

# EDUCATION FOR FOSTER CHILDREN: REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

REPORT BRIEF

**Prepared by:**

Pamela Choice, Ph.D.  
Amy D'Andrade, M.S.W.  
Kira Gunther, B.A.  
Debbie Downes, B.A.  
James Schaldach, B.A.  
Csilla Csiszar, B.A.  
Michael J. Austin, Ph.D.

**APRIL  
2001**

For further information  
or copies of the  
full report please call:

**Bay Area Social  
Services Consortium  
at the  
Center for Social  
Services Research**

School of  
Social Welfare  
University of  
California, Berkeley

**(510) 642-1899**

Or see:

[http://cssr.berkeley.edu/  
bassc](http://cssr.berkeley.edu/bassc)

## INTRODUCTION

In California, approximately 10 out of every 1,000 children are in foster care and approximately 72% of these children are school age. (Needell, Webster, Cuccaro-Alamin, Armijo, Brookhart 2000). As foster children enter emergency shelter care and then move back to their own homes or into longer-term foster care situations, the primary job of the social worker is to protect children's immediate safety and ensure their emotional well-being. Concern for meeting foster children's educational needs is clearly within the social services domain of child well-being, yet it is the school system that ultimately is responsible for ensuring that all children receive appropriate education.

Although much attention has been devoted to understanding the characteristics of children in foster care and their child welfare supervised case outcomes, only a limited number of studies have examined academic variables for these children (Ferguson, 1999). The studies that do exist indicate that high percentages of children in foster care experience difficulty in school and perform poorly across a range of subjects including math, reading, and vocabulary (Ferguson, 1999; Sawyer, & Dubowitz, 1994; Stein, 1997). The reasons for these problems are complex and may include problems in the child welfare system (such as discontinuity in case management), as well as problems in the school system (such as a lack of resources and the belief that foster children only reside in particular school districts temporarily).

Compounding this situation, it is unclear whether school districts have the resources to meet the educational needs of this special population. While fiscal responsibility for children's educational needs lies in their individual school districts, the transitory nature of foster care for many children may affect their educational needs and their ability to access educational resources. For example, it is unknown to what extent foster children may experience delays in school admittance until the court assures that children are not returning home to their original school districts. When children do enter new schools, the circumstances that may prompt an Individual Education Plan (IEP) request are unclear and questions exist regarding the extent to which there may be reluctance to assess children for enhanced educational services.

## **PURPOSE & METHODS**

Nine Bay Area counties including Alameda, Contra Costa, Monterey, Napa, San Mateo, San Francisco, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma sponsored this study in order to develop a fuller understanding of the factors associated with the identification and delivery of educational services for Bay Area foster youth. Specifically, the study investigates the following research questions:

**1. Service Delays.** How are educational services received, and not received, by foster youth including timelines of services such as how long it takes children to enter school, be assessed for educational needs, and receive specialized services?

**2. Characteristics Related to Services.** What is the nature of the relationships between the educational services received by foster children, and where they reside and attend school, and their types of child welfare placements?

**3. Perceptions of County and School Respondents.** What are child welfare directors' and school respondents' perceptions of the ways in which model programs may assist in meeting foster children's educational needs?

These goals were addressed through the following methods:

**Telephone surveys** were conducted with 303 randomly selected foster parents.

**Case records** of 150 children were reviewed in order to corroborate information gained in the telephone surveys.

**Interviews** were conducted with 13 experts in the fields of child welfare and education to obtain their perceptions of the educational services available to foster children and to obtain their recommendations for legislative, educational, and child welfare reforms, as well as model advocacy programs.

## **RESULTS**

Several themes emerged from the study regarding foster children's educational experiences, barriers in meeting their needs, and suggestions for improving access to services. These themes are highlighted below.

-- **Difficulties Transferring Children's Cumulative Records for School Enrollment**

Transferring the cumulative record when children move to a new school can result in delayed enrollment. During this time period, children may lose valuable time in school.

