Testimony Supporting
H.B. 5567: An Act Concerning Alternative Schools
Edie Joseph
Education Committee
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Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

I am testifying today 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 strongly supports H.B. 5567: An Act Concerning Alternative School Programs. This bill addresses an important aspect of our education system that currently lacks sufficient oversight and accountability: alternative schools. While we offer a few minor recommendations to improve this bill, we are very pleased with the Committee's recognition of the problem and thoughtful recommendations.

Alternative schools exist in many school districts in Connecticut and can play a valuable role for many at-risk students who require nontraditional modes of instruction. Although there are certainly some high quality alternative schools in Connecticut, there are many others with poor or unknown records. Additionally, **there is a pressing set of systemic issues facing the largely invisible and almost entirely unregulated network of alternative schools, programs, and settings in the state**. Most notably:

- The State Department of Education **does not provide any oversight of alternative schools or programs, nor does it require basic data reporting except in limited circumstances.**
- The **lack of a clear statutory definition** for alternative schools and programs makes it difficult to establish oversight and evaluate the educational success of these programs.[1]
- Some districts unilaterally move students into alternative schools or programs **without parental consent**, and sometimes also refuse to allow students to exit the programs back to traditional schools.[2]
- Many alternative schools do not offer their students the same number of class hours or course offerings that regular public schools require, **thus denying vulnerable students access** to the quantity and quality of education that they deserve.[3]
- While some alternative schools help students succeed, others become "**dumping grounds**" for vulnerable students, providing pathways to the juvenile justice system.[4]

H.B. 5567 takes five important steps to reform alternative schools in order to better serve our young people: (1) **defining alternative school programs**; (2) requiring **informed consent by students and parents** before placement in an alternative setting; (3) ensuring students in alternative settings maintain their **right to access a diversity of courses** and receive the **proper number of hours of instruction**; (4) promoting oversight of alternative school programs through **requiring they have**

their own easily-accessible Strategic School Profile; and (5) ensuring that **students expelled from school receive quality education opportunities**.

1. Defining "Alternative School Programs"

By creating a statutory definition for alternative school programs, this bill will create a basis for clearer state and local oversight over these alternative settings. Districts will no longer be able to maintain "off-book" schools and programs by defining the alternatives as something other than a school. At present alternative schools are not defined, and appear in statute only subsequent to districts' responsibility to provide alternative educational opportunities to certain expelled students.[5] This bill helps remedy this statutory vagueness. Finally, H.B. 5567 requires districts to publicize the existence of these alternative options online, facilitating student and parent access to the schools and programs, and ensuring greater transparency about their existence and offerings.

2. Informed Consent for Placement

H.B. 5567 establishes a clear right to informed consent for parents and students before placement in an alternative school or program. This will help ensure that students are being placed in a thoughtful and equitable way, and that students understand their rights and are not forced or counseled out of traditional education against their will (except in cases of expulsion).

3. Student Right to Course Offerings and Hours

We support the bill's efforts to require that students in alternative programs have access to the full range of course offerings and are entitled to the full 6 hours per day/180 days of education of traditional students, pursuant to sections 10-15, 10-16, and 10-6b of the general statutes. A 2014 State Department of Education report on alternative schools notes that at least 10% of students in alternative and dropout diversion programs do not receive the minimum nine hundred hours of instruction.[6] Moreover, in several Alliance Districts, students in alternative and dropout prevention programs receive up to 2.75 hours fewer hours of instruction than their public school counterparts.[7] Through mandating class hours and course offerings, the bill will ensure that alternative students will have access to the same depth and breadth of education as their peers in regular public schools.

4. Oversight Through the Strategic School Profiles

We applaud H.B. 5567 for requiring that districts complete a Strategic School Profile (SSP) for each alternative school under its jurisdiction, just as it requires for all traditional schools. Requiring SSPs for alternatives schools will help ensure that alternative schools and the students they enroll are no longer invisible. This basic accountability measure will help districts, parents, and the state better understand important features of the state's alternative school system, including information about the number of students receiving special education services and the types of services provided; test scores, graduation rates, and other student outcome measures; course offerings and enrollment; access to materials, such as books and computers; qualifications of teachers and staff; student discipline and truancy rates; and the racial and ethnic composition of the student body and the number of students eligible for free and reduce price lunch.

5. Quality Educational Opportunities for Expelled Students

H.B. 5567 improves the quality of education for students who are expelled from school by offering enrollment in an alternative school program. Under current statute, only students who are under the age of 16, or students who are between 16 and 18 and are facing their first expulsion

and have not committed certain enumerated categories of offenses, are entitled to *any* educational program after being expelled. Furthermore, the law allows districts to offer *only* adult education to students 17-18 who are expelled. The vast majority of districts only offer two hours a day of tutoring to expelled students who are eligible for an alternative educational opportunity. Very often, these tutoring programs are flawed in that districts take weeks to connect students with tutors, and tutors can be very unreliable in their quality and hours of instruction.[8] Offering enrollment in alternative schools to students who have been expelled means that the most "at-risk" students will have an opportunity to participate in full-time, educational experiences.

There are certain respects in which this bill could be strengthened:

- **Create standardized entry and exit procedures** to ensure that districts are complying with the proposed informed consent requirement, and to facilitate clearer understanding on the part of students and parents about how any why students can be placed into programs, and what their rights are in the process.
- **Allow a waiver process to provide alternative school flexibility while maintaining sufficient oversight**, by which alternative schools and programs may petition the State Department of Education for approval of more limited course hours or offerings provided the school justifies an academic or other need for such limitations and that such reduced hours and offerings will benefit participating students.
- **Remove adult education as an alternative educational opportunity for high school students.** This would keep high school aged students in their school systems with better resources and support services rather than being pushed into adult education settings that are not generally equipped to meet their needs.
- **Allow expelled children of any age and regardless of prior expulsion status the opportunity to enroll in an alternative school program.**

This legislation takes important steps in improving regulation and oversight of alternative schools and thus promoting positive academic outcomes for Connecticut's young people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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[1] The state tracks the demographics but not educational attainment of students in so-called "90 Programs" (a term stemming from a PSIS identification code number), which are district-run schools and programs serving at risk students. The State Department of Education (SDE) reported that fifty such programs spread across 27 school districts were in operation in Connecticut in 2009. Based on local district websites, researcher Laura McCargar identified more than 50 district-defined alternative schools or programs in operation in the state, of which only 9 were included in the 90 Program list provided by SDE (*See*, McCargar, pg 46). In February 2014, the State Department of Education released a report listing known alternative schools in Connecticut; *see* "Report on the Study of Alternative School Programs, Connecticut State Department of Education, (February 2014), available upon request.

[2] *See* Laura McCargar, "Invisible Students: The Role of Alternative and Adult Education in the Connecticut School-to-Prison Pipeline," Connecticut Pushout Research and Organizing Project, (December 2011), 30-32, available at: http://ctprop.org/

[3] *See*, McCargar, 49-50

[4] *See*, McCargar, 20-25, 47-49

[5] Connecticut General Statutes 10-233d. Expulsion of Pupils.

[6] "Report on the Study of Alternative School Programs, Connecticut State Department of Education, (February 2014), available upon request, page 8.

[7] "Alternative Schools and Programs: Views from the Inside, The Need for Systemic Review and Reform in Connecticut," Center for Children's Advocacy, (January 2014), available at: http://www.kidscounsel.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/R-Jan-29-AltSch-2014.pdf.
[8] *See*, "Proposed Act Concerning Expulsions" Fact Sheet, Center for Children's Advocacy, available upon request.