



"Tapping the Unlimited Potential in Our Youth"



Ashley Foster – "The Value of My Voice"

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While speaking at the podium, the microphone was not the true mechanism for transmitting her voice. It was her message – "Speak up," she said in a clear and convincing tone. "Question what is going on and the people sitting at the table".

"No one knows you better than you," she told the youth in the audience. As an adolescent, Ashley entered a system struggling with youth engagement and the youth voice. While physically included in case reviews and discussions about her placements, she did not understand what these meetings were for, making it difficult for her to contribute. She also did not feel heard or valued. "I was told what to do," Ashley recounts.

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Dr. Jerry Milner, Acting Commissioner of the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Government, speaking at the DCF Leadership Summit.



Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and United States Representative Jahana Hayes.



Commissioner Dorantes as guest speaker at the Mt. Olive A.M.E. Zion Church Martin Luther King Breakfast

Watch the video of Commissioner Dorantes Speaking about the inspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King



(Click on the photo to view video)

Maria Kelley Knows

Maria Kelley knows what it's like to not know where you are going to be living or who will take care of you. The 18 year old Florida native knows what it's like to not know if you can stay in the same high school where it feels safe and familiar.

She knows what it's like to not know if you are going to have a secure future with permanent relationships. That's because Maria Kelley knows what it's like to be in foster care. But now Maria also knows what it's like to feel hope, to excel in a four-year college, and to help others in the same position she found herself in just a few years ago.

Maria is one of the 158 Connecticut youth in foster care to have participated in the Rising Scholars program (see main story) since it began in 2013. And she credits the staff with giving her the encouragement and support to succeed as a freshman at UCONN.



[STORY CONTINUES HERE](#)

“Thank You Joshua Fisher”



Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes, DPH Commissioner Renee Coleman-Michell, Senior Advisor to President Barack Obama Valerie Jarrett and DMHAS Commissioner Miriam Dolphin-Rittman.



Thank you for your leadership and dedication to the YAB members. Your guidance and compassion have changed lives!



UCONN

Giving Youth In Foster Care Hope for College

Being a child in foster care is hard, and it does not get easier when childhood and foster care ends. Just about everyone recognizes the importance of education – primary, secondary and post-secondary – and all the evidence shows that children in foster care have poorer educational outcomes due to the trauma they experience and the transitory character of existence in foster care.

Estimates are that nationally only 30 percent of children who grow up in foster care graduate from high school. According to child welfare experts at Casey Family Programs, about 7 to 13 percent of children in foster care enroll in higher education. And while 24 percent of adults nationally get a bachelor's or an advanced degree, only about 2 percent of youth in foster care do.

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USD 2 Virtual Academy Supports Youth in Foster Care Overcome Educational Gaps

An unintended but damaging repercussion of life as a child in foster care are gaps in education that are very hard to fill without extraordinary efforts.

Even “foster care stars” like Maria Kelley – now a freshman at UCONN who is rocking a better than 3.0 GPA – can tell you about how being moved from place to place in foster care as often happens has profound implications for a youth's education.

“Moving around from school to school, how do you expect a kid to graduate high school?” Maria said. “When you aren't even in the same high school from year to year, it becomes really difficult to advance like students typically are expected to do.”

Maria credits committed advocacy on the part of Department of Children and Families social worker Gina Cluff and school officials who fought to let Maria stay in the school despite being moved from a group home to a foster home.



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YOUTH DAY AT THE CAPITOL



Panel of Youth Advocates at Youth at the Capitol Day



YAB Statewide Coordinator Steve Smith

speaking at the Youth at the Capital Day.



Ryan Wilson and Jessica Nelson from Voices for Children

presenting at Youth at the Capitol Day



CCSU CARE Scholars Program



Youth transitioning to post-secondary education may require supports which look different to each individual. The Central Connecticut State University Cares Scholars Program is dedicated to providing students coming from foster care and adoption with resources to support them throughout their college experience.

At CCSU, students in the CARE Scholars program are matched with a Success Central Mentor whom they meet with for guidance in addition to the campus resources already available for them. They will receive assistance in selecting courses each semester and in deciding which career to choose. The University supports also include the students being exposed to skill development such as resume writing and interviewing to prepare them for the workforce.

