Maximizing educational achievement of youth in foster care and alumni: Factors associated with success

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ABSTRACT

The challenges faced by the United States and other countries with respect to education are particularly acute with respect to youth placed in out of home care and alumni of foster care. After describing the number of youth in foster care in the United States and recent research on their outcomes, this article will describe what factors have been linked with educational success for these youth and young adults. Strategies for improvement outlined in the article include pursuing permanency to help youth find enduring mentors, maximizing placement and school stability, conducting strengths-based assessment, aggressively pursuing educational supports, and treating mental health problems that may act as barriers to classroom success.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Education challenges in the United States

While the United States saw its athletes bring home more medals than any other country in the summer Olympics of 2008, this country performs less well than other industrialized countries with respect to infant mortality, family poverty, academic achievement and other areas of child well-being (Alliance for Excellent Education as cited in Lesley, B. 2008, p. 2.). In fact, the United Nations ranked the U.S. 20th out of 21 countries on various outcome indicators for children (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 2007). Economic experts and business leaders state that if the United States does not make a greater investment in the health and education of the youngest generation, it will not be able to compete with other countries or assume what future generations will be better off than previous ones (Sawhill, 2008).

Currently the United States has approximately a 20% dropout rate which is economically unsustainable.¹ This country has gone from 1st in the world in college graduates to 9th in the world, which is due to flat lining while other countries continue to improve. The U.S. Secretary of Education is planning to invest up to $4 billion in the bottom 5% performing schools to try to achieve huge breakthroughs in their performance and the barriers holding them back. A recent national conference presentation emphasized that the U.S. needs to (1) increase funding flexibility to improve educational systems — both to identify where there is flexibility currently, and to create more flexibility; (2) shine a spotlight on success and reward excellence by incentivizing improved educational outcomes; and (3) focus on growth in improvement of test scores and expand curricula offerings. While math and reading are very important, there must also be refinement in other subject areas (Education, Early Childhood and Workforce Committee, 2011).

The challenges faced by the United States and other countries with respect to education are particularly acute with respect to youth placed in out of home care and alumni of foster care. After describing the number of youth in care in the United States and recent research on their outcomes, this article will describe what factors have been linked with educational success for these youth and young adults.

1.2. Foster care placement in the United States

As a result of child maltreatment, and in certain cases where child emotional and behavioral problems are beyond the control of parents, children are placed in out-of-home care. In the U.S. in 2010 approximately 662,000 children were placed, and on any given day approximately 408,000 children were placed out of their homes in licensed foster family homes and non-family group home and residential treatment settings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2011). As of the end of the federal fiscal year 2009 (September 30), over four in ten youth (44%) in foster care have lived in more than three placement settings. Nearly four in ten (38%) are currently residing...
in group homes, shelter care, or institutions, and 38% have a permanent goal of “emancipation” or “long term foster care.” Children and youth with permanent goals other than reunification, adoption, or guardianship are likely to age out of care. In FY09, about 30,000 youth aged out of care without achieving legal permanency (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2010).

Success in school can be a positive counterweight to the abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence experienced by children and youth in foster care:

Education has the potential to markedly improve their life chances and their ability to contribute to society as productive adults. Although more data are clearly needed, particularly on a national level, the overall picture emerging from the studies to date is not encouraging. The research suggests that far too many of the children and youth in foster care are not succeeding in school and that a concerted effort will be required if significant progress is to be made in their educational outcomes. At the same time, however, there are some promising developments that may lead to better educational experiences and outcomes for children and youth in foster care:

Table 1
Selected foster care outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children in foster care who have chronic medical problems</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni (adults formerly in foster care) who experienced seven or more school changes (K-12)</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni who completed high school</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth emancipating from foster care who plan to attend college</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni who completed a bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>3% to 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni who were employed at age 21</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni who became homeless for one day or more after emancipating from foster care</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni of foster care who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:


First, enrollment problems and educational instability lower test scores and complicate a child’s journey through the educational system. A child’s difficulty in education may begin with enrollment problems, as highlighted by the National Working Group for Education and Foster Care (2011). For example, in a 2000 New York study of 70 children and youth in foster care, 42% did not begin school immediately upon entering foster care. Nearly half of these young people said that they were kept out of school because of lost or misplaced school records (Advocates for Children of New York, Inc, 2000, p. 4). A 2001 Bay Area study of over 300 foster parents found that “missing information from prior schools increased the odds of enrollment delays by 6.5 times” (Choice et al., 2001, p.44). One federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) study found that 18 of 46 states (39%) had “educational records missing from case file or not provided to foster parents” and 12 states (26%) had “issues with school/agency relationships, communication or cooperation” — limiting their ability to meet the Educational Needs outcome for their review (Christian, 2003, p.4).

