



Early Childhood and School-Aged Student Wellness Efforts

*Addressing Barriers to Student Academic
Success, Health, and Safety in FY22*

A Report by the Office of the Child Advocate

February 2022

<https://www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-the-child-advocate>

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February 24, 2022

The Honorable Michael J. Finn
House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
State House, Room 146
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

The Honorable Adam Gomez
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
State House, Room 413-B
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Dear Chair Finn, Chair Gomez, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Pursuant to line item 0930-0100 in the Fiscal Year 2022 General Appropriations Act (FY22 GAA), the Office of the Advocate (OCA) is pleased to submit this report on the status of the agency's efforts to *"ensure effective cross-agency coordination of early childhood and school-aged student wellness efforts to address barriers to student academic success, health and safety, including, but not limited to, access to social services, mental health and behavioral health resources information sharing that ensures confidentiality, clear communication and addresses barriers to effective monitoring of students who are in the legal custody of the department of children and families, including coordination of mandated reporter responsibilities."*

The OCA's mission is to ensure that children receive timely, appropriate, and quality services from the agencies that serve them, with a particular focus on ensuring the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children have the opportunity to thrive. Our duties include ensuring that Massachusetts children receive the free and appropriate education to which they are entitled. We believe strongly that school is not only critical for academic learning, but also fundamental to a child's social and emotional stability. School provides children with education, socialization, and opportunities for growth necessary for them in the moment, as well as success in adult life.

Creating and funding more engaging and supportive systems across state government will bolster the Commonwealth's efforts to address longstanding barriers to student success

and wellbeing, particularly for children in the care and custody of the Department of Children and Families. As such, the OCA is deeply appreciative of the Legislature's \$100,000 investment in support of this vital work and honored to be entrusted with this position of significant responsibility.

I remain grateful for your collaboration, support, and shared commitment to ensuring that all of the Commonwealth's children are healthy, safe, and thriving. We look forward to continuing to partner with you on advancing these priorities throughout the remainder of this Fiscal Year. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maria", followed by a long horizontal line that ends in a small arrowhead pointing to the right.

Maria Mossaides
Director, Office of the Child Advocate

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is an independent executive branch state agency with oversight and ombudsperson responsibilities, established by the Massachusetts Legislature in 2008. The OCA's mission is to ensure that children receive appropriate, timely and quality state services, with a particular focus on ensuring that the Commonwealth's most vulnerable and at-risk children have the opportunity to thrive. Through collaboration with public and private stakeholders, the OCA identifies gaps in state services and recommends improvements in policy, practice, regulation, and/or law. The OCA also serves as a resource for families who are receiving, or are eligible to receive, services from the Commonwealth.

The [Fiscal Year 2022 General Appropriations Act](#) (FY22 GAA) earmarked \$100,000 for the OCA to *“ensure effective cross-agency coordination of early childhood and school-aged student wellness efforts to address barriers to student academic success, health and safety, including, but not limited to, access to social services, mental health and behavioral health resources information sharing that ensures confidentiality, clear communication and addresses barriers to effective monitoring of students who are in the legal custody of the department of children and families, including coordination of mandated reporter responsibilities.”*

This report, which is required by the FY22 GAA, summarizes the OCA's efforts to-date on several initiatives it launched pursuant to this mandate.

FY2022 Early Childhood & School-Aged Student Wellness Activities

Mandated Reporting Training Pilot for Educators: The OCA is designing an evidence-based online training on mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect specifically for kindergarten through 12th grade educators. This online training is intended to cover aspects of mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect relevant to all mandated reporters in the Commonwealth, but also have information that is specifically designed to address common issues regarding educators' responsibilities and experiences with reporting. This will be a pilot project to determine the efficacy and value of evidence-based mandated reporter trainings. This training program will be standard-setting as the OCA does not know of any other state that is seeking to tailor the content of mandated reporter trainings this closely to profession-specific needs. The pilot project will be made available to a limited number of school districts and education entities in Massachusetts. If successful, the pilot program is intended to serve as a model for future profession-specific mandated reporter trainings in the Commonwealth.

