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# Court-based Education Efforts for Children in Foster Care

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PIMA COUNTY JUVENILE COURT (ARIZONA)







This chronicle was researched and written by Kim Taitano, Permanency Planning for Children Department, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, with support from Casey Family Programs. Special thanks to Sharon Dobbin for her assistance and for conducting the focus groups. Other contributors included Sophia Gatowski, Kristen Rudlang-Perman, Dennis Ichikawa, Susan Smith, Susan A. Weiss, and Trisha Matthieu.

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## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PIMA COUNTY JUVENILE COURT (ARIZONA)

Courts play a unique and necessary role in helping to improve educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care. Leadership provided by the courts in guiding change efforts, in building and communicating a shared vision for reform, and in marshaling resources is vital to creating and implementing sustained systems change.

An example of one jurisdiction exercising this leadership to bring education issues to the forefront is the Pima County Juvenile Court based in Tucson, Arizona. As a participant in the NCJFCJ Model Courts Project,<sup>1</sup> Pima County began to understand the issue, recognized the role it could have in advancing change, and formed a committee to take action. In four years, the county went from simply having an interest in improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care to making real improvements in courtroom policy and practice.

This document chronicles these education reform efforts and offers some suggestions to other jurisdictions that want to design and implement their own reform initiatives. Specifically, this document:

- Outlines the need to focus on the education of children and youth in foster care
- Provides an overview of the Pima County Juvenile Court
- Describes the education reform efforts in Pima County
- Discusses the impact of these efforts on court practice
- Offers implementation lessons learned and strategies for success
- Identifies next steps and a vision for future reform efforts in Pima County

### THE CHRONICLING METHOD

The Pima County Juvenile Court participates in the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' (NCJFCJ) national Model Courts Project. Because of this, the NCJFCJ has obtained a wealth of practice and policy materials regarding systems change efforts in Pima County. To develop this chronicle, NCJFCJ reviewed these materials with specific attention to their education reform initiatives.

Individuals who participated in the reform efforts (including, local judicial officers, committee chairs, caseworkers, education specialists, and a state-level child welfare specialist) were interviewed by NCJFCJ about a wide variety of topics for this project:

- The history of the court's focus on addressing the educational needs of foster care
- The first initiative or project undertaken in this effort
- Relevant initiatives implemented within the last year
- Steps taken and key stakeholders involved to implement these initiatives
- Roadblocks encountered and strategies used to overcome these obstacles
- How initiatives were evaluated to determine their effectiveness
- Lessons learned that could be shared with other jurisdictions
- The future vision regarding educational outcomes for Pima County's children and youth in foster care

In addition, Casey Family Programs conducted focus groups in December 2006 with Pima County youth in foster care and one alumnus of care, foster parents, and case managers, to solicit input on their experiences as to how the educational needs of children and youth in foster care are being addressed in Pima County.

The practice and policy review, as well as the interviews and focus groups, helped to develop a rich understanding of Pima County's education initiatives. Together they provide critical information about the evolution of the education reform initiatives and lessons learned about engaging in this systems change effort.

Finally, a preliminary review of Juvenile Court records was undertaken by NCJFCJ as part of this chronicling effort to ascertain whether Pima County's focused efforts on the educational needs of children and youth are reflected in court practice (e.g., judicial orders, reports to the court, motions, etc.).

## Overview of the Problem

Positive and appropriate educational experiences play an important role in the successful transition to adulthood. Children and youth in foster care often lack successful transitions due in part to an unstable educational experience.<sup>2</sup> Numerous studies indicate that children in foster care are often less likely to experience a successful outcome in education than the general population. The negative outcomes for children in foster care are seen in higher rates of grade retention, truancy, and dropping out, as well as multiple school changes and the failure by school officials to identify special needs in a timely manner. Several studies illustrate these outcomes:

- In a three-state study by Chapin Hall of youth aging out of foster care, over a third reported having experienced five or more school changes.<sup>3</sup>
- A 1996 study of students in Chicago Public Schools found that students who had changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of educational growth by their sixth year.<sup>4</sup>
- A 2001 Washington State study found that twice as many youth in foster care at both the elementary and secondary levels repeated a grade compared to youth not in care.<sup>5</sup>
- Numerous studies report that anywhere from 23–47% of children and youth in out-of-home care receive special education services at some time in their schooling.<sup>6</sup>
- In the Chapin Hall study of Chicago Public Schools, 15-year-old students in out-of-home care were only about half as likely to have graduated from high school five years later, with a significantly higher percentage of youth in care having dropped out.<sup>7</sup>

