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Dismissing the Foster Children: The Eleventh Circuit's Misapplication and Improper Expansion of the Younger Abstention Doctrine in *Bonnie L. v. Bush*

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Dismissing the Foster Children

THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT’S MISAPPLICATION AND IMPROPER EXPANSION OF THE YOUNGER ABSTENTION DOCTRINE IN BONNIE L. V. BUSH*

I. INTRODUCTION

In June of 2000, a class action suit was filed on behalf of all children statewide in the custody of Florida’s child welfare system.1 The suit alleged that the governor of Florida, the secretary of Florida’s Department of Children and Families, and administrators of the state’s foster care system violated the plaintiffs’ constitutional and federal statutory rights by maintaining a foster care system riddled with “widespread deficiencies.”2 Specific allegations against the defendants


2 31 Foster Children v. Bush, 329 F.3d 1255, 1260 (11th Cir. 2003). The amended complaint contains six counts, alleging that the defendants’ practices deny and threaten the plaintiffs’ claimed rights to:

(1) safe care that meets their basic needs, prompt placements with permanent families, and services extended after their eighteenth birthdays, as guaranteed by substantive due process (Count I); (2) procedural due process in determining the services they will receive (Count II); (3) family association with siblings as guaranteed by the First, Ninth, and Fourteenth Amendments (Count III); (4) prompt placement with permanent families and to have their medical and educational backgrounds provided to their caregivers, as guaranteed by 42 U.S.C. §§ 675(5)(D) and (E), which are provisions of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-272, 94 Stat. 500, 516 (June 17, 1980) (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. §§ 620-628 and §§ 670-679a (“the Adoption Act”) (Count IV); (5) health screening and follow-up under schedules established pursuant to the Medicaid Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 1396a(a)(43)(B), 1396a(a)(43)(C), and 1396(r) (Count V); and (6) in the case of the black plaintiff foster children, freedom
included claims that the child welfare agency engaged in a "pattern and practice" of placing children in "dangerous, abusive, neglectful, overcrowded or inappropriate" foster care settings; failed to "screen, oversee, monitor, and visit" foster homes; and ignored complaints of abuse or neglect in foster homes.3

Despite the pressing need for reform of Florida's Department of Children and Families (DCF or the Department), the suit's constitutional claims—violations of substantive due process and the First, Ninth, and Fourteenth Amendments—were dismissed4 on the basis of Younger abstention, a doctrine developed in the 1971 case of Younger v. Harris.5 The doctrine provides that federal courts should abstain from adjudicating a case, over which the federal court otherwise has proper jurisdiction, when the relief sought in federal court would interfere with an ongoing state court proceeding and when the litigant has an adequate opportunity to raise his constitutional claims in the ongoing state proceeding.6 The federal court in Bonnie L. v. Bush determined that an order of injunctive relief from federal court directed at improving Florida's foster care system "had the potential for an unseemly conflict between a state judge and [itself]."7 On appeal, the Eleventh Circuit affirmed the dismissal on Younger

from racial discrimination in the provision of care and services, as guaranteed by Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Count VI).

Id. at 1261.


Id. at 1338. In addition to abstention grounds, the District Court dismissed the case also on grounds of Eleventh Amendment Immunity and lack of private right of enforcement, under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act. See id. at 1331, 1344.


Middlesex County Ethics Comm. v. Garden State Bar Ass'n, 457 U.S. 423, 432 (1982) (holding that the federal court properly abstained from hearing litigant's federal constitutional challenge seeking to enjoin a pending state bar disciplinary proceeding because of the important state interest in the pending state proceeding and because the litigant had opportunity to raise his claim in the state proceeding).

Bonnie L., 180 F. Supp. 2d at 1335.
abstention grounds,\textsuperscript{9} agreeing that the federal lawsuit would interfere with juvenile court proceedings in the state court system in which foster children are regularly involved.\textsuperscript{10} Disregarding the merits of the claim and the critical need for the sought-after reform, the Eleventh Circuit asserted that the plaintiffs could, and therefore should, raise their constitutional claims in the state's juvenile system.\textsuperscript{11} Even with what the Supreme Court has characterized as the federal courts' "virtually unflagging obligation . . . to exercise the jurisdiction given them,"\textsuperscript{12} the Eleventh Circuit declined to exercise jurisdiction and ignored its duty to protect and enforce the plaintiffs' constitutional rights.

This Note challenges the Eleventh Circuit's decision to dismiss the case of \textit{Bonnie L. v. Bush} on grounds of Younger abstention.\textsuperscript{13} Part II of this Note begins with a brief description of Florida's child welfare system, highlighting the system's deficiencies and outlining the improvements sought by the plaintiffs in \textit{Bonnie L}. Part III sketches the evolution of the Younger abstention doctrine, the expansion of the doctrine over the last twenty years, and the current standard in applying Younger abstention. Part IV then closely examines the Eleventh Circuit's decision in \textit{Bonnie L. v. Bush}, arguing that the court's decision relies on an unwarranted expansion and incorrect application of the Younger abstention doctrine. Part V asserts that federal courts have an obligation to exercise their proper jurisdiction to protect the constitutional rights of foster children. This section also proposes that federal courts are the only viable forum in which remedial schemes to improve Florida's child welfare system can be accomplished. And finally, this Note ends with a plea to federal courts to live up to their responsibility to protect the rights of U.S. citizens,

\textsuperscript{9} 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1282.
\textsuperscript{10} Id. at 1278. State juvenile courts are required to conduct periodic review proceedings for every child in state custody, generally once every 6 months. See, e.g., FLA. STAT. ch. 39.701(1)(a) (2003). On appeal, the Eleventh Circuit did not address the issue of dismissal based on Eleventh Amendment Immunity because the Circuit Court dismissed on abstention grounds and lack of enforceable right. See 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1268 (citation omitted).
\textsuperscript{11} 31 Foster Children, 329 F. 3d at 1279-80.
\textsuperscript{12} Colorado River Water Conservation Dist. v. United States, 424 U.S. 800, 817 (1976) (involving dismissal of a suit brought in federal court by the United States on its behalf and on behalf of two Indian tribes seeking declaratory judgment of rights over water and tributaries of the Colorado River).
\textsuperscript{13} Note that on appeal, the name of the case was changed from \textit{Bonnie L. v. Bush} to \textit{31 Foster Children v. Bush}. Throughout this note, however, I will refer to the Eleventh Circuit case as "Bonnie L." despite the case name modification.
especially ones as vulnerable as foster children, in the hopes that child welfare institutions in this country can be effectively reformed before any more children are unnecessarily harmed or killed.

II. THE FAILURE OF FLORIDA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM AND THE FILING OF BONNIE L. V. BUSH

Child welfare systems are created to protect children who cannot be adequately cared for by their biological families. These systems remove abused and neglected children from their parents' custody and place them in the custody of the state. The state, in turn, has a constitutional obligation to provide adequate care for these children. The state must provide them with services and make efforts either to return them to the custody of their biological families, or to facilitate the adoption process with an alternative family.

The Florida system, like many large child welfare systems across the country, has failed its children. From July

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15 See, e.g., FLA. STAT. chs. 409, 39 (2003) (the two chapters of the Florida statutes which govern the obligations of the state in providing a child welfare system). The Federal Government provides federal grants to states, and states are required to create a state department to provide foster care and foster services in compliance with federal law.

16 See Youngberg v. Romeo, 457 U.S. 307, 312, 322 (1982) (finding that a mental patient involuntarily committed to a state institution had a constitutionally protected liberty interest under the Due Process clause to reasonably safe conditions of confinement); Taylor By and Through Walker v. Ledbetter, 818 F. 2d 791, 795 (11th Cir. 1987) (in § 1983 action brought by foster child against state child welfare system for injuries suffered while in custody of foster parents, the court stated that "the state's action in assuming the responsibility of finding and keeping the child in a safe environment placed an obligation on the state to insure the continuing safety of that environment."); see also Deshaney v. Winnebago County Dept. of Soc. Servs., 489 U.S. 189, 201 n.9 (1989) (noting that foster care may be "sufficiently analogous" to institutionalization to give rise to an affirmative duty to protect children in custody).


2000 to July 2001, ninety-five children died of abuse or neglect after the Department began an investigation into each child's circumstances. In the following year, there were eighty-seven to ninety such deaths. Nonetheless, it was only after the disappearance of 5-year old foster child, Rilya Wilson, that Florida's troubled system received national attention. In that case, state caseworkers became aware that the young girl was missing in April 2002, at which point she had been missing, wholly unbeknownst to the agency, for over fifteen months.

The severe shortcomings of Florida’s Department of Children and Families are undisputed. In August 2003, the federal government conducted the first Child and Family Service Review, a test created to measure a state’s “ability to protect children from child abuse and to find permanent homes for kids who often languish in foster care.” The review covered seven categories. Florida’s system failed six of those seven categories, displaying the Department’s inadequacies in each of the following areas: protecting children from abuse and neglect; maintaining children in the home as opposed to placing them in foster care when possible and appropriate; providing permanency and stability in children’s living situations; supporting families’ ability to provide for children’s needs;
ensuring children's educational needs are met; and securing the physical and mental well-being of children.24

In response to the failure of Florida's child welfare system, and in the hopes of protecting thousands of abused and neglected children in the state of Florida's care, Bonnie L. v. Bush25 was filed in federal district court in the Southern District of Florida. The suit was brought under 42 U.S.C. § 198326 and sought declaratory and injunctive relief to improve the embattled system.27 Specifically, the plaintiffs sought to have the court declare unconstitutional and unlawful various practices of Florida's Department of Children and Families; to enjoin DCF and the other defendants from violating the plaintiffs' constitutional rights; to order appropriate remedial relief in compliance with the Constitution and federal laws; to appoint a panel of child welfare experts to "develop and oversee the implementation of a plan for reform"; and finally, to appoint an ombudsman or child advocate to meet with the defendants regularly and advocate on behalf of children in the system.28

Avoiding the merits of the Bonnie L. complaint, both the District Court and the Eleventh Circuit improperly abstained from entertaining the case altogether.29 Under the doctrine of

