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Using State Wide Child and Family Services Review Data to Analyze Policies to Improve Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care

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Public policy is designed to improve life conditions for communities and individuals. Ideally, reasonable solutions to social problems are instituted through the creation of public policy. Preferably, the final outcome is a resolution or improvement in the problem. However, few gains are made unless that policy is analyzed after it has been implemented. A policy may undergo changes once it reaches the implementation stage, particularly when a federal policy is to be implemented on a state level. Progress made toward resolving a social problem can be highlighted by a thorough policy analysis, just as it can uncover barriers and problems encountered during policy implementation. This paper reviews federal policy enacted to improve the problem of poor educational outcomes of youth in foster care; it proposes a means to collect data to analyze the success of that policy through program implementation on the state level in Louisiana.

Defining Poor Educational Outcomes

A well-documented problem in child welfare is poor educational outcomes for children in the foster care system. The growing body of research documenting this problem is discouraging. Foster youth are regularly referred to as educationally vulnerable or at risk for poor educational outcomes (Hahnel, 2007; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). A study of national data indicated that 32% of children in foster care had school-related problems (Franck, 2001). School related problems can include behavior problems, poor academic performance, grade retention, special education needs, school mobility and low graduation rates (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012). The expectation that children in the foster care system will have educational challenges is realistic, as children from abusive home environments are shown to have deficits in cognitive development (Wilkerson, Johnson & Johnson, 2008; Cozier & Barth, 2005). However, a review of the magnitude of the problem gives impetus for further examination of the policies in place to address the problem.

Sengal (2013), notes that the first step to analyzing a policy is to clearly define the problem. Therefore, an examination of the characteristics of the foster care population is vital. Foster youth are those who were identified as being at extreme risk for abuse or neglect by their natural parents or caregivers and were thus removed from their home and taken into custody by a state's child protection agency. The state child protection agency is then responsible for finding a substitute home for the child. Ideally, children are placed with a relative, but if relative placement is not an option, placement with a certified foster family is made while the biological parents are assisted in being able to assume their parenting responsibilities.

National data obtained by the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), and reported through the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013), reported an estimated 400,540 children in foster care on September 30, 2011. National foster care data also indicate that an estimated 65% of the children in foster care are school age (5 to 17 years old) (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011). Contrary to a belief that most children entering foster care are very young, the average age of a child entering foster care is close to 8 years old (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). In addition, almost half (47%) of the children in foster care were in a non-relative foster home placement and more than a quarter (27%) were placed with relatives. Another important factor in relation to educational outcomes is the case plan or permanency plan in place for the child while in foster care; for more than half (52%) of the cases in the 2011 data, the permanency plan was reunification with the birth family, and that same amount were in fact reunified with their birth parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). These statistics highlight the importance of policies designed to improve the educational outcomes of children in care.

Time in care is another important characteristic to review when considering the educational outcomes of foster youth. Although the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 pushed time limits toward finding a permanent placement for a child in care, the amount of time a child remains in the foster care system still varies. The median length of time spent in foster care in 2010 was 13.2 months and the average or mean number of months was 23.9 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2010). Unfortunately, longer stays are associated with a greater number of placements (Berrick, Needell, Barth & Johnson-Reid, 1998). Statistics from the Casey Family Program (2011) indicate that the average number of placement changes per stay for children in foster care in 2010 was 3.1. However, other data indicate that although the majority of children in care had two to three placements, 15% had six or more placements during their time in care (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011). The high degree of mobility that foster children often experience is referred to as placement instability, and it is a factor that is thought to contribute to poor educational outcomes for children in care.

School-Related Problems

The placement instability, or high mobility of foster children, often results in numerous school moves during the period the child is in care. More than half of the children in the system have been found to have anywhere from three to five or more school changes while in care (Pecora et al., 2005; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, George & Courtney, 2004). Multiple placements have also been linked to poor educational outcomes, including math and reading achievements and dropping out (Reynolds, Chen, & Herbers, 2009; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010). In addition to numerous school moves, children in foster care often have higher absence rates, which are seen as attendance problems (absent from school 10 or more days) than their peers not in foster care (Smithgall, Jarpe-Ratner, & Walker, 2010). Attendance problems have also been a result of behavior problems at school; Scherr (2007) found that one-quarter of foster children in his sample had been suspended or expelled at least one time.

The general instability foster youth face in their daily lives makes it difficult for them to succeed academically. Clear indicators of the academic challenges foster children face are reflected in their scores on standardized test and their grade level placement. Foster children score significantly lower than children who are not in foster care, particularly in reading and math, and they are often a year or more below grade level (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge & Courtney, 2004; Zimma et al., 2000). Poor academic performance is likely to also affect grade retention. The grade retention of youth in foster care has been found to be as much as double the rate for youth not in the foster care system (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2008). Another indicator is the rates by which foster children need special education services; 30% of children between the ages of 6 and 11 who are in foster care need services compared to 9.16% of school age children as a whole (Webb, Frome, Harden, Baxter, Dowd, & Shin, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

A final measure of academic success can be drawn from graduation rates of youth in foster care. Research shows that educational success, including graduating from high school, is critical for older youth in foster care to transition to independent living (Seyfried, Pecora, Downs, Levine, & Emerson, 2000). However, a Midwest study of youth found that compared to the 89% of 21 year olds who completed high school, only 77% of foster youth completed high school (Courtney et al., 2007). Another study of foster care alumni reported fair results in the area of educational attainment of young people who had been in the foster care

system. They found that in comparison to the general public, more foster youth obtain their GED instead of a high school diploma, and a significantly lower portion of their sample obtained their bachelor's degree (1.8%) (Pecora et al., 2005). While some results show promise, they do not negate the research that shows one with a high school diploma is more successful than one who quits school and gets a GED (Smith, 2003).

