
Caregivers, School Liaisons, and Agency Advocates Speak Out about the Educational Needs of Children and Youths in Foster Care

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Children in foster care comprise a population of students at great risk for school failure. The child welfare agency, schools, and home must all work together to provide the services and supports required to achieve better results. The purpose of this study was to conduct focus groups with participants from each sector to discuss their views on the educational problems and needs of students in foster care and their recommendations for what is needed to improve the academic prospects of foster students. The article provides details of the distinct themes identified by caregivers, school liaisons, and agency advocates and reveals how each group—while recognizing that foster students face substantial school problems—operates independent of each other and lacks a shared view on what is needed. The article concludes with recommendations for designing a model program that involves all the sectors and provides an arena for strategically addressing barriers to school success.

KEY WORDS: *caregivers; child welfare; educational barriers; foster youth; liaisons*

There are half a million children in our nation who live away from their families and communities because of abuse or neglect at home. A third of the children who enter foster care are younger than age five (Needell et al., 2007). Many of these children experience further trauma when moving from foster home to foster home and from school to school. Although approximately 40 percent of children entering foster care for the first time reunify with their parents in fewer than 12 months, many are trapped in the system and remain in foster care until they “age out” at 18 (Needell et al., 2007). With no place to go, one in four of the youths who age out is incarcerated within two years of leaving foster care, one in five becomes homeless at some time after age 18, only 46 percent complete high school, a mere 3 percent earn a college degree, and just 51 percent have a job at age 21 (Casey Family Programs, 2003).

The academic records of these children reveal students who experience significant difficulties in school (Casey Family Programs, 2003; Courtney & Dworky, 2005; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004). Foster youths are more likely than their peers to struggle academically, socially, and behaviorally in the school setting (Altschuler, 2003). When com-

pared with the school population as a whole, they have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals (Smithgall et al., 2004; Zima et al., 2000); three-fourths perform below grade level (Smithgall et al., 2004); more than half have been retained at least one year in school (Berrick, Courtney, & Barth, 1993); they perform significantly lower on standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics and earn lower grades in these subjects (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003); and they exhibit more internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems, including higher rates of depression, poor social skills, lower adaptive functioning, and more aggression and impulsivity (Harden, 2004).

The result of removing these children from their birth families and having public agencies assume parental rights is public responsibility for the well-being of this population. Under pressure from the Child and Family Services Review process, child welfare (CW) recently expanded its focus on safety and permanency well-being to include educational well-being (Reed & Karpilow, 2002). However, it is clear that CW cannot address the education issues that foster children and youths face alone. No one agency has the resources or expertise to provide the services and supports required to address the needs of this high-risk population. The basic assumption is

that the responsibility for changing the unacceptably low educational performance of foster students is shared. The CW agency, the schools, family members, and the youths themselves must all work together strategically in new ways and with great energy to accelerate, expand, and unify efforts to achieve better results. Only by joining forces can real change be accomplished. In actuality, these groups do not operate in unified ways; rather, they typically operate separately even though the actions of each affect the same children's lives (Altshuler, 2003).

The first step in building such partnerships requires that the key groups come together to voice their views on the educational problems and needs of children in out-of-home care and discuss their recommendations for what needs to be done to improve the educational prospects of this population. This exploratory study solicited, from caregivers and professionals in the education and CW systems, perspectives, based on personal experience, as to what barriers they encountered when dealing with the education of students in foster care and what strategies they used to secure what was necessary to help the children achieve in school.

METHOD

From August 2005 to July 2006, we conducted four focus group sessions to hear from three distinct groups about their experiences with addressing the schooling of children in the foster care system. Two focus groups consisted of foster parents and relative caregivers from two different California counties, one focus group consisted of school district counselors and foster youth liaisons from one of the largest school districts in the nation, and one focus group consisted of education liaisons from CW or advocacy agencies in four California counties. We used the focus group methodology because this research strategy allows ideas to emerge more easily through the interactions and free-flowing discussions among participants. Separate focus group sessions were conducted because the key constituents were presumed to have conflictive relationships that we wanted revealed.

