

**The Role of School Counselors Working with Students in Foster Care: Increasing
Access to Postsecondary Educational Opportunities**

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Abstract

With school reform efforts underway, students in foster care are in sharper focus as a subgroup and districts are now being held accountable for academic achievement for these youth. School counselors play a key role in the effort to increase rates of postsecondary enrollment and are often a primary support for academic planning, resource connectivity, and college readiness for students in care. The purpose of this article is to inform professional school counselors and counselor trainers about the unique needs of students in foster care. Highlighted are 6 areas of focus and recommendations for school counselors to increase access to postsecondary educational opportunities for students in foster care.

Keywords: School counseling, school counselor trainers, foster youth, student success, college access

The Role of School Counselors Working with Students in Foster Care: Increasing Access to Postsecondary Educational Opportunities

As leaders and facilitators, professional school counselors must be skilled to work with and advocate for all students (American School Counseling Association, 2005, 2012, 2019; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Brown & Trusty, 2005). Students in foster care represent one of the most vulnerable populations school counselors will serve. Acting as the liaison between school and child welfare agencies, as well as one of the primary advocates responsible for addressing this population's educational needs through collaborative efforts with all stakeholders, school counselors provide multi-dimensional support for these students.

Students in foster care face multiple home and school placements which exacerbates an already disproportionately high level of exposure to trauma and psychiatric distress. In addition to the absence of a consistent parent or guardian, students in care also are challenged with delayed enrollment, credit transfer, and lack of transportation to and from school and afterschool activities (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). This necessitates additional social and mental health services for this often-underserved population. Year after year, special interest advocacy groups fight for the rights of these youth and legislators are responding with mandates that place the educational outcomes of these youth in an even sharper focus. Consequently, foster youth are now defined as a distinct sub-group in the funding guidelines of California public schools and annual accountability plans that include prioritized evaluation metrics for Local Education Agencies (LEAs).

These new educational mandates allow foster youth who are in high school to seriously begin to consider postsecondary educational options. Obtaining a postsecondary degree increases opportunities for a higher annual income and financial stability for these youth (Osgood & Courtney, 2010). Although approximately 83% of students in foster care aspire to attain a postsecondary degree (Okpych, Courtney, & Charles, 2015), only 10% apply to a four-year college; 3-5% of those who actually attend college graduate with a college diploma (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). School counselors are key in the effort to increase rates of postsecondary enrollment for these youth as school counselors are often a primary source of college-related information and social support for historically disadvantaged populations (Morton, 2016).

School counselors are best situated within the schools to identify resources and develop plans to support academic achievement for this population. Central to the success of school counselors is their understanding of the individual backgrounds of each student in their care (Vacca, 2008). With training and/or professional development, school personnel will be more skilled to create the environments and develop the plans that will deliver the services necessary to increase the educational opportunities that can lead to gainful employment for these students in the future.

The purpose of this article is to inform professional school counselors and school counselor trainers about the unique needs of students in foster care as well as highlight 6 areas of focus and recommendations to increase access to postsecondary educational opportunities for students in foster care.

Focus # 1: Building supportive relationships with students

School counselors are key in identifying, promoting, and assisting students with information and resources to access higher education. Former foster youth who have successfully enrolled in postsecondary education or training reported that having at least one caring and supportive adult was of invaluable assistance. These supportive adults have helped these former foster youth build up the resilience needed to overcome the typical challenges that are likely to occur in early adulthood (Hass & Gaydon, 2009). Research supports that these students' academic, behavioral, emotional and social unmet needs are the possible result of the lack of adult investment (Pleck, 2008). Former foster youth have reported that they would have liked more support from their teachers (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002). School counselors are positioned to intervene with this special population (Brinser & Wissel, 2020) to remove barriers to learning and deliver needed services to support academic success (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

Focus #1: Recommendations for School Counselors

It is reported that the number of contacts students have with their school counselor can have a positive effect on the number of college application submissions (Bryan et. al, 2011). In the state of California, district education liaisons assist LEAs in meeting the state mandates for the education of these young people from K through 12th grade. To maximize the most opportunities for students to participate in programs, school counselors could work directly with case carrying social workers, and district education liaisons to establish effective professional collaborations in order to build

positive relationships that will facilitate the development of planning for, and access to resources (i.e., access to mental health services, information regarding financial support for postsecondary education, and other supports that are needed for a successful completion of primary and secondary education). Student input in such plans is critical; therefore, an in-depth conversation with the students regarding their future aspirations is essential. This work is enhanced with school counselors and case carrying social workers who work in coordination with each other. Utilizing the American School Counselor (ASCA, 2005, 2012, 2019) standards, the framework for developing such plans will increase future opportunities for these particular young people by identifying gaps in the following facets of their lives (i.e., academic, personal/social, and career domains), to create individualized plans that are unique to each student who is in out-of-home care.

