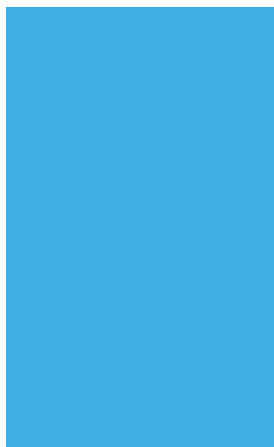


Meeting the Educational Needs of Students in the Child Welfare System



A Tool for Teachers

Juvenile Law Center and
Education Law Center

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TEACHERS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

*Since I moved around from school district to school district so often, tracking down all of the paperwork was a huge problem. No one knew when I was graduating... If I had known, I could have applied to college. **

**from Casey Family Programs, [A Roadmap for Learning](#)*

Schools can drastically change the lives of children in the child welfare system. While students in foster care often struggle educationally, they can excel in school when they receive the right support. For example, youth in care who are connected to mentors are three times as likely to graduate as those who are not. A single educator who helps connect a child in foster care to the school community can change the trajectory of that child's life. Former foster youth often tell us that a teacher or guidance counselor made the most profound difference in their lives.

Children in foster care have unique educational needs that too often go unnoticed. Frequent school changes cause serious confusion and sometimes lost instructional time. Students end up repeating or missing courses, sometimes failing to graduate as a result. Without an active parent, youth in care fail to receive needed accommodations, remedial education, or gifted and talented classes.

These challenges are heightened for the many youth in care with special education needs. Studies show that "youth in foster care are 2.5 [to] 3.5 [times] more likely to be receiving special education services than their non-foster care peers. Research also suggests that children in foster care who are in special education tend to change schools more frequently, be placed in more restrictive

educational settings, and have poorer quality education plans than their non-foster care peers in special education.”*

For all children in care, the trauma in their home life interferes with their learning, setting them even further behind academically. Teachers are often the most stable and informed adults in these children’s lives. Even foster parents often look to the school staff for information about the children in their homes.

Teachers who make the extra effort to assess the child’s performance and needs, identify supportive adults, and connect students with legal entitlements and opportunities, find that their students have more positive experiences in school, improve academically, and are more likely to meet their goals of high school graduation and post-secondary education.

This tool is designed to help educators ask the right questions and take needed steps to meet the needs of children in care when they start school and reviewed at every marking period to assess any new needs. The accompanying guide for administrators provides a more thorough analysis of the relevant federal and Pennsylvania law and suggests additional opportunities to connect students with needed services. **Always remember to coordinate with your administrator so as not to duplicate efforts.** By engaging with these students, schools can dramatically improve education outcomes – and thus life outcomes – for our most vulnerable youth.

*I am the only one in my family to graduate high school. My school counselor really helped – calling me every day, giving me pencils and paper and a daily planner. She taught me study skills. She had a good life and showed me the way.**

**from Casey Family Programs, [A Roadmap for Learning](#)*

*National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, *Education is the Lifeline for Youth in Care*, 2011.

HOW TO HELP YOUTH IN CARE SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

*I started playing football... I met a lot of people I didn't know before... I ended up going to school because of the friends I had there.**

**quote from a young foster care alumni, and member of Youth Fostering Change, a Juvenile Law Center youth advocacy group.*

- 1. Welcome the student to the school and make sure that he or she has all necessary school supplies.**
 - ◇ Be discreet about the student's involvement in the child welfare system. Consult with the child before disclosing his or her status.
 - ◇ Identify and address any practices that segregate or discriminate against students in the child welfare system.
- 2. Identify and communicate with the child's regular and/or special education decision-maker, who may be a parent, foster parent, or other individual.**
- 3. Engage the student in the school community and activities – help the student join an extra-curricular activity even if the child enrolls at mid-term.**

4. Be an advocate for the student: ensure that the student has the support and guidance needed to progress academically and socially.

◇ **Ensure that the student is in the regular school setting unless he or she needs another placement to address his or her needs.**

◇ **Ensure that the student's special education needs are met.**

◇ **Ensure that the student's English Language Learner needs are met.**

◇ **Ensure that the student's disabilities are accommodated in the school setting, regardless of whether the child is eligible for special education.**

◇ **Ensure that the student's behavioral health needs are met.**

5. For students 14 or older, help the student plan for graduation and post-secondary education (for students with IEPs, this is required by law).

SIX ACTS A TEACHER CAN TAKE TO HELP A CHILD IN CARE SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

1. WELCOME THE STUDENT TO THE SCHOOL

These initial recommendations are the most obvious. However, for youth in care who often change schools while also losing their families, friends, and entire communities, these small steps can be incredibly important. Make sure one person in the school takes responsibility for coordinating these efforts. A homeroom or advisory teacher is a good choice. Be mindful not to publicly disclose a student's involvement with the child welfare system without his or her consent.

- ◇ **Take the student on a tour of the building.**
- ◇ **Make sure that welcome efforts are accessible to all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners.**
- ◇ **Ensure that the student has all necessary school supplies, with attention to the student's unique needs.**
- ◇ **Designate peers as a welcoming committee (without disclosing the child's foster care status).**
- ◇ **Check in with the student regularly about his or her needs and adjustment.**
- ◇ **Ensure that your school does not discriminate against children in foster care, for example, by preventing them from taking home textbooks or otherwise participating in academics and extra-curricular activities like all other youth.**

2. ENSURE ADULT SUPPORT FOR THE STUDENT'S EDUCATION

Involved adults supporting a child's education can make a tremendous difference in outcomes for students.

