

# Fostering Futures Project

## **Are We Ignoring Foster Youth With Disabilities?**

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*An Awareness Document for Parents, Professional & Youth*

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# The Current State of Affairs

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## DO WE HAVE A PROBLEM?

Each year, in the United States, approximately 20,000 youth “age out” of foster care when they turn eighteen. These youth often enter independent [adult] life with:

- ◆ Little or no help from family
- ◆ Few community connections
- ◆ Practically no financial support

Among adolescents in foster care, 30-40% have disabilities. For these youth, entry into independent life with a disability -and no support - may be like falling off a cliff, with no connection to adult services to break their fall.

## A LACK OF SCHOOL SUCCESS

Success in school is a critical factor for all students in achieving positive adult outcomes; however, it may be especially important for foster youth who have little else. The Fostering Futures Project conducted a study to investigate the academic performance of high school students who are in both foster care and special education. There were seven key findings that indicated that *a lack of school success is a significant issue for foster youth with disabilities.*

Foster youth who were in both foster care and special education:

1. **Had lower grade point averages** (than youth in general education)
2. **Changed schools more frequently** (than youth in general education and special education only)
3. **Earned fewer credits toward graduation** (than youth in general education)
4. **Had lower scores on state testing** (than youth in general education and foster care only)

5. **Were more likely to be exempted from state testing** (than youth in general education and foster care only)
6. **Were more likely to be in segregated special education classes** (than youth in special education only)
7. **Had more instability in foster care placement** (than youth in foster care only)

**Additionally, the study revealed that foster youth in general (both with and without disabilities) were more likely to attend an alternative school** (i.e. a school targeting at-risk youth which offered a specialized program outside of a typical school setting).

## The Cause of The Problem: Are We Inadvertently Ignoring Foster Youth with Disabilities?

### 6 KEY FACTORS

While it is likely that the academic difficulties of foster youth reflects the stressful family experiences that led up to their placement in care, systems may contribute to these difficulties in number of ways. Fostering Futures conducted a needs assessment that identified 6 key factors behind the lack of school success among foster youth with disabilities. Input was received from professionals in education, child welfare, juvenile justice, vocational rehabilitation, foster parents and foster youth.

#### **FACTOR 1: DISABILITY AND/OR SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS OF FOSTER YOUTH ARE OFTEN UNKNOWN OR OVERLOOKED IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM**

- A. Traditionally, education has not been emphasized in the child welfare system. Furthermore, the needs of foster children have not been a focus of education reform.
- B. There is a strong need for accurate and timely exchange of disability information between schools and child welfare

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agencies. School districts and child-welfare agencies typically operate in separate worlds, though the decisions of each system affects the same children's lives. \_\_\_\_\_

- C. This information must reach multiple levels in a timely fashion. For example, within child welfare information regarding the youth's disability needs to be given to the caseworker, foster parent and Court Appointed Special Advocate-CASA, as well as included in child welfare evaluation and record keeping procedures. Similarly, educators (teachers, principals, administrators) need accurate information about which students are in foster care.
- D. Legislation, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) makes the exchange of information further difficult, if not impossible.

## **FACTOR 2: FOSTER YOUTH WHO NEED SPECIAL EDUCATION ARE LESS LIKELY TO RECEIVE SERVICES THAN YOUTH NOT IN FOSTER CARE**

- A. In 1990, a study conducted by Oregon Services to Children and Families revealed that while 36% of foster children have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), only 16% actually received special education services.\*
- B. Youth who have multiple foster care placements may be at particular risk for disruption in their services because they may have to transfer to different schools and their school records may not follow them in a timely manner.
- C. Youth who experience "problem behavior" (i.e. emotional, learning or behavior related disabilities) are more likely to experience multiple (i.e. disrupted) foster placements.
- D. A change in schools is accompanied by a change in teachers, peers and curricula. Research consistently shows that this kind of instability has a negative effect on educational performance.

### **FACTOR 3: FOSTER YOUTH OFTEN FACE SOCIAL ISOLATION**

- A. When youth move from foster home to foster home, changing schools and neighborhoods, they often have trouble forming and maintaining relationships with peers.
- B. Many foster youth feel alienated from other youth because of their family history or foster care status.
- C. Having a disability may further add to a foster youth's feeling that s/he is somehow different than his/her peer group.
- D. Youth who have unstable foster care arrangements or who have recently entered the child welfare system may also lack caring relationships with supportive adults, and they may be estranged from their biological family.

### **FACTOR 4: FOSTER YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES LACK EDUCATIONAL ADVOCATES**

- A. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that parents be involved in special education planning and decision-making. When a parent is unavailable (e.g. as is the case when a child is the "ward of the state"), a surrogate parent must be appointed by the school district in a timely fashion.
- B. Unfortunately, however, youth sometimes go through special education with no parent surrogate.
- C. IDEA regulations say that a parent surrogate cannot be an employee of an educational agency (e.g. a teacher) or any person who may have a conflict of interest (e.g. a case worker). School districts are responsible for maintaining a list of potential surrogate parents.
- D. Anecdotal evidence however, indicates that at times educational surrogates appointed by the school district do have a real conflict of interest, and are not always able to represent the best interests of the child
- E. Frequently, a foster parent is appointed as the educational surrogate. This typically means that as a youth changes foster homes, s/he typically experiences a change in educational surrogate. Thus, foster youth often lack a caring adult who can consistently advocate for their educational needs over time.
- F. Foster parents are often confused about their rights and role in the educational process. These caregivers often experience

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“instant parenthood” and have not had the opportunity to learn about special education policy over time. There is strong need for training foster parents about school rights and procedures if they are to be actively involved as educational surrogates.

