

When Working Together Works: Academic Success for Students in Out-of-Home Care

Introduction

When children and youth in out-of-home care succeed in school, everyone wins. Schools enjoy higher test scores and overall student outcomes; child welfare agencies enjoy the increased placement stability that tends to accompany students' academic success; and young people enjoy the sense of accomplishment and world of opportunities that come with doing well in school.

The National Center for Homeless Education and the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education present this brief to help educators and child welfare advocates work together to support the academic success of children and youth in out-of-home care. The brief offers practical, proven strategies for implementing two federal laws collaboratively: The McKinney-Vento Act, which applies to state and local educational agencies, and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which applies to state and local child welfare agencies.

Specifically, this brief will assist state and local agencies and staff in:

- Laying a foundation for working together;
- Agreeing on requirements and expectations;
- Promoting school stability; and
- Incorporating children fully in classes and school activities.

Laying a Foundation for Working Together

Improving the academic success of children in out-of-home care requires the effort of both schools and child welfare agencies. Effective, sustained collaboration between these agencies is critical. Collaboration is most likely to be successful if it includes positive, informal



The Fostering Connections Act: A Primer

The Fostering Connections Act requires child welfare agencies to have a plan for the educational stability of every child in foster care. When placing children in care, agencies must take into account the appropriateness of the student's current educational setting and the placement's proximity to that school. Child welfare agencies must coordinate with schools to ensure that children remain in the school they attended at the time of placement. If remaining in the same school is not in the child's best interest, the child's case plan must include assurances by the child welfare agency and local educational agencies that the agencies will provide immediate and appropriate enrollment in a new school and ensure that the child's educational records follow. More information on the Fostering Connections Act is available at <http://www.abanet.org/child/education/publications/fosteringconnections.html>.

relationships with colleagues in the complementary agency, supplemented by regular, ongoing communication to discuss concerns and adjust policies and practices based on lessons learned. Some strategies to build a foundation for working together include:

- Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors should contact the school district's central office to ask if the district has a foster care coordinator. If no such coordinator has been designated, the child welfare agency should work with school district leadership to designate such a contact. In the meantime, school counselors or social workers may be the best contacts. For children "awaiting foster care placement" under the McKinney-Vento Act, the local homeless education liaison is the appropriate contact. In turn, school staff should contact their local child welfare office (commonly known as Children's Services, Children and Families, or Social Services) and ask to speak with an educational advocate or consultant, a supervisor, or if the contact relates to a particular child, the child's assigned caseworker.
- Meet with counterparts in other agencies to explain the services you provide and discuss challenges. Each agency should designate a contact person responsible for communicating with the other. For example, child welfare agencies should identify education specialists within their agencies with sufficient capacity and resources to attend to education issues. School districts should designate foster care coordinators to ensure children in out-of-home care receive all education services to which they are entitled.
- Exchange contact lists with each other: names, phone numbers and e-mails. Update and renew contacts regularly to maintain relationships and address staff turnover.
- Institutionalize your collaborations through regular meetings or a formal agreement to revisit policies and practices at determined intervals. Developing protocols for appropriate information-sharing and confidentiality also can facilitate cooperation while protecting children's privacy. It is important to assess

The McKinney-Vento Act: A Primer

The McKinney-Vento Act is designed to increase the school stability, participation, and success of children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those "awaiting foster care placement." The law does not define the phrase "awaiting foster care placement"; however, many states have implemented the "awaiting foster care placement" provision by establishing state policy or practice. Where state guidance is lacking, many school districts have defined the term.

The McKinney-Vento Act provides eligible children with many rights and services, including: the right to remain in one school and receive transportation, even if their temporary living situation is located in another school district or attendance area, if continuing to attend that school is in their best interest; and the right to enroll in school and begin participating fully in all school activities immediately, even if they cannot produce documents normally required for enrollment, such as birth certificates, proof of guardianship, previous school records, immunization records, or proof of residency.

The McKinney-Vento Act also requires every state to designate a State Coordinator for Homeless Education and every school district to designate a local homeless education liaison to implement the law on the state and local levels. Visit http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php for a complete listing of contact information for State Coordinators. More information on the McKinney-Vento Act is available at <http://www.serve.org/nche>.

periodically how the collaboration is working and to revise agreements and policies to keep issues current and timely.

Agreeing on Requirements and Expectations

The foundation for collaboration will crumble quickly if schools and child welfare agencies have different expectations or disagree on basic legal requirements. Both agencies must “speak the same language” if their work together is to succeed. They should formalize joint priorities, policies, and practices on both the state and local level. Specific strategies include:

