***“Education is a huge component of a child's overall well-being and future success in life, yet child welfare systems and public school systems often work separately, despite sharing a common goal.***

Dr. Johnny Veselka, Executive Director, Texas Association ofSchool Administrators and Education Committee Member

On May 20, 2010, the Supreme Court of Texas signed the *Order Establishing Education Committee of Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families.* This order created state level collaboration by bringing together judges, child welfare and education leaders. The membership of the Education Committee includes three judges as well the Commissioners of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Executive Directors of the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB), the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA), and Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). The Honorable Patricia Macias, Children’s Commissioner and presiding judge of the 388th District Court in El Paso, was named chair of the Committee by the Supreme Court.

**Moving the Collaboration Forward and Maintaining the Momentum**

As the Education Committee closes this chapter, it looks forward to making sure that the rest of the book is written and the children in Texas care have the opportunity to realize their educational potential and dreams.

Unprecedented in Texas, the idea of a high-level Education Committee began with a group of judges and child welfare stakeholders and resulted in the highest court in Texas rendering an order to create it. At the time the order was signed, many hoped the seeds of collaboration would be planted. Almost two years later, not only were the seeds planted, but they were nurtured enough to grow into a robust collaboration, that, with continued support and maintenance, will remain a strong, long-term partnership among systems committed to improving the well-being outcomes of children in and from foster care.

For the children and youth in foster care each year in Texas, educational success can be a positive counterweight to abuse, neglect, separation, and lack of permanency. Positive school experiences enhance their well-being, help them make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase their chances for economic self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, the educational outcomes of most children in foster care in the United States are poor and Texas students are no exception. Fortunately, through judicial leadership and collaboration, Texas has decided to focus on this important issue and improve the educational outcomes of children in foster care.

***Texas Responds and Creates A Judicially Led, High Level Education Committee Looking to Improve a Broad Spectrum of Education Issues***

***Texas Education Committee Focuses on Child Well-Being to Improve Educational Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care***

The state’s geography and diverse population created an opportunity to structure an inclusive and well-represented collaborative. Subcommittee members representing the court, education and child welfare systems were identified from throughout the state with particular attention to diversity and areas of expertise. The result was a collective of over 100 individuals on four subcommittees: 1) School Readiness; 2) School Stability and Transitions; 3) School Experience, Supports, and Advocacy; and 4) Post-secondary Education. Each subcommittee was co-chaired by representatives from the court, education and child welfare systems and included judges, child welfare professionals, state education agency staff, CASA, foster parents, child placing agencies, early childhood intervention, Head Start, school boards, advocacy organizations, attorneys, former foster youth, teachers, school counselors, two and four year universities, youth services and children’s shelter staff. With facilitation and consultation from the ABA and Casey Family Programs, each subcommittee established an action plan and set benchmarks to ensure it completed the charged tasks in a timely manner.

***Supreme Court Charge and Guiding Principles Lay Groundwork for Education Committee***

Once established, the Education Committee met frequently in person, by webinar and conference calls over an 18-month period. At its inaugural meeting in September 2010, the Committee established its guiding principles, modeled after the *Blueprint for Change – Education Success for Children in Foster Care (2008)*, a guide produced by the American Bar Association’s Legal Center for Foster Care and Education (“ABA”), in partnership with Casey Family Programs.

***Subcommittee Structure Reflects the Texas Spirit of Collaboration***

***“Each stakeholder entity and individual who touches the life of a child in foster care is accountable.”***

The Honorable Patricia Macias, Education Committee Chair and Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families Member

The Education Committee developed general recommendations as well as specific recommendations based on the issues considered by the four subcommittees.

**School Readiness**

1. Improve access to Early Head Start and Head Start
2. Increase access of child care slots to additional populations of children involved with the foster care system
3. Enhance knowledge of the child assessment process for young children

**School Stability and Transitions Subcommittee**

1. Expand options and use of transportation to keep children in their school of origin, when in their best interest
2. Improve decisions regarding keeping children in their school of origin
3. Increase foster care capacity in school districts
4. Implement and support House Bill 826 ISD liaisons in school districts
5. Support timely enrollment when children initially enroll or change school placements
6. Improve timeliness and efficiency of transfer of accurate school records to new school placements

**School Experience, Supports and Advocacy**

1. Improve education decision making
2. Promote and improve the quality of education advocacy
3. Better coordinate child welfare and school evaluations and assessments
4. Connect more youth in care with school services and supports
5. Address over and underrepresentation in Special Education
6. Improve school experience of children and youth enrolled in charter schools
7. Lessen frequency and severity of school discipline actions

**Post-Secondary Education**

1. Increase readiness for and access to post-secondary education
2. Increase retention in and completion of post-secondary education
3. Support post-secondary education success and employment

**ISSUE-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS**

**GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Improve educational outcomes of children in foster care by utilizing existing resources
2. Identify and recommend judicial practices to help achieve better educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care
3. Identify multi-disciplinary training needs regarding education outcomes, including for the judiciary and for attorneys who represent DFPS, children and parents
4. Improve exchange and sharing of education-related data
5. Develop a collaborative model to continue systemic improvement of educational outcomes

**Recommendations of the Education Committee**

Special thanks to Casey Family Programs ([www.casey.org](http://www.casey.org)) and the ABA Legal Center for Foster Care and Education ([www.abanet.org/child/education](http://www.abanet.org/child/education)) for invaluable technical assistance to this project.

For a copy of ***The Texas Blueprint: Transforming Education Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster Care***, please see the Children's Commission website at [www.supreme.courts.state.tx.us/children/index.html](http://www.supreme.courts.state.tx.us/children/index.html) or contact Mari Aaron at Mari.Aaron@txcourts.gov.

***“The recommendations from the Educational Committee will change the educational experience of a child or youth in foster care by providing them with support and advocacy in every stage of service. They ensure that the child or youth is heard and that supportive networks are in place for ensuring they are prepared for higher education. It encourages children/or youth to aim high and become self-advocates knowing that there is a continuum of resources available to them.”***

April McWilliams, Child Protective Services Youth Specialist and former foster youth

**Next Steps**

The Committee’s report provides Texas with a comprehensive blueprint for improving the academic achievement of children in foster care. With the blueprint in hand, Committee members will now work together to ensure:

* an implementation plan is developed and progress is monitored and assessed under the auspices of the Commission;
* educators, child welfare workers and members of the judiciary are aware of the unique needs of students in foster care and how best to meet those needs;
* the right tools and cross system training are developed and made available; and
* broad-based attention is given to the problems students in foster care face by supporting a statewide education summit.

A caption is a sentence describing a picture or graphic.