TESTIMONY OF BRIDGET ALLISON,
DEAN OF THE LAW & GOVERNMENT ACADEMY AND
SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER AT HARTFORD PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL,
IN SUPPORT OF PROPOSED H.B. NO. 5842:
AN ACT CONCERNING FOSTER PLACEMENT AND EDUCATION

February 10, 2009

My name is Bridget Allison. I am a Social Studies teacher at and the Dean of the Law & Government Academy at Hartford Public High School. I am also an attorney. In the almost five years that I have taught at Hartford Public and in the Law & Government Academy, I have seen first hand the devastating effects that school disruptions have on a student's academic and social performance, and the financial burdens placed upon schools who, for humanitarian reasons, allow students to maintain enrollment even when they have moved out of district.

I am here today to urge you to pass Proposed H. B. No. 5842 AN ACT CONCERNING FOSTER PLACEMENT AND EDUCATION. I believe in the bill's stated intent, which is **"To improve educational outcomes for youth committed to the Department of Children and Families by permitting them to attend their schools of origin while in foster care."**

I have learned in my time as an educator that all students - no matter their circumstances - crave consistency and stability. This is particularly true of high risk students, such as those whose home life has been disrupted by placement with the Department of Children and Families. **When a student has been removed from their home, the only thing in their life that may remain the same is school, where they may have adults and peers who know and care about them.** In my experience, a young person who does not have at least one thing in their life that they can count on to be there tomorrow loses hope that they will ever have a future worth living. Without that hope, a student has no motivation to do well in school, thereby failing at the one thing that can help bring them a secure future.

I have seen this happen with countless students who are in the custody of the Department of Children and Families. One student, a young woman, was placed in DCF custody because her mother's boyfriend raped her. The mother refused to believe her daughter, even after the boyfriend was convicted of the crime and sent to jail. In the years since her removal, the student has been placed in a number of foster homes, including shelters. Every few months her placement changes. **The only stability she has in life is school.** About a year and a half ago, the student came to me and told me that DCF had decided that she could no longer attend Hartford Public and would have to attend a school near her shelter, which was in a different town. This young woman was already shaky in her academics. After this announcement, she completely gave up. Some time later, DCF reversed that decision and allowed her to stay at Hartford Public. However, the damage had already been done. **The mere threat of transfer crushed this young woman**, who was already struggling with the realities of being a victim of rape.

Another student, also a young woman, was in DCF custody for almost her entire life. She had been in and out of multiple foster homes since she was a young child. Now a teenager, she was old beyond her years. Drained by a system that continually wreaked havoc in her life, she confessed to me that she was "tired of it all," of having so little stability in her life. I, and a few other teachers, spent a great amount of time counseling this young woman. **School was the one place where she had consistent contact with adults who cared about her**. We were on the verge of a breakthrough with her when she tragically died. While school stability alone did not ultimately save her, school was very important to her while she was alive.

I have also seen what happens when students actually move to a new school during an ongoing academic year. At Hartford Public, we have students who transfer in and out of the school during all months of the year, sometimes multiple times. **In every case, the student struggles to achieve academically.** This process is complicated by many factors, including:

- The student may be transferring into a class that he or she was not enrolled in at the previous school. For example, most high schools do not offer a Law class. If a student enters my Academy's Law class in December, that student must become familiar with all the material that the class has learned in September, October, and November to truly succeed in the class. That is true for every other new class in which the student is enrolled.

- If a student transfers into a class that he or she was enrolled in at the previous school, it is highly unlikely that the material learned in the old class is exactly the same as the material learned in the new class. Again, the student must work hard to make-up missed learning.

For a highly motivated student, it may take months to become fully integrated into new classes. For students who are not highly motivated, they may never become fully integrated and are therefore at a substantial risk of failure. For a student who is in DCF custody and has to move to a new school, the consequences are even more severe.

Student transfers also affect the teachers and other staff members of the school. When a student transfers into my classroom I have very little time to spend one on one with that student. The information and skills that I - and most other educators - teach are sequential and build upon each other. **After the first few months of school, it is almost impossible for me to ensure that a new student fully understands all the information and skills that he or she has missed.** As a teacher, it is terribly frustrating and disheartening to observe a student fail, not because they are incapable of understanding the subject matter, but because there simply is not enough time in the day to tutor that student to competency.

When students in DCF are forced to move out of their home district, schools face the choice between humanitarianism and the realities of budget reductions. When a

student lives out of district, the school does not receive any funding for that child - a loss that could total thousands of dollars a year. When a DCF child moves out of district we must decide whether it is in the child's best interest to remain enrolled in our school, even if it means a loss of funding. The Law & Government Academy has made that choice for at least one of its students this year. The student moved to an emergency shelter outside of Hartford. We chose to continue her enrollment, even though we did not receive any funding for her. However, we believed it was the right thing to do.

In short, we do our young people, and those who serve them, a disservice when we interrupt their education by transferring them to a new school. When it is possible and in a child's best interest to do so, we should strive to maintain consistency and stability for that child. This bill would help achieve that goal with respect to the education of some of our most vulnerable children.

Respectfully Submitted,

/s/ Bridget Allison

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