

Foster Youth Share Their School Experiences

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“It was hard having to adjust and be uncomfortable at school and then going back to a home where I was uncomfortable too.”

Family and school support systems are both critical to children’s healthy development. These words, spoken by a young person who experienced frequent school moves while in foster care, only begin to capture what life is like for teenagers who are not only uprooted from a permanent home or family, but lack stability and support at school. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 contains provisions designed to help young people stay in the same school when they change placements if it is in their best interests. Educational stability is especially critical for young people in 8th to 12th grade, because research shows that they are more likely to complete high school if they remain in the same school. But many states and jurisdictions have yet to implement these provisions and to ensure that foster care children have the support they need to climb the educational ladder to a satisfying and secure future.

According to national and multistate studies, only half of young people in foster care complete high school by age 18. While 84 percent of 17- and 18-year-old foster youth report wanting to go to college, only 20 percent of those who graduate from high school attend college. And only 2 percent to 9 percent actually earn their bachelor’s degree. The following are stories of young people who have navigated hurdles that no child should have to surmount to graduate from high school or have a chance at college. Often, these young people found individual mentors and allies who helped them along the way. And always, they marshalled incredible resilience, determination and grit. Some have achieved significant success despite long odds, while others continue to struggle to find their way. But one thing is clear: these young people got where they are despite, not because of, the systems set up for their care.

As these stories vividly illustrate, child welfare and education systems need to work together to ensure that young people stay in school, where they can continue to develop the knowledge and interpersonal skills that prepare them for higher education and adulthood.

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Source: Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, October 2013

Megan Hill entered foster care at age 7 and went to three elementary schools, four middle schools and three high schools in the Philadelphia area while living in multiple homes. “The hardest part was finding the right crowd to be around and adjusting to new friends, teachers and environments,” says Hill, who also experienced many academic setbacks, including losing credits and having to take some subjects multiple times.

Transportation was another major barrier for Hill, who was sometimes able to stay in her school of choice but had to endure long commutes and frequently got to school late. Other times, she had to choose between remaining close to family and switching schools. That was the case in 9th grade, when she had the opportunity to move from a foster home to kinship care with her older sister, but had to leave a high school where she was doing well. “I knew people there and they were the same people from the last middle school,” she explains. “I knew exactly what activities I wanted to be part of, and at the new school I didn’t know anyone and I knew nothing about what they offered.”

After experiencing a rough 10th grade year behaviorally, socially and academically, she “pulled it together,” and built good relationships with her teachers in 11th and 12th grade, while joining activities from cheerleading to debate team to yearbook committee. “My teachers knew my situation in foster care. I was moving from home to home and then living on my own. I didn’t have access to a computer and I had to shop for food. I would come to school crying sometimes and it was really rocky, but my teachers were really great supporters.”

Hill had brought her grades up and had taken enough classes to graduate, but she did not learn until senior year that one of her credits was never transferred. Her older sister had to help her negotiate directly with the school district to rectify the error. “I had multiple social workers over the years, but during that period I didn’t have a set caseworker, and my sister and a few teachers helped me.”

After graduating from high school, Hill went to the Community College of Philadelphia for a month but could not keep up with her classes while living on her own and working. She is currently assisting her sister in her job as a nurse and taking an entrepreneurship class at the Achievement Independence Center for foster youth. Hill hopes to take more community college classes, transfer to a university and complete a double major in business and social work. She dreams of starting her own peer mentoring program for 8th graders transitioning into high school.

“Policymakers should follow up with the laws they enact and make sure they are actually being followed,” says Hill. “The system does not always stress that you need to do well in school to graduate and go to college and that it has to be a priority. The mindset of a foster youth is that you need to work and have a roof over your head.”

Harold “R.J.” Sloke entered foster care in South Carolina at age 12 with a juvenile record, so some of the schools he attended were in maximum security group homes. He went to 12 different high schools in all and repeated the 9th grade three times, which he says happened because his records and credits never got transferred. “A lot of my caseworkers believed I would never graduate, so they just kept passing me along, and I kept getting into trouble.”

At his 11th high school, Sloke walked into his keyboarding class one day tired and hungry, and put his head on the desk. His teacher, Karen Parker, approached him after class to find out what was wrong. After he shared his story, he recounts, “She advocated for me for six months” to restore all of the credits that had never been transferred. “She gave me hope, and I eventually graduated from Westside High School [in Summerville, S.C.] when I was 19.” Parker also visited the group home where Sloke was living at the time, and she was so appalled by conditions there that she reported it to the state and helped to get it shut down.

