



Research on the Educational Experiences of Dependent and Delinquent Youth

A Review of Recent Literature and Questions for the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council

by

Jacquelyn McCroskey, D.S.W., and Carrie Watson, Ph.D.

April 2005

Of the over 500,000 foster and probation youth in the United States, 62,361 currently live in Los Angeles County. Recent figures suggest that family involvement in the child welfare system has decreased considerably since its height in the late 1990s¹. In 2002, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Families (DCFS) reported that 30,785 children lived in out-of-home care, a significant decrease from 1999 when 48,613 were living in foster-care settings, including foster family care, group homes, and relative homes. As of January 2005, DCFS was serving a total of 39,212 children, including both those living in out-of-home care and those who remained at home with their families under departmental supervision². In contrast, according to the Los Angeles County Probation Department, the number of juveniles involved in the County's delinquency system increased by over 10 percent between 2002, when there were 21,406 juvenile probationers, and 2003, when there were 23,149³.

While little is known about the specific educational experiences of these 62,361 children and youth, a comprehensive review of the literature may help to inform the decisions that lie ahead for the County's new Education Coordinating Council⁴. This briefing paper highlights research findings about the educational performance of maltreated children and delinquent youth, identifying key issues that may inform the ongoing deliberations of the Council. It concludes with a preliminary list of questions based on this research that may warrant further discussion among members of the Council, its Planning Committee, working groups, and subcommittees⁵.

Research Findings

Children in Foster Care

Nationally, it is estimated that 30 to 60 percent of foster youth graduate from high school^{6,7}, but fewer than 5 percent graduate from college⁸. Research has shown that foster youth are twice as likely as non-foster youth to repeat a grade⁷. Between 33 and 50 percent perform below grade level^{9,10}, and 25 to 33 percent are enrolled in special education^{7,9}. A recent study reported that foster youth who completed the tenth or eleventh grade were reading, on average, at a seventh-grade level^{11,12}.

One study found that students' grade point average (GPA) improved somewhat after they were placed in foster care, although improvements were marginal; Rosenthal and Glass reported that GPAs of foster youth averaged 1.22 before entering care and increased to 1.38 two and a half years after entering care¹³. Other researchers have suggested that some of these problems in educational performance may be attributed to the traumatic family experiences that led to the need for protective services¹⁴, as well as to under-performing schools in the home communities of these children and youth^{15,16}.

Studies have also found that some of the possible explanations for poor school performance—such as length of time in care, age at entry, and caseworker turnover—do not appear to affect achievement^{7,17,18}. Researchers have, however, identified changes in school placement as contributing to decreased test scores and performance^{19,17}. Rogers (1991) found a loss of approximately four to six months of learning with each change in school placement²⁰. The complicated demands of being in foster care (court dates, caseworker appointments, doctor visits, and so on) may also contribute to attendance problems in school¹⁸.

Clearly, children dealing with abuse and neglect, trauma, loss, and chaotic family situations can have many reasons for not focusing on school. A number of researchers have reported on the psychological, behavioral, and social effects of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence^{21,22,23,24,25}. At least one study has also addressed the physiological effects of maltreatment; in that study, the brain volumes of maltreated children were significantly smaller than those of the non-maltreated group, and the brains of more traumatized children showed greater deficits²³. Fortunately, researchers are also beginning to focus on enhancing the well-being of abused and neglected children, highlighting treatment programs and parenting approaches that can augment children's natural resilience and ability to overcome even the worst of circumstances²⁶.

Educational Risks for Neglected Children

A growing body of research points to neglect as the major cause of academic difficulties among maltreated children^{27,28}. Neglect allegations alone generally account for a substantial proportion of all child abuse referrals, and neglect may also play a role even when the primary reason for referral was physical or sexual abuse. In October 2003, the single largest category of maltreatment allegations in Los Angeles County was severe neglect, accounting for 26 percent of all referrals²⁹. (When all categories related to neglect are added together, the total is over 60 percent of referrals³⁰.) Neglect can have a devastating effect on young children especially, limiting bonding and attachment between parent and child, decreasing the interpersonal transactions that

stimulate brain development, and decreasing the child's potential for physical, social, and cognitive development.

