

Ready to Succeed in the Classroom

Findings from Teacher Discussion Groups on their Experiences and Aspirations Teaching Students in the Foster Care System



Prepared by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning
for The Stuart Foundation and the Ready to Succeed Leadership Team
April 2010

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning is made up of education professionals, scholars and public policy experts who care deeply about improving the schooling of California's children. The Center was founded in 1995 as a public, nonprofit organization with the purpose of strengthening the capacity of California's teachers for delivering rigorous, well-rounded curriculum and ensuring the continuing intellectual, ethical and social development of all children.

The Ready to Succeed Initiative is a Stuart Foundation effort to improve educational outcomes for children and youth in the foster care system by helping public education and child welfare systems work together more closely and effectively at the local and state levels.

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Project Team: Jane Henderson (Director), Margaret Gaston, Judy Kingsley, Nicole Lezin, Diane Siri

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Introduction

By the time children enter the foster care system, they are likely to have experienced a variety of emotional, physical and psychological harms. These accumulated hurts affect children to varying degrees. With caring support and interventions, many can overcome the hurdles that (through no fault of their own) have been placed in their way. Still, the path to a healthy, happy adulthood is often arduous — with many of the most glaring difficulties manifesting themselves in the classroom.

As documented in *Ready to Succeed*¹ and many other research and policy reports, educational outcomes for children and youth in the foster care system are dismal, lagging far behind averages for markers such as standardized test scores, reading at grade level, repeating grades, receiving special education services, and completing high school.

This isn't surprising. Beyond the emotional and psychological problems that many children in foster care experience at an early age, they also contend with unpredictable, frequent changes in placements that uproot them from one school after another, causing many to lose academic ground and support as soon as they have gained any. When these children and youth miss opportunities for educational achievement, they also miss the best opportunity they have to boost their chances of transitioning successfully to adulthood, with stable and productive jobs and careers, economic self-sufficiency, and a sense of personal well being and fulfillment.

Although the issue of improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care is receiving some long-overdue attention, the voices of classroom teachers have not been prominent in the discussions. What happens in the classroom is critical for these students, as the quality of the interaction with their teacher is an important determinant of learning. In the fall of 2009, a team from the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and funded by the Stuart Foundation convened six discussion groups to explore how teachers and foster

¹ California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care. 2008. *Ready to Succeed: Changing Systems to Give California's Foster Children the Opportunities They Deserve to be Ready for and Succeed in School*. Prepared by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. Available from the Center's Web site: www.cftl.org.

children and youth interact in the classroom to improve educational outcomes. The discussion group sessions were held in three California counties — Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento — and covered the following topics:

- Unique **barriers** that children in foster care experience in the classroom;
- Strategies for **welcoming** a new student known to be in the foster care system;
- Quick **assessments** to gauge a student's level and progress;
- **Wish lists** — what teachers would like to see from their schools, districts, and communities to help them be more effective with this population;
- Strategies for **engaging families and caregivers** of foster children and youth; and
- General **advice** for other teachers who have foster children in their classrooms.

“You may not realize that you’ve had a foster child in your classroom — but chances are, you have.”

This document captures teachers' ideas, aspirations, and experiences in each of these areas, followed by an appendix listing some resources that individual teachers have found helpful. It is designed to be a conduit for the voices of teachers who have struggled to help foster children succeed in school — so that they can share what they have learned with other teachers, whether they are novice or veteran. As one teacher said (lamenting the absence of information about her students), “You may not realize that you've had a foster child in your classroom — but chances are, you have.”

The discussions focused on the experiences of classroom teachers and covered elementary, middle, high school, and alternative school settings. In addition, several administrators attended the sessions and spoke from their perspectives as former teachers as well as administrators. Finally, one teacher was a foster child herself, and several had become foster parents and were able to contribute from those perspectives as well.

We hope that the voices of these teachers will provide practical ideas and support the many other teachers, administrators, school staff, coaches and others eager to help and advocate for the foster children within their schools and classrooms.

In the Classroom: Barriers, Strategies for Overcoming Them, and Welcoming and Assessing Foster Children

BARRIERS

“The extreme stress these children are under . . . it affects everything in their lives. It’s amazing they can do anything. They’re incredible little people. They’re survivors. If I were them, I’d be curled up in a little corner — but they’re coming to school, smiling, doing their best. It’s a tribute to them!”

This teacher’s passionate admiration for the children in foster care who found their way to her classroom — those “incredible little people” — was echoed by many of the teachers in the six discussion groups. As they got to know these students, teachers learned of many barriers faced by these children and marveled that they functioned as well as they did.

