



JUNE 2019



**GUARDIAN
AD LITEM**

FOR CHILDREN

NEWSLETTER

FEATURED

*Education...
Our Role as a Program,
Staff and
Volunteer Child Advocates*

STAY INFORMED

*Read and get updated
with what's happening
Statewide!*

WHAT'S IN THE ISSUE

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A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ **LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATING THE PUBLIC WILL REDUCE CHILD MALTREATMENT**

As leaders in Child Protection Services, it is crucial that the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program focus on education in every aspect – staff, volunteers, providers, community partners, civic leaders and, of course, the children we serve.

That's why we must elevate Florida's understanding of the damage done by child abuse and neglect. But we must also show that maltreated children can find happy, productive lives with the right support from competent, caring adults.

That's why we as an organization are studying the impacts of trauma, poverty and discrimination on which Florida children come into care and stay the longest.



“As leaders in Child Protection Services, it is crucial that the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program focus on education in every aspect – staff, volunteers, providers, community partners, civic leaders and, of course, the children we serve.”

That's why we propose and fight for legislation to improve conditions and opportunities for children in care.

That's why we hold community events to generate interest, volunteers and donations for our non-profit partners.

That's why we tell elected officials in public forums what our children need – and why it is in our best interests to help.

That's why we train professionals to help children who need our services, such as the 'FAWL in Love with GAL' project with the Florida Association of Women Lawyers.

That's why we teach the community to help your neighbor, call the hotline – it takes a village but everyone has to be educated on their roles for children to thrive.

That's why in each of these roles, Guardian ad Litem shows leadership. We model leadership for children without adults to guide them, and encourage community members who are weary.

That's why we show people how they can make a difference.

That's why we refuse to say nothing can be done.

That's why we are learning to weave a tighter safety net and to draw more segments of the state inside.

That means we must lead by educating ... and **that is why!**

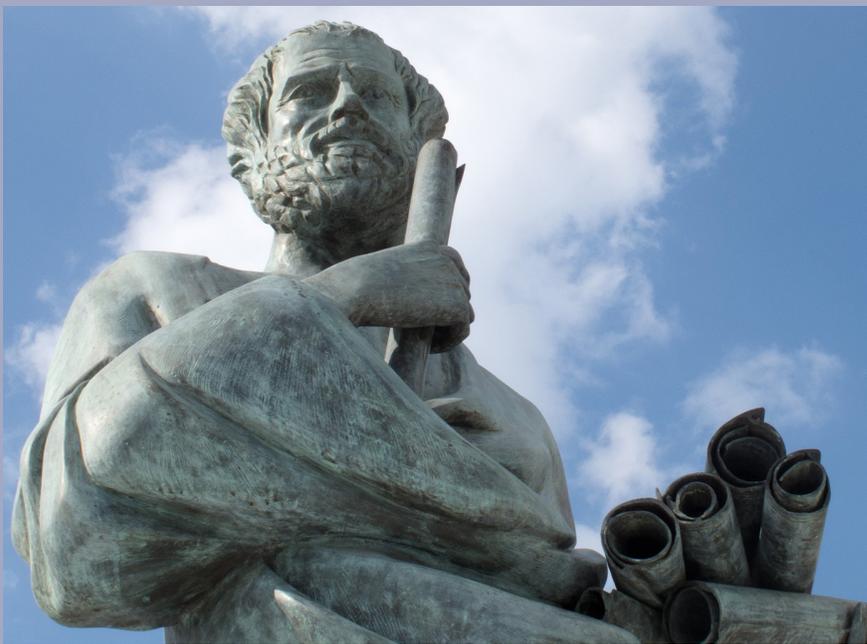
OPERATIONS

FAN THE FLAMES

Socrates said, 'Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.' Have you ever listened to a motivational speaker and felt energized and ready to take on the world? That's what education and knowledge can do for us. Our roles within the Child Protection Services system are sobering, the future of each child rests within the boundaries of our actions. We now have research and training that far exceeds what we learned in the 20th Century.

What if we speak with the child and the current caregivers but not the parents? Wouldn't our advocacy then be limited by what we see now and not what we can learn from everyone who has influence over the child we represent?

We've learned that children want and need to be involved in the courtroom as it affects their lives. We've also learned and continue to learn what effect trauma has on children and adults. We know how scarce mental health services are for the children and the parents who truly need them, and how simple 'neglect' is not simple at all – it can result in serious adult dysfunction if not recognized and treated.



