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# Educational Stability for Foster Youth: What Schools and Districts Need to Know

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## Introduction

Foster youth represent one of the most vulnerable populations in American schools. Roughly 369,000 children were in foster care in the United States at the end of fiscal year 2022 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), the large majority of them enrolled in public schools. These students face unique educational challenges stemming from trauma, placement instability, and systemic barriers to educational continuity. Research consistently demonstrates that foster youth have lower graduation rates, lower test scores, and higher rates of school discipline than their peers (Clemens et al., 2016; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018; Pecora et al., 2006).

Educational stability—the ability to remain in a consistent school placement and maintain uninterrupted academic progress—is critical for fostering academic success and reducing long-term adverse outcomes. Yet federal and state legal frameworks protecting foster youth educational rights remain underutilized by many school districts. Districts often lack the knowledge and infrastructure to effectively coordinate with child welfare agencies, implement trauma-informed policies, and support the work of education liaisons and school social workers who champion foster youth success.

This white paper synthesizes research and federal policy guidance to provide practical recommendations for school leaders, policymakers, and district administrators. We address placement disruptions and educational outcomes, outline federal and state legal protections, discuss evidence-based trauma-informed practices, and detail the critical role of education liaisons in supporting foster youth. Our goal is to equip districts with the knowledge and tools necessary to improve educational outcomes for this vulnerable student population.

## The Impact of Placement Disruptions on Educational Outcomes

Placement disruptions—defined as unexpected or unplanned changes in foster care living situations—directly harm educational outcomes. Foster youth experience placement changes at significantly higher

rates than the general student population. Nearly two-thirds of children in foster care experience more than one living placement, and about 14% of school-age children in care have six or more; roughly one-third of 17- to 18-year-olds in care have changed schools five or more times (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Each placement change often necessitates a school change, creating cascading educational consequences.

## Academic Performance and Graduation Rates

Research demonstrates a direct correlation between placement stability and academic achievement. When foster youth change schools, they frequently lose credits, experience curriculum misalignment, and fall behind academically (Altshuler, 2003). The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study found that each additional placement change per year substantially reduced the odds of completing high school—alumni with one fewer placement change per year were nearly twice as likely to graduate (Pecora et al., 2006). In Colorado, students in foster care changed high schools an average of 3.46 times in four years, and each additional school move lowered the odds of earning a diploma (Clemens et al., 2016).

Graduation rates for foster youth are substantially lower than their peers. National data indicate that about 65% of youth in foster care complete high school by age 21, compared with 86% of all young adults, and four-year on-time graduation rates in several states range from roughly 35% to 58% versus 70–84% for non-foster peers (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Even among those who graduate, many leave high school severely underprepared for college or career pathways, limiting long-term economic mobility.

## Trauma and Educational Engagement

Beyond academic mechanics, placement disruptions exacerbate trauma and reduce educational engagement. Foster youth have elevated rates of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and parental substance abuse (Greeson et al., 2011). Placement changes—while necessary for safety—retraumatize youth and disrupt the therapeutic relationships they build with teachers and school staff. Frequent school changes prevent youth from establishing trust, which is essential for academic recovery and emotional regulation.

A substantial body of neuroscience research reveals that chronic stress from placement instability impairs executive function, working

memory, and impulse control—cognitive domains essential for academic success (van der Kolk, 2014). Students experiencing repeated disruptions show higher rates of behavioral referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, further pushing them out of school and into juvenile justice systems.

## Federal and State Legal Protections

Multiple federal laws establish specific protections for foster youth educational rights. However, implementation varies significantly across states and districts, and many school leaders remain unfamiliar with these requirements. Understanding the legal landscape is essential for ensuring foster youth access the educational stability protections they deserve.

### The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Title I Part A Foster Care Provisions

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), enacted in 2015, contains specific provisions protecting foster youth in Title I Part A, the nation's largest federal education program. Under ESSA, states and districts must:

- Establish a collaborative process between child welfare and education agencies to address foster youth educational stability, prioritizing remaining in the school of origin unless a best-interest determination indicates otherwise (ESEA § 1111(g)(1)(E), 20 U.S.C. § 6311(g)(1)(E)).
- Appoint a Point of Contact (POC) in each district to coordinate foster youth services, facilitate communication between child welfare agencies and schools, and ensure foster youth access academic support and services.
- Ensure timely transfers of academic records and enrollment, eliminating unnecessary delays that disrupt educational continuity.
- Provide transportation from a new foster placement to the school of origin when remaining in that school serves the best interests of the student.

Despite these clear mandates, implementation remains uneven: a 2019 federal review found that staff turnover at education and child welfare agencies, difficulty arranging and funding transportation, and limited data sharing continue to hamper the provisions in many districts (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019). This implementation gap leaves foster youth without consistent advocates

and schools without clear accountability for supporting their educational needs.

