



Child Welfare and Education Officials Join Forces to Help Foster Children Succeed in School

by **Rae Donovan**

Following up on recommendations in a recent report on foster youth education, several California counties will be employing new strategies to help foster youth do better in school. Agencies in San Diego, Fresno, and Sacramento counties have received foundation funding to implement a number of initiatives designed to provide needed support to foster youth, increase foster youth enrollment in preschool education, and reform data sharing systems to improve collaboration between foster care and school officials.

These initiatives are part of a larger effort to address the educational needs of California's foster youth funded by the Stuart Foundation. In 2005, Stuart granted funding to two organizations - Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning - to convene a team of professionals from both public education and child welfare and issue a report on their findings and recommendations. The overarching goal of this team, called the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care (the

"Collaborative") was to explore the challenges and opportunities that exist in their respective systems to improve educational outcomes for foster youth. The focus was on developing a better understanding of the nexus between these two systems and improving collaboration between schools and social services in order to better serve foster youth.

The Collaborative's report, *Ready to Succeed*, highlights many of the on-going educational challenges faced by foster youth. It cites research showing that school age foster children have high rates of absenteeism, poor performance, and behavior issues that lead to suspension and expulsion. Many foster children frequently change homes and schools, and experience other challenges that often prevent them from doing well in school.

California foster children who changed schools even once during high school were less than half as likely to graduate as those who stayed in the same school all four years. Research shows that only 54 percent of children in foster care will finish high school and less than two percent of foster children will receive a bachelor's degree by the time they turn 25. Between 25 to 52 percent of foster children are placed in special

education, as opposed to 10 to 12 percent of the general student population.¹

A history of abuse or neglect can lead to lower test scores and serious behavior problems that can interfere with the learning process. These students need intensive academic and social supports provided and organized by the schools and agencies. Foster children are more at risk for failure than many other students and yet there are few systems in place to help them succeed.²

Action Steps

As part of the next stage of the Collaborative's work, Sacramento, Fresno, and San Diego counties have begun the process of expanding services and creating liaisons to improve links between schools and foster care agencies. Each county is working to implement the recommendations based on its unique set of strengths and needs.

In Fresno County, one of the areas of focus will be improving data sharing between the Fresno County Department of Children and Family Services and relevant community stakeholders. The data sharing system will replicate San Diego's system, known as the Foster Youth-Student

1. Ready to Succeed: Changing Systems to Give California's Foster Children the Opportunities They Deserve to be Ready for and Succeed in School. 2008. p 5.

2. *Id.*, p 1.

Information System. The data sharing will initially focus on the larger districts, with the goal of ultimately implementing the system countywide over the next three years. The system will allow stakeholders to gather and transfer placement, health, and education records.

Fresno will also be focusing additional attention on the educational needs of children aged 0-6. Through the creation of a new social work position, the county plans to in-

crease enrollment in Head Start and other preschool programs, facilitate training for caregivers, agency staff, and service providers in the educational needs of young children, and provide advocacy for this population to ensure their needs are being met.

Sacramento plans to provide additional support and advocacy to foster youth through instructional case managers who will follow the youth from 7th through 12th grade. The case managers will facilitate coordi-

ination among caregivers, schools, and social workers in order to continually emphasize the importance of education in the lives of children in foster care. With the additional foundation resources, case managers will be able to continue providing services to children who move from a foster home to a kinship placement.

Sacramento also plans to provide foster youth with additional academic support and extra curricular opportunities. Academic support will be

NCYL's Role in Foster Youth Education Reform

The Ready to Succeed report's recommendations regarding the need for professional training aligns with NCYL's extensive work in this area.

"One of the recommendations that particularly sparked our interest was around the need for teacher trainings on foster care issues. We frequently get calls from teachers who are trying to help their students in the foster care system. We would love to help teachers in a more systematic way rather than just one call at a time," says NCYL Senior Attorney Leecia Welch. The Center is developing an initiative focused on helping teachers get the resources they need to better support foster youth in their schools.

