

The Educational Needs of Children in Foster Care: The Need For System Reform

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**Center Without Walls
Final Report
To The Child Welfare Fund
November 6, 1998**

"Child welfare has been a mess for decades."

Nicholas Scoppetta
Commissioner, New York City's Agency for Children
New York Times, October, 1997

Introduction

Children who are caught up in the child welfare system are often seriously harmed. The impact of being removed from their parents and their homes and being placed into foster care is particularly disruptive for children with educational disabilities or other special needs. This final report provides an overview of the educational needs of children in foster care. It is based on the experiences of parents and agency staff who attended workshops presented by the Center Without Walls and who were served by the Center Without Walls, and focus groups and individual interviews with key informants. Focus groups were held at CASA and C-PLAN. Individual interviews were conducted with: MaryAnn Quaranda (Dean of Fordham's School of Social Welfare and member of the ACS Research Advisory Panel); Jane Golden (C-PLAN Project at the Office of Mark Green); Betsy Krebs (Youth Advocacy Center); Janet Acker (CASA); Fran Getelis (South Bronx Human Development Organization); Megan McLoughlin (Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies); and Nancy Mamis-King (Neighborhood Youth and Family Services). Relevant reports on the topic were also reviewed. Part I of this report focuses on the survey findings. Part II focuses on the major barriers to educational success confronting children who are involved with the foster care system. It focuses on (a) barriers to timely school placements; (b) impact on appropriate school placements; and (c) impact on school success.

Part I: Survey Findings

A. Demographics

Overall 72 parents completed the survey. Their ages ranged from 18 to 60; 50% were age 33 or younger. The majority were female (73%), Black/African American (69%), reported that English was their home language (86%), and had a high school diploma (66%). Almost half (47%) reported that some of their children were currently in foster care.

The majority of survey respondents were biological parents (73%), 4% were grandparents, and 13% were foster parents. Slightly more than half had 2 children or less (53%); 22% had 3 children; 20% had 4 or 5; 3% had 6; and the remainder (3%) had 9 or 10 children. Overall, the 72 survey respondents represented 197 children; 83% reported having at least one child currently enrolled in school. The majority of the 197 children (122) were attending school. Of the 122 children in school, 50% (n=61) were currently placed in special education.

B. Family Needs for Assistance

Parents were asked to respond to a series of questions designed to assess their needs for assistance. The questions were posed as follows:

"There are a number of different things that parents often mention when they are asked about information or programs they would like to have. To what extent do you feel the need for any of the following types of help or assistance?"

The response choices were [0] No Interest; [1] Low Priority; [2] Medium Priority; and [3] High Priority. Table 1 provides a summary of the issues, and the proportion of parents who indicated that the issue was a "High Priority." The issues are listed in descending order of importance. Some key points are summarized below.

Parents want to be able to participate in decisions about their child's schooling, but they need help.

- o 92% report that they need help with regard to participating in decisions about schooling (66% say this is a High Priority).
- o 98% want information about their child's legal rights to services and aid (82% say this is a High Priority).
- o 75% want information about special education (46% say this is a High Priority).
- o 92% want help to enable them to more effectively talk with agency staff to get better services for their child (61% say this is a High Priority).

Parents want support services for their child.

- o 85% want information about recreational, after-school and other social programs (72% say this is a High Priority).
- o 72% want information about camps and other summer programs (68% say this is a High Priority).
- o 73% want information about medical and health services (59% say this is a High Priority).
- o 70% want help locating a day care center or preschool program for their child (42% say this is a High Priority).

Parents want parenting support.

- o 98% want information about how children grow and develop (52% say this is a High Priority).

- o 81% want information on parenting (49% say this is a High Priority).

Parents want support services for themselves.

- o 72% want information about support groups (43% say this is a High Priority).
- o 63% want information about respite services (42% say this is a High Priority).
- o 79% want information about case management services (39% say this is a High Priority).
- o 77% want information about family support services (47% say this is a High Priority).

Table 1: Family Needs for Assistance

	<u>HIGH PRIORITY</u>
Information about my child's legal rights to services and aid	82%
Recreational, after-school and other social programs	72%
How to participate in decisions about schooling	66%
How to talk with agency staff to get better services for my child	61%
Information about medical and health services	59%
Camps and other summer programs	58%
Information about how children grow and develop	52%
Information about parenting courses	49%
Information about family support services	47%
Information about special education	46%
Information about support groups	43%
Locating a day care center/preschool for my child	42%
Getting professional respite services for my child	42%

C. Experiences with Special Education

Overall 34 parents had experiences with the Special Education System. The major issues are highlighted below and summarized in Table 2.

