ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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The Unique Educational Challenges Facing Youth in Foster Care

BY JETAINE HART

This time of year means "back to school" for both students and parents. It is a time of excitement, anticipation, curiosity, and the prospect of being one year closer to graduation. Despite all the fun that was had over the summer, many students are anxious to return to the routine of normalcy that each school year brings. During the first days of school, students head back to the classroom, meet new teachers, compare stories about their summer excursions, try out for sports, and join clubs and student organizations.

This exciting experience of returning to the familiarity of school, teachers, friends, and classmates is not a typical experience for the 400,000 youth in foster care. Instead, the school year of a youth in foster care often begins in an unfamiliar environment, due to placement changes over the summer. A foster youth at a new school may have no friends, may not be placed in the appropriate classes, and often has no idea what to expect. In addition to the normal pressures and stressors associated with a new school year, some foster youth have the added feelings of anxiety and embarrassment over being placed in the wrong grade as a result of under-enrollment, or having only two different outfits to wear to school because all their belongings were left at a previous placement. It is no wonder that many youth in foster care develop a sense of resentment and ambivalence towards school, which is exhibited through their lack of engagement and motivation.

Educational Challenges for Youth in Foster Care

Without a doubt, education is the number one contributing factor for success. We expect students to learn foundational skills during elementary school and build upon their basic proficiency in secondary school, with the hope that they will continue on with post-secondary education and develop a knowledge base that they can then apply to their careers. Yet our education system is failing students from all walks of life, not just youth in foster care. For too many students, school has become a place where the curriculum is geared towards passing standardized tests, rather than creating an environment in which teachers incorporate creative activities and engage students in the learning process. Too many students are not taught *how* to learn, only *what* to learn.

Statistics show that youth in foster care are performing far below their peers in both academic achievement and educational outcomes. According to the National Center for Youth Law, "Compared to their non-foster youth peers, foster children are: more likely to have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals; more likely to perform below grade level; approximately twice as likely to have been held back in school; almost twice as likely to have dropped out of high school; and less likely to attend a 4-year college (fewer than 3% do so)."[1] The unintended consequences of these outcomes include homelessness, incarceration, dependence on public assistance, teen pregnancy, and unaddressed mental health issues. Without support from someone who can guide them through the educational process, foster youth often lose out.

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The Role of Educational Liaisons

Involved parents typically provide their children with educational support, ensuring that they are making positive academic gains. They attend parent/teacher conferences, help their children enroll in appropriate classes, and obtain additional academic support when necessary. They also begin having conversations with their children about post-secondary education as early as elementary and junior high school. Involved parents question their children about their career aspirations and encourage them to pursue their passions, regardless of how difficult the path may be.

For many youth who have been removed from the care of their parents and placed in foster or group homes, however, there is no one who automatically steps in and takes over the responsibilities of educational

advocate. In most instances, it is only when the student begins to present behavioral issues at school, grades begin to drop, and attendance issues persist, that care providers and others become concerned and make a referral for an Educational Mentor.

In the child welfare community, there is a consensus that one of the most effective interventions to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care is to connect them with an educational advocate. My unique role as an Educational Mentor allows me to use all of my interactions with the youth I assist as opportunities to teach them life skills and build solid, meaningful relationships. I also work to address the barriers that contribute to the disproportionate educational shortfalls among foster youth, by working to address educational instability, meet the need for specialized educational support, increase access to resources and skill-building programs, raise expectations, and increase interactions with supportive and engaged adults.

This article includes a discussion of each of these issues, as well as an explanation of what Educational Mentors and others involved in the lives of youth in foster care – including their foster parents, teachers, mentors, and school guidance counselors – can do to help youth in foster care overcome the challenges that threaten their educational attainment.