Over the past several years, NCYL has created curriculum and provided training to advocates, caseworkers, school administrators, and youth about laws affecting the education of foster youth. Welch has trained Alameda County caseworkers as well as volunteers with Alameda's Court Appointed Special Advocates. In May 2008, she spoke to social work and education professionals at the California Foster Youth Education Summit in Sacramento regarding the various models in California for ensuring that foster youth have educational advocates.

"NCYL has long recognized that the laws designed to help foster youth succeed in school don't do any good just sitting on the shelf. Social work-

ers, teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders need training on these issues in understandable language, not legalese, so that they can help bring about needed change," Welch says.

NCYL will also be expanding its capacity to provide educational advocacy to foster youth. Jesse Hahnel, a recent law school graduate and former teacher in the New York City school system, will be joining the Center this fall as a Skadden fellow. At NCYL, Jesse will work to improve educational outcomes for foster children in California's group homes. Jesse will provide representation to individual youth, seek policy changes, and pursue litigation strategies where appropriate.

Education Surrogates for Foster Youth

For the past two years, NCYL has been training law students to act as educational representatives for foster youth. Working through the Education Advocacy Clinic at UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law, NCYL recruited, trained, and supervised law and graduate students to serve as education surrogates. The surrogates' role is to ensure the foster children's educational needs are met. Surrogates actively evaluate the students' school placements, engage teachers and administrators, and advocate for needed support and services.

Foster children need surrogates to help them choose a good school, communicate with school personnel, and advocate on their behalf. These students often have academic difficulties due to frequent moves and the trauma of abuse and neglect. It is the consistency of having one person, officially designated, that makes the difference in ensuring these children's success.

More than 20 Berkeley students have completed training to become education representatives, and more than 15 foster youth have been paired with them by the Alameda County Juvenile Court. The students serve as one-on-one representatives to foster youth in schools throughout the county. The surrogates are required to serve for at least one year, although most of them have continued in their roles for several years.

Former NCYL law clerk Lynn Wu, who graduated this year from Boalt Hall School of law at UC Berkeley, was a teacher in Oakland for three years between college and law school and now serves as an educational surrogate.

"It is really important to have someone specifically focused on education. Sometimes it's hard on these students because there's no one person that they can rely on for help," Lynn says.

enhanced through extra time with guidance counselors and a two-week summer program focused on learning skills, research, and college planning. Funding will also go towards ensuring that foster youth can participate in extracurricular activities, such as athletics, art, and music, which help connect them to school.

San Diego plans to implement a “School Success” project involving the creation of six educational liaison positions to assist with collaboration and coordination among social workers, school sites, and caregivers. The liaisons will focus on ensuring that students are assessed for academic strengths and needs; facilitating the prompt transfer of records; providing social workers with educational resources and information they need to comply with recent changes to the Rules of Court; ensuring that the mandates of AB 490 are met; and assisting social workers, caregivers and youth throughout the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process.

The Report

The *Ready to Succeed* report was created by a 51-member “Design Team,” which includes public educators, legislators, policymakers, child advocates, researchers, and mental health providers from across California. Among them are former Superior Juvenile Court Judge Leonard Edwards, Robert Ayasse, a leader in foster care education research at UC Berkeley, and Christopher Wu, the Executive Director of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care (and a member of the Board of the National Center for Youth Law). The Collaborative’s efforts over several years have been to develop and disseminate “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.”³ Design Team members were divided into three workgroups: school readiness, school success, and data sharing. Each workgroup prepared a set of recommendations. Their recommendations include various strategies to ensure that foster youth have educational advocates; to improve collaboration between agencies through data sharing between schools and child welfare offices; and to provide training and support to educators, caseworkers, and caregivers to encourage collaboration and understanding of foster youth’s educational needs (*See sidebar, p. 2*). The report also finds that teachers need professional development in how to best support foster youth in their classrooms. Also, as a way towards school readiness, agencies should train caseworkers and caregivers on the importance of early childhood education and strategies for reinforcing preschool activities and skills at home.

