



Education and Children in Care

While schools should serve as a source of stability for a child in foster care, many children and youth in foster care encounter numerous barriers to school success. In addition to the abuse and neglect initially bringing them to the attention of the child welfare system they must deal with the emotional consequences of being removed from their homes and communities, separation from siblings, being bounced from home to home, and having the child welfare agency and court system involved in all aspects of their lives. A child placed in foster care may have to move to a new neighborhood, which can mean the child has to adjust to a new home as well as a new school. A new school may mean a delay in enrollment because of required health and immunization records, and grades may not be readily available. A school transfer may take place in the middle of a school year, disrupting a foster child's classes and breaking relationships with teachers, friends, and other peers, which adds to the level of stress. A foster child leaving these attachments behind will also be confronting the stresses of new teachers, friends, and curricula.

Although some foster children may be best-served by remaining in the same school despite being moved out of that district, this in fact may not always be an option for the child and foster parent. This option may exist in other instances, but the services that would make this possible, such as bus transportation or covering the cost of individual transportation, are not available.

Some youth in foster care have been reported to move through an average of nine different schools during their tenure in foster care. These children and youth are commonly out of school for weeks or months on end and, not surprisingly, fall behind academically, cognitively, and socially. They often need to repeat courses and are unable to access the support services that could improve education outcomes. Schools need a better understanding of the unique situations and experiences of children in foster care, and child welfare agencies need to focus more on the educational needs and outcomes of the children and youth they are serving.

Although all children are entitled to education services under federal, state, and local laws, the specific educational needs of children and youth in care often go unmet. The rate at which foster youth complete high school (50%) is significantly below that of their peers (70%). The rate at which college-qualified foster youth attend postsecondary education (20%) also is substantially below that of their peers (60%). Important to note, however, is that 70% of former foster youth express the desire to attend college. The effect on future earnings is enormous. The U.S. Census Bureau reports college graduates make \$24,000 more per year than those with high school diplomas.

Education for all children is fundamental to a successful future. It is perhaps even more critical to those children who at a young age face additional life challenges. That is why access to a quality education and ongoing support and encouragement are so vital to the approximate 800,000 children who will spend time in foster care in a given year.

Working in various partnerships, CWLA has sought to promote some fundamental goals with regard to education and children and youth in foster care: educational stability, seamless



educational transitions for children and youth when education changes do occur, high-quality educational experiences, high expectations and aspirations, and greater national attention to the disparate educational outcomes for young people in foster care, particularly children and youth of color.

Congress began to address these challenges with the enactment of the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (PL 110-351). The new law requires that the case plan of a child in foster care take into account the appropriateness of the current educational setting and that the child welfare agency coordinate with the local education agency that the child remains in the school in which he or she is enrolled at the time of the foster care placement. When remaining in that same school is not in the child's best interest, the child welfare and local education agencies must ensure immediate and appropriate enrollment in a new school, with all of the child's educational records provided.

To address the issue of transportation, the legislation amends what can be included in the foster care maintenance payment to include "reasonable travel for the child to remain in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of his or her placement."

The state is also directed to ensure that each child who is eligible for federal funding under foster care, adoption assistance, or kinship care, and is covered by compulsory school laws, is a full-time student (with some health exceptions).

Issues have developed in some areas around restrictions on adoptive children temporarily in group homes for treatment, in that they are not allowed to attend a nearby school due because the adoptive parent may live in a different district. The new education requirement provides that a foster child be allowed to remain in the current school when it's in the child's best interest or in a new school with immediate enrollment when that is in the child's best interest.

These are important steps toward ensuring better education outcomes for children in care, but they represent only one part of the challenge. For the child welfare agency to be effective in such case planning requires the cooperation of the education agency. Many times, CWLA member agencies indicate the discussion with education agencies, and creating a strategy to ensure a child stays in school or obtains immediate enrollment in a new school, is difficult. This needs to be a two-sided process developed by both the education and child welfare communities.

In order to properly implement the education provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success Act, the new administration should provide flexible guidance and regulation that will strengthen the use of foster care maintenance payments to address the transportation costs of those foster children living in one school district but continue to travel to their old school district.

Congress and the new Administration should include, in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, language that would direct the local education agencies work with child welfare agencies to ensure foster children remain in their current schools when it is in the child's best interest, and to guarantee immediate enrollment in a new district when that is in the



child's best interest. Additionally, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, should incorporate a broader definition of homeless children, under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, to include children in foster care.