

foster youth education initiative

A project to ensure foster youth receive the educational advocacy and opportunities they need to succeed.



PROJECT SUMMARY

Foster children are taken from their families because they have experienced abuse or neglect. Bounced from home to home and school to school, their educational outcomes are tragically poor. Most children have parents who monitor their academic progress, attend parent-teacher conferences, enroll them in appropriate classes, and generally ensure they receive a high quality education. Foster children frequently lack such educational advocacy. Without an educational advocate, they often do not receive the educational opportunities to which they are entitled. The foster youth education initiative seeks to ensure foster youth receive the educational advocacy and opportunities they need to succeed in school and in life.

IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF FOSTER YOUTH

Problem Description

There are over half a million foster children in the United States. Children in foster care are taken from their families and placed in state custody because they have experienced abuse or neglect and cannot remain safely at home.



Perhaps more than any other group of children, foster youth are in desperate need of high-quality public education. They depend on the educational system to provide positive role models, the role models other children might find at home. They depend on the educational system to provide social capital, a network of relationships other children receive through their extended family and friends. And they depend on the system to provide the educational opportunities they need to succeed in life.

Unfortunately, most foster youth do not receive the education they need. They are frequently bounced from home to home and consequently from school to school, leading to prolonged absences, inappropriate placements, missing records, lost credits, and deficient special education services. Foster children are disproportionately funneled into low-quality and alternative schools and are frequently denied the educational opportunities to which they are entitled.

The consequences are tragic. Compared to their peers, foster children are:

- More likely to have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals;
- More likely to perform below grade level;
- Approximately twice as likely to have been held back in school;
- Almost twice as likely to have dropped out of high school; and
- Less likely to attend a 4-year college (fewer than 3% do so).

The cost to these children, and society, is extraordinary. Approximately 25% of former foster children experience homelessness, around 25% have been arrested and spent time incarcerated, about 33% receive public assistance, and unemployment rates top 50%.

The Need for Educational Advocacy

The educational challenges faced by foster youth have not gone unnoticed. The federal *Fostering Connections to Success Act* of 2008 includes provisions intended to improve the educational outcomes of this population. States such as California have enacted legislation entitling foster youth to specific educational opportunities. Moreover, there are numerous programs at the local level designed to help foster children succeed in school. These entitlements and programs have helped tens of thousands of foster youth, but many continue to slip through the cracks.

There is growing recognition that a complementary strategy is needed, one focused on ensuring all foster youth receive the educational opportunities they are promised on paper. This strategy focuses on providing educational advocates to individual foster youth. Most children have parents who serve as their educational advocate, attending parent-teacher conferences, returning teacher phone calls, ensuring enrollment in appropriate classes, and generally making sure their children receive a high quality education. Foster youth frequently lack such educational advocacy. Without an educational advocate many foster children are unable to access appropriate educational opportunities.



EDUCATION ADVOCACY SYSTEMS

Education advocacy systems provide a structure through which foster youth facing educational challenges are identified, their educational needs determined, and appropriate educational advocacy provided. While the specifics of each system differ, each shares a common four-part architecture: A) a source of referrals; B) a case management process; C) a pool of specialized educational advocates; and D) system management.

Referral Sources

With numerous adults responsible for a foster child's well-being and success, it is imperative that anyone be able to refer a child to their local education advocacy system. An educational issue might be identified by a foster parent, relative, teacher, judge, child welfare worker, court-appointed special advocate, or group home staff. Making the education advocacy system available to all of these stakeholders ensures that the maximum number of issues will be resolved and the most foster youth served.

