

# Connecticut Education Association NEWS RELEASE



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## **Teachers Share Stories of Student Trauma, Anxiety, Toxic Stress Pervading Connecticut's Classrooms**

Call on legislators to give children back their childhood, Support Safe and Compassionate Learning Environment Initiatives

Abuse, neglect, witnessing violent events, prolonged hunger, and a host of other traumatic events are unfortunate realities in the lives of Connecticut's students, leading to toxic stress and disruptive classroom behaviors.

Today, teachers shared their stories about the growing problem, including overextended staff with very high caseloads and the impact this has on Connecticut's youngest learners, many of whom are in crisis and are not getting the supports they need. At a public hearing before the legislature's Education Committee, teachers asked lawmakers for help in dealing with everything from student trauma in the home to excessive testing, large class sizes, and kindergarten start age, which are often at the root of disruptive behaviors that put so many children and their classmates at risk.

Windsor teacher Stacey Paley told legislators she has witnessed colleagues getting hit, kicked, bitten, and yelled at by students. "My building has had several teachers out for multiple days due to injuries by students. We have also had several teachers leave in the middle of this year due to student behaviors. I have witnessed teachers crying and trying to figure out how to make it through the day. I have witnessed teachers being blamed for these behaviors, because they must have done something to cause a child to act that way. We must find a way to help all of the students, the ones who are acting out and the ones who have to witness it. We owe them better than what they are currently getting."

While teachers support Raised Bill 5378, An Act Concerning the Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in Programs of Professional Development for Educators in Connecticut, it does not go far enough to address the severity of the current problem.

"Doing nothing is unacceptable," says CEA President Jeff Leake. "Pretending there is no crisis is foolish and irresponsible. It is past time to address the violence in our classrooms, the loss of learning, and the trauma affecting our students and our teachers. While professional development in social-emotional learning is part of the solution, it is only one piece."

CEA members, leaders, and staff are calling for a comprehensive approach to addressing student trauma and promoting social-emotional learning, which includes holistically addressing the social-emotional needs of children and revising the Common Core for grades K-2.

"We need to let children be children and enjoy their childhood," said Kate Field, CEA's Teacher Development Specialist and a former public school teacher and administrator testifying before legislators.

The Common Core Standards neglect to incorporate social and emotional development into the curriculum, and they push academic studies into grades where it is not developmentally appropriate—contributing to children’s emotional dysregulation that erupts into negative classroom behaviors. “The increase in rigor has stretched our littlest learners so thin that they are now anxious, stressed-out students who struggle to work through problems themselves,” Marlborough kindergarten teacher Amy Farrow told legislators.

Kindergarten and the early grades have become more academically rigorous due to the implementation of the early childhood Common Core Standards, which are inappropriate for children as young as four. Students in the early grades are also subject to repeated standardized tests, longer school days, less playtime, and more direct instruction to meet these standards. This causes many young children intense frustration, stress, and anxiety, which often manifest as classroom outbursts among children who have not yet acquired the language or skills to regulate their emotions.

“It breaks my heart to watch my students struggle, cry, throw their pencils, and crumple their papers because what I am teaching them is not developmentally appropriate,” Farrow testified. “I had a student in tears as he was working through this math problem:  $7 + \_\_ = 9$ . He looked up at me with tears in his eyes, crumpled his paper, and said, ‘I am not smart enough for kindergarten.’ It absolutely crushed me.”

Farrow added, “My five-year-olds should not be learning pre-algebra skills. They should not be crying because they can’t read. They should be playing with their same-age peers and problem-solving and exploring the world around them.”

Retired teacher Ann Grosjean agrees. “With the Common Core Standards, kindergarten is the new first grade. In order for children to ‘do well on the test,’ what used to be taught in first grade is now taught in kindergarten, and most of the younger children, with birthdays after September 1, are not developmentally mature enough to successfully do this work. This leads to social and emotional misbehavior in the classroom.”

