

Foster Care & Education

Issue Brief

SCHOOL STABILITY UNDER FOSTERING CONNECTIONS: “PROXIMITY,” OR PLACING CHILDREN CLOSE TO THEIR CURRENT SCHOOLS

Introduction

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections) requires the child welfare agency to strive for school stability for each child.¹ Achieving school stability requires the child welfare agency and the education agency to collaborate effectively, and may necessitate that one or both agencies provide transportation for the child to remain in the same school when he or she changes living placements.² However, child welfare agencies can ensure school stability without the additional stress and cost of special transportation by selecting a new home for the child in the child’s current school catchment area or school district. Indeed, Fostering Connections directs the child welfare agency to document in the case plan “assurances that the placement of the child in foster care takes into account. . . . the proximity to the school in which the child was enrolled at the time of placement.”³ This issue brief focuses on **how agencies can implement this “proximity” requirement.**

Enacted in October 2008, the “Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008,” (the Fostering Connections Act) is a comprehensive law designed to promote permanent family connections and improve the lives of youth in the child welfare system. Among other important provisions, the Act requires child welfare agencies to create “a plan for ensuring the education stability of the child while in foster care.” The Act emphasizes the importance of school stability as well as the need for collaboration between child welfare and education agencies.

This brief is part of a series of materials designed to be used together to support all stakeholders in implementing the education provisions of the Fostering Connections Act. To access the full series, please visit [The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education's Fostering Connections Toolkit](#).



The Benefits of Considering School-Placement Proximity

Finding a living placement in or near the child’s school can present challenges, especially in areas with few available foster homes or for children in sibling groups or with specialized needs. Additionally, school stability is one of numerous factors child welfare agencies must consider when making the best placement decision for a child, including decisions about placements that are best to achieve ultimate permanency for the child. Indeed, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) released a Program Instruction on Fostering Connections that acknowledges that:

[t]he title IV-E agency is vested with the responsibility for making individual placement decisions on a case-by-case basis on behalf of a child in foster care. As such, we realize that the agency will be balancing the child’s needs for proximity to the family, the available foster care resources, along with the appropriateness of the child’s current educational setting, among other things.⁴

Locating a living placement that is proximate to the child’s current school can save the education and child welfare agencies time and money, and can reduce commuting time for the child. Focusing on school proximity can also improve the quality of the child’s school experience. For example, if the child lives close to his or her school, it will be much easier for the child to participate in extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports.

School proximity may also increase community support for the child outside the education system. To achieve proximity, the child welfare agency will often recruit community or family members to provide homes or placements for local youth. Engaging extended family and community members (such as coaches, teachers, and church members) in this way can bolster the child’s support network, sense of belonging to the community, and cultural identity. Keeping the child in the same community from which he or she was removed will also ease his or her transition in the likely event of family reunification.

This brief highlights practices from jurisdictions around the country that have succeeded in increasing school stability by focusing on “school-placement proximity” – i.e. identifying living placements that are close to the school where the child has experienced stability. These practices include using technological tools to locate nearby families, as well as focused recruitment efforts in high-needs communities.

¹ Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (hereinafter “Fostering Connections”), Pub. L. 110-351, 122 Stat. 3949 (codified as amended in scattered sections of 42 U.S.C.).

²For more information, see the other issue briefs in this series, including Making the Case: Engaging Education; Making it Work: Successful Collaboration; Making Best Interest Decisions; and When School Stability Requires Transportation, *available at* http://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/projects_initiatives/education/state_implementation_toolkit.html.

³ 42 U.S.C. 675(1)(G)(i).

⁴U.S. Dep’t of Health and Human Servs.Admin.for Children and Families, Guidance on Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, 19 (July 9, 2010) (hereinafter “ACF Guidance”), *available at* http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws_policies/policy/pi/2010/pi1011.htm.

Using Technology to Find “Proximate” Placements

Several jurisdictions have successfully utilized technology to identify placements close to the home from which the child was removed and/or the school he/she currently attends.