Students are also afforded the opportunity to take part in workshops and forums during the year which serve to empower youth so they remain self-motivated.

What is the outcome? A model of support for our youth leading to greater outcomes! Thank you Central Connecticut State University and the CARE Scholars Program.

YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD (YAB) NEWS

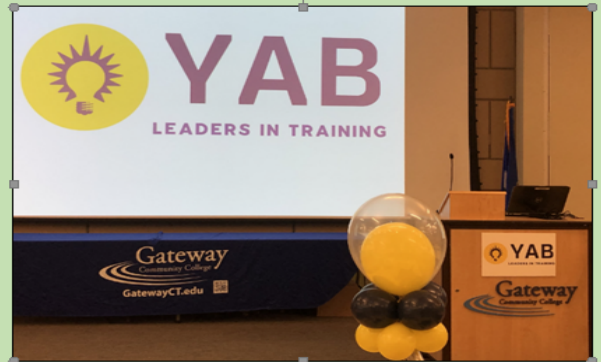
The Youth Advisory Board Leaders in Training Summit took place at Gateway Community College. With over 100 youth and DCF staff in attendance, it was a huge success!

The event featured remarks by Deputy Commissioners Michael Williams and Jodi Hill-Lilly who encouraged all youth to "speak up" and take an "active role" in their planning. While placing emphasis on empowering youth, these senior administrators made a commitment to ensuring Department staff, at all levels, will continue to value the youth voice.

The day featured workshops ranging from the topics of public speaking and developing leadership skills to roundtable discussions pertaining to race equity and a youth advocacy listening forum. The Department appreciated our community partners who assisted with the workshops. A few of the sessions were actually facilitated by current youth in care or individuals who were previously involved with the Department. Their words and inspiration were powerful!

After lunch, the audience received a keynote speech delivered by Ashley Foster, a foster care alumnus and current DCF Social Worker, in the Milford Office! With her strong and deliberate message about "staying involved," Ashley's strength was clear for all to see!

The day came to a close, but only on a positive note when awards were given to individuals who have made significant contributions to the Youth Advisory Board!



Vincent Espino speaking at the YAB Summit



Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams delivering Opening remarks at the YAB Summit



Ashley Foster giving the keynote address at the YAB Summit

YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD SCORES LEGISLATIVE VICTORY

The DCF Youth Advisory Board is an assembly of extraordinary young people who provide the Department with great advice and policy recommendations from the viewpoint of youths that are involved in the child welfare system. They promote that youth should be given voice in their care, be afforded dignity, have their personal beliefs be respected and nurture relationships with their siblings. These concepts became reality with the passage of Public Act 19-44, An Act Concerning a Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations and the Sibling Bill of Rights.

Public Act 19-44, sponsored by the Youth Advisory Board, establishes a bill of rights and expectations for children placed by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) in out-of-home care. It requires each child's caseworker to meet with the child and provide and explain these rights annually and at any time the child is placed in a new out-of-home placement. The bill also requires the caseworker to provide and explain the Sibling Bill of Rights annually and at any time the child is placed in a new out-of-home placement.

The bill gives children the right to maintain their own values and identity, including racial, sexual, religious and gender identity; visitation with parents, siblings, family and friends; and meaningful participation in their case plan and contact with their caseworker. The bill of rights also requires guardians to be respectful of the child's goals and identity and assist them in participating in therapy sessions, building life skills, extracurricular activities, and other activities that are age appropriate for the child.

The Sibling Bill of Rights lists ways to protect the relationships of siblings separated as a result of DCF intervention. This bill of rights, which is incorporated in DCF policy, gives siblings certain rights, including the right to placement with siblings, consistent and regular contact with siblings and notification of a sibling's change of placement. Their initiative to provide other youths with the tools necessary to advocate for themselves by becoming knowledgeable of their rights is remarkable.