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24 Id. The only category Florida passed was in preservation of continuous family relationships and connections.
26 Id. at 1325. 42 U.S.C. § 1983 states in relevant part:
Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory or the District of Columbia, subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress. . . .
27 Id.
The alleged unconstitutional and unlawful practices of DCF and the defendants included, among others, the following: failure to provide for the plaintiffs' basic needs, safety, freedom from harm, freedom from unreasonable restraints on liberty, freedom from being placed into unnecessary state-created danger, and freedom from arbitrary and capricious actions and decisions that deprive plaintiffs of benefits to which they are entitled; deprivation of state-created entitlements without an adequate and fair procedure; and unnecessary separation of siblings and denial of visitation among them. Id. at 1261.
29 Bonnie L., 180 F. Supp. 2d at 1326; 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1282.
Younger abstention, federal courts are permitted to abstain only when the federal suit and the relief sought would interfere with an ongoing state proceeding and there is a sufficient opportunity for the litigant to raise his constitutional claims in the state proceeding at issue.\textsuperscript{30} In the case of \textit{Bonnie L.}, the relief sought would not have affected state court proceedings in any manner that would have run afoul of the Younger doctrine. The injunctive relief sought in \textit{Bonnie L.} was aimed at improving Florida's Department of Children and Families to make the agency live up to its constitutional obligations to protect Florida's abused and neglected children.\textsuperscript{31} Contrary to the court's determination, such system-wide reformation of Florida's foster care system in no way interferes with the juvenile court dependency proceedings of Florida's foster children.\textsuperscript{32} The Eleventh Circuit was only able to justify its dismissal of \textit{Bonnie L.} by incorrectly and inappropriately expanding the scope of interference upon which Younger abstention jurisprudence has always been based. Furthermore, the juvenile courts of Florida do not provide an adequate forum for the plaintiff children in \textit{Bonnie L.} to raise their constitutional claims.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, procedural and practical barriers to bringing a statewide class action, institutional reform case such as \textit{Bonnie L.} in juvenile court dictate that abstention was not warranted.\textsuperscript{34}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} \textit{Middlesex County Ethics Comm.}, 457 U.S. at 432.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{31 Foster Children}, 328 F.3d at 1261-62.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} \textit{Cf. Kenny A. ex rel. Winn v. Perdue}, 218 F.R.D. 277, 286 (N.D. Ga. 2003) (finding that reform of child welfare system analogous to reform sought in \textit{Bonnie L.} did not interfere with dependency proceedings and further could only have helped the juvenile court proceedings by relieving stresses on caseworkers so that they could better represent children's interests).
  \item \textsuperscript{33} \textit{See Fla. R. Juv. P. 8.000-8.735.} (containing no provision for class actions suits).
  \item \textsuperscript{34} \textit{See Dept' of Children and Family Servs. v. I.C.}, 742 So. 2d 401, 404 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1992) (State courts conducting periodic reviews of foster children have "no general jurisdiction over [the Department of Children and Family Services] to monitor and evaluate its functioning."); \textit{See also LaShawn A. ex rel. Moore v. Kelly}, 990 F.2d 1319, 1323 (D.C. Cir. 1993) (holding that juvenile court proceedings did not provide an adequate forum for plaintiff class of foster children "to present its multifaceted request for broad-based injunctive relief based on the Constitution and on federal and local statutory law").
\end{itemize}
III. HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THE YOUNGER ABSTENTION DOCTRINE

A. Background

In the case of *Younger v. Harris*, the Supreme Court developed the abstention doctrine which came to be known as Younger abstention.35 In defining the doctrine, the Court relied on notions of comity, equity, and federalism.36 The basic principle articulated in *Younger* was that a federal court cannot enjoin a pending state court proceeding absent extraordinary circumstances.37 Although *Younger* is considered the first explicit declaration of this doctrine, it is based on an ideal born long before the historic 1971 case.38

The foundation of the abstention principle came from English law, where it was impermissible for courts of equity to interfere with criminal proceedings.39 In 1888, the United States Supreme Court refused to intrude in a forthcoming criminal proceeding in the case of *In re Sawyer*.40 In that case, the Court determined, based on long-standing principles of English jurisprudence, that a court of equity "has no jurisdiction over the prosecution, the punishment, or the pardon of crimes or misdemeanors, or over the appointment and removal of public officers." To intervene in criminal matters, the Court said, would be to "invade the domain of the courts of common law . . . ."41 The *Sawyer* decision also cited the Anti-Injunction Act42 as a basis for non-intervention.43 Passed in 1793, the Anti-Injunction Act instructs that no United States Court has authority to grant an injunction of state court proceedings "except as authorized by an act of Congress or

36 *Id.* at 43-44.
37 *Id.* at 45.
39 *Id.*
40 *In re Sawyer*, 124 U.S. 200 (1888).
41 *Id.* at 210.
42 *Id.*
where necessary in aid of its jurisdiction, or to protect or effectuate its judgments." The foundation of the Anti-Injunction Act, like the decision in Sawyer, concerns the relationship between federal and state court, and the tensions therein. The case of Younger v. Harris raised those same concerns.

B. Younger v. Harris

The plaintiff in Younger v. Harris, John Harris, was indicted in California state court under California's Criminal Syndicalism Act for distributing political pamphlets. Following his indictment and unsuccessful attempts in the California trial and appellate courts to have the case dismissed, Harris filed suit in federal district court, seeking an injunction to enjoin the Los Angeles County District Attorney, Evelle Younger, from further prosecution. Harris alleged that the Syndicalism Act violated his constitutional rights guaranteed to him by the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the Federal Constitution. The District Court for the Central District of California granted the injunction enjoining further prosecution and held that California's Act was void for vagueness and overbreadth. The Supreme Court reversed, holding that the lower court decision "must be reversed as a violation of the national policy forbidding federal courts to stay or enjoin pending state court proceedings except under special circumstances." In its decision, the Supreme Court outlined the "precise reasons" for the "longstanding" federal non-intervention policy. The first reason the Court cited was that courts of equity, under the "basic doctrine of equity jurisprudence," ought not restrain criminal prosecutions when the complainant has an adequate remedy at law and will not

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46 Id. In Mitchum v. Foster, the Supreme Court held that civil rights actions brought under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 were exempt from the Anti-Injunction Act because Congress explicitly provided in § 1983 for federal courts to have authority to issue injunctive relief. 407 U.S. 225, 242-43 (1972).

47 See Oklahoma Packing Co. v. Oklahoma Gas & Elec. Co., 309 U.S. 4, 9 (1940) (noting that the intent of the Anti-Injunction Act was to avoid "needless friction between state and federal courts").

48 Younger, 401 U.S. at 38.

49 Id. at 38-39.


51 Younger, 401 U.S. at 41.

52 Id. at 43.
suffer irreparable harm from denial of equitable relief. The opinion continues:

This underlying reason for restraining courts of equity from interfering with criminal prosecutions is reinforced by an even more vital consideration, the notion of 'comity,' that is, a proper respect for state functions, a recognition of the fact that the entire country is made up of a Union of separate state governments, and a continuance of the belief that the National Government will fare best if the States and their institutions are left free to perform their separate functions in their separate ways.

The Court referred to this second principle as "Our Federalism." Our Federalism, as a concept, the Court explained, "does not mean blind deference to 'States' Rights,'" but rather a system which is sensitive to "the legitimate interests of both State and National Governments."

In applying the principles of equity, comity, and federalism to Harris's case, the Supreme Court found abstention proper. Harris had a pending proceeding in state court in which he was afforded the opportunity to raise his constitutional claims. Moreover, the Court determined that Harris's prosecution was not brought in bad faith; the only injury facing Harris was "solely 'that incidental to every criminal proceeding brought lawfully and in good faith.'" Thus, Harris's case did not give rise to exceptional circumstances warranting federal intervention.

With this ruling, Younger abstention was born. At its creation, the doctrine was relatively restricted: it forbade a federal court from enjoining a pending state criminal proceeding unless the complainant was not afforded an adequate remedy at law or he would be immediately and

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52 Id. at 43-44.
53 Id. at 44.
54 Id.
55 Younger, 401 U.S. at 44.
56 Id. at 53.
57 Id. at 49.
58 Id. (quoting Douglas v. City of Jeannette, 319 U.S. 157, 164 (1943)). The Younger decision continued: "[T]herefore under the settled doctrine we have already described he is not entitled to equitable relief 'even if such statutes are unconstitutional.'" Id. (quoting Watson v. Buck, 313 U.S. 387, 400 (1941).
59 Id. at 53.
irreparably injured if denied equitable relief.\textsuperscript{60} However, the doctrine was quickly expanded, further limiting litigants' access to federal courts to vindicate federal constitutional rights.\textsuperscript{61}

C. Expansion of the Younger Abstention Doctrine

On the same day the Supreme Court decided \textit{Younger}, it also decided \textit{Samuels v. Mackell},\textsuperscript{62} an almost factually analogous case, in which the plaintiffs sought not only an injunction against further criminal proceedings, but also declaratory relief. The plaintiffs in \textit{Samuels}, indicted under New York's criminal anarchy statutes, requested the district court to enter a declaratory judgment stating that the challenged laws were unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{63} The Supreme Court relied on the same principles it did in \textit{Younger} in determining that abstention was proper with respect to declaratory relief as well as injunctive relief.\textsuperscript{64} The opinion states:

\begin{quote}
[In cases where the criminal proceeding was begun prior to the federal civil suit, the propriety of declaratory and injunctive relief should be judged by essentially the same standards. In both situations deeply rooted and long-settled principles of equity have narrowly restricted the scope for federal intervention, and ordinarily
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{60} Three years after \textit{Younger}, the Supreme Court held that Younger abstention was not applicable in cases where there is no state criminal proceeding pending at the time the federal complaint is filed. \textit{Steffel v. Thompson}, 415 U.S. 452, 462 (1974).

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{See}, e.g., Donald H. Zeigler, \textit{An Accommodation of the Younger Doctrine and the Duty of the Federal Courts to Enforce Constitutional Safeguards in the State Criminal Process}, 125 U. PA. L. REV. 266, 267 (1976-77) (stating that "even though the Younger doctrine as properly understood reflects the sound policy of avoiding unnecessary federal interference with state proceedings, some courts have extended the doctrine to situations in which the potential interference is minimal and federal court action is essential to the vindication of the complainants' constitutional rights."); Bryce M. Baird, \textit{Federal Court Abstention in Civil Rights Cases: Chief Judge Rehnquist and the New Doctrine of Civil Rights Abstention}, 42 BUFF. L. REV. 501 (1994).


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Id.} at 68.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Id.} at 72. However, the Court did note that:

There may be unusual circumstances in which an injunction might be withheld because, despite a plaintiff's strong claim for relief under the established standards, the injunctive remedy seemed particularly intrusive or offensive; in such a situation, a declaratory judgment might be appropriate and might not be contrary to the basic equitable doctrines governing the availability of relief. Ordinarily, however, the practical effect of the two forms of relief will be virtually identical, and the basic policy against federal interference with pending state criminal prosecutions will be frustrated as much by a declaratory judgment as it would be by an injunction.

