

# An Education Agenda for Those Who Need It Most

*Bill Baccaglino, MA*

One of the most pressing challenges our country faces is the persistently huge disparity in academic achievement between children growing up in poor, underserved communities and children in communities with the resources to meet their educational and developmental needs. That education gap is even wider for children who are also members of our most fragile student population: those in the child welfare system, which includes children who have been victims of abuse or neglect, are living in foster homes, or whose families are receiving supervision and support from child protective agencies.

As these children grow up, they lack the kinds of supports many of us take for granted: a good education; a reliable network of family, friends, and community; and the presence of stable adult role models in their lives. On any given day, there are over 400,000 children in the foster care system in America (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). A variety of reasons exist for removing them from their homes, but all of the children have been victims of neglect or abuse. They are often the latest link in a multi-generational chain characterized by poverty, dependency, and sometimes, crime.

More often than not, they will enter adulthood without the tools to live independently. As a result, just under one in four transition-age foster youth will be incarcerated within two years. Twenty-seven percent will experience homelessness (Child Trends, 2017). Only half will graduate from high school and of the 10% who eventually attend college, only 3% will graduate (Tzawa-Hayden, 2004).

For years, the child welfare system has focused on the most urgent needs of the children it served, making sure they are safe, have enough food to eat, and have clean clothes to wear, while striving to achieve permanency. Although those are crucial first steps, they are not enough and never have been.

We believe education is the best path toward a successful future for these children, and after we keep them safe and healthy, education should be our highest priority. Thus far, widespread educational solutions have been a challenge, but several programs and ideas now offer great promise and, perhaps, a roadmap forward.

## Why This Matters

The foster care population is less than 1% of the total number of children in America. Why focus attention on them when our education system needs improvement in so many other ways that affect so many more young people? Because the cost of maintaining the status quo is enormous. The human toll of failing to educate a segment of our population is obvious, but we also incur a significant cost in terms of the tax dollars needed to respond to the consequences of that failure.

Without an adequate education, many of these children will spend at least some of their adult lives either in the justice system or dependent on various service systems, or both. Even putting aside the tragedy of having lost these individuals as productive members of society, the costs to taxpayers alone can be staggering, with government having to spend tens

of thousands of dollars each year for every person who is homeless or incarcerated. Add to that the multiplier effect of inter-generational poverty and dependency, in which one generation cannot count on the prior one when “times get tough.”

The New York Foundling is one of the oldest and largest child welfare organizations in the country, and in recent years, we have adopted several evidence-based programs that have proven to be effective at keeping families together, diverting young people from the criminal justice system, getting the young on a positive track in life, and protecting children from the physical abuse and psychological trauma that characterize so many of their lives.

We have concluded that education is the final piece of the puzzle and should be the current and future focus of our energies. Our experience in developing educational programs has taught us some valuable lessons, which we believe can serve as models for other organizations and for governmental entities around the country. And, what these programs have in common is that they are all scalable.

## Elementary Education

Traditional public education systems are built to educate the majority of students. Teachers, out of necessity, teach to the “middle of the room.” They aren’t equipped to address the special needs and circumstances of students in the child welfare system—all of whom have experienced trauma, often the result of having been physically or sexually abused or seriously neglected. As a result, foster children tend to be the most marginal students attending the most marginal schools.

Creating a model that reaches these children is crucial. Without an exemplar, they are far more likely to struggle with mental illness, unplanned pregnancies, drug abuse, incarceration, and long-term dependence on government-funded services for food, healthcare, and housing.

Ten years ago, The Foundling launched Mott Haven Academy, a PreK–5 charter school in one of the nation’s most disadvantaged communities. Two thirds

of our students are in the child welfare system, and the remaining third come from the surrounding community. We created this model as the best way of assessing what subgroups, if any, benefit from our integrated approach. The Foundling has no intention of growing as a charter management organization. It wants only to build a base of knowledge and experience that others can use to potentially serve thousands of these children across the country. Despite all our experience, however, we initially found progress elusive. It was only after more fully appreciating the consequences of trauma for the learning process, and incorporating these into our curriculum, that real achievement occurred. Having gone through this process, we now have strong evidence that our approach is working. Last year, we achieved the following:

- Overall, in both English and math, the percentage of students with passing scores at Haven Academy was triple the percentage in the surrounding community school district.
- Our students’ performance also exceeded the averages for public and charter schools in New York City and New York State.
- Child welfare-involved children at Haven Academy outperformed students in the general community school district.
- In English, the percentage of child welfare students at Haven who passed the exam was double the percentage in the community school district as a whole.
- In math, the percentage of Haven child welfare students passing was 2.5 times greater than the community school district and exceeded the overall city and state averages.

What are the keys to these results? What tactics are we using that are replicable and scalable?

Educators and child welfare professionals work together so that, for example, when a student is absent, the teacher notifies the school social worker who can reach out to the family and follow up, if necessary,

with home visits including school personnel and case workers.

We offer health and dental services on the premises so we can integrate the visits into the school day, and the student doesn't need to miss a day of school for an appointment—or miss the appointment because scheduling is too much of a challenge.

Because so many of these children have experienced trauma in their young lives, we provide teachers and staff with specific training in this area. In fact, trauma sensitivity is integrated into every aspect of school life. For instance, if a student recoils when a teacher touches him on the shoulder, it is likely a result of a history of abuse and an indication that the student needs to be engaged without physical contact. Teachers and staff are very intentional about the language, habits, routines, and interactions they exhibit. All school staff members understand the “triggers” of student behaviors.



