



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare

RE: Oversight: Foster care in New York City and a report on the educational continuity of children in foster care

June 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the needs of children in foster care, particularly the importance of school stability for students in care. My name is Erika Palmer, and I am a Supervising Attorney at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC), where I direct our project that focuses on the educational needs of children in foster care or involved with the child welfare system. For over 40 years, AFC has worked to promote access to the best education New York can provide to all students, especially students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. Every year, our office helps thousands of families navigate New York City's public school system, and my colleagues and I help hundreds of students in foster care access needed educational services.

Research consistently shows that youth in care experience a host of educational challenges, and multiple school transfers are a big part of the problem. Students who change schools frequently have lower test scores, earn fewer credits, and are less likely to complete high school than students whose school placements are stable. Even one school transfer during high school cuts a student's chances of graduating in half. On average, students who age out of foster care experience *seven or more* unplanned school changes from elementary school through high school.

In addition to the academic impact of frequent school moves, changing schools, especially in the middle of the year, can be emotionally damaging. Transferring schools suddenly forces students to adjust to new schedules and routines, different curriculums and teaching styles, and varying school environments while experiencing the trauma of being separated from their families and losing their home. Students might have to leave friends and teachers without getting the chance to say good-bye. In part as a result of these disruptions, students in foster care are twice as likely to be suspended, three times as likely to be identified as having special education needs, and three times as likely to be classified as having an Emotional Disturbance as their non-foster care peers. Improving school stability for students in care may not solve these inequities, but we believe that it can go a long way toward addressing them.

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In 2008, the federal government recognized the importance of educational continuity for children in care when it included school stability provisions in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. Over the past year or two, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and its contracting agencies have begun to take notice. ACS and the foster care agencies are showing a greater understanding of the importance of school stability, sometimes expending substantial resources to maintain students' school placements. ACS has also formed a working group with contract agency staff and advocates to develop protocols and best practices for promoting school stability.

Based on our discussions in this workgroup, our conversations with agency staff, and my own experiences working with students and families, the greatest challenge to ensuring school stability for children in care is identifying transportation options for students. There are simply not enough foster homes to place every child in a foster home near their school. If a foster parent has multiple children who all attend different schools, it may be impossible for them to bring one child to a school in another neighborhood, let alone another borough. Currently, the Department of Education (DOE) will not provide busing to general education students whose school is more than five miles away or outside of the community school district; nor will it bus any student from outside of the five boroughs to a school in the city, no matter the distance. As a result, agencies may be forced to have staff members spend 4 or more hours per day escorting a child to and from school, rather than tending to their case planning responsibilities, in order to maintain a child's school placement. Besides being incredibly inefficient, such arrangements are not sustainable over the long term, and children may be forced to change schools, not because it's best for them, but because the adults in charge cannot agree on how to get them to school every day.

Recent amendments to the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act require school districts to collaborate with state and local child welfare agencies to develop transportation plans for students in foster care by the 2016-2017 school year. School districts will be required to provide transportation to students in care if the child welfare agency has agreed to reimburse them or if the respective departments have agreed to share the cost of transportation. We urge the City Council to encourage ACS and the DOE to work together to develop a viable transportation plan as soon as possible. Students in care need transportation to achieve school stability, and disputes about funding should not get in the way of meeting children's educational needs.

We also appreciate the City Council's efforts to require reporting on school stability and educational outcomes for students in foster care. We are attaching to our testimony some minor suggestions for strengthening the educational continuity bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.