



2007 CALIFORNIA FOSTER YOUTH EDUCATION SUMMIT Backgrounder

The Summit

The 2007 California Foster Youth Education Summit is the first statewide convening of foster youth, former foster youth and leaders and professionals from education, child welfare, probation and the courts to address critical issues in foster youth education.

This gathering is an extension of work begun in 2003 when five California teams from across disciplines attended the first national Higher Education and Child Welfare Summit sponsored by Casey Family Programs in Washington, D.C. The teams returned home to Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco and the Bay Area, to spearhead multi-disciplinary communication and problem solving on behalf of foster youth educational needs at the local and state level. That same year, a collaborative in Los Angeles led by the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, sponsored the first Los Angeles Education Summit on needs and challenges facing foster youth education in Los Angeles. In 2004 and 2005 teams traveled to Seattle for two more national meetings addressing foster youth education issues and continued work in their respective counties. A second Los Angeles Summit was held in 2004 and a first annual Sacramento County summit was held in 2006.

All of this work contributed to the establishment of the California Foster Youth Education Task Force, a coalition of 21 organizations co-chaired by Casey Family Programs and the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, working to implement practice and policy change to benefit foster youth educational outcomes in California. Since 2004, the California Foster Youth Education Task Force has convened representatives from each of the teams that attended the national summits to address issues at the state level and to share best practices and forge solutions collectively.

The Challenge

In California today, there are 75,000 foster children and youth in the foster care system. The educational progress of this staggering number of children is a crucial factor in ensuring that each one of them reaches his or her full potential. While a quality education is key to every child's successful development and adulthood, it is especially crucial for children in foster care. Educational success is a source of resiliency, sparks a variety of other opportunities and becomes a positive counterweight to abuse, neglect, separation and lack of permanent caring family connections. Stable and positive school experiences can enhance children's well-being and increase their chances for a successful transition to adulthood and their ability to contribute to society.

Unfortunately, the educational outcomes for foster youth lag far behind the average student. Although national and state data are limited, research makes it clear that there

are serious issues that must be addressed to ensure the educational success of our children and youth in foster care.

Foster youth face overwhelming challenges in attaining a successful education:

- ◆ A recent study conducted in connection with legislation to mandate the Foster Youth Service Program showed that:
 - 75% of foster students in California function below their grade level
 - 83% are being held back by grade three
 - 46% become high school dropouts, compared with 16% of non-foster youth
 - Fewer than 10% of foster youth enroll in college

Roots of these challenges include:

- ◆ Instability - multiple home removals and placements resulting in numerous school changes and poor academic performance due to time missed in school and readjustment to new school environments.
 - 43% of California's foster youth are moved 3 or more times and 11% are moved 5 or more times
- ◆ Lack of consistent educational monitoring, intervention and support – caretakers such as foster parents and group home staff often lack the expectations, resources, training and support to systematically provide educational advocacy for children in their care.
- ◆ Systemic issues - a lack of clarity between child welfare and education personnel about shared responsibility for the educational outcomes of foster youth and specific role clarity, and barriers to information sharing such as incompatible data systems and perceived confidentiality constraints.

Not surprisingly, these poor educational outcomes contribute to instability in future adult life. Challenges faced by youth within 2 years of leaving foster care include:

- ◆ 51% are unemployed
- ◆ 62% have not maintained a job for at least one year
- ◆ Approximately 40% of former foster youth receive public assistance
- ◆ Approximately 25% experience homelessness
- ◆ 1 in 5 former foster youth will be incarcerated

Recent Progress

- ◆ Assembly Bill AB490, the landmark legislation authored by then Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg and passed in 2003, signified a new commitment in California to ensuring school stability and educational opportunity for foster children in California.
- ◆ The recent expansion of the Foster Youth Services Program (FYS) administered by the California Department of Education will now provide grants to 57 counties for educational and support services and increase

service from approximately 14,000 children to approximately 35,000 in 2007.

- ◆ The Guardian Scholars Program, a comprehensive program for foster youth in college that combines scholarship and personalized life support (e.g., housing, counseling, mentoring, employment and peer assistance), has grown from serving three students when it first began in 1997 at Cal State Fullerton to serving hundreds in 20 colleges in California, Washington, Colorado, Indiana and Massachusetts. Momentum is growing to expand and standardize the highly successful model program statewide.

Conclusion

Though there have been important policy and funding improvements recently, a number of areas remain that need policy attention, and implementation remains an on-going challenge. The intent of this summit, then, is to draw attention to the urgency of foster youth education outcomes, provide policy makers with the tools they need to address policy issues, and support local implementation through action planning, resource sharing and support.

Working together in new ways, we hope to help the young people raised in our foster care system overcome the numerous daily challenges and obstacles they face in attaining an education and their dreams of lifelong happiness and success.

