

Heritage Lectures

No. 1050

Delivered June 19, 2007



Published by The Heritage Foundation

November 5, 2007

Improving Educational Opportunities for Foster Children

Dan Lips

The more than 500,000 children currently in foster care are among the most at-risk children in American society. Research shows that adults who were formerly in foster care are more likely than the general population to succumb to poor life outcomes.

- They are more likely to be homeless, unprepared for employment and limited to low-skill jobs, and dependent on welfare or Medicaid.
- They are also more likely than the general population to be convicted of crimes and incarcerated, to abuse drugs and alcohol, or to have poor physical or mental health.
- Research has shown that women who have been in foster care experience higher rates of early pregnancy and are more likely to see their own children placed in foster care.

Many of these problems are at least in part a product of problems in the classroom, where foster children tend to have lower educational attainment than their peers. Foster children on average have lower scores on standardized tests and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy, and dropout rates. Overall, a synthesis of available research evidence published by the Child Welfare League of America found that “Almost all of the reviewed studies of those who were in out-of-home care revealed that the subject’s level of educational attainment is below that of other citizens of comparable age.”¹

This is not surprising when one considers the many problems and challenges that foster children commonly experience at school. These common problems

Talking Points

- Foster children are among the most at-risk groups in American society. Research shows that adults who were formerly foster children are more likely than the general population to succumb to poor life outcomes.
- Research evidence and surveys of former foster children find many common problems in the classroom, such as persistent low expectations and instability caused by frequent school transfers.
- Offering foster children new school choice options would provide greater stability and help more students receive a quality education that prepares them to attain independence in adulthood.
- Congress should help to address this problem by requesting government research on the problems plaguing foster children in the classroom and by reforming existing federal programs and education policies to expand school choice options for foster children.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Education/hl1050.cfm

Produced by the Domestic Policy Studies Department

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

include instability, persistent low expectations, poor adult advocacy on their behalf, inadequate life-skills training, and a failure to receive needed special education services.

Instability and Low Expectations: Root Causes of Poor Educational Outcomes

One of the biggest problems foster children face is instability. Children in long-term foster care often experience multiple out-of-home placements. For example, here in Washington, D.C., 40 percent of the children in the District's foster care system have experienced four or more placements.

Out-of-home placements often lead to school transfers since where one attends school is often tied to where one lives. For example, the Vera Institute of Justice reports that in New York City between 1995 and 1999, 42 percent of children changed schools within 30 days of entering foster care.²

Research evidence suggests that frequent school transfers and disruptions in the learning process can take a toll on a student's development. For example, a study by the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that third-grade students who had experienced frequent school changes were more likely to perform below grade level in reading and math or to repeat a grade than were students who had never changed schools.³

It is not surprising, therefore, that frequent school transfers would negatively affect foster children. A research synthesis reported that former foster children who experienced fewer out-of-home placements performed better in school and completed more years of education than did others in

foster care.⁴ A survey of former foster children found that they "strongly believed that they had been shifted around too much while in foster care, and as a result, they suffered, especially in terms of education."⁵

It is clear how instability causes problems. School transfers create gaps in the learning cycle. They force children to adjust to new classroom settings, teachers, and classmates and cause children to lose social networks, peer groups, and relationships with adults—relationships that can be particularly important to foster care children with tumultuous family lives. These changes can exacerbate the emotional instability and unrest caused by the home transfers themselves. Reducing instability for foster children is identified by researchers and advocates as a way to improve the foster care system.