“In order for our Volunteer Child Advocates, our staff, and our community partners to remain actively engaged and in-service to the children we represent we must keep learning and, in turn, educate others in the ever changing dynamics within Child Protection Services.”

As Child Advocates, we began this journey by learning the trade, researching data, listening to others. Child Protection Services requires continual professional development in order to do our best work, which is why our Program requires 12 hours of in-service education per year for all of us. In order for our Volunteer Child Advocates, our staff, and our community partners to remain actively engaged and in-service to the children we represent we must keep learning and, in turn, educate others in the ever changing dynamics within Child Protection Services.

Nelson Mandela said, 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.'

GETTING A “GOOD EDUCATION”

Education is probably the last thing on a sheltered or dependent child’s mind. Getting a “good education” seems like a very low priority for a child who has been abused, abandoned, or neglected, removed from “home”, and may be living with strangers.

As an attorney for the Guardian ad Litem Program, it is, in part, up to us to make the court and parties apply the state and federal laws in this critical area of the child’s life.

It is for this reason we, the attorneys, must advocate in all areas that affect the learning process. The issue is so important we list education as one of our 6 Basic Practice Steps. See below.



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EDUCATION PRACTICE STEPS FOR GUARDIAN AD LITEM ATTORNEYS

- Is the child enrolled in school? Have obstacles been eliminated such as transportation, supplies, clothing, and no need for record or guardianship requirements? Where applicable have we advocated for stability?
- Does the child need an Early Steps or educational evaluation?
- Does the child have an Individual Education Plan? Are the child’s needs being addressed?
- Does the child (13+) have an Educational/Career Plan that has been reviewed at each Judicial Review? Does the child understand the requirements of that plan? Does the child agree to the plan? Have they changed their mind?

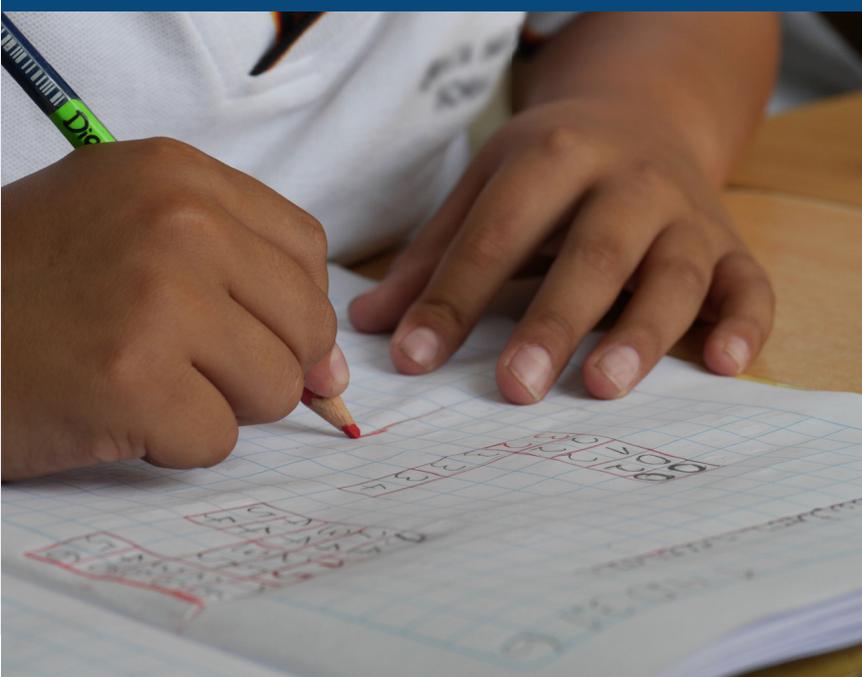
The above “Practice Steps” must be considered by the Program and Guardian ad Litem Best Interest Attorneys in every dependency case. For specific requirements refer to your Dependency Practice Manual. Additional practice aids and reference materials may be found at the Guardian ad Litem Program website at www.GuardianadLitem.org.

ADVOCACY AND INCLUSION

EDUCATION IS THE ESCALATOR OUT OF POVERTY

A good education tends to be the most reliable escalator out of poverty but over the years, disadvantaged children often don't get a chance to board it. These same children are more likely to have behavioral problems as well as complete fewer years of education.

