Increasing the Educational Attainment and Achievement of Youth in

Foster Care

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Preface

The basis for this research stems from my experiences working with foster youth through my internship with the Los Angeles based organization the Alliance for Children's Rights and the REACH program at the University of Redlands. Through these experiences I was able to connect with several individuals that inspired me to research how these individuals could better be supported in a system that often stacks the odds against them. As a future educator, I also wanted to learn how I could engage and advocate for all of the students in my classroom. This paper has been written to fulfill the honors thesis requirements for the Proudian Interdisciplinary Honors Society. I was engaged in researching and writing this paper from September 2021 to February 2022.

I couldn't have written this thesis without a strong support group. I'd like to thank my family, for always encouraging me to try my best and loving me regardless of how it turned out. Secondly, I'd like to thank my friends for talking through arguments and listening to me rant about every new problem I had learned. I'd also like to thank the Redlands Mock Trial Team who motivated me through my last weekend of writing during our 2022 Regional Tournament. Finally, I'd like to thank my readers, especially my chair Althea Sircar. Professor Sircar worked with me all year long and guided me through the research process, while also constantly reassuring me that everything would be fine when I felt like it wouldn't be. Thank you all so much for everything. I couldn't have done it without you.

Introduction

Students in foster care are one of the most vulnerable, underperforming groups in school districts today. The California Smarter Balanced Assessments in English Language Arts and Mathematics (a standardized test taken in 3rd-8th grade and then again in the third year of high school) found that only 24% and 15% of students in foster care met or exceeded standards (California Department of Education, n.d., Table 3 and Table 4). These low rates of educational

achievement are often indicators for the educational attainment — the highest level of education completed — of foster youth later in life. According to California Department of Education records from the 2019-2020 school year, only 58% of youth in foster care graduated high school in four years, compared to 85% of students not in foster care (California Department of Education, n.d., Table 5). Of the students who do earn their high school diploma, less than 3% graduate with a college degree (National Foster Youth Institute, 2021).

Youth in foster care are "just as likely as their peers to have college aspirations," indicating that their success is being impeded by some external force (Johnson, 2019). How can school districts better provide foster youth with the structure, support, and stability they need to increase academic performance in school (educational achievement) and completion of higher education (educational attainment)? This essay will suggest ways to increase the number of foster youth graduating high school in four years, with the option to pursue higher education.

Background

There are two main federal laws that shape the experiences of students in foster care: the "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008" and the "Every Student Succeeds Act or (ESSA)" (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, n.d.). These laws outline the main guidelines for students in foster care with the primary goal of maintaining educational stability, which can be defined as a child remaining at their school of origin unless a school change is "in the best interest of the child" (H.R. H.R.6893, 110th Cong, 2008).

Table 1: Major Provisions of Federal Laws Regarding K-12 Students in Foster Care

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (H.R. H.R.6893, 110th Cong, 2008)	**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Foster Care Provisions** (S. S. 1177, 114th Cong, 2015)
Required child welfare agencies to identify	Foster youth must remain in their school of

and notify all adult relatives of a child/children's removal from the home within 30 days	origin unless a school change is in their "best interest"
Notify all adult relatives of their options to become a placement for the child/children	Foster youth must be immediately enrolled into their new school, regardless of credit or record status
Required each child in the foster care system to be a full time student (unless they are incapable due to a documented medical condition)	The new school must immediately contact the previous school to obtain any relevant academic or disciplinary records
Required child welfare agencies to make "reasonable efforts" to keep siblings together	Local education agencies must communicate with child welfare agencies to discuss issues such as transportation and student status
Required that each child's case plan must include a plan for ensuring educational stability	States must provide disaggregated data on foster youth and their achievement, including high school graduation rates

According to these laws, students should only be removed from their school of origin if it is in their best interest for a school change to occur. While the legislation does not explicitly define what this means, the most commonly accepted reason for a school change is when the child is moving to a permanent placement, such as an adult relative residing in another state. Because the student will be able to plant roots at their new school and in their new home, this school change is not considered to be as disruptive to the child. Unfortunately, this is not an option that every student has. Over half of youth in foster care will experience a school change upon entering the system alone, indicating that while the legislation discourages school changes, the law does not reflect reality (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

In theory, child welfare agencies should be consulting with teachers, coaches, school counselors, and anyone else who may be able to testify to the student's experiences. Most importantly, they should be speaking with the students themselves, to determine what connections and relationships the child would lose. In practice, social workers often have

significant caseloads that make it difficult for such conversations to take place. While the Fostering Connections Act and the ESSA mandate that school districts and child welfare agencies establish and maintain communication to ensure each student's educational stability and academic success, this is notoriously difficult to enforce.

