

OPERATING PROTOCOL BETWEEN JEFFERSON COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND BESSEMER CITY SCHOOL SYSTEM

This Protocol was established as the result of collaborative efforts between the Bessemer City School System and the Jefferson County Department of Human Resources. This initiative rose out of the desire of both agencies to accomplish the following:

1. Create a more collaborative working relationship.
2. Establish consistent practice and guidelines when investigating child abuse and neglect within the Bessemer City School System.
3. Increase and improve communication between the two agencies.
4. Work in partnership to serve the children and families in Jefferson County.

This Protocol establishes the roles of the DHR Social Worker and the Schools' Representatives and provides guidelines in order to aid in the investigation of abuse or neglect complaints as well as in the inclusion of the school as part of the Individualized Service Plan (ISP) planning team for the children in that school system. Additionally, these guidelines provide for the inclusion of DHR Social Workers as part of a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or other student support team for children in the Bessemer City School System.

REPORTING SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE/NEGLECT

As mandated by law; principals, counselors, teachers and other school staff are mandatory reporters of any **suspected** child abuse/neglect. Any school official, who **suspects** abuse or neglect, knows of a child who is at risk, or knows of a child to be at risk of suicide due to abuse or neglect, is to follow their school policy regarding who will make the report to DHR. That designee will contact Central Intake at DHR (205-423-4850) and report the suspected abuse/neglect. The intake social workers will listen to the concerns, ask questions to elicit more information and will inform the caller of whether or not the concerns rise to the level of a Child abuse/neglect report or Prevention Assessment. A Prevention Assessment is a report in which the allegations do not fall within the legal guidelines of child abuse or neglect but involves concerns that, if not assessed and addressed, could lead to abuse or neglect.

After the report is made, the intake worker will call the reporter back to inform the mandatory reporter whether or not the report was accepted. If the report was not accepted, the intake worker will explain the reason. If the case is accepted, intake will follow up with the reporter within 3 days of accepting the report with a letter informing the reporter of the worker assigned. Additionally, the mandatory reporter will receive a letter at the completion of the investigation, informing the reporter of the disposition of the case. Child Abuse Investigations can take up to 60 days to complete, and therefore the notification may be received after that time period.

As mentioned above, school officials need to report to DHR when there is reasonable suspicion that a child is a victim of abuse or neglect. DHR has the responsibility to investigate the report to

determine whether abuse or neglect occurred. In order to determine if there is reasonable suspicion, school officials may need to talk to the child. It is appropriate for that school official to ask the following types of questions: "How did you get those bruises/marks?" "What happened before (or after)?" "How is everything going at home?" Based on the child's responses, it may be necessary for the school official to call Intake and report the incident. School officials are not to question parents or siblings about the potential abuse or neglect. If the case is accepted as a report, DHR will contact family members as part of the investigation. School officials are also encouraged to refer to the DHR Handbook for Mandatory Reporters for additional information.

When it is necessary for a DHR worker to interview a child at the school, the worker will contact the school counselor prior to coming to the school. By doing so, the worker will know if the child is in school and the counselor will have notice to prepare for the worker's interview of the child. In all schools, the counselor or principal's designee will be the primary contact person for requests to interview children.

When the school is not the reporter, state law prohibits the DHR worker from revealing the exact details of the report. The worker may share that they are investigating a report regarding the child and family for abuse and/or neglect, but not specific details regarding the content of the report. However, the worker may request information from the counselor, teacher and other school staff who may have information in order to make a determination of the report's validity.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Upon entering the school, the DHR worker will present identification and request to speak to the counselor or designated contact person. The worker will sign the visitor's log book and indicate that the counselor or designee is the person who is to be seen in order to protect the confidentiality of the child.

The counselor or principal designee will designate an area that will be used to interview the children. The area should be private and allow the DHR worker to interview the child without others being able to see, hear or interrupt.

According to the Civil Appeals Court of Alabama, DHR has the legal right to interview children privately without any school official being present. This is done to maintain confidentiality of the child and the family. However, it is recognized that in some instances, the presence of a counselor, or school teacher could be beneficial during the interview as support to the child. Therefore, if the child requests that school personnel be allowed to remain during the interview, the DHR worker will allow this person to be present. However, if this is allowed, the school personnel must sign a confidentiality agreement indicating that they are aware of the legal consequences of violating confidentiality by sharing with any person, the content of the interview. No part of the interview is to be shared with the parent. The investigation can be obstructed or the child could be placed at risk of further harm if the parent/guardian is notified of the interview. The school official may give the parent, if asked, the name and telephone number of the DHR worker.

