



National Association of Public
Child Welfare Administrators

an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association

Educational Needs of Foster Youth

Young people who experience foster care have poorer academic outcomes than those in the general population. This is due in large part to the early childhood emotional and/or physical trauma of child abuse and the challenges and realities of being in the foster care system. Many children and youth in state custody function below grade level, score lower on standardized tests, and have higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates.¹ Additionally, foster children are more likely to be placed in stigmatizing special education settings, yet their needs are not met. Young people enter foster care already behind in school and have difficulty catching up while in care.²

While in state custody, it is not unusual for children to transfer schools several times as they change placements. Students lose four to six months of academic programs every time they change schools.³ Multiple changes in teachers, guidance counselors and friends hinder educational progress and increase the likelihood that a young person will drop out. Youth in state custody often repeat a grade. Sadly, only 3 percent of youth who age out of the system attend and graduate from a college or university.⁴ The long-term outcomes associated with poor academic performance are unemployment or jobs with poverty-level wages, substance abuse, criminal behavior and homelessness.

Permanency or a positive foster care placement history and robust independent living preparation play a direct role in better educational outcomes for foster youth.⁵

The Critical Role of Adults

Foster parents, social workers, teachers, and judges play a critical role in ensuring academic success for foster youth. Research indicates that foster parents who ignore school performance or do not provide regular assistance with homework only add to the educational challenges young people face. Foster parents can be the best advocate for school services for children in their care.

Good practice occurs when social workers and teachers collaborate in addressing the educational needs of foster children. When children first enter care, they often receive an Individualized Education Plan that assesses

academic levels and provides guidance on school needs. Caseworkers and teachers must update each other on foster youths' academic progress. Additionally, there should be a dual effort for the social worker and teacher to encourage these students to finish school, not just get a GED. Although one study shows that foster care alumni completed high school at a rate comparable to the general population, most were through the process of obtaining a GED. Receiving a GED should be a secondary option. It is often given priority, however, when high school graduation may afford better future opportunities for youths.⁶

Judges also play a role in reviewing educational assessments, screening results, and requiring caseworkers to submit an academic progress report update at each hearing. Another action step may be the judge simply asking the young person about their educational aspirations at the hearing, especially before the case is closed.⁷ Addressing the educational needs of youth in court can help improve their school outcome and better their future.

Laws that Improve Educational Outcomes

Over the past several decades, Congress has passed several pieces of legislation intended to help at-risk children and youth meet their educational needs.

Although not specifically designed to address foster youth education, the **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act** and the **No Child Left Behind Act** have programs that may address educational needs. McKinney-Vento addresses school stability for homeless youth, many who have foster care experiences. Eligible youth include those who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence and those awaiting foster care placement. Under the law, local education agencies designate a liaison to help homeless youth with academic enrollment and referrals.

No Child Left Behind provides an array of services for children and youth at the greatest risk of failing to meet state educational standards required under the law. Particularly focused on the economically disadvantaged, school districts use NCLB funds to provide tutoring and

other supports to students who are not achieving their grade level, many who have foster care backgrounds.

Many children and youth in foster care have one or more disabilities. The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** provides guidelines and funding to states that help with early intervention services and educational programming for persons with disabilities from birth to 21 years of age.

The **Higher Education Act** establishes federal grants and loan programs to assist low-income people with paying for post-secondary education. Programs include Pell and Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants and the Perkins, Stafford and Federal Direct Loan Programs. In general, foster youth 18 or older are eligible HEA programs as a “family of one.”

The **Chafee Foster Care Independence Act** is designed to provide services for older youth that help prepare them for self-sufficiency and adulthood. Known as the independent living program, an array of services such as vocational and life skills training, educational interventions, tutoring and summer or night school may be available to struggling youth.

Separately, the **Chafee Educational and Training Vouchers Program**, which was authorized under the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001, provides \$5,000 annually per eligible youth for full or part-time college or university. The money may be spent on tuition fees, books, supplies or room and board.

The most recent and significant law that addresses better outcomes for older foster youth is the **Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act**. The law primarily provides additional opportunities for placement stability for older youth through guardianship and increasing the age they can remain in care to 21. Placement stability is one of the direct indicators for good educational outcomes for foster youth.

