

Improve the academic odds for foster children.



Students in foster care face barriers to school success that can be overcome. Texas can help more children thrive at school and achieve educational and lifelong success by cutting red tape that gets in kids' way and being responsive to the circumstances that foster children face.

When children are taken out of their homes because of child abuse or neglect, upheaval naturally follows. Separating kids from their families also means, many times, separation from their communities and their schools, and this can create barriers to lifelong success. Removing red tape that stands in the way of foster youths' school enrollment and ensuring schools have resources to help these child victims would remedy some of what is keeping more foster children from succeeding at school. Texas has made some pilot efforts at this, but sustained, statewide improvements would ensure all Texas schools with foster students promote youth success.

What to Know:

- Studies show **kids in the foster care system are more likely to wind up homeless, jobless, and in poverty**, compared to their peers,¹ but those who receive supports and services that help them stay in school and achieve success face better lifelong odds.
- Right now, Texas foster children face an average of 2.9 placements,² which means **a typical foster child moves three times** while in foster care. Each of those placements can mean not only a new caregiver, but a new school system, too.
- Changing schools is a big transition for any child, but foster youth have added burdens, including delays in their enrollment. When **records, like personal information and school paperwork, get lost in the shuffle**, it can keep kids from getting into school and the right classes for them. Under current law, the state uses a paper education portfolio for foster kids' personal and school-related records, but if these files were brought into the digital age, it would be easier to update them and lessen the bureaucratic delays when kids move between schools.
- **Texas has started working on better communications** between the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS).

The two agencies entered an agreement in 2010, allowing them to share education-related data, like graduation rates and enrollment numbers, about youth in foster care in the aggregate. Additionally, the federally funded Texas Court, Child Welfare, and Education Collaboration (TRIO) project gets key child-serving agencies to collaborate on delivering consistent and coordinated school services and supports. TRIO has put tools, policies, and procedures in place to promote communication, data-sharing, and shared standards of practice among the court, child welfare, and education systems, **but the program is set to expire in February 2013.**

- **A clear, statewide process for streamlined school enrollment doesn't yet exist**, and the same is true for tracking foster youths' school outcomes. This means kids are missing out on coordination and planning that would improve their educational odds. Improvement will come from routine data-sharing between agencies, so Texas can evaluate progress and barriers to foster kids' academic achievement. It will also come from findings ways to help these youth enroll, withdraw, and transfer between schools without red tape and get the appropriate services and supports that they need at school.
- **Children in foster care experience higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems at school than their peers.**³ Although these behaviors are many times a direct result of trauma and experiences in foster care, these behaviors sometimes lead schools to respond with disciplinary measures that only add instability and create more hurdles to academic achievement.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Along with the other key pieces of information schools collect about their students, have schools indicate whether a child is a foster youth.** School districts already collect student demographic and academic performance

data using the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Adding a specific student demographic code for youth in foster care would allow for more appropriate and expedited education planning by each school and strengthen education data-sharing between DFPS and TEA, as required by the agreement signed in 2010.

- **Enable schools and TEA to collect and share student-specific data electronically:** DFPS uses an education portfolio to collect personal and education related paperwork during a child's time in foster care. Making that information available electronically would make updating it easier and would ensure timely school enrollment, transfers, and service delivery for children in foster care.
- **Collect and track data on foster students**—like graduation rates, discipline outcomes, grade retention, school mobility, and enrollment—so the state can understand and address educational barriers for these children.
- **Identify who is helping foster kids enroll and transfer in school.** All school districts are supposed to appoint a liaison whose job it is to help foster youth enroll, withdraw, and transfer. Having a public list of these liaisons on the TEA website would create accountability and allow training for, support of, and communication between these liaisons. For example, the Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families⁴ is developing training materials for these appointed liaisons, but is challenged in identifying who these liaisons are.
- **Expand trauma-informed training to all school personnel.** Trauma-informed care has been recognized as a best practice for addressing the social and emotional needs of children in foster care, as it helps them heal and respond to, learn from, and interact with others better.⁵ Many people in foster children's lives receive training in trauma-informed care, and extending this training to school staff would help them respond appropriately to students affected by trauma, so their educational, social, emotional, and ultimately academic needs are met.
- **Promote school-wide implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS),** which is the recommended intervention for promoting a positive school environment and dealing with challenging behavior in children with emotional disturbances and other behavioral needs.

For more on this idea, see <http://tinyurl.com/InCareInSchool>

Thinking About Costs

Educational achievement is a big determinant of future success: kids who make it through school are more likely to become healthy and productive adults. Often, youth in foster care struggle to succeed in school and experience poor outcomes in adulthood, and that carries a high price for Texas and taxpayers.

Sources

Thinking about Costs

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