

Ready to Succeed

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



Recommendations to Improve School Readiness, School Success, and Data Sharing
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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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 (based in Santa Cruz), 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.

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

Karen Bentley, Shasta County Foster Youth Services

Mary Cavanaugh, Sacramento County Office of Education

Cindy Charron, Voices for Children

Mark Courtney, Partners for Our Children

Patty Danon, San Diego County Child Welfare Services

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Catherine Giacalone, Contra Costa County Office of Education

Mary Harris, San Diego County Child Welfare Services

Pam Hosmer, San Diego Unified School District

Patricia Huston, Deputy Director, Governmental Affairs, Department of Social Services

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Tara Lein, Efforts to Outcome Database; Stanislaus County CWS/CMS

Jeff Middleton, Mount Diablo Unified School District

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Carol Regaldo, Contra Costa County Office of Education

Jennifer Rodriguez, Youth Law Center

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

The state's placement of a child in foster care — whether with relatives, foster parents, or in a group home — is an event with lifelong repercussions. When the state intervenes to remove a child from his or her parents or guardian, it does so out of concern for the child's immediate safety and in the wake of an investigation that confirms abuse and/or neglect. Yet even as the safety of foster children is protected by this drastic measure, another set of hazards to their immediate and long-term well-being emerges. Prominent among these is a lack of attention to the educational needs and potential of foster youth — a lack of attention that in many ways constitutes another form of damaging neglect.

It is important to note that this neglect is not the product of individual failings, but of systemic ones. This document summarizes recommendations from the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care — a group 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.

Education Outcomes Among Foster Youth

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 (Smithgall et al., 2004; Zima et al., 2000)
- Have higher rates of absenteeism and

disciplinary referrals (Preliminary Analysis, 2005)

- Perform below grade level (Smithgall et al., 2004)
- Have been held back in school (50%) (Berrick et al., 1994)
- Have not completed high school (46% do not complete high school) (Blome, 1997)
- 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 (Berrick et al., 1993; Parrish et al., 2001).

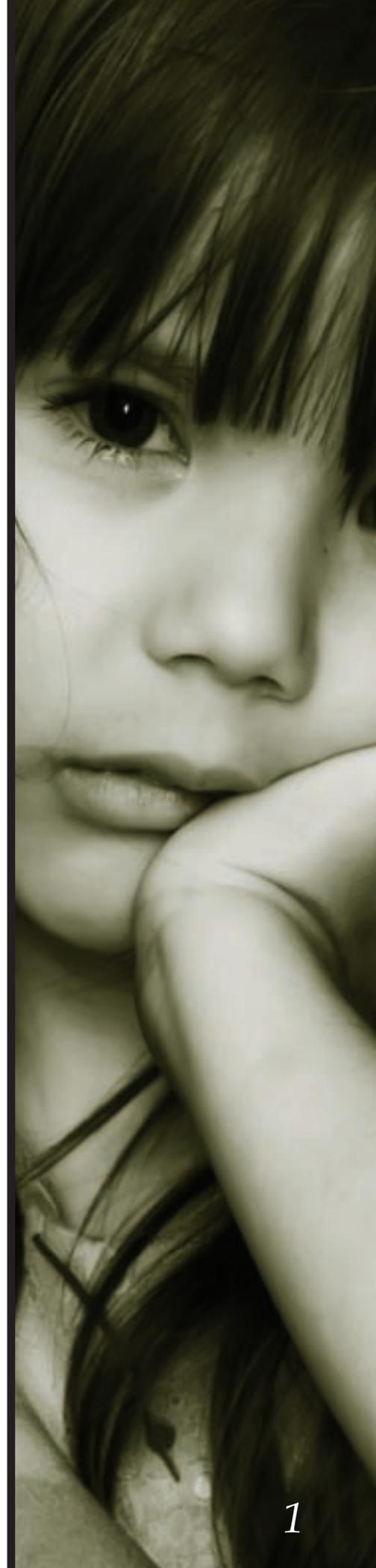
Poor Educational Outcomes for Foster Youth Have Lifelong Repercussions

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.

As is true for their counterparts outside the foster care system, these educational problems significantly undermine the immediate and long-term economic prospects of foster youth. 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.

Obstacles to Educational Achievement

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 (Smithgall, et al., 2004).

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). 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 de-

velopment 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).

Casework vs. Advocacy

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

Addressing the Problem of Poor Education Outcomes for Foster Youth

In California, a number of legislative initiatives, task forces, and pilot projects have been put in place to highlight and remedy some of the systemic barriers undermining the educational success of foster children and youth. 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 — includ-

ing 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 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.

