

## Site Visit Report: Improving Educational Well-Being Outcomes of Children

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/edcollaborations>

**Award #: 90CO1076**

**Cluster: Child Welfare – Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability**

**Grantee: Allegheny County, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS)**

**Website: <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research-education.aspx>**

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**Last Update: March 2013**

# Site Visit Report: Improving Educational Well-Being Outcomes of Children

## SUMMARY

Using a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS), the Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) District, and the Allegheny County Family Court continued their work to improve educational stability and permanency outcomes for children being served by all three systems. The project, built on an existing data sharing partnership between DHS and PPS, began in 2009 and has helped improve collaboration between the school, social services, and the courts.

The two core initiatives of the project were EdMap, which established or improved the technological infrastructure of the project, and the Shared Accountability for Education program that fostered joint accountability among court, DHS, and school staff for the educational and overall well-being of the children served by all three entities. The grant funded technological enhancements to DHS' case management system, building a decision support tool to identify best-fit placements for children in out-of-home care and improved access to education records for social service workers and the court system. In addition, the grant helped fund educational trainings and professional development for all three systems regarding educational issues and barriers for children involved in the child welfare system.

In 2009, DHS and the PPS District signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that allowed for data sharing to conduct research and analysis related to students' educational status and possible strategies for improving educational outcomes. In addition, if consent is obtained, the up-to-date education information can be shared with direct service workers at DHS to more closely follow the academic performance of children on their caseloads and to address issues more expeditiously. DHS is responsible for integrating and housing the data in the DHS data warehouse and conducting the analyses. The PPS District is responsible for providing educational and directory information to DHS for all enrolled students. Shared data includes, but are not limited to, the following:

- Personal identifiers of students
- School directory information
- Demographics
- Federal free and reduced lunch eligibility
- Student performance
- Attendance
- Disciplinary actions
- Special education and gifted education

In October 2012, a new MOU expanded the project's scope to allow DHS to share with PPS personal identifiers of children who are adjudicated dependent by the court, as well as the contact information for their child welfare caseworkers. In addition, DHS can now share information for all children who are identified as homeless in order to help them receive school supports, as required by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. While the legal framework to share this information exists, at the writing of this article, DHS and the district are still working through the implementation.

All data received from PPS can be used in aggregate, de-identified analysis. DHS uses the data to prepare reports that identify characteristics and indicators related to academic successes and challenges for students involved with human services. DHS and the school districts then develop

effective strategies for addressing the needs of students and their families. The individual student records can only be accessed under two scenarios: (1) if the child is adjudicated dependent, which is known through information from the Common Pleas Court Management System, and (2) if the caseworker uploads a signed parental consent into KIDS.<sup>1</sup>

The project has yielded the following results:

- **Automation of the State education screen.** The Pennsylvania State Education Screen was built into the KIDS case management system and must be completed for all school-age children involved with child welfare. DHS reduced the workload of caseworkers by populating some of the fields from the integrated data acquired through the data-sharing agreement.
- **Cross-agency consent to share educational records.** DHS identified a need to create a consent form to be used across all DHS program areas and that would allow for more collaboration among agencies serving school-age children.
- **Electronic access to education records.** DHS built the technical infrastructure to display child-level education data received from PPS in the KIDS case management system.
- **Best Interest Placement Tool (BIPT).** DHS implemented a decision support tool to ensure that when a child needs to be placed in out-of-home care, DHS is identifying placements that are in the best interest of that child and family. A home that is in their best interest will be the most family-like setting, located in the child's community and school catchment area (if preferred), and willing to care for the child's identified behavioral challenges, mental health, and/or medical needs, etc.
- **Training for child welfare staff.** The Education Law Center has partnered with DHS to provide training for child welfare staff on education issues, including training on the State Education Screen.

To review additional information about the project and to review reports developed by the project, please visit the Allegheny, PA, Department of Human Services research and reports webpage at <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research-education.aspx>.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Improving Educational Well-Being Outcomes for Children" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Using a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS), the Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) District, and the Allegheny County Family Court continued their work to improve educational stability and permanency outcomes for children being served by all three systems. The project, built on an existing data sharing partnership between DHS and PPS, began in 2009 and has helped improve collaboration between the school, social services and the courts.

The two core initiatives of the project were EdMap, which established or improved the technological infrastructure of the project, and the Shared Accountability for Education program that fostered joint accountability among court, DHS, and school staff for the educational and overall well-being of the children served by all three entities. The grant funded technological enhancements to DHS' case management system, building a decision support tool to identify best-fit placements for children in out-of-home care and improved access to education records for social service workers and the court system. In addition, the grant helped fund educational

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<sup>1</sup> KIDS is the Pennsylvania statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System.

training and professional development for all three systems regarding educational issues and barriers for children involved in the child welfare system.

