

Data-Sharing Could Ease 'Back-to-School' for Foster Children

Forum Column

By Miriam Aroni Krinsky

As schools open their doors for another academic year, children typically experience some level of uncertainty and trepidation. New people, new subjects and new environments are in store, and changes are never easy.

But for the tens of thousands of foster children in California, the challenges of a new school year can be that much more daunting, extending far beyond dealing with a new teacher or a different classroom.

Many have no idea where or with whom they will live during the next school year; others don't know when or whether they will return to parents, a familiar home environment or the comfort of siblings.

One former foster youth told the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, "I remember every day I would come home from school, I would just see if my stuff was packed or what - that was the first thing I would go check for."

Foster children often move from placement to placement, on average four times while they are under our charge and part of our child welfare system. As these moves occur, school disruptions are inevitable; foster youth pass through, on average, nine schools before they leave the system. Each time a child moves, he or she must come to grips not just with new schools and classmates but also with altered living arrangements and unfamiliar neighborhoods, not to mention the typical adjustments encountered by other youth.

The fallout from this life in motion can be debilitating. When children from intact families move to a new school, studies show that they drop six months behind their classmates academically. But foster youth facing repeated relocations - often entirely on their own - are that much more disadvantaged.

Children living in foster care often miss out on the essential building blocks of a good education. As a result, 75 percent of our youth in foster care are working below grade level, 35 percent are in special-education classes, 46 percent do not complete high school and as few as 15 percent take any college-level classes. Without a good education, the future can look bleak.

As foster children are shifted from one placement to another, sometimes with little or no notice, they often are forced to stuff their clothing and other belongings into garbage bags or other makeshift containers. The resulting message these children frequently perceive is that they, too, are throwaways. Unfortunately, many respond by giving up and dropping out.

The Backpack Drive, a project created and enthusiastically run by the Barristers organization of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, with support from the Los Angeles Superior Court along with the Children's Law Center, tries to correct this misperception and remove at least some of the stigma for foster youth moving into new school situations.

During the past few months, attorneys, judges, businesses and individuals throughout Los Angeles have contributed a thousand backpacks that are being filled with school supplies to help children living in foster care get off to a more positive start for the coming school year. The Backpack Drive helps provide these children with something they can keep permanently to carry some of their valued personal possessions as they pack and repack.

This is a wonderful initiative that empowers foster youth by providing them with essential items that otherwise might not be part of their back-to-school preparation. Sadly, however, even this gesture falls far short of ensuring that the abused and neglected children under our protection have a sense that they are

special and that someone genuinely cares about their welfare.

For many foster children, school is merely a transitory experience, when instead it could be a unique opportunity to find stability and become the one constant environment in a turbulent life - a place where they could be nurtured and supported by peers and teachers and have a chance to develop a positive self-image

Although academic success may be a foster child's best hope for the future, our community's institutions too often raise barriers instead of working in partnership to bring about the best possible educational outcomes. The leadership of the institutions at a state level that collectively "parent" youth in foster care have no formal mechanism to come together, work through the challenges these youth face or engage in information sharing.

When systems guard rather than share crucially important data, the fragmented flow of information that results can significantly impede scholastic achievement for foster youth.

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care aptly observed, "Assuring child safety, permanence and well being is a shared responsibility, requiring collaboration and coordination across publicly financed systems." Yet we continue to operate systemically in a piecemeal fashion in addressing the disparate requirements and hurdles of agencies and organizations that remain unconnected.

These barriers are typified by the obstacles faced in sharing educational records of foster youth. The Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act protects the privacy of parents and students by specifying that parents have the right not to have education records released to third parties without their written consent.

Although California law expressly recognizes that child welfare agencies act in the role of the parent for foster youth and are responsible for providing for their educational needs, and although our state's federal review faulted the state for not doing enough to attend to the educational needs and attainment of youth in foster care, a few major school districts in the state continue to resist the sharing of critical information unless the biological parents provide written consent or there is a specific court order to that effect.

This position can result in extremely detrimental outcomes for children living in foster care. When the Department of Children and Family Services, the court and child advocates lack access to basic academic information, all parts of the system are severely hindered in fulfilling their legal obligation to the child, and it becomes difficult to ensure that foster youth are receiving an adequate education.

Despite these stumbling blocks, progress is being made, as well. The state Department of Social Services, under the leadership of Director Dennis Boyle, has become engaged in addressing barriers to educational information sharing and in crafting more sensible solutions to this problem. Moreover, the establishment of the Los Angeles Education Coordinating Council is a significant step in getting systems to work in coordination.

Fifty years ago, in the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court underscored the critical role that education plays in crafting a successful path to adulthood. The court explained, "It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to achieve in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education."

For youth in our foster care system, who too often have no anchor and no mentor or dependable family ties, a solid and stable education is even more essential.

All segments of our community must join forces and renew their commitment to break the cycle of abuse, neglect and despair that too many of

our youth encounter. We must redouble our efforts to raise an educated generation so that all of our children will be ready to face the future with confidence.

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