Several factors<sup>8</sup> contribute to these negative outcomes:

- Numerous placement changes, which often result in school changes
- Unclear lines of responsibility and accountability for educational outcomes
- Lack of coordination between child welfare agencies, schools, and other service providers
- Lack of a consistent and knowledgeable education advocate

School changes have been identified as a risk factor for low-income children as these changes increase the discontinuity in their education and create a negative impact on learning. Additionally, school changes adversely affect children's social circles, as reflected by their peer-to-peer relationships and relationships with teachers.<sup>9</sup>

These statistics translate into real-life problems for the most vulnerable youth being served by the child welfare agencies and juvenile courts. Those exiting the foster care system have an increased risk of becoming homeless, experiencing mental and physical health problems, incarceration, pregnancy, drug use, and unemployment.<sup>10</sup>

Unless significant changes are made for our nation's youth in foster care, this population will continue to have substandard educational experiences and lack the opportunity to reach their full potential.

#### **JUDGES AND OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS AGREE THAT EDUCATION IS AN IMPORTANT AND CHALLENGING ISSUE TO ADDRESS**

During July 2006, Casey Family Programs partnered with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) to conduct a national survey of dependency court judges, key stakeholders involved in dependency cases, and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs). The intent of the survey was to identify current barriers or challenges to meeting the educational needs of children and youth in foster care and—ultimately—to inform improvements in practice, policy, and/or procedure. A total of 169 judges, 65 key stakeholders, and 1,117 CASAs completed the survey. There was widespread agreement by all respondents that judges have a role in ensuring that the educational needs of youth in care are met.

In particular, the following issues were noted:

- **School placement stability is a significant concern.** Over half of the survey respondents reported that movement of a child from one foster home/placement to another results in a school change at least 40% of the time. The transfer of records and paperwork was cited as the number one barrier to timely school enrollment.
- **Special education services are often lacking.** The court does not always address issues of special education on a regular basis. Discussion around the development and adherence to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) occurred less than 40% of the time in cases where it was necessary, according to key stakeholders and CASAs.
- **Children do not always have educational advocates in court.** Less than half of the respondents reported that children always have an educational advocate in the courtroom when they need one.

Despite the importance placed on education, however, limited resources and competing challenges often make it difficult to thoroughly address this issue in the courtroom. The majority of respondents cited time constraints and high caseloads as the dominant barriers to addressing issues of education in the courtroom. Other barriers identified by judges included caseworkers who are unprepared or not knowledgeable about educational issues, a lack of information from or involvement of the school, and infrequency of court hearings.

## PIMA COUNTY JUVENILE COURT—AT A GLANCE

Pima County is the second most populous county in Arizona and includes the city of Tucson, where the Pima County Juvenile Court is based.

### Judicial Officers

- The Presiding Judge maintains a caseload and manages the Juvenile Court with the assistance of the Court Administrator.
- Five judges and six judges pro tempore/commissioners rotate through the Juvenile Court with a three-year minimum commitment.

### Jurisdiction

- The Court has exclusive jurisdiction over all dependency matters, severances, and adoptions, as well as all children under the age of 18 who are referred to the court due to mental health issues, incorrigibility, or delinquency.
- On December 31, 2005, there were 3,068 abused and neglected children under the jurisdiction of the court (a 7.6% increase from 2004). In 2005, a total of 985 new abuse and neglect petitions were filed, with the average dependency caseload for the year at 143 cases.
- In 2005, permanency was achieved for 38.5% of children under the court's jurisdiction by reunification (19.1%), adoption (11.5%), relative placement (2.5%), legal guardian placement (4.8%), and other planned permanent living arrangement (0.7%).

## Pima County's Road Map to Education Reform

### THE COMMITTEE TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR COURT-INVOLVED YOUTH

Pima County's road map to education reform began in January 2003 when the Juvenile Court established the Committee to Improve Educational Outcomes for Court-Involved Youth as a subcommittee of the Dependency Model Court. The goal of this committee was to explore ways in which educational outcomes for youth in foster care could be improved. Its inception was the result of the vision of Cathleen Fitzgerald, CASA Coordinator and Community Volunteer, and Sharon Dobbin, Education Specialist at Casey Family Programs. The 12 original members of the committee included representatives from child protective services (CPS), Casey Family Programs, the Juvenile Court Dependency Unit, CASA, several school districts, the Attorney General's office, and Judge Suzanna Cuneo.