Focus # 2: Addressing mobility and school stability

The literature indicates that residential mobility can have a negative impact on academic performance among foster youth (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004; Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012). Ten percent of these youth will remain in care for five or more years (California Department of Social Services, 2013). Most foster youth live within private homes with relatives or foster families, and nearly 12% (California) foster youth reside in group homes or institutions, and spend slightly over two years (28 months) in placement (Webster et al., 2017). Furthermore, youth who enter the foster care system between the ages of 11 and 14 are likely to have an average of 7 to 13 placements over the course of their time in out-of-home care, which translates into roughly a move every 6 months (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). While in care, these

youth may have their basic needs met, but often their lives are far from stable. On average, foster youth will move to new homes and transfer to new schools approximately 3.1 times per year (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012).

Focus #2: Recommendations for School Counselors

Districts must provide placement agencies with grade transfer documentation and academic work to ensure a student's successful administrative transition to a new school. With the passage of California AB 97, the transfer of school records must happen within two business days (California Education Code §1622: AB-97 [2013] – School Finance). In addition, the language of this law also ensures that grades cannot be lowered due to absences that are caused by a change in placement, a court ordered activity, or a court appearance; and allows for partial credits to be awarded. School counselors can monitor students' work, and facilitate the expeditious application of administrative paperwork in order to ensure the transfer of academic records (Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010; Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

School counselors can familiarize themselves with laws such as AB 490 and use its provisions to collaborate with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and district personnel to ensure that students in foster care are afforded stable school placements, that they have the least restrictive educational placements, and that they have access to services and resources that include enrichment and extracurricular activities (California Education Code: §48945.5: AB490 [2003] – Education: foster children; Shea et al., 2010; Williams, 2016). To further address educational stability and to keep foster youth

at the same school, it is recommended that school personnel work directly with case carrying social workers (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012).

Focus # 3: Identifying the need for special education services

Inadequate resources for special education services can have a tremendously negative impact on foster youth who qualify for these services (Stanley, 2012). School transfers can impede the implementation of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and the provision of special education services (Blakeslee et. al, 2013; Zetlin, 2006). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] of 2005 (Public Law 101-476 2004) Section 1416 (a) (3) (A) provides states with funding to ensure that children with special needs receive “a free, appropriate, public education in a least restrictive environment.” Youth in foster care are more likely to qualify for special education services than students in the general population (Blakeslee et. al, 2013). Almost 55% of the students in foster care qualify for special education services, in comparison to 10% of the students in the general population. While school districts are recognizing that students in foster care come with significant academic and personal challenges, many school districts are struggling to meet the needs of these youth (Wiegmann, Putnam-Hornstein, Barrat, Magruder, & Needell, 2014).

Focus #3: Recommendations for School Counselors

Youth in foster care are more likely to have been assessed for services but they frequently do not receive the services they need because of the significant likelihood of changing placements (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004); or often they face disciplinary action by school personnel who may be unaware that the students are foster youth and/or that they may have an IEP (Zetlin, 2006). Even when schools are prepared to provide

services to foster youth, there may be delays for any number of reasons, such as school staff do not receive records that include the current IEP; the IEP is out of date; the parent or education rights holder cannot be contacted in a timely manner (Zetlin, 2006); and often the Local Education Agency (LEA) does not have enough information to make an appropriate educational placement. The caregivers of these youth may lack information about special education services, therefore are not able to effectively advocate for better options when it comes to determining an appropriate educational placement (Blakeslee et. al, 2013). Without informed advocates, some foster youth are placed into alternative education or independent study (Zetlin, 2006). Because foster youth with special needs cannot optimize their educational outcomes if they do not have access to resources and supports that can help them receive the services outlined by IDEA, school counselors must collaborate with case carrying social workers and school personnel to develop plans to identify who will be involved in 1) the IEP meetings, 2) the implementation of IEP goals, and 3) the follow up with communication strategies, making sure to include all stakeholder input.

Focus # 4: Creating a culture of trauma informed practice

A common issue that sets students in foster care apart from students who have not been in care is that they have been exposed to some form of trauma. The most basic type of trauma is that which results from being 'placed' in a home away from familiar surroundings and people (i.e., a new school and neighborhood). Compounding this trauma is the direct experience of witnessing maltreatment. Youth in foster care are likely to develop emotional and psychological responses to deal with these traumatic events. These responses can lead to problems such as depression, substance abuse,

eating disorders, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] (Pecora, 2010); and these challenges are many times addressed inadequately or not at all (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002). Further Finkelstein et al. suggest that students in foster care experience difficulties not only in their home placements but also at school with teachers and classmates. Thus, as a consequence of these many potential challenges, children in the foster care system are more likely to experience academic and disciplinary problems at school (Scherr, 2007).

Focus #4: Recommendations for School Counselors

A critical role of school counselors is to assist in the development of school policies based on the recognition of the impact of trauma on all children, but in particular, children who are in foster care. School counselors can offer professional development for teachers and administrative staff so that they fully understand the needs of foster youth and the best practices that can improve classroom success and ease the challenges of adjusting to a new school (Zeitlin & Weinberg, 2004). Orienting new students to their classroom and helping to set clear expectations and guidelines for academic success is critical (Vacca, 2006). Notifying teachers about foster youth who transfer into their classes can increase opportunities for teachers to adapt assignments and/or to arrange for additional help for students who are currently in foster care (Gustavvson & MacEachron, 2012). These notifications must be communicated in such a way to protect the privacy of each student.