Address educational instability

According to federal data collected in 2009, on average, youth in care experience 3.39 different school placements. Each time a student changes schools, they lose approximately six months of educational growth. Multiple school placements, as well as extended periods of not being enrolled in school, result in the delayed transfer of records, the repeating of classes previously taken and passed, an inability to earn a sufficient number of credits, and limited academic skills. Youth with even one less placement change per year are twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving foster care.[2]

Legislation such as the Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2008 and AB 490 in my own state of California have created policies that allow youth in foster care to remain in their schools of origin when it is in their best interest. Unfortunately, implementing and incorporating such laws into practice takes a great deal of time and effort. This is why one of the most important aspects of my job is to advocate for the educational rights of my youth.

[2] National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, "Education is the Lifeline for Youth in Foster Care," (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, July 2011). Retrieved from www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/EducationalOutcomesFactSheet.pdf.

In order to have an accurate understanding of how my students are doing in school, I visit them there. I am able to see current grades and attendance records, speak to school staff, and receive updates on any incidents. To avoid pulling a student from a class that they might be struggling in, I usually visit during PE or another elective class, or right before or after lunch. It is imperative to be consistent in my visits to the school, because it motivates many of my youth to improve their grades, helps them identify areas in which they are struggling, and encourages them to communicate with their teachers regularly to check progress and get additional support or work. School staff members are also reassured to know that someone is actively involved in supporting these students; all too often, I hear from teachers that they are unsure exactly who they should speak with if they need to discuss educational issues related to a youth in foster care.

Last year, I had a senior who struggled all year to keep her grades up. Despite my constant encouragement, she found it difficult to stay motivated, and was uncertain about her graduation status until the final days of school. While there were several classes that were challenging to her, it was her English class that had caused her the most trouble. When she approached her teacher to see what she could do to bring her grade up to ensure that she graduated, he was initially unreceptive and ready to fail her. He was not aware that she had had several placement changes over the past year, and was unsympathetic to the fact that she was internalizing a lot of family issues. Once we had the opportunity to meet and discuss her situation, her teacher and I were able to develop a plan for her to pass and graduate on time. When she walked across the stage beaming with pride and accomplishment, I could not have been happier. She is now attending a four-year college out of state.

Sometimes when a placement has disrupted and a youth has to move to a new foster home, a team decision-making meeting (TDM) is held to develop an action plan on how to find the least disruptive new placement for a youth. During such meetings, I have the opportunity to share my observations about the youth's progress, or lack thereof, at school. Often it takes months, sometimes even an entire school year, for a student to develop relationships with their peers and teachers and adjust to the expectations regarding both quality and quantity of schoolwork. For that reason, the team tries to develop placement options that will enable foster youth to continue at their current schools. Unfortunately, due to the limited number of foster home placements available, especially for those youth who are harder to place as a result of multiple moves, many foster youth are moved to different neighborhoods or cities and cannot remain at their current schools.

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When youth do change placements and schools, the responsibility of choosing and enrolling them in a new school often, and rightly so, falls upon the Educational Rights Holder, usually the foster parent. Most of the educational information that foster parents need to choose the appropriate school placement is provided by both social workers and Educational Mentors. For instance, social workers provide documentation verifying that foster parents have the authority to enroll a student. As an employee of a Local Education Agency, I support foster parents in the school enrollment process by providing information and insight, transcripts, and records. In addition, I try to help them understand their rights and responsibilities in the education of their foster youth.

For youth that are so far behind in credits that it would be disadvantageous to enroll them in a comprehensive high school, foster parents often appreciate learning about alternative education options and feel empowered to make decisions about the most appropriate school environment for their youth. Because of the increase in students that are behind in credits and failing classes, access to alternative education options such as continuation school, GED, and adult education programs can often be limited. For one of my youth, we had to find the most suitable school placement for her to graduate by June 2012, despite the fact that she was far behind in credits and has struggled with mental health issues that undermined her attendance. At 17 years old, she is not eligible to attain her GED for another ten months, and would have to wait an entire year to enroll in an adult education program. For students like her, in of need special education resources, it can be even more challenging to locate the correct placement. I attended numerous Student Support Team meetings and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) reviews to advocate on her behalf; I had knowledge of her entire educational history and was able to provide a sense of consistency and continuity. While she was unable to graduate last June, we were able to enroll her in a continuation school, where we developed a unique plan to address her individual needs.

