Foster Care & Education
COVID-19

Education During COVID-19:
How Child Welfare Agencies Can Help

Now, more than ever, prioritizing the educational needs of students in foster care is essential. With most school systems closed throughout the country, attention to children in foster care and their education progress is critical because these students are already educationally vulnerable, and often enter care behind academically. This added time away from school compounds these negative impacts for all vulnerable students, especially students in foster care.

While schools, courts, and other advocacy partners all need to do their part, child welfare agencies must prioritize education by focusing on **four major areas**: partnering with schools; supporting education and well-being of students; directly supporting caregivers; and addressing the needs of students in foster care with disabilities.

1. **Partner with Schools**
   - ➢ **Know what schools offer.** Schools play a huge role in providing needed services and supports to students in foster care. It is critical that child welfare agencies ensure children in their care are benefiting from all supports available from schools.
     - o *Ensure access to meals.* Schools are on the frontline addressing food insecurity for students by maintaining access to meals during school closures and making meals available to students and families in need. All children in foster care are categorically eligible for free school meals and school districts are showing great flexibility in giving access to meals for children in foster care (i.e., school district where child is living is providing meals even when child is attending school in another district).
     - o *Ensure access to school-related resources and services.* Schools in many communities are providing students with tools and resources to stay on track with learning, connect with their school community, and participate in distance learning opportunities.
       - ▪ In many communities, schools are providing students with the technology they need (internet connectivity, hotspots, computers and laptops) to allow students to connect to academic as well as social emotional supports (i.e., school counselors and resource specialists).   For students in foster care, there are added benefits to having access to this technology beyond education (i.e., virtual caseworker contacts, connecting with parents and siblings, virtual medical or counseling appointments, and communicating with attorneys or attending virtual hearings or meetings).

- Schools that cannot provide technology are providing educational materials, including packets, worksheets, and printed materials available for pickup or sent home to families. Some communities are distributing learning materials during meal pick-ups, to maximize reach to students and families.

➢ **Communicate regularly with schools.** Schools and child welfare agencies need to stay in close communication as both agencies are constantly developing new ways to serve the needs of children and families during this crisis.
   o *Get current information from schools.* Child welfare agencies must know school closure timelines, and what distance learning opportunities and services are being offered by each school district. Child welfare agencies should similarly know what summer school or other programming may be available. This information and guidance changes frequently, making ongoing communication essential.
   o *Provide current information to schools.* Child welfare agencies must share information with school districts timely. Communicating relevant student-specific information to schools, even during closure, ensures schools know where the child is living and his or her current needs. Some examples of information child welfare agencies should share with schools include: when children move living placements; when student or caretakers need added supports; and when a change in who holds education decision making authority is needed.
   o *Plan for post-COVID-19 transitions.* Schools and child welfare agencies need to stay connected about school stability issues for children in foster care and communicate changes that occur while schools are closed. This will ensure smoother transitions for students in care when schools reopen. Issues such as whether a child has moved placements, credit accrual, or graduation requirements, all must be addressed.

➢ **Continue or create new cross-system collaborations and communication structures.**
   o *Tap existing school-agency collaborations.* In many communities, child welfare agencies and school systems already work closely to support the school stability and success of students as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act and Fostering Connections Act. These collaborations may need to shift priorities to address COVID-19 related issues along with other priorities.
   o *Discuss key roles and responsibilities.* Begin or continue conversations with schools about school personnel's roles in supporting students in foster care, including their role in ensuring school stability and addressing educational needs and gaps. This role also includes the school personnel's role as mandatory reporters and how schools can navigate making reports of suspected abuse.
   o *Work together at the systemic and individual levels.* Collaboration should occur at the system level (school district foster care points of contact can help) and the individual student level (caseworker and school building personnel need to work together).

2. **Support the Education and Well-Being of Students in Foster Care.** Ensuring well-being of children in the custody of the child welfare agency has always been a priority for caseworkers. This includes ensuring education is addressed in case planning and preparation, case staffings, and court hearings and reviews.

➢ **Ensure the student has access to school materials and resources, including technology to benefit from remote learning opportunities.** This includes internet connectivity and access to technology to remain connected to school, and other critical services. Students should make academic progress and have opportunities for social/emotional well-being support (i.e., connection with school counselors and support services).
   o *Provide technology when needed.* Many school districts are leading plans to provide technology devices and connectivity to support virtual learning for all students. Child welfare agencies must not only help connect students and families to school-offered technology but must also work to supplement and provide or coordinate devices and connectivity if schools cannot. Federal guidance has clarified that federal dollars can

be used to support technology expenditures. Tracking which students in foster care have access is a first step; then identify and address barriers to provide needed technology to remaining students (particularly those living in congregate care settings) and families. No student in foster care should miss educational opportunities due to lack of technology.

o *Provide educational materials and supports when needed.* Even in communities with no virtual school offerings, child welfare agencies can support students and families to quickly overcome any barriers to staying connected to school and continued learning so students in foster care do not fall further behind. This can mean providing rides to and from school to pick up or drop off schoolwork and assignments; finding online courses and learning supports. Some child welfare agencies are connecting children in foster care with virtual tutoring and education counselors. For youth who are already behind in school, these supports can create opportunities to access remedial help.