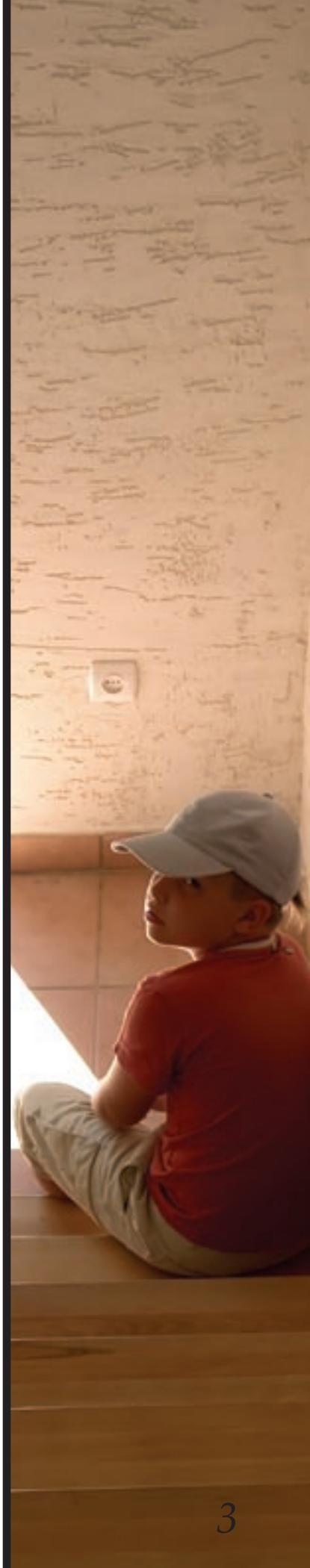
The **Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning** is a public, non-profit organization based in Santa Cruz, California and dedicated to the premise that teachers matter. The Center’s many initiatives share a goal of building California’s teacher workforce capacity and, ultimately, ensuring that 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 Family to Family counties.

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 25) 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.



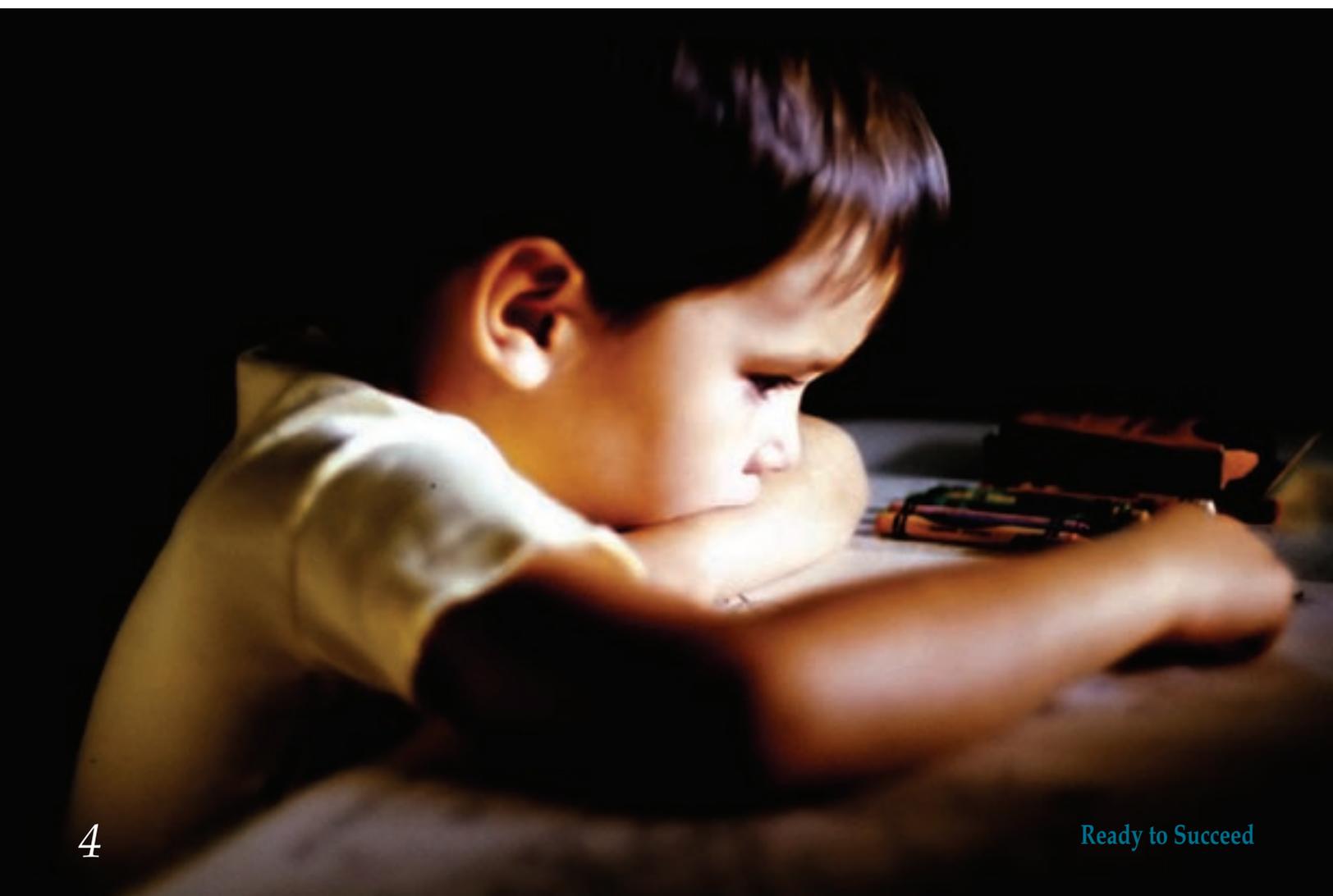
The Collaborative's charges included:

