

Testimony of

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Before the Education Committee

**HB 6881 An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to
Educator Compensation and Paraeducators
6884 An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention and Enhancement of the Teaching
Profession**

March 15, 2023

Thank you to the Education Committee for raising so many important bills for hearing today. I am Kate Dias, president of the Connecticut Education Association, and a proud high school math teacher in Manchester.

I am so pleased to provide testimony on this historic day and, believe me, it is historic. It is historic, if not for our ambitions, then for the actions that come next. For months (in some cases years), the issues you are hearing testimony about have been discussed in the halls of our schools – the “why don’t they” and “can’t they just” and the “they don’t understand us” can become sentiments of the past with the presentation of these bills. I am confident you are going to hear from hundreds of educators, and I know they will share with you their personal experiences and desperate desire for change. But I am going to take this time to share some of my excitement and suggestions.

Let me start with HB 6881, which addresses educator and paraprofessional compensation. As you know well, there is a massive shortage of adults that want to work in education, and compensation is a key factor. In our fall poll of members, 74% said they are considering leaving the profession and 98% said that educator salary is a top priority to keep them in the classroom. This bill starts that conversation; it brings teachers back to the table. Yes, raising salaries is not a free enterprise. We need to ensure equity in this process and ensure teachers in every zip code are paid a professional and competitive salary. This bill provides funding to get this process started, allocating \$600 million in surplus funds to the goal of raising salaries. You may ask yourself if this will really work. To that I say, yes. In 1986 when the Teacher Enhancement Act was passed there was a teacher shortage, and within three years that shortage was turned around. It took a lot of resources, but it can be done. We can stop bleeding educators from our schools with bold and decisive actions. Perhaps you are worried that voters will think this is too indulgent. To that I say that we polled your voters and 90% say that teacher compensation should be comparable to or higher than professionals with similar education and training. Three quarters of voters favor more state funding to cities and towns for teacher salaries. The support is there, we just need this legislation to make it happen.

In HB 6884 I almost don't know where to start. So, let's begin at the beginning with salary in section 1. This bill again presents a minimum teacher salary. Let's take that leap and raise the bar for entry salary. I imagine you wonder how this helps all teachers. In fact, raising the starting salary will impact all. If we move the initial salary, people like me, a union president, will ensure that all employees move along the continuum. That is the process of negotiations, and we will work with our districts to ensure the benefit is felt across our peers. Again, referring to the 1986 Act, initial educators felt an increase of 22% to their salaries and those at the top of the range saw a 30% increase. Keep in mind that in 1986 we raised starting salaries to \$20,000 from the state average of \$17,021. The federal poverty threshold for a single person was \$5,360. Today, we are asking for the minimum salary to be raised to an amount that would not put a teacher who might be a single mother on state support. Yet, as shown in special CEA report on starting salaries, not one starting salary for teachers with a [BA](#) or [MA](#) in the state is higher than the qualifying level for HUSKY B for a family of 2, which is 3.23 times the Federal Poverty Level.¹

We strongly believe that the proposal to increase salaries is stronger in HB 6881 and know that we can reconcile the language between the two bills to ensure the raise that our teachers need, the raise that the voters want, is what the legislature puts forward.

Also, in HB 6884 (section 3), is a pandemic pension credit for teachers. As with the regular pension system, this approach rewards teachers for staying with the profession. More years of service provides a greater reward. While I truly appreciate this and support the idea of encouraging retention of teachers, this does fall flat in recognition for the work of our veteran teachers. All teachers put in tremendous effort to keep education going during the heart of the pandemic and upon return to school. We all took risks to our own health and safety to ensure students had their needs met. Let us not forget our veteran staff who would be eligible for no benefit if they retire this year, those that have retired, and those that have already achieved 37.5 years of service and therefore reached the pension maximum. I am confident we can present an amended version that includes and acknowledges their sacrifices and the contributions of all educators.

