

# Removing Barriers to Educating Children in Foster Care Through Interagency Collaboration: A Seven County Multiple-Case Study

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This multiple-case study examines interagency collaboration between child protective services (CPS), local education agencies (LEAs), and other public agencies in seven California counties. These agencies were provided technical assistance to remove barriers impeding the education of children in foster care and improve their educational outcomes. Results of this study suggest that making changes to remove educational barriers for foster children and improve their educational outcomes requires successful collaboration between CPS and LEAs and strong leadership within at least one of the agencies.

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Historically, the success of the foster care system has been calculated in terms that have little to do with how a child fares in school (Jacobson, 1998; Parrish, Dubois, Delano, Dixon, Webster, Berrick, & Bolus, 2001). In 2000, however, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) published a new review process, the child and family services review (CFSR), to evaluate state performance in cases involving children and families (Harden, 2004; Reed & Karpilow, 2002). State outcomes include safety, permanency, and child well-being. Under child well-being, the CFSRs evaluate three outcomes, one of which requires that children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.

The recent focus of the CFSRs on the educational needs of children in foster care comes on the heels of a growing body of research that provides substantial evidence that children in foster care are substantially more likely than other children to struggle academically and socially in school. These studies show that foster children generally have lower scores on standardized tests, poorer school grades, and more behavior problems and suspensions from school than comparison groups (Aldgate, Colton, Ghate, & Heath, 1992; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Crozier & Barth, 2005; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004). In the child welfare system, 30% of children ages 6 to 11 show a need for special education services (Webb, Frome, Harden, Baxter, Dowd, & Shin, 2007) compared to 9.16% of the school-age population as a whole that receives these services (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Contributing to the wide range of at-risk school indicators is the high level of residential mobility that children in foster care experience (Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995). Not surprisingly,

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studies have found that between one third and two thirds of current or former foster youth drop out before completing high school, or by age 19 have received neither a high school diploma nor a GED, compared to 10% of their same-age peers (Blome, 1997; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Joiner, 2001).

The fact that governmental entities have assumed parental rights for children in foster care clearly results in public responsibility for the well-being of this population. In the CFSR evaluation process, respondents must address specific core questions related to the educational well-being of children in foster care. Under the questions addressing educational need, there is a clear recognition that other agencies besides child protective services (CPS) administrators and caseworkers are necessary to help determine how well this outcome is being met within a state. These agencies, however, typically operate separately, even though the actions of each impact the same children's lives (Altschuler, 2003).

Factors that specifically have been found to contribute to successful interagency collaboration between CPS, education, and other agencies are shared goals, a high level of trust, mutual responsibility, open lines of communication, and strong leadership (Johnson, Zorn, Tam, LaMontagne, & Johnson, 2003). However, Nicholson, Artz, Armitage, and Fagan (2000) found that no single model of effective interagency collaboration could be applied to all multidisciplinary collaborative endeavors. Rather, the appropriate approach to interagency collaboration depends on the context and goals of the work and on the organizational structure. Nevertheless, the provision of technical assistance has been a strategy used to help educational and other agencies make major changes in their practices and organizational structures, gain knowledge in new areas, and work collaboratively with other agencies (Garcia & Donmoyer, 2005; Rotholz & Ford; 2003; Sadao & Robinson, 2002). Yet, Carrillo, Packard, and Clapp (2003) found that even with the support of technical assistance, intended changes might not occur.

This paper describes a two-year, multiple-case study of seven California counties that took place for the purpose of (1) identifying

the interagency structures (e.g., ongoing meetings, joint training, education data collection for foster children) between CPS, local education agencies (LEAs), departments of mental health (DMH), and other agencies supporting the education of foster children in the selected counties, (2) determining how the agencies responded to receiving technical assistance aimed at identifying problems in the education of foster children in their counties, and (3) ascertaining how they worked to solve the problems identified (e.g., enrolling children in school quickly, providing them with correct special and general education services).

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## Method

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### *County Selection*

CPS, in all the counties selected for study, had been participating in the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF; 2001) family-to-family initiative, a program whose goals include keeping children who are in the foster care system in their home communities, strengthening support in those communities, and involving birthparents and other caregivers as team members with CPS in making placement decisions. Family-to-family counties focus on four core strategies: (1) building community partnerships to support the placement of foster children, (2) team decision making (TDM) for home placement changes, (3) self-evaluation/data collection to track placement changes and other factors related to foster children (e.g., school districts where they are enrolled), and (4) recruitment, development, and support of resource families that can serve as foster parents. CPS in California family-to-family counties enter into written grant agreements with AECF that include the agency's commitments to implement the strategies to create stability for children in foster care as well as to provide data and reports on their endeavors. The child welfare directors of the counties sign the grant agreements. Further approval occurs from either the director of the larger county human services or social services agency, the

chief administrative officer for the county, or the county board of supervisors.

The family-to-family project director for California identified nine counties that were thought ready to focus on educational issues of foster youth based on their progress in implementing the core strategies to maintain foster children in their home communities and stabilize their out-of-home placements. The nine counties were each sent invitations to participate in the study and were offered education technical assistance by the study authors if they chose to participate. Seven of the CPS agencies accepted the offer and specifically agreed in writing to work with the study authors and provide and allow for data collection. While the counties share certain characteristics in common (e.g., they are all part of the family-to-family initiative), they also vary considerably from one another on many grounds. The demographic differences between the counties are delineated in Table 1.

