FOCUS GROUP STUDY

Foster Care Families, Children, and Education
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The Maryland Public Policy Institute
MPPI

Founded in 2001, the Maryland Public Policy Institute is a nonpartisan public policy research and education organization that focuses on state policy issues. Our goal is to provide accurate and timely research analysis of Maryland policy issues and market these findings to key primary audiences. The mission of the Maryland Public Policy Institute is to formulate and promote public policies at all levels of government based on principles of free enterprise, limited government, and civil society. The Institute is a member of the State Policy Network. In order to maintain objectivity and independence, the Institute accepts no government funding and does not perform contract research. The Maryland Public Policy Institute is recognized as a 501 (C) (3) research and education organization under the Internal Revenue Code.
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BACKGROUND

The Maryland Public Policy Institute is working to spearhead initiatives that help children entrusted in the foster care system to simultaneously receive a high-quality education. Many of these children experience unstable and often abusive living conditions. Social service placement typically requires frequent relocations for these wards of the courts: home-to-home, community-to-community and school-to-school.

At this time, The Maryland Public Policy Institute has enlisted the services of Baltimore Research to conduct research that will aid in gaining a better understanding of the impact of foster care on the education of those in its charge.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

These findings will be used to better understand the educational needs of foster care children and their families. Specifically:

- To understand what elements of the current system are working
- Conversely, to understand what is not working
- Develop a formula for success

Ultimately, the goal is to develop legislation and programs that assist in providing improved educational services to foster care children and their families.

METHODOLOGY

Baltimore Research conducted two focus groups. Brenda Lee served as moderator for the groups. One group was comprised of current foster care parents or guardians, while the other included former foster care children. The following screening criteria were applied:
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

BACKGROUND

The originating birth family living arrangements that led to foster care placement, by and large, are horrific.

The nature of foster care is that children are being removed from a home where their parents/guardians are unable or unwilling to care for them. This statement drastically minimizes the horrendous situations from which many of these children are emerging. Several respondents spoke of sexual abuse at the hands of family members (sometimes more than one family member), physical abuse that required hospitalization, abject neglect where toddlers were forced to survive on dog food. For these children, survival took precedence over a focus on obtaining a quality education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foster Care Parents/Guardians</th>
<th>Former Foster Care Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster parents of multiple children who have gone through at least one school year cycle</td>
<td>24–40 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix of ages</td>
<td>In foster care system as a child more than one year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In foster care system as a parent/guardian more than one year</td>
<td>Mix of living arrangements (home-based, group, other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must have been a foster care parent within the past 7 years</td>
<td>“Aged out” of foster care system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must have had at least one foster care child in their care for at least a one year</td>
<td>Not employed by state or federal government or a market research firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed by state or federal government or a market research firm</td>
<td>Articulate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Constant movement seems to be the hallmark of a foster care child or within a foster care home.

Several of the former foster care children indicated they were in a different living arrangement and school every year of their formative years. For some, this transitory behavior began with their birth parents who, in several instances, moved frequently. Some of this movement also occurred due to failed efforts to re-unite the family once social services became involved. However, in a number of instances, once a child was placed solidly in the system, social services would frequently relocate the child.

Several foster care parents indicated they have taken care of “hundreds” of foster care children. For these foster care parents, they typically have a few children who have been with them long-term (a few years). In some instances, some of these foster care parents have even adopted children who first came to them via the foster care system. However, several of the homes represented in these discussions are often used as short-term refuge for children in an urgent situation. For this need, it appears that there is a constant flow of children in and out of these homes.

A few respondents were in kinship care situations. In these instances, the children remained wards of the state. However, they typically remained in their family member’s home until they reached legal age.

Many of the foster care children had spent most of their formative years in the foster care system. They typically left the system, with few exceptions, when they aged out.

Several foster care children found living in a group home environment or institution more appealing than a private home.

Several former foster care children in the discussion indicated their preference for living in a group setting. For most, they seemed to like the anonymity that this setting provided. The nature of being a resident meant a more level social playing field. Even if these children attended a public access school, they came with their own social network.

Additionally, former foster care children enjoyed the readily available tangential services in the institutional homes. The staff was trained to manage the multitude of needs that a foster child might have and they readily knew how to access the services. Education was typically available on-premise.

Group living also provided the benefit of integrated structure. Foster children had a safe haven that could provide support for their emotional and educational needs. If, for example, a child had an emotional crisis, the academic staff would work in conjunction with the counseling staff to treat, manage and monitor the situation.
Movement of a foster care child appears to have no boundaries.

