

**H. Improving Education Outcomes for Children
in Foster Care: Intervention by an
Education Liaison**

Running Head: Improving Education Outcomes

Improving Education Outcomes for Children in Foster Care:
Intervention by an Education Liaison

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To Appear in: *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (in press)*

(*JESPAR*)

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Abstract

Children in foster care represent one of the most vulnerable, academically at risk populations in the U.S. Aside from lower standardized achievement test scores, higher grade retention numbers, and a greater dropout rate than non-foster youth, between 30% to 50% of children in foster care are placed in special education programs, generally related to either a learning disability or an emotional disturbance. This study investigated the effectiveness on school performance of an education liaison from the school system who worked with social workers to resolve educational barriers to learning and achieving. Advocacy by the education liaison led to positive results in terms of school performance of foster youth. Recommendations are made for better addressing the educational needs of children in foster care.

Key Words: Education, foster care, foster youth, foster care and interagency collaboration , children in foster care

Children in the foster care system are an educationally vulnerable population. They are more likely than other children to have academic and behavioral trouble in school. They have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals. Three fourths perform below grade level and more than half have been retained at least one year in school (Parrish et al., 2001). Their academic difficulties include weaker cognitive abilities and lower academic achievement and classroom performance compared to non-maltreated children (Altshuler, 1997). On standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics, they perform significantly lower than non-foster youth and earn lower grades in these subject areas. They exhibit behavioral problems in school settings ranging from aggressive, demanding, immature, and attention-seeking behaviors to withdrawn, anxious, and over-compliant behaviors. These difficulties lead many foster youth to experience grade retention, placement below age appropriate grade levels, and/or placement in special education. In fact, they are significantly over-represented in special education. Between 30% to 50% of children in foster care are placed in special education compared with 12% of the general school population (Hunt & Marshall, 2002). They are also twice as likely as non-foster youth to leave school without obtaining a high school diploma. A number of recent studies describe the barriers to educational achievement that children in foster care experience (Altshuler, 1997, Parrish et al., 2001; Weinberg, Zetlin & Shea, 2003). Many of the educational problems they encounter have to do with placement instability and multiple school transfers. Resulting problems from frequent moves and gaps in enrollment include difficulty accumulating school credits, falling behind in academic skill areas, placement in classes already taken, delay in transfer of school records, and difficulty being evaluated for special education placement.

Even if placement instability were reduced, there still remain substantial problems adversely affecting the education of all foster youth. Too often, the education programs made available to foster children are inadequate. Many foster youth, especially those living in group homes, attend non-public special education schools or alternative school programs (e.g., continuation schools, community day schools). Such schools lack credentialed teachers and tend not to offer college preparatory courses. For a great many children in the foster care system, there is no one familiar with their academic strengths and weaknesses and no one regularly providing educational advocacy and mentoring.

Also to consider is that the educational barriers experienced by foster youth occur “amidst a staggering amount of disruption, deprivation, negative peer influences, and abuse in other parts of their lives” (Burrell, 2003, p.3). A lack of mental health services to adequately meet the increasing emotional needs caused by their life circumstances further compounds the situation. Kelly (2000) cautioned that without intervention, most of these young people will not complete high school and are at great risk for becoming part of the public assistance and criminal justice systems.

Recent efforts to improve the schooling experience and outcomes of foster youth have been focused in four areas: (1) stability of educational placement (i.e., maintaining students in their schools of origin); (2) educational rights and opportunities (i.e., information and training on educational rights, special education, and college or workforce preparation); (3) advocacy and cross-system liaisons (i.e., advocacy resources to assist youth and families with enrollment, suspension/expulsion, special education or other barriers); and (4) quality of educational programming (Burrell, 2003). State and local programs are establishing policies and procedures for protecting this most

vulnerable population. Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family multisite program strives to have children placed in supportive foster homes in their same communities, thus allowing them to remain in their original schools (Usher, 1998). In Massachusetts, funds are set aside to cover transportation as well as education costs so that children living in foster placements outside their home districts can remain in their neighborhood schools (Jackson, 1997). In California, new legislation requires that educational passports be maintained for all foster youth with information necessary for monitoring school progress (i.e., grades, attendance, retention, Individualized Education Program (IEP), achievement test scores). Also in California, the Foster Youth Services program provides direct educational services such as tutoring, tracking down school records/transcripts, and mentoring to foster youth residing in group homes to increase academic achievement and graduation rates (Ayasse, 1995).

Policymakers and practitioners realize that the child welfare and school systems can no longer operate in isolation to manage the educational functioning of foster children. Altshuler (2003) and others have called for a more collaborative approach with the two systems working together to address educational needs in a comprehensive and coordinated way. Over the last decade, the service integration movement, which features improved linkages between public service systems, has strengthened the ability of agencies to work together, share scarce resources, and take advantage of each other's respective disciplinary knowledge (Franklin & Allen-Mears, 1997; Morrill, 1992). With the mutual goal of improving school outcomes for foster youth, the education and child welfare systems can come together as collaborative partners to achieve more effective service delivery. Their shared planning and goal setting will lead to a jointly developed

comprehensive system to provide the necessary supports and procedures to overcome educational hurdles that hinder school progress.