At the onset, the committee focused on accessing existing resources through Casey Family Programs and TeamChild in Washington State to both field test a new Judicial Education Checklist<sup>11</sup> and to organize a juvenile court-based training aimed at increasing the awareness of educational issues faced by children in foster care. Table 1 describes the projects that were identified at this training that became the focus for the committee's work in 2003–2005.

**TABLE 1. LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR REFORM: INITIAL PROJECTS (2003–2005)**

<b>Project</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Solution</b>
<b>Minute Entry Order</b>	Reluctance of schools to share educational records with CPS case managers due to confidentiality laws.	Pima County resolved the issue and the delay in enrolling children in school, by creating a separate Minute Entry Form that is signed by the judge at the time of the preliminary protective hearing (PPH), allowing CPS to access school records without prior consent of a parent or guardian or the involvement of a surrogate parent. Achieved in 2005 and implemented statewide. <sup>12</sup>
<b>Judicial Education Checklist</b>	Education was not being addressed in court or in other areas of foster youths' lives (e.g., case manager reports).	Identified and incorporated education-specific questions from <i>Asking the Right Questions: A Judicial Checklist to Ensure that the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care Are Being Addressed</i> into the PPH process. <sup>13</sup> Achieved in 2004.
<b>Tutor List</b>	Children and youth in foster care are behind academically and are not getting enrichment at school. Money is available for tutoring but finding a tutor is extremely difficult.	Developed a tutor list. This is currently being incorporated into a Pima County Education Resource Guide (developed in 2005).
<b>Address Surrogate Parent Issues</b>	Children and youth in foster care were not getting special education services due to insufficient numbers of surrogates and confusion regarding surrogate law.	Formed a subcommittee in early 2004 to work on issues such as expanding the distribution list for surrogate parent orders to include the surrogate, identifying and creating a list of available and trained surrogate parents, and organizing and implementing a training for court staff. Achieved. The training for court staff was held in 2005.

**EXPANDING THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

In February 2005, the Education Committee expanded into a court-wide committee to be inclusive of all court-involved minors. The committee’s membership grew to 37 and included representatives from 6 school districts in Pima County, Pima Community College, Pima County Superintendents Office, CPS, CASA, juvenile probation, juvenile detention, group care facilities, the public defender, contract attorneys, the county attorney, the Attorney General’s office, and all areas of juvenile court. The committee’s overall goal became *to reach a time when every court-involved minor would be assured of the development and implementation of a specific educational plan designed for the needs of that particular minor*. The committee identified the following issues as key components to address in 2005:

- Providing court-wide training on educational advocacy, special education issues, and the Judicial Education Checklist
- Increasing collaborative efforts between CPS, probation, and the schools, including alternative schools, Pima Community College, and trade schools

Table 2 includes the specific projects undertaken by the court-wide committee in 2005–2006.

**TABLE 2. MOVING IMPLEMENTATION FORWARD: COURT-WIDE PROJECTS (2005-2006)**

<b>Project</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Solution</b>
<b>Education Advocacy Manual</b>	Lack of education advocates for children and youth in foster care.  Those involved in the lives of foster youth not trained in education issues and have few resources.	Finalized in 2005. Trainings on the manual are being scheduled for CPS, probation, attorneys, and court staff (in early 2006).
<b>Collaborative Trainings</b>	Lack of knowledge of education issues and outcomes for youth in out-of-home care.	Implemented collaborative trainings such as homeless assistance, surrogate parent, special education advocacy, and the McKinney-Vento Act. <sup>14</sup>
<b>Career Day</b>	Very few youth leaving high school and going on to postsecondary education. Lack of exposure to and knowledge of postsecondary education.	Organized and held a Career Day in Spring 2006 <sup>15</sup> for court-involved youth in conjunction with Pima Community College.
<b>Court Management Presentation</b>	All systems working with court-involved youth have a need for educational advocacy assistance.	Made a presentation to the Presiding Judge and court management by CASA to offer educational advocacy assistance to CPS workers and probation officers on difficult cases.
<b>Educational Advocacy Services for All Court-involved Youth</b>	Lack of education advocates for court-involved youth. Lack of parental involvement and knowledge regarding education issues. Youth not meeting the conditions of probation—attending school. Probation officers and case managers lack the time and resources needed to do intensive education work.	A group of CASA volunteers created a proposal to incorporate educational advocacy services for all court-involved youth into the formal court process. (Began in 2003.) Through a collaborative effort with key stakeholders, space was made available in the courtroom along with access to computers and phones for educational consultants increasing their visibility and accessibility. (January 2006). In the first six months, education consultants responded to 52 requests covering topics such as the McKinney-Vento Act, tutoring, special education, enrollment, expulsion, and GED.
<b>Pilot Project with Detention</b>	Part of the need for educational advocacy services stated above.	Began implementation of a pilot project with Detention and an identified group home in order to collaborate in developing behavioral plans for youth in detention aimed at reducing the “revolving door.”
<b>Surrogate Parents Expansion</b>	Continued shortage of surrogate parents.	Through a collaborative effort with Tucson Unified School District, the Surrogate Parent Trainer, local CASA program, and local service providers, the list of available surrogate parents expanded from 60 to 120 volunteers. In addition, the subcommittee (described above) created a protocol for surrogate parent procedures.
<b>Report Reformatting</b>	Education addressed only briefly (if at all) in the section titled “Children’s Placement.” Unable to identify school moves that have occurred for individuals.	Reformatted the child welfare agency reports to the court to include specific sections on the educational experience of youth.
<b>Tip Sheet</b>	Complicated education laws.  Lack of ongoing training in education for new case managers.	Created an education case plan and “education planning for children in CPS Care” tip sheet.

