

Good afternoon, Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and Committee Members. My name is Sarah Chasse, and I am an MSW student, here in favor of H.B. 6497 An Act Concerning Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care. I would like to begin with a statement from Casey Family Programs:

"A quality education builds on a foundation of educational continuity and school stability. Unfortunately, too many children in foster care experience multiple placement changes, and each change in home placement frequently results in a change in school placement. Every school change has a significant impact on student's education. Whenever students enter a new school, they must adapt to different curricula, different expectations, new friends, and new teachers. A stable school environment provides children with opportunities to develop positive relationships with supportive and caring teachers, school counselors, and classmates. These relationships and an established school routine often provide a measure of protection from the disruption and uncertainty associated with foster care."

This statement speaks to a need voiced by the foster youth population; educational stability. For individuals in the foster care system, there is often a background of trauma, and instability is present in most areas of their life. Changes in home, family, friends, community, and school impact youth who often enter the system with pre-existing mental health issues and special education needs. The differences in curriculum, expectations, and social groups create disorganization in the minds of youth surrounded by chaos. Youth are forced to be independent in order to manage such disorganization, when they are often unprepared to handle such responsibility. This bill would provide the stability needed for these youth to build a foundation upon which they can develop into healthy, productive, and contributing citizens.

Last year I facilitated an advocacy leadership group for foster care youth, where we discussed policy and current child welfare issues. I asked the members to select three main concerns currently faced by foster youth. Each youth had a unique experience with one of the three main topics, and prepared individual testimonies to deliver at a meeting with Representative Walker.

At the meeting, the youth shared all three topics, but clearly were most interested in improving policy around educational stability. Representative Walker discussed possible solutions with the youth, which were integrated in last session's legislation on the same topic. The youth testified on the bill, and spoke of their individual experiences with instability.

One youth shared that she was often in trouble at school, because every time she transferred to a new school (she had attended 9 different schools in 14 years), it was the "bad" kids which were always accepting new friends. She spoke of the lack of any meaningful connection with teachers, and described how she would often act out in class to distract from her embarrassment for not knowing the material. Without community, a consistent group of friends or stable family, many youth in foster care share these experiences.

The youth in my advocacy group followed the policy process and took pride in their ability to influence change. They all understood that the legislation would not impact them directly, as most were in high school, but they fought for the potential to change the lives of the next generation of foster youth around the state for years to come.

Please continue that fight. Thank you for your attention.