### *Technical Assistance and Requirements of Participation*

In the initial letter prepared for the counties as well as later in an onsite presentation, counties were told that the education technical assistance that would be available to them consisted of (1) holding focus groups with stakeholders and reviewing cases of individual children in foster care to identify educational barriers, (2) connecting CPS agencies to LEA partners, (3) helping to troubleshoot the education barriers identified by holding onsite meetings with CPS and other agencies (e.g., LEAs, DMH), (4) providing ongoing e-mail and telephone support, (5) preparing education training materials, (6) doing presentations and conducting training on relevant education topics, and (7) providing guidance on the collection of school data on foster children. The study authors were identified as the technical assistants (TAs) for the study and a description of their considerable background working in this area was included. CPS also received information about what was required of them if they chose to accept the technical assistance and participate in the project. Within the first three months they

**TABLE 1**  
County Demographic Characteristics\*

	MEYER	RAMONA	STINEMORE	WARWICK	BENNETSEN	LUQUEVILLE	FOOTHILL
Population <sup>a</sup>	3,002,048	2,026,803	410,206	1,731,281	744,041	512,138	61,686
Median income <sup>a</sup>	\$58,605	\$46,885	\$46,971	\$68,842	\$51,815	\$43,072	\$34,520
Population by ethnicity <sup>a,c</sup>							
White	48%	46%	38%	40%	44%	52%	76%
Hispanic	33%	41%	51%	25%	14%	38%	19%
Black	2%	7%	4%	3%	7%	3%	1%
Asian	16%	5%	7%	30%	33%	5%	1%
American Indian	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%
% of households language other than English <sup>a</sup>	41%	33%	47%	45%	46%	32%	14%
Size by square miles <sup>a</sup>	789	7,207	3,321	1,290	46	1,493	2,950
Geography	Urban/ suburban	Urban/ suburban/ rural	Coastal/ rural	Urban/ suburban	Urban	Suburban/ rural	Rural
Number of school districts	28	24	26	33	1	27	19
Number of foster children <sup>b</sup>	3,110	5,744	469	2,029	1,855	535	233
Number of foster children by age <sup>b</sup>							
0-5	1,113	2,100	164	686	398	157	77
6-10	715	1,351	102	383	325	101	50
11-18	1,277	2,292	203	953	1,115	276	106
19-20	5	1	0	7	17	1	0
Percentage of foster children placed out of county <sup>c</sup>	25	22	16	27	55	19	26

\*All of the counties have been given fictitious names.

<sup>a</sup>U.S. Census Bureau (2007).

<sup>b</sup>Needell, Webster, Cuccaro-Alamin, Armijo, Lee, Brookhart, & Lery (2007b).

<sup>c</sup>Needell et al. (2007a).

were to (1) develop an education work group or integrate education into an existing work group; (2) identify what education data they were collecting about the foster children in the county; and (3) complete a county readiness survey, a 25-item questionnaire that sought information on the age and number of foster youth being served in and out of county; communication and collaboration with the local school districts and county offices of education; kinds of education data collected; training offered social workers, school staff, and caregivers; and educational support programs available in the county.

By the end of the first year, the expectations for CPS were (1) with their education partners, identify two goals that they would work on to improve education outcomes for foster children, (2) designate an individual within CPS that would provide leadership on education, (3) include an education representative as an optional member at meetings where change-of-home placement decisions for foster children were being made, and (4) complete an updated county readiness survey.

### *Research Questions and Design*

The research questions guiding this multiple case study were as follows: (1) Would providing technical assistance to CPS and other agencies in the county (e.g., LEAs, DMH) help them identify barriers related to educating foster children? (2) Would providing technical assistance to CPS and other agencies help them begin to reduce the barriers? (3) Would each county choose its own unique array of technical assistance strategies offered by the TAs? (4) Would the extent of existing leadership in CPS related to education affect efforts to bring about change? (5) Would interagency collaboration be required to reduce the identified barriers?

This study used a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2003). The multiple-case study design follows a replication, rather than a sampling, logic. Each case is considered a complete study in itself and each case's conclusions are considered to be the information needing replication by the other cases (Yin, 2003). Cross-case

analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) then deepens understanding of the issues, explains the findings, and enhances generalizability.

### *Data Sources and Coding*

Multiple data sources formed the basis for developing this seven-county multiple-case study. In each case, relevant data were abstracted from the following sources of information: notes taken at regularly held education work group meetings, forms and other documents developed by the work groups or other relevant committees, formal and informal interviews with CPS and LEA participants, focus groups with caregivers, and responses to the county readiness survey completed by each county at the start of years 1 and 2 of the project.

Data from all sources were coded and entered into organizing single-county and cross-county matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were coded for basic/demographic information about the county (e.g., number of school districts), technical assistance utilized, type of educational barriers identified in the county, efforts engaged in by CPS or other county agencies to reduce the educational barriers (e.g., training of social work staff, development of collaborative forms and procedures), leadership within CPS or another agency that was the driving force for change or the impediment to change not occurring, and the effectiveness of interagency collaboration. A single county organizing matrix appears in Table 2.

Each author took primary responsibility for coding the data for one or two counties with which she had the most familiarity. The coded data for each county was then shared with the other authors, who reviewed them for accuracy and completeness. Additional data were included or changes were made in the way data were coded until all authors agreed with the coding for each county.