## The Impact of Pima County's Efforts on Court Practice

The impact of Pima County's educational reform initiatives has not yet been fully and comprehensively evaluated, and currently there is no data tracking system in place. However, a preliminary review of Juvenile Court records was undertaken by NCJFCJ as part of this chronicling effort and to provide a measure of the degree to which court practice is focused on educational needs and outcomes (e.g., through judicial orders, reports to the court, motions, etc.). In addition, Casey Family Programs conducted focus groups with Pima County youth in foster care, foster parents, and case managers to solicit input on their experiences of how the educational needs of children and youth in foster care are being addressed in Pima County.

### CASE RECORD REVIEWS

A review of 30 randomly selected court files and accompanying social service agency exhibits determined that:

- Education issues are addressed as part of routine court practice in Pima County, regardless of whether there is an identified educational issue in the case. This occurs as early as the first hearing after removal and petition filing. The judge specifically addressed the educational needs of the child at the PPH in the majority of cases reviewed (92%; n=28).
- At the PPH, judges were directly inquiring about provision of school supplies, change in placement and change in school, the mental health needs of the children and how these might affect school progress and achievement, and concerns about the division of educational responsibilities.
- Judicial minute orders, caseworker reports, and CASA and Foster Care Review reports typically addressed the categories of information suggested in the Judicial Education Checklist (e.g., enrollment, attendance, transportation, supplies, performance, change in placement/change in school, health factors affecting education, extracurricular activities, and talents).
- By the adjudication stage of proceedings, education issues were being resolved. School records were obtained in 35% of the cases for which they were previously unavailable (n=11), children were enrolled in school in 35% of the cases where they had previously not been enrolled (n=11), and educational assessments or evaluations were obtained in 23% of the cases (n=7).
- Overall, by the permanency hearing stage, 82% of the cases coded (n=25) had seen progress or resolution on educational issues identified at earlier stages of the proceedings.

For more detailed information about this study of Pima County's educational reform efforts, including method used, please see the report available online at [www.ncjfcj.org](http://www.ncjfcj.org).

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus groups were conducted with 7 Pima County youth in foster care and 1 alumnus, 7 foster parents, and 13 case managers. The results of the focus groups indicate both that improvements have been made and that there is still work to be done.

Steps towards improvements include more education trainings being available for foster parents and case managers, several youth and some parents being asked consistently about education issues by judges, some case managers recognizing the Judicial Education Checklist as being used in court, and the availability of education consultants to help case managers.

Recommendations for improvements by youth included more tutoring help, support in getting appropriate classes, opportunities to learn study skills, transportation, and the ability to participate in extracurricular activities. Other potential reform efforts based on focus group comments might include more youth and parents attending and participating in hearings and Foster Care Review Board reviews and viewing court reports, required education training for foster parents and case managers, and a more evident use of the Judicial Education Checklist, including having case managers use it to write the education area of court reports.