Approved Private Special Education School Residential Program Project: The OCA has been leading an effort to review and implement recommendations to improve oversight and monitoring of residential education schools. In 2021, the OCA began facilitating weekly meetings with relevant agencies to discuss new incidents, investigators, or challenges facing residential schools. These meetings have resulted in:

- The creation of a full listing of all Approved Special Education Schools that includes key information (i.e. licensing capacity, staffing ratios, contacts) about each school. This list has been shared across state agencies.
- A single, streamlined incident reporting form that allows schools to attend immediately to an incident rather than being bogged down in repetitive documentation.
- Work to further define and describe the role and purpose of each agency's investigation, as the roles and purposes have not always been clear to the residential education schools. This project will also help to streamline joint investigations to reduce the incidences of multiple agencies asking for the same information and interviewing youth and staff multiple times.

Educational Records for Students in the Custody of the Department of Children and Families: The OCA is mapping the issues that students in the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) face regarding access to detailed and up-to-date information about their education and health records during their time in care, and is designing an achievable deliverable— or set of deliverables— that will resolve issues for these students. The OCA seeks to work collaboratively with the legislators on this important topic and determine how the Legislature can sanction this project and push it forward in a manner that reflects the seriousness of the issues at hand.

HandholdMA Interactive Website: In FY20, in partnership with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and the Department of Mental Health (DMH), the OCA launched [HandholdMA.org](https://www.handholdma.org), a family-friendly website created by a team of mental health and child development experts with tips, tools, and resources curated especially for parents who are worried about their child's mental health. The website was enhanced in FY21 with an expanded set of resources for parents of very young children and adolescents, and through FY22 the OCA has continued to work with DMH to promote the site to schools and other community service providers that work with children and families.

Supporting Youth in Schools and in the Communities: Trainings for Paraprofessionals and Mentors: In FY21, the OCA partnered with the [Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children \(BIRCh\) Project at UMass](#) to develop a free 10-module training curriculum designed specifically for the paraprofessional and mentor work force. The modules focus on expanding the toolboxes of professionals related to culturally responsive and trauma-informed assessment, prevention, and intervention practices, and addressing strategies for fostering well-being, behavior management, and skill building of youth. Additionally, modules also address fostering well-being of staff and behavioral health career pathways to explore for those interested. In FY22, the OCA is again partnering with the BIRCh Project to support ongoing distribution and promotion of the training program, to move the training to an online Learning Management System to allow participants to receive a Certificate of Completion, and to create facilitator guiding documents to allow for live/in-person training delivery in the future as requested.

Conclusion

For the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children, any measure of academic success often requires high levels of educational and emotional support, along with robust protections to keep them safe from harm. As an independent state agency, the OCA is uniquely positioned to be a neutral convener on complex issues that intersect with child welfare and education policy across state government. The OCA appreciates the Legislature's investment in the agency's efforts to improve the delivery of services and promote better academic outcomes for children and youth, and is pleased to submit this report as a status update on the critical initiatives described herein.

MANDATED REPORTER TRAINING PILOT FOR K-12 EDUCATORS

The OCA has identified the improvement of mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect in the Commonwealth as a priority of the office for the past several years. The OCA chaired the Mandated Reporter Commission ([Mandated Reporter Commission | Mass.gov](#)) from 2020 to 2021. For FY22, the OCA has committed to design an evidence-based online training on mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect specifically for kindergarten through 12th grade educators. This online training is intended to cover aspects of mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect relevant to all mandated reporters in the Commonwealth, but also have information that is specifically designed to address common issues regarding educators' responsibilities and experiences with reporting.¹

The training program designed by the OCA through this project will be a pilot to determine the efficacy and value of evidence-based mandated reporter trainings. This training program will be standard-setting as the OCA does not know of any other state that is seeking to tailor the content of mandated reporter trainings this closely to profession-specific needs.

This pilot project, if successful, is intended to serve as a model for future profession-specific mandated reporter trainings in the Commonwealth. The pilot project will be made available to a limited number of school districts and education entities in the Commonwealth; however, the training program will have the capacity to be available to all educators in the Commonwealth after the pilot program period is complete. The training program will be evidence-based, as it will measure whether users can better recognize, report, and respond to suspected child abuse and neglect.

