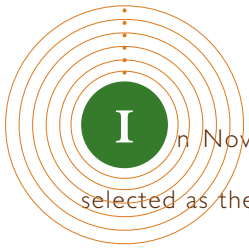
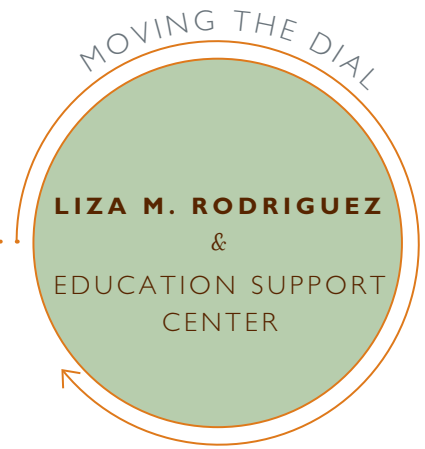


**The Education Support Center: Improving the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care**  
February 2012



**I**n November of 2008, Liza M. Rodriguez was selected as the first Stoneleigh Policy Fellow. Working in close partnership with the Mayor's Office of Education, she led the effort to develop a cross-sector effort between the Department of Human Services and the School District of Philadelphia – the DHS Education Support Center – to improve the educational stability and outcomes of children in foster care and those receiving court-supervised services. Liza's project consisted of conducting best practices research, developing new partnerships, designing a program model, and identifying funding sources to support the first two years of the model's implementation.

In Philadelphia and across the country, children who have been involved with child welfare or juvenile justice systems have the highest risk of dropping out of high school. A third of the young people that drop out of school in Philadelphia are – or have been – involved with the DHS through foster care or delinquent placement.

The ground-breaking report on the drop-out crisis in Philadelphia – *Unfulfilled Promise* – found that 70% of the students who had a substantiated case of abuse or neglect during the high school years and 75% who had a foster care placement never finished high school. In addition to these alarming drop-out rates, new federal and state actions requiring child welfare agencies to improve the educational stability of children and youth in out-of-home placement, created an urgency to improve stability for these youth.

Recognizing this urgency, and consistent with his efforts to engage the private sector in his ambitious education goal of cutting the city's drop-out rate in half, newly elected Mayor Michael Nutter reached out to the Stoneleigh Foundation in early 2008.



**DISCOVERY**

The research and planning phase had three major goals:

- Establish a formal cross-system partnership with the School District of Philadelphia (SDP).
- Identify the multiple leverage points in the DHS continuum of services where educational assessments and supports could be better arranged.
- Develop a preliminary design of the infrastructure and functions of the Education Support Center.

Key components of this phase included:

- Over 35 interviews, meetings, and/or focus groups with key child welfare and education leaders and staff, city government and private agency partners, foster parents, and youth.
- Co-chairmanship, participation and/or presentations at multiple DHS and cross-systems meetings and discussions regarding education and child welfare collaboration.
- A literature review of articles and reports on best practices regarding child welfare/juvenile justice and education system partnerships.

## FINDINGS

Liza's extensive research enabled her to collect, synthesize and contextualize a vast amount of information.

**Concern:** How can Philadelphia remove barriers to effectively track and support the education of youth in out-of-home care?

Many of Liza's national findings were consistent with the education indicators that had been collected about Philadelphia youth in foster care:

- › Children in foster care have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, perform significantly lower on standardized tests in reading and mathematics, and exhibit a wide range of behavioral problems.
- › Children and youth in foster care experience high rates of educational instability. According to a national study of 1000 foster care alumni, 68% attended 3 or more elementary schools; 33% attended 5 or more.
- › Contributing to the high rates of educational instability are cumbersome record-transfer procedures between schools and child welfare agencies.
- › Truancy has been clearly identified as an early warning sign for potential delinquent activities, social isolation, and/or educational failure via suspension, expulsion, or dropping out.

**Concern:** How can Philadelphia effectively track and support the education of youth in out-of-home care?

Liza identified a number of promising practices that addressed the most common barriers to effectively track and support the education of children in out-of-home care. She organized these practices into two major categories:

**Data Sharing and Records Transfers:** Across the country child welfare agencies and school districts have developed protocols to share key information about students through state legislation and/or regulations, Memoranda of Understanding and inter-agency agreements, and regular cross-system data reports.