This study presents findings from a collaborative interagency program in one of the largest urban counties in the U.S. seeking to improve education outcomes for children in foster care. In 1998, the nation's largest county child welfare agency embarked on an Education Initiative to ensure that agency workers focused on the educational needs and schooling of foster children on their caseloads. A key component of the initiative was the provision of an Education Specialist (ES), a liaison from the local education agency who was co-located in the child welfare agency (CWA) office. The ES worked alongside CWA workers, and as workers identified school problems for individual cases, the ES sought to secure appropriate and effective educational programs and services from the child's school district.

The ES, a certified special education teacher, was selected for the position because of her knowledge of the rules and regulations of California schools and of the educational resources and services available in the schools and community. The ES received training on a variety of relevant education and legal issues from a nonprofit advocacy law firm that also provided weekly technical assistance with individual cases on which she was working (i.e., the law firm also served as a partner agency for the project). The ES also had daily access to the law office staff by telephone to consult about a case. Consequently, if, during the course of the day, the ES was unclear about the next steps to take on a case, she had the option of getting immediate information from the law office staff.

The ES was assigned to a region office of the CWA that served approximately 8,000 children. Social workers made referrals to the ES when confronted with an educational problem for a child that they were unable to resolve. Problems included, among others, inability to obtain a child's school records, refusal by a school district to enroll a child in school, inappropriate denial of special education eligibility, failure to provide required special education services, inappropriate school placement, and inappropriate suspension or expulsion of a child. During the first year of the program, a total of 160 cases were referred to the ES by CWA workers.

Upon receipt of a referral, the ES first sought information about the youth's current school status. The ES discussed with the CWA worker the young person's schooling situation, read the case file (e.g., including bi-annual reports to the court on school performance) and sought to obtain recent school records (e.g., attendance, achievement, transcripts, IEP). For some referrals, the ES simply had to provide one time or intermittent counsel to the CWA worker; in other instances, the case required direct intervention by the ES to ensure that the needs of the foster youth were appropriately addressed. This often involved contacting a resource person at the school of attendance, soliciting information from or providing information to the caregiver and CWA worker, attending an IEP or Student Study Team (SST) meeting at the school, and/or investigating alternative school options. In a related study, Zetlin, Weinberg, and Tunick (2002) reported that 50% of the cases were resolved by the ES with one or two inquiries/actions; 33% were resolved with 3 to 10 inquiries/actions; and 17% involved problems so complex that they required over 10 inquiries/actions to resolve and sometimes necessitated referring the case to the advocacy law office.

When cases were referred to the advocacy law office, a staff member often attended case conferences with the ES to move the case along. Law office staff also attended special education meetings (i.e., an individualized education program meeting) with the ES when the backing of the law office was necessary to resolve the issues in the case. In a few instances, when the reason why the child was not receiving appropriate school services involved a violation of federal or state special education law, the law office staff filed a noncompliance complaint with the state or federal government. And in one or two cases, when there was a disagreement between the child's caregiver and the school district about a child's special education eligibility, evaluation, placement, services, or other aspect of special education law, and the caregiver's position clearly seemed to be correct, the law office represented the child in a special education mediation or administrative hearing.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of intervention by the ES on the school performance of children receiving liaison services. This study was one part of a larger effort to assess changes in the child welfare agency in terms of level of involvement and knowledge regarding the schooling of foster children since implementation of the Education Initiative (see Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2002). The intent of this study was to document the viability of the Education Liaison model, in which the ES works collaboratively with the CWA worker interfacing with the school or district to advocate for the educational needs of children in foster care.

Methods

The research was conducted by examining school performance data from foster youth for the year prior to intervention by the ES (1997-1998) and the year immediately

following intervention (1998-1999). The sample included 120 foster youth consisting of 60 treatment and 60 control cases. The treatment cases were randomly selected from the pool of 160 cases that comprised the first-year caseload of the ES assigned to the pilot CWA office. The control cases were randomly drawn from a list of 111 cases that comprised the baseline case files from a comparable control office that had been examined at the start of the project. None of the control cases received intervention from the ES.

From school records, we sought grade point average, math and reading achievement test scores, daily attendance, special education status, and the number of schools attended during the 2-year period. Of the 120 cases, complete or partial school data were available for 50 treatment and 38 control cases (see Zetlin, Weinberg & Luderer, in press, for a description of difficulty accessing school records of foster youth). The treatment group ranged in age from 5 years 4 months to 17 years 1 month (mean = 12 years 3 months) and the control group from 5 years 11 months to 16 years 11 months (mean = 10 years 5 months). Thirteen treatment members were in elementary school, 22 in middle school, and 20 in high school; 34 control members were in elementary school, 11 in middle school, and 14 in high school. In terms of school placement, within the treatment group, 32% were in general education and of those in special education, 45% were in public schools, 11% in non-public school (NPS), and 11% in residential schools. Within the control group, 59% were in general education and of those in special education, 32% were in public schools, and 9% in NPS. Of the 60 treatment cases, 31% were referred to the ES because of special education questions (how to get outdated IEPs updated, who can sign the IEP if parent is not available), 26% for prereferral needs (what

kinds of educational support services are available for a failing student), 16% sought procedural information (how to get the cumulative file for a child who has changed schools often), 16% for troubled student needs (identification of an alternative placement for a youth who refuses to attend school or has too few credits to graduate), 10% were resource requests (what mental health or tutoring services are available), and 2% dealt with court orders (what to do if court-ordered tutoring has not been provided or court-ordered IEP assessment has not been conducted). None of the control cases received the services of the ES or were included in her caseload. The control cases represented a true random sampling of the array of cases served by a CWA office while the treatment cases were specifically drawn from the pool of cases experiencing more or less substantial educational problems.

