

Testimony Supporting H.B 6569, An Act Concerning School Graduation Rate

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Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and Members of the Education Committee:

We testify on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children supports 6569, An Act Concerning School Drop Out Rates (

HB 6569 promotes drop out prevention and graduation programs in the state by raising the age of compulsory schooling from 16 to 18 years of age. The proposed bill also compels the State Department of Education to develop a standardized dropout formula that accounts for all adult education students in all reported drop out and graduation rates. The bill mandates that school districts whose drop out rates exceed 10% establish an alternative school or regional partnership with an alternative school to service at risk students.

Introduction

Failure to complete high school is a serious problem in many of Connecticut's public schools. Students who drop out lose the potential benefits derived from education, including increased employment opportunities and higher wage trajectories. Unfortunately, students who drop out are also more vulnerable than their peers to becoming involved in crime. Urgent attention to prevent dropping out is required to ensure that at-risk youth receive the services and programming that they need to stay in school and be successful.

While Connecticut has a myriad of local initiatives aimed at preventing students from leaving high school, basic data showing how many 9th graders graduate from high school are not publicly available. Existing drop out data are misleading because they fail to count students who leave school to attend adult education programs but drop out prior to receiving a degree or certificate.¹ In addition to creating more useful and public drop out data, the state of Connecticut can move to address this crisis in schools by raising the age of permitted legal drop out. By allowing 16 year olds to legally leave school, the state condones and perpetuates the idea that it is acceptable for children to not complete their education.

Passage of HB 6569 addresses these concerns in data collection and raising the legal drop out age. HB 6569 would improve the state's ability to generate and publish useful drop out data by compelling school districts to more account for adult education students in their drop out formula and mandate that one standardized formula be used across the state. In addition, this proposal would directly impact the drop out rate by raising the age of legal drop out and reducing the likelihood that students will leave school before graduating with a high school degree. As our president recently said, dropping out of high school can no longer be tolerated, when youth leave

school they are “not only giving up on themselves, (they are) giving up on their country.” The Dangers of Unabated Drop Out Rates

Research indicates that failure to earn a high school degree often leads to limited employment, poor health, lowered tax revenue for the state, increased crime, and individual drug abuse.

- Limited Employment opportunities, Students who leave high school without obtaining a diploma face limited job prospects. In our modern economy, most full time jobs with benefits require that applicants hold at least a high school degree if not post secondary experience. Dropping out of school makes youth vulnerable to jobs that do not pay a livable wage.
- Decreased Wage trajectories, Due to the limited employment opportunities that high school dropouts have throughout their life, their wage trajectory (ability to “move up” in a salary range over time) is extremely flat compared to persons with a high school or post secondary degree. A male who graduates from high school earns, anywhere from \$117,000-\$322,000 over a lifetime than his counterpart who did not earn a high school degree.²
- Increased crime and drug abuse- Youth who leave high school often do not go directly into the workforce. Instead, many of these individuals find themselves unsupervised for most of the day and become more prone to crime. This is most evident when comparing incarceration statistics to the general population. While less than 20% of the general population lack a high school degree, more than half of the state inmate prison population in the U.S. lack a high school degree.³
- Poor Health. Since many jobs accessible to persons without a high school degree lack health insurance, high school dropouts are significantly less likely to utilize preventative medical care and are more like to have higher rates of illness and mortality.⁴
- Decreased Tax Revenue- Because high school drop outs earn less over time, states receive less in tax revenue from these individuals and, in fact, spend more money on social welfare programs.⁵

Risk Factors That Data Can Help Identify

Most literature that discusses the phenomena of high school drop out cite several identifiable risk factors that a student who on course to dropping out possesses. Better collection of and use of data will allow schools to efficiently identify students who possess risk factors and proactively intervene to provide that student with the resources and supports needed to stay in school.

The following is a list of factors for high school students that several (two or more) studies have confirmed are linked to increased likelihood of dropping out⁶:

- Low academic achievement
- Poor attendance
- Misbehavior
- Low socioeconomic status

School districts in Connecticut already track and record the above factors in their strategic school profiles. Refining the process for recording and reporting drop out and graduation data would encourage schools to examine their already existing data on “at risk” students in the context of accurate drop out and graduation experiences in their school.

