

Florida's child welfare system

Florida's "failing grade" on a national report card 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 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. 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.

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 the advocates urging the state to adopt amendments to make Florida Statute 39.4085's goals mandatory. They addressed the draft bill from the Florida Bar Association's 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.

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