STORY CONTINUES HERE

Click here to access the

[2019-2020 DCF Youth Advisory Board Coordinator Contact List](#)

Click here to access the

[2020 DCF Youth Advisory Board Meeting Schedule](#)

OUR "AWARD WINNING" STAFF



Adam Teixeira receiving the YAB Staff Service Award



Lee DeBarrows receiving the YAB Staff Service Award



Mark Brown receiving the YAB Staff Service Award

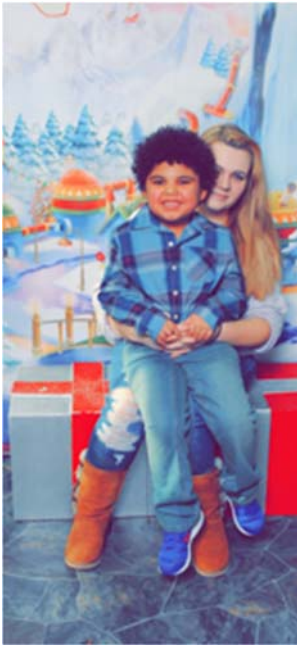


Vincent Espino receiving the YAB Legacy Award

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Ashley Foster - The Value of My Voice



For Ashley Foster, it was a journey to become the keynote speaker at the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) "*Leaders in Training*" Summit. A long way from attending her first YAB meeting, an even greater distance from the feelings of disempowerment she experienced as a youth in care.

While speaking at the podium, the microphone was not the true mechanism for transmitting her voice. It was her message – "Speak up," she said in a clear and convincing tone. "Question what is going on and the people sitting at the table".

"No one knows you better than you," she told the youth in the audience.

As an adolescent, Ashley entered a system struggling with youth engagement and the youth voice. While physically included in case reviews and discussions about her placements, she did not understand what these meetings were for, making it difficult for her to contribute. She also did not feel heard or valued. "I was told what to do," Ashley recounts.

At the time, her family system and the child protective services system were acting in a parallel process – excluding her voice.

Ashley quickly learned how to navigate the environment. As a 16 year old youth, "Fake it until you make it," was a term she heard often. When facing the system, you "Don't put up a fight," Ashley remembers.

Youth in care present with unique responses to their personal experiences and may embrace the support offered to them in non-traditional ways. It is incumbent upon the adults in their life to understand the meaning behind their behaviors. When missed, the impact can be significant. A clear example of this is Ashley's story of where she lived for years of her life.

Growing up, Ashley recalls "Everyone was always telling me something was wrong with me. I was blamed for everything." This led to her not wanting to engage in therapy as it was viewed as yet another way in which her faults would be discussed. Yet, while in care, her "unwillingness" to engage in treatment was viewed as her being "non-compliant." The result was that decisions were made for her to be placed into congregate care settings rather than a family.

Her path on life's journey was not positive. Enter the Youth Advisory Board.

Ashley credits the Youth Advisory Board with helping her understand that her experiences were not what they should have been. With each meeting attended, she started to feel empowered. The confusing pieces of the Agency's work became a little clearer. "If I knew things sooner, life could have been different," she stated.

Impacted by the positive YAB message, she now began speaking up. Challenging the adults around her, influencing her own future.

"Personally, if you tell me I will fail, I will show you the opposite," she clearly stated. This one sentence may give us the most insight into Ashley's strength.

Through the YAB, Ashley became part of the process with her peers to influence the system. As their voices were heard and momentum was gaining, the members pushed for legislation to ensure a better experience for future generations of youth in care. They advocated for the Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations and the Siblings Bill of Rights and both bills were promulgated into state statute this past legislative session. A true testament to the power of our youth!

Through the YAB, Ashley realized her passion for helping others to assist them with life's struggles. She switched her major from Nursing and graduated from Southern Connecticut State University in 2016 with a degree in Social Work. Immediately upon graduation, she became a social worker in the DCF Milford Office.

Once a DCF youth in care, now a DCF Social Worker.

Ashley now sees the Agency from a different perspective – an insider. She believes the Agency has changed for the positive. Youth do have more of a voice and greater emphasis is placed on youth engagement in their planning and placement decisions.

In thinking back on her early days with the Department, Ashley recalls some staff did initially question if she could do the job, given her past. They underestimated her strength. Ashley is clear, "Trauma of your past can turn into a strength." Those experiences she had growing up, and while in care, "Helped build the person I am, the values I have," she stated. Now, her colleagues value her experiences and have asked her to go with them so she can assist with difficult discussions with adolescents on their own caseloads. Youth around the state have outreached to her directly for advice.

Ashley still attends the YAB meetings and looks for ways to empower youth just like what she needed years ago. Concurrently, she has thoughts for the staff in her own agency that work with youth just like her years ago.