- ◇ **Make sure you know the counselor or teacher the administration has designated to be the main point of contact for the student.**
- ◇ **Make sure your administration has identified the person who will make regular and special education decisions for the student** (sign permission slips, determine which courses the student should take, etc.). Stay in contact with this person about the student's needs and progress. Because youth in foster care often lack a history of connection with their caregivers, your communications can be particularly vital for these youth.
- ◇ **Recommend the student for mentorship programs and other activities that will connect them with caring adults.**

TIP: Children in care can have many adults in their lives (biological parents, foster parents, case workers, lawyers, etc.), most of whom play a role in a child's educational success. Having a team of interested adults can ultimately be a good thing for a child. However, schools need to be attentive to the student's and the family's privacy rights. Be sure to get clear information from your school administration regarding who you are authorized to contact. See the administrators' guide for more information about the relevant laws.

3. ENGAGE THE STUDENT IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY AND ACTIVITIES

A student who is engaged in the school community is more likely to engage in classwork and succeed in school.

- ◇ **Talk to the student about his or her interests. Assist the student in signing up for relevant extra-curricular activities.** Ask the student if he or she needs help figuring out transportation or other accommodations to be a part of activities, and connect with the people in the school who can help.

- ◇ **With the student's agreement, check with administration to make sure the student is signed up for a free school lunch.**
 - ◆ *All students in the child welfare system are eligible for free school lunches.*

4. BE AN ADVOCATE FOR THE MOST APPROPRIATE EDUCATION

For many children in care, the teacher is the active adult in their life who knows them best. As a result, teachers can make a significant difference by ensuring that the unique needs of any individual youth in care are met.

INFORM YOUR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION IF:

- ◇ **The student could succeed in a less restrictive setting: for example, regular education rather than alternative education, homebound instruction, or residential treatment facility, or separate classroom.**
- ◇ **The student could benefit from appropriate advanced placement, honors courses or gifted and talented programs.**
- ◇ **The student needs academic support including English Language Learner services.**
- ◇ **The student needs remedial supports.**
- ◇ **The student needs special education services, or needs different special education services.**

5. ADDRESS THE STUDENT’S BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH NEEDS

Students in the child welfare system too often slip through the cracks, failing to receive needed disabilities accommodations. Moreover, between 50 and 80 percent of students in the child welfare system have behavioral health needs. Teachers can play a vital role in securing the necessary supports so that students can thrive.*

- ◇ **If a student in care is disengaged or disruptive , consider the significant stress he or she is facing, and help the child find needed help.**
 - ◆ If the child has an identified behavioral health need in his or her IEP, make sure that the IEP contains a positive behavior support plan.
 - ◆ Learn about the impact of trauma on learning.
 - ◆ Refer the child to that Student Assistance Program (“SAP”) or ask the administration to identify any other supports to which the child is entitled.
- ◇ **Inform your administration if the child has any physical or behavioral health issues that require accommodation.**



***TIP:** For more information on these trauma-informed teaching and discipline strategies, see **Helping Traumatized Children Learn**, available at <http://www.massadvocates.org/download-book.php>.*

* National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, *Education is the Lifeline for Youth in Foster Care*.

6. HELP OLDER YOUTH PLAN FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Many youth in foster care have no idea that they can attend college. Some have said that the thought never crossed their mind until a teacher, judge, or other adult in their lives suggested it. They may not even know how to start the process.

- ◇ **Ask the student about his or her plans for after graduation, and describe the possibilities and the process.**
- ◇ **Connect the student with a guidance counselor who can talk to him or her more about scholarships, financial aid, and applications. Ensure that the counselor knows to give the student extra help and support with the application process, touring schools, pursuing financial aid, and setting up housing and other supports for college.**
- ◇ **For students 14 and older, confirm that the student has an appropriate transition plan in his or her IEP.**

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND LEGAL GUIDANCE

- 1. *Why Special Education Teachers Should Care About Foster Care:*** an LD Online resource created by the Department of Special Education at Eastern Michigan University, available at www.ldonline.org/article/5610.
- 2. *How the Child Welfare System Works:*** a factsheet created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, available at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/cpswork.cfm.
- 3. *Special Education Decision Making: A Guide for Educators:*** a Legal Center on Foster Care and Education guide for educators working with children and youth in foster care who qualify for special education services, available at www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/child/education/publications/special_ed_series_DM_educators.authcheckdam.pdf.
- 4. *Education Law Center website:*** www.elc-pa.org contains numerous fact sheets and publications on the education rights of youth in the child welfare system.

TRAINING CURRICULA

- 5. *Endless Dreams:*** a Casey Family Programs video and training curriculum for teachers about children in foster care, available at www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/EndlessDreams/.

6. What Teachers and Educators Can Do to Help Youth in Foster Care: a resource from The ALLIANCE National Parent Technical Assistance Center that offers helpful tips for educators, available at www.taalliance.org/conferences/2009/materials/3b_FCM08%20What%20Teachers%20and%20Educators%20Can%20Do.pdf.

7. A Conversation with an Educator: a written interview with a professor of education who is also a resource parent on what teachers working with youth in foster care should know. Available on the website for the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, at www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/conversation-with-educator.html.

8. Everybody's a Teacher: a statewide initiative, including a "Backpack" of resources, in Florida to help children and youth in foster care get the best education possible, available at www.dcf.state.fl.us/initiatives/everybodysateacher/.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND REFORM INITIATIVES

9. Blueprint for Change: Educational Success for Children in Foster Care: a Legal Center for Foster Care and Education guide for reform available for download at www.abanet.org/child/education/publications/blueprint_second_edition_final.pdf. Guides specific to educators can be found at www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/child/education/publications/blueprint_tools_educator_school_stability.authcheckdam.pdf.

10. Solving the Data Puzzle: a Legal Center for Foster Care and Education guide on how child welfare and education agencies can best work to improve data collection and information sharing, available at www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/SolvingDataPuzzle.pdf.



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