During the interview, the DHR worker has the sole responsibility to initiate any questions concerning the abuse/neglect. They are trained to guide interviews in a manner that does not subject the child to leading questions. This can be critical if legal involvement becomes necessary. Any school official present must be in a supportive role only.

Upon concluding the interview, the DHR worker may need to speak to siblings and these interviews should be conducted in the same discreet manner. Other school staff may also need to be interviewed to ascertain if any abuse/neglect has been observed.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

When a school official is the reporter and the report is accepted as a child abuse/neglect report, the results of the disposition can be disclosed. The school has the right to know the outcome and any services being provided to the child and family. The assigned DHR worker will provide this information to the school official who made the report.

If removal of a child is determined to be necessary and this occurs at the school, the worker is mandated to notify the parents. Before leaving the school or within an hour of the time of the removal, the parent will be notified by the worker that the child has been placed into protective custody. If the school is questioned by the parents, the school official is to refer to its respective board policy of notification while remaining neutral in the situation.

Should removal of a child occur outside of the school, it is necessary that the DHR worker notify the school of the child's absence on the next working day. Many times books and other school items are misplaced or lost while the child is in the home of parents or relatives. Although Jefferson County DHR cannot be responsible for books or other school items prior to our agency receiving custody, we will take the necessary steps to ensure the child's educational needs are met.

Often times, the child's placement, whether with a relative or foster home, are outside the child's school district. If feasible, DHR would like for the child to remain in their same school as this would circumvent another change. If DHR moves a child to a different school zone and wants the child to remain in their former school, the DHR worker will contact the Board of Education.

If a child is placed in a different school, within 30 days of placement, our social workers will provide the school any or all of the information from the list below:

1. Previous school attended.
2. Special Education or 504 eligibility including ARD/IEP reports.
3. Behavior intervention plans.
4. Immunizations.
5. Vision or hearing issues.
6. Proof of residence.
7. Proof of identity.
8. Identity of the individual with authority to enroll the child in school.

9. Case worker contact information.

Children in foster care have experienced tremendous loss and trauma. We realize that adverse child and youth experiences may impact a student's learning, behavior, socialization and stability. We intervene and provide services to treat the trauma in hopes of stabilizing the education process. Information on a child's progress or lack of progress helps social workers plan appropriately. This information will become a part of the child's record with our agency. In the event of a change in worker, the newly assigned worker will have immediate access to educational reports.

Case planning through our ISP process helps us to assure that our children are safe and that they get to grow up with permanent connections that allow them to develop the skills and competencies necessary for them to become productive adults. The DHR worker will invite the teacher and/or counselor to each ISP and make every effort to have the ISPs when it is convenient for school personnel to attend. When school personnel is unable to attend an ISP meeting, the DHR worker will provide an ISP Absentee form so that education's input can be obtained. Teachers who attend ISPs will be mailed a copy of the ISP as part of the team. The teacher or counselor will invite the DHR worker to each Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting of those children in Foster Care.

Jefferson County Department of Human Resources cannot meet the needs of the children we service without your expertise. All cases of abuse and neglect are unique and require different responses. However, the need to provide protection to our children from abuse/neglect is constant. By establishing guidelines for collaboration between the Bessemer City School System and the Jefferson County Department of Human Resources, improved communication should promote the partnership needed to accomplish this goal.

Bessemer City School Officials have a wealth of knowledge regarding the school children of Jefferson County. Because of this knowledge, their participation as a team member in ISP meetings is vital. Information needed by school personnel includes comments on progress, areas of concern and suggestions for more effectively working with our children. The DHR worker will reciprocally provide to school personnel timely assistance including: participation in IEPs, addressing concerns regarding our children and answering questions regarding child abuse and neglect. In conclusion, DHR cannot meet all of the needs of the children we serve without the partnership of the Bessemer City School System. We appreciate your participation. Together, we will continue to strive to strengthen families and to keep children safe.

Approved: Shea Cobb-England
Shea Cobb-England, Interim Director
Jefferson County DHR

Date: 8/14/18

Approved: Keith A. Stewart
Dr. Keith A. Stewart Superintendent
Bessemer City Schools

Date: 8/16/18