

TESTIMONY OF ALEXIS STURDY

Judiciary Committee Hearing

March 11, 2013

Testimony in Support of HB 6581

My name is Lexi Sturdy; I am the Program Manager for the Center for Prison Education, which brings Wesleyan University classes into Connecticut prisons. I am here to testify in support of HB 6581, An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission Regarding Lengthy Sentences for Crimes Committed by a Child or Youth.

When asked to speak about this bill, I was at first hesitant. I wondered what unique perspective I could bring to this discussion, given the wide variety of professionals and families that are speaking here today. But once I looked closely at our program's roster, I was shocked and saddened to see how young some of our students came into the system and how lengthy their sentences were. A bill like the one we are discussing today would dramatically impact men that have grown and matured within the system and have applied themselves and taken advantage of programs like ours. We have three students who are enrolled in our college program and two who are in our college prep program who would be impacted by HB 6581. When I asked them what they were like as sixteen and seventeen-year-olds as they were entering the prison system they described themselves as arrogant, easily influenced, functionally illiterate, and unpredictable. They were honest and remorseful about the descriptions of their past. But my colleagues and I started this program at Cheshire, and now at York C.I., because we believe men and women, especially those who come into the system this young, deserve in the least an opportunity to change their path and fulfill their potential through intellectual exploration and access to higher education.

Today the men in our program live up the creed of USD#1: I am more than I once was. These men are seven to fifteen years into their lengthy juvenile sentences. They are no longer arrogant; instead they are humbled learners, hungry for extra readings, guest lectures, and endless feedback on their work. They described themselves as once easily influenced, but we see them as passionate leaders within our program and the while facility. They encourage each other throughout the semester, creating study guides to share for the bio-chemistry final or peer-editing each other's papers. Even beyond our program we can see the influence and leadership of our students. When we did our admissions process a second time at the facility, nearly everyone we interviewed had read and loved some novel or textbook the Wesleyan students had shared with them. To us it was a proud moment to see how influential our students were and how their passion for intellectual curiosity had spread throughout the facility.

But before our program even arrived at Cheshire C.I. these men had dedicated themselves to learning. At 16 or 17 they have been functionally illiterate but ten years later they are inquisitive, open-minded, and enthusiastic Wesleyan scholars; unparalleled by typical Wesleyan undergraduates. They may have been unpredictable, as they claim, in their teenage years, but now they have grown into mature, driven, and focused men, who are dedicated to their education, family and communities.

In each of these convicted juveniles, I see a horrific history with complicated upbringings in violent and malnourished communities. But on a daily basis I also get the great pleasure of seeing them as sophisticated students, who if given the chance have the potential to be productive leaders in our community. I encourage the Judiciary Committee to pass this important and influential bill.

Thank you.