We have always had poverty in this country but now we have a new group, working and middle-class families, who have fallen into poverty and who are likely embarrassed and sometimes don't know how to ask for help. This same group is also impacted by the Child Protection Services system as the correlation between poverty and neglect remains blurred.



“Research shows that students have an equal opportunity to succeed when they have access to high-quality preschool, effective teachers and equitable resources.”

More than one in five children (15.7 million) lived in poverty in the United States in 2018. In Florida, 924,000 children lived in poverty. The number of students slipping into poverty has affected all 67 school districts in the state with homelessness topping the list among public school students ages 5 to 17 jumping 84%.

Some of the Florida's largest school districts — Miami-Dade, Broward, Hillsborough, Orange, Duval, Palm Beach and Polk — have traditionally had the highest numbers of students in poverty. Over half of students in these seven school districts qualified for free and/or reduced meals in 2015-18. Miami-Dade was at the top with 7 of 10 students qualifying for free and/or reduced meals.

It doesn't need to be this way. Research shows that students have an equal opportunity to succeed when they have access to high-quality preschool, effective teachers and equitable resources. But to reverse the cycle of poverty, it's going to take those of us who have the skill set, wherewithal and experience to make sure everyone can board that escalator.

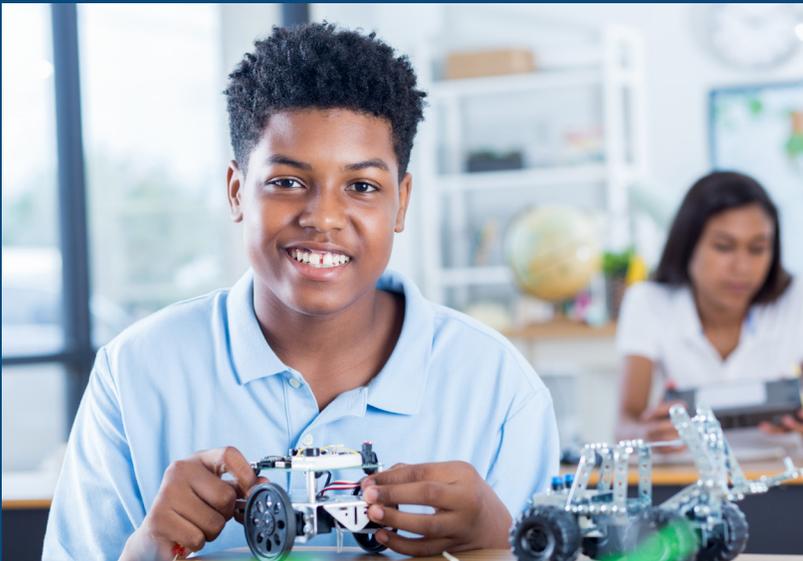
NORTH REGION UPDATE

EDUCATION – THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Youth who age out of foster care can be bound for failure. They earn lower rates of annual income and experience higher rates of homelessness, incarceration, and pregnancy.

Every youth deserves the opportunity to realize and develop their potential. As Guardian ad Litem staff and Volunteer Child Advocates we can increase the likelihood of high school graduation.

Third grade reading levels correlate to high school graduation. We need to ensure children have Individual Educational Plans in place and can read at grade level. Every school move sets a child back. Advocate for your child to stay in their school of origin. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act and the McKinney-Vento Act allows students to remain in their school of origin, and ensures immediate enrollment if a school change is required.



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If your older youth is not on track to graduate, ask about tutoring and credit recovery programs. If they have dropped out, technical colleges, Career Source, Goodwill, and many libraries offer adult literacy/GED programs.

For youth with a high school diploma or equivalent, § 1009.25, Florida Statutes provides exemption of tuition and § 409.145, Florida Statutes offers a monthly stipend of \$1256 for youth enrolled in a full – time post-secondary educational program. Additionally, provisions in the McKinney-Vento Act allow youth to apply for financial aid as an “independent” student.

While jurisdiction as a Guardian ad Litem ends at age 18, your relationship doesn’t have to. As a mentor, you can be the advocate and cheerleader for your youth’s needs!

CENTRAL REGION UPDATE

STUDENTS GRADUATING EARLY COULD MISS OUT ON IMPORTANT BENEFITS

Paras is a Volunteer Child Advocate in the 18th Circuit who has been with the program for almost two years. He started working with Rayla in January, 2018. She was a high performer at 17 years old and could be on track to complete high school after her junior year, get a GED and go on to the local community college, skipping her senior year of high school.

