



Residential education: An emerging resource for improving educational outcomes for youth in foster care? [☆]

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing interest in the use of boarding schools for disadvantaged youth, including youth in the child welfare system. However, concerns about group placements and the failings of other congregate care services like residential treatment have raised questions about the role of residential schools for foster care youth. This study presents results from the first national survey of residential education programs. Based on a sample of 67 residential education programs, findings offer a description of enrolled students and the services they received through residential schools. Results suggest that the number of applications programs received was more than double the number of youth enrolled in residential schools and schools reported that almost half of program graduates enter college. Implications for policy and future research are also presented.

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1. Introduction

Boarding schools for youth in the U.S. are more than 250 years old. Although boarding schools are now typically conceived of as the exclusive domain of youth from wealthy families to receive an enriched academic living environment, there is longstanding and growing interest in adapting this model for less privileged youth (Matthews, 2004; O'Leary, 2004; "Residential education," 2006). The use of residential schools for low-income or foster care youth is a newly implemented policy initiative in the United Kingdom (Frea, 2006) and is gaining traction in the United States (Jones & Landsverk, 2006; Schuh & Caneda, 1997).

However, residential schools face challenges to their role as a resource for foster youth; several recent legal actions have limited the use of residential education for foster youth (Brian A. v. Sundquist, 2000; Kenny A. v. Purdue, 2005). Concerns about residential education programs seem to stem from well-known criticisms of group care interventions like residential treatment (Barth, 2005). Although approximately 20% of youth in child welfare placements receive group-based care (US DHHS, 2007), several advocacy groups (cf. Annie E. Casey Foundation, Children's Rights, Inc.) contest the continued reliance on these programs. The failings of group care have been detailed elsewhere, but include potential iatrogenic effects of deviant peers (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999), separation from family and community (Barth, 2002), inadequate permanency planning (Freundlich & Avery, 2005), lack of cost-effective-

ness (DeSena et al., 2005) and weak evidence for promoting positive outcomes (Hair, 2005; Hoagwood, Burns, Kiser, Ringeisen, & Schoenwald, 2001). As evidence for the effectiveness of community-based services increases (Barth et al., 2007), questions about the merits of out-of-home placement mount. Can residential schools successfully avoid these pitfalls common among group-based placement services?

Little is known about the use of residential education programs in the United States. Even less is known about the use of residential education with foster youth or with other youth at-risk of school failure. This paper will consider the merits of residential education as a tool that can complement the current bulwarks of child welfare services — foster care, small group care, and large residential treatment centers — for youth currently in foster care as well as youth at-risk for placement. Descriptive data from a national survey of residential programs will be presented and implications for child welfare practice and future research will be discussed.

1.1. What is residential education?

The Coalition for Residential Education defines residential education as "the umbrella term for community-like environments where youth both live and learn outside of their own family homes. Whether called a boarding school, preparatory academy, children's home, youth village, or residential charter school, all share a common mission — to provide safety, nurturing, structure, and stability in an education-focused setting" (<http://www.residentialeducation.org/whatis/index.html>). Residential education is an academically-focused out-of-home placement setting that integrates both home and school life. Formal education is provided by an on-site school or through partnerships with local schools in the community. The close connection between

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the learning environment and the home environment is a hallmark of residential education programs.

Residential education programs aim to serve youth who are socially or economically disadvantaged. More specific to the purposes of this analysis of the role of residential education in child welfare services, residential education programs serve youth whose homes or communities cannot meet their educational or socio-behavioral needs and who, therefore, risk out-of-home placement, as well as youth attending underperforming schools, or youth already involved with child welfare services.

1.2. Distinctions of the residential education approach

Although labels describing group-based placement services are often erroneously used interchangeably (Lee, 2007), residential education programs differ from residential treatment centers in several significant ways. Residential treatment centers are traditionally organized around a “medical model,” where services are intentionally short-term and focused on treating mental health symptomatology. Even Project Re-Ed, a group care model with roots in education and some evidence of its effectiveness (Hooper, Murphy, Devaney, & Hultman, 2000; Lochman, Bennett, & Simmers, 1988), equally prioritizes academics with the mental health needs of youth clients (Hobbs, 1982). While residential education programs often provide a low-level of mental health services or referrals for youth to psychiatric services that are provided off campus as needed, the goal of the program is boost youth development rather than provide treatment. In light of the GAO report on abuses and fatalities in therapeutic boarding schools and wilderness programs (2007) and reviews of group care that are highly skeptical of its value (Barth, 2005; Hoagwood, Burns, Kiser, Ringeisen, & Schoenwald, 2001), this distinction is important. Residential education programs are not correctional facilities, boot camps, survival programs, or other treatment interventions. Residential education is first and foremost an educational program that occurs in a group living setting.

