

Child Welfare, Education and The Courts:
A Collaboration to Strengthen Educational Successes of Children and Youth in Foster Care
November 3-4, 2011

Summary prepared by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau and the U.S. Department of Education jointly sponsored the convening which was attended by teams representing each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Collaboration was the overarching theme as both Departments recognized that the full implementation of the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 depends on the meaningful collaboration of child welfare, education and the courts at both the federal and state levels. State teams consisted of state leaders from the fields of child welfare, education and the courts; each team was invited to bring 3 child welfare representatives, 3 education representatives, and 2 court representatives. Prior to the convening, each team was asked to complete a Self-Assessment Tool to assist the team in identifying its strengths and challenges in achieving educational success for children and youth in foster care. During the convening, state teams were asked to develop State Action Plans, with short- and long-term goals around foster care and education collaboration.

The meeting was organized into plenary sessions, workshops and team meetings which provided team members with the opportunity to develop the State Action Plans. The convening began with an opening "call to action" plenary session and personal welcomes by Commissioner Samuels and Secretary Sibelius. Secretary Duncan presented through a video-taped welcome. Following these welcomes, a powerful panel of young people in foster care shared their and their peers' educational experiences when they were in foster care. The voices of youth as key to informing participants and shaping outcomes were heard throughout the convening, and encouraged in ongoing state activities. At the evening reception, members of Foster Care Alumni of America were introduced as experts on education and foster care and circulated among participants with an "Ask the Expert" name tag, inviting informal conversations about the challenges and supports that youth in care need to educationally succeed. Each team designated an "ambassador" to attend "Education Unplugged" that evening – which provided selected team members with an opportunity to engage in small group discussions with foster care alumni, a foster parent, an educator and a CASA. These ambassadors reported back to their teams the following day. At the closing plenary session, two young adults formerly in foster care made presentations that brought the many themes of the convening together.

Closing the first day's plenary session, Dr. Mark Courtney presented research findings on educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care; Elizabeth Sharp reviewed federal policy on the educational provisions of the Fostering Connections Act; and Kathy McNaught guided participants in considering promising practices already underway in states and developing new practices of their own.

Twenty workshops were provided with presenters from across the country highlighting best practices and state and local examples. Topics related to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 included state legislation to foster education success for children and youth in foster care, collaboration, making best interests determinations, school transportation, immediate

school enrollment, and case planning for educational stability. Other workshops focused on special education for students in out-of-home placements; data exchange and performance measurement; school readiness for young children in foster care; preparing youth in care for high school graduation, college and careers; and trauma and learning. The materials from the workshops and plenary sessions can be found at: http://www.nrcpfc.org/education_summit/

Significant time was allotted for four team meetings where the state teams met independently to develop their State Action Plans. Most teams had at least one judicial officer and 46 teams had two judicial officers, who in some states, were state supreme court judges. All but two jurisdictions sent a child welfare leader, with the child welfare commissioner from one of these two states joining the team meetings by conference call. Education leaders participated on at least 45 teams and came from a variety of backgrounds, including state directors and superintendants of education, special education directors, principals, Title I coordinators, and McKinney-Vento State Coordinators and liaisons. Through these meetings, state team members were able to forge strong partnerships and collaboratively develop a plan which they have now brought to their states with the goal of building even greater systems collaboration. Each plan contains two short-term goals (to be completed in 3 to 6 months) two long-term goals (to be completed in 6 to 12 months). The teams submitted their plans to the Children's Bureau which is posted on a protected website administered by the National Resource Center on Permanency and Fostering Connections.

A key issue that arose throughout the convening was the critical need for improved data collection and information sharing between child welfare, education and the courts, including real and perceived barriers from federal confidentiality laws. In both workshops and team meetings, discussion focused on aggregate data collection to evaluate outcomes and student-specific information sharing that includes the students' educational and foster care status, services and needs. Many state plans include goals related to examining and addressing data sharing needs, gaps and opportunities. It was clear that there continues to be much misunderstanding about what information can and cannot be shared under the federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as well as state confidentiality laws.

The US Children's Bureau and the US Department of Education will work together to develop next steps as states begin to implement their action plans. The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education will continue its involvement following their active engagement in the planning process and their work in developing many of the workshops. The National Working Group plans to build on the momentum of the convening at both the federal and state level, with members of the Working Group, particularly the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, responding to the critical need for ongoing training and technical assistance to support states.