**Education Advocacy as** **a Best Practice for Justice-Involved Youth**

## **What is the JPEA Program?**

In November 2015, Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) and Harris County Juvenile Probation Department (HCJPD) to help improve educational outcomes for probation-involved youth – and the Juvenile Probation Education Advocacy (JPEA) program was launched! The JPEA program is dedicated to changing the life course of youth in the juvenile justice system through educational advocacy. Specifically, the program strives to improve education services for children and youth who are “neglected,” “delinquent,” or “at-risk,” help youth successfully transition from institutionalization to further schooling or employment, and ensure continued education by building support systems to keep youth from dropping out of school.

**Why We Exist**

As many as 65-85% of youth in the juvenile justice system have a disability and likely require services to be successful in school, but many of them are not receiving those services.

Youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system face many hurdles in accessing education. Schools often refer students to the system without identifying their need for special education services, or providing the right academic and behavioral supports. This means that students are going without the supports and services that allow them to make academic and behavioral progress – the same supports and services that should be provided to them, for free, under federal law!

As a result, students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be expelled than their peers who do not have disabilities. These students are frequently referred to juvenile court for incidents that occurred at school or forced out of their classrooms due to disability-related behaviors. Families are often unaware of their child’s rights and unsure of how to collaborate with schools or advocate for their child to ensure appropriate educational services. For these reasons, a partnership with Disability Rights Texas, the federal protection and advocacy organization for people with disabilities, is a natural fit for juvenile probation departments.

## **What We Are Doing**

DRTx’s JPEA Team has worked to protect and advocate for the rights of justice-involved youth in many ways, including:

* Providing direct advocacy and technical assistance services to justice-involved youth and their families
* Working with multiple school districts to make policy changes that provide youth with appropriate educational services and minimize discriminatory referrals to the justice system
* Offering dozens of Back-to-School workshops for youth and families in English and Spanish
* Providing numerous trainings to juvenile justice actors to better equip them to assist families with their youths’ educational needs
* Joining with major community stakeholders to address barriers to school reentry and transition challenges for youth released from juvenile justice facilities and disciplinary programs
* Providing a number of self-advocacy resources so families of justice-involved youth understand their rights and how to take action

## **Real Results**

Over the past seven years, DRTx has provided services to over 2,000 probation-involved youth in Harris County, keeping them on the path to staying in school and away from the justice system. Those advocacy efforts have resulted in meaningful successes, including more evaluations for special education services; improved disability services at school; smoother reentry into community schools; reduced length or prevention of placement in disciplinary programs; identification of appropriate education programs for youth who are struggling academically; enhanced protections for youth who have experienced bullying; and obtainment of homeless services and appropriate truancy prevention interventions.

The JPEA program’s work speaks for itself. In 2021 and 2022, on average 94% of youth served were not re-referred for a new offense. Of course, these drastically reduced recidivism rates are only one way to measure the program’s success!

## **Education Advocacy as a Cost-Saving Measure**

Another way the program has demonstrated success is through cost reduction. DRTx’s services have helped youth successfully complete their conditions of probation (keeping them in their communities and out of justice facilities) and has even resulted in early termination of probation for some youth. In addition, DRTx’s advocacy has kept youth in community placements and reduced further involvement with juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. In this way, DRTx’s advocacy services have proved to be an effective cost-saving measure.

**Education Advocacy as a Best Practice**

DRTx’s educational advocacy for justice-involved youth is supported by both research and concrete results. In addition to successfully advocating for increased use of community placements and evidence-based behavior supports for our youth, the JPEA team has secured over 1,000 hours of compensatory education services to make up for educational services students should have received but didn’t. Clearly, the JPEA program has made a big impact on individual students’ lives since its 2016 inception!

Just as importantly, DRTx has tackled systemic challenges by serving as a liaison between the juvenile justice system and local school districts, helping bridge the gap between the two systems. By raising awareness with school districts about some of the most common barriers to success and discussing ways districts can improve programming for these students, the JPEA Team has seen systemic changes in school districts’ approach to education of our youth.

DRTx is excited about the positive benefits the program has yielded and encourages other probation departments and legal service organizations to consider forming a partnership with us as a best practice for serving juvenile-justice involved youth.

*DRTx is working to establish partnerships with other Texas counties to provide similar services. If your county is interested in starting this type of program, please contact Sarah Beebe, Supervising Attorney and Program Director, at (832) 681-8211 or* [*sbeebe@disabilityrightstx.org*](mailto:sbeebe@disabilityrightstx.org)*.*