

Fighting for Children's Rights

**Fostering Success:**  
**Strategies to Empower Youth to Succeed as Adults**  
*Report of Proceedings*

February 14, 2008



Fighting for Children's Rights

1801 N. University Drive, 3rd Floor, Suite B, Coral Springs, FL 33071  
Phone: 954-796-0860 Fax: 954-796-0862 [floridaschildrenfirst.org](http://floridaschildrenfirst.org)

# Fostering Success: Strategies to Empower Youth to Succeed as Adults February 14, 2008 - Report of Proceedings

## Introduction

*This forum was Florida's first concerted effort to bring together the advocates, researchers and programs most knowledgeable about the transitional needs of Florida's foster youth. The goal of the forum was to provide a common base of knowledge to the individuals who work directly with youth as well as to serve as an idea incubator by sharing novel programs and promising practices that can be replicated. Finally, the forum was intended to assist the individuals who make public policy decisions that affect youth aging out of state care.*

## Education Panel

**Kele Williams, University of Miami Children and Youth Law Clinic, moderator:**

Ms. Williams asserted that the education of children in foster care in Florida is of paramount concern. That need was recognized by the Florida Legislature in 2004 when it enacted legislation that requires inter-agency agreements between child welfare agencies and local school districts. A study conducted by the University of Miami Children and Youth Law Center and Florida's Children First showed however, that only half Florida's counties had implemented the law by entering into inter-agency agreements.

**Kathleen McNaught, Legal Center for Foster Care and Education /American Bar Association:**

The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education recently released its *Blueprint for Change: Education Success for Children in Foster Care*. This Blueprint is the culmination of years of study and input from around the country. It sets eight goals for youth, sets benchmarks for each goal, and provides national, state and local examples of successful programs. This Blueprint creates a framework for revision and implementation of laws and policies that will enhance education outcomes for youth. The entire document can be viewed at [www.abanet.org/child/education/blueprint](http://www.abanet.org/child/education/blueprint).

Ms. McNaught focused on five of the eight goals as being most pertinent for older foster youth for purposes of this forum. For each goal she highlighted a few of the benchmarks that Florida should look to in judging its efforts to serve children. She also provided specific examples of national and state programs that address each goal.

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After a Welcome by Andrea L. Moore and a call to action by Howard Talenfeld, President of Florida's Children First, the forum opened with the Education Panel:

**GOAL 1: Right to Remain in Same School.**

This goal addresses the efforts needed to keep children in out-of-home care from having to change schools.

Many, if not most youth in foster care experience far more school transitions than their counterparts who are not in care. Transitions for foster youth are less likely to occur at natural breaks in the school calendar. Specific benchmarks that Florida should keep in mind when serving youth are:

- The need to consider school stability and continuity when making foster care decisions and placements;
- Recruitment of foster parents within school boundaries so children can stay at their home school;
- Creation of the right to remain at school of origin and committing funds for transportation to fulfill that right; and
- Maintenance of appropriate education setting and services for youth with disabilities who come into state care.

**GOAL 2: Seamless Transition Between Schools.**

This goal addresses the efforts needed to make school changes; when they do happen, supports making them as least disruptive as possible; and suggests including additional supports needed to successfully complete the transition.

Large numbers of youth do not attend school immediately after coming into care. Some may wait weeks prior to re-enrollment. Delays are often caused by the failure of paperwork to catch up to the youth in their new placement. Even when youth are immediately enrolled, the paperwork lag impedes placement in appropriate classroom settings. As a consequence, youth lose credits, repeat courses, or miss subjects entirely. Benchmarks Florida should strive for include:

- Practices/procedures that allow for immediate or expedited enrollment;
- Clarity on who can enroll a student in school;

- Practices/procedures that provide for timely and accurate transfers of records and credits;
- Practices/procedures that allow youth to promptly participate in academic and extracurricular programs; and
- Timely delivery of services to children with disabilities.

**GOAL 6: Involving and Empowering Youth.**

This goal addresses youth involvement and engagement, and includes the issue of participation in court proceedings.

