

Executive Summary

# Educating Children in Foster Care

The McKinney-Vento and No Child Left Behind Acts



SCOTT JOFTUS, Ed.D., CROSS & JOFTUS, LLC



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**Education begins at home.** Educators and policymakers often point out that parents are children's first and most enduring teachers. Indeed, no bond is more fundamental and life-defining than the one between parent and child. Children in foster care or out-of-home care, however, have had that crucial bond broken, frayed, or interrupted through no fault of their own. Traumatized first by the maltreatment, neglect, or abuse that brings them to the attention of the authorities, then by their removal from their family, and possibly yet again by their experiences in the foster care system, these children are among our most vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> For the 800,000 children and youth who are involved in the foster care system each year, a solid education is their best hope—in some cases, their only hope—of achieving independence and success in adulthood.

A quality education builds on a foundation of educational continuity and school stability. Unfortunately, too many children in foster care experience multiple placement changes, and each change in home placement frequently results in a change in school placement. Every school change has a significant impact on a student's education. Whenever students enter a new school, they must adapt to different curricula, different expectations, new friends, and new teachers. A stable school environment provides children with opportunities to develop positive relationships with supportive and caring teachers, school counselors, and classmates. These relationships and an established school routine often provide a measure of protection from

the disruption and uncertainty associated with foster care. Hence, both school stability and uninterrupted attendance are necessary.

## **Education is vital for the future success of all children, but children and youth in foster care are particularly vulnerable to academic failure:**

- According to a 2004 study of Chicago public school youth, fifteen-year-old students in foster care were only about half as likely as other students to have graduated from high school five years later, with significantly higher percentages of youth in care having dropped out (55%) or become incarcerated (10%).<sup>2</sup>
- In a three-state Midwest study from 2004, youth in foster care on average read at only a seventh-grade level after completing tenth or eleventh grade.<sup>3</sup>

## **High rates of foster home placement changes are also documented, with direct consequences on academic outcomes:**

- The same study of youth aging out of care revealed substantial levels of school mobility associated with placement in foster care. Over a third of young adults reported having had five or more school changes.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Christian, S. (2003). *Educating children in foster care*. Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved March 27, 2006, from <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/CPIeducate.htm>; Gerber, J. & Dicker, S. (2005). Children adrift: Addressing the educational needs of New York's foster children. *Albany Law Review*, 69(1), 1–74; Casey Family Programs. (2006a). *Breakthrough Series Collaborative: Improving educational stability for children in out-of-home care*. Seattle, WA: Author. Retrieved March 18, 2007, from [http://www.abanet.org/child/rc/education/bsc\\_topic\\_selection\\_flow\\_chart.ppt](http://www.abanet.org/child/rc/education/bsc_topic_selection_flow_chart.ppt)

<sup>2</sup> Smithgall, C., Gladden, R.M., Howard, E., Goerge, R., & Courtney, M. (2004). *Educational experiences of children in out-of-home care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Abstract available online at [http://www.chapinhall.org/article\\_abstract.aspx?ar=1372](http://www.chapinhall.org/article_abstract.aspx?ar=1372). This report compared children in the Illinois Chicago Public Schools system. Data were pulled from the Integrated Database on Child and Family Services' Child and Youth Center Information System and matched using probabilistic record matching with the Chicago Public Schools Student Information System to almost 16,000 students. Academic performance indicators used included elementary students' scores on the reading section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the percent of elementary students who were at least one grade level behind for their age, and high school dropout rates.

<sup>3</sup> Courtney, M.E., Terao, S. & Bost, N. (2004a). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

<sup>4</sup> Courtney et al., 2004a.

- A 1999 study found that California high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate as those who did not change schools, even when controlling for other variables that affect high school completion.<sup>5</sup>

**On the other hand, when youth in foster care have stable home placements, with stable school attendance as a result, outcomes improve dramatically:**

- In a national study of 1,087 youth who had been in foster care, those who had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school.<sup>6</sup>

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the principal federal statute that addresses school stability, primarily for homeless youth.<sup>7</sup> McKinney-Vento was reauthorized and strengthened by amendments made in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.<sup>8</sup> The McKinney-Vento Act has proven an effective law and successful program for addressing the needs of homeless children and youth—those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Currently, however, it covers only a fraction of the approximately 513,000 young people under the age of 18 who are in the U.S. foster care system on any given day.<sup>9</sup> All children in out-of-home care



could benefit greatly from inclusion in the scope of the McKinney-Vento Act.

While McKinney-Vento focuses on homeless children and youth, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) identifies many other categories of at-risk students. Children in foster care often fall into one or more of the at-risk categories of students NCLB identifies. But while most disadvantaged children are explicitly singled out by NCLB for each of multiple academic risk factors, children in foster care are not specifically recognized. The result is to deprive many vulnerable students of the full benefit of the services provided under the law.

The reauthorization of the NCLB and McKinney-Vento Acts represents an opportunity to help ensure that children in foster care are no longer left behind. This opportunity for federal policymakers to take a leap forward in improving educational outcomes for these children also comes at a favorable time. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and state and local child-welfare agencies, the authorities that traditionally, and appropriately, hold chief responsibility for addressing the broad and acute needs of youth

<sup>5</sup> Rumberger, R., Larson, K., Ream, R., & Palardy, G. (1999). The educational consequences of mobility for California students and schools. *PACE Policy Brief* (University of California at Berkeley), 1 (1), 1–12.

<sup>6</sup> Pecora, P.J., Williams, J., Kessler, R.C., Downs, A.C., O'Brien, K., Hiripi, E., & Morello, S. (2003). *Assessing the effects of foster care: Early results from the Casey National Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

<sup>7</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 11431 *et seq.*

<sup>8</sup> Public Law 107-110. The Act reauthorized and substantially revised the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (2006). *The AFCARS report No. 13: Preliminary FY 2005 estimates as of September 2006*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm)

in out-of-home care, have identified improving educational outcomes as part of ongoing federal reviews.<sup>10</sup> But as the child-welfare community recognizes, advancing educational attainment requires the expertise of and collaboration with the education system.

A collaboration between schools and the child-welfare system would turn a sharpened focus on the problem. Although federal child-welfare policymakers seek to improve the foster care system by including educational outcomes in the federal reviews of each state's child-welfare system, this is only a first step in improving partnership. To realize this aim, federal lawmakers should make use of the largest significant program for the education of disadvantaged children, NCLB, and should align and address these issues in companion child-welfare legislation reform efforts.

The following recommendations are designed to bring students in foster care into the spotlight of NCLB and into the purview of educational systems that can address their needs and ensure their success. Because of the overriding importance of school stability for children in care and their need for educational advocates, the recommendations seek to expand the current coverage afforded children under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. In addition, reflecting research findings on improving educational outcomes, the recommendations also aim to strengthen NCLB provisions concerning supplemental educational services, school counselors, and mental health services.

### **The recommendations are:**

- 1) Improve school stability by ensuring that the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act applies to all children in out-of-home care and increase funding for the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act under Title X, Part C, Subtitle B to a level that covers all eligible children.
- 2) Ensure that children and youth in foster care have access to education-related support services by making them automatically eligible for Title 1, Part A services and including them in the set-aside that exists for homeless children. Increase funding for school counselors (Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Programs), and mental health services (Grants to Improve the Mental Health of Children).

These recommendations are critical steps toward improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care. Accordingly, it is time for federal policymakers to address these concerns as the reauthorization of NCLB and McKinney-Vento looms.



<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2006.