The OCA is currently working on the curriculum design of this training. The OCA has reviewed the relevant statutes at length, reviewed the complex analysis of the statute done by the Mandated Reporter Commission, and leveraged our internal expertise on child abuse and neglect reporting, including our reviews of institutional reports that our staff review on a routine basis which include reports in school settings. OCA staff have surveyed the landscape of mandated reporter trainings in the Commonwealth, as well as trainings from other states to gather information about innovative and best practices. Our research staff have reviewed relevant academic articles about mandated reporting and about adult-

¹ Mandated reporting responsibilities are described primarily in [M.G.L. c. 119 § 21, 51A, 51B](#). Mandated reporters who are professionally licensed by the Commonwealth, as many educators are, are required to complete training to recognize and report suspected child abuse and neglect ([M.G.L. c. 119 § 51A\(k\)](#)).

focused training programs, as well as the intersection between poverty and neglect. We have also conducted research about implicit bias and confirmation bias to inform how to best address biases in the training in as effective manner as possible.

In November 2021, the OCA launched a Mandated Reporter Survey for Educators in the Commonwealth. We are grateful to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents for their assistance in the design and advertising of the survey. The survey, which closed in mid-January 2022, was completed by 913 educators including teachers, administrators, school-based social workers, school athletic coaches, school nurses and so on. The survey obtained information about any recent mandated reporter trainings that the educator had taken, the educator's confidence level in reporting cases of abuse and neglect, the educator's motivation for reporting cases of abuse and neglect, and the topics that the educator would most want to learn about in a profession specific training.

We designed this survey so that we can slice the data to see how the answers to questions may be different based on the geography of the district, the tenure of the educator, the student population the educator works with, and the role of the educator. Slicing the data in this way will inform how our pilot training curriculum can be tailored to the different roles and experiences of educators.

Preliminary findings from the survey include that overwhelmingly (96%), educators are motivated to file 51As out of concern for children and only 1% of educators were motivated to file 51As out of a fear of legal penalties for failing to report. The most common concerns cited when deciding whether to file a 51A were not having sufficient information, straining relationships with children and families, and differentiating between when a family needs resources and when a 51A report is necessary. Educators reported needing additional guidance on how to sustain relationships with children and families when a report is made, distinguishing between neglect and poverty, navigating the reporting process with DCF, and recognizing signs of abuse and neglect.

The next step in the OCA's curriculum design is to conduct focus groups with educators across the Commonwealth. The OCA believes that engaging educators in guided conversations about mandated reporting will provide OCA staff with a depth of understanding that could not be replicated any other way. The information from the educator survey will inform the topics of the focus group discussion. The OCA has identified districts that are diverse geographically, racially/ethnically, and socio-economically as potential focus-group partners. The OCA will be reaching out to these districts of interest in mid-February to schedule focus-group discussions for March.

Finally, the OCA is in the process of signing a contract with a Commonwealth vendor to consult on how to translate our OCA-generated curriculum design and vision into the technological design of an online training platform that is evidence-based and has the capacity to be expanded statewide. That consultancy will result in the creation of a detailed proposal for vendors to bid on the design of the training pilot. The OCA is confident that the consultancy process will appropriately translate the expertise the OCA has developed in this area to a deliverable that will meet the needs of educators in the Commonwealth to keep students safe and supported.

APPROVED PRIVATE SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL RESIDENTIAL PROGRAM PROJECT

The OCA has been leading an effort to review and implement recommendations to improve oversight and monitoring of residential education schools. These recommendations were the result of a 2017 Interagency/Inter-Secretariat working group which reviewed the roles of the various Commonwealth agencies with respect to approved special education residential schools. The review looked at the system's capacity to identify, collaborate and support residential education schools experiencing challenges and to develop an early warning system that provides enhanced communication across the agencies and technical assistance to schools to prevent harm to children and ensure safe operation. When the Commonwealth agencies collaborate and share information, the Commonwealth is better able to ensure the safety and well-being of youth receiving services in residential education schools. The report generated by that working group is available here: [MA OCA Residential Schools Report April 2017 \(mass.gov\)](#).