According to respondents, foster care children frequently cross school district lines for placement. Apparently, neither the educational needs nor the current schooling situation of the child is taken into consideration during the placement process. Respondents indicated that, as a result, they or the children in their charge crossed county and city lines for placement. In one instance, a respondent moved along with her foster care children across state lines.

This practice clearly undermines the education of a child. There is no consistency in the programs being offered across school districts. The children are constantly in a situation where they are off balance—sometimes ahead of their classes, but more often behind.

Their frequent movement also leads to incomplete school records and inconsistency in their ability to receive needed services. In some instances, foster care children have blocks of time when they are not able to attend school because they are in the midst of a series of short-term moves.

An additional issue foster care children face when they are moved outside of their communities is the loss of contact with any existing support system. Foster care parents, teachers and schools who supported and motivated a child are lost as the child moves from home to home and school to school.

Former foster care children and foster care parents agree that the primary role of a foster care parent is to:

- Provide safety for a child
- Love and nurture a child

In a worksheet exercise, all respondents appeared to recognize that “making sure the child gets a good education” is important. However, the need for safety and love received greater emphasis. According to most respondents, helping the child to focus on school cannot be accomplished until the child feels safe. Nurturing and loving the child will help him to feel safe. As such, these two roles of a foster parent are interrelated.

Foster care parents demonstrate these two roles by:

- Showing concern for the child
- Advocating for the child
- Giving physical affection tempered by sensitivity to the emotional scars from which an abused child may suffer
- Providing structure and discipline
- Motivating the child
FOSTER CARE IMPACT ON EDUCATION

Most often a foster care child is attending the public school in which his current foster care home is zoned.

Generally, only in unique, short-term circumstances is a child transported (privately by a foster care parent) across school zones to a particular school. Circumstances that might lead to this effort include:

- The child's stay is known to be short-term.
- The foster parents decide that it is in the best interest of the child to finish out a term.

However, if the stay at a foster care home is expected to be relatively long-term, the child is typically placed in the zoned school. Convenience is the motivator.

There is stigma associated with being a foster child.

The general public generally treats foster children as children with problems. As such, the expectation is that they will be under-performers slated for dismal futures.

This expectation surfaces in the educational system, as these children are given limited opportunities to participate in course work that could lead to higher learning. Often, partly due to inconsistency in school records, the children are overlooked for special services that they need—whether they are in need of remedial or accelerated programs.

Often these children are treated and feel like social outcasts. They are labeled as “the children with no parents.” As foster care children these children differ from their peer group. This difference isolates these children, as their peer group looks at them as “less than.”

Unfortunately, some practices appear to “flag” to the community that a child is in foster care. One practice mentioned was that children from a group home are brought to school as a group to register for school. This practice makes it clear to everyone—students, teachers, administrators and parents—that these are foster care children. Another practice mentioned was clearly distinguishing a foster care parent as not being a “real” parent. A number of respondents indicate that these types of practices are angering and humiliating.
Internal fortitude appears to be the single most critical factor in obtaining a good education, while in the foster care system. Most respondents said that they had a desire to succeed, despite (or in many instances, in spite of) the system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors that Contribute to a Child's Ability to Navigate the Foster Care System</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positively</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• An inner desire to prove the world wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– A desire to “buck” the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Motivating foster care parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A desire to escape their environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Being taught to &quot;dream big&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sensitive, qualified &amp; trained teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Managing the whole child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A desire for independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– A distraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Leads to an escape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers trained in the needs of foster care children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Older siblings/role models that they can look up to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Foster care parents as advocates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Availability of tutoring and other services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negatively</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Birth parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loss of interest in academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dysfunctional schools/services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Foster parents not “staying on top” of foster care children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Medication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Foster care children seem to minimize the role that foster care parents play in their success. For them, being self-motivated appears to be the most critical factor leading to success once they are out of the system.
There does not appear to be a school district or type of school that does a universally good job of providing smooth transitions and services for foster care children.

Respondents said that particular schools did a better job than others at attending to the needs of foster care children, but that this was typically by happenstance.

Factors Impacting the Quality of Education of a Foster Care Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best Schools</th>
<th>Worst Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Don't make them stand out</td>
<td>• Doom them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Protect their privacy</td>
<td>–Foster care is used as an excuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have services to address their educational and emotional needs</td>
<td>• Foster care parents are discounted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are free</td>
<td>• Bureaucracy holds up transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–Uniforms</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>–Lunch</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>–Food</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Forward the child's information once the child has moved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It appears that without a foster care parent who is willing to advocate, foster care children are often overlooked for specialized services.