Research has also found that children who are neglected have an even greater risk of becoming delinquent than those who are physically abused^{28,31}. For example, Zingraff et al. (1994) demonstrated the mediating effect of good school performance on the maltreatment-delinquency relationship, showing a significantly reduced risk of delinquency for physically abused children who did well in school, but only slight reductions for neglected children²⁸.

Delinquent Youth

Perhaps because delinquent youth are often older than those in the child welfare system, with histories of acting out, behavior problems, and conflict, on average they perform even more poorly in school. Researchers have found that only 20 to 40 percent earn a diploma or GED^{32,33}, 50 percent perform below grade level³⁴, and over 40 percent may be enrolled in special education³⁵. One study found that average reading scores for probationers were at about the fifth-grade level³⁶. Researchers have also documented more school absences and disciplinary actions for delinquent youth^{28,37}.

Crossover between Dependency and Delinquency Systems

Among the youth most at risk for educational failure are those who move back and forth between the dependency and delinquency systems. Victimized as children, unable to resolve family problems or find alternative families, some youth escalate their acting-out behaviors, get arrested, and end up labeled as criminals themselves. Researchers who have followed samples of maltreated children to examine subsequent criminal behaviors have shown that these children do indeed face increased risks of juvenile delinquency and adult crime, although maltreatment alone does not determine later criminal behaviors^{38,39,40}. For example, Widom (1991) pointed out that while most of the abused and neglected children in her sample overcame their early disadvantages, the subset of children who were most likely to commit crimes, both as juveniles and as adults, were those whose difficult behavior problems prevented bonding or attachment in foster care, leading to a series of failed relationships in multiple placements⁴⁰.

Morris and Freundlich report in their 2004 review of this literature³⁹ that children in the child welfare system have a significantly higher likelihood of juvenile arrest, more arrests for violent crimes, and more self-reports of delinquent behavior than non-maltreated children. At the same time, the effects of involvement in the public child welfare system can mean that these children face more scrutiny and are more likely to be reported by their caregivers. For example, English, Widom, and Brandford (2001) reported that maltreated children placed in non-relative foster care were more likely to be arrested as juveniles than those remaining at home or placed with relatives³⁸.

Studies have also documented gender differences. While placement instability in foster care was correlated with delinquency for boys, placement alone predicted delinquency for girls⁴¹. Jonson-Reid and Barth (2003) reported that girls with prior spells in foster care had much higher rates of entry into the California Youth Authority (ten times higher than the general population) than boys (five times higher than the general population)⁴².

Key Issues for the Education Coordinating Council

Poverty, Race, and Ethnicity

Research shows that educational outcomes for foster youth and students of color from poor socioeconomic backgrounds are comparable^{7,17,16}. In one study that controlled for race, ethnicity, and poverty, the advantage for non-foster youth versus youth in foster care was about one half of a school year¹⁶. This finding suggests that it should be possible for the ECC to make a real difference in the lives of foster youth by paying attention to school stability, encouraging attendance, and highlighting educational outcomes as an important aspect of overall well-being for all children and youth. The importance of high-quality child care and preschool for young children involved in the protective services system and for the preschool-age children of probationers should receive special attention. The corollary is, of course, that more multi-institutional and community-based partnerships are needed to assure that early childhood education and schools are performing well for all of our children.

School Violence

The issue of violence in and around schools is one of great concern in communities around the country. Efforts to define the relative contributions of community and family, plus socioeconomic and other variables, to increasing patterns of school violence are relatively new, but there is some evidence that these factors are inter-related and cannot be effectively addressed in isolation⁴³. Ignorance or misperceptions of the actual experiences of youth clearly do not help families or professionals protect youth or deal effectively with their problems. For example, a 1999 study by Guterman and Cameron⁴⁴ reported that, while well aware of allegations of abuse or neglect, therapists treating youth in group homes did not necessarily know about their experiences with domestic violence or their exposure to violence at school or in the community—in many cases because they had not asked these questions.