- Define the contours of “awaiting foster care placement” clearly and establish the basic legal framework and policies each agency must follow. State educational and child welfare agencies should develop shared definitions of “awaiting foster care placement” via inter-agency agreements. These agreements should address practical implementation strategies, such as training school and child welfare staff on the definition, assigning responsibility for identifying eligible youth in care, enrolling eligible students in the school that is in their best interest, and providing and arranging transportation. Local child welfare workers, advocates, and homeless education liaisons should consult the State Coordinator for Homeless Education to see if their state has a policy defining “awaiting foster care placement.”
- Adopt policies and procedures to implement the Fostering Connections Act jointly through child welfare agencies and schools. Fostering Connections and McKinney-Vento overlap, but the eligible students and specific benefits under each law vary. In any case, collaboration between schools and child welfare will always be necessary for both agencies to comply fully with their legal obligations.
- Plan cross-training and joint training events. Child welfare caseworkers and administrators should be trained on the McKinney-Vento Act, the Fostering Connections Act, and the value of school stability. Homeless education staff, school counselors, teachers, and administrators should be trained on the McKinney-Vento Act, the Fostering Connections Act, and strategies to meet the educational needs of children in out-of-home care. An excellent training strategy is to invite alumni from foster care to share their perspectives with educators and child welfare administrators. Additionally, inviting school district staff to share information about education policies and practices at a child welfare agency staff meeting or in-house training and asking child welfare agency representatives to speak at school staff meetings are effective strategies for providing each agency with important information and sharing perspectives. Co-hosting events for combined audiences can also ensure that all involved parties are hearing the same information and promote dialogue and understanding across agencies.
- Review and revise requirements and expectations over time. As both agencies learn lessons about how to support academic success for children in out-of-home care best, and as legal implementation evolves, it is important to assess periodically how policies and practices are working and to keep issues current and timely.

Promoting School Stability

Students in out-of-home care are forced to change schools often. For example, a study in Washington state found that when compared to students not in foster care, twice as many students in care changed schools. Youth who are entering foster care for the first time are the most vulnerable to school mobility, as over two-thirds switch schools shortly after they enter care. Such

school mobility has harmful effects on academic achievement, emotional health, and foster care placements. For these reasons, both McKinney-Vento and Fostering Connections require schools and child welfare agencies to keep students stable in one school, consistent with their best interest. Strategies to implement this requirement and support school stability for youth in care include:

- Strive to find living placements near the child's school of origin. While the child welfare agency is responsible for the child's living placement, many schools are working with child welfare agencies to recruit foster parents in the school district where the child attends at the time of placement. Increasing the pool of local foster families can help students stay close to school.
- Work to maintain continuity in the student's living situation. Child welfare caseworkers, school counselors, school administrators, and teachers should work with foster parents and other caretakers to provide specific supports to the student and family, such as trauma-sensitive curricula and discipline procedures, counseling, appropriate family visitation, and respite care.
- Develop joint procedures for implementing the school stability provisions of McKinney-Vento and Fostering Connections, including: Presuming that all youth in care will remain in the same school, unless it is not in their best interest; determining when it is not in a student's best interest to remain in the same school; requesting and arranging transportation, including procedures to allocate the cost and responsibility of transportation appropriately; and designating staff to facilitate implementation in both agencies.

Incorporating Children Fully in Classes and School Activities

Immediate enrollment and full participation in school is critical to student's academic success and required by both the McKinney-Vento Act and the Fostering Connections Act. Students must be incorporated quickly into appropriate classes, services, clubs, and activities so they can feel a sense of belonging within the school community and the encouragement and motivation they need to succeed. Strategies for immediate, full school participation include:

- Establish clear, prompt decision-making protocols for students in out-of-home care. Child welfare agencies should inform schools about who has the authority to make school-related decisions for each child in care. If school staff members are unclear as to who holds this authority, they should contact someone involved in the child's case to make them aware that this lack of clarity is an obstacle to successful education planning for the student.
- Share school records and relevant educational information quickly, consistent with privacy laws. Records can be faxed, educators from the new school can talk to those from previous schools, and foster parents and caseworkers can share relevant information with appropriate school staff. When sharing information, it is important to respect students' privacy and not to share personal, irrelevant details about the child or family. The Fostering Connections Act makes caseworkers responsible for ensuring that educational records are transferred to a new school immediately. The McKinney-Vento Act also requires such records transfer and the elimination of other barriers to immediate enrollment and full participation in school.
- Talk to students about the clubs and activities available at school, and involve them quickly in the activities that interest them. Such involvement will help children feel included and invested in the school community. Deadlines and fees should be waived to allow youth to participate right away.

Additional Resources

Collaboration between state and local education agencies and child welfare agencies is crucial for the successful implementation of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. Reference the following resources for more information on the successful implementation of these laws:

- The National Center for Homeless Education website at <http://www.serve.org/nche>
- The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education website at <http://www.abanet.org/child/education/>
- *Clearing the Path to School Success for Students in Out-of-Home Care*, a joint publication of The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education and the National Center for Homeless Education, available at <http://www.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>
- *School Selection for Students in Out-of-Home Care*, a joint publication of The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education and the National Center for Homeless Education, available at <http://www.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>
- *The McKinney-Vento Act and Children and Youth Awaiting Foster Care Placement*, a publication of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEH CY), available at http://www.naehcy.org/naehcy_pubs.html

This brief was developed by:

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LEGAL CENTER FOR
FOSTER CARE & EDUCATION

Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.

For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.



Local Contact Information: