

Supporting Students in Foster Care

Students who are in foster care need individualized support to succeed in school and life.

Nancy McKellar and Katherine C. Cowan

Nancy McKellar is an associate professor in the counseling, educational, and school psychology department at Wichita (KS) State University. She has volunteered with children in foster care for more than 10 years.

Katherine C. Cowan is the director of communications for the National Association of School Psychologists.

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Pincipal Simpson receives a call from the foster mother of an incoming 10th grader. Robert has been in and out of foster care since 4th grade and is moving into the district from a school in another county. His biological father is in jail, and his mother has been deemed unfit for parenting because of substance abuse. His younger sister has been placed in a foster home nearer their birthplace. Robert is 16, and this will be his third placement since entering high school.

All children need stability, connectedness, and support to thrive in school and life. Unfortunately, for many in foster care, life is anything but stable. Most have experienced neglect and abuse, and life in the foster care system is characterized more by transience and loss than continuity and security. In fact, two-thirds of youth move seven or more times while in foster care (Association of Small Foundations, 2008).

On any given day, nearly a half million children are living in foster care; approximately 44% are between the ages of 11 and 18. The median amount of time spent in care is 15.4 months, but many remain much longer and some exit and reenter care several times (U.S. Department of Health, 2009). The issues that children in foster care face can become increasingly problematic the older the child is and the longer he or she remains in care.

Schools have the potential to be a powerful force toward normalization for these students and can provide the skills that they need to support themselves as adults. Doing so takes school leadership, intentionality, and awareness of the challenges that children and adolescents in foster care face and of the relevant resources and regulations.

Challenges for Students in Foster Care

Some children thrive in foster care

and later credit their foster families with providing stability, care, and guidance. Others experience challenges that can significantly affect their learning and social-emotional development. But in general, children in foster care have more physical, academic, and behavioral problems than their peers.

Relationship instability. Typically, youth in foster care leave behind siblings, other family members, friends, and teachers when they enter foster care. They may strongly miss their biological parents, even if their parents were the reasons for their foster placement, which can result in a deep sense of grief and loss. With each subsequent move, they are again forced to leave people with whom they have established relationships, and many express anger at having to do so.

Academic challenges. Youth in foster care are 44% less likely to graduate from high school than their peers. Many age out of foster care without jobs, adequate educational preparation, and support systems, and 40%–50% of those never complete high school (Beisse, Atkins, Scantlen, & Tyre, 2011). Many perform below their peers, with the greatest achievement gaps in basic reading, math calculation, and written expression. They score on average 15–20 percentile points lower than their peers on standardized academic tests and are more likely to be retained at least one

year and to be referred for special education (Beisse et al., 2011; Scherr, 2006).

Incomplete records. On average, students lose four to six months of progress every time they switch schools because of acclimation, delays in transfer of records, and assessment for special services. Often foster parents have little or no information about a child's prior educational performance and needs, which interferes with continuity of instruction and services.

Behavioral and emotional challenges. Children in foster care may have experienced emotional trauma and may not dare to get excited about school events or activities because they know that they can be moved without warning. Those who suffered parental neglect often lack self-control and social skills. As children in foster care grow older, some become detached and apathetic and daydream excessively. Others may be overly sociable, even clingy. Still others become disruptive, defiant, self-destructive, or antisocial.

Youth who have been physically or emotionally abused may suffer lingering effects, such as depression, anxiety, denial, sleeplessness, excessive sleeping, self-harm, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder. They may be easily overwhelmed and disorganized by stress. In a threatening situation, they may withdraw from adults or become unresponsive, which can be misinterpreted as defiance or oppositional behavior. Youth in foster care have higher rates of discipline problems than their peers, and 24% have been suspended or expelled at least once, compared with a national rate of 7% (Scherr, 2006).

Attachment issues. Children in

foster care can suffer from attachment disorders, meaning they may be overly vigilant or compliant, may "connect" indiscriminately with adults, or may not demonstrate attachment to adults at all. Left untreated, such disordered attachments can cause lifelong relationship and mental health problems (Leslie et al., 2005; Scherr, 2006).