Another important distinction between residential education programs and other group care intervention is that residential school placements are voluntary in nature. These are not locked programs where youth have been remanded without input. Youth often must apply and be selected to attend. While some residential schools that have a clear college-preparatory focus may establish academically-oriented selection criteria, most programs expect that youth coming from underperforming schools will be a few years behind grade level. Once admitted, youth or their families can also disenroll when residential schooling is no longer in the youth's best interest.

Residential treatment programs are designed to be short in duration and high in intensity of treatment, with the goal that youth quickly move to a lower (and less expensive) level of care. Residential schools are often more long-term in nature, in order to provide educational stability for youth. Strong research (e.g., Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan & Localio, 2007) indicates that placement instability causes problems in behavior which, in turn, is associated with poorer educational performance (Crozier & Barth, 2005). For older youth in foster care who often experience multiple placement changes and similar numbers of school changes (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008), residential education programs provide the opportunity of remaining in one placement and one school system.

Many residential education programs have a strong or absolute preference that students must enter school at least two years before graduation in order to allow students to adapt to the program norms and then make substantial educational progress. Although the data about the proportion of students who leave these programs is sparse, and some youth certainly run away or otherwise discontinue their stays in residential education, those who do attend and graduate most often go on to attend college (Dvorak, 2006; Milton Hershey School, 2007).

With regard to the treatment environment, traditional group programs discharge the most pro-social youth as they “step down” to

other types of care, leading to a milieu dominated by youth who have recently arrived and have not yet been socialized to the positive norms that the group milieu is trying to create (Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985). These environments are, then, increasingly likely to reflect the perception of group care having iatrogenic effects due to deviancy training (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996; Dodge, Lansford, & Dishion, 2006). Although the negative effects of group-based services have recently been questioned (Lee & Thompson, 2008; Lipsey, 2005), residential education may further avoid these concerns by selective acceptance criteria and enhanced duration of stay.

Family involvement during out-of-home stays has consistently been found to promote positive outcomes for youth (Bar-Nir & Schmid, 1998; Landsman, Groza, Tyler, & Malone, 2001). Residential education programs promote the role of family in a number of ways. Family members are encouraged to maintain involvement through visits and phone calls. Parents may be invited to meetings with teachers as well as dinners in the youth's residential home. Athletic events, music performances, and other celebrations are additional opportunities for family members to attend. Some residential education programs are designed for youth to live onsite during the week and then return to live with family every weekend. This schedule maximizes youth learning during the week while ensuring consistent family connections.

In addition to maintaining family connections, residential education programs integrate family-living skills in the home environment. Many residential education programs are organized around family-style living, with a small group of youth living in a home with live-in caregivers, who may be singles or even married couples with children. Meals are served family-style and recreational activities are planned and decided as a family group. In this way, youth are socialized to family living rather than institutional life. Others have dormitory living and most meals are eaten at the school dining hall.

Despite efforts to define and narrowly classify programs, residential education remains an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of residential school models. Programs like the Milton Hershey School or Girard College are intentionally college-preparatory, while programs like San Pasquale Academy are designed for long-term foster care placements. The SEED school operates five days a week and serves youth whose families live locally. Mooseheart Child City and School accepts youth from any state as well as hosting international boarding students. The diversity among program models allows flexibility in meeting the needs of different populations and reflecting the values of the surrounding community. However, this diversity also creates a challenge in developing a meaningfully distinct classification with clear criteria to differentiate residential school programs from other group care settings.

1.3. Emphasis on education

The failures of the U.S. public education system in serving disadvantaged communities are widely evident. School districts that are urban, in areas of high-poverty and with high rates of minority students are significantly more likely to be identified as not meeting progress benchmarks established by the No Child Left Behind policy (US GAO, 2004). The differences are stark: urban schools were twice as likely to be identified as needing improvement compared to suburban and rural districts; and, over one-third of schools with a high concentration of minority students were labeled as needing improvement compared to only 4% of low-minority schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). High rates of absenteeism and poor quality services leave youth unprepared for seeking productive employment.

