



Office of the Child Advocate

State of Rhode Island

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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

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Thank you, Chair McNamara and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of House Bill 6156 which would create a special legislative commission to study educational outcomes for children in state care. On behalf of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), I would like to thank Representative Casimiro and Representative Noret for introducing this bill to ensure that there is a focus on the educational outcomes for children who are in the care of the state.

My name is Katelyn Medeiros, and I am the Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island. I am the Director of the agency which serves as the oversight agency to DCYF. As the oversight agency, we monitor the case of each child and young adult open to the Department to protect their legal rights and to promote policies and practices which ensure that youth are safe, and that their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral health needs are met.

Throughout the 2025 legislative session, the OCA has continued to highlight the significant disparities in the educational outcomes for children and youth experiencing the child welfare, juvenile justice and children's behavioral health systems. The OCA has elevated this issue with the hope of exploring the systemic issues, which uniquely impact the education of the youth we serve. The OCA has also attempted to develop and promote innovative solutions. H6156 develops a study commission, which will provide the forum necessary for a comprehensive review of the systems issues and barriers impacting our youth and develop recommendations to address these issues.

The focus of the OCA is prioritizing the best interests of the children, youth, and young adults served by DCYF. The OCA recognized a need for heightened advocacy for some of our most vulnerable children specific to education needs. We continue to advocate for youth on specific cases, receive calls to our office, see increases in the court referred cases specific to education, and continue to be involved on cases with education issues. Youth experiencing the system present with complex needs and trauma histories. These youth are experiencing the impacts of a fragmented and under resourced child welfare and children's behavioral health system, which has a direct impact on their educational experience. The complex nature of these cases requires a holistic and coordinated approach. This is an opportunity to explore whether the systems currently in place provide the services and supports necessary to ensure youth in care can achieve their educational goals.

What is undeniable is that the data regarding the educational outcomes for our youth have remained largely unchanged for the last twenty years. Students in foster care are under performing in almost every area of academics in

comparison to their peers. Between 2004 and 2020, 85% of youth in foster care were chronically truant from school and 41% of youth in foster care repeated at least one grade compared to 11% of all students. Between 2010 and 2017, 43% of Rhode Island's youth in foster care graduated from high school compared to 70% of all students. Between 2019 and 2023, 84% of all Rhode Island high school students graduated within four years. During that time, the graduation rate for youth in foster care fluctuated from 49% to 57%. As of 2023, the Administration on Children, Youth and Families reports that the national average of students in foster care graduating high school was 71% in comparison to 88% of all students. In 2023, Rhode Island's graduation rate for students in foster care was **20% below the national average**. This data illustrates a call to action to support Rhode Island youth experiencing foster care. This data, in combination with OCA staff observations in court, education meetings, and calls to our office from LEA's, parents, foster parents, residential programs, teachers, DCYF workers and CASA, pertaining to education specific concerns, shed light on the pervasive inequities in education experienced by our youth. Our young people do not have the luxury of time. We must assess and address these disparities.

Experiencing the child welfare, juvenile justice, or children's behavioral health systems should not risk long-term academic achievement for youth and young adults. As a state, we must support the education of all youth. We cannot ignore a system that is not working as it should or as it was intended to. Rather, we have an obligation to fix what's broken. Meaningful change, although necessary, is not easy to accomplish. I have been appointed by the State to elevate the voices of our youth in state care. Today, I am stating very clearly on their behalf, that we will no longer accept systems that perpetuate poor outcomes. All of our youth deserve an opportunity to thrive. I refuse to accept that this is the best we can do for our children and youth. We will continue to fiercely advocate and defend their rights, empowering our youth to reach their full potential and ensure coming into state care does not define a child's future.

The OCA recognizes the critical need to conduct this study commission to collaborate with key professionals, legislators, and community members to evaluate and make actionable recommendations to improve the educational outcomes for youth in state care. This expertise will allow the study commission to assess the entire experience of a youth within the child welfare system to identify the barriers and gaps present, preventing the overall educational success of youth in state care. While their school placement, supports, and services are central to evaluate, a youth in care may also be experiencing disruptions from their home, mental and behavioral health issues, and trauma unique to those who enter the child welfare system.

The OCA strongly supports House Bill 6156 to create a special legislative commission to study educational outcomes for children in state care. We thank you for your continued support of children and families involved with DCYF in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,



Katelyn Medeiros, Esq.
Child Advocate