I am pleased to write to you today on behalf of Committee for Children. Committee for Children is a nonprofit organization that for 35 years has been creating and supporting educators in implementing evidence-based child safety and social-emotional learning curricula – including the Second Step program, a universal, classroom-based curriculum designed to decrease problem behaviors, increase students’ school success, and promote social-emotional competence and self-regulation. Committee for Children’s curricula can be found in over 25,000 schools across the US including well over 1200 schools in Massachusetts. We work with hundreds of thousands of educators who, despite an appalling lack of policy support or funding, struggle daily to teach children the skills to be safer, kinder, and in the bargain, more academically successful people. We consider these educators our country’s unsung heroes, whose work to educate the whole child must now more than ever, be lifted up and supported, in the interests of the safety and well-being of all of our children.

Social-emotional learning, when taught from early grades throughout the school years, is a proven essential ingredient to making our schools safe, positive places where all kids can learn. So that we know exactly what we mean by social-emotional learning, these are the skills we are talking about: emotion management, problem solving, self-control, empathy, friendship building and assertiveness. To you these might seem to be the skills that make people nicer to be around, more mentally sound, better collaborators, more peaceful problem solvers—and they are. In fact, every time we talk about social-emotional learning we hear that these would be very good skills to impart to some grownups we know. But what you may not know is that the imparting of these skills, which we sometimes shorthand as SEL—when taught as part of a research-based, well-implemented school curriculum, also result in children who achieve academically, who are more likely to stay in school and graduate, who grow up to be safer community members, and are more successful throughout their lives.

CASEL, Collaborative for Social-Emotional Learning, the research and thought leaders in this field who have really coined this phrase and brought SEL into daily thinking and discussions in education settings at the highest and most grassroots level today are the best central resource for information and research (www.casel.org).

Student achievement, health, attendance, discipline referrals, graduation rates...all these metrics are significantly impacted by students’ sense of safety, attachment to their teachers and peers, students’ ability to pay attention, solve problems peacefully, and defer instant gratification in favor of longer term goals. Social-emotional learning provides the bedrock foundation for student success. The teaching of these essential skills is falling by the wayside, due to lack of support in our current education policy, as well as a dearth of funding with the demise of the Safe and Drug-Free schools and other recently eliminated federal education programs. In the wake of the Newtown tragedy, the focus of the President’s plan with respect to school safety and mental health is welcome.
But to quote Dr. Howard Adelman, Head of the School Mental Health department at UCLA: as always, making resources pay the greatest dividends for students and schools remains a significant challenge. Says Adelman, past trends suggest that, in the rush to pursue new dollars, staff and programs will be added in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. This will further fragment efforts to improve how schools address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Instead, he says, let’s open up the opportunity for schools to systematically embed the work of school safety and mental health into efforts designed to unify and enhance existing student and learning supports. This is what social and emotional learning is all about. In our experience working with tens of thousands of schools and hundreds of thousands of teachers, principals, and parents across the country, there is no shortage public will to teach these skills to children in school, in a thoughtful, integrated manner—but there is a dire shortage of policy support and funding that will allow our educators it so.

The president has also offered gun control solutions—and these ideas will no doubt become the subject of epic Congressional battles in the weeks and months ahead. So how do all of us, regardless of our stand on gun control, stand firmly WITH the children and families of Sandy Hook School and other schools? We can find great common ground in the response to invest early and wisely in evidence-based social-emotional learning programs. We can all agree that early prevention is money well spent for something as precious and priceless as the safety of our children.

An Act Relative to Safe and Supportive Schools will provide the foundation schools need to teach children all the skills, including, SEL, they require to be effective learners. On behalf of our Massachusetts allies and friends, Committee for Children encourages passage of S210/H520.