- Producing three **documents** to inform the work of the Design Team:
 - 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 (Weinberg et al., 2007);
 - 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 (Shea et al., 2007); and
 - A **survey of beginning general and special education teachers** in schools regarding their experiences with foster youth in their classrooms (Zetlin et al., 2007).
- 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 and spark new work that ultimately will improve educational outcomes for foster children and youth.

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.

This summary report highlights the Design Team's recommendations in each of these three areas. A lengthier report, available through the Collaborative's Web site (www.cftl.org/fostercare/), provides more information on the literature review, focus groups, and teacher survey that informed the Design Team's work. Each of these documents also is available in its entirety via links on the Web site.



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 20 ¹⁷
Average reading level of foster youth in the Midwest Study, after grade 10 or 11:	7th grade ¹⁸
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.

Workgroup Charges and Recommendations

As noted above, members of the Collaborative’s Design Team were divided into three Workgroups. This section presents the charge to each group, its recommendations, and the rationale behind them. Many of these recommendations are not new; rather, they echo and reinforce those of others who have observed the many missed opportunities to improve the educational outcomes — and thus the lifetime stability and success — of foster children. What *is* new about these recommendations is that they focus on the critical role of the education system in improving educational outcomes and affecting systemic change at the state and county level.

School Readiness Workgroup Charge and Focus

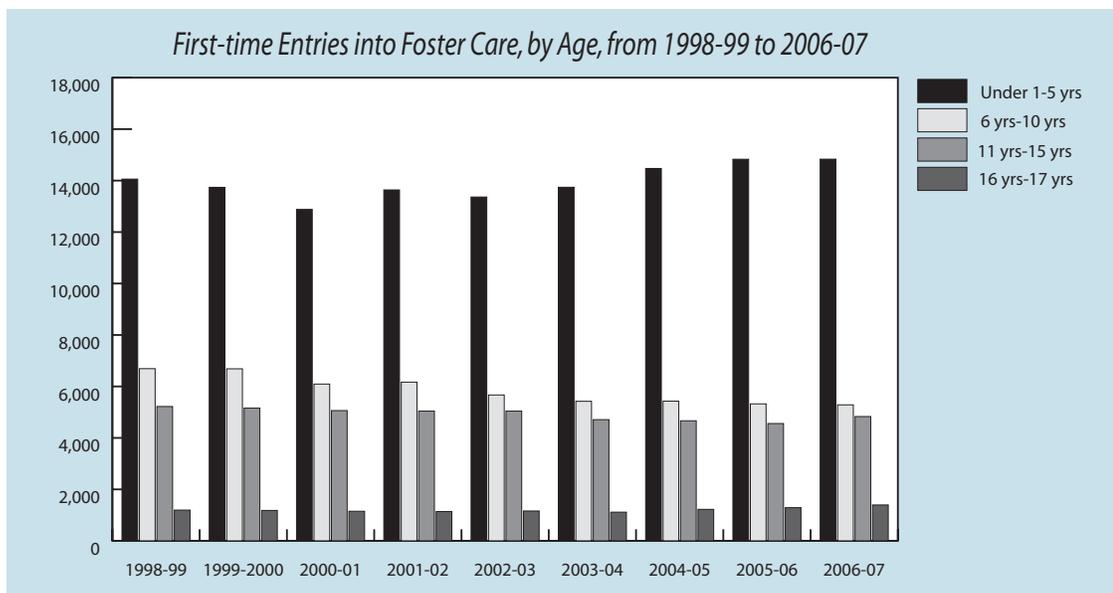
School readiness begins in infancy, as infants learn how to trust and feel secure, explore their environments, and form close attachments. These early experiences and relationships provide the foundation for all future