Using GIS-mapping to find available placements

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) refers to systems that organize and analyze data in terms of geographic location. Most often a visual representation of the data is developed by plotting the data points on a map. For many foster care agencies nationwide, GIS is a powerful tool: it can help agency staff track the location of available foster homes, map the locations of schools and their catchment areas, and allow foster family recruiters to focus their efforts on the areas with the greatest need. As the examples below demonstrate, locales use GIS tools in different ways, but it serves a valuable purpose: finding the best possible placements for children—which means looking within their communities, their neighborhoods, and their schools. Cost for such software varies widely, from single computer use programs to server installed systems for multiple users.⁵

Louisiana provides GIS mapping technology to child protective workers to use when they remove children and are looking for appropriate placements. Workers can access the GIS from the office, their home, or from their laptops while out in the field. This means that they can immediately gather information about current foster placements anywhere, anytime, and can visually assess the feasibility of available homes based on their location and proximity to the child’s school. The GIS maps include other pertinent information as well, such as the location of courthouses, child care centers, hospitals, mental health therapists, etc. — which allows a worker to find the best possible placement location match for a child.

To keep the system up-to-date, data is pulled nightly from the agency’s child welfare information system which is used to track and pay all child welfare service providers and clients. Thus, workers have access to information about children’s recent removals and placements as well as the availability of new foster homes. This makes the data available to child welfare staff “on the fly,” with information updated regularly by all child welfare staff. Workers can use the data to find vacancies, make child placement decisions, and determine where to target recruitment efforts.

The impact of the GIS technology in Louisiana is impressive. Since installation of the technology, there has been an over 10% decrease in school changes.

⁵ The most commonly used software is called ArcMap, published by ESRI (<http://www.esri.com/>). The cost to run ArcMap on a single computer is currently \$1,500; to install it on a server for multiple users the cost is \$3,500. For more comprehensive GIS systems, the price can run upwards of \$50,000 for one jurisdiction’s system.

For an in-depth look at how to implement a GIS system, see *Using Geographical Information Systems to Enhance Community-Based Child Welfare Services*, Child Maltreatment, August 1998 3: 224-234.

Like many of the other jurisdictions using GIS technology, Louisiana uses ESRI products, as well as a business intelligence product known as WebFocus. The software is shared among various state program offices. This spreads costs and allows for greater collaboration between the agencies in a more streamlined and economical manner. For instance, the closure of a child care center reported by the state's child care licensing agency is automatically updated in the GIS system. Conversely, the status of a child care center under investigation for abuse or neglect is passed on to the licensing agency. The entire system is run on a server, and is accessible via the Internet. Though this kind of comprehensive GIS technology is more expensive than a more limited program, it also creates cost savings. Placements are made faster and with fewer changes since the caseworkers have both textual and visual information when making their placement decisions. For more information, please contact Terry Skaggs at Terry.Skaggs@la.gov.

The **Illinois** Department of Children and Families uses a GIS program called SchoolMinder to locate foster placements for children. SchoolMinder is used with children in homes not previously involved with the Department and when the child protective services investigator has been unable to find a willing and suitable relative with whom to place the child.⁶ A "placement worker" consults SchoolMinder for a list of eligible homes within 10 miles of the school the child attends (or, if unavailable, the address of the home of the parent or another landmark). The search parameters include basic demographics (age, sex and number of siblings) of the child or sibling group being placed.

The placement worker then creates a "call list" by loading the homes within the child's school catchment area (Chicago) or school district (rest of state) into a statewide system which then orders the list of eligible homes and agencies according to the performance contracting rules of the Department. The placement worker then begins calling agencies in the order presented on the call list. If the placement worker fails to obtain placement in the catchment area/district, she generates a new call list of all homes and related agencies within a mile of the child's school or home address, and from there 5 miles, and then in succeeding 5 mile increments until a placement is found. SchoolMinder's success depends on keeping the information about available homes up-to-date. Updating SchoolMinder takes one clerical staff about 15 hours/week.

