

3/17/2021

Members of the Public Health Committee,

I'm writing today to suggest several important modifications to proposed committee bill **SB 1**.

Section 1 (starting at line 1) requires a local school board to conduct an "exit interview" with each student withdrawing from public or private school. **Section 1 of the bill should be omitted in its entirety for the following reasons:**

I understand the purpose of the section is to collect data on students exiting the public/private school systems, but the effect of requiring an "exit interview" of departing students will doubtless further stress parents and students looking to leave the school systems for other alternatives. These families are already often facing massive stress as they seek to make important decisions with long-lasting ramifications. The mandatory "exit interview" will only add to that stress.

Too many questions remain unanswered regarding these "exit interviews", including:

1. What will be the format of these "interviews"? 1-page questionnaire? Full-on interview by four board of ed members?
2. Will a child (potentially as young as 5 years old) be subject to an "exit interview" alone? With or without notification to or approval of a parent?
3. What happens when the interviewer doesn't approve of the answers? Does he/she now have the power to **deny** the withdrawal? (In Massachusetts and many other states, for example, this is exactly the case.) If this isn't explicitly defined, won't superintendents **assume** they now have this power (or pretend they have it)?
4. Who defines what qualifies as "trauma"?
5. Why should a student or parent be forced to disclose to the local school board whether their family has ever been "reported" to DCF or any other agency for "ongoing stressors"? Is no one on the PH committee aware of the difference between a **report** to DCF and a **substantiation** (1,468 reports and only 156 substantiations in 4th quarter of 2020 per the DCF's own records)? "Any other agency for ongoing stressors" is a VERY open-ended and legally vague term.
6. What or who determines if a student is "trainable in skills that will provide financial independence"? What if they're deemed "**not** trainable"? How is this at all applicable to students in elementary or middle school (or most of high school)?
7. How is this information to be aggregated and reported to the state DOE and DPH? Sounds like another unfunded (and vague) mandate being pushed on already taxed local school boards and staff!
8. How should school boards treat families that refuse or just skip the "exit interview"? Is that grounds for a call to DCF? Is the interview optional for students/parents? What about students who were already out of school (for health, distance learning, or many other reasons) and whose parents simply decided to withdraw them and homeschool them? Do they have to make a special trip back to the school or office of board of ed for the "exit interview"?

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These questions (and others) will ALL be faced many, many times each year by the multitude of different school boards across the state. In my experience as an advocate for homeschooling families, I have seen that local school boards and superintendents tend to fill in with their own rules when there's a vacuum of information like the gaping holes left by this proposed mandate and the result is further confusion and chaos, stress on families, and legal challenges against school boards.

Most concerning to me, however, is the addition of a new hurdle to families trying to leave the public school systems to educate their child at home or another alternative. Parents should have the authority to freely make decisions in the best educational interest of their children, and our state legislature, under the guidance of our state constitution, has so far protected that freedom. We have one of the lowest levels of regulation over our homeschooling families and this is actually a selling point to families considering moving to CT (a selling point we should be zealously trying to preserve). To add this new requirement to a family seeking a better alternative to a system they're likely already experiencing serious problems in, will likely serve to insert someone the school board as a final ominous "gauntlet" the exiting student must pass through before leaving.

Please remove Section 1, as collecting or synthesizing this data (the stated goal of this section) is the job of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), and not the job of every school board in each town in the state. Keep the OCA accountable to do their own job and don't put that burden on parents and local BOE members.

Section 14 (starting at Line 282) would require doctors to perform a "mental health examination" as part of the an annual physical. **Section 14 should also be omitted from the bill in its entirety.**

I believe doctors should have the freedom to practice medicine in the way they feel is best. The legislature should not have the authority to mandate which "tests" my doctor must perform as part of a routine exam. I trust my doctor (and other doctors) to make their own judgement calls as they interact with and treat me to determine if mental health needs to be discussed or further evaluated as part of a visit. Please stay out of my doctor-patient relationship!

As a parent, I also don't want my children to be forced to submit to a [vaguely defined] "mental health examination" as part of their annual physicals merely because it's mandated by law. Again, that should be a discussion and decision between the doctor and the parent. Please respect our medical autonomy and our parental freedoms. **Please omit Section 14 from this bill.**

Thank you for your consideration of these points.

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