

Ready to Succeed

Changing Systems to Give California's Foster Children the Opportunities
They Deserve to be Ready for and Succeed in School



Recommendations and Implementation Strategies
from The California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care

The California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care is co-sponsored by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc.

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning is made up of education professionals, scholars and public policy experts who care deeply about improving the schooling of California's children. The Center was founded in 1995 as a public, nonprofit organization with the purpose of strengthening the capacity of California's teachers for delivering rigorous, well-rounded curriculum and ensuring the continuing intellectual, ethical and social development of all children.

Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. is a private nonprofit corporation providing free legal services to people with mental and developmental disabilities. MHAS assists children and adults with obtaining government benefits and services, protecting their rights and fighting discrimination. MHAS also serves as a resource to the community by providing training and technical assistance to attorneys, mental health professionals, consumer and family member groups, and other advocates.

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Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc.

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Foreword

The California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care brings together two important streams of Stuart Foundation funding and interest: child welfare and public education. In both areas, our investments support policy and system changes with the greatest potential to make a profound difference not only for children today but for future generations of vulnerable children as well.

The set of recommendations that follow cap two years of collaborative effort among the Stuart Foundation and two long-standing Foundation partners: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, and Los Angeles-based Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. (MHAS). Together, the Center and MHAS have contributed their expertise in public education and child welfare and convened a team of dedicated professionals from both arenas to delve deeply into the challenges and opportunities that exist in the child welfare and public education systems to improve educational outcomes for foster youth.

The recommendations made by this collaborative team reinforce and build upon the work of others who have called for smoother collaboration between education and child welfare arenas, earlier intervention in the learning trajectory of foster children which needs to occur long before school officially begins, and intensive supports for foster children so that they can succeed in the classroom. These recommendations take a systems and policy approach, addressing three basic areas of need: school readiness, school success, and data sharing.

For the Stuart Foundation, a nexus between the worlds of public education and child welfare is critically important. Both systems have the potential to improve outcomes for foster children and youth and to do so by working together more closely and effectively at the local and state levels. We also believe strongly in the value of relationships and partnership, both in our own work and in the work of the organizations that we support. For this reason, we are particularly pleased to support a collaborative effort – one that we hope will spawn additional collaborative research, pilot programs, and lasting policy changes.

We understand that California currently faces a budget crisis of considerable magnitude and that some of our recommendations call for additional resources to ensure that foster children have an opportunity to succeed in society. We urge that, when the budget situation improves, these recommendations be considered among California's highest priorities. As these recommendations are implemented, they will amplify the work of the Stuart Foundation and many others to ensure that all children grow up in caring families, learn in vibrant and effective schools, and have opportunities to become productive members of their communities. That is our mission; we know it is one we share with many of the people and organizations who contributed to these recommendations and with those we hope will carry them forward.

We look forward with interest and optimism to the implementation of these recommendations and to the enhanced opportunities that will be available to the foster youth in our communities as a result of this collaborative effort.

Teri Kook, MSW

Senior Program Officer, Stuart Foundation

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Stuart Foundation, the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc., we would like to thank the Design Team members who generously and collaboratively contributed their time and expertise to several full-day meetings, conference calls, and reviews of many, many iterations of the group's recommendations. Design Team members also helped identify additional resources to shape and improve the recommendations. Without them, we would not have a California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care, nor would we have been able to make the progress that we did. The members of the Design Team, along with their affiliations, are listed in an Appendix.

BethAnn Berliner, a Senior Researcher at WestEd, made an invaluable contribution to the evidence base for the recommendations (and to the identification of many research gaps) by expertly assembling and summarizing the research literature on school readiness, school success, and data sharing as these relate to foster children and youth. We are very grateful to her.

The desire to improve the educational outcomes for foster youth is at the core of the Design Team's work and its recommendations. Several former foster youth shared their educational experiences – both positive and negative – with the Design Team's members, reinforcing the compelling nature of this work and the moral imperative to make their impressive successes in life the rule, rather than the exception.

A number of people in the education and child welfare fields supported the Collaborative by reviewing the recommendations at different points in their development. Their perspectives helped us improve each iteration of the recommendations and were especially useful in bringing forward the voices of those working most closely with foster children and the many adults involved in their care and education. They include:

Steve Ashman, Stanislaus County Community Services

Mary Ault, Deputy Director, California Department of Children and Family Services

Robert Ayasse, UC Berkeley

Vicki Baker, Alvarado Middle School, Union City, CA

Karen Bentley, Shasta County Foster Youth Services

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Carole Shauffer, Youth Law Center

Nancy Sherrod, CASA of Santa Cruz

Debbie Staub, Casey Family Programs

Elizabeth Tarango, Alameda County Office of Education

Joyce Wright, Sacramento County Office of Education

Thanks to each of you for making this a truly collaborative effort.

Introduction

In his 2008 annual “State of Education” address on the status of education in California, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell focused on the achievement gap between white students and many others: students of color, English language learners, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities.¹ To this list, he could have added foster youth, whose demographics overlap significantly with those of students of color and those living in poverty.

By any of the measures that Superintendent O’Connell cited – test scores, dropout rates, rates of college entry and completion – foster youth are mired in their own particular achievement gap. This gap, in turn, translates into fewer economic opportunities and more adverse outcomes, condemning many foster youth to a harsh life sentence among California’s have-nots. Within the first 2 to 4 years after aging out of the foster care system, 51% of these young adults are unemployed, 40% are on public assistance, 25% become homeless, and 20% will be incarcerated.

While any student’s academic achievement gap represents missed opportunities and untapped potential, the plight of foster youth is unique because the state itself – and, by extension, its court, child welfare and education systems – has assumed responsibility for their safety and well-being. Removing foster children from a situation of abuse or neglect at home may indeed improve their immediate physical safety. But all too often it leads, however inadvertently, to a lack of attention to children’s educational needs that in many ways constitutes yet another form of damaging neglect.

It is important to note that this neglect is not the product of individual failings, but of systemic ones. It is equally important to note that these systemic failures are far from inevitable. Indeed, identifying short- and long-term ways to reverse

them is the focus of this report, which summarizes findings and recommendations from the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care. The Collaborative was convened by the Stuart Foundation specifically to identify and address ways that the child welfare, education, court systems, and caregivers can create a framework to partner with the many dedicated professionals working within these systems to do better by the foster children in their care.

Approximately 20% of the nation’s half million foster youth – at least 74,000 youth – live in California. As a proportion of the state’s student population, their numbers may be small, but their significance to the education system and the state’s economy is not. As Superintendent O’Connell noted in his address, in California (unlike other states), the students facing an achievement gap constitute the *majority* of the school population. An important implication, he observed, is that closing the achievement gap helps improve the lives and futures of *all* California students, not just those furthest behind. It also promotes the skilled workforce that the state needs to compete and thrive in the global economy. Likewise, while foster youth face unique challenges and deserve to be among our highest priorities because of their status as the state’s responsibility, many of the strategies below benefit not only foster youth, but many other students as well. The case for devoting attention and resources to closing their educational achievement gap is both morally *and* practically compelling.

This report describes the Collaborative’s charge and products, briefly summarizes some of the relevant research that the group considered in developing its recommendations, and identifies specific recommendations in three areas: school readiness, school success, and data sharing.

(The research summary and recommendations also are available in a shorter stand-alone document that is a companion piece to this report.)

A final section identifies some strategies and implications for implementing the Collaborative's recommendations, which were presented and discussed at a forum on educating foster youth in Sacramento in January 2008.

The Collaborative's sponsors and members hope that these recommendations, which echo and re-

inforce those of many other groups, will lead to both short- and long-term changes in the educational experiences of foster youth and contribute to closing their particular achievement gap. Regardless of what happens at home, education remains the ticket for foster youth (and for many other students, too) to escape the trajectory that they find themselves in – placed there through no fault of their own, yet paying such a heavy and lasting price.

The California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care

In 2005, the Stuart Foundation funded two of its grantees – the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. – to both model and achieve greater collaboration between the public education and child welfare sectors. The two organizations share a philosophical commitment to narrowing the profound gaps between the “haves” and “have nots” within California’s public education system, with foster youth unacceptably over-represented in the latter group.

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning is a public, non-profit organization dedicated to the premise that excellent teachers matter to the well-being of all children. The Center’s many initiatives share a goal of building California’s teacher workforce capacity and, ultimately, ensuring that every child enjoys the benefits of having a well-prepared, effective teacher. A decade of respected research on the quality of California’s teacher workforce has led the Center to focus on a related issue revealed by the data: the unacceptable bifurcation of California’s public education system into two systems with less and less in common, with one serving students and families in economically advantaged circumstances and another for everyone else.

Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. (MHAS), a non-profit public interest law firm in Los Angeles, has a strong track record in researching, designing, implementing, and evaluating efforts that seek to improve educational outcomes for foster youth. MHAS compiled an extensive literature review on the education of foster youth for the Judicial Council of California and developed, implemented, and evaluated the Stuart Foundation-funded Education Liaison Model in Los Angeles County.

As a result of these and other efforts, the Stuart Foundation has supported MHAS’s ongoing training and technical assistance in education in seven counties with Family to Family programs, which promote neighborhood-based foster care and permanence for foster children. With the Stuart Foundation’s support, the two organizations convened the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care. The Collaborative’s charge, described in greater detail below, supports and reinforces the work of others involved in child welfare and education issues concerning foster youth. It is distinct from these other efforts, however, in its focus on educational outcomes for foster youth (as opposed to the logistical issues such as placement that, while extremely important, already are the focus of other initiatives). To this end, the voice of teachers and administrators features more prominently in the Collaborative’s work than some other efforts that have concentrated on child welfare agencies as the natural locus of work on foster care issues.

A Design Team formed the Collaborative’s core group, bringing together creative thinkers to help guide and advance the Collaborative’s work. Design Team members (listed with their affiliations on page 34) included representatives of the child welfare and public education fields as well as former foster youth, legislators and policymakers, legal system representatives, philanthropy representatives, researchers, mental health providers, and advocates. During a series of meetings between 2005 and 2007, the Design Team members worked together to identify key questions, review materials, monitor and interpret the policy landscape, and recommend concrete actions to improve educational outcomes for foster youth.

The Collaborative's charges included:

- Producing three documents to inform the work of the Design Team:²
 - A review and critique of recent research literature on educational issues of foster children and youth as well as evidence-based school interventions that might reduce educational problems;
 - A report on focus group discussions with educators which explored specific barriers, information gaps and ways in which education and child welfare can work together;³ and
 - A survey of beginning general and special education teachers in schools regarding their experiences with foster youth in their classrooms.⁴
- Convening joint regional meetings to bring together influential public education and child welfare players at the county level to discuss the implications of the research and focus group findings in their communities; and
- Developing and disseminating a set of specific recommendations to reinforce existing calls to action, shape education policy, and spark new work that ultimately will improve educational outcomes for foster children and youth.

This report highlights the results of each of these products, focusing on the recommendations and their implementation.

The Design Team was divided into Workgroups to focus more concretely on three significant realms that have the most potential to shift the education landscape for foster children and youth and improve their dismal educational outcomes: their readiness for school (i.e., the care, nurturing, and interventions they receive before they formally enter the school system), their success once they are in school, and the collection and sharing of data across agencies and systems. The

specific charge and focus for each Workgroup are described below, followed by a brief summary of the research each Workgroup considered in crafting recommendations.

School Readiness Workgroup: Charge and Focus

The School Readiness Workgroup explored the policies and interventions needed to ensure that all foster children are ready to start school.

School readiness begins in infancy, as infants learn how to trust and feel secure, explore their environments, and form close attachments. These early experiences and relationships provide the foundation for all future learning. In fact, many of the poor educational outcomes among foster youth that manifest themselves in grade school and high school have their origins much earlier in life, long before formal education begins.

As of October 2007, approximately 32% of the 74,728 children in California's foster care system were under the age of 5⁵, and data suggest that the proportion of foster children in this very young age group is increasing.

School Success Workgroup: Charge and Focus

One of the aspects of foster care that most undermines educational outcomes for foster youth is the disruption in schooling that is caused by constant changes in placements. Initially, this Workgroup focused on school stability, in recognition that no intervention will succeed unless the student's school placement is stabilized. However, the group quickly expanded its focus to address other factors that affect success in school: early and ongoing assessments of students' strengths and challenges; interventions (both in the classroom and out of school) which have some research to support their efficacy with at-risk students in the gen-

eral population; teacher and student supports that lead to improved educational outcomes; research gaps; and model legislation.

Each of these topic areas is addressed in the recommendations below, which collectively address what is needed to ensure that a) the educational needs of foster children and youth are identified early and that b) foster children and youth not only remain in the same school but also thrive there.

Data Sharing Workgroup: Charge and Focus

Data systems about foster youth and their educational outcomes struggle with issues familiar to other fields: balancing the need for aggregate trend data useful to policy makers and researchers with systems that yield individual, identifiable data that can guide day-to-day actions and interventions. Attempts to improve the coordination of foster youth's progress through the education system often are hampered by a lack of data and, where data exist, barriers to sharing it.

The Data Sharing Workgroup members recognized that local jurisdictions vary widely with respect to information sharing on individual cases and interpretation of laws governing confidentiality. Yet some type of consistent local and regional data collection and sharing is needed to identify issues, track trends, and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programs. Currently, educators do not receive the information they need in order to appropriately respond to the educational needs of children in foster care. Moreover, coordination of education, child welfare and court data does not exist at the state level.

Considering these barriers and issues, the Data Sharing Workgroup members examined what information educators need, and how they could obtain and/or generate it in a reliable, timely fashion. The Workgroup's charge was to address these issues by identifying and/or developing replicable models for sharing data and overcoming confidentiality concerns.

The Foster Youth Educational Achievement Gap: An Overview of Research Findings

The markers of educational neglect among foster youth are overwhelming and sadly consistent across the country.

Compared to other children, foster youth are more likely to:

- Have academic and behavioral problems in school^{6,7}
- Have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals⁸
- Perform below grade level⁹
- Have been held back in school (50%)¹⁰
- Have not completed high school (46% do not complete high school)¹¹
- Fail to go on to a 4-year college (fewer than 3% do so)
- Be placed in special education (25- 52%, compared to 10- 12% of the general student population) – often because of a learning disability or emotional disturbance.^{12,13}

As is true for their counterparts outside the foster care system, these educational problems significantly undermine the immediate and long-term economic futures of foster youth, who experience elevated rates of unemployment, poverty, reliance on public assistance, and imprisonment.

As noted above, of the half million American children who are placed in the foster care system, approximately 20% – or at least 74,000 – live in California. By the time they enter the foster care system, these vulnerable children and youth already have experienced significant emotional and often physical trauma and maltreatment that compromises their ability to function and interferes significantly with their ability to learn. Indeed, one study documented that most children who enter the foster care system are already a full academic year behind their peers.¹⁴

As foster children move through the educational system, they encounter additional systemic and structural barriers beyond the profound trauma to which they already have been exposed (and which, in turn, may not be addressed or even assessed properly).

Casework vs. Advocacy

"There are 15 people responsible for my education, but not one of them reads my report card or calls my teacher."

Frequent changes in foster care placements often mean changes in schools – a lack of stability that leads to a bewildering array of teachers, administrators, classmates, and routines. Too often, records do not follow these students in a timely way, magnifying the disruption. These ruptures in routine quickly manifest themselves in the outcomes listed above: academic and behavioral problems in school, performing below grade level, being held back, and, ultimately, dropping out of school altogether.

Another barrier to educational achievement is the absence of a single person with the interest, authority, and accountability for a foster child's educational outcomes. Even when many caring individuals and professionals are involved in a foster child's life – a judge, social worker, a foster parent, counselors and birth parents – these adults may be focused on other aspects of a child's life and development that may claim greater urgency on

a day-to-day basis. As one foster child lamented, speaking for many others, “There are 15 people responsible for my education, but not one of them reads my report card or calls my teacher.”

At a systems level, child welfare, education, and other service providers do not and often can not share information about foster children for whom they share responsibility, making it even more difficult to coordinate a child’s education and other education-related interventions (such as mental health screening and counseling).

School Readiness Research and Rationale

The school readiness research summaries and recommendations are organized according to the following major categories:

- Training and support for parents and caregivers
- Access to high-quality and therapeutic preschool programs
- Professional development
- Early intervention
- Data collection and research
- Education rights
- Legislation regarding congregate care for children under age 5.

Training and Support for Parents and Caregivers

The relationships of very young children with at least one caring, sensitive adult are essential ingredients in a child’s development. The absence of such a relationship is harmful; its presence is helpful and even restorative for children who have lacked such a relationship. All parents and caregivers would benefit from incorporating the science of brain development, which stresses the role of stimulation in creating neural pathways and the toxic effects of chronic stress.¹⁵

Knowledge about the developing brain – and, more importantly, acting on this knowledge – is particularly important for young foster and other at-risk children, who are more vulnerable to both stress (from witnessing or being subjected to abuse and neglect) and to a lack of brain stimulation in a chaotic and neglectful home environment. These practices affect not only the cognitive and linguistic competence so necessary for later school success, but also the emotional and behavioral development that are key elements of “social intelligence” – and also key to school success.

