

Children In State Care Need School Supports

By SARAH HEALY EAGAN | OP-ED

The Hartford Courant
7:52 PM EDT, March 25, 2013

More than 4,000 children are in the custody or care of the state. These are the most vulnerable of our children and the effort to address the state's alarming academic achievement gap must start with them.

Three bills before the General Assembly would help ensure that these children are not overlooked by the schools, that the state is accountable for their education and that the support system and resources needed to give them good early childhood schooling are in place.

Students in the state's care or custody include children in the child welfare system, children in Court Support Services Division facilities and children who have been adjudicated delinquent.

But before the state can begin closing the achievement gap, it first must determine the size and scope of the challenge before it. The state does not currently collect or track these children's academic success or failure and school districts do not have to account for how children in foster care perform. The state Department of Children and Families has made recent efforts to obtain children's standardized test scores, however despite its efforts, the agency often lacks basic data necessary to measure children's educational progress.

As a result, we do not always have reliable information on the readiness of these children to graduate from high school, their yearly grade-level performance or even, in some cases, their absenteeism.

These children, many of whom have experienced the trauma of abuse, neglect and abandonment, face challenges other students do not.

First, they may change schools during the academic year. Their education is further disrupted when lags in coordination and cooperation from local school districts delay the transfer of their school records.

Second, students in state care may lack a consistent adult or advocate who can ensure they are getting the help they need in school to succeed.

And, third, many students in state care live and attend schools in residential facilities that are not rigorously monitored as to whether they are meeting children's educational needs.

Data from around the country confirm that students in foster care have higher rates of absenteeism, disciplinary infractions, grade retention and special education placements, and lower test scores than their peers. Preliminary figures from the Connecticut Department of Education indicate that the majority of eighth graders in the foster care system are below goal in reading and math. The state agencies and towns caring for and educating these children are critical partners, along with foster parents and families, in improving these achievement levels. DCF can often be a resource of strength and support for vulnerable children and their families. That agency must have the tools it needs to support the educational performance and progress of children who rely on it every day.

An important step toward addressing this achievement gap is found in the three bills being considered by the

legislature. The first would enable state agencies to share and report educational information and support DCF efforts to make sure children in state care do not fall through the cracks of our educational system. The second compels certification, transparency and accountability from schools run by the state or state contractors. The third proposal creates a pilot program to ensure that children in state care have targeted supports to improve academically and that DCF has resources it needs to ensure young children are enrolled in early childhood education programs.

These solutions, which are based on successful models in other states, are logical, evidence-based, and cost-effective. They speak to basic transparency and accountability. As Connecticut develops its master plan to close the education achievement gap statewide, we ask the state to track, advocate for and support the educational needs of children in its care.

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