



FOSTERING SUCCESS

When Tiffany Anderson took over as superintendent of Jennings School District near St. Louis in 2012, she faced high poverty and low academic achievement. As part of the turnaround effort, she focused on building supports for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those in foster care who struggle with social-emotional trauma and frequent changes in residence.

With assistance from community partners, Anderson renovated a dilapidated, district-owned house and turned it into a permanent group home for students in foster care.

Christened Hope House, the 3,000-square-foot home is managed by a full-time, licensed foster counselor. Up to seven students of both genders, who range in age from 5 to 17, are selected by the superintendent and house parent to live in private rooms there, receiving regular meals and experiencing a greater sense of stability. Students stay for one to two school years, on average.

The renovation required an initial \$50,000 investment from the district. The program's success has since inspired more than \$80,000 in sustaining donations from the community. Thanks to this and similar efforts targeting at-risk students, the district moved from a Missouri school assessment score of 57 percent in 2012 to 81 percent four years later.

"We have the opportunity to remove barriers in amaz-

How districts work to ensure that students in foster care thrive along with their classmates

By Ray Bendici



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PLACE TO CALL HOME—In 2015, Jennings School District in Missouri opened Hope House, a group foster home that accommodates up to seven students in foster care every school year.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE

The Texas Education Agency's Foster Care and Student Success guide (download at DAMag.me/fcss) offers strategies for supporting students in foster care. Increasing awareness for educators is critical. Here are a few things to know:

Students come into foster care through no fault of their own and have often experienced abusive, neglectful environments.

Students in foster care want to be treated like everyone else. School often provides normalcy and can be a refuge from a chaotic home life.

Maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity is key as students do not want to be stigmatized as "foster children."

Students often enter foster care with gaps in their education.

Trauma and adversity may impact students' learning and behavior.

Most students have experienced tremendous loss, often having been separated from siblings, family members and personal belongings.

Students want to be empowered with decision-making and engage in goal setting.

ing ways if we change our mindset," says Anderson, who is now superintendent of Topeka Public Schools in Kansas.

Most school districts have not marshaled the resources to build and operate such a facility. Instead, other approaches have been implemented to support students in foster care, ranging from raising awareness and providing PD, to creating special programs and adding specialized staff.

Kansas 'can-do'

Students in foster care face huge challenges. According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, only about 60 percent graduate high school by age 19; they miss an average of five weeks of school annually; and most have faced trauma. Many also require special education services.

Anderson found many of the same foster care challenges two years ago when she took over in Topeka, a 32-school district with approximately 300 students in foster care.

She first organized three-person mental health intervention teams that are deployed across the district. Each team consists of a school liaison (a district employee who is a licensed clinical social worker), a mental health agency clinician, and a care coordinator who assists with family outreach. The liaison—the bridge between the district and social services—reviews student intervention plans, tracks grades and coordinates mental health care.

A representative from every school also begins visiting foster homes during the first week of school, and new teachers tour the community to become familiar with areas that have a high concentration of students in foster care.

"There's no substitute for developing personal relationships," says Anderson. "We really focus on creating a sense of belonging in the classroom and in the school community."

The district also provides PD that covers topics such as how to become a licensed foster parent because there is a shortage of foster homes in the district.

"Schools have staff development programs for curriculum materials, CPR and everything else, so why not this?" says Anderson.

In the past two years, Topeka's students in foster care have shown improvements in attendance, in standardized assessments, and in math and English grades at the elementary, middle and high school levels.

Tutoring and college tours

With between 7,000 and 12,000 students in foster care at any point during a school year, Los Angeles USD launched the Foster Youth Achievement Program in 2013. The district spends \$11 million annually to support the initiative.

The achievement program employs 82 counselors who conduct comprehensive academic assessments on individual students to track attendance, educational progress and social-emotional wellness, says La Shona Jenkins, the program's coordinator. Counselors also develop individual education plans and communicate progress with guardians, teachers, school psychologists, county social workers and, if applicable, probation officers.

The program also has 10 lead counselors—one each at LAUSD's six sub-districts and also at the district's youth resource centers. These counselors handle compliance with state and federal policies, among other issues. They also provide PD for administrators on subjects such as the commercial exploitation of children.

Through the district's academic support and achievement program, students receive tutoring—at school or at home—from LAUSD teachers. And the program organizes college tours and Foster Youth Shadow Day, in which students are paired with carpenters, doctors or other local professionals.

The district also supports foster youth leadership councils, which are active at 26 high schools and at one middle school. More than 200 students meet monthly to learn about advocating for themselves, attending college, developing public speaking skills and other subjects.

In 2016, the Every Student Succeeds Act clarified McKinney-Vento Act requirements that students in foster care remain in their school of origin. If they move, the district must provide transportation and immediate enrollment in the new system, and transfer all records.

To enhance stability and meet transportation requirements, LAUSD's buses transport students when necessary. If a student moves to a neighboring district, they may be transported by a private company at the district's expense.

Welcome teams

In Texas, nearly 16,000 school-age students are in foster care at any given time, according to the Texas Education Agency.