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 5 (Needell et al., 2007), and data suggests that the proportion of foster children in this very young age group is increasing.

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

Recommendations and Rationale *Training and Support for Parents and Caregivers*

Provide training to social workers and all caregivers (including parents, foster parents, and relative caregivers) on the growing body of research about the developing brain, the health and developmental prob-



Source: Needell, B., Webster, D., Armijo, M., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Zimmerman, K., Simon, V., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Frerer, K., Ataie, Y., Atkinson, L., Blumberg, R., Henry, C., & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (2007). *Child Welfare Services Reports for California*. Retrieved January 8, 2008, from University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research website. URL: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare

lems young children in foster care experience, and the importance of attachment, bonding, and stimulation (e.g., play time and reading vs. television), to enhance future school readiness and increase the stability of the foster care placements of very young children by decreasing stress and increasing “social intelligence.”

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 stress and cortisol. Several studies have documented, not surprisingly, that children in foster care exhibit the type of early and lifelong irregular cortisol production associated with conduct disorders, antisocial personality disorder, substance abuse, and depression (Dozier et al., 2006).

Knowledge about the developing brain — and, more importantly, act-

ing 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 (Rosenberg, Smith, and Levinson, 2007; Silver et al., 1999; Klee, Kronstadt, and Zlotnick, 1997; Urquiza et al., 1994). 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 (Halfon, Mendonca, and Berkowitz,

1995; Silver et al., 1999; Berrick, Courtney, and Barth, 1993). Maltreatment also is associated with significant speech and language delays in syntax and receptive vocabulary, compared to nonmaltreated children with similar backgrounds (Eigsti and Cicchetti, 2004). Children who have insecure attachments to caregivers are at somewhat increased risk for anxiety disorders (Warren, et al., 1997), and for somewhat less optimal outcomes with teachers and peers (e.g., Elicker, Englund and Sroufe, 1992). Disorganized attachment 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) (Carlson, 1998), but also internalizing symptoms (e.g., depressive and anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., acting out) (Lyons-Ruth, 1996; Lyons-Ruth, Alpern and Repacholi, 1993).

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 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 (Dozier, et al., 2001).

“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

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.

A study of children whose parents and Head Start teachers participated in The Incredible Years intervention 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 (Webster-Stratton, Reid, and Hammond, 2001).

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.

Although early education is essential for the population of children in fos-

ter 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 (Zetlin, Weinberg and Shea, 2006). Data indicate that only 6% of foster children under 6 attend Head Start (Vandivere, Chalk, and Moore, 2003). 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 (Zetlin, Weinberg and Shea, 2006). 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 (Zetlin, Weinberg and Shea, 2006). Without quality early childhood education, children from economically poor 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 (Ramey and Ramey, 2004). 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 (Smokowski et al., 2004).

Ensure that foster children suffering the effects of abuse and/or neglect have access to evidence-based therapeutic preschool programs to address their needs.

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 (Whitemore, Ford and Stack, 2003). 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 (Gray et al., 2000). 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,

providing caretakers with the opportunity to feel understood, supported, and connected with other parents (Children's Research Triangle, 2008).

Increase the number of high-quality preschools in areas with large concentrations of foster children (and/or children at risk).

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 (Munger et al., 2007). 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 (Hall et al., 2005). Children who spend more hours in high quality center-based care perform better in math and reading in the early grades of elementary school (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). 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 to attend a four-year college and score higher on measures of academic and intellectual success and were less likely to have a teen pregnancy (Campbell et al., 2002).

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.

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. The combination of low pay, low credentials, and high turnover can be reversed, however. For example, the U.S. mil-

itary'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 (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Research supports the importance of having highly-trained, well-educated early childhood teachers (Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow, 2002).

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

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.