The Trust Deficit

Over and over, teachers told us how mistrustful children in the foster care system were of the adults in their lives (often with good reason). Building trust, teachers said, was their first and most important goal. “Once the trust comes,” a teacher said, “any child who trusts you is going to want to work for you and please you.”

Many of the adults in these children’s lives have let them down in various ways; others may be trying to help, but are involved because of their professional roles as social workers, therapists, or court appointed special advocates (CASAs). “What are you getting paid to do this?” one teacher was asked by a student when she stayed late to help him with an assignment.

Disruptive Behaviors

Teachers felt that some of the behaviors they saw in the classroom — such as demanding attention (whether positive or negative), being rude and disruptive in the classroom, failing to complete assignments, and rejecting or resisting authority — were easy to misinterpret. “There’s a reason for every behavior,” one teacher said. “They build walls around themselves to protect themselves, not to keep you out.”

Some professionals who work with children and youth in the foster system have noted the “2-to-21” syndrome, in which a child may act much older and much younger than his or her years, often within minutes of each other. Teachers and other professionals who are unprepared for these swings may take them personally or become easily frustrated with the inconsistent behaviors, without understanding their root causes.

Unfortunately, when these behaviors are not explored or understood, the response is often purely disciplinary — sometimes making things worse. For example, one administrator explained that he and his colleagues did not realize that expelling a student from school also led to an automatic change in placement — adding an even more punitive layer to this disciplinary action.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Teachers also struggled to understand the roots of some attitudes and beliefs that children in care have about themselves and the world. “If they haven’t received trust and respect, they can’t give it,” said one.

A profound lack of self-confidence was another common observation. “They don’t have confidence in themselves, so why should anyone else have confidence in them?” one teacher explained, trying to recreate their reasoning. One child in foster care told a sympathetic teacher that another teacher had told him he was useless. “What some adults have said to children . . . “ she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

Some teachers noted the sense of victimhood, entitlement, and learned helplessness that became a part of how children in the foster care system (especially older ones) saw themselves. One consequence of constant

changes in placement, several teachers noted, is that students may feel they can get away with things and avoid accountability.

In their discussions about these barriers, teachers talked a great deal about the balance between empathy and expectations. “Don’t buy into that learned helplessness and victimization,” said one. “We have to teach them to be advocates for themselves.”

Academic Gaps

Although children in the foster care system typically do not perform well in school and many suffer from cognitive and learning disabilities, many also are highly intelligent, teachers said. Their checkered academic histories “are like Swiss cheese,” one teacher observed — full of gaps. They have had so few opportunities to feel successful in school that they tend to approach each new classroom and teacher with a high degree of suspicion and low expectations. In high school, they cannot accumulate partial credits when a mid-semester placement change causes them to switch schools, and they fall further and further behind their peers.

“It gave me a whole new perspective on how malleable the brain is and what we can really do for these children.”

Teachers felt they had very little academic information to work with as new children in foster care entered their classroom. (Indeed, many do not know which of their students are in the foster care system, and would like to have this information.) Individual Education Plans (IEPs), transcripts, and any insights from a previous school and teacher were often late, arriving weeks or months after the student entered the classroom (and, in some cases, long after the student had moved on).

Teachers spoke about profound changes in their own assumptions about how malleable a young brain is — and how misguided it is to give up on *any* child’s potential to learn, no matter how great their deficits. One teacher, who had become a foster parent to a young girl, told this story:

“She’s 12 now. When she came to me 5 years ago, I thought she was borderline mentally retarded — a diagnosis she had received at birth. She was very challenged academically, performing at a very low level. We

didn't know her potential and just assumed from her history of low performance that the diagnosis was correct, but we still felt it was important to do our best to do what we could to get her to grade level.

We put her in a program and also helped her at home, showing her how much we believed in her. Within 2 years, by age 9 and 10, she was at grade level — and then she began performing above grade level! It floored me; I just wouldn't have predicted it could happen. She still has some difficulties and dips in different areas, which is not unusual for a foster child. But it stopped me in my tracks.

As a teacher, I used to think that a child's potential was pretty much set at a certain age. Her improvement was so dramatic; it has given me a different perspective on every child. If you look at where they are now, who's to say where they might go?

Never give up. Open every possible door for that child. My own child is a perfect example of how they can overcome obstacles. It wasn't me, as a parent, alone — it was everyone working together and the resources devoted to her. But it gave me a whole new perspective on how malleable the brain is and what we really can do for these children.”

Logistical Barriers

“When I go to garage sales, every time I see a backpack, I buy it.”