Paras supported Rayla's plans to accelerate her schooling, seeing her potential, but he was uneasy with her receiving only a GED. It didn't seem right that a high achieving student would not get a full high school diploma!



“It didn't seem right that a high achieving student would not get a full high school diploma!...”

Paras continued to question and probe and eventually found out that upon completion of 20 hours of core curriculum hours, Rayla could receive a full high school diploma. He found that even if students are close to 20 core courses at the end of their junior year, they can take a couple of courses in June, allowing them to start college in the fall.

This also allowed Rayla to take advantage of Post-secondary Education Services and Support (PESS) and PELL grants, resulting in a \$17,000 increase in income for her. Qualifying students need to be going to school full time, with 9-15 hours of classes per semester.

If you have a child who is in a similar situation, Paras suggests starting with the guidance counselor. Paras is happy to report that Rayla is in her second semester of college with a 3.5 GPA. Thank you Paras for never giving up and pushing to get what is best for Rayla!

Remember to check out the Educational Advocacy courses on the “I am for the Child” Academy. There are currently six available and they are excellent. Follow the link to the Educational Advocacy courses: florida-guardian-ad-litem-program.thinkific.com/bundles/educational-advocacy

SOUTHERN REGION UPDATE

PARTNERSHIP AIMS TO INCREASE OPPORTUNITY FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM FOSTER CARE

A new Guardian ad Litem partnership with a Department of Children and Families (DCF) program, Positive Pathways, will enable more Guardian ad Litem staff and Volunteer Child Advocates to become actively involved in the lives of former foster youth as they pursue post-secondary education.

Young adults from foster care in Florida can benefit from state policies that provide them with financial support to pursue their educational dreams. Florida is one of 20 states offering tuition and fee exemptions to former foster youth if they were:

- In foster care, under the jurisdiction of DCF, or living with a relative or non-relative by court order, on their 18th birthday;
- In foster care for at least six months, after their 16th birthday or
- Adopted after May 5, 1997.



“Young adults from foster care in Florida can benefit from state policies that provide them with financial support to pursue their educational dreams.”

The exemption can be used to obtain degrees at a public post-secondary educational institutions (i.e., college, university, district technical college program) until a student’s 28th birthday (F.S. 1009(1)(c)(d))

Furthermore, through its Post-secondary Education Services and Support (PESS) program, Florida offers a monthly educational stipend of \$1,256, to qualified students – up to age 23 – who have aged out of foster care or have spent six months in foster care after their 16th birthday, while completing their post-secondary education.

Since 2017 Positive Pathways, a DCF initiative administered by Educate Tomorrow and directed by Dr. Steve J. Rios, has supported a network of student support services professionals (i.e., foster care liaisons and college coaches) at public colleges and universities throughout Florida.

For more information, visit www.PositivePathwaysFlorida.oracquelrg, or contact Dr. Steve J. Rios, Senior Director of the Program, at Pathways@EducateTomorrow.org.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM FOUNDATION **LEADERSHIP = INFLUENCE**

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation held its inaugural Triumph Award on April 10th in Tallahassee. It was an opportunity for us to honor three outstanding young people who have successfully navigated the foster care system. Our three honorees were:

Robert Hurley from the 6th Circuit. Robert will be attending Stanford University in the fall.

Jasmyne Prohet from the 5th Circuit. Jazmyne is attending New College.

Angela Dawkins from the 15th Circuit. Angela is still weighing her college choices but will be making a decision in the coming weeks.



Angela, Robert and Jasmyne



Triumph Award Recipients and
Guardian ad Litem Foundation Board of Directors

While in Tallahassee, Robert, Jazmyne, and Angela were recognized at a luncheon at the Governors Club. They also had an opportunity to spend the afternoon doing the ropes course at the Tallahassee Museum.

Robert and Angela also participated as Messengers for the Florida Legislature during the week. This was a great experience and they enjoyed seeing first-hand Florida government in action. "I have been treated like a rock star. Everything has been great and I am overwhelmed by all the attention. This has been a wonderful experience" stated Robert Hurley. Both Jasmyne and Angela echoed his statement and really enjoyed the special treatment that they received while in Tallahassee.

A total of \$10,000 in scholarships were awarded as well as each youth receiving a Dell laptop computer.

Be on the lookout for information regarding the 2020 Triumph Award.



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FOR CHILDREN



Helping Children Reach Home Through Heartfelt Advocacy

www.GuardianadLitem.org

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