## Lessons Learned: Implementation Elements and Strategies to Success

Pima County stakeholders found the following issues critical to consider when implementing initiatives to ensure that youth in foster care experience successful educational outcomes:

- School placement stability. Allow children to remain in their home schools after a risk assessment determines that it is safe to do so and in the student's best interest.
- Portable records for prompt enrollment. Students should not be denied enrollment due to a delay in records being transferred to their new school (e.g., immunization records, birth certificate).
- Confidentiality and collaboration. Agencies will need to collaborate to ensure that appropriate information is shared and agreements are developed that meet federal and state standards.

In addition, Pima County stakeholders identified the elements and accompanying strategies that have been necessary to effectively plan and implement their educational reform efforts. These are summarized on the next page in the “Road Map for Education Reform” and detailed more thoroughly below.

### **FIND JUDICIAL LEADERSHIP**

Pima County stakeholders believed it imperative that efforts be spearheaded by a judge who is interested in the issue and willing to delve into the details. Judicial leadership and buy-in provide the credibility and focus on the issue needed to open doors that other stakeholders may not be able to. If the judge believes improved educational outcomes for children in foster care are important, and educational questions are asked from the bench, then everyone else responds.

Having a champion who will move the issues forward is another critical component. If a champion does not step forward, it is vital for the courts to identify an effective person for this role, not only to add value inside the court but also to garner and wield community influence.

### **IDENTIFY AND INVOLVE ALL KEY STAKEHOLDERS**

It is important to identify key stakeholders, both those who are natural allies and supporters and those who do not support the cause. It is also important to develop a strategy to engage all stakeholders, especially those who are not supportive, without placing blame on any particular organization or agency. And it is critical to ensure that all levels of stakeholders are involved, both direct service workers and policy or decision-makers.

An effective strategy employed by the Pima County Committee has been to ensure that membership is inclusive. Members would consistently ask themselves who was missing and then develop a recruitment plan to increase involvement and the success of buy-in. They also learned to involve numerous alumni of foster care so that individuals did not feel asked to speak for all youth.

**ROAD MAP FOR EDUCATION REFORM: ELEMENTS AND STRATEGIES**

Necessary Elements	Strategies
Find judicial leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify a champion</li> </ul>
Identify and involve all key stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify both natural allies and those not supportive</li> <li>• Ensure membership is inclusive; ask, “Who is missing?”</li> <li>• Involve multiple alumni</li> </ul>
Active and consistent involvement of committee members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop annual goals with concrete timelines and responsible parties</li> <li>• Share chair responsibilities</li> <li>• Identify issues and barriers</li> <li>• Establish smaller work groups</li> <li>• Review and highlight accomplishments</li> </ul>
Collaboration of similar issue committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify one “umbrella” committee to oversee and coordinate ongoing efforts</li> </ul>
School district involvement and buy-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educate districts about needs of children in foster care</li> <li>• Make connection between behavior of children in foster care and environment they were removed from</li> </ul>
Tools and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create tools and resources tailored to the jurisdiction/court’s need, including training curriculum and materials</li> </ul>
Data collection and project evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct an informal survey to determine amount of time dedicated to addressing educational issues</li> <li>• Gather data on Judicial Education Checklist questions asked at the PPH</li> <li>• Modify existing data system to collect data relevant to educational outcomes</li> <li>• Periodically solicit feedback from key players</li> <li>• Follow youth who attend Career Day, or other relevant events, to determine educational outcomes</li> </ul>
Youth’s voice heard in court	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have committee examine the benefits of youth attending court hearings</li> </ul>
Address student suspension and expulsion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form a committee to spearhead issue</li> <li>• Have committee investigate alternatives to ensure educational continuity</li> </ul>

## ACTIVE AND CONSISTENT INVOLVEMENT OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS

One of the most difficult aspects of collaboration is ensuring active and consistent involvement by all key stakeholders. Often, key players are well-meaning and supportive of addressing the issues in a collaborative and innovative way, but they may be unable to consistently participate in all meetings due to their everyday work and caseload demands. Another struggle is the management of a large committee given the ebb and flow of members. The Pima County committee has experienced the departure of some members because these members perceived that their immediate needs were not being met by the work of the committee.