Results

A nested analysis of variance was used to investigate the treatment effects within treatment and control groups: A nested ANOVA was appropriate for this design because there were significant differences between control and experimental groups by nature before the treatment was introduced. The variables assessed were: grade point averages (GPA), math achievement test scores, reading achievement test scores, daily attendance, special education status, and number of schools attended during the 2-year period.

Significant differences were found for math and reading test scores. For both variables, the control group had significantly higher scores on the pretest than the treatment group [math: $F(1, 9.05, p < .004)$; reading: $F(1, 6.25, p < .01)$] but no significant differences were found in math or reading test scores on the posttest (see Table 1). In other words, while the control group out-performed the more troubled treatment group during the pre-treatment year, during the post-treatment year, the treatment group showed signs of

improving in math and reading while the control group's test performance followed the typical downward trajectory for youth in foster care over time. There were no significant differences between the groups in terms of GPA. A *t test* was computed to assess pre and post differences between the groups in terms of attendance. The control group had significantly fewer absences during the post period than the treatment group ($t=2.31$, $p<.03$). Chi square analysis was computed to assess the relationship between treatment and control groups and special education status. A significant difference was found, indicating that there were more treatment group members than control group members receiving special education services ($X^2 (1) = 5.73$; $p<.02$).

<insert tables 1 and 2 about here>

Discussion

Because children in foster care lack parents to advocate on their behalf and because of their extreme educational vulnerability, it is important for the child welfare and school systems to develop strategies to identify and resolve the problems (i.e., academic, behavioral, and bureaucratic) which impede the educational progress of this population of children. These data indicate that the Education Specialist (ES) can be an effective tool for supporting schooling needs of children in foster care. Within the pilot office, the evidence shows that having a liaison from the school district accessible as a resource for CWA workers to identify and address educational problems led to positive results for foster youth in the treatment group in terms of academic achievement. While youth in the control group outperformed the treatment group on a number of school variables the year preceding intervention by the ES, there were no differences between the two groups in math and reading achievement scores the year following intervention. In fact, the treatment group made positive gains as reflected in math and reading

achievement test scores, indicators of academic performance over a school year.

Nonetheless, the continued differences in attendance and special education status between the treatment and control groups as well as the downward trajectory of the control group in math and reading achievement underscores the vulnerability of this population and the need for active educational advocacy by both the CWA and school systems.

A limitation of the study is that a component analysis could not be conducted, so specific effects cannot be tied to a particular strategy or set of actions that the ES followed. Another limitation is that the treatment and control samples were developed from a similar but not equivalent population. That is, the treatment cases were drawn from the list of cases referred to the ES for serious education problems, while the control cases were randomly sampled from the general population served in the same or a geographically comparable CWA office. None of the control cases received the services of the ES and thus may have experienced fewer education or behavioral problems and less mobility and school transfers. However, it appears that the appointment of the ES to resolve educational problems and help negotiate the cultures of both school districts and the CWA was critical to the positive outcomes seen in the data. Follow-up research is needed to identify what specific kinds of support and actions are linked to improvements in test scores and in what ways the ES can work to improve attendance and secure appropriate programs and services to reduce the need for referral to special education.. Further study should also focus on how the partner agencies collaborate, how much coordination is required, the cross-training necessary to develop trust and awareness of

each other's system and culture, and what is needed to troubleshoot when obstacles occur.

Establishing a collaborative partnership with the local educational agency (LEA) and having CWA workers work with education liaisons who are more knowledgeable about educational needs, education law and regulations, and school procedures appears to be a viable strategy for monitoring school progress and dealing with educational barriers which hinder the educational progress of foster youth. For this project, the ES was well prepared for her position. She received training from the LEA and nonprofit law office about laws and policies of California schools and available local educational resources and services. She handled 160 cases in the first year, but as many as 250 cases per year in subsequent years. Most of the cases required short-term involvement; about a third of the cases were more labor intensive. Technical assistance for handling the more problematic cases was provided by the nonprofit law office (for a detailed description of the Education Liaison model, see Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2003).

Both the school and child welfare systems must be accountable for the child's education. They must operate in collaborative, coordinated ways to confront the educational challenges that impede school achievement for foster children. Through education liaisons partnering with social workers, the two systems can work together to monitor the progress of children in foster care and act promptly when problems occur. Be it difficulties with school enrollment, selecting the most appropriate educational option for a student, or evaluating a child for special education services, only if problems are known can they be resolved. Ongoing assessment and a systematic tracking of

students' movement through school must become a priority and intervention in a timely manner must occur when there is a need.