Specifically, the new law addresses educational stability for the child. States must assure that a child’s foster care placement takes into account the current educational setting and proximity of the placement to the school in which the child is enrolled. Also, the law requires states to work with foster youth on a transition plan prior to them leaving the system. The plan must include specifics on continuing education, housing and employment services.

States Offer Promising Practices to Improve Education for Foster Youth

Washington has practices and policies in place that promote educational stability for young people. Since 2001, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has been documenting low test scores, school failures, and grade retentions and school changes. In 2003, the state mandated that, whenever possible, foster children should remain in the schools they were attending prior to the placement. Child welfare agencies are also mandated to communicate, collaborate and coordinate with local school districts to share educational information regarding youth in care.⁸

Illinois has a geographic information systems application call “SchoolMinder” which is used for kids being placed into foster care. SchoolMinder helps children stay in their community and supports: education stability; continuity of services (received from their school); and parental and family visitation. The 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. The state has been successful in keeping children in their schools of origin.⁹

Kansas’ iGRAD project is a partnership between Keys for Networking and Families Together, Inc., and the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. The project provides education liaisons to help foster youth track credit histories, capture missing transcripts, and analyze information as it relates to graduation requirements. When a youth transfers to another school, the liaisons work closely to ensure that educational credits also transfer. The project has seen an increase in graduation rates as well as timeliness to graduation.

Like Kansas, **Colorado** has education liaisons who collaborate with child-placing agencies to ensure proper school placement, transfer and enrollment of foster children. These liaisons work with all parties to ensure that a foster child remains in an educational situation that promotes stability. The state requires schools to transfer educational records within 5 school days and that the receiving school admits these children within 5 days of receipt of those records.¹⁰

Texas and **California** have laws that require school districts to immediately accept children in state custody for enrollment without documentation. The state must provide the school with documentation within 30 days of enrollment. California alone has seen a 13 percent increase in college enrollment among foster youth.

In 2009 **New Mexico** started requiring state agencies to describe efforts taken on behalf of children’s educational needs during court hearings.¹¹

Oregon has a state law that allows the young person in foster care to retain dual residency if they are placed in a new school district. The state provides transportation or reimburses for the costs so that the youth can continue to attend the school in which they were enrolled prior to placement.

All states are utilizing Education and Training Vouchers. In 2006, there were 232 **Nebraska** youth who received assistance through this program. Several states, including **Mississippi**, award graduation stipends to foster youth that receive a high school diploma or GED.

The **District of Columbia** has a college preparatory program that assists youth in their transition to college.

Connecticut allows youth to remain as voluntary clients until the age of 23 to complete their college program. Several states, such as **North Carolina**, **Texas** and **Maine**, provide tuition waivers that help foster youth attend college or a university. In **Maine** young people can go to either public or private school in or out of state. **Oklahoma** allows youth to attend state public university if they were in state custody between the ages of 16 and 18. **Virginia** has a similar program.

Conclusion

School plays an important role in any child’s life, but particularly to those in the foster care system. Providing for the educational needs of these young people can be challenging. Congress, however, must continue to provide opportunities for states to improve educational outcomes for foster youth.

¹ National Conference of State Legislatures: The Forum for American’s Ideas. *Educating Children in Foster Care*, Steve Christian. November 2003.

² Ibid

³ Governor’s Task Force on Children’s Justice: Addressing the Educational Needs of Children in Foster Care in Michigan. February 2007.

⁴ ScienceDirect: Children and Youth Services Review. “Educational and employment outcomes of adults formerly in foster care: Results from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study.” July 5, 2006.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Governor’s Task Force on Children’s Justice: Addressing the Educational Needs of Children in Foster Care in Michigan. February 2007

⁸ National Conference of State Legislatures: The Forum for American’s Ideas. *Educating Children in Foster Care*, Steve Christian November 2003.

⁹ NAPCWA’s Fostering Connections Implementation Summaries—Illinois.

¹⁰ NAPCWA’s Fostering Connections Implementation Summaries—Colorado.

¹¹ NAPCWA’s Fostering Connections Implementation Summaries—New Mexico.