Institute Kicks off a Lunch-and-Learn Series with a Program on the Every Student Succeeds Act

On January 5, 2017, the Institute held the first of a series of one-hour “Lunch-and-Learn” sessions to inform educators and child welfare professionals about educational issues that children in the Texas foster care system face. This series is a product of the Institute’s collaboration with Educational Service Center Region 10, Dallas CASA, CitySquare’s Transitional Resource Action Center, Disability Rights Texas, Texas Lawyers for Children, the Texas Department of Family Protective Services, Friends of Wednesday’s Child, the Rees-Jones Clinic for Foster Care Excellence, Texas Woman’s University, and the Dallas Bar Association’s Juvenile Justice Committee. This event, the first in the series, focused on informing attendees on the transportation requirements of the “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA) and was held at ESC Region 10’s conference facility in Richardson. Attendees received 1 hour of C.L.E. or C.P.E. credit, as applicable. Future sessions will also provide for social work C.E.U credits.

Pursuant to ESSA, the schools and DFPS (along with foster parents) must consider whether it would be in the foster child’s best interest to continue to go to the school he attended before his foster placement, even if the foster home is outside of that school’s attendance zone. If it is determined that he should remain in his school of origin, the law mandates that the stakeholders coordinate transportation for that child. In many cases, school is one of the only sources of stability for these children. Moreover, it is widely recognized that frequent school moves have a deleterious impact on children’s education outcomes.

Kristen Bell, a Program Attorney with Texas Lawyers for Children, opened the program with an background information about the need for ESSA and the effects of its construction. Ms. Bell explained that ESSA’s predecessors, the Fostering Connections Act and McKinney-Vento Act, were limited in effect because of their narrow application to only *homeless* children or foster youth *in emergency care*. She then explained how ESSA broadens the scope of these Acts to (1) require an effort be made to keep *all* children in foster care in their Schools of Origin (if in their best interests), (2) streamline the process if transfer is necessary, and (3) mandate communication and cooperation between the state and school districts for plans and funding.

Next, Donna Knight, the Student and Family Services Coordinator at the Red Oak Independent School District, spoke about her district’s implementation of ESSA. Ms. Knight also has personal experience and connections to the foster care system, as her parents and her daughter have opened their homes to foster children. She stressed the importance of focusing on the positive impact the changes will have on individual students, rather than any accompanying bureaucratic burdens.

Finally, Kristine Mohajer, the Education Program Specialist with DFPS, spoke about Child Protective Service’s implementation of ESSA. She explained the financial limitations schools and the Department face and emphasized collaboration at the state and local level to foster the creative solutions necessary for accomplishing ESSA’s ultimate goals. She also highlighted the importance of approaching each child’s needs and best interests on a case-by-case basis, rather than implementing blanket policies for transportation.