"What we do now impacts future generations," she pointed out. Reinforcing the need to continue to look across the Agency and all systems that impact youth, to ensure they have the youth voice embedded in policies and practices. While well intended, she also emphasizes that staff cannot get "Stuck in procedures and methods." Pointing out that given the rapid pace of the work and risks identified, often what is in front of us may not be clearly seen. "We do not see the full effect of our actions," she stated. The system must "Make room for individuality and the uniqueness of youth," she added.

In her opinion, the ultimate question we strive to answer is "How are we meeting the needs of the youth?"

Her voice has been heard, and her actions have been recognized.

In 2018, she received the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) Cassandra Rainey Youth Champion award in recognition of her personal and professional commitment to improving the lives of children who enter or are at risk of entering foster care. She accepted her award during a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

She was not done.

In 2019, Ashley earned her Master's in Social Work degree from Fordham University. She earned both her degrees while parenting a son with specialized needs.

She was not done.

Ashley recently passed the State of Connecticut Licensed Master's in Social Work (LMSW) exam.

What have all of these life experiences taught her? "I did not relax growing up," Ashley stated. "Now, I appreciate the little things in life." This includes just being able to sit on the couch in a quiet house. "I don't take anything for granted."

During the interview, she expressed that her childhood, "Taught me to give my son what he needs. A better life than I had." Perhaps that statement should have included "sons" as Ashley is now licensed as a pre-adoptive parent with the plan to adopt a two year-old little boy.

The message in Ashley Foster's 15 minute keynote speech was far greater than the individual words. That focused and articulate young woman who stood so strongly in front of colleagues and youth was an example of resilience. An example of the power of the human spirit.

Perhaps the greatest irony of her story is that the system did not value Ashley Foster's voice but Ashley Foster's voice is the value in the system.

A former youth in care. A DCF worker. A mom. A future adoptive parent. An advocate.
Meet the empowered Ashley Foster.

Maria Kelley Knows

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The 18 year old Florida native knows what it's like to not know if you can stay in the same high school where it feels safe and familiar.

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That's because Maria Kelley knows what it's like to be in foster care.

But now Maria also knows what it's like to feel hope, to excel in a four-year college, and to help others in the same position she found herself in just a few years ago.

Maria is one of the 158 Connecticut youth in foster care to have participated in the Rising Scholars program (see main story) since it began in 2013. And she credits the staff with giving her the encouragement and support to succeed as a freshman at UCONN.



"They opened so many doors of opportunity for me," said Maria of the Rising Scholars program. "It gave me hope and inspired me to keep working hard."

She said the program inspired many others as well and that about 15 of the foster youth she attended the summer program with in 2018 are now at a college.

College was the furthest thing from her mind just a few years ago. That's because Maria last entered foster care when she was 13 and was placed into a group or "congregate" setting. At 15, she was placed into a foster family. Fortunately for Maria, she had a fantastic social worker – Gina Cluff -- who specializes in serving adolescents out of the Department's Willimantic office.

"Gina is amazing," Maria said. "She is so huge in my life. She's never given up on me and had my back since day one."

Ms. Cluff clearly recognized Maria's potential.

Although Maria was once a special education student, school was a sanctuary for Maria that she embraced despite all the uncertainty in her life. "She was thriving in school and getting good grades," said Ms. Cluff. "So she was a natural for the program."

Maria participated in the Rising Star program during her junior year and the summer before she returned to Wethersfield High School as a senior. During that summer, Maria took classes at the UCONN Storrs campus in math and English composition as well as another in general college preparation, she said.

She earned college credits – but the benefits went well beyond that.

The experience gave Maria the confidence that she belonged in college and that she could thrive in the environment of a top-flight university like UCONN.

"It gave me the hope that I can do this," she said. "It's a pre-college experience. You walk to class, you go to the dining hall. I use the habits I gained then, including study habits. And I saw other kids in my situation on campus. It made me realize that I can do this."

She certainly can.

Maria just completed the first semester of her freshman year at the Storrs UCONN campus. She received an A in every class except for one -- in which she earned a B.

Her social worker, Ms. Cluff, is proud of Maria – not just for her performance academically, but also for her generous spirit that has her giving back to others.

