



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: House Bill 6189, An Act Relating to Education -- Tuition Waiver Program for Children In Rhode Island Foster Care
House Committee on Finance

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. We would also like to thank Representative Casimiro for sponsoring this important bill and Representatives Noret, Serpa, Spears, Roberts, Diaz, and Morales for co-sponsoring. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 6189, which would establish the Tuition Waiver Program for children in Rhode Island foster care.

Rhode Island children in foster care often experience multiple placements, lose contact with family members and siblings, and overwhelmingly have overlooked educational, physical, and mental health needs. Multiple, prolonged, and unstable placements can negatively affect children's long-term well-being and academic achievement.

As of the 2017-2018 school year in Rhode Island, data on reading and math proficiency and high school graduation for students in foster care is publicly available. Since this data was made available, we have a clearer picture of the disparate educational outcomes youth in foster care experience compared to their peers. In 2022, only 17% of third-grade students in foster care were meeting expectations in English Language Arts/Literacy, compared to 37% of their peers and only 6% of eighth-grade students in foster care were meeting expectations in Mathematics, compared to 21% of their peers. Most troubling is the high school graduation rate among children in foster care. For the Class of 2022, 83% of Rhode Island students graduated in four years, but only 52% of students in foster care, the lowest rate of any student subgroup. Additionally, **less than 1% of youth in foster care in Rhode Island obtain a college degree.**

We know that many youth who experience foster care possess the academic ability and interest to pursue higher education, but face barriers to reaching that goal. We believe the establishment of this Tuition Waiver Program will improve the educational attainment outcomes for our youth in foster care.

The high cost of post-secondary education is cited as the primary barrier youth in foster care experience when considering attending college. For those who do pursue a college degree and decide to drop out of their programs, nearly 50% of them do so because they cannot afford to continue.

To combat this financial barrier, 37 states have instituted tuition waiver programs for students who experienced foster care. Texas has operated one

of the largest tuition and fee waiver programs in the nation for 30 years. Since its implementation, evaluation studies of the program have shown that the **students who accessed the waiver were 3.5 times more likely than their peers in foster care to graduate with a post-secondary education degree.**

The value of obtaining a college degree has a lifelong impact. It is well documented that there are not only professional and personal advantages to achieving a post-secondary degree, but it is directly associated with financial stability and independence.

Estimated Number of Foster Youth Graduating from High School Each Year

Cohort Year	# in Cohort	4-year graduates	5-year graduates	6-year graduates
2016	31	14	3	3
2017	55	28	6	2
2018	60	28	7	
2019	66	34		

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Cohort Graduation Rates. The 2019 cohort began 9th grade during the 2018-2019 school year and would be expected to graduate in spring of 2022.

In 2022, a total of 43 students in foster care graduated from high school -- 34 in 4 years, seven in 5 years, and two in 6 years. In 2021, a total of 37 students in foster care graduated from high school -- 28 in 4 years, six in 5 years, and three in 6 years. With the establishment of the Tuition Waiver Program, we can ensure our most vulnerable youth are able to access higher education to ensure their success.

We urge you to pass House Bill 6189, as we believe it is an important step to eliminate barriers to post-secondary educational attainment, and will help improve long-term outcomes and experiences among our youth who have experienced foster care. This is a small population of young people, and the costs of providing this benefit will not be large, but to these students this investment will make a huge impact.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.