Sloke’s story was written up in the news, which helped pave the way for him to receive support from various organizations and to land an internship with the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI). As an intern for Missouri Senator Roy Blunt, he wrote a paper making the case that social workers and foster care professionals needed to be able to access school records to ease school transitions and help address students’ needs. Sloke’s story, and his recommendation, helped garner Senator Blunt’s sponsorship to assure passage of the Uninterrupted Scholar’s Act in 2013, which lifts some restrictions under the Family Education and Privacy Act so that social workers and other child welfare agencies can access students’ educational records.

At 23, Sloke has served in the Army Reserve and is married and the father of a 2-year-old. He is also close to earning a bachelor’s degree from the University of Missouri at St. Louis, with a triple major in criminology, political science and social work and a minor in psychology. He has a job now as a juvenile detention officer and does public speaking engagements across the country. “My long-term goal is to run for political office,” notes Sloke, who says he “has hope for every single one of the kids” he sees in juvenile detention every day.

Sloke would like to see more emphasis on intensive therapy, less reliance on psychotropic drugs for youth in residential institutions and more awareness among social workers of the role of gangs in luring vulnerable young people into criminal activity. During his frequent school moves, Sloke says, he became a gang target and stayed connected to gangs out of self-defense, “for protection.” If his teacher hadn’t intervened, “I probably wouldn’t have graduated, and I could have ended up in prison,” says Sloke.

Ollie Hernandez was in foster care from age 9 to 12 and then again from age 13 to 19. She moved from home to home and school to school until she aged out of foster care and began living on her own. She attended nine different schools from elementary through high school. “It really affected me — I would either be ahead of a curriculum or too far behind,” notes Hernandez, who says she was often placed in the wrong class until her transcripts arrived, which inevitably took time. “They were never quite sure what class I was supposed to be in — I’d get settled in one class and then they would change my schedule and my classes.” A bright and capable student, Hernandez was determined to keep up academically and managed to do well. But the constant

school moves took a huge emotional toll. “If you already know that you are moving, you don’t want to get close to anybody or make friends or have mentors. Not having a lot of educational stability made me isolate myself from people,” she says.

Hernandez moved five times in and around Las Vegas, Nevada, but managed to stay in the same high school for the first three years, in some cases by waking up three hours early to take a public bus. “But the last year, I had to move to a new school, and that really messed me up,” she says. “It’s hard to be in your senior year and not know anybody. I didn’t try to talk to my peers who had normal upbringings and normal parents, and I didn’t want favoritism from teachers. My idea was not to let anyone see me sweat.” As a senior, Hernandez entered independent living and had to juggle school with the responsibility of living in her own place and learning about shopping and budgeting.

With the help of some teachers and counselors, Hernandez graduated from high school and enrolled in the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, “but it has been really bumpy,” she says. “I didn’t have a strong support system and ended up withdrawing after my first semester.” She has since tried community college as well as returning to UNLV, but she found it hard to focus while struggling to work and live on her own. Maintaining close ties with her two sisters, from whom she has been painfully separated at times by foster care placements, has been a huge priority. “There were times when I didn’t care if I moved schools, I just wanted to be near them,” says Hernandez.

Now 22, Hernandez, who once dreamed of becoming a doctor, is enrolled in a training program to become a medical assistant. Her involvement in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and Foster Club All-Stars has helped her learn to advocate for herself and other young people, and it has connected her to a network of young people she can relate to because of their common experiences. “I finally found my safe haven, where people actually get you,” she says.

A system designed to promote educational stability rather than discourage it — while listening to and engaging youth in decisions about their future — would have made a big difference, notes Hernandez. “There weren’t a lot of efforts made to keep me on a stable path in school, and I really didn’t understand what was going on half the time.”

Switching schools was part of everyday life for **Alex McFarland**, who attended five different elementary schools, with the moves starting even before he entered foster care in the 2nd grade. But in middle school, he faced a different challenge. Living at home at the time, “I was frequently kept home from school to babysit my siblings. I didn’t realize how much of a detriment it was until later,” says McFarland. After moving a lot within Ohio and between Ohio and Tennessee, McFarland learned that he would not have enough credits to graduate before aging out of foster care at 18 and having to live on his own. He was told that he would need to “drop out” and work toward his GED to complete school.

“When I was younger, I always really liked school, and it was an escape from problems at home. I wanted to graduate and go to college, and getting a GED was not what I envisioned at all—it had a negative connotation,” McFarland explains. “I already couldn’t do a lot of extracurricular activities, like band camp, because of moves outside of the right jurisdiction, and now they were saying I couldn’t graduate with my class. I was really upset about that.”

