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Unique Partnership Forms to Help Foster Children Succeed in School

**Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services and Cincinnati Public Schools
Lead Effort to Keep At-risk Children on Track Academically**

Cincinnati (Feb. 29, 2008) Several Cincinnati organizations have come together to kick start what is believed to be the first program in the country of its kind focusing on helping foster children stay in school and achieve academic success.

The three-year pilot program, entitled “Kids in School Rule!,” is expected to result in lower truancy, fewer interruptions in school days for students, more promotions to higher grade levels, more graduates and – ultimately – less substance abuse, crime and other social problems associated with educational failure.

The pilot will focus on 100 foster children who are at-risk of academic failure because they’ve been abused and neglected and face instability in their home and school life. Foster children often must move to different schools as they await permanent placement and are faced with outside counseling and other obstacles that threaten academic success.

“As much as we would like to keep our children in the same schools and have their lives minimally interrupted, it is not always possible and they face challenges their peers do not,” said Moira Weir, director of Hamilton County’s Department of Job and Family Services. “Recognizing this problem, we turned to some of our partners for help. This unique program ensures that everyone will work together to remove obstacles and make education a top priority for these children.”

The pilot originated from a long-standing collaborative effort, the Foster Care Committee of the School District’s Special Education Work Group. Many of the groups participating in that committee are also participating in Kids in School Rule!: the Job and Family Services Department, Cincinnati Public Schools, the Legal Aid Society of Greater

Cincinnati, Hamilton County Juvenile Court, the Guardian ad Litem Division of the Hamilton County Office of the Public Defender and ProKids.

“One of the ways Cincinnati schools became the top performer in test scores among Ohio’s urban school districts was by working with our partners to reduce the obstacles our children face when trying to achieve academic success,” said Superintendent Rosa Blackwell. “We believe this program is another avenue towards that end and we’re excited to see the outcomes of this pilot.”

Cincinnati Public Schools will provide progress reports and coordinate educational and case plan services in an effort to improve outcomes and avoid disruptions for students. Each school will appoint a contact person for JFS.

Among other things, Job and Family Services has assigned a special caseworker to serve as a liaison to the schools, assisting other caseworkers in monitoring education progress.

“A lot of times, teachers don’t know who to contact when a foster child runs into trouble,” Weir said. “Our caseworker is building relationships with principals, teachers and other social workers so they have an additional point of contact.”

The Legal Aid Society will develop and lead training on educational law and advocacy and the importance of school achievement and high school graduation for key stakeholders, including foster parents, kinship caregivers and the children themselves. Legal Aid also will advocate for interventions and supports that strengthen academic achievement and push for transition planning to prepare youth for emancipation and self-sufficiency.

Juvenile Court will track and review reports from HCJFS, the guardian ad litem or ProKids that include information about educational progress, services and outcomes. The court has developed an extensive checklist for each student that includes items such as attendance, changes in living arrangement, discipline and the role of a child’s caregiver in education. This will help guide magistrates as they review child welfare cases.

“We’re very excited to be able to offer a pilot project that increases coordination among the collaborating partners in an effort to improve education outcomes for youth in foster care,” said Carla Guenther, deputy chief magistrate for Juvenile Court. “One of the goals is to increase stability in residential and educational placements for children in agency custody. National and local data suggest youth in foster care bounce from school to school, and that phenomenon negatively impacts academic performance.”

Kids in School Rule! will be evaluated on a periodic basis over the next three years and, if successful, will be continued and expanded.