Home and school placements for foster youth were also found to be concentrated in poorer school districts, limiting the resources available to foster care students (Zetlin, Macleod, & Kimm, 2012). As a result, youth in foster care have reported experiencing more "discrimination-based harassment, weapons-use, gang involvement and victimization" than their non foster care peers (Benbenishty et. al, 2018). These experiences - also called risk factors - have proven to have a negative impact on student performance for both foster and non foster youth. The primary difference is that students in foster care may not have family or friends to turn to when such events occur. Foster youth reported having less adult support outside of school, indicating that teachers and other school staff may be the only positive adult presence foster youth have in their lives (Benbenishty et. al, 2018). Without school, students in foster care may not have an adult they feel safe enough to turn to for guidance.

When a student experiences a school change, they are affected both academically and emotionally. From an academic standpoint, there is no guarantee that the courses the student was taking at one school will directly translate to the new school they are placed in. For example, many schools will separate math courses differently, with one school site going by content - Pre Algebra or Geometry - while another will go by grade level - Math 7 or Math 8. Even if the student is enrolled in an equivalent course, it is extremely unlikely that the class will be at the same point in the curriculum. This results in one of two problems: the student will either be behind or ahead, both of which add another layer of difficulty to the student's learning journey. Combined with the fact that every teacher has a different style of instruction, students who experience a mid-term school change are at a significant disadvantage.

A school change can also make it extremely difficult for children with IEPs, or Individualized Education Plans, to receive the accommodations they need. In order to implement interventions in the classroom, the person holding a student's educational rights needs to sign off. Typically, these are held by child's biological parent(s) - but when a child enters the system, the courts can limit a biological parent's rights to make decisions on how the child is being educated. In many cases, foster parents do not hold educational rights either. This leaves a school unable to implement an IEP until a social worker arrives to sign, which often takes time and delays the student from getting the services they need (Zetlin, Macleod, & Kimm, 2012).

From an emotional standpoint, a school change may come with a loss of relationships between trusted friends or teachers, in addition to the potential anxiety that results from being the new kid in school. These anxieties and feelings of abandonment often make it difficult for students to form positive relationships, both with their peers and their teachers. In one 2019 study, teachers' described youth in foster care as having unpredictable emotions that were "extremely difficult to manage" (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Furthermore, many teachers, foster parents, and former foster youth testified to students in foster care receiving differential treatment like "lower expectations" and "pity" (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). In some cases, students in foster care were 'passed on' to the next grade level instead of challenged to meet curriculum standards, causing students to progress in school without the skills they needed to continue learning. These biases made it difficult for the students to feel like they were truly capable of educational success because they could tell they were being treated differently, regardless of whether or not this treatment was positive or negative.

In addition to the hardships that come with changing schools, many of these students are also experiencing the extreme trauma that comes with being removed from the home. When children are removed from their homes, they are isolated from their families, friends, teachers, and other relationships they may have previously relied on for support. Students may also still

be processing the abuse, neglect, or loss that resulted in them entering the foster care system in the first place. One study conducted by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente found that adverse childhood experiences such as being removed from the home had "lasting, negative effects" (CDC & Kaiser Permanente, 2021). Children who experienced such trauma had a higher risk for mental health issues like depression and anxiety, which in turn affected their ability to perform in school and in the workplace (CDC & Kaiser Permanente, 2021). To no fault of their own, many students in foster care are simply unable to learn until their feelings of trauma and separation have been processed.

When a child experiences trauma over a period of time like neglect or abuse, the chronic stress causes "neurobiological changes" that can prevent students from being able to be in a normal classroom (Terrasi & Galarce, 2017). Stress hormones may cause structural changes inside the brain such as "the amygdala becoming enlarged" or the "cerebellar vermis becoming overactive" (Terrasi & Galarce, 2017). These changes in particular often result in "quick and exaggerated emotional responses and an inability to sustain attention on academic content," leaving children unable to regulate their actions/emotions (Terrasi & Galarce, 2017). On the surface level, traumatized student behavior can look like "willful disobedience, defiance, or inattention" (Terrasi & Galarce, 2017). In actuality, the student does not feel safe in their environment, and views everyone around them as a "potential threat to their safety," including the teacher (Terrasi & Galarce, 2017). Students who have experienced trauma are often "too scared to learn" (Terrasi & Galarce, 2017). When a teacher is unaware of this, they may misinterpret a student's actions as misbehavior, rather than the trauma response it actually is. Unfortunately, many teachers and educators are not given the training to work with students who have experienced such trauma, making it difficult to reach students where they are and bring them towards higher educational performance (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). With the proper training, learning can be used as a tool to reverse the effects of trauma on the brain, allowing students in foster care to re-enter learning and achieve educational success.