Connecticut’s History of Drop Out Prevention Programs

Drop out prevention programs are not new to the state. For the past several decades, school districts, municipal police agencies and community groups have organized to address the problem of students in their communities. Currently, a host of programs are being implemented throughout the state to address poor student attendance that leads to dropping out. Programs differ in their focus ranging from court intervention to law enforcement to direct service intervention. This year Connecticut also accepted a grant by the national organization “America’s Promise” to bring together stakeholders from across the state to discuss and plan to address the drop out crisis in Connecticut.

Why Existing Drop Out Data Should be Revised

If the state of Connecticut and its municipalities want to continue to reduce drop out rates, then there must be a coordinated effort to collect and analyze dropout data. Once data are available, organizations and agencies will have an opportunity to craft specific interventions that prevent drop outs by identifying which students are currently most at risk. For Connecticut to implement a system of data driven action in response to drop out rates, existing data needs to be publicly accessible. Currently, the drop out data collected and published on the state’s “Strategic School Profiles” reflect only a percentage of students who drop out. However, students who leave school to attend alternative schools or GED programs are not counted in the drop out data even if they fail to complete their alternative program. Students who transfer out of district to another public high school are also counted as dropouts. While many other states have adopted coding systems⁷ that describe the conditions upon which a child has left the school (like the one proposed in this legislation), Connecticut data currently only records students as having left school or not.

Independent analysis of Connecticut’s drop out rate confirms that numbers that are currently reported are underestimates of the actual drop out count. The Education Trust recently reported that a more thorough analysis of Connecticut’s drop out and graduation (including students who leave school to attend alternative education programs) would place Connecticut’s graduation rate closer to 70%--a difference of 17 percentage points from the higher rate of 87% that the state currently reports.⁸ In order to create strategic plans that appropriately respond to high school drop out rates, we must produce more accurate data reflecting who is leaving our public schools without having acquired a high school diploma. Having a comprehensive, well organized and realistic data set on drop outs will allow concerned bodies in the state to better address the high drop out rates.⁹

The Potential Impact of Raising the Legal Drop Out Age to 18

Currently, 12 states have changed their laws to raise the age that students are allowed to legally withdraw from school.¹⁰ Comprehensive analysis of drop out data show that states that have raised the age for compulsory schooling had gains in student attendance and achievement across the board.¹¹ These gains were not experienced among “at risk” students but were evident among all students. In addition to potentially raising high school graduation rates, raising the age of compulsory schooling to 18 also could have the positive effect of increasing post secondary enrollment of students. Analysis of recent drop out and state data found a positive correlation between having

statutes that raise the age of compulsory schooling and increases in enrollment in college or other programs after high school.¹²

Considerations, Caveats and Concerns on HB 5769

While Connecticut Voices for Children supports the intention of HB 5769 and endorses the bill's proposals on defining and reporting drop out and graduation rates, we do have reservations about the components of the bill that propose usage of alternative schools as proxies to traditional schools when drop out rates in a district exceed 10%. Examination of the strategic school profile data for the state's seven¹³ alternative schools reveal that the most recent (2006-2007) drop out rate (66%)¹⁴ in these schools is *significantly* higher than the statewide annual dropout rate for all high schools of 1.7%¹⁵ If the aim of this legislation is to promote graduation and reduce high school drop out rates, it is counterintuitive to send students from traditional schools to schools that also have high rates of student exits. Alternative schools also provide less hours of instruction (an average of 967¹⁶) than the state average for high schools (1002 hours a year)¹⁷. While it is possible that alternative schools, due to their unique student population, are better at preventing dropping out than traditional schools, we have our reservations about requiring that students enter alternative schools over traditional schools. Before a policy is adopted that mandates more alternative schools, it is advisable that more research be done to assess the true impact of alternative schools on student learning and retention.