For youth receiving child welfare services, obtaining a high quality education is further complicated by placement instability and academic functioning delays. In a study of youth aging out of the foster care system, McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White and Thompson (2003) found that 70% of foster care youths aspired to attend college. Among a sample of former foster youth in college, almost half of the youth had a goal to complete a master's degree (Merding, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt,

2005). Considering the lack of preparation for college that foster youth receive (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005), it is not surprising that many foster youth fall short of their educational goals. The percentage of 21-year-old former foster youth who have neither graduated from high school nor obtained a GED has been reported to be 23%, more than twice the rate of a nationally representative sample of same age peers (Courtney et al., 2007). The inadequacies of their educational accomplishments further compounds the struggles these youth will face as they transition to adulthood and attempt to achieve independence (Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

If residential education programs can help combat the educational injustices faced by disadvantaged youth and, more specifically, the poor educational performance of foster youth, this would be a significant contribution, as addressing educational inequalities for foster youth is a major concern of child welfare service administrators (Casey Family Programs, 2003). Residential education programs typically endeavor to improve the meaningfulness of education by establishing partnerships with local schools and by providing youth with educational services that are responsive to their needs, interests, and abilities. Youth are encouraged to become actively engaged in their school environment through participating in extra-curricular activities like sports or fine arts programs. Through these efforts to make school a nurturing environment and to have pro-social academic values reinforced in the home environment, absenteeism is rarely an issue at residential education programs.

1.4. Evidence for residential education

There is little research available on residential education programs in the United States and only one study on the use of residential education for foster youth. Jones and Landsverk (2006) presented a program model description and preliminary outcomes of a single residential school in Southern California. The program, San Pasqual Academy, serves youth in long-term foster care who are unlikely to be reunified with family. Based on three years of data on program graduates, the study found a high level of placement stability for admitted youth: 72% graduated from the program or were still enrolled. Prior to entering this residential school, the sample of youth averaged one placement change each year. Regarding educational attainment, higher rates of school completion (78%) and college attendance (29%) were found for Academy students, compared to other studies of youth in foster care. These results suggest that there is currency for a residential education model for youth in foster care.

The value of boarding school as an intervention for at-risk youth has recently been studied by the Royal Wansstead Children's Foundation in the United Kingdom (Morrison, 2007). They assessed experiences and outcomes of 97 youth who had received assisted boarding, meaning that their boarding school experiences were funded by a charitable organization. While none of these youth were formally in foster care placements, 15% were reported to be known to the child welfare system. These youth faced challenges in their home environment, with a significant portion being raised by a single parent with a mental (38%) or physical (11%) disability. More than 60% of the youth had been exposed to abusive or threatening behavior in their family or home environment. At boarding school admission, only 24% of the sample was assessed as being at or above their peer average on social, emotional and learning criteria. After two years in the boarding environment, 85% of the sample were at or above average for their peer group. Of the 49 youth who had completed at least three years in boarding school, 39% were considered to be among the top students in their class on social and academic measures. While this sample is small and admittedly did not account for the less than 2% of youth who disenroll from boarding school in less than one year, it suggests that a residential educational environment may be transformative for vulnerable youth.

As evident by this brief literature review, it is difficult to empirically establish the promise of residential education. In this age of account-

ability, more evidence is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of residential education. Currently, there is no evidence that residential education programs improve youth outcomes compared to any other intervention or non-intervention. There is not even evidence that students at residential schools or their families are more satisfied with their experience, compared to youth in other out-of-home placements. If residential education programs can be pursued as a viable alternative or complement to current child welfare practice, it is imperative that these gaps in research are filled. Such evaluation should begin with a description of the population of programs and, then, the population of youth. This paper purports to make a small contribution to building knowledge about what residential education is and to lay a foundation for much-needed future work to test its value for foster youth.

2. Methodology

This section will describe the first national survey of residential education programs, conducted by the Coalition for Residential Education (CORE), a membership and advocacy organization for residential education programs. CORE has established the following criteria for organizations to be considered residential education programs: (a) maintain a residential program with a well-defined residential curriculum including but not limited to sports, arts, clubs and other enrichment activities, as well as community service, mentoring and positive adult role models; (b) maintain a youth development approach, not a treatment/medical approach; (c) mainly or solely serve socially and/or economically disadvantaged youth whose homes or communities cannot meet their needs; (d) intend to enroll students for at least one year; (e) have a school on site or incorporate education as a primary program component; and (f) enroll students voluntarily.

