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Education Committee

Public Hearing: February 28, 2024

In Support of H.B. 5213: An Act Concerning Disconnected Youth

Dear Representative Currey, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, Representative Leeper, Senator Winfield, and members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support H.B. 5213: An Act Concerning Disconnected Youth. My name is Rhea Henry. I currently serve as a Workforce Development Coordinator at Norwalk ACTS in Norwalk. Norwalk ACTS is a Collective Impact partnership that brings people, organizations, and systems together, in a structured way, to achieve social change.

I support H.B. 5213: An Act Concerning Disconnected Youth as I believe that this legislation addresses a critical issue facing our youth and provides much-needed support to those who find themselves disconnected from educational and employment opportunities. A recently published Dalio Education report found that, approximately 119,000 or 19% of Connecticut's 14- to 26-year-olds were either at-risk or disconnected in, and of those 119,000 approximately 63,000 are already classified as "disconnected".

In Norwalk, the disconnected youth crisis is even more dire than that of the state on average. A concerning reality in Norwalk is 28% of our youth, amounting to 1114 individuals are currently disconnected. Amongst this group, a particularly alarming trend is the presence of 242 newly disconnected youth. This crisis is highlighted among our recent Norwalk Public School graduates. An average of 29% of the last five graduating classes from Norwalk Public Schools (2018-2022), representing approximately 220 graduates each year, have not enrolled in 2 or 4-year degree colleges or universities. This statistic sheds light on a significant portion of our youth who face barriers to accessing higher education opportunities and job training opportunities that connect them to livable wage career pathways. What's particularly alarming is that 80% of these non-enrolled students are individuals of color. This stark racial disparity underscores the urgency of addressing the disconnected youth crisis, as it disproportionately affects marginalized communities.

Addressing the disconnected youth crisis not only has intrinsic value to our communities but holds immense instrumental value for the state. For instance, the potential impact on addressing this crisis is significant for our economy, given that there are more than 90,000 unfilled jobs statewide. By reengaging disconnected youth, not only could it address the workforce shortage but bolster the state's Gross Domestic Product by an estimated \$5 billion to \$5.5 billion.

I believe that by supporting H.B. 5213, we are taking a significant step toward building a more inclusive and supportive community for our young people. I urge the committee to consider the long-term benefits that this legislation can bring to our youth, economy, and Connecticut as a whole.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Sincerely,
Rhea Henry, Workforce Development Coordinator
Norwalk ACTS