The need for specialized educational support

We are all aware that youth in out-of-home placements endure trauma prior to, during, and after their removal from their biological families. As a result, foster youth often have a hard time processing and dealing with unresolved emotional issues, which in turn has an impact on their ability to focus and learn in the classroom. Youth who exhibit extended periods of difficulty are often referred for special education assessments, in an attempt to identify and address the issues impacting their ability to be successful in the classroom. In 2002, Hunt and Marshall reported that 30 to 50 percent of foster youth are placed in special education, compared to

12 percent of the general school population.[3] Ten years later, this is still an accurate representation.

My caseload consists of 20 to 25 girls at any given time, and eight or more have Individualized Education Plans. While several of my students suffer from serious disabilities, often special education assessments reveal that many youth do not qualify for special education services but would benefit from additional support and resources to help them succeed in school. A majority of the youth who undergo the initial special education assessment but are found ineligible for special education services are those that have fallen far behind in school with little hope of being able to learn the required skills to perform at grade level.

While an Educational Mentor's input can be invaluable during IEP reviews, there are times when my knowledge and advocacy is not sufficient to address the needs of a particular student. In such circumstances, I try to utilize the relationships I have developed with other community advocates over the years in order to problem-solve. In one example, I was referred by a Project Permanence worker to a young woman who was placed on home instruction at the suggestion of her psychiatrist, and she told me about the lack of accountability for her teacher. He had made only two visits, never collected completed work, and failed to provide her with any actual lessons. Despite the difficulties she has participating in a regular classroom setting, this student is very motivated to do well in school, and is able to articulate what she needs in order to be successful. It was fortunate that she had a great education-minded lawyer who was engaged in the conversation and able to rectify the issue. Collaboration with individuals and organizations in the community greatly increases my ability to assist my youth and ensure that they get the services and resources they need.

One consequence of multiple school placements is low academic achievement and an inability to perform at grade level. Those who fall behind early tend to stay behind.

Increase access to resources and skill-building programs

As previously mentioned, one consequence of multiple school placements is low academic achievement and an inability to perform at grade level. Those who fall behind early tend to stay behind; according to a 2011 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a child who cannot read proficiently by the third grade is four times more likely to drop out of high school without a diploma.[4]

When I first begin working with a youth in foster care, I work with them to complete an assessment that helps me identify areas of strength and

[3] Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L., and Kimm, C., "Improving Education Outcomes for Children in Foster care: Intervention by an Education Liaison" (to appear in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*; in press). Retrieved from www.mhas-la.org/Ed%20Liaison%20Model-App%20H-l.pdf.

[4] Hernandez, D.J., "Double jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Retrieved from www.aecf.org/~/media/Pubs/Topics/Education/Other/DoubleJeopardyHowThirdGradeReadingSkillsandPovery/DoubleJeopardyReport030812forweb.pdf.

areas that need improvement. While most of my students are reading above a third-grade level, they still perform below grade level in core areas. What baffles me is the fact that there are limited programs that focus on teaching students the fundamental skills in basic math and English, yet many of my students continue to be placed in classes such as Algebra when their educators know that they struggle with simple addition and subtraction. Unintentionally, these youth are being set up for failure.

The tutoring services provided by Foster Youth Services can help many of our students struggling in math or English. Whether a student is struggling with Trigonometry homework or has been unable to grasp the fundamental rules of paragraph structure, tutors can be assigned to spend four or more hours a week with a youth to work on these issues. Several of my youth have also received help in biology, history, and language courses as well. The additional help builds skills and increases confidence in the youth.

