



Fostering School Stability for Children in Connecticut's Care

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Foster children in Connecticut are frequently uprooted from their schools when they are removed from their families or shuffled between foster homes or institutions. Although DCF does not keep track the number of school changes for children in its care, we know from working with youth that five, eight – even ten -- school changes are not uncommon.

Frequent school changes are traumatic for foster children. Children in the child protection system already have been traumatized by abuse or neglect in their homes and removal from their families. Uprooting a child from her school community deepens this trauma. Not only does this child lose her parents and possibly her siblings, but she also loses connections to classmates, a favorite teacher, coach, and school activities – the aspects of daily life that create a sense of security, self-worth and belonging.

School disruptions have devastating effects on the educational outcomes of foster children. Studies have shown that it takes a child approximately three to six months to recover academically from *each* school transfer. Students who change schools even once during high school are significantly less likely to graduate than their peers. Not surprisingly, the effects of *multiple* school transfers are devastating. Extensive research links frequent school changes to an increased risk of failing a grade, behavior problems, and dropping out. Poor academic performance in turn contributes to above-average rates of homelessness, criminality, drug abuse, and unemployment. For these reasons, experts have identified school stability as arguably *the* single most effective way to improve educational outcomes for foster children.

School stability is better for foster children's classmates, educators, schools and communities. High student mobility puts an enormous burden on schools and educators. Teachers and administrators must scramble to determine the appropriate education program for each new student, without being able to predict how long that student will remain in the school. Even the most extraordinary and devoted teachers cannot educate children effectively without stability and continuity. And when foster children who switch schools mid-year fall behind, towns and taxpayers are left paying for additional schooling.

Fifteen states have taken the lead in enacting mechanisms to promote school stability for foster children. Although each of these states has tackled this issue with creative and cost-effective solutions, Oregon, in particular, has adopted legislation well suited to Connecticut.

The fifteen states that have enacted legislation to provide school stability for foster youth: Arkansas, California, Illinois, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Virginia and Washington

Connecticut should follow other states in enacting legislation that would allow foster children to remain in their home schools, as long as it is in their best interest. Foster children would be kept in their home schools only if it is in their best interest. In most cases, DCF and the child's representative would agree upon what was in the child's best interest. In cases of disagreement, juvenile court judges – who have

extensive experience in applying the “best interest of the child” standard -- would make these determinations.

School stability should be ensured by the custodial parent of the foster children – the State of Connecticut. This avoids putting an unfunded mandate on the towns. The state Department of Children and Families (DCF) already is intimately involved in other aspects of the child’s placement. DCF is in the best position to arrange for transportation to the child’s previous school district if continuity is in the child’s best interest. Oregon’s experience demonstrates that transportation can be provided in a safe and cost-effective manner appropriate for the age of the child.

Last session, school stability legislation received extensive bipartisan support. The bill passed unanimously in the Children’s and Education Committees and received funding in the Appropriations Committee. Had a new budget been adopted last session, this initiative likely would have passed.

The program is relatively inexpensive and can likely be funded through current outlays. Based on preliminary cost estimates, including information submitted by DCF, a school stability program would cost *less than 1/3 of 1 percent* of DCF’s yearly budget. Moreover, a portion of the costs would be covered by Title IV-E and therefore return to the General Fund. Given the documented social, economic, and educational costs of frequent school disruptions on foster children, schools, and towns, ensuring school stability is a wise investment.

A new federal law requires Connecticut to plan for school stability. In October 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was signed into law. The goal of the Fostering Connections law is to help hundreds of thousands of children and youth in foster care find permanent families and improve their educational outcomes.

The new federal law *requires* child welfare agencies to include “a plan for ensuring the educational stability of the child while in foster care.” Specifically, the agency must include assurances that:

- the child’s foster care placement takes into account the appropriateness of the current educational setting and the proximity to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement; and
- the state child welfare agency has coordinated with appropriate local educational agencies to ensure that the child remains in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement.

Finally, the new law provides federal funding (through Title IV-E reimbursement) for reasonable transportation costs to a child’s home school.