Nearly half of young children in foster care have or are at risk for developmental delays – four to five times the rate among children in the general population.^{16,17,18,19} In part, this may be due to high rates (up to 40%) of young foster children born prematurely or with low birth weights, with serious medical problems (including prenatal drug exposure) and internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, withdrawal, and/or depression.^{20,21,22} Maltreatment also is associated with significant speech and language delays in syntax and receptive vocabulary, compared to nonmaltreated children with similar backgrounds.²³

Children who have insecure attachments to caregivers are at somewhat increased risk for anxiety disorders,²⁴ and for somewhat less optimal outcomes with teachers and peers.²⁵ Disorganized attachment (i.e., attachment that is inconsistent or confused) is associated with a range of later problems, including dissociative symptoms (e.g., child seeming to be “in a fog,” “out of it,” or detached),²⁶ but also internalizing symptoms (e.g., internalizing symptoms (e.g., depressive and anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., acting out).^{27,28}

Among 50 foster care child and caregiver dyads, 68% placed with autonomous (i.e., nurturing) caregivers formed secure attachments with their caregivers, and 81% placed with non-autonomous caregivers formed insecure attachments. This was

Foster Care and Education Index: A Snapshot

Based on data compiled by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education's Fact Sheet on Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster and Out-of-Home Care, September 2007.

Percent of foster parents in a 2000 New York study who reported that children in their care were enrolled in preschool programs: **18%**¹

Of those foster parents whose children in care were not enrolled, percentage reporting that no one had advised them to enroll their foster children in preschool programs: **80%**²

Percentage of toddlers with high developmental and behavioral needs, in a 2005 national study of 2,813 young children in child welfare: **40%**³

Percentage of preschoolers in the same study with high developmental and behavioral needs: **50%**⁴

Percent receiving services for these issues: **23%**⁵

National average of number of home placement changes per year for foster children and youth: **1 to 2**⁶

Percentage of 70 foster children in a 2000 New York study who stayed in their school after being placed in foster care: **25%**⁷

Percentage of those who changed schools who had to do so in the middle of the school year: **65%**⁸

Percentage of 1,082 Casey Family Program foster care alumni who had attended three or more elementary schools: **68%**⁹

Percentage who had attended five or more elementary schools: **33%**¹⁰

Years of educational growth lost by the sixth year among Chicago Public School students who change schools four or more times: **1 year**¹¹

Likelihood that California high school students who changed schools even once would graduate from high school, compared to those who did not change schools: **Less than half as likely**¹²

Percent of foster youth in the Midwest Study suspended from school at least once: **67%**¹³

Percent of youth in national general population sample suspended at least once: **28%**¹⁴

Percent of foster youth in the Midwest Study expelled from school:	17% (one sixth)¹⁵
Percent of youth in national general population sample expelled:	5%¹⁶
Percentile points by which Washington State children and youth in foster care attending public schools scored below non-foster youth in statewide standardized tests at grades three, six, and nine:	16 to 20¹⁷
Average reading level of foster youth in the Midwest Study, after grade 10 or 11:	7th grade¹⁸
Percent reading at a high school level or higher:	44%¹⁹
Percent of foster children and youth in third to eighth grade in Chicago Public Schools who scored in the bottom quartile on the reading section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills:	50%²⁰
Foster care alumni in a Northwest Alumni Study who completed a bachelor's degree by age 25:	1.8%²¹
Percent among foster care alumni 25 and older:	3%²²
General population rate:	24%²³

¹ Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (2000, July). *Educational Neglect: The delivery of educational services to children in New York City's foster care system*.

² Ibid.

³ Stahmer, A., Leslie, L., Hurlburt, M., Barth, R., Webb, M., Landsverk, J., Zhang, J. (2005, Oct). Developmental and Behavioral Needs and Service Use for Young Children in Child Welfare. *Pediatrics* Vol. 116, No. 4, October 2005, pp. 891-900.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ National AFCARS data (2002). National 2002 AFCARS case level data available from the Child Welfare League of America's National Data Analysis System (NDAS) indicate a mean of 2.5 placements with an average stay of 22 months in care (or a median of 2 placements for a median length of stay of 12 months. (Personal Communication, Carrie Friedman, March 23, 2005). Note that the placement change rate is inflated by the large percentage of children who have a short-term shelter care.

⁷ Advocates for Children, op cit.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pecora, P., Williams, J., Kessler, R., Hiripi, E., O'Brien, K., Eerson, J., Herrick, M., Torres, D. (2006). Assessing the Educational Achievements of Adults Who Formerly Were Placed in Family Foster Care. *Child and Family Social Work*, 11, p. 223.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kerbow, D. (1996). *Patterns of urban student mobility and local school reform*. Technical Report No. 5, October. Washington, DC: Center for Research on the Education of Children Placed at Risk.

¹² Rumberger, R.W., Larson, K.A., Ream, R.K., & Palardy, G.J. (1999). The educational consequences of mobility: California students and schools. Policy Analysis for California Education, University of California at Berkeley.

¹³ Courtney, M.E., Terao, S. & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Burley, M., & Halpern, M. (2001). Educational attainment of foster youth: Achievement and graduation outcomes for children in state care. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

¹⁸ Courtney et al., op cit.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Smithgall, C., Gladden, R.M., Howard, E., Goerge, R., Courtney, M. (2004). Educational experiences of children in out-of-home care. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

²¹ Pecora, P., Kessler, R., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T. & Holmes, K. (2005). *Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

seen regardless of when children were placed into care; even children placed as late as 20 months of age developed secure attachments with autonomous caregivers. Seventy-two percent of children placed with non-autonomous (i.e., non-nurturing) caregivers formed disorganized attachments. It did not matter whether children were placed with dismissing or unresolved caregivers; in either case, they were very likely to form disorganized attachments.²⁹

A study of children whose parents and Head Start teachers participated in The Incredible Years intervention (a parent and teacher training program to improve children's social skills) showed fewer conduct problems in school among children in the treatment group than a comparison group of children whose parents and teachers had not gone

through the program. Children whose parents attended six or more sessions showed fewer conduct problems at home and bonding between parents and teachers was higher for those in the treatment group. Parents had lower negative parenting and higher positive parenting compared to the comparison group. Children in the treatment group also showed clinically significant reductions in high-risk behavior (noncompliance and aggression) ratings, while their teachers showed better classroom management skills. These outcomes were maintained at the 1-year follow-up assessment for those who attended more than six sessions.³⁰

Access

Although early education is essential for the population of children in foster care under age 5 (about 30% of the foster care population), many child protective services (CPS) agencies do not require or provide adequate funding for caregivers to send young foster children to preschool.³¹ Data indicate that only 6% of foster children under 6 attend Head Start.³² This may be because there are not enough spaces for all the children who want to attend and foster children are not typically given the priority status to which they may be entitled.³³ Furthermore, many of the programs are only half day, making it difficult for caregivers who work outside the home to have the children in their care attend.³⁴ Without quality early childhood education, children from economically disadvantaged families with low levels of education are likely to start kindergarten approximately 2 or more years behind their same-age peers – a lag that widens throughout the school years.³⁵

Just as the absence of preschool is an initial disadvantage that intensifies over time, the presence of preschool in a child's life is a protective factor into middle and high school, protecting children and youth against depression in adolescence even more markedly when combined with other factors such as social skills and classroom adjustment.³⁶

"I don't think we spend enough time thinking about what it feels like to move homes regularly and hope/pray/expect to be reunited with a parent 'soon' only to be disappointed when it just doesn't happen. It is devastating. These kids are on an emotional roller coaster ride. It certainly keeps them from being free to be educated."

- A Teacher

Therapeutic preschool programs can help children who have been abused and/or neglected function in less restrictive environments because of significant improvements in behavioral, developmental and language skills, which in turn contribute to increases in family placement stability.³⁷ Another study of children who had been physically or sexually abused and/or been neglected found that 1 to 5 years after graduating from a therapeutic day treatment preschool program, these children were able to progress appropriately in school. Over 81% improved or maintained a public school classroom setting and had not repeated a grade.³⁸

An example of a therapeutic preschool program is the Early Childhood Mental Health Dyadic Therapy Program which provides services to children who are experiencing relational, developmental and/or behavioral difficulties. An essential component of the program is the psycho-educational parent group, Ready to Succeed 9 providing caretakers with the opportunity to feel understood, supported, and connected with other parents.³⁹

California currently lacks preschool-suitable spaces for 20% of its 4-year-olds. The shortfall disproportionately affects low-income children, children of color, and children whose parents do not speak English at home and who did not finish high school – the very population with the highest percentage of foster children.⁴⁰ Nationally, children who attend high-quality, center-based child care, prekindergarten or preschool programs tend to have better pre-academic and language skills than other children.⁴¹ Children who spend more hours in high quality center-based care perform better in math and reading in the early grades of elementary school.⁴²

One long-term follow-up study of very high-quality early care and education – the Abecedarian Project – found that children who participated in full-day high-quality programs from birth to kindergarten were more likely than those who did not attend a four-year college and score higher

on measures of academic and intellectual success and were less likely to have a teen pregnancy.⁴³

Professional Development

The child care provider – whether he or she is based in a child care center, an informal child care setting, or at home – is one (and perhaps the) key variable in high-quality early childhood education. Yet child care providers are typically underpaid and have few opportunities for professional development and career advancement, contributing to high turnover rates in the field.

