

PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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Partnering with Schools to Promote the Academic Well-Being of Children in Foster Care

This publication for child welfare professionals is produced by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families within the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!

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To work in child welfare means working, at least some of the time, with schools.

At the "front end" of the child welfare continuum, schools are a key source of child maltreatment reports. In 2013, 17.5% of CPS reports in the U.S. came from education personnel (USDHHS, 2015). During investigative assessments, CPS social workers often interview children at school. Good working relationships with schools are essential at this stage.

When children are in DSS custody, the need for strong partnerships deepens. Child welfare agencies must work closely with schools to monitor children's academic progress and promote their learning and development.

This isn't always easy. When large, complex systems interact, friction and confusion can result. Involving additional key players, including birth families, resource parents, and others, can further complicate things.

Yet collaborating successfully is vital. As the table below suggests, many children involved with child welfare have a hard time in school. This is especially true of those in foster care. And research tells us very clearly that low academic achievement can have severe consequences throughout children's lives.

Schools and child welfare agencies are natural partners. They can and should have cordial, fruitful relationships. If we understand, support, and hold each other accountable, we can help children achieve amazing results. That's what this issue of *Practice Notes* is all about. ♦



If schools and child welfare agencies understand, support, and hold each other accountable, the results can be amazing.

Educational Experiences of Children and Youth in Foster Care in the United States: Reasons for Concern	
Number of children and youth in foster care in the U.S. on September 30, 2012	399,546
Average number of living arrangements during first foster care stay	2.8
Number of school-age children in foster care	249,107
Likelihood a school-age child in foster care will be absent from school	2x that of other students
Percent of youth in foster care who change schools when first entering care	56%-75%
Percent of 17-18 year olds in care who have experienced 5+ school changes	34%
Chances a 17-18 year old in foster care will have an out-of-school suspension	2x that of other students
Chances a 17-18 year old in foster care will be expelled	3x that of other students
Average reading level of 17-18 year olds in foster care	7th grade
Likelihood a youth in foster care receives special education	2.5 - 3.5x that of others
Percent of youth in foster care who complete high school by age 18	50%
Percent of 17-18 year olds in foster care who want to go to college	84%
Percent of youth in foster care who graduated from high school who attend college	20%
Percent of foster care alumni who attain a bachelor's degree	2 - 9%

(Excerpted from Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014)



Aileen Hays

What You Need to Know to Work Effectively with Schools

by Aileen Hays, LCSW

In my work as a school social worker and counselor here in North Carolina I have had lots of contact with child welfare workers. Sometimes this contact has been positive and collaborative. Other times it has felt more like the clashing of two huge systems that do not understand each other and cannot get along.

In my opinion a lot of the friction that arises when our two systems meet could be avoided if we understood a few basic things about each other. Accordingly, I'd like to share the following thoughts and suggestions.

How Teachers Think

School personnel come from a child-centered approach, not a family-centered approach. Although many school reform efforts include looking at the "whole child" and making schools more family friendly by providing family resource centers, student health centers, etc., the fact remains that schools focus on children, not families. It is important to understand this fundamental difference between teachers and child welfare workers.

When working with a child's school, remember that the teacher sees the child in the context of the classroom. Every day the teacher observes how that child compares with her peer group. This perspective shows very clearly how the child's life circumstances affect her chances for success in school and, by extension, in life. This is why teachers are so frustrated with truancy, untreated ADHD, lice, and other issues the child welfare system may see as minor concerns that simply do not rise to the legal definition of neglect. Teachers often try many times to contact the child's family, without success. Imagine their frustration and growing concern as they watch the child fall further and further behind his or her peer group.

Teachers do not see children in the context of their family or their community—that's what you see. It's important to remember that both viewpoints are valid, and that both are the reality of the child's life.

Stress and Testing

As you work with school personnel, you need to know that stress and anxiety among adults in public schools is at an all-time high. Teachers and administrators feel a huge amount of pressure to ensure students perform well on end-of-grade tests. Life circumstances or disabilities of students are not taken into account when teachers, administrators, and schools are judged by their test scores.

Chances are you will encounter this stress and anxiety when you interact with teachers and administrators. Don't take it personally.

Suggestions for Success

Seek to understand. Just as understanding families helps us serve them better, understanding teachers' point of view will help you to work more effectively together.

Educate the educators. Take time to educate relevant school personnel concerning your role with a family, your goals, and whatever information you can share in good faith and within the bounds of confidentiality.

Prepare us. Let school personnel know what you need of them. If you're inviting them to a child and family team meeting, tell them ahead of time exactly what will be expected of them.

Partner with school social workers and counselors. Get to know the social workers and counselors in the schools that serve your families. Developing a good relationship with them will foster productive school/child welfare communication. School

When they work together, our two systems increase the tremendous impact they have on the well-being of children.

social workers and school counselors have their feet in both the school and social work worlds. They play by many of the same rules you play by; they can be a valuable ally.

Learn the rules.

Just like law enforcement, the courts, and the other professionals you interact with, schools have certain rules they must follow. If you're exceptionally frustrated by a situation, try to learn the rules. For example, what exactly is the school district's lice policy? What is its truancy policy? Learn about services available for your families and their children through programs such as Title I, Exceptional Children, English as a Second Language, and the McKinney Act for Homeless children. Knowing about these policies and programs will help you advocate successfully for your families.