Second, placement changes in foster care frequently lower school stability and a child’s educational performance (Pecora et al., 2003, pp. 26–27). School mobility rates are highest for those entering care for the first time. According to a 2004 study of almost 16,000 children and youth in the Chicago Public School system, over two-thirds switched schools shortly after their initial placement in out-of-home care (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004, p. 46). A study of 479 alumni of foster care in Oregon and Washington (the Northwest Alumni Study) found that 65% experienced seven or more school changes from elementary through high school (Pecora et al., 2005, pp. 26, 28). Finally, in an ongoing three-state study of youth aging out of care (the Midwest Study) by Chapin Hall, over a third of young adults reported having had five or more school changes (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004, p. 42).

Third, educational challenges can result in a child being held back a grade, resulting in stigma from being older than many children in their grade. For example, nearly 45% of youth in care in the New York State study reported being retained at least once in school (Advocates for Children of New York, Inc, 2000, p. 45). In the Midwest Study, 37% of youth in foster care (compared with 22% of a comparable national sample) reported repeating a grade (Courtney et al., 2004, p. 42). Similarly, the Casey National Foster Care Alumni Study found that 36% of the alumni of foster care had repeated a grade (Pecora et al., 2003, p. 26). With grade repeats comes the embarrassment of being older than your classmates: Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care were almost twice as likely as other students to be at least a year older for their grade, even after demographic factors were taken into account and comparisons made to other students attending the same schools (Smithgall et al., 2004, p. 22).

Fourth, various genetic, environmental, parent–child interaction, community and other factors, not the least of which might be child abuse or neglect, contribute to the higher rates of certain emotional and behavioral disorders of children in care that can interfere with learning. For example, a study of 373 17-year-old youths in foster care in Missouri that used the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for DSM-IV found that 37% met DSM-IV criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis in the past year, and 61% met similar criteria for a lifetime disorder, with the highest rates for disruptive disorders (Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder), Major Depression, and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (McMillen et al., 2005). Similarly, a study of 15,507 children receiving medical assistance found the rate of emotional and behavioral disorders among children in foster care was twice that of youth who were receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and close to 15 times that of children who were receiving other forms of medical assistance (dosReis, Zito, Safer, & Soeken, 2001).

This pattern appears true, even when nationally recognized and strict reporting of youth in care is used. The Casey Field Office Mental
Health Study (CFOMH) included a sample of 188 14–17 year old adolescents in Casey foster care who were assessed using the CIDI — the Comprehensive International Diagnostic Interview. About three in five (63.3%) youth had at least one lifetime CIDI diagnosis, and about one in five (22.8%) had three or more lifetime diagnoses. The most common lifetime diagnoses were Oppositional Defiant Disorder (29.3%), Conduct Disorder (20.7%), Major Depressive Disorder (19.0%), Major Depressive Episode (19.0%), Panic Attack (18.9%), and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (15.1%). Over one-third of youth served by Casey in this study (35.8%) reported symptoms indicative of a mental health disorder in the past year, and a much smaller percentage (7.7%) had symptoms indicative of three or more past year mental health problems. The most common past year conditions were Major Depressive Disorder (10.9%), Major Depressive Episode (10.9%), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (9.3%), Intermittent Explosive Disorder (8.6%), and Conduct Disorder (8.3%) (White, Havalchak, Jackson, O’Brien, & Pecora, 2007).

4. Method

The sections below describe the studies used in this article that identified factors predictive of education success. Because of space limitations, readers are referred to the major study publications for additional details.