#### **FACTOR 5: TRANSITION PLANNING IN CHILD WELFARE IS NOT INTEGRATED WITH TRANSITION PLANNING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

- A. Transition planning is an important bridge for ensuring that young people with disabilities move into productive and successful adult lives.
- B. Within child welfare, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA) provides resources to assist foster youth with planning for their transition to adulthood. Assistance is often given to youth through state independent living programs.
- C. Transition planning also occurs through special education. For example, IDEA 1997 stipulates that at age 14 a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) include a statement of transition service need and that a comprehensive transition plan be in place by age 16.
- D. The transition planning that occurs through foster care is rarely coordinated with the transition planning that happens through special education. This results in a duplication of services, and sometimes, youth having transition plans that go in different directions.

#### **FACTOR 6: PROFESSIONALS RECEIVE INADEQUATE INFORMATION ABOUT THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF FOSTER YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**

- A. The school difficulties of foster youth (e.g. disruptive behavior, academic failure, truancy) do not necessarily distinguish them from their peers. However, researchers have pointed out that, “although these problems are also found among children not in foster care, the reason behind them are different. Therefore, intervention must be different.” \*\*
- B. Teachers need more information on the life experiences and history of foster youth, as well as specific strategies for supporting them.

- C. Similarly, professionals within child welfare require information and training around the disability needs of a youth. This information may be critical for a caseworker in choosing the best foster care placement for a youth, or for an independent living provider in giving necessary accommodations so that a youth can effectively move toward adult life.
- D. There is also a strong need to educate professionals in models for supporting youth that emphasize their strengths, including self-determination and youth development approaches.
- E. Both special education and the foster care system can be dis-empowering experiences for youth. It is important to highlight the capabilities and resources that foster care youth with disabilities have to offer. This may help professionals appreciate and give attention to the unique challenges these youth face.



# Addressing the Problem: Recommendations

## **1. APPOINT AN “EDUCATIONAL LIAISON”**

To address the many educational barriers facing foster youth requires commitment and time. A new position should be created – the Educational Liaison – which would serve as a bridge between the special education and child welfare systems. The Liaison should:

- A. Focus on the timely and accurate exchange of information between foster care and school.
- B. Engage in person centered transition planning with youth coordinated across agencies.
- C. Identify community resources (e.g. mentors) for youth.

## **2. ENSURE COORDINATED TRANSITION PLANNING**

At the local and state level, agencies (e.g. child welfare, education, vocational rehabilitation) should form “partnership councils,” with the goal of the council being to create a transition community for foster youth with disabilities. The council should address policy issues (such as shared consent) across agencies, clarify agency roles and identify mechanisms for pooling resources across agencies to provide flexible funding to help youth establish adult lives.

## **3. TRAIN FOSTER PARENTS**

Train foster parents in advocating for youth within the educational process – particularly special education. Training should also focus on supporting the transition plans and self-determination of youth, as well as addressing needs around a youth’s disability.

## **4. TRAIN PROFESSIONALS**

Train child welfare professionals, school staff, Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, staff in One-Stop Career Resource Centers and other key



professionals on supporting the specific educational and transition needs of foster youth – from a youth-directed perspective.

## **5. STIMULATE YOUTH LEADERSHIP**

Foster youth with and without disabilities need more opportunities to perform leadership activities. Youth leadership groups, where foster care youth meet together and do activities on a regular basis, may be the best forums for youth to learn and practice leadership. Youth can share their experiences, challenges and strategies related to school and transition. They can also learn skills to build their school and transition success, such as goal setting, problem solving and self-advocacy. Youth groups may also help to address social isolation by connecting youth who share similar experiences and backgrounds. Mentorship, where young adults with foster care experience establish relationships with younger foster care youth, may be another important source of support.

## **6. DEVELOP POLICIES THAT SUPPORT THE NEEDS OF FOSTER YOUTH**

Federal and state policymakers should focus on gathering better information about the educational and transition outcomes of foster youth, including those with disabilities. Legislative barriers to interagency collaboration (i.e. FERPA) need to be addressed, and there is a strong need for increased public awareness of the needs of youth in care and opportunities for communities to get involved in the support of these young people.

\* Cited in Ayasse, R. (1995). Addressing the needs of foster children: The Foster Youth Services Program. Social Work in Education, 17(4), pp. 207-216.

\*\*Noble, L. (1997). The Face of Foster Care. Educational Leadership, 54 (7) pp.26

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**The Fostering Futures Project is conducting a \_\_\_\_\_ number of studies investigating the educational and transition experiences of foster care youth with disabilities.**

**If you have questions/comments, would like additional copies of the brief, and/or would like to receive future updates about other Fostering Futures studies, please contact Dr. Sarah Geenen at the Regional Research Institute at Portland State University: (503) 725-9604; FAX (503) 725-4180; or email to [geenens@pdx.edu](mailto:geenens@pdx.edu).**

**For further information about this study and findings, also see:** Geenen, S. & Powers, L. (in press). Are we ignoring youth with disabilities in foster care: An examination of their school performance. *Journal of the National Association of Social Workers*.

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