

**Addressing the Unremitting Educational Neglect of Homeless
and Foster Children:
Toward a Culture of Urgency and Caring**

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The purpose of this article is to highlight the continuing national crisis in the education of children in homeless and foster care circumstances and to make recommendations for improving local education agency (LEA) response to their needs. In 2004 there were in excess of 560,000 children in foster care in the United States. "Those younger than 6 years form the largest cohort of children entering care, and remain longest in care" (Vig, Chinitz & Shulman, 2005, p. 147). These children historically have been underserved after experiencing parental neglect, abuse, and emotional disorders. These vulnerable children are often placed with foster home staff who, despite their best efforts and intentions, often do not know how to address the specific emotional and learning needs of their clients (McNeil, Hershell, Gurwitsch & Clemens-Mowrer, 2005, May) In time, many foster children become "unplaceable" and face institutionalization until they "age-out" of foster care.

The daily transition from foster care to school campus is seldom smooth. The adults they depend on often are busy with multiple tasks at the same time, collaboration between schools and foster care institutions often is weak, non-existent or adversarial. Without focused, intentional, and caring support it is therefore not surprising that within twelve months after leaving foster care, one third of the foster children will have an encounter with the law. More than 50 per cent will be unemployed, 40 per cent will be homeless, and approximately 40 per cent of the young women will become pregnant. (Chichon, 2004).

The average age of initial placement in a foster care is 5.52 years. The average stay in foster care is 425 days, a significant portion of the developmental years. Longer stays are usually attributed to parental substance abuse. These children often have serious psychosocial concerns that go neglected. Their cases are often treated as behavioral issues rather than as emotional disturbance issues both within the foster home setting and schools (Chichon, 2004).

Regardless of their experiences in school prior to placement in foster care, foster children come to see school as a lonely, hostile, and uncaring place. A dramatic case of a 17 year old girl whose test scores revealed a grade equivalency of no greater than third grade in math and reading is instructive. School officials assured her that she would receive a diploma if she just came to class. She had already spent half of her short lifespan in the foster care system and her educational outlook was bleak. When one foster parent finally requested help from the high school staff, her records from any schools she had previously attended could not be found. In this same documented case, when the school district appointed an education surrogate for the 17 year-old, he signed the student paper

work to implement her individual education program (IEP) though he had never attended an ARD meeting. (Timbers, 2001, July 26)

In light of legal requirements to provide a free and appropriate public education for every child, it would seem that the fragile learners who come from foster homes or from the streets should be receiving the utmost attention and care when it comes to admitting them to school, sending and receiving records between schools, and diagnosing and providing services where special needs exist (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2004). Without effective adult advocacy on their behalf, this seldom is the case. With each successive account that comes from children and youth in the foster care systems it is clear that they still are not receiving from the schools or social service agencies the straightforward, uncomplicated care and attention that they deserve (Chichon, 2004). This makes even more disturbing reports about the inefficiencies and misapplications of dedicated funds intended to help these children. The inefficiencies due to lack of interagency collaboration between agencies and schools, agencies and other agencies, and schools and other schools results in incalculable delays and enormous losses of learning opportunities, placing homeless and foster children and youth at even greater risk of failing school and dropping out. While children suffer, it is often the adults to whom their care has been entrusted who do little more than shift blame both within and across institutional lines in an on-going cycle of territorial and adversarial game playing.

To better serve homeless and foster children, research has identified the following considerations that educators should address when working with homeless or foster children who are attempting to enroll in school. Many of these issues are not new. Most schools in 2006 still do not have specific plans or strategies for addressing the needs of these vulnerable learners.

1. Foster children tend to be highly mobile. There is no certainty that a child will complete a full academic year or even a thematic unit. Many will have multiple placements during a single school year (Sanderson, 2003). An Oregon study found that children who had multiple placements during the school year were less likely to be above grade level or to be involved in extracurricular activities than children who had a sustained period of time in one school (Ayasse, 1995, October).
2. Foster children tend to have greater emotional needs than the typical student. They tend to be fragile learners and have higher maintenance needs than the typical student (Sanderson, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg & Kim, 2004). Because their brains are coping with problems that other students do not experience or that their adult teachers cannot even imagine, foster and homeless children may require far more encouragement and time to master learning objectives (Chichon, 2004)
3. The learning experiences of foster children often have been filled with discrimination, hostility, apathy toward their needs, and rejection. They have learned not to seek help when it is needed (Altshuler, 1997, April). They are embarrassed at being singled out. Special attention or assistance is often shunned or rejected

outright. Special attention nevertheless is essential. Foster children, without a “program specifically designed to meet their individual needs...are frequently dysfunctional human beings at great penal and welfare cost” (Ayasse, 1995, Oct., p. 3).

4. Foster children with special needs often go unidentified or find their special needs addressed by impersonal, apathetic, bureaucratic processes. According to Cichon (2004) “Growing numbers of children are suffering needlessly because their emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs are not being met by those very institutions which were explicitly created to take care of them” (p. 39).

5. Foster children need to experience “a caring environment, engage in decision-making [regarding their education decisions] and pro-social action, see pro-social [helpful] behavior modeled by adults, develop skills such as perspective taking and conflict resolution, and confront injustice” (Carisson-Paig & Lantieri, 2005, summer, p. 98). They often miss their families, old neighborhoods, and friends. They feel stigmatized as homeless individuals when they enter new schools (Nunez, 1994; Dupper, 1994; Chicon, 2004).

6. Although foster and homeless children are referred for special education at higher rates than the general population, many are still not properly diagnosed. Often their referrals are related to emotional disturbances associated with histories of abuse or uncertainties about the present or future living arrangements. They may become more “aggressive, demanding, immature, and attention seeking than their peers. They also may tend to be more withdrawn, anxious, or over-compliant in some cases” (Altshuler, 1997, April; McNeil, Herschell, Gurwitch & Clemens-Mowrer, 2005, May). Their behaviors call for intervention rather than discipline. This reality is greatly overlooked by educators.

