

# DCF Failing Some Foster Children Educationally

December 18, 2012  
By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas

After running away from her abusive family, Crystal Griffin spent years attending school at the group homes where the state sent her to live. She knows firsthand the quality of the education foster children get when the state is your parent. "There was nothing hard about it," said Griffin, who is now 19. "They may say it's tenth grade work, but I learned that stuff in eighth grade."

The quality of the education provided in non-traditional settings for abused and neglected foster children-- and the lack of monitoring of their educational progress -- is coming under fire by both child advocates and a prominent state legislator. "What's most shocking is that [the] state is really a bad parent," said Sen. Toni Harp, a Democrat from New Haven and the co-chairwoman of the legislature's Appropriations Committee.

Alfred L. Burr School							
Mme Fabienne Pierre-Maxwell, Principal		Dr. Christina Kishimoto, Superintendent of Schools					
Student: _____	Grade: 7		Homeroom: _____				
	Trimester 1		Trimester 2		Trimester 3		Final Grade
	G	C	G	C	G	C	
Language Arts	D 60%	2	D 61%	2	D 63%	2	D
Math	D 63%	1	C- 70%	2	F 48%	1	D- 60%
Science	N/A		N/A				
Humanities	D 60%	2	F 48%	1	F 50%	1	F
Art	F	1	F	1	F	5	F
Music	C	2	D+	2	D	2	D+
Physical Education	B+ 89%	3	B 85%	3	B	3	B
Library	N/A		F	1	F	2	F

Martha Stone, a lawyer representing foster children: 'This is a typical report card of the kids we represent on a daily basis... No one is keeping track that they are making any type of academic progress.'

The Department of Children and Families has been under federal court oversight for two decades for failing too many children in its custody. In the court monitor's most recent quarterly review of the agency, it cited gaps in the educational services the state provides to those in its custody. Additionally, the education needs of 10 percent of the foster children leaving group homes were not appropriately planned for, the monitor said.

"The failure of these kids is shown on their report cards," Martha Stone, a lawyer who represents foster children, told the state's Achievement Gap Task Force last week while holding up the grades of one of her clients. "They are failing... There are thousands of these kids."

The Department of Children and Families -- the legal guardian and parent of nearly 5,000 children in Connecticut on any given day -- is well aware of the problem and for the first time has signed an agreement with the State Department of Education in an effort to track and monitor the education of the children in their custody.

"We are in desperate need of data.... We want to see how our children are doing. We are expecting the answer to be discouraging," said Stephen Tracy, the superintendent of DCF-run programs and lead person for education strategies for the agency. Tracy said the agency is seeking this "real time" information so top officials and social workers are aware if a foster child is chronically absent from school, is having discipline problems, getting the special education services necessary and whether they are passing their classes. "There is no point in finding out a youngster missed 52 days in June," Tracy told a roomful of community-service providers in Middletown last month.

But child advocates are growing impatient waiting for the agency, as the agreement was signed between the education department and DCF more than six months ago. Officials say the information will begin being shared by next month. Charlene Russell-Tucker, the chief operating officer for the education department, said the department is working on getting the communication flowing. "The best thing is for us to be able to communicate in real time and so there is no delay in getting them services... This is a population we really need to pay attention to," she said.

## 'Falling through the cracks'

Jovan "JV" Santiago is not proud of his past. At 14 years old he was expelled from school for the second time in two years for getting into a fight with someone he says was picking on him. While he waited for the charges stemming from the fight to play out in court, his yearlong expulsion was up. "I tried to get back into school, but they denied me," Santiago said. "I never got back in."

Instead, he was offered tutoring or enrollment in an alternative, nontraditional program. Eventually, DCF and a judge decided that what was best for Santiago was sending him to live in a group home in Rhode Island for two years with other troubled boys. Santiago isn't complimentary about the education he received during his four-year hiatus from traditional public school. "I wouldn't call that providing an education. It was horrible," the now 22-year-old former foster child said. "I was so far behind when I came back to school."



Martha Stone: foster children 'are put into programs under the radar. They are falling through the cracks.'

This reality is one that child advocates say foster children routinely face as they are shunted into unregulated

and unmonitored alternative and adult education programs.

“They are put into programs under the radar. They are falling through the cracks,” said Stone, a lawyer with the Center for Children’s Advocacy, an organization that advocates for policy changes at the state Capitol. “Our most vulnerable kids are in these alternative programs.”

In fact, 40 percent of children on probation on Nov. 14 were enrolled in alternative programs. No one knows -- including DCF and SDE -- how many foster children are enrolled in these alternative programs or how many will graduate, drop out or go back to their traditional public school. “It’s not seen as a transition program. It’s seen as a last stop,” said Gary Highsmith, the principal of Hamden High School and a member of the legislature’s Achievement Gap Task Force. “No one is holding anyone accountable.”

A review of Alternative Programs in the state by the Better Way Foundation, concluded that many of these programs are the “dumping groups” for students with discipline issues, which are often minority students. “Students are counseled, coerced and involuntary placed in alternative and adult education programs through a variety of tactics,” the report concludes.

Stone is asking legislators to take a series of steps to ensure that no matter what type of program these children end up in, it is high quality. Her proposals, being considered by the Achievement Gap Task Force, would require that foster children take the state’s standardized tests no matter where they are in school; that informed consent be issued by DCF before a child can attend a non-traditional public school; and that these programs provide a minimum number of instructional hours and course offerings for students. “I really think you are on to something,” Harp responded to this proposal at the task force’s last meeting.

And DCF seems poised to also better track its children. “Education is not something we are doing very well,” said Janice Gruendel, the deputy commissioner for the agency. “We are the legal parent, so we have a legal obligation.” In a plan presented by DCF to address these shortfalls, Gruendel and Tracy highlighted plans for the agency to help shepherd its children to get the necessary education services in local school districts. The agency also intends to incorporate education performance requirements for all the group homes it contracts with and to assess student progress when they leave these programs.

Stone applauds these initiatives but is asking that they be cemented into law. Recommendations given to the task force would require the education department to establish standards for these schools surrounding professional development, teacher certification, curriculum, special education case planning and reporting of student outcomes.

### **Figuring out what grade they are in**

Highsmith said it is not uncommon for a foster child to show up at his school with no records. “There is no reason we shouldn’t know what grade a kid is in,” Highsmith said, who has had students who show up with nothing except contact information for their foster parent.

“We can do better than that,” he said.

Advocates say that too often it takes months for students’ records to make it to their school, and by then these highly transient students have already been placed elsewhere. State and federal laws were passed in recent years to allow students to remain in the same school if it is determined to be in their best interest.

These laws, advocates say, have helped. But they have not eliminated foster children bouncing around schools.

When DCF found a home for Griffin closer to home in Hartford, her education records took months to make it back from Massachusetts. Griffin, who was pregnant at the time and thought she was all done with high school, was told she would have to go to high school in Hartford until they sorted it all out.

“They didn’t know what grade I was in,” Griffin remembered. “One day, they finally called me to the principal’s office and told me I had all the credits I needed.”

A few weeks later she enrolled in college to become a medical assistant, one year later than she had hoped to start.