

WELCOME TO FFLIC'S
BI-MONTHLY
NEWSLETTER!

SPECIAL
POINTS OF
INTEREST:

- Learn more about FFLIC's current work
- Check out the results of the spring legislative session!
- Learn about FFLIC's work in Shreveport!

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Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children



JUNE 2014

FFLIC Rallies at the Capitol!

On Thursday, April 24th, FFLIC joined other education advocacy groups to rally at the capitol in Baton Rouge. The groups came together to urge lawmakers to support HB 777 and HB 407, both of which aim to keep children in school.

The group also went to vehemently oppose SB 652, dubbed "The School to Prison Pipeline" Bill, as it would have required teachers to refer students to the juvenile justice system for behavior that does not break any laws.



FFLIC put a wide call out to its member base and had a strong showing at the rally. Most importantly, the voices of parents, youth, community

and allies across the country were heard! HB 407 passed and thankfully SB 652 was defeated.

Message from the Director, Gina Womack



Dear Parents, Friends, Supporters, and Youth,

Welcome to the June edition of FFLIC's bi-monthly newsletter!

FFLIC has had a busy spring: legislative battles, rallies, the sudden closure and planned opening of new youth secure care facilities, and connecting with you, our community. You can read about all of these strug-

gles and successes in this newsletter.

But as the school year closes, I want to draw your attention to one issue that is at the forefront of all our minds: discipline in schools and, specifically, the school-to-prison pipeline. At FFLIC, we know it is not enough to simply focus on children once they are incarcerated; we also need to ensure that there are systems in place to steer them down a different path from the outset.

Too often, that's not happening. And as we mark the historic 60th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, we must note that too often it's not happening along racial lines.

In Louisiana, predominantly African American students are placed in schools with the highest rates of suspension and expulsion. And predominantly African American students are pushed into the juvenile justice system and denied their chance at an equitable education and a successful future.

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Member Spotlight: Sonia Coleman



Ms. Sonia Coleman spearheads the active FFLIC chapter in Shreveport, where residents are currently working to construct their own version of a secure-care facility. Families in the Shreveport area are frustrated with their children being sent away to Bridge City or

even Monroe, distances from home that they say set their children up for failure.

Ms. Coleman's 18 year old son is currently incarcerated at Bridge City and she says she often can't afford to travel to visit with him. He's allowed to call her once a week, but often the facility claims he doesn't have enough money to

make the calls or that the call could not be completed. Then she has to wait another week to hear from him, concerned for his safety, his education, and his general well-being. These concerns aren't unsubstantiated; he was supposed to graduate in May, but Bridge City still lists him as an 11th grader, and he has repeatedly experienced abuse in the system.

Message from the director cont.

Can we imagine a system where we don't only celebrate our perceived best, but actually the achievements of the whole community?

In the past few months, two separate lawsuits have been filed against schools in New Orleans. One—a federal civil rights complaint—alleges that school closure policies unfairly target black students. The second targets charter management organization Collegiate Academies for their excessive and sometimes draconian discipline procedures, which disproportionately are used against students with special needs. Collegiate's flagship school, Sci Academy, suspended over 58% of its student body in 2013, according to JJPL.

This is unacceptable.

Public charter schools are tasked with educating *all* of our children, not just the best behaved, the most talented, the quietest, or the whitest. As the Recovery School District becomes the nation's first all-charter district, it is vital that we honestly evaluate the charters' success, not only by their students' grades or graduation rates, but also by

their ability to retain students and use positive behavior supports and restorative practices which keep youth walking the school hallways instead of the lobbies of prisons and courthouses.

FFLIC partners with various schools throughout the state and trains them to use alternatives to suspension and expulsion, like restorative justice and positive behavior supports. We are also seeking schools to sign on to a "moratorium on suspensions" and had the honor to hear Dr. Vera Triplett speak about her vision for a school where "not a single child will be suspended." Is that so unreasonable? Can we envision a school—or a district—where kids aren't pushed out, but instead are supported, challenged, and encouraged? Can we imagine a system where we don't only celebrate the achievements of the perceived best, but actually the achievements of the whole community?

As FFLIC continues to work with our partner schools and fight for alternatives to suspension, you too can join our struggle! Please encourage the schools in your neighborhood and the schools that your children attend to revise their student codes of conduct and sign on to our moratorium on suspensions. Change always starts with us, with parents and youth who are most affected. We want to hear your perspective. Participate in our People's Date Campaign to share your stories and allow us to do advocacy in the schools that impact your life.

There is momentum building around changing the harsh discipline practices in schools, in Louisiana as well as nation-wide. Together, we can ensure that all our children receive the education they deserve, the education promised in *Brown v. Board of Education* 60 years ago, the education that, far too often, we still have to fight to get.