While the reason for youth participation in court is for purposes beyond education, the presence of youth in court can bring education issues to the forefront of court proceedings. Ms. McNaught noted that encouraging youth to be engaged in education decision making and planning helps them take an active role in their educational future and gives direction and guidance to the professionals and adults advocating on their behalf. Participation in court proceedings, school meetings, the special education process, and transition planning for postsecondary education or jobs allows youth to become advocates on their own behalf. Appropriately trained professionals should facilitate this participation. Key benchmarks for this goal are:

- Involve youth in education planning and attending court hearings;
- Support youth involvement through training and transportation; and
- Encourage youth with disabilities to participate in the education process, especially transition planning.

**GOAL 7: Supportive Adult as Education Advocate.**

This goal addresses both education advocates (one person or several people who can stand up for the child, speak on their behalf, and mentor and guide them in their education goals and pursuits) and legal education decision

makers (individual or individuals who have the legal authority to make education decisions).

Youth need supportive adults to help them achieve their education goals and pursuits. It is critical that all students, and in particular students with disabilities, have an available adult who has the authority to make education decisions on their behalf. It is also critical that youth have adults available to advocate for their rights and needs, and to serve as mentors as they navigate the educational system. Trauma-sensitive training and a full understanding of federal disability law is necessary for any adult who advocates for a child in care or serves as a surrogate parent or authorized decision maker. Benchmarks for this goal are:

- Trained and supportive advocates;
- Clearly identified decision makers;
- Right to qualified, independent surrogates for youth with disabilities; and
- Education supports that extend beyond the child welfare case.

#### **GOAL 8: Postsecondary Education.**

This goal 8 addresses postsecondary education pursuits, and includes the important issue of continuing child welfare and court involvement for youth over 18. While extending jurisdiction for youth over 18 is important for many reasons, education pursuits are a critical part of this bigger issue. In addition, these youth need career and college counseling, assistance with applications and financial aid, and support while participating in their educational program of choice. Benchmarks include:

- Youth are exposed to and prepared for post-secondary education opportunities;
- Youth receive help with application and financial aid materials; and
- Youth have access to additional supports throughout post-secondary education; and
- Youth with disabilities pursuing higher education receive supports under state and federal law.

**Ms. Williams:** At the conclusion of Ms. McNaught's presentation, Ms. Williams noted that there is currently a bill with the Legislature that addresses some of the issues that Ms. McNaught raised. Among other things it would allow the immediate enrollment of foster youth with records to catch up later, it would also require that the dependency court judge ascertain who the education decision maker is and to appoint an educational surrogate if none exists. [Editor's note: House Bill 769 passed the Florida House, but did not make it to the floor Senate before the 2008 legislative session concluded.]

**Drs. Denise Crammer, Ron Cugno, and James Pann, Nova Southeastern University Fischler School of Education and Human Services:** presented information on their project, *Aging Out: A Transitional Pathway from Foster Care to College and Beyond*. They are planning, implementing and researching a supportive transition program for a former foster youth who is enrolled as a full-time student at Nova Southeastern University.

Their research objectives are first to develop a theoretical conceptualization of the experience of foster youth in the transition from secondary to post-secondary education milieu. Second, to initiate the process of enhancing and validating the supportive model proposed to be utilized with the foster youth participant.

They note that former foster youth face a number of risk factors that may lead to academic failure, including

- Mobility;
- Homelessness;
- Criminal justice involvement;
- Limited transportation;
- Substance abuse;
- Teenage prostitution;
- Mental health issues;
- Maltreatment; and
- Community Challenges.

Although the project is in the midst of its first year, they have already learned a number of important lessons;

- The scholarship application process needs to be refined to make it easier for youth to complete.
- Many youth disqualify themselves by failing to follow through in the application process.
- New students need frequent mentoring– at least bi-weekly.
- The availability of services to meet student needs does not necessarily ensure success
- Youth exiting foster care have trust issues with adults.
- Youth have difficulty with time management and procrastination.
- Youth with a history of trauma, may use avoidance as a coping mechanism.
- High mobility increases social and educational disruption, the consequences of which are felt throughout the youth’s educational career.
- Need for continued counseling and/or therapy.