Participants

Caregivers. Social workers from two midsize central California county CW agencies nominated caregivers who had a strong commitment to the children in their custody. These caregivers were identified as experienced foster parents caring for some of

the most troubled children at the time of the foster group session. Social workers first explained the purpose of the focus group meeting to the caregivers (that is, to learn about school problems that their children were experiencing and how the system could better support caregivers) and then asked the caregivers to participate. All but two caregivers who were approached—one in each county—agreed to attend the session. The two who declined expressed interest in participating but were unavailable at the time the meetings were held.

A total of 13 caregivers participated in the two focus groups; seven from one county attended one focus group session, and six from the other county comprised the other group. They cared for a total of 33 children, with one to six children in their homes. All but one caregiver were women. Three were relative caregivers (that is, grandparents or aunt), and six had adopted some or all the children in their care. The children ranged in age from three years to 23 years; some had been cared for since birth (see Table 1).

School Liaisons. Contact was made with the head of the foster care unit at a large school district in California's largest county. The district serves 60 percent of the foster children in the county and has made a commitment to assist in addressing the educational needs of foster children within this school system. The district established a foster care

Table 1: Age and Number of Children in Care

Caregiver	Children in Care and Their Ages
1	Four adopted children (23 years, 15 years, 9 years, 2 years) and one foster child (3 years)
2	Five adopted children (under 18 years)
3	One foster child (3 years)
4	One foster child (3 years)
5	Three foster youths (12 years, 10 years, 4 years)
6	One adopted grandson (14 years)
7	Two foster youths (18 years, 12 years)
8	Six adopted children (6 to 17 years)
9	Two adopted children (8 years, 6 years) and one foster child (3 years)
10	Three foster youths (7 years, 7 years, 5 years)
11	One relative foster child (14-year-old grandson)
12	One adopted child (17 years)
13	Two relative foster youths (16-year-old grandson, 13-year-old niece)

unit consisting of three social workers who assist with the timely transfer of school and immunization records, interact with the schools on behalf of the youths, address concerns regarding the youths' academic progress and needs, assess the youths' basic reading and math skills and recommend further assessment and services, address suspension/expulsion crises to ensure due process, and participate in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for special education services, as needed. In addition to the three members of the foster care unit, the unit coordinator identified seven counselors who work at schools or in support units in which foster youths receive services. Two of the counselors had previously been classroom teachers and had had foster children in their classes. All agreed to participate in the focus group.

Agency Education Advocates. Six education liaisons who had been placed in the role as advocates for foster youths by their respective agencies agreed to participate. They came from three geographic areas of the state—southern, central, and northern California. Four were employed by their county child welfare agency (CWA), one was the coordinator of a court-appointed special advocate's office, and one served as the lead social worker addressing foster care issues of a large school district. Four had backgrounds in social work, one had been a teacher before becoming a CWA liaison, and one had a counseling background.

PROCEDURE

The focus group meetings lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Each set of participants was asked a series of questions that we developed. Caregivers were asked seven questions about their children's schooling experience (see Appendix). School liaisons and education advocates were asked 11 questions that focused on their experiences dealing with caregivers and the school and CW systems (see Appendix). Within each meeting, responses to questions led to discussions of related issues as the participants initiated topics and ideas with little prompting from the facilitator.

Data Analysis

The educator and CW focus group sessions were audiotaped, and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. Because caregivers were sensitive about their privacy, detailed notes were handwritten during the two caregiver focus group meetings by two of the

authors, who attended the sessions. Each focus group meeting was analyzed separately using an analytical and iterative process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Notes and transcriptions from the focus groups were read independently by two or more of the authors and assigned preliminary codes for responses and relationships between responses. We then discussed the evolving coding scheme and continued to refine and revise the scheme until a list of agreed-on themes was finalized for each set of transcripts. The focus group data were then fully analyzed using the coding schemes, and the coded data were examined for accuracy and completeness. Differences in coding of transcripts were discussed until reconciled. A summary of the three sets of focus groups' themes is provided in the following sections.

Caregiver Focus Groups

Searching for Resources. The caregivers described the children under their care and the multitude of medical, learning, and behavioral problems that the children were experiencing. In all instances, caregivers actively sought outside help to address the children's many needs. This often meant searching for difficult-to-identify and -access resources. Some families were more ingenious than others in pursuing services; some were more accepting of messages that no additional supports were available.