Connecticut Voices for Children also urges committee members to add provisions to the bill that discourage drop outs by removing the current provision that allows schools to not readmit dropped out students for up to 3 months. This current provision (Sec 10-186) creates a barrier for students who drop out from changing their mind and returning to pursue their high school diploma.

Connecticut Voices for Children commends the bill's authors for recognizing the need to standardize and align state definitions of "Drop out". We would add to that consideration that there is also a need for school districts to adhere to one uniform definition for "attendance". Currently, it is up to the discretion of each individual school board to determine what "attendance" is. Some schools currently count out of school suspensions as days in attendance while others only include unexcused absences in their reporting. Such inconsistencies across the state weaken any data comparisons and make it difficult to effectively promote data driven decision-making at the district and state level. We would ask this body to consider adding a provision in this bill that creates a uniform definition for attendance as reported in state reports like the "Strategic School Profiles" (Finally, we would urge the state to consider already existing formulas for calculating drop outs like the thorough "Greene Method"¹⁸

We Need To Promote Policies that Make it Easier for Schools and Policy Makers to Use Data As we face an era of economic turmoil, we need more than ever to invest in public education to ensure that we will be able to compete in the global economy for generations to come. In a time of tight budgets, it is wise to pursue policies that creatively use resources already at our disposal. Schools already have a myriad of data about their students. HB 5769 is a strategic step forward in compelling districts to better organize and report their already existing drop out data so that drop out prevention programs can better assess and grow their work. By raising the legal age of mandatory schooling, as proposed in HB 5769, the State sends a powerful message that it is no longer acceptable to give up your education, it is no longer acceptable to drop out of school.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.

¹ (Beginning with the 1993-94 profile, students who transferred to adult education credit-earning programs were not counted as dropouts.). Definition of “drop out” from State Department of Education

http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/profiles/ssp_help/Terms_93-07.pdf

² Levin et al. “The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for All of America’s Children.” Columbia Teachers College. (January 2007) P. 7 http://www.cbcse.org/media/download_gallery/Leeds_Report_Final_Jan2007.pdf

³ ibid. P 13.

⁴ Ibid P 9

⁵ ibid. P 6

⁶ Hammond, Cathy et al. “Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report.” National Dropout Prevention Network (May 2007)

⁷ Habash, Anna. “Counting on Graduation: An Agenda for state leadership.” The Education Trust. Fall 2008. P 2.

⁸ Education Trust “Telling the Whole Truth (or Not) about High School Graduation” New State Data: The Education Trust. December 2003 P. 4.

⁹ Swanson, Christopher “The Real truth about graduation rates;” The Urban Institute (August 2004) P. 5

¹⁰ Finnegan and Schleicher, Molly and Annie “Opinion Mixed on Bumping up Drop out Rate.” Newshour With Jim Lehrer (2007)

¹¹ Oreopoulos, Philip. “Would More Compulsory Schooling Help Disadvantaged Youth?: Evidence from Recent Changes to School Leaving Laws.” University of Toronto National Bureau of Economic Search. (2007) P. 10

¹² Oreopoulos P 12

¹³ Alternative Center for Excellence, Stevens Alternative High School, Alternative Education Program in Milford, Urban Youth Center Middle School, Polly T McCabe Center, Briggs High School and Joy D. Rice School

¹⁴ As calculated by Lauren Velazquez at Connecticut Voices for Children by averaging the dropout rates reported in the Strategic school profiles accessed at <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/profiles/index.htm#go>

¹⁵ As reported by the State Department of Education

<http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/cedar/dropout/index.htm>

¹⁶ As average calculated by Lauren Velazquez at Connecticut Voices for Children using strategic school profile data from SDE

¹⁷ As reported by the SDE

http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/cedar/hours_of_instruction/hoursbytype0506.htm

¹⁸ The “Greene method” for calculating drop outs looks at individual cohorts of students and accounts for students who no longer attend school but have not signed official drop out paperwork, students who receive a regular diploma and population change. Greene, Peter PhD. And Winters, Marcus. “Public School Graduation Rates in the United States.” The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research V31. (November 2002) http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baco.htm