"Maria is a leader," said Ms. Cluff. "So Rising Scholars asked her to come back."

Maria now is working for the program under Susana Ulloa, the director of High School Initiatives at the Center for Academic Programs, and program coordinator Alex Katz.

"She's working with us as an office assistant and acting as a mentor to the foster youth who are now in college," said Ms. Ulloa.

Maria said that helping other children and youth in foster care is her aspiration – perhaps as an attorney or advocate.

Clearly she has the skills, the compassion and the experience to be a powerful voice for children in foster care.

"Foster care is emotionally hard," Maria said. "Education inequality is so present for foster kids in particular. Education was a safe haven for me. Other foster children might be able to grab onto that too.

"There is always hope – always light at the end of the tunnel," Maria summed up.

Giving Youth In Foster Care Hope for College

Being a child in foster care is hard, and it does not get easier when childhood and foster care ends. Just about everyone recognizes the importance of education – primary, secondary and post-secondary – and all the evidence shows that children in foster care have poorer educational outcomes due to the trauma they experience and the transitory character of existence in foster care.

Estimates are that nationally only 30 percent of children who grow up in foster care graduate from high school. According to child welfare experts at Casey Family Programs, about 7 to 13 percent of children in foster care enroll in higher education. And while 24 percent of adults nationally get a bachelor's or an advanced degree, only about 2 percent of youth in foster care do.

The lack of access to and success in post-secondary education is something Connecticut is trying hard to address. For many years, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families has proudly offered youth in foster care financial support for post-secondary education. That could mean attending two or four-year college, a training program to gain entry to a trade, or other post-high school educational regiment designed to lead to a good career and an independent, successful adulthood. In each of the last four years, more than 500 youth participated annually for an average of 544 youth a year. The youth can get the support up until they reach 23 years old, and financial support is capped at the cost of attending one of the Connecticut state university system schools.

As proud as the State can be of supporting foster youth education in this way, the professionals who work for the Department's school district know that youth in foster care need both the opportunity *and* the encouragement to take advantage of the opportunity.



Matt Folan, the Department's superintendent of schools, says many youth in foster care may not even be thinking about attending college. "A lot of them may think that college is not for them – college may be the furthest thing from their minds, but it is our responsibility to expose our students to early college and career opportunities during high school when both academic and social supports are readily available" he said.

Inspiring hope and confidence that a youth in care can attend college is the idea behind the UConn Rising Scholars Program (URS), which the Department initiated in a partnership with the University of Connecticut's Center for Academic Programs. Since the program started in 2013, 158 youth in foster care who attend high school and have potential to advance to higher education have participated, according to data provided by the program.

The central element of URS is an intensive four-week summer immersion experience at the UCONN Storrs campus. The students live in an on-campus dormitory, attend classes, and have access to the same facilities as any other UCONN student. The academic courses offered over the last six years include English, math, social studies and sciences that are taught by certified teachers and UCONN graduate students. After the morning academic coursework, afternoons are devoted to learning about various elements of life in college, including financial aid, college admissions, study and other practical skills. Evenings are less structured opportunities to enjoy athletic and social activities.

In addition, before students come to Storrs in July, monthly "Academic Day" meetings are held on campus that offers support year round, said Maria Pastorelli, a Department post-secondary education consultant. The monthly meetings also help students prepare for college by offering information and skill development related to financial literacy, health, and college admissions and finance.

The entire experience – both the summer immersion program and the monthly meetings are designed to "enlighten youth to the possibility of college and provide first-hand experience of college life," Ms. Pastorelli said. "Bringing them to a college campus helps them to see themselves there. It gives them the confidence and encouragement they need to stay on track academically and pursue college."

Rising Scholars, which is 100 percent funded by the Department, has been overseen by UCONN's Center for Academic Programs since its inception by Susana Ulloa, the director of high school initiatives. Ms. Ulloa said URS also employs a program coordinator, Alex Katz, who assists students one-on-one to secure tutoring, navigate the admissions process, and access academic advising – the nuts and bolts of success on a college campus. While the coordinator "makes sure the students have support year round," Ms. Ulloa said, the key to the program's success is "we treat them like college students."