Negative behaviors. Youth in foster care face the same turbulent development issues common to all adolescents, but they often lack the stable guidance and consistent nurturing from a trusted adult that is necessary to help them cope successfully. Because of the trauma and instability of their lives, they are at higher risk for negative behaviors, such as substance abuse and delinquency, than their peers. Many have developed protective mechanisms that keep them at an emotional distance from others and distrust the system and adults. Those issues, as well as actual transience, can prevent youth in care from getting involved in the positive aspects of school and community life, such as sports, after-school clubs, volunteering, and other programs.

Aging out. One of the biggest challenges that youth in foster care face is aging out of the system at 18. Every year, about 20,000 youth age out of the system and its supports. Fewer than half graduate from high school, many flounder without any adult guidance, a quarter become homeless, and many become parents themselves (Association of Small Foundations, 2008).

Challenges for Schools

Frequent moves, often between districts, make it difficult for schools to keep track of youth in foster care, and delays in transferring their educational



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About Foster Care

Nearly half of children in foster care live in homes of nonrelatives (foster families), a quarter live with relatives, and the majority of the balance live in institutional or group settings. Older children are less likely to live with a family, with 36% of children 16 years or older living in group homes or institutions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). More than 50% are Black or Hispanic. As the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 is more fully implemented, those statistics may change. The law contains provisions to facilitate care by relative guardians, to maintain contacts among siblings, to ensure that children are in school full time, and to provide greater continuity for support for older youth who age out of the system. (Go to www.nassp.org/mckellar0911 for more information on the law.)

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2009). The AFCARS report. Retrieved from www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report17.htm

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and immunization records and in assessing their needs interfere with the delivery of needed services. Although children in foster care are more likely to receive special education services than their peers, many do not receive the special services they need because they are not in one setting long enough to be referred. As a result, students who have been in care for a number of years can be significantly behind academically by the time they reach high school.

Schools also face significant barriers in obtaining information about student health and school history without access to information from the biological parents. The conditions associated with a foster care placement and the plan for a student's long-term guardianship affect the legal restrictions on sharing information about the child and obtaining parental permission for assessment and services. Caseworkers must be consulted to determine the specific restrictions about sharing information with biological parents and parental permissions.

School-Based Interventions

The following suggestions highlight effective teaching practices for all students but are particularly important for students in foster care.

Plan for students in foster care.

Plan to accommodate students who enter school midyear. Keep a file of all school notices and newsletters that you send home with your students. You can then make copies for families who move into the district during the year. Explain classroom and school procedures, encourage students to introduce themselves to their new classmates, and show them around the school.

Individualize instruction. Review the student's educational records—but be aware that you may need to track them down. Within a week of enrolling in your school, the student should complete sample assignments and tests to determine how classroom curricula match his or her instructional level. Clearly communicate the expectations for both academic and behavioral performance. Contact the child study team promptly if you suspect that the student may have a disability. Tutoring and remedial instruction should be provided to students in foster care, as well as training in life skills, such as how to respond in an emergency or fill out an application.

Make credit recovery available.

Students who change schools in the middle of the semester may lose credits for incomplete classes. Work with other educators to develop procedures for assigning credits in less-than-whole blocks so that even when students are forced to move during the school year, they can receive credit for the work that they have completed.

Create a structured and supportive classroom. Explain new situations and clarify expectations and limits. Teach students about important classroom practices, such as daily routines, opportunities for practicing skills, and schedule changes. Be patient and consistent as you develop trusting relationships with students in foster care. They may expect that teachers will fail them. Combat stigmatization and be sensitive to the difficulties that students in foster care may have in completing certain assignments, such as constructing a family tree.

Encourage foster parents' involvement. If the foster parents are

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351)

The Fostering Connections Act contains a number of provisions that support improved access to services and school continuity for children and youth in foster care. The law also encourages greater cooperation between schools and child welfare services. School personnel should be familiar with implementation of the law in their state and local resources and services. Following is a summary of key provisions relevant to schools and older youth.