The caregivers approached regional centers (RCs) (local nonprofit centers in California that receive state funds and help families find and access services for individuals with developmental disabilities), K-12 schools, Head Start, and medical and behavioral specialists in search of programs, therapies, and medications for the children. They mostly struggled on their own, building up their knowledge about the special education process, early intervention services, and intervention specialists over time and with the help of professionals and other parents.

For families with a young child who had an individual family service plan (IFSP) and was an RC client, there was greater access to services than for families whose children did not have an identified disability or were considered "at risk." One foster mother reported that with the backing of an RC, she was able to enroll her two-year-old foster daughter—a victim of prenatal exposure to cocaine—in Early Head Start. The RC case manager also helped the family secure play therapy, speech therapy, and the services of a behavior specialist to deal with the child's loud, destructive behavior and

emotional volatility. When she was four years of age and constantly removing her clothes and making sexual gestures, arrangements were made to take her to see a "big-city behavioral specialist" three hours away from home. Another mother, whose three-year-old had an IFSP, was able to enroll the child in a preschool special day class offered by the county office of education.

Struggles with Schools. A source of intense and continuing stress for these caregivers was the struggles they had or were having to get the schools to acknowledge that their children needed services for their learning or behavior problems and to have the schools provide more intensive supports for their challenging children. These caregivers described young children who suffered from medical and behavioral disorders such as prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol; posttraumatic stress, bipolar, or obsessive-compulsive disorder; depression; anxiety; migraine headaches; or irritable bowel syndrome. At school, the children got into repeated trouble on the school bus; were suspended numerous times from school; had attention deficit disorder or school phobia; had speech delays, learning disabilities, or both; and were unable to progress academically.

One mother reported that her "son" had been suspended 17 times between third and fifth grades and was not retained when he failed all subjects in sixth grade. Another parent, who cared for a very demanding 12-year-old boy, was trying to get him certified as emotionally disturbed so he could have an IEP. He had recently been expelled for taking a pocket knife to school and had a history of lying, stealing, and taking street drugs. The foster mother felt he needed "counseling and modifications in class, and time out." Although he had been diagnosed with social anxiety disorder and took the antidepressant Zoloft, the school insisted he did not qualify for special education services because he performed only slightly below grade level on achievement tests. A third mother described having to fight the school when the school tried to "cancel her foster daughter's IEP" because of too many absences (she ran away frequently). If the school had had its way, funding would have ceased for the adolescent's day treatment program and psychological services provided in school and at home. Two other youths were so disturbed that their caregivers fought the school district to have the youths placed in a residential program out of state because no local or state program was equipped to deal with the severity of

the emotional and behavioral problems that their foster sons were exhibiting.

Generic School Complaints. Caregivers also shared complaints that many biological parents voice about the schools. They were concerned about the lack of interventions and other support services within schools, they did not know what to do when the school declared their troubled child ineligible for an IEP, and they were disturbed by the lack of advisement by school counselors for teenagers who had few credits toward graduation and were functionally illiterate. Parents also complained about wait lists for Head Start, few school placement options when the child was declared eligible to receive special education support, and a lack of teacher attention to students whose grades dropped rapidly from As and Bs to Ds and Fs. The caregiver of the three-year-old in the county special education preschool program was disturbed that children with learning disabilities were in programs with children with severe emotional disturbance.

Parents as Sole Advocates. For the most part, the caregivers sought needed services without the help of their CW workers. Many caregivers noted that social workers had very high caseloads, and although they informed the caseworker of what actions they believed were needed to address their foster child's problems, the caregivers recognized that caseworkers were overwhelmed and not available to intercede. Caregivers believed that they, not the social worker, were responsible for their child's schooling. For this reason, caregivers suggested that more training is needed for foster parents and relative caregivers about how to access services; how to advocate for the children; how to become the holder of educational rights for children in their care; and how to learn about educational and behavioral support services that are available, such as special education, therapeutic behavioral services, and sensory integration therapy. One caregiver suggested that the CWA offer an education class for foster parents. Another recommended that the CWA employ an education advocate on staff and that the court make available education attorneys to work with caregivers to identify and secure needed services.