Yours in Solidarity,

Gina Womack

Upcoming Events



How does Nelson Mandela inspire our work and perseverance?:

FFLIC

Leadership Training, July 2nd All FFLIC members and interested community members are invited to attend FFLIC's leadership training to learn how to navigate the juvenile justice system.

July 18th FFLIC Celebrates Nelson Mandela's Birthday Join us as we reflect on the life of South Africa's president and how it informs our work in New Orleans.

FFLIC Lafayette Chapter Meeting, July 22nd

Make your voice heard if you live in or around the Lafayette area!

FFLIC Lake Charles Chapter Meeting, July 23rd

Make your voice heard if you live in

or around the Lake Charles area!

SAVE THE DATES!

*** FFLIC's Annual 5K Run for Juvenile Justice — October**

*** Statewide Membership Leadership Academy and end of year celebration — December 6, 2014**

To attend meetings or more information please contact Ernest Johnson at 504.522.5437

People's Data Campaign Redux

FFLIC is continuing to collect data on family and youth experiences in the school system, now with an exciting partnership with Avodah!

Avodah is a Jewish Service Corps in New Orleans. FFLIC is very excited to have the opportunity to partner with them and

expand our community collaborations.

In the next few months, we will be reaching out to individuals, parent groups, neighborhood associations and churches to collect people's stories. You can also contribute your own story online.

We encourage all parents who have students in K-12 education in Louisiana to participate and make your voice heard!

Go to www.fflic.org/archives/1528 to share your story and contribute to our campaign.

Go to

www.fflic.org/archives/1528

to ensure that

your story is

included in our campaign!

Dr. Vera Triplett's Vision

To mark the 60th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, Vera Triplett spoke to FFLIC members about the state of education in New Orleans.

Participants discussed changes in the district since Hurricane Katrina and their hopes for the future.

Dr. Triplett plans to start a school called Noble Minds that

speaks to the needs and desires of parents and children from New Orleans.

FFLIC Director Gina Womack publicly asked Dr. Triplett to sign on to a moratorium on suspensions and she agreed.

We look forward to collaborating with Noble Minds on an end to the school-to-prison pipeline!



Vera Triplett (standing) says her school "will not explore suspensions or expulsions as a disciplinary option but will instead provide the necessary therapeutic supports to build the capacity of children and families."

FFLIC Legislative Updates & Successes

FFLIC and our allies had some successes this legislative session!



Guiding Principles
A Resource Guide for
Improving School Climate and Discipline

U.S. Department of Education

The 2014 Legislative session was a busy one for FFLIC. We spent several days visiting the Capitol with our members as they worked to educate lawmakers on the affects of the school to prison pipeline

- **SB 652: DEFEATED!** This bill would have provided an easy pathway for teachers to push students into secure custody but it was rejected.

- **HB Bill 541: DEFEATED!** This bill would have allowed video conferencing between youth and family members, probation and parole officers, and to conduct court hearings. This means children could be sent to jail without ever setting foot in a courtroom or speaking in person to a lawyer.

FFLIC worked with Senator Broome and her staff to develop 3 resolutions aimed at holding the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Office of Juvenile Justice more accountable:

- **SCR 134:** Requests BESE to study and report to the legislature regarding current student discipline policies and possible changes to these policies.
- **SR 174:** To urge and request BESE to review and consider adopting the United States Department of Education's *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline* as a master plan for supporting student behavior and discipline.

- **SCR 148:** Requests the DPSC, Youth Services, office of juvenile justice to report to the legislature on Louisiana's progress in conforming to and complying with the original goals and purposes for juvenile justice reform outlined in Act 1225 of 2003.

FFLIC was appointed to the Pretrial Service Commission to review the state's pretrial service laws and policies and to make recommendations for policy and legislative changes that will assist in providing more effective pretrial decision-making as a nonvoting member as per **Senate Resolution No. 150**. We are looking forward to providing much need input from the family perspective.



FFLIC Members worked together with partner organizations: JJPL, LCCR and SPLC to successfully defeat HB 541.

“We need a regional secure facility here for our children,” she says, and she is planning it herself, designing it differently than the other facilities across the state, Columbia, Swanson, and Bridge City. “It’ll be smaller, more like a home. The children will have bedrooms. There will be security, but the whole facility will be designed to help children succeed, not to punish them.”

Ms. Coleman first became involved with FFLIC in 2010, when she returned to Shreveport from Texas. Her son, then 15, was on probation and she moved home to get him help. However, she found the services available seriously lacking, even detrimental. In fact, it was at the very counseling center where she had sent him to get help—at a moment when the counselors had instructed her to leave—that he was accused of another crime. Ms. Coleman didn’t know about FFLIC then, she didn’t know about any resources to help her, and she didn’t have money to hire a lawyer. According to her, the staff psychologist lied in court. It was her word against his, and her son received a juvenile life sentence.

