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Kids Win in the First Pennsylvania Bill of the Year

Youth Leaders and Advocates Celebrate Victory for Youth

Harrisburg, PA – Yesterday, Governor Tom Wolf (D) signed Senate Bill 324 into law as Act 1 of 2022. This bill, sponsored by Senators Langerholc (R) and Browne (R), requires all school districts to provide additional supports for students who experience educational disruption due to homelessness or involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems. In divided political times, it is noteworthy that this bill passed both chambers unanimously.

The legislation removes significant obstacles to successful high school completion for students who already face barriers to on-time graduation, requiring school districts to create an infrastructure to help students get credit for courses taken in other districts, acquire necessary records and access extracurricular activities. These interventions ensure a timely graduation for students who have changed schools due to these factors.

The legislation also provides school districts flexibility related to credits and diplomas so they can respond to youth's individual circumstances.

Students who change schools often lose credits for work they have completed in previous districts. Research shows only 60% of students who experience homelessness graduate on time, and one out of three of students with juvenile justice involvement never graduate at all. Only 75% of students who have had foster care placements graduate or get a GED by age 21, compared to 92% of Pennsylvania's general population.

Attorneys at the Education Law Center and Juvenile Law Center first began working on versions of this legislation more than a decade ago. The bill is modeled after legislation adopted in several other states including Maine and New Mexico.

"We are grateful to the General Assembly and the Governor for their support for Act 1 and to the youth who advocated for this important change," said Kate Burdick, Senior Attorney at Juvenile Law Center. "Students who complete their coursework under the most difficult circumstances and desperately want to graduate will now have an adult in their school district to help them. This simple fix to frustrating and unnecessary system roadblocks will facilitate on-time graduation and help students connect with their school community. We thank Senator Wayne Langerholc and Senator Pat Browne for their leadership in securing passage of the bill and prioritizing youth who so often are marginalized by our society."

"Act 1 is a game-changer for youth who too often fall through the cracks and drop out of school due to educational disruptions," *said Maura McInerney, Legal Director at Education Law Center. "We celebrate the youth who have created this pathway forward and look forward to working with school leaders to immediately implement this new law."*

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The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, community engagement, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, English learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness. For more information, visit elc-pa.org or @edlawcenterpa on Twitter.

Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the foster care and justice systems. Founded in 1975, Juvenile Law Center is the first non-profit, public interest law firm for children in the country. We fight for youth through litigation, appellate advocacy and submission of amicus (friend-of-the-court) briefs, policy reform, public education, training, consulting, and strategic communications. Widely published and internationally recognized as leaders in the field, Juvenile Law Center has substantially shaped the development of law and policy on behalf of youth. We strive to ensure that laws, policies, and practices affecting youth advance racial and economic equity and are rooted in research, consistent with children's unique developmental characteristics, and reflective of international human rights values. For more information about Juvenile Law Center's work, visit www.JLC.org.