\textit{Id.} at 73.
\end{footnotes}
a declaratory judgment will result in precisely the same interference
with and disruption of state proceedings that the longstanding policy
limiting injunctions was designed to avoid.65

The Samuels Court also relied on the Declaratory
Judgment Act to support its decision of non-intervention.66 The
Declaratory Judgment Act provides that a district court, after
issuing a declaratory judgment, may grant "further necessary
or proper relief" based on that judgment.67 Thus, the court
reasoned, once a declaratory judgment is entered, a subsequent
injunction could follow in order to uphold the declaratory
relief.68 In that situation, the injunction, and thus the
declaratory judgment which preceded it, would interfere with
pending state proceedings and run afoul of Younger abstention
principles.69

Following the extension of Younger's application from
injunctive to declaratory relief, in 1975 the Court further
expanded the doctrine in the case of Huffman v. Pursue.70 This
case began in state court in Ohio, where prosecutors attempted
to close a movie theater under Ohio's public nuisance statute.71
The theatre owner lost at the trial level in state court.72 In lieu
of appealing the decision within the state system, he filed suit
under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 in district court seeking injunctive and
declaratory relief based on the claim that Ohio's public
nuisance statute was unconstitutional.73 The district court,
without considering Younger abstention, found in favor of the
theatre owner and issued a permanent injunction against

65 Id. at 72.
66 Federal Declaratory Judgment Act of 1934, 48 Stat. 955 (current version at
69 See Samuel, 401 U.S. at 72.
71 OHIO REV. CODE ANN. §§ 3767.01-3767.99 (1971). The alleged nuisance
violation was based on the theatre's showing of pornographic movies. Under the
statute, any establishment in violation could be closed for up to one year, and any
items determined to be "obscene" could be subject to forced sale. Huffman, 420 U.S. at
595-97.
72 State ex rel. Huffman v. Dakota, No. 72 CIV 0326 (Ct. Com. Pleas, Allen
County, Ohio, Nov. 30, 1972) (cited in Huffman, 420 U.S. at 598).
73 Huffman, 420 U.S. at 598.
closing the theatre. On appeal the Supreme Court addressed only the Younger abstention issue and dismissed the case.

Although the Younger doctrine would not have applied in this case because it was civil in nature and not criminal, the Supreme Court expanded the boundaries of the doctrine, holding that Younger abstention applied and was proper in Huffman. For one, the Court disapproved of the owner's attempt to bypass the state appellate process. It explained that the theater owner could have continued with an appeal in the state court system and could have ultimately reached the U.S. Supreme Court by traveling that road. In addition, the Court reasoned that the nuisance proceeding in Ohio could be likened to criminal prosecution. The critical contribution of Huffman, therefore, is that Younger abstention was expanded to apply to civil proceedings which are "both in aid of and closely related to criminal statutes." In other words, Younger abstention was extended to apply to proceedings that are "quasi-criminal" in nature.

Then, in Ohio Civil Rights Commission v. Dayton Christian School, the Younger doctrine was further expanded to include "quasi-judicial" proceedings. In Dayton Christian School, a pregnant teacher's contract at a religious school was terminated because of a religious policy requiring mothers to stay home with their young children. In response, the Ohio Civil Rights Commission began administrative proceedings

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74 Id. at 599.
75 Id.
76 See Younger, 401 U.S. at 43-44.
77 Huffman, 420 U.S. at 603, 606.
78 Id. at 607, 611-12.
79 Id. at 609.
80 Id. at 609-10.
81 Huffman, 420 U.S. at 604. The opinion states: [W]e deal here with a state proceeding which in important respects is more akin to a criminal proceeding than are most civil cases. The State is a party to the Court of Common Pleas proceeding, and the proceeding is both in aid of and closely related to criminal statutes which prohibit the dissemination of obscene materials. Thus, an offense to the State's interest in the nuisance litigation is likely to be every bit as great as it would be were this a criminal proceeding.
Id.
82 Id. at 604.
83 See Staver, supra note 38, at 1169.
85 See Staver, supra note 38, at 1169.
86 Ohio Civil Rights Comm'n, 477 U.S. at 623. When the teacher prepared to sue, the school rescinded its decision, but then fired the teacher on grounds that she had violated the school's internal dispute resolution policy. Id.
against the school based on the teacher's discharge.\textsuperscript{87} Seeking an injunction against the pending administrative process, the school filed suit in federal district court claiming that any sanctions imposed would constitute violations of the Establishment and Free Exercise of Religion clauses of the First Amendment.\textsuperscript{88} The Supreme Court held that abstention was proper in this case.\textsuperscript{89} Justice Rehnquist, writing for the majority, reasoned that because the administrative proceeding provided the school the opportunity to raise its constitutional claims, abstention was appropriate and warranted.\textsuperscript{90} With this holding, Younger abstention doctrine expanded to also encompass quasi-judicial proceedings.

The Younger theory has now also been applied to prohibit federal intervention in more traditional civil proceedings.\textsuperscript{91} With this, a shifting analysis in the Younger line of cases has occurred.\textsuperscript{92} The origins of Younger abstention, as we have seen and as the \textit{Younger} opinion itself decries, lie in notions of equity, comity, and federalism.\textsuperscript{93} As the Younger doctrine has expanded, however, the analysis has developed into an inquiry of the sufficiency of the state interest in its proceedings and, ultimately, has evolved into an analysis of the adequacy of the state forum.\textsuperscript{94} A brief sketch of the following cases highlights this evolution.

\textsuperscript{87} Id. at 623-24.  
\textsuperscript{88} Id. at 624-25.  
\textsuperscript{89} Id. at 625.  
\textsuperscript{90} Id. at 626-27.  
\textsuperscript{92} See, \textit{e.g.}, \textit{Penzoil Co. v. Texaco, Inc.}, 481 U.S. 1, 11 (1987).  
\textsuperscript{93} Concern mandates application of \textit{Younger} abstention not only when the pending state proceedings are criminal, but also when certain civil proceedings are pending, if the State's interests in the proceeding are so important that exercise of the federal judicial power would disregard the comity between the States and the National Government. \textsuperscript{94} See \textit{Younger}, 401 U.S. at 44.  
\textsuperscript{94} See, \textit{e.g.}, \textit{Baird}, supra note 61 (arguing that Rehnquist has played a critical role in expanding the federalism element of the \textit{Younger} abstention doctrine beyond the bounds contemplated by the \textit{Younger} decision, in abrogation of 28 U.S.C. § 1343, which grants access to federal courts to civil rights plaintiffs).
In *Juidice v. Vail*, the Supreme Court took an exceedingly expansive view of the notion of comity and held that abstention was proper in a case where the pending state proceeding was civil, but neither quasi-criminal nor quasi-judicial. In this case, the plaintiff, Harry Vail, had disobeyed subpoenas and was held in contempt by state court judges. He then brought a class-action suit on behalf of a class of judgment debtors in federal court, under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, seeking to enjoin the use of statutory contempt procedures as unconstitutional violations of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court held that Younger abstention was proper in this case because abstention under *Younger* was not limited to state action akin to criminal proceedings. In its decision, the Court relied on the language of *Huffman* and *Younger*, noting that "the "more vital consideration" behind the Younger doctrine of nonintervention lay not in the fact that the state criminal process was involved, but rather in "the notion of 'comity.'" The opinion emphasized that *Younger* mandated deference not only to state judicial proceedings, but also to state functions, such as the contempt power, which lie "at the core of the administration of a State judicial system." Labeling the state proceeding as civil, quasi-criminal, or criminal in nature was not the "salient fact" in Younger analysis, the Court declared. Rather, the critical factor was the federal court interference with the State's interest in enforcing its contempt power.

In *Juidice v. Vail*, the abstention analysis focused on a state's interest in litigating in its own state judicial system. Two years later, the Supreme Court again modified the

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96 See *Baird*, supra note 61, at 536.
97 *Juidice*, 430 U.S. at 328-29. Vail was a judgment debtor who had defaulted on a credit arrangement, for which a default judgment was entered against him in City Court of Poughkeepsie, NY. He then disobeyed a subpoena to attend a deposition, and subsequently failed to appear at a hearing to show cause why he should not be held in contempt for missing the deposition. *Id.* at 329.
98 *Id.* at 327.
99 *Id.* at 330.
100 *Id.* at 333-34.
102 *Juidice*, 430 U.S. at 335.
103 *Id.* at 335-36.
104 *Id.*
105 *Id.* at 335.
Younger analysis in the case of Moore v. Sims. There, a Texas couple's three children were removed from their custody because of suspected child abuse pursuant to a state court proceeding. The children were held in state custody for six weeks without a hearing. The couple filed a federal suit challenging the constitutionality of certain statutes of the Texas Family Code, seeking a preliminary injunction enjoining any further prosecutions under the statutes at issue. The District Court held that abstention was inappropriate in this case. The Supreme Court, however, reversed. In its analysis, the Court not only looked to Texas's interest in litigating this matter in its own courts, but more importantly, to the fact that the state proceedings provided the federal plaintiffs the opportunity to raise their constitutional claims. Justice Rehnquist, writing for the majority, wrote:

The price exacted in terms of comity would only be outweighed if state courts were not competent to adjudicate federal constitutional claims—a postulate we have repeatedly and emphatically rejected. In sum, the only pertinent inquiry is whether the state proceedings afford an adequate opportunity to raise the constitutional claims, and Texas law appears to raise no procedural barriers.

The strong language used in this passage, asserting that the "only pertinent inquiry" is the adequacy of the state forum, marks a significant shift in the Supreme Court's Younger abstention analysis. The Moore opinion suggests that the State interest is secondary, the merits of the claim itself are no longer even considered, and that the only way comity concerns will be outweighed in favor of federal courts exercising their jurisdiction is when the state forum is inadequate. This standard is quite disparate from the original foundations of abstention laid down in Younger v. Harris only eight years

106 See Baird, supra note 61, at 540.
108 Id. at 419-20.
109 Id. at 421-22.
110 Id. at 422. The decision was also in part based on the fact that the state litigation was "the product of procedural confusion in the state courts." Id.
111 Id. at 423, 435.
112 Moore, 442 U.S. at 430.
113 Id. (internal citation omitted).
114 See Baird, supra note 61, at 540-41.
earlier. In Younger, the Court explicitly stated that their holding in that case did "not mean blind deference to 'States' Rights," but only a "sensitivity" to the interests of both the state and the federal government, and an endeavor on the part of the federal courts not to interfere when unwarranted.\textsuperscript{115}

D. Younger Abstention Today: The Three-Prong Middlesex Test

The Supreme Court constructed a three-prong standard for cases implicating Younger abstention in 1982 in the case of Middlesex County Ethics Committee v. Garden State Bar Association.\textsuperscript{116} The Middlesex test is recognized as the current standard for Younger abstention, and is most often characterized as follows: Younger abstention is proper when (1) the state action is an ongoing state proceeding (2) that implicates important state interests, and (3) the plaintiff has an adequate opportunity to raise his constitutional claims in the state proceeding.\textsuperscript{117} Since the establishment of this three-part standard, however, questions concerning the precise boundaries of Younger abstention have persisted, and the Supreme Court has not provided a great deal of guidance in clarifying the doctrine’s exact limits and parameters.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{115} Younger, 401 U.S. at 44.

