

**FOSTER CHILDREN AND
EDUCATION
VERA EXCERPT**

**Meeting the Education Needs of Children
Placed Across State Lines
Resources**

Speaker

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ENROLLMENT/TRANSFERS

Foster Children



& Education

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ENROLLMENT/TRANSFERS

A change in school is a challenging experience for any child – but for a child in foster care the challenges are even greater. All children changing schools have to adjust to new teachers and counselors, new classmates. There are new classes to attend, classes in which the curriculum may differ significantly from the previous school, and a whole new school environment to decipher. And all of that change proves even harder if the transfer occurs in the middle of a school year.

Foster Children Face Additional Burdens

For foster children, school transfers usually occur at the same time they are adjusting to a new home and new foster parents. In New York City between 1995 and 1999, some 42 percent of children changed schools within 30 days of entering foster care, according to the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the city's child welfare agency. Researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice found a number of studies that cited school transfers and delays in registration as reasons why foster children are not succeeding in school. A recent study by the Child Welfare League of America suggests that it takes a child from four to six months to recover academically from the disruption of changing schools. And many children experience multiple transfers during their time in care.

These additional burdens on foster children make it especially important for caseworkers to pay attention to the question of school enrollment. Yet time pressures, high caseloads, a singular focus on safety – and often the scramble to find a bed – can make it difficult for caseworkers to think about the

impact of placement on the child's schooling. As Vera staff observed in three years of work with foster youth in New York City middle schools, caseworkers did not neglect the education of the youth under their care purposefully; most neglected education because it got lost in the process of placement and because they did not know how to negotiate the school system.

Such negotiation can be challenging. If the child is moved out of his school district, the task of registering him in a new school can prove overwhelming to whichever adult (caseworker, foster parent, group home staff person) ends up with that responsibility – and the child may miss days or weeks of school. In Vera staff's experience, most caseworkers, foster parents, and group home staff receive little or no training in how to negotiate the school system. This paper presents some tools to make that task easier.

Placing a Priority on Avoiding School Transfers

For children in care, school can be a place of stability in their otherwise chaotic lives. So the first question to ask is if placement in foster care (or reassignment to a new home within the child welfare system) really necessitates a change in school. At ACS and many child welfare agencies around the country, there is a growing preference for keeping the child in her current school – or at least in the same community school district – if possible. There are, of course, circumstances that can make school stability difficult to maintain: The child could be placed in kinship care in another part of the city, for example, or the current school may not

be able to meet her special education needs. But in general, if the child is doing well and there are no risks involved in remaining at the current school, strong consideration should be given to continuity of education. Caseworkers and other child welfare staff should be trained and encouraged to regard school transfers as undesirable. And all avenues — including transportation support to enable the child to commute to her own school — should be exhausted before embarking on a necessary school transfer.

Not all school changes result from entry into care or change of foster care residence. Transfers can occur if a child is moved because of behavior problems, is placed in a permanent home (reunited with birth parent or adopted), or ages out of the system before graduating.

A number of advocates are urging that the child be included in the decision about where he will attend school. An older child especially may have strong feelings about school choice. He may wish to remain with friends in familiar surroundings or, conversely, he may wish to make a new start in a new setting.

Simple Tools Can Facilitate Necessary School Transfers

If placement results in a change of school, there are several steps a caseworker can take to facilitate the process. A good place to start is with a simple set of tools to navigate what can be a complex education system.

The Vera Institute's Safe and Smart program, ACS, and New York City school officials produced a "Back to School" kit for use by caseworkers and foster parents that can be adapted to any school district. The kit was distributed at trainings for foster care agency caseworkers, who then shared it with co-workers and foster and birth parents.

The kit includes two letters designed to expedite the registration process. The first is addressed to school personnel and signed by a senior official of the child welfare agency. The letter, to be presented to school staff, asks for — and cites regulations that require — prompt registration of foster children. The second, addressed to superintendents and principals, is from the chancellor (top official) of the school system and emphasizes the role of timely registration in providing "every possible support and encouragement to children who are in foster care."

Together, the letters show that both the education and child welfare systems place great importance on promptly enrolling foster children in school. They also clarify which education regulations govern the registration process so as to ensure those regulations are applied fairly and consistently to foster youth. Attendees said the enrollment letter was the most useful aspect of the trainings, and several reported that the letter elicited positive responses from school staff.