Never underestimate the importance of school success. Children spend 8 hours a day, 180 days a year in school. They learn to read, write, calculate, explore, question, and get along with others. School success is a primary predictor of life success.

Conclusion

Don't overlook schools or write them off in frustration—reach out to us. One of the very best ways to help a child who is in foster care or involved with CPS is to create a strong partnership between our two systems. In fact, it is one of the only ways to ensure that child's success and well-being both today and on into the future. ♦

This article is reprinted from Children's Services Practice Notes, Vol. 11, No. 4 (September 2006). Today Aileen Hays is in private practice outside Austin, Texas, providing parent coaching and individual counseling for children, teens, and adults (<http://www.aileenhays.com>).

Too Many Schools: Moving Every Year Makes It Hard to Graduate by A.L.

I was tired. This would be my fourth high school in four years. I'd already moved twice the previous year, which meant having to go to two different schools during my junior year.

The principal didn't make it easy. She looked over my transcripts, and decided that I should be placed in the 11th grade again. My heart sank as tears welled up in my eyes and the walls of my esophagus got tighter, making it impossible for me to swallow. There was no way in the world I was going to repeat 11th grade.

I began to cry right then and there as I pleaded for her not to do that. I told her I'd been in foster care since birth and moved around a lot. I also told her that my medical condition had put me in the hospital and forced me to miss weeks of school several times over the past two years.

The last time I got really sick, I hadn't received home instruction from the school for almost two months. I don't think my agency acted quickly enough to get my schoolwork to me, and since I'd recently transferred, the school didn't know me and hadn't made much effort to get things going. All of that had messed up my credits....

What I went through is common to a lot of teens in foster care who move around a lot. I decided to ask the other teens in my house if being in foster care has caused them problems

in school. They all said yes. One of them wrote me this note:

"I am 16 and I belong in the 11th grade, but I am in the 9th grade with one or two credits. It's almost the end of the school year and I don't think I'm going to make it to the next grade by the fall. What do you think I should do?"

Then there's my brother. He comes home every day shouting, "I'm not going back to school!" and threatening to drop out. He's 19 and still in high school because his credits also got messed up with all the moving around, and they held him back a year. I guess sometimes dropping out seems like the easier route for him because he doesn't have a support system to fall back on.

But even though we're all struggling, we really do push ourselves. . . . The foster care system should do more to help kids in care graduate. I also think teachers should reach out to new students. When you're new, you can't form that student-teacher bond like someone who's attended the school since their freshman year. If teachers could have one-on-one talks with new students, they could build trust and good relationships.

But I believe the students themselves should play a strong role also. One thing I've learned is that I have to be an advocate for myself. My social workers and the other adults in my life haven't really pushed the school officials, so I've started taking initiative by asking more



questions at school and asking for help again and again.

It's good if you already have supportive adults tackling these obstacles with you, but if you don't, it's important to let others know what you need. Having even one teacher or other staff member by your side can make a big difference. I wish I'd known that sooner.

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Minimizing School Moves

When they change schools, children in foster care have to cope with the emotional consequences of instability and adjust to new teachers, classmates, curricula, and rules (Christian, 2003). School change itself may lead to repeating a grade, which in turn can reduce the likelihood of completing high school at all (Smithgall, et al., 2004).

There are several things agencies and workers can do to minimize school moves. One is to prevent foster care placement disruptions. Careful matching of foster parent strengths and child needs before placement, adequate training of foster parents (especially on the topic of behavior management), the delivery of appropriate services to the child and family, and supporting foster parents all contribute to placement stability.

When placements disrupt, try to keep children in the same school. Developing an adequate number of foster homes in the area your agency serves is one way to do this. Making special transportation arrangements is another (Courtney, et al., 2004).

If school moves are necessary, time them carefully. Moving children from one school to

another can cause them to miss critical tests or other important events. If circumstances permit, delay the move until a planned school hiatus (e.g., summer, spring, or winter break). This will minimize the impact on the student's academic progress.

Moves and School Credits

Adapted from Ward & Herrick, 2010

When they change schools, older students may risk losing credits. Districts often have different course requirements or credit policies. In some cases, school officials may not review records carefully enough to recognize when transferring students have taken comparable courses.

When a young person transfers to a new school, request a complete transcript of all coursework, as well as other activities (e.g., service learning) that could qualify the student for credits. Have the transcript ready for review so credits aren't lost and the student can be placed in the appropriate classes.

Collaborating with Schools: Tips for Caseworkers

Adapted from Ward & Herrick, 2010

Establish a good working relationship with school personnel at the outset. Find out if the school district has designated someone to be point of contact for children involved with child welfare. If they do, get to know this person.

It may also be useful to introduce yourself at each school you will be dealing with before any specific issues arise involving individual students. In the beginning of the school year, take a contact sheet such as the one shown in the box below with you when you visit the schools in your area. You'll get the information you need to make communication easier later and will also have a chance to introduce yourself as a pleasant, resourceful, and organized advocate for the students on your caseload.

