



Jeanne Milstein
Child Advocate

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
999 Asylum Avenue, Hartford, Connecticut 06105

TESTIMONY OF JEANNE MILSTEIN, CHILD ADVOCATE
IN SUPPORT OF
HOUSE BILL NO. 6497, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL STABILITY FOR
CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE
February 23, 2009

Good Morning Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and Members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify **in support of House Bill No. 6497, An Act Concerning Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care.**

HB 6497 would allow a child placed in foster care by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to continue to attend the school such child attended prior to placement, or change in placement, if that is in the best interest of the child.

Over 5000 children are in out-of-home care in the custody of DCF. Many of these children bounce from placement to placement – home, foster homes, residential settings, hospitals, and shelters. For anyone, a life of such constant change would be discouraging and traumatic. For a child or adolescent, however, this constant change can be devastating, as the presence of a consistent adult with whom a child can build a trusting relationship is the foundation of healthy emotional development. The impact on education is significant. Children in foster care are a highly vulnerable population. Victims of abuse or neglect not only experience dramatic upheaval upon removal from their parents, but they are also likely to experience several placements over the course of their stay in care. School may be one of the only stable elements in a child's life while he or she is in foster care. The ability to remain in their home schools is likely to provide children in foster care with social and academic benefits that will serve as protective factors during the foster care process and into the future. We know that educational consistency, which provides a better chance for academic achievement, is one of the most important factors in successful transition to adulthood. These children have endured significant trauma. Sadly, children in foster care:

- Lag behind their peers in academic achievement;
- Repeat grades and fail classes at greater rates than peers;
- Are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities;
- Are twice as likely to dropout of high school than their peers outside of the child welfare system;
- Obtain G.E.D.'s at a higher percentage than their peers; and
- Less frequently enroll in or complete post-secondary education.¹

Frequent school changes add to the trauma. They've already lost connections to parents and siblings, and now they lose connections to classmates, teachers, a coach, after school activities-the

¹ McNaught ,K. (2005). *Mythbusting: Breaking down confidentiality and decision-making barriers to meet the educational needs of children in foster care.* American Bar Association.

aspects of daily life that create a sense of security, self-worth and belonging. Disruptions have devastating short and long-term effects on the educational experience of foster children. Studies show that frequent school changes are linked to an increased risk of failing grades, repeated behavior problems, and dropping out. The poor academic performance of these children contributes to above average rates of homelessness, criminality, drug abuse, and unemployment.

A report published by my office in 2005 explores the school mobility of Connecticut's foster children and the degree to which public policies and casework practices influence their educational experience.² This report found:

- The quality and efficiency of service delivery, both in education and child protection systems, varies by the individual worker. When asked about their experiences in setting up education services for foster children, all stakeholders responded with some version of the statement, "It depends." Each group of professionals reported variability in the quality and efficiency of work provided by the other. This finding is compelling and suggests a serious need for agencies to reevaluate and reinforce their recruitment, training, and quality assurance procedures.
- There is a need for improved multidisciplinary training and communication. In addition to clarification on each other's technical policies and practices, DCF and SDE also need to be informed regarding each other's goals, needs, and priorities. Multidisciplinary training can help educators and child protection workers combine their goals of education and building healthy families. DCF and SDE must work together on establishing plans for school stability, management of foster children in school and data sharing.
- The lack of foster homes is inextricably tied to children being placed outside of their school districts of origin. All of the participants in this study described concerns related to the limited number of available foster homes. As such, the findings strongly support renewed efforts to recruit and retain foster parents. When children are removed from their biological homes, we should make every effort to place them in foster homes within their community and school district so they can maintain as much continuity in relationships as possible.

My office advocated for legislation like HB 6497 last year because it was good public policy for children. Since then, the U.S. Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. The new federal law *requires* child welfare agencies to include "a plan for ensuring the educational stability of the child while in foster care." Specifically, the agency must include assurances that:

- the child's foster care placement takes into account the appropriateness of the current educational setting and the proximity to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement; and
- the state child welfare agency has coordinated with appropriate local educational agencies to ensure that the child remains in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement.

² The full report, entitled "School Mobility and Issues of Educational Access for Children in Foster Care," can be found at http://www.ct.gov/oca/lib/oca/Lily_Alpert%27s_report_for_OCA.pdf.

Finally, the new law increases the amount of federal funding that may be used to cover education-related transportation costs for children in foster care.

I would be happy to work with the Committee to move forward HB 6497 to provide children in foster care with educational stability to promote success and prevent some of the well-documented unintended consequences of being a “child in the system” and to ensure that Connecticut can comply with the new federal law in a way that is effective and efficient.

It is time for Connecticut to follow a number of other states that have recognized that efforts towards ensuring stability in educational placement may help.

I would be happy to answer any questions.