

Educational Success for Children in Foster Care: Identifying Cross-System Barriers on the Ground

WHAT WE ASKED:

What are the challenges for individuals working with children in the child welfare system as they try to collaborate to improve these children's educational outcomes?

The federal *Fostering Connections to Success and Adoption Act*, passed in 2008, requires **child welfare** and **education** systems to collaborate towards improved educational outcomes for children in foster care. There is now a need to understand **what that collaboration has looked like on the ground**.

WHAT WE DID:

Ten **focus groups** were held with a total of 90 adults involved in the child welfare and education systems in a large, urban area. Separate groups were held for **foster parents, foster care caseworkers, teachers, and school counselors**.

Participants described the experience of **collaborating across the child welfare and education systems** in order to achieve **positive educational outcomes** for children in foster care.

Participant demographics: Of our focus group participants, experience with the child welfare or education systems ranged from 0-2 years (13%) to more than 10 years (46%).*

WHAT WE FOUND:

- **Communication:** All groups identified ineffective and limited cross-system communication as a barrier to children's educational success.
- **Policy and procedure clarity:** Within in each group (teachers, caseworkers, etc.), there was significant variation in knowledge and implementation of policies related to the educational requirements of children in foster care, i.e. school enrollment and transportation.
- **Behavioral health:** All groups shared concerns about child behavioral problems and current practices of behavioral health service provision.

"Putting a policy into place is one thing – but having the people who actually need to know the policy know it is a totally different situation."

- Caseworker



"My experience is of somewhat frustration in the lack of communication from the agencies involved."

- School Counselor

WHAT IT MEANS:

- When implementing legislation, it is important to have a plan for **ground-level dissemination** to ensure **role and procedure clarity** among all affected parties.
- The 2008 *Fostering Connections* legislation provides an opportunity to develop and implement **further policies** that can strengthen educational outcomes for children in foster care by **relieving some of the day-to-day challenges** experienced by adults working in the child welfare and education systems.
- Future child welfare policies should seek to **increase communication, clarify roles and procedures, and improve behavioral health service delivery** across systems that involve children in child welfare.

*For detailed study methods, see the back of this sheet.

STUDY METHODS: Focus group study of a purposive sample of adults involved in the child welfare and education systems in a large urban area. Included five populations: kinship and non-kin foster parents; city child welfare department caseworkers; foster care agency caseworkers; teachers; and school counselors. Two focus groups were conducted across each of the populations. Focus groups were led by trained facilitators and used a semi-structured interview guide developed by the research team. The groups lasted 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were de-identified for data management. Analysis was performed by three investigators using modified grounded theory to identify themes.

PUBLICATION:

Noonan K, Matone M, Zlotnik S, Hernandez-Mekonnen R, Watts C, Rubin D, Mollen C. Cross-system barriers to educational success for children in foster care: The front line perspective. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 2012;34(2):403-408.

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RESEARCH CONTEXT:

The **Children’s Stability and Well-being Study (CSAW)** is a three-part project that uses multiple research methodologies to examine child well-being in a large, urban child welfare system:

- 1) **Longitudinal cohort:** this study followed a group of 407 children in foster care over a two-year period to capture the impact of child welfare system characteristics on placement stability, child well-being, and child educational outcomes. Data to be available Spring 2012.
- 2) **Cross-system collaboration focus groups:** this study informed this brief. Data published January 2012 (see above).
- 3) **Pilot behavioral health intervention:** this study pilots the co-location of two evidence-based behavioral health interventions in selected foster care agencies. The aim is to demonstrate effectiveness and feasibility of implementing an evidence-based program within the child welfare system. The intervention and data collection are underway.

For more information and project updates, visit us at <http://www.research.chop.edu/policylab>

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