Ask questions. Just asking the right questions about a child's education can make a big difference. You don't need to be an education expert to ask these questions. The vast majority of educators are dedicated people who care deeply about the success of students. Unfortunately, they are often overwhelmed by their responsibilities to serve children of widely varying abilities, backgrounds, and needs. Despite the best efforts of everyone involved, children can and do get lost in the system. Just by asking questions, in a respectful way, you are conveying to the school that some-

one is looking out for that child.

Think about how you are coming across. Be as aware of the manner in which you make a point as you are of the words you choose. Convey by your tone that while you are clear about the importance of meeting the needs of the child, you are also respectful of the role of educators in the process and aware of the constraints and pressures they face.

Be a good listener. Especially if the issue is a difficult one, there is a risk that the tension may interfere with your ability to listen respectfully and attentively to what the other side has to say as well as with your ability to ask the key questions that provide you with the information you need to advocate for the student.

Ensure the foster parent or biological

continued next page



There are lots of details to master in this area of practice, but our basic role is easy to understand: we must approach children's education as a parent would, inquiring often about school progress and regularly asking, "Are we doing all that can be done to help this child succeed in school?"

Caseworkers can copy this form on agency letterhead and give it to the adult who is registering a foster child for school.

Child: _____ DOB: _____
 Student ID: _____ Medicaid #: _____
 Address: _____
 Previous School: _____ Current Grade: _____
 Check one: General Ed _____ Special Ed _____ Gifted Program _____
 Foster Care Agency _____
 Caseworker/Contact: _____ Phone Number: _____
 Address: _____
 Parent(s): _____ Phone Number: _____
 Address: _____
 Foster Parent(s): _____ Phone Number: _____
 Date of Placement with Foster Parent: _____
 Interaction with Parent (circle one): Permitted Limited Prohibited
 Date of Court Order (if applicable): _____
 Other Relevant Information: _____

Source: Vera Institute of Justice, 2002

Tips

continued from previous page

parent is supported in their role. Help them feel confident about making their concerns and observations known. It's always a good idea to prepare with them ahead of time before any meeting with school staff so you can help them deal with any concerns they may have. The ideas on page 10 for supporting foster parents may also be helpful.

Follow up. Being a good advocate involves not only representing to school staff what you think a student needs and working out a solution with them, but also following up to make sure what's decided is fully implemented.

This is often where things break down. Everyone's energy and attention is focused on problem solving to address a situation, and once agreement is reached, people may mistakenly think the situation has been resolved. Don't let that happen!

- At the end of a meeting, recap so you understand the decision that's been made, who will be responsible for making sure it happens, what the tasks are that need to be done, and when implementation will occur.
- When you get back to your office, go through your notes and put a tickler in your calendar to remind you to contact the responsible staff person, as well as the foster parent and, depending on his or her age, the child, to make sure implementation occurred.
- Use your regular check-ins with the child and the foster parent to ask about whether the strategy or service that was implemented is working.
- Contact the responsible person at the school if there are still concerns.

Document thoroughly. Keep good educational records, review them regularly, and keep them up to date. Especially for children in special education, there will be a lot of paperwork. Obtain necessary releases and set up clear mechanisms with the school and the foster parent for receiving copies of report cards, IEP minutes, etc. Keep a log of all communications you have with school personnel.

In North Carolina child welfare agencies are required to include in a child's case file all applicable parts of the Out-of-Home Family Services Agreement, including the health and education components, which must be signed by all appropriate parties. Files for school-age children in foster care must also contain educational records and reports, including IEPs when appropriate (NC DSS, 2015). ♦

How Involved Are You?

When they interviewed a small sample of child welfare caseworkers about their involvement in the education of the children in foster care, Finkelstein and colleagues (2002) found they were more informed than foster parents or school personnel about children's developmental delays. These caseworkers also advocated for special treatment and programs.

Yet they also found these workers lacked generalized knowledge about the academic performance of children in foster care, and what they knew about the performance of specific children "seemed limited to situations where information was easily obtained, where the child also exhibited behavioral problems, or where a child's performance was so poor it was reaching crisis levels." Caseworkers generally did not see low grades alone as a pressing issue.

Even if these findings do not resonate with your experience, it can be helpful to periodically assess your own performance in this area. For example, consider the extent to which you:

- Closely monitor children's grades throughout the year
- Initiate contact with children's teachers to discuss their school progress and overall well-being
- Help foster parents with school registration
- Arrange for tutoring and other school-related services

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but considering the extent to which you are involved in these activities will help you get a sense of your performance in this area.

Schools and Transportation: A Learning Resource

Transporting children in foster care to and from school is often an issue for schools, child welfare agencies, and families. That's why the Center for Family and Community Engagement has developed *Reducing the Costs: School Transportation of Foster Youth* and "Child and Family Team Guide for Foster Parents."

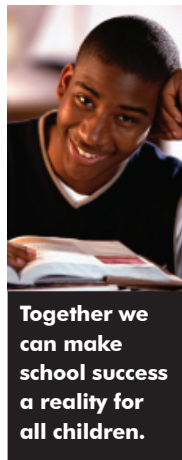
This online, self-paced training provides a framework for child welfare and education professionals to understand and develop strategies to reduce the costs of transporting youth in foster care. Strategic transportation planning outlined in this short course provides professionals flexible options to reduce transportation costs and increase well-being and academic outcomes for children. To learn more or to take the course, go to http://cface.chass.ncsu.edu/projects/family_engagement/dss/on_demand.php.