In sum, school districts and the CWA must develop policies and practices that directly address the schooling of children in foster care. The educational needs of children in the foster care system are real and dire. As Kelly (2000) pointed out, those working with children in foster care need to do more to address and ameliorate these children's educational plight. Formal procedures must be established for the school and child welfare systems to work in coordinated ways that result in payoffs on critical school outcomes. There must be shared responsibility and shared accountability across agencies in order to properly address the educational needs of youth in foster care. The Education Liaison model, which features advocates who can assess the child's educational situation and work to ensure that the youth is placed in an appropriate program and receives the services to which he or she is entitled, appears to be one such effective solution.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported, in part, by a grant from the Stuart Foundation

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Table 1
Comparison of Math and Reading Achievement Test Scores

	Treatment		Control		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Math						
Pretest	20.84	17.87	41.22	28.17	9.05	.004*
Posttest	24.54	19.86	30.67	25.11	3.14	.082
Reading						
Pretest	21.01	17.77	34.91	26.41	6.25	.016*
Posttest	23.40	21.97	32.66	23.44	.59	.448

Note. SD = Standard Deviation; F= Analysis of Variance; Sig.= level of significance

Table 2

Comparison of GPA, Attendance, Number of Schools Attended, and Special Education Status

	Treatment Group	Control Group	
	Mean	Mean	
GPA			
Pretest	1.68	2.03	ns
Posttest	1.82	2.20	ns
Attendance			
Pretest	15.56	12.39	ns
Posttest	13.74	7.59	<i>p</i> <.03
Number of Schools			
Pretest	1.30	1.28	ns
Posttest	1.18	1.12	<i>p</i> <.05
Special Education*			* <i>p</i> <.001
Pretest	18	10	
Posttest	9	7	

Note: GPA = Grade Point Average; ns= not significant

**I. The Effectiveness of the Education Liaison Model for
Educating Children in Foster Care**

The Effectiveness of the Educational Liaison Model
for Educating Children in Foster Care

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Keywords: Foster youth, Foster care, Foster care and education, Foster care and
interagency collaboration

Submitted for Publication

Abstract

Objective: The main aim was to determine the effectiveness of the Educational Initiative, an intervention program in one of the largest urban counties in the U.S. seeking to improve education results for foster children.

Method: A pre-post test control group design was used. Data from case files and caseworkers were examined at the start of the project and 18 months later to determine changes in: a) caseworker's knowledge and practices regarding school programs and services and b) their maintenance of educational records for children on their caseloads.

Results: Data from both sources confirmed the effectiveness of the Educational Liaison as a viable model. Caseworkers increased their knowledge about the school system and the attention they direct to educational needs of children on their caseloads.

Conclusions: The data raise questions as to whether caseworkers by themselves would be the most effective advocates for foster children. The evidence showed that having a liaison from the school district who can assess the child's educational situation and advocate with the caseworker for appropriate services is an effective model.

The Effectiveness of the Educational Liaison Model
for Educating Children in Foster Care

There are over half a million children in the U.S. in foster care—a 76% increase since 1986 (Jacobson, 1998). In California alone, there are over 100,000 children in out-of-home care (Kelly, 2000). The mission of the foster care system is to protect children who have been physically or sexually abused or neglected and reduce the risk of endangerment. Although mounting evidence shows that the school experience of children in out-of-home care can play a key role in stability in placement as well as successful transition out of the foster care system, the dependency system's success is calculated in terms that have little to do with how children fare in school. For example, Fletcher-Campbell (1990) found that placements were jeopardized when foster parents were unable to tolerate the situation if difficult children were around the house all day or for practical reasons, if both parents worked. In Wisconsin, follow-up data revealed that within 12-18 months after leaving care, a fourth of the boys ended up incarcerated, a third had not finished high school and fewer than a fifth reported receiving any job training (Courtney cited in McCann, et al, 1996). Other studies of the educational achievement of foster youth have shown that this population is more likely than other children to have academic and behavioral trouble in school (Hochstadt, Jaudes, Zimo & Schacter, 1987; Urquiza, Writz, Peterson & Singer, 1994). They have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, 75% perform below grade level and more than 50% have been retained at least one year in school (Goerge, Van Voorhis, Grant, Casey & Robinson, 1992; Parrish, Dubois, Delano, Dixon, Webster, Berrick & Bolus, 2001; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994). Kelly (2000) cautions that without intervention, most of these young

people will not complete high school and are at great risk for becoming part of the public assistance and criminal justice systems. This study presents findings from an intervention program in one of the largest urban counties in the U.S. seeking to improve education results for children in foster care.

Educational Difficulties of Foster Youth

Researchers have found that children in foster care demonstrate a variety of academic difficulties including weaker cognitive abilities and lower academic achievement and classroom performance compared to non-maltreated children (Altshuler, 1997). They perform significantly lower on standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics and earn lower grades in these subjects than non-foster youth. They exhibit behavioral problems in school settings ranging from aggressive, demanding, immature and attention seeking behaviors to withdrawn, anxious and over-compliant behaviors. These difficulties lead many children in foster care to experience grade retention, placement below age appropriate grade levels and/or placement in special education. In fact, whereas 10-12% of the general population receives special education services, 25% to 40% of children in foster care are placed in special education, generally related to either a learning disability or a serious emotional disturbance (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2001).

Contributing to a wide range of at-risk school indicators are the high levels of residential mobility and school transfers that children in foster care experience (Eckenrode, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995). Data collected in California have revealed that children in foster care attend an average of 9 different schools by the age of 18 (Kelly, 2000). Far reaching effects have been documented as these highly mobile children struggle to adjust to new classmates, new educational curricula, and new teaching styles and expectations. They often grapple with delays in enrollment, difficulties with the transfer of their records, and lost school credits when they move mid-semester (Ayasse, 1995; Leiter & Johnson, 1997, Kelly, 2000).

