Advocating to Resolve Educational Problems of Children in Foster Care

Andrea Zetlin, Ed.D.
California State University, Los Angeles
Charter College of Education
Lois Weinberg, Mental Health Advocacy Services
and
Roni Tunick, Los Angeles County Office of Education

Researchers have assessed the educational performance of children in foster care and found a wider range of school problems compared to nonmaltreated children. In two separate studies, children who had been physically abused and neglected were found to perform significantly lower on standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics, earn lower grades in these subjects, have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, and be more likely to repeat a grade (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993).

In a study by Leiter and Johnson (1994), maltreated children showed poorer school outcomes in general (i.e., failing grades, increased absenteeism, worsening school deportment, retention in grade, and involvement in special education programs) than nonmaltreated children, although cognitive outcomes were most significantly affected. Smucket and Kauffman (1999) found that emotional disturbance compounded the problems of children in foster care. They argued that the combination of foster care and emotional disturbance is what puts these children at highest risk for school-related problems. Trocme and Caunce (1995) concluded that severe educational deficits are by far the most prominent characteristics of maltreated children.

High levels of residential mobility and school transfers experienced by foster youth were also found to contribute to more academic difficulties compared to nonmaltreated peers. Eckenrode et al. (1995) mentioned the following possible consequences of foster care placement: (a) an increase in social isolation and loss of social support associated with separations from family, friends, neighbors, school mates, and teachers; (b) changes in the child's affective state which could be associated with learning difficulties; (c) discontinuities in the curriculum and teacher expectations; and (d) changes in the affective states of parents or siblings that may represent a stressor for the child. Further, highly mobile children often miss large portions of the school year, lose academic credits due to moves made mid-semester, and have incomplete educational records due to missing transcripts, assessments, attendance, data, and so forth.

Youth in foster care are also at significant risk for not completing high school. Of the more than 20,000 children who "aged out" of foster care in the summer of 1998, only 35% graduated from high school and only 11% went on to college or post secondary vocational school (Sieg, 1998). Examination of the youths in foster care from the High School and Beyond Study revealed that 37% had dropped out of high school compared to 16% of matched nonfoster youth (Blome, 1997). Further, five years after dropping out, 23% of the former foster youth had not received a diploma or certificate compared with only 7% of the nonfoster youth dropouts. These foster youth are leaving the system without the skills to guide them into productive adulthood. As many as 25% of foster youth who age out of the foster care system end up homeless. For foster youth who do go on to college, they may be completely alone in making such decisions.

Recent state and local initiatives have emphasized the need to address the educational problems being experienced by children in foster care in order to improve school performance outcomes (Jacobson, 1998). These initiatives acknowledge the need to actively oversee the education of foster children and intercede when problems are detected. California has established the Foster Youth Services (FYS) program, a promising strategy whereby program staff provide direct educational service to foster youth, such as tutoring, tracking down school records/transcripts, and mentoring (Ayasse,1995). Early follow-up has shown that foster youth students in high school who received FYS interventions earned 10.1 credits more per semester than other foster students in a school district with no FYS program. There were also decreases in maladaptive behavior, lower drop-out rates, and more successful transitions to employment or higher education among foster youth receiving services. Policymakers have suggested that school social workers could serve as educational advocates for children in foster care (Altshuler, 1997; Noble, 1997). The school social workers would be responsible for checking that a child is placed in the appropriate grade or program, has coursework that is developmentally appropriate, and receives school records after a school transfer.

One of the nation's largest county child welfare agencies has launched an "Educational Initiative" to ensure that agency workers focus more attention on the educational needs and schooling of foster children. A key component of the initiative is the provision of Educational Specialists (ES), liaisons from the school district, who are colocated in the offices of the child welfare agency and who serve as advocates for foster children experiencing educational problems. The ES work alongside agency workers and, as school problems are identified for each foster child, seek appropriate and effective programs and services from the school district. The ES also provide regular training to agency workers to increase (a) awareness of educational problems and needs that foster children often experience, (b) knowledge of rules and regulations of California schools (i.e., Education Code), (c) knowledge of educational resources and services available in the schools and community, (d) maintenance of school transcripts and other school documents, and (e) use of advocacy and practices to secure appropriate school services and class placements.

During the first year of the program, two ES, certified special education teachers with pupil personnel credentials, were assigned to two pilot region offices, each office serving approximately 10,000 children. The ES were required to maintain a contact log documenting all the cases referred by agency workers seeking assistance regarding educational problems. The entries contained the child's name, how the case was referred to the ES, and the nature of the referral. A total of 225 cases were logged between the two offices—160 cases by ES1 and 65 cases by ES2. As the ES acted to understand and resolve the problem, subsequent contacts pertaining to each case plus background demographic and educational information were entered into the log. In sum, for each case entered, information was available about (1) who referred the case to the ES, (2) the presenting educational problem that needed attention, and (3) each step taken to resolve the problem. These entries form the basis for the subsequent analysis reported below. The purpose of this study is twofold: to describe (1) the types of educational problems experienced by children in foster care and (2) the kinds of actions required by those working in advocacy roles to resolve problems and secure appropriate services or programs.