Many of the problem behaviors that youth exhibit in the classroom – speaking out of turn, not going to class or school, refusing to complete or turn in assignments – is really a guise to hide the fact that they do not understand how to complete their work. During a conversation with one of my youth, she shared that the reason she didn't attend school regularly was because she felt embarrassed about her inability to understand and complete the work. Based on her age she was enrolled in tenth grade, but because she had not been enrolled in school for two years, her skill level was closer to that of a seventh- or eighth-grader. I referred her to a tutor to help her build on her skills and complete her homework, but she would have benefited from a more comprehensive program at her school.

In my community, there are few options for students who need to make up credits if they have fallen behind due to multiple school placements or failed classes. Students are also unable to enroll in continuation school, where they have the opportunity to earn credits at an accelerated rate, until they are 17 years old. The option to take summer school and make up credits is not offered until junior year. At 17, with only ten credits, it is highly unlikely that a youth will graduate on time, if at all. Alternative options such as Cyber High and after-school programs for students to earn credits are available at many schools, but require the ability to learn independently. For students that have missed months or years of school, that is not realistic.

Raise expectations

Those of us concerned with the welfare of youth in foster care should refuse to accept the low rates of foster youth graduation from high school and college and vocational school achievement. One of the roles of a parent is to have conversations with their children that encourage them

to dream big and expect great results; however, many foster parents feel that they would be better equipped to engage youth in these conversations if they were provided with additional training and support. We must raise expectations for our youth in foster care, and work with all foster parents to engage them on this issue in their homes.

I believe there are two reasons that our youth are not setting higher expectations for themselves when it comes to educational attainment and career aspirations. The first is that foster youth are often overrepresented in alternative educational programs. While I understand the need for GED programs and refer students to them if they are not on track to graduate from high school in a timely fashion, I do have to stress that a GED does not carry the same merit as a high school diploma when applying for a job. Compared to high school graduates, those with a GED earn less on average, and are less likely to graduate from college. For students who attend continuation schools, there is often the assumption that they are inferior to students who attend comprehensive high schools, and will be unable to attend a reputable college upon graduation. If students feel inadequate and subsequently put less energy into excelling in school, it is the direct result of lowered expectations about school performance and career aspirations.

The second and possibly the most important reason that many youth in foster care do not set higher goals for educational attainment is that they are not building meaningful relationships with adults or being exposed to new opportunities that will allow them to see the possibilities beyond their everyday lives. The connection between community and education is fundamental to the development and success of young adults.

Increase interactions with supportive and engaged adults

The ultimate goal for a youth leaving foster care should include independence – the ability to be self-sufficient – as well as *interdependence* – the ability to utilize community resources and relationships to provide additional support. Independent Living Skills Programs are intended to teach foster youth the life skills necessary for independence. However, there is a need for additional efforts to ensure that youth are provided with opportunities for learning and growth outside the classroom. It truly takes a community to raise a child, and we need to offer opportunities for youth in foster care to build and sustain meaningful relationships with adults in their lives.

When you think back on your life and examine the times when you had to make important decisions about your education, your career, and your future, can you recall to whom you turned for guidance? I look back on

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my own success as a youth in foster care, beating all the odds and statistics, and the single most important factor was the relationships I had with adults in my community. I didn't have just one mentor, I had several, and each played a different role: my dance teacher taught me the importance of civil engagement; a banker friend helped me apply to colleges; my math teacher introduced me to God. Although we define "permanency" as a youth having one long-lasting relationship with a caring adult, the majority of interactions that foster youth have with adults – their therapists, lawyers, Court Appointed Special Advocates, social workers, and community liaisons – last only as long as required by a court order.

The first thing I tell my youth when we begin our relationship is that they have the choice whether or not they work with me, and they get to decide how we interact. Just the simple act of giving them autonomy and control builds rapport and helps them feel empowered. Some of my youth do not like me to visit them at school; others want me to text them to check in between our face-to-face visits; others only contact me when they need assistance. Additionally, as I get to know my youth and work with them to identify their goals, the activities we pursue outside of school are catered to meet their individualized needs – whether it's volunteering at fundraisers to fulfill community service hours, participating in biweekly foster youth advocacy groups, attending college orientation workshops, or searching for summer employment.