In addition to disruptions in their educational environment, adults formerly in foster care report that the foster system did not encourage high aspirations for their education. One survey found that older youth in foster care have high aspirations and resent others' low expectations. They also reported that they would have benefited from stronger adult encouragement.⁶

Addressing the Need for Greater Stability, High Expectations, and Better Educational Opportunities

There is no single solution to all of the challenges and problems that foster children face in school and at home. Ideally, every child in the foster care system would become a part of a stable, loving, permanent home with adults committed to nurturing their talents and skills. However, policymakers can

1. For a summary of the risk factors facing children in foster care, see Thomas P. McDonald, Reva I. Allen, Alex Westerfelt, and Irving Piliavin, *Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Foster Care: A Research Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America, 1996).
2. Vera Institute of Justice, "Foster Children and Education: How You Can Create a Positive Educational Experience for the Foster Child," July 2004, p. 2, at www.vera.org/publication_pdf/241_452.pdf (October 26, 2007).
3. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education*, GAO/HEHS-94-45, February 1994, at <http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat4/150724.pdf> (October 26, 2007).
4. McDonald *et al.*, *Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Foster Care*, p. 135.
5. Trudy Festinger, *No One Ever Asked Us—A Postscript to Foster Care* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), cited in Patrick A. Curtis, Grady Dale Jr., and Joshua C. Kendall, eds., *The Foster Care Crisis: Translating Research into Policy and Practice* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 109.
6. Vera Institute of Justice, "Foster Children and Education."

embrace measures to alleviate some of the stresses associated with foster care that contribute to lower educational attainment and poor life outcomes.

One promising reform solution would be to provide foster children with more control and more options for where they attend school. For example, offering tuition scholarships or school vouchers to children in foster care would be an important step in encouraging greater stability in their education—indeed, in their lives—and open the door to better educational opportunities for many students.

In 2006, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano, a Democrat, signed legislation to create the nation's first K–12 tuition scholarship program for foster children. Under this program, approximately 500 foster children will be awarded \$5,000 tuition scholarships to attend private school starting in the fall of 2007.

The Benefits of Providing Scholarships to Foster Children

A scholarship program for children in foster care like the new program created in Arizona could provide a number of important benefits:

- **First, a tuition scholarship could provide foster children with stability.** A scholarship or choice option could allow a child to remain in the same school (whenever geographically possible) even when placed in a new home setting. This could have educational and social benefits. Allowing a child to remain in the same school could prevent disruptions in the learning process. Importantly, it would also allow a child to maintain peer groups, friendships, and important relationships with adults.
- **Second, for other children, a tuition scholarship could allow some children to transfer into schools that offer a better educational experience.** Academic studies have reported that students participating in school voucher programs have improved academically compared to their peers who remain in public school. For example, the school voucher program in Mil-

waukee has been subject to two randomized-experiment studies that found that students who received vouchers through a lottery made academic gains when compared to their peers who remained in public school.⁷ Similar studies of private school choice programs in Charlotte, North Carolina, New York City, and Washington, D.C. reached similar conclusions.⁸

- **Third, a tuition scholarship program could allow students to attend schools that offer specialized services that cater to a foster child's unique needs.** Many schools are unequipped to offer the specialized services that foster children may need. Allowing for greater choice could give families the opportunity to select the most appropriate school for their child. It could also give schools an incentive to specialize, innovate, and deliver the specialized education services that foster children may need, such as counseling, tutoring, remedial instruction, and life-skills training.
- **Fourth, a tuition scholarship program could improve family satisfaction and involvement in children's education.** Most foster parents are dedicated individuals who want the best for the children in their care. However, many lack the resources needed to give that child the education that he or she deserves. They need and deserve assistance in creating an environment that will help their child thrive. A school choice program would give foster parents the ability to provide their children a quality education, which would likely improve the foster care experience for both children and parents.

How Congress Can Help Encourage School Choice for Foster Children

Providing social services and education, of course, is primarily the responsibility of state and local governments, not the federal government. Indeed states and localities are beginning to embrace the idea of school choice for children in foster care.

7. Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp. 150–154.

8. *Ibid.*

This idea of providing tuition scholarships is gaining momentum across the country. In addition to the new program that was created in Arizona in 2006, other states are considering legislation to provide school choice scholarships to children in foster care. In 2007, state legislators in at least four states—Florida, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas—have considered similar initiatives. The American Legislative Exchange Council has created model legislation to provide opportunity scholarships to children in foster care.