Strategies used by Pima County to keep committee members involved included:

- **Sharing chair responsibilities.** Pima County shared this responsibility between three core members, which allowed movement in and out of the role as chair (bringing a fresh perspective and focus) while ensuring that the long-range goals and vision continue to move forward.<sup>16</sup>
- **Identifying issues and barriers.** It is imperative to the life of a committee that all potential (real or perceived) barriers to resolving the issues are identified at the outset. Pima County found that the lack of awareness of the issue was a major barrier to accomplishing their goals. Consequently, it developed a strategy to increase awareness, including but not limited to cross-training in disciplines working with children and families on educational needs.
- **Developing concrete goals and timelines.** The development of annual goals with concrete timelines and responsible parties continues the momentum forward. The committee also limited goals to three goals per year. As a result, the committee is operating at its strongest and has been able to capitalize on the momentum generated by its members.
- **Establishing smaller work groups.** To prevent stakeholders from being overwhelmed with collaborative projects and meetings, Pima County broke the larger committee into several work groups to address “special issues” and include experts in the field. This allowed the larger issue of educational reform to be broken into several smaller more manageable pieces. It also provided the opportunity for each member to actively contribute, stay motivated, and feel valued as a contributing team member.
- **Reviewing and highlighting accomplishments.** The work and issues undertaken by the smaller work groups were reported back on a regular basis to the full committee, which helped minimize overlap and ensured that the larger picture always remained in focus. For those subcommittees that are time-limited, informing new members may increase their willingness to participate if they know up front that the time commitment is defined.

## COLLABORATION OF SIMILAR ISSUE COMMITTEES

Pima County is home to three distinct system improvement initiatives:

- 1) Model Dependency Court
- 2) Model Delinquency Court
- 3) Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative and Disproportionate Minority Contact (JDAI/DMC)

Each group has identified education reform as an area needing attention and improvement. In order to ensure communication, collaboration, and coordination, and to minimize overlap between each group, it has been important for the Committee to Improve Educational Outcomes for Court-Involved Youth to serve as an umbrella committee with a clearly established mandate to guide the overall mission of each system improvement initiative as it relates to educational issues.

#### **SCHOOL DISTRICT INVOLVEMENT AND BUY-IN**

Pima County stakeholders agreed that achieving buy-in and involvement from the school districts was a barrier that needed to be strategically addressed. Long-standing distrust and misunderstandings between the school and other systems (namely CPS) contributed to active disengagement of the school districts in the court's and CPS's reform efforts. Additionally, each system has its own language, laws, and regulations that may not be understood by the other system and may, in fact, be in contradiction to its goals and outcomes.

Committee members were able to make some inroads by identifying ways to educate the education community about the importance of improving educational outcomes for foster children, as well as the benefits to the schools of their involvement in collaborative efforts to these ends. Committee members also stressed educating the school community about the connection between the behavior of children in foster care and the environment they were removed from, and the impact removal has on their behaviors. When the committee ensured that educational reform efforts were targeted for *all* children involved in the dependency system as well as the delinquency system, it also became easier for school districts to see the benefit of becoming part of the collaborative.

#### **TOOLS AND RESOURCES**

Creating tools and resources specific to one's jurisdiction is imperative. Pima County gathered information from stakeholders throughout the system to determine which tools and resources were necessary for their jurisdiction. In addition, they recognized the need for training on education advocacy and the importance of education issues and began to create trainings on those topics. Tables 1 and 2, on pages 6 and 7, illustrate the various resources created as a part of this reform effort.

#### **DATA COLLECTION AND PROJECT EVALUATION**

When assessing whether to undergo a new project as a part of a reform effort, it is important to research similar initiatives or programs that have been implemented in other communities and evaluate the potential of replication. To ensure that the effectiveness of an initiative can be measured, it is critical to put evaluation measures in place prior to project implementation.

Pima County stakeholders have had some starts and stops with data collection, and they have currently identified the need to better evaluate their education reform initiatives in order to determine their effectiveness. An initial step towards evaluation was implemented about one year after the committee formed

with an informal survey of attorneys, social workers, and judges to determine how much time was spent on addressing educational issues. Follow-up is still pending to see if these responses have changed.

In September 2004, a Data Collection Subcommittee was formed to gather data on the Judicial Education Checklist questions asked at the PPH.<sup>17</sup> The goal was to enter the data into the juvenile court's data system (JOLTS). By December, however, it became evident that there was some inconsistency regarding the education questions being asked and documented at the PPH, and the project was halted and has not yet been resumed.

In 2006, committee members collected information on the number of presentations they had conducted and the efforts of the educational liaisons. In addition, Pima County is working towards modifying its data collection system in order to effectively gather education data that have not been captured in the past. Another step taken towards data gathering is the use of the JDAI/DMC system, which is completely data-driven.