Parents are encouraged to participate in planning and decision making.

- o 67% report getting a lot of encouragement to participate.

Parents need help securing services for their child.

- o Only 42% have an individual who works with them to inform them of available services.

Agency staff are not helpful finding services for children

- o Only 33% report they got any help from agency or school staff in finding services for their child.

There is poor interagency communication and collaboration

- o Only 32% report that staff from one provider help them to obtain services from other providers.

Barriers prevent parents from participating in planning and decision making.

- o Only 33% report that meetings are planned at convenient times.
- o Only 41% report that there is a sharing of information between parents and professionals.
- o Only 46% report that communication is in clear understandable language, avoiding jargon and technical terms.
- o Only 38% report that professionals are sensitive when sharing the results of assessments.

Table 2: Experiences with Special Education

Feel encouraged to participate in planning and decision making	67%
Communication is in clear understandable language	46%
Has a person who informs them of available services	42%
There is a sharing of information between parents and professionals	41%
Professionals are sensitive when sharing assessment information	38%
Got help from agency/school staff in finding services	33%
Meetings planned at convenient times	33%
Staff from one provider helped access services from another provider	32%

Part II: Barriers to Educational Success

I. Impact on Timely School Placements

Issue 1: Disruptions in educational services resulting from multiple moves between schools.

The major aspect of foster care which has a detrimental impact on the education of children is the instability of their living arrangements. Children in foster care generally experience multiple moves, from placement to placement. Some children are moved frequently and even abruptly. Educational continuity is rarely considered when children are changed from one home to another. Frequent moves generally result in frequent changes in school.

"Young people in care are frequently transferred among foster care placements. Too often, a youth will have been in as many as seven residences over a three year period, with just as many school transfers." [Advocate]

Both school mobility and the subsequent disruptions to regular school attendance are well documented barriers to school success. In addition, some students who qualify for special services such as Title I, special education, or gifted and talented programs, are unable to access such services because their transience results in their not being evaluated. Chancellor's Regulation A-831, for example, requires schools to make and document efforts to remediate deficits before a special education evaluation is pursued. Any sincere effort in this regard takes time to implement and determine its effectiveness in remediating the student's deficits. However, many children's stays in school are shorter than the length of time involved in developing, implementing, and evaluating interventions. Further, districts are required to complete an evaluation of the student within 30 days of the parent's consent. In some cases, the children are moved prior to the completion of an evaluation.

"A number of compelling reasons can be made for allowing the student to remain at their current school: the school becomes an island of continuity at a time when everything else in the child's life is in upheaval; the child will almost surely suffer academically in adjusting to a new program and new teachers in the middle of a school year." [Advocate]

Issue 2: Placement into local schools is frequently untimely as a result of enrollment delays.

The present system fails to ensure continuity of educational services when children are removed from their homes, or are transferred from one placement to another. Consequently, children who are relocated and required to move to a new school are often forced to endure a considerable loss of school time.

Issue 3: Residency barriers prevent children from remaining in their current schools.

When a child relocates to a new district it is in the child's best interest to either remain in the old school until a school transfer is affected or to remain at his/her current school until graduation.

Some administrators at the old school have been known to object on the grounds that the youngster is now out of their district, and they may even discharge him. This is illegal. In addition, parents rarely know that a child has the right to stay at their current school. They should be informed of this right.

Issue 4: Some schools deny enrollment of children without proof of immunization.

In NYC, school-age children cannot attend school unless they have been immunized or are in the process of being immunized. Because of the transiency associated with their living arrangements, children in foster care are likely to have their immunization records either lost or misplaced. Some parents reported that their children had been denied admission to school because they are unable to provide the school with a copy of their records. Some were required to have the children reimmunized because they were unable to provide a copy of their immunization records and their school records could not be located. The inability of families to provide the school with a copy of their records should not necessarily result in placement delays. Chancellor's Regulation A-710 states that homeless children do not need proof of immunization if they were previously attending a NYC public school. There is no similar protection for children in foster care. There should be.

Issue 5: Loss of school records hinder timely school placements.

Given the transiency associated with placement in the foster care system, school records are frequently lost in the shuffle. While school reports are required to be maintained in the case records of the authorized agency, they rarely are. Since most children are removed from their homes while they are in school, perhaps they should be issued with an "education passport" at the time of their removal.