As they continue to gather information and work with their student, the researchers are developing an online academic transitional “toolbox” for aging-out foster youth. They will work on developing a university-wide transitional support system to advise and continually mentor aging-out foster youth, as well as an aging-out foster youth post-secondary transitional center.

**Dr. Cugno** specifically recommended that the state look toward making educational records available on-line in order to reduce the lag time in enrollment as well as to facilitate placement in appropriate courses.

**Ms. McNaught** was later asked to comment on that recommendation and she noted that the data in electronic systems is only as good as the person who entered the data – so that some states that have tried electronic records have not

had great successes where the data entry was lacking

**Dr. Earleen Smiley, Deputy Superintendent Broward County Schools:**

The Broward County School system is part of the first local inter-agency agreement in Florida directed toward the education of youth in foster care. Though they have not resolved all issues, Broward has experienced a great deal of success with their agreement.

There are two staff positions that are critical to the success of the agreement. The first is the Dependency Court Liaison who serves as a link between the school system, the community based care provider and the court. This school board employee confers with school personnel, attends dependency hearings, processes special transportation requests, tracks and monitors court-ordered education actions like psycho-educational testing, tracks the “salmon” forms – basic information sharing document. He or she also works on intra agency and cross agency staff development.

The second key position is the “foster care designee” who serves as the primary contact at each school for the child welfare worker. They coordinate with other school personnel, maintain the student’s records, and document interventions by maintaining a confidential folder on each student in foster care. They communicate with the child welfare agency staff, parents and caregivers. They work to facilitate transportation.

In Broward, both the school system and the child welfare agency play a key role in maintaining educational stability for youth in foster care. ChildNet – the community based care provider- attempts to place students in foster care homes within home school boundaries or as close as possible to home schools. The school system then makes every effort to provide

transportation to keep the child in the same school (or a previous school) if it is in the child's best interest. In the 2006-07 school year the school was able to accommodate 90% of the special transportation requests. If the school cannot provide bus transportation, it will offer mileage reimbursement to foster parents.

Broward has made a concerted effort to recruit and train volunteers to serve as educational surrogate parents. They also conduct extensive training of both school and child welfare personnel on the identification of youth in care who are eligible for the appointment of surrogate parents. Each month ChildNet reviews the list of assigned students and updates the school for monitoring or action if needed. Currently they have 52 surrogates and 99 children assigned to a surrogate.

In response to a question about records, Dr. Smiley noted that key school records in Broward are now available to students and parents electronically via the internet.

Audience Suggestions & Concerns

Need Point of contact at the Dept. of Education to send the FCAT scores to the CBCs. CBCs need to know scores in order to know where help is needed.

Local school boards should give CBCs access to on-line systems. Immediate access to class schedule, grades, absences would be helpful.

Local school boards can help by providing CBC with school curriculum on classes that are considered "life skills" such as health, and finance.

Change the law stating that an 18 year old in high school can't get records, as they must go to "parent."

Failure to transfer of ALL school records for students with disabilities from one district to another (or to agencies like DJJ) is a very serious issue.

**Disability Panel**

***Melissa Lader Barnhardt, SunTrust,***  
**moderator:**

Ms. Lader Barnhardt noted that a large population of foster youth has one or more disabilities and therefore we should undertake a more comprehensive look at how to serve those youth.

***Dr. Herman Fishbein, Broward Children's Services Council:***

Dr. Fishbein presented information about successful efforts in Broward County to help young people with disabilities (ages 16-22) enter the workforce as paid summer interns. He began by reminding everyone that when working with youth we should always focus on their strengths rather than weaknesses (abilities vs. disabilities). Moreover he noted that we have to break down the "silos" so that agencies, programs and service providers work together to serve children.

Dr. Fishbein provided an overview of the employment situation in Broward. The unemployment rate for persons with disabilities in Broward is over 70%, and less than 1% of adults eligible for the Ticket to Work Program (a Social Security work incentive) take advantage of it. Moreover, the population of individuals with disabilities who work has been stagnant for decades – even within the federal government itself, which has seen a decrease in the number of employees with disabilities.

