

Site Visit Report: Kids in School Rule! (KISR!)

Award #: 90CO1077

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

Grantee: Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati

Contact: Elaine Fink, KISR! Project Manager, efink@lascinti.org

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SUMMARY

Using a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant, an existing partnership between Cincinnati Public Schools, the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS), and the juvenile court, has been enhanced to increase school stability for students involved with child welfare or under court-ordered protective supervision. This infrastructure-building grant is part of CB's Child Welfare - Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability grant cluster. The collaboration, Kids in School Rule! (KISR!), is focused on improving educational outcomes by increasing school stability, improving direct communication about students, and reducing disruptions and removals from school.

KISR! is a partnership among Cincinnati Public Schools, JFS, Hamilton County Juvenile Court, and the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati (LAS). The project actually began in 2008, prior to the grant being awarded. Before the project began, a lack of communication and collaboration between school personnel and JFS staff affected the educational stability of students served. School personnel were confused about whom to contact concerning children's educational issues and voiced concern about the number of absences of children in foster care. In addition, the child welfare agency experienced barriers enrolling their students in Cincinnati Public Schools, and caseworkers did not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the school district to resolve common educational issues. KISR!'s primary goal was to build the infrastructure for an intensive cross-systems collaboration to improve educational outcomes.

To help meet project goals, two education specialists assist JFS case managers with education-related issues and serve as the point of contact regarding student participants. In addition, each Cincinnati school has a KISR! liaison to support students. To ensure the educational needs of children are met, magistrates in Hamilton County Juvenile Court review educational information about each KISR! child in foster care or under court-ordered protective supervision.

In 2008, 22 Cincinnati Public Schools participated in KISR!, which served only children in the custody of JFS. The CB grant was awarded in January 2012, and the project expanded to the 56 schools within the district. In August 2012, the project began serving children under court-ordered protective supervision of JFS if the parents signed consent for the service to continue. KISR! has served 706 students since 2008. As of January 2013, the project is serving 181 students; 167 (92 percent) of the students are in the custody of JFS and 14 (8 percent) of the students are under the protective supervision of JFS. The population of youth served who are in protective supervision were part of the KISR! project when they were in agency custody.

Evaluation activities continue and some positive outcomes have already been realized, including:

- A set of key data indicators and an expanded Cincinnati Public Schools' Learning Partner Dashboard that shares specific data about KISR! students and generates reports to inform the project



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- An operations manual, an education specialist manual, and a KISR! liaison handbook to describe procedures that apply to KISR! students and the roles and responsibilities of the specialized positions
- An enrollment protocol to ensure KISR! students do not miss instruction time
- A trauma-informed consultation program
- Automatic school fee waivers for students in KISR!

The project recently received the first data reports from Learning Partner Dashboard, which provided powerful documentation for the need to take action to stabilize students. In addition, project data shows that KISR! students rarely miss school for counseling or family visitations.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Cincinnati's Kids In School Rule!" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Using a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant, Cincinnati Public Schools, Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS), Hamilton County Juvenile Court, and the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati (LAS) are working to increase school stability for students in custody of or under the protective supervision of JFS. This infrastructure-building grant is part of CB's Child Welfare - Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability grant cluster. The collaboration, Kids in School Rule! (KISR!) is focused on improving education outcomes for the children it serves by increasing school stability, improving coordination among the grant partners, improving direct communication about individual students, and reducing disruptions and removals from school for discipline or other reasons. (The KISR! executive summary attached to this report provides information about the partners and the goals of KISR!)

KISR! began in 22 Cincinnati Public Schools in 2008 and served only children in the custody of JFS. The project expanded to the 56 schools within the Cincinnati Public School district in January 2012 after the CB grant was awarded to the project. In August 2012, the project also began to serve children under court-ordered protective supervision of JFS if the students were already participating in KISR! and the parents signed consent for the service to continue. Since its onset in 2008, KISR! has served a total of 706 students. As of January 2013 KISR! was currently (January 2013) serving 181 students; 167 (92 percent) of the students are in the custody of JFS and 14 (8 percent) of the students are under the protective supervision of JFS.

