

TESTIMONY OF ZACHARY FISCHMAN

Judiciary Committee

March 3, 2014

HB 5221

My name is Zach Fischman, and I am currently the Coordinator at the Wesleyan University Center for Prison Education. Our central contention is to offer a high caliber liberal arts education inside of prison walls. I am here to testify in support of HB 5221, the juvenile sentencing bill.

Earlier this morning, I was at Cheshire Correctional Institution, facilitating a study hall for our students enrolled in an Introduction to Environmental Science course. I was fielding rapid-fire questions about ocean acidification, deforestation, and increased levels of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere, when I did a quick mental scan of the room. So many of the faces looking back at me were those of students who entered the criminal justice system as children, and who are now serving lengthy sentences at Cheshire CI. A bill like the one we are discussing today would have a dramatic impact on the lives of people who have taken advantage of programs like ours while in the system, demonstrating maturity, dedication, and hard work.

When I spoke with the students who would be affected by this bill, they were forthright and remorseful in discussing their pasts. The majority described themselves as arrogant, mercurial, impressionable, and functionally illiterate at fifteen and sixteen, when they entered the criminal justice system. And while the students make sure to describe their personal shortcomings before anything else, they also describe the impoverished and malnourished communities from which they come. These students are accessing post-secondary education for the first time in their lives, and are often the first members of their family to do so.

In our society, post-secondary education has come to mean opportunity: the opportunity to learn, the opportunity to better one's self, the opportunity to change one's path. Indeed, given the opportunity, our students are ravenous for answers, thoughts, feedback, books, essays, guest lectures, conversations, criticism, information about next semester's classes, extra writing assignments, summer reading suggestions. Access to

education is what allows our students to better articulate their experiences: their remorse about their pasts, their frustrations about themselves, and their stories about the families from which they come. Perhaps most importantly, education is what allows these people to articulate their transformations.

I work for the Center for Prison Education because I believe that our students are worthy of speaking about their transformations, and engaging in deep intellectual and academic pursuits. The people I work with on a daily basis are no longer arrogant and unpredictable children, but have fashioned themselves into educated adults who are able to understand and express what they were incapable of understanding and expressing as children. They have used their time proactively, transforming themselves to the best of their ability, acquiring skills that will allow them to function productively in the communities they might one day return to.

The Center for Prison Education recently started programming at York Correctional Institution for women. During one of our first meetings, our students went around the room introducing themselves, telling each other about where they grew up. One student gave her name, and when asked where she grew up, she responded: York. This student came to York when she was fourteen. Now thirty-two years old, she has taken advantage of every resource available to her at York, and has transformed herself into an admirable leader in her community. Today, I encourage this body to adopt this important and influential legislation, which will allow people like this student the opportunity to voice her transformation. Thank you.