In order to address the very real need to help young people with disabilities obtain employment, the Broward Children's Services Council (CSC) embarked on an ambitious project starting in 2004. They began with a business plan, surveyed the population, conducted focus groups and interviews. The CSC brought many community partners together to form the Special Needs Advisory Committee (SNAC) and related work groups comprising over 90 provider and



therapist member agencies. The mission of the program is to provide school-to-work transition instruction in the classroom, and on-site at business and community based work sites for individuals with disabilities age 16-22.

The CSC's research showed that there are approximately 50,000 students (birth to 22) in Broward with disabilities. Many parents, agencies and specialists don't know where to go for help. In order to assist CSC funded (through SNAC) a special needs hotline that is accessed through the 211 community help line number. This provides an entry point for persons seeking information and assistance. It provides community referrals, community presentations, operates a special needs hotline, and maintains a special needs database.

Next, the CSC created Summer STEPS (Supported Training Employment Program for Special Needs), a program that assists youth in preparing to enter the work world. It assists youth to develop communication, social and employability skills. It provides real world work experience and brings community involvement to bear by supporting work activities with onsite social skills training and support. Job sites are accessible to participants; each location has a fulltime job coach (mentor) on-site, as well as a designated supervisor to interface with. In the summer of 2007, 62 participants were paid \$6.57 an hour for a 30-hour work weeks at a location of their choice. In summer 2008, 95 participants will be employed in the program. Dr. Fishbein's PowerPoint presentation included a list of job sites involved in the STEPS program, located at 22 community sites, which included office buildings, schools, government agencies, hospitals, and not-for profit agencies.

The STEPS program shows that when provided the opportunity and the support, the community will gladly support inclusive practices. The community will benefit from an informed work place and become an enabling force for change. Employing youth with

disabilities assists community partners with gaining better understanding and insight into individuals with disabilities. The results for the youth were impressive as well. Ninety-eight percent of participants successfully completed the program and were very satisfied with it. Some were given job offers for continued work. From cost effectiveness standpoint the program was also a success as it cost less than most "special needs" summer camps.

After Broward created the STEPS program, it next its focus on the creation of a specialized after-school program for youth age 16-22. LIFT – Learning Independence thru Focused Transition is a community-based after-school program. It focuses on social skills, employability, communication and relationship building. Classes vary somewhat by location. For example Youth attend class 5 days a week at 1 of 4 YMCA sites; youth enrolled through the ARC and UCP have combined work and class experience; and the League of Hard of Hearing classes includes driver's education. All sites include community activities as well as after school and out of school time.

Dr. Fishbein offered strategies to engage and sustain community involvement in efforts to help youth with disabilities transition to adulthood. He emphasized the value of collaboration and agency capacity building as a positive force for change.

***Dr. Deborah Mulligan, M.D., Director, Institute for Child Health Policy, Nova Southeastern University:***

Dr. Mulligan addressed the health care needs of youth aging out of state care. Dr. Mulligan described transition as a "deliberate, coordinated provision of developmentally appropriate and culturally competent health assessments, counseling and referrals." She noted that successful transition must incorporate: self determination, person centered planning,

preparation for adult health care, work/independence, inclusion in community life – all of which must start early.

Dr. Mulligan described how health impacts all aspects of life. Good health facilitates success in the classroom and at work. In order to remain healthy, youth need to understand their health and participate in health care decisions. Unfortunately, she noted that studies show that as many as one third of children in foster care do not receive adequate healthcare. Children are not immunized, remain untested for HIV even when at high risk, and significant problems go undetected or untreated. Children in state care are more likely than their peers to have medical, developmental and mental health concerns.

Although many young adults who age out of care remain eligible for Medicaid for a few years, there are other significant barriers that preclude provision of adequate care. There are delays in obtaining Medicaid cards, and inadequate reimbursement to health care providers which results in an inadequate number of providers and barriers within managed care. There is often little or no coordination in the transfer of care from a pediatrician to an adult health care provider. Adults may also have more difficulty in locating and obtaining access to specialist providers. These difficulties are compounded as young adults are more transient and have no health care advocate. When they make it to the doctor, former foster youth often have additional concerns due to lack of family health history as well as an inadequate record of their own prior treatment.