School personnel may need professional development to inform their understanding of the physical and emotional impact that trauma can have on a student's ability to learn, interact with others, and self-regulate in a classroom setting. The role of

the school counselor in this area would be to guide school personnel to appropriate resources on these subjects, as well as to become resources themselves. With training regarding the impact of trauma on these children, informed teachers can approach foster youth with more sensitivity and flexibility, and encourage a supportive relationship while these students are in school (Parker et al., 2020; Rodger et al., 2020; Wall, 2020).

Focus # 5: Strengthening inter-agency collaborations

Studies emphasize the extent to which collaborative relationships between school personnel and social workers can be a challenge (Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). While both case carrying social workers and school personnel work to support youth in foster care, each focuses on different aspects of these students' needs. Collaboration and communication between school personnel and case carrying social workers can reduce inconsistencies in case management efforts (Altshuler, 2003). Having stakeholders work together to utilize available resources and participate in collaborative relationships would be in the best interest of students in foster care. Advocates' knowledge and awareness of legal mandates are invaluable in providing the best services for these young people. Primary advocates include (but are not limited to): caregivers, school personnel, and case carrying social workers (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006; Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009). While the situations, resources, and responses to the educational achievement of foster youth are variable, successful collaboration is critical. Such successful collaborations could include the following: institutions/agencies that are committed to working with LEAs; making plans to collect and share data; and strong cooperative leadership between institutions, agencies, and school districts. Although existing positive relationships are helpful, the combination of

strong leadership and the commitment of resources leads to increased collaboration (Bryan, 2005; Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009) which has measurable positive influence in assisting students who are in foster care overcome barriers to academic achievement.

Focus #5: Recommendations for School Counselors

Although school counselors cannot be expected to be the sole source of support for these youth, school counselors can create connections that nurture positive relationships for foster youth, as well as build relationships with other stakeholders (institutions and agencies) (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Lafavor, 2008). Each school district in California is mandated to have a foster youth liaison. The district liaisons can be an invaluable asset to school counselors and foster youth. These individuals are tasked with helping students adjust to school and helping them develop positive perspectives about school (Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014).

School counselors can work with school psychologists and case carrying social workers to develop behavioral assessment and intervention plans that support the academic achievement of students in foster care (Scherr, 2007). There are a number of ways to learn to work interdisciplinary to effectively serve foster youth enrolled in school, such as cross-system training for pre-service and continuing professional education by universities; professional development that fosters interagency communication and awareness of trauma-related behavioral or learning issues; and the use of innovative practices to increase interagency involvement (Day, Somers, Darden, Yoon, 2015).

Focus # 6: Working with students to create an academic plan

Students in foster care are at a significant disadvantage in their preparation for college and career (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). This disadvantage poses both a challenge and significant opportunity for the school counselors. Over 80% of students in care do not apply to college; a lack of awareness about funding opportunities, the requirements for applying for funding, meeting the eligibility requirements, and the frequent missing of application deadlines (Okpych, 2012) are a few reasons why these college application rates are low. Understanding state laws and legislation that have an impact on the lives of these youth can expand the range of opportunities and pathways to postsecondary education.

Focus #6: Recommendations for School Counselors

School counselors can familiarize themselves with laws such as California AB 97, AB 490, and AB 167/216, as well as California Welfare and Institution codes. It is recommended that school counselors utilize the American School Counselor standards (ASCA, 2005, 2012, 2019) which is the framework for developing individualized plans (i.e., academic, personal/social, and career domains). The Foster Youth Education Toolkit (2016) can be used as a template for school counselors to ensure that district and school site personnel have all the relevant information regarding the educational rights for students in foster care. The Toolkit includes comprehensive information, procedures and implementation tools such as sample notification letters, records requests, and helpful checklists. This toolkit also addresses best practices for handling topics such as how to complete education evaluations, assisting youth with immediate enrollment or remaining in their school of origin, awarding partial credits and supporting

youth through high school graduation. Creating a comprehensive academic plan with student input is critical; therefore, an in-depth conversation with students regarding their future aspirations is essential to the development of their future plans.

Conclusion

The opportunity gap facing students in foster care justifies the creation of more collaborative work between schools, district offices and child welfare agencies. Increasing postsecondary outcomes for these youth will require that district and school site personnel develop the knowledge and capacity to effectively implement the policies that have been created to address the academic and social obstacles that exist for students in foster care. Federal and state policy makers have sent a strong message through the implementation of a legislative agenda that seeks to ensure that students in foster care are seen and are effectively served. School counselors are uniquely situated in schools to increase the educational opportunities for students in foster care, but they must be equipped for their roles at their school sites. School counselor training programs would benefit from staying current on legislation that protects these students and include specific curriculum that addresses the needs of these young people.

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