Reducing the Costs



DSS and Schools: Improving Outcomes through Collaboration

The work our public schools do really matters. Research has shown that education brings wide-ranging benefits to society and to individuals. For instance, adults with more education tend to be healthier, live longer, engage more in civic activities (e.g., voting), and tend to feel happier (Nat'l Poverty Center, 2007; OEDC, 2013). These are definitely the kinds of results we want for young people in foster care.



Efforts to improve educational outcomes for children in the child welfare system often focus on child-specific strategies. This makes sense, but research tells us that if we want to see meaningful, sustainable changes in children's school performance, we also need to improve interagency collaboration between child welfare agencies and schools.

Barriers

Multiple studies have identified obstacles to successful collaboration between child welfare and schools. These barriers fall into four categories:

1. Lack of trust / adversarial relationships. Several studies have found mistrust at the agency level between schools and child welfare, with each seeing the other as less committed to the well-being of children and at fault for children's poor academic outcomes. Schools and child welfare agencies sometimes believe that the other is purposely withholding useful information from them (Ferguson, 2012; Alsthuler, 2003; Weinberg, 2009; Cox, 2012).

2. Role confusion. Knowing who does what and who is ultimately responsible for the child is a key element of successful collaboration. Unfortunately, child welfare agencies and schools are often confused around topics such as legal rights, decision making, communication, goal setting, and monitoring of student progress (Ferguson, 2012; Weinberg, 2009).

3. Challenges in sharing information. Sometimes child welfare agen-

cies and schools do not understand what can and cannot be shared when it comes to background information, child and family histories, school histories, and ongoing data on school performance and discipline (Ferguson, 2012; Alsthuler, 2003). The confidentiality limitations schools and child welfare operate under are very real, but they are not total. When these limitations are exaggerated or poorly understood, collaboration suffers.

4. Lack of understanding of job functions and the laws that govern them. Misinformation and ignorance about different aspects of the jobs performed within the two systems is another major challenge to better outcomes identified by the research literature (Ferguson, 2012; Weinberg, 2009).

Solutions

Because of differences in county size, local education agency (LEA) structure and leadership, and other factors, solutions for overcoming these barriers will differ from place to place. However, if you want to enhance child welfare-school collaboration in your community, consider the following:

Formal and informal approaches to improving relationships. It's clear efforts need to be made to build relationships both at the agency and individual levels. Possible strategies include (1) creating formal interagency meetings focused on finding common ground and coordinating efforts and (2) outreach by individual caseworkers, such as developing letters of introduction and sending them to each teacher of a child on their caseload at the beginning of the school year (Weinberg, 2009; Ferguson, 2012; Florida Children First, n.d.; Alsthuler, 2003).

Clearer roles and expectations. Creating and sharing written expectations is often very helpful. The chart on the following page outlines common responsibilities for leaders in child

welfare agency and education leaders. Another strategy to consider is assigning a specific individual at both the school and DSS to be the point of contact. Agencies might also consider tasking specific individuals within DSS to focus on school issues (Weinberg, 2009; Florida Children First, n.d.).

Detailed information sharing agreements. In some communities, schools and child welfare agencies have developed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that spell out what can be shared and with whom. In others, child welfare agencies have created forms for gathering important school information, which is then used to inform placement decisions. Talking openly about the legal issues that cause challenges in data sharing is also helpful, since improved understanding can prevent one agency from unfairly blaming the other when specific information can't be shared (Florida Children First, n.d.; Weinberg 2009; Ferguson, 2012).

Education and cross training. To improve the extent to which their systems understand one another, some communities have held education summits. These can be opportunities to promote collaboration and share key information about educational rights and special education laws. Another strategy is to have staff from each agency shadow each other to better understand their day-to-day experiences. Other ideas include presenting at staff meetings and creating informational materials and presentations that can be shared electronically (Florida Children First, n.d.; Ferguson, 2012).

Conclusion

The poor school outcomes experienced by many children in the child welfare system should motivate and unite us: we must increase our focus on working together. There are barriers, but everyone in both systems has the best interests of children in mind. If we're willing to do what's needed, we can make school success a reality for all children. ♦