Finally, the committee has identified the Career Day as one initiative that will have an evaluation tool as a component in 2007. Youth participating in Career Day will be followed to determine if their participation had any impact on future decisions and outcomes.

There is currently a consensus by committee members that, even though they haven't done formal data collection for many of the reform initiatives, intuitively they know the educational reform efforts are having a positive impact.

#### **YOUTH'S VOICE HEARD IN COURT**

The committee is evaluating the benefits of having youth attend their dependency hearings to have a more active role in the outcome of their case. One benefit identified by the committee is that when the educational issues are addressed in court, the youth will see that their educational success is important to the adults making decisions in their lives.

#### **ADDRESS STUDENT SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION**

One of the biggest undertakings for the committee in the coming year is to investigate alternatives for youth who are subject to suspensions or expulsions. A subcommittee has been formed and there is a lot of interest in strategizing and implementing creative initiatives.

**GENERAL PRACTICE TIPS WHEN ENGAGING IN REFORM EFFORTS:**

- Establish clear goals.
- Remember that collaboration is more than just bringing stakeholders to the table. Give collaborators a meaningful role, a strong voice, and a real opportunity to make a contribution.
- Ensure multidisciplinary representation on subcommittees.
- Identify a chair or co-chairs for subcommittees as a way to provide an opportunity for shared leadership, and from different systems to understand cross-system collaboration.
- Make sure the roles and responsibilities of subcommittees or workgroups are clearly defined and establish clear lines of communication between them and the larger committee.
- Review and highlight accomplishments to keep members motivated.
- Pay attention to evaluation at the design stage of a reform initiative. Institutionalize data collection as a part of the program implementation, and, as a result, build a capacity for process and outcome evaluation of the reform effort. Consider incorporating comparison groups.

## Next Steps/Vision for Future

*“We know that in general children in foster care suffer educationally. Knowing this makes it is our responsibility to look out for these children. We have an obligation to change that...We need to go to some places where people don’t necessarily want to go. We must bring the issue to the attention of all stakeholders and try to do it differently.”* —Judicial Officer

As efforts to improve educational outcomes for youth in care continue to move forward, Pima County’s Committee to Improve Educational Outcomes for Court-Involved Youth has identified the need to ensure that both the process and the strategies implemented become institutionalized. In order for the committee and its initiatives to exist beyond the life of the personalities that have very effectively brought the issue to the forefront, it is imperative for the process to be deeply ingrained and embedded in the system and agencies in order that changes in leadership do not stop the forward movement. Pima County has been successful in developing transition plans, including a formalized annual process to review and establish goals for the upcoming year.

In order to ensure progress and to keep the momentum moving forward, the committee continues to meet regularly and has established the following upcoming goals/projects for 2006–2007:

Goals	Projects
Increase stakeholder involvement and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a Spring Stakeholders’ Forum in 2007 to discuss system collaboration between the court and schools.</li> <li>• Assist in making the <i>Endless Dreams</i> video available to teachers online.</li> </ul>
Provide education resources to professionals working with court involved youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an Early Education Resource Guide.</li> <li>• Create a Resource Manual on available charter schools, alternative vocational programs, community college programs, and GED programs. Once complete, provide training for CPS and probation on these services and how to gain access to them.</li> </ul>
Develop strategies and goals for alternatives to suspension and expulsion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand Career Day to include middle school and high school students.</li> <li>• Support development of the Pima County Juvenile Court (PCJCC) Community Advisory Board Volunteer Training.</li> <li>• Recruit and train additional education consultants.</li> <li>• Convene an ongoing subcommittee to develop strategies and goals for alternatives to suspension and expulsion.</li> </ul>

Data collection was incorporated into all of these goals.

Educational reform efforts implemented in Pima County, Arizona, are replicable around the county by other jurisdictions. These efforts have been approached with the understanding that, at the very least, youth in foster care should be provided the opportunity to graduate on time and at the same rate as their peers. The court's responsibility to youth in care does not stop here, however. In addition to education stability and quality, the nation's youth deserve placement stability, successful relationships with supportive adults and peers, improved physical and mental health, employment experiences, and social stability in order to successfully move into adulthood. Further, these vulnerable youth should be provided the opportunity to pursue and graduate from postsecondary educational settings. Because courts have such influence on the lives of these children, it is imperative to recognize the role courts can play in helping to make a dramatic difference in their life outcomes.