Case Management Process

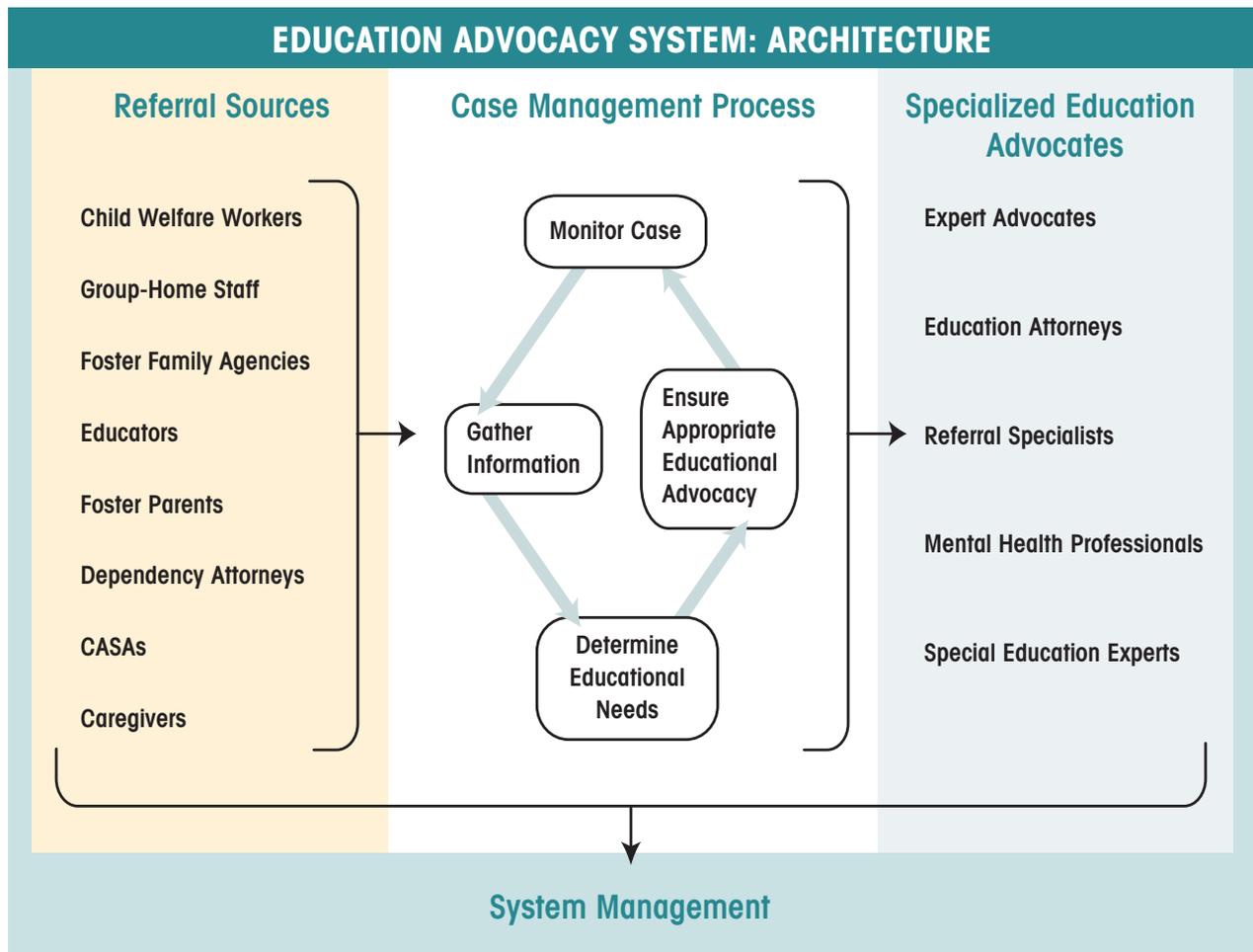
The case management process is the core of an education advocacy system. Whether performed by a centralized panel or decentralized administrators, case management consists of a four-stage cycle: 1) gathering information about the referred child and their educational challenges; 2) determining the youth's educational needs; 3) ensuring the youth receives appropriate educational advocacy; and 4) monitoring the situation to ensure the child receives high quality educational opportunities.



Specialized Educational Advocates

Education advocacy systems train the adults in a referred youth's life to become strong educational advocates. Oftentimes this training ensures the referred youth receives the educational advocacy

EDUCATION ADVOCACY SYSTEM: ARCHITECTURE



they need. But foster youth with greater educational challenges sometimes require specialized educational advocates. Such advocates include:

- *Expert advocates:* Individuals with a thorough understanding of education law and the child welfare system;
- *Education attorneys:* Attorneys trained in education law;
- *Referral specialists:* Individuals with expert knowledge of the local community resources available to foster youth;
- *Mental health professionals:* Psychologists and psychiatrists; and
- *Special education experts:* Resource specialists and experts in learning disabilities.

Specialized advocates are connected to a case as needed and advocate directly on behalf of the referred foster youth.

System Management

In addition to procedures for handling individual cases, education advocacy systems require system-level management. Such management includes coordinating outreach, managing the budget, locating sustainable sources of funding, monitoring intake and success metrics, and initiating data-driven improvement.



THE FOSTER YOUTH EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The foster youth education initiative improves the educational outcomes of foster youth by ensuring they have the educational advocacy they need to succeed. To that end, this new National Center for Youth Law initiative helps



localities develop and operate education advocacy systems for foster youth. The project also advocates for state-level policies that encourage the development of such systems.

Developing Local Education Advocacy Systems

The project's core mission is to facilitate the creation of education advocacy systems for foster youth. The focus is on collaborating with local agencies and public-interest organizations to create an education advocacy plan: a collection of procedures and responsibilities that details how foster youth facing educational challenges are to be provided the advocacy and opportunities they

need. Project staff codify this plan into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) and help localities locate and secure necessary funding.

Managing Local Education Advocacy Systems

When necessary, the project manages education advocacy systems during their initial period of operation. During this period the project helps an appropriate local organization develop the infrastructure and institutional capacity to manage the system on an ongoing basis. The goal is to transition system management to a local organization with roots in the local foster youth education community.

Policy Advocacy

A complementary component of the project advocates for policies and regulations that encourage the creation of education advocacy systems. Support from state-level agencies and policy-making bodies facilitates the creation of successful education advocacy systems.

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR YOUTH LAW

The National Center for Youth Law (NCYL) is a national non-profit organization that has been working for over four decades to improve the lives of poor children. Employing a range of strategies, NCYL works to ensure that low-income children have the resources, support, and opportunities they need for healthy and productive lives.

