



TEXANS CARE for CHILDREN

Improving Education Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care

October 30, 2012

Texas Senate Education Committee and Senate Criminal Justice Committee

Charge #7 Conduct a comprehensive review of school discipline practice. Specifically review and make recommendations on: The number of students in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) referred to juvenile or municipal courts, suspended, expelled, and placed in Disciplinary Alternative Programs (DAEP). Examine data-sharing practices between DFPS, TEA, and local education agencies and make recommendations to increase communication between schools and DFPS to increase educational outcomes for children in foster care.

Members, I am Ashley R. Harris with Texans Care for Children, a statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated exclusively to improving the lives of Texas children through policy change. We look to our broad base of community-based experts—our partners and 220 members throughout the state who together represent thousands of Texas children—to inform our work and help us in developing our legislative agenda. We also co-convene various stakeholder groups that bring together a wide range of organizations, families, and advocates around our areas of focus, which are: early opportunities; infant, child and maternal health; children’s mental health; child welfare; and juvenile justice.

As you examine the disciplinary outcomes of students in foster care and the data-sharing practices between DFPS, TEA, and local education agencies, Texans Care for Children urges the joint committee to include in its consideration the role that improved data collection and information-sharing between child serving agencies, and training has on academic success for all youth in foster care.

Each school district should indicate through PEIMS whether a child is a foster youth.

The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) is required by all school districts and includes student demographic and academic performance data. Currently, there is not a specific student demographic code for youth in foster care. The identification of this student population will allow for more appropriate and expedited education planning by each school and improve the sharing of data between DFPS and TEA, as required by the MOU signed in 2010.

Additional data elements should be consistently tracked in order to better understand how children are served in school systems.

To ensure child serving agencies and systems have a comprehensive picture of how schools are serving youth in foster care and barriers to their academic success, additional data elements should be tracked and shared with DFPS. Proposed additional data elements include, graduation rates, discipline outcomes, grade retention, school mobility, and enrollment. If tracked, these data points would provide a more accurate picture of the systematic barriers to success and opportunities for cross systems improvement.

Student-specific information should be collected and exchanged electronically between TEA, school districts, and DFPS to ensure the expedited school enrollment, transfer, withdrawal, and delivery of services.

Often, youth in foster care move frequently and their personal and education records are lost, delaying their school enrollment and appropriate class placement. All child serving agencies should develop ways to collect and share a child’s information electronically. DFPS utilizes the education portfolio, as mandated by SB 6 to collect personal and education related paperwork during a child’s time in foster care. If made available electronically, information could be updated more frequently and would ensure the expedited delivery of school services and supports to children and foster care.

Expand and strengthen the routine exchange of education related data between DFPS and TEA; including an in-depth analysis of results.

Per the MOU between DFPS and TEA signed in 2010, aggregate level data should be shared between DFPS and TEA. However, systematic and ongoing sharing of information is not occurring and the information gathered does not highlight trends, deficits, and areas of improvement. A detailed analysis that provides such information would support the development of valuable practice and policy improvements that remove barrier's to a child's success in the school environment. To ensure the information is being tracked, evaluated, and shared routinely, this information should also be made readily available to the public.

TEA should identify the assigned staff person within each school district who is responsible for assisting with the enrollment and transfer of foster youth.

With the passage of HB 826, school districts are now required to appoint a liaison to assist with the enrollment, withdrawal, and transfer of youth in foster care. To provide greater accountability that these liaisons are indeed in place across the state and to allow TEA to provide training and support, a list of those appointed to this position should be accessible to the public and made available on the TEA website.

Expand trauma-informed training to all school personnel

Trauma-informed care has been recognized as a best practice for addressing the social and emotional needs of those in foster care and promoting improved outcomes for children impacted by abuse and neglect. Child maltreatment and acts of violence may impact a child's ability to appropriately respond, learn and interact with others in the school environment.ⁱ STAR Health has provided trauma informed training across the state of Texas to CPS caseworkers, caregivers, and providers. Expansion of this training in the school setting will ensure school staff have the tools needed to respond appropriately to students impacted by trauma and ensure their educational, social and emotional needs are met; ultimately, improving a child's learning and overall performance in the school environment.

Promote school-wide implementation of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SW-PBIS)

Children in foster care experience higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems than their peersⁱⁱ. Although these behaviors are many times a direct result of trauma and experiences in foster care, these behaviors can lead to disciplinary outcomes that do not support a child's stability and academic achievement in the school setting. SW-PBIS is the recommended intervention for dealing with challenging behavior in children with emotional disturbances and other behavioral needs. SW-PBIS is not a curriculum, intervention, or practice, but an approach schools can use to coordinate effective strategies and interventions targeting student behavior into an integrated manner that improves outcomes for all students.

Thank you for your time and commitment and ensuring all children in foster care have the opportunity to succeed. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,
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ⁱ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2010). *Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Affect Young Children's Learning and Development: Working Paper No. 9*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

ⁱⁱ Smithgall, C., Jarpe-Ratner, E., & Walker, L. (2010). *Looking Back, Moving Forward: Using Integrated Assessments to Examine the Educational Experiences of Children Entering Foster Care*. Available at: http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Looking_Back_Moving_Forward_111810.pdf