

Written Testimony of

Tom Nicholas, Vice President

Connecticut Education Association

Before the

Committee on Appropriations

RE:

**HB 6662 AA DECLARING RACISM AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS AND ESTABLISHING THE
COMMISSION ON RACIAL EQUITY IN PUBLIC HEALTH**

March 26, 2021

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Tom Nicholas and I serve as the Vice President for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA). CEA represents teachers in over 150 school districts in Connecticut.

I speak on behalf of our thousands of CEA members across Connecticut in support of HB 6662, which would formally designate racism in Connecticut as a public health crisis and create a Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health.

We believe that this bill is critically important as we have experienced an escalation of instances of racism in our country and state. As we noted regarding similar legislation in SB 1 heard in the Public Health Committee, the time is now to address this crisis.

We recognize the very disturbing incidents of racism and bias that have taken hold in communities across the country. We are deeply disturbed by the many instances that have occurred closer to home in Connecticut cities and towns. What had been unacceptable implicit bias has become more explicit, clearly exposing the historical racism that continues to sit in the underbelly of our communities.

Educators, like the vast majority of the families in the communities we serve, believe in the fundamental value of treating and respecting others as we want to be treated. We fear that it is this fundamental value that is under attack. Its impact on all people of color, children especially, has resulted in a crisis that educators see on a daily basis. They see it in the trauma exhibited by students and in the inequities and biases that fuel the crisis. Its impact on all people, regardless of color, prevents our society from being all it can be. Everyone suffers.

The Connecticut Education Association, along with our affiliate, the National Education Association, have recognized the crisis of institutional racism and the damage it continues to impart on our society. For the state to formally designate racism as a public health crisis acknowledges the persistent injustices

that have continued for centuries and enables institutions across the state to address the crisis comprehensively.

Our members see racism's effects on health every day. Black school children are more likely to experience trauma from the loss of siblings because black mothers are four times more likely to lose their babies than white mothers. Black school children are also twice as likely to lose their fathers to prostate cancer than children of white fathers.¹ The impact of such loss on children, as well as other adverse childhood experiences driven by racial disparities and bias is itself a health crisis.

Additionally, the prevalence of asthma in children in Connecticut is above the national rate and affects roughly 3 out of 20 of Connecticut's school-age children. Most of the state's minority students attend school in urban areas, which is where asthma is most prevalent in part because of greater air pollution from cars and trucks. Disinvestment in communities of color leave schools dilapidated adding to disparate childhood asthma rates. This results in Hispanics being four and half times more likely to end up in an emergency room than their white peers. For black children, the rate of emergency room visits for asthma is even higher at five and a half times white children. Ultimately racial disparities in health become disparities in the learning and development that happens in our schools.

For our part, CEA has developed resources to help facilitate conversations about race, including classroom appropriate lesson plans, guides on how to have tough conversations with peers and students, implicit bias training available to school districts, and more. We stand ready as a partner in turning back the tide of racism.

CEA also supports the establishment of a Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health to study the impact of racial disparities. We commend the committee for including housing discrimination and hiring practices among the aspects to be studied. We see the impact of racism on student health, as well as the impact of racism on housing and ultimately the patterns that resulted in our highly segregated school districts with attendant disparities. As this bill moves toward final passage, we suggest that it include in the commission's study, the impact of racism on schooling. To that end, we offer participation of our organization and in particular our educators of color, in that discussion. We can also bring to that discussion the resources we have at our disposal through our national affiliate.

Thank you.

¹ <https://www.cthealth.org/latest-news/news-releases/new-report-health-disparities-in-connecticut-causes-effects-and-what-we-can-do/>