It should also be noted that school records should not prevent children from enrolling in school. According to Chancellor's Regulations, schools are obligated to immediately register children in school (Kindergarten through 8th grade). If there are doubts as to the legitimacy of a child's residence in the zone of the school, a school may request an investigation only after registering the child. Both agency staff and parents must be informed of this mandate.

Issue 6: Additional barriers confront high school students.

Because of the high school admission process, the full range of educational options and placements is not available in the middle of the academic year because schools and programs are full.

Because placements in group homes are generally made without regard to the educational wishes of the youth, some high school students who wish to continue in their current schools must travel lengthy distances.

Parents are almost never aware of the options of "alternative high schools." Consequently, students are often left to languish in their large zoned schools.

Parents and agency staff should be informed that high school students in New York City can transfer to a new school when they move--but only during the "transfer periods" in September and January. These transfers need not be limited to transfers to zoned schools; students should be given the opportunity to attend a "comparable" program to the one they are leaving.

Issue 7: Kindergarten children are routinely denied access to schooling.

Children who are eligible for kindergarten programs are routinely being denied access to school. This practice clearly violates Section 3202 of the Education Law which provides that five year olds have the right to attend school as long as they turn five before December 1st. The New York City Board of Education is not required to establish kindergarten programs, but if sufficient kindergarten classes do not exist, five year olds have the right to start first grade (IED. DEPT. REP. 775, 1952). However, Section 3205 of the law provides that they are not required to attend school until age six. Thus, attendance of 5-year olds is at the discretion of their parents, not the New York City Board of Education.

One additional problem is that kindergarten students who register late are sent to "annexes". This usually requires that children arrive at their zoned school by 7:30am to be bussed to the kindergarten annex.

Issue 8: Efforts are rarely made to place preschoolers into available programs.

NYC's public day care system, run by the Agency for Child Development (ACD) is often inaccessible. In addition to the public day care system in the community, most community school districts have preschool programs in the schools. Transient children, however, are often excluded from these programs, because selections are done periodically, and transient children may not be in the right place at the right time. In many districts, for example, slots are allocated by lottery in the springtime, preventing transient children from being able to apply for services. The problems are even greater for children who require bilingual preschool programs.

Children in foster care should be given a priority for preschool programs. Currently these slots are on a first come, first served basis. As the Board of Education plans for the expansion of the new universal pre-kindergarten program in 2001, they should be coordinated with ACS to ensure that children in foster care, as well as those in preventive services, are prioritized for service.

Issue 9: The educational needs of preschoolers with disabilities are frequently overlooked.

In July 1989, New York Education Law Secs. 4401-4410 were amended. The new law outlined all activities associated with the provision of preschool special education. The municipality of residence and the local district Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) were given the responsibility for ensuring that preschool children ages three and four with suspected disabilities are evaluated and given appropriate placements. Prior to this date, the Family Court was responsible for this process. Although it is the responsibility of parents who wish to have their child evaluated to contact the district CPSE, or the Early Childhood Direction Center in their area, they are not always aware of how to access available services. Thus, many children

are not identified. The Administration for Children Services should ensure that preschoolers in foster care are identified during the health screening, and referred to the school district CPSE. Case workers should be required to ask parents routinely if their preschool children have a physical or learning problem. When parents determine that there may be a need for preschool special education services, they should be referred to the CPSE, or the Early Childhood Direction Center in their area.

Sadly, few parents and agency staff are aware of these rights and available programs.

Issue 10: Infants and toddlers who are eligible for Early Intervention services do not always receive them.

Children between the ages of 0 and 3 are eligible for early intervention services in New York City. Foster care children born with risks for disabilities must receive prompt referrals to early intervention. Caseworkers, however, are rarely trained on how to help children who are suspected of being developmentally delayed.

"The generally held opinion of these child welfare experts and practitioners is that most foster children in New York City suffer from undetected and untreated disabilities. If social service agency staff seem unable to identify and recommend treatment for infants and toddlers with risks for disabilities, other diagnostic resources should be sought. New York State has developed numerous special programs to identify and treat early delays in development, especially for drug-exposed infants at risk of disabilities. Most foster children and their parents and caregivers in New York City, however, do not receive these special services."[Advocate]

One informant, an early intervention specialist in a City hospital, reported that many foster care children who are hospitalized for several months do not receive Early Intervention services--despite their eligibility. They should. Adequate caseloads and inadequate staff training is particularly important in this area.