\textsuperscript{116} Middlesex County Ethics Comm. v. Garden State Bar Ass’n, 457 U.S. 423 (1982). At issue in this case was the constitutionality of disciplinary rules of a New Jersey county ethics committee. The federal plaintiff, an attorney who was charged with violating the New Jersey Code of Professional Conduct, was involved in a disciplinary proceeding before the Ethics Committee when he filed his federal suit. The Supreme Court held abstention warranted in this case, relying on the precedent of Juidice v. Vail and Moore v. Sims. Id. at 432-33, 436.

\textsuperscript{117} Middlesex County Ethics Comm., 457 U.S. at 432. The question in this case is threefold: first, do state bar disciplinary hearings within the constitutionally prescribed jurisdiction of the State Supreme Court constitute an ongoing state judicial proceeding; second, do the proceedings implicate important state interests; and third, is there an adequate opportunity in the state proceedings to raise constitutional challenges. Id.

\textsuperscript{118} See, e.g., Charles R. Wise & Robert K. Chistensen, Sorting Out Federal and State Judicial Roles in State Institutional Reform: Abstention’s Potential Role, 29 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 387, 389 (2001) ("The ambiguity surrounding the abstention doctrine in institutional reform cases hinders the effective reform of state and local institutions."); Green v. Tucson, 255 F.3d 1086, 1089 (9th Cir. 2001) (characterizing the abstention doctrine as an "oversimplification" of complex issues, leading to "a tendency for the district courts, and this court, to lose their way in the maze of various abstention doctrines, with the consequence that litigants who had properly invoked federal court jurisdiction are improperly relegated to an exclusive state court remedy for claimed violations of their federal constitutional rights").
E. Curtailment of the Younger Doctrine

In order to acquire a full understanding of where Younger abstention stands today, and thus why it should not have been applied in the Bonnie L. case, there is one final case which must be discussed. This case, New Orleans Public Service, Inc. v. Council of the City of New Orleans, known as "NOPSI," is significant because in its decision the Supreme Court limited the extent to which abstention applies in civil cases. To briefly summarize the complicated facts, the New Orleans City Council brought suit in state court seeking a declaration to establish a rate order. NOPSI, a local utility company, then filed suit in federal court seeking an injunction against the council and challenging the constitutionality of the rate order. The U.S. Supreme Court, reversing the rulings of the district court and the Fifth Circuit, held that a federal court should not abstain when the ongoing state proceeding at issue involves a state court engaged in an "essentially legislative act."

The NOPSI opinion is essential in analyzing the Eleventh Circuit's ruling in Bonnie L. NOPSI stresses the importance of federal courts exercising the jurisdiction granted to them in protecting and enforcing individuals' rights. The opinion states: "Our cases have long supported the proposition that federal courts lack the authority to abstain from the exercise of jurisdiction that has been conferred." While

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119 Id. at 353-58. NOPSI was held liable by the Federal Energy Regulation Commission (FERC) for costs associated with constructing a nuclear power plant. The New Orleans City Council denied NOPSI's request for a rate increase to cover the construction costs, determining that NOPSI has incurred some of the costs through its own negligence. Id. at 352.
120 Id. at 371.
121 Id. at 358. To support this statement, the NOPSI opinion cites the following cases: Cohens v. Virginia, 6 Wheat. 264, 404 (1821) ("We have no more right to decline the exercise of jurisdiction which is given, than to usurp that which is not given. The one or the other would be treason to the constitution."); Chicot County v. Sherwood, 148 U.S. 529, 534 (1893) ("[T]he courts of the United States are bound to proceed to judgment and to afford redress to suitors before them in every case in which their jurisdiction extends. They cannot abdicate their authority or duty in any case in favor of another jurisdiction."); Wilcox v. Consolidated Gas Co., 212 U.S. 19, 40 (1909) ("When a federal court is properly appealed to in a case over which it has by law
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recognizing that there are certain situations where federal courts should abstain, the Court stated that it has "carefully defined" the areas in which abstention is appropriate; the Court reiterated that abstention remains "the exception, not the rule."123 With this principle in mind, the Court determined that the rate making at issue in NOPSI was a legislative act,124 and therefore that Younger abstention was unwarranted because the challenge was not within the scope of abstention defined by Younger v. Harris and its progeny.125 Following the reasoning of the NOPSI decision, and bearing in mind the origins and evolution of the Younger abstention doctrine generally, the Eleventh Circuit's decision to abstain in the case of Bonnie L. is erroneous.

IV. THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT'S MISAPPLICATION OF YOUNGERS ABSTENTION IN BONNIE L.

In Bonnie L. v. Bush, the Eleventh Circuit misapplied the doctrine of Younger abstention, inappropriately extending it beyond the boundaries proscribed by the Supreme Court. As precedent, this incorrect decision in favor of abstention could adversely affect hundreds of thousands of children in foster care throughout this country.126

The three-prong Middlesex test, the current standard for the application of Younger abstention, authorizes federal abstention in favor of the state proceeding when the following three conditions are met: (1) the state action is an ongoing state proceeding (2) that implicates important state interests, and (3) the plaintiff has an adequate opportunity to raise his constitutional claims in the state proceeding.127 In the case of Bonnie L., both parties conceded that the second prong of the Middlesex test was met, agreeing that the safety and well-

jurisdiction, it is its duty to take such jurisdiction. ... The right of a party plaintiff to choose a Federal court where there is a choice cannot be properly denied." (citations omitted). NOPSI, 491 U.S. at 358-59.


124 NOPSI, 491 U.S. at 371.

125 Id. at 373.


being of children in state custody is an important state interest. Additionally, both parties also agreed that state juvenile court dependency proceedings, held periodically for every child in Florida's custody, constitute an ongoing state proceeding implicating the first prong of the Middlesex test. Thus, the contested issues in Bonnie L. were (1) whether the federal suit and the relief it sought would interfere with the state proceedings in juvenile court, and (2) whether the state dependency proceedings provide the plaintiff children "with an opportunity to raise and vindicate [their] federal constitutional claims. . . ." The Eleventh Circuit answered both questions incorrectly.

A. The Ongoing State Court Proceeding: A Foster Child's Periodic Review in Juvenile Court

As the Eleventh Circuit emphasized in the Bonnie L. decision, to properly conduct a Middlesex analysis, an understanding of the features of the ongoing state proceeding with which there is alleged interference is important. Thus to analyze the abstention issue in Bonnie L., a cursory understanding of the features of Florida's foster care system is required. A child in Florida enters the foster care system when he or she is removed from his or her home and placed into state custody. Florida's Department of Children and Families is responsible for conducting, supervising, and administering a "program for dependent children and their families" with the following goals: (a) prevention of separation

128 31 Foster Children v. Bush, 329 F.3d 1255, 1275 (11th Cir. 2003) ("The parties also agree . . . that important state interests are involved.").

129 Id. at 1275 ("The parties agree . . . that continuing state dependency proceedings involving each of the plaintiffs are ongoing state proceedings for the purposes of Middlesex analysis.") (citing J.B. v. Valdez, 186 F.3d 1280, 1291 (10th Cir. 1999) (holding that continuing jurisdiction of juvenile court and six month periodic review hearings constitute an ongoing state judicial proceeding)).

130 31 Foster Children v. Bush, 329 F.3d at 1275.

131 Id. at 1277 ("Whether the effect of the federal court injunctive relief the plaintiffs seek in this lawsuit will interfere with ongoing state dependency proceedings depends in part on the nature and extent of those proceedings.").

132 The Eleventh Circuit opinion gives a chronological outline of Florida's foster care system along the same lines as the one which follows. See id. at 1277-78.

133 See Fla. Stat. ch. 409.145 (2003). Children can also be voluntarily placed into foster care by their parents or guardians. Id.
of children from their families; (b) reunification of families who have had children placed in foster homes or institutions; (c) permanent placement (i.e. adoption) of children who cannot be reunited with their families or when reunification would not be in the best interest of the child; and (d) protection of dependent children or children alleged to be dependent, including provision of emergency and long-term alternate living arrangements.\textsuperscript{134} 

A child is involuntarily brought into the foster care system either by the Department or by law enforcement officers.\textsuperscript{135} Once brought in, the Department must immediately consider whether probable cause exists to detain the child.\textsuperscript{136} If probable cause exists, the Department must conduct a shelter hearing within 24 hours of removal of the child to retain custody.\textsuperscript{137} Next a determination of dependency is made. A child is deemed dependent when he or she has been abused, neglected, or abandoned, or suffers from or is in “imminent danger of illness or injury as a result of abuse, neglect, or abandonment.”\textsuperscript{138} If deemed necessary, the Department files a petition for dependency against the parents or legal guardians of the abused, neglected, or abandoned child.\textsuperscript{139} 

Once that occurs, the Florida state juvenile court system is given jurisdiction to proceed with determinations in the best interest of the child.\textsuperscript{140} An adjudicatory hearing in the juvenile court, with the purpose of either decreeing the child dependent or returning the child to its home, must be held “as soon as practicable after the petition for dependency is filed.”\textsuperscript{141} The child is adjudicated dependent at this hearing if the facts alleged in the dependency proceeding regarding the abandonment, neglect, or abuse are found to be true.\textsuperscript{142} The court must follow-up within 30 days of the dependency determination with a dispositional hearing.\textsuperscript{143} At the child’s

\textsuperscript{134} FLA. STAT. ch. 409.145(1) (2003).
\textsuperscript{135} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.401(1)(b) (2003).)
\textsuperscript{136} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.401(3) (2003).
\textsuperscript{137} Id.
\textsuperscript{138} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.402(1)(a) (2003).
\textsuperscript{139} See FLA. STAT. ch. 39.401 (2003).
\textsuperscript{140} See FLA. STAT. ch. 39.507 (2003).
\textsuperscript{141} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.507(1)(a) (2003).
\textsuperscript{142} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.521(1) (2003) (“A disposition hearing shall be conducted by the court, if the court finds that the facts alleged in the petition for dependency were proven in the adjudicatory hearing,...”).
\textsuperscript{143} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.507(7) (2003). (“At the conclusion of the adjudicatory hearing, if the child named in the petition is found dependent, the court shall schedule the disposition hearing within 30 days after the last day of the adjudicatory hearing.”).
dispositional hearing, the court resolves in whose custody the child will remain.\textsuperscript{144} Only after the court determines that it is not in the best interest of the child's safety and well-being to be placed with a parent, relative, or other non-licensed placement will the court "commit the child into the temporary legal custody of the department."\textsuperscript{145} The governing statute describes this transfer of custody as follows:

Such commitment invests in the [D]epartment all rights and responsibilities of a legal custodian. The [D]epartment shall not return any child to the physical care and custody of the person from whom the child was removed, except for court-approved visitation periods, without the approval of the court. The term of such commitment continues until terminated by the court or until the child reaches the age of 18.\textsuperscript{146}

When a child is placed into legal custody of the Department, a written case plan, which follows the child until he or she leaves the system, is required to be submitted and approved by the court.\textsuperscript{147} Among other items, the case plan for a child in state custody must include the following: a description of the permanency goal for the child; a description of the type of placement in which the child is placed; a description of the visitation rights of the parents; a discussion of the safety and appropriateness of the child's placement; a discussion of the department's plans to carry out the judicial determination made by the court; a description of the plan to facilitate either the safe return of the child to the home or the permanent placement of the child; and a description of the plan to address the needs of the child.\textsuperscript{148}