Dr. Mulligan identified 6 steps to ensuring a successful transition to adult oriented health care. First, a primary health care provider must be identified, along with other specialists that the young adult will need to consult. Second, the health care provider must identify and address the core knowledge and skills that the youth needs. This can be done through checklists, outcome lists

and other teaching tools. Third, the youth must have an up-to-date medical summary that is portable and accessible. Fourth, a health care transition plan should be written for the youth starting at age 14. Key factors like what services will be needed, who will provide them, and how they will be financed should be addressed in this plan. For youth in care who have transition plans, health care is a component that should be coordinated so that plans are not divergent. Fifth, youth should be provided with preventative screenings. Following screening guidelines will catch problems early, prevent secondary disabilities and help teens stay healthy. Finally, sixth, is to ensure affordable continuous health insurance.

Dr. Mulligan concluded by highlighting a model program in Jacksonville that addresses healthcare transition in a comprehensive fashion. Jacksonville Health and Transition Services (JaxHATS). JaxHATS provides a medical home for transitioning youth. They offer adolescent primary care services, education and care coordination, medical referrals and transitional support beyond health care matters. JaxHATS aims to help youth manage their own health care, learn to access adult services, learn how to get and stay healthy, and to plan and implement their own education/vocational goals.

***Dr. Michele (Mickie) McGuire, Professor, Fischler School of Education and Human Services Nova Southeastern University:***

Dr. McGuire is an expert in the special educational needs of children. She inspired the audience with her discussion of how zealous advocacy by caring, committed adults can make a world of difference for youth with special educational needs. Dr. McGuire addressed the need for youth in state care to have educational advocates who can address the individual needs of each youth, and emphasized the need for advocates to become familiar with the legal protections provided for children and youth with



disabilities.

She urged advocates to focus on the services, not the disability label given to the child. Dr. McGuire stated that the purpose of labeling children as having a specific disability is not to place confines or limitations on that child or the services for which the child is eligible. Instead, the label assigned should serve as an entry point or portal to obtaining the breadth of education and related services specifically needed by that child. Advocates who understand the needs of the child and the services available in the school district can help an education team craft, with input from the child, an individualized education plan designed to maximize a child's educational experience and, ultimately, self-advocacy and independence.

**Mr. Markell Harrison-Jackson, Ph.D.  
Candidate and Assistant Principal:**

Mr. Harrison-Jackson shared his personal journey through the foster care and education systems. He entered foster care at the age of 2 and resided in 43 homes before he turned 18. Mr. Harrison-Jackson's story is familiar at the start. He was placed into special education classes and told that he wasn't really cut out for education, but Mr. Harrison-Jackson did not let that prognosis dictate his life. With the encouragement of a mentor and a lot of hard work, Mr. Harrison-Jackson not only completed high school, but he also received an undergraduate degree, 3 masters degrees and has completed the coursework for his PhD.

Mr. Harrison-Jackson's doctoral research builds on his own personal knowledge of the strength and resiliency of youth in foster care. His dissertation topic is "*Predictors of Academic Achievement Outcomes of Foster Care Alumni Adults*," for which he is conducting a secondary data analysis with national child welfare expert Dr. Peter Pecora of the Univ. of Washington and Casey Family programs.

Mr. Harrison-Jackson shared some of the dismal statistics concerning outcomes for adults who aged-out of state care. He explained that many of the environmental factors that are attendant upon children in state care contribute to poor academic outcomes. Moreover, research has shown that children in foster care are at a disadvantage for achieving positive self-reliance and academic achievement outcomes. He explained that the predictors for resilience are a temperament that elicits positive responses from others, relationships that promote trust, autonomy, initiatives and connections, and community support systems that reinforce self-esteem and self-efficacy. The research he is engaging in hopes to answer some of the questions as to how child-serving systems can help youth build the skill set that enables them to achieve academic success.

Audience Suggestions & Concerns

Students with disabilities, whether they have an IEP or 504, need to understand section 504 and how it applies to accommodations in college. This should be done as part of the transition plan.