The impact of the technology is impressive. Since Illinois began using the SchoolMinder application in 2007, the average distances for initial foster care placement in Cook County dropped from 9.9 to 2.5 miles. Outside Cook County, the average dropped from 22.5 to 11.4 miles. Children placed using SchoolMinder are 50% more likely to stay in the same school. For more information, especially about any of the technical aspects of implementing a GIS system like SchoolMinder, please contact Richard Foltz at richard.foltz@illinois.gov.⁷

⁶ Currently, SchoolMinder is only used for children upon removal from the home; it is not utilized for later placement changes.

⁷ For more information on SchoolMinder, see *There's No Place Like Close to Home: Illinois Takes a Geographic Approach to Foster Care*, available at <http://www.esri.com/news/arcnews/summer07/articles/theres-no-place.html>.

Using other software (non-GIS mapping) to find available placements

Other computer programs or enhancements to an existing case management system can also dramatically increase school-placement proximity, at a relatively low cost.

To keep foster youth in their schools of origin, **Sacramento County** is using a searchable database called School Connect to match the children with available housing within their school districts. Various Foster Family Agency (FFA) employees update the database daily with information about newly available foster placements. The database stores information about each placement's certifications, as well as other details that can help make good placement decisions, such as the family's experience with children with behavioral or physical disabilities, or whether there are pets or smokers in the placement. Child Protective Services (CPS) employees can then search the database for the placement closest to a child's school. The database lists the address of the placements, indicates whether busing is available, and states whether the potential caretaker is willing to transport the child to and from school. After considering the various other relevant factors, the CPS employee then matches the child with an appropriate placement.

Sacramento County mandates the use of this program for all CPS workers and FFAs. The creation and maintenance of the database was funded internally by the Sacramento County Foster Youth Services Agency. The database software is easily shared among other California districts and counties, and could be adapted to other states and jurisdictions. For more information, please contact Virginia D'Amico at vdamico@scoe.net.

Increasing Neighborhood Placement Options

Recognizing the importance of keeping children close to home, including in the same school, child welfare agencies have used technology to identify the areas children are being removed from, and targeted recruitment through those communities and schools.

Using GIS-mapping to target recruiting

The **Connecticut** Department of Children and Families (DCF) strives to maintain children that come into agency care in placements within their own communities. To help achieve that goal, DCF staff have used GIS products to pinpoint the locations of all schools, universities and foster and congregate care providers across the state. DCF staff can then determine where there may be concentrations of families with the greatest potential to become foster homes, and which areas are most in need of additional foster care capacity. This information is disseminated to local recruiters, who are then able to focus their efforts on the specific geographic areas where their time will result in the most benefit.

Connecticut is currently utilizing the ESRI Arc GIS Desktop software at the basic Arcview license level. Two employees use this software to produce descriptive and analytic map products. While the state has been able to provide useful services for relatively low cost, it is currently exploring an expansion of its software to allow for operational, web-based map services and automated address verification to improve data quality. For more information on Connecticut's use of GIS, please contact Fred North at fred.north@ct.gov.



Arizona has been using GIS to locate and recruit foster homes for approximately seven years. The state's child welfare division is divided into five regional districts, and GIS is used regularly to target recruitment efforts. Home recruitment managers in each region use the information to aim recruitment efforts at areas in which removal rates are higher than the number of available foster homes.

GIS maps are refreshed with updated foster home and removal information every six months so that home recruitment managers may reevaluate the areas that require focus. This geographical information is available publicly, and is sortable by zip code.

(See https://www.azdes.gov/Arizona_Serves.aspx?menu=332&id=4998#Maps). Arizona uses ESRI's GIS software, which includes ArcMap. The GIS technology is shared among several state agencies which has helped to reduce costs.

For more information about Arizona's use of GIS mapping, please contact Jakki Kolzow, Deputy Assistant Director of DCYF at JKolzow@azdes.gov or Lucas Murray, GIS programmer and analyst at LucasMurray@azdes.gov.