While there are no easy answers, research and local experience suggest some starting points for the ECC. Efforts have begun to match data across school districts, DCFS, and the Probation Department to determine which schools have the greatest numbers of foster and probation youth. These data should help the ECC focus its efforts, and should encourage the agencies caring for these children to coordinate services and provide additional resources where needed. For example, the Probation Department has reported that stationing juvenile probation officers on high school campuses resulted in better communication, increased attendance, and higher educational performance. DCFS is working with the Los Angeles Unified School District to resume the out-stationing of social workers on school campuses, a practice that showed positive results in earlier pilot tests.

Child Developmental Considerations and Special Education

Considerable research in the field of early childhood education has shown that high-quality programs can have lifetime benefits for young children. As Schweinhart and Weikert's (1993) study⁴⁵ of the Perry Preschool demonstrates, early childhood education combined with in-home family visits increases children's motivation to succeed in school, leading to better performance, less need for special education, and higher literacy at high school graduation. Lifetime benefits include economic success, less use of government benefits, less crime, and other personal bene-

fits in terms of family and social success. In fact, the RAND Corporation recently conducted a study that found that, by serving one age cohort in a single year only, California would receive a financial benefit of \$2.7 billion resulting from reduced costs to the education, child welfare, and justice systems; increased earnings; and fewer incidents of child abuse and crime⁴⁶.

A number of other studies have also shown that high-quality early childhood development programs can significantly improve school achievement and decrease the need for special education services²³. One report that only 18 percent of foster youth actually attend preschool⁴⁷ is disturbing in this regard. The fact is hardly surprising, though, since the child welfare system has few policies and little encouragement for caseworkers or families to locate or finance high-quality child care⁴⁸. For example, 80 percent of a sample of foster parents who had not enrolled their foster children in preschool reported that no one had ever asked them to⁴⁷.

These findings suggest that the ECC could make a significant difference in the lives of young children whose families are involved in the child welfare and probation systems by promoting, encouraging, and helping to fund access to high-quality early childhood education programs. Likewise, adolescent parents who are involved in both systems should be helped to find high-quality early childhood education programs for their young children—preferably programs that encourage family involvement and help young parents learn how to reinforce learning and stimulate their child’s development.

Evidence-Based Programs and Best Practices

A number of intervention strategies have shown great promise for at-risk children and families. For example, David Olds’ nurse home-visiting program targets first-time mothers who meet specific eligibility criteria, and is provided from pregnancy through the child’s second birthday. Longitudinal follow-up over more than 15 years has demonstrated many long-term benefits, including reductions in child maltreatment⁴⁹.

Overall, probably the most promising intervention for reducing delinquent behavior is Multisystemic Therapy (MST), a whole-family-centered counseling and intervention program similar to many models of family preservation. Studies have consistently shown that MST has produced long-lasting effects such as 70 percent reductions in re-arrests, 64 percent fewer out-of-home placements, and significantly decreased mental health problems in chronic and violent juvenile offenders. MST is particularly effective in creating stronger family-school linkages that are associated with better school outcomes for these youth⁵⁰.

For school-age children, another method for closing the achievement gap is access to summer or off-session learning enrichment opportunities. Studies show that while lower-income and middle-income students learn at the same rate throughout the school year, middle-income students tend to continue their reading improvement during the summer, while lower-income students lose an average of two months in reading skills⁵¹. Making summer or off-session enhancement experiences available to foster and probation youth, as well as to other lower-income students, could go a long way to minimizing this achievement gap.

Interventions aimed at developing feelings of competency and a sense of control over one’s own life are critical, especially in early adolescence²⁶, and the incorporation of peer-led activities can encourage both leadership and participation⁵². The program components found to be the most

effective for raising educational achievement and graduation rates for these youth, in addition to summer learning activities, are tutoring, mentoring, employment programs, and money management and budgeting training^{8,53}.

