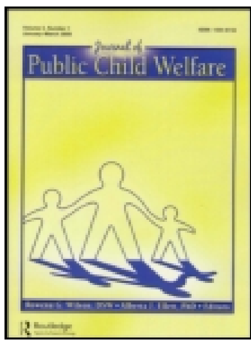
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Educational Services for Children in Foster Care: Common and Contrasting Perspectives of Child Welfare and Education Stakeholders

Susan Stone
Amy D'Andrade
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ABSTRACT. Most literature on the education of foster youth focuses on their individual outcomes and characteristics. A small body of literature documents a lack of collaboration between the child welfare and education systems. This study explores commonalities and differences in perspectives between child welfare and education system stakeholders. It draws on findings from a multi-county exploratory study on educational services for foster youth. The findings in this study identify several systemic barriers including placement instability within the child welfare system, limited financial resources of schools, and poor interagency communication. In addition, differences in the perceptions of school and child welfare agency personnel regarding the needs of foster children in school, problems encountered in enrolling children in school, and the role and motives of each agency in addressing these needs and problems are identified. These differences point to both the challenges

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involved in improving communications and collaboration between the two systems, as well as the opportunities to improve educational services to children in foster care. doi:10.1300/J479v01n02_04 *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>* *© 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Education, foster care, child welfare

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Child welfare advocates and policymakers alike express deep concern that the educational needs of foster children are unmet both by the child welfare and education systems (Seyfried, Pecora, Downs, Levine & Emerson, 2000; Yu, Day & Williams, 2002). While there are several studies describing the poor academic performance of foster children, there are relatively fewer studies that move beyond the experiences and characteristics of individual children to look at child welfare and school systemic factors that may contribute to this pattern of academic difficulty. Existent qualitative research, drawing on the experience of foster children, teachers and child welfare workers, documents adversarial and uncooperative relationships between education and child welfare professionals (Altschuler, 2003). Findings such as these suggest the importance of further elaboration of systems-level barriers. Understanding these barriers is highly relevant in light of the Adoption and Safe Families Act ([P.L.] 105-89) which includes child educational progress as an outcome on which state performance will be evaluated. A recent report of the National Conference of State Legislatures suggests that only 11 states have "substantively achieved" outcomes related to education (Christian, 2003).

We present results from an exploratory, multi-county qualitative study in California designed to identify attributes of the child welfare and education systems that may enhance or impede the educational experiences of foster youth. Building on prior research, we focus on reports from experienced and administrative stakeholders representing each system. We also compared data generated from stakeholder interviews with supplementary telephone surveys of 303 foster parents.

EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF FOSTER CHILDREN

Much of what we know about the academic performance of children in foster care emerges from either descriptive studies of localized samples of foster children, secondary analyses of large-scale survey

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data, and purposive retrospective or longitudinal studies. In general, the studies indicate that foster children often have basic academic skill deficits, cognitive lags and behavior problems when compared with other "at-risk" peers or their peers in the general population (Dubowitz & Sawyer, 1994; Dubowitz, Zuravin, Starr, Fiegelman, & Harrington, 1993; Evans, 2001; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994; Stein, 1997). Retrospective studies of young adults generally find that adults with a history of foster placement were less likely than the general population to complete high school or an equivalent (Barth, 1990; Dumaret, Coppel-Batsch, & Courand, 1997), but had high school completion rates equal to those living below the poverty level (Cook, 1994). Prospective longitudinal studies find that about 60% receive high school diplomas (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stallings, 1996; Courtney, Pillavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001). While these findings clearly describe the academic vulnerability of current and former foster youth, there is also an accumulating body of evidence that begins to inform the question of why foster youth may be academically vulnerable. These data suggest that child welfare and educational system characteristics may play a significant role.