In 2020, it came to the OCA's attention that very little, if any, progress had been made on the recommendations of the working group after the report had been issued. The OCA therefore stepped-in to take the lead on ensuring enactment of the recommendations. The OCA brought onboard a knowledgeable and skilled part-time staff member with an extensive career in health and human services to conduct the inter-agency and inter-secretariat collaboration necessary for this project.

The OCA is currently facilitating weekly meetings with relevant agencies to enhance communication across the agencies. These meetings are an opportunity to discuss new incidents, and investigations or challenges the residential education schools are facing. During the pandemic these meetings have been invaluable as a tool to ensure agencies are communicating and collaborating to support the residential education schools who are serving some of the most vulnerable youth on behalf of the Commonwealth.

These meetings have resulted in:

- The creation, for the first time that the OCA is aware of, of a full listing of all Approved Special Education Schools, including the associated residential programs, licensed capacity, staffing ratios and key contacts for the school, the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), and DESE. This list has been shared across agencies to clarify what is an approved special education residential school.
- A single, streamlined incident reporting form that captures information currently submitted by the schools to the various state agencies resulting in residential education schools submitting one form, instead of the 5+ forms that have been

required in the past. This streamlined reporting will be piloted with a few schools over the next few months and then rolled out to all residential education schools. One of the many benefits of a streamlined form will be to allow residential education staff to attend immediately to the incident rather than being bogged down in repetitive documentation of the incident. This will better serve children.

- Several agencies have responsibility for conducting investigations at residential education schools based on their statutory mandate. This project includes work to further define and describe the role and purpose of each agency's investigation as the roles and purposes have not always been clear to the residential education schools. This project will also help to streamline joint investigations to reduce the incidences of multiple agencies asking for the same information and interviewing youth and staff multiple times. Investigations are traumatic events for youth and staff, therefore agencies should conduct joint investigations and interviews whenever possible and share relevant materials. Residential education schools welcome the clarity of roles and opportunity for joint investigations whenever possible.

There is still much work to be done, but positive progress has been made to create open communication, streamlined reporting, and a holistic approach across state agencies for overseeing residential education schools.

EDUCATIONAL RECORDS FOR STUDENTS IN THE CUSTODY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

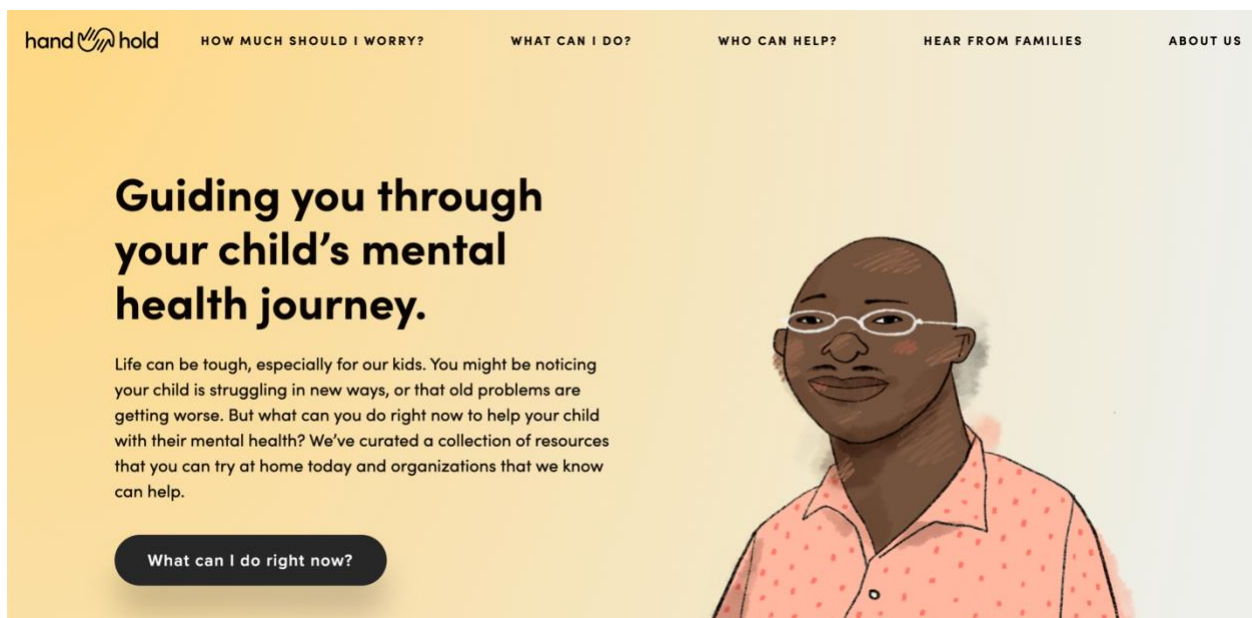
As an independent agency, the OCA communicates regularly with the Massachusetts Legislature on a variety of issues relative to its work and expertise. One such issue the OCA has been asked to weigh-in on during the current legislative session is legislation seeking to create a digital repository of educational records—also known as an “electronic backpack”—for students who enter and exit foster care. Many students in foster care frequently change schools, and as a result, may have difficulty identifying where and how to obtain their educational records.

