Testimony Regarding S.B. 1017: An Act Concerning the Open Choice Program and Supporting H.B. 7313: An Act Concerning Homeless Students’ Access to Education

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Education Committee
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Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and esteemed members of the Education Committee:

I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based child advocacy organization working to ensure that all Connecticut children have an equitable opportunity to achieve their full potential. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to comment on S.B. 1017: An Act Concerning the Open Choice Program and H.B. 7313: An Act Concerning Homeless Students’ Access to Education.

Testimony Regarding S.B. 1017: An Act Concerning the Open Choice Program

We support S.B. 1017 as an act that will provide students with the tools needed to transition into a new school, yet we feel the act could be strengthened by expanding the duties of the education advocate to include culturally competency and providing for education advocates in more schools.

Open Choice efforts in Connecticut have worked to facilitate racial and economic integration by providing students the opportunity to attend schools outside of their districts, with the ultimate goal of raising academic achievement. Currently, Open Choice programs exist in the greater Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven areas. In the 2017-2018 school year, 2,340 students participated in Hartford’s Open Choice program Capitol Region Education Services, 260 students participated in Bridgeport’s Open Choice program Cooperative Educational Services, and 455 students participated in New Haven’s Open Choice program Area Cooperative Education Services.

In any situation, attending a new school can leave a student and their family feeling anxious and nervous. A study conducted in Nashville found that any school transition – even necessary ones such as transitioning to high school from a lower school in ninth grade—can negatively impact student growth in reading and math during the school year following the transition. For many students, meeting new teachers, making new friends, and adjusting to a new curriculum can be difficult. In the Open Choice program, students not only have to transition to a new school, but also a new district and neighborhood, which may make the change even more difficult.

S.B. 1017 will help ease the transition for students participating in an Open Choice program by establishing the position of “an education advocate” and clarifying duties that were previously designated to general “staff.” Specifically, the bill adds “providing academic and other social support to students” to previously named duties such as being “a liaison between parents the new school district.” We believe S.B. 1017 will facilitate a smoother transition to a new school district, increasing student wellbeing for students who participate in the state’s Open Choice program.

However, we propose adding language to the bill to expand families’ access to education advocates and extend their duties to help children and families navigate school districts with cultural and racial
demographics that may be different from what they are familiar with in their home school. First, we suggest that the language of the bill be revised to remove the requirement that a receiving district must accept “more than forty students under the program” to be provided with an education advocate. In the 2017-2018 school year, individual school districts accepted anywhere from one to 196 students through Open Choice programs, with 29 out of 49 school districts (59 percent of school districts with Open Choice programs) enrolling less than 40 Open Choice students. Students in these districts are likely to face an even more difficult transition, given that they are one of few students attending their schools from outside the district. Removing the “more than forty students” requirement and ensuring that all 49 districts participating in the state’s three Open Choice programs are equipped with an education advocate will provide all Open Choice students with the supports needed to smooth their transition to a new school.

Additionally, we recommend that a fourth duty be added to the education advocate description in Section 1 Part E, stipulating that the education advocate must demonstrate racial consciousness, have knowledge of implicit biases and ways to mitigate them, as well as demonstrate the ability to use culturally relevant practices when working with children, families, and educators. Since racial integration is one of the primary goals of the state’s Open Choice programs, it is highly likely that a student will be placed in a setting that is racially, ethnically, and culturally different from what they are familiar with—this can lead to a variety of issues. One study of a school integration effort that took place in the Northeast found that Black students who were sent to a predominantly White, suburban school struggled with feeling uncomfortable and disconnected from the school environment. Furthermore, social psychological research has consistently found that implicit biases in the classroom can lead to Black students being unfairly disciplined and even receiving lower grades. As a staff role designated to help students and families transition to a new district, the education advocate should be knowledgeable of potential issues such as these, and provide strategies for addressing them. We believe requiring the school’s education advocate to be racially conscious, have strategies for addressing implicit bias, and the ability to engage in culturally relevant practice when working with families and educators will create a more welcoming environment for all students and improve students’ wellbeing as they transition to a new district.

Testimony Supporting H.B. 7313: An Act Concerning Homeless Students’ Access to Education

We support H.B. 7313 as an act that will aid homeless students in pursuing academic success by bolstering the rights afforded to them by the McKinney-Vento Act. In a 2018 point-in-time count, there were over 1,250 homeless or unstably housed youth identified under the age of 18 in Connecticut, and evidence suggests that many more homeless children and teens are unidentified. Homelessness is traumatic, stressful, and can disrupt a child’s education. Students who become homeless are at-risk for being chronically absent in school due to issues such as lack of transportation, lack of proper school supplies, or lack of hygiene products and clean clothes. Additionally, a homeless student may miss time in school if they are temporarily sheltered in a different school district than the one they originally attended, and believe they must reenroll in a new school. Missing class days and changing schools can not only impact a student academically, but also separate a child from supportive friends and mentors. Having supportive relationships is especially important when children undergo traumatic experiences such as homelessness. These issues lead to gaps in achievement between homeless students and their stably housed peers.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, updated with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, was established to mitigate the issues homeless students and their families face in pursuing education. One of the primary functions of this act is providing students the right to stay in their school of origin—the school they attended before becoming homeless—even if they are rehoused outside of the district. If the school of origin is not in the best interest of the youth, families may choose another school with consideration of factors such as physical proximity to temporary housing, safety, and stability. Additionally,
students who are homeless must be enrolled in the school that they wish to attend immediately, even if they lack documents typically necessary for enrollment or have missed an application deadline due to homelessness.\textsuperscript{12}

McKinney-Vento has protected the rights of homeless youth across the country and across Connecticut as they continue to pursue their education. H.B. 7313 will further protect the rights of homeless students by updating state statute to incorporate the protections guaranteed by McKinney-Vento and ensuring that homeless youth have the right to enroll in school. **Therefore, we support H.B. 7313 as a bill that will solidify the rights and protections afforded to students experiencing homelessness and their families, and help ensure that homeless children experience robust educational opportunities that will help them academically succeed.**

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding S.B. 1017 and supporting H.B. 7313. I can be reached with questions via email at jnelson@ctvoices.org or via phone at 203-498-4240.

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\textsuperscript{5} Thompson, M.S. & McDonald, S. (2016). Race, Skin Tone, and Educational Achievement, *Sociological Perspectives*, 59(1), 91-111.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.