2.1. Sample selection

To be eligible to participate in the national residential education survey, a program must meet the criteria specified above for CORE membership. Using these criteria, several methods were used to compile lists of potential programs to be vetted. These methods included: networking with current CORE members, culling national directories from membership organizations like the National Association of Homes and Services for Children, and an exhaustive online search. Approximately 3000 programs were identified using these methods. Four staff members assessed these programs to determine whether they met the pre-determined criteria specified above. These staff all held college degrees, received instruction on the study process from doctoral-level researchers, and received consultation when questions arose. Program websites as well as direct contacts with program staff through telephone or e-mail were used to determine eligibility. Following these procedures, 119 programs were identified that qualified for inclusion in the national residential education survey. Most programs were excluded because they were intentionally short-term in nature or focused on mental health or behavioral issues.

2.2. Data collection and instrumentation

CORE staff developed an electronic questionnaire, which was reviewed and improved by the CORE Research Advisory Group, composed of researchers from five universities and bi-partisan think tanks. The survey instrument was fine-tuned by ANALYTICA, Inc., an educational research organization. The survey was piloted with nine programs prior to full administration. The 52-item survey sought information primarily about programs' organizational history and profile, goals and objectives, funding, and services. A brief section on outcomes was also included. The purpose of the survey was to lay a foundation for qualitative research on residential education programs.

The National Residential Education Survey was administered online. Survey respondents were Executive Directors or their

designee. A 56% response rate was achieved (67 out of the possible 119 programs submitted surveys). To increase the response rate, non-responders were phoned by the researchers up to three times.

3. Results

3.1. Sample description

Respondents were asked to describe the population of youth served by their residential education program. Findings related to student demographics are presented in Table 1. Most programs were co-educational (85%) and served school-aged youth from diverse backgrounds. Programs reported that most youth were referred by parents (38%) or other family members (12%) as well as social services (28%). Over 60% of the programs serve youth in the foster care system ($n=41$). Among these programs, the proportion of students from foster care ranged from 1–100%, with a mean of 34%.

Programs were also asked to report the number of applications received in a 12-month period and the number of students subsequently enrolled. The 51 programs who responded to this question reported a total of 10,048 applications, with 3920 students enrolled. The number of students at each program ranged widely. The average student enrollment was 73 students, with about 10% of respondents having 8 or fewer students and 20% of respondents having over 100 students.

3.2. Services description

The emphasis on educational stability within residential education programs appeared connected to longer lengths of residence. Over three-fourths of programs reported an average length of stay of at least one year, with 43% of programs reporting 13–24 months and almost 20% reporting a 2–3 year duration of stay.

A focus on family-style living is evident in the description of structural elements. A large majority of programs (85%) arranged their living environments using the cottage model, while a smaller portion is organized as dorm-style (12%). Staffing patterns predominantly followed a live-in houseparent system (82%), with less than 10% relying solely on shift-staff, while the remaining programs use a combination of live-in and shift-staff supervision.

Programs were asked about the types of services provided to youth and families (Table 2). In addition to a close-ended item listing an array of services (Table 2), program respondents specified some

Table 1
Characteristics of youth served at residential schools ($N=67$ programs)

	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male only	8	12
Female only	2	3
Both male and female	57	85
<i>Age groups served</i>		
Under 5 years old	28	42
6–10 years old	50	75
11–15 years	63	94
16–18 years	64	96
Over 18 years	33	49
<i>Race</i>		
White		51
African American		29
Hispanic		13
Other		7
<i>Referral source</i>		
Parents/guardians		38
Social service agency		28
Grandparents		12
Court systems		9
Clergy		3
School		5
Other		5

Table 2
Services offered at residential school programs ($N=63$ programs)

Services offered	Program N	%
Counseling	63	100
Spiritual development	61	97
Independent living skills	57	90
Computers	53	84
Sports	50	79
Leadership/citizenship	39	62
On-site school	37	59
Fine arts	34	54
Peer tutoring	25	40

unique programs including equine therapy, adventure-based programming, ropes/challenge courses, scouting, 4-H, job skills, community service and travel opportunities. Family-specific services included parenting classes and family counseling.