"When caseworkers are inexperienced, untrained, and have excessive caseloads, outcomes for foster and adopted children depend almost entirely on the skills and related knowledge of their foster parents and caregivers. When caregivers knew about appropriate child development, programs and services, the children in their homes received early interventions. When they waited for agency action, or ignored or didn't recognize early warning signals, only the most symptomatic children received treatment." [Advocate]

Many parents and agency staff are unaware of this program. They should be.

B. Impact of Appropriate School Placements

"One thing that is sorely needed is advocacy. There needs to be someone who works with the foster parents so that everybody can

address the fact that the child is not getting the appropriate education." [Parent]

Issue 1: Youth who reside in Residential Treatment Centers (RCT) are often placed in the most restrictive educational program, regardless of their individual ability and needs. The process by which they are placed in these schools does not protect their rights.

The New York State Constitution and the State Education Law protect the right to attend public school in the district in which a student resides. [NY CONST Art XI, Section 1; Education Law Section 3202.] Children with disabilities are entitled to "special education" and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C.A. Section 1401 et seq. Article 89 of the Education Law in New York defines the framework within which the schools may act and incorporates the protections and rights enacted in the federal legislation.

No child can be placed in a residential school, unless there is no appropriate nonresidential school available consistent with the needs of the child. [Education Law Section 4402 (2) (b) (2), 4005 (3) (Supp. 1994).] A child who resides in a residential treatment center (RTC) who could benefit from instruction in a public school program must be admitted to the public school in the district in which the RTC is located (and for the purpose of this provision, the special act school district is not considered to be the district in which the RTC is located). [Education Law Section 4005 (3) (Supp. 1994); 8 N.Y.C.R.R. Section 200.11 (b) (1).] New York law also mandates that private or special act schools run on site by RTCs follow the same special education assessment procedures set forth in all public schools. [Education Law Section 4005 (2) (a) (Supp. 1994); 8 N.Y.C.R.R. Section 200.11 (b) (2).]

Despite these protections, children at RTCs are almost never sent to the local public schools. Instead, they are placed in the most restrictive special education setting, regardless of their individual ability and needs. Children are routinely "rubber stamped" as SIE VII, without a true consideration of whether or not the child is emotionally disturbed. For example, in addition to providing room and board, many of the RTCs run on-site special education programs, either as private schools or special act school districts, and place by almost all of their residents in these schools.

"Social workers and administrators cite legitimate concerns regarding the inexperience at the public school districts in dealing with foster care issues, the low quality of public education, the detrimental effects of a drain of the highest functioning students from the RTCs' school programs, and the bias or racism the youth may face in white suburban schools. They also offer another rationale: the agencies receive generous additional financial support from the state for each child they educate." [Advocate]

In the more restrictive segregated schools, all students are labeled as having severe emotional and/or behavioral difficulties and are grouped together in small, rigidly managed classes in which the emphasis often is on behavior management instead of educational instruction.

"Young people at the RTCs describe the schools as unable to meet their needs. Students sit through the same lesson plans year after year. Teachers are not certified in individual subjects. The students are given work far below their abilities; with a wide

range of student abilities in each class, teachers often target the lowest common denominator. At many of the campuses, there is no opportunity to get a high school degree, only a GED or an IEP certificate. The young people "lose" credits while on campus. Youth inappropriately placed in these schools fall behind. The result is students who are at high risk for dropping out or who graduate with less chance for educational or employment advances than their peers in community schools."[Advocate]

One informant provided a solution designed to address the inappropriate and excessive placements of foster care youth in schools located at residential treatment centers and run by foster care agencies:

"If there was proper compliance, each youth in an RTC would receive (a) an independent educational evaluation; (b) the opportunity to attend a community school if he or she can function there; (c) academic instruction appropriate to the ability of the individual student--including a high school diploma track--if he or she can't function in the community school setting, and (d) the assistance of a properly trained surrogate parent who can ensure meaningful participation and protection through the process of Special Educational evaluation." [Advocate]

These issues cause additional problems when children are reunited with parents or foster parents. Residential Treatment Centers refuse to release students until an appropriate school placement is found in their new home area. As a result, students remain in RTCs months longer than necessary. Students should be placed in the new zoned school until the district locates an appropriate placement. However, the mislabeling of these young children causes the problem of placing these children in unnecessarily restrictive placements when they return home. One solution is to require the re-evaluation of these students at least 30 days before they return home and a reconsideration of the most appropriate placement option. This would ensure that children who could function in less restrictive placements (e.g., MIS or general education) are afforded such an opportunity.

Issue 2: Delays in the transfer of school records prevent students from being placed in appropriate classroom settings. Many lose the services they previously received.