Teachers pleaded for more awareness about the difficulties children in the foster care system face in preparing for school. Transportation is often an issue, complicating participation in after-school activities (e.g., if a group home van makes just one trip from school to home each day). In some group home settings, shopping for school and

other supplies is done once a week, so students need some advance notice for items that might be easy for other families to provide overnight. In a group home, access to a common area computer may be limited as well, making some assignments more difficult to complete.

Many teachers expressed frustration and anger at the lack of basic support that some children receive from the foster parents ostensibly paid to care for them.

Teachers told of students showing up without pencils, unwashed, in dirty clothes. “When I go to garage sales,” one teacher said, “every time I see a backpack, I buy it” — so she can give them to children in her classroom who need one. “It doesn’t happen often,” one teacher said of the children showing up without the most basic of supplies, “but often enough to break your heart.”

The hygiene issues are sometimes extreme enough that they draw hurtful and harsh comments from other children, exacerbating foster children’s fears that they don’t fit in and are different from others.

STRATEGIES

How have teachers responded to these types of barriers in their own classrooms and schools? These are some of the specific strategies they shared with us:

- **Putting Peers to Work:** Several teachers described buddy systems (pairing a new student with one who knows the ropes), which is routine for any new student (not just those in foster care). Others devised group assignments (with frequent allocation of “points” as feedback for the group’s interactions and work), and assigned children in foster care to buddies or groups hand-picked to be particularly helpful and understanding. One school takes this a step further and matches each child in foster care with a caring adult within the school — a teacher, staff member, coach, groundskeeper, or anyone who volunteers to pay a little extra attention to the child and check in during that semester or year.
- **Putting Students to Work:** Giving a child in foster care a task as a helper has worked well for many teachers, helping the students focus and giving them a sense of being valued that is often lacking from the rest of their daily routine. Similarly, some teachers suggested looking for opportunities in which foster children could make decisions and have choices — something they lack at home.
- **Offering Extra Individual Attention:** Children and youth in foster care crave adult attention; going the extra mile to provide some one-on-one time to help with an assignment or to identify a particular academic interest or hobby has tremendous pay-offs, teachers said. Reading to them, listening to them, valuing what they say, taking time

with them — all of these basic human courtesies have extra meaning for children and youth in the foster care system, teachers said.

- **Finding Common Interests:** To help children who feel lonely or different identify common interests with others, one teacher described a “last person standing” game that is popular in her high school classroom: innocuous questions are posed (Who likes ice cream? Who saw this movie? Who likes this band?) every other week, with responses dictated by standing or sitting — and students can quickly see who shares some of their enthusiasms and interests.
- **Bringing Structure to Chaos:** Many teachers talked about the importance of providing a predictable, structured environment for children and youth in the foster care system. With so much uncertainty in their lives and so many decisions out of their control, a structured environment may feel particularly safe — and thus be more conducive to learning.
- **Creating a Token Economy:** Some teachers experienced success in building trust and relationships with students by creating systems of rewards and competitive games. The rewards were not necessarily expensive or store-bought items (although some teachers did try to secure these from local businesses). Instead, a lunch with the teacher, extra computer time, sitting in the teacher’s chair for a class period, choosing a recess activity, or a special delicious home-baked treat were examples of rewards for good behavior.
- **Setting Students Up for Success, not Failure:** Teachers spoke often about how little success these students have experienced in every area of their lives, but especially at school. Restoring some confidence by creating small, do-able assignments (and then “praising the heck out of them,” as one teacher put it) was a common suggestion.

One teacher described a poster that lists the acronym CHAMPS — for Conversation, Helping, Activity, Movement, Participation. Allowable or encouraged behaviors in each category change at regular intervals and are reviewed with the class; students get points and praise for following the guidelines.

■ **Keeping the Praise Flowing:** Several teachers mentioned how important it was to praise and encourage children and youth in the foster care system with the positive reinforcement that they both lack and crave. It is essential that the praise reflects a true accomplishment, however small (e.g., “You did a good job of being nice to X today”) — because teachers noted that foster children often have particularly acute radar for insincerity. “I tell them, ‘there’s nothing you can’t do,’” one teacher said. “We have to help them believe that.”

“There are too many good projects out there to keep doing family trees. Come on, people — let’s get creative!”

■ **Keeping Promises:** As noted above, trust — or lack thereof — is a common issue for children in the foster care system. One of the ways a teacher builds trust is to deliver on promises and to behave consistently. “Don’t ever promise something you can’t deliver,” a teacher warned.