## The Fostering Connections Act and Credit Transfer Requirements

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires child welfare agencies to include an educational-stability plan in every child's case plan and to coordinate with schools so that children remain in their school of origin or are promptly enrolled elsewhere (42 U.S.C. § 675(1)(G)). Building on this, many states have enacted credit-transfer protections, and federal ESSA guidance encourages districts to:

- Accept and apply credits earned in other schools, subjects, or alternative education settings (e.g., residential treatment centers, detention facilities).
- Apply earned credits toward graduation requirements without requiring students to retake entire courses.
- Establish transparent and streamlined credit verification and transcript review processes.

Implementation of credit transfer policies has improved in recent years, but inconsistency remains. Some states require literal credit equivalency; others allow districts discretion in evaluating credits from alternative or non-traditional settings. This variation creates barriers for highly mobile students and perpetuates credit loss.

## State Foster Youth Laws and McKinney-Vento Overlaps

Beyond federal law, most states have enacted legislation establishing foster youth rights. Twenty states now have specific statutes requiring schools to prioritize foster youth remaining in their school of origin, and a growing number have strengthened credit transfer requirements and mandated Points of Contact. Many states have also aligned foster care and education regulations with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which shares overlapping populations and protections.

Approximately 15–20% of foster youth are also homeless or have experienced homelessness, creating dual eligibility for protections. School districts must understand both legal frameworks and ensure foster youth receive the fullest protections available under either law.

# Trauma-Informed School Policies and Practices

Legal protections address structural barriers, but trauma-informed policies address the psychological and relational dimensions of foster youth success. Trauma-informed practice is not a single intervention; rather, it is a system-wide approach grounded in understanding how trauma affects learning, development, and behavior.

## Understanding Trauma and Its Impact on Learning

Foster youth have experienced multiple types of trauma: pre-removal trauma (abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence), separation trauma from removal from family and community, and ongoing trauma from placement instability and repeated loss. Trauma alters neural pathways and creates a heightened stress response system; even minor stressors can trigger fight-flight-freeze responses that appear as behavior problems, oppositional defiance, or withdrawal (van der Kolk, 2014).

Schools often respond to trauma-driven behaviors with punitive measures—detention, suspension, expulsion—that deepen disengagement and replicate the youth's prior experiences with systems failure. Trauma-informed approaches replace punishment with curiosity, asking "What happened to this student?" rather than "What's wrong with this student?" This fundamental reorientation creates psychological safety and allows students to reengage with learning.

## Core Trauma-Informed Practices for Schools

SAMHSA identifies six key principles of a trauma-informed approach: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). Applied to schools, these translate to specific practices:

- Safety: Create predictable, consistent physical and relational environments. Establish clear behavioral expectations, consistent routines, and calm, regulated staff responses to dysregulation.
- Trustworthiness: Communicate transparently with students and families. Follow through on commitments. Avoid surprise consequences or arbitrary changes to schedules or placements.

- Choice: Offer students autonomy wherever possible. Provide choices in how to complete assignments, where to sit, which restorative circle to join, or when to engage in a difficult conversation.
- Collaboration: Involve students, families, and caregivers in decisions affecting them. Use collaborative problem-solving rather than top-down discipline. Partner with child welfare agencies and other support services.
- Empowerment: Identify and build on student strengths. Create opportunities for competence and mastery. Focus on resilience and growth rather than deficits.

Evaluations of whole-school trauma-informed programs report improvements in staff knowledge and practice, student time on task and attendance, and large reductions in disciplinary incidents and suspensions over multi-year implementation (Dorado et al., 2016; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016).

## The Role of Education Liaisons

Education liaisons are the linchpin connecting schools, child welfare agencies, families, and foster youth themselves. Also known as Foster Care Liaisons or Youth Advocates, these professionals serve a critical yet often underfunded and under-resourced function in the educational system.

### Core Functions and Responsibilities

Effective education liaisons fulfill multiple roles:

- Identification and enrollment: Identify foster youth in their district, ensure timely enrollment, and facilitate swift resolution of enrollment barriers (missing documentation, immunization delays, etc.).
- Coordination with child welfare: Serve as the primary point of contact for caseworkers, foster parents, and relatives, ensuring schools understand changes in placement, custody, or child welfare proceedings.
- School of origin advocacy: Monitor and advocate for remaining in the school of origin when educationally appropriate, coordinating transportation and addressing barriers.
- Academic support and monitoring: Track academic performance, credit completion, and progress toward graduation. Identify students at risk and coordinate interventions.