4.1. Casey National Alumni Study

This research examined the early life experiences, educational progress, and success as adults of more than one thousand foster care alumni who were served in 23 communities across the country between 1966 and 1998. The data were collected through 1609 case record reviews and 1087 in-person interviews with alumni. The focus of this study was a model of long-term family foster care that was delivered by Casey Family Programs (Casey) from 1966 to 1998. Nearly all of the youth had been placed by the local public child welfare agency but then were served by Casey through participation agreements with those same agencies. The study sample included a slight majority (54.6%) of women, and most alumni (65%) were Caucasian. The mean age at the time of interview was 30.5 years (SD = 6.3), with a range of 20–51 years. The average length of time in foster care, adjusting for periods of time spent at home, was 7.2 years (SD = 4.3). (See Pecora et al., 2003.)

4.2. Northwest Alumni Study

The Northwest Alumni Study involved foster care alumni from the states of Oregon and Washington, along with alumni from the Casey Family Programs foster care offices in both of these states. Case record reviews were conducted for 659 alumni (479 of whom were interviewed) who had been in foster care with one of those agencies between 1988 and 1998. Samples were matched based on the agency office from which they emancipated or otherwise left care. Casey’s offices in Washington (Seattle, Tacoma, and Yakima) were matched with Washington State offices in the geographic areas. Casey’s Oregon office in Portland was matched with the Oregon State sample from Multnomah County (including the city of Portland). Youth who lived in family foster care for 12 months or more were included in the sample. Youth who only had other types of out-of-home care (e.g., residential care) were excluded from the sample. The study sample included a majority (60.5%) of women; slightly over half of the sample (54.4%) were people of color. Average age at the time of interview was 24.2 years (SE = 0.1) years with a range of 20–33 years old. The mean length of time in care was 6.1 years (SE = 0.1). (See Pecora et al., 2010).

4.3. Salazar Study of College Completers

Salazar (2011) identified the predictors of postsecondary retention and success using survey data from a cross-sectional sample of 329 foster care alumni who received a national scholarship to various colleges provided by the Orphan Foundation of America Foster Care to Success or Casey Family Scholarship Program postsecondary scholarships. Salazar also compared adult outcomes of former foster youth graduates with general population graduates and general population non-graduates to explore the role higher education plays in these youths’ lives. Data were collected during 2010 using an online survey of foster care alumni who received scholarships between the years of 2001 and 2009, and who either graduated from college or dropped out of the scholarship program before graduating. The study sample included a majority (75.8%) of women. The largest ethnic group was Caucasian (44%), but African Americans were heavily represented (30.9%). Average age at the time of interview was 25.6 years (SD = 2.7). The mean length of time in care was 8.7 years (SD = 5.0). (See Salazar, 2011.)

5. Results

5.1. Casey National Alumni Study regression equations: what predicts high school completion while in foster care?

Completing high school and going on to some kind of further education, which for youth in foster care often requires some form of financial assistance, can be seen as a major stepping stone toward successful adulthood. So what predicts high school completion? An exploratory analysis to determine which variables predicted high school completion before leaving foster care was conducted. Logistic regression analyses were used to determine which variables together predicted high school completion.

The analysis produced a robust model incorporating fourteen variables that together best predicted high school completion through a diploma or a GED (Chi Square X² (18) = 181.385, p < .001). A summary of the most powerful predictive factors model is summarized in Table 3. Note that while all the predictors were statistically significant, some of the odds ratios are relatively small. For example, delaying entering foster care as first placement by five years is associated with a youth being 1.5 times more likely to complete high school before leaving Casey than another child. (The odds ratio is an expression of the likelihood that an event or outcome will happen. In this case the odds ratio is 1.5.)

In contrast, consider the model for employment experience: youth with extensive employment experience are over four times more likely to graduate than youth with no experience.² Similarly, having a positive relationship with the last (or longest) foster family means they are over two times more likely to complete high school. (Note that this foster family variable refers to the overall relationship with family members, vs. a particular parent or sibling. However, this finding does differ from the result that a less supportive foster mother was associated with success in the first set of prediction equations.)