Supporting School Success: What Child Welfare and Education Leaders Can Do

Excerpted from Flynn-Khan, 2010

Cross-System Planning & Staffing	Policies and Procedures	Practice Supports	Data Supports
<p>Child Welfare Leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and/or participate in interagency planning efforts at the state and local levels. • Designate child welfare staff to act as education liaisons and advocates at state or local level. • Co-locate child welfare staff in schools and/or postsecondary institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an interagency agreement that describes how child welfare agencies and education agencies will work together to support education enrollment, continuity, and stability, including how they will pay for transportation to a school of origin. • Develop policies and procedures for determining each child’s education decisionmaker. • Develop policies and procedures for determining the best interest of the child for purposes of assessing whether a child should be enrolled in another school. • Create clear procedures for caseworkers to follow for school enrollment and school transfers. • Create clear procedures for arranging for and paying for transportation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate training on education requirements, policies, procedures, and supports in caseworker and caregiver initial and ongoing training. • Provide training to youth in care on their education rights, postsecondary education options, and resources available to help them pursue postsecondary education. • Adjust case management forms and protocols so they include attention to education stability, enrollment, and outcomes in ongoing case planning as well as transition planning. • Adjust family teaming protocols and forms to include education issues and education experts. • Develop tools (e.g., resource guides) to support case managers and caregivers in addressing education issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure state and tribal statewide automated child welfare information system includes appropriate fields for collecting education data. • Develop appropriate processes for gathering education data from local education agencies. • Inform schools of who is in foster care and provide timely notice of anticipated changes in placements that may affect the child’s school placement. • Provide encouragement and resources to caseworkers and/or data entry personnel to ensure education data fields are completed with up-to-date information. • Work with the courts and education system to develop shared-data systems that automate data sharing.
<p>Education Leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and/or participate in interagency planning efforts at the state and local levels. • Designate education staff to act as experts on education issues affecting young people in foster care and as liaisons for the child welfare and court systems at the state and local levels. • Provide opportunities for the child welfare agency to co-locate child welfare staff in schools and/or in postsecondary institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an interagency agreement between the state education agency and state child welfare agency that describes how the two will work together to support education success. • Create clear procedures for guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators to follow for determining school enrollment, supporting decisions regarding best interests of the child in education placement, and effecting school transfers. • Create clear procedures for arranging for and paying for transportation to a school of origin. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate training on the education needs of foster youth and policies on education enrollment, continuity, and stability into initial and in-service teacher and counselor training. • Include training on transition planning within the child welfare system and on the importance of coordinating individualized education program transition planning with child welfare transition planning. • Provide training to youth in care on their education rights, postsecondary education options, and resources available to help them pursue postsecondary education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop appropriate processes for receiving data and information from the child welfare agency on who is in care and when placement changes occur. • Develop appropriate processes for sharing education records and data with the child welfare agency. • Work with the courts and education system to develop shared-data systems so data sharing is automated.

IEP Basics

Adapted from Iowa Univ. Center for Excellence on Disabilities, n. d.

An Individual Education Program is a written plan that specifies the academic and/or functional goals with the frequency, duration, and location of specially-designed instruction for students with disabilities. A legal document, the IEP focuses on the child's strengths as well as areas in which the child requires specially-designed instruction in order to make progress.

How IEPs usually get started

1. The IEP Team forms when a child is first identified as needing special education services. The IEP team consists of the individuals involved in a child's education:

- Parent – the parent is a key member of the IEP team
- Older children are expected to be involved in the IEP process
- At least one general education teacher who works with the child
- At least one special education teacher who works with the child
- A representative from the school district who is qualified to oversee the provision of special education and general education
- Any specialists that work with a child, such as a speech, physical, or occupational therapists or social workers
- Another professional the parent or school district would like who has special training

2. The Team meets to write the IEP. The team meets when a child is first identified as needing special education services. It meets at least annually thereafter. The IEP team may meet sooner if a member of the team, such as the school or parents, feels a meeting is necessary.

3. IEP Contents. The IEP should contain . . .

- A statement about the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including how the student's disability affects his or her involvement in the general education curriculum.
- A statement about when and if a child will be pulled out of the regular classroom for services. Children should be in the regular classroom as much as possible. Children who are spending a lot of time in a special education classroom should still be with the regular class for lunch, recess, PE, art, music, and afterschool programs unless there is a reason why they cannot participate in these activities.
- If the child is 14 years old or older, the IEP should include information about the student and family goals and expectations for living, learning, and working after high school (schools often refer to this as "transition services" or "transition plan"). The information about the present levels of functioning should include information about the child's present educa-

What's the Difference between an IEP and a 504 Plan?

The **Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)** is a plan or program developed to ensure a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending a public elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services.



The **504 Plan** is a plan developed to ensure a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending a public elementary or secondary educational institution receives accommodations that will ensure their academic success and access to the learning environment.

Students with 504 Plans do not require specialized instruction. However, as with an IEP, 504 Plans should be updated annually to ensure students are receiving the most effective accommodations for their specific circumstances.

Source: University of Washington, 2015

tion level and what is needed to help the child reach post-secondary goals.

Goals for the child and how they will be measured

- It should be clear to everyone involved when and how goals in the IEP will be measured.
- Parents of children with IEPs should be informed about their child's progress as often as parents of children without IEPs. An IEP progress report is in addition to a report card and provides an update regarding the student's progress toward the IEP goals. IEP progress reports are provided as often as report cards.
- The IEP must contain a statement of measurable goals for the child. IEP goals are related to the unique needs of the student and are addressed through specially-designed instruction.
- The IEP must include information on how the goals will be measured and how often.
- The IEP team may determine that progress reports are needed more often and will decide what these reports will look like.

Curious what an IEP looks like?