While a child is in state custody, the state court maintains continuing jurisdiction over the dependency case, and the court reviews the status of the child in a dependency

\textsuperscript{144} See FLA. STAT. ch. 39.521 (2003).
\textsuperscript{145} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.521(3)(d) (2003).
\textsuperscript{146} Id.
\textsuperscript{147} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.521(1)(a) (2003); FLA. STAT. ch. 39.601 (2003). The case plan is defined as a document "prepared by the department with input from all parties. The case plan follows the child from the provision of voluntary services through any dependency, foster care, or termination of parental rights proceeding or related activity or process." FLA. STAT. ch. 39.01(11) (2003).
\textsuperscript{148} See FLA. STAT. chs. 39.601(1)-(3) (2003) (providing an exhaustive list of all required items in a child's case plan).
proceeding at least once every six months.\textsuperscript{149} At a dependency hearing, the court considers "the child’s situation, including whether there has been compliance with the case plan, the appropriateness of the child’s current placement, and whether the child is in a setting that is family-like and consistent with the child’s best interests and special needs."\textsuperscript{150} The court determines at a dependency hearing whether the child is to remain in foster care, be returned to the parent or guardian, or if termination of parental rights hearings should be initiated against the parent to free the child for adoption.\textsuperscript{151} Additionally, if the court finds that the Department is not in compliance with the case plan, it can hold the Department in contempt for its failure to comply.\textsuperscript{152}

It is this periodic dependency hearing (or review hearing) that is at the heart of the abstention dispute in Bonnie L. It is the “ongoing state court proceeding” over which the Eleventh Circuit claims potential federal court interference that runs afoul of Younger abstention.\textsuperscript{153} In Bonnie L., the Eleventh Circuit resolved that “the plaintiffs are seeking relief that would interfere with the ongoing state dependency proceedings by placing decisions that are now in the hands of the state courts under the direction of the federal district court.”\textsuperscript{154} The court of appeals concluded that the declaratory judgment and injunctions requested by plaintiffs could result in impermissible interferences with state court adjudications because the federal court and state court could issue “conflicting orders about what is best for a particular plaintiff, such as whether a particular placement is safe or appropriate or whether sufficient efforts are being made to find an adoptive family.”\textsuperscript{155} The circuit court also concluded that the federal court could “effectively require an amendment to a child’s case

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\textsuperscript{149} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.701(1)(a) (2003).

\textsuperscript{150} 31 Foster Children v. Bush, 329 F.3d 1255, 1277 (11th Cir. 2003) (referencing FLA. STAT. chs. 39.701(7)(d), (g) (2003)).

\textsuperscript{151} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.701(9)(d) (2003).

\textsuperscript{152} FLA. STAT. ch. 39.701(9)(c) (2003).

\textsuperscript{153} 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d. at 1278.

\textsuperscript{154} Id.

\textsuperscript{155} Id.
plan that the state court would not have approved" when state law gives the state courts authority to make such amendments.\footnote{See id. at 1261-62 (outlining the relief sought).}

Both of these conclusions are unsupported and incorrect. The court did not explain how such interferences would occur as a result of the declaratory and injunctive relief sought in \textit{Bonnie L}. The relief sought was aimed specifically at the executive branch officials of Florida's Department of Children and Families. It was not directed in any way against the state court system, its procedures, the actions of its judges, or the dependency proceedings conducted therein.\footnote{31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1261-62.} The plaintiffs sought a declaration that certain practices of the Department were unconstitutional and unlawful; an injunction against the Department to end continued constitutional violations; remedial relief to ensure compliance with the Constitution and laws of the United States; and the appointment of a panel of experts to supervise the implementation of a plan to reform the Department of Children and Families.\footnote{Id. at 1279. Plaintiffs sought panel rehearing of the Eleventh Circuit's abstention ruling, in particular of the Court's reliance on an incorrect interpretation of the nature and purpose of the proposed expert panel. The hearing was denied by summary per curiam order. Petition for Writ of Certiorari at *14, Reggie B. v. Bush, 540 U.S. 984 (2003) (No. 03-351), available at 2003 WL 22428949.} In more concrete terms, the plaintiffs sought relief such as increased funding for the Department, improved training for Department employees and foster families, and better supervision, visitation and monitoring of children in foster care. None of this relief would affect the nature or jurisdiction of the juvenile court, nor would it interfere with dispositions made in that court with respect to individual children in the foster care system.

Moreover, the Eleventh Circuit made an egregious mistake in its incorrect reading of the mission of the expert panel that plaintiffs sought to have created. The court of appeals asserted that the plaintiffs sought the appointment of a panel "to implement a systemwide plan to revamp and reform dependency proceedings in Florida."\footnote{Id. at 1279.} The directive of the
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panel was completely unrelated to dependency proceedings. Rather, the panel's explicit objective was to develop and oversee reform of the executive agency only. As the following two sections detail, this mischaracterization is but one of many errors made by the Eleventh Circuit in finding abstention proper in Bonnie L. v. Bush.

B. Inappropriate Extension of the Younger Abstention Doctrine

1. First Middlesex Prong: No Interference with State Court Proceedings

It is in its analysis of the first Middlesex prong that the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals inappropriately extended the scope of Younger abstention beyond its proscribed bounds. The court relied on several cases to support its finding of impermissible interference, none of which provide persuasive justification for abstention. Most notably, the court relied on the Tenth Circuit decision in Joseph A. v. Ingram. In that case, factually analogous to Bonnie L., a class action civil rights claim was filed in 1980 against New Mexico's child welfare system on behalf of children in New Mexico's custody, alleging systemic deficiencies in that state's foster care system in violation of the constitutional rights of the plaintiff foster children. A settlement was reached in the suit three years after filing, with both parties agreeing to enter into a consent decree. In 1999 plaintiffs brought a contempt proceeding in federal district court against the defendant Department for failure to comply with the decree. In response, the defendants moved for dismissal on grounds of Younger abstention, which the district court granted. The Tenth Circuit vacated the district court's Younger abstention dismissal, determining that while some provisions of the consent decree may warrant

160 Joseph A. ex rel. Wolfe v. Ingram, 275 F.3d 1253 (10th Cir. 2002). It should be noted that the Tenth Circuit's first opinion, decided in August of 2001 and reported at 262 F.3d 1113, was withdrawn and superseded on rehearing (in January 2002) by the opinion cited infra.
161 See Joseph A., 275 F.3d at 1257.
162 Id.
163 Id. In 1988, the initial consent decree was vacated and replaced with a second decree. The contempt proceeding brought in 1999 was actually for failure to comply with the second decree. Id.
164 Id. The defendants also sought dismissal based on Eleventh Amendment sovereign immunity, which the court rejected. Id.
Younger abstention, not all necessarily do. The Circuit Court remanded the case, ordering that the district court conduct a “provision-by-provision” analysis of the consent decree to conclude which provisions, if any, run afoul of Younger.

While the Tenth Circuit did not rule that any of the consent decree provisions warranted Younger abstention, its discussion of the possibility of abstention articulates an inappropriate expansion of the doctrine. The court of appeals conceded that the issue before it was dissimilar to most abstention cases: “[W]e recognize that this is not the typical Younger case in which a federal court is asked either to enjoin an action from proceeding in state court, or to issue a declaratory judgment that would have essentially the same effect as an injunction.” The court, nonetheless, found that Younger abstention would be applicable, noting that “[e]nforcement of the [decree] . . . requires interference with the operations of the Children’s Court in an insidious way in that the [decree] expressly prevents the Department’s employees from recommending a range of planning options for children who are in the Department’s custody.”

The Tenth Circuit admitted that this was not the type of interference Younger v. Harris and its progeny contemplated, and yet refused to reject the abstention argument. Instead the Court created a new type of interference, which it deemed “insidious” interference, to which Younger abstention would apply. The Court stated that enforcement of the consent decree would have “an effect not unlike that of an injunction or declaratory judgment.”

In Bonnie L., the Eleventh Circuit looked to the Tenth Circuit’s decision in Joseph A. to support its own ruling. Use of the Joseph A. decision as support is misguided and inapt. For one, the Joseph A. decision is based on an unwarranted expansion of the abstention doctrine. Moreover, on remand, the

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165 Id. at 1274.
166 Joseph A., 275 F.3d at 1272 (stating that although “one provision may not be enforceable in light of Younger” . . . that “does not necessarily warrant voiding the entire consent decree . . . or dismissing the entire action”) (internal citations omitted).
167 Id. at 1268 (internal citations omitted).
168 Id. (emphasis added).
169 Joseph A., 275 F.3d at 1268.
district court, instructed by the Tenth Circuit to do a provision-specific analysis pursuant to the fictitious insidious interference standard,171 found that only one provision of the entire consent decree called for Younger abstention.172 In light of the remand decision, the precedential value of Joseph A. is extremely weak.173

Additionally, the Eleventh Circuit's finding of interference with state court proceedings sufficient to satisfy the first prong of the Middlesex test is discredited by the Supreme Court's holding in NOPSI,174 where the Supreme Court explicitly restrained the expansion of Younger abstention in the civil sphere.175 The opinion states:

Although our concern for comity and federalism has led us to expand the protection of Younger beyond state criminal prosecution, to civil enforcement proceedings, and even to civil proceedings involving certain orders that are uniquely in furtherance of the state courts' ability to perform their judicial functions, it has never been suggested that Younger requires abstention in deference to a state judicial proceeding reviewing legislative or executive action. Such a broad abstention requirement would make a mockery of the rule that only exceptional circumstances justify a federal court's refusal to decide a case in deference to the States.176

It is clear then that abstention is improper when the state court proceeding reviews legislative or executive action. The case of Bonnie L. falls squarely into this category. The suit challenges wholly executive conduct, that of the Department of Children and Families, and its inability to effectively run a child welfare system in compliance with the U.S. Constitution. The defendants in the suit are all executive officials and administrators of an executive agency,177 and the relief sought is aimed directly at their actions and inactions.178

Furthermore, only three months after the Eleventh Circuit's decision in Bonnie L., the District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, upon which the Eleventh Circuit provides binding authority, rejected Younger abstention in a

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171 See Joseph A., 275 F.3d at 1272-73.
174 NOPSI, 491 U.S. 350 (1989); see supra text accompanying notes 119-25.
175 See NOPSI, 491 U.S. at 367-69, 373.
176 Id. at 367-68 (internal citations omitted).
177 See 31 Foster Children v. Bush, 329 F.3d 1255, 1260 (11th Cir. 2003).
178 Id. at 1261-62.
case factually analogous to Bonnie L.\textsuperscript{179} In Kenny A. \textit{v.} Perdue, a plaintiff class consisting of all foster children residing in two of Georgia’s counties in the custody of the Georgia Department of Human Resources brought a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 class action suit seeking systemic reform of the two counties’ child welfare systems.\textsuperscript{180} As in Bonnie L., the plaintiffs alleged widespread deficiencies in the system in violation of their constitutional and federal statutory rights.\textsuperscript{181} The district court found that the relief sought did not implicate Younger concerns because it would not interfere in any way with ongoing state court proceedings.\textsuperscript{182} The district court stated:

Although plaintiffs all have periodic reviews before the state juvenile courts, the declaratory and injunctive relief plaintiffs seek is not directed at their review hearings, or at Georgia’s juvenile courts, juvenile court judges, or juvenile court personnel. Rather, plaintiffs seek relief directed solely at executive branch defendants to remedy their alleged failures as plaintiffs custodians.\textsuperscript{183}

After detailing the alleged violations of the Georgia child welfare department,\textsuperscript{184} the court went on to proclaim that if the allegations were proven to be true, “an order by this Court remedying such failures would not interfere in any way with ongoing juvenile court proceedings.”\textsuperscript{185} The court determined, in fact, that “[t]o the contrary, the relief sought by plaintiffs would at most simply support and further the juvenile court’s own mission of ensuring that children removed


\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Id.} at 283.