■ **Keeping Expectations High:** Although teachers expressed a great deal of compassion and sympathy for their students in the foster care system, they also felt that lowering or altering their expectations for these students constituted a profound disservice to them. “I tell them the past doesn’t have to shape the future,” one teacher explained. “They’ve been dealt a bad hand, but it doesn’t mean the rest of their life has to be horrible. Foster kids have to understand that the rest of their life is largely up to them. It may be hard, but they can find people to help them.”

Another teacher emphasized how important it was to differentiate between disappointment that an expectation for certain *behaviors* was not met, versus disappointment in the child as a *person*: “I care about you, I like having you in my classroom . . . but this behavior can’t happen again.”

■ **Starting Every Day with a Clean Slate.** Teachers struggled to not take a child’s behavior personally. They suggested starting each day with a clean slate as much as possible, modeling a positive, optimistic outlook

to demonstrate that yesterday's behaviors or problems need not spill over into today.

- **Avoiding Assumptions about Family Structure:** To a child in foster care, seemingly innocuous classroom projects and assignments can become painful reminders that they are different from other children. Class projects like family trees, bringing in baby pictures, or even creating Mother's Day cards are all examples of class exercises that needlessly set foster children apart from their peers. "There are too many good projects out there to keep doing family trees," one teacher said. "Come on, people — let's get creative!" For example, Mother's Day cards can be crafted for moms, or others (grandmothers, aunts, or even teachers). Several teachers emotionally recounted getting Mother's Day cards from their students in the foster care system — often unaware until that moment that they fulfilled this role in their students' lives.

Several teachers noted that school office staff need training and reminders about using the emotionally laden "Mom" term to describe any female adult calling or visiting the school. A casual "His mom is on the phone," or "His mom is in the office" could set off a strong reaction for a child who knows his "mom" is in prison, for example, or in another city. Alternatively, some children *want* their foster mom referred to as "mom." Teachers suggest asking children directly, instead of assuming anything: "What do you call the people at your house?"

- **Asking Students for Advice:** As part of a Breakthrough Series Collaborative experience, one high school's leadership team went to the source, asking youth in foster care attending their school to help them better understand and respond to their needs as well as the needs of incoming students in care. Over several years, the group progressed from meetings, to guest speakers, to a homeroom just for foster youth, to having foster youth educate teachers and administrators about ways they were (and were not) helpful.
- **Understanding Behaviors and Responding Appropriately:** As noted above, many teachers observed that the disruptive classroom behaviors of children and youth in the foster care system (as well as

others) could be interpreted more constructively as pleas for attention or other reactions, and met with more nuanced responses than immediate disciplinary action.

For example, a child who treats every encounter as a power struggle may be extremely difficult to deal with in a classroom, constantly saying things like, “You can’t make me!” Contrary to how this sounds, though, it may instead be a plea for being involved in different ways — by helping, or by having a choice (even within a limited spectrum of options).

Another example might be a child who lacks self-confidence. The child may try to convince others not to expect anything from him or her, or may feel helpless in most situations, believing from experience that it’s not worth trying very hard, because he or she won’t succeed anyway. The underlying message, though, might be something quite different: “Have faith in me; please don’t give up on me!” Instead of berating a child for not trying hard enough, a teacher who viewed the situation through this lens might break a task down into smaller steps or make it easier until the child experiences some success, would continue to express encouragement and positive feedback for any progress, and praise the child for not giving up.

Some behaviors or outbursts may have nothing to do with anything that happened at school. For example, one teacher noticed that a child in foster care in her classroom was distraught and uncooperative on certain Mondays — the ones after a family visitation with siblings and a drug-addicted parent. Being alert and understanding about triggers like this may help teachers keep an outburst or disruptive behavior from escalating.

Several teachers had observed hoarding behaviors among young children in foster care — such as stashing a week’s worth of fruit or candy in the back of a desk, “just in case.” As with the examples above, teachers noted that understanding that this behavior may stem from underlying and long-standing issues could lead to helping or referring the child.

- **Engaging Foster Parents and Families:** Teachers suggested reaching out to foster parents, who may not see themselves as their foster child's education advocate. (If a foster parent does not respond to these overtures, teachers suggested identifying someone who does or could play that role, such as a social worker or CASA.) Several teachers observed that phone calls from teachers to foster parents usually involve negative feedback about a problem at school. Even when these are necessary, they suggested making positive calls as well to praise a child's efforts or accomplishments — and to make a point of starting off the relationship with a positive call early in the child's tenure in the classroom.

Other teachers suggested special efforts to involve foster (and other) parents, such as a Thanksgiving potluck that features foods from different traditions, or family movie or trivia contest nights at school that mix social and school connections for parents, teachers, and children (but making an extra effort to draw foster parents to these events).