And because of these children's often chaotic lives, they need stability and predictability. If they accidentally spill a drink, for example, will someone hit them or will someone simply help them clean it up and remind them to be careful? If they intentionally break rules, they need to know exactly what will happen as a result—predictable accountability and the knowledge that while they must respect authority figures, they need not live in fear of them.

We believe that in supporting educators with some of the tools and training usually employed by child welfare professionals, and increasing the integration between the two to create trauma-sensitive schools, we can bridge the education gap between at-risk youth and students in the general population nationwide.

Our experience at Haven Academy shows that this outcome is within our reach.

The results to date have been so positive that, this year, in recognition of the need to continue working with children beyond 5th grade, we opened a new middle school.

### The Path to Higher Education

For older children in foster care, The Foundling developed Road to Success, a program that provides tutors and mentors trained specifically to work with foster care students. They meet weekly in a location of the students' choosing, lowering the chances of “no shows.” Often, these tutors and mentors, who may not be much older than the students themselves, become one of the most stable and important relationships these children have.

This relationship is about more than passing the next exam; it's about preparing young people to cope with academic

life as part of their lives overall—something most of us spend a lifetime teaching our own children, but that has been completely missing in the lives of this population. In fact, the most important part of this relationship involves developing trust at the outset. These tutors and mentors often spend considerable time learning about the lives of the young people they work with, teaching them to cope, working with them on life skills, and building a genuine bond before they can shift the focus to academics.

It sounds so simple, and for most people, it seems like an obvious step. Children aren't doing well in school—get them a tutor. But, first, that would be unlikely to happen for most children in the child welfare program. And, these are more than mere tutors; they are

carefully selected, undergo a rigorous vetting process, and receive extensive training before they begin work. Does so simple an intervention really make a difference in the lives of children who already face so many other challenges? With the right tutors and mentors, the answer is “yes” in our experience. Nevertheless, we reinforce the fact that while the intervention may seem simple from a distance, it is being conducted by professionals who are carefully selected and trained.

Among children in our care overall, the high school graduation rate has increased from 34% to 55%. Those who were in tutoring in grades 7–11 were promoted to the next grade 91% of the time. The number of high school graduates enrolling in four-year colleges has quadrupled over the last four years. Eighty-eight percent have continued working with their tutors after aging out of foster care. The cost: a little more than \$5,000 per year per child.

Clearly, in addition to the human benefits, the long-term cost savings and overall economic impact of a program like this, if scaled up to connect with a much larger percentage of foster children across the country, could be staggering.

## Success in College

Last year, The Foundling began a partnership with the City University of New York and New York’s Administration for Children’s Services to provide support for children under the supervision of the child welfare system who enroll in one of three CUNY campuses.

These young people lack the types of support systems and life experiences available to many of their peers. They may not be prepared to live on their own in a college dorm, manage their expenses or their time, or navigate the college landscape.

We have just completed the first year of this program and are in the process of scaling it up from 40 students to 200. Even though, in the first year, the initial students were not as prepared to begin as subsequent classes will be, we have seen signs of success. Compared with the overall foster care population,

which sees approximately 3% graduating from college, we have noted the following:

- Several students have GPAs above 3.0 and about one third have GPAs above 2.6.
- 33 out of 40 initial students are still in our program.
- GPA is clearly connected to the number of tutoring hours students received, but the amount of tutoring needed was not overwhelming. The students with GPAs above 2.6 received at least 17 hours of tutoring over the course of the entire school year.

The programs are staffed by Residence Assistants (RAs) and Tutors. Unlike traditional RAs, ours are full-time employees, not students, and all have backgrounds in education or social work, or both. Living among the students, the RAs focus on helping each one learn how to navigate the college environment. Because RAs are assigned only 10 students, they are able to get to know the students very well and advise on the full range of social and academic issues and challenges they may encounter.

Like in our Road to Success program, tutors help the students stay current in their coursework and provide whatever remediation may be required. Working with a caseload of just 12 students, the tutors, all full-time employees, are able to provide the one-on-one attention necessary for our students to develop and adhere to an academic plan.

## The Time Is Now

Our country clearly is looking for new ideas to effect transformative change in areas where problems have long seemed intractable. Our program has the potential to improve the lives of countless children and break the cycle of poverty and, at the same time, can be accomplished through the use of proven techniques that will provide enormous budgetary savings, over the near term and for generations to come. Educating children who have been left behind (generation

after generation) certainly meets that definition, and it could well be an area where broad consensus is possible.

The Foundling is not alone in this effort and is proud to be on the front lines. The evidence-based models that we, and others, are developing and refining continue to yield measurable results that show a clear path forward. If others replicate and expand on them, we can make progress on one of the most intractable challenges we have faced in the past 50 years. Both the financial and moral costs of doing otherwise are unacceptable.

## About the Author

*Bill Baccaglino, MA, is President and CEO of The New York Foundling. He has overseen expansion of the charity to reduce the operating deficit by \$7.5 million, to implement policies and procedures resulting in national accreditation, and to expand the charity's foster boarding and prevention programs. He has led the push toward evidenced-based practices, increasing the effectiveness of service delivery and enhancing The Foundling's role as an industry leader.*

*Bill previously spent more than twenty years in New York State government, where he was instrumental in the creation of the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OFCS) in Albany; served as Director of the OFCS Office of Strategic Planning, and Policy Development; and worked to develop a new model for funding foster care services in New York State. He also led the agency's initiative to expand mental health services in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Contact: bill.baccaglino@nyfoundling.org or by phone at 212-886-4005.*

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