Main Problems

This lower rate of educational attainment and achievement in foster youth can be attributed to three main problems: Lack of Communication, Lack of Consistency, and the Need for Trauma - Informed Pedagogy. Despite current legislation and recent studies outlining that consistent communication leads to the best possible outcomes for youth in foster care, many teachers, foster parents, and foster youth often feel detached from one another (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). It is important for these parties to work collaboratively to ensure that all of the student's needs are addressed. Unfortunately, due to the lack of consistency in the lives of foster youth, it can be difficult to establish and maintain relationships between these parties, leaving foster youth without a true support system (Benbenishty et. al, 2018). These feelings of isolation and abandonment can greatly impact a student, making it difficult for them to learn and succeed in school. Sadly, most foster youth are left to work through these issues alone, as most schools are not structured in a way that is responsive to the effects trauma has on student learning. Additionally, most youth in foster care do not have adequate access to adults who are trained to help them process their trauma so they are able to re-enter learning. Since all three of these issues are so interconnected, they must be addressed simultaneously in order to create real change.

Lack of Communication

In order to determine what is truly the 'best interest' for the student, social workers need to establish and maintain consistent communication with teachers, foster parents, and the student themselves. Take, for example, the issue of transportation. According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is required by law to provide a means of transportation that will allow students to remain at their school of origin if they are placed outside of the school's district. While DCFS offices across the country seem to be in accordance with supplying a means of transportation, these are not always

realistic or sustainable. Upon being removed from her mother's home, one foster youth was placed over 80 miles away from her school of origin (Heimpel & Loudenback, 2017). The small amount of money DCFS offered to cover public transportation was not enough to get her to school on time. Her commute ultimately involved an hour-long car ride with her foster father, "two trains, and a bus" (Heimpel & Loudenback, 2017). Without consistent communication between DCFS, the school site, the foster parents, and the child themselves, there is no way to determine whether or not remaining at the school of origin is truly in 'the best interest' of the child.

However, communication between child welfare agencies and school sites should not end once a student's school site has been decided. Ideally, DCFS would continue to communicate with the school and its staff to determine how the school can best support the student on a day to day basis. Unfortunately, many teachers do not have access to the information they need to properly address the needs of these students. One 2012 study of new teachers (in their first few years of teaching) found that teachers felt extremely unprepared and unequipped to teach students in foster care. Not only were very few teachers informed of their student's foster care status, but they also had little access to student history and other background information (Zetlin, Macleod, & Kimm, 2012). Special education teachers were found to have slightly more access to their students' information than their general ed counterparts, but still less than their students who were not in foster care.

A few general education teachers described gaining some information from the caregiver(s) or from the student themselves, but they claimed that not all foster parents were willing to work with them "as a team" (Zetlin, Macleod, & Kimm, 2012). Several special education teachers felt that "some caregivers were unconcerned" about their students' academic challenges when they "did not attend parent-teacher or IEP conferences, sign paperwork…or provide support when contacted by the teacher" (Zetlin, Macleod, & Kimm, 2012). While there were some foster parents who were willing to actively participate, some special education

teachers believed "[they] did not fully understand the IEP process," making it extremely difficult to ensure the student was receiving the accommodations they needed.

In contrast, many foster parents felt that teacher(s) "did not consider them "real" parents" and would not properly communicate about how the child was performing in school (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Additionally, some felt that because they were not considered 'the real parents,' their knowledge of how to take care of the child - such as in times of emotional distress - were ignored or not taken seriously. While both the teacher and the caregiver(s) may have knowledge about the child the other does not, this information needs to be shared rather than used against the other party. In order for the child to progress in their learning, both the school and the caregivers need to be working together.

Although willing, foster parents are not always able to advocate for the child in their care. Since the birth parent(s) often still hold educational rights for the child, they get to decide how involved the caregiver(s) is in their child's education. In the state of Wisconsin, foster parents are unable to participate in the IEP process "unless the birth parent gives written permission for the foster parents to be part of the team" (Coalition for Children, Youth, & Families & Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2008, updated 2012). This can create a difficult situation for foster parents who want to advocate for a child's education, but do not have the legal right to do so. While foster parent(s) are encouraged to establish and maintain a relationship with the child's birth parents, birth parents are not required to engage if they do not want to. However, a robust relationship between these two parties can help "reduce trauma" for both the child and the birth parent (Children's Trust Fund Alliance, 2020). Not only are the birth parent and foster parent able to exchange information about caring for the child, but the child and birth parent are able to maintain a connection with each other despite being separated. Whenever possible, foster parents and birth parents should communicate and work with each other to give the child the best chance at educational success.

