

To: Delegate Kaiser and Members of the Ways and Means Committee  
From: Rachel White, Advocates for Children and Youth  
Re: House Bill 754: Education- High School Graduation Requirements-  
Students in Foster Care or Homeless Youth  
Date: February 19, 2020  
Position: Support

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 754: Education- High School Graduation Requirements-Students in Foster Care or Homeless Youth. Advocates for Children and Youth supports this bill as it works to eliminate educational barriers faced by youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness.

Youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness are an extremely mobile population. In fact, youth in Maryland's foster care system are regularly bounced from placement to placement and from school to school. **On average youth in the custody of Maryland's Department of Human Services move 5 times per 1000 days.** These constant transitions often result in a loss of school credits, academic problems, and a delay in earning a high school diploma.

**In Maryland, during the 2017 academic school year, 23 percent of high school youth in foster care attended two schools and 7 percent attended three or more. In a single school year, 41 percent of homeless children will attend two different schools and 28 percent will attend three or more schools.** It is important to note that **youth lose approximately 4-6 months of academic progress with each change in school placement and are 50 percent less likely to graduate.** This bill is intended to mitigate the effects of changing schools by creating equitable graduation requirements for youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness.

Currently in Maryland, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) sets minimum high school graduation standards for the state's school districts (22 credits) yet allows school districts flexibility to add additional coursework and credits in order to graduate. This caveat creates additional barriers for youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness. Based on the current framework, it is possible that a youth is on track and eligible to graduate from Baltimore City Public Schools (22 credits), moves to Anne Arundel county at no fault of their own and are unable to graduate in a reasonable timeframe because they are unable to meet the increased standard (26 credits).

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This bill creates equitable graduation requirements by allowing 11th and 12th grade youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness the ability to graduate meeting the minimum state graduation requirements if at the time of school transfer, the youth could not reasonably complete additional local school district graduation requirements.

It is important to highlight the relationship between the lack of a high school diploma and homelessness. Homeless youth who don't receive a high school diploma are at an even greater risk of remaining homeless because their employment opportunities will be limited. Without sufficient income, it is less likely homeless youth will be able to maintain housing or pull themselves out of poverty. In addition, more than 23,000 children will age out of the U.S. foster care system every year; 20 percent of these youth will instantly become homeless- a high school diploma will improve this glaring statistic.

Concerns have been raised that this bill will open a window to manipulate the system in which youth will claim to be homeless when they are not. We do not believe this will be the case. Claiming to be a homeless student amongst your peers is a high burden to reach. It should also be noted that unaccompanied homeless youth in Maryland are entitled to attend Maryland state colleges for free and during the 2015-2016 school year, only 95 youth took advantage of the waiver. If youth are not claiming to be homeless to go to college tuition free, I do not believe one will claim to be homeless to receive a high school diploma.

Passing this bill is fiscally responsible for Maryland as it will increase graduation rates, combat homelessness, and improve employability for our youth, and for these reasons we ask that you issue a favorable report.