



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 768, An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government -- Department of Children, Youth and Families.

Senate Committee on Education

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. We would also like to thank Senator DiPalma for sponsoring this important bill and Senators Miller, Lauria, and Murray for co-sponsoring. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for Senate Bill 768, which would require that each child under the supervision of the Department of Children, Youth and Families be provided a team of educational advocates which would be required to attend meetings on a regular basis to ensure the child's educational planning, progress and success.

Children in foster care are about twice as likely as their peers to be absent from school or to be suspended, are nearly three times more likely than their peers to be expelled from school, and have increased rates of learning and social/emotional disabilities. Multiple, prolonged, and unstable placements can negatively affect children's academic achievement. According to recent *RICAS* scores, 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 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.

Appropriate supports and services, like a team of educational advocates, can help youth in care maximize their potential and ensure that they are prepared for higher education and work.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank Senator DiPalma for ensuring that in this bill the provision of a team of educational advocates is also extended to youth in the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program. In 2018, Rhode Island established the VEC program, allowing youth ages 18 to 21 who were in foster care the option of continuing to receive services. VEC helps older youth in care transition to adulthood by supporting them in making life decisions about education, housing, employment, health care, social services, and to remain enrolled, youth must meet education or employment requirements. Of the 97 youth in VEC on November 30, 2022, 38% were continuing their education. We hope to see this percentage continue to increase with the provision of a dedicated team of educational advocates provided to youth from the time they are in foster care through the their time in the VEC program.

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We support provisions that require that the team of educational advocates includes key members, such as the students themselves when they are age 16 or older and the child's school counselor, who can help the student evaluate postsecondary opportunities and better understand the application processes and available aid.

We urge you to pass Senate Bill 768, which would ensure each child under the supervision of DCYF be provided a team of educational advocates and the collaboration necessary to improve educational outcomes for children in the foster care system.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.