For additional resources on improving the education outcomes of children and youth in foster care, visit the National Working Group for Foster Care and Education at [www.casey.org/friendsandfamilies/partners](http://www.casey.org/friendsandfamilies/partners) and the Legal Center on Foster Care and Education at [www.abanet.org/child/education](http://www.abanet.org/child/education).

## Endnotes

- 1 The Model Courts consist of 25 juvenile and family courts that work with the NCJFCJ and use a best-practices bench book as a guide to systems reform.
- 2 Christian, S. Educating children in foster care. Retrieved November 23, 2006, from <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/CPIeducate.htm>.
- 3 Courtney, M.E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, p. 42.
- 4 Kerbow, D. (1996). *Patterns of urban student mobility and local school reform*. Technical Report No. 5, October. Washington, DC: Center for Research on the Education of Children Placed at Risk.
- 5 Burley, M. & Halpern, M. (2001). *Educational attainment of foster youth: Achievement and graduation outcomes for children in state care*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.
- 6 Courtney, M. E., et al., 2004 (47% of 732); Smithgall, C., Gladden, R.M., Howard, E., Goerge, R., & Courtney, M. (2004). *Educational experiences of children in out-of-home care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago (45% of 1,216 sixth-through eighth-graders); Burley & Halpern, 2001 (23% of 1,423 third-graders, 29% of 1,539 six-graders, 24% of 1,597 ninth-graders); Choice, P., D'Andrade, A., Gunther, K., Downes, D., Schaldach, J., Csiszar, C., & Austin, M. (2001). *Education for foster children: Removing barriers to academic success*. Berkeley, CA: Bay Area Social Services Consortium, Center for Social Services Research, School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley (36% of 303); Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (2000, July). *Educational neglect: The delivery of educational services to children in New York City's foster care system*. New York, NY (30% of 70); Zanghi, M., Oldham, E., Sheehy, A. M., & Riebman, D. (1999). *Maine study on improving the educational outcomes for children in care*. Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine, Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, Institute for Child and Family Policy (41% of 134); Jones, E., Zanghi, M., Onge, A., Sheehy, A., & Oldham, E. (1998). *Improving economic opportunities for young people served by the foster care system: Three views of the path to independent living*. Phase II—Survey. Portland, ME: Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine (23% of 249); Goerge, R. M., Van Voorhis, J., Grant, S., Casey, K., & Robinson, M. (1992). Special-education experiences of children in care: An empirical study. *Child Welfare*, 71(5), 419-437 (29.1% of 14,714).
- 7 Smithgall, C., et al., 2004, p. 22.
- 8 Christian, S. Educating children in foster care. Retrieved November 23, 2006, from <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/CPIeducate.htm>.
- 9 Temple, J.A., & Reynolds, A. J. (1999). School mobility and achievement: longitudinal results from an urban cohort. *Journal of School Psychology*, 37(4), 355-377.
- 10 Allen, M. (Updated August 2005). Teens aging out of foster care in Oregon: A guide to transition planning for caseworkers, judges and advocates. Juvenile Rights Project, Inc. Portland, OR.
- 11 For a complete judicial checklist, see the following technical assistance brief: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. (2005). *Asking the right questions: A judicial checklist to ensure that the educational needs of children and youth in foster care are being addressed*. Reno, NV: Author. Available at [www.ncjfcj.org](http://www.ncjfcj.org)
- 12 The Committee is also reviewing the potential of obtaining standardized testing scores when obtaining school records. The testing scores show specific areas the youth is not meeting and allows the case worker to be proactive in identifying tutoring needs.
- 13 After initial implementation, the education questions were removed from the PPH process and incorporated into the Pre-Conference Hearing; however, it was determined that this was not as effective. As a result, the education questions have been re-introduced into the PPH process so that they are “judge-driven” and emphasize the importance of education. Stakeholders reported a distinct difference when the judge asked these questions in the courtroom.
- 14 The training series implemented in 2005 was a result of a collaborative effort with the State Department of Education and the Homeless Liaison Coordinator.
- 15 This project was held in collaboration with Pima Community College and included a tour of the campus and a three-hour presentation to begin a dialogue about the opportunities available. Approximately 50 court-involved minors participated and received community service.
- 16 Pima County has maximized having three core members who not only share leadership but are actively involved in various sub-committees and other community collaboratives to ensure that overlap is addressed and the larger goal is kept in focus.
- 17 Questions asked from the Judicial Education Checklist are as follows: Is the child in school or early intervention? Does the child have special needs? How will educational responsibilities be divided to ensure that the child's educational needs are being met?