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Op-Ed

Why aren't we prioritizing the children?

By MARTHA STONE
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I get that tolls, marijuana legalization, losing Connecticut residents and municipal aid allocations are at the top of the agenda for the governor and his team, the news media and the legislature. But the priorities that matter to the kids we represent seem conspicuously absent from the policy lists garnering attention.

The top priority list for the Center for Children's Advocacy contains reforms that are urgent, compelling and long overdue — and it offers a different perspective from the dialogue so far.

* Eliminate the achievement gap.

We have one of the worst achievement gaps in the country between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers. And the needle has virtually not moved in the last four years, despite some valiant efforts in this regard. At least two-thirds of black and Latino students in Connecticut are behind in math or English. Why isn't this at the top of anyone's agenda? How can it be OK to have a "crisis" as it relates to chronic absenteeism in some of our cities, where a large percentage of the students are already absent and the school year isn't even half over?

* Provide incentives to regionalize schools and programs.

It is now 23 years since the Connecticut Supreme Court decided *Sheff v. O'Neill*, and we still have segregated and unequal school systems. Just as the phrase "all deliberate speed" in *Brown v. Board of Education* never came to fruition, so too have we made a mockery of Chief Justice Ellen Ash Peters' admonition in the *Sheff* opinion that "every passing day denies these children their constitutional right to a substantially equal educational opportunity."

* Stop gun violence

In 2017, my client Keon Huff was gunned down and made the headlines. In 2018, Karlonzo Taylor and Clinton Howell reached the front page. Attention focused on these young men for a day, maybe even two. But what about the others under the age of 18 who were shot, and sometimes killed, in recent years? When was the last time you even saw what this number was? Where is the outcry for them? Where are the changes in policies as a result of their deaths? Why is violence against youth not at the top of the state's agenda?

* Provide health care access to immigrant youth

It reminds me of the segregated water fountains that were so prolific in the South. Here, if you were born in the United States, live in Connecticut and are an infant — or a 7-year-old, or a teen who needs crucial health care — even if you are poor, your health care needs are addressed. If you are a child who wasn't born here, are undocumented, cry out for medical care or suffered from trauma just to get here, you go to the fountain that is dry.



Hartford, CT - 12/6/18 - Tyzhuan Hayes, 18, wears a photo of his childhood friend Karlonzo Taylor around his neck outside the Park Street building where Taylor was fatally shot Wednesday afternoon. Several people gathered Thursday evening in remembrance of Taylor. Photo by Brad Horrigan | bhorrigan@courant.com (Brad Horrigan / Hartford Courant)

*** Address the race discrimination that is occurring in our child welfare and juvenile justice systems**

Young people of color are still disproportionately being stopped by police,
Young people of color are still disproportionately both entering the DCF system and staying longer in out-of-home care.
Young people of color are still incarcerated at higher rates than their white counterparts for the same crimes.

Why isn't eliminating race discrimination, intentional or not, at the top of anyone's agenda?

*** Commit to ending youth homelessness by 2020**

There has been a big push to end homelessness for veterans in the last few years in Connecticut, which has been tremendously successful. Why is it acceptable that we still have young people couch-surfing with no place to go, children who are homeless and wonder where their next meal will come from? Don't our vulnerable young ones deserve that same laser focus?

*** Meet the last few outcome measures in the DCF consent decree**

Twenty-eight years after the Juan F. consent decree that placed the Department of Children and Families under federal court jurisdiction, we still have children removed from their homes, sitting in DCF offices and waiting for a place to go. Why is it that young people who need substance abuse or mental health treatment are placed on waiting lists for treatment or have case plans that are deficient in addressing their needs?

Gov. Ned Lamont, executives, news media, legislators — these young people can't wait. If the optimism and collaboration you have professed in the last few weeks can be translated into action for these most vulnerable, your "top priority" list will rightly be adjusted for the young people who have no lobby and who have no voice.

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