Jackson (1994) reported that information about the school performance of children in foster care is not systematically tracked by social workers and minimal, if any, attention is focused on educational issues. Thus, social workers know little of the school progress or needs of children on their caseloads and too often educational needs go unknown and unattended. The failure to monitor educational progress has led to an array of consequences: foster youth being placed in inappropriate school programs or excluded from attending school due to school records being

lost or misplaced when home placements were changed (Carlen, Gleeson & Wardhaugh, 1992; Maginnis, 1993); failure to detect learning disabilities or other problems because assessments were not fully conducted at the last school or results were not communicated to the new school or foster parent (Ayasse, 1995); and failure to implement a child's active Individualized Education Program (IEP) due to delays in receiving school records including those related to special education. It is sometimes weeks or months until the new school does its' own psycho-educational assessments and holds its' own multidisciplinary meetings during which time the child does not receive the services already identified on the IEP (Altshuler, 1997).

Initiatives to Improve Education Outcomes

Recent state and local initiatives have emphasized the need to address the educational problems being experienced by children in foster care in order to improve school performance outcomes (Jacobson, 1998). These initiatives acknowledge the need to actively oversee the education of foster children and intercede when problems are detected. California has established the Foster Youth Services (FYS) program, a promising strategy whereby program staff provide direct educational service to foster youth such as tutoring, tracking down school records/transcripts, and mentoring (Ayasse, 1995). Early follow-up has shown that foster youth attending high school who received FYS interventions earned 10.1 credits more per semester than other high school students in foster care in a school district with no FYS program. There was also a decrease in maladaptive behavior, lower drop out rates, and more successful transitions to employment or higher education among foster youth receiving services. Policy makers

have suggested that school social workers could serve as educational advocates for children in foster care (Altshuler, 1997; Noble, 1997). The school social workers would be responsible for checking that the child is placed in the appropriate grade or program, has coursework that is developmentally appropriate, and that school records are sent or received when there is a school transfer.

In 1998, one of the nation's largest county child welfare agencies (CWA) launched an "Educational Initiative" to ensure that agency workers focused more attention on the educational needs and schooling of foster children on their caseloads. The main goal of the Educational Initiative was to provide technical assistance and training to CWA social workers to help them to become more aware of educational problems and needs that children might be experiencing. The intent was to increase workers' knowledge about educational resources and services available in the schools and community and to help them develop proactive practices to secure appropriate services and placements.

A key component of the initiative was the provision of an Educational Specialist (ES), a liaison from the local education agency who was co-located in the CWA office. The ES helped CWA workers address the numerous, and often complex, educational problems of the children on their caseloads. Social workers would make referrals to the ES when confronted with an educational problem for a child that they were unable to resolve themselves. Problems included, among others, inability to obtain a child's school records, refusal by a school district to enroll a child in school, inappropriate denial of special education eligibility, failure to provide required special education services; inappropriate school placement, and inappropriate suspension or expulsion of a child.

Upon receipt of the referral, the ES analyzed and discussed the referral with the social worker to determine an appropriate course of action. Sometimes, the ES simply had to provide one time or ongoing advise to the social worker; at other times, the case required direct intervention by the ES to secure from the child's school district, appropriate and effective educational programs and services for the foster child.

The ES also provided more formal small or large group training to the social workers on issues that were of general concern. The intent of the training was to increase (a) awareness of educational problems and needs that foster children often experience, (b) knowledge of laws and regulations governing school programs and services, (c) knowledge of educational resources and services available in the schools and community, (d) maintenance of school transcripts and other school documents, and (e) use of advocacy to secure appropriate school services and class placements.

The Educational Initiative Studies

To determine the effectiveness of the Educational Initiative, data were examined at two points in time, at the start of the project and 18 months later, to determine changes in level of involvement and knowledge regarding the schooling of foster children. This reports builds on data from an earlier study that examined the extent to which education had been a focus of child welfare agency staff before the Educational Initiative was adopted (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2003). Results from the baseline study indicated that prior to implementation of the Educational Initiative, the CWA focused little attention on the educational process and that little was known by CWA workers of the educational progress or needs of children in the agency's care. In terms of knowledge and practices and the actual maintenance of educational records, there was only

occasional attention by those connected to the child welfare system directed to school performance and educational needs. Neither supervisors nor caseworkers appeared to be informed about their potential role in detecting and dealing with school problems, and they had limited knowledge regarding educational procedures, regulations and resources.

For this study, baseline data were compared with data collected after the Educational Initiative had been in effect for 18 months in designated pilot offices of the CWA. This study investigated changes in: a) the extent of caseworker's knowledge and practices regarding school programs and services; and b) their maintenance of educational records for children on their caseloads. The intent of the study was to investigate the viability of the Educational Liaison model in which the ES serves as a trainer for CWA workers and as a model advocating for more appropriate and effective educational services for children in foster care.

Methods

This research was conducted by examining pre and post intervention data from two sources. Data were collected from case files and caseworkers (both supervisors and line workers) at the start of the project and 18 months later to determine changes in the extent to which the caseworkers focused on the schooling of children in foster care.