Lack of Consistency

As previously discussed, school changes are often extremely disruptive and damaging to a child's education. Not only does a child lose their teacher and classmates, but they may also lose the activity or extracurricular that helped them feel connected to other people, which in turn helped them succeed academically. Somers et. al (2020) defined school connectedness as "the degree of support in student-teacher relationships, relationships with peers, opportunities to be involved in school, and feelings of belonging." Activities like athletics, music, and art can often bring students together and can lead to professional and academic opportunities as students get older.

Studies have shown that school connectedness - and an overall feeling of belonging - play an important role in "reducing adolescent risk behavior," higher levels of academic achievement," and the likelihood of a student having higher educational attainment (Somers et. al, 2020). While this research is not unforeseen, it is important to note that the opportunity to achieve school connectedness is inherently impeded by a child entering the foster care system. Students who experience numerous school changes are "less likely to develop supportive relationships with school staff and peers" and encounter fewer "opportunities to engage" in extracurricular activities, greatly lowering their school connectedness and overall feeling of belonging (Somers et. al, 2020). Unsurprisingly, students in foster care reported lower levels of school connectedness than students not in foster care (Somers et. al, 2020).

Additionally, students who experience school changes in middle school or high school face the issue of losing credits. "Because different school districts, residential treatment facilities, and group homes have different classes," students in the foster care system are often unable to transfer these classes/credits from one school site to another (Morton, 2015). Since foster students are often moved mid semester, they are "unable to finish their classes" and receive credit for the work they had already completed (Morton, 2015). This results in many foster students having very few credits to their name despite consistently being enrolled in

various school programs. Not only are credit issues "discouraging" to youth in foster care, but they also make it extremely difficult for students to make up for lost time. Furthermore, many youth in foster care will move from one type of school to another. Treatment centers, for example, operate differently from traditional public schools, making it difficult for students in foster care to "get back in the flow of going to [public] school" (Morton, 2015). These inconsistencies only add to the challenges foster youth experience when trying to earn their diploma.

Foster youth who experienced multiple placement changes were also found to be more likely to experience school changes - meaning that students who experienced inconsistency at home were more likely to experience it academically. This lack of consistency makes it extremely difficult for students in foster care to focus on school. Even students who *want* to succeed in school cannot possibly focus on homework when they are worried about their safety and where they are going to end up the next time a placement decides they no longer want them. A 2015 study by Brenda M. Morton found that foster youth had overwhelming feelings of unwantedness and discouragement as a result of experiencing multiple placements while in the system.

In contrast, foster youth who reported consistently feeling safe while in the system were "about three times more likely to complete a high school diploma (not a GED)" than foster youth who did not always feel safe (Gallegos & White, 2013). Stability in placement is "linked to educational resiliency;" students who only experienced one placement were three times more likely to "return to school after dropping out" than students who experienced "five or more placements" (Gallegos & White, 2013). These findings indicate that when students feel secure in their living situation, they are able to turn their attention and efforts towards performing well in school.

Former foster youth have also testified to their mental health and family stressors negatively affecting how they performed in school and their overall perception of school in general (Morton, 2015). While this is not an issue for every student, those whose case includes a

reunification plan may also be focused on the biological parent(s) or siblings they may be separated from at the time. The current foster care system prioritizes reuniting youth with their family of origin, despite the fact that many are removed from their home due to the"neglect or abuse" caused by their family of origin (Font et. al, 2018). In order to be reunified, birth parents must meet the "requirements for reunification" set by their case worker (Font et. al, 2018). Unfortunately, these plans for reunification take time and do not always ensure the child will be reunited with their family of origin. This unpredictability prevents youth in foster care from entering more permanent living situations, and may cause significant stress on the child, especially when reunification is unable to occur due to a birth parent not meeting the requirements (Font et. al, 2018). When a child is preoccupied with worrying about whether or not they will be reunited with their birth families, school is no longer a top priority.

The Need for Trauma - Informed Pedagogy

The trauma experienced by students in foster care can greatly affect their mental stability and create a significant need for support from adults. In addition to feelings of abandonment or grief, foster youth may also be working through abuse, neglect, or domestic violence, which can make it difficult for them to focus on school (Martinez, Williams, & Green, 2019). To no fault of their own, many students in foster care are simply unable to learn until they work through their feelings of trauma and separation. Sadly, most schools do not have trauma-informed training for their faculty and staff. One 2012 study found that both general and special education teachers wanted professional development designed to teach them how to support the emotional and behavioral needs of the foster youth in their classroom, as they had not yet received any such training (Zetlin et. al, 2012). Many of the teachers had never experienced problems like students using drugs or running away, and felt unequipped to deal with such issues without additional support from their principal and counselor(s) (Zetlin et. al, 2012).

One 2019 study found that trauma-informed teaching decreased the number of trauma symptoms students experienced and improved overall student well being (Crosby et. al, 2019). By acknowledging how trauma impacts the brain and its ability to learn, teachers are able to help students address their own trauma, rather than ignoring it. Furthermore, teachers and counselors are able to understand why students are not progressing or are behaving a certain way. One student in foster care attested to being placed in a special education classroom for her behavior, despite not having any of the academic challenges that would typically place a child into special education (Morton, 2015). This caused her to feel frustrated "at being behind her peers because she did not receive the same education they did" (Morton, 2015). This student's teachers attempted to treat her behavior, rather than her trauma, because they did not know how being in the foster care system affected her. Trauma-informed teaching looks at the student as a whole, providing them with the support they need to continue learning without separating them from the rest of the class and making them feel othered (Crosby et. al, 2019).

As a current teacher candidate myself, I can speak to feeling unprepared for working with foster youth. The courses have primarily focused on content and teaching strategies that reach the average student, rather than students with high needs. Interestingly enough, however, many of the strategies that help support high need students can help with average need students as well. Brian Stipp and Lance Kilpatrick conducted a study on "American school teachers' perceptions of a six-session training that used the trauma-informed Trust-based Relational Intervention (TBRI) system." Participants highly valued strategies such as "self regulation activities" to help students "come back to a balanced state" (Stipp & Kilpatrick, 2021). And these strategies are not limited to students with a history of trauma. Anyone who has ever worked with children can testify to the fact that kids frequently get dysregulated, even when they do not have any risk factors that qualify them as high need. If strategies for working with high need students — a minority student population — can work for every child, why not implement training that addresses the minority *and* the majority? While foster youth are not found in every school, it is

important for incoming teachers to be equipped with the knowledge of how they can support any kind of student.

The one caveat with trauma-informed care is that it relies on "consistent interaction with a nurturing adult" (Martinez, Williams, & Green, 2019). As previously discussed, many students experience multiple placements and multiple school changes, making it difficult to ensure this relationship continues despite legislation prioritizing educational stability. If a student experiences a school change, this relationship is interrupted and the student may lose the progress they have already made. Nevertheless, implementing training that teaches school staff how to identify and react to trauma responses will help foster youth feel safe at school while also preventing them from experiencing punishments like detention that fail to address the real reason they are acting out in the first place.

Discussion

While the solutions to these problems appear straightforward, the reality is significantly more nuanced. First, let's look at the issue of a lack of communication. The obvious answer is to mandate higher levels of communication and enforce penalties if such communication does not occur. Technically, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) does just that. The law outlines that students should only be moved from their school of origin when it is in their "best interest," because students who experience educational stability fare better than those who do not (S. S. 1177, 114th Cong, 2015). While communication between child welfare agencies, school sites, and foster families is not explicitly outlined, there is really no other way to get such information without having these conversations. If states fail to comply, they risk losing a portion of their Title 1 funding (Heimpel & Loudenback, 2017). According to the 2017 California Department of Education Communications Director Bill Ainsworth, however, "the federal government was unlikely to do anything" in the event a state failed to comply (Heimpel & Loudenback, 2017). If

there are truly no repercussions to a state's noncompliance, then there is no incentive for a state to implement every element of the law 100% of the time.

Unfortunately, the solutions to the second and third issues partially rely on something we cannot control: people. In a perfect world, there would be very few children in the foster care system because they would never experience any abuse, neglect, or loss that would result in them entering the system in the first place. For the few children who were in the system, they would have one social worker who would immediately pair them with loving foster parents who would never give them back. Sadly, this is not the case. It is no secret that the foster care system and social workers are stretched thin. According to the Children's Bureau Foster Care Factsheet for the 2019 fiscal year, over 400,000 children were in foster care as of September 30th, 2019. This is an almost identical number to September 30th, 2009, indicating that recent legislation has proved ineffective at preventing birth parents from harming their children and forcing them to be removed from the home. Since there is no clear way to prevent children from entering foster care in the first place, we must instead amend the current system.[1]

One area that cannot truly be controlled is the lack of placement options available to a child. State data reports that there were "218, 927 licensed foster homes in 2019," with a significant decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kelly & Cheeseman, 2020). In California, there was "an 8% drop" in the number of foster homes available in 2020 (Kelly & Cheeseman, 2020). With over 400,00 children in the system, while exact locations and numbers are unavailable, it is reasonable to assume that a convenient placement is not always available. While there has been an increase in relative caregivers in the last 2 years, there is no guarantee that a family member will offer their home as a placement either. In the end, although