Studies suggest that only a small number of children in foster care are enrolled in early intervention services under IDEA (Horowitz, Owens, and Simms, 2000; Robinson and Rosenberg, 2000). 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 (Rosenberg, Smith, and Levinson, 2007).

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.

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 problems for maltreated children are more severe (Wiggins, Fenichel, and Martin, 2007). 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 (Rosenberg and Robinson, 2004).

Ready to Succeed

An intervention that addresses the special emotional and relationship needs of children in foster care is Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up Intervention which helps caregivers learn to reinterpret children's alienating behaviors, over-ride 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, based on cortisol production and results in fewer behavior problems being reported from caregivers for older children (Dozier et al., 2006).

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.**

While the evidence base 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 Na-

tional Institute of Mental Health recently funded a five-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 (University of Washington Center on Infant Mental Health and Development, 2008).

Educational 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.

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 interventions.

Legislation

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

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 (Nelson and Zeanah, 2007).

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 which 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 general 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.

Recommendations and Rationale

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) 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 support 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.

Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, and Brathwaite (1995) 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, Webster, Barth and Needell (2000) found their likelihood of multiple

placement moves increased over time. 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 ten have been found to have three or more foster care placements (McMillen and Tucker, 1999).

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 Team Decision Making (including making information about the child's education available for such planning meetings).

Assessment

Provide initial and ongoing periodic assessment of academic, language, social, and emotional functioning of foster children and youth that provides diagnostic information for the teacher and the school.

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 (Leiter and

"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

Johnsen, 1997). 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 (Aldgate, et al., 1992; Courtney, Terao, and Bost, 2004; Crozier and Barth, 2005; Kendall-Tackett and Eckenrode, 1996; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, and Howing, 1993; ECC, 2006b; Smithgall et al., 2004). 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 (Webb et al., 2007).

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 skills.

Response to Intervention (RTI): Large-scale studies with students randomly assigned to treatment and comparison groups (e.g., Scanlon, 2005; Velutino, 2006) have found that RTI programs are effective in reducing the number of young children who qualify as poor readers in first grade. Large-scale studies (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, and Hollenbeck) with students at risk for math difficulties randomly assigned to treatment and control groups found response-to-intervention (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.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID): Studies (e.g., Guthrie and Guthrie, 2002; Watt, Powell, and Mendiola, 2004) of Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) programs indicate that students in these programs in middle school outperform their classmates on standardized tests, attend school at higher rates, and accumulate more high school credits.

Tutoring and After-School Programs: Studies of Strategic Tutoring (Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, and Schumaker, 2001; Hock, Schumaker, and Deshler, 2001; Staub and Lenz, 2000) of at-risk students using a multiple baseline design and students in foster care with a comparison group show evidence of improved academic achievement. The Tutor Connection program in San Diego (Halcon and Lustig, n.d.) 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. 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 (Treehouse, 2008).

Meta-analyses of 35 reading and 22 math after school and summer programs (Lauer et al., 2006) showed that out of school time programs can have positive effects on the achievement of at-risk students.



Ensure that high school foster youth attend 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 under-represented in four-year colleges and universities).

Studies in California (Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan, 2002; Guthrie and Guthrie, 1999; Mehan et al., 1996) and Texas (Watt, Powell, and Mendiola, 2004) 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.

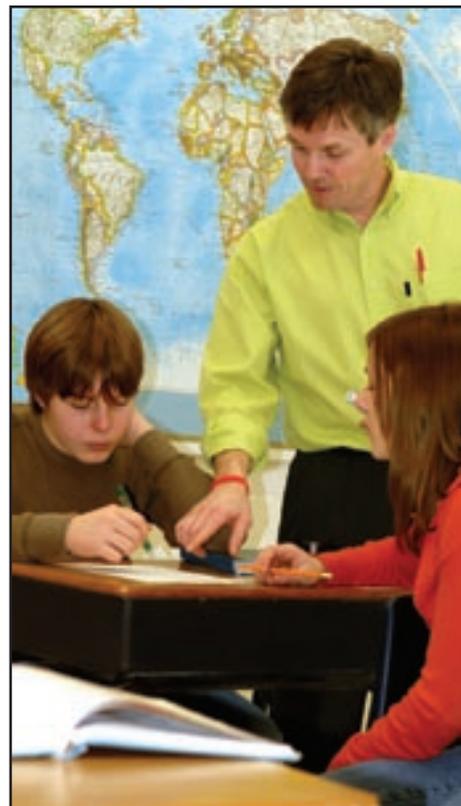
Supports for Students and Teachers
Provide teachers with information, training and support related to meeting the educational needs of foster youth in the classroom.

