

TESTIMONY OF Colleen E. Masse
IN SUPPORT OF SB 842, AN ACT CONCERNING FOSTER CHILDREN AND THE
DESIGNATION OF SURROGATE PARENTS AND HB 5658, AN ACT CONCERNING
EDUCATIONAL SURROGATES, THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND
CHILDREN REQUIRING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Committee on Children
February 17, 2015

Submitted by Colleen E. Masse

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, Distinguished Members of the Committee on Children:

I submit this testimony in support of SB 842 and HB 5658.

My name is Colleen Masse, I am the parent of a child with a learning disability and I am a Surrogate Parent with the Connecticut State Department of Education.

I have been the Surrogate Parent for more than 60 students. I currently have 32 students on my caseload.

Through my advocacy for my own child and my advocacy for students in my capacity as Surrogate Parent, it has become clear to me that the Planning and Placement Team process is much more effective when there is an advocate with knowledge of the system. Few parents know what to ask for, what their rights are, and how to make requests in a way that they will be heard. One family I was working with had a 3rd grader, who had repeated kindergarten, meaning that he had been in the same elementary school for 5 years and had not been identified as a student entitled to special education. This parent simply did not know to ask for a PPT meeting or an educational evaluation. When I became involved, the student was found to qualify for Special Education in four different categories and was placed at a therapeutic school. The most concerning part of this story is that as the student fell further and further behind, his behavior worsened to the point where it became dangerous to have him in class. Also, his home life deteriorated and he was taken into DCF custody (which is why I was assigned as a Surrogate Parent). Sitting beside me at the PPT which decided that the student qualified for Special Education, his mother told me that she had been asking for help since Kindergarten. Would early and appropriate educational supports have changed this child's life? I have no doubt that the lack of a free appropriate public education had great costs to this child, his family, and ultimately the school district.

It is my sincere belief that students involved in the juvenile justice system would benefit from experienced and specialized advocacy at school. Ultimately an appropriate education benefits all

of society and is certainly less expensive than recidivism. Through my work as a Surrogate Parent I have worked with students in the juvenile justice system only because ~~they are~~ they are already committed already committed to the Department of Children and Families for child welfare reasons and are in foster care and have been removed from their home because of abuse and neglect. These students have had complex emotional and educational needs. I frequently find that school teams are dealing only with the most pressing issues, which tend to be behavioral. A skilled Surrogate Parent can help to ensure that the team looks at the big picture including educational, social emotional and transitional goals so that all students, including those who are committed to DCF only for juvenile justice reasons, ~~have,~~ have the necessary skills to be successful.

Sincerely,

Colleen E. Masse, Esq.
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