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[1] It is important to note the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the child welfare system. According to a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, "the number of child abuse and neglect reports" made to child welfare agencies had a significant decline, especially during "the early months of the pandemic" (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). This does not mean that fewer children were being abused or neglected, however. Because children were "not going to school," teachers and faculty (aka mandated reporters) were having fewer interactions with children experiencing child abuse and/or neglect (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). As pandemic restrictions loosened and children returned to school in person, child welfare agencies said reporting trends began to return to pre-pandemic levels.

increasing the number of available placements would solve many of the continuity issues experienced by youth in foster care, we cannot force individuals to take in a foster child.

However, many of the issues of continuity faced by foster children could be solved if they only had one social worker. Due to the rigorous and unsustainable amount of cases social workers are expected to undertake, most youth in foster care will work with several different case workers during their time in the system. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the national average turnover rate for social workers is "approximately 30 percent (with individual agency rates as high as 65 percent and as low as 6 percent) (2017)." The rate for "child welfare trainees" sat even higher at "46-54%" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). As previously stated, many students in foster care are overwhelmed with feelings of unwantedness as a result of experiencing multiple placements. The additional loss of one or more social workers during this same time only exacerbates these emotions.

Not only is having one social worker better for foster youths' mental and emotional health, but it also increases their chances at permanency in placements. Children who only had one social worker "achieved permanency 74.5% of the time" while children who worked with two social workers saw their chances for permanency cut by more than 50% (Flower et. al, 2005). On the most extreme end of the data, children who worked with 6 or more social workers only achieved permanency "0.1% of the time" (Flower et. al, 2005). These statistics indicate a clear need to minimize the number of social workers a child works with as much as possible. Not only will this help mediate the issue of inconsistency in home and school placement, but it will also provide a more consistent adult presence in the child's life regardless of the changes in placement that may occur. In order to do this, however, the country needs to address the issue of social worker burnout. Many social workers are overworked and underpaid in a position that is already incredibly emotionally involved. Additionally, the size of their caseloads often prevent social workers from devoting as much time and energy as they would if they had fewer cases to work on.

One associate social worker I spoke with testified to her ability to spend time with her clients due to working for a non profit in the state of California. The non-profit works with individuals who have transitioned out of the foster care system. Because her organization is a private entity, they are able to place restrictions on how many cases are accepted into the program and how many cases each of their social workers takes on. Additionally, clients must apply to take part in the program. This style of intake allows the organization to select clients who will find success participating in their program. On one hand, this allows her to spend more time with each client. She is able to have consistent communication with her clients, which then allows her to establish where they need support while also creating a relationship based on trust. Because the program only accepts a certain number of clients, she is not restricted by the number of cases she is assigned or expected to complete more work than is realistic. This not only helps the clients, but also helps to prevent burnout (and by extension, turnover).

While this is a great opportunity for the transitional age youth who are accepted into the program, because of the limited amount of space, it is not an option for everyone. Private organizations such as this one are able to make great changes in the lives of foster youth, but they are limited in number and do not address the larger issue. Ultimately, social workers either need to be paid a higher salary or assigned fewer cases so that the stress of the job matches the compensation. Since public child welfare agencies are not able to 'turn down' cases, the only option left is to pay social workers more. Not only will this plan reduce turnover in current social workers, but it will attract more individuals to the position and reduce the turnover rate in social workers in training. Until plans to increase pay are implemented, social workers will continue to leave the profession in high numbers.

The same problem needs to be addressed in the field of education. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are leaving the classroom in droves, citing low pay, high stress, and the health risks that come with teaching in a pandemic (Jagannathan, 2021). Similarly to social workers, teachers are overworked and underpaid in a position that requires them to be

highly involved with their students. If the United States can address the issues causing many teachers to leave the position, this will increase the retention rate and allow teachers to be better resources for their students. In contrast to social workers, however, increasing pay will not solve many of the issues faced by teachers. Since teachers are expected to work in the classroom whenever students are on campus, there is little time for 'behind the scenes' work such as organizing a meeting with social workers, foster parents, and other school staff. While paying teachers more will certainly provide an incentive for them to continue the work they are already doing, it would be unreasonable to require American teachers to take on more responsibilities. To truly support the academic success of youth in foster care, school districts across the United States need to rethink how they work with students in foster care. .

