

**STATE OF CONNECTICUT**  
**OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE**  
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**Testimony of Jamey Bell, Acting Child Advocate,  
and Mickey Kramer, Associate Child Advocate,  
Regarding HB 6504 AAC Alternative School Programs  
Education Committee  
March 4, 2013**

Good morning Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischman, Senator Bye, Representative McCrory, Senator Boucher, Representative Ackert and distinguished members of the Education Committee. We appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today **in support of HB 6504 AAC Alternative School Programs.**

*The mandate of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) includes evaluating the delivery of state funded services to children and advocating for policies and practices that promote their well being and protect their special rights.* Education is a right constitutionally afforded to all children. Yet many of Connecticut's most vulnerable children are currently being denied their right to education by widespread district practices which allow for children with significant emotional and behavioral challenges to be placed by their school districts into essentially unregulated "alternative" programs that are too often neither designed nor resourced to meet their educational needs. It is challenging to get a handle on these children's poor educational outcomes because of the current system's lack of transparency and accountability. HB 6504 seeks to 1) define what constitutes a public "alternative school" for the first time, 2) identify what categories of students may be served by an "alternative school", 3) require districts' strategic school profiles to also include specific information about what "alternative" programs they run and what services are being provided there, and, 4) require districts to obtain parental informed consent before unilaterally transferring a student to an "alternative" program.

The OCA has come to know firsthand the circumstances of many of these children through numerous child fatality investigations and facility-based investigations concerning children in "the deepest end" of the state's child-serving system. Over 50% of the work we do—including responding to individual calls for assistance or information, and individual and systemic advocacy-- seeks to improve access to education, health and other services for children, and to monitor the general educational and health system supports for children and families, across the lifespan. Many of the children, adolescents and young adults with whom we work directly are either placed in hospitals or residential treatment facilities, committed to psychiatric hospitals, or incarcerated within the juvenile justice or adult corrections systems. We also receive many calls from parents, professionals and other concerned citizens in need of assistance in navigating and advocating within complex and intimidating systems, including the state's educational systems,

for children that they are worried about or who are in crisis. Our unique access has allowed us to examine the details of their lives, revealing that too often these children have experienced neglect, abandonment, abuse, home and community violence, and continued adversity within their schools. We encounter many of these children in the state's correctional facilities, where histories of disengagement from schools and pervasive lack of basic reading, writing and math skills are the norm.

Connecticut must take every measure to ensure that all children are given equal opportunity to receive a quality education. We will not be able to reduce the current serious opportunity gaps in our state without examining local school districts' practices regarding children at greatest risk. It is crucial to implement a statewide expectation that the educational progress of all children is measured and accounted for, that every school is resourced adequately to provide for the educational needs of the students they serve, and that parents are fully informed and involved in decisions regarding their child's educational plan. Without such requirements families, taxpayers and policymakers are hamstrung in their efforts to ensure a legally sufficient, high quality, accountable and accessible educational system that contains a full spectrum of types and intensities of services to meet the needs of all Connecticut's children. **The requirements imbedded in HB 6504 are an essential step in the right direction toward achieving this.**

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and we look forward to working with you to improve the chances for success for every child in Connecticut by ensuring access to quality education.