Many parents cited delays in the transfer of records as having a negative impact on their ability to place children according to their educational needs and legal entitlements. The process is even more disheartening for children who have been bounced between different placements and schools. Often, their records are lost in the shuffle. In some cases they never arrive because the child's former school may not have them or because they never arrived there from the previous school.

Without school records, children often do not receive the services to which they are entitled. In some cases, children are simply placed in their assigned grade without receiving the educational services to which they are entitled. In other cases, children are placed in inappropriate programs until their records arrive. This affects Title 1 services, and access to other remedial, bilingual, and special education programs.

Issue 3: The process for re-evaluating a special education placement is long and complicated.

For some children in foster care in special education, the decision with regard to their classroom placement may need to be reexamined. In some cases the re-evaluation and placement process takes longer than the mandated 60 days. (Although the Board of Education may be in compliance with the law by offering parents the option to place their child in a state approved private school, this is often not a viable option as private school seats are rarely available.)

"When initial school placements are not appropriate, and when children predictably deteriorate, schools do not respond quickly to support and/or change their placements."
[Advocate]

One additional related problem is that parents do not know that they can request an evaluation of their child at any time. Others do not know that their request should be made in writing. Parents or foster parents clearly need to be made aware of the educational rights of their children.

Issue 4: Children requiring special education services often wait in regular education classes until appropriate placements and transportation are arranged.

In New York City, responsibility for educating children with disabilities lies within each community school district. Each district has a Committee on Special Education (CSE) which oversees the evaluation and placement of these children. However, when children are hard of hearing, visually impaired, or have severe emotional and social needs, the district CSE must request placements from Central's Division of Special Education, Office of Citywide Programs. For children with severe disabilities (e.g. hard of hearing), the scarcity of seats in appropriate programs (especially in the middle of the academic year) often leaves them with no other option but to continue attending their current school. For children who require actual bus transportation to school, this can be a serious obstacle, especially for children who are placed in one borough and attend school in another. In some cases, interborough transportation has been flatly denied.

For children who are transferring into different schools, the major barrier is the untimely transfer of the child's individualized education program (IEP) and other pertinent records. Once the IEP arrives at the CSE, a proper placement has to be found--a process that can take 3-4 weeks, depending on the nature of the child's disability. For example, children requiring resource room instruction often do not receive the required services until an opening occurs in the appropriate program; children are placed in regular classes or in other inappropriate programs; children must travel long distances to available programs; and, in some cases, wait at home until a placement is found.

"The CSE recommended that both boys be placed in 12 month S.I.E. VII Programs for severely emotionally disturbed children, but told the foster mother that there were no available placements. She and the caseworker assumed that there was nothing more that they could do."[Advocate]

One additional problem is that principals often pressure parents of children with severe behavioral problems to keep their children at home until a placement is found. This is illegal, and parents need to know this.

Issue 5: Some students are inappropriately placed in special education.

Several indicators of bias against children and youth in foster care were reported. While it may be true that some of the foster care students have behavioral and/or cognitive delays, there seems to be an assumption that they will all present such difficulties. Questions were continuously raised about the large numbers of foster care youth who are in special education and whether or not their placement in special education is always appropriate.

"Some students are referred to special education when they enter the foster care system, despite being on grade level. Many never leave it." [Advocate]

The excessive over-referral of children into special education especially impact on children with behavior problems and/or ADHD. In many cases, parents reported being pressured into placing their children into special education. Some reported that their child's principal had threatened to call ACS if parents did not consent to having their child evaluated and/or placed in special education. Some parents reported that they had been "baited into special education" by promises of SSI benefits and by being told that they could remove their child from special education if it is no longer appropriate. Finally, many parents reported that they were totally unaware of any intervention/prevention services at the school (e.g., counseling or remediation programs).

Issue 6: Decisions regarding special education are often made by those who are unfamiliar with the needs of the child. In cases where the biological parent is not available, foster care parents must be given more responsibility.

