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OCTOBER 19, 2009

Florida needs to fix this failing grade in children's services

> Posted by Doug Lyons on October 19, 2009 10:59 AM



By Howard Talenfeld

Florida's "failing grade" on a national report card this week should serve not as a sign of defeat but a commitment to improve the way the state serves juveniles in the state welfare system.

The grade, issued by **First Star**, a nonprofit group that litigates and advocates on behalf of children, and the **Children's Advocacy Institute** at the University of San Diego School of Law, ranked all 50 states on the protections of the legal rights of abused and neglected children.

Florida, the study found, needed improvement in its requirement that attorneys represent abused and neglected children throughout the court cases, and the level of training those advocates receive. The authors found that thousands of children didn't receive a guardian ad litem, and even those who had one didn't have representation from initial detention until they were permanently placed.

This is unacceptable.

Those of us who work with the state to improve the way it serves its most vulnerable citizens agree that more must be done. In fact, one bright spot amid Florida's failings was its advocates urging the state to adopt amendments which make Florida Statute § 39.4085's goals mandatory. They addressed the draft bill from the Florida Bar Association Standing Committee on the Legal Needs of Children that would amend existing state statute and address legal representation of children involved in dependency proceedings.

As chair of the committee, I am hopeful the Florida Legislature will pass this legislation. We know that the single-most important element to improve our child welfare system is how children are represented and the voice they're given. Maybe this failing grade is just the wake-up call the system needs to welcome change.

Howard M. Talenfeld is a statewide advocate living in Parkland, Fla., and he is president of Florida's Children First, a statewide child advocacy group.

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OCTOBER 16, 2009

Legalize, and sell, pot!

> Posted by Doug Lyons on October 16, 2009 12:14 PM



By Imani Martinez

I think marijuana should be legalized because it has been proven that it is less harmful for you than tobacco and other medications. It will bring up the economy by a lot if the government sells it. There would be less violence and crime because people will be too calm and relaxed to do the bad things we used to do.

Imani Martinez lives in Margate, Fla.

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We hope to elevate the public discourse -- and have fun doing it.

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