COMMENTARY

School-based Program Provides Important Lessons for Supporting Foster Youth

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Despite our knowledge of poor educational outcomes for youth in foster care, the literature on methods or models for addressing the needs of this vulnerable group of students remains extremely limited.

In a recent issue of *Children & Schools*, Ashli Tyre reports on outcomes of the Educational Success Program, a school-based educational support model in Washington state that provides advocacy, tutoring, and mentoring for middle school youth enrolled in urban Seattle schools while involved in the foster care system.

The Educational Success Program is designed so a teacher and tutor serve as stable adult mentors in the academic lives of youth despite changes in their home living situations. Full-time, certified teachers supervise a staff of tutors, determine the content and frequency of tutoring services, and coordinate the delivery of those services. They also facilitate communication between the student, caregivers, caseworkers, and the student's multiple teachers. Perhaps most importantly, teachers serve as educational advocates for students by facilitating access to school and community-based programs.

Evaluation of educational outcomes for youth served demonstrated practically significant gains in reading fluency and comprehension over the duration of one school year. Most notably, the average rate of improvement per week in reading fluency was significantly greater than expected based on normative data, suggesting that youth made the level of progress needed to close the gap between their performance and that of their peers.

While it may not be feasible to embed a full-time teacher and staff of paid tutors in every school to address the needs of youth involved in the foster care system, aspects of the Educational Success Program could be incorporated into the existing practices of school, child welfare, and community-based programs that serve youth in care.

First, the educational success of youth in care can be supported through the appointment of a liaison between the educational and child welfare systems, one whose paramount role is to facilitate communication across two systems that otherwise do not communicate well. The liaison role might be filled with a specially trained teacher, school social worker, or child welfare worker.

Second, all parties would benefit from an exchange of information about their respective systems. For example, social workers can build awareness among school professionals of the policies and procedures of the child welfare system, the needs of youth in care, and the role of caregivers in supporting the educational success of youth in the home. In turn, school professionals can share information with social workers about academic supports available within the educational system, including special education services.

Third, procedures should be established to ensure effective communication regarding the needs of individual youth. Beginning by identifying youth in care who are enrolled in the school, additional strategies may include record sharing between agencies, location of educational records for youth who have attended multiple schools, and retrieval of academic credits for youth at the secondary level to ensure their timely progress toward graduation.

Fourth, social workers and educators can collaborate to ensure youth in care receive the educational supports they need by including caregivers in educational planning meetings, identifying areas of need through screening measures, and linking youth to intervention programs. When existing school and community resources prove insufficient, individualized tutoring can be provided by trained community volunteers.

Additionally, it is important to plan for the transition of youth into adulthood, which may include college and career planning, vocational training, and life skills instruction.

In conclusion, there are many adults involved in the lives of youth in care. However, when social workers, educators, and caregivers collaborate, we can work together to ensure youth in care are successful in school and, hence, successful in life.

The full study is in Tyre, A. D. (2012). Educational supports for middle school youth involved in the foster care system. *Children & Schools*, 34(4), 231-238.

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