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Executive Summary: Strengthening CASA-School Collaboration for Foster Youth Success

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Introduction

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), or also referred to as Guardian ad Litem (GAL)s, play a critical role in ensuring that foster youth receive the educational support and services they need. However, GALs often encounter systemic barriers when attempting to collaborate with schools. This study explores the challenges Guardian ad Litem face in obtaining academic, social-emotional, and health-related information from schools and examines potential policy solutions to improve collaboration.

Methodology

This study surveyed CASA GALs across Texas, gathering qualitative and quantitative data on their experiences working with schools. A Likert-scale questionnaire was distributed, allowing advocates to report on school cooperation, access to student records, and the effectiveness of current advocacy efforts. A total of 40 Guardian ad Litem responded, representing diverse regions of Texas. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, identifying key barriers and opportunities for improving CASA-school collaboration.

Key Findings

Five primary themes emerged from the data, highlighting the most significant barriers GALs face when working with schools. These challenges not only hinder GAL's ability to advocate effectively but also contribute to the broader systemic inequities that foster youth experience in education. Despite GAL's legal authority to access student records and participate in educational decision-making under Texas Family Code § 107.002, many schools either misunderstand or are unaware of these provisions, leading to delays and gaps in information-sharing. These findings demonstrate the persistent challenges in CASA-school interactions, many of which stem from systemic barriers such as inconsistent policies, technological limitations, and a lack of understanding among school personnel.



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Theme	Subtheme	Description	Example Quote
Barriers to Accessing Information	<i>Unresponsive School Staff</i>	Schools often fail to respond to CASA Guardian ad Litem, delaying access to records.	"Schools often ignore me even though I'm listed as a Parental Surrogate (Education Decision-Maker)."
	<i>Lack of Familiarity with CASA's Role</i>	Many educators are unaware of CASA's legal authority to access student information.	"The school didn't know what CASA was, and I had to explain it to multiple staff members before getting the records."
	<i>Reluctance to Share Data</i>	Schools hesitate to provide records, citing privacy concerns despite legal provisions.	"Even with a court order, I've had school districts refuse to release attendance records."
Importance of Relationships	<i>Building Rapport with School Staff</i>	Establishing relationships with school personnel improves cooperation.	"Once I established a good relationship with the counselor, things became much easier."
	<i>Finding the Right Point of Contact</i>	Identifying a key administrator or liaison streamlines communication.	"Having a designated foster care liaison at schools would make a huge difference."
Policy and Procedural Gaps	<i>Inconsistent Policies Across Districts</i>	CASA Guardian ad Litem encounter varied procedures across different school districts.	"It's not consistent, even within the same ISD."
	<i>Lack of Standardized Data Sharing Systems</i>	Schools lack a uniform process for reporting student progress to CASA volunteer.	"Some schools send weekly updates, others don't respond at all."
Technology and System Limitations	<i>Restricted Access to School Portals</i>	Many school record systems prevent CASA Guardian ad Litem from accessing necessary documents.	"Many schools use portals that do not allow for attachment, preventing us from sending court orders."
	<i>Need for a Centralized Reporting System</i>	Advocates call for a secure, shared database to facilitate communication.	"A system where CASA can directly access attendance, and grades would be a game-changer."
Role Clarity and Training	<i>Educators' Limited Understanding of CASA's Role</i>	Teachers and school staff often misunderstand CASA's legal authority and responsibilities.	"Some schools are unfamiliar with the role of CASA. Once it is explained, they understand."
	<i>Suggestions for Mandatory Training</i>	Advocates recommend annual training to ensure school staff understand CASA's involvement.	"Schools should be required to train staff about CASA advocates and what they do."



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Recommendations for CASA Guardian ad Litem

Establish Proactive Communication with Schools

- Introduce Yourself Early:** Upon being assigned a case, reach out to school personnel immediately. Send an introductory email to the principal, counselor, and any relevant staff explaining your role.
- Request a Meeting:** Arrange an initial meeting with school staff to discuss the foster child's educational needs, attendance, and behavioral support plans.
- Build Relationships:** Regularly check in with school staff to establish rapport and ensure open lines of communication.

