

Alaska State Legislature

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Senator Bettye Davis

Senate Bill No. 105

"An Act relating to continuing the secondary public education of a homeless student; relating to the purpose of certain laws as they relate to children; relating to tuition waivers, loans, and medical assistance for a child placed in out-of-home care by the state; relating to foster care; relating to children in need of aid; relating to foster care transition to independent living; and relating to juvenile programs and institutions."

Sponsor Statement

SB 105 provides much needed additional educational, medical, financial, and housing assistance to foster care or "out-of-home" care children and students as they transition through and out of the Alaska state foster care system. An estimated 40% of the 2,000 Alaska foster care youth become homeless after being released from care. Many others wind up in poverty or are incarcerated at higher levels than their peers. SB 105 codifies and increases assistance beyond certain provisions of the federal McKinney-Vento Act, which was reauthorized as Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002. The McKinney-Vento Act is the primary piece of federal legislation dealing with the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness in U.S. public schools. Fourteen or more states have enacted foster care/educational legislation modeled after some provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act.

Children in foster care struggle academically and suffer more poverty, low self-esteem, emotional trauma, social stigma, and higher mobility than others. They are more likely to drop out of school, repeat grades, and be placed in special education. A 2004 study of Chicago Public School youth found that fifteen-year-old students in out-of-home care were half as likely as other students to have graduated from high school five years later, with 55% having dropped out and 10% having been incarcerated. Only 54% of young adults who age out of care have completed high school. Youth in foster care attending public schools score 16 to 20 percentile points below youth in the general population in statewide standardized tests. And Youth in foster care on average read at only at a 7th grade level after completing 10th or 11th grade. (Casey Family Programs, White Paper, Educating Children in Foster Care, McKinney-Vento and NCLB; also, ABANET.org/Child/Education).

Low educational outcomes are exacerbated by the high mobility of children in foster care. Frequent school changes are associated with an increased risk of failing a grade in school and of repeated behavior problems. By 6th grade, students who have changed schools four or more times have lost approximately 1 year of educational growth. A Casey Foundation study of 1,087 foster care alumni found that youth who

had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving care. The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education reported that children and youth in out-of-home care experience, on average, 1 or 2 foster care placement changes per year, citing U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services Administration for Children and Families. One third of children in foster care stay in care for less than 5 months, and another 17% remain in care for one year or less.