Placement stability has one of the largest positive effects. Youth who have an average of one fewer placement per year while in Casey foster care are nearly twice as likely to complete high school before leaving care. If youth do not move between homes they are more likely to develop networks of support and coaching that can

² It should be noted that, as with some of these “predictors,” employment may come both before and after high school success. And working 20 or more hours per week is associated with less positive academic performance, so there must be a healthy balance regarding schoolwork, employment and free time [Jekielek, Cochran, and Hair (2002) as cited in Levin-Epstein and Greenberg (2003), p. 70].
help them further develop their life skills; and they have more chance to benefit from independent living training.

If we can establish a consistent and stable environment, allowing the youth to develop relationships with the foster family, stay in the same school, work at the same job, and not have to cope with the anxiety, anger, and adjustment of changing homes and changing caseworkers, that youth has a much better probability of completing high school, and from there going on to further success. A youth in such a stable situation may be less likely to need tutoring to catch up with his or her new classmates. And overcoming a learning disability or attention-deficit diagnosis may be easier if a child is in a more stable living situation. These youth may also be less likely to act out and commit crimes (Pecora et al., 2003).

5.2. Northwest Study prediction equations: what program changes could improve youth outcomes?

As with the study summarized earlier, child welfare administrators and practitioners want to know the aspects of service delivery that they should improve to maximize success for youth in care. To address this need, this study conducted statistical simulations that estimated the degree to which optimizing certain foster care experiences might affect alumni outcomes. This set of equations was more complex than those undertaken in the Casey National Alumni Study. The second regression equation to estimate the number of positive outcomes before and after optimizing these foster care experiences was more complex than those undertaken in the Casey National Alumni Study.

The first step in the simulation was to create a domain score for each alumnus on various outcome domains. For example, the Education domain outcome score summed the five individual education outcome variables that are listed below:

1. Complete High School with a High School Diploma or GED (84.8%, SE: 1.9)
2. Complete High School with a Diploma (56.3%, SE: 2.3)
3. Education past High School (42.7%, SE: 2.7)
4. Complete Any Degree/Certificate beyond High School (20.6%, SE: 1.8)
5. Complete College or More (1.8%, SE: 0.4)

Scores could range from zero (no positive individual education outcomes) to five (attained all positive individual education outcomes). For the outcome domain score, the simulation defined the individual outcome variables so that they were all in a positive direction (e.g., high school completion). Therefore, outcome domain scores represented the number of positive items within the Education domain.

The second step in the simulation was to use the two outcome domain scores to create regression models that would estimate the number of positive outcomes in each domain that each alumnus would achieve based on the foster care experiences that the alumnus actually had in foster care (e.g., time in care, number of schools attended). Next, these foster care experiences were “optimized” in the simulation so that each alumnus had the most optimal foster care experience possible (e.g., a short time in care, fewer number of schools attended). (See Pecora, Kessler, O’Brien, White, Williams, Hiripi, English, White, & Herrick, 2006; Pecora et al., 2010, for more information about the procedures.)

The last step in the simulation used the optimized variables in a second regression equation to estimate the number of positive outcomes that could be achieved with these optimal experiences. The change in the predicted number of positive outcomes before and after optimizing the foster care experience variables represents the anticipated effect of optimizing these foster care experiences. (See Little, 1982 for more information on this statistical approach.) This statistical simulation was conducted using all foster care experience areas at once (to estimate the effects of optimizing all areas simultaneously), and on each area individually (to measure the effect of optimizing only a particular area). The latter was done because it is more likely that an agency could implement program changes for one area than all areas at once.

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Table 3
Summary of the prediction model for completing high school from the Casey National Foster Care Alumni Study. All variables listed were significant predictors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Odds ratio for completing high school while in foster care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at first placement (years)</td>
<td>Placed one year later: 1.2 times more likely to complete high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total time in family foster care (years)</td>
<td>Placed five years later: 1.4 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total time in group care (years)</td>
<td>One year more in care: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time between first placement and entering Casey (years)</td>
<td>Five more years in care: 1.5 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement disruption in Casey (placements per year)</td>
<td>One year later: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring (extensive vs. none)</td>
<td>One year later: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent living training (once vs. none)</td>
<td>One year later: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent living training (intermittent vs. none)</td>
<td>One year later: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment experience (extensive vs. none)</td>
<td>One year later: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment experience (intermittent vs. none)</td>
<td>One year later: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less positive relationship with last foster family</td>
<td>One year later: 1.1 times more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted criminal activity score*</td>
<td>Crime score 1 higher in severity × incidence: 1.02 times more likely to complete school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-related diagnoses (LD, ADHD, MR)</td>
<td>Crime score 6 higher in severity × incidence: 1.2 times more likely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This composite scale assigns a weight of 1 to 6 to each crime, and the weight is then multiplied by the number of times that the crime was committed. This scoring approach is based on the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program, and sums across all recorded crimes.