- Go to: <http://ecac-parentcenter.org/userfiles/PTI/Resource%20pages/IEP/NC%20IEP%20Forms%20revised%2009-2012.pdf>. Note that the forms your local school system uses may look different but must contain all of the components found in this example.
- The forms and directions for their use can be found on the NC Department of Public Instruction's website at: <http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/policies/forms> ♦

When Children in Foster Care Need IEPs or Special Education Services

All children need support to succeed in school. Some need more than others. The preceding page gives an overview of how Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and special education services can assist qualified children. This article offers tips for child welfare professionals seeking to navigate the sometimes confusing world of IEPs and special education services in North Carolina's public schools. *(Special thanks to Marlyn Wells, of the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center, for her suggestions.)*

It's a Team Process

The IEP process should be a collaborative one similar to the child and family team (CFT) meeting process used by North Carolina's child welfare agencies. If social workers understand and appreciate the CFT process, they will be primed to participate on the IEP team. IEP teams require cooperation and partnership. No single individual has all the answers—IEPs involve a group process and group decisions.

Parent Involvement

The IEP process strongly emphasizes parental involvement. Parents are expected to participate as equal partners in the process; they must be invited to attend meetings and an IEP must be shown to parents before it can be implemented. For a handbook outlining parent rights related to the IEP process, click [here](#).

Child welfare agencies should be aware that even when children are in foster care, under federal law (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) parents retain their parental educational rights unless they are specifically taken away by the court (NC DPI, 2008). This extends even to parents who are incarcerated (Ward & Herlick, 2010).

In addition to birth parents who retain their educational rights, in North Carolina family foster care par-

ents, guardians, and relatives (e.g., kinship caregivers) who live with the child are legally allowed to fill the parental role in the IEP process. However, a therapeutic foster parent, group home worker, or the DSS worker cannot fill the role of a parent in an IEP meeting (NC DPI, 2014). Guardians ad Litem (GALs) can also serve as a parent in the IEP process if they are appointed to do so by the court (NC DPI, 2008).

Surrogate parents. If a parent or foster parent isn't available, the local education agency (LEA) is required to recommend or appoint a surrogate parent to fill this role in the IEP process. LEAs maintain a registry of adults they call on to act as IEP surrogates.

If a surrogate parent is assigned, DSS workers should make sure they're appropriate. See the box below for some hallmarks of effective surrogates. If DSS believes a surrogate isn't acting in the best interest of the child, the agency can ask the LEA to find a new one.

Children with IEPs

Any time a child enters foster care, child welfare agencies should be sure to ask birth parents and schools if the child has an IEP. Many will. Compared to their peers, young people in foster care are five times as likely to be eligible for or to receive special education services (Scherr, 2007).

If you are working with a child in foster care who has an IEP, follow these initial steps:

Get the child's records. Your first step should be to obtain copies of all relevant school records, including: (1) a copy of the child's IEP; (2) copies of psychological/diagnostic testing and evaluation materials; and (3) records that show the classification of disability and the determination of placement,

Any time a child enters foster care, be sure to ask birth parents and schools if the child has an IEP.

which describe where and how special education services are delivered.

As a representative of the agency with custody of the child, you have a right to copies of these records.

Knowing the child's educational record is vitally important if you want to be helpful to the child.

Always use email to request these records. Who you approach to obtain records will depend on the situation. If the child enters foster care but remains in the same classroom, start by asking the child's teacher. If you can't get what you need from the teacher, go up the chain of command, contacting the school's head of special programs or, if necessary, the principal.

If the child changes schools upon entering foster care, email the record request to the child's former principal, cc'ing that school's head of special programs.

Review the child's records once you have them. You want to understand the child's situation and assess whether the IEP is being followed or other actions or information are needed. Use information from the assessments and evaluations to make sure all of the child's relevant special education needs are being addressed.

continued next page

Traits of Effective IEP Surrogates

1. Knowledgeable about special ed.
2. Comfortable with the IEP process.
3. Knows the child has a right to participate actively in the school environment.
4. Makes no judgment about the child's history but is there to advocate from a strengths-based perspective.
5. Culturally responsive and sensitive, especially to race, poverty, and socio-economic issues.
6. Able to negotiate.

Share what you can with the team.

If court proceedings have included decisions about educational rights for the child, provide copies of those decisions to the school and foster parents.

Empower and support the child's temporary caregivers to get involved in the child's education. As explained above, caregivers may have an important role to play.

If You Think a Child Needs an IEP

Some children have a need for special education services that hasn't been identified yet. Many things can hamper our ability to recognize when children in foster care have educational needs. Moves between schools, delayed transfer of records, and lack of knowledge about the child's learning abilities can all contribute to under-identification of their need for special education services or an IEP (Zetlin, 2006).

Keep in mind, however, that poor academic performance doesn't necessarily indicate special education services are needed. Frequent changes in schools and classrooms—a common experience for kids in foster care—is correlated with poor educational outcomes. If a child exhibits poor academic achievement, the only sure way to identify the underlying cause is educational testing (Scherr, 2007). Here are the steps to take if you suspect a child has learning differences and might benefit from an IEP.

Review the child's records. Seek deeper insight into the child's performance, especially if the child shows significant behavioral problems in school. Many times school behavior issues actually stem from academic struggle. This is especially problematic for children in foster care, since teachers and administrators may attribute the behavior exclusively to trauma and the placement experience rather than consider learning difficulties as a possible cause.

Get the child a physical. Testing for learning difficulties should always

begin with a thorough physical exam, preferably with a developmental pediatrician. The exam should include hearing and vision tests, as these can be a cause of poor academic performance in young children who do not have a readily apparent disability. If everything checks out with the physical...