Educational stability. Child welfare agencies must work with education agencies to keep children in their same school when they enter foster care. When staying in the same school is not in the child's best interest, the child must be enrolled in and their records transferred to a new school immediately.

Staying in school. Unless a child cannot attend school because of medical reasons, each child in foster care who is of school age must be enrolled in school.

Travel costs. The act provides a way to help cover the costs for keeping children in their school after placement into foster care.

Extending Title IV-E benefits. States may choose to extend foster care for older youth beyond the age of 18—up to age 21—and ensures that federal resources match state contributions when those youth meet certain education, training, or work requirements.

Transition planning. An individual transition plan must be developed during the 90-day period before a youth leaves foster care that addresses such issues as specific options on housing, health insurance, education, local opportunities for mentors, and workforce supports and employment services.

Extending transition benefits. The act extends eligibility for the Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program (ILP) services to children placed in kinship guardianship at age 16 or older.

Source: *Fostering Connections Resource Center. (n.d.).* Education provisions summary [Brief]. and Older Youth provisions summary [Brief]. Retrieved from www.fosteringconnections.org/resources?id=0003

new to the school community, a lead staff member should call to welcome them and tell them about the school's calendar, policies, expectations, opportunities to become involved, and contact information for teachers and staff members. If foster parents don't know what information to seek, suggest questions that they might want to ask, such as:

- How will I be told if my foster child starts to have trouble in class?
- Is there any tutoring available for students who have trouble keeping up?
- What's the best way for me to touch base with my foster child's teachers?

- What's the policy on making up work after a student is absent?

Consider structuring information you share at parent-teacher conferences around similar questions. Offer suggestions about how to reinforce study skills at home.

Monitor and communicate student progress. Arrange periodic progress report meetings with the foster parents, the caseworker, and the student to discuss the student's accomplishments and needs. Close monitoring of educational outcomes is associated with higher school completion rates among youth in foster care. Including students in educational planning addresses their need for control over their lives and can also help

them develop goals and self-advocacy skills. Give the caseworker written records of meetings to include in the student's file so that the caseworker will have educationally relevant information to share even if the student's school records are not transferred promptly after a move.

Encourage student involvement at school. Some students gain their sense of accomplishment through cocurricular activities, positions of responsibility, or sports. Develop procedures for permitting students who enroll after the beginning of the school year to participate in ongoing school programs and activities.

Arrange for an advocate or mentor. Many youth in foster care need the

support of an adult who is responsible for monitoring their education and advocating for needed services. If the student's caseworker or foster parents do not assume this role, then school personnel can designate a teacher or a related services staff member to do so. A volunteer mentor can advise adolescents in foster care about course selection, volunteer and part-time job opportunities, college and technical school applications, and financial aid for postsecondary education.

Identify students who will age out or have already done so. Most students who age out of the foster care system should still be in school. Many drop out. Those who attempt to stay in school may become homeless or lack money for food or clothes. Work with caseworkers to help students know their rights and how to access resources to stay in school. The Fostering Connections Act extended access to support for youth 18–21. It also requires that personal transition plans for youth aging out are developed 90 days before exiting care. This is primarily the responsibility of the foster care system, but school psychologists and social workers can collaborate with caseworkers to support transition planning and high school completion.

Refer students for mental health services. Given their high risk for mental health problems, some students may benefit from individual or group counseling. Discuss concerns with the foster parents and legal guardians. A community agency will be more appropriate and offer a better chance for continuity for youth in foster care than school-based counseling. Students who have experienced frequent changes in foster placements may have had

multiple counselors or therapists. Care should be taken to maintain as much consistency as possible.

Conclusion

School can be a valuable protective force in the lives of youth in foster care by providing stability, belonging, skills, and successful experiences. The school can promote a sense of mastery and success within warm, secure learning environments. Educators have the opportunity to provide the stable base that students in foster care need. **PL**

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