

# Putting the Needs of Children in Foster Care on the Education Research Agenda

Children in foster care move like shadows through the school system, but they leave indelible marks. Largely ignored by the education community, as a group they've had consistently dismal educational outcomes. Research shows that by the time many of their peers are graduating from college, half the young adults who have been in the foster care system are unemployed, a fourth are homeless, and a fifth are in prison.

"They are one of the most academically vulnerable student groups," says BethAnn Berliner, Senior Research Associate at WestEd. "Improving their academic outcomes means we must do right by them when they are young and still in school, so they can turn around their life trajectories."

One of the main challenges is a lack of coordination among the many entities and services that play a role in the foster care system. As wards of the state, children in foster care come in contact with a wide range of adults from judicial, social service, and education sectors. Usually there is no one who advocates specifically for their academic needs. With limited coordination of services and little or no sharing of data, agencies lack any reliable way to determine what the children need to succeed in school.

A promising initiative is poised to change those circumstances. Ready to Succeed, a project born of the former California Collaborative for Children in Foster Care, aims to spotlight the educational needs of children in foster care to find ways to support their success. The initiative unites philanthropists, researchers, educators, and state and county social service providers who have often worked at cross-purposes, despite good intentions and shared interests in helping children in foster care excel.

"This is such vital work. The education of these kids has too often been overlooked, trumped by caring for other crises in their lives," says WestEd's Chief Executive Officer, Glen Harvey, who was a member of the Collaborative. "But given their outcomes, improving education for these children has become an emergency as well."

The initiative could have a profound impact on foster care services throughout the United States. California is home to one-fifth of the country's more than half-million children in foster care. Like other states, California has a hodgepodge of policies designed to serve children in foster care, and many have been implemented without sufficient evidence that they improve academic achievement or reduce the scars of family trauma.

Studies show that children in foster care perform significantly worse in school than the general population: Three-quarters perform below grade level, over half are held back in school, and they

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are twice as likely as their classmates to be suspended and to drop out. By age 18, California's foster children have attended an average of nine different schools. Uprooted from their biological families because of abuse and neglect, they often have behavioral problems so severe that some schools have expelled children from kindergarten.

In 2010, Ready to Succeed published a report that points to new research priorities that could determine a better approach to educating children in foster care. *Grappling with the Gaps: Toward a Research Agenda to Meet the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care* examined three main focus areas: school readiness, school success, and data sharing.

**School readiness.** Many young children in foster care experience conditions that undermine school readiness and place them at risk for school failure. Ready to Succeed has identified early intervention services and preschools as essential developmental supports to young children. The initiative recommends expanded eligibility and access to early intervention services for all children ages 0-2 in foster care and better access to high-quality preschool for all children ages 3-5 in foster care. But there is limited research about how many of these children are currently receiving these supports, which of the supports are most beneficial, or what other problems could also affect their early learning.

For example, when researchers tried to determine baseline information about the percentage of young children in foster care who were receiving preschool and other early intervention services, only one of the 58 counties in California had collected data that could be reviewed. That review found that there is a long way to go before achieving the initiative's recommendations for universal access to early intervention services and licensed preschools.

**School success.** Most educators don't even know where to begin to turn around the poor educational outcomes of children in foster care. For example, experts consulted for the *Grappling with the Gaps* report said, "We know virtually nothing about what happens in classrooms" for these children. There is almost no research about effective instructional practices for this student population. And because children's school record transfers are often delayed or incomplete, and professional development focused on trauma and learning is practically nonexistent, teachers don't know how to help. "How can we expect teachers to adjust their instruction if they aren't even clued in that their students are foster kids?" the report asks. "Schools are starved for this information and want classroom solutions, but it isn't there."

Additionally, policymakers and social service providers often urge school districts to keep foster children in the same schools as a way to ease the disruptions caused by frequent changes in their home placements. But because the children are often concentrated in low-performing schools, it remains an open and controversial question whether they may be better off in the long run moving to higher-achieving schools.

Another common practice that may not be effective is to place children in special education services because of behavior problems likely associated with the foster care experience. As one expert explained, "It's the only game in town" because mental health services are virtually nonexistent at schools and there are few other ways to fill the gaps in their learning. "We don't even know why their performance is so low," said one expert cited in the report. "Is it (poor) attendance, instability in their home placement, school changes, or cognitive impairments and developmental



delays?" Another expert remarked, "We haven't separated out what part of what we're seeing in student performance is student effect, teacher effect, school effect, or system effect."

**Data sharing.** Data are rarely shared across education, child welfare, mental health, and judicial systems. Confidentiality is the primary reason cited for the closed silos of information erected by agencies with overlapping responsibilities for children in foster care. But protecting children in the state's care might require new kinds of data sharing agreements.

The Ready to Succeed initiative aims to create the collaborative spirit and innovative thinking needed to break down the barriers that interfere with the school success of children in foster care. And there is much work ahead.

WestEd is currently in the early stages of launching an ambitious data-sharing effort with the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, the Stuart Foundation, the California Department of Education, the California Department of Social Services, and other initiative partners. The goal is to create the first-ever statewide report on the educational outcomes of children in foster care drawing from multiple data sources. The conclusions from such a report could provide the information needed to answer key questions raised by the *Grappling with the Gaps* study, including:

- What improves the educational outcomes of children in foster care, and in which circumstances?
- How can duplicated services be eliminated and more effective ones be coordinated, funded, and monitored?
- Who should be responsible for planning and providing counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and other targeted interventions? And what kinds of training and supports are needed for those who provide advocacy and instruction?

"We need to share data across the education and child welfare fields to better serve those children," says Vanessa Ximenes Barrat, Senior Research Associate at WestEd. "The goal is to have programs, evaluations, and solutions that can be generalized and useful to other communities and states."

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