DATE: November 14, 2021

TO: Members, House of PA Education Committee

FROM: Organizations and professionals dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth who experience homelessness or have experience in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, as well as individuals who have directly experienced these challenges.

RE: Support for S.B. 324, Fostering A Smooth Transition for Graduation

We are writing to urge you to support Senate Bill 324, which passed unanimously out of the Pennsylvania Senate this past June. This bill will help youth who have experienced homelessness, foster care, or juvenile justice involvement to stay on track to graduate from high school.

Despite working hard, students who are experiencing homelessness, or who have experience in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, are at high risk of not graduating high school. These highly mobile students want to obtain a high school diploma, yet face an onslaught of unique challenges in doing so. They frequently have to change schools mid-term, and as such do not earn full academic credit for the schoolwork they successfully completed. Their course credits are often not properly documented, and their school records are often lost. Typically, courses students take in residential placements do not align with state standards or the home district’s curricula. And, when students transition to a new school, there is usually no one designated to welcome them and help them navigate the difficult process of determining appropriate courses, getting connected to necessary services, and making a plan to ensure they can graduate on time despite the education interruptions they endured.

As Amber, a Youth Fostering Change Youth Advocate with Juvenile Law Center lamented, “I had a big problem with my credits not transferring during this time, and no one helped me track down my credits. No one could locate my credits from my last school.” Qilah, a Juveniles for Justice Youth Advocate with Juvenile Law Center suggested, “I wish I had more support to prepare for college or had someone who could guarantee my educational transition would be successful.”

S.B. 324 breaks down needless barriers and enables students to focus on their own school success. The bill creates a uniform statewide process to help youth who have experienced education instability through: graduation planning requirements; credit transfer, waiver, and make-up provisions; greater access to extra-curricular activities; and more flexible diploma options while still complying with rigorous statewide academic standards. Importantly, the bill directs schools to designate a point of contact with specific responsibilities designed to ease the student’s transition to the new school and help the student graduate on time.

The below-signed are organizations and professionals dedicated to improving the lives of children who experience homelessness or are system involved, as well as individuals who have directly experienced these challenges. We urge you to support S.B. 324 to bring graduation within the reach of these students.

Organizations

Education Law Center-PA
Juvenile Law Center
CASA of Philadelphia County
CASA of Warren and Forest Counties
CASA Youth Advocates, Delaware and Chester Counties
Centre County Public Defender
Chester Education Foundation
Child Advocacy Unit, Defender Association of Philadelphia
Community Legal Services
Delaware County Office of the Public Defender
Girls Justice League
Gwen's Girls
HELP: MLP
Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP)
Institute on Disabilities
Juvenile Defenders Association of Pennsylvania (JDAP)
PCares
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
People's Emergency Center
Public Citizens for Children and Youth, now Children First
Support Center for Child Advocates
The Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania
The Village of Arts & Humanities
Turning Points for Children
Vision for Equality, Inc.
Women Against Abuse
Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project (YSRP)

Individuals

Joshua Chodrow Fayette
Clarissa Shirk Clinton
Kiara Castillo Monroe
Daniel Tursack Montgomery
Donna E. Ostroff
Scott A. Dengler
Annie Steinberg, M.D.
Bikem Ayse Polat, Temple University Montgomery
Melissa DeMotta, Berks County Intermediate Unit Berks
Deusdedith Damasceno
Rachel Rosnick Chester
Jaclyn M. Nagle, MPA, BCEA Allegheny
Carmen R. Labrador Berks
Cheryl Sobeski-Reedy, Esquire, Luzerne County Public Defender's Office
Tracey York, Berks Coalition to End Homelessness Luzerne County
Steve Gill Berks
Ryan Gruber Philadelphia
Lauren Hammond Berks
Frank L. Cecchetti, Esq. Montgomery
Amber Stine  
Erica Hesselson  
Ingrid Fisher  
Alyssa Dourte, foster parent  
Michelle Filling-Brown, PhD  
Virginia Garris Sharp, Legal Counsel and Guardian ad Litem for youth  
Law Office of Natalie Burston  
Gary L. Rothschild, Esq.  
Anne Fisher - Reading School District  
Ashley Rinehart, LSW  
Rita C. Murillo  
Karen L Domalakes  
Barbara Starkey  
Daniella Fadjoh, Girls Justice League  
Diane E. Hasek, Esq.  
Edward J. McIntyre  
Karen Sehman  
Laura Doran, Adelphoi  
Sheri L Roth, Community Services for Children - ELRC - Region 13  
Dr. Stephanie Scordia, Associate Professor, Community College of Philadelphia  
Christine Lysionek, Cabrini University  
Corey Leigh Korinda, Esq.  
Julie Odell, Community College of Philadelphia  
Elisa McCool  
Professor Kara R. Finck, Director Penn Law Interdisciplinary Child Advocacy Clinic (University affiliation listed for identification purposes only)  
Chae Sweet  
Girija Nagaswami  
Martha Morgan  
Naomi E. Goldstein, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Co-Director of the JD/PhD Program in Law and Psychology, and Director of the Juvenile Justice Research and Reform Lab at Drexel University  
Lucy Johnston-Walsh, Esq. Dickinson Law School  
Sarah Byker James, Assistant Professor, Community College of Philadelphia  
Barbara Senst  
Yvonne King, PhD  
Eleanor Fitzpatrick  
Lonce Scott, Cradle of Liberty Council, Boy Scouts of America