"I had someone in preschool who taught me to read. Even though I can't remember her name and can't thank her, she saved me, because if you can read, you can catch up."

– Former foster youth Jennifer Rodriguez, Staff Attorney for the Youth Law Center and Former Commissioner of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care

The combination of low pay, weak credentials, and high turnover can be reversed, however. For example, the U.S. military's child care system operates 300 locations around the world and serves over 200,000 children on any given day. Under provisions of the 1989 Military Child Care Act (MCCA), the military reduced staff turnover in

its child care settings from 48% per year in 1989 to 24% in 1993, primarily by increasing the compensation and training of child care workers. Almost all – 95% – of military child care settings meet the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation requirements, compared to 8% of civilian ones.⁴⁴

Research supports the importance of having highly-trained, well-educated early childhood teachers.⁴⁵ National Board Certification for Early Childhood Educators requires teachers to demonstrate expertise in a number of areas. However, expertise related to young children in the foster care system needs to be added.

Early Intervention

Studies suggest that only a small number of children in foster care are enrolled in early intervention services under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).⁴⁶ Moreover, caseworkers may overestimate their ability to assess children's developmental delays accurately. In a study with a national sample of 1,138 children younger than 3 years at the start of the study who had substantiated cases of abuse or neglect, 46.5% were classified as having developmental delays on the basis of assessments; however, intake caseworkers were able to identify only 23% of these children as having such delays.⁴⁷

As noted above, a high percentage of young children in foster care begin life with conditions that increase their need for early intervention and education, such as being born prematurely, at low birth weights, and/ or prenatally exposed to drugs. Maltreatment at an early age is related to poor developmental outcomes in many areas, including physical, cognitive, socioemotional, relational, and psychological that affect school readiness and later school functioning.

These outcomes are similar to those of children living in poverty; however, the rates of these prob-

lems for maltreated children are more severe.⁴⁸ Maltreated children younger than 3 who have medical or developmental problems experience more removals from parental care, have longer stays in foster care, are placed in more settings, and are less likely to be permanently reunited with their parents than foster children unaffected by these conditions.⁴⁹

Interventions that address the special emotional and relationship needs of children in foster care are being developed. One such program is the Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up Intervention, which is designed to help caregivers learn to reinterpret children's alienating behaviors, override their own issues that interfere with providing nurturing care, and provide an environment that helps children develop regulatory capabilities. It has been shown to improve the regulatory capabilities for foster children and results in fewer behavior problems being reported by caregivers for older children.⁵⁰

Data Collection and Research

While evidence for early intervention in general is strong, the specific needs and outcomes among young foster children are not well documented or understood. Research on which of the many promising practices and interventions are best suited to young foster children would provide much-needed guidance to policy makers and practitioners alike. To expand the research base, the National Institute of Mental Health recently funded a 5-year randomized controlled study at the University of Washington's Center on Infant Mental Health and Development to compare two different approaches to assisting foster families with infants and toddlers.⁵¹ Conclusions about the efficacy of one or both of these programs can help to shape interventions that are effective for children and workable for their foster families.

Educational Rights

Even when young foster children are not formally enrolled in school, they still need an adult advocate for their education rights – just as their older counterparts do. An education representative for young foster children can advocate for enrollment in high-quality preschool that might not otherwise be available or accessible, as well as for needed screening and other interventions.

Legislation

Although Workgroup members recognize that congregate care for young children results from a lack of options for placing young children with foster parents, the practice of prolonged stays in congregate care (i.e., group homes or orphanages) for very young children is harmful to crucial early social and cognitive development and thus threatens future educational success.⁵²

School Success Research and Rationale

The School Success Workgroup's research and rationale, as well as the recommendations that follow, are organized into the following categories:

- School stability
- Assessment
- Interventions
- Supports for Students and Teachers
- Research
- Legislation.

School Stability

Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, and Brathwaite⁵³ found that maltreated children have more academic difficulties compared to their nonmaltreated peers in part because they experience relatively high levels of residential mobility and school transfers. They found that more than twice as many foster youth as the comparison group had changed schools three times or more since fifth grade.

In a study of 5,557 children in California who entered foster care between birth and age 6 and remained in care for 8 years, the researchers found that their likelihood of multiple placement moves increased over time.⁵⁴ After 8 years in foster care, almost 30% of children who were placed with relatives (i.e., kinship care) and more than 50% of children who were not placed with relatives but in other foster care settings had experienced three or more placements. Children who enter foster care after the age of 10 have been found to have three or more foster care placements.⁵⁵

Focus group participants noted that the most critical element for improving education outcomes was to increase school stability and reduce the number of placements for foster children. Their suggestions included requiring and supporting caregiver involvement in the education of youth in their care, appointing and supporting AB 490 liaison staff, resolving issues regarding who is responsible (under AB 490 provisions) for transporting students back to their school of origin after a placement change, and involving educators in Child Welfare meetings regarding home placement changes (e.g., Team Decision Making), including making information about the child's education available for such planning meetings.⁵⁶

Assessment

Child maltreatment is associated with declines in a wide range of school outcomes, including falling grades, increasing absenteeism, worsening elementary school deportment, retention in grade, and involvement in special education programs.⁵⁷ Studies show that children who have been abused or neglected and children who are placed in foster care generally have lower scores on standardized tests, poorer school grades, and more behavior problems and suspensions from school than comparison groups.^{58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63} Nearly a third (30%) of all children ages 6 through 11 in the child welfare system showed a need for special education

services based on low scores from cognitive and/or behavioral assessment.⁶⁴

"School is their stability... and when that gets affected or they get moved to another school, they sometimes lose the only stable thing that they have in their lives at that moment."

- A School Administrator

Interventions

Response to Intervention (RTI): Schools that are implementing RTI models provide evidence-based instruction to all students, assess the performance of students at regular intervals to identify those who are not benefiting from the instruction, and provide increasingly intensive small group and individual intervention to those who require additional support. Large-scale studies with students randomly assigned to treatment and comparison groups have found that RTI programs are effective in reducing the number of young children who qualify as poor readers in first grade.⁶⁵ Large-scale studies with students at risk for math difficulties randomly assigned to treatment and control groups found RTI programs effective in significantly improving the math performance of the treatment group and the growth was either comparable or superior to their not-at-risk classmates.⁶⁶

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID): Studies of AVID programs indicate that students in these programs in middle school out-

perform their classmates on standardized tests, attend school at higher rates, and accumulate more high school credits.^{67, 68}

Studies in California^{69, 70, 71} and Texas⁷² have validated the benefits of the AVID program for students directly served by it (e.g., increasing enrollment of students in rigorous coursework, placing students on a college track for gaining admission to four-year colleges and universities; increasing the number of students taking and passing advanced placement classes; increasing school attendance; and decreasing dropout rates). A pilot program in the Central Valley, funded by the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, is creating a pipeline for foster youth to be served in larger numbers by the AVID program. Many of the Guardian Scholar programs now at 30 college campuses in California also work with high school youth to create viable educational plans that will prepare foster youth for a successful college career.

Tutoring and Out-of-School Programs: Studies of Strategic Tutoring of at-risk students using a multiple baseline design and students in foster care with a comparison group show evidence of improved academic achievement.^{73, 74, 75} The Tutor Connection program in San Diego showed statistically significant increases in reading, math, and spelling in a pre/post- test study without a comparison group of two cohorts of foster children and youth.⁷⁶ Treehouse in Washington State also has an intensive tutoring program that places certified teachers in public schools to provide foster children with essential tutoring in basic skills.⁷⁷ Meta-analyses of 35 reading and 22 math after-school and summer programs showed that out of school time programs can have positive effects on the achievement of at-risk students.⁷⁸

Supports for Students and Teachers

Both special education and general education teachers who participated in the teacher survey conducted for the Collaborative wanted inservice training

to learn how best to support students in foster care, especially to address their emotional and behavioral needs.⁷⁹ Strategies to help the foster children “succeed and feel comfortable in class” were high on the list of needs cited by these teachers.