Young people's rights to equal protection under the law are assumed to be protected by their parents. State and federal law focus much attention on protecting the procedural due process rights of the parent. [20 U.S.C.A. Sections 1414-15; 34 C.F.R. Sections 300.500-513; Education Law Sections 4402-4404 (Supp. 1994); 8 N.Y.C.R.R. Section 200.1, 200.5, 279.1-8.] Where there is not a parent or a "person in parental relation" involved, federal and state law require that a "surrogate parent" represent the child's interests in the Committee on Special Education [CSE] process. The surrogate parent is appointed by the school district. [20 U.S.C.A. Sections 1415 (b) (1) (B); 34 C.F.R. Sections 300.514; 8 N.Y.C.R.R. Section 200.5(e).] The surrogate must be committed to becoming thoroughly acquainted with the student and the student's educational needs, and must be familiar with the laws and procedures regarding special education. [34 C.F.R. Section 300.513 (c) (2) (ii); 8 N.Y.C.R.R. Section 200.5 (e) (1) (ii), 200.5 (e) (1) (iv).] Concerned with conflicts of interest, the law prohibits school district employees, other professionals engaged in the educational care of the student, or anyone else with an interest which "could conflict with their primary allegiance to the student they would "represent" from serving as a surrogate parent." [34 C.F.R. Section 300.513 (c) (2) (i); 8 N.Y.C.R.R. Section 200.5(e) (1) (i).] Several objections were made with regard to the surrogate systems.

"They do not know the students, and so cannot represent them adequately; they are not themselves professionals, and so they tend to be passive at CSE meetings, deferring to the professionals; and, because they work for the school system and the CSE, they have more of a sense of comradeship and loyalty to the other workers whom they know, than to the students whom they do not know."[Advocate]

Workshop participants consistently complained about this issue. Agency staff must learn that biological parents must be informed of any meeting regarding their child and allowed to participate in all discussion regarding special education evaluation and/or placement.

Issue 7: Children stay too long in Diagnostic Reception Centers hindering their continuity of education

Some children remain in Diagnostic Reception Centers for 60-90 days. Many receive "Homebound Instruction" -- inadequate services by Board of Education teachers who are supervised by the agencies. Only rarely are children and youth sent to the local schools in the area or allowed to continue at their current school. While this policy is clearly detrimental for all children, it is particularly harmful (and illegal) for special education students.

C. Impact on Academic Success

"Learning problems appear to be endemic among children who enter the child welfare system. Schools play a crucial role in prevention and treatment--especially in situations of child maltreatment." [Agency worker]

Issue 1: As a result of disruptions in educational services resulting from multiple moves between schools, children are performing below grade level.

Research on children who move from one permanent home to another indicates that even when the move is planned and children are prepared for the subsequent disruption, the transition is stressful. Research also indicates that high rates of school mobility are associated with poor attendance and academic failure. For children in the foster care system, the move from their home has generally been more sudden, more unexpected, and therefore more traumatic and stressful--children are suddenly taken away from their families and placed outside of their communities, support systems, schools, and friends. The dislocation of children from their homes, and the subsequent bouncing between temporary placements, result in time away from school, and lack of instructional continuity resulting from movement between schools. Because of unstable home situations, possibly including abuse and neglect, many of these young people are likely to have been in academic difficulty before they entered the foster care system. Their experiences while in foster care often place them at risk of becoming frustrated and defeated, and of experiencing school failure. Children who transfer from school to school fall behind academically and get discouraged; credits are often lost in the process. This places them at greater risk of dropping out of school.

When children move from school to school, they lose their friends and have to make new ones. At the same time, they have to get used to a new school, new teachers, and new school work that is often discontinuous with the work they were doing before. For children in foster care, moving two, three, and sometimes four times or more in one year, is devastating--emotional and academically. The constant transfers make it almost impossible for them to succeed.

Key informants indicated that many students drop out of school because of traditional problems such as poor grades, lack of interest in school, pregnancy, parenting, and behavior problems. Others drop out because of factors directly related to their experiences in foster care. Few are targeted for intervention services, and alternative school programs, programs for pregnant and parenting teens are often filled.

"Youth in foster care are frequently failed twice, falling between the crack of two bureaucracies designed for the sole purpose of serving them. These kids face the troubling prospect of leaving foster care without a high school diploma." [Advocate]

Constant transfers also make it more difficult for schools to provide meaningful services. The way schools are organized assumes continuity. When rosters change from week to week, continuity of instruction is virtually impossible. Furthermore, when children remain in a school for only a short period of time, it becomes difficult to provide any educational service of lasting value, or to begin to repair the damage done by the combination of instability, foster care, and poverty. Classroom teachers do not have adequate time to identify and appropriately respond to the specific academic deficits of children before they move. By the time their deficits are identified and services are arranged, they have moved to a different school.

Issue 2: Barriers to parental involvement in the education of their children.