The kit also contains such information as requirements for registration, a "What to Bring" list, phone numbers for key contacts in the school system, a school-year calendar, and a schedule of parent-teacher conferences. (Examples are included at the end of this report.) The "What to Bring" list helps ensure that caseworkers, foster parents, or other adult advocates arrive at the school with all of the documents necessary for registration. Caseworkers had complained to Vera staff that they spent considerable time going back and forth to school for multiple appointments. This list gives them the security of knowing they have all the materials needed to complete the registration in one trip. The other materials in the tool kit — the school schedule and the dates of parent-teacher conferences — signal that ongoing contact between child welfare staff and the school is expected.

ACS has continued the trainings and has expanded the kit to include a sample form from the foster care agency that accompanies the enrollment letter and is designed to clear up any confusion about guardianship, and a form the guardian signs that allows the school to share information about the child's educational record with ACS. These additions reflect an increased understanding of the challenges faced by education officials in dealing with foster youth. School officials told Safe and Smart staff that there were almost too many adults involved with foster youth – and they did not know who had the authority and responsibility for the child's educational needs. This confusion also spilled over to foster parents, who didn't give permission for a child to attend an after-school program, sign up for tutoring, or participate in a field trip because they assumed they lacked the authority. The guardianship clarifies which adult serves as the primary point person for the school.

Responses from attendees indicated that the training gave them the tools they needed to expedite registration and, more importantly, motivated many agency workers to become advocates for the educational needs of foster children. Once engaged, there is much more that agency workers can do. But they cannot learn it all on their own. They need access to training, materials, and experts. The Vera/ACS experience suggests that providing this necessary support need not be expensive or burdensome.

Support for Caseworkers

First, caseworkers must know the law and the requirements of the school system. Because policies and procedures vary from one locality to another – and often from one school to another – it is difficult to provide caseworkers with a universal set of rules. But knowing the local rules and regulations can be the difference between successfully enrolling a child

in school and a child missing days or weeks of education. In New York State, for example, a child must be admitted even if all required documents are not on hand. Prior to training, few New York City caseworkers knew this rule and often found themselves turned away because they lacked records – records which, given their charges' circumstances, are often difficult for them to obtain. Some educational staff did not know this rule either and unnecessarily denied admission. Giving caseworkers the appropriate school regulation – and letting them know how to use it and when to share it with school staff – went a long way to improving prompt registration of foster youth in school.

Other states recognize that foster youth present special circumstances. Some states will waive parental signatures for enrollment in special education or arrange necessary immunizations at nearby community clinics. Rachel DeAragon, education specialist at Good Shepherd Services, a New York foster care agency, says caseworkers "have to know what the requirements are – academic and others – at every point in the educational system if they are going to advocate for a kid." In the case of Good Shepherd, DeAragon serves as the expert resource for the agency's caseworkers, tutoring them on educational practice and encouraging them to advocate for the children on their caseloads.

Other Things Caseworkers Can Do:

- Decide which adult will be the point person for that child's education. (See "Adult Involvement")
- Discuss with foster parents and the child during the summer where the child will be attending school. Although never easy, transfers are less disruptive in summer or during a mid-year break.
- Find out if the school has an enrollment packet with written admission policies and share this information

with the foster parent or other designated adult.

- Know when the foster parent or other designated adult is taking the child to school and make sure that she can contact you if she encounters a problem.
- If records are missing, write to the new school asking staff to request records from the child's previous school.

Additional Complexities

Registration is even more complicated when a child who has been placed in a residential treatment center (RTC) or other institutional placement outside of the local school district returns to his home locality and needs to be re-registered in school. Some of these institutions have their own schools or enroll children in a different district – and the home district does not recognize the educational credits or understand how to translate that educational experience and place the child at the appropriate level in school upon return.

While much progress has been made in New York City to coordinate the efforts of local educational and child welfare systems, there has been little formal cooperation between the schools and the RTCs, virtually all of which are located

outside of the city. In this instance it is important to start the re-enrollment process early. It would benefit both child and school if the school had knowledge of the child's educational experience at the RTC and had access to tests and psycho-social interviews. It is also important to recognize that these cases usually require the additional support of an educational specialist or a local advocacy organization and to secure that support early in planning for the child's return. If the child has special needs, enlisting the advice and input of an expert in special education can help to improve the transition process.