Ms. Ulloa said 35 students from 27 distinct high schools are currently in the program and that the 158 students participating from 2013 to the present have come from 103 high schools across the state. Of those who participated, 83 percent completed the program, and of those who completed, 99 percent graduated high school, 95 percent were accepted to a college, and 93 percent enrolled in college. In addition to UCONN and all four Connecticut State universities, students were enrolled at Norwich University, Roger Williams University, Sacred Heart University, Bennett College, Mitchell College, Bentley University, Oakwood University, Delaware State University, Mercy College, University of Bridgeport, Mount Ida College, Fisher College, the Culinary Institute of America, and several Connecticut community colleges.

Rising Scholars plays a crucial role in helping youth who face unique challenges to overcome them and take advantage of opportunities that most young people in Connecticut take for granted.

"This program plays a critical role in helping high school students transition to college," Ms. Ulloa said. "Considering the personal and academic needs of the students, this program is vitally important. The students in the program are amazing kids – resilient, really smart and very hard working.

"It's been a privilege to work with them," Ms. Ulloa concluded.

Virtual Academy Supports Youth in Foster Care Overcome Educational Gaps

An unintended but damaging repercussion of life as a child in foster care are gaps in education that are very hard to fill without extraordinary efforts.

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Maria credits committed advocacy on the part of Department of Children and Families social worker Gina Cluff and school officials who fought to let Maria stay in the school despite being moved from a group home to a foster home.



The Department's superintendent of schools, Matt Folan, said rectifying the negative academic effects of such instability is the reason the Department established the Virtual Academy in 2016.

“With all the transitions, we use the Virtual Academy to fill the resulting gaps,” he said. “We are literally meeting kids where they are at – geographically and academically.”

The Virtual Academy, as the name implies, provides an online mechanism for youth to catch up on credits they did not attain on schedule with other students who do not face the disruptions that come from being in foster care. The online platform, called Edgenuity, provides students an account and access to all of their coursework. The student then receives online course instruction, takes exams, and earns course credit when they pass exams.

In addition, the students receive a lot of very human attention coming from Department teachers serving youth in each region of the state.

Michael MacDonald, a state school teacher serving all of the Department's Region 1 area -- basically Fairfield County, including the Bridgeport and Norwalk areas -- is one of those working with students on the ground and right in their schools.

“I go into the schools every single day,” he said. “I try to have as much one-to-one contact with students as possible, as well as with guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators. It is all based on the individual student's needs.”

Any student with present or past involvement with the Department can get enrolled in the Virtual Academy. Mr. MacDonald says he works with the youth's school to identify courses where the student is either credit deficient or academically not as strong as she or he should be. “It is remediation coursework to close educational gaps,” he said.

The online technology allows students to “log on at any time or any place – nights or weekends. It's like a YouTube video that teaches a concept. The student then takes a quiz and can move on to the next module,” Mr. MacDonald said. While the technology makes the process convenient for students, the state teachers provide personal attention when challenges arise; if a student is struggling to advance, as evidenced by the quiz scores or information from the school, the Department teachers lean in.

“If they struggle on a section, we offer them assistance to get through their work,” he said. “Everything we do is individualized as we meet each student's specific needs. We run a student-centric program.”

The time spent in the student's school is crucial, said Mr. MacDonald. “Every single day, I am at one or more schools so that they know we are a consistent and reliable resource for them should they have a student who needs it.”

For example, earlier in the week, Mr. MacDonald attended a parent-student meeting at Norwalk High School to discuss the student's lack of regular attendance. Then later that day, he went to another high school in Norwalk to meet with three Virtual Academy students about their progress. Then he went to an alternative high school in Stratford to help a student work through a physical science course module.

It is painstaking, individual work that pays off.

Students have earned over 250 academic credits that have been applied to high graduation requirements, and 79 students achieved high school graduation, according to Mr. Folan. Since the Virtual Academy's inception in 2016, more than 1,000 high school students participated in the program. Often these students are over-age, under-credited and in need of academic remediation, credit recovery, and credit accumulation.

One of Mr. MacDonald's students made up enough credits last year to catch her up for her senior year so she can graduate in June. Mr. MacDonald said the Virtual Academy can prevent a youth traumatized from foster care from suffering additional negative consequences educationally.

“Once they begin to heal from the trauma, we can help them heal educationally and get them back on track,” he said.