

TESTIMONY OF Meaghan Sartoris

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 Meaghan Sartoris

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 Meaghan Sartoris. I am an Educational Surrogate Parent contracted by the CT State Board of Education. I have been a Surrogate Parent for over 7 years and have worked to advocate for the educational needs of over 200 children and young adults.

I want to tell you the story of Jenny. When I first was assigned as the Educational Surrogate to Jenny, she was attending an alternative high school because she was unable to function in a regular high school. Her Individual Education Plan (IEP) was directed at helping her with her emotional needs, and although the alternative high school was able to educate her properly and she was able to earn credits towards graduation, her lifestyle outside of school caused her to end up in Juvenile Detention. Because I was her Surrogate Parent, appointed already because she was committed to DCF as an abused and neglected child, I was able to visit her in detention and meet with the principal and teachers of the facility to make sure they knew what Jenny was capable of, where she was in terms of credits and classes, explain her individual educational needs and give support to Jenny to continue her education even though things seemed bleak at the time.

Jenny ended up leaving the facility and moved into a residential treatment center, then into a group home, a foster home and eventually back into the care of her grandparents. All the while, I made frequent visits to the schools she was attending, mending the educational gaps by helping with the transfer of records, meeting with the teachers and staff, and most importantly, meeting with Jenny to continue to support her in her education.

Jenny graduated from high school in 2012. At her last PPT she was given a Summary of Performance; a document that summarizes her strengths and weaknesses in school. She took that document to the

local community college and is receiving some accommodations for tests and quizzes in college. She is the first girl in her family to attend college.

David is 19 years old and currently in prison for what he himself calls a “stupid, impulsive act”. I first met David in middle school when he was living in foster care and I was appointed as his Surrogate because he was committed to DCF as a foster child. He transferred to 4 different foster homes until he committed a crime and pleaded guilty. We had his last PPT in prison where he was told he earned his high school diploma. He was offered a job in prison and a different ‘bed’ in a better area of the prison. He was offered a seat in the vocational program for inmates. I am convinced that if I was not present at his PPT in prison, he would not have been offered any of these opportunities. I was able to advocate for him, telling the staff at the prison his story, his hardships, his motivation, his wants and his desires for further education.

When I left David’s final PPT in prison, I thought about all the other young adults incarcerated. Will they continue their education? Do they know it’s a possibility to continue their education in prison? Do they know that because they are identified as a special education student they can receive accommodations? Do their parents care about their education? Do they know the language and educational jargon used at educational meetings? Do they know how to advocate for a student with specific learning disabilities? Do they know how to get records from other districts by making a simple phone call? Do they know the requirements for a high school diploma? I think the answer is no. There must be hundreds of kids in prison who need a Surrogate to advocate for their specialized needs in prison.

Some kids need extra time to complete assignments, some need to be allowed only to do half that math problems assigned. Some kids need to have 4 math credits to graduate, some need 3. As a Surrogate assigned to young adults in the juvenile system, I can advocate for the specialized needs of these kids. I could advocate for certain goals and objectives on their IEP’s. This way, they can get the same services as they would in a public school in prison. They can get vocational programming, they can prepare themselves for a better life when they get out. I can help them with that process.

To be clear, I was only able to advocate for these two students and others in the juvenile justice system over the past seven years because they were entitled to an educational surrogate through their status as DCF committed children in the child welfare system. As it stands now, it is not currently possible to advocate for the many young people in the juvenile system if they are not already under the auspices of DCF as abused and neglected children. These are the young people who are most in need of supports and guidance. If they are to have a chance at growth and maturation into positive contributing members of their community, is it not our obligation ethically, morally and legally to provide the needed foundation to do so? The very foundations which in so many cases, for so many reasons, are through no fault of the child’s, already so clearly missing.

And in the end... Doesn’t it cost less to educate than to imprison? Wouldn’t it be better to break the cycle? Wouldn’t it be better for all of society to ensure these kids earn their high school diploma in prison and understand the value of the high school diploma? So that they know the pathways that can

be followed and the doors that can be opened? Educational Surrogate Parents can help to make it happen, can help to break the cycle of incarceration and poverty. Don't children in the JJS deserve at least a better chance than what currently exists?

Meaghan Sartoris

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Meaghan Sartoris". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "M".

Surrogate Parent/Educational Advocate

February 16, 2015