Results

The 225 case entries in the ES logs were submitted to established content analysis techniques (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993). Two researchers independently reviewed the entries and coded them twice into tentative categories representing (1) type of educational problems and (2) type of strategy employed by the ES. The researchers then met to resolve any disagreements regarding the coding of an entry. Lastly, they refined the categories until all entries fit into the two emerging typologies.

Typology of Educational Problems

A typology of educational problems was established that features seven main categories along with their subcategories. The categories are presented below with illustrations of typical entries.

1. Special Education Issues

    a. Nonpublic Schools (how to help youth who needs transfer from one nonpublic school to another)

    b. Individual Education Plan (IEP) Problems (how to get out-of-date IEP updated)

    c. Special Education Procedures (who can sign IEP if parent is not available)

2. Role Clarification

    a. Role of Agency Worker (why is school providing psychological services without notifying worker)

    b. Role of Educational Specialist (can ES attend IEPmeeting)

    c. Educational Involvement

        i. Concern for Student Progress (what should worker do for nonreading youth)

        ii. Increasing Knowledge (how much does worker need to know about educational terms/labels such as IEP, autism)

3. School Procedure Issues

    a. Enrollment (how do you enroll a student under an assumed confidential name)

    b. School Records (how do I get records for a child who has moved around a lot)

    c. Transfer (what should be done about a youth attending school outside the district)

    d. Opportunity Transfer (how do you appeal a forced transfer from one high school to another)

    e. Program Placement

        i. Magnet (what to do for student who needs a new magnet school due to change in placement)

        ii. Transportation (how can we help child in placement who wants transportation to previous school)

        iii. Multi-Track schools (can we change student's track to coordinate with sibling's track)

4. Troubled Student Needs

    a. Attendance (what can be done for youth who refuses to attend school and is consistently truant)

    b. Re-enrollment (how can we expedite continuation school placement process)

    c. Discipline (what are options for youth suspended from school because he had a shaving blade)

5. Resources Requests

    a. Tutoring (what tutoring services are available in a particular neighborhood)

    b. Educational Placement (what types of programs are suitable based on student's grades)

    c. Location (what middle school is in a particular neighborhood)

    d. Mental Health Resources (what school mental health resources are available for child)

    e. District Involvement (will district provide financial assistance for continued schooling of 16-year-old graduate of nonpublic school)

    f. Special Program (is there a pregnant-teen school program)

6. Pre-referral Needs

    a. Failing or Poor Performing Students (what should agency worker write in letter requesting Student Study Team meeting)

7. Dealing with Court Orders

    a. Court-Ordered Services (what to do if court-ordered tutoring has not been provided)

    b. Special Education Court Orders (what to write in letter requesting court-ordered IEP)

Typology of Action Strategies to Resolve Problems

We identified 12 specific strategies (both individual and subsequent) that the Educational Specialists used to resolve schooling problems. For each strategy, we present examples of the types of problems or questions for which ES were most likely to select a particular action. Because the untangling of problems often required more than one strategy, two additional strategies are also described—developing a following-up plan for subsequent action and providing agency workers with updated information on how the case was evolving.

1. Contacted Specific Resource Person at School or Agency – telephoned or met with staff person responsible for specific service or program; e.g., spoke with principal or Dean about youth's threatening behavior; spoke with school psychologist to discuss upcoming IEP triennial and student's progress; spoke with district transportation coordinator to arrange bus transportation to magnet school for recently placed child

2. Visited Home and/or Communicated with Caregiver, Youth – telephoned or met with caregiver or youth to gain background information or explain school procedures and develop action plan; e.g., met with youth and caregiver to discuss youth's lack of school progress; advised caregiver about procedure to request Student Study Team (SST)/special education evaluation; arranged to meet caregiver at nonpublic school (NPS) to check out appropriateness of placement; spoke with youth about consequences of not attending school and suggested alternative school options

3. Contacted School Office – telephoned or faxed school a) to gain information regarding a specific child or school procedures, b) to request services for a child, or c) to inform of special education regulations; e.g., to obtain copy of school records (IEP, transcript, test scores); to determine procedures for enrolling child in school; to determine procedure for inter-district transfer by permit; to inform of special education timelines; to verify IEP had been updated

4. Gave Agency Worker Requested Information – responded to query by agency worker for information regarding school procedures, timelines, regulations, resources; e.g., informed worker of need for letter from psychiatrist to extend test time for child with attention deficit disorder (ADD); provided worker with list of alternative education programs/teen mom programs; explained school district policy of faxing school records; explained need for surrogate parent to sign IEP