\textsuperscript{181} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Id.} at 285-86.

\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Id.} at 286 (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Kenny A.}, 218 F.R.D. at 286. The alleged failures include the following: assignment of excessive caseloads to inadequately trained and poorly supervised caseworkers; insufficient number of appropriately safe foster homes; lack of identification of possible relative placements as alternative to stranger or institutional placements; failure to provide sufficient support services to foster parents; failure to implement adequate information management systems to ensure expeditious placement of children in homes matching individual needs; failure to provide timely and appropriate permanency planning; placement of children in unsafe, unsanitary, and inappropriate shelters or placements; failure to prove mental, medical health, and educational needs being met for children in state custody; and separation of teenage mothers in foster care from their babies and siblings in foster care from one another without adequate visitation. \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Id.}
from their parents' custody because of abuse or neglect are not further harmed when the juvenile court orders them into the custody of the state."\(^{186}\) For example, the court explained, the "only conceivable effect" of reducing caseworkers' caseloads is that caseworkers would be better prepared to appear in juvenile court.\(^{187}\)

The Kenny A. decision is especially informative because of the manner in which the Georgia district court distinguished the facts of Kenny A. from Bonnie L., and thereby avoided following the Eleventh Circuit's decision to dismiss in Bonnie L.\(^{188}\) The district court, in Kenny A., determined that "the relief requested in [Bonnie L.] went far beyond what [was] sought [in Kenny A.]."\(^{189}\) In reality, however, the relief sought was for the most part exactly the same. The Northern District of Georgia's proposition that Bonnie L. sought more far-reaching relief was based entirely on the Eleventh Circuit's mischaracterization of the relief sought in the Florida case.\(^{190}\) The Georgia opinion states: "As described by the court of appeals, plaintiffs in [Bonnie L.] sought 'to have the district court appoint a panel and give it authority to implement a systemwide plan to revamp and reform dependency proceedings in Florida, as well as the appointment of a permanent children's advocate to oversee that plan.'\(^{191}\) However, as previously noted, the plaintiffs in Bonnie L. did not seek to create a panel for the purpose of revamping or reforming the dependency proceedings in any way. The panel was meant to monitor reformation of the executive agency controlling the child welfare system. The Georgia district court also distinguished Kenny A. from Bonnie L. by noting that the Eleventh Circuit found in Bonnie L. that

\(^{186}\) Id.

\(^{187}\) Id.

\(^{188}\) Younger abstention was ostensibly not applied in Kenny A. because the defendants removed the case from state to federal court, and in so doing waived their right to seek abstention.

In this case, however, State Defendants are in federal court only because of their own decision to remove the case from state court. It would be fundamentally unfair to permit State Defendants to argue that this Court must abstain from hearing the case after they voluntarily brought the case before this Court. To do so would permit defendants effectively to prevent plaintiffs from pursuing their federal claims in any forum.

Kenny A., 218 F.R.D. at 285. Nonetheless, the court determined that even absent defendants' waiver of the right to seek abstention, Younger abstention would be unwarranted and would not apply in the case. Id. at 285-86.

\(^{189}\) Id. at 287.

\(^{190}\) Id.

\(^{191}\) See Kenny A, 218 F.R.D. at 287 (citing 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1279).
"the federal and state courts could well differ, issuing conflicting orders about what is best for a particular plaintiff." The Georgia court asserted:

In this case . . . plaintiffs do not ask the Court to make individualized determinations with respect to particular foster children. Instead, they seek relief mandating, on a system-wide basis, that State Defendants institute reforms to ensure that deprived children's constitutional and statutory rights are not violated. Again, the Georgia district court's determinations are based on mischaracterizations in Bonnie L. Plaintiffs in Bonnie L. did not seek to have the court make any determinations about individual foster children that could conflict with orders in the child's dependency proceeding. The relief sought by Florida's foster children in Bonnie L. was exactly the relief described in the above quoted passage: systemic reform of the state's institution to ensure that plaintiffs' rights would not be violated. Thus, the Georgia case of Kenny A. is effectively indistinguishable from Bonnie L., illustrating that, on the merits, abstention was likewise not warranted in Bonnie L. because there was no interference with state court proceedings.

The Eleventh Circuit's finding of interference necessitating Younger abstention in Bonnie L. is also plainly inconsistent with the prior cases in which the U.S. Supreme Court has applied the doctrine. A survey of those cases reveals that Younger abstention has been limited to scenarios where the relief sought is the enjoinment of specific actions of state court judges, prosecutors, and other law enforcement officials, or the enjoinment of a specific proceeding from going forward.

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192 Kenny A, 218 F.R.D. at 288 (citing 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1278).
193 Id.
194 See supra text accompanying notes 25-28.
195 See Petition for Writ of Certiorari at *18, Reggie B. v. Bush, 540 U.S. 984 (2003) (No. 03-351), available at 2003 WL 22428949 (noting that "every case in which [the Supreme Court] has applied Younger has involved remedies that would have the effect of putting a halt to state court proceedings"). In support of this proposition, the plaintiffs' petition for certiorari cites the following cases: Trainor v. Hernandez, 431 U.S. 434, 438 (1977) (enjoining clerks and sheriffs from issuing or serving attachments); Judice v. Vail, 430 U.S. 327, 330 (1977) (enjoining state court judges from enforcement of contempt proceedings); Doran v. Salem Inn, Inc., 422 U.S. 922, 924 (1975) (granting injunction of town attorney and other law enforcement officials); Hicks v. Miranda, 422 U.S. 332, 345 (1975) (enjoining district attorneys and law
DISMISSING THE FOSTER CHILDREN

In all cases, the effective outcome of the relief sought was to immobilize a state court proceeding. In the case of Bonnie L., the relief sought would have had no affect whatsoever on the state court proceedings, the enforcement of judgments in those proceedings, or the continuance of those proceedings. The relief sought in Bonnie L. does not target juvenile court decisions regarding individual children or seek changes to the case plans of those children. Instead the suit seeks systemic reform of the child welfare agency itself, including an increase in the number of caseworkers employed by the agency to decrease the number of cases assigned to each worker; more and better training of caseworkers; recruitment of additional foster homes to serve as placements for foster children; and increased state supervision and control over contract agencies with whom the Department partners to provide foster case service. Thus, the enforcement personnel and declaring the unconstitutionality of obscenity statute in criminal proceeding); Kugler v. Helfant, 421 U.S. 117, 119 (1975) (enjoining attorney general from proceeding with criminal prosecution); Huffman v. Pursue, Ltd., 420 U.S. 592, 598-99 (1975) (enjoining sheriff and prosecuting attorney and execution of judgment); O'Shea v. Littleton, 414 U.S. 488, 492 (1974) (seeking to enjoin state court judges and law enforcement officials from taking certain actions in future criminal prosecutions); Perez v. Ledesma, 401 U.S. 82, 83-84 (1971) (entering suppression order requiring return by law enforcement officials of materials); Boyle v. Landry, 401 U.S. 77, 78-79 (1971) (enjoining state court judges and state attorneys from prosecution of intimidation statutes); Samuels v. Mackell, 401 U.S. 66, 67-68 (1971) (seeking to enjoin district attorney from proceeding with criminal case and to declare statute underlying prosecution unconstitutional); Younger v. Harris, 401 U.S. 37, 38-39, 53-54 (enjoining district attorney from proceeding with criminal case). Certiorari Petition at *19 n.17, Reggie B., (No.03-351).

Petition for Writ of Certiorari at *18-19, Reggie B. v. Bush, 540 U.S. 984 (2003) (No. 03-351), available at 2003 WL 22428949. The plaintiffs' petition also distinguishes the remaining four of the Supreme Court's fifteen affirmative applications of Younger abstention. The petition asserts that, notwithstanding the fact that the relief sought in those four cases was directed at “administrative bodies, executive agency officials, and even private litigants,” it was nonetheless sought to “enjoin the state proceedings themselves or to enjoin a litigant from instituting or continuing with such proceedings.” Id. The petition cites the following cases in support: Pennzoil Co. v. Texaco, Inc., 481 U.S. 1, 8 (1987) (enjoining attempts to enforce state court judgment or obtain lien under state law); Ohio Civil Rights Comm’n v. Dayton Christian Sch., Inc., 477 U.S. 619, 624-25 (1986) (seeking to enjoin state court proceedings); Garden State Bar Ass’n, 457 U.S. 423, 429 (1982) (seeking to enjoin state attorney disciplinary proceeding); Moore v. Sims, 442 U.S. 415, 422 (1979) (enjoining juvenile court neglect and abuse proceeding). Certiorari Petition at *19 n.18, Reggie B., (No. 03-351).

See 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1261-62.

relief sought in the federal suit in no way implicates Younger abstention, and the Eleventh Circuit's application of Younger abstention is an impermissible extension of the doctrine.

2. Third Middlesex Prong Not Satisfied: No Opportunity for Relief in State Court Proceeding

The Eleventh Circuit was also incorrect in its determination that plaintiff had an adequate opportunity in the state court proceeding to raise his constitutional challenges, thereby satisfying the third factor in the Middlesex test. The plaintiffs in Bonnie L. did not have such an opportunity in their juvenile court dependency proceedings. To begin, it is clear from statutory and case law that Florida's Juvenile Courts do not have the authority to implement system-wide reform of Florida's Department of Children and Families. There is no provision in Florida's Rules of Juvenile Procedure for bringing class action suits in a foster child's periodic dependency hearing. The committee notes accompanying the rules unambiguously state that "the rules governing dependency and termination of parental rights proceedings are self-contained and no longer need to reference the Florida Rules of Civil Procedure." Moreover, the Florida District Court of Appeals has held that "[t]he courts are not given general supervisory power over [the Department] under the statutes." (2003).

