Testimony of
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Connecticut Education Association
Before the Education Committee
Re: SB 390 An Act Concerning Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention
March 9, 2020

Members of the Education Committee, my name is Nancy Andrews, and I am the Communications Director at the Connecticut Education Association. CEA is Connecticut’s largest teachers’ union, representing active, retired, and aspiring educators across the state.

Thank you for reading my testimony today regarding Raised Bill 390, AAC Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention. CEA strongly supports this bill. On a number of different fronts, CEA is leading the call to diversify our teaching profession. Today I will share with you more background about our new ad campaign, called Teaching Is Calling You, that has been airing on Connecticut television.

Background
More than 40 percent of Connecticut students are minorities, but only eight percent of teachers are minorities. The lack of minorities in the teaching profession is a concern for urban, suburban, and rural school districts. At least 23 Connecticut school districts do not have any minority educators on staff, denying students the opportunity to engage with teachers of color. Minority teachers in some CEA districts often say that they are the only minority in the entire school, if not the entire district.

Approximately 2,500 students are enrolled in teacher preparation programs at colleges throughout Connecticut, but only four percent are black, and only eight percent are Hispanic. The vast majority—82 percent—are white.

The minority teacher shortage is not exclusive to Connecticut. States across the country are feeling the impact of this critical shortage of teachers. We know we must take actions to reverse this trend to ensure students have the skills to succeed in our multicultural workplace.

Numerous studies show that students of color do better in school when they have teachers of color at the front of their classrooms. Students taught by teachers of the same race or ethnicity report feeling more connected to their teachers, being happier in class, and being more engaged academically. Black elementary school students perform better on standardized tests when taught by a black teacher, and having a black teacher in elementary school reduces the high school dropout rate for disadvantaged black males by 39 percent.
CEA’s Initiatives

CEA strongly believes that an essential path to improving educational outcomes is hiring teachers who reflect the faces and cultural experiences of all students. CEA has a number of initiatives currently underway to help diversify the teaching profession, including awarding scholarships to minority students pursuing teaching careers and building upon the Future Educators of Diversity Clubs across the state that encourage high school students to examine teaching as a profession.

But today, I am here to tell you how we have taken our efforts a step further to ensure all students have access to positive teaching and learning from diverse educators. We have amplified our efforts to diversify Connecticut’s teaching force by launching a statewide awareness campaign aimed at encouraging more young people of color to pursue careers in teaching.

The new campaign, called Teaching Is Calling You, highlights teachers as role models for their students as well as mentors for young people who may never have considered the positive difference they could make as educators. The public awareness campaign includes TV, radio, print and social media ads, and video vignettes, all in English and Spanish, that illustrate the positive influence teachers of color have on their students and school communities. Please see a sampling of campaign materials in the attached documents.

The ads target young people to let them know that they can make a profound, positive difference in their communities by entering the teaching profession. It’s important to have minority teachers so that students can learn from teachers who look like them, share their cultures and family contexts, and serve as role models.

We based our campaign on research that highlights the main reasons teachers get into the profession, and they are the same for teachers of color. Reasons include wanting to give back to their community, making a difference in the lives of students, wanting to change the world, and paying it forward. Many teachers point to specific educators who changed their lives and wanting to be that teacher for other students.

The teachers in the ads are from school districts across the state, including many from Bridgeport, where we shot the ads. They all have important stories to hear. Many would have liked to attend this hearing to share their experiences with you and explain the importance of this bill. But they are in their classrooms today, teaching.

Fortunately, some were able to attend today and you will hear from a number of teachers:

One of the stars of our TV ad, 2020 Teacher of the Year finalist Marquis Johnson, is a science teacher in Windsor, where he was educated. He will discuss the importance of an inclusive curriculum for all students.
2019 Teacher of the Year and Bridgeport music teacher Sheena Graham will share her experiences and discuss how a teacher of color influenced her profoundly and is the reason she teaches today.