“We give them not less, but the same – and for these kids, the same is simply not enough.”

- A Teacher

Inexperienced teachers and teachers who are not fully credentialed often are assigned children in foster care who have significant learning or behavioral challenges. These teachers need support from their colleagues (experienced teachers, counselors, principals) as well as more communication and more opportunity to work with foster parents and social workers. These novice teachers felt that it would be helpful to know more about the child welfare system: Why are students placed in foster care? How long do they remain in foster care? What are the laws regarding education rights? What is the role of the social worker?

In addition, educators who participated in the focus groups emphasized that teachers needed training on engaging a foster child in the classroom – especially one who had suffered loss and trauma. There was consensus across focus groups that training was essential on the following:

- 1) the challenges that foster youth face;
- 2) district policies regarding foster youth including AB 490 requirements;
- 3) community resources available to support foster youth; and
- 4) skills to de-escalate a potential crisis on a school campus.⁸⁰

Studies have found that between one- and two-thirds of current or former foster youth drop out before completing high school, or by age 19 have received neither a high school diploma nor a GED compared to 10% of their same-age peers.^{81, 82, 83}

Teachers who participated in the survey specifically mentioned the need for an individual at the school level who can monitor the progress that foster youth are making and ensure that they are enrolled in the appropriate programs and classes and are receiving the services and interventions for learning and behavioral problems.⁸⁴

Both the teachers who responded to the teacher survey and the educators who participated in the focus groups reported that the behavior of foster youth was their greatest challenge in the classroom. They reported emotions that ranged from anger and explosive behaviors to withdrawal and depression.^{85, 86} These observations align with a number of studies reporting that a significant number of foster youth receive special education. Thirty percent of all children ages 6 through 11 in the child welfare system showed a need for special education services based on low scores from cognitive and/or behavioral assessment.⁸⁷

Studies confirm that children in foster care receive special education services at a much higher rate than students in the general student population, between 25 and 50% of the populations studied.^{88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93}

Children who have been abused or neglected and children who are placed in foster care generally have lower scores on standardized tests, poorer school grades, and more behavior problems and suspensions from school than comparison groups^{94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100}. Integrating mental health services into the classroom would provide support both to teachers and students and lead to fewer removals from the general education program.

Research

Research that would support or refute claims of current programs or yield clues to the use of effective interventions for foster children and youth is woefully

inadequate. Only one study of the Strategic Tutoring model used foster children in their treatment and comparison groups.¹⁰¹ There has been only one unpublished study of the Tutor Connection program and this study did not use a comparison group.¹⁰² Except for two tutoring studies, no additional studies of out-of-school time (i.e., after-school or summer programs) specifically focused on foster children and youth have been conducted.

"I just want them to know that there's somebody in their day who cares about them. It's tiny, but I hope it makes a difference."
- A Teacher

Legislation

Some states already have laws on the books that address specific school-based interventions that support foster children and youth. For example, a Massachusetts law creates grants for schools to develop regular education interventions that address the educational and psychosocial needs of children whose behavior interferes with learning, particularly because of their traumatic effects of exposure to violence.¹⁰³ Programs that the grants may be used for include, but are not limited to, those to address problems of students exposed to abuse, family or community violence, war, or homelessness. The grants may be used to develop school-based teams to, among other things, collaborate with experts in the fields of trauma, provide ongoing training to teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to understand and identify the symptoms of trauma, and evaluate school policies, programs, and services to determine whether they are effective supports for those suffering from exposure to trauma.

Data Sharing Background and Rationale

In 2002, legislation was enacted to require: (1) the assignment of a Statewide Student Identifier (SSID) as an individual, yet non-personally identifiable number to each K-12 student enrolled in a California public school; and (2) the establishment of the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) that includes statewide assessment data, enrollment data, teacher assignment data, and other elements required to meet federal No Child Left Behind reporting requirements. CALPADS has been designed to include student demographic, program participation, grade level, enrollment, course enrollment and completion, discipline, and statewide assessment data. The construction of this statewide student data system has already begun.

But in California, as in most other states, systems for communicating information about foster youth between county welfare and mental health agencies and county offices of education and school districts are extremely limited. Although both the child welfare and education systems maintain databases, these databases are not linked and information is not shared. Moreover, child welfare agencies and the courts often do not inform educational institutions about students' foster status, who has educational rights, and other factors that may influence educational outcomes for these students.

The education system, in turn, differs from county to county and from district to district in what data are collected concerning foster youth, the quality of the available data, and to whom that information is or may be provided. Often educators at both school and district levels do not know that students are in foster care and if they do know, may still lack essential information that could improve educational delivery to these students.

The general lack of knowledge about foster status, coupled with the often frequent movement of fos-

"I just think we have such a wealth of information [about the student] that isn't being shared, and it's hurting the child."

- A School Psychologist

ter youth between schools and districts, means that school personnel often are unaware of the needs of the students in foster care that they encounter; are unable to target assessment, specific interventions, or support; and may have difficulty ensuring that the foster youth receive partial credit for their work when they are moved to another placement.

To complicate matters, federal laws that protect children's and parents' privacy rights are being interpreted as giving control to agencies to decide not to share individual student information, rather than observing a parent's, child's or other educational decision-maker's authority to decide what information can be shared between education and social welfare systems. Although there is increasing pressure to coordinate systems at the state level, it would appear that regulatory clarification if not legislative change might be necessary for sharing between systems.

Federal privacy standards under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA)¹⁰⁴ and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)¹⁰⁵ appear to limit information sharing between agencies. Although these restrictions are being resolved in some counties using court orders, memoranda of understanding, and other agreements, they are still creating barriers to the exchange of information between professionals in other counties and on a statewide basis, and

consequently barriers to informed decision-making and service delivery.

Efforts have been made to improve the exchange and collection of education data relative to foster youth in California, while maintaining privacy rights. In 2005-06, over \$7.5 million and in 2006-07, over \$15 million was provided by the Governor and the Legislature to support Foster Youth Services personnel in county offices of education. Almost all counties have taken advantage of this funding and one of the major uses of funding has been to support better availability of education data regarding students in foster care.

Several counties – notably San Diego, Sacramento, and Fresno counties – have developed their own unique databases that allow secure access to authorized users and provide critical placement, health, and education information to partner agencies about foster youth. The intent of each database is to facilitate timely and appropriate school placement, seamless record and credit transfer, and expedited enrollment.

The databases vary in such features as how data are entered, the extent of stored information, and what functions the system can perform. Sacramento's database, for example, stores, among other things, transcripts, test scores, attendance, and disciplinary information. These data can be accessed by districts, the child welfare agency, and the juvenile court to make possible the tracking of an individual student's progress. The system also immediately notifies school districts of new out-of-home placements and change of placements. A limitation of the system is that much of the data are hand entered as compared to San Diego's database, which relies on electronic data matching. San Diego's system, however, is more limited in the kinds of data stored in the database and the functions performed.

All three systems are unable to track foster youth living and attending schools in other counties and none store data for young foster children aged 0

to 5 years. Moreover, the databases cannot link with each other and share data as foster youth move from one county to another. Given the inherent limitations within each system, the three databases need to be examined comparatively to identify the exemplary features that can be used to inform the development of a statewide database.

A review of the literature on databases serving foster youth provides few other instances of efforts to bridge the gap between child welfare data and education data. While some examples exist of integration of child welfare and juvenile court data, they generally include very limited, if any, education data. Similarly, most education data collected for state or local databases are not tied to foster care status. While these education databases report data by student characteristics such as ethnicity, English language, Title 1, and special education status, they do not report data for the population of students in foster care. There are, however, calls for improved data systems^{106, 107} and examples of homeless and migrant data systems that receive information from a variety of sources including multiple databases.^{108, 109}

Professionals working in child welfare, mental health, education, and court systems, both in California and nationally, clearly recognize the need for more systematic approaches to sharing and collecting data on the educational progress of foster youth. The recommendations below address the need for improved exchange of data and the long-term goal of developing a statewide system that defines necessary data elements, provides for electronic sharing of such data, respects privacy and security needs, and includes professional development for the individuals collecting, sharing, and using the data.

In the short term, a pilot project is needed to demonstrate how a database can be developed that includes the qualities required for a statewide foster youth database system. The pilot should meet the following criteria:

- It must use the “unique student identifier” (UID) currently in use by the education system because of high levels of movement of individuals in and out of the foster care system;
- It must be capable of updating on a very frequent basis to ensure current accuracy and to track foster youth who change districts within and outside their county of placement;
- It should be a secure Web-based system to allow access by approved “need to know” users;
- School districts and county offices of education must be able to input data directly to their sections of the database; and
- It must be able to provide information to and receive information from CWS/CMS.