-- **Difficulties Obtaining Immunization Records for School Enrollment**

In many cases, the immunization record may be the most difficult piece of information for a new school to obtain when enrolling children. Foster parents often are asked to obtain a new set of immunizations for their children, which, from a health perspective, may be dangerous for children.

-- **Responsibility for Enrolling Children in School**

In most cases foster parents or group home staff enroll children in school and most participants indicated comfort with this arrangement. However, group home children were significantly more likely to have delayed enrollments. This finding may be related to another finding that children with emotional and/or behavioral problems also were likely to have delayed enrollments.

-- **Identifying Foster Children in Schools**

Identifying foster children in school was considered a controversial topic among study participants. While some informants felt that the identification of foster children may stigmatize them, others felt that identifying foster children may result in automatic testing and offering of specialized services. Identifying foster children to school administrators may be a problem due to the school's possible reluctance to provide services to foster children because of funding concerns.

-- **Identifying Children with Special Needs**

The findings indicate that some social workers and foster parents may not be adequately informed about special education to know when children in their care need special services, nor how to go about obtaining services. Children in kin care were less likely to be receiving special education services.

-- **Assessing Children for Special Education**

A variety of barriers were found to impede testing children for special education services in a timely manner. Foremost among these were the shortage of school psychologists in the Bay Area who are qualified to perform educational assessments.

-- **Authorizing Services for Special Education**

Although biological parents retain educational rights for their children, unless terminated by the courts, some schools allow foster parents and social workers to authorize special education services for children in order to expedite receipt of these services.

-- **Provision of Special Education Services**

Many caregivers felt there was a lack of differentiation in special education class placements. Due to behavior problems in the classroom, foster children without learning disabilities tend to be given IEP's and placed in remedial learning classes. These classes do not meet their needs and their placement in these classes may disrupt their peers.

-- **School Success**

A substantial proportion of the children studied are not succeeding in school and have failed or been kept back a grade. Children with emotional problems, learning delays, and who need an IEP are less likely to be succeeding in school.

-- **Collaboration**

Findings indicated that schools and child welfare systems had problems communicating with each other and sharing information. Greater collaboration is needed across systems to ensure that the educational and safety needs of foster children are met.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study reveal several suggestions for school-based, child welfare-based, and legislative reforms to improve education for foster children. These recommendations are summarized below.

### **SCHOOL BASED RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### **1. Develop Strategies for Increased Communication and Information Sharing between School and Child Welfare Systems.**

There was little reported collaboration and cooperation between the two systems. Finding ways that the two systems can work together, including inter-agency meetings and trainings, could forge a bond to assist children. Suggestions to improve record keeping and timely information transmission include the development of information databases, implementation of Health and Education passports, and hiring professionals to work within child welfare to act as liaisons between the county and the school.

#### **2. Utilize Special Education Classes for Children with Behavioral Problems.**

School districts need to more carefully assign children with learning disabilities and behavior problems to different special education classrooms. This strategy would allow more effective learning for children with specific needs.

#### **3. Offer School Credit in Less than Whole Blocks for Academic Semesters.**

Schools need to develop regulations for assigning credits in less than whole blocks for foster children who may switch schools in the middle of the academic semester, and who would traditionally lose credits for incomplete classes.

#### **4. Continue to Study School Issues Facing Foster Children.**

School districts need to further investigate the advantages and disadvantages of identifying foster children in schools, the reasons behind school enrollment delays for foster children with behavior and emotional problems, and which characteristics of children with IEPs contribute to their poor school performance.

### **CHILD WELFARE AGENCY-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### **1. Increase Support for Continuity in Foster Children's Lives.**

Although it may be impossible to substantially reduce the movement of foster children from placement to placement, having consistent people in children's lives can increase their chances of receiving educational support. If children must be moved, supports to assist foster parents in obtaining records and enrolling children could alleviate transition delays.

