

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY'S FosterEd PROGRAM: IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Byron Myers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No individual agency or organization can single-handedly enable children in foster care to succeed in school; improving their education outcomes requires a collaborative approach. The Santa Clara County FosterEd Program is a unique initiative that brings together Family and Children Services, the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, and the Juvenile Court to improve the academic outcomes of children in foster care. The FosterEd program has demonstrated over the last two years, when agencies come together with a shared vision and shared goals, improved outcomes can be achieved.

Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children Services has approximately 1,200 children in foster care, whereas Santa Cruz County Family and Children Services has approximately 300 children in care. Implementing the Santa Cruz County model of the FosterEd program in Santa Clara County would require substantially more financial resources. There are essential elements of the FosterEd model that are discussed in the case study that can be implemented in Santa Clara County that would improve collaboration among system partners and ultimately improve the academic outcomes of foster youth.

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Background

Youth involved in the child welfare system in California and throughout the United States generally demonstrate poor performance on educational outcome measures. These youth are likely to experience academic and behavioral challenges, be in need of special education and related services, have mental health needs that affect academic success and dropout rates before finishing high school. A key factor in such poor outcomes for these youth is the lack of collaboration between the child welfare, education system and significant adults who care about the well-being of the youth.

One can be accustomed to thinking about the educational achievement of vulnerable youth as an issue of the individual child. It is also a school-level and system-level issue raising important questions around how to foster collaboration between the partners aforementioned to enhance the education of the most vulnerable youth. The importance of education for the youth in the child welfare system cannot be overstated. The successful and positive completion of education for the youth in the child welfare system is vital for increasing their chances of successful outcomes.

Youth who are not able to have adequate support or advocates for their educational needs are at risk of unemployment, poverty, having poor self-esteem, becoming recipients of government assistance, emotional and psychosocial difficulties, homelessness, criminality and isolation.¹ The benefits of education are much more than academic attainment, however. Attendance and participation in school offers youth the opportunity to engage in a range of social experiences

that can provide essential emotional development. The consistency of the school environment can be beneficial for youth in foster care because it can be a source of stability when other facets of their lives are unstable. The statistics below illustrate the poor outcomes of California youth in the child welfare system:

- Age 0-5: Only 10% of foster children receive early intervention services. Only 35% of foster children attend pre-school.
- Age 6-13: 75% of foster children perform below grade level. By the 3rd grade, 80% of foster children have had to repeat a grade in school.
- Age 14-17: Only 1 in 5 of the youth is proficient in English by grade 11. Only 1 in 20 is proficient in math by grade 11.
- Age 18-20: 35% of foster youth who attend community college plan to earn an associate degree, only 10% actually graduate.²

Santa Cruz County FosterEd Implementation

FosterEd is a research-based initiative from the National Center for Youth Law that aims to improve the educational outcomes of students in foster care. The program was first developed in Indiana in 2009. In 2011, FosterEd approached leaders of Santa Cruz County Office of Education, Family and Children Services, and Juvenile Court to gauge their interest in partnering on a pilot project. The Santa Cruz County FosterEd program started serving students in 2013. In 2014, FosterEd Santa Cruz County was invited to formally join the Education Equals Partnership as a demonstration county. The FosterEd Santa Cruz Model has four core program components³:

- Ensuring each youth in care is supported by an Educational Champion (EC). With a preference for a biological parent or long-term caregiver. Foster youth often do not

have anyone in their lives championing their education by monitoring their educational progress and their educational needs.

- Ensuring each youth in care is supported by an educational team. A team of adults needs to be engaged to fully support the educational strengths and needs of the youth. The EC is part of the educational team.
- Conducting a proactive assessment of each student's educational strengths and needs. Assessment is made across three primary domains: academic, social capital, and social development.
- Developing and monitoring an educational case plan based on the assessment of the youths strengths and needs.

The team sets goals for the youth and tracks progress.

Integral to making sure the core program components are implemented and followed through on, an Educational Liaison (EL) is assigned to every case. The EL is an employee of the Santa Cruz County Office of Education. The FosterEd program employs three liaisons and a full-time project manager employed by the Office of Education. The project manager provides oversight and support to the EL's while collaborating and supporting the essential partnerships that will make up the educational team. Educational Liaisons work with the Family and Children Services and the Dependency Court to bring cases into the FosterEd program. All children that become dependents of Santa Cruz Juvenile Court are referred to the FosterEd program. The EL stays with the assigned family throughout the dependency case. The three EL's have a caseload of approximately 50 youth each. Two of the three EL's are co-located at the Family and Children Services office which aids in the communication and collaboration with social worker's.

Key to the FosterEd program is different systems coming together to work as a team for the benefit of improving the academic outcomes of the youth being served. FosterEd introduced the Goalbook, an online education case management tool that allows the education teams to set goals for youth, track progress, and communicate about the education progress of the youth. EL's create a Goalbook team for each FosterEd student and invite the key stakeholders to join the online tool.

An important aspect of the FosterEd program is the formation of a county Leadership Team that meets on a quarterly basis and is made up of the Presiding Juvenile Judge, Family and Children Services Program Manager, Human Services Director of Planning and Evaluation, Foster Youth Service Coordinator, and CASA Executive Director. The Leadership Team is responsible for overseeing the development, implementation and sustainability of the program.

