



American Public Human Services Association an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association



National Association of Public
Child Welfare Administrators

May 20, 2010

The Honorable Tom Harkin, Chairman
The Honorable Mike Enzi, Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Enzi:

On behalf of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, we respectfully submit comments for your consideration as the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee moves forward with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. A strong education means a strong future for children, particularly for those under the care of public child welfare agencies. Helping young people who experience foster care, graduate from high school, go onto college and become productive citizens, are important to all those who work in the child welfare arena.

When reauthorizing ESEA, NAPCWA asks the committee to incorporate these principles:

- Permanency and educational stability must go hand in hand.
- Education agencies must also be held accountable for the academic well-being of foster children, as is currently required by law for child welfare.
- The education decisions made for children and youth must be a partnership made among families, child welfare and education.
- The cost of transportation should be a shared responsibility of both child welfare and education.
- In order to respond to their unique communities, child welfare and education agencies operate differently from state to state and often county to county. Any approach should provide the administrative flexibility to account for and support these differences.

Families play a critical role in a child's education. Parents help track homework assignments, serve as tutors and attend parent-teacher conferences. Moms, dads, and other relative caregivers are children's best advocates as they matriculate through school. In many states, biological parents remain the education decision makers even when children are removed from their homes. NAPCWA supports this involvement.

Nearly half a million children and young people are under the supervision of child welfare, each child with a unique set of circumstances and educational needs. Child welfare agencies' mission is to serve vulnerable children and their families. For abused and neglected children who cannot safely remain at home, child welfare agencies are responsible for their safety, permanency and well-being, as well as their educational stability. Children with special needs, including many of those in foster care, are entitled to a needs assessment and an Individual Educational Plan that outlines how those needs will be addressed.

There are several federal laws that impact the education needs of foster children such as McKinney-Vento, Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. All should work together and not at cross purposes.

Foster children face challenges in attaining educational success for a variety of reasons, including early childhood trauma, lack of consistent adult role models, multiple placements or transferring schools. Research indicates that they tend to function below grade level, score lower on standardized tests and have higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates. Poor academic performance may be due to several factors within and outside the jurisdiction of child welfare agencies. Child welfare agencies recognize the important role they play and work hard to balance permanency goals and educational stability requirements to ensure that the best interests of the children are met.

Other issues also inhibit academic performance. While in and out of foster care a young person may experience homelessness either during reunification or emancipating from care. Educational support services for homeless youth, through McKinney Vento, are significantly under funded and homeless youth are sometimes hard to identify.

Child welfare agencies alone cannot ensure the educational success of foster children. Education agencies, both at the local and state levels, teachers, guidance counselors, parents and temporary caregivers, as well as judges all have a role to play. Foster parents can provide assistance with homework, social workers and teachers can collaborate on independent living and individualized education plans, and judges can review assessments, screening and request updates on academic progress.

Child welfare agencies have many efforts underway to enable academic success for children in foster care, including keeping them in their school of origin when it is in the best interest of the child, tracking their educational records, and ensuring immediate school enrollment. Below are some state examples:

Illinois has a geographic information system call SchoolMinder for children under child welfare's supervision. This GIS technology helps identify available foster homes that are near both the child's current educational setting and the home from which he or she was removed. This effort helps children remain in their own community and prevents avoidable school transfers. In **Kansas**, the iGRAD project provides educational liaisons to help foster youth track school credit history, capture missing transcripts and analyze information as it relates to graduation requirements. **Texas** and **California** have laws that require school districts to immediately enroll foster children without the necessary school documentation, with records being provided within a 30 day time frame. This measure helps prevent children from losing educational time while records are being transferred. Finally, **Colorado's** education liaison works with child placing agencies to transfer education records within five school days. All of these efforts have shown better graduation outcomes for foster children. States are taking various approaches to addressing educational stability for foster children. However, it is important to keep in mind that what works in one state may not work in another.

A young person's education does not stop at graduation. States continue efforts to improve foster youth's academic success through post-secondary education. The **District of Columbia** has a college prep program that assists youth in their transition to college. **North Carolina, Kansas** and **Maine** provide tuition waivers for youth to attend college or universities.

Finally, the economic crisis has impacted both child welfare and education agencies. News headlines highlight school closings across the country and educational stability may not be possible at all times. Some degree of flexibility is always required.

Child welfare agencies want to partner with school agencies to ensure academic success for children in care. We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback as committee members consider reauthorization. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. For additional information, please contact Ngozi Onunaku at (202) 682-0100 ex. 251 or by email at Ngozi.Onunaku@aphsa.org or Courteney Holden at (202) 682-0100 ex. 249 or by email at Courteney.Holden@aphsa.org.

Sincerely,



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