



**Testimony to House Juvenile Justice and Family Issues Committee  
HB 2684: Training School Police to Help Keep Students with Special Needs  
in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System**

April 22, 2015

Texans Care for Children supports the passage of HB 2684, which would help keep students with special needs, such as those with mental health concerns, trauma histories, and disabilities, in school learning and out of the juvenile justice system.

**School police officers need specialized training to help them effectively engage with all students**, including those with mental health concerns, trauma histories, and disabilities. Increasing the capacity of school police officers to appropriately engage with students, including those with unique challenges, will help keep students safe and successful in school.

**Kids are different than adults.** Even though an adolescent may physically look like an adult, they do not think or behave like one. The brain does not fully develop until an individual's mid-twenties.<sup>i</sup> The parts of the brain responsible for controlling impulses and planning ahead are among the last to mature.<sup>ii</sup> Hormonal changes, which are a constant for teenagers, also effect the brain, and as a result, an adolescent's behavior.<sup>iii</sup>

**Kids with mental illness respond differently than kids without mental illness.** In addition to the developmental changes all kids go through, kids with mental illness can have behavioral symptoms that are often labeled as misbehavior or non-compliance. This places them at greater risk of disciplinary actions or justice involvement. Between 1999 and 2009, 90% of students classified as having an emotional disturbance in a Texas public school were suspended or expelled from school for discretionary reasons.<sup>iv</sup> Instead of assisting them in managing their illness, uninformed and ineffective disciplinary responses can put a student on a downward trajectory in terms of academic, social, and mental outcomes. In 2011, 44% of youth offenders sent to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department had a need for treatment by a licensed or specially trained provider for a mental health related issue,<sup>v</sup> more than double what would be expected in the general population.

**Kids with trauma histories respond to situations or people in ways often labeled as misbehavior or non-compliance.** Chronic stress or on-going trauma can physically alter the neural wiring and chemical response in a child's brain, causing children who have experienced trauma to be more impulsive and more likely to engage in risky behavior.<sup>vi</sup> For a student who has been physically or sexually abused, being restrained by another person can trigger strong responses that can escalate a situation at best and cause significant psychological and/or physical harm to a student at worse.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Texas children and families. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,  
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*Texans Care for Children is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fulfilling the promise of children through improved state policies and programs on child protective services; juvenile justice; mental well-being; health and fitness; and early childhood education and opportunities.*

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<sup>i</sup> National Institute of Mental Health. *The Teen Brain: Still Under Construction*  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>

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<sup>iii</sup> National Institute of Mental Health. *The Teen Brain: Still Under Construction*  
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<sup>iv</sup> CSG Justice Center. (2011) *Breaking School Rules Report*. <http://justicecenter.csg.org/resources/juveniles> Accessed May 1, 2012.

<sup>v</sup> Texas Juvenile Justice Department. *Who Are TJJD Offenders?* [http://www.tjjd.texas.gov/research/youth\\_stats.aspx](http://www.tjjd.texas.gov/research/youth_stats.aspx) Accessed May 1, 2012.

<sup>vi</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2009). *Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development*  
[http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue\\_briefs/brain\\_development/brain\\_development.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/brain_development/brain_development.pdf)