The project's focus is to use integrated data from the DHS data warehouse<sup>2</sup> and various school systems to conduct research and analysis related to students involved with DHS agencies. These data will provide information about the current educational status of children served by DHS and provide information about what may be needed to improve educational outcomes for these children, as well as all children in the participating school districts.

In 2009, PPS and DHS signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that allowed data sharing between the two entities. According to the MOU, DHS was responsible for housing the data in the DHS data warehouse and integrating and analyzing student data. The PPS District was responsible for providing educational and directory information to DHS. Data that are shared include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Personal identifiers of students
- School directory information
- Demographics
- Federal free and reduced lunch eligibility
- Student performance
- Attendance
- Disciplinary actions
- Special education and gifted education

In October 2012, a new MOU with PPS was signed that expanded the scope of the initial MOU by allowing DHS to share with PPS personal identifiers of children who are adjudicated dependent by the court, as well as the contact information for their primary child welfare caseworkers. In addition, DHS, per the new MOU, can share identifying information for all children who are identified as homeless in order to help these students receive school supports as required by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

### **Need for This Service**

According to project staff, integrating DHS data with the school systems' data allows for better strategies to improve outcomes for children served by both systems. It allows school personnel to understand circumstances outside of the school that may influence school performance and behavior. In addition, it allows child welfare caseworkers to more closely follow the academic performance of children on their caseloads and to address issues more expeditiously.

**Note:** To review additional information about the project and to review reports developed by the project, please visit the Allegheny, PA, Department of Human Services research and reports webpage at <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research-education.aspx>.

### **SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS**

The virtual site visit occurred between January 14, 2013, and February 15, 2013, via phone interviews and emails with project staff. The interviews included project staff, the chairman of the

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<sup>2</sup> The DHS data warehouse contains data on human services recipients, including those receiving services for child welfare, mental health, homelessness, and juvenile justice.

stakeholder committee, and Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) personnel. The following list includes interviewees and the date that each interview occurred:

- Erin Dalton, Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS), Deputy Director of the Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation; Kathryn Collins, DHS Data Analyst; Emily Kulick, DHS Manager in the Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (January 14)
- Samantha Murphy, DHS Resources Services Manager/Education Liaison (January 25)
- Fred Thieman, President of the Buhl Foundation/Chairman of the project stakeholder committee (January 25)
- Eddie Wilson, Director of Operations, Student Support Services, PPS (February 15)

The interviews lasted between 25 minutes to 1.5 hours. Topics discussed included the following:

- The impetus to the development of the project
- The successes of the project
- The challenges of the project
- The evaluation process
- The sustainability of the project

In addition, information was obtained from the project's semiannual reports for the reporting periods of October 2011 through March 2012 and April 2012 through September 2012, as well as the grantees final report submitted at the end of the grant period.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Unique and Innovative Features

**EdMap initiative.** This initiative established or improved the technological infrastructure that allows the following:

- **Data sharing** – Through the memorandum of understanding (MOU), the school systems integrate data into the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) data warehouse.<sup>3</sup> These data include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Personal identifiers (name, date of birth, Social Security Number)
  - School directory data (school building, grade level)
  - Demographic data (gender, race, age, free lunch indicator)
  - Performance data (grade point averages, Pennsylvania System of State Assessment Scores)
  - Attendance data (days of suspension, excused and unexcused absences, tardy arrivals)

The school system data are made accessible and integrated into the DHS data warehouse under two scenarios. First, if the child is adjudicated dependent, which is known through information from the Common Pleas Court Management System, and, secondly, if the caseworker uploads a signed parental consent into KIDS.<sup>4</sup> (A copy of this consent is attached.) According to project staff, all student data provided by the school districts are considered confidential, as are the reports prepared from the data when they contain personally identifiable information.

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<sup>3</sup> The DHS data warehouse contains data on human services recipients, including those receiving services for child welfare, mental health, homelessness, and juvenile justice.

<sup>4</sup> KIDS is the Pennsylvania statewide automated child welfare information system.

The MOU authorizes the use of the data for conducting an "action research" project, which is a problem-solving process in which DHS and the school district work toward improving the way they address certain issues involving students served by both systems. To do this, DHS uses data to prepare analytical, aggregate reports related to students who receive services through DHS. These reports identify characteristics and indicators related to academic successes and challenges. DHS and the school districts examine the data in order to develop effective strategies for improving the way they address the needs of students and their families. (The MOU is attached to this article.)