More information and education is needed through out the state regarding surrogate parents for children with disabilities in the foster care system.

Employment Panel

**Misty Stenslie, Deputy Director, Foster Care Alumni of America, moderator:**

Ms. Stenslie began the panel by describing the work of the Foster Care Alumni of America which serves as the family for the thousands of adults who spent some or all of their childhood in foster care. Between the sessions throughout the day, the audience viewed some of the post cards created by Foster Care Alumni. These visual expressions show many of

the emotions, reactions, and reality of life in and after foster care. One of the realities of life in foster care is the challenge of obtaining employment – the subject of the final panel. This panel featured several innovative programs that help young people acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to join the workforce.

**Gail Browne, Ph.D. President and CEO of G4S Youth Services:**

Ms. Browne's organization has a long history of serving at-risk youth primarily through the juvenile justice system. G4S operates the Avon Park Youth Academy and STREET Smart Aftercare youth programs. A substantial focus of their programs is to assist youth with educational, vocational, and employment programs so that youth are prepared to become productive members of the workforce.

Avon Park Youth Academy was created with the vision of establishing a normal environment in which teens could learn both vocational skills and community living skills so that they would be prepared to join the workforce. The Academy is a model of partnership between the Dept. of Juvenile Justice, the Polk County School Board, and the Home Builder's Institute. The Home Builders Institute provides training in the construction trade for 80 youth at the Academy.

The Academy helps youth obtain certificates that enable them to obtain at least entry level jobs in trades that pay a living wage. They earn high school diplomas or GEDs and learn independent living skills that will assist their transition to the community. In addition to construction trades, youth may work in culinary arts, desktop publishing, horticulture, automotive service, and computer assisted design. Youth take 840 hours of vocational training in addition to their academic curriculum.

Much of the work done to refurbish the campus and to construct new buildings was done

by youth as part of their vocational education. They also work in school-based businesses such as a plant nursery, print shop, automotive service shop, and bowling alley.

Part of the program's success in working with youth in the delinquency system is the services that are provided after the youth have completed the residential component. The STREET Smart aftercare program provides intensive support and services to the youth in the community. Over the course of 12 months the youth will be contacted 130 times. For the first 3 months they are seen in person 4 times a week and spoken to on the phone once a week. Contacts are reduced as the youth demonstrates independent living skills. It runs via a performance based incentive program, youth receive a graduation pack with interview clothes and alarm clock. They can earn gift certificates, tools for employment, and scholarships to assist with tuition and books.

STREET Smart provides employment support services which can range from help in finding a job, supplying uniforms to purchasing tools, paying deposits and smoothing over problems. The STREET Smart program runs with the cooperation and good relationships between the youth and their families, the court system, employers, teachers and the community. Efforts are made to connect youth with community resources such as job development centers, mental health and substance abuse treatment programs, transportation, and medical care.

Some of the services provided by STREET Smart include career counseling, assistance with completing applications and preparing resumes, interviewing skills, and leisure skills. The program offers special assistance with transportation expenses, the first month of rent and even tattoo removal.

The success of Avon Park Academy and the STREET Smart program can be seen in its

outcomes – 90% of resident youth earn a vocational certificate. Reading and math scores average 2 grade level increase over a 9 month period and 55% earn a high school diploma or GED. One year after completion, 70% of youth are working, in school or seeking work. Youth gain independent living skills, with 96% of residents showing improvement in the independent living assessment.

**Dr. Judith Stein, Executive Director for the National Institute for Educational Options (NIEO) at Nova Southeastern University’s Fischler School of Education and Human Services.**

Dr. Stein’s presentation provided a good contrast to Dr. Browne’s. Her work focuses on education of youth in local public schools. She began with some interesting statistics about high school and college completion. Only 68% of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students will actually complete high school. (Note that number is much lower for youth in foster care.) Eighty-four percent of high school students anticipate earning a college degree, but more than 50% of students who start college do not complete it. Students who anticipate earning a degree are unlikely to prepare for a career following high school.