However, Congress can take a number of steps to advance this reform initiative and improve educational opportunities for children in foster care.

First, Congress should request that the Government Accountability Office compile research on the frequency of foster children’s school transfers and the need to improve educational opportunities for children in foster care. The federal government has the opportunity to work through the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services to study this problem and highlight the need for reform.

Second, Congress should reform the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Act to allow states to implement programs to improve educational opportunities for younger children. The Chaffee program provides funding grants to states to assist older foster youth and former foster children in the process of attaining independence in adulthood. For example, through the program, states can award “education and training vouchers” to older youths (age 16 and older) who are aging out of the foster care system.

However, the education aid offered by the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Act may come too late in many cases because it targets foster children 16 years old and older. Foster children throughout the K–12 education system have a number of unique needs. Providing education choice and flexibility to younger students could provide them with a more solid educational foundation, helping them

to achieve academic success, social stability, and adult self-sufficiency.

Congress should give states the flexibility to use funds allocated through the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program to promote K–12 education options for younger children in foster care if state policymakers believe that this would be the best use of funds to prepare foster children for independence in adulthood.

Third, since the federal government has oversight over the District of Columbia, Congress should provide opportunity scholarships to foster children in Washington, D.C. In 2004, Congress created a school voucher program for low-income students in Washington, D.C. This program has proven very popular with parents. All of the program’s 1,800 scholarships are currently subscribed; and, in all, 6,500 children have applied for scholarships. A recent evaluation of the program conducted by Georgetown University researchers found that the parents of participating students were very satisfied with their children’s experience in the program and have become more involved in their education.⁹

There is good reason to believe that many more children would benefit from opportunity scholarships, including the approximately 1,800 school-age children in foster care living in Washington, D.C. Congress should expand the existing Opportunity Scholarship program to allow more children to participate, and it should expand the eligibility requirements to ensure that all foster children can participate. As an alternative, Congress could create a new program that specifically focuses on providing opportunity scholarships for children in foster care in Washington, D.C.

Conclusion

It is clear that giving foster children the ability to attend a safe and high-quality school of choice will not address all of the problems they face, but it can give some of the most at-risk children in our society a chance for a better life.

9. Stephen Q. Cornman, Esq., Thomas Stewart, Ph.D., and Patrick J. Wolf, Ph.D., *The Evolution of School Choice Consumers: Parent and Student Voices on the Second Year of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Georgetown University School Choice Demonstration Project, May 2007, at www.washingtonscholarshipfund.org/PDF/gtownstudy.pdf (October 26, 2007).

Consider the words of Lisa Dickson, a former foster child, who graduated from high school and went on to succeed in college and graduate school. Ms. Dickson, now an advocate for foster children, wrote an essay, “What the Arizona Foster Voucher Program Would Have Meant to Me”:¹⁰

As I look back on my experience in foster care, educational vouchers would have benefited me if they had made it possible for me to attend one high school, rather than five. I don’t know that I would have chosen a private school, rather than a public one. I do know that I never received college preparatory counseling at any of the high schools I attended. I also know that having one teacher and one textbook, and perhaps also some individualized tutoring, would have helped me to master algebra. There was no individualized educational attention given, at

home or at school, to any of the teenagers from the group homes where I resided. No special tutoring was made available to foster youth who were failing their classes.

Since foster children are charges of the state, they are, in a sense, all of our children. We should not be satisfied until every child in foster care has the opportunity to have a stable and high-quality education that prepares him or her to succeed in life. I believe creating a voluntary, school choice scholarship program for children in foster care is a promising step toward accomplishing this important goal.

—Dan Lips is Education Analyst at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered in testimony before the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support of the House Committee on Ways and Means.

10. Lisa Dickson, “What the Arizona Foster Voucher Program Would Have Meant to Me,” *Edspresso.com*, August 15, 2006.