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3 This section is abstracted from Pecora, et al. (2006), pp. 1472–1475.
Table 4 presents the estimated outcome domain scores before and after the simulated optimizations of the foster care experiences. For example, the Education domain scores before and after optimization of the foster care experience area of Placement History and Experience were 2.3 and 2.8, respectively. This represents a 17.8% decrease in the number of undesirable outcomes. Thus 17.8% is presented in parentheses due to improving placement history and experience. This statistic is calculated using the following formula:

\[
\text{Percent change in negative outcomes} = \left( \frac{\text{Number of negative outcomes before optimization} - \text{Number of negative outcomes after optimization}}{\text{Number of negative outcomes before optimization}} \right) \times 100
\]

Note that (a) the number of positive outcomes must be subtracted from the highest possible score to calculate the number of negative outcomes; and (b) the number of positive outcome scores in the table will vary slightly due to rounding error in the estimated outcome scores before and after the optimization. But the percent change in negative outcomes score is based on non-rounded outcome scores.

For the Education domain, two foster care experience areas reduced the estimated number of undesirable outcomes significantly: Placement History and Experience and Resources upon Leaving Care (−17.8% and −14.6%, respectively). The effect of Foster Family Activities was modest. Note that, in this analysis with this sample, optimizing Foster Family and Other Nurturing Supports was estimated to result in a 7.0% increase in undesirable outcomes.

There were three variables within Foster Family and Other Nurturing Supports that were not conceptualized well, so these variables may have counteracted the effects of the other variables within that area. The first was parenting style where the authoritative, permissive, authoritarian and disengaged dimensions (Baumrind, 1995) may not have been well-defined or were interacting with other variables. The second problematic variable was whether the alumnus had experienced an enduring positive relationship with an adult while growing up. Many alumni had mixed scores on this variable—possibly because frequent placement change disrupted these relationships or the way the variable was interpreted. The third variable with mixed results was maltreatment while in foster care. Because we included reports as well as substantiated reports for both foster parents and other caregivers, this variable may have produced conflicting results. Despite some concerns about three of the variables within this area, a dramatic reduction in undesirable education outcomes (−25.5%) was estimated when optimizing all foster care experience areas simultaneously.

5.3. Salazar Study of College Completers

Salazar (2011) identified the predictors of postsecondary retention and success using survey data from a cross-sectional sample of 329 foster care alumni who received a national scholarship to various colleges provided by the Casey Family Scholarship Program or Foster Care to Success (formerly Orphan Foundation of America) postsecondary scholarships. This student scholarship program used V-mentors (adults who mentored youth over the phone and internet) in ways that many students appreciated:

> Re: V-Mentor: "My OFA mentor was helpful when I needed to ask someone questions about academic or career related questions. She was the only adult I was connected to at the time who had graduated from college and had a career."

> Describing supportive adults during college: "No matter what, I felt I could call Tina or <my vMentor>. <My vMentor> helped my through a really tough time in my marriage and personal/ work life. Tina has been unwavering in my life. I live far apart from her but I feel confident if I were in town today, and she were in town, I could go over to her house have my kids be a mess or learn to walk and she would listen, never judge and give sound advice."

Two sets of factors were examined as predictors of postsecondary retention: factors that have been found to be related to retention in the general population (Academic-related skills, Academic goals, Institutional commitment, Social support, High school GPA, Institutional selectivity, Social involvement, Institutional financial support, SES; Robbins et al., 2004) and factors that were hypothesized to be more unique to the foster care population (Maltreatment/trauma/PTSD, Other mental health challenges, Stigma, Independent living stability, Participation in foster youth-specific programming, Tangible support, Connectedness to loved ones). Each factor was represented by one or more indicators; for example, social support was measured using the Medical Outcomes Study Social Support Survey (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991) in addition to a 1–10 rating of how helpful adults were during one’s time in college.