Often schools that children transition into do not take the time to assess their needs. The result is that these children do not get services that they need and are entitled to. It appears that foster care parents have to be assertive advocates for the children they care for to ensure that their children get services.

HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Most of the former foster care children, as well as those who came of age who were referenced by foster care parents in these discussions, did finish high school.

Some respondents graduated from high school. Some obtained GEDs and one went on to the Job Corp. A couple of respondents obtained college degrees or cared for former foster care children who went on to college or other specialized training.
A child is a success after being in the foster care system if he is able to be a self-sustaining adult.

The former foster care children participating in this discussion were successes in the true sense of the word. They had overcome unfathomable circumstances. Regardless of their occupations, these respondents were contributors to society. Many were family people. One leads a Girl Scout troop. All appeared to be self-sustaining. They attribute their “success” to their inner drive to beat the system.

UPON REFLECTION

Most respondents across both groups did not feel that foster care children are receiving quality education.

As a result, these children are left to flounder once they are legal adults. They are not well-educated and they often have not mastered basic life skills. These respondents understand that according to statistics they are exceptions. They are not homeless or criminals.

Given their history, these respondents understand how difficult it is for a foster care child to focus on education. If they “age-out” of the system, they are left to fend for themselves at a very young age. They asked, “How many 18-year olds are truly left to fend for themselves?” That is how the foster care system is currently structured. Even these “successes” indicate that in their early adulthood, they were ill-equipped to manage their affairs.

Unaided, foster care parent respondents are interested in vouchers that allow their foster care children to attend private schools.

Foster care parents are completely convinced that the issue of attending to the needs of foster care children will be addressed at schools that they perceive as being better educational environments (e.g., private schools).

When specifically asked about the appeal of a voucher/scholarship to allow the child to consistently attend a particular school, both foster care parents and former foster care children communicated great interest. However, there was concern (primarily from foster care parents) that the voucher would only address the issue of getting a child enrolled in a particular school, and that the voucher does not take into consideration how this child will be transported to and from school or how this child will obtain other special services that he may need. Although positive about the idea of a voucher, respondents were clear that there needed to be additional funding associated with the vouchers to make utilizing the vouchers more practical.
Committee

Respondents were asked to create policies that improve the education provided to foster care children. Below is a summary of their efforts.

### Recommendations To Improve The Education Provided To Foster Care Children
(Created By Foster Care Parents)

- Mentor program (with adult former foster care children)
- Tutoring
- More funding
- Special liaison between foster child and the school system
- Transportation
- Therapy counseling/conflict resolution
- Testing/evaluation
- Vouchers for private school

### Recommendations To Improve The Education Provided To Foster Care Children
(Created By Former Foster Care Children)

- Transitional tutors
- On site/on-call counselors/therapists
- Communication to school administration that it may be necessary to protect child from biological parent
- Educate/train teachers in recognizing loss/separation issues
- Lessen the caseload for DSS workers
- Foster care peer support groups (voluntary)
- Create a better network for teachers/foster parents/social workers/etc. (include training)
- Lessen the stigma of foster care
- Better planning of long-term education goals

### Implications

Stability is important to any child. And certainly, stability in the educational setting is a part of that. Given the circumstance of being placed in foster care, these children have virtually no sense of normalcy and stability. Remaining at the same school, while other aspects of their lives are in an upheaval, can provide them with an ‘anchor.’

In these discussions, foster care parents and former foster care children alike were very interested in scholarships/vouchers that would allow foster care chil-
Children to remain at their schools regardless of their living arrangement. However, efforts to keep them at the same school must be supported by other services, which must include assistance with transportation.

Given that foster care children live all over the state, there needs to be a general initiative to better equip all schools to handle the needs of these children. Specifically, schools need to be trained to:

- Identify signs of a troubled home life that might necessitate foster care intervention
- Provide the unique services needed by foster care children
- Be sensitive and responsive to the incoming and outgoing transition issues
- Create as much normalcy as possible for these children

Finally, efforts to raise the awareness of good foster care outcomes and the role that the public can play (even without being foster care parents) should be considered. Several former foster care children mentioned that although they were victims, they often felt like they were treated as problems. Raising awareness and positioning foster families as yet another segment of non-traditional families that are valued members of our community can assist in de-stigmatizing foster children.