The Questions are the Same

But in all cases in which a child in care is entering a new school the questions are the same: When registration problems arise, how are they addressed? And who is ultimately responsible for the child's education – the caseworker, the educational specialist, the foster parent, or the birth parent? Our experience suggests that the most important thing is to acknowledge the importance of school – and then to provide child welfare staff with some inexpensive and easy-to-use training and tools to tackle the challenge of school registration.



ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES
150 WILLIAM STREET: 18TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10038

WILLIAM C. BELL
Commissioner

WHAT TO BRING WHEN REGISTERING A FOSTER CHILD FOR SCHOOL

MUST ABSOLUTELY HAVE:

1. The child

SHOULD HAVE:

(Chancellor's regulation, A-101, 1.3: "If a parent or guardian or agency social worker brings a student to school for admission without appropriate documents, the principal will admit the student...")

1. **Letter from ACS signed by Anne Williams-Isom.** A letter to the school with the non-parent's name, home address, telephone number, name(s) of parent or guardian of the student with their home address and telephone numbers, the circumstances under which the student came to reside with them, and the duration of the stay (Chancellor's Reg. A-101, 4.2.1)
2. **Proof of address:** (Chancellor's Reg. A-101, 5.1.2)
 - a. Utility bill
 - b. Or, deed to a house
 - c. Or, document from City Housing Authority or Human Resources Administration
 - d. Or, medical insurance cards
 - e. Or, statement that verifies the address from an employer, a social agency, a community based organization, or a religious institution (see letter listed in 1.)

HELPFUL TO HAVE:

1. **Certification of child's name:**
 - a. Birth certificate
 - b. Or, baptismal certificate
 - c. Or, passport
2. **Proof of Immunization:**
 - a. 4DTP's
 - b. 4 Polio
 - c. 1 MMR after 1 year old
 - d. 2nd MMR 30 days after 1st and after 15 months
3. Child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) regarding special education placement
4. Report card from previous school with school ID#
5. Attendance record from previous school with school ID#
6. Knowledge of child's previous class placement: special education, general education, gifted class
7. Name, place, and address of previous school



**ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN'S SERVICES**
150 William Street
New York, NY 10038

WILLIAM C. BELL
Commissioner

ANNE WILLIAMS-ISOM
Associate Commissioner

Dear School Principal:

The below-named student is in foster care and is currently placed with the agency listed in the attached document. We are requesting that s/he be enrolled in your school as quickly as possible. The Department of Education and the Administration for Children's Services are committed to working together to ensure that all the children in foster care are getting the best education possible.

As you know, Chancellor's Regulation A-101 calls for the prompt admission of all pupils, including children in foster care. The child must be enrolled regardless of whether s/he has the required documentation, or before an investigation of her/his school history is completed. If there are any issues related to the adequacy of the documentation presented, an investigation is to be conducted after the admission has been completed.

The foster parent or agency named in the attached form has day-to-day responsibility for the care of this child. The foster parent and parent should be invited to parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, and any other school business pertaining to the performance of the student. We strongly encourage you to reach out to these parties and include them in the child's educational process. In some cases, however, interaction between parent and child is either limited, or prohibited, by the court. For further clarity in these situations, school staff can refer to the attached copy of the portion of the court order which covers visitation.

ACS would like to invite staff and administrators from your school to get involved in the case conferences pertaining to the child. The case conferences, which occur at regular intervals, serve as a forum for sharing information related to the safety and protection, as well as the functioning of the child and his or her family. School staff can add a valuable perspective to these meetings and we encourage your participation.

The fact that this child is in foster care is strictly confidential and should be revealed to school staff on a need-to-know basis. We appreciate your sensitivity to this issue.

Sincerely,

Anne Williams-Isom
Associate Commissioner and Special Counsel to the Commissioner



BOARD OF EDUCATION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
HAROLD O. LEVY, *Chancellor*

OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR
110 LIVINGSTON STREET · BROOKLYN, NY 11201

TELEPHONE: 718-935-2794

FACSIMILE: 718-935-3383
E-MAIL: hlevy@nycboe.net

MEMORANDUM

TO: ALL SUPERINTENDENTS and PRINCIPALS
FROM: Harold Levy
SUBJECT: School Registration of Children in Foster Care
DATE: August 16, 2001

Regular attendance is, of course, among the most significant components of success in school. The increasing mobility of our student population has placed ever-greater importance on the capacity of our schools to facilitate the transfer and registration process. This is particularly true for students in foster care, who may be subject to more frequent changes of location and circumstance.