Leake says, “Some children are misbehaving, not engaged, and experiencing social and emotional issues in the classroom because they are not developmentally ready to learn. Students who are not old enough or developmentally advanced enough to attend kindergarten would benefit from a universal preschool program. Developmentally appropriate, play-based preschool opportunities can help better prepare students for social, emotional, and academic life in school.”

CEA and its members are urging legislators to include CEA’s Safe and Compassionate Learning Environment Initiatives in the bill.

“We are proposing systemic changes that address the underlying causes of disruptive student behavior, establish school protocols so that students get the help they need, and create a safe and compassionate space for social emotional learning to take root and flourish in Connecticut’s schools,” says Leake.

CEA’s Safe and Compassionate Learning Environment Initiatives include the following:

- **Universal Preschool:** The SDE and OEC should develop a plan for universal preschool and report their findings and recommendations for implementation to the legislature. Implementing universal preschool would provide long-term cost savings to the state and help address the impact of trauma on students.

- **Revise the Common Core for Grades K-2:** To create space for social-emotional learning to flourish in the lower grades, the Common Core Standards for K-2 must be revised to include social-emotional learning standards, play-based learning, and cognitively appropriate standards.
- **Class Size Reduction in Alliance Districts:** Provide additional ECS funds to Alliance Districts that maintain class sizes at or below the state average for similar grade levels.
- **Reduce Testing:** High stakes and school accountability pressures force schools to focus on test scores, and many now require students in kindergarten through grade 2 to be tested. Other states have begun to recognize that standardized testing is cognitively inappropriate for most of our youngest learners and extraordinarily stressful for many. Testing should be prohibited from pre-kindergarten through second grade, as was done in New Jersey.
- **Counselor, Social Worker, and School Psychologist Staff Ratios Should Meet National Standards:** For social workers and school counselors, the student-to-teacher standard is 250:1; for school psychologists, it's 500-700:1. Current ratios in most Connecticut schools are much higher and there is a disconnect between what students need and the resources available to address their needs.
- **Special Education Caseload Limits:** Initiate a comprehensive study to be conducted by the Special Education Advisory Council (with input from parents, educators, board members, and advocacy groups) that results in caseload limits.
- **Change the Kindergarten Start Age:** Children should be five years old by September 1 in order to begin kindergarten. This would ensure Connecticut's start age is consistent with the other 49 states and ensure students are cognitively, psychologically, and emotionally ready to start school.
- **Address Trauma for Students Who Exhibit Need:** Require districts to have plans in place to ensure an appropriate, timely, and student-centered response to disruptive students. And a process for teachers to advocate for resources to prevent future incidents.  
Plans must:
  1. **Identify a suitable location** for a student who has been temporarily removed from class for dangerous behavior so that educational needs can be met.
  2. **Implement interventions to address underlying trauma**, such as therapeutic support; restorative practices with training; trauma-informed instruction; and strategies to improve the school climate, etc.
  3. **Ensure teacher input** into the supports and interventions necessary to help affected students and protect teachers who advocate for their students from workplace retaliation – an all-too-familiar form of silencing teachers.

At a forum in Rocky Hill last week, teachers stood up and spoke directly with Connecticut Education Commissioner Miguel Cardona, sharing stories of underresourced schools, overtaxed students, and dysregulated behavior in classrooms.

Cardona told teachers, "For far too long, we've been dealing with the symptoms and not the underlying problems." The Commissioner understands the issue and has pledged to provide Connecticut's teachers and students with the supports they need and to involve them in identifying what those supports should be.

“We urge the state legislature to do the same,” said Leake. “Read the heartfelt stories submitted by more than 50 teachers and the calls for help in their testimony. Take action by incorporating CEA’s Safe and Compassionate Learning Environment Initiatives into Raised Bill 5378. Our students’ futures depend on it.”

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The Connecticut Education Association is Connecticut’s largest teachers’ union, representing active and retired educators across the state. For further information contact Nancy Andrews at 860-725-6317, [nancya@cea.org](mailto:nancya@cea.org). Visit [cea.org](http://cea.org) or follow us on Twitter @ceanews and on Facebook at CTEDAssoc.

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