**Educational Specialists in child welfare agency/Foster Youth Liaison in school district:** Many jurisdictions track and support the educational progress of children in foster care through the creation and appointment of Education Specialists at the child welfare agency and/or Foster Care Liaisons at the school district. These specialists provide individual case assistance and develop the capacity of agency staff to identify and solve routine school-related issues.

## OUTCOMES: MOVING THE DIAL

Liza's research and active participation in key cross-systems conversations enabled her to offer a number of recommendations to DHS and the school district leaders regarding policies, strategies, and interventions that could help improve the educational stability of children in foster care. With the strong and steadfast support of her three system partners, Liza was able to accomplish a number of critical project milestones that ultimately led to significant institutional changes at DHS and the school district.

### Project Milestones

#### 1. A historic data-sharing Memorandum of Understanding between DHS, School District of Philadelphia, and Juvenile Court

As a result of this agreement, for the first time in its history, DHS now obtains educational records of children in out-of-home placement or under court supervision on

a regular basis that includes:

- History of schools attended
- Grades for all subjects
- Current and historical attendance
- Disciplinary infractions
- Special education status
- Standardized test scores
- Accrued high school credits

The agreement enables DHS to:

- › Track how children in its care are doing in school and to pro-actively plan and coordinate with schools to remove educational barriers for these children.
- › Monitor and measure how it is performing – as an agency – on educational well-being indicators such as school stability, attendance, and academic progress.

At the same time, the school district is now able to know:

- › Which children are in DHS custody;
- › Whether they are in foster care or receiving court-supervised in-home services;
- › The service provider agency and contact information;
- › Updated contact information for caregivers and case managers, including supervisors;
- › Final status of an investigation if the school is the child abuse reporter;
- › Status of parents' education rights;
- › Which children are placed outside of the county by DHS, their placement date and circumstances, discharge dates from placement, and who to contact at DHS in order to plan for a smooth transition back into the Philadelphia School District.

At the school level, the agreement enables Principals and counselors to know:

- › Who are the DHS or court-involved children in their schools.

- › Who is the DHS contact to coordinate educational and other supports.
- › Which caregivers should be engaged in planning for the child.

## 2. A new DHS policy on the educational stability and continuity of children and youth in substitute care.

This policy requires DHS and service provider case managers to track, document, and support the educational stability and continuity (smooth transitions) of children in DHS care.

The policy states that:

*“DHS and provider workers must consider educational stability and continuity for children in DHS custody at every point in the life of the case, document decisions which affect a child’s education, and maintain current education information in the case record. DHS and provider workers should advocate for educational stability on behalf of the children in CYD care.”*

The policy requires that a child must remain in his/her current school when entering placement unless there is a documented reason why it is not in the child’s best interest to remain there. If a decision is made to transfer the child to another school, the child must be enrolled immediately without missing any school days during the transition.

The policy also provides a practice guide to child welfare workers, including guidance on who to contact at the child’s school and/or DHS to coordinate the transfer of records or transportation.

## 3. The integration of educational well-being indicators into Child Permanency Plans

The Child Permanency Plan (CPP) is the key case management document utilized by DHS and provider agency case workers to define, plan for, and track the child permanency goals and progress of the case. Liza led the integration of sections on educational well-being. The revamped tool now contains a section requiring the following information:

- › Proximity of the placement setting to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement;

- › Efforts to keep the child in his/her current school, including efforts to arrange for transportation;
- › How the current school enrollment meets the child's educational needs;
- › How visits and appointments will be made during non-school hours whenever possible.

#### 4. Institutionalization of regular DHS-School District cross-system leadership team

Started as the “Educational Stability Coordination” work group after the data-sharing agreement was signed, this group has representatives from the DHS Educational Support Center, DHS case management leadership, school district support services, and the school district General Counsel's office.