The project has a committed leadership team made up of high-level staff from each partner agency, as well as frontline staff from JFS. To help meet the goals of the project, JFS has two designated education specialists whose responsibility is to serve on the leadership team and to assist JFS case managers with education-related issues, as well as be the point of contact for the schools regarding children participating in KISR!. In addition, each Cincinnati Public School has an assigned KISR! liaison to support KISR! students. To ensure that the educational needs of KISR! children are being met, magistrates in Hamilton County Juvenile Court review educational information about each child in the program. The CB grant provided for technical assistance to strengthen the effectiveness of the Education Court Report that JFS submits to Court in advance of review hearings.

Need for This Service

Project staff reported that prior to the development of KISR! in 2008, there was a lack of communication between school personnel and JFS staff. School personnel indicated that if a child in foster care had educational issues, the school would frequently not know whom to contact about the child, or phone calls to case workers would not be returned, which resulted in poor education outcomes for the child. In addition, school personnel voiced concern about how many

hours of instruction children in foster care missed because of parental visiting and counseling appointments and questioned how children could be successful in school when they were frequently absent. In addition, magistrates and case managers were often uninformed about education law and did not recognize legal issues that undermined student success in school. Magistrates were not sure what they should ask regarding education issues, and case managers often did not know how to support children in the custody of JFS in school, and did not consistently seek outside education advocacy

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred January 10 and 11, 2013. The interviews included several members of the leadership team and staff from Cincinnati Public Schools, including the following:

- Elaine Fink, Managing Attorney, Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati (LAS), Project Director
- Carla Guenther, Chief Magistrate, Hamilton County Juvenile Court
- Cynthia Dillon, General Counsel, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Denise Orchard, Section Chief, Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS)
- Monica Benton, Education Specialist, Hamilton County JFS
- Sarah Mangan, Education Specialist, Hamilton County JFS
- Stephanie Moes, Senior Attorney, LAS
- Sarah Trimble, Director of Information Technology Applications, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Wendy Popejoy, Administrative Assistant to the Assistant Superintendent, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Joe Wilmers, Kids in School Rule! (KISR!) School Liaison, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Julie Kneuen, Beech Acres Parenting Center

During the site visit, project staff presented a PowerPoint presentation on the Cincinnati Public School Learning Partner Dashboard, and the site visitor attended a KISR! Leadership Team meeting.

Additional interviews with the project evaluator and staff from Cincinnati Public Schools were held via telephone between January 17 and January 24, 2013:

- Kathleen McNaught, Esq., Assistant Director, Center on Children and the Law, American Bar Association
- Meg Burrows, KISR! School Liaison, Cincinnati Public Schools

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 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 early results 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.

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

Since the inception of Kids in School Rule! (KISR!), the leadership team has included committed, high-level management staff from each partner agency. This commitment from management has ensured that decisions related to the project can be made expeditiously by each partner agency. In addition to this aspect of KISR!, the following features of KISR! may be considered innovative and unique:

Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS) Education Specialists: JFS has two case managers who are designated as education specialists. Their role is to assist in maintaining educational stability and success for KISR! students by assisting with school enrollment, ensuring children are enrolled in the appropriate programs, providing and receiving information from school liaisons, preparing educational court reports, reviewing information from the Learning Partner Dashboard and PowerSchool (which are explained below), discussing education issues with the child's case manager, and assisting in maintaining children in the same school should a placement move occur or the child return home. The education specialists have been hailed as a key component of what makes this project a success. They are the point of contact for all issues involving KISR! students and are knowledgeable about education law and education advocacy. The education specialists have regular meetings with the Assistant School Superintendent in order to expeditiously resolve issues involving KISR! Students. In addition, they have access to certain data reports from the juvenile court's information system to ensure all eligible children are involved in KISR!. School and JFS staff depend on the expertise of the education specialists to support KISR! students through the education system, including preparation for postsecondary education. (The guidelines and responsibilities of the JFS education specialists are outlined in the JFS operational manual attached to this report.)