Once there was agreement on the single-county matrices, the authors developed cross-county matrices by reading through the data on the single-county matrices looking for themes and patterns within each category. As new themes emerged the data were continuously reviewed to ensure that data previously coded were still considered coded correctly. The themes continued to be revised

**TABLE 2**

Stinemore Matrix

<b>STINEMORE COUNTY</b>	
<b>County description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 27 LEAs, 26 school districts and 1 COE</li> <li>• 6 school districts serve majority of foster children</li> <li>• 469 foster children</li> <li>• 44 foster children placed out-of county within state</li> <li>• 22 foster children placed out of state</li> <li>• See Table 1 for other county information</li> </ul>
<b>TA strategies used</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend work group meetings (existing FYS advisory committee)</li> <li>• Attend education subcommittee of advisory committee</li> <li>• Meet separately with CPS and COE representatives about concerns</li> <li>• Have CPS select yearly goals and benchmarks related to the education of foster children</li> <li>• Facilitate planning of countywide education summit</li> <li>• Participate in education summit</li> <li>• Provide TA on individual cases</li> <li>• Share information/materials on data-sharing, state law (AB 490, AB 3632), other county’s interagency agreements, school notification forms, education questions to ask at TDM meetings</li> <li>• Hold focus group with caregivers on educational issues related to their foster children</li> <li>• Provide handbook for caregivers on education</li> </ul>
<b>Educational barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CPS did not know which school districts foster children attended</li> <li>• No one within CPS had specific responsibility for education</li> <li>• CPS director, was not a leader on FYS educational issues</li> <li>• CPS had low level of knowledge of services school districts could provide</li> <li>• CPS had low level of familiarity with state law (AB490)</li> <li>• No systematic sharing of individual or aggregate student information between CPS and LEAs</li> </ul>

**TABLE 2** cont.

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|---|---|
| <b>Efforts to reduce educational barriers</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No formal system in place within CPS to update student education information</li> <li>• LEAs were not informed when foster children entered or would be leaving</li> <li>• No state, county, or LEA funding for AB490 transportation for foster children receiving special education to remain in their district of origin</li> <li>• LEAs frequently did not know who had educational rights for a foster child</li> <li>• No policy for enrolling young foster children in preschool and no financial assistance provided</li> <li>• No intensive training on education for new social workers</li> <li>• CPS rarely attended FYS advisory committee meeting</li> <li>• School notification form developed based on sample from Meyer County and implemented</li> <li>• Interagency education summit took place that included training and breakout groups</li> <li>• Implementation of education questions at CPS TDM meetings</li> <li>• Draft a MOU between CPS, COE, and school district LEAs on funding transportation for special education foster children to remain in their school districts of origin</li> </ul> |
| <b>Educational leadership</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CPS attends FYS advisory meeting</li> <li>• Leadership initially assumed by COE FYS coordinator</li> <li>• FYS coordinator pushed for countywide interagency education summit</li> <li>• New special education local plan area director took leadership in developing an MOU to pay for AB 490 transportation</li> <li>• One CPS manager eventually began to focus on education</li> <li>• CPS director and director of children's services within CPS attended education summit</li> </ul>  |

**TABLE 2** cont.**Interagency  
collaboration**

- FYS coordinator held quarterly interagency advisory committee and education subcommittee meetings
- SELPA director drafted interagency transportation MOU regarding which agencies would pay for foster children receiving special education staying in their schools of origin
- FYS coordinator pushed for interagency education summit
- FYS coordinator convened an after-summit work group
- FYS coordinator and CPS manager identified after summit goals based on summit breakout group reports
- CPS coordinator worked with LEAs because of incorporating education goals into a project for which she had major responsibility

until no new themes emerged and there was agreement on how all data had been categorized. The cross-county matrix featuring examples of some of the barriers identified in each county appears in Table 3.

*Analytic Strategy*

Initially, each case was focused on separately (Yin, 2003). The authors individually, and as a group, addressed the research questions guiding the study by reading through the matrices and discussing the data in relation to each research question. Discussion focused on the barriers identified for each county in educating foster children and those barriers that were being or had been addressed. Where barriers were being addressed, discussion centered on the processes, time sequences, and the particular strategies used by the counties. Examples were sought that illuminated the leadership (or lack of leadership) within CPS and the LEAs in tackling the education issues of foster children. Also identified were data indicating the ways in which interagency collaboration facilitated or inhibited the changes that occurred and changes that

**TABLE 3**

Example of Cross-Country Barrier Matrix

	<b>BARRIERS</b>	
	<b>AGENCY ATTITUDES/ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>COMMUNICATION/COORDINATION</b>
<b>Bennetsen</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education liaison position not clearly articulated</li> <li>• Education liaison not supported or supervised adequately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adversarial relationship between CPS and LEA</li> <li>• Special education records not shared with CPS</li> <li>• Delays related to AB3632 services for in-county foster youth</li> <li>• Difficulty in obtaining nonpublic school placement</li> </ul>
<b>Foothill</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural county that is not always open to making changes; superintendent of schools said this county would resist being told what to do by “folks from Los Angeles”</li> <li>• Resistance from CPS staff to making changes</li> <li>• Judge does not take a leadership role in making changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of cooperation by foster family agencies with CPS on education and placement issues</li> <li>• CPS does not have adequate school records</li> <li>• CPS does not track school credits</li> <li>• LEA representative not included at TDMs</li> </ul>
<b>Luqueville</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CPS administrators withdrew project support</li> <li>• Only focused on educational issues of foster youth 14 years and older</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CPS did not have education data on foster youth</li> <li>• Lack of close connection between CPS and LEAs</li> <li>• Little collaboration between CPS and LEAs regarding special education foster youth</li> <li>• No priority given for foster children in Head Start</li> </ul>
<b>Meyer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large agency with many units—new procedures/policies take a long time to develop and be approved before implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Units lack information on what other units are doing—for example, FYS has a contract with one unit to</li> </ul>

