

Your Educational Specialist



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TESTIMONY OF Jacqueline Kelly

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

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 Jacqueline Kelly and I currently work as a State Appointed Surrogate Parent, in addition to privately advocating for families and children needing educational support. I hold a Master's Degree in Education, with Connecticut Certification in Special Education, and a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration. As a former Special Education Teacher, my experience includes 7 years of teaching at all grade levels (K-12), in settings ranging from large general education classrooms, to small resource rooms, and 1:1 instruction. I have also held a position as a GED Instructor, teaching adults in a Regional Adult Basic Education program. In addition, my current position as a Surrogate Parent for the Department of Education has provided me with solid experience regarding state and federal laws, concerning special education and quality educational programs for children with disabilities. Over the past four years, I have represented over 100 children as a Surrogate Parent. In a contract year, I have had a maximum caseload of 60 children, and currently advocate for 45 appointed children.

Although the many responsibilities and unending work may often go unnoticed, being a Surrogate Parent has been the most rewarding position I have yet to hold. Please allow me to share the following two situations with you. One young man that I worked for received his High School Diploma last year, and I consider him at the top of my success stories. Prior to my involvement, he was failing many classes and on the verge of dropping out. During my appointment he was very close to becoming expelled from school. Due to my position and advocacy for this young man, I had access to resources (specifically, CJJF: a

group of attorneys that have contracted with the Surrogate Parent Office to offer Pro Bono legal services to those youth in the child welfare system only to support the legal needs of children in our care. We went through the process of a Manifestation PPT, and an Expulsion Hearing, in which we won. He was not expelled, due to the strong advocacy and case that was argued in his favor. I firmly believe that if he was not appointed a Surrogate Parent, he would have either dropped out of school, or have been expelled. Another example is of a young lady who attended high school for 3 years and had only earned 2.5 credits. This was prior to my appointment as a Surrogate Parent. She was never identified as a student eligible for Special Education Support Services, and she was very close to dropping out of high school. Her attendance was minimal, prior to my involvement. Through a series of PPT meetings, resolution sessions, and ultimately Mediation, I was able to have the District enroll her in a State Approved Private Special Education School, which offers employment opportunities and focuses on transitional goals, all while providing her with the specialized instruction she needs, in order to succeed. She is now determined to succeed and has a primary goal of graduating and earning her high school diploma. Without the support of an Educational Surrogate, she was not invested in her education or future, at all. She too, will be graduating soon and has employment experiences to support her success in finding a full time career. I was only able to help her because she was committed to DCF as an abused and neglected child.

Extending the right to an Educational Surrogate for children in the juvenile justice system is not only extremely important; it is critical to their educational and emotional success. Due to the fact that these children have not had the opportunity to have an educational surrogate, many are “lost” in the regular education environment or even worse, not receiving special education services within the CJTS facility, or other residential facilities and lack the support and educational advocacy they desperately need. Many children admitted to CJTS and to residential and group homes should have been formerly identified as a child in need of special education support services, but due to their behaviors, or extenuating circumstances, they were never evaluated, diagnosed, or identified. (It has been my experience that many parents, if involved with the education of their children, are not even aware of their children’s right to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education.) If these children were extended the right to an Educational Surrogate, they would receive the benefit of a professional, knowledgeable advocate, and a strong “voice,” on their side. I have yet to meet a child that understood their educational rights, or the Procedural Rights and Safeguards, regarding their education. They are not able to be their own advocate, without understanding their rights and the policies and procedures that are mandated.

Many children have given up on their education, without having access to an Educational Surrogate. Due to the many obstacles they have faced in their life, the poor decisions made due to lack of parental or positive adult support, along with the challenges of systemic

bureaucracy; this population of children have lost hope for their future. As an Educational Surrogate, we revive their spirits, and give them hope for an education they have the right to receive and a future that they CAN change.

Respectfully,

Jacqueline Kelly

**Jacqueline Kelly, M.Ed.
Educational Consultant
Surrogate Parent**