5. Attended Meeting – accompanied agency worker or caregiver to school meetings or served as agency representative at meetings; e.g., attended IEP meeting to request NPS placement for minor; attended SST meeting with school personnel, mother, and agency worker to discuss youth's failing grades in elementary school; attended intake meeting with foster mother and gifted, behavior-disordered student at district's special education office

6. Reviewed IEP/Grades/School Reports – requested school records from agency worker or school and reviewed to become better informed of child's problems/needs; e.g., reviewed transcripts to advise mother and youth about appropriate educational options; reviewed student's academic progress to see if referral for special education was needed; reviewed psychological evaluation and IEP of emotionally disturbed student in special day class who was doing poorly

7. Visited School Site – went to school to obtain student's records, to evaluate appropriateness of placement for youth, to accompany caregiver to request special services, and to meet with youth and/or school staff at school site; e.g., to accompany caregiver to school to request SST meeting, special education evaluation, or IEP-specified services that youth is not receiving (counseling, tutoring); to review school records and investigate IEP status; to meet with failing student at school to find out why he or she is not performing well; to visit alternative school site to see if troubled youth could enroll

8. Contacted District or County of Education Office – telephoned district office to determine district procedures for requesting a) additional services/evaluations (i.e., mental health, tutoring, speech assessment), b) inter-district transfers or c) alternative school placements (e.g., to obtain copy of updated IEP, to identify alternative district placement options for troubled youth; to request tutoring or additional mental health services)

9. Wrote Letter – wrote or helped agency worker to compose letter to school or agency requesting needed services for youth; e.g., helped worker write letter to district requesting mental health services for disturbed youth; instructed worker to write letter requesting assessment for special education; replied to school's inquiry as to who had educational rights for youth by requesting appointment of surrogate parent

10. Described School Procedure to Follow – spoke with agency worker or caregiver and advised of procedures to follow to request a) evaluations or support services, b) inter-district transfers, a) student information from district data system, d) school generated daily attendance/behavior reports, or d) special education services; e.g., referred worker to district locator hotline to determine if youth is enrolled in school or to identify attending school of youth; informed worker of IEP procedures regarding parent notification of IEP meeting/timeline for IEP process; advised worker to contact assistant principal at local school to request special education for 3-year-old; advised worker on how to request SST to follow-up on court-ordered IEP

11. Made Referral – when persistent action failed, referred case to outside advocacy agency to secure access to services/programs being denied or if services were not being delivered within reasonable timeline; e.g., referred case to outside advocacy to request due process mediation for youth with IEP who has been out of school for months; to request district IEP meeting for child released from mental hospital who needs district school placement

12. Checked-out School Options – visited or called schools to determine appropriateness for youth; e.g., visited a number of continuation/alternative education schools to identify options for truant student with special education needs; contacted local schools in overcrowded neighborhood to locate opening for child recently placed in community

13. Developed Follow-up Plan – after initial fact-finding, delineated next steps to resolve case concern/problem; e.g., developed plan for caregiver to visit/select from possible school options for school-phobic student; prepared due process mediation request for student not receiving services specified on IEP; after reviewing school records, met with worker to discuss alternative school options and prepare referral request for special education evaluation

14. Updated Agency Worker – kept worker informed on ongoing basis of various steps taken on behalf of case; e.g., informed of calls to caregiver and school resource staff to arrange meeting to review IEP; described actions thus far to secure mental health services through district and county mental health offices

Patterns From Random Selection of Log Entries

Twenty percent of the log entries were randomly selected and then analyzed to determine (a) the number of contacts required by the ES to resolve each problem, (b) the incidence of each problem type, and (c) the frequency of employment of the various action strategies. Fifty percent of the cases were resolved with one or two inquiries/ actions; 33% were resolved with 3 to 10 inquiries/actions, and 17% involved problems so complex that they required over 10 inquiries/actions to resolve and often necessitated referring the case to an outside advocacy agency. Table 1 presents the distribution of problem types.

Table 1. Types of Educational Problems	
PROBLEM TYPES	**FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE**
Special Education	**25% (13)**
Role Clarification	**25% (13)**
Procedural Issues	**17% (9)**
Troubled Student Needs	**15% (8)**
Resource Requests	**8% (4)**
Pre-referral Needs	**6% (3)**
Dealing with Court Orders	**4% (2)**
Total:	**52 cases**

* raw numbers in parentheses

Discussion

Jacobson (1998) noted that the odds against children in foster care achieving success in school are great. The data from the logs provide critical insight into the kinds of educational problems agency workers are likely to encounter. Role clarification, special education, and school procedure issues were the most common concerns. Given the relatively recent focus on education for agency workers as well as the newness of the role of Educational Specialist, it is not surprising that workers and ES want clarification of their responsibilities with regard to monitoring educational needs of foster youth. Similarly, workers' unfamiliarity with the school system led to many inquiries concerning school procedures and regulations. Also common were questions regarding special education, how to refer or whether to refer a child for special education, how to request additional services or supports through the IEP, and so forth. Given that as much as 40% of the foster youth population receives or may need special education services, special education is a critical topic for agency workers.