Forming the Educational Team

Formation of the Educational Team may be the most important aspect of the FosterEd program. The goal of implementing this approach is to build a network of adult support around each youth to improve collaboration and communication of the team members. The Education Champion, social worker and youth are key members of the team; others members could be: school staff, a Court-Appointed Child Advocate, mental health service providers and other significant adults in the youth's life. Youth will be invited to participate in the team if or when they are age appropriate. The Education Liaison will facilitate an initial meeting during which the team will review the youth's educational needs and collectively set educational goals. Team members will then be able to communicate regarding the goals and provide updates through the Goalbook online program. It is important for the Educational Champion and the social worker to try and

identify team members that will still be accessible if dependency is dismissed. The hope is the Educational Team will continue to meet and support the youth after he/she is no longer in the child welfare system. Once this occurs, it is difficult to observe continued support from service providers whose funding would end upon case dismissal. An important role of the Educational Liaison and the social worker is mentoring and coaching the Education Champion to be able to advocate on behalf of the youth once the case is dismissed. The goal is to build the competency of Education Champions so that they are able to play an increasingly active role in the facilitation of the Educational Team.

Outcomes

In July 2012, the National Center for Youth Law contracted with Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to conduct an external evaluation of the Santa Cruz FosterEd program. RIT employed multiple methods of evaluation involving the collection and analysis of various types of qualitative and quantitative data. In collaboration with FosterEd staff, RTI developed an evaluation matrix dividing indicators into three major sections: infrastructure, practice and outcomes. The Year two evaluation report covered the first two years of the program but with more attention focused on the second year. For the purpose of this case study, I will be focusing on the following outcome indicators⁴:

- 228 youth were served between January 2013 and December 2014.
- 162 youth (94% of active cases) had an Educational Champion by the end of 2014.
- Of 499 goals set by active family teams, 113 goals had been completed.
- Approximately 75% of foster youth who entered FosterEd with less than a 95% attendance rate increased their attendance.

- Median GPA increased from a 2.04, prior to FosterEd, to 2.80 after joining the program.
- 92% of adult team members would recommend FosterEd to other adults in the lives of foster youth.

RTI's Year two evaluation concluded, "Rarely do complex initiatives involving many partners and multiple systems changes achieve so much so early. Major, well thought out adjustments to the model were introduced and refined, and evaluation outcomes data reveal positive findings regarding attendance and GPA, which were consistent with perceptions of adult team members regarding the impact of FosterEd on youth."⁵

Recommendations

After speaking with Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services Project Manager, Marisela Martinez, and Educational Rights Coordinator, Nikki Baccera, it was apparent they were impressed with the amount of collaboration there is between the Santa Cruz Family and Children Services, Office of Education and the Juvenile Court. While Santa Clara County DFCS, The Office of Education and Juvenile Court all recognize that youth in foster care often have poor academic outcomes, there is not a partnership to come up with strategies and programs to improve outcomes as a team.

It would be great if the NCYL had a large grant to start a similar FosterEd program in Santa Clara County. Because Santa Clara County is so much larger than Santa Cruz and has quadruple the number of children in foster care, funding a similar program would be difficult. There are essential aspects of the FosterEd program that could be implemented, without major financial

impact, that could still achieve positive academic outcomes for foster youth. A series of five recommendations are as follows:

1. Santa Clara County DFCS, Santa Clara County Office of Education and Santa Clara County Juvenile Court construct and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreeing to work together in partnership to implement strategies to improve academic outcomes for foster youth. Santa Cruz County has an MOU agreement signed and this document has laid the foundation for the different agencies to be on the same page and know what their responsibilities are to make the FosterEd program successful.
2. Juvenile Court identifies and appoints an Educational Champion for all school-age children. The identification of an Educational Champion, and mentoring and coaching that person to identify and advocate for the child's academic needs, may be the most important aspect of the FosterEd model.
3. The social worker collaborates with and facilitates at least one meeting with school staff and the Educational Champion to come up with academic strengths and weaknesses of the youth.
4. The Juvenile Court reviews the academic goals set by the Educational Champion, social worker and school staff at every Status Review Hearing, and continues to empower and reiterate the important role of the Educational Champion to advocate on behalf of the youth.
5. Formation of a Leadership Team—made up of executive leaders from Santa Clara County DFCS, executive leaders from the Office of Education and the Presiding Juvenile Court Judge— that meets on a quarterly basis. The goal of the Leadership Team is to

continually assess what is working well and what the partners can do to improve collaboration to achieve improved academic outcomes for youth in foster care.

If each of these recommendations are enacted, the fiscal impact would be minimal because the strategies would use existing staff and work within existing system structures.

Conclusion

This case study of the Santa Cruz FosterEd program highlights the importance of systems working together for the benefit of the children in the child welfare system. The collaboration of the Family and Child Services, The Office of Education and Juvenile Court is key to positive outcomes that the FosterEd program is demonstrating. The strong collaborations and endorsement of the FosterEd program have been evident as the partners have worked to identify public funding for the project in order for it to move from a largely grant supported project to a sustained program embedded in a public agency. Santa Clara County Social Services would benefit from taking essential elements of the FosterEd program: identifying an Educational Champion, being more proactive in identifying the academic needs of the youth and having the Juvenile Court focus on the progress of the identified needs during the Court Status Review Hearings. Though the recommendations will not require additional financial allocation, they will require social workers and the Juvenile Court to prioritize the valuable resource of time to focus on the educational needs of all the youth in foster care to improve outcomes so they can grow into productive adults.

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