

Testimony of Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK)
To Committee on Education
March 3, 2025

Senator McCrory, Chairwoman Leeper, Senator Berthel, and Representative Zupkus,

We are pleased to be able to present testimony to you today. This document is our comprehensive statement, which would take longer than the allotted three minutes to read. Rather, members of the SEEK Legislative Committee – Andrew Feinstein, John Flanders, Naomi Nova, and Stacey Tie – will focus on a specific area. We look forward to working with the Committee to develop legislative proposals that will protect and enhance the rights and the quality of education for students with disabilities in Connecticut.

SEEK needs to comment on three bills before the Committee today. In brief, we support Raised Bill No. 1392 and strongly oppose Raised Bill No. 7076 and have mixed views on Raised Bill No. 7077.

Raised Bill No. 1392

Raised Bill No. 1392 finally provides routes to teacher certification in addition to passing the PRAXIS exam. Connecticut is desperately in need of special education teachers. The PRAXIS has posed an obstacle to certification, especially for would-be teachers of color and immigrants. Allowing a prospective teacher to show content knowledge by graduating with a major in the relevant subject or by the submission of a portfolio, as the bill permits, does not lower standards: instead, it merely affords other, reliable indicia to use in determining content knowledge. We have a critical teacher shortage, especially in the area of special education. Raised Bill No. 1392 takes a small but meaningful step in addressing that shortage. Far more needs to be done to deal with the staff shortage in special education. We have made a number of proposals to this Committee and to the Select Committee on Special Education, which we hope will be considered. The single most impactful proposal is for pay supplementation in shortage areas.

Raised Bill No. 7076

Raised Bill No. 7076 seeks to overturn the decision of this Legislature in enacting Public Law 23-137. In the case of *A.R. v. Connecticut State Board of Education*, 5 F.4th 155 (2d Cir. 2021), the court invalidated Connecticut law that exited a student with a disability at the end of the school year in which the student turned 21. The Legislature then acted to extend eligibility until the end of the school year in which the student turned 22. This determination was made because schools run on a school year cycle. Just as students enter kindergarten in September, not on their 5th birthday, students should exit in June, not on their 22nd birthday. Educational programming is on a school year basis. Leaving early disrupts the program. This decision was also made in recognition of the inadequate nature of adult services for individuals in Connecticut. An extra few months of service for the time between the individual's 22 birthday and June 30 can be critical for families to make plans.

The only possible justification for this about face is to save money for municipalities. We understand that municipalities are stressed by the increasing cost of special education and the insufficient levels of excess cost reimbursement. The answer is not to punish young adults with disabilities and their families. The answer is to appropriate more money for special education.

At a time when families of students with disabilities are, frankly, terrorized by the threatened actions of the Trump Administration, it is especially disheartening to see the Connecticut Legislature considering a bill that would curtail the rights of those students. To our knowledge, this would be the first time that this body has acted to reduce the protections of our most vulnerable students. Please, we plead with you, don't do it.

Raised Bill No. 7077

Raised Bill No. 7077 continues the requirement of a crisis response drill every three months but adds a variety of protocols attempting to reduce the trauma these drills cause, particularly to students with disabilities. We certainly support efforts to make school children and teachers better protected from a school shooter. We are not convinced that students learn any "muscle memory" by going through such drills, but we do know that the trauma caused by these drills are real. We would accept one drill each year so that emergency officials can understand school layouts, points of vulnerability and the like. We think, however, that the incremental value of three drills is far less than the damage those drills cause to individual students. The ten protocols spelled out in section 3 of the bill are important and need to be implemented. We ask that the bill be amended to reduce the number of crisis drills that students participate in to one per year.

As always, SEEK is ready to work with this Committee.