Illinois has been able to employ the same GIS software behind their SchoolMinder program (see above) to identify the areas with the greatest need for new foster homes. Yearly, Illinois uses their GIS program to determine the number of available foster homes per square mile, as well as number of homes per square mile from which children have been removed. Staff also consider the number of available homes within reasonable travel distance from the homes from which children have been removed and perform several analyses that demonstrate very specific areas in need of new foster homes. With this additional support and information, child welfare professionals in Illinois are able to focus their efforts and limited resources on the areas most in need of new homes. With this information, the state is able to guarantee that a child – most likely from the same community – will be placed with a qualified resource family, which helps recruitment efforts. Effective recruitment allows the SchoolMinder program to succeed because it ensures there will be sufficient homes available near a child's school.

For more information please contact Richard Foltz at richard.foltz@illinois.gov.

Community-based recruitment

Many jurisdictions improve proximity by taking advantage of a child's ties to the entire neighborhood. The following are examples of some innovative approaches to improving the recruitment and retention of foster families within a child's neighborhood.

Family to Family (F2F) was a **National** initiative started by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It incorporated four key strategies to improve child welfare services: building community partnerships, using team decision making, providing resources for family recruitment, and expanding placement options. One of the goals of the F2F initiative was to establish a strong network of neighborhood-based resource families so that children can be placed with safe and stable families from their own community or neighborhood. Jurisdictions using the F2F held meetings with community stakeholders to create plans for the children in their neighborhoods. The program also recruited and trained foster families, particularly in neighborhoods with especially large numbers of children in the child welfare system. The F2F model was implemented in several states and counties; its



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principles are easily incorporated into existing programs and models. For more information about F2F, please visit <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/Family%20to%20Family.aspx>.

Neighborhoods for Kids (N4K) in **San Diego** works to find placements within children's community to keep them connected to their current schools. To do this, investigators build "genograms" and "ecomaps" for each child. A genogram is like a family tree and is used to identify and locate possible kin care providers. The "tree" can include as many as five levels of family relationships—that is, it may include great-grandparents or cousins twice-removed. An ecomap is more of a social family tree; it includes other adults that are present in the child's life—teachers, therapists, Little League coaches, neighbors, church members, etc.—to identify leads for possible foster placements. Placing a child with a person from the child's ecomap would allow her to remain connected to her community in the care of a person she knows and trusts.

N4K is used to actively recruit new foster parents so that, if the genograms and ecomaps do not pan out for a particular child, there are other options. N4K uses Parent Teacher Associations to recruit at schools, and also recruits at community events. Additionally, N4K runs temporary foster placements called "Waystation" homes in each school district they serve. These homes are open 24 hours a day, and are available for temporary placements when a child is first removed from his or her home. These Waystations are responsible for transporting the child to and from school so that their education is not interrupted. For more information about the Neighborhoods for Kids program, including how to adapt it for other locales, contact Dennis Leggett at Dennis.Leggett@sdcounty.ca.gov.

The **Arizona** Division of Children, Youth and Families stresses the importance of recruiting and maintaining foster homes to best serve their children. Foster family agencies hold neighborhood events to raise awareness and support, inviting others to learn more about what being a foster parent is like. The Arizona SERVES initiative (<https://www.azdes.gov/arizonaserveshome.aspx>) also promotes foster care as an important volunteer effort. This culture of promoting and maintaining new foster parent relationships builds cohesion in the community, promotes permanency, and ultimately helps children to remain in their neighborhoods and schools. For more information about Arizona's programming, please contact Jakki Kolzow, Deputy Assistant Director of DCYF at JKolzow@azdes.gov.

School-based recruitment

Schools can be key partners in efforts to maintain proximity of school and placement.

