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Letters to the Editor

REPORT CARD

Failing grade wake-up call to help kids

Florida's ``failing grade" on a national report card issued recently 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 the 50 states on their 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 in the level of training that 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.

This is unacceptable. Those of us who work with the state to improve the way it serves its most vulnerable residents agree that more must be done. In fact, one bright spot amid Florida's failings was its advocates urging the state to adopt amendments that 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 state statute and address legal representation of children involved in dependency proceedings.

As chair of the committee, I am hopeful that Florida lawmakers will pass this legislation. The most important element to improving 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 that the system needs to welcome change.

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