

# The New York Times

Education

## For Students' Problems, Some Legal Advice

By GAIL BRACCIDIFERRO

BRIDGEPORT

Dayquinn Miller, 17, transferred to Warren Harding High School from another school in the fall, but for three months he did not know whether he would be allowed to graduate in the spring. His former school district refused to release his transcript unless his family paid for school bus damage he was accused of causing.

The Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic that opened at his new school in the fall informed him that it is illegal for a school district to withhold a transcript over such a dispute. After a letter was written on the young man's behalf, the transcript was released, said Josh Michtom, the staff lawyer at the clinic.

Without the transcript, Dayquinn said Harding had no records of what credits he had earned.

"It was scary," he said.

Mr. Michtom said that in the first three months since the clinic opened, about 20 students had sought legal advice there. The clinic is sponsored by the Center for Children's Advocacy, which is affiliated with the University of Connecticut's School of Law.

The children's advocacy center opened its first school-based legal clinic at Hartford High School in 1998 as part of an effort to reduce the school's dropout rate, which then stood at 50 percent.

The intention was to help students in struggling communities cope with legal problems that often stand in the way of their educational success, problems that students from well-heeled neighborhoods either don't have, or have the resources to handle in a different manner.

"The idea is to remove obstacles that can keep students from coming to school," said Stacey Violante Cote, a lawyer who has worked at Hartford High School since the program began.

Teenagers here might need help navigating special education services, or they live in abusive homes and want to be legally emancipated, the center's directors said. Others are homeless and might need a permanent foster home, or they are immigrants without the proper documentation to work. Others are young parents who need food, child care or support payments.

With his transcript dispute settled, Dayquinn is confident about graduating in the spring, and he plans to attend the Georgia

Institute of Technology in the fall.

Another 17-year-old student whose first name is Hector was struggling with a problem at home with his mother that was making it difficult for him to concentrate on schoolwork. For confidentiality reasons, Mr. Michtom could not be more specific, but he said he had counseled Hector about his rights, advised him of a course of action and appeared in court with him on an unrelated case to help translate the proceeding for the Spanish-speaking teenager.

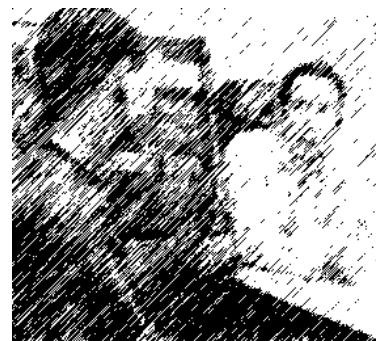
"He told me things I didn't know about my rights," Hector said, referring to Mr. Michtom. "I don't know what problems I would have gotten into. I was feeling disoriented."

Now Hector is earning good grades and is even considering a career as a lawyer.

In about five years, the program has counseled more than 850 students and conducted about 300 training groups, Ms. Violante Cote said. It has also worked to make larger, more systemic changes, like improvements to the special education system, she said.

Mr. Michtom had worked as a public defender in Cambridge, Mass., but he said in his current job he has a broader impact on students' lives because he can help them stay in school and encourage them to go on to college.

"The reason I'm a lawyer is to make the legal system accessible to poor people," he said.



THOMAS McDONALD FOR  
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**COUNSEL** Josh Michtom, right, a lawyer, and Dayquinn Miller, 17, a high-school student.