3.3. Outcomes

Respondents were asked about efforts to monitor student outcomes following completion of the program (i.e. high school graduation). Two-thirds of programs reported tracking students after graduation. Efforts to follow-up with students included using an alumni office, follow-up surveys, reunions, or personal contacts by staff who maintain connections with youth. A few agencies reported providing extended aftercare services like transitional housing and supervised apartment settings.

Programs who monitored outcomes reported what portion of the most recent graduating class enrolled in post-high school programs. Almost half of program graduates were reported to be enrolled in 2-year (23%) or 4-year (26%) colleges. A smaller group entered vocational programs (11%) or the military (8%) and about 18% were reported to directly enter the workforce. The remaining 14% had unknown outcomes. The survey did not attempt to obtain information about the proportion of a cohort that graduates from the program.

3.4. Comparing programs by foster youth inclusion

Characteristics of the 41 programs that had foster youth currently enrolled were compared to the 26 programs that were not serving foster youth. Bivariate analyses were conducted with SPSS using chi-square and independent samples *t*-tests. No significant differences were found on gender or race composition, types of services offered, residence style, urbanicity of location, or graduate outcomes. Significant differences were found in the referral sources for these schools. For schools serving foster youth, only 38% of referrals on average originated from parents or grandparents, while 65% of referrals were from relatives for schools not serving foster youth. Conversely, referrals from social services were higher on average for schools serving foster youth compared to schools not serving foster youth (35% vs. 18%, respectively).

4. Discussion

This paper sought to provide a view of the landscape of residential education and to consider its potential in improving the educational opportunities of youth in need. Findings from the first national survey of residential education offer a descriptive profile of current programs and their services. In summary, most programs have on-site schools and lengths of stay that encourage stability for at least an academic school year. The living environment within programs was primarily organized around cottages or small houses staffed by live-in house parents who served in a mentoring role. This offers a more family like environment than the typical shift care approach that characterizes group care. Parents were encouraged to remain involved with their student through various program activities and regular home visits.

Strikingly, the survey results found that the number of applicants for residential education programs is double the number of students that can be enrolled. This suggests that the interest in residential education exceeds the capacity of current programs. Findings from this limited sample reveal that a sizable proportion of youth in residential schools go on to college, a level of educational attainment that most youth in foster care hope to achieve.

4.1. Limitations

As a first effort, this paper is not without its limitations, especially regarding the survey results presented. Residential education is a broad term that made it difficult to ascertain whether programs were correctly screened for inclusion in the study. Some eligible programs were likely overlooked and some programs that were included may be less typical of residential education models. The response rate of 56% is low, although it exceeds the 50% mark that Dillman (1991) suggests is minimally acceptable. Surveys sent to the workplace have been shown to have a lower response rate than surveys mailed to homes (Hager, Wilson, Pollak, & Rooney, 2003); however, a marginal response rate weakens any generalization of the findings beyond the sample.

For many survey items, a school representative may have self-reported estimates or approximations rather than actual data. It is impossible to assess the accuracy of the data reported by respondents. In reporting the types of services provided in residential schools, no effort was made to assess the quality or comprehensiveness of these auxiliary services. Following the example set by Libby, Coen, Price, Silverman and Orton (2005) in unpacking the “black box” of residential treatment programs, future studies of residential schools could identify typical routines of daily living and the frequency or duration of various activities.

Without results from a parallel survey of residential treatment programs or other school settings that serve foster youth, it is difficult to put into context the residential education outcomes reported in this study. Additional longitudinal research is needed to identify the effects of residential education on long-term outcomes like college retention and graduation. Considering the high number of applications compared to the number of youth enrolled, some residential education programs may be able to feasibly conduct a randomized or quasi-experimental design that compares applicants with enrolled students on various academic and functioning milestones. These studies would greatly enhance the knowledge base for residential education.

4.2. Next steps

Despite these limitations, this study presents some key ideas that merit further consideration. The role of residential education programs within the array of services for at-risk youth should be further explored. In seeking to promote opportunities for educational achievement for youth in underperforming schools, residential education programs may be a possible solution. For youth in the foster care system, attending a residential school may provide stability and enhanced educational services that may otherwise be difficult to attain.

