

Ready to Succeed in the Classroom

Teachers' Ideas About How **Schools** Can Help Improve Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in the Foster Care System

The issue of improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care is receiving some long-overdue attention, but the voices of classroom teachers have not been prominent in the discussions so far. To help fill this gap, a team from the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and funded by the Stuart Foundation convened six discussion groups in late 2009 to explore how teachers and foster children and youth interact in the classroom. The discussion group sessions were held in three California counties (Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento).

This document is one of three highlighting “wish lists” from teachers who participated in these discussions. The wish lists capture teachers’ ideas about what would help them serve children and youth in foster care better, at three different levels: within their schools, at the district or administrative level, and outside the school system (within the broader community). Their ideas for *individual schools* are summarized below, followed by discussion questions for school staff, teachers and principals that are based on the teachers’ wish lists. We encourage you to use these as a starting point for discussions at your school, and to add to this list.

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At the top of the “within schools” list was a better, faster system for communicating to teachers that they had a child or youth in foster care in the classroom. Late, incomplete, or non-existent paperwork was a common refrain. Teachers also wanted fuller information on these students — not just their academic performance, but information that could better serve these children, including attendance, interests, physical health, mental health, and previous successes.

Teachers also wished for more streamlined procedures within their schools — such as one counselor working with all children and youth in foster care and thus familiar with their situations, or a team approach in which all of a student’s teachers have opportunities to compare approaches and strategize about how to help the child achieve success in school. Teachers wished for more support as they worked with children and youth in foster care — professional development (on behaviors, how to create structure in the classroom, and community resources available to them), mentors, more planning time, and contact lists or flow charts for accessing support within schools and districts. Several teachers mentioned that certain teachers within their schools were particularly effective with children and youth in foster care, and that it would be helpful to be able to create an individualized schedule for these children, with hand-picked teachers throughout their school day.

On behalf of their students, teachers called for more counseling and social work resources on site, resources for children not performing at grade level, more

Ready to Succeed: Discussion Card for Schools





frequent and accessible life/social skills training for students who had not received much of this at home, more physical activity and recreational options, access to supplies for those who needed them, and extra help and tutoring for writing skills. They also thought youth in the foster care system (along with many others) would benefit from conflict management sessions and some type of peer support — either one-on-one, and/or in small groups.

Discussion Questions for Schools: What Can Schools Do to Help Teachers Help Students in Foster Care?

- What is the best way for us to let teachers know a foster child is in the classroom?
- What can we do to move paperwork (IEPs, assessments, transcripts, etc.) faster from school to school?
- How can we learn more about non-academic information for a fuller picture of a student in the foster care system (e.g., a student's interests, health, talents)?
- Is it possible to assign one counselor within the school to all attending students in the foster care system?
- What are opportunities for offering more professional development geared to improving educational outcomes for foster children and youth (e.g., regarding behaviors, discipline, structure in the classroom, community resources)?
- What will it take to build in more planning time for teachers with students in the foster care system?
- Who can help us create school- (and district-) specific flow charts and contact information that make it easier to find and access support for students in foster care?
- Can we assign students to teachers known to succeed with foster students?
- How can we bring more counseling and social work resources for these students on-site?
- What resources are available to provide more help (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, assessments) for students in foster care who are not performing at grade level?
- Can our school offer more ongoing life skills classes (especially conflict management/resolution) to support students in the foster care system, especially in high school?
- How can we create more opportunities for physical activity and recreation for students in foster care?
- How can we procure and distribute school and recreational supplies to students in foster care who need these items and are not receiving them from their foster parents or group homes?
- In what ways can we boost writing skills for these students? In-class opportunities? Intensive tutoring? Something else?
- Can we find ways to connect foster students to their peers through peer-to-peer support and functions?