There are three types of Family Division proceedings that may be 'pending' for a child entangled in the District of Columbia's foster-care system: (1) a "neglect proceeding" adjudicating a neglect petition filed by the Corporation Counsel against the child's parents, (2) periodic review hearings, and (3) proceedings adjudicating motions to terminate parental rights. None of these proceedings is an appropriate forum for this multi-faceted class-action challenge to the District of Columbia's administration of its entire foster-care system.

Id.
In limited instances, the Juvenile Court may hold the Department in contempt for its failure to comply with a child’s case plan. However, the court has been found to have “no general jurisdiction over DCF to monitor and evaluate its functioning.” In particular, for example, the court does not have jurisdiction to order specific placement or specific treatment for a child in the custody of the Department. Furthermore, the state courts do not have authority to implement reform with respect to the number of caseworkers employed by the Department, and thus the number of cases each caseworker covers. Nor is the court able to shut down or prohibit the use of a shelter found to be unsafe or unfit for foster children. In sum, the juvenile court is empowered only to provide limited, individualized relief for a specific child in its jurisdiction. The court has no authority to initiate systemic

the juvenile court does not have the authority to declare precisely where a dependant child in the custody of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services can be placed; see also Florida Dep’t of Health and Rehab. Servs., Division of Youth Servs. v. Crowell, 327 So. 2d 115, 116 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1976) (“Nowhere in [the governing Florida] statutes do we find that the court has been given general supervisory authority over the day-to-day operations of Division of Youth Services in the administration of the powers and duties conferred upon it.”).


Dept’ of Children and Family Servs. v. I.C., 742 So. 2d 401, 404 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1999) (holding that juvenile court did not have jurisdiction to enter an injunction preventing DCF from housing disabled children who have been rejected from placements at an assessment center).

See, e.g., State, ex rel. Dep’t of Health and Rehabilitative Servs. v. Nourse, 437 So. 2d 221, 222 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1983) (“[T]he court does not have the jurisdiction to manage the details of how [the Department] will attempt to rehabilitate juveniles.”); Henry & Rilla White Found., Inc., v. Migdal, 720 So. 2d 568, 572 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1998) (“a court may not require a child committed to the department to be placed in a specific facility”). But see In re L.W., 615 So. 2d 834, 838 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1993) (holding that the Department could order placement in a therapeutic foster home or residential treatment center and distinguishing Nourse on the grounds that the child in that case was a delinquent, and not a dependant); State Dep’t of Health and Rehabilitative Servs. v. Brooke, 573 So. 2d 363, 369 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1991) (holding that circuit court did “not facially interfere with the Department’s executive discretion concerning the placement of dependent children in derogation of the doctrine of separation of powers by ordering the children to be placed in specific [therapeutic] institutions”).

See Lee v. Dep’t of Health and Rehabilitative Servs., 698 So. 2d 1194, 1197 (Fla. 1997) (“[T]he function of interpreting and implementing the rules governing the number and assignment of employees to supervise and care for the mentally disabled . . . is a discretionary policy-making function for which [the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services] cannot be held liable because those types of decisions are sovereignly immune.”).

See Dept’ of Children and Family Servs. v. I.C., 742 So. 2d 401, 405 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1992); see also Henry & Rilla White Found., Inc., 720 So. 2d at 568 (finding that trial court has authority to investigate and consider safety concerns arising from placement of a child in a particular facility, but not holding that the trial court can shut down an unsafe facility).
reform of the Department's conduct because such actions are deemed "executive agency decisions which implicate policy development and prioritizing of funding," and are thus outside of the scope of the juvenile court's jurisdiction.\(^{210}\)

The Supreme Court has determined that, in abstention analysis, the federal court plaintiff must provide "unambiguous authority" that the state-court proceedings fail to afford an adequate remedy.\(^{211}\) In *Bonnie L.*, the Eleventh Circuit affirmed that "in determining whether the state remedies are adequate . . . [t]he relevant question is not whether the state courts can do all that Plaintiffs wish they could, but whether the available remedies are sufficient to meet [the] requirement that the remedy be adequate."\(^{212}\) As discussed in the preceding paragraph, the juvenile court is not able to provide an adequate remedy to the plaintiffs. Florida's foster care system is severely deficient, and its deficiencies put children at risk.\(^{213}\) The adequate remedies are what plaintiffs in *Bonnie L.* sought, among them increased funding and the creation of a panel of child welfare experts to develop and oversee institutional reform of the entire troubled system, a remedy that the juvenile court cannot provide.\(^{214}\)

The juvenile court is further restrained by the fact that the Department is guaranteed the absolute defense of inadequate resources in a juvenile court proceeding.\(^{215}\)

\(^{210}\) See Dep't of Children and Family Servs., 742 So. 2d at 404.

\(^{211}\) Pennzoil Co. v. Texaco Inc., 481 U.S. 1, 15 (1987) ("[W]hen a litigant has not attempted to present his federal claims in related state-court proceedings, a federal court should assume that state procedures will afford an adequate remedy, in the absence of unambiguous authority to the contrary.").

\(^{212}\) 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1279 (quoting *Bonnie L.* v. *Bush*, 180 F. Supp. 2d 1321, 1337 (S.D. Fla. 2001)).

\(^{213}\) See supra text accompanying notes 18-24.

\(^{214}\) Similar panels of experts to oversee reform were created pursuant to consent decrees arising from settlements in cases analogous to *Bonnie L.* brought on behalf of foster children in New York and New Jersey (with plaintiffs represented by the same advocacy group as plaintiffs in *Bonnie L.*). See Michelle Han, *DYFS Panel Gets Broad Powers*, THE RECORD (New Jersey), June 25, 2003, at A1; Leslie Brody, *New York Panel is Model for DYFS Reforms: Commitment Necessary For Change, Experts Say*, THE RECORD (New Jersey), June 25, 2003, at A12.

\(^{215}\) See, e.g., Dep't of Children and Families v. J.H., 831 So. 2d 782, 783 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2002) (holding that the Circuit Court could not require DCF to provide funding for therapy and evaluations for a dependent child, and noting that "the court's order ignores DCF's funding issues"); Dep't of Health and Rehab. Servs. v. V.L., 583 So. 2d 765, 766 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1991) (holding that the Department was not required to
Statutory law provides that the Department of Children and Families shall establish and supervise a foster care program "within funds appropriated."\(^{216}\) The Florida Appellate Court itself has articulated this inherent limitation. In the case of \textit{In re L.W.},\(^{217}\) the court explained:

The Legislature has imposed a daunting responsibility on the Department to provide for the needs of the children of this state but apparently has not provided the funds necessary to accomplish the task. On the other hand, it has given the courts the duty to review the actions of the Department to assure the protection of the minor child, but the absence of needed funds has limited the trial court's ability to assure the protection of the child's rights and welfare. The losers in all this are the children like L.W.\(^{218}\)

The Eleventh Circuit noted in \textit{Bonnie L.} that one reason behind plaintiffs' failure to establish an inadequate remedy in the ongoing state court proceedings was the Florida juvenile court's contempt power in the face of Department non-compliance with an individual child's case plan.\(^{219}\) However, this touted contempt power is effectively futile when the Department can plead inadequate funding in its defense. To implement the type of institutional reform plaintiffs in \textit{Bonnie L.} sought requires the expenditure of funds to finance efforts such as hiring more caseworkers and providing improved training for caseworkers and foster families.\(^{220}\) Indeed, in late 2003, the Secretary of Florida's Department of Children and Families requested from the State Legislature an increase of $474 million in the Department's budget to initiate effective reform of the system.\(^{221}\) The Department received less than twenty-five percent of that figure.\(^{222}\)

Assuming, arguendo, that the Florida Juvenile Court would even have jurisdiction to place a dependent child in psychiatric facility until funds were available to do so and that "the legislature's appropriations power is . . . off limits to the courts偏好"

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\(^{216}\) FLA. STAT. CH. 409.165 (2003).
\(^{218}\) Id. at 839.
\(^{219}\) See 31 Foster Children, 329 F.3d at 1281.
\(^{220}\) The recent settlement in the District Court of New Jersey of the \textit{Charlie & Nadine H. v. McGreevey} class action suit illustrates the need for additional funding in the implementation of system-wide reform of state child welfare systems. Under the settlement terms of that case, brought against New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) on behalf of foster children in New Jersey's custody, the State was ordered to appropriate an additional $23.85 million for DYFS's fiscal year 2004 budget. \textit{See Michael Booth, DYFS Monitoring, Additional Funding End Suit Alleging Shoddy Foster Care, 172 N.J.L.J. 1213 (June 30, 2003).}

\(^{221}\) Hollis & Gruskin, supra note 18.
\(^{222}\) Id.
order improvements of Florida's child welfare system, those improvements would likely never come about as the court orders would be unenforceable given the Department's defense of inadequate resources.

The federal courts, on the other hand, are not constrained by funding concerns when granting injunctive relief to remedy constitutional violations. Even if the remedial scheme requires additional funding, federal court orders are fully enforceable. Thus, for all the reasons discussed, the federal courts are the only forum which can provide the plaintiffs in *Bonnie L.* with an adequate remedy for their constitutional violations. The Eleventh Circuit's ruling in favor of abstention, therefore, is misguided as the third Middlesex factor was not satisfied.

V. **FEDERAL COURTS' RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT THE CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS OF FOSTER CHILDREN**

The Supreme Court has explicitly affirmed the federal courts' duty to protect citizens from constitutional violations committed at the hands of the State: "The very purpose of Section 1983 was to interpose the federal courts between the States and the people, as guardians of the people's federal rights—to protect the people from unconstitutional action under color of state law . . . ." The Eleventh Circuit's decision to abstain in *Bonnie L.* has closed the doors of federal courthouses to a class of children deeply in need of the Court's protections. As one author has put it:

> It is difficult to imagine a more powerless group of people than foster children. They are largely unrepresented in the court proceedings that lead to their placements. Living without the protection of their parents, they are completely at the mercy of the persons who may also be responsible for maltreating them. They do not vote; they lack

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223 *See, e.g.*, Will v. Mich. Dep't of State Police, 491 U.S. 58, 90 (1989) ("equitable relief—even 'a remedy that might require the expenditure of state funds'—may be awarded to ensure future compliance by a State with a substantive federal question determination") (citing Papasan v. Allain, 478 U.S. 265, 282 (1986); Antrican v. Odom, 290 F.3d 178, 185 (4th Cir. 2002) ("simply because the implementation of such prospective relief would require the expenditure of substantial sums of money does not remove a claim from the *Ex Parte Young* exception").

the developmental ability to organize. Their voices, assuming they are old enough to speak, cannot be heard.\(^{225}\)

In addition to the inherent helplessness of foster children, many foster care systems in this country, Florida among them, are clearly not succeeding at the job of protecting children.\(^{226}\) According to a recent study, "national data on child abuse fatalities show that a child is more than twice as likely to die of abuse in foster care than in the general population."\(^{227}\) And because the number of children in foster care in this country has more than doubled since 1982 (to over half a million children), the rate of abuse in foster care has "increased dramatically over the last 30 years."\(^{228}\) The following passage depicts several of the major shortcomings of current foster care systems:

As foster care agencies scramble to find more homes for the influx of children, they cut corners and certify foster parents who should not be permitted to care for children. They place children with families who cannot meet their needs, and fail to supervise the children once they are placed in homes.

