

Testimony of Corinn Williams, New Bedford, Massachusetts

H.3435 An Act to Help Students Stay in School

November 10, 2009

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on H.3435, an Act to Help Students Stay in School. My son was one of countless casualties of selectively applied, heavy-handed zero-tolerance policies. My 13 year-old son started in the 9th grade at New Bedford High in 1999. In the third week of the semester, I received a phone call from the school to come immediately concerning my son. I was informed by the school principal that my son's backpack was searched and they found a small pipe, the kind used to smoke marijuana, in his possession. As a parent, I was naturally concerned and upset. When I arrived at the school, there was a police officer there who did not arrest or pursue any criminal action, given that my son not in possession of any controlled substance, only the pipe. The principal of the school then informed me that as result of having the pipe, my son would be expelled from school FOREVER. I was stunned to hear the word FOREVER and asked the principal "What about my son's right to a free, public education?" And he replied that he did not have that right and that under zero-tolerance policies, the school could and would permanently exclude my son.

That day was the beginning of a two year ordeal to find a way to keep my son in school. Although it was a considerable economic hardship, I was able to find private legal counsel who was able to afford my son some protection by placing him under an Individual Education Plan (IEP). My son was placed in New Bedford's Alternative High School, where instruction was provided for only 2.5 hours per day. Students who arguably were in need of the most support, were released at 11 AM. I was told that no student had ever graduated from the Alternative school and it was basically a matter of time before students dropped out. It should be noted that the Alternative High School has since been closed down given their poor performance to serve the needs of these students.

My son eventually made his way back to the high school, but the punitive and adversarial role school administration took from early on took its toll and my son, and he eventually decided to drop out. Despite the poor educational preparation received in the New Bedford Public Schools, my son was able to earn his GED soon after and he then enrolled in Bristol Community College where he was able to continue his education and earn good grades. He has since been a degree candidate at Berklee College of Music , where he is pursuing a major in Music Production and Engineering. The requirements if the major involves a background in math and algebra that a typical student who had this preparation in High School would have received. My

son is currently living with the consequences of the lack of this preparation and is facing this considerable obstacle in pursuing his career goals.

Over the years I have reflected many times about this very dark and painful chapter in my son's life. I never understood how easily and abruptly a school administrator could take away access to something as critical as an education on the basis of zero-tolerance policies. My son was not involved in a violent assault against students or teachers, nor was he dealing drugs. I would also venture to guess that he was not the only student at New Bedford High at the time who was experimenting with marijuana. I would often read in the newspapers about students in other more suburban towns who committed much worse infractions and yet were not subject to zero-tolerance expulsions. I was very fortunate to have found avenues to advocate on my son's behalf, and although I am a single parent, I had enough flexibility in my work schedule to be available to attend countless meetings with school administrators. I think about other families who may have a language barrier or might not have information to challenge these often arbitrary and destructive zero-tolerance and expulsion policies. And above all I think about the many students who have never been given a fighting chance to succeed and thrive in school and are instead seen only as threats and troublemakers. I urge your serious consideration of H.3435 because it's provisions go a long way to address some of the most egregious and counter-productive school policies that have undermined and derailed public education for so many students who are pushed out of the system prematurely.

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