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Teachers' Ideas About How School *Districts* Can Help Improve Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in the Foster Care System

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Teachers wished their districts and administrative staff would find ways to share information that would enable them to work more successfully and efficiently with these students. Another specific concern was the problem of students not being able to receive partial credit for their work when they transferred from one school to the next. As students approach the end of their high school years with a deficit in the credits needed to graduate and no realistic hope of making them up, many give up and lose whatever motivation they had to persevere in their classes, according to secondary school teachers.

High school teachers were painfully aware of the “cliff” that awaits youth when they emancipate from the system at the age of 18 and their foster families no longer receive financial support. As one teacher said, she had difficulty envisioning her own 18-year-old son — a product of a loving, supportive, and happy family — living independently at that age, much less someone lacking the education and life skills to do so. Teachers wished their districts and communities could find more ways to help youth aging out of the foster care system with credits towards graduation, variations on adult education, transitions to community colleges, and other support for older students. They noted that both schools and districts could do more to help foster youth (and other students) explore careers earlier in their academic progression by considering alternative pathways through high school, including Career Technical Education (CTE).

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Many teachers expressed grief about losing track of foster students to whom they had become attached, but whose progress they could not follow once the children left their schools. They wished for help from the district in finding ways to stay in touch with these students, while preserving their privacy and confidentiality.

Teachers thought districts could do more to ensure that children stayed within the same school or feeder system, even when their placements changed. Similar to the wish list for their individual schools, teachers wished districts could provide more professional development, including guest speakers on topics relevant to helping teachers become more effective with youth from the foster care system who were in their classrooms (i.e., dealing with typical behaviors, creating structure and consistency in the classroom, accessing community resources).

Discussion Questions for School Districts: What Can Districts Do to Help Teachers Help Students in Foster Care?

- What is already being done to address the issue of partial credits not being awarded, creating a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to graduation; what more could we be doing?
- How can our district offer more support for older students (i.e., over 18) — e.g., offering more adult education or helping students transition to college and careers?
- What can our district do to promote earlier career exploration and provide multiple pathways through high school (Career Technical Education)?
- Can we find ways to allow district teachers to contact and stay in touch with a student removed from their classroom due to a placement change?
- What are we doing (and what more can we do) to keep children in the same school or feeder system, even when placements change?
- What types of professional development, including guest speakers, could be provided district-wide to support teachers with students in foster care in their classrooms?

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Teachers' Ideas About How **Communities** Can Help Improve Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in the Foster Care System

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Teachers expressed concern about the lack of concrete support they had sometimes witnessed from the larger community (including some foster parents). They wished for better screening, training and enforcement of who could become (and remain) a foster parent or group home staff member. Although many recognized that the demand for foster parents far exceeds the supply and that these measures might further restrict the options for foster children and youth, they also said, in the words of one teacher, “Our neediest kids deserve the very best.”

One teacher — a foster parent herself — noted that the foster parent approval process can be expedited for teachers (similar to the streamlined approval process in place for family members), taking as little as 30 days. Her experience was so positive and rewarding that she encouraged other teachers to consider becoming foster parents, and wished for a foster parent recruiting campaign geared specifically to teachers.

Teachers expressed concern about emancipating foster care youth at age 18. They wished for broader community support for their students in terms of guidance for job seeking, college applications and matriculation, and life skills. They also wished for easier access to social workers on campus — especially for high school students nearing the age of 18.





Ready to Succeed: Discussion Card for Communities

Teachers also saw communities as largely untapped but potential allies for a range of resources and contributions that could help children and youth in the foster care system, from practical help with everyday school supplies to identifying recreational outlets, job shadowing and mentoring opportunities, and transition assistance for those aging out of the system.

Discussion Questions for Communities: What Can *Communities* Do to Help Teachers Help Students in Foster Care?

- How can we strengthen standards, guidelines, enforcement, and training of foster parents?
- How can we encourage more teachers to become foster parents?
- What can our community do to change laws that emancipate foster youth at age 18?
- How can we work with social services agencies to bring social workers onto campuses to support students in the foster care system?
- What individuals and groups in our community could join forces to provide needed support for students in the foster care system — such as supplies, equipment, mentoring, job shadowing, and transition assistance?

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