Concerns of Adoptive Parents. A big concern among the participants in both groups was the lack of services available to caregivers who adopt foster children. Caregivers who became adoptive parents had access to far fewer services than they had access to when the child had been in foster care. For

example, a three-year-old former RC client suffering from a rare blood disorder and speech delay was placed on the wait list for Head Start. Because he was no longer a foster child, he was not eligible for priority enrollment in Head Start (available to young children in foster care) or for a tuition subsidy. One caregiver complained, "Once adopted, there is no one to call to say help!"

School Liaisons' Focus Group

School Stability. The school liaisons recognized that the most serious problem for students in foster care was the lack of stability in their lives. Their foster homes change, their social workers change, and their school and all the connections related to school change. One participant noted that "for many of our students, the school is their stability. So when that gets affected or they get moved to another school, they lose sometimes the only one stable thing that they have in their lives at the moment, which is their school."

Teamwork with the Home. The school liaisons felt that a strong home-school partnership was critically missing in dealing with students in foster care. They stressed that everyone needed to work together as a team to help these students, supporting them and the educational system. One participant suggested that caregivers need to do what conscientious parents do, "make sure they have a quiet space where they can sit down and do their homework without the television on . . . just having expectations that the kids are going to do well."

Several school liaisons commented that foster children's problems frequently escalate because caregivers do not show up to school meetings convened when learning or behavior troubles first appear. They felt strongly that "schools are doing all they can from their end," but problems will continue to worsen until the school and caregivers work together as a team, with caregivers giving input and implementing the plan at home. Relative caregivers, in particular, were singled out as "not the most supportive of school." When foster children are placed with adult siblings or grandmothers who lack a positive orientation toward school, the schools cannot rely on these caregivers to send the children to school each day or ensure that they come prepared to learn. Another problematic group mentioned are those foster or group home caregivers who are "challenged by the responsibility of caring for multiple children." These caregivers are often reluctant to enroll foster youths

in and transport them to after school or Saturday programs to address their learning gaps.

Teamwork with CWA. A school liaison said that there needed to be "more communication and collaboration amongst the different agencies involved." In particular, the CWA needs to be at the table. Schools are in the dark as to which of their students are in foster care. Schools are also not informed when students are moved and need to be disenrolled. One school liaison stressed that especially if the child is to remain in the same school when a home placement changes, the administrator should be informed to ensure "continuity of services and stability" between the home and school.

Attempts to get information from social workers about children's whereabouts when they move are often futile. Typically, social workers do not respond when messages are left by school staff regarding the foster child or foster parent. Several school liaisons complained that the CWA is reluctant to share any information about the child—whether he or she is even in the system or who holds education rights—which delays securing parental signatures for needed assessment and services. Teachers would like the child to have a smoother transition when he or she must leave the school. One school liaison, a former teacher, described it this way, "If they [teachers] knew that the child was not returning, they would bring in, like, a stuffed animal and have the kids write a note, just a kind of goodbye from the class. But it doesn't happen as often as it should."

The school liaisons were critical that "social workers are always requesting services from the school—supplemental, transportation, counseling, assessment." Schools, however, have limited resources. The participants felt that more services could be made available (not just what may be available at the school) if all the agencies collaborated and worked as a team, with each group responsibly doing its part. Social workers, more often than not, are "no shows" for school meetings and conferences. One school liaison noted, "I feel that we're not really connecting with what's best for the child."

Another concern was the school's lack of opportunity to follow through with difficult problems. Often, no action can be taken and the foster youth "falls through the cracks." If a foster youth has repeatedly missed school and is then moved to another home and school district, the previous school does not find out if the truancy problem is being addressed. One chronically truant youth

who was living in a group home was scheduled to go before the district's School Attendance Review Board. Much to the district's dismay, her placement was changed and she was moved to the home of a previous foster parent (in another district) who, in the past, had allowed her to miss school.

The school liaisons were also concerned that, too often, the school calls the CW hotline to report neglect and nothing seems to happen. The schools believe that CW does not take their concerns seriously—for example, a student whose parent could not deal with the child's repeated absences or a student whose parent has disappeared and left the child in another's care. Rather than remove the child, the liaisons felt that CW investigations typically conclude that if the student is being fed and clothed and is not physically abused, case closed. Though the child's educational achievement is being hindered, from CW's perspective, the case does not meet the threshold for involvement.

