

Abstract—Keeping Kids in School and Out of the Court

The 406th Judicial District Court (“Court”) proposes to collaborate with Laredo Independent School District (LISD), Webb County Justice of the Peace Precinct 1 – Place 2, Webb County Justice of the Peace Precinct 2 – Place 1, Webb County Attorney’s office, 49th Judicial District Attorney’s Office and Texas A&M International University’s faculty members on our “Keeping Kids In School and Out of the Court” initiative. The initiative is focused on *at-risk* students with excessive truancies and minor deviant behaviors (drug use) within the residential boundaries of LISD; an inner city district in the heart of Webb County serving over 24,700 students from severely impoverished homes (24,175 or 97.5% economically disadvantaged), impacted by Spanish as their first language (14,575 or 58.8% ELL), with daily exposure to narcotic trafficking activity, high mobility rates, and parents with little or no education (18,194 or 73.4% At-Risk). 2011 census poverty data indicates, 12,323 (56.69%) children from families with incomes below poverty line. 93.82% of children receive free/reduced lunch. The dropout rate for LISD in 2012 was 11.1% compared with the state of Texas rate of 6.3%.

The goals are to keep students out of the judicial system, reduce the high dropout rate, and prevent unnecessary suspensions. This project asks LISD to engage in tracking truant youth. If a youth is chronically truant or tardy, LISD will attempt to abate the truancy through a counseling diversion program. If pre-court diversion does not abate the student’s truancy then the Court will oversee a court diversion program. The local county and district attorney’s offices are committed to providing a non-criminal sanction to provide family assistance to keeping youth in schools. Only in serious cases (at the prosecutor’s discretion) will legal sanctions be applied. Thus, in order to reverse the negative drop-out trend at LISD, we propose to implement our “Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court” initiative, which consists of four educational components. Three components of our program will be offered for students with truancy issues and/or other delinquent issues and the fourth component will be offered to their parents. Instead of assessing fines, the participating justices of the peace will be requiring students’ parents to attend counseling sessions at a time ordered by the respective court. Anticipated outcomes are increased school attendance rates, reduced truancies referred to the Court and positive learning outcomes for students and their parents.