

The Department of Human Services' Education Support Center: A Public/Private Partnership

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One of the population groups most at risk of dropping out of high school in Philadelphia—and throughout the country—is children who have been involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. A third of the young people who drop out of school in Philadelphia are or have been involved with the Department of Human Services (DHS) via foster care or delinquent placement.

Approximately 70 percent of students who have a substantiated case of abuse or neglect during the high school years and 75 percent who have a foster care placement never finish high school (Neild and Balfanz 2006). Moreover, close to 90 percent of students who have a juvenile justice placement during their high school years ultimately drop out.

Over the past decade, various groups representing the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, the child advocacy community, the philanthropic sector, youth development organizations, and coalitions working to

develop and sustain multiple pathways to graduation have developed initiatives and policy proposals to address some of the educational needs of this population. With a new city administration in place in November 2007, and key leadership appointments made by incoming Mayor Michael Nutter, many of these efforts were aligned to support the Mayor's goal of cutting the city's high school dropout rate in half and doubling the college graduation rate. Three of the Mayor's leadership appointments—Chief Education Officer Lori Shorr, DHS Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose, and DHS Deputy Commissioner Cynthia Figueroa—were critical to the inception and development of cross-systems and public/private partnerships that resulted in the implementation of an Education Support Center at DHS.

This ground-breaking public/private effort in Philadelphia to support the educational stability and outcomes of children in DHS care is the first time that the child welfare system, the School District of Philadelphia, Juvenile Court, the child advocacy community, the philanthropic sector and other city systems have joined forces with a clear educational goal: to increase the educational stability and high school and college graduation rates for children involved with DHS. Policy-makers at DHS have agreed for some time that the agency needed an education team to spearhead a massive effort like this one. However, for a variety of reasons that included limited resources, unsuccessful partnership development, and a vacuum in

leadership focused on this issue, the effort to start up and operationalize a DHS Education Support Center did not get any traction. Not until recently, under the auspices of Project U-Turn—a citywide campaign to focus public attention on Philadelphia’s dropout crisis and to design strategies and leverage investments to resolve it—did the campaign’s advocacy efforts and committed city leadership align themselves to make a DHS education office a reality.

In order to effectively develop and implement the DHS Education Support Center, the Mayor’s Office of Education and DHS recognized the need to research other models throughout the country and develop one that would work in Philadelphia and that would involve partnership commitments from the School District, Family Court, Behavioral Health, and other key public and private organizations. They successfully applied for a senior policy fellow from the Stoneleigh Center, a local foundation focused on supporting policy fellowships designed to integrate research, policy and practice to impact systems change. The policy fellow, Liza M. Rodriguez, was charged with conducting the research, developing key partnerships, designing a DHS Education Support Center model, and, given the city’s financial crisis, identifying potential private funding sources to support the first two years of implementation.

Rodriguez completed the project in one year, and the implementation of the DHS Education Support Center

began in November 2009 with her appointment by Ambrose and Figueroa as the new Director for the Center. In the same month, DHS applied for a grant from the William Penn Foundation to support staffing the Center for the first two years of operations. Funding was approved by the foundation's Board in February, and four DHS Education Liaisons were hired in April 2010.

The relatively quick process for developing and implementing a DHS Education Support Center was only possible because of the public/private partnerships that advocated for its development, supported the planning through a policy fellow, and ultimately provided seed money for the first two years of operation. This public/private partnership alignment included the Mayor's Office of Education, DHS, Family Court, School District of Philadelphia, Department of Behavioral Health, Project U-Turn Collaborative, the Stoneleigh Center, and the William Penn Foundation. Without the public/private alignment along the goal of increasing the educational stability and high school graduation rates for some of the most at-risk children in the city, the effort might have remained a concept paper in policy circles.

The DHS Education Support Center is an adaptation of the Education Liaison model utilized in New York City (Advocates for Children 2005) and the State of California (Weinberg, Zetlin, and Shea 2004; Weinberg et al. 2007) to bridge the communication and service gaps that exist between the child welfare and educational systems. The

goal of the DHS Education Support Center is to substantially increase the educational stability and high school graduation rates of children in DHS care. The strategies utilized to reach this goal are the following:

1. Strengthen the tracking of educational indicators for children in DHS care in order to identify early warning signals of educational challenges or failure and coordinate communication and planning among children's service providers and school staff to ensure that appropriate interventions are in place.
2. Provide individual and group consultation to child welfare case workers, School District staff, and resource families to remove educational barriers faced by children in DHS care.
3. Facilitate the integration of educational well-being considerations into every aspect of child welfare practice.
4. Inform the integration of educational stability and well-being considerations and data into DHS-funded community-based programs.
5. Develop inter-agency communication and practice protocols between DHS, School District of Philadelphia, and other public and non-public schools to cultivate and institutionalize collaborative approaches to serving the educational needs of children and youth involved with DHS.

As of this writing, the DHS Education Support Center has trained over 300 DHS child welfare practitioners on the

educational stability needs of children in DHS care, new federal and state legislation[1] requiring that child welfare agencies throughout the country make significant efforts to improve the educational stability and continuity of children in care, and the role and functions of the Education Support Center. Moreover, the Center has presented to over 250 counselors in the School District of Philadelphia on the same topic. By the end of May, the Center will have trained over 500 child welfare practitioners and 300 School District counselors. The goal is to have as many child welfare and school practitioners trained before the beginning of the 2010-11 school year.

While the training focus is on the specific educational stability needs of children involved with DHS, this massive outreach to child welfare and school practitioners over the spring and summer months is also part of a larger strategy to engage practitioners from two large city systems in shared communication and service coordination protocols that will ultimately have a positive impact on the school stability and achievement of children involved with DHS.

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Note

[1]Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (federal) and Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children and Youth, State Bulletin on the Educational Stability and Continuity for Children in Substitute Care (Bulleting #3130-08-01).