Sample

Case Files. At the start of the project, the Management Information Division (MID) developed a random list of 500 cases generated from the total pool of open cases of children and youths aged 5 to 18 years in four geographically distinct region offices and two specialized units (Deaf and Medical Placement). Of the 500 names identified, a baseline sample was developed consisting of 308 foster youth. The remaining 192 cases

were unavailable for review, having been terminated, forwarded for adoption, or transferred to another region office. By 18 months into the initiative, a large number of the 308 baseline cases were no longer available due to adoption, case termination or transfer out of the area. A second random sample was developed from a pool of 350 cases by MID from the same four geographically distinct region offices and two specialized units. Sixty-three cases were unavailable for study leaving a final sample comprised of 287 foster youth aged 5 to 18 years that served as the post-intervention sample.

For both the pre- and post- samples, the case files were examined to determine how current the educational records were including the collection of relevant forms and school documents detailing attendance, behavior and achievement. The case files were fully read and basic demographic and education-related information was transferred to specially developed data information sheets. To establish inter-rater reliability, each data collection time, the team of three researchers, two graduate students in schools of education and one professor of education (first author), together reviewed five files and developed a strategy for locating and extracting the relevant information within the file. Each researcher then reviewed two files independently and presented the data information sheets to the team. Once familiarity with the organization of data within the files and the process of locating and extracting data of interest was established, files within each office were divided among the three researchers who completed a data information sheet for each case. On the data information sheet, the researchers identified: (a) demographic information about the child or youth; (b) reason for initial placement; (c) stability (1 placement, 2-3 placements, more than 3 placements) and duration of

placement history (18 months or less, 19-48 months, more than 48 months); (d) whether there was documentation of the schools having completed School Attendance and Performance forms (SAP), how recently such forms were completed (within 6 months, within 6 months to 1 year, longer than 1 year), and whether academic or behavior problems were noted; (e) whether caseworkers completed Needs Assessment (NA) and Case Plan Summary forms (CWA), how recently such forms were completed, and whether school problems were noted; (f) whether the child or youth receives special education services, if an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is in the file, and how current the IEP is; and (g) whether the child or youth has a transition/ emancipation plan.

Caseworkers. During baseline and again 18 months later, caseworkers, both supervisors and line workers, completed an extensive 40 item questionnaire which assessed their degree of knowledge about educational resources and school procedures and regulations and their practices and actions with respect to getting involved in the educational process. The questionnaire was developed by the first two authors based on their extensive experience in working with K-12 schools. At the start of the project, the questionnaire was administered to all 33 supervisors and 275 caseworkers from the six offices. Eighteen months into the project, 25 supervisors and 192 caseworkers from the original sample completed the questionnaire (CWA experiences a 30% annual turnover in caseworkers). For both administrations, the Regional Administrator from each office distributed and collected the forms to maximize cooperation. Thirteen questions assessed worker practices and required respondents to use a five point likert scale ranging from 1-never to 5-almost always (e.g., How often have you attended an IEP meeting? How often have you requested that the school district or IEP team refer a child for mental health

evaluation?). Twenty-seven questions assessed knowledge of educational procedures, resources and regulations and required respondents to rate their knowledge on a five point likert scale ranging from 1-almost no knowledge to 5-very knowledgeable (e.g., How aware are you of who is able to sign consent for special education evaluation for a youth in foster care? How aware are you with remedial resources provided by the school district--Student Study Team, after-school tutoring, ESL services, Title I services?).

Results

Case Files

Table 1 presents the demographic data for the two samples of foster youth. Chi Square tests were computed to compare the pre and post samples on each of the variables. No significant differences were found in terms of age, gender, duration of placement in the foster care system, overall number of youth receiving special education services and number of youth with an emancipation plan. There were significant differences in terms of ethnicity, reason for placement, stability of placement, and number of youth who were placed within special education within the last six months. Over the 18 months of the project, there were fewer white youth and more African American youth being served by the foster care system ($X^2(4) = 14.27; p < .006$). There was a decrease in the number of children removed from homes due to physical and sexual abuse and an increase in placements due to negligence ($X^2(4) = 14.43; p < .006$). The same number of children were in one placement but fewer children were in two to three placements and the number of children who changed placements more than three times increased ($X^2(3) = 8.54; p < .04$). Lastly, significantly more children had recently been placed in special education than was the case for the baseline sample ($X^2(3) = 16.99; p < .001$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Case files were examined to see if there were changes in the availability of the three relevant forms from time 1 to time 2. Specifically we looked to see if there was an increase in how much attention workers paid to educational needs and whether they noted school problems on forms they regularly completed for the case file. First we looked to see if there was a change in the percentage of case files that had received School Attendance and Performance (SAP) forms within the last six months and whether academic, attendance, or behavior problems were noted. The SAP forms are those forms sent by the caseworker every six months to the foster child's attending school to request current information on attendance and academic performance. Next we looked to see if there was a change in the percentage of case files that had recent Case Plan Summary (CSP) forms which are completed by the caseworker every six months and help the caregiver understand the foster youth's routines, needs, and tendencies. Lastly we looked to see if there was a change in the percentage of case files that had Needs Assessment (NA) forms which are completed by caseworkers when the youth is initially placed in foster care and each time the foster child's placement is changed. Chi Square analyses indicated that for all three forms, there was a significant increase in the number of current forms (completed within the last 6 months) available in the case files during the post period (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Next we computed chi square analyses within each data collection time (baseline and post periods) to assess whether there was a difference between the pilot and control offices in the availability of the three forms. During baseline, there were no significant

