

*Testimony of*

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***Connecticut Education Association***

*Before the*

***Education Committee***

*HB 6884 An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention, and Enhancement of the Teaching Profession*

*March 15, 2023*

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and distinguished members of the Education Committee, my name is Joslyn DeLancey, and I am the Vice President of the Connecticut Education Association. CEA represents active, retired, and aspiring educators across the state and advocates for students, teachers, and public schools. I am also a proud elementary school educator. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of **HB 6884 AAC the Recruitment, Retention, and Enhancement of the Teaching Profession** for your consideration.

I first want to thank the committee for drafting this bill and for bringing it to a public hearing. I believe that this bill is historic, brings significant and positive changes to teaching and learning in Connecticut, and will make our state a pioneer in shaping education as we head into the future. This bill will not only help with the retention of current educators, but it will also attract teachers to the profession and encourage teachers from other states to shift their careers to Connecticut. The passing of HB 6884 will show a true investment in the support of educators and the success of our public education system.

Today, you will be hearing from over 500 of our members speaking in support of this bill. I echo their enthusiasm and want to highlight a few areas that, from my nearly 20 years of experience in the classroom as well as my experience as a union leader, will make proactive and positive changes to teaching and learning in our public schools.

Sec. 10 speaks to the kindergarten start age. Our kindergarten teachers have articulated a need to ensure that our students are starting school in a space where they can be successful. The current expectations of kindergarten students are not the same as they may have been when your child entered elementary school. Federal legislation like Race to the Top, Common Core standards, “teach-to-the-test” mindsets, not to mention the influx of boxed curriculums mandated by school districts, have shifted the expectations of kindergarten to be much closer

to those of a first-grade classroom. A child starting at four with a fifth birthday not happening until December is entering a space with high demands and little ability to build social emotional skills and learning strategies needed to find success. In some past practices, students who started kindergarten early and then realized that another year of the kindergarten experience would be helpful would be able to repeat the grade. Current practice in most districts does not allow for retention in kindergarten. As a fifth-grade teacher, I have seen the social emotional impact on students who start kindergarten too early. Many of these students suffer from a negative self-image of their academic abilities and struggle socially. Setting a kindergarten start age with a cut-off at five years old by September 1 will help students enter into a space that is age-appropriate for academics as well as social emotional development.

I can't stress enough the importance of passing the language in sections 11 and 12, which speak to Play Based Learning (PBL). I believe we should be utilizing play-based pedagogies with our earliest learners throughout their entire learning journey, but PBL is particularly critical in the primary grades and in pre-kindergarten. Over the past two decades that I have been an educator, I've watched as boxed curriculums and stringent pacing guides have slowly taken the joy out of classrooms – especially in elementary schools. Kindergarten teachers were forced to take away learning centers, an over-reliance on technology has limited students' abilities to problem solve and be creative, and while we talk about differentiated instructions, our programs don't offer many strategies that speak to the needs of most children. Utilizing play allows for teachers to bring some joy back into teaching and inspires students to begin asking questions and taking academic risks in a safe and fun learning environment. It builds soft skills like problem solving, sharing, thinking ahead, and executive functioning. I don't believe that the rise in disciplinary issues and school violence and increases in the number of students facing mental health crises is a coincidence. In an effort to ensure high academic output and to get more kids into college, we missed the mark and shifted away from best practice.

This legislation is not an unfunded mandate. There is no cost to shifting pedagogy. Legislating the use of play-based learning in our earliest grades sets a framework and understanding that this is what we want our public schools to look like.

I know some may wonder why legislation is necessary. It's a fair question. The answer is that educators are forced to focus their energy where the legislature directs it, currently that lays squarely on test-prep. We emphasize the importance of passing tests and rank our districts accordingly. So that is what we are forced to train our students to do. With this measure, we move the focus away from the score and direct our attention to how students should learn. We change the narrative of early education, which will not happen unless permission is granted and focus provided by the legislature.

My twin sister is a pre-school teacher at the King School in Stamford. She has a Reggio-inspired program that is completely play based. She shares stories, pictures of her student work, and videos of her students with me. There is so much joy in this classroom. The students are actively engaged at every moment and their excitement for learning is evident. With a focus on play and not on academics, the academic markers still get hit—and then some. These students not only

have key early literacy skills and number sense, but also have self-advocacy skills, share well, problem solve, and inspire each other's curiosity. I believe that legislating play-based learning pedagogies is a pivotal component of HB 6884 and will not only help students with SEL but will also support academic success in all of our districts across the state (to learn more about the benefits of PBL, please see our [CEA Policy Brief - Playful Learning: Enhancing Education in the Early Grades](#)).

I was excited to see sections 14-16, which speak to Exit Surveys. In order to ensure that we are doing everything possible as a state to support our public schools, it's critical to know why our teachers leave districts. It is easy to presume that it's because of salary, commute, or because an educator is taking time to be with family or to pursue other interests. As the local union president in a district for almost a decade, I can tell you that this isn't always the case. Many teachers would want to give an exit interview but don't because they fear retaliation, or they presume that nothing useful will be done with the information. Mandating the practice and having a space where districts are required to submit the information will encourage educators to speak up and freely share why they are leaving. This information will be key to ensuring that we get public education right. We can track trends with concerns and issues, as well as identify what's going right and what we can do to ensure those things are practiced statewide.

Having educator voices at the table while considering the work being done by public schools in Connecticut is critical. Sections 17-18 call for this to happen at the State Board of Education with the establishment of a State Department of Education Advisory Committee. We fully support these two sections and hope to see them come to fruition. For example, having educator voices at the SDE in the creation stage of CT-SEDS would have avoided many problems and could have led to a smooth and successful rollout of the program, instead of the nightmare special education teachers are facing today. This is a proactive approach, and I look forward to seeing educator voices at the state department level.

Lastly, section 19 calls for a task force to look at the Teachers' Retirement Board (TRB). As a sitting member of the TRB, I hope that this task force is set up to ensure that we have a competitive system in comparison to other states and seeks to ensure that our benefit is protected and improved upon as we work to retain and recruit educators. We need to ensure that we continue to protect the Teachers' Retirement System, as well as fund it appropriately and fairly. We support a task force if it includes educator voices, as well as ensures or improves upon current benefits. I would also be remiss if I didn't speak to ensuring that we include our most veteran or recently retired teachers who worked during the pandemic in Section 3. Those teachers did their part to support teaching and learning during the pandemic and should be recognized for that effort.

The last time that a bill this significant was passed was over 35 years ago. I was in first grade. It was a historic piece of legislation that saw an immediate turnaround in public education in Connecticut. HB 6884 could be that modern piece of legacy legislation that shifts our public schools in the right direction. I hope that we can sit together in a few months and celebrate this pivotal moment of change with a bill signing.