

# Kids in School Rule! Improving School Outcomes for Students in Care

by Morgan Tyler

“One of our 11th grade KISR! students has made significant progress in the past two years. He had a history of behavior issues and academic problems, but then set a goal for last quarter of straight A’s—and achieved it! The various KISR! supports in combination with efforts by his foster parent have made a huge difference.”

—KISR! CPS Liaison, School Psychologist

The interventions established through Kids in School Rule! (KISR!) give students in foster care the tools and supports to succeed and have positive experiences in school. KISR! was created in 2008 to address common challenges students in care face and provide them with stable school environments. The program now serves children in custody of Hamilton County who attend any of the 56 Cincinnati Public Schools. It offers a model for how schools, courts, child welfare agencies, and legal advocates can work together to address common education barriers for children in foster care.

## Results

The program’s statistics are impressive. For the 2013-14 school year:

- 100% of KISR! third graders were reading at grade level compared to 97.1% district-wide,
- 91% of eligible KISR! seniors graduated from high school in 2014 compared to 73.6% district-wide,
- 83% of KISR! students attended 90% or more days of school, and
- disciplinary referrals for KISR! students decreased by 50%.

## Secrets to Success

### Partnerships

The success of KISR! depends on effective partnerships between Cincinnati Public Schools, Hamilton County Department of Jobs and

Family Services, Hamilton County Juvenile Court, and the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati. Each partner brings different strengths to the collaboration, but collectively they support students in foster care by:

- helping them navigate the education system,
- highlighting the importance of education for children in the child welfare system,

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- having an identified liaison in each school and dedicated education specialists to coordinate with the county children’s services, and
- providing education advocacy in court and in schools.

Strong communication among the partners, and leadership within each entity, result in comprehensive support and strategies that combat education issues faced by children in foster care.

### Six Goals

Through the four partners, KISR! increases educational opportunities by focusing on six goals:

- Increasing school stability—promotes keeping children in the same schools when foster placements change.
- Improving academic achievement—improves students’ academic progress and fosters a love for learning.
- Enhancing school engagement—creates a connection between the students and the school; expands the interests of students to extra-curricular activities.
- Reducing school removals due to school discipline or changing homes—decreases unnecessary breaks in learning; helps contribute to a cohesive educational experience.
- Aiding coordination between partners, including integrated data sharing—allows for efficient communication between the most essential stakeholders in each child’s education.
- Improving direct communication about individual students—helps quickly address and solve issues on a personalized basis.

### Program Leadership and Staff

To reach the six goals, KISR! is guided by a group of leaders from the four partners. These professionals comprise the KISR! Leadership Team and hold one another accountable for executing the program. KISR! liaisons are identified at every KISR! school to communicate regularly with their students. Liaisons ensure appropriate communication takes place to support the academic needs of each KISR! student. Two Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS) KISR! education specialists work with the liaisons to promote school stability and problem-solve for each student. They help with enrollment and

communicate with the school liaisons and other school leaders about the needs of these students.

### Information-sharing Tools

To improve communication and data sharing between the partners, KISR! uses two tools:

- *Learning Partnership Dashboard (LPD)*. This student information dashboard includes over 50 data points for each KISR! student, including education and child welfare data. The information is regularly updated so that the stability and success of individual students can be monitored on an ongoing basis. The LPD enables liaisons, education specialists, and program leadership to support individual students and track their progress related to academics, attendance, discipline, extracurricular activities, and more. Cincinnati Public Schools maintains the LPD and ensures education records and JFS data are current for each student.
- *Judicial Bench Card for Education Success*. This tool is used by all eight juvenile dependency court magistrates during KISR! review hearings. It helps stimulate discussion about school issues and ensure education needs are being addressed.

### School Enrollment/Higher Education Assistance

KISR! is also using creative approaches to address school enrollment and higher education, two issues that are especially difficult for students in foster care.

- The Cincinnati Public Schools “No Barrier Enrollment” process and automatic waiver of school fees based on communication with HCJFS ensure KISR! students have efficient school transitions. These efforts are proving extremely successful, with 100% enrollment of new students at the beginning of the school year.

- Partnering with the Higher Education Mentor Initiative (HEMI) provides many KISR! juniors and seniors with mentors who motivate and support them to seek higher education opportunities. Over 50 KISR! students have participated in HEMI, and in 2014 10 of the 15 scholarships for higher education given by HEMI went to KISR! students.

KISR! is improving school outcomes for students in care in Cincinnati Public Schools. New information-sharing tools, effective coordination across systems, and leadership within the legal, child welfare, and school systems, and educational support of each student in foster care underlie this success. KISR! plans to continue this work in the months and years ahead, with a focus on sustaining the existing model and interventions; using and analyzing data to improve and expand the program; and seeking funding to implement additional interventions and enhancements.

### More Resources

#### Kids in School Rule! - Child Welfare Information Gateway

[www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/edcollaborations/kisr/#tab=summary](http://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/edcollaborations/kisr/#tab=summary)

#### “Kids in School Rule! Makes a Difference for Foster Children” from Hamilton County Job and Family Services

[www.hcjfs.org/kids-in-school-rule-makes-a-difference-for-foster-children/](http://www.hcjfs.org/kids-in-school-rule-makes-a-difference-for-foster-children/)

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This article was based on a recent report, “Kids in School Rule! Today and Tomorrow,” by the KISR! Leadership Team, released in May 2015.

### Education Training and Technical Assistance

The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education at the ABA Center on Children and the Law provides states training and technical assistance. Some sample topics:

- **Identifying Key Goals and Priorities:** Guiding states through a process of identifying their strengths and areas needing improvement, and prioritizing their policy and practice goals.
- **Addressing Data Collection and Information Sharing:** Assisting jurisdictions identify what information needs to be collected and shared across systems, and addressing federal and state confidentiality laws.
- **Promoting Positive Court Practices:** Working closely with the judiciary to improving educational outcomes for youth in care. Providing expertise to lawyers practicing before the court and enhancing the knowledge and attention of legal advocates related to education issues.
- **Implementing Fostering Connections:** Helping states develop plans to implement the education provisions of the Fostering Connections Act.
- **Building Knowledge of Related Laws and Policies:** Sharing legal expertise in a wide range of child welfare and educational laws and policies affecting youth in care.

To request training or technical assistance, send an email to [ccleducation@americanbar.org](mailto:ccleducation@americanbar.org)