It is during these extracurricular activities that we engage in meaningful conversations about life, relationships, the future, and everything else, and it is through these honest and open conversations that I have seen them begin to challenge their own beliefs, step outside their comfort zone, and grow. Last January, I accompanied a youth to the annual California Youth Connections Day at the Capitol Conference in Sacramento. A naturally shy young woman, she was very quiet for the first couple of days, but by Monday, when we held meetings with members of the legislature, she was comfortable sharing her personal story and began opening up to the other chapter members. The leadership skills she learned at that conference have given her the confidence to engage in other advocacy opportunities, and helped her realize just how powerful her voice can be.

Moving Forward with Lessons Learned

As a mentor, I can be the bridge for my youth between their schools, foster parents, and social workers. I can advocate for their educational rights, and I can help motivate them to expect more of themselves. But alone, my actions are not enough. Caregiver engagement, school involvement, community relationships, and continued collaboration are

all essential to ensuring that young people in foster care transition into adulthood with the skills they need to overcome obstacles, meet their goals, and succeed.

We must holistically examine the impact that multiple placements and school changes have on our youth in foster care – not only on their educational outcomes and achievement, but also on their ability to build strong interpersonal relationships and address intrapersonal issues. Foster parents, social workers, educators, care providers, advocates, and mentors must seek out ways to work together in order to provide youth in foster care with encouragement and every opportunity to thrive and be successful.

Practical Tips for Caregivers, Professionals, and Advocates

Build a partnership between the school and caregiver. Teachers, guidance counselors, and school administrative staff have daily opportunities to observe students' behavior in the classroom and on campus. If they see that a student exhibits abnormal behaviors or performs below average in school, they should take the earliest possible opportunity to engage him and learn what is wrong. In the event that a student is not comfortable opening up to a teacher or school counselor, they should follow up with the foster parent or social worker, who may have additional insight into how changes in the home or family are having an impact on the youth in question.

Start the conversation and expose youth to new opportunities as early as possible. The conversation about educational goals and future aspirations should begin early, remain ongoing, and be the shared responsibility of all adults working with a youth in foster care. Additionally, these conversations should be supplemented with opportunities for students to participate in and witness events that expose them to different people, careers, and walks of life.

Take a strength-based approach. Empower youth to be a part of their own educational process, whether it is meeting with a teacher, choosing the right school, or engaging in community activities. For youth in foster care, who often have little control over their environment, it is especially important for them to know that they have agency in their lives.

Utilize community resources and information. Understanding a student's rights, the policies and practices of her school, and how to help her maneuver through the special education process if necessary can be difficult for many caregivers and social workers. Connect with school district liaisons or educational specialists in local community organizations, who can provide support and information to help you better serve your youth.

Identify placements by school district. In an effort to ensure school stability, when a placement change does prove necessary for a youth in foster care, social workers should look for placements in the same school district. While this is not always possible, moving a student to a new foster home from which it is impossible for her to continue attending her current school should never be seen as the best or first option.

Engage youth at home. Foster parents have the responsibility not only to house, clothe, and feed their youth, but also to parent them. This means that foster parents should be talking to their youth, having meaningful conversations, asking how school is going, helping with homework, and trying to maintain a genuine sense of what is going on in their lives. Youth in foster care want to feel that they are a part of the family, not just a stranger who boards there. The conversations that take place between parent and child can make all difference.

About the Author

Jetaine Hart received her Bachelor's degree in social work from La Sierra University. After participating in CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program in 2009, she spent two years working in the office of Senator Mary L. Landrieu, focusing on communications as well as policy issues related to foster care and adoption. Ms. Hart currently works as an Educational Mentor for the Alameda County Office of Education, where she advocates for the educational rights and needs of youth in out-of-home placements. Through collaboration and individualized support services, she works to reduce the myriad challenges that affect the educational success of foster youth.

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