A Plan to Increase the Educational Attainment and Achievement of Youth in Foster Care

In order to improve the educational attainment and achievement of youth in foster care, the education system must become more responsive to the needs of students in foster care. To create teachers who are equipped to work with high need students, teacher preparation programs need to include at least one class focused on teaching such students. This is not limited to students who have experienced trauma like being in the foster care system. This also includes students who have experienced homelessness, students with learning disabilities, gifted students, and students with other mental conditions like autism or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). While foster youth are not found in every classroom, this knowledge can be modified and adapted to work with any type of student. Unfortunately, training on behavior management and modified instruction techniques for high need students are not requirements for getting a teaching credential, even in California, where there are 60,000 children in the foster care system alone (Children's Law Center of California, n.d.). This means that most

teachers are entering the classroom with little knowledge on how to support or address high need students. When faced with a child in foster care or a student experiencing homelessness, teachers are forced to figure out strategies on the spot and make it work. Although teachers have been able to do great work without this training, it is clear that more guidance will only benefit high need students.

Since there are many teachers already in the field, school districts need to implement professional development that educates teachers and school staff on how to work with students who have experienced trauma. Every district already has set aside money and days intended for teachers to continue their learning; these resources ought to be redirected towards trauma-informed teaching instruction. Not only will this allow current teachers to gain knowledge of how they can better educate and respond to students who have experienced trauma, but it also provides space for teachers to share their knowledge with each other. Veteran teachers can share techniques and stories of how they have previously worked with foster youth, creating a network of teachers who are better equipped to work with such students *and* have the community to ask questions when new problems arise. Most importantly, this professional development needs to continue every single year. It is not enough for teachers to go through one training a few hours a day and then never again. Teachers, new and veteran, need to continue to teach and learn from each other in order to best support students who have experienced trauma. This will allow foster youth to have access to the same resources, regardless of what class or school they are placed in.[2]

To address the needs of students in foster care more directly, school districts need a position whose sole responsibility is connecting with foster youth, called a Child Welfare Educational Liaison (CWEL). In contrast to a social worker, whose main focus is the child as a foster youth, and a teacher, whose main focus is the child as a student, the Child Welfare

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[2] While I acknowledge that not every school has students in the foster care system - especially in more affluent districts - it is important for every school district to have this kind of training because being in foster care is not the only type of trauma children experience.

Educational Liaison looks at the intersectionality of both identities. In addition to establishing and maintaining a relationship with students in foster care, liaisons would also serve as a point of contact for the social worker, the foster parents, the birth parents, and the teacher(s). Not only would this position improve the lack of communication occurring between these parties, but they would also assist with providing continuity and information to the next school in the event the child experiences another school change. Furthermore, liaisons would have access to student history, compiled from previous school records, conversations with the foster youth themselves, and the previous liaison. This would allow them to provide a detailed background to the teacher(s), allowing the teacher(s) to have the information they need to best approach the student while in the classroom. Moreover, a 2006 study of implementing educational liaisons found that both social workers and foster youth benefitted from working with a liaison who helped to support the educational needs of students in foster care (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). Because the educational liaisons were "more knowledgeable about educational needs, education law and regulations, and school procedures," they were able to provide much needed assistance to students who needed extra support such as "mental health services" and "enrolling in alternative program[s]" (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

Therefore, I propose that the federal government allocate funds specifically for school districts to hire Child Welfare Educational Liaisons (CWEL), modeled after Colorado Statute 22-32-128. The responsibilities of a CWEL are listed in Table 2 below. According to C.R.S. 22-32-128, each of Colorado's 178 school districts and charter schools have to designate a CWEL who helps support foster care students and their educational needs. While the Colorado Statute allows either a current employee of the district or an outside, contracted individual to serve as the liaison, I believe the position should only be filled by a contracted individual so that they may work full time on addressing the needs of students. To prevent burnout, a liaison should be assigned to no more than 15 cases at any given time. This requires larger school districts such as Los Angeles County (home to more than half of the state's foster care population) to have several

hundred liaisons working at one time. Due to some school districts or school sites having more cases than others, mid-year movement of liaisons should occur as necessary. In order to ensure this position is filled, the United States Department of Education ought to restrict Title 1 funding to school districts who fail to hire or designate a liaison. Considering the fact that the Department of Education is not currently taking any action against school districts who are not complying with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), there will be no incentive for school districts to change anything unless there is a consequence for noncompliance.

While some states have already passed bills requiring school districts and charter schools to designate educational liaisons, they still face the issue of having more cases than one person can take on at a time. California Assembly Bill 490 only requires a school district to designate one "staff person as the educational liaison for foster children who are a ward or dependent child of the court." Often these liaisons often also serve as "their district's liaison for students experiencing homelessness," a significant additional role that often leaves them "stretched thin" trying to manage their caseloads (Wondra, 2021). In order for the position to truly be effective, Child Welfare Educational Liaisons need to have adequate time to connect with their students and manage their cases. While it will be expensive to create and maintain these positions, it is a worthy investment that will make a huge difference in the lives of students in foster care.