Systems Issues

The sheer size of Los Angeles County hinders effective communication and collaboration across all the systems that families with dependent and delinquent children may need to deal with. Collaborative approaches to working with youth as soon as they enter the child welfare system could help to eliminate duplicative assessments, create better communication across systems, allow youth access to the most comprehensive care available, and direct them on a path toward better outcomes. The premise of the ECC is that working together will not only improve outcomes overall, but will allow each system to carry out its own responsibilities more effectively. Even with maximum communication and coordination, however, circumstances are bound to arise when special cross-system liaisons will be needed. At least one study has reported that such liaisons currently working in the schools are helpful because of their ability to troubleshoot issues involving multiple systems¹⁸.

Researchers have reported that 71 percent of foster youth¹⁵ and 60 percent of probation youth⁵⁴ have been diagnosed with emotional disturbances. Others suggest that some of these youth may only be exhibiting temporary dysfunctional behaviors in response to the trauma of being removed from their families^{16,55}. Such misdiagnoses may lead to inappropriate placement in special education classes⁹. On the other hand, some foster youth with emotional disorders may initially appear to be symptom-free, thereby decreasing their chances of receiving the treatment they need²⁶ while increasing their likelihood of experiencing a failed placement. Learning disabilities may also go undiagnosed, leaving youth struggling just to keep up¹⁸. These issues highlight the importance of a collaborative effort that ensures that youth are getting the proper services they need across systems.

Parent Involvement and Foster Care

When surveyed, the majority of foster youth say that they hope to graduate from college someday¹¹, yet many of them are not familiar with what classes they need to take⁴⁸ or how to secure financial aid⁵⁶. Some studies have suggested that caseworkers, foster parents, and others working with these youth typically do not urge them to plan for or work toward college¹⁹. Blome (1997) found that foster youth performed comparably to non-foster youth, but were significantly less likely to be enrolled in college preparatory classes and more likely to be enrolled in vocational programs⁶. One study found that, in a matched sample of foster youth and low-income non-foster youth who had dropped out of high school, only 27 percent of foster youth had enrolled in a GED program, compared to 75 percent of non-foster youth, yet foster youth were significantly more likely to be enrolled in government-funded job training programs¹⁷. In general, no clear expectations exist for foster and probation youth to succeed academically and attend college. The ECC could work to change this by raising the bar as to what is considered “successful” for these youth, thereby encouraging them to believe in their own ability to achieve.

Questions for the ECC

1. What can be done to address the effects of neglect on academic performance?
2. What is known about the educational experiences of system crossover (or 300/600) youth in Los Angeles County? Are there any differences between the experiences of girls and boys?
3. What is known about correlations between school stability and placement stability for dependent and delinquent youth in Los Angeles County?
4. What can be done to ensure enrollment in school, in appropriate placements, and in appropriate classes?
5. To what extent are dependent and delinquent youth enrolled in schools reporting high levels of school violence?
6. What can be done to highlight the importance of early childhood education for young children in the child welfare system, and for the children of teen parents in both systems?
7. What can be done to establish ongoing discussions among child welfare, probation, and early childhood education professionals to assure that our most vulnerable young children have access to high-quality child care?
8. What can be done to make summer or off-session enhancement programs available? What can be done to increase enrollment in weekend and after-school educational support programs during the school year?
9. What can be done to address mental health services as soon as youth enter care, even if the youth appear to be symptom-free?
10. What can be done to raise the educational expectations of those working with or caring for these youth?

Notes

¹ Children's Planning Council (2004). Los Angeles County 2004 Children's ScoreCard. Healthy families and income: Key areas of child well-being for school readiness and success. Los Angeles, CA: author.

² Department of Children and Families (2005). Data abstract, January 2005.

³ County of Los Angeles Chief Administrative Office (2005). *County of Los Angeles progress report 2004*. Los Angeles, CA: author.

⁴ On November 3, 2004, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors established the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council as a cross-jurisdictional body where schools, County departments, courts, advocates, and leaders of the not-for-profit sector could work together to improve educational outcomes for foster and probation youth.

- ⁵ This is the first in a set of working papers designed to inform the Council's work plan, its "blueprint" for improving educational performance, and its recommendations to the Board of Supervisors and other key entities.
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