**TABLE 3** cont.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CPS staff have many other responsibilities and little available time to dedicate to follow through of education tasks</li> </ul>	<p>partially pay for counselors to work with 14-year-olds and to monitor progress, assess academics, and intervene; other units do not know that school information is being shared</p>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No systematic data sharing between CPS and LEAs</li> <li>• AB 490 liaisons do not know which students in their districts are in foster care</li> <li>• A large county with multiple school districts, and it is difficult to get representatives from all the districts to attend the education work group</li> <li>• There are other parallel efforts taking place in this large county (court committees, heads of agencies committees)</li> </ul>
<b>Ramona</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All work on project stopped when with the departure of two key managers and all three deputy directors; the county went through a four- to six-month period of inaction</li> <li>• EdTAs were not contacted directly by DPSS staff; contact was through a social service planner in the program development unit who set up meetings and served as the go-between between CPS and the EdTAs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CPS concerned about placement of FY from other counties into their county—social workers from other counties not setting up services for their foster youth</li> <li>• FFAs move children from one home and school to another without notification to CPS</li> </ul>

**TABLE 3** cont.

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<b>Stinemore</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EdTAs had not been integrated as a resource into ongoing education focused activities—EdTAs appeared to serve more as family-to-family agents to be given updates of CPS activities</li> <li>• No one had responsibility for education within CPS, family-to-family coordinator did not appear to have time, and new program analyst did not have familiarity or was not enough connected within CPS</li> <li>• CPS director was not a leader on foster youth educational issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little understanding of each other's agencies (CPS and LEAs)</li> <li>• CPS did not know school districts foster youth were in</li> <li>• For group home foster youth, FYS frequently did not know who had education rights</li> <li>• School districts frequently did not know who held education rights for any foster youth</li> <li>• No systematic data sharing between CPS and LEAs</li> </ul>
<b>Warwick</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pilot project between CPS and LEA stalled because of change of CPS management position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clear policy existed regarding whom to request school records from in the various LEAs</li> <li>• Neither CPS nor FYS had a list of the AB 490 liaisons in the LEAs</li> <li>• Minimal relationship between CPS and LEA administrators, which made it difficult to initiate pilot project</li> <li>• No central database for records from various agencies</li> </ul>

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occurred over time, paying close attention to their chronological sequence. In addition, data were sought that suggested rival explanations of why specific changes had or had not occurred within the counties (Yin, 2003). Specifically, the researchers sought data to confirm and/or disconfirm the effectiveness of their involvement or the technical assistance they provided in bringing about change versus the role of county leadership, interagency collaboration, or other events taking place in the counties. After analyzing each case separately (e.g., Table 2), the authors then used cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003) to identify common and different patterns among all of the cases (e.g., Table 3).

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## Results

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### *Did providing technical assistance to CPS and other agencies help them identify barriers related to educating foster children?*

Each county, with the provision of technical assistance, identified a list of barriers impeding the education of children in the foster care system. Six of the seven counties developed interagency education work groups as a way of identifying barriers in their counties. The authors, based on the analysis of the data, added to the list and included barriers encountered in working with CPS in each county. The barriers identified were divided into the following general categories: agency attitudes/organization, communication/collaboration, legal violation/issue, lack of knowledge, and lack of educational resources. In addition to these barriers, it was understood in each of the counties that placement instability (frequent movement of foster children to a different home and then a different school) was a barrier to education, and reducing the instability was a major goal of their work as part of the family-to-family program.

#### *Agency Attitudes/Organization*

Each of the county CPS and/or other agencies had organizational structures and priorities or attitudinal perspectives that proved to be barriers in either receiving technical assistance or otherwise

moving forward on improving educational outcomes for foster youth. The CPS agency in Luqueville largely withdrew administrative support for the project because of administrative changes and other agency priorities; however, the educational liaison continued to work with the TAs. The superintendent of schools in Foothill, a small rural county, was reluctant to accept the advice of the TAs because they were from a large city in another part of the state and the small CPS agency social workers were set in the ways that they had always done things. Organizational barriers also were apparent in the CPS agency in Meyer, one of the larger counties. Here, there was a large bureaucracy with many different specialized units, and it took a long time for new procedures and policies to be developed and then implemented. In Bennetsen, an education liaison supported the work of the social workers; however, his position was ill-defined, and he did not receive the kind of supervision and support that he needed to effectively do his job. In both Ramona and Warwick, management staff leaving or changing positions led to significant delays in moving forward on their educational goals. In Stinemore, initially no one assumed responsibility for the educational issues of foster youth.

#### *Communication/Collaboration*

Problems in communication or collaboration between the agencies also proved to be barriers in moving forward on an education agenda. The work groups, in which the TAs participated, identified low levels of communication or adversarial relationships between CPS and the LEAs in the counties.

Another barrier was that at the start of the project, none of the CPS agencies in any of the counties had developed a process for systematically sharing data about individual children with the schools in which the foster children were enrolled. This meant that CPS did not typically have school outcome data (e.g., grade point averages, standardized test scores, accumulated credits) to track the school progress of the children for whom they were responsible. At the start of the project, only one county, Warwick,

had a partially developed data-sharing system where an order from the juvenile court allowed social workers to request records on individual students.

Other barriers related to communication and collaboration difficulties between CPS and other agencies led to delays or difficulty in foster youth receiving certain educational (e.g., nonpublic school placements) or mental health services. In Meyer, CPS units did not communicate with other units within the same agency and, consequently, were not aware of what other units were doing in relation to the education of foster youth. Foothill did not have cooperation from the foster family agencies on the educational placements for the foster youth placed in their homes.

#### *Legal Violation/Issue*

A state law (AB 490) was passed to help stabilize school placements for foster youth by requiring school districts to immediately enroll them in their new schools when they change home placements, even if the youth do not have birth certificates or immunization forms. A barrier to implementing this law was that school districts claimed they did not know which children were in the foster care system, since they did not receive any notification from CPS. Furthermore, CPS representatives in Bennetsen and Stinmore complained that foster children, particularly those with special education needs, were not immediately enrolled in school when they entered the district and did not receive timely assessments or appropriate special education services if enrolled. Other provisions of AB 490 that reportedly were not being followed were that school records were not transferred immediately to a new school district when a foster child moved, or transportation was not provided for the student to stay in the school district of origin (i.e., the school district the child had been attending).

