Foster Care & Education Q&A

THE LINK BETWEEN EDUCATION AND PERMANENCY

Q: What is "permanency" for children and youth in foster care?

A: The focus on achieving permanency for children in the child welfare system began in the early 1980s, but was reemphasized with the passage of the Adoption & Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997. Under ASFA permanency for a child is achieved by finalizing one of the permanency planning goals approved in the Act: reunification, adoption, permanent legal custodianship, or another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA). Many organizations working with children in foster care define "permanency" more broadly to include ensuring a lifelong relationship with the child, in a safe and comfortable setting, where a child has a sense of belonging and well-being.

Q: How do positive educational experiences impact a child's lifelong stability and permanence?

A: Educational outcomes significantly affect long-term life stability for all children, and stability and permanency for any child can promote educational success. Better student performance has been linked to the family's economic and housing stability and to increased marital and family stability. Conversely, educational failure has long been linked to higher rates of homelessness, unemployment, and incarceration. In fact, among children exiting foster care, poor educational outcomes in particular have been specifically linked to the fact that, within the first 2 to 4 years after emancipation from care, 51% of these young adults are unemployed, 40% are on public assistance, 25% become homeless and 20% are incarcerated.

Q: Is there any research evidence that positive educational experiences increase opportunities for achieving permanency through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or APPLA?

A: Yes. Advocates and practitioners from across the country have provided anecdotal evidence that positive educational experiences leads to increased permanency for children in out-of-home care. Although no widespread or national research exists, limited research supports this anecdotal evidence:

Toledo, Ohio – An ongoing study of children and youth considered the educational performance and permanency outcomes of 243 school-aged children in Lucas County. Preliminary research from that study indicates:

- Children and youth who remain in care longer, and who are less likely to be reunified or adopted, are more likely to struggle to school and more likely to have special education needs.
- An inverse correlation exists between GPA and length of time in care: as a child's GPA went down, their length of time in care increased. Sadly, a portion of these children reached 16 or 17 yrs old with little to no high school credits.

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Minnesota Permanency Demonstration Project – A 5 year study surveyed 111 caregivers and compared the experiences of children who achieved permanency with those who remained in foster care. Preliminary data from this study indicates:

- Children who had achieved permanency were more likely to have attended school regularly and more likely to talk to their caregivers about school work and school-related activities while in foster care.
- They were also less likely to have changed schools during the prior two years and less likely to have been suspended from school.

http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=dhs16_137480

Q: Is there any evidence that negative educational outcomes undermine permanency goals?

A: Yes. The Midwest Study by Chapin Hall found that school discipline problems lead to longer stays in foster care, more disruptions in living placements, and more involvement with the judicial system. Such disruptions undermine permanence as it is widely acknowledged that children with frequent living placement changes are more likely to have their current placement disrupt and less likely to be reunified, adopted or enter another permanent placement. According to one study, with each living placement change, the odds of finding permanence declines by 25 percent. (See Children and Family Research Center, Instability in Foster Care at http://www.cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/briefpdfs/instability.pdf). Recently published research by the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania also links high rates of living placement changes with poor educational outcomes. *Securing Child Safety, Well Being and Permanency Through Placement Stability in Foster Care* (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia 2009) available at http://www.research.chop.edu/programs/policylab/docs/Fall09EtoACSAW.pdf

Q: What are some specific education-related factors that can impact permanency?

A: Local studies and anecdotal evidence collected by the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education suggest that permanency is often undermined by what happens in school. Students who experience school discipline or are truant, lack remedial support, have unmet academic and/or behavioral health needs, are placed in alternative education or part-time school settings, or have unmet special education needs are especially at risk for placement disruption. Here are some examples from excerpts of comments provided to the Legal Center regarding this issue:

- *"When my foster child was expelled from school for over a year, I had no choice but to return him to the foster care system. I couldn't stay home with him and he couldn't be left alone every day. When schools fail a child in care, that decision undermines the child's entire future. Schools don't seem to understand the devastation."*

- *"In my experience as a caseworker, when a child has special education needs and those needs are ignored, a child exhibits more disruptive behavior both in school and at home. Sometimes it's too much and families give up. It's heartbreaking because the problems could and should be addressed to allow the child to succeed in school."*

- *"Sometimes schools place children in care in twilight programs or other part-time alternative education programs. When children remain in these settings for prolonged periods they give up on school altogether contributing to greater lifetime instability"*

Q: Is there any evidence that a court's focus on improving educational outcomes increases rates of permanency?

A: Yes. Several judges, -- particularly those in New York and California which have rules mandating that a child's education needs be addressed in court (See California Rule of Court 5.650(a) *et. seq.* and 5.651 *et. seq.* and New York's Family Court Act §1089 (2007).) and some judges who have used a Judicial Education Checklist -- have informally reported improved educational outcomes and improved permanency rates. As retired Judge Joan Cooney of Westchester County, New York explained, improving educational outcomes through court intervention is highly effective in not only stemming the tide of involvement in the delinquency system, but also dramatically increasing permanency rates.

Q: How can schools and child welfare agencies work together to improve permanency outcomes?

A: As explained in a recent policy brief issued by Chapin Hall, changing a child's educational trajectory can change the child's life trajectory as well. Improving basic classroom instruction alone is not enough to change the trajectory because the most vulnerable children need additional supports such as mental health services, counseling and remedial help. Moreover, punitive approaches to school misconduct are especially damaging for children who have experienced abuse or neglect and violence. School reformers are already promoting innovative school climate initiatives such as school-based positive behavior support and restorative practices as an alternative to suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement. Increased collaboration between child welfare and schools can help teachers learn to identify and respond to signs of trauma and can help social workers, caregivers, and parents support learning and skill development. *Underperforming Schools and the Education of Vulnerable Children*, Chapin Hall, 2009 available at http://www.chapinhall.org/research/brief/underperforming-schools-and-education-vulnerable-children.

Q: Is additional research on this topic needed?

A: Yes. While limited research and overwhelming anecdotal evidence supports the concept that improving educational outcomes promotes and increases permanency, additional research is necessary. The availability of more detailed education data maintained by child welfare and by courts provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate this important relationship.