The reasons youths drop out are: boring classes, too many absences, peer group, too much personal freedom, and failing in school. For those youth who do make it to college, nearly 30% of high school graduates require some remediation. Interestingly, while students are taking more academic classes, they are not reading better, learning more science, or improving their math skills.

Taking these facts, she has identified 3 main problems in education – engagement of youth in attending and completing school; academic/technical achievement and need to transition to post-secondary education without need for remediation.

Dr. Stein then described programs initiated by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) which improved outcomes for youths who were medium and high risk. The primary focus of her discussion was the use of Career Academies to address the challenges for this population of students.

Career Academies are part of the high school reform and small schools models. They employ teams of teachers to work with the same set of students. They present a high academic and technical curriculum. The emphasis is on keeping at-risk students in school through graduation. Career Academies engage students by using an integrated, active, project-based curriculum. They offer industry internships during high school and focus on college/technical school career attainment. They succeed with strong partnerships between the school, business, industry, and community.

Several reviewing and accrediting organizations evaluate Career Academies. Dr. Stein described the review process used by the Manatee County schools. The process allowed them to determine which of their six Career Academies were up to par. She described several of the different Career Academies in Manatee County as an example of the variety and innovation academies can take on.

Public schools can undertake to create programs like Career Academies that redefine the high school experience. Programs succeed where students want to come to school, teachers want to teach, and communities and employers benefit from having well-prepared graduates.

**Khalil Zeinieh, substituting for Dr. Brittany Birkin, Agency for Workforce Innovation:**

The Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) is responsible for Florida's workforce development and early learning programs. Mr. Zeinieh used his time with the panel to discuss a new AWI

initiative directed specifically at summer youth. AWI will use the federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), an existing program, to partner with business leaders who are willing to hire and mentor at-risk youth.

Employers will benefit by potentially reducing turnover, improving retention, and building a stable workforce, with the added bonus of a tax credit. There are no limits on the number of employees for whom an employer can take a tax credit. Tax credits are based on a percentage of wages - up to \$1,200 for summer employment and up to \$6,000 for the first year of full time employment.

The Agency is currently piloting this initiative in Miami and Jacksonville and plans to expand the program statewide by September. Current participants must meet the following criteria: Youth who perform services for an employer between May 1st and September 15<sup>th</sup>, Youth who are 16 but not yet 18 on the hiring date and have never worked for the employer before, Youth who live within the Empowerment Zones (designated zip codes) in Duval and Miami-Dade county.

**Melinda Large, Regional People Director – for the Americas Region at Wal-Mart International:**

Ms. Large offered Wal-Mart’s enthusiastic support for the employment of youth exiting the foster care system. She described the work atmosphere and support provided to entry-level employees. Wal-Mart has an aggressive program for supporting entry level employees. It has a good track record for supporting youth with disabilities. Unfortunately, time ran out before Ms. Large could complete her presentation.

Copies of the presentations shown at the event are available on our website: [www.floridaschildrenfirst.org](http://www.floridaschildrenfirst.org)

**Audience Suggestions & Concerns**

It is frustrating to learn about programs that work, like the Avon Park Academy, but not see them replicated in other communities.

Youth need work experience before they turn 18 to help them develop a vision of what their future can be like – work experience is more important than formal education in developing that vision.

Community collaboration is central to empowering students. They must have the opportunity to explore their community and the community must also come to the schools.

We must create partnerships that foster employment, internships & educational opportunities

We need to engage the business community. We can help them obtain good employees and they can help us by giving real-life experiences to foster youth.

**Concluding Session**

After the employment panel concluded, Senator Nan Rich and Bob Butterworth, Secretary of the Department of Children and Families, took a few minutes to address the audience. They remarked on the breadth and variety of good ideas that were generated during the forum. They also offered their continued commitment to ensure that the State will take an active role and helping young people transition from foster care to successful adulthood.

**Florida's Children First** thanks the panelists and audience for helping to make this event a success.

*Special Thanks To*

**Our host:** Nova Southeastern University

**Event Sponsors:** Wal-Mart; Colodny, Fass, Talenfeld, Karlinsky & Abate; President’s Fest in the Park; and the Children’s Services Council of Broward County

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