#### *Lack of Knowledge*

CPS agencies and the LEAs had a surprising lack of knowledge about each other's agencies, procedures, and laws that governed them. CPS social workers and managers did not fully grasp the

complexities of special education law. Neither agency was well-versed on the provisions of AB 490 nor who held education rights for the children. School district representatives were not aware of the kinds of cases that constituted abuse or neglect or the experience of being a child in the foster care system.

Another problem identified in many of the counties was that social workers, caregivers, judges, and others did not have adequate information about the school system and the laws governing the treatment of foster children and youth with disabilities. In addition, CPS staff expressed concern that teachers, school administrators, and school office staff did not have adequate information about foster children and the foster care system. School personnel frequently did not know which children in their schools were foster children or, if they did, what problems they were likely to see based on the children's histories or who had the rights to make their educational decisions. Of the seven CPS agencies, only Warwick and Bennetsen knew how many of their foster children were in each school district in their respective counties. However, the Bennetsen CPS, which placed over half of the county's foster children in out-of-county homes—many in close surrounding counties—did not know the neighboring county school districts in which the children were placed.

#### *Lack of Educational Resources*

While none of the counties had developed educational resources targeted specifically to reduce the poor educational performance of their foster youth (other than referring students to special education), only Luqueville and Warwick identified this as an issue on which they wanted to focus.

#### *Did providing technical assistance to CPS and other agencies help them begin to reduce the barriers related to educating foster children?*

There was a differential use of in-person technical assistance among the counties, which appears initially to have affected their ability to reduce barriers. In addition to in-person TA, which varied from 3 to

10 visits per county the first year, counties also received e-mail and telephone contact. County leadership largely dictated the frequency and way in which technical assistance was used and is described later in the paper.

The following categories describe the efforts by the counties to reduce identified barriers.

#### *Agency Attitudes/Organization*

Although Luqueville administrators largely withdrew from the project, the halftime education advocate that they had hired was able to work with the TAs and move forward on reducing educational barriers for transition-age foster youth. The manager in Bennetsen used the TAs to provide some support to the education liaison since she did not have a background in education. In Ramona and Warwick, movement on the project remained delayed until management positions were filled. In Stinemore, one of the managers began to assume responsibility for education. Although the superintendent of schools in Foothill was initially suspicious of recommendations from TAs from a large city, he used their suggestion of applying for state funding to support a foster youth services (FYS) coordinator position.

#### *Communication/Collaboration*

One of the reasons expressed by representatives of CPS agencies and LEAs that their agencies did not share student information about foster youth was because of confidentiality laws governing the release of child information for their agencies. During the course of the project, one of the authors developed considerable expertise on the data-sharing systems between CPS and local education agencies in several counties in the state that were not a part of this study, including how they overcame the legal restrictions on sharing data. These data systems were shared at inter-agency education work groups in six counties and with a CPS education advocate in the seventh county, with emphasis placed on the value of data-sharing systems for improving educational outcomes for foster youth. By the end of the second year of the project, one of the counties—Ramona—had made significant

progress in putting together a data-sharing system. Warwick and Meyer CPS agencies, after learning about the data-sharing systems in other counties, began developing more extensive data-sharing systems with local school districts where their foster children attend school.

Another way that Meyer County CPS increased communication with schools and enlarged its focus on education was to use a school information form (adapted from one supplied by the TAs) at their TDM meetings, where home placement change decisions occurred for foster children. With the implementation of the school information form, the CPS caseworker contacted the school liaison to obtain educational information about the child so it would be available at the TDM meeting to help inform placement change decisions.

Stinemore was the most proactive in addressing the communication/collaboration issue by putting together an education summit for a wide range of stakeholders to improve knowledge about the foster care system, laws affecting the education of foster children, and the educational needs of foster children. The presenters and attendees at the summit were from CPS, LEAs, juvenile court, DMH, and court-appointed special advocate offices. This county also developed an interagency memorandum of understanding (MOU) between CPS, the County Office of Education (COE), and other LEAs that detailed which agencies would pay for transportation for foster youth who received special education services to remain in their school districts of origin. In Bennetsen, the LEA and DMH decided to use a joint consent form for both a referral for a mental health assessment and to conduct the assessment so that there would not be confusion on the part of caregivers from receiving a consent form from DMH after they had already signed one for the LEA.

### *Legal Violation/Issue*

In Meyer County, a juvenile court committee drafted an MOU that required school districts to coordinate special education assessments of foster children who moved from district to district so the

assessments could be completed within the 60-day legal timeline required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. The school districts were reluctant to sign the MOU since they felt they were not systematically informed when a foster child enrolled in or left their districts. They did not know that CPS had recently developed a form, as part of the activities of its inter-agency education work group, to notify the school when a foster child was entering or leaving. When the school districts learned about the school notification form by the cochair of the work group, they were less reluctant to sign the MOU. Stinemore and Bennetsen work groups also developed school notification forms for CPS to use to inform the schools in those counties of the enrollment or withdrawal of county foster youth, which helped those agencies avoid violating state law.