Policy to Address the Problem

This review of the literature on educational outcomes of foster youth is not inclusive; but sought to paint a picture of the problem based on the more recent research conducted throughout the United States. Congress made a significant step toward resolving the problem of poor academic outcomes for foster youth when they passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, P.L. 110-351 (110th United States Congress, 2008). This act requires states to take certain steps to ensure the educational stability of a child while in foster care. A key piece of the legislation mandates that all efforts be made to keep a child coming into state custody in the school in which he or she is enrolled at the time of placement, unless it is not in the child's best interest. And if remaining in the home school is not in the child's best interest, the state must ensure immediate and appropriate enrollment in a new school and the child's records must be transferred in a timely manner (110th United States Congress, 2008). The policy directly addresses factors that have been shown to negatively impact the educational outcomes of foster youth, namely school moves.

States are now addressing the problem by enacting state policies to ensure compliance with the Fostering Connections Act. Louisiana was in the forefront in passing state legislation with the Louisiana Title 17- Education Legislation REV. STAT. 17: 238, which deals with: "Education of children having no permanent address, certain abandoned children, and children in foster care" (Louisiana State Legislature, 2012). Louisiana's legislation is comprehensive and detailed enough to eliminate some of the foreseeable problems with implementation. For instance, Louisiana Title 17- Education legislation (LA. REV. STAT. 17:238(c)) addresses problems related to responsibility for school transportation of children coming into care. The state law clearly requires the school district to be responsible when the child is placed in a foster home within the child's school of origin. And the Department of Children and Family Services is responsible for transporting the child from his foster placement to the home school district boundary when the child is placed in a foster home outside his or her

home school district (Chambers & Palmer, 2010). The Louisiana law also eliminated the residency requirements for a foster child enrolling in a new school. It also made the child protection agency, the Department of Children and Family Services, responsible for deciding what was in the child's best interest when deciding if the child should remain in his school of origin (Louisiana State Legislature, 2012).

Federal policies are created and the government establishes entities to ensure those policies are followed. All states are held accountable by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In 1994 the Child and Family Service Review Program (CFSR) was established to evaluate each state's performance on a set of performance standards for child welfare. The primary responsibility of the CFSR is to ensure that all states are providing for the safety, permanency and well-being of children. The reviews provide an outline of statewide performance in the three areas (Milner, Mitchell, & Hornsby, 2005). Three dimensions of wellbeing are assessed in the CFSR: the child's educational needs, mental health needs, and physical health needs. Specifically, the CFSR outcome related to educational outcomes of children in foster care is measured by the indication that "children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs" (Milner, Mitchell & Hornsby, 2005, p. 709). Individual state CFSR reports should be used to assess the impact of the Fostering Connections Act and subsequent state policies designed to improve the educational outcomes of children in the foster care system.

Policy Analysis Method and Findings

Louisiana's first Child and Family Service review was conducted in 2003. Since the first review, Louisiana has faced numerous environmental forces that have put tremendous stress on the child welfare system, including hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 and hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008 (Louisiana's Child and Family Services Review, 2010). However, the state has shown resilience and a determined effort to ensure the well-being of children in the state. The latest CFSR onsite review sample period ran from October 1, 2008 to March 31, 2009. Therefore, the latest state CFSR contains relevant data by which to evaluate child well-being in the area of educational outcomes. The state can use the CFSR data as a benchmark to gauge progress toward improving educational outcomes of children in foster care following passage of the Fostering Connections Act and LA. REV. STAT. 17:238(c).

The CSFR well-being outcome number two (Item 21) measures how effective the agency responsible for child protection is "in addressing

the educational needs of children in foster care” (Louisiana CFSR, 2010, p. 140). Methods of measurement included Peer Case Reviews and Quality Assurance Data. In the first round of performance evaluations, the area was noted as needing improvement, because child welfare workers were not seen as “making diligent enough efforts to meet children’s educational needs” (Louisiana CFSR, 2010, p. 142). However, the 2010 statewide assessment report provides an overview of the state’s compliance and progress on the educational well-being outcome since the date of the first CFSR review in 2003. Overall, the Continuous Quality Improvement Peer Case Review showed a general increase in compliance toward addressing the educational needs of children in foster care. The results indicated that compliance on “appropriate services to meet educational needs” was at 77.9% in 2003-2004, 85% in 2004-2005, 81.1% in 2005-2006 and 94% in 2007-2009, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Appropriate services in place to meet educations needs

Year	Compliance Percentage
2003-2004	77.9%
2004-2005	85.0% (a strength)
2005-2006	81.1% (a strength)
2007-2009	94% (a strength)

A second measure included in the Louisiana Statewide Assessment is directly linked to the Fostering Connections Act. From near the end of 2006 to the present, Louisiana has been collecting data on the ability to maintain children in their home school when coming into care. The data available from October 2006 to June 2009 indicated that maintaining children in their home schools was a weakness for Louisiana. Table 2 contains the compliance rates on ability to maintain foster children in their home school.