- **Using In-Classroom Assessments:** Because of frequent placement and school changes, many students in the foster care system have accumulated knowledge and skills very unevenly. Some students missed key concepts in a particular course or curriculum; others missed a subject entirely. The gaps, teachers noted, made it particularly important to conduct some type of quick assessment — especially because formal records (such as a student's cumulative file) tend to be tardy and, too often, incomplete and therefore unhelpful.

Teachers relied on a wide variety of assessments, ranging from formal ones used district-wide to informal ones such as having a new student read aloud, or write a paragraph about herself. (See below for more information on assessments.)

- **Engaging Students in Enrichment Activities:** Teachers described programs such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), which is designed to close academic achievement gaps by offering students intensive support and guidance, as ideal for students like those in the foster system. Unfortunately, students must enroll in AVID at the beginning of a semester, putting it out of reach for students whose placement and school changes don't coincide with school schedules.

Still, teachers suggested seeking out these or similar enrichment programs within schools, districts and communities and making sure that students in foster care had access to them whenever possible.

- **Linking to School Activities Outside the Classroom:** Sports, clubs, tutoring, band — all of these can help students in the foster care system connect to a school community, develop a talent or interest, and interact with peers and caring adults. However, students in care experience additional barriers if they wish to participate in after-school activities, ranging from a lack of transportation to difficulties obtaining needed supplies. Teachers suggested working with others in the school community to overcome barriers that allow children and youth in the foster care system to participate in after-school activities — and educating coaches and other adults about *initially* giving these children some additional leeway if needed regarding supplies and equipment, tardiness, and other rules that might restrict or discourage their participation.

WELCOMING AND ASSESSING NEW STUDENTS

Children and youth in the foster care system experience many “first days” in new schools — often not on the official first day of school, but in the middle of the year or semester. As described above, teachers adapt the strategies they would employ for any student new to their classroom to help children feel welcome: assigning a buddy, giving a child extra attention and one-on-one time, making an extra effort to learn about a child’s interests.

Having a clear idea of students’ areas of academic strength as well where they are more challenged can help teachers target instruction more appropriately right from the beginning. Most teachers use a daily stream of informal assessments as a matter of course (e.g., “Can you share with me what you are reading?”, “Do you think this problem is too hard, too easy or just about right?” and so on). But teachers had different opinions about the sequence of welcoming and formal or informal academic assessments, with some feeling that a child needed to feel safe and comfortable in a new classroom before formal assessments began, and others believing assessments were an urgent

Teachers' Wish Lists: What Schools, Districts, and Communities Can Do

Teachers waved an imaginary “magic wand” during the discussion groups and described what would help them serve children and youth in foster care better, from three different levels: within their individual schools, at the district or administrative level, and outside the school system (within the broader community), as summarized in the chart on pages 16 and 17.

WITHIN SCHOOLS

At the top of the “within schools” list was a better, faster system for communicating to teachers that they had a child or youth in foster care in the classroom. Late, incomplete, or non-existent paperwork was a common refrain. Teachers also wanted fuller information on these students — not just their academic performance (or lack thereof), but information on attendance, interests, physical health, mental health, and previous successes.

Teachers also wished for more streamlined procedures within their schools — such as one counselor working with all children and youth in foster care and thus familiar with their situations, or a team approach in which all of a student’s teachers have opportunities to compare notes and strategize about how to help the child achieve success in school. Teachers wished for more support as they worked with children and youth in foster care — professional development (on behaviors, how to create structure in the classroom, and community resources available to them), mentors, more planning time, and contact lists or flow charts for accessing support within schools and districts. Several teachers mentioned that certain teachers within their schools were particularly effective with children and youth in foster care, and that it would be nice to be able to create an individualized schedule for these children, with hand-picked teachers throughout their school day.

On behalf of their students, teachers called for more counseling and social work resources on site, resources for children not performing at grade level, more frequent and accessible life/social skills training for students who had not received much of this at home, more physical activity and recreational options,

access to supplies for those who needed them, and extra help and tutoring for writing skills. They also thought youth in the foster care system (along with many others) would benefit from conflict management sessions and some type of peer support — either one-on-one, and/or in small groups.

WITHIN DISTRICTS

Teachers wished their districts and administrative staff would find ways to share information more efficiently. A specific concern was the problem of students not being able to receive partial credit for their work when they transferred from one school to another. As students approach the end of their high school years with a deficit in the credits needed to graduate and no realistic hope of making them up, many give up and lose whatever motivation they had to persevere in their classes, according to secondary school teachers.