#### *Lack of Knowledge*

As the counties became more aware of the educational barriers facing foster children, they recognized the need to provide increased training for CPS workers. The TAs provided, participated in, or helped design training sessions in Bennetsen, Foothill, Luqueville, and Meyer counties on various topics related to improving educational outcomes for foster youth. In addition, as a way of informing social workers and others who participated in TDM meetings about the educational issues that state law required to be addressed whenever home placement changes were considered, the TAs developed and were instrumental in getting three counties—Stinemore, Meyer, and Ramona—to include education questions at their TDM meetings (e.g., If out-of-home placement is to occur, does the child have educational needs, including special education needs, which might affect the placement decision?).

#### *Lack of Educational Resources*

Two counties took specific measures to address the lack of resources targeted to address educational deficiencies of foster youth and provide support for their transition to postsecondary schools. The education advocate in Luqueville put together an array of

educational interventions, which included academic assessment and tutoring services, student study teams to assess and recommend interventions when needed, and an orientation and support program for students who might attend the local community or state college. Warwick developed a pilot partnership with a local school district to assist foster youth in raising math and reading skills of foster youth with a 2.0 or less grade point average.

*Did each county choose a unique array of technical assistance strategies offered by the TAs?*

Each county not only chose a somewhat different array of technical assistance strategies, but they also used what would seem to be the same strategy, the education work group, in unique ways. All the counties except Luqueville had an ongoing interagency education work group. However, the work group in these six counties all differed to some extent. Bennetsen, Ramona, and Meyer set up new interagency work groups, whereas in Stinemore the work group was a subcommittee of an ongoing advisory group that was initially set up, under the state-funded FYS program, to address educational problems of foster youth primarily living in group homes. FYS was based in the COEs and included education liaisons who worked with CPS to identify foster youth and provide direct educational services such as tutoring, tracking down school records, educational counseling, and resource brokering. In Warwick, the work group was an already established interagency group that was brought together for the specific purpose of developing a pilot partnership with a local school district to assist foster youth in improving their reading and math skills. In Foothill, a rural county with a relatively small population, the work group consisted of only three people, two from CPS and one from a LEA. The TAs shared relevant information and a variety of strategies with each of the work groups that were intended to remove barriers and improve educational outcomes of foster children.

Two counties—Luqueville and Stinemore—requested that the TAs conduct focus groups of caregivers to help identify the

problems in these counties related to caregivers supporting the education of foster children. One county set up an interagency meeting with relevant stakeholders to discuss the educational problems existing in this county. One strategy used by Bennetsen and Stinmore was to request that the TAs help CPS managers and an education advocate figure out solutions to school-related problems for individual or groups of foster children. In Bennetsen, these problems related to the special education services students were receiving. In Stinmore, eligibility on an athletic team for a foster youth who had been moved to a new home placement outside the residential boundaries of the school he was attending was one of the issues brought to the TAs.

However, in addition to the type of technical assistance strategy selected, there also was a difference in the number of TA contacts for the counties. As Table 4 shows, they varied from a low of 3 in Foothill and Ramona to a high of 10 in Stinmore and Warwick. The difference in number of TA in-person visits was largely dependent on the local context. Those counties that had 8 to 10 in-person TA contacts had regularly scheduled interagency work group meetings that the TAs attended. Those that had 3 to 4 in-person contacts typically had changes of managerial staff that

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**TABLE 4**

In-Person Technical Assistance Contacts

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COUNTIES	NUMBER OF IN-PERSON TA
Bennetsen	9
Foothill	3
Luqueville	4
Meyer	8
Ramona	3
Stinmore	10
Warwick	10

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delayed progress on removing barriers impeding educational progress for foster youth or the administrative support for the project was not as strong. Even with fewer TA contacts, progress still continued in Luqueville because of the strong leadership of a part-time education advocate who had ongoing connect with the TAs and the education liaisons on other counties. In Ramona, once new administrators were in place, progress continued.

*Did the extent of existing leadership in CPS that was focused on education affect efforts to bring about change?*

In general, what became clear was that leadership not only was an important factor in bringing about change, but also looked somewhat different in different counties. Furthermore, changes in leadership had substantial consequences in several of the counties.

For five of the counties—Meyer, Ramona, Warwick, Bennetsen, and Foothill—existing, committed leadership to the education of foster youth in CPS was the impetus for seeing that change was pursued. While committed leadership within CPS was important in these five counties, the leadership in each operated in very different ways. In Foothill, the program manager for CPS had a strong commitment to improving education outcomes for foster children; however, she had to balance that commitment with the demands of working in a rural community. Nevertheless, the county LEA showed important commitment and leadership in both seeking funding from the state and then using this funding to hire a dynamic foster youth liaison to work closely with CPS and the local school districts to make needed changes.

Strong top-down leadership existed in the Warwick CPS agency. The CPS director decided that the direction this county should take to improve education outcomes for foster children was to initiate a pilot project to improve reading and math scores of a cohort of foster children. Problems arose, however, when a manager who was in charge of the pilot project was promoted and the person who replaced her did not seem to have the needed background or skills to direct the project.

In Ramona, Bennetsen, and Luqueville counties, changes in administrators within CPS caused slowdown or complete stoppage in making changes related to education. In Bennetsen, the slowdown was fairly mild despite a change in the deputy director of CPS, because the manager in charge of the project remained focused on educational issues. However, it took the involvement of the new deputy director, who came in with a strong focus on education, to connect with the special education director of the LEA before collaborative activities between the two agencies got back on track.

In Ramona, the slowdown was significant. Until June 2006, major progress was being made toward addressing educational issues. A CPS representative regularly attended countywide education committee meetings. Plans were on track to address the training needs of social workers and caregivers, develop a memorandum of understanding with LEAs to share data on foster children in their school districts, adopt the school information form for the TDM meetings, and hold a high school orientation meeting for foster youth entering the ninth grade. All plans came to a halt when CPS experienced the departure of two key managers and all three deputy directors. The county went through almost six months of inaction on education issues. However, with a new deputy director taking on responsibilities for the family-to-family initiative and for education, plans began moving ahead again.