Parents are a vital resource for assisting in the education of their children. Active parent participation significantly enhances school attendance, self-esteem, academic achievement, social behavior, and attitudes and expectations toward school. Despite the evidence, parents continue to be an untapped resource in New York City. In fact, only rarely do schools provide outreach services to involve parents in the education of their children. Some key informants stressed the need for parent workshops for both biological and foster parents. They also identified some possible workshop topics, including, the educational rights of children in foster care, special education, parenting skills, nutrition, activities to do with children, requirements for school enrollment, how to help children with homework, how to advocate around welfare issues, sexuality, child and adolescent development, and how to communicate with teachers (e.g., how often, issues to discuss, the report card).

"Some parents report feeling that voluntary agencies [i.e. foster care] do not treat them with respect. They report that it is very difficult to obtain information and feel that they are left out of agency process. They also report that they are not invited to planning conferences." [Advocate]

Issue 3: Lack of interagency communication and coordination.

Because the educational needs of children in foster care are many, and the problems involved in their education are complex, no agency, school or school district can solve the problems alone. Consequently, these needs can best be met through support, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration between the various agencies that work with children in foster care, as well as communication at the state and local level. A coordinated model of service delivery would enhance the provision of programs and services to these children and their families.

"Any educational program which consists of multiple school placements during the course of an academic year is not appropriate. This practice only serves to impede a child's education and overall development. We must not allow children in foster care to experience further instability and inconsistencies in their lives by forcing them to move from school to school. The agencies involved must ensure that children have the chance to remain in one school, with familiar peers, teachers, and curricula. To accomplish this goal, all agencies involved with foster care children must work together with schools and parents."[Advocate]

Furthermore, communication between foster care staff and schools is critical to the success of efforts to educate students in foster care. Improved communication promotes faster enrollment processes, fewer absences, and better follow-up on behavior, academic, and health concerns. However, some informants expressed concern about the poor coordination between the Administration for Children Services and the public school system:

"Administration for Children Services and the Board of Education do not work well together...even for something as straightforward as attendance. When a child misses several days of school, the school will send an automated recording that "your student has missed several days of school" without personal follow-up. This message is often ignored by overworked social workers or is not passed along to the appropriate people in ACS." [Advocate]

Finally, foster care services are improved when schools share information on how to accommodate student homework needs, health needs, and other needs that impact on the student's success in school. Similarly, foster care agencies have been able to share with schools information that has helped schools better accommodate the student's emotional, physical, and social needs that impact on the student's success in school.

These findings identify the need for intensive collaboration between child welfare agencies and schools. Effective strategies may include agencies assigning a specific school liaison person to monitor and advocate for services for the children in placement.

Workshop participants also frequently noted that ACS workers are unaware of special education procedures and due process rights of parents. Thus, they encourage parents to accept programs that are not beneficial to children (especially MIS II and SIE VII) and they sometimes refer cases to family court for educational neglect, when, in fact, parents are exercising their due process rights. ACS needs to be better informed of educational options and rights.

Issue 4: Emotional problems and adjustments result from the removal from their families, being bounced from one temporary home to another, and frequent school transitions.

Given the disruptions, losses and uncertainties associated with the loss of a permanent home and the subsequent experiences within the emergency shelter system, some children come to school with emotional conflicts that impact on their ability to concentrate on academic tasks.

Psychological problems most often identified among children include anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems. Some children also suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In some cases, psychological counseling may be necessary to enable them to succeed academically, and benefit from education. In addition, children who have been abused need understanding, attention, and someone to talk to.

Despite these needs, the availability of counselors, social workers, and psychologists do not meet the need for such services. Few elementary schools have full-time counselors. Some schools have counselors only one or two days a week. Counselors in secondary schools generally have many responsibilities such as scheduling and testing that limit the amount of time they have to address the emotional needs of children in foster care. In some schools, counselors feel that they do not have adequate time to appropriately respond to the needs of children coming from typical home environments. These counselors are likely to have only minimal amounts of time to respond to the many needs of children in foster care. School social workers are trained to respond to certain counseling needs. However, many schools do not have social workers at all. Where they do exist, the size of their caseload generally prevents them from being able to adequately respond with the time intensive assistance required.

Given the inadequacy of mental health services provided by school social workers, the New York City Board of Education and ACS need to collaborate to ensure that children who need mental health services are linked to private agencies where services are provided by properly trained staff (e.g., school-clinical child psychologists).