Email the principal. Your message should identify the child, state that there is an educational concern, explain what the concern is, and ask what the process is to get the child tested. This should trigger "child find" activities, which are federally-mandated efforts to identify and assess children who might have disabilities.

Be persistent when pursuing this process. There are professional diagnosticians out there—seek them out. Stick-to-itiveness can be very helpful when trying to get children evaluated.

Assisting Children Not in Traditional Public Schools

Charter schools. Because they are public schools, charter schools are required by law to provide the evaluative testing and supportive services (including IEPs) offered in traditional public schools.

Private schools. If a child in foster care is currently enrolled in a private school and has or is suspected to have special educational needs, the public school the child would have otherwise attended must evaluate the child, perform federally-mandated "child find" activities, and maintain records of that child. However, that public school is under no obligation to provide special education services to the child. Public school systems do sometimes offer a few limited services to private school students with special educational needs, but this is not required.

Homeschool. Same as for private schools.

Resources

These resources can help if you suspect learning may be an issue for a child:

- For children under age 3, contact the NC Infant-toddler program (919-707-5520, www.beearly.nc.gov)
- For children age 3+, contact the NC Department of Public Instruction (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/>)
- For information and referral related to special education services in NC, contact the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center (<http://www.ecac-parentcenter.org>) ♦

Beware of Potentially Problematic IEP Practices

Schools usually work hard to ensure everyone on the IEP team gets a chance to have input on the development of goals and objectives and the services to be provided to the child. There are times, however, when practices related to development of IEPs do not adhere to the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Fortunately, these practices are not common, but you should still be aware of them. Be alert to the following:

- The school presents an IEP that makes no mention of the child's individual needs. Instead, it seems to be a one-size-fits-all IEP for all children with a particular disability. Such a plan would be a violation of the requirement that the plan be individualized to the child's particular needs.
- An IEP that fails to provide detail on a child's current level of performance. For example, if you don't know the grade level the child is reading at currently, you will not be able to monitor whether the child has made academic progress a year from now. You need that baseline data.
- An IEP that relies solely on vague, general goals such as "improve reading levels" without a quantifiable measure (such as "to a sixth grade level"). IEP goals must be measurable or you will have no objective way to determine whether the child is making progress.

Excerpted from DO-IT, 2015

Messages to Send to Foster Parents

To Support School Success for Children in Foster Care

Excerpted from Ward & Herrick, 2010

Set high expectations. Encourage foster parents to have high expectations for children and attach the same importance to education as they do to children's behavior at home.

Provide a supportive environment. Make sure foster parents are providing children with the necessary school supplies and a quiet space, free from distraction, in which to do school work.

Monitor and provide help with homework. Tell foster parents they should expect children to do their homework. Urge them to check to make sure it is complete and done well. Explain why it is important to make this a priority ahead of doing household chores. Foster parents also must understand that most children need some kind of support to complete their homework. They should provide that support themselves or find alternative resources such as another adult or tutor to help.

Praise school success. Emphasize that foster parents should praise children each time they do well in school. Suggest they post papers for which children have received a good grade on the refrigerator or start a tradition that every time a child makes the honor roll or improves their grades, a special dinner or outing will be planned.

Enable children to participate in extracurriculars. These activities are key factors in educational success. Urge foster parents to go through the papers children bring home from school on a daily basis so opportunities aren't missed. Tell them they can play an important role in encouraging children to participate. Work with the school to ensure clarity about who can sign permission slips and fill out necessary forms, then make sure that happens in a timely fashion. (See sidebar for more on permission and extracurriculars.) If foster parents cannot provide transportation to events and games, find another way the child can be transported.

Address special school-related costs. For certain courses or for big projects there will be special costs for scientific calculators, art materials, etc. There also may be monthly rental fees for an instrument for the school band or uniforms for the soccer team. Sometimes schools can help with these costs, but it may be hard for children in the child welfare system to speak up and request help. School social workers and school psychologists are good sources of information about resources in the community to help defray these costs for children who can't afford them. Foster parents need to let children know they are willing to help them with this. If foster parents need help covering these costs they should contact you right away. Not having the money to meet these expenses not only affects children's academic performance and ability to participate in beneficial activities, it can stigmatize and embarrass them at school.

Attend parent - teacher conferences. For children not in special education, these are the only formal times when

their performance is discussed. A meeting with a child's teacher can be requested whenever there is a concern, but attendance at these regularly scheduled meetings is essential.

Promote early literacy. Encourage foster parents caring for very young children to read to the child daily, beginning in infancy, and talk about what the child is seeing and doing to develop the early language skills so necessary for later success in school. Encourage foster parents to enroll the child in a good quality early care and education program to provide an enriched early learning environment.

Support educational aspirations. For older children, explain that foster parents need to support and encourage aspirations for attending college or other post-secondary schooling. Encourage them to talk to the guidance counselor and to you, as the caseworker, to make sure they are taking the right courses and know about financial supports for further education.

Provide copies of report cards. Request that foster parents provide you with copies of report cards and urge them to inform you about any concerns about the child's experience and performance in school.

