



For Immediate Release

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Juvenile Rights Project Promotes Achievement of At-Risk Students

*A grant of \$380 thousand from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will help support
greater opportunities for students*

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Portland, OR – The Juvenile Rights Project, Inc. (JRP) today announced a major new investment that will help improve services to at-risk and foster youth through two of JRP’s programs, SchoolWorks and HelpLine. The grant, totaling \$380,000 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, provides support for the two programs over three years and is the largest single private grant awarded to JRP in its 32 year history. This grant comes at a time where research is showing that programs such as SchoolWorks provide a cost-effective way to improve the historically poor educational outcomes of court-involved children and youth.

JRP has been devoted to improving the educational success of children involved in the juvenile court system. JRP represents individual children and parents in the juvenile court system and has successfully promoted policy and other system changes in Oregon’s child welfare, juvenile justice, education and mental health systems. Established in 2002, SchoolWorks keeps at-risk students in school so that they can be successful and stay out of trouble. The Helpline responds to youth in need with information, advice and brief legal services.

“This award from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is an honor for our organization and recognition of the hard work we do every day to give each child we serve a chance to succeed,” expressed Janet Merrell, JRP’s Executive Director.

SchoolWorks has also tackled the excessive number of school moves that court-involved students experience. A study of former foster youth in 2005 found that 65% had attended seven or more schools and 30% had attended 10 or more different schools.

Twenty-two percent of the school-aged children referred to SchoolWorks were out of school at the time, due to lack of enrollment, suspension, expulsion, truancy or because a parent or guardian had failed to either enroll the student or send them to school on a regular basis. Multnomah County’s juvenile probation department has also found on a consistent basis that 30% of youth on probation are out of school at any given time.

SchoolWorks has been able to get students who were out of school re-enrolled 82% of the time. The program has also worked with schools to use alternatives to suspension and expulsion for students facing such disciplinary action 88% percent of the time. Research has shown that suspension and expulsion significantly increase the chances a student will drop out before completing high school.

Children raised in foster care were less likely to graduate from high school and six times more likely to earn a GED than their peers, according to the 2005 study conducted in Oregon and Washington by the Casey Family Foundation. Receiving a high school diploma increases the likelihood that students will go to college or receive other post-secondary education. Students who fail to graduate, however, are more likely to experience poverty or homelessness, receive public benefits or become involved in the criminal justice system as adults.

Federal grant funds, as well as substantial support from the Portland Children's Investment Fund, Meyer Memorial Trust and a number of other Oregon foundations, have supported the success of the SchoolWorks program in its first five and a half years of operation.

The HelpLine was developed by popular demand in response to the hundreds of calls received each year from abused, homeless and other vulnerable youth and their adult advocates. Demand has grown to nearly 700 calls per year. Private contributions and foundation grants allow the HelpLine to devote a full-time staff person to respond to questions and requests for help and a part-time attorney who can provide brief legal advice and legal representation in some cases. The HelpLine and SchoolWorks programs complement one another in responding to over 125 calls per year related to education, including special education rights and school discipline, in particular.

About the Juvenile Rights Project

Juvenile Rights Project, Inc. is an Oregon non-profit corporation founded for the purpose of providing high quality legal services to children and families, without the means to retain counsel, through individual representation in juvenile proceedings, and through class-wide advocacy in the courts and legislature. JRP achieves victories for individual clients in the courtroom and in the community and has a substantial track record of policy and legislative reforms that benefit vulnerable children and their families across the state.

About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, the foundation is led by CEO Patty Stonesifer and co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.