Other agency deficiencies include failure to recruit a broad range and higher number of foster placements, not having an accurate system for tracking past allegations of abuse and not hiring and training qualified workers who are able to screen homes and monitor children. As a result, some children are sent to live with abusive foster parents, and the abuse may continue unheeded by caseworkers whose caseloads are far too heavy.\(^{229}\)

The need for reform of child welfare agencies is evident. How to achieve successful reform, however, is a difficult question without an easy answer.\(^{230}\) What is known is that federal courts are the proper forum for attempting to do so.\(^{231}\) Filing a suit seeking redress and reform of a state foster care agency in state court, as opposed to federal court, has several

\(^{225}\) See Mushlin, supra note 126, at 214 (internal citations omitted).

\(^{226}\) See supra text accompanying notes 18-24.


\(^{228}\) Kubitschek, supra note 18, at 42.

\(^{229}\) Id. (internal citations omitted).

\(^{230}\) For a general discussion of past cases seeking to reform child welfare systems and the inconsistency among courts with respect to defining the legal rights of children in state custody, see Arlene E. Fried, The Foster Child's Avenue of Redress: Questions Left Unanswered, 26 COLUM. J. L. & SOC. PROBS. 465 (1993).

\(^{231}\) See Mushlin, supra note 126, at 256-58.
critical disadvantages. The palpable drawbacks of suing in state court combine with a substantial preference in foster care reform litigation to seek injunctive relief, as opposed to damages, to make federal courts the only appropriate forum.

One major disadvantage to bringing a suit such as Bonnie L. in state court is the barrier that can be imposed by the doctrine of sovereign immunity. In states recognizing the doctrine, foster children will be barred from bringing any state tort claim. Another disadvantage to suit in state court is the necessity of overcoming state laws that seal the records of foster children; every state has legislation that makes foster care records confidential. Although the purpose underlying these confidentiality laws is protection of the child’s privacy, the laws allow foster care agencies to evade accountability for their actions. In contrast, a civil rights suit filed in federal court avoids these obstacles. For one, sovereign immunity and other state law immunity claims would not apply to a claim brought against a state child welfare agency under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. In addition, confidentiality would not be a concern in a federal civil rights action because federal law would govern confidentiality and trump state privilege statutes. Federal courts’ liberal discovery rules would mandate disclosure of all records kept by the agency.

232 See, e.g., Kubitschek, supra note 18, at 42 (“Abused foster children . . . already have three strikes against them when they seek redress in state court: state immunity, no adults to sue on their behalf, and sealed records.”); Mushlin, supra note 126, at 256 (“[State courts] lack the institutional attributes necessary to overcome the bureaucratic and political obstacles to the achievement of a safe foster care system.”).
234 See Kubitschek, supra note 18, at 42; Mushlin, supra note 126, at 245-46; Karoline S. Homer, Note, Program Abuse and Foster Care: A Search for Solutions, 1 VA. J. SOC. POLY & L. 177, 218-19 (1993).
235 See Kubitschek, supra note 18, at 42
236 See id. at 42-43.
237 Howlett v. Rose, 496 U.S. 356, 376 (1990); see also Kubitschek, supra note 18, at 43.
238 See Kubitschek, supra note 18, at 46.
239 See id.
The federal system is also preferable to the state system in a case seeking institutional reform of a major state agency, such as child welfare, because the lifetime appointment of federal court judges insulates them from pressures that could adversely affect the attainment of effective reform.\textsuperscript{240} State court judges are elected officials and therefore subject to political pressure, and their "lack of electoral independence" can "dilute their ability to order and supervise reform of state institutions, such as the foster care system."\textsuperscript{241}

The other major component of the argument in favor of federal courts presiding over suits on behalf of foster children, such as \textit{Bonnie L.}, is the preference for injunctive relief over damages. The major drawback to a damage action is its inability to bring about systemic reform of failing systems on an institutional level.\textsuperscript{242} A damage action addresses the needs of a single child, and in so doing overlooks the "root causes" of the problem from a broader perspective, i.e. the inadequate funding, staffing, and monitoring of child welfare systems.\textsuperscript{243} One scholar has aptly described the ineffectiveness of damages actions in achieving system-wide foster care reform as follows:

Child welfare agencies often are inadequately funded, and as a result, violations of federal foster care law often are not caused by recalcitrance, but rather by limited resources. Although permanency planning is the undisputed goal of foster care, achieving a permanent plan for each child is a highly resource-intensive task. Under such conditions, the utility of a damages remedy as the linchpin of reform is questionable, since successful judgments simply diminish the already scarce resources of child welfare agencies. Agencies found liable for damages will be forced to concentrate their resources on remediying the particular problem that created the liability rather than on the more fundamental problems affecting the child welfare system. Finally, when faced with known funding limitations, judges often will be unwilling to compensate just one

\textsuperscript{240} See Mushlin, \textit{supra} note 126, at 256-57 ("Article III requirement of lifetime appointment for federal judges . . . largely insulates the federal judiciary from the political process, giving federal judges the level of independence needed to counter the majoritarian tendencies—expressed through elected officials—to tolerate a substandard system of foster care.") (internal citations omitted).

\textsuperscript{241} Id.

\textsuperscript{242} See Marcia Lowry, \textit{Derring-Do in the 1980s: Child Welfare Impact Litigation After the Warren Years}, 20 \textit{FAM. L.Q.} 255, 266-67 (1986) ("[T]here is a real question about whether [damage actions] have any real impact on an operating system. . . . [T]heir utility, beyond redressing the harm to a particular plaintiff, is questionable.").

\textsuperscript{243} See Mushlin, \textit{supra} note 126, at 250.
child when many others have been injured or will be injured in the future.\textsuperscript{244}

Damage actions allow courts to avoid dealing with the widespread deficiencies of child welfare systems, the deficiencies which cause harm to individual children within the system.

In light of the inadequacy of suits seeking damages, a federally enforceable injunction is a “more promising catalyst for foster care reform.”\textsuperscript{245} In particular, the “structural injunction” is the most appropriate remedy to bring about reform of troubled foster care systems.\textsuperscript{246} A structural injunction, by definition, “seeks to effectuate the reformation of policies or practices of an ongoing social institution.”\textsuperscript{247} It is “a court’s remedial tool to reform an entire state institution in order to bring it into compliance with the Constitution” and it “requires a judge to maintain an ongoing relationship with the institution as she supervises its reconstruction.”\textsuperscript{248} To improve failing child welfare systems and protect foster children from abuse and neglect, states must be forced, among other things, to appropriate more funding to embattled systems, provide better training to caseworkers and foster families, ensure closer monitoring of children placed in state custody, and decrease caseloads of caseworkers to guarantee adequate supervision. The structural injunction is the tool that can best accomplish these goals. It is the best way to proactively prevent harm, abuse, and neglect from occurring within the foster care system in the first place.\textsuperscript{249}

Federal courts must, therefore, take it upon themselves to fulfill the duty and jurisdiction bestowed upon them and to

\textsuperscript{244} Homer, supra note 234, at 217-18 (internal citations omitted); see also Lowry, supra note 242, at 267.
\textsuperscript{245} Homer, supra note 234, at 222.
\textsuperscript{246} See Preston, supra note 233, at 1706. Preston traces the introduction of the “structural injunction” to the injunction issued by the Supreme Court in 1955 in the case of Brown v. Board of Education, noting that “[t]hereafter, the Supreme Court began to uphold other forms of public law litigation aimed at remedying constitutional violations at various state funded institutions.” Id. at 1687.
\textsuperscript{247} Id. at 1688.
\textsuperscript{249} Mushlin, supra note 126, at 250.
protect the constitutional rights of foster children by hearing cases such as *Bonnie L*. In hiding behind a misguided interpretation of the Younger abstention doctrine, the Eleventh Circuit has passed this obligation to the state courts of Florida, a forum which is not equipped procedurally or practically to grant the relief required. The Eleventh Circuit, like the beleaguered Florida Department of Children and Families, has failed the foster children of Florida. The federal courts should be the greatest ally of these vulnerable children in making the state of Florida live up to its obligation to provide foster children with the protection and care they are entitled to and desperately need; instead the Eleventh Circuit has chosen to abandon them.

VI. CONCLUSION

Florida's Department of Children and Families is not alone in its failure to provide adequate care for children in its custody. In a recent audit of thirty-two states' foster care systems, in which each state system was measured against a national standard in seven categories, no state passed in more than two areas. The problems that state child welfare agencies face are no secret: insufficient resources, inadequate number of foster homes and facilities, improper training and support, high turnover of caseworkers, and unmanageably high caseloads. These problems have been around for decades and continue to persist today. And yet, the deplorable state of foster care seems to only capture the attention of politicians and the general public after the horrible, gruesome, preventable death of a child in foster care.

Children languishing in foster care need the protection of the courts. When the Eleventh Circuit abstained from adjudicating *Bonnie L. v. Bush*, it not only deserted Florida's foster children, it also set a dangerous precedent that could

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250 Meckler, *supra* note 23.

251 A recent example of this was the January 2003 death of Faheem Williams, a New Jersey child found starved, decomposed, and dead in a garbage bin in the basement of his Newark home, along with his two brothers who were alive but severely starved. The New Jersey system had closed its investigation of the Williams' home despite open allegations of abuse. See Michael Powell & Christine Haughney, *Kids in N.J.'s Care Missing; 110 in Abuse Cases Unaccounted For as Files Are Checked*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Jan. 11, 2003, at A8; Richard Wexler, *Don't Rush to Foster Care*, THE STAR-LEDGER, Jan. 12, 2003. The tragic death spurred the State of New Jersey to settle a class action suit filed against its Division of Youth and Family Services four years prior to Williams' death.
have a widespread effect on the half a million children in foster care in the United States today. The decision to abstain in *Bonnie L.* was improper. As this Note has attempted to show, the Younger abstention doctrine does not provide just cause for abstention in this case. The relief sought would not interfere with juvenile court dependency proceedings, and the plaintiff foster children cannot seek the relief they need and ought to be given in the state court forum. Moreover, federal courts have an obligation to vindicate federal constitutional violations. As Chief Justice Marshall put it in 1821, "[T]o decline the exercise of jurisdiction which is given . . . would be treason to the constitution."252 The Eleventh Circuit's affirmation of the District Court's decision not to hear this case and not to protect abused and neglected children in Florida and throughout the country was just that.

*Nora Meltzer*

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