Factors Associated with the Child Welfare System

Placement Stability. Clinical, case-based research has identified the instability of foster care placements as important factors impacting a child's progress in school (Altschuler, 1997; Ayasse, 1995), primarily as a result of transferring from one school to another (Yu et al., 2002). Others raise concern that this instability may create additional behavioral and/or socio-emotional problems that interfere with foster children's ability to engage in school work (Ayasse, 1995). Three recent reports (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004) analyze data generated from linkages of school system data with child welfare archives also implicate placement instability. Conger and Rebeck (2001) found that placement transfers were associated with an increased likelihood of school transfers and decreased attendance within a year after placement. However, they did not appear to be related to short or long-term test scores, controlling for prior performance (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Conger & Rebeck, 2001). In addition, although the timing is unclear, others have found associations between the number of placements and the existence of skill delays and expulsions (Zima et al., 2000).

Recent evidence suggests that the transitions into and out of foster care may also impact the academic performance of youth (Conger &

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Rebeck, 2001). Among sixth and eighth graders, entering foster care within the past year is associated with lower test scores. However, third and sixth grade children who have been in foster care, for at least a year, achieved higher test scores. Children who left care prior to the end of a semester had lower rates of attendance. Length of time in care was related to increased probability of school transfers. Foster children may also experience more school mobility, a known educational risk factor (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003; Smithgall et al., 2004).

System Capacities. Small-scale qualitative and clinical studies suggest that there are unique logistical and procedural difficulties (record transfer, immunization) related to school enrollment after a child enters foster care or when they change placements (Altschuler, 2003; 1997; Ayasse, 1995; Powers & Stotland, 2002). Tracking of educational outcomes among children in foster care has only recently been undertaken and only in some jurisdictions (Seyfried et al., 2000). Moreover, intervention around educational issues has not been perceived as a priority among child welfare workers (Jackson, 1994).

Factors Associated with Schools

Special Education. Data from a variety of local sources confirm that approximately 30% of children in foster care are placed in special education versus about 15% of their non-foster counterparts (Goerge, Voorhis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992; Hill, Hayden, Laken, Menke, & Amado, 1990). Goerge et al.'s analysis found that the distribution of handicapping conditions of foster children in Illinois was different from the general special education population (1992). Foster children were more likely to be classified as emotionally disturbed or developmentally disabled than learning disabled or physically disabled; an association was also found between children in group or residential placement and those enrolled in special education. Research in California produced roughly similar results in that foster children were overrepresented in classes for the emotionally disturbed and underrepresented in classes for speech and language impaired children, compared with the general population. Of those labeled emotionally disturbed, children placed in group homes were considerably overrepresented (41%) relative to other foster youth (9%) and the general special education population (3%). However, the most common disability for both foster and non-foster youth was learning disabilities (55%) (Parrish et al., 2001). Other studies have found that both learning disabilities and emotional disturbances are typical handicapping conditions of foster children (e.g., Stein, 1997).

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These findings raise questions about how well foster children are being served in educational settings. Research on academic performance (Halpern & Burley, 2001) and behavioral status (Smucker, Kauffman, & Ball, 1996) confirm that special education placement status among foster youth is generally appropriate. Moreover, children in foster placements and in special education performed similarly to their non-foster counterparts in special education (Burley & Halpern, 2001).

On the other hand, Altschuler (2003) suggests that certain conflicts may arise in the overall process for developing and implementing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that is required by law for a child to receive special education services. The IEP process is to be a collaborative and fact-finding process as a way of determining the most appropriate education. However, child welfare workers complain that this information gathering process can infringe on a child and family's confidentiality. It is also unclear if foster parents or child welfare workers have adequate knowledge or time to help foster children navigate the educational system. Since it is not uncommon for a foster child to change foster placements and schools after comprehensive assessments and accommodations are made, public school personnel may be less willing to work with child welfare workers in directing foster youth to special educational services. While these studies raise issues about communications between child welfare and education personnel, the research is still too limited to fully capture the magnitude of any one of these issues.

In summary, there is little research that helps specifically elucidate the child welfare and education systemic barriers that may influence the educational experiences of foster children. This study was designed to address this gap by exploring two questions that emerge from the current literature: (1) How do representatives from child welfare and education institutions characterize the educational issues faced by foster children; and (2) How do they understand the role of each institution in addressing these issues? We add to existent research by focusing on reports of child welfare and educational personnel working at multiple organizational levels in each of these systems.