Professionals working on foster youth programs in education, child welfare and mental health, and the court system are often unaware of the current exemplary systems operating in some county offices of education. Creating awareness in these groups may lead to a sense of urgency for improving data on foster students by adopting these or similar database systems. Understanding how counties with exemplary systems have been able to forge agreements for exchange of data and what data elements they have found useful should lead to improved quality and availability of data and greater consistency across the state.

In a number of forums, foster youth have expressed concerns that increased collection and sharing of data will lead to misuse of information by the educational system. To address this concern, California Youth Connection representatives, among others, have called for professional development that specifically addresses limits to the access to and use of confidential information. Training of teachers, school psychologists, and administrators about the child welfare system and the experiences of foster students is required to increase understanding of student needs and concerns and of the difficulties they face in inter-

acting with the educational system when they are moved from school to school or district to district. Although professional development on this topic is presented as a short-term recommendation to accompany implementation of a pilot, it should be offered on an ongoing basis for educators who interact with foster students.

Communication between databases maintained by the various systems requires the ability to clearly identify and match individual students. Because names provided in different settings may vary, a constant identification tag is required. The education system currently uses a unique student identifier for all students in California schools. This identification number represents the best opportunity to assure the identity of school-age foster students, thus enabling communication between systems and their databases.

Stemming partially from privacy and confidentiality concerns of foster youth, confidentiality safeguards also are central to meeting legal requirements for the welfare, mental health, and court systems as well as the education system. Agreements for current exemplary databases have included specification of access rights. Foster youth representatives also express concern that educators will focus on past history rather than accepting students as they currently present themselves – thus, the request that older foster students be included in discussions that affect their interactions with the education system.

In the long term, while funding will be required to establish and maintain a statewide database to include the approximately 80,000 foster students in California, there is general consensus that this remains a pressing need. In 2005, for example, *Mythbusting: Breaking Down Confidentiality and Decision-Making Barriers to Meet the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care*, a publication of the American Bar Association, specifically addressed growing concerns nationally about legal

impediments to the exchange of welfare and education data.¹¹⁰ In 2006, the Youth Law Center in California sponsored a cross-disciplinary conference for counties participating in the California Connected by 25 Initiative focused on improving the sharing of education information. And in 2007, an Education for Foster Youth Summit cross-agency data group in California identified the development of a statewide database as their primary recommendation.

Although development of a statewide database should be informed by the findings of the pilot project, use of the education unique identifier is a prerequisite, as is the ability to receive frequent input from a number of sources. Ideally, the database will contain longitudinal information, since foster students may move in and out of system. Finally, the ability to connect to the new Web-based CWS/ CMS system due to be completed in 2011 is important.

Certain data elements are of such importance that they should be required of all county offices and districts. Examples of such elements include: last and current schools of attendance, grade placement, vaccinations, other health issues, special education status, IEP elements, high school class credits, etc. Efforts have begun to identify such a set of data elements that should be provided for all students, if applicable. In addition, another set of data elements is being developed that has proven useful, but may not be necessary for all districts and counties.

Although there are specific laws allowing school officials to have access to foster youth records in many states, it is currently not possible for education data to be electronically exchanged between CWS/CMS and education systems in California. Some agencies that possess health and education information are cautious about sharing this information with the education system because of the potential legal ramifications of breaching

compliance with HIPPA and/or FERPA regulations. There are, however, a number of counties in which collaborative agreements, memoranda of understanding, and standing court orders have been developed to address confidentiality issues related to sharing of foster youth records. In order to implement a state-level foster youth database that can interface electronically with the new CWS/CMS system, it is necessary to develop legislation that specifically requires exchange of data between the two systems, or to obtain a federal waiver that allows for sharing of data.

The Workgroup members also note the need for professional development for individuals who

will receive information from and provide data to a statewide database. Users need to understand the overall provisions of the database, the data elements they will provide and extract, reasons for confidentiality and limitations on who may use the system, and how to provide the best quality data. Data professionals and administrators must be provided with sufficient understanding of the database to enable them to explain privacy issues to teachers and to communicate to teachers what data they will need to provide for data entry and what information may be available from the system.

Workgroup Recommendations

Existing Efforts to Address Poor Education Outcomes Among Foster Youth

As noted above, the Collaborative's recommendations join long-standing efforts by many individuals and groups to raise awareness about the plight of foster youth and to remedy some of the systemic barriers undermining their educational success. These include the passage of AB 490 in California, which mandates that school and child welfare agencies address the educational needs of foster youth. Key provisions of AB 490 include giving foster youth access to the same academic resources, services, and extracurricular activities as other students and making education and placement decisions that are dictated by the child's best interests – including giving children the right to remain in their schools of origin.

The Foster Youth Services Program, which now operates in 57 of the state's 58 County Offices of Education, provides education-related services to foster children. These services include educational assessments, tutoring, mentoring, counseling, advocacy, and facilitating school enrollment and

the sharing of information and transfer of school records. The California Foster Youth Education Task Force has brought together individuals and representatives of numerous organizations to heighten awareness of the educational needs of children and youth in foster care and promotes best and promising practices and reforms. Recently, the Education Workgroup of the National Governor's Association on Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care completed its work by setting forth a series of recommendations.

In order to help counties respond to the growing awareness within the child welfare community of the importance of education, the Stuart Foundation has funded the Family to Family Educational Technical Assistance Project. The Project's work with seven counties has led to strategies and tools for incorporating education into the Annie E. Casey Family to Family Initiative.

In addition to the above, the Judicial Council of California recently adopted new Rules of Court, effective January 1, 2008, that will require the juvenile court, advocates, caregivers, child welfare and educators to work together to address on an

ongoing basis the educational needs of all children in the foster care system.

The Workgroup members recognize that the recommendations below are, in many ways, echoes of other recommendations in areas as varied as improving access to quality preschool, expanding mental health diagnostic assessments and interventions, ensuring school stability for foster youth, adding to the scant evidence base regarding this population, and coordinating fragmented data and other systems, among many others. Other sets of recommendations, such as those of California's Blue Ribbon Commission (excerpted below), do address education environments and

outcomes for foster youth, but that is not their sole focus.

The purpose of reinforcing and reiterating these recommendations is to continue to highlight the education-specific obstacles that foster youth face, to link these issues to those of other students who may benefit from similar interventions and attention, and to inspire creative and persistent approaches to accomplishing both short-term and long-term elements of the recommendations below. A discussion of implementation strategies, which follows the specific Workgroup recommendations below, explores some of the implications in greater detail.

Reinforcing Recommendations on Foster Care and Education Recommendations from the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care

Recommendation 4D

Educational services for foster youth should be expanded to increase access to education and to improve the quality of those services.

The Blue Ribbon Commission recommends that:

- Courts and partnering agencies ensure that foster children receive the full education they are entitled to, including the support they need to graduate from high school. This includes tutoring and participation in extracurricular activities. The courts should require other agencies to justify any denial of such services to foster youth in school;
- The Judicial Council urge Congress and the state Legislature to strengthen current education laws to explicitly include all foster children and to fill funding gaps, such as the lack of support for transportation to maintain school stability;
- The Child Welfare Council prioritize foster children's educational rights and work with educators to establish categorical program monitoring to oversee compliance with education laws and regulations that support foster youth in school;
- The California Department of Education designate foster youth as "at-risk" students to recognize that foster care creates challenges and obstacles to a child's education that other children do not experience and to increase the access of foster youth to local education programs; and
- Foster Youth Services grants be expanded to include all children age five or older, including those in kinship placements, because close to half of foster children are placed with kin and Foster Youth Services is not currently funded to serve those children.

Source: *The Role of the Courts in Improving the Lives of Children and Families.*

Draft Recommendations of the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care, March 2008.

The Design Team's recommendations follow the same major categories as the summaries of research and rationale, above.

School Readiness Recommendations

Training and Support for Parents and Caregivers

- Develop procedures, training and incentives that are designed to include caregivers (both birth and foster parents) in daily preschool learning activities so that these can be reinforced at home.

Access

- Ensure that all foster children aged 3 to 5 years have access to and are enrolled in high-quality preschools by making high-quality preschools affordable (e.g., providing subsidies) and by placing foster children (and, whenever possible, a caregiver's other children) on priority lists for enrollment.
- Ensure that foster children suffering the effects of abuse and/or neglect have access to evidence-based therapeutic preschool programs to address their needs.
- Increase the number of high-quality preschools in areas with large concentrations of foster children (and/ or children at risk).

Professional Development

- In the short term, provide the training and ongoing professional development that will make it possible for all preschool teachers to be prepared to deliver high-quality early childhood education to all children, including foster children, in preschool settings.
- In the longer term, move towards a certification system for preschool teachers that will support raising teacher standards, salaries and benefits to the level of comparably prepared K-12 teachers.