In Luqueville, after a strong start and what appeared to be quite a lot of excitement about making changes to improve education outcomes for foster youth, the change of four high-level administrators in CPS led to a complete rejection of any forward movement on education as part of the family-to-family initiative. The manager who initially was assigned to work on educational issues was assigned additional, major responsibilities for the agency and no longer had time to focus on education. CPS ultimately refused to choose specific education goals for the upcoming year, which were not connected to other projects already. Any focus on education issues was relegated to a part-time education liaison.

Different from the other counties where the leadership came from within CPS, in Stinemore county the major leadership came from outside CPS, from the county FYS coordinator who was on contract with the county LEA. In Stinemore, the family-to-family coordinator within CPS did not initially provide leadership on education nor did a newly hired program analyst who was assigned to work with the TAs. The county FYS coordinator, however, had some knowledge of strategies that were used in other counties to encourage education and CPS agencies to work together. He started discussions with the TAs about the barriers in the county in educating foster youth and was the impetus for organizing an interagency education summit. Eventually, one of the managers within CPS became interested in education issues and emerged as a leader. At the same time, a newly hired special education administrator within the county education system took interest in and helped to resolve a major issue in the county over funding for transportation of foster children who change home placements but elect to remain in their school districts of origin. This special education administrator took the lead in putting together and getting agreement from CPS and a county LEA assistant superintendent on an MOU that specified procedures and cost sharing to provide transportation to children in foster care receiving special education services when they choose to remain in their schools of origin.

The plan in Ramona to institute a data-sharing system between CPS and LEAs was related to the leadership of CPS personnel. The family-to-family coordinator and her immediate supervisor, both of who attended the interagency education work group, were from the CPS information technology unit and understood the necessity of establishing a means to share data with the LEAs. When the TA first discussed the benefits of data sharing, these leaders immediately endorsed the idea and appealed to the court for an order to allow data sharing between CPS and the LEAs. The information provided by the TA regarding data sharing systems in other counties, the intrinsic interest in and understanding of information

technology by CPS managers, and the connection between CPS leaders and top management in counties that had initiated data-sharing systems appear to be the factors that led to the initiation of a data-sharing system in this county.

The commitment by a leader either within CPS, or in or connected to a LEA, was a necessary condition for bringing about changes in the counties related to improving the education of foster children. These changes included implementing procedures to ensure that the laws related to the education of foster children were followed, collaborative data systems were designed, training topics were identified and training implemented, and other interventions were taken.

*Was interagency collaboration required to reduce the identified barriers?*

Clearly, in all of the counties where a reduction of barriers (e.g., preventing foster children from enrolling in school promptly) occurred, collaboration between CPS and other agencies was important. CPS frequently found the organization of the school system very confusing and difficult to navigate. Unlike CPS that was a single county agency with a director and managers, the school system had an intermediate level COE that had virtually no authority over the multitude of school districts, and each school district had its own superintendent, elected school board, and school site administrators. In all seven counties, a key for the CPS to navigate the school system was through collaboration with the FYS program. FYS program coordinators in Ramona, Bennetsen, Stinmore, Meyer, and Foothill counties attended the interagency education work groups and played a major role in the activities of the work group. In Meyer, Stinmore, and Foothill, the coordinators also conducted training for school and CPS staff on AB 490 provisions and educational advocacy for foster youth. In Meyer, the CPS agency provided additional funding to FYS so the liaisons could expand their services to work with all 14- to 18-year-old foster youths, not just youth in group homes.

The interagency education work group was an important vehicle through which much of the interagency collaboration happened. In Bennetsen, Meyer, and Stinemore counties, CPS worked with LEA representatives to the work group to design notification forms to inform the LEAs that a foster child was either enrolling or disenrolling in one of their schools. In Bennetsen, DMH representatives attended the work group and worked collaboratively to simplify the process, authorizing a referral for mental health services for a student receiving special education services. In Warwick and Meyer, the work groups established a partnership with LEAs that had a high number of foster children in the districts' schools to begin a pilot project to improve reading and math scores of specific foster youth. Work groups in Ramona, Stinemore, and Meyer identified LEAs in which large numbers of foster youth were enrolled to pilot data-sharing systems.

Training in CPS or the schools were often collaborative. The TDM coordinator in the Bennetsen CPS agency trained school administrators about the TDM process and discussed how to obtain needed education information for TDM meetings. The chair of the work group in Meyer trained school district representatives on the procedures related to the School Notification and the TDM School Information forms. Some training that took place in CPS agencies did not require collaboration between CPS and the LEA. When such training occurred, the trainers were people who had relevant background on education issues or laws. In Meyer, the TAs reviewed the training agenda and gave input before it was introduced to all 400 social workers.

The more involved CPS became with its education partners in addressing the education needs of foster youth, the more agency managers recognized the need to establish education liaison positions within CPS. In each of the counties, a position was designated or funds were being sought to designate a small number of staff with background knowledge in education to serve both as liaisons between CPS and the schools and educational resources for the social workers and children.

Interagency collaboration was relatively easy when the changes necessary to remove barriers did not affect overall agency funding or organizational structures. The development of new forms in accordance with the requirements of a state law was relatively straightforward; although in some counties, such as Meyer, the nature of the fairly large CPS bureaucracy made it difficult to have forms approved quickly. Some agencies, such as the school district in Bennetsen, were willing to collaborate more readily when suggested changes affected other agencies and not their own agency. In Warwick, it took many invitations and constant urging before representatives of a school district began attending a work group meeting aimed at improving education outcomes for foster youth in that district.

