



## Application for 2009 Outstanding County Program Awards

County (if multi-county entry, list all): Catawba

Submitted by: Dawn Wilson Title: Special Projects Coordinator

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The Association encourages electronic submissions. E-mail the application and project/program description to Todd McGee at [todd.mcgee@ncacc.org](mailto:todd.mcgee@ncacc.org). You can also fax your entry to (919) 733-1065 (attn. Todd McGee), or mail it to: NCACC, 215 N. Dawson St., Raleigh, NC 27603. Applications must be postmarked by **Friday, Feb. 26, 2010**.

Projects/programs must have been implemented between Jan. 1, 2008, and Dec. 31, 2009. For additional information and category criteria, visit [www.ncacc.org/awards/ocpa/about.html](http://www.ncacc.org/awards/ocpa/about.html).

Project title: Educational Advocate Initiative

Category (you may check more than one):

General Government       Human Services       Public Information/Participation

Address each of the following questions in a typed program/project summary in a separate Word document attached to this application form. Limit your responses to two pages. Use single-spaced lines and 12-point, Times New Roman font. Supporting materials may be submitted, but due to time constraints, judges may not review the materials.

1. What are the purpose, history, timeline and budget of the program/project? Will the county realize any projected cost savings? (For public information/participation programs, please try to estimate participation levels).
2. What makes the program/project unique? How does it differ from similar projects in your county or in other counties?
3. How well did the program use available resources, given the limitations on such resources?
4. Can this project be duplicated in other counties? If another county wanted to do a similar project, what advice would you give them to minimize obstacles and problems?
5. How did the project involve collaboration with other agencies, jurisdictions, nonprofits, businesses, etc.? How well did this collaboration work and is it on-going?

**What are the purpose, history, timeline and budget of the program/project? Will the county realize any projected cost savings?**

*The Educational Advocate Initiative* aimed to improve educational continuity and stability for children in foster care in Catawba County, N.C. Specifically, our initiatives included:

- Stronger collaboration with school personnel through the establishment of an Educational Advocate position based at DSS, use of a communication protocol, and assignment of school designees in 44 schools in order to minimize school moves or facilitate school transfers
- Coordinated database to capture children's grades, behavior, attendance and special needs
- Raised awareness of the educational needs and challenges of children in foster care among child welfare and educational staff
- Focus on special educational needs of and supports for children in foster care

In fall, 2008, Catawba County Social Services created a half-time Educational Advocate position to focus efforts on minimizing school moves for children who enter foster care. This position was the culmination of collaborative efforts during the previous two years between DSS and the three public school systems in Catawba County which focused on: 1) establishing communication channels and standardizing communication protocols between DSS and the school systems, 2) minimizing school moves for children in foster care, 3) developing timely enrollment procedures, and 4) tracking school placements and educational progress of children in foster care. These efforts were designed to address the negative impact of multiple school moves and lack of educational continuity experienced by many foster care children.

By using and encouraging front line workers to use the established communication protocol and building relationships with assigned school designees and school system administrators, the Educational Advocate was able to assure coordination of transportation and communication in order to minimize school moves or facilitate school record transfers for children entering foster care. In addition to coordinating transportation, the Educational Advocate tracked school placements and gathered report cards and information from school designees to track educational progress. She also had responsibility for assuring that free and reduced school lunch forms and enrollment packets were available to foster care workers and completed, as needed. The Advocate spearheaded a "Back to School Backpack" drive to ensure that each child in foster care had a back pack and necessary school supplies to start the school year and as they entered care. Finally, the Advocate made contact with school systems in neighboring counties to initiate discussions about developing similar protocols or processes to track placements and progress, since a significant number of children in our county's custody live in neighboring counties.

The main cost of this program is in personnel expenses for a half time position. However, we were fortunate to have the ability to reallocate 20 hours/week of a full-time grant funded professional position while maintaining the existing grant funding - so there was no additional outlay of funds for this position.

**What makes the program/project unique? How does it differ from similar projects in your county or in other counties?**

While keeping children entering foster care in their home school is a concern for foster care workers in every county, it is not always practical to coordinate transportation by foster parents or schools across school zones or districts given the many barriers and mandates that exist. As a case example, four siblings were placed in a foster home outside their home school district with 2 of the children attending elementary schools and 1 attending middle school. The Educational Advocate had contact with the Student Services and Transportation Directors to discuss

transportation options. She transported all three school age children to school for several days until new bus routes could be arranged. For the remaining four months of school, she coordinated and divided responsibility for transportation home from school with the foster parent and foster worker, as well as made arrangements for two children to attend afterschool. This shows the significant efforts required for these children to stay in their home school. Without the Educational Advocate position, it is very likely that all three school-age children would have been enrolled in a new school, separating them from their school, teachers and friends, in addition to their home and parents.

**How well did the program use available resources, given the limitations on such resources?**

From a resource perspective, the primary benefit of this new position was an increase in efficiency and effectiveness in communication between DSS and three school systems. This position allowed one staff person rather than 13 foster care workers to focus energies on building and sustaining relationships and serving as primary contact with administrators in three school systems and designees in 44 schools. It enabled better communication and response to requests, led to a better understanding about the roles and mandates of each system, contributing to an increase in overall productivity for staff, while also reducing the number of school moves for children entering foster care and providing the ability for our agency to track academic progress, behavior and attendance for all children in foster care. This work also positioned us to comply with federal Fostering Connections Child Welfare legislation, which went into effect in late 2008, outlining mandates on educational stability and achievement for children foster care.

**Can this project be duplicated in other counties? If another county wanted to do a similar project, what advice would you give them to minimize obstacles and problems?**

The position is replicable with minimal operating costs utilizing local, unrestricted or grant funding. Even without the half-time position, DSS and school systems can commit to improving educational stability and continuity for children in foster care by actively collaborating to develop communication, enrollment and school transfer protocols and provide opportunities to educate their staff on the educational needs and challenges of children in care. It is important to involve youth in foster care in this collaborative effort in order to hear first-hand the impact of school moves and foster care on a child's academic experience.

**How did the project involve collaboration with other agencies, jurisdictions, nonprofits, businesses, etc.? How well did this collaboration work and is it on-going?**

Collaboration began before the position was created as a result of our agency's involvement in a national *Casey Family Program Breakthrough Series Collaborative on School Stability and Continuity for Youth in Out-of-Home Care*. An Education Committee bringing together representatives from child welfare and the three public schools districts in Catawba County as well as a youth in foster care and a parent of children previously in care set the foundation for the communication channels and protocol used by the Educational Advocate. The Educational Advocate continues to build and maintain relationships with 44 school designees, administrators in three local systems as well as school systems in neighboring counties to coordinate transportation and school transfers as children enter care and track their educational progress while in care. The Education Committee, now chaired by the Educational Advocate, continues to meet quarterly to review protocols and to identify and address barriers to practice.