

My name is Dara Young, and I am currently the Program Manager for the Wesleyan University Center for Prison Education. The Center for Prison Education offers Wesleyan University classes — as rigorous as those taught on our main campus — inside the Cheshire and York Correctional Institutions.

About 10% of the students who have studied with the Center are serving long sentences for crimes they committed while juveniles. This disproportionately high number speaks not just to the ability of those incarcerated as juveniles to change, but the determination of many such individuals to do so. A bill like the one we are discussing today would have a dramatic impact on the lives of those who, during their years of incarceration, have taken advantage of programs like ours, to better themselves – demonstrating maturity, dedication and hard work.

I do not suggest that everyone in prison transforms. But I know for a fact some student. When I speak with the students who would be affected directly by this bill, they are forthright and remorseful in discussing their pasts. The majority describe themselves as arrogant, impulsive and impressionable teenagers, at the time of their arrests. Most had already dropped out of school, many while in junior high. But the people I work with are no longer arrogant and unpredictable children. They speak with deep understanding and remorse about their crimes. They are dedicated learners, inside and outside the classroom. They work ceaselessly to better themselves, to become the responsible, resilient, sensitive individuals, they were not as children.

These students are accessing postsecondary academic education for the first time in their lives and are often the first members of their family to do so. In our society, postsecondary education has come to mean opportunity, the opportunity to learn, the opportunity to better oneself, the opportunity to change one's path. But for these students education is most importantly an opportunity to better the lives of others and improve the communities to which they one day hope to return. When imagining a possible future after prison, what they might do if released, every student articulates a desire to work with juveniles - to help kids at risk of making the same mistakes they did. They cannot stand to see more young lives thrown away. I hope our legislators feel the same.