- › An early team accomplishment was the development of a transportation coordination protocol to support the school stability of children in foster care.
- › It continues to meet on a bi-monthly basis to discuss and address collaboration barriers, data-sharing improvements, cross-systems training needs, and case-specific issues that require a collaborative resolution.
- › The DHS Commissioner and School District Assistant Superintendent started an annual DHS/School District leadership forum that includes senior and mid-level managers from both systems to provide ongoing face-to-face dialogue between the systems.

#### 5. Concept Paper: DHS Education Support

Liza's most significant recommendations came in the form of a concept paper for the implementation of the DHS Education Support Center. The concept paper laid out the proposed structure and functions of the Center to bridge the communication and service gaps between the child welfare and education systems.

The primary goal of the ESC would be to improve the educational stability and outcomes for children in DHS care (in out-of-home placement or receiving court-supervised services).

### Stoneleigh Foundation

The Stoneleigh Fellowship is designed to support researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who have demonstrated leadership in child welfare, juvenile justice, or related fields. We are particularly interested in individuals whose fellowship proposal work involves work that crosses systems of enhances the coordination of service delivery. For more information, please visit our website at [www.stoneleighfoundation.org](http://www.stoneleighfoundation.org)

### Liza M. Rodriguez, PhD

Liza has eighteen years of experience in the public and non-profit sectors: designing and implementing community based and city-wide social service and education programs, leading non-profit and government initiatives, researching and planning best-practice models, creating social marketing and communication strategies, and training hundreds of public and non-profit sector employees. Liza earned her doctorate degree in Urban Education from Temple University (2007).

### Education Support Center

The Education Support Center (ESC) works to improve the educational stability and outcomes for children in DHS care, including dependent, delinquent, and in-home services. For more information, please contact DHS.Education.Support@phila.gov

The four principal functions for the ESC would be to:

- › Track the educational indicators of children in DHS care in order to identify early signs of challenges and coordinate communication and planning amongst service providers and school staff.
- › Provide individual consultation to DHS and provider agency case workers, school district staff, and resource families to facilitate the removal of educational barriers experienced by children in DHS care.
- › Integrate educational well-being indicators into DHS performance management processes and practice tools, such as the Child Permanency Plan.

- > Develop inter-agency communication and practice protocols to address the timely sharing of data, safe and confidential feedback mechanisms for DHS and school counselors, transportation coordination, and a collaborative approach to the professional development of both child welfare practitioners and school staff.

In addition to these core functions, Liza designed an organizational structure, developed a preliminary budget, and drafted job descriptions for a team of “DHS Education Liaisons”.

## 6. As a result of this work, the William Penn Foundation awarded a two year grant to start-up the ESC

In November of 2009, DHS Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose appointed Liza to the newly created position of Director of the DHS Education Support Center.

### NEXT STEPS: WHERE IS THE DIAL NOW?

Liza moved quickly to hire the first ESC staff team: a combination of city and grant-funded employees that illustrated Mayor Nutter’s original intent to develop a public/private partnership for this endeavor. By the end of the 2010 school year Liza had:

#### Hired all the staff for the Educational Support Center, including:

- Education liaison supervisor
- Four education liaisons
- Senior education liaison focused on data analysis and cross-training efforts

**Trained the first cohort of DHS and provider staff** on the provisions of the federal Fostering Connections Act and the new DHS educational stability policy.

**Trained the first cohort of school district counselors** on the educational needs of children and youth in out-of-home placement.

**Implemented a new School Transportation Coordination Protocol** with the school district and foster care providers to support the school stability of children and youth in out-of-home placement.

#### Conducted the first school district/DHS data match and analysis - per the new Memorandum of Understanding.

As of 2012, the DHS Education Support Center has:

**Trained over 1000 child welfare professionals** on the education stability needs and policies of children in out-of-home placement;

**Trained over 350 school counselors** on the educational needs of children in placement and the collaboration protocols between DHS and the School District of Philadelphia;

**Hosted three Education Forums** for child welfare practitioners on Navigating Schools, Understanding Special Education, and Advocating for Youth Throughout School Disciplinary Processes;

**Worked on over 1500 individual consultations** for children in the DHS system who are facing educational barriers, of which **95% have been resolved;** and,

**Integrated educational well-being indicators** in the DHS Child Stat performance management system.