Foster Youth Needs. The school liaisons described a multitude of problems that students in foster care experience in the school setting. Academically, they often have learning gaps that lead to a referral to special education. Participants felt these gaps were more the result of frequent school changes and difficulty retaining information (due to emotional trauma) than a learning disability. Reading problems were seen as related to the youths having to change districts and thus change reading programs. For students who come from districts where a phonics approach is not used, "bringing them up to date is a big challenge." Also, getting them the supports they need to catch up is a challenge for most resource-poor schools.

Poor attendance and emotional and behavioral problems are also common among this population. Foster youths may suddenly cry in class or act out. One school liaison described a foster youth who was very angry about the circumstances of his life and the way he felt he had been treated: "A lot of adults are making decisions about my life but no one is talking to me. My decisions are not being taken seriously." The school liaison argued that these students "need someone that's connecting with them, that's really listening to what their concerns are ... behavior problems are a result of just things building and building until there's no place to put it." Unfortunately, principals and deans appear to be less understanding. They are "ready to kick out any student with a behavior problem or move them to

another school or move them around. That's exactly the opposite of what these kids need."

Lastly, the delay in receiving school records or incomplete records often results in students missing out on credits earned for classes they have attended or being enrolled in the wrong classes. One school liaison said,

students are sometimes in an interim placement, and they're at a school for a few weeks or a month before they're off to the next placement. And the school hasn't had a chance to put everything in the records. And maybe they haven't even gotten the records from the last school yet. And then sometimes the records move to a school and the kid's gone someplace else and nobody knows where the kid is. All of that really plays into this whole issue of programming and what do you do with the credits and has the kid taken what California requires (in terms of the requirements to graduate).

Programming is also affected if the school is unaware that the child had an IEP in his or her previous school and needs special education placement and related services.

Agency Advocates' Focus Group

Concerns about the CW Education Liaison Position. A major issue for the CW participants was that their liaison position is not well integrated into their agency's operations. They felt little guidance from agency supervisors; some even questioned whether agency administrators had "any idea about what we do." They are unable to seek answers to education questions from their CW colleagues and must rely on district and county office of education contacts for responses to their queries. They felt that their CW colleagues needed to better understand the "tie-in with education," and they wanted social workers to be more involved in referring foster youths for needed services like tutoring, special education evaluation, and attendance monitoring.

Although CW agencies talk about how important education is, the establishment of the liaison position appears to be the only way that the agencies have chosen to address the education imperative. CW liaisons are the "go-to" people for anything related to education in their agencies. They answer questions that social workers bring to them and collaborate with district and school personnel, county

office of education staff, and caregivers. They attend school district meetings as the CW representative and are assigned by their agency to any committee or task force with an education focus. They organize and conduct trainings for social workers and court and school personnel about foster care and laws relating to the education of students in foster care. One CW liaison described his job as "putting [his] finger in the hole in the dike." He said his agency "has no game plan"; too much of what the agency does is "reactive." He said, "after a while it is like a tsunami." The liaisons have no clerical support to assist them, and as one participant stressed, "there isn't enough of us to go around." Another CW liaison likened his work to "putting out 75,000 fires with a squirt gun."

Foster Youth Needs. A big concern among the agency liaisons is that students in foster care go "unnoticed and unassessed." Their extreme needs go "unserved" because few in CW are aware of or understand their problems. When these young children finally start exhibiting problems, suddenly CW and the schools ask, "how come he's not learning?" The agency liaisons felt that many foster youths, even those not "crying out for help," have "layers and layers and layers of issues that at some point are going to surface." Because there is little prevention or early intervention work at the school or by CW, when problems blow up, "people want them locked up or put in special education [nonpublic schools] just to get them out of the school." One agency liaison emphasized that a large percentage of foster children are experiencing the effects of prenatal exposure to drugs, including hyperaggression, hyperactivity, and cognitive impairment. Without comprehensive programs to teach them social skills and manage behavior, "we're really just pushing it off on the school district, and the school district is pushing back." Even when problems are detected and meetings arranged, "people do not respond because, it's almost like, it's kind of the attitude, 'it's not really my child' and so there is very little participation in school meetings."

