

# Education Committee

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-6846

AN ACT CONCERNING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CRISIS RESPONSE

**Title:** DRILLS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

**Vote Date:** 3/17/2023

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 3/8/2023

**File No.:** 416

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### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Education Committee

Rep. Jennifer Leeper, 132<sup>nd</sup> Dist.

Rep. Sarah Keitt, 134<sup>th</sup> Dist.

### REASONS FOR BILL:

Recent research has documented increases in anxiety, depression, and other health problems resulting from crisis response drills specifically. There have also been concerns that the currently required number of fire drills and crisis response drills in schools are consuming excessive instructional time from students.

This bill ensures that the procedures and frequency of crisis response drills are revised to minimize potential negative effects for students, teachers, and staff. It reduces the number of required fire drills from monthly to two per school year and reduces the number of required crisis response drills from every three months to one per school year.

The bill also requires school boards, with the help of local law enforcement, to develop crisis response drill protocols that are trauma-informed and created with input from school administrators. Requirements for these protocols include a seven-day notice of drills, parent or guardian opt-outs for their children, the provision of mental health accommodations and resources, and a prohibition of active shooter simulations.

### SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

The substitute language of the bill adds a new section which requires the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP), in consultation with the State

Department of Education (SDE), to evaluate the effectiveness of the bill's changes to the number of fire drills and crisis response drills and report their findings to the Education Committee by January 1, 2025.

This inclusion addresses concerns that additional background information is needed to ensure that the changes to these drills do not compromise student emergency preparedness.

#### **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

**State Department of Education (SDE), Commissioner, Charlene Russell-Tucker;**

recommends that before implementing these changes, SDE engage with the DESPP School Security Working Group for discussion and recommendations\*. They note that members of this group are experts in this area and that school trauma and mental health staff could also be included in this conversation with DESPP.

*\*The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

**Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, & Opportunity (CWCSEO),**

**Commission Fellow, Hannah Scott;** supports this bill citing research showing that many children involved in crisis response drills report feeling unsafe, frightened, helpless, and depressed. They also note that crisis response drills invoke frustration and annoyance among students and are only shown to have short term effects on their preparedness.

**Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS),**

**Executive Director, Fran Rabinowitz;** supports this bill stating that it will minimize drill-related student trauma, which aligns with their most recently published public policy agenda. They also note that reducing the number of school drills will provide more instructional time.

**Connecticut Children's Medical Center, Division Head of Pediatric Psychology, Melissa**

**Santos;** supports this bill stating that it better integrates behavioral health supports and developmentally appropriate, trauma informed approaches to crisis response drills in schools. They also note that the bill is in line with the best practice considerations published by the National Association of School Psychologists. They specifically highlight Section 2, expressing that many students would benefit from the advance notice and age-appropriate explanation provisions.

**Connecticut Education Association (CEA), President, Kate Dias;**

supports this bill stating that there is little evidence that repeated crisis response drills effectively prepare students for emergency – but growing evidence that these drills may increase student anxiety. They also note that emergency preparedness must be balanced with the social and emotional needs of students. Finally, they assert that students should feel safe and supported in schools, not constantly reminded of the potential for danger.

**CT Against Gun Violence, Executive Director, Jeremy Stein;**

supports this bill stating that active shooter drills do not effectively prepare schools for crisis situations. They cite research showing that these drills are associated with increases in depression, anxiety, and concerns over death among students of all ages, parents, and teachers.

**National Association of Social Workers – Connecticut Chapter (NASW/CT), Intern,**

**Matthew Dionne;** supports this bill stating that it will implement a best-practice and standard operating procedure for crisis response drills, which doesn't currently exist. They also express that this bill would reduce the child trauma and documented mental health issues that arise from excessive school drills.

**AFT Connecticut, Divisional Vice President, Mary Yordon;** expresses their support for reductions in the number of drills, which they believe will provide sufficient opportunity to rehearse safety protocol. Additionally, they request that trauma-informed protocols in each school be developed with input from administrators and employees from each bargaining unit.

**Derby Public Schools, Superintendent, Matthew Conway;** supports the bill and suggests including language in the Section 2 provision regarding a seven-day notice of drills to parents to specify that adds that the date of the crisis response drill is "anticipated." They noted that this flexibility would allow for potential scheduling changes due to unexpected events that may occur. They expressed their support for the rest of the bill.

**E.O. Smith High School, Teachers, Tina Roberts and Shawn Santasiere;** support this bill stating that these drills are disruptive to education and needlessly anxiety inducing for both students and staff. They share their personal experiences as teachers feeling uncomfortable and unsettled during these drills, as well as witnessing their students feeling similarly while participating. They note that the repetition of crisis response drills compounds these feelings of stress during each event over the course of the school year.

**Parents, Joe Goldman and Sarah Dagon Goldman;** support this bill stating that it allows all parents to feel comfortable with school safety procedures. As parents, they share their experience requesting that their child be opted-out of the crisis response drills in their school. They state that this was not possible because current statute does not give parents or students the ability to request abstentions from these drills.

**Town of Fairfield, Resident, Tanya Smith;** supports this bill stating that the addressed drills are disruptive and take away from valuable instructional time. They also note that these drills have become so routine that they are often not taken seriously.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

**Connecticut General Assembly (CGA), Rep. Ben McGorty;** opposes this bill stating that it is essential for children to learn how to exit buildings in a quick, safe, and orderly manner. As a former firefighter who has responded to school fires in Connecticut, they expressed that fire drills are an effective learning experience regarding fire safety that students carry for the rest of their lives. They also asserted that without repetition and practice, students will forget what to do when the fire alarm sounds.

**Connecticut Fire Marshal's Association, Vice President and Co-Legislative**

**Representative, Roger Nelson;** opposes this bill stating that teaching and practicing fire drills in schools is an important aspect of fire prevention and ensures student safety. They also note that the bill would conflict with the current Connecticut Fire Safety Code language, which is based on NFPA national standard. Finally, they express that dropping the monthly

fire drill standard, which is followed by 28 states, is unacceptable and that these rules should be determined by fire and safety professionals.

**Reported by: Taha Anwar**

**Date: 4/3/2023**