7. Foster children may go through numerous name changes during their time within the foster care system. This can lead to confusion and delays in finding records, admitting children to class (contrary to the requirements of Subtitle VII-B of the Education for Homeless Children and Youths Act also known as the McKinney-Vento Act, a reauthorization of the McKinney Act), establishing ID documents that will enable them to all services provided by the school and agencies (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2004).

8. Discrepancies between school records and social agency records presents a problem. An Illinois study found that schools reported 30 percent of foster children were receiving special education services while case-workers’ records showed that only 5 percent did (Ayasse, 1995, October). “Teachers and foster parents may not be able to recognize learning disabilities or other problems that were not fully assessed at the last school or may have been assessed and not communicated to the new school or foster parent” (p. 2).

9. Lack of collaboration between school officials and the child welfare workers is a major problem. Although professionals from schools and social service agencies share similar broader purposes of helping the children, their actions often become territorial and adversarial. Foster children find themselves caught between the warring adult factions. They find this “sea of adversity” to be chaotic, confusing, hurtful, stressful and unhelpful (Altshuler, 1997, april). Some children report that “living on the streets” is less stressful for them than navigating the confusing, unfamiliar, and contradictory procedures and processes that have been established to manage their lives.

Educational Response Required

There are several responses educators should make to address these issues faced by homeless and foster children.

1. Administrators need to acquire and disseminate to all staff members and teachers a basic knowledge of laws related to the rights of children, especially related to special education, the education rights of children and youth in homeless situations, laws on related to parental rights and responsibilities, and any legal other requirement to exercise diligence in addressing their needs. Schools that fail to address the needs of students who are legally entitled to special treatment are violating their civil rights. Federal law requires that public schools provide all children with a free and appropriate public education in the least-restrictive environment. Ignorance of the law is not at issue when denying the civil rights of any child.

2. School administrations must make homeless and foster children aware of their legal rights. The number one reason that services are not sought out by these children and their guardians is a lack of knowledge of their legal rights. The McKinney-Vento Act requires that schools make these rights available to the children twice during the academic year (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2004).

3. Administrators must be able to train their staff and teachers regarding ways to be particularly accountable to the homeless and foster children they serve. This means going beyond legal requirements to serve their needs toward a greater ethical and moral consideration of their needs. Training should also be offered to caseworkers and foster home parents so that they can better understand the various services and processes necessary to obtain services for the children in their care. Case workers need help learning to serve effectively as a team member of admission, review and dismissal (ARD) committees so that they do not delay implantation of required instructional education plan (IEP). To overcome complacency and lack of accountability, school administrators must instill a sense of urgency and caring within the school culture regarding the needs of homeless and foster children and convey this in all interactions with case workers and foster parents.

4. Education liaisons that are knowledgeable about education placement issues as well as the special characteristics of homeless and foster children should be employed and empowered to advocate between the local education agency (LEA) and case workers so that children will not be caught in the middle of adversarial or neglectful situations. Education liaisons currently are employed in California with great success in bringing together the schools and child welfare system (Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2004).

5. Administrators should diligently seek to engage counselors to acquire and utilize technology that locate, obtain, or disseminate educational records for students who may have spent the previous few years in multiple foster and school settings. School staff should be prepared to provide technical assistance to social service agencies and foster care institutions that will be required to develop “education passports.” These education passports should include all necessary documents that will remain with the child as he or she moves from one placement situation to another to expedite school enrollment and proper placement.

6. Class policies and procedures must reflect a deep acknowledgement of the delicate circumstances of homeless and foster children. Teachers need to be diligent at detecting and preventing taunting or other bullying behaviors that would further alienate these children.

7. Discipline systems that are designed to process students out of class efficiently rather than provide guidance and support for misbehaving students are inappropriate for children with emotional disturbances. Homeless and foster children tend to have a much higher rate of emotional disturbance than the general population. They also are less likely to receive the needed referrals for special help and are treated as behavioral concerns instead. This abuse needs to be recognized and corrected.

8. Zero-tolerance policies related to non-violent and non-drug related concerns should be abolished completely, especially for foster and homeless children. Such approaches are devastating to the development of children dealing with multiple emotional issues as well as academic issues. The practice of giving a grade of zero for failure of the student to participate in a class activity or missed homework assignment is based on a psychological motivation paradigm that is inconsistent with the needs of these children. An accumulation of zeros sets up a situation where no payoff exists for students to begin putting forth more effort. A cycle of failure is established and perpetuated. In such cases both schools and students that need to improve test scores suffer the consequence of the inappropriate disciplinary response.

9. Acknowledging and requesting “education passports” is essential. Many states already have education passports. Texas will soon join that group of states in

July 2007. Hurricane Katrina raised many issues in Texas during 2005 when unprecedented numbers of evacuees overwhelmed the ability of most school systems to serve the homeless children and families who arrived in a very short time.

10. School administrators must acknowledge the legal rights of a homeless or foster child to be in school even if complete documentation is not available. (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2004). Temporary placement will prevent delays and confusion that tend to frustrate, humiliate, and discourage these already suffering, vulnerable children. They must also ensure that student records are promptly sent to other schools when requested.

When school administrators, teachers, and school staff act with intention and consistency homeless and foster children will have a greater hope for academic success. The existing cultures of complacency and disrespect need to be replaced with cultures of urgency and caring. When educators come face to face with the huge gap between social justice ideals and the current realities of institutionalized abuse and neglect faced daily by these children, they can begin to make a difference.

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