The first step of analysis involved bivariate examinations of each factor and its relation to college disengagement using logistic regressions. The second step involved analyzing the factors together in multivariate analyses using discrete-time survival analyses of (1) general college retention factors, (2) factors more unique to the foster care population, and (3) all factors together in predicting college graduation. Multiple imputation was used to handle the problem of missing data.

When all factors significant in bivariate analyses were added together into one multivariate discrete-time survival analysis, four factors emerged as having indicators with significant relationships to college graduation. Two were general population factors: Institutional Commitment (Indicator = Satisfaction with college), and Social Involvement (Indicator = Frequency of college social events). The remaining two factors were from the foster care-specific group: Independent Living Stability (Indicator = Hours worked per week) and...
Tangible Support (Indicator = Received insufficient support with academic-related skills).

The findings of this study suggest the importance of strengthening the policies, programs, and supports that foster care alumni have access to as they attempt to reach their postsecondary goals. More integrative and relational supports are needed beyond the more typical logistical (i.e., paperwork) supports to help students get more invested in their college communities. Furthermore, social workers need to consider the possibility that, just as parents often continue to support their children well beyond late adolescence, foster care alumni may continue to need specialized supports into adulthood (Salazar, 2011).

6. Discussion

6.1. Recommendations for policy and program design

In examining the three sets of multivariate analyses, one common predictor across all three studies was academic and tangible support for the alumni. These networks of support are often disrupted by school and placement moves (Perry, 2006; Salazar, Keller, & Courtney, 2011). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires child welfare agencies to have a plan for “ensuring the educational stability of the child while in foster care,” including the child remaining in the school in which the child enrolled at time of placement unless it is not in the best interests of the child. The recommendations listed below to help improve youth educational achievement stem from the basic descriptive outcomes of the studies, the statistical simulations and prediction analyses, and conversations with stakeholders. Stakeholders included alumni of foster care, foster parents, caseworkers, and agency executives, as well as clinical and policy specialists from public and private child welfare agencies.

6.1.1. Pursue permanency

All children need a caring adult in their lives who is willing to serve as an advocate for them. Helping children find “forever families” increases the likelihood that they will receive the ongoing coaching, training and support necessary to live successfully as adults in the community. There has been much concern about the lack of data and poor results of many independent living programs. But it is important to underscore that it is not about a class; it is about having a person to guide you in life.

However, we will not be able to increase child permanency until the field develops and carefully implements better practice frameworks. We need to carefully listen to foster care alumni, as well as build on the lessons learned from the MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood and the SAMHSA-sponsored mental health-oriented youth transition projects called Building Bridges. Using new strategies for permanency planning and Arnett’s conceptual work, we need to develop a more theory and research-based conceptual practice framework to guide the design and implementation of transition programs for older youth in foster care. These should include efforts to support permanency, adult connections, and preparation for adult living (Arnett, 2004; Casey Family Programs, 2001, 2010; Furstenberg, Kennedy, Mcloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2003; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2004, and the Building Bridges Initiative). (See www.buildingbridges4youth.org.)

6.1.2. Provide strengths-based assessment and educational support

Some people believe that one way to work with discouraged youth is to begin with a strengths-based assessment and to tutor to strengths—not just to deficits. Children in care benefit when the adults in their lives aggressively pursue educational supports (Emerson, 2007; Golanka, 2010). For example, one program in Franklin County Ohio found that when an educational specialist worked weekly with youth in care, youth school attendance, rates of passing grades, and high school graduation rates were very positive (Personal communication, Katherine Canada, Franklin County Children’s Services, November 4, 2011). School personnel would also benefit from more training about the challenges that youth in foster care face, and ways they can advocate for these youth. (See the Endless Dreams and other curricula at www.casey.org.)