Educate School Personnel on CASA's Role

- Provide Informational Materials:** Share brief, easy-to-understand documents outlining CASA's legal authority and responsibilities.
- Clarify Legal Access:** Remind school personnel that CASA Guardian ad Litem have the right to access student records per the Texas Family Code § 107.002.

Advocate for a Foster Care Liaison in Each School

- Identify a Key Contact:** If a school lacks a designated foster care liaison, work with school leadership to appoint one.
- Encourage Consistency:** Push for school districts to formalize the role so CASA Guardian ad Litem always have a direct point of contact.

Improve Information Access and Documentation

- Utilize Court Orders for Records:** If schools resist sharing student records, provide a copy of the court order confirming your authorization to access them.
- Request Regular Progress Reports:** Advocate for structured updates every six weeks (or per grading period) to track student progress, attendance, and disciplinary actions.

Support Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools

- Encourage Restorative Discipline:** Work with schools to ensure that foster youth receive supportive interventions rather than punitive disciplinary actions.
- Advocate for Mental Health Support:** Ensure that foster children have access to counseling services, social-emotional learning programs, and behavioral interventions.

Use Technology to Improve Advocacy Efforts

- Use Online Tools for Communication:** Request access to school portals where possible to monitor attendance and grades in real-time.



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Recommendations for CASA Coordinators

Strengthen CASA Training Programs

Provide School Advocacy Training: CASA organizations could enhance workshops focused on navigating school systems, legal rights, and effective communication strategies.

- **Informational Materials:** Create brief, easy-to-understand documents outlining CASA's legal authority and responsibilities for CASA Guardian ad Litem to share with the school. Including 'right to access' student's records per Texas Family Code§ 107.002.
- **Email Template Support:** Create an email template for CASA Guardian ad Litem to have access to communicate with schools.
- **Educate CASA Guardian ad Litem on Special Education Rights:** Many foster children qualify for special education services; advocates should be trained on how to ensure proper evaluations and accommodations.
- **Provide Mock-ARD meetings.** Guardian ad Litem could benefit from seeing how an ARD is conducting and what to expect including their role.

Recommendations for Schools

Designate a Foster Care Liaison in Each School

- A single point of contact would ensure consistent communication and timely responses to CASA requests.

Implement Standardized Reporting Protocols

- Schools should provide scheduled updates on foster children's academic performance, attendance, and behavioral progress to CASA GALs.

Enhance Educator Training

- Annual professional development sessions should be required to educate school staff on CASA's role, legal obligations, and best practices for supporting foster youth.

Develop a Secure Data-Sharing System

- A centralized, secure portal allowing CASA GALs access to relevant student records would improve efficiency and reduce administrative burdens.

Promote Trauma-Informed Educational Practices

- Schools should integrate trauma-sensitive approaches to better support foster youth, focusing on restorative practices rather than punitive disciplinary measures.



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References

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- Texas Family Code § 107.002 (2024). Powers and duties of guardian ad litem and attorney ad litem for child. Retrieved from
<https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/FA/htm/FA.107.htm>

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Relevant Prior Work

- Palmer, D.L.** *EduVoices: Podcasting as a Medium for Foster Care Development*. American Educational Research Association, Denver, CO, 2025.
- Palmer, D.L.** *EduVoices: Podcasting for Foster Care Advocacy and Education*. Hyflex International Conference, San Antonio, TX, 2024.
- Palmer, C., **Palmer, D.L.**, & Cumby, S. *A Circle of Support: Partnerships Supporting Students with Trauma*. Texas Association of School Boards, Dallas, TX, 2023.

Disclaimer: This research was designed, analyzed, and written by Dusty Palmer, Ed.D., in his role as an assistant professor with the College of Education at Texas Tech and not in his capacity serving as a CASA volunteer. Texas CASA distributed the survey through its CASA newsletter. Texas CASA has permission to publish this report within its official publications, reports, and other relevant sources.

