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**To: Members of the Joint Committee on Education**

**From: Hon. Leslie E. Harris**

**Re: Legislative Testimony for H. 177 and H. 178**

I am pleased to testify in support of H. 177 and H. 178 and regret that I cannot be there in person. I have been an Associate Justice in the Suffolk County Juvenile Court in Massachusetts since 1994. Prior to that I was Chief of the Juvenile Division at the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, and I have worked as both a public defender and a probation officer. I have also taught third and fourth grade. My wife taught in the Boston Public Schools for over thirty eight years and my son is presently a high school teacher in Boston.

All too often children are deprived of their education. These bills address this great injustice by both identifying and preventing unnecessary school exclusions. H. 177 would mandate reporting and reviewing of all school exclusion data, helping to further identify the problem. H. 178 would limit school expulsions to one year, foregoing the current possibility of permanent expulsion. It also spells out significant due process protections to all students facing exclusion from school for greater than ten days. Further, the bill provides for alternative education options for excluded students. A child's education must still continue even if they are excluded from school. When some form of school exclusion is necessary, such as a long-term suspension, alternative paths must be provided to allow that child to continue his or her education.

As a Juvenile Court judge in Suffolk County I am keenly aware that exclusion from school often leads to court involvement. Permanently expelling students from school seals their fate, putting them at a much greater risk than their peers for being

arrested and living in poverty. This is especially true for children of color, who disproportionately represent the majority of school dropouts and juvenile court cases. Excluding these students from school nearly guarantees that the government and taxpayers will have to deal with them for the rest of their lives.

The heart of the issue is access to justice and due process. Permanent expulsion exacerbates existing social, political and economic inequities. Excluded students are thus severely impaired from becoming equal participants in the pursuit of Life, Liberty and Freedom. Massachusetts already provides superior due process protections for youth in the juvenile court system. Unfortunately, by the time a student becomes court-involved it is often too late. We have an obligation to make a positive difference in the lives of students by keeping them in school and out of the courtroom whenever possible. Therefore I encourage you to give these bills serious consideration and help all students to have the chance they deserve.

Sincerely,  
  
Leslie E. Harris