Many parents in the workshops reported that they were being pressured by both ACS and their child's school to place their children on medication. There is little information about these drugs and many parents complain about the side effects. Parents also reported that psychiatrists give little attention to individual children. Once on the medication, case workers and schools tend not to encourage counseling. Parents clearly need to be more informed of their options (e.g., get a second opinion), and rights regarding all psychotropic drugs.

An additional concern raised during the workshops, is that teachers and school staff fail to recognize that children may have a learning disability or need remedial education services. Instead, they may assume that the problems are emotional simply because the children are in foster care. In some cases, children are simply not encouraged to achieve academically.

Issue 5: Unmet medical, dental, nutrition, and other health needs.

Children in foster care experience many acute and chronic health problems. Overall, they are at risk for low birth weight, higher infant mortality, upper respiratory infections, ear disorders, chronic physical disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, and higher levels of lead in their blood. Despite their increased risk, their access to timely and consistent health care is compromised by extreme poverty, removal from community ties, frequent disruptions in family life, and inadequate health care. Without adequate primary and preventive health care services, children in foster care cannot maintain adequate levels of school attendance.

Issue 6: Children are frequently suspended from school/and illegally denied access to school.

Because of the emotional and behavioral problems associated with foster care placement, compounded by their unmet counseling needs, children in foster care are routinely suspended from school.

"One 5-year old child, born to a woman diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, crack and alcohol abuse, moved 5 times between placements and suffered physical abuse and negligence by relatives and caregivers. He was sent home from kindergarten early in the term. The school instructed his foster mother to keep him at home because of his misbehavior and did not refer him to the CSE." [Agency Worker]

This was a frequent and major issue raised by parents during the workshops. Some parents reported that their children are suspended five, six, and even nine times a year. Everything above twice a year is illegal (by a principal's suspension). In addition, parents are frequently called to come pick their children up in the middle of the day. Schools rarely offer interventions such as counseling or working on behavior modification plans. The federal IDEA mandates such services.

Finally, some schools frequently use in-school detentions with children who have behavior problems. In some cases, however, children are kept all day in the dean's office with no school work.

Issue 7: Transition services for youth are inadequate.

Informants express concern about the vocational training needs of non-college bound youth (e.g., training on independent living, low educational expectations for the youth, underestimating them by believing they are not capable of success in college). Some concerns focused on the availability and appropriateness of vocational training programs:

"At one residential training center, the issue was raised about the need to begin vocational training while a youngster is still in high school. Until recently, the regulations did not permit this. Vocational training was only available for youngsters of 16 years or older who were out of school and not working. Newer regulations permit training to begin while the student is still in school, but there is still a problem in that the necessary release time is not granted." [Advocate]

Some concerns focused on the access barriers--particularly for special education youth in foster care:

"Obtaining good vocational training is a very difficult problem, especially for youth who are in special education. Most of them are reading at or below the 3rd grade level, whereas most of the programs use reading materials geared to a 12th grade level. Hence, because of their low reading levels and their IEP diplomas, the students cannot get into these programs. Yet, there is a variety of training areas, such as food service work, corporate cafeteria work, or even retail work for which courses that use simpler reading materials would be very appropriate. There is a strong need for such courses, and for more resources to which these young people can be sent for training."[Advocate]

Some concerns identified specific issues with regard to accessing services from VESID (Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities), the New York State rehabilitation agency which has many training programs which could be helpful to these young people. Some informants reported that the counselors at VESID were not sensitive to the needs of adolescents, and especially of youth in foster care. Others reported that there needs to be a system of improved coordination of services between foster care agencies and VESID to improve access to non-college, vocational training alternatives. Representatives of residences located outside the city said that they had unique problems:

"Most of the training programs are in the city, and they are not necessarily conveniently located with regard to public transportation; it was difficult to get VESID to cover the cost of transportation and lunches; and, sometimes VESID refuses to sponsor students if the agency was unable to guarantee how long the student would remain at the residence, although it was unclear why the eligibility for rehabilitation services could not be maintained even if the address of the student changed. It would seem that a better system for cooperation between the foster care agencies and VESID needs to be developed."[Advocate]

Other comments focused on the adequacy of the training that is provided.

"The preparation should have several essential components: teaching self-esteem, self confidence, self reliance and responsibility as well as techniques for overcoming discouragement and despair improving academic skills; teaching about educational issues; teaching about the resources that are available and how to access them; teaching about careers; teaching research skills so they can know how to get more information on their own; providing computers and calculators at the homes of the students so they can become comfortable with their use from an early age; recreation and socialization programs and help in developing networking skills; and the development of decision making skills."[Advocate]

Again, the federal IDEA mandates such transition services.