McFarland, a strong student, had to give up other dreams too—like a pre-law program he researched at Brown University for foster care students with good grades who took a special summer course. “I qualified in terms of my grades, but I couldn’t attend because I had a GED,” he explains. Living on his own and juggling a full-time job as manager of a pet store to pay the rent, it took him several tries at community college and later at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, to graduate from college. With dreams of becoming a veterinarian, McFarland, who had never had high school chemistry, struggled to complete the credits he needed. But things began to fall into place when learning support center at the university tested him and determined he had a learning disability in math that had never been identified or addressed all the years that he was in care.

With help from the support center, caring professors and some scholarship money, McFarland studied harder and persevered, not only passing chemistry but spending a summer studying zoology in Malaysia and doing independent research. He graduated from Miami University with honors in 2013 and is now taking the prerequisite hard science courses to apply for veterinary school for 2015. “I want to be a vet for primates—it is a very specific field, and the competition is fierce,” he says.

McFarland, who now works as a program coordinator at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, has been involved in state efforts to improve the outcomes of foster care youth in higher education, and has served on the state youth advisory board and on national policy councils for foster youth alumni. “I would like to see more consistent youth-driven assessments that look at not just what level your classes should be but how you function in school and what kind of help you need. It never happened with me, and it would have been beneficial when I moved so that the next school could have had that information,” he says. “Today, my aspirations and successes are so much greater than me. They’re successes on behalf of all foster youth who are told they can’t achieve anything greater.”

Maurissa Sorensen spent most of her high school years in a residential program in Los Angeles to help address the traumatic experiences and behaviors that brought her into foster care. “It was very good for emotional and psychological issues, but not educationally,” she recalls. “I graduated with honors, but I didn’t learn honors material and I really didn’t get the foundation to move up the educational ladder.”

But Sorensen learned lifelong lessons from the program's principal, Dr. Adam Grudberg, a caring and inspirational leader who encouraged her to reach for her dreams and never give up. When he died in his 30s of cancer, Sorensen was more determined than ever to follow in his footsteps. "I wanted to be an expert in the field of working with foster kids. I knew I didn't have a choice because I didn't want my dream to go away, and I had to carry his message to other kids."

The Dr. Adam Grudberg Opportunity Fund, a college fund set up by his family for students like Sorensen, helped with tuition, but it took her almost 10 years to finish community college. "I was living on my own and working a minimum of 40 hours per week, and I had to take algebra nine times to pass," Sorensen explains. After graduating from Oxnard Community College in 2009, she went on to receive a bachelor's degree in psychology from California State University Channel Islands in 2011. Sorensen got a lot of support from professors there, and her story was shared with the head of the psychology department, who had gone to Harvard University. He urged her to apply to the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and in 2012 she completed a master's degree program in human development and psychology there. She is now enrolled at the University of Southern California (USC), where she is working on a master's of social work.

As she struggled to balance work and higher education, Sorensen did not realize that she would have qualified for federal funds to help foster care students pay for college until she had completed her degree at Harvard at age 28. She does not qualify for that help at USC because she is over the maximum age of 23. "They don't take into account that a lot of foster kids take longer to complete high school and college because of all the obstacles, so now I'm on the loan train," she says.

Sorensen, who has also participated in the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute internship, has "big dreams" about running for political office and helping to ease the road for foster youth facing nearly insurmountable odds in getting a quality education. "None of the kids I know who were in my situation succeeded in education, and a lot of them are in jail," she says.

Octavia Lacks entered foster care in 9th grade and moved in and out of 11 homes between 2009 and 2012. She switched schools five times during her high school years. "When I transferred between school districts, the credits I had didn't always transfer, and credits I had at one school didn't always count at other schools," says Lacks. "Math was the biggest issue—one school put me in a lower level math class than another school, and then I was placed in Algebra II when I had never taken Algebra I."

In her 9th grade year, she fought for two months to stay in the same school following a move, citing the new federal Fostering Connections law. But beyond her educational struggles, the frequent moves left her socially isolated and depressed. "I didn't want to sit alone at lunch, so I

would go to the library or lie down in the nurse's office," Lacks says. "It's hard having to adjust and be uncomfortable at school and then going back to a home where I was uncomfortable too."

It was difficult to find any continuity in sources of help to navigate all these changes in homes and schools; Lacks had seven different caseworkers during that period. As she prepared to age out of care and live on her own in an apartment, "My independent living worker helped me more than anyone else," Lacks recalls. "She helped me fill out my student loan applications and apply to college."