However, priorities within the child welfare system may complicate placement in a residential school. Child welfare services are organized around the goal of permanency, with timeliness and reunification strongly valued. The long-term nature of residential schools operates counter to these tenets. If residential education is to be considered a viable option for foster youth then residential education will have to learn about child welfare timelines and find ways to support a child’s reunification or accommodate visits with potential guardians or adoptive parents. The plan for a residential education program in Los Angeles, discussed below, may have gone the furthest in identifying accommodations for children and youth at all junctures in the permanency planning process.

Prior to sweeping policy changes, additional research must be conducted to assess whether the promise of residential education can

be realized. Studies comparing residential education programs with other placement types and community-based services are needed before claims about outcomes can be validated. In addition to long-term follow-up studies that are sorely needed for many common child welfare interventions, residential education would also benefit from qualitative studies exploring the experiences of youth and their families. By expanding the knowledge base of residential education, the systems of care for helping at-risk youth can be strengthened.

In the meantime, this study calls into question the practice of aggregating and decrying all forms of group settings. Many national organizations that advocate for foster care reform (e.g., the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Children’s Rights Inc., Youth Law Center, and Casey Family Programs) have clearly established the reduction of group care usage as one of the cornerstones of their initiatives. For example, when Children’s Rights Inc. recently settled a class action lawsuit in Tennessee, they stipulated that children not be placed into group care facilities with more than eight children (Kenny A. v. Purdue, 2005). This limits the opportunity for a foster youth to participate in a residential education program, even if that is the best educational option for them and even though it might have increased their likelihood of a successful outcome.

In contrast, some progress is being made in identifying a residential education model that does meet the concerns of critics who view all forms of group care as counterproductive and who are concerned that residential education for foster youth will interfere with their chance at reunification. When Los Angeles county Education Coordinating Council (ECC) initially proposed a residential academy for foster youth, stakeholders from the community (ranging from foster youth to child welfare administrators to politicians) were adamantly opposed to the idea, fearing it would keep kids away from families and the community in long-term group placements (personal communication, Carrie Miller, February 11, 2008). To counter these fears and build community support, ECC invited these stakeholders to participate in planning committees to develop a program that avoided these concerns. Through this consensus-building process, a residential education model emerged that all stakeholders endorsed. The school would be college-preparatory, but geared to B/C students who are currently placed in group home settings. The school would function as a boarding academy for foster youth, but also include day students from the local community. Boarding students would be encouraged to spend weekends with family or potential foster families. Efforts to achieve permanency would continue and when a permanency home was identified, youth could continue attending the school as day students while living in the community with a permanency family. By incorporating creative ideas, LA county emerged with a residential education model that met stakeholders’ approval and is slated for implementation once adequate land is secured.

Thinking of residential education as more kindred to boarding school than residential treatment is a starting point for more appropriate policy making. Such a view might generate distinctions that would allow residential education, despite the concern about funding ineffective and costly residential treatment. This would, in turn, allow residential schools to be a resource for foster youth who think that residential education would boost their chance of going on to college. Although there are no evaluation studies that would definitely support that hope, there is reason to believe that the promising outcomes like post-secondary school enrollment rates reported by individual residential education programs in this study can also apply to foster youth.

While the unique orientation of residential education addresses many of the well-known concerns of ineffective group home programs and dangerous treatment programs described by the GAO (2007), residential schools are not impervious to problems. Insuring high quality services requires more than just a promising approach. Recent GAO reports (2007, 2008) brought to light the lack of regulation present in many group-based programs for youths. Residential schools need to go beyond just maintaining local or state licensing requirements that focus on adequate food storage or specify the number of

fire extinguishers in a residence. Instead, residential schools should develop quality standards that can be used to evaluate program environments. The CAREStandards developed by CORE (2005) may be a starting point for assessing quality in residential schools.

To develop as a viable placement alternative for foster youth, the field of residential education should pursue two goals. First, there is a need to establish clear and specific criteria to differentiate residential education programs from other group care settings. Only by ensuring that residential schools are truly a distinct intervention can residential education begin to build an evidence-base separate from less impressive findings of other group care models.

Second, evidence for the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of residential schools in improving educational outcomes for foster youth above and beyond the effectiveness of other residential or community-based alternatives must be developed. The onus of responsibility in demonstrating this evidence is on residential education. Outcome measures, including tracking of applicants, current students, disenrollees, and graduates should be systematically implemented by residential school programs. Building this research foundation will provide an answer to the question of what type of resource residential education can be for improving educational outcomes for which foster youth.

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