Early Intervention

- Ensure that foster children receive needed screening and early intervention services by following existing legal requirements in Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) that all children aged 0-3 who are placed under the supervision of child welfare receive screening for early intervention services in a timely manner.
- Expand eligibility and access to intensive therapeutic programs and/or high quality education services for foster children aged 0-3 regardless of their eligibility under Part C of IDEA.

Data Collection and Research

Improve the understanding of data, programs, and school readiness outcomes for young foster children by:

- collecting and analyzing data on which, and how many, foster children have access to early intervention services;
- identifying the existing programs in education, mental health, and physical health, such as multi-dimensional treatment services, that are available to foster children; and
- conducting research on school readiness strategies for young children in the child welfare system in order to determine those that are the most effective and the ways in which the elements of successful programs can be brought to scale.

Education Rights

- The courts should designate an educational representative to monitor and advocate for young foster children as a way of assuring that they are enrolled in appropriate high-quality early intervention and preschool programs.

Legislation

- Change statutes to eliminate the practice of placing children under the age of 5 in congregate care for any length of time.

School Success Recommendations

School Stability

- Ensure school stability through multiple strategies, including (but not limited to) the following:
 - 1) increased support for families prior to removal of children from the home;
 - 2) stepped-up recruitment of foster families within school attendance areas;
 - 3) full implementation of the mandates of AB 490, including full funding for transportation;
 - 4) co-location of education liaisons in child welfare offices to better enable social workers to address educational problems of children on their caseloads; and
 - 5) restructuring child welfare regions to align with school catchment areas.
- In addition to the above strategies for ensuring school stability, it is recommended that child welfare increase training, support, and incentives to caregivers so that it is understood that education is a priority for caring for children and youth in the foster care system.

Assessment

- Provide initial and ongoing assessment of academic, language, social, and emotional functioning of foster children and youth upon which classroom, school and district personnel can base the design and implementation of effective instruction.

Interventions

- Ensure that foster children and youth whose assessments reveal inadequate skills in reading, writing, and/or math receive in-school and out-of-school-time evidence-based interventions with ongoing assessments to improve their knowledge and skills.

- Ensure that high school foster children and youth have access to schools with Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)-type programs (i.e., rigorous and relevant curriculum, academic and social support from an elective class, college tutors for academic “middle” students who are historically underrepresented in four-year colleges and universities).

“We should call home with the good news, too, not just the bad. These kids have lots of negatives in their lives. Being the one who sees something good and positive is even more powerful for them.”

– A Teacher

Supports for Students and Teachers

- Provide teachers with information, training and support related to meeting the educational needs of foster youth in the classroom.
- Provide all foster children and youth with a designated individual at the school who can connect with them by creating a welcoming environment and support them by ensuring that they are:

- 1) informed about the full range of educational choices within the public school system (traditional programs, magnet schools, small schools, academies, charter schools, school within schools, and other alternative schools and programs);

- 2) assessed and an education plan developed in a timely manner;
- 3) enrolled in appropriate classes with appropriate teachers;
- 4) progressing as expected; and
- 5) receiving all appropriate services and interventions.
- Provide school mental health services as appropriate that are integrated into the classroom and will promote youth development and a healthy learning environment.

Research

- More research is needed to document essential characteristics of successful programs and strategies that increase educational success for foster youth. A good place to start would be with the studies of response to intervention models that have not specifically studied children and youth in foster care in their treatment or comparison groups.

Legislation

- Promote legislation that provides grants to schools to provide training, services, and programs for children traumatized by violence.

Data Sharing Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

- Establish a pilot project that can lead to a statewide foster youth database that is Web-based, uses the “unique student identifier,” interfaces with CALPADS, CWS/CMS and district and county student information systems, can be updated electronically on a daily basis, and is located at a county office of education, regional lead county office, regional hub, or at a university.

- Hold statewide or regional meetings for county foster youth coordinators, data professionals, educators, county child welfare social workers and probation professionals to acquaint them with current exemplary systems and data elements.
- Ensure that the CWS/CMS system and the Court system use the education UID to facilitate interconnectivity of the various databases.
- Guard confidential information by assuring that data access is limited to an individual’s need to know, limit past history information as appropriate, and include older foster youth in discussions with teachers and other professionals regarding their status and background.

Long-term Recommendations

- Seek legislation to establish and fund a web-based, state-level foster student database, based on findings from the pilot project above, that will utilize the education “unique student identifier”, interface with CALPADS and the new CWS/CMS system, and accept daily input from districts and counties as required.
- Require county offices of education and districts to collect a specific set of data elements to be included in a statewide database.
- Seek a mandate or federal waiver for CWS/CMS and the education system to exchange essential data.
- Provide professional development for county foster youth coordinators, data professionals, educators, county child welfare social workers and probation professionals to acquaint them with the statewide system and required data elements. Include educators in the design and delivery of the professional development.

Implementation Strategies

“Even when our state is short of financial capital, I know we have the human capital to improve on what we do.”

– State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell

In California’s current budget climate, large-scale investments in the training, infrastructure, and systems change called for in the full set of Workgroup recommendations are unlikely. This reality, while sobering, did not stop the Design Team and Workgroup members from considering the many steps that could be taken towards implementing a subset of recommendations, both to seize the “quick wins” imbedded in some of them and to lay the groundwork for more substantive change in the future. As Superintendent O’Connell put it when discussing the same limitation for closing the achievement gap, “Even when our state is short of financial capital, I know we have the human capital to improve on what we do.”

A panel of Design Team members noted that foster youth currently are not a priority within the state policy apparatus. One clear overall strategy is to raise the profile of foster youth so that they can become more of a priority within existing programs, without necessarily drawing upon new or additional resources. Often, it was noted, foster youth may lose out on existing services and resources because they are a relatively small and hidden population, without vocal advocates in their corner.

A related suggestion was to link the education outcomes of foster youth to existing initiatives championed in Superintendent O’Connell’s achievement gap strategies addressing access, culture and climate, expectations, and strategies that promote best practices. Indeed, the student population

most at risk for foster care (and for staying in foster care longer) overlaps considerably with the population at risk for poor educational outcomes in general: poor, African-American, engaged with the juvenile justice system, suffering from early childhood trauma.

Along the same lines, Superintendent O’Connell noted that “we can’t close the achievement gap unless we close the readiness gap before kindergarten,” adding that it is often the students who need quality preschool the most who lack access to it. He was not referring specifically to foster children, but could have been. Access to quality preschool is a concern of many California policymakers, including Senator Darrell Steinberg, who is carrying legislation to streamline all current Title 5 programs that serve preschool-aged children and create the largest, most efficient state-funded pre-kindergarten program in the country. The needs of foster children, as enumerated in the School Readiness Workgroup’s recommendations, are a perfect fit with this emphasis.

Another area of emphasis in the achievement gap strategies is to understand the culture and climate of schools and how these relate to learning environments that stimulate excellence in teaching and learning. Again, Superintendent O’Connell focused on racial and cultural issues in suggesting expansion of the existing California School Climate Survey to encompass these topics, but the environments that foster youth encounter also could become part of the survey’s exploration

of the school environment, culture, and climate (with disaggregated data specific to foster youth). Likewise, Superintendent O'Connell's emphasis on high expectations has important and specific implications for foster youth, who too often are hastily (and inappropriately) assigned to Special Education and to less rigorous academic paths.

Within the Legislature, policies that present a "united front" (in this case, between child welfare and education) have more potential for support than those that might be perceived as pitting agencies against one another or forcing one's will or agenda on the other. As a result, system changes have a greater chance of future support if child welfare and education representatives can agree on shared outcomes, strategies, and terminology – as demonstrated in the various Workgroup recommendations.

Two other broad areas of interest within the Legislature also could benefit the specific foster care recommendations. One is an emphasis on data and accountability, with growing recognition that investments in data systems (such as the ones proposed in the Data Sharing Workgroup recommendations) yield lasting and crucial benefits. The other is to tie the education outcomes of foster youth to the missed opportunities for a skilled California workforce – a concern also echoed in Superintendent O'Connell's achievement gap strategies.

Outside the state funding stream, Design Team members noted the potential for support for some recommendations from the philanthropic community and from public-private partnerships. As with the Legislature, the united front presented by child welfare and education on these issues makes the investment more fruitful and attractive.

Finally, as described in greater detail below, several observers pointed out that the goal of improving education outcomes for foster youth is one that offers many opportunities for smaller-scale, pilot projects that could then become the basis for more widespread implementation.

