Written testimony of Careen Jennings
Sentencing for Juveniles

Judiciary Committee
March 23, 2012

H.B. No. 5546, An Act Concerning Sentence Modification for Juveniles

Dear Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am Careen Jennings, retired from high school teaching after 37 years and a volunteer co-facilitator with the writers' group at York Correctional Institution since 2005. I submit this testimony regarding H.B. No. 5546, An Act Concerning Sentence Modification for Juveniles. I urge the legislature to create a procedure to take a second look at long sentences that were imposed on juveniles after they have served a portion of that sentence.

We don't allow 15-year-olds to vote. We limit 16-year-old drivers. Seventeen-year-olds cannot sign contracts, and 18-year-olds, who can do all of these things, cannot legally drink. But when a 14, 15, 16, or 17 year old commits a crime, we can sentence that child as a legal adult. Why do we do this when it is inconsistent with all other laws relating to minors?

It's even inconsistent with our own personal experiences of having been teenagers.

I ask you to remember something that you did before you were 18 than now makes you cringe and wonder, "What was I thinking?" Maybe you were college age, well past that 18th birthday, when you exercised horrible judgment, used no impulse control, and did something incredibly stupid. And probably you were lucky because your action which could have resulted in life-changing consequences did not.

Developed countries do not sentence children to long prison terms. Children can and do commit crimes, but we must not give up on our kids before they are old enough to drive, to vote, or to sign a contract. Young brains are malleable. I saw this daily in my 37 years in the high school classroom, and I have seen the difference maturity brings in my seven years at York. All other developed countries have chosen to try to save their kids, not throw them away. It's cheaper. It's safer. And it works.