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Representative Marvin L. Abney
Rhode Island State House
RI House Finance Committee Chairman
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

March 20, 2025

Dear Representative Abney,

I write in opposition of the Office of the Child Advocate's (OCA) proposal to move the RI Educational Surrogate Parent Program from the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), provides parents the right to participate in all decision-making about their child's educational program. IDEA, section 300.519, further describes that in cases where a child's parent is unavailable or unable to participate, a surrogate parent is appointed to represent a child with a disability. A child with a disability in the care and custody of the state meets the requirement for having a surrogate parent appointed to represent their educational interests. Public agencies overseeing the implementation of IDEA must ensure that an individual appointed meets the following criteria: 1) is not an employee of the State Education Agency (SEA), the Local Education Agency (LEA) or any other agency that is involved in the education or care of the child, 2) must be not have any personal or professional interests that conflict with the child's interest, and 3) have the knowledge and skills to represent the child's needs.

The Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities is Rhode Island's federally designated University Center on Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) with a mission to promote membership for all in school, work and the community. The Sherlock Center has successfully implemented the Educational Surrogate Parent Program since 2003. Each year, the program supports approximate 18% of children in the care and custody of RI Department of Youth and Families (DCYF). The program has consistently met or exceeded the goals set by the state consent decree to provide services to students with disabilities in the care and custody of DCYF. Graduation rates for students supported by this program have consistently exceeded 85%, and the majority of students transition from high school into higher education programs, transition programs and/or into employment and independent living situations.

The Sherlock Center staff have the knowledge, training and skills, as well as access to legal counsel, to make conflict-free and informed educational decisions that are in the best interest of the students.

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As part of the Sherlock Center and Rhode Island College, staff also have access to current research, practices and programs that support individuals with disabilities in school and across the lifespan.

Since joining the Sherlock Center, the RI Educational Surrogate Parent Program has benefited from our collaborative relationships DCYF, family court personnel, RIDE, ORS and community disability agencies, as well as OCA. Only since the appointment of Child Advocate Kaitlyn Mederios has the collaborative work between the OCA and the Sherlock Center deteriorated. The Sherlock Center learned of the consolidation effort when Ms. Mederios first testified before the RI legislature in 2024. Prior to that, there were no formal complaints presented to the Sherlock Center and no outreach or communication by the OCA to discuss the possibility of consolidation in an effort to make systemic improvements.

We agree and support the OCA's position that many children in the foster care system are not reaching intended educational outcomes. The OCA describes factors influencing these outcomes including, but not limited to, school enrollment, ESSA determinations, transportation and truancy. Simply stated, these factors, unless directly related to students with disabilities, are not the responsibility of RI Educational Surrogate Parent Program. It is the position of the Sherlock Center that the reasons for the achievement gaps are complex and require a comprehensive statewide approach allowing all involved to 1) understand the issues influencing these outcomes, and 2) to work across state agencies to put in place strategies to improve the experiences and outcomes of children in the care and custody of the state. The Sherlock Center is committed to working collaboratively with all state agencies and community organizations to address these issues.

The RI Educational Surrogate Parent Program has a proven track record of successfully supporting students with disabilities in the care and custody of DCYF. We ask that you continue to support the Sherlock Center to implement this program and that you do not approve the consolidation proposal.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amy Grattan".

Amy Grattan, PhD

Executive Director, Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College