

## Next Steps: Improving Educational Outcomes for System-Involved Students in Philadelphia

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**The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) PolicyLab’s latest report** tells us that one in five Philadelphia high school students (and 17% district-wide) are involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice system. And these children are in educational crisis: they fall far below their peers academically; are more likely to be eligible for special education services; experience higher rates of absenteeism and lower rates of grade promotion and credit accumulation.<sup>1</sup> They are at high risk of dropping out. The Report’s findings are not unique: they reflect similar trends discovered in other cities and states where researchers have examined the educational outcomes of children in dependency or delinquency system. See *e.g.*, the National Fact Sheet on Educational Outcomes of Youth in Foster Care released by National Working Group for Foster Care & Education in January 2014.<sup>2</sup>

So the question is – how can we respond? How can we use these important findings to drive effective systemic reform, inform legislative change and develop policies and practices to support the educational success of these children and youth? A few suggestions:

***Provide school-based Education Liaisons to meet the needs of students.*** The Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) has already undertaken this important effort by placing social workers in targeted schools and agreeing to add 27 more liaisons across the City. Education Liaisons have been proven to improve the lives of students by linking them to school services and opportunities, advocating on their behalf and supporting their connection and transition to school. In other cities, liaisons assist in developing a graduation plan to ensure that students are able to graduate on time.

***Strategically locate additional resources, programs and interventions in schools with higher percentages of system-involved youth.*** We now know that nearly half of neighborhood high schools

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<sup>1</sup> The full report, *Supporting the Needs of Students Involved with the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice System in the School District of Philadelphia* is available at [http://policylab.chop.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/PolicyLab\\_Report\\_Supporting\\_Students\\_Involved\\_with\\_Child\\_Welfare\\_June\\_2014.pdf](http://policylab.chop.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/PolicyLab_Report_Supporting_Students_Involved_with_Child_Welfare_June_2014.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> National Fact Sheet available at [http://www.cacollegepathways.org/sites/default/files/datasheet\\_jan\\_2014\\_update.pdf](http://www.cacollegepathways.org/sites/default/files/datasheet_jan_2014_update.pdf)

have over 100 students and/or 20% of students who have been involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice system. These schools need additional remedial resources, credit recovery and truancy prevention programs, guidance counselors etc. to meet the needs of students.

**Expand access to the full range of school placement options.** According to the report, system-involved students predominantly attend comprehensive district-run schools and alternative education schools. They are less likely to be enrolled in special admission, citywide, or charter schools than their non-system involved peers. Comprehensive and alternative schools educate nearly 75% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders ever involved with DHS. To ensure that these highly-mobile students have access to the full range of placement options, we need to ensure that caregivers/students are fully apprised of all opportunities and receive targeted support to access to schools with special admission requirements and programs provided by the District.

**Revise or adopt new district-wide policies to address the specific needs of these students.** The report makes clear that system-involved youth are more likely to be absent, have significant special education needs and earn fewer credits than their non-system involved peers. Some school districts, e.g., Cincinnati Public Schools (“Kids in School Rule” project) changed district policies to address specific barriers. Here are some examples of policies adopted to better support children in foster care:

- Adopting an “immediate enrollment” protocol to ensure students do not miss instruction time
- Using a trauma-informed consultation program for teachers
- Providing automatic school fee waivers & ensuring access to at least one extra-curricular
- Assigning peer and/or teacher mentors to students
- Providing advocacy to prevent or minimize absence due to school discipline
- Adopting policies to develop graduation plans, waive district-required credits, test students to assess mastery of subject matter.

**Reduce absenteeism and improve academic performance by ensuring that students remain in the same school as often as possible.** It is estimated that students lose between 4-6 months of academic progress with every school move.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, remaining in the same school is linked to higher graduation rates and improved academic performance. Accordingly, district-wide policies should support “school stability.”

**Enhance supportive services and programs, including access to accelerated programs.** Identify and provide positive interventions and supports to strengthen academic achievement and promote positive, pro-social behaviors. Supplemental educational resources include one-on-one tutoring, counseling, truancy prevention, on-line credit recovery programs, vocational assessment testing etc.

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<sup>3</sup> Kerbow, D. (1996). Patterns of urban school mobility and local school reform. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At-Risk*, 1, 147-169.

***Secure special education services for eligible students and ensure access to an appropriate education that includes needed accommodations, supports and interventions.*** Create a collaborative structure to coordinate the delivery of special education services. This includes ensuring that representatives of child welfare and/or juvenile justice participate in IEP meetings or work in partnership with the Team, engaging in regular meetings or conference calls to discuss a youth's educational progress and employing a coordinated approach to address physical, mental, and behavioral health issues as well as transition planning for youth beginning at age 14 and supporting, training and engaging caregivers.

***Create an Infrastructure for Data Sharing and Program Evaluation.*** Identify, develop and implement methods for “real time” data and information sharing among the partnering agencies, including the School District of Philadelphia and DHS. Both program and individual student outcomes should be measured and tracked to establish baseline measures of education outcomes and to monitor progress and assess the effectiveness of new approaches and interventions.

CONTACT:

Maura McInerney  
Education Law Center  
215-238-6970 ext. 316  
mmcinerney@elc-pa.org