



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

**A REVIEW OF CHILDREN WITHDRAWN FROM SCHOOL
FOR EQUIVALENT INSTRUCTION ELSEWHERE**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAY 5, 2025

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Introduction

The Office of the Child Advocate (“OCA”) is an independent government agency that is statutorily required to “[r]eview complaints of persons concerning the actions of any state or municipal agency providing services to children and of any entity that provides services to children through funds provided by the state ... investigate those where the Child Advocate determines that a child or family may be in need of assistance from the Child Advocate or that a systemic issue in the state's provision of services to children is raised by the complaint ... provide assistance to a child or family who the Child Advocate determines is in need of such assistance including, but not limited to, advocating with an agency, provider or others on behalf of the best interests of the child . . . [and] [e]valuate the delivery of services to children by state agencies and those entities that provide services to children through funds provided by the state.”¹ Concurrently, OCA is required to “[t]ake all possible action including, but not limited to, conducting programs of public education, undertaking legislative advocacy and making proposals for systemic reform and formal legal action, in order to secure and ensure the legal, civil and special rights of children who reside in this state.”²

Recent news regarding a Waterbury’s man’s rescue, after allegedly being held captive for approximately 20 years following his withdrawal from school in or around 5th grade has prompted renewed discussions about homeschooling in Connecticut. OCA is investigating that case. OCA continues to gather documentation and assess all of the system implications of this case. OCA anticipates issuing a public report in the future, which will include recommendations developed from that investigation.

OCA previously wrote about homeschooling in 2018, in our report entitled [Examining Connecticut’s Safety Net for Children from School for the Purpose of Homeschooling – Supplemental Investigation to OCA’s December 12, 2017 Report Regarding the Death of Matthew Tirado](#).

This report includes the story of another child found in January 2023, locked away and being abused after being withdrawn from school for the stated purpose of homeschooling. The arrest warrant for his stepfather alleges that the mother corroborated that the child was withdrawn from school to hide evidence of injuries. The ten-year-old child was found after police responded to a domestic disturbance. The warrant states that the child had multiple traumas throughout his body, a broken finger, cauliflower ear [deformity of the ear due to blunt force trauma], and that he was undernourished. The child’s mother had a lengthy DCF history, but at the time of the child’s withdrawal from school for homeschooling, there was nothing in the educational records that indicated there were concerns for abuse.

OCA writes this report to highlight an ongoing previously identified systemic issue that must be addressed by policy makers: that some parents and guardians withdraw their children from school, isolate their children, shield themselves from reports to our child welfare agency, and neglect or abuse their children. We, as a state, have enabled this to occur through our lack of statutory requirements and regulations. OCA recommends that the state adopt several basic

¹ Conn. Gen. Stat. § 46a-131.

² Id.

statutory requirements that would ensure that children who are withdrawn from school receive an education while also ensuring that parents continue to have the right to choose to educate their children outside of public school.

Brief Summary of Findings

Connecticut law requires that parents enroll their children in public school, “unless such child is a high school graduate or the parent or person having control of such child is able to show that the child is elsewhere receiving equivalent instruction in the studies taught in the public schools.”³ The law also requires local boards of education to “cause each child five years of age and over and under eighteen years of age who is not a high school graduate and is living in the school district to attend school in accordance with the provisions of section [10-184](#).”⁴ Nothing in state law or regulation, however, establishes any mechanism by which a parent must show that the child is receiving equivalent instruction. In practice, there is currently no meaningful enforcement of these provisions.

OCA reviewed statewide data regarding students withdrawn from school for equivalent instruction elsewhere and examined the oversight currently in place when children are withdrawn from school to be enrolled in private school or to be homeschooled. While Connecticut has robust procedures for following up on children who are not attending school, once children are withdrawn for the purpose of enrolling in private school in Connecticut or to be homeschooled, nothing is in place to ensure those children are, in fact, receiving educational services. Connecticut’s lack of statutory and regulatory oversight at times confounds the child welfare system.

OCA found that over a three-year-period,⁵

- 5,102 children under the age of 18 were withdrawn from school for homeschooling;
- 1,547 children aged 7 to 11 (inclusive) were withdrawn from school for the stated purpose of homeschooling; and
- Of the children aged 7 to 11, 31% were chronically absent and 19% were children identified as students with special education needs prior to their withdrawal from public school.⁶

From the list of 1,547 children aged 7 to 11, OCA then randomly selected 50% of the children

³ [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-184](#). Parents of children aged 5 and six have the option of not sending their children to school until age 7 “personally appearing at the school district office and signing an option form. The school district shall provide the parent or person with information on the educational opportunities available in the school system.”

⁴ [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-220](#). “[T]he Supreme Court has recognized that, given the important governmental interest in educating its citizens, the state generally has the power to compel attendance at school.” [Gary B. v. Whitmer](#), 957 F.3d 616, 640 (citing *E.g., Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, 213, 92 S. Ct. 1526, 32 L. Ed. 2d 15 (1972); *Prince v. Massachusetts*, 321 U.S. 158, 166, 64 S. Ct. 438, 88 L. Ed. 645 (1944); *Pierce v. Soc’y of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus & Mary*, 268 U.S. 510, 534, 45 S. Ct. 571, 69 L. Ed. 1070 (1925); *Meyer*, 262 U.S. at 402.)

