

**Testimony on**  
**HB 177: An Act to Respond to School Exclusion Data and Reduce School Dropouts**  
**HB 178: An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services & Exclusion from**  
**School**

**Dan French, Executive Director**  
**Center for Collaborative Education**

My name is Dan French. I am the executive director of the Center for Collaborative Education, a nonprofit organization based in Boston that assists urban school districts to create high performing schools. Previously, I was the Director of Instruction & Curriculum for the state Department of Education during the first years of the 1993 Education Reform Act.

I come before you to voice my support for House Bills 177 and 178. The goal of a school's discipline policies should be to foster self-discipline, while keeping students in school and engaged in learning. Yet, too many students are losing valuable learning time and becoming disengaged through the practice of exclusion.

While the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education no longer provides annual public reports on suspensions and exclusions, we know that from 2002-2003 through 2006-2007 the number of students excluded from school 10 or more consecutive days for disciplinary reasons rose steadily. The disparities by race for this group of students were alarming. African-American students were excluded at about three times the rate, and Latino students over twice the rate, of White students. Special education students were excluded at 4 times the rate of their regular education peers. Low-income students were also disproportionately excluded. And we know from the 2009-2010 school year, that of the nine largest urban districts in the state, every district except for Boston had out-of-school suspension rates that ranged from 50% to three times greater than the state-wide suspension rate.

High rates of suspension and exclusion are usually a sign that a school is not addressing the needs of a significant group of students. For example, the highest rate of exclusions and suspensions in this state occur at the ninth grade, suggesting that schools are not providing

supportive transitions to incoming ninth graders, such as small learning communities, advisory, and meaningful and engaging curriculum.

Past data and research tells us that many exclusions are given for less serious offenses than that of student and staff safety. For example, in 2002-2003, the last ESE report on exclusions, over 20% of the exclusions were in the "Other" category, a category that provides far too much latitude and discretion to administrators. As well, past state data suggests that most suspensions are for attendance violations, disruption, and disrespect, rather than more serious offenses such as drugs and alcohol, assault, weapons, or vandalism. This data is similar to more recent national data which finds that the majority of suspensions are for offenses of a less serious nature.

The impact of suspensions and exclusions on affected students carries long-term negative consequences. Suspension and exclusion are strongly correlated with lower attendance and academic achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, and higher dropout rates, resulting in higher costs to society through higher incarceration and public assistance rates, as well as lower life-time earnings for the dropout.

Ultimately, education is a civil right, and denying students this right should be undertaken with utmost care and thought. Exclusions of 10 days or more should be limited to those students who engage in illegal or violent behavior, and those who are excluded should receive alternative education opportunities. These two bills will bring greater accountability to the discipline process in schools through outlining a hearing process that must take place, requiring schools to submit annual reports on exclusions to the state and the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education to investigate those schools that have high exclusion rates, and provide education services to all students who are excluded. For these reasons, I fully support House Bills 177 and 178. Then we can turn our attention to what is most successful in reducing the numbers of exclusion in schools, which is engaging all students in meaningful learning and personalized relationships with adults.

Thank you.