Table 2 presents the distribution of action strategies employed by the Educational Specialists.

Table 2. **Typology of Action Strategies Used by Educational Specialists**

| STRATEGY	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE
Contacted School or Agency Resource Person	17 % (61)*
Visited Home/Communicated with Caregiver, Youth	12% (43)
Contacted School	6% (22)
Gave Agency Worker Requested Information	4% (15)
Attended Meeting	4% (14)
Reviewed IEP/Grades/School Reports	4% (14)
Visited School Site	4% (15)
Contacted District or County of Education Office	2% (9)
Wrote Letter	1% (4)
Described School Procedure to Follow	1% (2)
Made Referral	1% (3)
Checked-out School Options	1% (2)
Developed Follow-up Plan	19% (71)
Updated Agency Worker	25% (92)

* raw number in parentheses

Specific educational topics of importance and actions to be taken to minimize or eliminate schooling problems and concerns have been identified from the logs. These data emphasize the need for permanent changes in the way both school systems and child welfare agencies operate. Formal procedures must be established for the two systems to work in coordinated ways, which will result in payoffs on critical school outcomes. The two systems need to appoint liaisons who can work together on cases and advocate for appropriate educational solutions. This point is underscored by identification of the most frequently employed action strategy that we mention (i.e., the reliance of the ES on contacting particular school or agency resource staff to resolve problems efficiently and directly).

Presently, workers in child protective agencies are not informed about their potential role in detecting and dealing with school problems, nor do they have adequate training and support. They need help in identifying potential problems as well as what resources are available for students not performing well. Similarly, agency procedures need to be amended to ensure that workers have the time and resources to delve into school problems. Whether a newly placed child is having difficulty enrolling in the neighborhood school, an evaluation is needed to assess eligibility for special education, or an alternative school must be found for a teen who is chronically truant and failing all subjects, the workers must be aware of how best to proceed, who in the school or district office to contact, and how best to advocate for an effective program or service for the child or youth.

As demonstrated by the analysis of the logs, children in foster care critically need an educational advocate, either in the child welfare agency or school system, who assumes an active role in overseeing their education and interceding when problems arise to improve their chances to achieve. Only then can we feel assured that the educational needs of this most vulnerable population will be addressed in a timely manner to ensure delivery of appropriate services leading to school attendance and academic achievement.
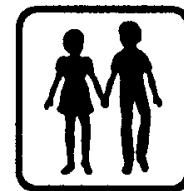
References

Altshuler, S. (1997). A reveille for school social workers: Children in foster care need our help! *Social Work in Education, 19*(2), 121-128.

Ayasse, R. H. (1995). Addressing the needs of foster children: The Foster Youth Services Program. *Social Work in Education, 17*(4), 207-216.

Blome, W. W. (1997). What happens to foster kids: Educational experiences of a random sample of foster care youth and a matched group of non-foster care youth, *Journal of Child and Adolescent Social Work, 14*(1), 41-53.

Eckenrode, J., Laird, M,. & Doris, J. (1993). School performance and disciplinary problems among abused and neglected children. *Developmental Psychology, 29*, 53-62.

Jacobson, L. (1998, September 9). One on one. *Education Week, 18*(1), 42-47.

Johnson, L. J., & LaMontagne, M. J. (1993). Research methods: Using content analysis to examine the verbal or written communication of stakeholders within early intervention. *Journal of Early Intervention, 17*(1), 73-79.

Kurtz, P. D., Gaudin, J. M., Jr., Wodarski, J. S., & Howing, P. T. (1993). Maltreatment and the school-aged child: School performance consequences. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 17*, 581-589.

Leiter, J., & Johnsen, M. C. (1997). Child maltreatment and school performance declines: An event-history analysis. *American Educational Research Journal, 34*(3), 563-589.

Noble, L. S. (1997). The face of foster care. *Educational Leadership, 54*(7), 26-29.

Sieg, K. (1998, October 26). Growing up a foster kid. *Newsweek, 132*(17), 20.

Smucket, K. S., & Kauffman, J. M. (1999). School-related problems of special education foster care students with emotional or behavioral disorders: A comparison to other groups. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders,4, 36-40.*

Trocme, N., & Caunce, C. (1995). The educational needs of abused and neglected children: A review of the literature. *Early Childhood Development and Care, 106*, 101-135.