High school teachers were painfully aware of the “cliff” that awaits youth when they emancipate from the system at the age of 18 and their foster families no longer receive financial support. As one teacher said, she had difficulty envisioning her own 18-year-old son — a product of a loving, supportive, and happy family — living independently at that age, much less someone lacking the education and life skills to do so. Teachers wished their districts and communities could find more ways to help youth aging out of the foster care system with credits towards graduation, variations on adult education, transitions to community colleges, and other support for older students. They noted that both schools and districts could do more to help foster youth (and other students) explore careers earlier in their academic progression and explore alternatives such as Career Technical Education (CTE).

Many teachers expressed grief about foster students to whom they had become attached, but whose progress they could not follow once the children left their schools. They wished for help from the district in finding ways to stay in touch with these students, while preserving their privacy and confidentiality.

Teachers thought districts could do more to ensure that children stayed within the same school or feeder system, even when their placements changed.

What Schools, Districts and Communities Can Do to Help Teachers Help Students in the Foster Care System

SCHOOLS

- Let teachers know a child in the foster care system is in the classroom.
- Move paperwork (IEPs, transcripts, etc.) faster from school to school.
- Offer non-academic information for a fuller picture (e.g., interests, health, talents).
- Assign one counselor or advisor within the school to all students in the foster care system who attend that school.
- Offer more professional development geared to improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care (instructional strategies, behaviors, discipline, structure in the classroom, community resources).
- Offer more planning and collaboration time for teachers, and other providers.
- Create flow charts and contact information that make it easy to find and access support.
- Assign students to teachers known to succeed with students in foster care.
- Bring more counseling and social work resources on-site to provide more cohesive, coordinated approaches to academic support and to help students access other needed referrals and support.
- Offer more help (mentoring, tutoring, assessments) for children not performing at grade level.
- Offer more ongoing life skills classes, and especially conflict management/resolution.
- Create more opportunities for physical activity and recreation.
- Find ways to procure and distribute supplies to children who need them.
- Boost writing skills with intensive tutoring.
- Connect students in foster care to their peers through peer-to-peer support and functions.

DISTRICTS

- Address the issue of partial credits (not being awarded, creating a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to graduation).
- Offer more support for older students (post-18): offer more adult education; help students transition to community colleges.
- Promote earlier career exploration and CTE careers.
- Find ways to allow teachers to contact and stay in touch with a student removed from their classroom due to a placement change.
- Do whatever it takes to keep children in the same school or feeder system, even when placements change.
- Provide more training and guest speakers.

COMMUNITIES

- Strengthen standards, regulations, enforcement, and training of foster parents.
- Encourage teachers to become foster parents.
- Change laws that emancipate foster youth at age 18.
- Bring social workers onto campuses.
- Rally to provide supplies, equipment, mentoring, job shadowing, and transition assistance to foster youth.

Similar to the wish list for their individual schools, teachers wished districts could provide more training and guest speakers on topics relevant to helping teachers become more effective with youth from the foster care system who were in their classrooms (i.e., dealing with typical behaviors, creating structure and consistency in the classroom, accessing community resources).

COMMUNITY/OUTSIDE SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Teachers expressed anger and frustration about the lack of caring, concern, and support they had witnessed from some foster parents. From the broader community, they wished for stricter regulations, better screening, training and enforcement of who could become (and remain) a foster parent. Although many recognized that the demand for foster parents far exceeds the supply and that these measures might further restrict the options for foster children and

youth, they also said, in the words of one teacher, “Our neediest kids deserve the very best, not the worst.”

One teacher — a foster parent herself — noted that the foster parent approval process can be expedited for teachers (similar to the streamlined approval process in place for family members), taking as little as 30 days. Her experience was so positive and rewarding that she encouraged other teachers to consider becoming foster parents, and wished for a foster parent recruiting campaign geared specifically to teachers.

Teachers also wished for more on-campus involvement by social workers. They saw communities as largely untapped but potential allies for a range of resources and contributions that could help children and youth in the foster care system, from practical help with supplies to identifying recreational outlets, job shadowing and mentoring opportunities, and transition assistance for those aging out of the system.

Advice for Teachers

Teachers who participated in these discussion groups showed a great sense of responsibility towards the children and youth in foster care in their classrooms — past, present, and future. The teachers recognized their potential to compensate for many other failures, rejections, and upheavals in their students’ lives. As one said, “We’re the stability in their lives.” Another said, “If they fail at school, they’re going to feel like failures for the rest of their lives. We need to help them be successful.”