Now 19 and a sophomore at Harrisburg Area Community College, Lacks is studying early childhood education. But she is still paying for the time and credits she lost in math. "I have to take two remedial algebra courses to get to college math," she explains.

Lacks participates in a county youth advisory board that promotes changes in foster care policies, and she is in her second year of an internship with the Child Welfare Resource Center in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Her biggest recommendation for policymakers is to listen more closely to the young people in care. "At the end of the day, you guys get to go home to your families," she says. "We are the ones still moving. Our lives and our education are in your hands."

Entering foster care at age 10, **Michael Peno** did not experience much disruption in elementary school, but he attended three different middle schools in three years. "It was difficult socially and academically," he says. "It's hard to keep and connect with friends, and changing school systems and curriculums is tough."

Peno started high school in a regular public school, but on the advice of a teacher, he switched to a charter school called the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center in Providence, R.I., where he was able to stay despite frequent foster care moves. "Being able to stay there made a huge difference academically and socially," he says. "I feel fortunate that I have relationships from my high school years."

Although he graduated from high school, "I didn't know the first thing about college," says Peno, who was working two jobs and participating in an after-care services program that helps former foster youth get settled and learn independent living skills. While working in a restaurant, he formed a friendship with one of the "regulars" who worked in higher education and became a mentor and key source of support. "My mentor was huge in helping me navigate the college entry process," he says. Peno has also received guidance and support from participating in his local advisory board for foster care youth and as a Young Fellow in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

It was not until he was applying for college that Peno learned he is dyslexic, which has enabled him to get extra tutoring and accommodations while attending Mitchell College in New London,

Connecticut. For example, in his first year he had a learning specialist who “really helped me with my time management and to solidify my study skills.”

Today, Peno has plans to attend graduate school at Western Michigan University to study educational leadership. He is eager to work with young people at colleges and universities to help them overcome challenges like the ones he faced. Through trial and error and “luck and circumstance,” Peno has become an expert at advocating for services he needs and finding ways to support himself, from becoming a resident assistant so that he could stay on campus during school vacations to working in the college bookstore to get discounts on textbooks.

“I don’t have many friends that grew up in care with me that are in college and trying to do the right thing,” notes Peno, who has siblings who grew up in the foster care system and have not fared as well. He acknowledges that the outcome could have been very different for him if he had not been able to stay at his charter school. “It’s harder to succeed than to fail in the system,” he reflects. “You shouldn’t have to put in so much work just to get an education.”

Brittany Hunter attended more than five schools in Arizona between the ages of 14 and 18, from traditional high schools to self-paced academic programs in residential facilities. “There were many obstacles I had to overcome to get a high school education,” from having to repeat a semester to losing credits to finding herself way ahead in a class or way behind. “I experienced many different ways of learning, but it was very chaotic,” she says.

When Hunter aged out of foster care at age 18, she moved to the district of her choice to attend high school. But since the requirements were different from other schools she had attended, she learned she would have to go to night school to earn her high school diploma. So she opted instead to take online classes. “I had been in high school for almost five years, and I would have had to be a senior for the second time, so I decided to take an alternative route,” Hunter explains.

While living on her own in an apartment and working in retail, she earned her high school diploma through the online program. With guidance and support from various advocacy organizations and friends, she earned her associate’s degree at Phoenix College in 2013. Today, she is fulfilling a lifelong dream as a junior at Arizona State University studying civil engineering with a minor in sustainable engineering.

“Many organizations in Arizona have helped me with scholarships, and I am enrolled in the Hopi tribe, which also gives me support,” says Hunter. “Having a support system makes the process less rigorous.”

Adapting through so many school changes “is such a confusing process combined with what you are already going through outside of your education,” she notes. “Staying in the same school

would help tremendously, but there also needs to be more attention given not just to education but to other things you are going through, like moving and fitting in.”

Hunter had a supportive caseworker and felt that her voice was heard when she advocated for herself. But she still regrets missing out on staples of the high school experience, “like having friends going back to freshman year, going to prom with your group of friends or having a study group or a debate team through the four years of high school — those are the things that are really important to teenagers.”

“We need to do whatever we can to help young children going through the system so that they have a different story,” adds Hunter. “They need to be able to have goals and know exactly how to get there.”

When **Alexandra “Lexie” Grüber** entered foster care at the age of 14, she was informed that few foster homes would house an older child, and that the only homes available would be short-term. If she wanted to live in a foster home, she was told, she would have to switch schools whenever she moved. That prognosis did not sit well with Grüber, then a freshman at William H. Hall High School in West Hartford, Connecticut.

