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Testimony Re: House Bill 7111 Relating to Annual Reports on the Academic Achievement of Students in Foster Care
House Health, Education & Welfare Committee
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 7111. This bill would require that every superintendent of schools in Rhode Island will create an annual report on the progress and status of academic achievement of students in foster care and develop a remediation plan if students in foster care are failing to meet academic standards or disproportionately subject to school discipline compared to overall student population.

Students in foster care represent one of the most vulnerable student subgroups in the country and are more likely to fall behind in school, have lower graduation rates, and lower test scores than their peers. Students in foster care experience higher levels of residential and school instability than their peers. Student mobility is associated with lower academic performance, behavior difficulties, lower levels of school engagement, and increased risk of dropping out of high school. One-third of children in foster care will experience five or more school changes before they turn age 18, and such changes often result in lost academic progress.

In 2015, President Obama signed the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* into law which reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)*. The law enhances collaboration between education and child welfare agencies and includes provisions that ensure school stability for children in foster care. If it is not in the child's best interest to remain in their school of origin, the child must be immediately enrolled in a new school, even if they lack the records normally required. It is up to the new school to immediately contact the school of origin to obtain records. *ESSA* promotes continuous collaboration and joint responsibility between education and child welfare agencies in ensuring the educational stability of foster youth.

ESSA also provides an important opportunity for school systems and child welfare agencies to work together to collect and use data in order to support children in foster care throughout their education. *ESSA* requires state education agencies to report disaggregated data on the graduation rates, performance on state-selected academic indicators, and achievement on academic assessments for youth in foster care.

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Rhode Island submitted its *ESSA* State Plan to the U.S. Department of Education in September 2017 which included a section on Statewide Accountability System and School Support and Improvement Activities and specified that the state will provide performance data on students in foster care. In 2019, for the first time, states were required to report how well students in foster care are performing on state testing and how many are graduating from high school. As of January 2019, just 15 states and Washington D.C. had shared both data points; Rhode Island was not one of them. The Rhode Island Department of Education recently started making data on the educational outcomes of children experiencing homelessness available (another important population covered by *ESSA*), but has not yet provided data on students in foster care.

Students in foster care need additional attention and supports to ensure their educational success. We urge you to pass House Bill 7111 which will guarantee specific tracking of outcomes for students in foster care and will provide insight into opportunities to strengthen supports for some of our most vulnerable students.

Thank you for your long-standing commitment in support of children and youth involved in the child welfare system. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