Personal, respectful relationships between relevant stakeholders were important in the collaborative process. Trust was not always easily attained or quickly forthcoming between some agencies, such as the LEA and CPS in Bennetsen, where friction existed over the role of the education liaison/advocate in the CPS office. In Foothill, personal relationships were particularly important in making changes. However, unless the commitments to reducing specific barriers and making changes to improve education outcomes were institutionalized within the agencies, when staff who had assumed responsibility for educational issues left, progress came to a halt.

One major barrier that was not addressed by any of the counties had to do with foster children placed out of county. These were foster children who were placed in a different county than the one that had legal jurisdiction over them and in which their social workers worked. This cross-county collaboration seemed too difficult to address by all seven counties in the first two years of the project. They each bemoaned all the problems faced by foster children placed out of county—social workers rarely visited them, mental health agencies denied them certain services, funding for independent living programs (ILP) was left to the county where the child was living—but cross-county collaboration never occurred even though the TAs

suggested cross-county meetings. The education problems that existed within each county were sufficient to keep the CPS representatives and their local school district partners busy.

The collaboration that took place within the counties did not include all of the LEAs in those counties, except for Bennetsen, which had only one school district. The reason for not collaborating with all the county LEAs was twofold. One reason was that not all the school districts had foster youth or had more than a few in their schools. The other reason was that in some cases there were just too many school districts to bring into a partnership, and the districts varied in how interested they were in addressing the education issues of foster children.

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## Discussion

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The results of this multiple case study show that while each county identified a set of barriers impeding the education of foster children, utilization by the CPS agencies of the technical assistance varied in terms of the frequency and extent to which it was used, the specific activities selected, and the inclusion of education and other agencies in technical assistance activities. There was some variation in how each county went about (1) identifying the problems within and between CPS and LEAs that impeded the educational progress and school achievement of foster youth; (2) developing organizational structures to address and resolve educational problems and (3) committing the necessary resources to lead to improvements in educational outcomes for foster children and youth. Those CPS agencies that were able to engage school partners, rouse interest within their own agencies to make changes to address the educational needs of children in foster care, and begin to systematically plan to collect school data had leaders in either CPS or the LEAs, or both. These leaders became strongly committed to making changes and pressing forward on a variety of fronts (e.g., training, shared data collection, development of interagency forms, procedures, and policies). Existing interagency

relationships were helpful in bringing together agency representatives, although strong leadership seemed to be the major factor along with a willingness to expend resources (funding or staff time) that was critical in bringing about necessary changes. Inter-agency collaboration took different forms in different counties. The case study showed that understanding the local context of each county is essential for establishing a workable process for developing cross-agency policies and procedures, although counties are likely to be more amenable to implementing changes when they know other counties have done it already. In addition, work in each of these counties shows that substantial barriers exist to the development of a collaborative system between CPS and the LEAs to support the education of foster children.

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### **Limitations**

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The counties selected for study had all been engaged in the family-to-family initiative and were specifically selected because of their success in implementing measures to create increased home placement stability for foster youth in their counties. This factor, along with the unique demographic and other contextual factors within each county, reduce the study's generalizability. Consequently, it is not clear from this study how counties (or other state subdivisions) that were not involved already in efforts to improve placement stability for foster youth—and had not received technical assistance on other issues—would respond to receiving technical assistance to improve their educational outcomes. However, another study, which used a quasi-experimental design, showed that technical assistance could be provided to educational liaisons from a COE who was colocated in CPS offices in order to improve educational outcomes of children in foster care (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). Nevertheless, in the study reported here the fact that efforts to reduce educational barriers and improve outcomes relied not only on the receipt of technical assistance, but also on the extent of leadership related to education and increased interagency collaboration

within the county, are important outcomes that have wider ramifications than a single initiative. Furthermore, many of the barriers identified in this study related to the education of foster youth have been identified in previous qualitative studies that employed either targeted interviews or focus groups (e.g., Altschuler, 2003; Stone, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2007; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). Finally, research supports the findings in this study that interagency collaboration (Altschuler, 2003; Stone et al., 2007) and committed leadership (Austin, 2002) are key ingredients in bringing about agency change.

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## Conclusion

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Because of the poor educational achievement outcomes of children in foster care, it is important that LEAs and CPS work together to develop collaborative structures and formal procedures for addressing the educational functioning of foster youth. The provision of technical assistance is one way to help agencies work toward change in this area, particularly for CPS agencies that are already involved in efforts to improve their practices in relation to foster youth. However, an important understanding from the study is that CPS agencies are more likely to make needed changes when they see that "sister" agencies in other jurisdictions have made these changes successfully and can share their procedures, policies, and other documents related to the changes. It also is helpful when an administrator from one CPS agency that has implemented changes related to the education of foster youth talks directly to the administrator in a CPS agency interested in making similar changes. Sharing powerful data (e.g., on the percentage of foster youth in relation to other youth who receive special education services or are suspended from school in a jurisdiction) or positive outcomes (e.g., on improved academic performance of foster youth related to a specific intervention) from a CPS agency that has implemented changes is also an effective strategy. Federal or state governments or private foundations should provide funding

for dissemination of information related to strategies that lead to improved educational outcomes for foster youth as well as bringing leaders from these agencies together to hear about the work of those agencies that have made changes and have had success in improving educational outcomes for foster youth.

Interagency work groups also proved to be effective in identifying barriers and fashioning county-specific solutions, but strong leadership related to the education of foster youth must be a priority. Leadership not only at the local level, but also at the state or federal levels, could lead to increased pressure to bring about needed changes. The USDHHS, in evaluating states on the CFSR child well-being outcome, should require not only that foster children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs, but also that there are improved educational outcomes for this population.

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