differences between the pilot and control offices, however, 18 months later, there were significant differences for each form indicating that the pilot offices had more current, up-to-date information available in the case files (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Chi square analyses were also computed to determine whether there were changes in the percentage of youth experiencing school problems as noted on the current SAP, CSP, and NA forms that had been completed within six months of each data collection period (see Table 4). Comparison of the SAP forms revealed that, although not significant, schools indicated that 57% of the baseline cases and 65% of the post-intervention cases had school problems; either grades or achievement test scores were low, or a school note had been sent home indicating problems with attendance, grades or reading. This increase may be due to the changing population—more youth during the post period have been in multiple placements than the baseline sample. Youth who experience multiple placements may have more behavior and/or emotional problems. This may also account for the increase in youth in special education during the post period. Schools may be placing these youths in special classes to provide needed support services. A significant relationship was found indicating that those with IEPs were more likely to have been in multiple placements ($X^2(6) = 22.68; p < .001$).

On the CSP forms, caseworkers indicated that the same numbers of youth were experiencing school problems during baseline and 18 months later. However, on the NA forms, a significant reduction in school problems was noted indicating that caseworkers perceived fewer academic and behavior needs in the post intervention period of those youth being placed or re-placed. Chi square analyses comparing the numbers of children

experiencing school problems in the pilot and control offices revealed the same overall patterns as described above. Interestingly, data from the CSP and NA forms completed by caseworkers are at odds with data completed by the schools (i.e. SAP forms) that specify an increase in school problems of children in foster care during the post period.

Insert Table 4 here

Caseworkers

During baseline, for both supervisors and caseworkers, scores on the questionnaire revealed relatively low levels of awareness of the educational system and of personal involvement in the educational process. The mean score for supervisors on level of involvement was 1.9 and on knowledge was 2.57. The mean score for caseworkers on level of involvement was 2.5 and on knowledge was 2.45. T-tests comparing the responses of each group during baseline and 18 months later, indicated that amongst the caseworkers, there were significant increases in both knowledge ($t=2.19$; $p<.03$) and level of involvement ($t=1.99$; $p<.05$). Amongst the supervisors, no change was found in terms of knowledge and, although not significant, a lower score was attained in terms of level of involvement. In other words, supervisors appeared to be less involved in the educational process than at the start of the project. In terms of patterns of change within the pilot and control offices, the post scores of caseworkers from the pilot offices indicated a significant increase in knowledge ($t=2.17$; $p<.03$) but not in terms of level of involvement. No differences were found in knowledge or level of involvement for the supervisors or caseworkers in the control offices or for supervisors in the pilot offices.

Discussion

Because children in foster care lack parents to advocate on their behalf and because of their extreme educational vulnerability, it is important for the child protective system to develop strategies to combat the problems (i.e. academic, behavioral, and bureaucratic) which impede the educational progress of this population of children. Data from the case files and caseworker questionnaires confirm the effectiveness of the Educational Initiative as a viable model. Within the pilot offices, the evidence shows that having a liaison from the school district accessible as a resource for agency workers has increased their knowledge about the school system and the attention they direct to educational needs of children on their caseloads. The pilot offices unlike the control offices received systematic training and technical assistance from the ES housed in the child welfare agency office. This on-site resource has served to increase the focus of agency workers on gathering current educational data and noting educational needs on relevant forms in the case files.

Since a component analysis was not conducted, specific effects cannot be tied to a particular strategy or element of the Educational Initiative. However, it appears that the appointment of the Educational Specialist to resolve educational problems and help negotiate the cultures of both school districts and the CWA was critical to the positive outcomes seen in the data. When debating who should assume responsibility for the education of foster youth, the data presented in this report raise questions as to whether social workers by themselves would be the most effective advocates for children in foster care. While caseworkers increased their knowledge about school policies and practices, their level of involvement went unchanged. Even 18 months into the project, they were

not more likely to attend school meetings, contact schools, or refer students for special services. Among the supervisors, there was actually a decrease in their level of involvement, a dangerous trend given the high turnover of caseworkers and relative stability among supervisors. Even in terms of recording information in case files, while more current and relevant data were found in the files 18 months after the project began, there were still relatively low levels of school information available in the case files. Further, there were inconsistencies between school and caseworker data in identifying whether foster youth were experiencing school problems. The schools reported an increase in academic, behavior and attendance problems 18 months into the project whereas the caseworkers indicated that fewer school problems were being experienced by youth on their caseload.

Establishing a collaborative partnership with the local educational agency and having caseworkers work with educational liaisons who are more knowledgeable about educational needs, education law and regulations, and school procedures appears to be a more viable strategy for monitoring school progress and dealing with educational hurdles which hinder the educational achievement of foster youth. However, resolving school problems should not be the sole responsibility of the educational liaisons either. Both systems, the school and child protective systems, must be accountable for the child's education. Through educational liaisons working with social workers, the two systems can work together to monitor the progress of children in foster care and to act promptly when problems occur. Be it difficulties with school enrollment, selecting the most appropriate educational option for a student, or evaluating a child for special education services, only if problems are known can they be resolved. A systematic tracking of

students' movement through school must become a priority and intervention in a timely manner must occur when there is a need.