Table 2. Ability to maintain foster youth in their home school

Date	Compliance	Yes	No	Applicable Cases
10/03-9/04	64.1%	662	370	1032
10/05-9/06	43.7%	121	156	227
10/06-9/07	38.9%	144	226	370
10/07-9/08	38.4%	163	262	425
10/08-6/09	36.9%	101	173	272

Since October of 2006, the state has not exceeded 39% compliance on this measure. Louisiana is clearly facing the problem of child mobility, which the literature demonstrates as having a negative impact on educational outcomes.

One additional piece of information in the Louisiana CFSR Statewide Assessment report is valuable in relation to assessing educational outcomes of foster youth. The data also mirror that of the literature review and demonstrate the level of the problem. Standardized test scores from the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) test of eighth graders statewide were compared to test scores of children in foster care during the 2005-2006 school years. Foster children were found to score significantly lower on the Math and English sections of the test compared to eighth graders statewide (p.143). For instance, in review of students scoring in the top levels, 37% of foster children scored in the top levels compared to 60% of the general student population in English. In Math, 34% of the foster care population scored in the top levels compared to 60% of the general student population. The lower test scores are not surprising considering the educational struggles of children in foster care and the findings in the literature review.

Discussion

Child and Family Service Reviews are a valuable tool for states to use in designing program improvements. Louisiana has already taken steps toward ensuring that children entering the foster care system in Louisiana will have positive educational outcomes. One step was passing Louisiana Title 17- Education legislation (LA. REV. STAT. 17:238(c)). The Department of Children and Family Services and the Department of Education have also increased collaborative efforts to improve educational outcomes for children in foster care, including transferring school records, ensuring transportation services, making appropriate educational placements, and putting systems in place to track the educational success of foster youth.

Additional steps should be taken to understand the barriers that prevent children in foster care from having better educational outcomes. Face-to-face conversations with child welfare workers in the field reveal additional barriers. Confidentiality rules and regulations maintained by the child welfare system and the education system often present a barrier. Child welfare agencies and the school system have different policies governing what information must be kept confidential. The Department of

Children and Families Services policy requires that an educational history be maintained in the child's case record. However, the majority of the information in the child's protective services file cannot be shared with the education system. A general lack of understanding on policies and procedures between child welfare workers and the education workers has been noted in the research addressing educational barriers (Noonan et al., 2012; Weinberg, Zetlin, & Sea, 2009). Louisiana could benefit by adopting suggestions posed by focus groups members in Noonan et al.'s study, namely to institute training related to cross-system roles and policies (Noonan et al., 2012). Communication in general can also be a problem when a child comes into care; no one person is responsible for communicating between the systems to ensure that the child's educational needs are addressed. Child Protection Services in other states have dealt with this problem by instituting a child welfare liaison between the schools and the child protection agency (Weinberg, et al., 2009).

Another large barrier noted by field workers is the shortage of foster homes in the state. As of August 14, 2012, the state of Louisiana had 4,014 children in the foster care system. In one region alone there were 709 children in care and only 368 foster homes available to care for those children (E. Shea, personal communication, November 19, 2012). The challenge is magnified for the agency when they do not have the resources to locate a foster home that is in the child's home school district. Geographic information systems (GIS) are available, which could track the location of foster parent homes and local school districts. However, confidentiality laws again place barriers on the ability to develop and utilize a comprehensive system that would map out where children come into care, and where available foster homes exist that would enable the child to be placed in his or her home school district. A collaborative effort is needed to put a GIS system in place that incorporates, areas kids are coming into care and percentages of kids coming in the system from different areas, as well as areas where foster parents reside and coordinating areas where more foster parents are needed along with school district information. This type of system would also benefit the foster parent recruiters in identifying areas to intensify recruitment efforts.

Conclusion

There are inherent challenges in the system. The Fostering Connections Legislation will only be successful if the child welfare and education systems collaborate and work together to improve the educational outcomes of children in foster care. The data collected during the CFSSR process are good indicators of the state's progress toward compliance

with the Fostering Connections Act, thereby improving the educational outcomes of foster youth. Individual states should take advantage of the data available through regular CFSRs to measure the effectiveness of their child welfare policies. The CFSR data can be used to analyze child welfare policies and programs that need to be revised or changed to ensure the well-being of children in the state are improving. States will also be more effective in meeting the needs of children in their state if they look deeper than the CFSR data and work toward eliminating barriers that are often unforeseen during policy development.

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