



House Homeland Security and Public Safety Committee
HB 348 – Training for School Resource and District Peace Officers
March 29, 2011

Texans Care for Children is a statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated exclusively to the children of Texas. We look to our broad base of community-based experts—our partners and 147 members throughout the state who together represent thousands of Texas children—to inform our work and help us in developing our legislative agenda. We also co-convene various stakeholder groups – including the Texas Children’s Mental Health Forum and the Texas Juvenile Justice Round Table - which bring together a wide range of organizations, families, and advocates around our areas of focus, which are: family economic security; infant, child and maternal health; children’s mental health; child welfare; and juvenile justice and at-risk youth.

HB 348 would help keep students with special needs, such as those with disabilities, mental health concerns, or those who have experienced trauma, in school and out of the juvenile justice system.

A disproportionate number of vulnerable youth are ending up in the Texas juvenile justice system:

- National studies estimate that 67-70% of youth in the juvenile justice system have a diagnosable mental health disorder.ⁱ
- The Texas Juvenile Probation Commission (TJPC) reports:
 - In 2006, 41% of its youth had mental health problems and 46% were chemically dependent.ⁱⁱ
 - In 2010, 37% of its youth had experienced a traumatic event in their life.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The Texas Youth Commission reports in 2010:^{iv}
 - 42% of youth sent to its facilities had a “high or moderate need for mental health treatment.”
 - 36% had a documented history of being abused or neglected.
 - 32% were identified as eligible for special education services.

Texas schools file more than 20,000 misdemeanor cases to the courts each year for truancy and minor violations of the Texas Education Code, such as disrupting a class.^v The single greatest predictor of future incarceration is a history of disciplinary referrals at school.^{vi} This trend of criminalizing student behaviors, especially those of students with special needs, could be reversed if school resource and peace officers were adequately trained in areas such as child development, children with disabilities and mental health concerns, and effective strategies and techniques in working with them. Without minimum training, school peace or resource officers are at high risk of escalating or exacerbating a situation. With training, they will be better equipped to identify potential concerns in students and to appropriately respond, helping students to succeed in school and keeping them out of the juvenile justice system.

Thank you for your time and commitment. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or the staff of Texans Care for Children at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,

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ⁱ National Center for Children in Poverty.(2009) *Adolescent Mental Health in the United States*.
http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_878.pdf

ⁱⁱ Texas Juvenile Probation Commission.(2008) *Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice Grant Application*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Texas Juvenile Probation Commission. (2010) *Strategic Plan: Fiscal Years 2011-2015*.
<http://www.tjpc.state.tx.us/publications/reports/RPTSTRAT201002.pdf>

^{iv} Texas Youth Commission. (2010) *Who Are Youth Offenders?* http://tyc.state.tx.us/research/youth_stats.html

^v Texas Appleseed. (2009) *Creating Flexibility from the Bench: Meeting the Needs of Juveniles with Mental Impairments*.
<http://www.texasappleseed.net>

^{vi} Public Policy Research Institute, Texas A&M (2005) *Study of Minority Over-Representation in the Texas Juvenile Justice System*. <http://dmcfinalreport.tamu.edu/DMRFinalReport.pdf>