METHODS

The data were generated in Spring 2001 as part of a multi-county exploratory study that focused on nine Northern California counties in the San Francisco Bay Area. The data sources included stakeholders from the child welfare and education systems serving children in these areas. We

drew on qualitative research methods to analyze these data. In addition, where possible, we compared data generated from county stakeholders with a supplementary data set of telephone surveys of 303 foster parents.

Study Context

Because local education agencies have varying practices, it is important to briefly characterize the educational context of the study with a general description of the way in which educational services are delivered to foster children in California. When children are removed from their biological parents due to abuse or neglect and placed in foster care, the foster parent with whom the child is placed (or, if the child is placed in a group home, a staff member) enrolls the child in school. Often, though not always, the child is enrolling in a school other than the one he or she attended while living with his or her birth parents. The new school must contact the old school and request that the child's education records (cumulative file) are forwarded to the new school. The child's school record is particularly important when the child receives special education services through an "Individualized Educational Plan" (IEP). A new foster parent caregiver may be unaware of the specific educational needs of the child, yet the new school needs this information before the child can be placed in the appropriate classroom setting and receive the appropriate services. If a child is believed to need special education services but is not yet receiving them, an IEP meeting is requested. Generally attended by the teacher, parent or guardian, and school psychologist, the goal of the IEP meeting is to assess the need or arrange for special services needed by the child to succeed academically along with a plan for the delivery of those services. If the birth parent or guardian of the child is not available to attend the meeting and authorize any special services, the educational rights of that parent may be terminated by court decree. Then the school district may assign an "educational surrogate" to perform these tasks. While Welfare and Institutions Code 361(a) of California law forbids the assignment of an educational surrogate who has a conflict of interest in representing the child, it also specifies that foster parents should not be considered to have a conflict of interest solely because they are compensated for their services. In addition, California Rule of Court 1499 (2005) asserts that "the court should consider appointing a responsible adult relative, non-relative extended family member, foster parent, family friend, mentor, or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) as the educational representative if one is available and willing to serve" (California Rules of Court, 2005).

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Data Sources and Collection Methods

The primary data sources within each county were interviews with child welfare and educational system personnel, including experienced practitioners, supervisors, and administrators. We also compared data with relevant survey results generated from a sample of foster parents from each of the nine counties to assess the degree to which perceptions of child welfare and education personnel working at broader systemic levels were consistent with the day-to-day experience of foster parents. Specifically, foster parents responded to four survey items related to school changes experienced by their foster children, enrollment in school, the IEP process and their handling of IEP-related documents. We present frequencies of these items to characterize foster parent experience in light of stakeholder interview responses.

Stakeholder Interviews. We selected a purposive sample of educators and child welfare personnel. Child welfare directors in each of the nine study counties suggested names of potential participants within their county. Directors were asked to identify both education and child welfare personnel who they felt had the most knowledge of educational issues faced by foster children. Potential participants were contacted through telephone calls to discuss the study, and faxed interview questions to prepare for face-to-face interviews. Educational representatives who agreed to participate included one director of a county Office of Education, a regional special education director, two teachers (one from each of special education and regular education), a principal, a district superintendent and two "educational liaison" employed by the school district, representing eight of the nine counties. All held masters degrees and had over 10 years of experience. The child welfare representatives included four child welfare agency directors, one child welfare supervisor, and an "education services coordinator" employed by a child welfare agency, representing six of the nine counties. All participants held MSW degrees and at least 10 years of experience (see Table 1 for a summary of participants).