“I almost lost my mind,” says Coleman. If it had not been for God sending the right people in my path”. Her son was taken out of her care and placed in Bridge City over 300 miles away. At Bridge City he was picked on and jumped, causing him to be transferred back and forth to other facilities. Sometimes he was blamed for the fights, eliminating the possibility of early release. When Ms. Coleman asked to see the incident reports, the state refused to show her. Her friends told her to sue the state but it seemed too complicated and too expensive. “I just want what’s best for my child,” she says.

She met Mr. Johnson of FFLIC shortly after the trial and he asked her to tell her story. “At that time, my story was more like a cry,” she says. “How do you deal with it, as a mother, if your child is snatched away from you suddenly? I tried to get him help and he was just pushed into the system by the same people that were supposed to help him.”

With Mr. Johnson’s guidance, she learned more about her rights and what was happening to other children in Shreveport and around Louisiana. Although she has been continually stymied in her own case, she has dedicated herself to trying to help other children and other parents. Indeed, Ms. Coleman began working within the Shreveport FFLIC chapter by literally going door to door and talking to other families and other mothers. With two friends, she went to schools and asked to meet with principals, guidance counselors, teachers, and even school nurses: anyone who would listen. Now, the FFLIC chapter in Shreveport boasts over 20 active members and they are working on a number of issues in addition to the proposed home-like secure care center.

As in New Orleans, one of the central issues in Shreveport is the schools. She says that children are constantly being pushed out of schools, suspended, and expelled. “Teachers are not educated enough to deal with kids with mental and emotional disorders. They write them up and send them out of the classroom. There should be a second teacher in the classroom to assist.” Ms. Coleman gives the example of one child, who will turn 18 in July, who is taking 7th grade classes. He has

a diagnosis but repeatedly is retained. “Who’s educating him? He’s about to be an adult—he can’t be in a class with 7th graders!”

Dismayed by the system but hopeful for change, Ms. Coleman has set up a meeting with four principals of local schools to discuss alternatives to suspensions and how to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Ms. Coleman’s experience with the juvenile justice system also inspired her to start working at the Coordinated System of Care (CSOC), where she helps other children and families navigate the system and advocates for youth to be kept in a safe home environment whenever possible. “The hurting part of it all is that the kids I work with, I have to go to court with them and look at the same judge who sentenced my child for so long, the same court-appointed lawyer who didn’t even fight for us, the same probation officer who lives in Shreveport but is paid to be servicing my son in Bridge City. And I walk in there and they’re looking at me like, ‘Don’t I know you?’”

Ms. Coleman is driven on by her own experiences and her insistence that things could be different. “The entire system is designed to keep our children incarcerated,” she explains. “That’s how they get paid. But we can change that.”

To learn more about the local secure care “group home” Ms. Coleman and the other Shreveport FFLIC members are planning, visit:
www.anewcreationadolescent.webs.com

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Follow us:



Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) is a statewide membership-based organization that fights for a better life for all of Louisiana's youth, especially those involved in or targeted by the juvenile justice system.

As mothers and fathers, grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and allies we believe in and implement a model of organizing that is people and community centered, and is explicitly anti-racist.

We engage in education, community building, and leadership development advocacy through strategically chosen goals in order to empower individuals, families and communities to transform currently oppressive systems and institutions into ones that uphold justice for our families, to build strong, powerful families and communities and to fight for justice for our children and ourselves.

We believe that we are the "experts" on what our communities need and that solidarity and collective action are our most powerful tools in our struggle for self-determination and justice for our children and families.

Support FFLIC!

There are many ways to support FFLIC's work and we appreciate all of our tireless volunteers, members, and employees!

Please consider becoming a member!

FFLIC is a member-driven organization and relies on the wisdom and energy of our members to guide our work. Whether you are a parent, relative, friend or ally, as a FFLIC member, you will get:

- FFLIC voting rights
- A support network
- Access to resources and training on how to advocate for your child and other children in the system
- A subscription to our newsletter, with updates on FFLIC activities and the reform effort, and information about important changes in the juvenile justice system and other issues that affect our communities.

Membership is \$10/year
(financial assistance is available)

Want to donate more?

Please consider becoming a monthly sustainer of FFLIC! For as little as \$5/month, you can ensure that FFLIC stays funded and can devote all of our energy to fighting for youth justice!

Visit our website to donate online or sign up to be a monthly sustainer. Every bit keeps us strong!

www.fflic.org



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