Faith Sweeney, a Westport teacher, will discuss why a diversity of perspectives is essential for all students. She will share her stories of often being the only minority in her school and sometimes her entire district, as well as how she helps to tackle a number of racial incidents happening in the wealthy suburban schools where she has taught.

So many other teachers in our campaign could not attend today to testify and tell their stories in support of this bill, including 2020 Connecticut Teacher of the Year Meghan Hatch-Geary, who teaches English at Woodland High School. Meghan says not only do students of color need to see themselves reflected in their teachers, but white students need to have the experience of being taught by teachers of color as well.

Omayra Rivera-Filardi, a visual arts teacher in Bridgeport who moved to the states from Puerto Rico, credits her own art teacher with saving her life and inspiring her to become an educator.

Tracey Lafayette, a third grade teacher in Manchester, saw a lack of diversity among future educators while a student at UConn and started a Leadership in Diversity program, which is still operating successfully today.

Nalleli Becerra-Garcia moved from Mexico to the U.S. at age 14, not knowing a word of English. She says it was hard, but she had a teacher who had also come to the states from Mexico and who helped her. Because of that teacher, Nalleli joined the profession so that she could help students.

We hope you have an opportunity to hear more of our teachers’ stories and to view the TV ads and video vignettes at www.CEA.org/teachingiscalling.

The ads, produced by Pedro Bermudez, of Revisionist Films in Hartford, communicate the important message in a relevant and emotionally engaging way. The ads let young people know that they can make a profound, positive difference in their communities by entering the teaching profession. Pedro, a well-known member of Hartford’s Latino community, has a personal connection to the ad. He moved to Connecticut from Puerto Rico. His parents have worked as educators in the Hartford Public school system, and he and his two sisters were part of the group of plaintiffs in the Sheff vs. O’Neill case, that pushed for desegregation of schools across Connecticut.

CEA will continue to advocate for students and teachers, and for improving educational outcomes by expanding diversity among the teaching force. We support SB 390 and its goal of diversity. We ask committee members to consider adding a CEA teacher to the task force created by this bill.
TEACHING IS CALLING YOU

CEA campaign highlights need for more teachers of color

CEA Advisor • February-March 2020

cea.org/teachingiscalling
A new CEA campaign seeks to bring more diversity to the teaching profession to reflect our student population. See pages 8-9.
I have always had a passion for science and an interest in working with young people, from the time I was involved in youth activism in high school. In college, I studied molecular biology on a pre-med track but realized I wanted to make a difference in another way. I had been told I had a knack for teaching. A lot of young people, including some students in the Adelphi Academy for the Arts whom I taught, encouraged me to apply to graduate school to study education. As an English major, I was already familiar with educational research. I became interested in trying to get a better understanding of how students retain information and how to make material more accessible. I also had an idea for a course on teaching science in the context of environmental issues, a topic I was passionate about.

When I applied to graduate school, I was surprised to find that even though I was a strong student, my GRE scores were lower than those of many of my classmates. I was also concerned about my lack of formal teaching experience. I had never actually taught a class, and I wasn't sure if I had the skills to do so. However, I knew that I had a passion for teaching and a desire to help others.

I began my graduate studies with a focus on educational research, and I quickly realized that I had a natural talent for teaching. I was able to connect with my students on a personal level, and I was able to create engaging, interactive lessons that helped them understand complex concepts.

As I continued my studies, I also began to focus on the importance of diversity in education. I was struck by the lack of diversity in the teaching profession, and I was determined to help make a difference. I wanted to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, had access to quality education and the opportunity to succeed.

I began my teaching career at a small, rural school in Vermont, where I was able to work closely with students and their families. I was able to create a supportive, inclusive learning environment that helped students feel valued and respected.

I went on to teach at a few different schools, each with its own unique challenges and opportunities. I was able to learn from each experience and continue to grow as a teacher. I was grateful for the support and encouragement of my colleagues, who helped me along the way.

I am now a professor at a major university, where I teach a wide range of courses in education and science. I continue to be inspired by my students, and I am committed to helping them achieve their full potential. I am proud to be part of a profession that is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of young people.