



**breakthrough  
series**  
collaborative

Improving Educational Continuity and School  
Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care

# Introduction: Educational Challenges for Children in Foster Care

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In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity, it is a pre-requisite...  
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—President Barack Obama

Address to Joint Session of Congress,  
February 24, 2009

Most people will agree that a quality education is an essential ingredient for the future success of all children. For the nearly 800,000 children who enter the foster care system each year, a quality education assumes even greater importance. In light of the numerous disruptive experiences faced by youth who are placed in out-of-home care, educational continuity and school stability play a heightened role in paving the path to a successful future.

School success is a precursor for long-term positive outcomes for youth in out-of-home care. Such success contributes to:

- Enhanced well-being
- A successful transition into adulthood
- Increased chances for personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency
- Increased ability to contribute positively to society<sup>1</sup>

Yet the reality is that all too often, children in out-of-home care do not have access to the school stability and educational continuity so essential for school success.

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<sup>1</sup> National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008).

The implications for this can have a devastating impact on the long-term positive outcomes that all children deserve. A change in home placement frequently necessitates a change in school placement. For many children in care, interruptions in education due to school transfers result in their falling behind both academically and socially. After falling behind, it becomes very difficult to regain the lost ground. Studies have revealed disturbing longitudinal findings related to educational outcomes for youth in care. **Researchers have suggested that it takes approximately 4-6 months for a child to recover academically after changing schools.**<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, changing schools during high school diminishes the chances for graduation.<sup>3</sup> Children in foster care have higher drop-out rates, are less likely to complete high school, and are less likely to complete post-secondary educational pursuits.<sup>4</sup>

Casey Family Programs' 2020 Strategy calls for comprehensive improvements in foster care, child welfare, and the systems that impact the 9 million children who will experience foster care by the year 2020 if nothing changes. Casey's 2020 Strategy identifies education among other critical factors that pave the path to self-sufficiency for children in foster care.

### **Casey 2020 Strategy**

- Safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2020.
- Reinvest savings to strengthen families and improve the child welfare system.
- Improve the path to self-sufficiency for youth in foster care through a focus on well-being—specifically education, employment, and mental health.

In line with Casey Family Programs' 2020 Strategy is a commitment to helping youth in foster care succeed in school and complete their education. To that end, Casey's Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) convened in 2006 with the goal of providing child welfare and educational systems across the nation with a unique and historic opportunity to collaboratively strategize around challenges. Historically, child welfare and education systems have had difficulty in communicating. These are two diverse systems, but each can directly impact the educational success of children and youth in foster care. This BSC brought together nine public child welfare agencies and their associated school systems to test practice changes that would ultimately improve educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. This work required innovative and courageous action and leadership to address complicated cross-systems challenges and make a lasting difference. The nine participating jurisdictions demonstrated a commitment to testing practice strategies and tools on a small scale, sharing lessons learned, and implementing the most successful of these strategies throughout their

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<sup>2</sup> Yu, Day, & Williams (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy (1999).

<sup>4</sup> National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008, December), pp. 5-6.

**Establish School Stability and Seamless School Transition Procedures**

- a). Develop written protocols for school staff on any policy for allowing children in foster care to remain in their school of origin when possible.
- b). Develop written protocols for school staff about what to do when a child who is in foster care is moved into a new school.
- c). Inform the old and new school as soon as possible once a decision is made that a child must change schools.
- d). Require that complete school records are immediately transferred to the new school once a placement change is needed.
- e). Eliminate (or waive for students in foster care) school policies that require records to be transferred prior to a child's enrollment in a new school.
- f). Ensure that course credits are easily transferred between schools (even from other districts or states).

**Implement Best Practices to Maintain School Continuity and Manage Transitions**

- a). Provide transportation for students to their schools of origin.
  - b). Place children in out-of-home settings that are within the boundaries of their current schools.
  - c). When school transfers are necessary, they should, if possible, occur during a natural academic break, i.e., summer or school vacations.
  - d). Establish procedures in schools to make sure children get needed services immediately.
  - e). Ensure that youth of color are assessed appropriately when transferring to a new school.
  - f). Establish age-appropriate welcome strategies to integrate children socially into the new school.
  - g). Have an advocate for the child check in with the child during the first week at a new school to ensure that everything is going smoothly.
  - h). Ensure that caseworkers address the educational needs of youth in out-of-home care and track educational progress particularly when placement changes are required.
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