Teachers have not yet been included in any hero pay program and have, in fact, been specifically excluded from previous programs--a wrong that teachers have noted clearly and regularly. If your inboxes are not full on this issue alone, I am shocked. But teachers are not the only interested party. Voters have again chimed in on this issue, and 71% believe that teachers who worked during the pandemic should be acknowledged for the extreme effort it took to keep education of students a high priority in often impossible situations. Let's make this proposal a priority.

In section 2 of the bill is a teacher tax credit for initial and provisional educators. This supports our lowest paid teachers, who often use their own money to buy supplies for students. These are teachers that frequently have to use third-party donation systems to supply their classrooms with

¹ See CEA Starting Salary Analyses (note: Red denotes salaries beneath the 3.25 times FPL provided in HB 6881). The reports can be found here: Starting Salaries – Master's - https://cea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Starting-Salaries-MA_March-2023.pdf Starting Salaries – Bachelor's - https://cea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Starting-Salaries-BA_March-2023.pdf

books. They are buying pencils, crayons, and other materials for their students. They are providing snacks in their classrooms and taking care of the basic needs of their students. A tax credit offsets some of these expenditures and gives support to their financial contributions. This credit could certainly benefit all teachers, and I would ask the committee to consider the viability of extending this to all teachers given that many on the highest level of certification may not be getting paid as much as you think.

In section 13, the bill addresses a 30-minute duty-free preparation period. This may find some opponents in those who create schedules. But similar to a 30-minute lunch, I would say that if we cannot build schedules that support adults, that give them time to prepare their lessons, provide time for consultation with parents and other staff, then we need to reset our priorities. A system designed to work our teachers without consideration for their ability to actually get the job done successfully is broken. I would love to say that all districts are providing this, and this provision is unnecessary, but that simply isn't the case. In fact, 95% of our teachers said that increasing preparation and planning time is necessary for preventing teacher burnout. If we want to keep the teachers we attract, the working conditions need to be desirable and supportive.

I am also pleased to speak to sections 20-21 of HB 6884. In recent memory, teachers have been under attack more often and more brutally—and often personally persecuted in the court of social media. These attacks, unfounded and hurtful, have an impact on our ability to do the important work of teaching children. When these attacks rise to the level of harassment, ensuring that the behavior has a meaningful consequence protects our teachers and allows them to do their jobs. Raising the class of the misdemeanor acknowledges support and protection for our educator population. Abuse of these individuals is not OK. I realize that detractors may say that this is whining; to those individuals I say — just wait until they come for you. Having your name dragged through the mud based on misinformation is harmful. It changes the way you approach your work and makes the job untenable in some cases. This section also calls on districts to adopt an educator bill of rights to protect their staff from attacks. This is an important effort that I am sure teachers across the state are prepared to work with their boards to accomplish. It is time for our education systems to openly, clearly, and decisively stand behind those individuals who care for and teach our children.

The proposals in HB 6884 and HB 6881 will go a long way toward addressing this crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. The bills are comprehensive because the cause is not solely low-pay, but also about the joy of teaching and learning. To provide more background on the challenges the state faces, I share with you [CEA's Policy Brief on Teacher Recruitment and Retention](#), which details the obstacles to keeping teachers in the classroom and attracting a more diverse pool of qualified young and mid-career adults into the teaching profession.²

I will end my testimony where it began. It is time for us to make some history. We are in a time when needs and resources are aligned. Where our desires for support and acknowledgment align with voters' priorities for schools. When legislators' big dreams can be accomplished. I believe that 2023 can be the year that serves as a turning point, a reference point to be acknowledged in future legislation.

² <https://cea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Teacher-Recruitment-Retention-CEA-Legislative-Brief-March-14-2023.pdf>

[October 2022 survey of CEA members](#)

[December 2022 survey of Connecticut voters](#)

[CEA: Summary of Policy Recommendations](#)