Testimony Regarding
S.B. 311: An Act Concerning Notification of Boards of Education of the Placement of Certain Children in the School District

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Committee on Children
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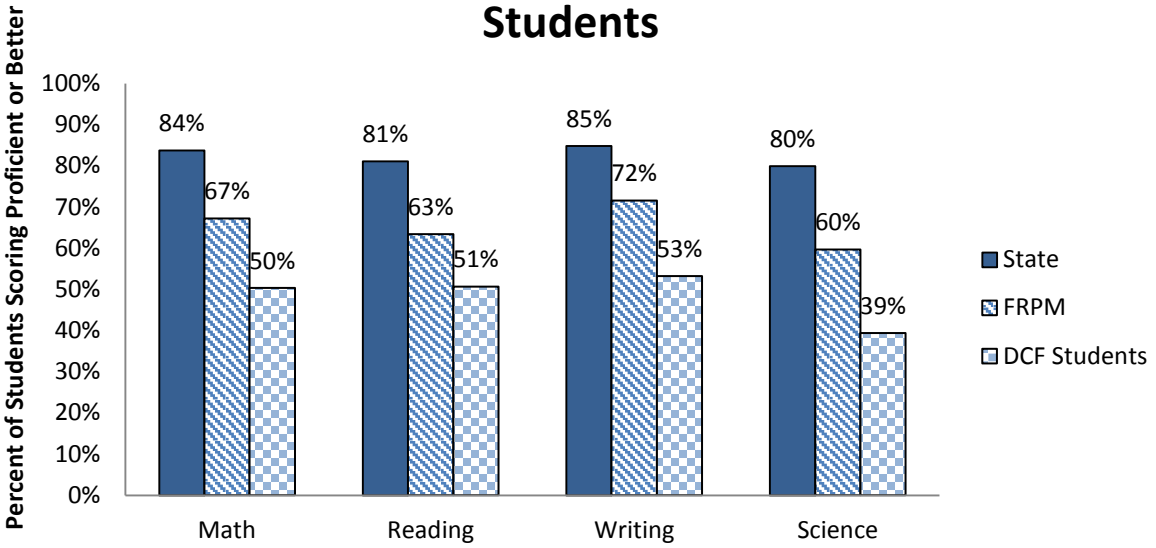
Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, and distinguished members of the Children's Committee:

I am a Policy Fellows at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that promotes the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families. I am testifying today on behalf of Voices for Children regarding S.B. 311: An Act Concerning Notification of Boards of Education of the Placement of Certain Children in the School District.

Connecticut Voices for Children supports measures that help school districts prepare to meet the needs of children in foster care placed in their district. However, it is important these measures offer districts no opportunity to discriminate against students in care, and protect students' privacy.

New research shows that children in Connecticut's foster care system are struggling in school. A recent Connecticut Voices for Children report documents an alarming, but previously invisible, "academic opportunity gap" between children in foster care and their peers.[1] In fact, children in foster care are *far* less likely to score proficient on State standardized tests (CMT and CAPT) than not only average Connecticut students, but low-income students eligible for Free or Reduced Price Meals (FRPM) as well (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Standardized Test Performance of All Connecticut, Low Income, and DCF-involved Students



A combination of factors likely drives this academic divide, including:[2]

- The detrimental effects of childhood trauma on academic performance;
- Insufficient parental support;
- Frequent school changes and high mobility as a result of changing foster care placements;
- Limited access to high quality schools;
- Poor attendance;
- Disproportionate contact with exclusionary school disciplinary measures like suspension and expulsion;
- Insufficient individualized supports to help overcome the aforementioned barriers.

School districts must be prepared, financially and otherwise, to meet all these unique needs of students in foster care to help students in foster care re-engage with school. Providing official notification to boards of education about a placement in their district may help districts to adequately prepare.

However, it is important that notification does not lead districts to push out, deny special education services to students in foster care, or otherwise disrupt their learning. Half of all students in Connecticut's foster care system have an identified special education need, and this may impose unexpected special education costs on a district. [3] Students who have been victims of maltreatment also often act out following a new school placement, and this may temporarily impose additional work on school counseling and behavioral support staff. [4] Unfortunately, this may create an incentive for districts to discriminate against students in foster care attending their schools. Such discrimination would undercut already struggling students' ability to learn at a critical juncture in their education, and do more harm to children who have already suffered**. For this reason, it is critical that any notifications from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the State Department of Education (SDE) provided to school boards inform them about supports, programs, and reimbursements these State agencies respectively offer that may help facilitate the integration of the child into a new school and support his or her academic growth (e.g., the surrogate parent program, enhanced Excess Cost special education reimbursement, DCF's education team, and/or DCF trauma training for school staff).**

Additionally, it is important that any notification respect the privacy of students in foster care. Many students currently committed to DCF state that a foster care placement carries a stigma, and when their peers learned of their foster care involvement, they were bullied. At times, students say foster care-related stigma has even led to discriminatory treatment from teachers and administrators. **For this reason, any notification must make clear to boards of education that they may not share the identify of a student in foster care with the public, and that information sharing among school staff should be limited to information that facilitates integration into school.**

Children and youth who are committed to the care and custody of the State of Connecticut because they have been victims of abuse or neglect face extraordinary barriers to future success**.** If these children hope to lead successful adult lives, it is critical that they receive a high quality education. As statutory parent, Connecticut has both a unique opportunity and unique responsibility to help children in foster care engage with school and learning – the State, and its public schools, can connect children, who often have grown up in environments of extreme deprivation or abuse, to previously inaccessible health, safety, and education resources necessary for learning. **Connecticut should take proactive measures to help schools and districts meet the educational needs of**

students in foster care, while protecting the educational rights and privacy of these vulnerable students.

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[1] See, Kenneth Feder, "Connecticut's Invisible Opportunity Gap: Academic Challenges Facing Children and Youth in Foster Care." *Connecticut Voices for Chidlren*. September, 2014. Available at http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/connecticuts-invisible-opportunity-gap-academic-challenges-facing-children-and-youth-fo.

[2] For a more detailed discussion of national literature, see, Kenneth Feder and Tamara Kramer, "Raise the Grade: Improving Educational Opportunities for Youth in State Care," *Connecticut Voices for Children*. January 2014. Available at http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/raise-grade-improving-educational-opportunities-children-state-care.

[3] See, Kenneth Feder, "Connecticut's Invisible Opportunity Gap: Academic Challenges Facing Children and Youth in Foster Care." *Connecticut Voices for Chidlren*. September, 2014. Available at http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/connecticuts-invisible-opportunity-gap-academic-challenges-facing-children-and-youth-fo.

[4] *Ibid.*