This sense of responsibility, though, shouldn’t make teachers anxious and stressed. On the contrary, one teacher said, “Relax! Accept the child; treat them like every other kid. Don’t be nervous — they’ll pick up on that. Avoid those personal questions, but treat them like another new kid. They’ll appreciate being treated normally.”

Teachers in these focus groups had a wealth of other general advice for their fellow teachers, in addition to the specific classroom and assessment strategies listed above. Specifically, they offered the following advice, based on their experiences:

- **Trust** and **caring** are the most important things: build trust, show caring. If a teacher can accomplish these two things, a lot of other things — including better classroom behavior, and academic achievement — will follow.
 - Show them that you **care**. In little ways each day, take notice, listen, make a comment, ask them about something you know they care about, connect with them, and give them some extra time, if possible.
 - Consciously build **trust**, starting the first day. Make a small promise and keep it. Day by day, work on building up their trust in you.
- Keep your **expectations** high and make them absolutely clear and consistent, whether they are about learning, respect, classroom behaviors, effort, or anything else.
- Be **positive**, early and often. Set students up for success, praise every accomplishment, and share your positive reactions with their foster family and other teachers.
- **Create opportunities** for students to succeed. Break big tasks into smaller chunks, give students opportunities to help you or their peers, and recognize their achievements — no matter how small.
- Be **patient** — with students, and yourself.
- Be as **flexible** as possible.
- Don't **judge** foster children; force yourself to consider an alternative explanation for their behavior and respond as calmly and constructively as possible.
- Ask for **help** early (before a relationship with a student deteriorates beyond repair). “The greatest behavior management tool in the classroom is the telephone,” one teacher said. “And I use it!”
- Have **faith** that every student can succeed, no matter how unlikely it may seem in your first encounter(s).

- Don't take anything **personally**. Start every day with a clean, fresh slate — and really mean it.
- Be **consistent**. Follow through 100% of the time on anything you promise to do, or don't offer it at all. Be **sincere**. Children and youth in foster care (like many of their peers) “will read you like a book,” teachers warned. Any whiff of insincerity will be detected immediately and will undermine relationship- and trust-building.

Finally, several teachers had stories of the children and youth in foster care their classrooms who persevered and succeeded, sometimes returning to an elementary school classroom to proudly announce their college acceptance or calling a special education teacher to explain that the teacher's crucial support long ago had led the student to enter that field.

These success stories are important reminders that many foster children do manage to overcome the many obstacles they face. Understanding exactly which factors help them succeed — and could help others as well — is a missing part of the evidence base, as noted by researchers interviewed for a parallel report on research gaps.

As teachers gain a greater understanding and awareness of the barriers foster children face, are able to access more systematic approaches to assessment and deploy more constructive responses to puzzling or disruptive behaviors, we hope that this part of the Ready to Succeed initiative will help teachers do what they do best: engage their students and help them find their own unique path to success in school, and beyond.

Appendix A: Resources

Please note that this list of resources is offered directly from teachers who participated in the discussion groups; the resources listed below are not the product of a systematic review.

Resources Suggested by Discussion Group Participants

Training, workshops, and workbooks designed to help middle-class educators understand and work more effectively with students from or living in poverty.

Why Try?

Social, emotional, and learning principles for at-risk youth, taught through a series of pictures.

www.whytry.org

Discipline Help

Resources and references for dealing with “misbehaviors” at school.

www.disciplinehelp.com

Positive Discipline and Mistaken Goals

Nelsen, J, Loti, L, and Glenn, S. 2000. *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*. Prima Publishing, Roseville, CA.

Resources for Teachers and Educators, from the National Foster Care Month Toolkit (www.fostercaremonth.org)

A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care

A Road Map for Learning is a guide for everyone working towards successful educational outcomes for youth in foster care or out-of-home care.

<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/RoadMapForLearning.htm>

Conversation with an Educator [Online]

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/conversation-with-educator.html

Education and Foster Care on the website of the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning:

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/education-and-foster-care.html

Education and Training Vouchers

These federal Independent Living/Chafee program funds provide youth who were formerly in foster care up to \$5,000 a year toward the cost of attending a postsecondary institution. Eligible expenses include tuition and room and board. For more information, see the National Resource Center for Youth Development,

<http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/yd/programs/etv.html>, and state-by-state information at http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/yd/state_pages.html.

Endless Dreams

This video and training curriculum informs teachers about the unique educational needs of youth in foster care and offers policies, procedures, and practices that can improve educational success.

<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/EndlessDreams.htm>

It's My Life: Postsecondary Education and Training

Based on the It's My Life transition framework, this guide helps child welfare professionals and educators prepare young people from foster care academically, financially, and emotionally for postsecondary education and training success.

