

Good afternoon, my name is Heidi Hart. I am an attorney with Richardson, Whitman, Large & Badger, which has offices in Portland and Bangor and practices statewide. I am also a former teen parent, a former TANF recipient, and a graduate of the Parents as Scholars program. Born to working poor, married, conservative Christian parents, I am the second of five children. From my earliest memories, poverty was a familiar state of affairs, and I still can recall the shame that I felt as a child because of my family's financial struggles. My father was an abusive man, so it was something of a relief when my parents separated when I was twelve years old. Unfortunately, this relief was short-lived, as my family plunged deeper and deeper into the hopelessness, degradation, and despair of poverty. I watched my now-single mother struggle to raise five emotionally-scarred children on next to nothing. I saw how her mother was treated by those who were supposed to be there to help her. It made me angry and sad to see my mother cry because she didn't know how she would meet all of our most basic needs every month. Could she afford food if she didn't pay the electric bill? Would we run out of money for heat in the middle of the month and spend days wrapped in blankets around a tiny electric heater? I spent my early life dreaming of a way out of this suffering and uncertainty. Understanding the value of education and its relationship to financial security and success, I fervently hoped that I could somehow make it to college someday.

But a childhood spent in poverty can deter any hope of a better future. The need to escape from the daily misery can lead children to make risky choices that threaten their chances for success. And when I learned that I was pregnant at the age of 15, my dreams for a safe and secure future nearly collapsed. I became convinced that my own beautiful daughter would be sentenced to a life like my own—one of deprivation, hunger, cold, embarrassment, shame, and depression. I promised my new baby that I would do everything possible to make her life better than my own had been so far. However, without any job skills or experience, I didn't even know how I could support myself, let alone this precious child who depended on me. I became severely depressed and sought treatment. As I began to recover, and with the help of my family and others, I managed to get my G.E.D. and applied to the University of Southern Maine, where I was accepted. At least at that time, the University was committed to providing quality child care for students who were also parents, along with offering designated family housing on campus. The financial plan for my college attendance was that I would pay for tuition, housing, and child care with student loans and grants. I would also rely on welfare assistance to fill the gap between the student financial aid available to me and the actual costs of living.

Almost immediately after I started college classes, I began hearing reports on the news about welfare reform. I heard people and politicians talking about people on welfare, except that it seemed to me that the people talking had never actually met a person on welfare, because they told all kinds of lies about what "those people" were really like. I heard a whole bunch of talk about how low-income parents should leave welfare and go to work, but I didn't hear anything about education. I was terrified that I would have to

drop out of college and become trapped in an endless cycle of minimum wage employment and welfare. I knew that the employment available to me would not pay nearly enough to support myself and my daughter. I also knew that I could not continue to live a life of suffering and deprivation, and I feared what I might do or where I might end up if faced with no real options or opportunity.

Fortunately, people who really cared about finding long-term solutions for people trapped in poverty and on welfare were already working on a solution, although unbeknownst to me, which would enable me to reach my dreams. I soon learned from a friend about something called the Parents as Scholars program, which had been created by the Maine Legislature to help people just like us. My friend was just one of a number of low-income student parents I would see graduate from the PAS program and go on to establish professional, stable and secure lives in Maine. I learned that the PaS program would provide some additional help like financial assistance to purchase books and supplies and clothing vouchers to purchase appropriate business attire for job interviews, but most importantly, the creation of this program meant that I didn't have to drop out of college and watch my dream of a better life and future for my daughter and myself disappear before my eyes. I also learned how lucky I was to live in Maine during welfare reform, as only one other state, Wyoming, also understood that education was a key component to any strategy to move people permanently from welfare to work, from poverty to financial security, and from despair to hope.

When I graduated from USM, my daughter walked across the stage with me to accept my degree. Even at her young age, she understood the immeasurable worth of education. I started working full-time just two days after my graduation, and I left the welfare rolls for good. That was almost thirteen years ago. Then, a year after graduating, the federal TANF legislation was up for reauthorization. Knowing how important education was to my success, I agreed to attend a meeting with other PaS graduates and Maine's own Senator Olympia Snowe. I still have the picture of me standing next to Senator Snowe, and I will always remember how thrilled I was when she decided to propose an amendment to the TANF reauthorization bill that would enable low-income parents throughout the country to attend college. Unfortunately, while Senator Snowe's amendment received unanimous support in committee, it did not become law.

I never understood the political opposition to this sensible idea. Because no matter which side of the political aisle you are on, support for this program should be a no-brainer. If your goal is to enable people to leave welfare and poverty behind for good, education is key to achieving that goal because education is key to securing the kind of job that will provide financial independence and security. As a taxpaying citizen, my lifelong contribution to this State will far outweigh the short-term investment that was made in me through the PaS program. The expected course of my daughter's life was also dramatically changed because of the wise decision that Maine made back in 1996 to create this program and provide a lifeline to people like me.

Please, do not cut the Parents as Scholars program. The cost-benefit analysis, in terms of both money and human lives, weighs in favor of keeping this opportunity open for low-income parents. This program has demonstrated success in transforming people's lives and economic opportunities. I am just one of many who have benefited from this sensible approach to welfare reform. To destroy this program based on false assumptions and ugly stereotypes about people on welfare would be especially egregious. Cutting or eliminating the PAS program is completely counter-productive to the goal of helping families permanently leave welfare and poverty. I hope that the members of this committee fully understand how foolish and irresponsible that would be, and I hope you refuse to deprive people like me of the hope of a better and more secure future.

Sincerely,

Heidi J. Hart