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Social Services to review alternative education programs offered to foster youths

Advocates say more needs to be done to provide comprehensive educational support for youths in the system

By Erica L. Green, The Baltimore Sun

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The Baltimore Department of Social Services on Monday pledged a comprehensive review of alternative education programs for foster children, after revelations that it paid \$40,000 to send students to a school in Philadelphia where they obtained a diploma in one day.

The Crooked Places Made Straight Academy, where 80 youths from Baltimore took a three-hour exam to obtain a Pennsylvania high school diploma, shut down its one-day program Friday after inquiries from The Baltimore Sun.

Molly McGrath Tierney, director of Baltimore's social services department, said in a statement Monday that the department remains committed to providing an array of options to foster care youths for whom education is the key to their success.

While she noted that many who received diplomas from Crooked Places have gone on to colleges and jobs, she said the department would review policies and procedures over the next several weeks and make any changes needed to ensure a "standard of excellence."

"Our experience with Crooked Places Made Straight reminds us that we have a solemn obligation to ensure that every alternative we provide is properly accredited, governed and authorized to do its work," Tierney said in the statement.

The head of the private Christian school's accrediting body, the National Association of Private Schools, compared Crooked Places to "a diploma mill" after inquiries from The Sun. Students took a series of exams, which the school's leader identified only as "diagnostic tests."

The school's principal, Winona Stewart, said that while she meant well, she realized that "shortcuts don't work."

Many youths in foster care take traditional roads to graduation or obtain a General Education Development (GED) certificate, but Tierney emphasized that alternative education programs have helped some students when traditional settings have not.

She has also said some students enroll in the city school system's programs that help students as old as 21 meet the state's graduation requirements at an accelerated pace. These are separate from the programs offered by the social services department.

The Crooked Places program was described as similar to a GED, though it deviated significantly from the regulated, nationally recognized program that requires a mastery of skills on several tests taken over two days and usually includes preparation classes.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said in a statement that she understood the social services department's desire to help the youths find quality programs that meet their unique needs. She pointed out that foster children typically have higher rates of homelessness, incarceration and unemployment.

"We should take a look and evaluate all programs with a focus on strengthening those that are proven to work and getting rid of those that don't, as we have done with several other programs in city government," Rawlings-Blake said.

The city social services department is run by the state's Department of Human Resources. A spokesman for Gov. Martin O'Malley referred to Tierney's statement and declined to comment further.

Some advocates say the use of Crooked Places Made Straight as an alternative program for Baltimore children highlights deficiencies in the foster care system's efforts to ensure youths get a quality education.

Mitchell Y. Mirviss, an attorney at the Baltimore law firm Venable LLP who has represented foster care youths in a class action lawsuit that has been litigated for more than 25 years and led to a consent decree against the state, said he was "shocked" to learn that sending students to the Philadelphia school was a systematic practice.

"It's obviously a sign of serious problems," said Mirviss. "The government ... should not be selling false illusions to foster kids."

Mirviss said the Department of Social Services has not made education a priority. He pointed to court filings that show the agency struggles to meet the educational provisions of the consent decree.

In June, the department reported in its latest filing that about 61 percent of foster youths had an educational plan, while the consent decree requires 90 percent. Of the youths who had educational plans, the department reported that it had met the plan's obligations, such as providing tutoring, for about 25 percent.

The department also reported that it referred about 79 percent of special-education students for services but made a "reasonable effort" to secure services and attend education plan meetings for only 3 percent of them.

Mirviss said the department has struggled with educational issues because a greater percentage of foster children in their care are older and more insistent on making their own decisions.

Tierney noted that about 40 percent of the city's foster children are age 17 or older, and those who attended Crooked Places Made Straight were nearing the end of their time in the system and were too far behind to complete high school through traditional means.

She also said that she didn't restrict the youths from attending because they were usually 18 or older and could make their own decisions. Youths age out of the system at age 21.

"The kids who got a diploma there might be delighted," Mirviss said, "but that's very problematic, not only because of its lack of significance and waste of money, but it's also giving the kids a false sense of opportunity and false sense of achievements.

"Its effect is pernicious," he said.

Other advocates say more monitoring is needed of students' progress while in traditional schools, so that they can be better prepared for college.

The department reported in the June court filing that it monitored 89 percent of foster children's educational progress monthly. Mirviss said he contested that number because the department didn't specify what monitoring entailed.

Melissa Rock, child welfare director for Advocates for Children and Youth, said that while the department does a good job of helping students get through the college application process, too many reach that point unprepared after years of moving around.

"To me, this is a matter of making sure there's a lot of oversight of their education because obviously, their lives are so chaotic, it's hard to stay on top of everything," she said. "And I worry about some of these youth who get a high school diploma and start college because they still have to take non-credit courses."

Monisha Cherayil, an attorney with the Public Justice Center Education Stability Project, said foster youths face the same challenges as homeless students because their transience often causes significant disruptions in their educational careers.

She said national research shows that changing schools is equivalent to losing six months of instructional education as the children fall behind.

Cherayil said state law has been strengthened to comply with the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which sought to improve stability for children who are adopted or in foster care.

Now, Maryland foster care youths don't have to change schools when they change homes, but she said there is still work to be done to keep disruptions to a minimum.

"What we're seeing is there are kids at 17 and 18 who have fallen way behind ... and frankly didn't receive all the educational support they could have along the way," Cherayil said. "So the department is left finding quick fixes just as the kids are about to age out.

"Fostering Connections is a first step," she added, "but it remains a work in progress here in Maryland."

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