Grüber made a series of moves while in foster care her sophomore year, but then took matters into her own hands. “I learned that a certain law, called the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, would allow me to stay in the high school I had started in — but in order to do so I had to be homeless,” recalls Grüber. “I reasoned that if I graduated from high school, I could one day get a good job and maybe create my own family. So I chose to be homeless, because my education came first.”

Grüber had been in and out of foster care since the age of 7, and when she entered foster again at 14, “my high school was the only stability I had,” she says. “I was a really good student and well-liked, and my school was the only place I really felt at home. It is also one of the top 10 schools in Connecticut and one of the top 100 in the country,” adds Grüber.

Even in the same school, Grüber endured her share of struggles. She battled with child welfare officials to take summer classes so that she could make up school credits that she missed sophomore year, earning her way up to a 3.9 GPA in her junior year. When a potential group home placement threatened to move her to a “dangerous high school,” her school superintendent agreed to pay transportation costs so she could stay at Hall.

“It was my school administration that really saved my life — they made calls for me, they advocated for me and they helped me prepare for the SATs and learn about colleges,” says Grüber, who won a special superintendent’s award in her senior year — “The highest award in my town.”

One of her heroes is Diedra Dietter, a school social worker who provided support and advocacy to help her succeed. “The school district made a commitment to keep Lexie here because we knew we were her primary support system,” says Dietter.

The time she spent living in a homeless shelter only strengthened Grüber’s resolve. “I would have to sit outside sometimes to get my schoolwork done,” she recalls. “But when you live in a place like that, you see what will happen if you don’t go to school. There are all these constant visual reminders.”

While in the shelter, Grüber made friends with a young woman as driven and intelligent as she was who loved books and poetry. Then she moved out, and when Grüber encountered her a few years later, she had attended 17 different high schools in all, failed in community college and was supporting herself through prostitution.

Grüber, meanwhile, is a junior studying political science and women’s studies at Quinnipiac University and has already held a number of prestigious internships, including one with the Bloomberg View. Through the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI), she also interned with Washington State Congressman Jim McDermott, a key sponsor of Fostering Connections, and with Connecticut Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro. Grüber recently moved to Washington, D.C., to continue to work with Congressman McDermott, where she will have the opportunity to take a class and intern in the House of Representatives in order to complete her bachelor’s degree. She plans to work on Capitol Hill for a few years and then go to law school.

During her CCAI internship, Grüber wrote a report called, “How a Stable Education Saved a Foster Child,” in which she recommends that children in foster care be automatically eligible for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to ensure that their educational needs are met. “The Individuals with Disabilities Act was the first bill that said education was a civil and constitutional right,” she says. “There can be no accountability for the education of foster care children without a legally enforceable plan.”

“I could very easily walk away from the child welfare system and from trying to change things,” adds Grüber. “But I have a moral and civic responsibility to share my story and to make legislative change happen.”

Khaliyl N. Lane entered foster care at age 14 near the start of his freshman year at the RHAM High School in Hebron, Connecticut. He missed a month of school while authorities tried to work out whether he could stay in that school despite moving to a foster home in a different zip code. But in the end, he was able to stay. “I was able to develop a support system in my high school that ultimately provided me with the stability I needed to ensure my success in and out of the classroom,” says Lane, who went on to earn a master’s degree in social work and today works on

child welfare and juvenile justice issues as a special assistant to U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal.

His brother's fate is a study in contrasts. "When my brother entered care at the age of 13, it became clear quite early on that his first placement was not going to work out for him. He was then forced to switch school districts, which only added to his struggles in the classroom," explains Lane. "After changing schools, things really spiraled out of control for him. He dropped out during his freshman year and engaged heavily in crime and substance abuse. This ultimately resulted in a string of juvenile offenses that would turn a life full of promise into one marred by recidivism and chronic homelessness."

Lane says "more transparency" in identifying youth in foster care and tracking their progress would help them reap the benefits of available programs and resources and says the fact that school administrators got to know him and understood his situation was instrumental. A school guidance counselor's assistance in applying for college and financial aid helped Lane become the first in his family to go to college, and led to a paid internship through CCAI, which in turn landed him his current full-time job with Senator Blumenthal.

Ensuring that kids have as much stability as possible in their education from people who know and care about them is an issue that "hits really close to home," reflects Lane. "My own brother didn't have the same guidance, and you can see how woefully things turned out."

This report was prepared by Deborah L. Cohen, a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

For more information, visit the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education's website, <http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/NationalWork/NationalWorkGroup.aspx>.