➢ **Ensure student's social/emotional needs are met.** Students in foster care have often already experienced trauma and loss. The COVID-19 crisis compounds these issues and adds social isolation challenges. Many students in foster care were receiving social/emotional support from counselors and other service providers as part of their regular school day. It is critical to ensure these supports continue while schools are closed, either through virtual school connections or finding new outside-of-school service providers to support the child in foster care. Even students in foster care who had not previously needed social/emotional support may require help during this time.

➢ **Encourage school engagement.** Students in foster care often struggle to engage in their school community and education. This can be for many reasons, such as past trauma, frequent school moves, unmet educational needs, mental health issues, or distrust of teachers and peers. The COVID-19 pandemic can lead students in foster care to further disengage from school if efforts aren't made to keep them connected. The goal is to find motivational strategies that help the student want to learn and continue in school.

3. **Support Caregivers.** Caregivers of children in foster care have always had an important job requiring support from many systems. During this crisis, school closures leave caregivers struggling to provide the additional supports children may need, and typically receive, from schools.

➢ **Provide information about school resources.** Child welfare agencies play an important role ensuring that children in care and their families are up to date on all new school guidance and resources, including information about meals and academic and emotional supports available through schools.

➢ **Provide additional support to caregivers when needed**. Caregivers may be under significant stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This may be exacerbated by school and daycare closures, and employment and health concerns. Without extra supports at home, caregivers may be unable or unwilling to provide the education support needed for children to benefit from virtual or distance learning. Many children in foster care live with older caretakers (kin and non-kin) who are more vulnerable to COVID-19 related health issues that may impact their ability to support the child's education needs. Given these added challenges, there is also greater chance of disrupted living placements creating further instability for the child. The support caregivers need will vary but may include: rides to pick up meals; delivery of school materials; technical support to set up technology and link to school online platforms; assistance with online course registration; and counseling or therapy arrangements through non-school providers.

4. **Prioritize Students in Foster Care with Special Education Needs.** A significant percentage of children in foster care require special education services and supports (far higher than the general student population). [Data shows](#) 36 -

47% of children in the foster care system are, or should be, receiving special education services in school. How school districts address this critical need for all students with disabilities is something the child welfare community needs to understand to effectively advocate for students in foster care with disabilities.

➢ **Reach out to children in care with disabilities and their caretakers to determine what supports they need.** Children with disabilities in foster care have unique learning needs that must be met. This current crisis makes this fact even more pronounced. Agencies must determine whether children in care are receiving any of their required special education services and interventions during school closures. They must provide guidance and support about how to work with the school to secure additional support and encourage caregivers to track progress (and regression) during remote learning.

➢ **Work closely with schools to identify ongoing needs of students under Individuals with Disabilities in Education (IDEA)**. Determine how Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) will be implemented during school closures, including developing a distance learning plan. Have ways to monitor and reassess student needs upon return to school.

➢ **Clarify who is the child's education decision maker**. Now more than ever the child's special education decision maker must be clearly identified. The child may need extra advocacy and support, and the child's caseworker should make sure the special education decision maker is supporting the child's special education needs. This includes participating in virtual IEP meetings or school efforts to meet special education needs during school closures and the transition back to school.

➢ **Reach out to the legal education advocacy community** (or child advocacy community, if separate education attorneys do not exist). The need for IDEA advocacy for these students will likely get complicated during and after this crisis. Special legal protections exist to ensure children with disabilities have their educational needs met. Child welfare advocates will need to mobilize to ensure children in foster care are not left behind as school districts struggle to support all students with disabilities in their schools.

➢ **Address the needs of young children birth through age 5 (Part C and services for 3 to 5-year-olds under IDEA).** Our youngest children in foster care also need to be connected to educational experiences that help them develop and be ready for school. With closure of early care and education settings, these young children cannot be forgotten.

OTHER RESOURCES:

Tip Sheet for Schools Re: COVID-19 and Students in Foster Care:

http://fostercareandeducation.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?portalid=0&EntryId=2104&Command=Core_Download

Tip Sheet for Addressing Education in Court Proceedings during COVID-19:

http://fostercareandeducation.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?portalid=0&EntryId=2106&Command=Core_Download

To learn more about Foster Care and Education please visit www.fostercareandeducation.org

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