Problems Dealing with the Schools. Special education seems to be the major area of contention between CW and the schools. In two counties, the CW liaison position was established specifically because, in too many instances, resolution around the provision of special education services and placement for foster youths was drawn out and problematic. A major responsibility of the liaison

in these counties is to attend IEP meetings and represent the CWA in advocating for appropriate placements and needed services. The CWA felt that, too often, school districts insisted on disciplinary transfers or nonpublic school placements for foster youths because they "don't know what else to do." The agency wanted the CW liaison present at the IEP meetings to advocate for schools to provide additional supports and services for the foster youths on their campuses.

Another area of contention that agency liaisons complained about had to do with compliance of educational law. Too often, school sites seemed to think that "their policy superseded anything else." Even when informed by the agency liaison that the school's policy was not in line with the law, schools were insistent that "they've always done it this way." The agency liaisons reported having encountered schools that were reluctant to assign students partial credit for classes attended part of the school year, unwilling to assess a student for special education because they had no school psychologist on site, and insistent that a sixth-grader could be placed in a three-week home study program as a disciplinary action.

Even when schools want to be responsive to their foster student population, neither the CW agency nor the schools "know which children they have in common, so it's difficult to do anything preventive." The agency liaisons want a data-tracking system so they can monitor when a foster youth is getting poor grades, is absent regularly, or is getting suspended too often. If foster status was tagged in the school information systems, then "the [school] administration cannot sit there and say that everything is OK. They've got to collaborate because the data reflect that those children need help."

Recommendation for Improving Services. The agency liaisons had a myriad of suggestions for improving collaboration between CW and the schools and for better serving the needs of foster youths in schools. First and foremost, they wanted the CW administrator to be better informed about what they do and what the education needs of foster youth are. One CW liaison noted, "I was sitting with our director and he didn't know what an IEP was." Besides administrators, social workers and court workers (that is, judges and education panel attorneys) also need training on special education and suspension and expulsion laws and regulations. All the parties, including classroom teachers, need

to be educated so they can detect needs early on and provide support.

Court workers (that is, judges and child and education attorneys) need training to develop a better understanding of how the schools and CW can better support foster youths in school. If court workers assume a more active role in overseeing educational progress, they can be counted on to ensure that interventions are in place to adequately address the education needs of foster youths. One CW liaison prepared a sample one-page court report including what education topics social workers should touch on. She noted that "if judges require that court report on education every time the foster child comes before the bench, then the judge can identify cases that are of concern and can refer those cases to me."

The agency liaisons would like to see assessments automatically done on children when they enter care. Learning and behavior problems would be detected early and arrangements made for interventions. Likewise, the development of a data-tracking system could alert the agency liaison and school early on before a student's problems become acute.

The CW liaisons wanted more support for their position. Because most worked "solo" within their agencies, when they learned of CW liaisons from other counties, they set up regular meetings to discuss educational matters and share battlefield stories. They wanted to see an "education unit" established within their agencies with several liaisons which would signify the commitment of the CW agency to make education a priority in caring for foster youths.

Finally, the agency liaisons want to see a major shift in attitudes toward foster children among all the groups. Social workers need to stop saying "it's the school's responsibility—that it's not my responsibility." The schools need to stop pointing fingers at the CW agency and the home. As one agency liaison strongly asserted, "I feel like everybody needs to take responsibility for these kids and really honor that they belong to all of us."

DISCUSSION

All three sets of participants recognized that students in foster care experience serious academic, social, and behavioral problems in the school setting and that much more needs to be done to address these considerable challenges. As foster children experienced troubles in school, all three groups looked to

their own group to deal with problems; there was no collaboration, no team approach, and no shared view on how and what was needed. All participants agreed that unattended problems continued to escalate and that some "school" problems threatened the stability of home placements. Each group, however, saw the other groups as needing to play a bigger role and work more collaboratively to develop mutually supportive and responsive practices to address barriers to school success for foster students. Although the participants across focus group sessions shared a similar goal—the improvement of educational prospects for children in foster care—each group saw the problems and needs of this high-risk population from very different perspectives.

Caregivers felt it was their responsibility, as the parent, to address the educational problems that their foster sons and daughters were exhibiting. They sought programs and supports on their own and single-handedly battled with the schools. They generally did not seek assistance from social workers and time and again gave way to whatever decisions the schools made regarding services, even when they felt those decisions were not in the best interest of their child.

