

To: The House Appropriations Committee
From: Rachel White, JD, Child Welfare Policy Director
Re: HB986-State Child Welfare System- Reporting
Date: February 25, 2020
Position: Support

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB986- State Child Welfare System-Reporting. Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY) supports this bill as it will establish a mechanism to create meaningful interventions to improve the outcomes of youth in Maryland's foster care system.

This bill works to improve the outcomes of youth in foster care by facilitating data sharing between the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Currently DHS releases monthly data and a yearly report with data of children involved with the child welfare system, HB986 will help fill some of the gaps in the data already provided by DHR.

One indicator includes the rate in which siblings in care are placed together. There is little national data on siblings in foster care, estimates indicate that well over half of children in foster care nationwide have one or more siblings also in care. Some sources state that as many as 75 percent of youth in foster care are placed apart from one or more of their siblings. **The rate of siblings being placed together is not made publicly available in Maryland making it harder to gauge the extent of the problem and to create meaningful interventions that yield the most change (i.e sibling registries, considering the sibling bond when deciding what is in the best interest of children)** Research suggests that when siblings are separated they are more likely to exhibit problematic emotional and behavioral problems, lower functioning in schools, inappropriate attachments, and placement instability.

Under the federal, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), beginning with the 2017-2018 school year, MSDE is required to make available disaggregated data on graduation rates and the academic performance for students in foster care. While this is a start, this information is just the tip of the iceberg and in fact the federal government encourages state collaboration between MSDE and the Department of Human Services to potentially go beyond the ESSA data points to ensure meaningful statewide data.

As a result, this bill will require MSDE to report on: the stability of school placements, the number of youth with Individualized Education Plans, the number of youth who have been retained, the number youth who have withdrawn from school, rates of absenteeism, and school disciplinary data.

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The children and families served by the child welfare system, as well as the public, must have a high level of confidence that the system will act in a child's best interests and will respond to the child's needs by providing the services and interventions best matched with that child's specific needs, to include their educational attainment. To engender this high level of confidence it is imperative that the public has well-publicized, easily accessible, and transparent data indicating the outcomes and experiences of the children involved in the child welfare system.

To improve child welfare outcomes and to foster best practices, there must be effective accountability mechanisms, including the availability of data on outcomes disaggregated by age, gender identity, race, and ethnicity, as required by HB986 and for the reasons stated above, we urge this Committee to issue a favorable report.