- **Automation of the State education screen.** The Pennsylvania State Education Screen is a part of the KIDS case management system. It was modified to include a section with detailed educational records about each child. The data may be entered manually but other data is populated automatically when the child attends school in a district with a data sharing agreement with DHS.
- **Cross-agency consent to share educational records.** DHS identified a need to create a consent form to be used by all DHS agencies that would allow for more collaboration among agencies within DHS that serve school-age children and their families (a copy of the Consent to Release Education Records is attached to this report).
- **Best Interest Placement Tool (BIPT).** This decision-making tool was developed and implemented during the grant period to improve permanency outcomes and school stability for children in foster care. It provides caseworkers access to information to identify the best placement for a child in an attempt to maintain a child within his or her current school catchment area, closer to the child's family and community of origin (if preferred), and close to the child's current medical and mental health providers.

**Training for child welfare staff.** The Education Law Center has partnered with DHS to provide training for child welfare staff on education issues, including training on the State Education Screen. Training topics included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Overview of the education screen and education records
- Enrollment/school stability and attendance
- The right school setting (includes school discipline)
- Special education issues and accommodations for children in school
- Education transition planning and postsecondary planning

**Shared Accountability for Education program.** This program focuses on shared accountability among court, DHS, and school staff for the educational and overall well-being of the children served by all three entities. As a result of these collaborations, the **Focus on Attendance Program** was piloted. Data analysis indicated high levels of truancy for some students (up to 60 percent in high schools). Under the Focus on Attendance Program, a school-based DHS outreach specialist provides early prevention and assistance to the students and their families in order to reduce truancy. The school refers high-risk students to the program, and the outreach specialist completes an assessment and refers families to and coordinates services for the families through available community resources. In addition, DHS staff work closely with the courts to find creative, alternative solutions to improve attendance for children served by DHS and the court.

## Challenges

The biggest challenge for the project was the amount of time it took for the relevant parties to agree on how to make the data sharing happen. According to project staff, everyone agreed that it was a good idea and that it would benefit children and improve education outcomes, but how to do it was not so easily agreed upon.

Note: To review additional information about the project and to review reports developed by the project, please visit the Allegheny, PA Department of Human Services research and reports webpage at <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research-education.aspx>.

## OUTCOMES

### Evaluation

The process and project outcome evaluation was conducted internally by Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation staff. The outcomes and the evaluation findings include, but are not limited to the following:

- **Best Interest Placement Tool.** Although the analysis of the effectiveness of the tool is ongoing, the tool allows DHS to collect more comprehensive data on placement needs and share it with foster home providers to inform recruiting efforts, which will allow DHS and provider agencies to build placement resources in targeted areas. Analysis and evaluation of the tool and how well it matches children to foster homes will be conducted on a regular basis.
- **Electronic Access to Education Information.** This aspect of the project helped improve the ability of caseworkers and the courts to access education records in a timely, efficient manner. In addition, project staff found that access to the education information made all involved parties communicate about, collaborate, and focus on the educational outcomes of children in foster care.
- **Adding Education Data to Court Addendum.** Educational data including the KIDS Education screen and a one-page summary of the child's education records for the current academic year have been added to the Court Addendum presented to the court at custody review hearings. This information/data, according to project documentation, further improved the communication and collaboration among child welfare, school personnel, and the court.
- **Focus on Attendance Program.** Based on information provided by the project, more than 150 students were served in the two pilot programs and over half had received services previously from an agency within DHS. About 40 percent of the students had prior child welfare experience. Of the students involved in the pilot program, 42 percent showed improvement in their attendance.
- **Ongoing Education Training for Child Welfare Staff.** Project staff reported that as of February 2013, DHS had offered 27 sessions, with more than 76 hours of training covering 10 topics relevant to the project. The trainings were offered via webinars and in person. In addition, technical assistance on managing the education screen has been available since the initial launch and through subsequent phases of implementation.
- **Key stakeholder surveys.** Surveys were administered to stakeholders regarding improvement in communication and collaboration among key partners in the project and

- whether the project has improved working relationships among court, child welfare, and school personnel. Survey respondents reported that the key outcomes from the collaboration was not only the exchange of data, but also higher quality and more timely information, as well as improved relationships and communication among the key partners.

## Sustainability

According to project staff, the project will continue to operate after the end of the grant period, February 28, 2013. The project predates the Children's Bureau grant and has been funded partially by local foundations since the onset. The local funding, in addition to grants received from national foundations, will allow the project to continue.

Note: To review additional information about the project and to review reports developed by the project, please visit the Allegheny, PA Department of Human Services research and reports webpage at <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research-education.aspx>.

## ATTACHMENTS

- [Allegheny County Department of Human Services \(DHS\) Consent to Release Education Records](#)
- [Framework for Collaboration: The Memorandum of Understanding between Allegheny County DHS and Pittsburgh Public Schools](#)



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