January 18, 2008

Dear Representative:

I write to strongly urge your co-sponsorship of H.R. 3846, the Youth Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support, and Education Act ("Youth PROMISE Act"), introduced by Representative Bobby Scott. This legislation calls for a fundamental paradigm shift in child policy and practice away from the too frequent first choice of punishment and incarceration to prevention and early intervention and sustained child investment. The Youth PROMISE Act is a direct response to what the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) calls America's "Cradle to Prison Pipeline" Crisis.

CDF recently launched the Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Campaign, a national call to action to stop the funneling of tens of thousands of youth, predominantly minority and poor children, down life paths that often lead to arrest, conviction, incarceration and, in some cases, death. Race and poverty are the major factors underpinning the Pipeline. The problems, policies and systems that feed the Pipeline are a result of human choices. They include the lack of access to health and mental health care; child abuse and neglect; lack of quality childhood education; failing schools; zero tolerance school discipline policies; too few positive alternatives to the streets after school and in the summer months; unsupported community institutions; too few positive role models and mentors in the home, community, social and cultural life; neighborhoods saturated with drugs and violence; a culture that glorifies excessive consumption, individualism, violence and triviality; rampant racial and economic disparities in child and youth serving systems; and tougher sentencing guidelines.

The Youth PROMISE Act addresses a number of these risks facing children and youth and takes steps to ensure that the work done is responsive to the needs of individual communities and youth. It calls for communities facing the greatest youth gang and crime challenges to form a local council, with representatives from law enforcement, court services, schools, social service, health and mental health providers, and community-based organizations, including faith-based organizations, and youth and families. The council is charged with developing a comprehensive community plan for implementing evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies, targeted at young people who are at-risk of or already involved in gangs or the juvenile or criminal justice system to redirect them toward successful adulthood. To help communities succeed, the Youth PROMISE Act establishes a National Center for Proven Practices Research to collect and disseminate to local councils and the public evidence-based and promising practices to prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency and criminal street gang activity.
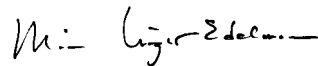
The Act also provides for hiring and training Youth Oriented Policing officers and establishes a Center for identification, development and dissemination of strategic policing practices and technologies to law enforcement agencies related to youth. The bill also improves current laws affecting juvenile delinquency and criminal street gang activity and extends and increases funding for the Juvenile Accountability Block Grant Program to support juvenile justice systems. All these changes will help sustain gains made in communities.

Our Nation must stop criminalizing children at younger and younger ages, and instead institute policies that place all children on a path to productive adulthood. The Youth PROMISE Act is a very important step toward that goal.

The Children's Defense Fund urges you to join us in strongly supporting the Youth PROMISE Act. Please contact me or Lynn White, our Senior Juvenile Justice Associate (202-662-3624 or lwhite@childensdefense.org) if you would like additional information about the Youth PROMISE Act or our *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* Campaign.

Sincerely yours,

Marian Wright Edelman

cc: Honorable John Conyers, Jr., Chairman, House Judiciary Committee
        Honorable Lamar S. Smith, Ranking Member, House Judiciary Committee