- Trauma-informed support: Provide or coordinate mental health referrals, counseling, and in-school emotional support. Interpret trauma-related behaviors to staff and families.
- Transition planning: For high school students, coordinate post-secondary planning, college applications, and career pathways. Ensure independent living skills training and life skills preparation for youth aging out of care.

### Challenges and Capacity Issues

Despite clear needs, many districts have insufficient liaison capacity. Although ESSA requires every district receiving Title I funds to designate a foster care point of contact, in many districts the role is assigned to staff with multiple other duties, and federal reviewers have documented high turnover in these positions (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019). Research on dedicated education liaisons shows they can improve school stability, record transfer, and academic outcomes for children in care (Zetlin et al., 2004), but the capacity gap means many high-need youth receive minimal support.

Additionally, liaisons often lack access to mental health professionals, navigators for higher education, and funding for supports like transportation. Isolated liaisons without administrative support or presence in school leadership meetings struggle to influence systemic policies and practices. Effective liaison programs require sustainable funding, clear accountability structures, and integration into school leadership.

## Implications for School Districts

Translating research and policy into practice requires intentional, systemic change. Districts seeking to improve educational outcomes for foster youth should consider the following priorities:

### Build Leadership Commitment and Infrastructure

District leadership—superintendents, assistant superintendents, and curriculum/instruction directors—must visibly prioritize foster youth education. This includes:

- Designating a district-level executive with authority and resources to oversee foster youth initiatives.
- Establishing a Foster Care Education Working Group including representatives from special education, Title I, CTE, secondary education, school counseling, and other relevant departments.

- Integrating foster youth education into the district strategic plan and accountability frameworks, with specific goals and progress monitoring.

## Fund and Empower Education Liaisons

Invest in adequate liaison staffing and professional development:

- Hire or designate liaisons at adequate ratios. Districts of any size should have at least one dedicated liaison; larger districts should set caseload targets that allow individual monitoring of each student in care.
- Provide liaisons with training in trauma-informed practice, special education law, child welfare systems, and higher education pathways.
- Ensure liaisons participate in school leadership meetings and have clear authority over foster youth educational decisions and allocations.
- Pair liaisons with mental health professionals (school psychologists, counselors) and college/career navigators when possible.

## Formalize Interagency Collaboration

Establish memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between school districts and child welfare agencies that specify:

- Points of contact and communication protocols for notification of placement changes.
- Timelines for information sharing (ideally within 24–48 hours of a change).
- Processes for determining school of origin placement decisions and transportation arrangements.
- Shared data systems and tracking mechanisms (where privacy laws allow) to monitor outcomes.
- Joint training and professional development opportunities.

## Implement Trauma-Informed Whole-School Approaches

Adopting trauma-informed practice requires more than a one-day training. Districts should:

- Conduct a comprehensive audit of current policies and practices, identifying policies or procedures that may retraumatize foster youth (e.g., zero-tolerance discipline, unnecessary searches, surprise transitions).

- Revise discipline policies to replace zero-tolerance approaches with restorative and collaborative problem-solving models.
- Invest in professional development for all staff, with advanced training for those working most directly with high-needs youth.
- Establish school-wide systems of support (PBIS) that emphasize positive relationships, predictability, and restoration over punishment.
- Create safe spaces within schools where students can decompress, process emotions, and connect with trusted adults.

### Strengthen Data Collection and Accountability

Establish systems to track foster youth outcomes separately and monitor progress:

- Accurately identify foster youth in student information systems (using privacy-preserving methods).
- Disaggregate data on graduation rates, credit completion, attendance, discipline, and special education identification by foster youth status.
- Use data to identify disparities and target resources; set district goals for reducing gaps.
- Share data with school leadership and governing boards to maintain accountability and priority.

## Conclusion

Foster youth represent less than 1% of the school-age population yet face disproportionate educational challenges and poorer long-term outcomes. Yet the solutions are neither mysterious nor prohibitively expensive. Federal law provides clear mandates for educational stability; research on trauma-informed practice offers evidence-based strategies; and dedicated professionals—education liaisons—stand ready to serve as advocates.

What remains is will and commitment from district and school leaders to implement these known solutions with fidelity and at scale. By ensuring foster youth remain in their school of origin when appropriate, receiving all earned credits; by creating trauma-informed school environments that prioritize relationship and safety; and by empowering education liaisons with adequate resources and authority, districts can meaningfully improve educational outcomes for this vulnerable population.

The cost of inaction is high: Foster youth who drop out face higher rates of unemployment, involvement in the criminal justice system, and re-entry into the child welfare system. Conversely, districts that invest in foster youth education benefit from improved school climate, more effective identification and support of trauma-affected youth broadly, and the moral satisfaction of ensuring the most vulnerable students receive genuine equal opportunity.

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