Both special education and general education teachers who participated in the teacher survey conducted for the Collaborative wanted an inser-

vice or workshop to learn how best to support students in foster care, especially to address their emotional and behavioral needs (Zetlin et al., 2007). They wanted strategies to help the foster children “succeed and feel comfortable in class.” 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. They 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 (Shea et al., 2007).

Provide all foster youth with a designated individual at the school who can connect with the youth by creating a welcoming environment and support them by ensuring that they and their caregivers 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.

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 (Blome, 1997; Courtney and Dworsky, 2005; Joiner, 2001). 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 (Zetlin et al., 2007).

Provide school mental health services that are integrated into the classroom and will promote youth development and a healthy learning environment.

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 which ranged from anger and explosive behaviors to withdrawal and depression (Zetlin et al., 2007; Shea et al., 2007). A number of studies report 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 (Webb et al., 2007). 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 (Berrick, Barth and Needell, 1994; Goerge et al., 1992; Parrish et al., 2001; ECC, 2006b; Sawyer and Dubowitz, 1994; Zima et al., 2000). 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 (Aldgate et al., 1992; Courtney,

Terao, and Bost, 2004; Crozier and Barth, 2005; Kendall-Tackett and Eckenrode, 1996; Kurtz et al., 1993; ECC, 2006b; Smithgall et al., 2004). 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

More research is needed to document essential characteristics of successful programs and strategies that increase educational success for foster youth.

Studies of response to intervention models have not specifically studied children and youth in foster care in their treatment or comparison groups. Only one study (Staub and Lenz, 2000) of the Strategic Tutoring model used foster children in their treatment and comparison groups. There has been only one unpublished study of the Tutor Connection program (Halcon and Lustig, n.d.) and this study did not use a comparison group. Except for two tutoring studies, no additional study of out-of-school time (i.e., after school or summer program) specifically focused on foster children and youth has been conducted.

Legislation

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

A Massachusetts law creates grants for schools to develop regular education interventions that address the educational and psycho-social needs of children whose behavior interferes with learning, particularly because of their traumatic effects of exposure to violence (Mass. Gen. Laws, 2004). 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.



"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

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 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.

Recommendations and Rationale

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 foster youth between schools and districts, means

that school personnel are often 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 and parents' privacy rights are being interpreted as giving control to agencies to decide to not 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. Federal privacy standards under the



Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA, 1996) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 2000) 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 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, and 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 (Data Quality Campaign, 2006; McNaught, 2005)



and examples of homeless and migrant data systems that receive information from a variety of sources including multiple databases (Perl, 2005; Dozier, 2007).

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 following recommendations 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.

Short-term Recommendations

Establish a pilot project that can lead to a statewide foster youth database that is Web-based, utilizes the “unique student identifier,” interfaces with 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.

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 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 web-based system to allow easy 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.

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.

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. Un-

derstanding 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.

Provide professional development about the child welfare system, foster youth needs and experiences, and privacy issues for school and district personnel prior to access to the foster youth pilot database. Include educators in the design and delivery of this professional development.

This recommendation arises partially from concerns of foster youth that increased collection and sharing of data of will lead to misuse of information by the educational system. California Youth Connection representatives have specifically asked for this professional development. Training of teachers, school psychologists, and administrators about the child welfare system and the experiences of foster students should increase understanding of student needs and concerns and of the difficulties they face in interacting with the educational system when they are moved from school to school or district to district. Although this is presented as a short-term recommendation to accompany implementation of a pilot, this type of professional development should be conducted on an ongoing basis for educators who interact with foster students.

Ensure that the CWS/CMS system and the Court system utilize the education UID to facilitate interconnectivity of the various databases.

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.

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.

Stemming partially from privacy and confidentiality concerns of foster youth, this recommendation is also 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 specifi-

cation 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.

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 the new CWS/CMS system, and rely on daily input from districts and counties.

While substantive funding will be required to establish and maintain a statewide database to include the approximately 80,000 foster students in California, this has been identified as 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 (McNaught, 2005). 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 student identifier” is a prerequisite, as is the ability to receive frequent input from a number of sources. Ideally the database will contain longitudinal information as 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.

Require county offices of education and districts to collect a specific set of data elements to be included in a statewide database.

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 have proven useful, but may not be necessary for all districts and counties.

Seek a mandate or federal waiver for CWS/CMS and the education system to exchange essential data.

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.

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.

This recommendation addresses the need for educating 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.

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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