The OCA feels that our ability to map issues across state agencies and secretariats, our role as a neutral convener, and our ongoing work with both DESE and DCF in monitoring and consulting on the implementation of the recommendation from our [*Investigative Report: A Multi System Investigation into the Death of David Almond*](#), uniquely situates our office to engage in making the goals of the electronic-backpack legislation a reality. We have therefore assigned two members of our senior management team to work on mapping the issues that students in DCF custody face regarding access to detailed and up-to-date information about their education and health during their time in care, and designing an achievable deliverable, or set of deliverables, that will resolve issues for these students and that have the buy-in, and leverage the expertise of, the state agencies involved. The OCA seeks to work collaboratively with the Legislature on this important topic and determine how the Legislature can sanction this project and push it forward in a manner that reflects the seriousness of the issues at hand.

The OCA supports the idea and spirit of the legislation seeking to create an electronic backpack for children in foster care. However, the OCA is concerned that the legislation as written will not be operational if passed due to the complex ways that records are kept, the different record keeping systems of DESE, individual school districts, DCF, and the medical community, and the various privacy laws that govern such records. The OCA looks forward to continuing to work with the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities on drafting legislation to ensure consistency in a foster child’s academic life by easing the transfer of educational documents in the event that a child must change schools.

HANDHOLDMA INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

Recognizing that children and families were under increased personal, economic, and emotional stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in Fiscal Year 2020 the OCA partnered with DMH and EOHHS to design and launch an interactive website called “[HandholdMA](#).” This website, which was created by a team of mental and child development experts, provides family-friendly information on helping kids build resiliency, tips on managing lower-level behavioral issues, advice on when a child needs a more intense intervention, and a guide to available state and community behavioral health resources. HandholdMA is available in multiple languages and can be found here: <https://handholdma.org/>.