The school liaisons saw the schools as operating in a crisis intervention mode. The schools struggled to address learning and behavior problems as they surfaced, without the cooperation or input of the home or the CW agency. Neither caregivers nor social workers could be counted on to attend student review conferences when convened by the school, but both groups were vocal in their requests for assessments, services, and interventions for the foster student.

The CW agency liaisons were critical of their own agencies' lack of commitment to addressing educational issues. They also criticized the schools for not identifying academic and emotional problems early and not having more comprehensive programs to address the immense needs of these students. Although they said little about the role of the caregiver in addressing school problems, agency liaisons felt that the schools did not take ownership of these students and were too quick to transfer them out or hide behind school policies that were in violation of the law.

An obvious limitation in the interpretation of the study's findings is the small sample size of each focus group. In all three groups, participants were selected because of their strong commitment to serving

children in foster care. Not all caregivers actively pursue services and supports for the children in their care; not all school liaisons are as informed or devoted to advocating for foster students; and not all agency liaisons champion the need to address school problems and educational achievement. However, the themes identified in these focus group sessions, by these three distinct groups of participants, shed light on the lack of collaboration and coordination among the home, the school, and the CW agency and the existing deficiencies and obstacles that hinder more positive education outcomes for foster children and youths.

It is clear that no single group or agency has the resources or expertise to provide the services and supports required to better serve this vulnerable population of students at risk for poor educational outcomes and lifetime consequences. Effectively addressing the educational needs of foster youths requires coordination, communication, and collaboration between the CW system, the schools, family members, and foster youths. We need to promote the design of model programs that involve all the sectors and provide an arena for strategically addressing educational barriers. These models must include development of the structures and organization that will lead to the identification of problems hindering school success for foster youths and the solutions needed to overcome them. The designation of liaisons in the schools and CW agency to advocate for these youths and track their progress is the first step in developing such a model. Interagency committees or task forces that include caregivers and foster youths must also be established to identify cross-agency policies and practices to troubleshoot problems and support better achievement outcomes. A foster youth database that can be accessed by the schools and the CW agency will allow schools and agency workers to monitor the progress of foster youths and intervene early when problems are first detected. In sum, we cannot continue to allow these systems, the home-school-agency, to operate separately and ineffectively if we are seriously committed to shifting the outcomes for foster youths and reversing the negative trajectories along which these at-risk youths are heading. **SW**

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APPENDIX

Caregiver Questions

1. Have your children or any children you have cared for had any problems with their schooling? Getting enrolled in school? Having problems learning? Any problems with teachers? Have they been retained? Discipline problems? Suspensions? Any on independent study?
2. Have you had children get evaluated for special education/IEP?
3. Have you had problems getting the special education services for your child?
4. Is your school a low performing school?
5. Does the school offer supplementary services?
6. What do you know about AB490?
7. Are there topics that you feel you'd like to learn more about?

School Liaison and Education Advocate Questions

1. In thinking about addressing the educational needs of foster youth, what do you think are their greatest needs? What is the foremost concern about foster youth in your school?
2. Can you recall specific examples of foster youth getting lost in the educational system?
3. What have been your experiences with the child welfare agency?
4. Do foster youth have a hard time getting enrolled in your school? getting appropriate classes when they enroll? getting credits for classes taken or partially attended?
5. Are you able to implement the provisions of AB490 in your school/district?
6. In general, how do you learn that students are in foster care? Are you informed of background information leading to the child's foster care status?
7. What specific learning and/or emotional/behavioral challenges exist for the teachers/counselors of students in foster care? Do these students present any unique challenges because of their foster status?
8. Are any school supports/resources made available to help you deal with the learning, emotional, or behavioral challenges of having a student in foster care in your class/school? If yes, please describe.
9. What training is needed so that you could be more effective with students in foster care?
10. When students in foster care are in special education, how is the IEP process managed? Is it difficult getting a signature on the assessment plan? Are you able to get a signature on the IEP? How is the parent, guardian, or surrogate parent notified about the IEP meetings? Which family members/care-giver/surrogate/social workers are invited to the IEP meeting? Is the child's social worker involved in the IEP process?
11. What changes would you like to see in schools that would help foster youth do better?

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