Cincinnati Public Schools KISR! Liaisons: Each school has a KISR! liaison to support KISR! students by working collaboratively with the education specialist and the assigned teachers to discuss the successes and address the challenges and education needs of KISR! students, including problems with attendance. The liaisons are required to have regular contact with KISR! students. (The guidelines and responsibilities of the KISR! liaisons are outlined in the KISR! liaison handbook attached to this report.)

The Cincinnati Public Schools' Learning Partner Dashboard (LPD) and PowerSchool: The school system expanded the range of education data points that are contained in LPD for KISR! students so it could track desired indicators and become the means to share specific data about all KISR! students with JFS. JFS inputs agreed-upon child welfare data into LPD on an ongoing basis for each KISR! student. The child welfare data points include legal status, permanency plan, and placement type, which is taken from the Ohio Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS). The education data points are populated for KISR! students on a daily basis. LPD can be accessed by JFS education specialists, who can review certain education data points for KISR! students, including, but not limited to, grade point average, attendance, discipline referrals, if a student is failing a class, and if the student has an individualized education program (IEP). In addition, the dashboard identifies if a student has any educational risk indicators, which are determined by the number of absences, tardies, discipline referrals, and/or class failings by the student. The dashboard provides data on individual students and can provide aggregate data on all KISR! students. LPD allows for meaningful integration of child welfare and education data, and it is designed to provide information about individual students as well as about KISR! students in the aggregate. KISR! partners expect to utilize LPD to generate reports that will inform and guide the project going forward. PowerSchool is a web-based student information system that allows parents to view real-time attendance and grade information for their children. Cincinnati Public Schools has provided access to PowerSchool to the JFS education specialists to allow them to closely monitor the KISR! students' performance and

attendance. PowerSchool provides more detailed information about student performance than the Dashboard.

Education Court Report and Judicial Bench Card for Education Success: JFS education specialists submit an Education Court Report to the juvenile court before every KISR! student custody review hearing. The court report includes information about the child's educational history, special education needs, attendance, discipline issues, and other issues relevant to the child's education. The assigned magistrate reviews the Education Court Report before the hearing and during the hearing references the Judicial Bench Card for Education Success, which is a guide for the magistrates used to direct discussions on education issues. The Judicial Bench Card has been so successful in gathering education information about KISR! students that some magistrates are beginning to use it for children not involved in KISR!. (The Education Court Report and the Judicial Bench Card for Education Success that goes into effect January 2014 are attached to this report.)

Enrollment Protocol: Cincinnati Public Schools created an enrollment protocol for children in foster care. The children are to be enrolled immediately in school even if they do not have all of the required documentation. KISR! students are not to miss educational instruction because of barriers to enrollment. In addition, all enrollment fees are waived for KISR! students, including summer school enrollment fees. Prior to the establishment of this enrollment protocol, the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati (LAS) would often receive calls about issues enrolling children in schools; however, during the 2012–2013 school year, there have been no enrollment issues with KISR! students. (The enrollment protocol, as well as other aspects of the partnership, are included in the 2011 KISR! partner Memorandum of Understanding attached to this report.)

Trauma-Informed Consultations: KISR! contracted with a local behavioral health provider, Beech Acres Parenting Center, to provide trauma-informed consultations to schools to build the capacity of teachers, school administrators, and other school personnel to understand how trauma may affect students in school; the best practices for working with children who have experienced trauma; and how to create a trauma sensitive environment that supports learning. These consultations were intended to enhance the capacity of school personnel to maintain educational stability for KISR! students. (The Beech Acres informational brochure on trauma-informed services is attached to this report.)

Training: Legal Aid attorneys have provided training for all KISR! partner agency staff and community partners, including attorneys, foster parents, and mental health providers. The training sessions have included information about the KISR! project, educational law and educational advocacy, and educational legal issues of children in foster care.

Legal Aid Society Advocacy: LAS provides advocacy or legal representation to KISR! students experiencing issues related to enrollment, school discipline, or special education.

Challenges

Trauma-informed Consultations: These consultations were not accessed by Cincinnati Public Schools as often as project leaders had hoped. The KISR! Leadership Team is working with school personnel to increase their capacity to understand why these consultations are beneficial to them and to improving education outcomes for not only KISR! students, but all students who have experienced trauma.