In **Barre, Vermont**, the Resource Coordinator of the Family Services Division of the Vermont Department for Children and Families uses several tactics to recruit and maintain foster families within the school districts, with a focus on recruiting in the towns with the highest removal rates. The Resource Coordinator regularly reaches out to principals and administrators of schools to help raise awareness about the need for foster families. Every May and November—National Foster Care and National Adoption Months—the Resource Coordinator includes a letter in all local school newsletters thanking current foster or adoptive families and providing information about how to become a foster parent.



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Another strategy used in Barre is to maintain a directory with the contact information of guidance counselors and other contact persons (often the school secretary or the secretary of student services) in every district. The information is updated annually and is used for mailings, recruitment, and to conduct family- and kin-finding for a particular child. The school often provides caseworkers with the child's emergency contact or information about relatives and family friends. School administrators are also often able to provide DCF workers useful information regarding the type of setting that would be most suitable to meet the child's needs. For more information, please contact the Resource Coordinator, Ms. Joan Rock at Joan.Rock@ahs.state.vt.us.

In **Baltimore, Maryland**, the Baltimore City Public Schools entered into a protocol with Baltimore City Department of Social Services (DSS) to allow DSS access to a student's school emergency contact card when the child enters care. The emergency contact is often a relative, neighbor, or close family friend who may be a placement option for the child in close proximity to the school. By relying on these contacts, DSS is able to increase the chances that the child can be placed within the same school district despite removal from home. For more information about the protocol, please see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-heimpel/a-simple-answer-to-a-comp_b_766742.html.

The Our Community, Our Children (OCOC) campaign in **San Francisco** seeks to promote permanency for children in foster homes by conducting community-wide outreach, raising awareness, and focusing on recruitment efforts to keep children in San Francisco. As a part of its awareness campaign, San Francisco's Foster Youth Services (FYS) has produced several videos and campaign materials for foster family recruitment. The program has specifically targeted schools as a site for foster family recruitment. FYS, in collaboration with the San Francisco Human Services Agency and local foster and adoptive agencies, also provides permanency orientation sessions within local schools for families and teachers who may be interested in becoming foster parents or another form of permanent support.

Additionally, OCOC employs two permanency coordinators who collaborate with the schools, protective service workers, youth, and identified permanent supports to find the best possible placement for a given child. The coordinator also contacts the foster youth liaison at the school to try to discover other placement options through family, friends, or school staff. Permanency coordinators work to address school issues by connecting with the Child Protective Center to identify schools previously attended. For more information on Our Community, Our Children, please contact Maya Webb at WebbM1@sfsud.edu or visit www.healthiersf.org/fys.

Defining Proximity in Light of Transportation Options

Fostering Connections does not define the term "proximity," but one reasonable interpretation can be that a student is in proximity of a school if her location allows her to continue in the same school without the need for special transportation. Generally, this will mean that a student is in the same school district or catchment area. However, some districts have looked creatively at bus transportation to schools to help guide living placement determinations.



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In **Broward County, Florida**, to allow the child welfare agency flexibility in identifying appropriate living placements that allow a student to attend the same school, the transportation department within the school district of Broward County has created a document called a “feasibility grid.” This grid separates the county into 8 geographic regions. For each of the schools in Broward County, the different regions are ranked from 0 to 5, 0 being the most difficult to secure transportation to and from the school, and 5 being the easiest. The child welfare agency then makes all efforts to select a placement in higher-ranked regions. This grid took only a few weeks to complete, and is updated approximately every 2 years.

For more information about Broward County’s policies concerning foster youth, please contact Debbie Winters at debbie.winters@browardschools.com.

Conclusion

Taking into account where the current school is located in relation to the proposed living placement can prevent a child from being placed so far away that a school change becomes inevitable or transportation becomes complex or expensive. This is the rationale behind Fostering Connections’ requirement that “proximity” to the current school be considered in placement decisions. As many of the state and local examples highlighted here demonstrate, strategies focused on proximity can often lead to the least disruption to the child’s education, social life, and family and community connections, and is best for the child welfare agency because it is cost effective.

