

**TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY  
IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL NO. 6497  
AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL STABILITY FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER  
CARE**

DATE February 20, 2009

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Owen Murphy, an attorney providing services to indigent clients in Superior Court, Juvenile Matters at New Haven. Attorney Murphy represents both parents and children in juvenile cases.

**I strongly endorse Bill No. 6497 which will ensure that a child has the right to remain in his or her home school even if she is placed into foster care and moved to another town.**

It is beyond argument that school is an integral part of the lives all youth, and educational success is vital to their successful transition to adulthood. It is so important our government is mandated to provide this education. The youths I represent have already been traumatized by being either abused or neglected in their home environment, or seeing their parents falsely accused by DCF of doing so. Often times, a foster child is moved to a home outside of his immediate community and must start over in a new school, typically after the academic year begins. Not only has the child lost his parents and possibly his siblings, but he has lost friends, classmates, a favorite teacher, a coach, music lessons, anything he identified with in his former school. I have observed such transfers often result in a severe deterioration of academic performance and result in behavior problems in school. These problems slow down the reunification with family that occurs in most of these cases. Foster care is expensive. Each day of delay in reunification caused by behavioral problems due to excessive school transfers costs hundreds of dollars.

**These Youth and Families Need Our Help**

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is often at a disadvantage in dealing with the local school boards involved. DCF is the legal guardian of all children committed to foster care in this state. Many of these children were so called "problem" students before DCF involvement. For both budgetary and legal liability reasons their home school boards are all too ready to force them out of their system when they are transferred to another town due to a foster care placement.

The town they have just moved to through foster care has every reason to try and dodge their legally mandated responsibility to educate the new residents of their town. This is especially true for youth who need special education services. While eventually such services are provided eventually it is often after every administrative delay possible has been used.

**School disruptions have devastating short and long-term effects on the education of foster children**

- Numerous studies have confirmed that foster children perform significantly worse in school than do children in the general population. The educational deficits of foster children are reflected in higher rates of grade retention; lower scores on standardized tests; and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates.

- Studies have shown that it takes a child approximately four to six months to recover academically from a school transfer<sup>1</sup>; the educational cost of multiple transfers is potentially devastating.
- Experts have identified school stability as the single most effective way to improve educational outcomes for foster children.<sup>2</sup>

### **HB 6497 Benefits Schools and Teachers**

Teachers and administrators are forced to scramble to determine the appropriate education program for each new student. Students transferred mid-year may be forced into special education programs to close the gaps between their old curriculum and the new one, programming which comes at great expense to the school district and town.<sup>3</sup> Frequent student movement can overtax even extraordinary teachers,<sup>4</sup> interfere with the pace of instruction, and lead to behavioral and social disruptions.<sup>5</sup> In addition, when foster children fall behind, towns and taxpayers must pay for additional schooling.

### **School Stability For Foster Youth is Now a Federal Mandate**

On October 7, 2008, the **Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (PL 110-351)** was signed into law. "Fostering Connections" amends the Social Security Act to help hundreds of thousands of children and youth in foster care find permanent families and improve their educational outcomes. The new federal law *requires* child welfare agencies to include "a plan for ensuring the educational stability of the child while in foster care." The agency must also include assurances that it has coordinated with the appropriate school districts to ensure that the child remains in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement. 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.

### **Fifteen states have taken the lead in promoting school stability for foster children:**

In passing educational stability legislation this year, Connecticut would be following the existing example set by over fifteen other states, including Arkansas, California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington—all have already created educational stability models for youth in foster care.<sup>6</sup>

No responsible parent would allow his or her child to move from one school to another every few months. Even though a lot of my parent clients are accused of neglecting their children they will, for the most part, be reunited with them in a functioning family unit. They want the best

<sup>1</sup> American Bar Association, *Educating Children Without Housing*, 11 (2002).

<sup>2</sup> See CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS, *A ROAD MAP FOR LEARNING: IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN FOSTER CARE 9* (2004).

<sup>3</sup> See MASON BURLEY & MINA HALPERN, *EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF FOSTER YOUTH: ACHIEVEMENT AND GRADUATION OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN STATE CARE 9* (Wash. State Inst. for Public Policy, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Hartman, *Students on the Move*, 63 EDUC. LEADERSHIP, 20-24 (Feb. 2006).

<sup>6</sup> See *Fostering School Stability for Children in Connecticut's Care*, (Center for Children's Advocacy et al.) Aug. 2008.

educational outcomes for their children as well. The youths and parents I represent are asking only that they be given the chance to stay in the school that is in best interests of their family. For the foregoing reasons, we urge you to pass Raised Bill No. 6497, *An Act Concerning Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care*.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Owen F. Murphy", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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