

**Testimony on House Bill No. 3435
An Act to Help Students Stay in School**

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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 innovative, high performing schools. Previously, I was the Director of Instruction & Curriculum for the Massachusetts Department of Education during the first years of the Education Reform Act.

I come before you to voice my support for House Bill 3435, An Act to Help Students Stay in School. The goal of a school's discipline policies should be to foster self-discipline and personal investment in contributing to a participatory, democratic society.

Yet, many schools in the Commonwealth have discipline policies that may not be serving some students well. The number of students excluded from school 10 or more consecutive days for disciplinary reasons has been steadily rising over the past decade, doubling from 2002-2003 to 2006-2007. The disparities by race are alarming. African-American students are excluded at twice the rate, and Latino students at 2.5 times the rate, of White students. Special education students are excluded at 4 times the rate of their regular education peers. Virtually every Massachusetts large urban district has suspensions rates ranging from 50% to three times the state-wide suspension rate.

Unfortunately, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education no longer provide public reports on suspensions and exclusions. However, we do have past data and research that tells us that many exclusions and even more suspensions are 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. 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.

The impact on affected students of suspensions and exclusions can carry long-term negative consequences. Suspension and exclusion are correlated with lower attendance and academic achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, and higher dropout rates, resulting in higher costs to society and lower life-time earnings.

In fact, high rates of suspension and exclusion are usually a symptom of a school that is not working well for a significant percentage of its students. For example, research tells us that ninth grade is the most difficult transition period of a student's career. This is a time when many students make decisions about staying in school or leaving. Yet, the highest rate of exclusions and suspensions 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.

Ultimately, exclusions of 10 days or more should be limited to those students who engage in illegal or violent behavior – that is, sale of illegal substances, possession of weapons, assault, or substantial vandalism. For these offenses, there needs to be a plan of support and intervention that helps to address the causes for a student's actions, and places them in a better position to succeed. For these reasons, I fully support House Bill 3435. This bill will provide greater clarity and safeguards for the reasons why students can be excluded, the process by which exclusions should occur, and the supports that should be in place for excluded students.

Thank you.