To improve support, the agency was recently reorganized to focus on highly mobile and at-risk students. It also published *Foster Care and Student Success*, a 135-page guide with more than 100 initiatives and strategies for improving conditions from early childhood through college (see sidebar, opposite page).

The guide was "a labor of love," says Kelly Kravitz, the Texas agency's director of highly mobile and at-risk student programs. Advice on subjects such as how to facilitate successful enrollment—from setting time frames to attaining necessary records—is provided.

Connecting students to extracurricular activities and to academic supports is also covered, including best practices for sharing academic performance data with child welfare stakeholders.

The agency also focuses on PD for principals, registrars and other frontline school personnel so they understand privacy and confidentiality issues. They also learn the proper care-related and documentation questions to ask new students when they arrive at a school.

The Department of Children and Families and local foster care agencies can send experienced personnel to schools to teach "basic foster care 101," says Kravitz.



STABLE ENVIRONMENT—Students who stay at Hope House get their own rooms and regular meals, providing the stability that allows students to concentrate on their education rather than worry about where they're going to live next.

Educators can learn the hurdles that foster students must overcome, such as living in toxic environments or not having basic school supplies, and who's involved in a particular student's life. In turn, schools share what services they have in place for at-risk students.

The agency also holds regular statewide foster care summits featuring representatives from the court system, the child welfare system and the education system. Topics covered include data sharing, special education needs, mobility issues and legal updates.

Tackling trauma

Colorado Springs School District 11 is a 28,000-student suburban district with a low foster care population. No specific district entity is solely tasked with support. Individual schools manage day-to-day student needs, says Cory Notestine, counseling services facilitator and crisis response team coordinator.

The district has forged partner-

ships with multiple community groups, including *Fostering Hope*, a local foster care agency that provides guidance in navigating the foster care system.

In addition, the district provides PD for teachers to support students who have suffered trauma. PD covers how to help students develop social-emotional competencies, such as perseverance, self-efficacy and grit.

"You can have two students who experience similar trauma, yet they perform dramatically different in the classroom," says Notestine. Ultimately, increasing awareness and stability is the key for students in foster care.

"It's very important that educators don't think of it as 'one more thing,'" says Texas Education Agency's Kravitz. "The approach should be 'What are we doing that we can build upon, and how can we better integrate this student group into those efforts?'" DA

Ray Bendici is deputy editor.

MORE ONLINE: How young people who age out of foster care can help current students, DAmag.me/fostercare

CHAPTER 1

Education & Students in Foster Care: An Overview

TOP THINGS EDUCATORS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE:

Children and youth come into foster care through no fault of their own and have often experienced chaotic, abusive, and neglectful environments: Common concerns include prenatal exposure to drugs and/or alcohol and witnessing domestic violence or other criminal behavior. Students in care may have challenges related to attachment and bonding.

Children and youth in care want to be treated like other students: The school day can provide a sense of normalcy and be an escape from challenges students are facing in their home life.

Maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity is very important: Children and youth do not want to be stigmatized as “foster children” and often do not want their schools to know. Students communicate that this label has negative connotations and can be embarrassing and shameful. Maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity is highly important.

Youth in foster care have many strengths: Students in care also have friendships, caring family members, and supportive adults. These strengths should be celebrated, nurtured, and supported.

Children and youth often enter foster care with gaps in their education: Some children may not be prepared to enter their age-appropriate grade for a variety of reasons. Additionally, school moves, delays in transferring educational records from school to school, and loss of course credits contribute to gaps in students’ education.

Trauma and adverse child and youth experiences may impact a student’s learning, behavior, and socialization: As a result of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, students in foster care may show signs of depression or anxiety and may have trouble socializing with their peers and trusting new adults. School staff may benefit from additional training on the impact of trauma and how to implement trauma-informed practices in the classroom.

Students in foster care may be a mobile population: Due to a variety of external circumstances, students may have to relocate to new homes and communities. Transitions and school moves may happen quickly, meaning children and youth are not able to say “goodbye” to their current school relationships. School withdrawal procedures may not be followed; this contributes to additional challenges with school transitions.

Students in foster care have experienced tremendous loss: Students are often separated from siblings, family members, and personal belongings. Loss of important education, social, cultural, and family connections are common and compound the trauma experienced.

Students in foster care want to be empowered with decision making and engage in goal setting: Students benefit from being included in decision making and discussions related to their school success and long-term goals.

Once a child or youth enters foster care, there are many child welfare professionals working with them: These professionals can include a Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworker, a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) or guardian ad litem, and an attorney ad litem, amongst others. It is likely that these persons will contact the child’s school to get education information regarding their client.

Supports and resources are available to help youth transition out of foster care and pay for college: These can include college scholarships, tuition and fee waivers, grants, and supportive campus-based programming. Additionally, CPS programs and services are available to help youth prepare for and transition to adulthood. Educators and counselors must be aware of these opportunities and, when able, connect students to these resources.

Federal and state legislation supports students in foster care: Examples of issue areas supported by law include immediate enrollment, school stability, maintaining school placement, smooth transitions, designated school district foster care liaisons, and coordination between child welfare and education.

Representatives of education, child welfare, and the courts are committed to improving the educational outcomes of students impacted by Texas’ foster care system