#### **2. Develop Additional Educational Support in Child Welfare.**

Social workers often are asked to make decisions regarding education without much training. Additional training on the educational system may assist social workers in advocating for the children in their care. Another option is to have educational experts employed by child welfare to assist case managers with educational issues.

### **3. Full Utilization of CWS/CMS including the Health and Education Passport.**

Routine use of the Health and Education Passport would resolve many of the difficulties encountered by foster children and their caregivers and educators. In addition to these practical benefits, regular use of CWS/CMS would allow researchers to more easily and frequently provide reports on children's educational performance indicators and outcomes.

### **4. Study the Educational Needs of Children in Kin Care.**

Almost 40% of the children represented in this study resided with kin, and these children were less likely than other foster children to be receiving special education services. Resources should be devoted to continuing to investigate why they were less likely to be receiving services as well as other special needs of children in kin care.

## **LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **1. Increase Funding for School and Educational Activities.**

Respondents from the school and child welfare systems indicated that a lack of resources was a major barrier for the school system. Increased funding is needed from the state or county to provide programs to enhance education for foster children.

### **2. Increase Funding for School Psychologists or License MSWs to perform testing.**

Many school psychologists are only available at a school once a week, thus long wait lists can form for special education testing. Additional resources and efforts are needed to create greater availability of school psychologists and provide funding to allow psychologists to test children in a more timely manner. In addition, school social workers could be trained and licensed to test children for special education services.

### **3. Enforce Role of Educational Surrogates.**

Some schools allow foster parents or social workers to authorize services for foster children even if they do not have educational rights, thus providing children with services, but undermining the role of parents and the law. There are clear guidelines for educational surrogates. More education, and enforcement of, the law is needed.

### **4. Re-evaluate Funding Distribution.**

Issues of funding distribution should be addressed with possible resolutions being to distribute funding for educational services through the County Office of Education, to require the home school district for each foster child to manage and distribute educational funding for those children, or to place the financial responsibility for special education for all foster children on the state (regardless of whether children attend public or non-public schools).

### **5. Create and Enforce Timelines Linked to the Transfer of School Records.**

Although the law states that schools shall transfer records when students move, no timelines have been established. Requiring schools to transfer records within a week of student transfers would reduce the risk of children missing school because of enrollment delays.

**6. Assign Funds to the Development of Additional Stable Placements for Foster Children.**

While most of the children represented in this study had one foster care placement, the mean number of placements was 5.9. Prior research supports the notion that Bay Area child welfare agencies face a resource problem with regard to stable placements for foster children. Additional funding is needed to develop new placements for children so that agencies can be empowered fully to support continuity in children's lives.

**7. Increase Child Welfare Funding for Liaisons and Advocacy Programs.**

The findings of this study suggest that foster children's educational needs can be supported through liaisons housed in Child Welfare agencies who are empowered to access children's school records. Similarly, organizations like CASA, Parents Helping Parents, and Foster Youth Services can assist social workers to provide advocacy for children. The legislature can support these efforts by expanding funding for these initiatives.

**8. Provide Funding to Enhance CWS/CMS Operations.**

Many of the barriers to meeting foster children's educational needs can be addressed through full utilization of CWS/CMS. However, the system suffers from operational problems that need to be fixed. The legislature should investigate these problems and provide funding to address them. In addition, funds should be provided to Child Welfare agencies to hire workers to enter data into the system.

**9. Mandate that Schools Honor Enrollment Information from CWS/CMS.**

Child Welfare agencies are encouraged to fully utilize CWS/CMS. Data entered into the system should include vital information from children's cumulative school records, last school attended, and immunization records. Schools should honor information obtained from CWS/CMS in order to enroll children in school. If full educational records exist on CWS/CMS, no child should be denied immediate school enrollment.

**10. Devote Resources to Studying the Role of the Courts in Shaping Foster Children's Educational Experiences.**

All children who are County dependents are affected by court decisions. For example, only the courts can terminate a biological parent's educational rights and assign a surrogate. Future research is needed to more fully examine how court decisions affect foster children's access to services and academic outcomes.