Interview Content and Procedures. Using the literature as a guide, we focused interview questions on issues related to placement stability (enrollment, continuity of services), as well as special education processes and placements. In addition, stakeholders were asked to identify barriers and suggest possible changes that could be made. These semi-structured interviews generally took about an hour to complete. Each interview was conducted face to face with the study director and a graduate student research assistant. Both took extensive notes that were transcribed for analysis and review. The interviews with participants

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TABLE 1. County Interview Participants by Stakeholder Group and Background

Education Participants	#	Child Welfare Participants	#
Director of County Office of Education	1	Agency Directors	4
Regular and Special Education Teachers	2	Supervisor	1
School Counselor	1	Education Services Coordinator	1
Principal	1		
Educational Liaison	2		
Superintendent	1		
Regional Special Education Director	1		
TOTAL	8		6

were recorded by hand rather than tape-recorded. However, because notes were quite detailed, and as two researchers attended each interview, these notes could be compared to ensure that the statements or beliefs attributed to a participant were clearly identified.

Telephone Surveys With Foster Parents. A randomly selected sample of approximately 1485 (165 from each of nine counties) cases was selected from a public child welfare database (Center for Social Services Research at the University of California at Berkeley). Out of these 1485 cases, a total of 1082 cases included current address information. After a series of mailings and phone calls to foster parents in order to explain the study and gain consent, a total of 303 (or 28% of the original sample of 1082) were actually surveyed. The interviews included information about child characteristics, placement characteristics, birth parent and foster parent background, and information about school enrollment and performance, and special education involvement.

Analytic Strategy

Using the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Glauser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), notes were grouped by stakeholder type and read, reviewed, and analyzed. This process included a search for themes and patterns across and within these groups as well as the identification of systemic problems between agencies and schools that could be contributing to foster children's educational difficulties. We focused on thematic similarities and differences that were generated from participants across these two systems.

When a theme was identified, data were reviewed again to determine if the theme was consistent with data previously reviewed. The themes were repeatedly revised and refined until a saturation point was reached and no new themes emerged.

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FINDINGS

Typical Educational Discontinuities for Foster Children

As a whole, both child welfare and education participants described several different ways that a child's foster care status can complicate or delay typical educational processes. The child's previous school may not be known, either because the birth parents are unavailable or uncooperative, and/or the foster parent has not been informed of the child's school history. Occasionally, a child entering foster care has never been to school before, or (more often) has not been attending school for a considerable amount of time. In this case, either there is no school record to forward, or else an out-of-date record must be tracked down and forwarded. If no documentation of immunization can be located, the child may need to obtain a new set of immunizations before beginning school, even if the child has already been immunized.

For children previously receiving special education services, the placement in an appropriate classroom can be delayed if the cumulative record is slow to arrive, as the new school may not be sure of the best classroom environment. Even if the educational services needed by the child are known, the new school may not have the services available on site or appropriate classroom availability. In such cases, children need to wait until an appropriate classroom is available or they need to be transferred to a different school with an appropriate classroom available. If the child has been out of school for some time, a meeting to create a new IEP must be arranged and can take several weeks to complete. Confusion can arise regarding whether a birth parent's educational rights have been or should be terminated, and who can or should be identified as an educational surrogate to authorize special education services in the place of the birth parent.

For children who change foster care placements, new placements most often mean a change in schools as well. The new school must repeat the same process of enrollment, transferring records, and placing children in appropriate classes. When children move several times, students can miss large amounts of class time and lose credits as a result.

Some schools fail to give the student credit when only portions of the classes have been completed. In this situation, students potentially fall farther behind in meeting grade-level expectations with every placement change they experience. The children waiting for special education testing at one school can be moved before the testing takes place, whereupon a new request must be made and the waiting starts all over.

Sources of Shared Understanding

Participants held similar perceptions about a number of factors that can intensify educational issues for foster children. First, both education and child welfare personnel described foster children as a highly mobile group and noted that this mobility interrupts educational processes. The high degree of mobility of foster children perceived by both groups of participants was corroborated by phone surveys of foster parents: almost 35% of the sample had experienced three or more moves during their current spell in care, and approximately 12% had five or more.

Second, participants raised concern about labeling children as foster children. Education stakeholders stressed the importance of treating all children similarly, especially in evaluations for special education services. Child welfare stakeholders indicated that this kind of disclosure needed to be weighed carefully, given the needs of the child and to whom this information is disclosed.