⁵ July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2024.

⁶ Of the 4,466 children withdrawn for the stated purpose of enrolling in private school in the state, 14.8% were chronically absent and 12.7% had identified special education needs. When children under the age of 7 were excluded, 3,242 students were withdrawn to attend private school. Of those, 438 (13.5%) were chronically absent and 373 (11.5%) were identified as students with special education needs.

(774 children) to cross reference with DCF records to understand the prevalence of contact with DCF. OCA found that of the 774 children, 22.9% (177) of the children lived in families with at least one accepted DCF report. The number of reports ranged from 1 to 23. 7.9% (61) lived in families with four or more accepted reports to DCF.

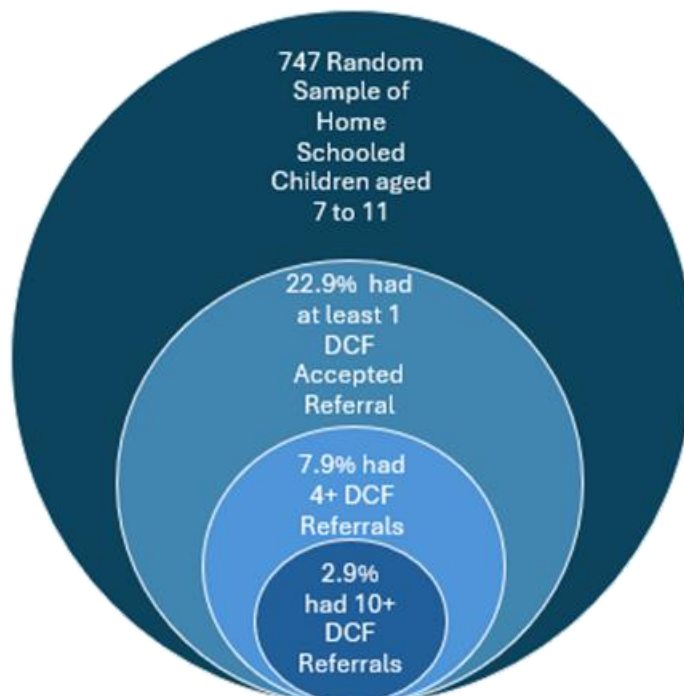


Figure 1: DCF Involvement, Children Aged 7 to 11

9.6% (75) of the 774 children in our sample of the children lived in families with at least one substantiated DCF investigation.⁷ 3.8% (30) lived in families with a caregiver on the DCF central registry.⁸

The report provides five case examples of children withdrawn from school for the stated purpose of homeschooling whose families had prior DCF involvement. These cases demonstrate the challenges with ensuring that children withdrawn from school under the stated purpose of homeschooling are both receiving educational instruction and are safe.

The report reviews homeschooling requirements in the other New England states and New

⁷ In 2023, DCF received 69,562 reports. Of those, 32,462 were accepted. Of the 32,462 accepted, 3733 (11.4%) were substantiated. [DCF Data Connect](#). Approximately half of all accepted cases proceed under Family Assessment Response. In those cases, there is no determination made as to whether the allegations are substantiated or unsubstantiated. [DCF Final Report: Annual Progress and Services Report for the Period 2020-2024](#), at 7.

⁸ OCA randomly selected a sample of 250 children who were withdrawn for the stated purpose of attending private school and cross referenced those children with DCF records. OCA found that 10.4% had at least one accepted report, 3% had four or more accepted reports, 4.4% had at least one substantiation, and 2.0% had a caregiver on the DCF Central Registry.

York (as it is a border state). Unlike Connecticut, all of them require some form of annual evaluation and two require pre-approval of the parent's homeschooling plan before the parent is permitted to homeschool. Connecticut can and must establish standards that ensure that children actually receive instruction while also respecting parents' ability to choose to provide equivalent instruction through homeschooling.

Recommendations

OCA recommends the following:

1. Amend Connecticut General Statutes § 10-184 to describe how the parent must be "able to show that the child is elsewhere receiving equivalent instruction in the studies taught in the public schools." OCA recommends that this include: that the parent and child appear annually to provide enrollment documentation, that the child be independently evaluated annually for academic progress, and that the parent provide initial and periodic assurances that the child is in good health. For children receiving equivalent instruction in a private school, annual proof of enrollment in the private school should be sufficient.
2. OCA recommends that the annual evaluation requirement include a list of options for independent evaluation of academic progress from which the parent may choose. This would allow the parent to select a form of evaluation that is most consistent with their choices regarding homeschooling and ensure that there are appropriate options for children with disabilities. Policy makers may look to New Hampshire and Maine for examples.
3. Add a statutory requirement that districts, upon receipt of a notice of intent to homeschool, conduct an internal assessment to determine if the district previously made reports of suspected abuse and neglect and, based on the totality of the information known to the district, determine whether such notice gives rise to a reasonable suspicion that a child is abused or neglected and should be reported to DCF.
4. Following amendment to the statute, DCF should review its acceptance criteria and update the operational definition of educational neglect to ensure that it is consistent with updated law. DCF should provide guidance and training on what is required for homeschooling and how the caseworker should assess to determine whether a child is in fact being homeschooled.