Table 2: Responsibilities of a Child Welfare Education Liaison (CWEL) (Colorado Department of Education, 2019)
● CWELs required at each Local Education Agency   ● Reporting of CWEL contact information by August 15 of each year   ● Participation in Best Interest Determination meetings upon request   ● Collaborating with county departments of human services to provide, arrange, and fund transportation to the school of origin   ● Participation in threat assessment teams upon request   ● Ensure immediate enrollment   ● Ensure immediate transfer of records   ● Honoring certified coursework and accepting partial credits   ● Waving fees that would otherwise be assessed

Conclusion

The educational attainment and achievement of foster youth will increase when the education system becomes more responsive to the needs of youth in foster care. By implementing trauma-informed teaching training in teacher preparation programs and district professional development, schools will become a safer place for students in foster care to learn and grow. Teachers and school staff will be able to recognize when a student is exhibiting a trauma response and respond in a way that acknowledges their trauma, instead of writing off their actions as misbehavior. By avoiding consequences like detention that fail to address the insecurity the child is feeling, students are able to spend more time in class, which in turn makes them feel more safe in the space and with the people around them. Once the student feels safe, they are able to re-enter learning and experience educational success. The introduction of Child Welfare Educational Liaisons will further allow for school sites to address the needs of students in foster care by offering foster youth another option for assistance and guidance. Not only will liaisons be able to assist with the communication and consistency issues experienced by students in foster care, but they will also be able to provide more focused attention on each individual student, creating a relationship based on trust and encouragement. A study of 15 young adults who had transitioned out of the foster care system found that these kinds of relationships were "instrumental" for their enrollment in higher education (Katz & Geiger, 2020). The most common theme between all of the participants was the need for one person who never gave up on them (Katz & Geiger, 2020).

Still, more research needs to be conducted to determine whether or not educational liaisons will actually benefit the academic performance of foster youth. While many states have passed laws mandating educational liaisons, almost no research has been conducted to indicate if more states should follow suit. Of the research that does exist, there is almost no testimony from former foster youth. Due to the constraints of this paper, I was unable to complete the IRB

process and speak with former foster youth. Without input from students in foster care, it is difficult to know if liaisons are effectively addressing the problems they were hired to solve.

Additionally, while this plan should address many of the issues faced by youth in foster care, it will function the best under a framework of social workers and teachers being appreciated. Until the United States acknowledges the important role social workers and teachers play in the lives of foster youth, students in foster care will continue to achieve low levels of academic success. If social workers and teachers continue to be undervalued, overworked, and underpaid, more and more will leave the profession, further straining the system and putting foster youth at a greater disadvantage. The first step to improving the educational attainment and achievement of foster youth is to pay social workers and teachers more. Increasing salaries both increases retention rates and attracts more individuals to the position (and back to the position). As a result of more personnel, caseloads and class sizes are able to be reduced, which allows social workers and teachers to spend more individual time with each child. If social workers and teachers are able to spend more time with students one on one, they will be able to better address the needs of each child while also establishing a meaningful relationship.

In my own experiences in studying education, it has been clear that the concerns of foster youth are not fully integrated in the curriculum. Though I have yet to teach in a classroom with foster students, I have gained the most knowledge from having conversations with foster youth through my internship and the REACH program. By simply listening to their stories, I was able to learn where they felt they needed support and where they felt the education and child welfare systems had failed them. From these experiences, it is clear that every teacher and teacher candidate should speak and work with current or former foster youth so that they can begin to understand what it is like to be in the system. Once you have that knowledge, it is easier to see the disadvantages they face and how your instruction can address some of those challenges.

The solution to increasing the educational attainment and achievement of foster youth is a multifaceted approach that requires both changes in policy, programming, and pedagogy *and* systematic changes to the child welfare system. Currently, the foster care system aims to ensure the wellbeing of students in foster care by taking them out of an unsafe home, placing them in a safe foster home, and keeping them enrolled in school. After writing this paper, it is clear that the idea of wellbeing should be expanded to include consideration for the child's mental and emotional health, their academic performance, and their opinions. The opinions of foster youth were largely excluded from a majority of the studies I read, indicating that most of the research about the foster care system has almost no input from the people who experienced it firsthand. In order to truly create positive change for foster youth, policy makers and researchers should ask foster youth what they really need, listen, and then followthrough.

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