



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

**Testimony In Support of Raised Bill No. 6504  
An Act Concerning Alternative School Programs**

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.  
Education Committee  
March 4, 2013

Distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc. provides civil legal services to Greater Hartford's low-income citizens, many of whom work regularly but struggle to provide for their families. The children of these families are particularly disadvantaged by chronic poverty. A good education is the most promising path out of chronic poverty.

We therefore join the Center for Children's Advocacy, Connecticut Legal Services, and others in strongly supporting Raised Bill No. 6504, which would help ensure that students in alternative schools receive the education to which they are legally entitled, and without which they have little hope of becoming successful, self-supporting citizens.

We have represented a number of high school students in several districts' alternative programs. In one district, special education students with behavioral challenges, and at least one student with a concurrent learning disability, were funneled into an evening program that provides only four hours of instruction four days per week -- about two thirds of what is required to meet the state mandate that students receive a minimum of 180 days of instruction per year. These students were placed in this program through the recommendation of Planning and Placement Team meetings where the parent was not represented, and where the school failed to present clinical or medical information confirming that the student could not benefit from a full time program -- the general legal standard for providing fewer hours of instruction to children with disabilities. A number of regular education, non-expelled students were in this evening program as well. No law that I am aware of permits regular education students to receive fewer hours of instruction than the law requires, unless they are expelled. Parents were not informed that the law actually requires more hours of instruction, not informed that their child would not be taught

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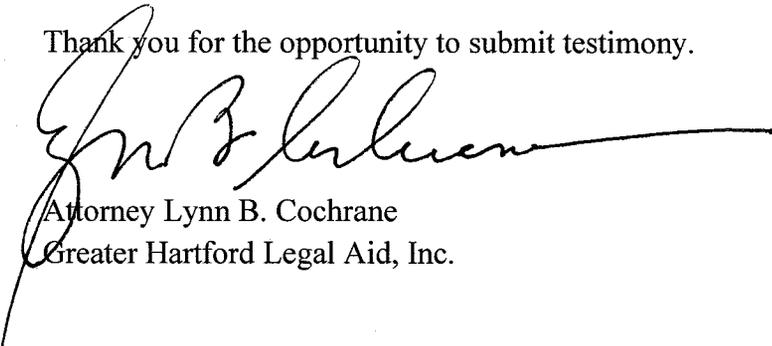
the same courses other students received, and not fully informed of what needed to happen to get their child back to the regular school. Because data is not collected and provided to the state, not even an enterprising parent could find out whether the alternative program had high rates of discipline, low rates of graduation, and other important indicators of school quality.

In another district, an expelled special education student received two hours of "instruction" per day per week in an alternative school setting where students were routinely allowed to play with Gameboys in class. Almost all of the "education" consisted of the students completing work sheets. No special education teacher was on-site. Our client's son said that when he had trouble figuring out math problems, the instructor said that he was also unable to figure them out.

Some day-time alternative programs appear to be doing a fairly good job. There is a need for such programs, for some students. We should examine and build upon those examples. Even programs with reduced hours that convene at night might meet the needs of some uniquely struggling students, but they are the exception to the rule. Virtually all students are much better served by full day programs which provide access to the same instruction all other students receive. If not, we are wasting the students' time and indeed their lives, by giving them far less than they will need to function as independent, self-sufficient adults.

Enacting this bill would help ensure that we can begin to know which programs are providing the education both regular and special education students need and are entitled to.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.



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