

# Partner Profile: AISD

During its seven years in existence, The Children's Partnership has forged valuable relationships with community organizations, state and federal agencies and mental health care providers to form a collaborative system of care for children with complex needs throughout Travis County.

While each of these respective 'partners' has played a significant role in helping The Children's Partnership expand its impact and provide assistance to more and more families each year, in this issue we highlight the Austin Independent School District (AISD).



Since the beginning of The Children's Partnership, and even prior to its formal inception, school districts have been involved in varying degrees to help collaborate services and funds on behalf of families with children who experience mental, physical and developmental challenges. AISD, for example, has served as a champion in understanding that a child's self esteem and self perception are tied closely to their adjustment and success at school and that a strong connection exists between academic excellence and the successful management of mental health needs. Fortunately, others in both special and general education have embraced the concept of a school environment serving as a safe place for all children to learn, and as a result, many school districts are seeking resources within

the community through initiatives such as The Children's Partnership.

## The Critical Role of Schools

In simplest terms, schools are critical to the mission of The Children's Partnership and the Travis County systems of care because school is where children spend significant time. It also serves as a defined environment where all children can reach their fullest potential. Once a school district becomes part of the systems of care, they embrace the core beliefs – child-centered, family driven, community based and culturally competent – that are vital to systems of care sustainability. This collaboration becomes one of mutual respect, with a shared interest in both educating the child while ensuring his/her mental health. By speaking the same language and sharing the same vision and goals, the Children's Partnership, schools, and most importantly, families all benefit.

The Children's Partnership works with schools to support children who have been diagnosed with significant mental health challenges. These children may be enrolled in special education classes, have involvement with a mental health entity, have experienced hospitalization and have the propensity for aggressive and suicidal behavior. Their families also may have prior or current involvement with the Juvenile Justice and Child Protective Services systems.

The Youth and Family Assessment Center (YFAC) is a collaborative initiative to expand the community's system of care efforts. YFAC provides a strength-based, holistic wraparound approach to children and youth at-risk of serious behavior problems and school drop-out and works with children who are experiencing episodic truancy, decrease in grades, increase

in disruptive behavior in class, withdrawal or increasingly aggressive behaviors. These children/youth may suddenly demonstrate a significant decrease in functioning or may have been slowly deteriorating in their functioning.

## Individualized, Family-Based Approach

While the needs of each individual child or youth differ, generally, the family and youth define the need for a mix of traditional and non-traditional services. For YFAC, these may include:

- Additional school support (tutoring)
- Evaluations to determine need for mental health intervention
- Enrichment activities
- Mentoring as a way to provide both a role model and non-traditional therapy
- Basic needs support (housing, utility, clothing)

Many of the families in need tend to be so financially on the margin that any crisis could potentially send them into chaos and destabilize the home environment. Thus the concept is to support the family holistically so as to address the needs of the identified youth, while also supporting the parents in their functioning and any basic needs issues. The outcome is a strengthened family and home environment with the increased ability to support a child/youth with complex needs.



## Our Partners:

- **Community Resource Coordination Group**
- **Austin Travis County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center**
- **Travis County Juvenile Probation Department**
- **Region XIII Education Service Center**
- **Texas Health and Human Services Commission**
- **Travis County Health and Human Services and Veteran Services**
- **Region VII Department of Family and Protective Services**
- **Austin Independent School District**
- **Manor Independent School District**
- **Pflugerville Independent School District**
- **Huston-Tillotson College**

## Identifying New School Partners

Since AISD joined The Children's Partnership, Manor Independent School District (MISD) and Pflugerville Independent School District (PISD) have come on board. School districts that wish to successfully serve their children understand the need for community partnership and they value the systems of care approach and the power of collaboration to serve children with complex needs.

According to Laura Peveto, Intervention and Prevention Manager for the Office of Children Services, "School districts are continuing to become more aware that they cannot tackle this issue alone, and without the support of coalitions such as The Children's Partnership, children with severe mental health challenges can negatively impact the resources of schools, both in terms of finances and the valuable energy of teachers and disciplinary teams needed to serve a larger student population."

## Family Profile – The Kuffels



At only 16 years of age, Austin resident Dane Kuffel was already heading down a path that his mother, Lisa, openly referred to as a crisis situation for the entire family. The young man, who had been diagnosed at age four with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) based on his inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, had already experienced ongoing behavioral problems in school and had had minor brushes with the law.

It was during this time that Dane's probation officer at Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center offered a contact that would make a profound impact on the well-being of Dane, his mother and his two brothers.

The officer recommended the Kuffels to The Children's Partnership, who then set up an appointment with Lisa to evaluate the family's needs and goals and determine a workable program to successfully achieve those goals and re-establish a sense of family unity. "To be perfectly honest, I really did not know why The Children's Partnership was entering my life at the time," said Lisa. "I thought I was just complying with the court's probation's rules for my son, but had no idea what a tremendous asset they would become to my entire family."

The Children's Partnership became involved with the Kuffel's on numerous fronts, including advocating for Dane on several occasions at school to help work with his teachers as well as during his court cases. This support played a key role in helping the young man enter the Juvenile Justice Center's CHOICES initiative, an intensive, residential program for kids with substance abuse. The Children's Partnership also helped financially by providing access to mental health and family counseling, mentors, and medications through Austin Travis County Mental Health Mental Retardation (ATCMHMR).

As a result of the Kuffel's interaction with the Juvenile Justice Center and ATCMHMR, Dane was further diagnosed with severe ADHD, polysubstance abuse and borderline schizoaffective disorder. Though at one point classified as "slow" in school, the young man went on to become a straight A student following him completion of CHOICES. "If nothing else, The Children's Partnership was a great resource just by being there for me during times I felt like giving up," said Lisa. "They not only encouraged me but helped in setting specific and attainable goals and assessing and re-assessing what worked and what didn't work for my family."

Dane is now 18, has recently finished in the top 10 in his high school program through Austin Community College (ACC), and has received a \$1,000 scholarship to attend ACC again next semester. When not in the classroom, he works part time with hopes of saving enough money to someday buy his own car. Dane is also an accomplished artist whose work can be found throughout the Kuffel's home. One of his pieces earned \$1,500 when auctioned at a local charitable event.

The favorable impact of The Children's Partnership on the Kuffel family extends far beyond Dane and his family. Lisa regularly offers assistance to other families going through similar experiences, and is continually amazed at the number of caring people in the Austin community so committed to keeping families health, enriched and intact.

"I can't help but want to support others and let them know that there is hope for them," said Lisa. "I am a walking testimony, and even though my family still has obstacles that we must overcome, we feel so much better equipped in handling them."