Recommendations

School Readiness

The Design Team emphasizes that students should be adequately prepared by the time they enter first grade. Key to this preparation are well-informed parents and caregivers, attendance in high quality preschools, the ability to address problems early, and knowledge of education rights. For example, although research has proven the importance of preschool, data shows that only 6 percent of preschool- or kindergarten-

age foster children attend the Head Start program. Head Start provides preschool children from low-income families with a program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs.

The report recommends:

- Child welfare/foster care agencies ensure that all foster children between ages three and five are enrolled in quality preschools by placing foster care children on priority lists and providing subsidies when necessary.
- Screening and assessment is provided for very young children to determine what specific needs, such as special education services, they may have.
- More research to support legislation designed to better prepare foster children to succeed in school.

School Success

When a child’s foster care placement changes, often so does his or her school. In turn, this creates a change of teachers, administrators, environment, and friends. Structure is vital to a child’s ability to grow and learn, and students need to trust the people who teach and discipline them. If students trust that their teachers have their best interests in mind, and that consequences for their behavior will be determined fairly, they will respond more positively to school structure. However, without this trust, they can exhibit even more challenging behavior. In light of this, the report recommends that foster care and school officials:

- Maintain school stability when placing children by increased

3. *Id.*, p 4.

recruitment of foster care families within school districts.

- Implement the mandates of Assembly Bill 490, which requires that children be allowed to remain in their school of origin for the duration of the school year when their placement changes, and that the child's school attendance area be considered in placement decisions.
- Expand access to intensive therapeutic programs and high quality educational services for foster care children.
- Designate a staff person as a foster care education liaison to ensure proper placement and enrollment in school for foster youth.
- Restructure child welfare offices to match up with school district areas.
- Assess the strengths and needs of students and provide early interventions as a response to the results of these assessments.
- Conduct research to determine what current systems are most effective and how those programs can be more fully implemented.

Data Sharing

One of the ways that the Design Team addresses the problems of communication between schools and agencies is with the creation of a Data Sharing Workgroup. One of the hurdles in improving systems is the regulation of information and the impact that can have on researchers trying to provide data which to law-makers. There is no official protocol in place to efficiently organize the sharing of critical data. Sometimes there simply is no data, but more often, there is no designated way to coordinate the sharing of data.

The report advised that agencies:

- Create a state-wide, web-based foster youth database that interfaces with CALPADS⁴, CWS/CMS⁵, and district and county student information systems, and can be updated and accessed regularly.
- Guard confidentiality by allowing access only to those who need to know certain information.
- Organize statewide or regional meetings to inform educators and child welfare professionals about current best practice methods of collaboration.
- Provide professional development for data professionals, educators, social workers, and probation professionals to acquaint them with statewide systems and required data elements. Include educators in design and delivery of the trainings.

Recommendations in Practice

San Diego County Superior Court Judge Ana Espana, a former public defender, has been involved in improving the educational outcomes of foster youth for 10 years. In a recent interview with *Youth Law News*, she said there have been many changes in San Diego County over the past few years that relate to the findings of the *Ready to Succeed* report. For example, San Diego County had one of the first web-based data sharing systems in California linking foster care agency information to school information.

Espana says that over time, she has seen steady improvement.

"I see that we're better now. I see more social workers talking about education, the courts are talking about education," Espana says. "Students are able to talk about what they need, what has helped or hurt them, and that is very powerful. Schools and child

welfare offices have more communication, collaboration; they are more connected. The system has improved, but there is a lot of work to do. It will keep us busy for a long time still."

Rae Donovan was a summer 2008 communications intern at NCYL. She has taught in the New York City School system and spent the past year teaching high school special education students in the post-Katrina Recovery School District in New Orleans.

4. California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/index.asp>

5. Child Welfare Services/Case Management System <http://www.hwcws.cahwnet.gov/>