Third, both stakeholder groups underscored the importance of educational advocacy for foster children. Both groups indicated that foster parents varied in their capacity to act as educational advocates for children. Foster parents may not have the educational expertise or ability to act as strong advocates for their foster children. Both groups indicated that training efforts would be helpful in clarifying foster parent roles regarding the education of their foster children. In addition, both groups thought Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) were especially effective as educational advocates, given their personal knowledge of foster children and availability for participation in educational planning (e.g., IEP meetings).

Fourth, school and child welfare personnel described problems in the communication and collaboration between the two systems. For example, the restrictions on maintaining confidentiality in each system can limit the type and amount of information that each can share with the other. In addition, child welfare participants noted that collaboration can be very difficult when the goals and focus of each institution are different: "The [child welfare] system is totally devoted to safety, and

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education is not even part of the equation." Both child welfare and education participants noted missing links between the two systems. As one educator noted, "The systems are not coordinated . . . we need to work together . . ."

And finally, both the child welfare and education participants describe schools as financially overburdened and lacking adequate resources to serve children (e.g., lack of certified teachers, qualified psychologists and school counselors). As a result, schools, as a child welfare stakeholder argued "can't do what they are required to do." Funding is particularly problematic for small counties with group homes treating children with emotional and behavioral problems, especially those children placed from outside the county. Education participants from rural school districts felt disproportionately burdened by the special education needs of foster children, and described their ambivalence about spending their district's money on special services for children whose parents do not reside in the area (e.g., "These are not our kids.").

Differences in Perceptions

Although both groups of participants agreed that these complications could occur and cause problems for any individual foster child, their responses differed in three ways: (1) Perceptions of the frequency of these complications, (2) the allocation of the responsibility for problems, and (3) how the needs of foster children are defined.

Differing perceptions of the problem. Child welfare and education stakeholders agreed that the school enrollment process for foster children has few problems. Indeed, only about 12% of the foster caregivers surveyed who had been required to enroll a foster child in school experienced a delay of two weeks or more. However, child welfare personnel noted difficulties and delays involved with the transfer of special education records.

Although both child welfare and school personnel spoke about delays in the provision of special education services, child welfare participants emphasized the problems associated with these record transfers. School personnel acknowledged some delays, due to the limited availability of specialized services and the school vacation breaks that interrupt the scheduling of IEPs and the testing processes. Child welfare stakeholders perceived school personnel as unable to complete assessments and/or unable to provide services within the timeframes set by law. Interestingly, foster parents surveyed indicated that IEP meetings occurred within the legal timeframes for most foster children. For over

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half of the 69 children with IEPs for whom timeframes were known (54%), there were less than 30 days between the request of an IEP and the actual meeting; for another 23% the meeting was held within 2 months of the request and the remaining 23% had delays exceeding 2 months. Approximately, one-third of the children in the telephone survey sample were receiving some form of special education services. Of these, 14% had delays of two weeks or longer in receiving at least one of the services indicated at the IEP meeting.

Child welfare stakeholders perceived delays in receipt of special education services as "reluctance" of schools to provide services (e.g., "If anything happens in six months, it is a miracle"). Education stakeholders attributed these delays to school, district, and especially county variation in special education resources.

Differing perceptions of efforts, responsibilities, and motives. The school personnel emphasized their desire to enroll children and provide services as quickly as possible. They noted that most school personnel go out of their way to help foster children get educational services and credits. Several educators said they would enroll children without records and rely upon the child or parent for whatever information they needed. One participant said that teachers "make up their own rules to help students get credits," even if that action is technically against the rules. The educational participants also noted that they generally allow foster parents to sign forms in IEP meetings, even if they have not been granted surrogate status. They will even place a child in special education without a signature. As one school administrator noted, "We are just trying to get services to kids and don't want anything to stand in the way." Telephone surveys of foster parents indicated that they frequently sign IEPs as parents of the children: for example, 81% of the caregivers of children with IEPs report having signed the IEP as the parent of the child.

