

BE A HERO!
START A SCHOOL-JUSTICE PARTNERSHIP IN YOUR COMMUNITY
By: KATHLEEN KROLL, Circuit Court Judge, Fifteenth Judicial Circuit

Keeping children in school and out of court just makes sense. Research shows the more days children miss school the lower they achieve not only academically but in life generally. On the dependency side we know that graduation rates decrease as the number of placements (and changed schools) increases. A child who changes schools three times in one year loses an entire year of educational success. Less than 50% of youth in foster care graduate high school. In delinquency we see school performance plummet as arrests increase. Students who are arrested in school are twice as likely not to graduate. If the arrest leads to a court appearance the student is four times as likely not to graduate. Every school administration is well aware of the importance of school attendance to successful educational outcomes. Just take a peek at all the truancy laws and you know the legislature is well aware of the importance of school attendance to successful citizenship and safe communities.

The School-Justice Partnership was formed nationally to enhance collaboration and coordination among courts, schools, state agencies, service providers, and law enforcement to keep children in school and out of court. These partnerships provide statistically increased graduation rates, fewer referrals to juvenile court, and a reduction in probation caseloads. The Florida Supreme Court Steering Committee on Families and Children in the Court is available to assist circuits with developing local school-justice partnerships. A step-by-step guide to developing a school-justice partnership is available on [this website]. Initially, a family court judge convenes the stakeholders who may include school superintendents, law enforcement, Department of Juvenile Justice staff, Department of Children and Families staff, Guardians ad Litem, parents, youth, judges, court staff, and any other individual with a vested interest in helping children. Together the stakeholders determine their shared outcomes and establish a new protocol leading to new outcomes supported by data. Outcomes often include increased school attendance, improved school safety, use of positive discipline, increased graduation rates, reduced suspensions, and automatic and simplified reenrollment for court-involved youth.

Benefits are numerous to the children, parents, schools, and courts: a reduction in school personnel coming to court; streamlined record exchanges between courts, agencies, and schools; increased understanding about the laws and what a court or school can and cannot do; specifically designed educational conditions for probation; improved "No Contact" order compliance; better coordination of transportation issues reducing costs and family stress; better transitions as every DCF child and DJJ child knows where they are starting school; improved calendaring issues; reduced pick up orders as the court can check if students are in school on a court date; and many more!

We can do better together for our children. The co-chairs of the School-Justice Partnership subcommittee of the Supreme Court Steering Committee on Families and Children in the Court are available to help anyone interested in starting a school-justice partnership. Please contact Nathan Moon at moonn@flcourts.org for assistance.