It is imperative that every effort be made to facilitate a smooth and efficient registration process for students who are in foster care. These youngsters will generally be accompanied for registration either by an employee of the Administration for Children's Services, by an employee of a private foster care agency, or by a foster parent. It is important that every consideration be extended in these situations, and that the student be registered as quickly as possible. If there is any question concerning documents being provided, or documents that may be missing, school staff should, in accordance with Chancellor's Regulations, immediately register the student on a provisional basis and request that follow up information be provided as promptly as possible. If the student is attempting to register in the wrong school, the student's accompanying adult should be directed to either the appropriate school or to the district office. Either way, a telephone call should first be made to the school or district office to which they are being directed, to ensure that it is the correct place and to let the office know to expect the student.

It is our goal to provide every possible support and encouragement to children who are in foster care. A warm, welcoming and efficient registration process will create a lasting impression, and help us to serve these students to the utmost of our ability.

Thank you for your cooperation concerning this important matter.



April 2003

Administration for Children's Services

DIVISION OF CHILD PROTECTION
(Insert Field Office Address)

WILLIAM C. BELL
Commissioner

ZEINAB CHAHINE
Deputy Commissioner

School-Record Release

To: _____

I authorize you to release to the Administration for Children's Services any and all records, including, but not limited to, the cumulative record folder and all its contents, all academic records, guidance reports, anecdotal records, incident reports, attendance records, immunization and health records, special education records (if any), and any other records maintained by the school; and also including any records kept by the guidance counselor.

The right of confidentiality means that you cannot share information without my consent. I fully understand that I am requesting that you share confidential information with the Administration for Children's Services. Please honor my request as quickly as possible.

_____ Name of Child	_____ Signature of Parent/Date
_____ Date of Birth	_____ Address
Send documents to:	_____ Name/Title
	_____ Address

SCHOOL REGISTRATION: Where & When

First Day of School

September 5, 2001 (High School only)

September 6, 2001 (Elementary & Middle School)

ELEMENTARY & MIDDLE SCHOOLS

When: Beginning August 27, 2001 and throughout the school year

Where: At the child's zoned school

HIGH SCHOOLS

When: August 27-August 31, 2001
& January 28-February 1, 2002

Where: High School Superintendency offices (designated by borough)

When: All other times of the year
8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., Monday – Friday

Where: Office of High School Admissions
22 E. 28th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10016

Caseworkers can copy this form on agency letterhead and give it to the adult who is registering a foster child for school.

Child: _____ DOB: _____

Student ID: _____ CIN (Medicaid #) _____

Address: _____

Previous School: _____ Current Grade: _____

Check one: General Ed _____ Special Ed _____ Gifted Program _____

Foster Care Agency _____

Caseworker/Contact: _____ Phone Number: _____

Address: _____

Parent(s): _____ Phone Number: _____

Address: _____

Foster Parent(s): _____ Phone Number: _____

Date of Placement with Foster Parent: _____

Interaction with Parent (circle one): Permitted Limited Prohibited

Date of Court Order (if applicable): _____

Other Relevant Information:

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INSTITUTE
of JUSTICE

Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th Floor, New York, NY 10279 212.334.1300 www.vera.org

Meeting the Education Needs of Children Placed Across State Lines

Pamela Kemp Parker
Special Projects Attorney
Texas Department of Family & Protective Services
April 2009

Resources

Asking the Right Questions: A Judicial Checklist to Ensure That the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care Are Being Addressed (National Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Permanency Planning for Children Department, April 2005).

www.ncjfcj.org/

Educating Children in Foster Care - State Legislation 2004-2007 (National Conference of State Legislatures, March 2008).

Fact Sheet: Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster and Out-of-Home care (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, December 2008).

Foster Children & Education, How You Can Create a Positive Experience for the Foster Child (Vera Institute of Justice). www.vera.org

Mythbusting - Breaking Down Confidentiality and Decision-Making Barriers to Meet the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care, Kathleen McNaught (American Bar Association, Center on Children and the Law, 2005).

Questions and Answers: Credit Transfer and School Completion, American Bar Association and Casey Family Programs Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2008). www.abanet.org/child/education