



NEWS RELEASE

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'Your Voice Matters' conference focuses on students in foster care

SAN JOSE, CA – During the 2014-2015 school year, the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) served 845 foster students, and approximately 1800 students were in care; while this is a small number, the SCCOE aims to improve student equity and reduce access discrepancies to high-quality education.

The Foster Youth and Homeless Education Services (FYS/HES) Department of the SCCOE provides services to children and youth in foster care and homeless situations. Services are designed to address their vital educational needs. FYS provides assistance and training to school districts and community stakeholders regarding the various educational laws that protect the rights of both foster and homeless youth. FYS/HES staff also work with group home providers, the Juvenile Justice Department, and the Department of Family and Children Services, along with other agencies and organizations involved in the lives of foster and homeless youth.

As part of National Foster Care Awareness Month, the SCCOE hosted a conference on May 20 empowering foster students aged 16 and up. Reminding them that “their experience has given them the strength to endure” and this will help them succeed as adults.

The evening’s theme, #yourvoicematters, focused on the rights of foster youth and included an inspiring speech from guest speaker Tyrone Wilson, Deputy District Attorney at Santa Clara County. Wilson shared his knowledge about the foster care program from first-hand personal experience, having lived in 20 foster homes himself. He talked about being a “struggling, but a perseverant survivor.” According to Wilson, “less than 50 percent of foster youth obtain a high school diploma, only 10 percent will attend college and only 3 percent will graduate from college, and over 70 percent of prison inmates come from a foster youth program.” Wilson talked about beating those odds; he believes the key is “consistency, consistently seeing the right choices” will help students “see their dreams come true.”

Event collaborators include the County of Santa Clara-Department of Family and Children Services, Family and Children Services of Silicon Valley/Independent Living Program, Silicon Valley Children’s Fund. Other collaborators represented were The Hub, a youth-led organization which provides employment development, laundry service, and meals for youth and other supportive services, and Foster Youth Success Initiatives (FYSI) an organization which provides access to post-secondary education to current and former foster youth.

Sonja House, from SCCOE’s Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program, also advocates consistency, “Children learn through repetition, foster children do not get that.” While children in foster care receive an education, it is often the little things they miss out on because guardians assume the children have that pre-existing knowledge. But foster children do not have the luxury of repetition. She continues, “It is the basic things they miss out on,” such as how to buy a car how to search for an apartment. Programs like the Independent Living Program help fill that gap. This event reinforces the basics.

The conference focused on topics guardians often miss such as voter registration. In breakout sessions, Planned Parenthood covered reproductive health, and California Youth Connection discussed the rights of youth in foster care. Also on hand were representatives from Work2Future.

Educating students in the foster care system presents challenges because students often move from district to district. To combat this, the SCCOE launched [FosterVision](#) in 2014. FosterVision is the result of a ten-year project which allows schools to support and monitor the academic life of foster youth at a glance including educational status, placement changes, immunization, and attendance records through a collection of data from districts and public agencies.

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