Advocate for the child in the IEP process. If the child is in special education or there is a concern over the child's educational progress that might mean there is a need for a referral, help the foster parent understand the special education system and provide tips on how to be a good advocate for the child. ♦



Promoting Normalcy for Kids in Care

For years, real and perceived legal and policy constraints have prevented some young people in foster care from engaging in "normal" activities such as going to a friend's house, taking a school trip, joining a club, attending the prom, and learning to drive (Pokempner, et al., 2015).

To address this problem, recent federal and state laws introduced the "reasonable and prudent parent standard." NC law now explicitly states that children and youth in foster care are to be allowed to participate in extracurricular, enrichment, cultural, and social activities as long as those activities are appropriate to the child's age, development, and maturity level. This law also states that foster parents have the authority to grant or withhold permission for a young person in their care to participate in these activities.

Consult the following resources to learn more about North Carolina's reasonable and prudent parent standard:

- *Applying the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard* (<http://bit.ly/1GAsaEL>)
- *Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Activities Guide* (<http://bit.ly/1RxWiad>)
- *Webinar: Promoting Normalcy for Children and Youth in Foster Care* (<http://fcrp.unc.edu/webinars.asp>)

Ensuring Appropriate, Effective School Discipline for Kids in Foster Care

Some young people in foster care struggle with their behavior. Sometimes this results disciplinary action at school. If this happens to a child with whom you work, you will want to ensure that the way the school disciplines the child is appropriate, fair, and ultimately contributes to the child's academic success.

Prevention

Ward and Herrick (2010) suggest a number of things that may help you address problems before disciplinary action by the school is ever needed. Their suggestions include:

- Review the school's conduct and discipline code with the child, or ask the foster parent to do this. Give concrete examples as you go over the rules, to make sure the child understands.
- Ask the school what it does to promote positive behavior. For example, many schools in NC use Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Research shows that, implemented school-wide, this program reduces discipline referrals and suspensions (Breunlin, 2002, cited in Iselin, 2010).
- Monitor the child's school progress. If there's a problem, do something. Share any strategies that help address the child's behavior at home. Work with the school to create a plan that uses positive reinforcement, not punishment, to change the child's behavior.
- Within the constraints of confidentiality, tell the school if something upsetting happens to the child. This can help schools be more flexible and willing to problem solve.
- If there's a pattern of misbehavior, consider whether the behavior is related to a disability. If this seems likely, refer the child for a special education evaluation. Qualifying for special education brings certain protections if the misbehavior is linked to the disability.

If a Child Faces Suspension or Expulsion

If you are working with a child or youth in foster care who is facing suspension or expulsion from school, Ward and Herrick (2010) advise taking the following steps:



- Respect and acknowledge that teachers and school administrators must balance the needs of individuals with the need to keep everyone safe. Acknowledging this fact when talking about discipline issues will help you advocate for the children you serve.
- Explain to school personnel about the potential effects of abuse, neglect, and placement on children's behaviors. Make it clear that, given the other traumas and disruptions the child has faced, long-term suspension or expulsion may truly damage the child's chances for success in school, and perhaps beyond.
- Learn all you can if suspension is being considered. Questions to ask include:
 - What is the suspension for?
 - How long is it for?
 - What were the circumstances surrounding the incident? (*Talk to the child to get their version.*)
 - Has the child ever been suspended for similar behavior?
 - Where will the child be during the suspension?
- If the child has an IEP, there are certain protections when it comes to suspension.
- If the youth is suspended, make sure the school provides an opportunity for the student to make up school work during the suspension.
- If a child faces expulsion, fully explore what avenues are open to allow the child to continue their education. ♦

New Hanover County Acts End to "School-to-Prison Pipeline"

Have you heard of the **school-to-prison pipeline**? This is shorthand for policies and practices that push K-12 students in the U.S., especially those most at risk, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. The following are some factors seen as contributing to this problem:

1. Inadequate resources in public schools;
2. Zero-tolerance policies and inappropriate use of suspensions and expulsions; and
3. School-based arrests, which stem in part from increased reliance on police (e.g., school resource officers) rather than teachers and administrators to maintain discipline (ACLU, n.d.).

The U.S. Departments of Justice and Education are concerned about the pipeline and are encouraging States and communities to assess their performance and take action to foster safe and productive learning environments in every classroom (US Dept. of Ed., 2011).

Inter-Agency Agreement

New Hanover County, NC is making a concerted effort to do just that. November 2015 saw the signing of that county's *Inter-Agency Governance Agreement on the Handling of School Offenses*. This agreement brings schools, law enforcement, justice system, DSS, and other government and community partners together to change disciplinary practices in New Hanover County Schools.

Under the agreement, schools must respond to student offenses using a graduated framework; law enforcement and the courts will not be involved unless absolutely necessary.

Although this is the first such agreement in our state, this approach has produced notable results elsewhere. Since 2003, when Clayton County, Georgia began a push to reduce school referrals to the juvenile and criminal justice systems, the county's daily juvenile detention rate has declined by 80% while its graduation rate has steadily improved (Dalton, 2015).

Check out the following if you are interested in learning more:

- New Hanover's Inter-Agency Agreement (<http://bit.ly/1IS7ioA>)
- UNC-Wilmington article (<http://bit.ly/1OVkXox>)

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