<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/IMLPostsecondaryEd.htm>

Garcia, C. (2004). Helping Foster Care Grads Move on to College. Connect for Kids. [Online].

http://www.connectforkids.org/articles/foster_care_grads_college

Mack, K. (2002). Educational Opportunity for Youth in Foster Care. Children's Voice. [Online].

<http://www.cwla.org/articles/cv0205youthcare.htm>

McNaught, K. (2006). Mythbusting: Breaking Down Confidentiality and Decision-Making Barriers to Meet the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care.

American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law through support from Casey Family Programs.

Ever struggle to gain access to education records? Are you ever unsure what education information can be shared, and with whom, when a child is in foster care? Ever tried to determine who in a child's life was responsible for making education decisions? This publication answers common questions by individuals involved with the child welfare system, including judges, children's attorneys, parents, foster parents, youth, caseworkers, and court appointed special advocates (CASAs). [Online].

http://www.abanet.org/child/2006_midyear_report.pdf

Orphan Foundation of America

Administers several scholarships for postsecondary education and training to young people who have been in foster care. Contact (571) 203-0270.

<http://www.orphan.org/>

Learning About Foster Care in the Classroom: May is Foster Care Month, sponsored by national child welfare organizations to raise awareness about child abuse and neglect — and what communities can do about it. The campaign's Web site, www.fostercaremonth.org, includes materials for teachers and others, as well as a link to a youth engagement component of the campaign (bandtogether) and Foster Club, an online network for young people in foster care (www.fosterclub.com).

An Overview of Assembly Bill 490

Some teachers in these discussion groups were not aware of the education-specific rights that children and youth in foster care gained with the passage of AB490 (Steinberg), Chapter 862, which became law in January 2004. Its provisions establish specific education rights for children and youth in foster care in California — as well as responsibilities for school personnel, judges, attorneys, social workers, probation officers, and caregivers. These provisions are designed to give children and youth in foster care access to the same educational opportunities and resources as other students and to have all their education placement decisions made according to the child's best interests.

Among AB490's provisions are those that specify that children and youth in the foster care system should have:

- the ability to finish the school year in their school of origin (if that is determined to be in the child's or youth's best interests), even if a change of placement puts them in a different school or district
- the ability to be enrolled in a new school immediately, even if records are not available
- their school records transferred quickly (within 2 days) from their former school to a new one when a placement change requires a change in schools
- full or partial credits for previous coursework calculated and accepted by schools.

In addition, AB490 requires that every school district appoint an Educational Liaison to ensure that students in the foster care system have access to these services.

Assembly Bill 490 Resources (AB490)

The National Center for Youth Law's Web site (www.ncyl.org) offers many AB490-specific resources, including roles and responsibilities for specific audiences (caregivers, school personnel, judges, attorneys and advocates, social workers, and probation officers), as well as an implementation guide for schools and current lists and contact information for California's Education Liaisons, by district.

Appendix B: Examples of Formal and Informal Assessments

Please note that this list is offered directly from teachers who participated in the discussion groups; the assessments on the list are not the product of a systematic review or search for research and evidence-based assessments.

Informal Assessments

- a portfolio approach, with a child contributing a paragraph about him or herself as well as a drawing or other creative work.
- an interview or conversation in which the teacher shares some of his/her own interests and learns about the child's. ("Some children can tell a story, even though they can't read and write well.")
- oral reading of high-frequency word lists
- dictation sentences with basic sight words
- grade-level reading passages as tests for accuracy and fluency; books for comprehension
- Simple addition and subtraction quizzes

Spelling, Language Arts, and Mathematics Assessments

- Basic Phonics Skills Tests (BPST) for letters and their sounds
- grade-level Math Prerequisite Skills tests
- STAR Assessment (Renaissance Learning)
- Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System
- DIBELS (University of Oregon)
- Spellingcity.com (free)
- Brain Pup
- Santa Clara quick assessments

- Aimsweb (online)
- Siveroli (reading inventory)
- PRA II
- Houghton Mifflin Beginning, Middle, End-of-Year assessments
- District-specific assessments (Language Arts Formative Assessment, Math Formative Assessment)

Population-Specific Tools Adapted for General Use

- California English Language Development Test (for English Language Learners)
- Special Education tools (such as Extended School Year Pre-Assessment Reading) used for both Special Education and general education diagnostic purposes

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The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning

133 Mission Street, Suite 220

Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Phone: 831 427-3628

Fax: 831 427-1612

E-mail: info@cftl.org

www.cftl.org

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**The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning
133 Mission Street, Suite 220
Santa Cruz, CA 95060
www.cftl.org**