

CASA Volunteers and the Education of Foster Children

Leonard Edwards, Supervising Judge, Juvenile Dependency Court, Santa Clara County, California and Past President of NCJFCJ

Summary

With judicial leadership and support, it is possible for every CASA program to have a significant impact on educational outcomes for the foster children served by volunteers.

The juvenile court has enormous responsibilities for the well-being of dependent children under the court's jurisdiction. The mandate of both federal and state law is to protect these children and keep them safe. The court must also oversee their care to ensure that they are healthy, well cared for and that they receive appropriate education. Judges cannot do this work themselves—we must rely on others to care for these children. The state provides social workers from children's services agencies and social service agencies to monitor the cases of these children and to take steps to ensure that they receive adequate health, mental health and educational services. However, social workers are typically over-worked, with high caseloads, and do not have the time to follow children to the doctor's office, to therapy sessions or to school. It is in this last area, in particular, that CASA volunteers can assist the child.

CASA volunteers can be very effective advocates for children in the school system. In Santa Clara County, the court and CASA program work closely together to improve educational outcomes for children. We do so in several ways.

First, the juvenile court judge convenes a meeting of educational leaders in the community once every three months. Those at the meeting include school principals, children's attorneys, CASA volunteers, other attorneys who practice in the juvenile dependency courts, children's services representatives and other interested parties. The meetings address issues large and small that impact educational outcomes for foster children. They include transportation, special education, new legislation and any other matters of interest to those at the meeting. We do not discuss the cases of individual children.

Second, our local CASA program has an educational specialist (a retired teacher with special training) who is ready to consult with any of the volunteers concerning educational issues facing the child they are working with. The specialist also attends the educational meetings. She provides guidance to volunteers on such issues as Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, the transfer of school records and advocacy within the school system.

Third, the presiding judge sponsors a luncheon each year for 11th- and 12th-grade foster children who have the interest and ability to go further than high school. In attendance at the luncheon are several philanthropists who are interested in assisting these children in their efforts. The goal that has been established by the judge is that every foster child who has the interest and ability to go further in his or her educational pursuits be supported in those efforts. Recently, a local university has opened its doors to this effort and will be sponsoring events on campus to acquaint foster youth with the university and help them apply and attend. Several additional philanthropists have come to these meetings. The foster children who attend these events are usually accompanied by their CASA volunteers.

Fourth, the Department of Family and Children's Services has designated one of its social workers as an expert in educational issues. This specially trained social worker is available for consultation to all social workers regarding educational issues and will assign the most difficult to herself, if necessary. This expert also works with the CASA educational specialist.

Fifth, the judge has at the bench letters to parents about their educational rights including their right to demand that the school test their child and determine whether their child should have an IEP. The judge also gives out other materials that encourage parents to be more active in educational issues relating to their children.

Finally, the judge removes parental educational rights when necessary and appoints an educational representative for the child. That person is often a CASA volunteer.

Our experience is that the CASA volunteer is very effective in advocating for the child in the school setting.

Foster children have many challenges in the school setting. They may change schools often. They are unlikely to have help with homework or encouragement at home to work on school projects. They face challenges when they go onto higher education because they often do not have a place to live or family to support them. In all of these areas, a CASA volunteer has proven to be a critical support for foster children. With judicial leadership and support, it is possible for every CASA program to have a significant impact on educational outcomes for the foster children served by volunteers.

[Back to top](#)