In contrast, the child welfare personnel perceive school personnel as deliberately attempting to avoid the provision of services to foster children. The child welfare participants noted that schools are "reluctant" to give services and purposely limit the access to special education services. Such avoidance is understood to be a strategy on the part of schools to preserve scarce resources. One child welfare administrator perceived school personnel as intentionally appointing educational surrogates who lack adequate understanding of the IEP process, giving them the ability to decide which services a child would receive without any outside interference and thereby purposely depriving students of needed services.

Education participants, in turn, thought that child welfare personnel were responsible for unnecessary delays in serving foster children. Social

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workers were assailed for failing to return calls or respond in a timely manner to the concerns of teachers. Foster parents were seen by school personnel as demonstrating a lack of involvement in the education of foster children and failing to follow through with necessary actions to ensure that children received special education services. Similar to the level of distrust voiced by the child welfare administrator who claimed schools purposefully appointed uninformed educational surrogates, one education participant claimed that foster parents advocated for special education designation primarily to qualify the children for additional social service funding that would increase the payment to the caregiver.

Child welfare participants perceived school personnel to be reluctant to invest the time and resources necessary to conduct an IEP meeting, assess the need for services, and deliver services to foster children, on the grounds that these children change schools frequently. School personnel did in fact associate foster care status with being transient, but consistently asserted that foster children are not treated differently than any other children.

Differing views of children's needs. Most school personnel saw no need to identify a child's foster care status in the schools. They believed that all children were (and should be) treated equally. In contrast, several child welfare administrators saw some benefit to identifying foster children in school settings in order to address their vulnerability and their greater need for support and assistance than other children. This view is based on the assumption that the identification of foster children would enable schools to increase their supervision and supports for these children. In contrast, rather than seeing foster children as particularly needy, education personnel consistently stated that foster children generally do not require the level of services provided through an IEP. Acknowledging that foster children do often have greater needs than the general school population, the education participants, nonetheless, asserted these needs generally did not reach the level necessary to justify special education services.

DISCUSSION

Prior research on the educational status and progress of foster children generally focuses on the academic risk of this population as a whole. A limited set of research suggests, based on student, teacher, and foster parent reports, the existence of organizational barriers between the child welfare and education systems, particularly in areas related to school enrollment and special education services (see Altschuler, 2003).

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This study builds upon this existent research by interviewing key stakeholders from both the child welfare and education system in several Northern California counties to explore issues related to organizational barriers more directly.

Child welfare and education stakeholders in this study agreed that the lack of stability experienced by foster children negatively impacts their education. Unfortunately, a child's initial placement in foster care all too often results in a change of schools; a move back to their birth parent or to an adoptive parent can result in another school change. It is likely that these school changes, in addition to those resulting from the moves from one foster home to another, contribute to the perception by school personnel that foster children are transient children. While education stakeholders deny that there is any differential treatment of foster children, child welfare stakeholders expressed concern that the mobility of foster children can contribute to a reduced willingness to invest time and resources to assess the child's needs and provide specialized services.

Results from this study also pinpoint the delivery of special education to foster children as extremely problematic. This is of high significance given the disproportionate usage of these services by this population (see Parrish et al., 2001). Indeed, there appear to be problems in continuity (versus access to) these services given the mobility of foster children. In addition, both child welfare and education professionals indicate there may be a critical group of underserved foster children. These children might not meet thresholds for special education, but may need other supplemental academic and psychosocial supports. It goes without saying that school funding at a level where supportive services could be provided to every child in need would be ideal. However, child welfare personnel need to acquire a better understanding of the nature and intensity of the problems that qualify a child for special education services. Similarly, education personnel need to incorporate into their understanding of the transient nature of foster care a more detailed knowledge of how maltreatment precipitated the need for foster care. While they may not need to know the details of a child's history of abuse, they do need an understanding of the effects of childhood trauma in order to provide additional support and attention for those who do not qualify for special education services.