Maintaining school stability: If a child's placement is disrupted, every attempt is made by JFS to locate a foster placement in the same school district; however, this can be problematic because the number of foster homes within the Cincinnati Public School catchment area does not meet the need. Cincinnati Public Schools will allow KISR! students to remain in their school to

ensure educational stability, but arranging transportation to maintain the students in their schools is often a problem.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

The project attributes a lot of its success to the committed leadership team, which includes high-level management staff from each partner agency, as well as the JFS education specialists. The leadership team meets every 2 to 3 weeks and communicates frequently via email. In addition to this, the project attributes its success to the following project features:

- The open, transparent communication among the partner agencies, including data and information sharing
- The continued commitment by JFS and Cincinnati Public Schools to provide specialized staff (educational specialists and KISR! liaisons) to support KISR! students
- The commitment of frontline JFS staff and school personnel to the project
- The benefits the project provides to students, teachers, and JFS case managers by ensuring information is shared and student's needs are met
- The leadership provided by the project director who is available to troubleshoot and hold partner agencies accountable

Additional Information

Although not exclusive to KISR! students, at least 40 KISR! students participate in the Higher Education Mentoring Initiative (HEMI). HEMI is a partnership between a Hamilton County Commissioner, Hamilton County JFS, the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, and Great Oaks vocational program. HEMI helps prepare children for postsecondary education. The initiative recruits, trains, and supports mentors to establish a long-term (4 years), positive relationship with youth in foster care. The mentors meet with the youth beginning their junior year in high school at least once a week and assist with applying for postsecondary education opportunities. HEMI recently announced its 2013 Scholarship winners for students pursuing higher education, and 8 of the 12 awards were to current or former KISR! participants. In addition, HEMI has started providing housing vouchers to students participating in the project.

Since the beginning of the program in 2008, 53 KISR! seniors have received high school diplomas. In 2012, 12 out of 12 seniors graduated, and this spring, there are 11 seniors on target to earn a diploma.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation

A process evaluation is being completed on the Kids in School Rule! (KISR!) project. The goal for the project is to build the infrastructure for a sustainable, intensive cross-system program. Some aspects of the project that indicate growth and success include the following:

- Expanded from 22 schools to 56 schools after the grant was awarded.
- Expanded the project to include children under court-ordered protective supervision.
- Expanded the project to include KISR! liaisons in every school.
- Developed key data indicators for child welfare and for education and expanded the Cincinnati Public Schools' Learning Partner Dashboard in order to share specific data about KISR! students and to generate reports that inform the project.

- Developed an operation manual, an education specialist manual, and a KISR! liaison handbook to describe procedures that apply to KISR! students and the roles and responsibilities of the specialized positions.
- Established an enrollment protocol to ensure KISR! students do not miss instruction time when there are barriers to enrollment.
- Developed the trauma-informed consultation program.

At the time of the site visit, the project had just received the first data reports from Learning Partner Dashboard. According to the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services education specialist, the students that were indicated by the reports as having risk factors were already known to the specialist and most issues were already being addressed, which indicates that the coordination and communication among the systems is working. In addition, because of project intervention, KISR! students rarely miss school for counseling or family visiting, which is a change from prior to KISR!. (Testimonials from individuals involved with the project are attached to this report.)

Sustainability

KISR! plans to continue its efforts after the grant period ends in February 2013. The project partners indicated that they are committed to improving educational outcomes for children in foster care and will continue to collaborate, communicate, and exchange data, as well as fund the specialized positions of education specialist and KISR! liaison. The only aspect of the project that is uncertain is the trauma-informed consultations, since this was completely funded by the Children's Bureau grant.

ATTACHMENTS

Project information/Public Relations

- KISR! Executive Summary
- KISR! Testimonials
- Beech Acres informational brochure on trauma-informed services

Implementation tools

- 2011 KISR! Partner Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
- KISR! Liaison Handbook
- JFS Operational Manual
- Judicial Bench Card for Education Success (effective January 2014)
- Education Court Report