In sum, there is a need for permanent changes in the way school districts and the child welfare agencies operate. The educational needs of children in the foster care system are real and dire. As Kelly (2000) points out, those working with children in foster care need to do more to address and ameliorate these children's educational plight. Formal procedures must be established for the school and child protective systems to work in coordinated ways that result in payoffs on critical school outcomes. There must be shared responsibility and shared accountability across agencies in order to properly address the educational plight of youth in foster care. The Educational Liaison model which features advocates who can assess the child's educational situation and work to ensure that the youth obtains the services to which he or she is entitled appears to be one such effective solution.

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Table 1
Demographic Information from Baseline and Post-Intervention Samples

Demographic Variables	Baseline (n=308)	Post (n=287)
Mean Age (in months)	11 yrs 4 mos	11 yrs. 9 mos
Age Group: Young	56%	53%
Middle	21%	24%
High	23%	23%
Ethnicity ^a : White	17%	11%
Black	52%	64%
Hispanic	29%	22%
Asian	.2%	0
Other	.3%	3%
Gender: Male	46%	48%
Female	54%	52%
Reason for Placement ^b :		
Physical Abuse	19%	13%
Negligence	58%	65%
Sexual Abuse	10%	4.%
Physical and Sexual Abuse	3%	4%
Other	9%	15%
Stability of Placement ^c :		
1 Placement	48%	45%
2-3 Placements	35%	30%
>3 Placements	16%	25%
Duration of Placement		
1-18 months	23%	24%
19-48 months	36%	30%
Over 48 months	41%	46%
IEP: yes	28%	35%
No	72%	65%
Date of IEP ^d : within last year	9%	21%
within last 2 years	6%	7%
within last 3 years	8%	6%
Emancipation Plan: yes	12%	18%
No	88%	82%

^a $X^2 = 14.27$; $p=.006$

^b $X^2 = 14.43$; $p=.006$

^c $X^2 = 8.54$; $p=.04$

^d $X^2 = 16.99$; $p=.001$

Table 2
Availability of School Data

Date of Current School Attendance and Performance (SAP) Form	Baseline	Post
Within last 6 mos	25%	44%^a
Between 6 mos to 1 yr	14%	20%
Longer than 1 yr	25%	14%
Not available	36%	22%
Date of Current Case Plan Summary (CWA) Form		
Within last 6 mos	14%	37%^b
Between 6 mos to 1 yr	15%	18%
Longer than 1 yr	34%	26%
Not available	37%	20%
Date of Current Needs Assessment (NA) Form		
Within last 6 mos	8%	17%^c
Between 6 mos to 1 yr	10%	12%
Longer than 1 yr	40%	36%
Not available	43%	36%

^a $X^2(3) = 38.26; p < .00$

^b $X^2(3) = 48.76; p < .00$

^c $X^2(3) = 13.64; p < .00$

Table 3
Availability of SAP, CSP, and NA Forms within Casefiles

Forms	Baseline			Posttest		
	2 Pilot Century/ N Hollywood	2 Control Hawthorne/Pasadena	Significance	2 Pilot Century/ N Hollywood	2 Control Hawthorne/Pasadena	Significance
<p>Current</p> <p>SAP</p> <p>1 within last 6 mos 2 6 mos-1 yr 3 older than 1 yr 4 not available</p>	<p>32%</p> <p>12%</p> <p>26%</p> <p>29%</p>	<p>29%</p> <p>16%</p> <p>11%</p> <p>20%</p>	ns	<p>50%</p> <p>28%</p> <p>6%</p> <p>22%</p>	<p>40%</p> <p>16%</p> <p>19%</p> <p>25%</p>	<p>$X^2=10.98$ $p=.012$</p>
<p>Current</p> <p>CW</p> <p>A</p> <p>1 within last 6 mos 2 6 mos-1 yr 3 older than 1 yr 4 not available</p>	<p>18%</p> <p>17%</p> <p>39%</p> <p>25%</p>	<p>17%</p> <p>18%</p> <p>30%</p> <p>35%</p>	ns	<p>49%</p> <p>13%</p> <p>16%</p> <p>22%</p>	<p>29%</p> <p>17%</p> <p>30%</p> <p>24%</p>	<p>$X^2=11.28$ $p=.01$</p>
<p>Current</p> <p>NA</p> <p>1 within last 6 mos 2 6 mos-1 yr 3 older than 1 yr 4 not available</p>	<p>12%</p> <p>13%</p> <p>36%</p> <p>38%</p>	<p>6%</p> <p>9%</p> <p>44%</p> <p>41%</p>	ns	<p>23%</p> <p>12%</p> <p>28%</p> <p>37%</p>	<p>11%</p> <p>11%</p> <p>44%</p> <p>35%</p>	<p>$X^2=9.47$ $p=.024$</p>

Table 4
Evidence of School Problems

Current SAP school report	Baseline	Post	Significance
No academic/behavior problems	43%	36%	ns
Academic/behavior/attendance problems noted	57%	65%	
Current CSP school report			
No academic/behavior problems	50%	52%	ns
Academic/behavior/attendance problems noted	50%	48%	
Current NA school report			
No academic/behavior problems	24%	47%	$X^2(1) = 9.23; p < .002$
Academic/behavior/attendance problems noted	76%	53%	