6.1.3. Improve identification and treatment of mental health problems that may act as barriers to classroom success

This would involve evidence-based treatment of anxiety, social phobia, depression, and the sleep and attention problems that accompany Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) found in a number of alumni studies.

6.1.4. Minimize placement change

If youth do not change homes and schools, there is no need to transfer school records and the youth are less likely to fall behind. Having fewer placement changes may allow youth in care to develop better social support networks, which can assist them to find employment and can serve as a safety net when an alumnus encounters financial difficulties. Youth should be placed with family and close to home, if at all possible, to help maintain continuity in schools and relationships. Placement instability, in part, is a result of poor administrative processes, lack of agency support of foster parents, and behavioral problems of youth (James, Landsverk, & Sylmen, 2004). All of these factors need to be studied and addressed. (See the 2010 issue of Child Welfare 360.)

6.1.5. Encourage youth to obtain a high school diploma and not just a GED

Although high school completion rates in some agencies can be high, the rates at which alumni completed high school with a GED are typically disproportionately higher than the general population—in the NW Alumni study the GED rate (28.5%) was nearly six times the rate of the general population in 2000 (5%; see National Center on Education Statistics, 2003). While having a GED is more beneficial than not completing high school, this is a concern because research indicates that people who obtain diplomas instead of GEDs are 1.7 times more likely to complete an AA degree, 3.9 times more likely to complete a BA degree, and more likely to have higher incomes (Grubb, 1999; National Center on Education Statistics, 2003; Smith, 2003). Among those who drop out of high school, however, obtaining a GED can improve long-run labor market earnings—but only for those who leave school with weak cognitive skills. The GED apparently does not help the economic performance of dropouts who leave school with higher academic skills. Having the option to obtain a GED may cause some students to drop out of school, although the statistical evidence for this finding is not as strong as that for the previous two findings (Tyler, 2003).

6.1.6. Improve life skills preparation and provide concrete resources to youth as they leave care

There are few well-evaluated life skill programs for youth in foster care in the United States (United States General Accounting Office, 1999). The multivariate data show that having concrete resources such as a driver’s license, $250 in cash, and dishes and utensils results in more financial stability, allowing alumni to pursue their education goals. A more plausible explanation is that these variables described youth who had received many different opportunities to develop skills for independent living, and had positive relationships with foster parents, agency staff and other adults, as well as concrete resources. A new website, iFoster, aims to help foster families, youth aging out of care, and organizations. Their first project is a discount at national and local retailers, grocery stores, healthcare providers, restaurants, and other vendors. The discount program is free. (See http://ifoster.org/iSave.aspx.)
6.1.7. Support better preparation for, access to, and success in post-secondary education programs

Caseworkers, foster families, and other stakeholders should encourage young people in foster care to plan for college or vocational school, and support them in being adequately prepared for higher education and training. Youth will benefit from information about local college-preparatory programs, such as Gear-Up, TRIO, and Upward Bound, and help with enrollment in these programs. 4 Tuition waiver programs (e.g., Maryland and Texas) and on-campus supports such as the Guardian Scholars programs in California and Washington also can make a difference. Finally, extending foster care beyond age 18 may be important for certain youth (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010).

6.1.8. Implement ongoing performance measurement

Service delivery systems, staff and policymakers need to be informed and motivated by regular sharing of key quality and outcome data related to education and other child well-being indicators. There are many research questions in this area that remain to be addressed (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010), and agency MIS data bases can be practical sources of powerful longitudinal data about cohorts of youth in care.

In summary, children placed in foster care face many educational challenges. Youth experience frequent school changes, which, along with other factors such as learning disabilities and child maltreatment, are associated with academic difficulties (Brodie, 2010; Jackson, 2001; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Trout, Hagaman, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). Despite the challenges of child maltreatment, placement instability, and other adversities, some youth in care and foster care alumni have demonstrated positive education outcomes (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2009; Flynn, Robyn, Marquis, Paquet, & Peeke, 2011; Pecora et al, 2010). Thus there are ways to improve these youth outcomes by addressing major barriers and filling gaps in youth support.

References


Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2010). Grappling with the gaps: Toward a research agenda to meet the educational needs of children and youth in foster care. Santa Cruz, CA: Author http://www.cft.org/


