

Testimony Supporting S.B. 1053: An Act Prohibiting Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions for Students in Preschool and Grades Kindergarten to Two

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Committee on Education

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Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

I am a Policy Fellow at 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.

I am testifying on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children **in support of S.B. 1053: An Act Prohibiting Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions for Students in Preschool and Grades Kindergarten to Two**. By prohibiting suspensions and expulsions for students who are too young to fully grasp the consequences of their actions, S.B. 1053 will help guarantee that exclusionary disciplinary practices are used appropriately.

Expulsions and suspensions exclude children from the classroom, resulting in significant educational and societal costs, particularly for our youngest children. Students expelled and suspended in their earliest years may be set on a path of negative life outcomes, including increased likelihood of dropping out of school, increased likelihood of juvenile incarceration, and decreased academic achievement.¹ These children are more likely to be incarcerated as adults, are more likely to rely on state-funded social programs, and have, on average, lower lifetime earnings.²

Excluding a child from school is rarely, in itself, a pedagogically or developmentally sound means of addressing misconduct. In fact, **research shows that a suspension in the earliest years may actually increase subsequent school misbehavior.**³ Instead, interventions designed to identify the root cause of disciplinary problems and prevent misconduct from escalating (such as positive reinforcement) and non- exclusionary punishments (such as detentions or restitution) are more effective strategies for ensuring a safe and positive learning environment than expulsion and suspension.

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education issued new school discipline guidelines which emphasized that schools should be “relying on suspension and expulsion only as a last resort and for appropriately serious infractions.”⁴ In recent years, Connecticut has made important progress in reducing the overall number of students expelled and suspended.⁵ However, **too many expulsions and suspensions are still being issued to students who are far too young to fully grasp the consequences of their actions.** In school year 2013 (hereinafter 2013), 1 in every 100 K-2 students in Connecticut were suspended or expelled (1,110 total K-2 students were suspended or expelled in 2013).⁶ Most worrisome, the number of kindergarteners expelled and suspended has increased by 35% in the last two years.⁷ An increasing number of our youngest students are being forced out of the classroom at a time when they can least afford it.

Also concerning is the extent to which exclusionary discipline practices are being inequitably applied in Connecticut. **The use of suspensions and expulsions disproportionality harms students of**

color, special education students, and students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. These disparities exist statewide and in nearly every district. For example:

- The ten districts with the highest number of suspensions of children under 7 in 2014 are all classified as the poorest in the state.⁸
- One hundred percent of second and third graders expelled in 2013 were from the poorest school districts.⁹
- In 2013 Black students were nearly 5 times more likely to be expelled than white students, and Hispanic/Latino students were 2.6 times more likely to be expelled.¹⁰
- In 2013 Black students were 6.5 times more likely to be suspended out-of-school than white students, and Hispanic/Latino students were 4.4 times more likely to be suspended out-of-school.¹¹
- Special education students nearly 2 times more likely to be expelled and 2.6 times more likely to be suspended out-of-school than general education students in 2013.¹²

Students of color, special education students, and low-income students, who often start school at a disadvantage in comparison to their more privileged peers, have more to lose by not being in the classroom. When exclusionary school disciplinary tactics push these children from the classroom at the very start of their academic careers, they may fall even further behind, widening achievement gaps and adding additional obstacles to their success.

Preschool and grades K-2 should be a time of nurturing the emotional, behavioral, social, and academic skills children need in subsequent years of schooling, not a time to exclude children from the classroom and create an adversarial relationship between a child and his school. If a child shows behavioral problems that cannot be safely addressed in the classroom, the child should be connected to needed behavioral and mental health support services.¹³ High-quality alternative educational settings, with qualified personnel, must also be provided so that students do not fall behind in their schoolwork and face further barriers to achievement.¹⁴ Such environments could also enact behavioral support services that mitigate future negative behaviors.

By prohibiting the expulsion and out-of-school suspension of preschoolers and children in grades K-2, S.B. 1053 promotes early intervention and support, rather than exclusion from the classroom. This is a tremendous opportunity to help eradicate the gross disproportionalities in the application of expulsions and suspensions, and a crucial means to set all children on the right path from the very start of their academic careers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or need additional information.

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- ¹ See, Skiba, Russell et al, “Consistent Removal: Contributions of School Discipline to the School-Prison Pipeline,” (May 2014), available at <http://varj.asn.au/resources/documents/consistent%20removal.pdf>.
- ² See Sweeten, Gary, “Who Will Graduate? Disruption of High School Education by Arrest and Court Involvement” 23.4, *Justice Quarterly*, 462-480, at 478 (December 2006). See also Paul Hirschfield, “Another Way Out: The Impact of Juvenile Arrests on High School Dropout”, *Sociology of Education*, Vo. 82, No.4 (October, 2009), pp. 368-393 See also Robert Sampson and John Laub, *Crime in the Making*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1993. See, Mark Cohen, “The Monetary Value of Saving a High-Risk Youth,” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 14: 1 (1998), available at: http://www.epi.msu.edu/janthony/requests/articles/Cohen_Monetary%20High-Risk%20Youth.pdf.
- ³ See, Tobin, T., Sugai, G., & Colvin, G, “Patterns in middle school discipline records,” *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, (1996), available at <http://ebx.sagepub.com/content/4/2/82.short?rss=1&source=mfc>.
- ⁴ See, U.S. Department of Education, *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*, (January 2014), available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>.
- ⁵ The number of students expelled in Connecticut has fallen from 1,302 (0.23%) in 2008 to 898 (0.16%) in 2013. The number of students suspended out-of-school has fallen from 27,497 (4.9%) to 14,720 (2.7%). See Iverson Sarah, Joseph, Edie, and Oppenheimer, Cyd, “Keeping Kids in Class: School Discipline in Connecticut 2008-2013” (February 2015), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/jj15schoolarrestsreport.pdf>.
- ⁶ Connecticut Voices for Children’s analysis of State Department of Education data.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* See above.
- ⁸ See, “Suspensions and Expulsions in Connecticut,” State Department of Education (March 2015), available at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1681328/suspensions-and-expulsions-in-connecticut-2015.pdf>. Connecticut Voices for Children’s analysis of State Department of Education data available on p.48.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ See, Iverson Sarah, Joseph, Edie, and Oppenheimer, Cyd, “Keeping Kids in Class: School Discipline in Connecticut 2008-2013” (February 2015), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/jj15schoolarrestsreport.pdf>.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ For example, the Connecticut School-Based Diversion Initiative promotes increased access to Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services as well as school- and community-based services for students at risk of expulsion or out-of-school suspension. See, “The SBDI Toolkit: A Community Resource for Reducing School-Based Arrests,” Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut (June 2013), available at http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/agency/pdf/community_resource_for_reducing_school-based_arrests.pdf.
- ¹⁴ For more information about alternative education, see Porowski, Allan et al, “How do states define alternative education?” U.S. Department of Education (September 2014), available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED546775.pdf>.