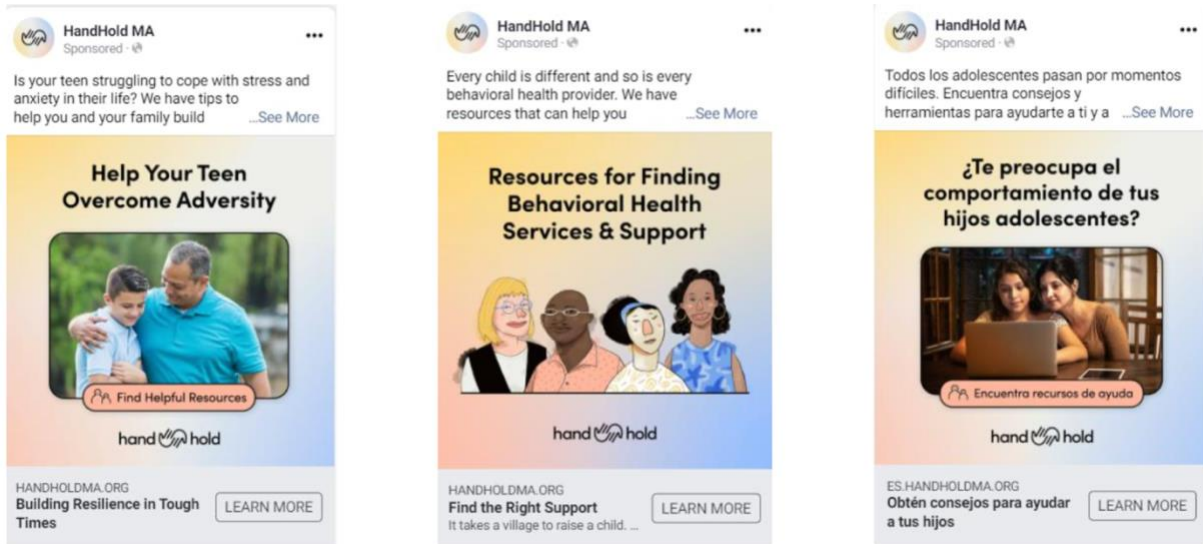


Caption: A picture of the HandholdMA homepage.

In the spring and summer of FY21, the OCA and DMH partnered again and launched an enhanced version of website, bolstering additional content specific to the needs of parents of infants, toddlers, and adolescents and making a number of changes to improve the user experience.

In FY22, the OCA, in partnership with DMH, has focused on continuing to spread the word to families about this resource. In December 2021, the OCA and DMH created a social media toolkit that was distributed to hundreds of state agency and community partners, including schools, along with every member of the Massachusetts Legislature. Since launching, the site has received 140,000+ visits, including nearly 80,000 unique visits. The

OCA looks forward to updating the Legislature on the website's success throughout the remainder of FY22.



Caption: A series of three ads for HandholdMA's fall 2021 social media campaign.

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN SCHOOLS AND IN COMMUNITIES: TRAININGS FOR PARAPROFESSIONALS AND MENTORS

School-based paraprofessionals and therapeutic mentors play an important role in many student's lives, particularly those who are struggling with behavioral health challenges. However, this sector of the workforce is often left out of relevant professional development activities at schools and otherwise lacks access to training specifically designed for them. In FY21, the OCA partnered with the [Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children \(BIRCh\) Project at UMass](#) to develop a free 10-module training curriculum designed specifically for the paraprofessional and mentor work force. The curriculum, the development of which was informed by evidence-based practices as well as interviews and focus groups with paraprofessionals, mentors, and other experts in this space, is focused on improving social, emotional, and behavioral services for children across multiple settings.

The modules of the curriculum focus on culturally responsive and trauma-informed assessment, prevention, and intervention practices, and address strategies for fostering well-being, behavior management, and skill building of children and youth. Additionally, modules also address fostering well-being as staff and behavioral health career pathways to explore for those interested.

The online training program can be viewed at:

https://www.umb.edu/birch/online_learning#Paras%20and%20mentors

In FY22, the OCA is again partnering with the BIRCh Project to support ongoing distribution and promotion of the training program, to move the training to an online Learning Management System to allow participants to receive a Certificate of Completion, and to create facilitator guiding documents to allow for live/in-person training delivery in the future as requested.

CONCLUSION

The Commonwealth has a responsibility to ensure that every student in Massachusetts has the opportunity to reach their full potential. This charge cannot be realized without recognizing and responding to the unique social, emotional, and academic needs of children in foster care, children in specialized school settings, and/or children struggling with significant behavioral health challenges. For these children, any measure of academic success often requires high levels of educational and emotional support, along with robust protections to keep them safe from harm.

The OCA would like to reiterate its appreciation to the Legislature for its investment in the agency's efforts to improve the delivery of services and promote better outcomes for the Commonwealth's most vulnerable students. As an independent agency, the OCA is uniquely positioned to be a neutral convener on complex issues that intersect with child welfare and education policy across state government. The OCA is grateful for the opportunity to submit this report as a status update on its efforts in thus far, and is enthusiastic about work the lies ahead with these projects throughout the remainder of FY22. The OCA looks forward to continuing to update the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities on its progress with implementing the critical initiatives described in this report.