In the wake of this discussion, the group considered which recommendations should become higher priorities and, of those, which agencies and sectors would be natural champions or had primary responsibility for implementing each recommendation. The results are shown in the tables below (once again organized by Workgroup: School Readiness, School Success, and Data Sharing), with the shading of each checkmark denoting the number of votes each item received.

Table Key:



1-5 votes



6-10 votes



10+ votes

SCHOOL READINESS: PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS AND LEADS

School Readiness Recommendations	Who Should Take the Lead in Implementing This Recommendation?							
	Federal	State Level			Local (County) Level		Community-Based Organizations	Philanthropy
		State (Child Welfare)	State (Education)	State (Policy)	Local (County Child Welfare)	Local (Schools/Districts)		
Training and Support for Parents & Caregivers	✓ (1)	✓ (3)		✓ (1)	✓ (9) both (7)	✓ (3)	✓ (3)	✓ (2)
Access to High Quality Preschools	✓ (1)		✓ (4)	✓ (3)		✓ (9) both (1)		
Professional Development for Preschool Teachers	✓ (1)		✓ (9)	✓ (1)		✓ (5)		
Screening & Early Intervention Services	✓ (1)	✓ (2)	✓ (7)		✓ (6)	✓ (3)		✓ (1)
Improve Data Collection & Research Activities	✓ (2)	✓ (3)	✓ (16) both (1)					✓ (1)
Designate Educational Advocate for Young Foster Children	✓ (1)		✓ (10)	✓ (3)	✓ (8)	✓ (7)		✓ (3)
Eliminate Congregate Care for Children under 5	✓ (1)	✓ (7)		✓ (6)	✓ (9)		✓ (1)	✓ (1) (2)

SCHOOL SUCCESS: PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS AND LEADS

School Success Recommendations	Who Should Take the Lead in Implementing This Recommendation?								
	Federal	State Level			Local (County) Level		Community-Based Organizations	Philanthropy	Courts
		State (Child Welfare)	State (Education)	State (Policy)	Local (County Child Welfare)	Local (Schools/Districts)			
Ensure School Stability	✓ (2)	✓ (1)	✓ (2)	✓ (2)	✓ (15)	✓ (12)	✓ (2)	✓ (1)	✓ both (8)
Conduct Assessments & Share Results with School/Teacher	✓ (2)	✓ (3)			✓ (5)	✓ (25)		✓ (1)	
Provide In- and Out-of-School Interventions	✓ (1)		✓ (1)	✓ (2)	✓ (2)	✓ (18)	✓ (2)	✓ (2)	✓ (1)
Professional Development for K-12 Teachers	✓ (1)		✓ (6)		✓ (3)	✓ (19)			
Provide Foster Youth with School-Based Advisors	✓ (1)		✓ (3)	✓ (1)		✓ (22)	✓ (1)		
Research Successful Education Programs	✓ (3)		✓ (17)	✓ (8)			✓ (1)	✓ (2)	
Legislation for Funding to Schools	✓ (5)	✓ (4)	✓ (13)		✓ (8)		✓ (1)	✓ (2)	
		✓ both (3)							

DATA SHARING: PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS AND LEADS

Data Sharing Recommendations	Who Should Take the Lead in Implementing This Recommendation?							
	Federal	State Level		Local (County) Level		Community-Based Organizations	Philanthropy	Courts
		State (Child Welfare)	State (Education)	State (Policy)	Local (County Child Welfare)			
Pilot Project Using Unique Student Identifier	(1)	✓ (1)	✓ (3)		✓ (2)	✓ (5)		
Hold Meetings to Share Exemplary Systems & Data Elements	(1)	✓ (2)	✓ (3)		✓ (1)			
Professional Development on Use of Foster Youth Database	(1)	✓ (1)	✓ (3)		✓ (2)			
Ensure CWS/CMS & Court Systems Utilize the Education UID	(1)	✓ (2)		✓ (4)	✓ (1)			
Limit Data Access Based on Need	(1)			✓ (3)				
Establish & Fund Web-based State-level Foster Student Database	(1)	✓ (3)	✓ (2)	✓ (3)				

DATA SHARING: PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS AND LEADS

Data Sharing Recommendations	Who Should Take the Lead in Implementing This Recommendation?							
	Federal	State Level		Local (County) Level		Community-Based Organizations	Philanthropy	Courts
		State (Child Welfare)	State (Education)	State (Policy)	Local (County Child Welfare)			
Require Local Education Agencies to Collect Specific Student Data	✓ (1)		✓ (6)	✓ (1)		✓ (2)		
Seek a Waiver for CWS/CMS & Education to Exchange Data	✓ (3)	✓ (2)	✓ (2)	✓ (2)	✓ (1)			✓ (3)
Professional Development for Child Welfare & Education in Use of Statewide Foster Youth Database			✓ (1)		✓ (2)			
		✓ both (7)			✓ both (1)			

Table Key:



1-5 votes



6-10 votes



10+ votes

Design Team Commitments

In their discussions about the Workgroup recommendations and implementation strategies, several Design Team members pointed out that in this and other efforts, it is all too easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the changes required. Yet small gains, they noted, are not only morale-boosters, but also can have a cumulative effect, leading to more substantive change in the future.

In this spirit, Design Team members were asked to identify actions they could commit to taking as individuals and within their organizations.

Many focused on opportunities to share the information from the Collaborative and the specific content of the recommendations through **training events** with colleagues and staff. Examples included:

- Trainings for caregivers regarding educational rights (and the responsibilities that accompany this designation)
- Staff and teacher trainings at every school site county-wide on the educational needs of foster youth, and ensuring that a teacher at every school site would be available to welcome and support foster youth
- Training for social workers on the impact of stability in school placements and of early interventions (particularly Part C of IDEA)
- Taking a fresh look at training resources for foster parents and finding ways to provide more parent/caregiver supports
- Training new social workers to be more aware of the educational needs of foster youth and supplying more social work interns to work with foster youth in schools

Another theme was playing a concrete role in connecting agencies, groups or individuals who might not otherwise come together, and to use

the recommendations as the impetus for doing so. Examples included:

- Bringing together child welfare, education, and a children's foundation in one county to move toward implementation of the school success and data recommendations
- Working with child welfare and education partners to assess the educational needs of foster youth in the county
- Working with Head Start and social services to prioritize foster youth for preschool services
- Connecting school staff to social workers
- Recruiting mentors and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) from professional and personal networks
- Sharing the recommendations with different workgroups (e.g., School Advisory Groups, Child Welfare Council) to spread the work and building consensus and momentum for change
- Advocating to have First 5 focus on foster youth

"I will continue to focus on integration across groups on which I serve or over which I have influence."

– Design Team member

Beyond their roles identifying training opportunities, building awareness, and connecting the recommendations and the issue of foster youth

in general across groups and sectors, some Design Team members were eager to pursue implementation itself. Examples include:

- Coordinating data sharing and reporting efforts, particularly by linking educational databases (at CalPASS and CWS) and providing Web-based access
- Organizing a teaching credential program for a tutoring program for foster youth
- Using a “Plan Do Study Act” (PDSA) process to test small changes in each of the three Workgroup areas
- Helping to develop evidence-based interventions, assessments, information, training and

support to teaching and providing a welcoming environment and information to foster youth and caregivers.

- Researching ways to use CWS data in ways that are meaningful for child welfare and schools – e.g., using Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

“There is low-hanging fruit.”

– Design Team member

Conclusion

The recommendations developed and endorsed by the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care are not entirely new nor particularly surprising. In fact, as noted above, many echo and reinforce recommendations made by other groups that have examined the plight of foster children. What is new about these recommendations is their focus on educational outcomes and on the systems and policies that collectively could shift these outcomes for foster youth.

The data behind these recommendations demonstrate how year after year the state, in its *in loco parentis* role for foster children, accepts educational outcomes that few parents would tolerate for their own children. The educational neglect this dismal record represents is particularly tragic because educational success could, for many foster children, improve not only their transitions to self-sufficiency and adulthood, but their overall well-being during and after their school years.

By sharing data more effectively, collaborating to make school stability a reality, and giving the youngest foster children the interventions that

give them a chance to be truly ready for school, the full implementation of many of these recommendations would alter the education and adult self-sufficiency prospects for the over 74,000 children in California’s foster system.

Implementation of these recommendations also would benefit many other children who may not be in the foster care system but are at risk for poor educational outcomes and their lifetime consequences in many other ways – from poverty, from homelessness, and from neglect and chaos at home that may not meet the threshold for child protective services involvement, but hinder educational achievement all the same.

A focus on school readiness and school success may not heal all the damage already inflicted early in the lives of foster children, but it can give these children – and many of their peers – the fighting chance they need and deserve to thrive as adults.

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