Programs like the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family initiative, support the process of placing children in the same neighborhood from which they were removed in order to facilitate family visiting, cultural continuity, and strengthen communities (Annie E. Casey, n.d.). Maintaining a stable school placement is another important bene-

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fit of such a practice. While efforts to address the effects of mobility can help reduce the resulting problems, more needs to be done to understand why foster care is so unstable for so many children. Very little is known about why children in foster care move so frequently, and what can be done to improve the situation (James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004).

Other initiatives emphasize increased emphasis on and monitoring of the educational needs of foster children (e.g., Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997) and case recording and review of foster children's health and education status (e.g., Section 475 of the Social Security Act). In addition, a California bill (AB 490) was recently passed to deal with the systemic problems that hamper the educational experiences of foster children (Chapter 862, California Statutes, 2003). It requires schools to accept and give credits for coursework partially completed by students; requires the transfer of records from one school to another to occur within two days of a request; allows county agency representatives access to educational records of students; and permits foster parents to make educational decisions on behalf of the child (without formal designation as the educational surrogate) only when the child is placed with the caregiver in a "planned permanent living arrangement" (as opposed to temporary foster care), and only if the educational rights of the biological parent have been limited by court order. In addition, schools are required to designate a liaison to facilitate the appropriate and timely educational placement of foster children and to assist with issues that arise in school transfers. Finally, it requires that children be allowed to continue in the same school after a placement change, as long as transportation can be arranged by the placing agency (Chapter 862, California Statutes, 2003).

However, while efforts to increase the residential stability of foster children, as well as maintaining and sharing their educational records are important pieces of the puzzle, our findings indicate that these may not be sufficient to meet their educational needs. First, both groups of stakeholders underscored the importance of continuous educational advocacy for foster children, especially for those children in need of or receiving special education services. It is notable that both groups of stakeholders and foster parents identified CASAs as effective in garnering and monitoring educational services for foster children.

Second, our findings confirm prior research about lack of collaboration and trust between child welfare and education systems (e.g., Altschuler, 2003). Perceptions of the participants about problems related to educational service delays appear related to their understanding of the needs of foster children. If foster children are perceived as education-

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ally vulnerable, delays or refusals of services are seen as much more problematic than if foster children are not seen as educationally vulnerable. In addition to perceiving foster children's educational needs differently, personnel from the two agencies may have different perceptions of foster children themselves. The different notions of the needs and/or vulnerability of foster children may be related to the different levels of understanding that school or child welfare employees acquire with respect to a child's history. Child welfare personnel know the degree of maltreatment suffered by the child that led to the need for protective services. Education personnel do not have access to this kind of information and are only aware of the child's classroom behavior.

These differences in understanding contribute to, if not create, the problems of communication or collaboration. In particular, differences in perceptions regarding the degree of effort school personnel expend to provide services to foster children seem likely to exacerbate strained relations between the two systems. The motives and tactics each group attributed to the other convey the depth of the mistrust and misunderstanding that exists between them. This distance needs to be bridged if the two systems are to work effectively together to improve educational service delivery and educational outcomes for children in foster care. Research on inter-agency collaboration finds that high levels of trust, fiscal and organizational resources, and executive level support are critical in maintaining functional collaborations (Bardach, 1998).

Formal structures may be required (e.g., case conferences, interagency task forces, memorandum of understandings) to improve communications and thereby confront and resolve these misunderstandings. Future policy efforts should involve incentives for these systems to develop and maintain collaborations, especially at the local level. Building trust between these institutions would likely facilitate the negotiation of controversial issues impacting foster children, such as the relative benefits of disclosing a child's foster care status and how to join to address the complex needs of these youth. In particular, our findings suggest that topics focused on special education and the unique needs of foster children may be especially fertile areas for cross-training.

Given the limitations of this study, including the relatively small number of participants and its focus on a regional group of counties within one state system, future research efforts should focus more specifically on dynamics of interactions between these systems. Specifically, a focus on alternative models for joining these two complex systems around the educational needs of foster youth under differing local and state contexts appears to be a promising next step in research.

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