# 1 in 5 High Schoolers Involved with Child Welfare: Response from a Teacher Turned Researcher

Family & Community Health

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On Tuesday, June 10, 2014, PolicyLab released a report, *Supporting the Needs of Students Involved with the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice System in the School District of Philadelphia,* at a press conference in partnership with the City, School District of Philadelphia (SDP), Department of Human Services (DHS), Philadelphia School Reform Commission, and Mayor's Office of Education.

### What We Found

Apart from the sheer magnitude of students involved with child welfare or juvenile justice in the School District—17% overall and greater than a third of students in many of our comprehensive high schools—the report describes the significant challenges that these students face.

Students involved with DHS are more likely to receive special education services and have poorer educational outcomes than their uninvolved peers. At the high school level, many of these students are concentrated in comprehensive schools where all students, regardless of DHS involvement, are struggling academically.

Our findings suggests that perhaps one solution to address the disparities in educational success is to provide resources to the schools facing the greatest challenges, so all students in those buildings can have the necessary supports to thrive in the classroom.

**My Personal Experience**

As the project director of the study and a former SDP high school science teacher, our findings resonated with me in a personal way. When I stood before my class, I had a feeling that some of my students were "involved with the system," but had no idea to what extent. I taught five periods, each with approximately 32 students. Now I know that about 1 in every 3 students on my roster was involved with DHS in some way, at some time.

Our research calls to mind the specific experiences of my students. Jamir* moved to a group home after his father passed away. Mark* came to school exhausted because he couldn't sleep well at his grandma's house. Janet's* report card was always picked up by her parole officer. These students struggled academically and they were also involved with DHS. As their teacher, I faced challenges trying to address the needs of all of my students, while also trying to nurture their strengths. Now as a researcher, I ask myself, "What supports did my children deserve? What resources would have helped me as their teacher?"

**So What Can We Do?**

From our report, many will simply take away that students involved with DHS have greater educational needs than their peers. However, and more importantly, our report quantifies the need as a means to improve the educational experience for all students in the School District—both for those involved and not involved with DHS. We highlight the opportunity and obligation to act and better serve our students.

Motivated by this report, our City partners announced their action plan. The School District and DHS will deploy 27 social workers (Education Liaisons) to Philadelphia public schools with substantial populations of students involved with DHS. I will eagerly wait to see how the Education Liaisons will be integrated into schools and trained to partner with existing school staff. Additionally, I hope that school staff will receive professional development about the unique needs of their students involved with DHS and the role of trauma and adverse experiences in the classroom.

At Tuesday's press conference, our partners announced next steps, but honestly admitted that 27 Education Liaisons in schools will not and cannot address all of the challenges we have uncovered. This can only be one part of the solution. In order for our most at-risk students to achieve academically, they also need safe school environments, appropriate behavioral health services, and caring and supportive mentors.

We all know this is a time of severe budgetary challenges and constrained resources, but I remain optimistic that DHS and the School District will continue to collaborate, identify additional gaps, and strategically invest in services to support students and staff.

We have seen a genuine commitment to collaboration from City and School District leadership in this moment of crisis. Our report marked the completion of our in-depth analysis and the beginning of actionable work. I look forward to seeing our partners take this responsibility so together, we can better serve Philadelphia's children. Lastly, I imagine that our experience in Philadelphia is similar to what's happening in other large cities in this country. I hope that our report will inspire conversations in other urban school districts about the resources and supports needed for students in their communities.

The full report can be found here.

*Names are fictional to protect the anonymity of the students. Anecdotes are based on actual student experiences.