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Judiciary Committee
House Bill 5642 Opposed

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and Members of the Judiciary Committee: My name is Paula Dillon; I am a teacher at the Walter G. Cady School, located at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. Today I am speaking in opposition to HB 5642, specifically the plan for implementing closure of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School.

Closure may inevitably be what needs to happen, however setting a date without a solid plan for ensuring public safety and the need to have a secure facility or facilities for youth is irresponsible and unconscionable. For that reason I ask this committee not to support this bill.

Young men are sent to this facility after repeated, unsuccessful attempts in schools or community-based programs elsewhere. The educational opportunities at the training school open a door for learning that many of our students have not had the chance to embrace. For most of our students, school becomes a rewarding experience. Students experience success in school — often for the first time — by increasing their reading and math abilities, learning a vocation and, in many cases, graduating from high school. These are some of the everyday accomplishments that must be part of our discourse. It is critical that young men, legislators, staff, and other key advocates have the opportunity to thoroughly consider these successes when evaluating programs and services that these students require for a better chance.

As a teacher with DCF for over 30 years I have been witness to the closing of various facilities, particularly the Long Lane School closing in 2002. Unfortunately, a plan did not exist to deal with the girls that needed a specialized and secure setting. Therefore, there was no place for the girls to go once Long Lane School permanently closed. Parole officers reported that they drove around trying to find placements, and that emergency rooms and prisons ended up being the only option for many of these youth.

We are now seeing a similar fate unfold. Many youth that would normally come to CJTS are ending up in the adult prison system at Manson Youth Institution. They are committing crimes that are landing them in the adult system. This is occurring because youth are leaving CJTS too soon and without transitional plans or supports that bridge a return to the community. The pressure of street life is often impossible to resist when returning home. Attending and staying in school is not a popular choice. Unfortunately it is more likely that our former students will be drawn into gang life and negative influences once again. So, when I think about CJTS closing,

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it is sad, not because of the brick and mortar that is CJTS, but because closing this facility and school programming without a proven solid plan will not serve our students or community well.

This population of young men need unique services. Please consider careful evaluation rather than a bill without resources and without all necessary information. Any plan by the state must prevent this population from being sent to Connecticut's prison for juvenile offenders, placed into private sector programs which are not prepared for these students, or returned to communities without support to an unchanged situation where they originally got into trouble. All programmatic changes must be well planned with education and support services being a main priority, or better outcomes will be unlikely.

Thank you for your consideration with this testimony.

Paula Dillon