



Promoting Educational Success for Young People in Foster Care *National Foster Youth Advisory Council*

We, the members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC), believe that every child and young person in foster care is entitled to the wide range of supports, services, and opportunities that promote our educational success.

We believe that all children and youth in foster care need:

- Caring and involved adults who *know* us, understand our experiences in foster care, and can assist us with educational planning and achievement;
- Safety, stability, and permanency, and the ability to attend our “home school” without disruption;
- Confidentiality of records and respect for our right to privacy;
- Support in accessing opportunities that promote our well-being and the ability to reach our full potential;
- The ability to pursue an educational or training program of our own choosing;
- Immediate enrollment in a new school, timely transfer of school credits, and continuity with regard to educational records when moves to other schools occur;
- Access to information, resources, and strategies that promote positive educational experiences;

“What Worked” - Key Components of Our Success

Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council convened on two occasions during 2003, to address the many challenges facing young people in foster care with regard to education. To move beyond a focus on the problems that youth encounter, group members were asked to identify *What Worked* and the range of supports that facilitated their educational success. The group articulated the following key components:

1. NFYAC members identified caring people, those individuals who comprise our “circle of support,” as the most critical support. For some, foster parents, siblings, mentors, “homework buddies” (peers who support completion of assignments), coaches, guidance counselors, and teachers were the individuals who made a difference. Others identified educational advocates and tutors – those individuals charged with supporting the educational achievement of the youth with whom they work.
2. Overwhelmingly, NFYAC members stressed the importance of having permanency and a sense of safety and stability. One Council member expressed, “young people need

permanent homes and need to know that they're not going to be randomly moved from place to place." Having a safe place to live and call "home" makes it easier to build relationships with caring adults, and to ultimately develop a circle of support that facilitates success across the board, especially around education. Members felt strongly about the custodial agency's responsibility to maintain the youth's school placement, even if the young person is attending private school.

On the issue of safety, a number of young people raised the issue of bullying in schools. For many who struggled with "always being the new kid in school," not having a group of close friends, and not having the resources to wear the "latest fashions," school often represented a place where they were misunderstood, ridiculed, and singled out as different. Efforts to address bullying in school settings and its root causes are critical to ensuring safety and an affirming learning environment for all young people, but especially for those in foster care.

3. Financial assistance was also an important component of the 'recipe' for educational success. Many NFYAC members identified resources that support the pursuit of post-secondary education, such as tuition waivers, support for room and board, cash assistance and scholarships. A number of members also highlighted the importance of having assistance with college visits and tours and the completion of applications, especially for federal financial aid. There was also quite a bit of discussion around health care and obtaining insurance if you leave the state where you were in care to attend college. Lastly, other supports, such as free breakfast and lunch programs, having a dress code and school uniforms (to defray the costs of clothing for school), providing school supplies, and transportation assistance were helpful to young people struggling to be successful in elementary through high school.
4. Flexibility with educational planning, such as the ability to choose classes and deal with multiple absences, credit recovery programs, and summer school were helpful to young people trying to stay on track with their education. Because the timely recovery of credits and transfer of school records pose major challenges to young people attempting to enroll in new schools, the aforementioned supports were essential to promoting academic continuity and success. NFYAC members also expressed that having teachers who understood their experiences in foster care made a big difference.
5. Programs promoting child and youth development were particularly supportive of young people in foster care. Many NFYAC members remembered being involved with Head Start programs and reflected on the important role that extracurricular and after school programs had on their educational success.

Recommendations for Improving Educational Outcomes

Given the list of challenges and corresponding supports that the group identified, NFYAC members were asked to generate a list of recommendations for improving educational outcomes for young people in foster care. As the discussions took place, it was evident that these recommendations were not solely limited to improving educational outcomes, but spoke to a

much broader need to revisit the way in which success is defined and pursued for America's foster youth.

The issue of educational underachievement is related to many of the other negative outcomes experienced by young people leaving foster care. With limited supports and resources, young people are forced to focus on day-to-day survival. As one member said, "If all aspects of your life are unbalanced and you need to figure out where you're going to spend the night, it's going to be difficult to think about your education."

Members of NFYAC believe in the strengths, talents, and potential of all young people in foster care. Our central message is that young people in foster care require what all young people need to become contributing members of society - unconditional love, care, and support and a strong connection to caring adults and communities that are willing to invest in our well-being and success.

NYFAC's Top Ten Recommendations for Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care:

Help me create my circle of support.

Everyone needs to feel loved and cared for! Young people in foster care need to experience a sense of belonging - they need to have someone to rely on when things get tough and also need to have someone to call upon when it's time to celebrate. Parents, caregivers, peers, teachers and other supportive adults need to be engaged in supporting young people in a variety of ways, especially when it comes to educational decisions and planning. To improve educational outcomes, we need to revisit the broad range of youth outcomes that we articulate for young people involved with the child welfare system. Having access and connections to "people resources" as well as opportunities to create one's own "circle of support" are critical components of facilitating the positive development of youth in care.

Make sure I have a place to call home.

A "home" is much more than just having a place to live - it's knowing that you're safe, feeling "wanted," and having a permanent place to *be*. Having a home means having a place to go for the holidays and summer vacations. It means you don't have to take all of your belongings with you when you leave. The research shows that placement instability negatively impacts the educational achievement of young people in foster care. When youth are moved from place to place - it's challenging to focus on anything beyond immediate day-to-day survival. All young people, regardless of what their experiences are or where they come from, need a place to call home.

Let me be involved in making decisions about my life.

Young people learn to make good decisions by having opportunities to make choices and be held accountable. Sometimes that involves making mistakes. Because of the way in which the child welfare system works, adults often presume that they know what's best without really

understanding the experiences, hopes, and dreams of the young people with whom they work. Young people should be involved in making decisions about their educational future – we have a right to have our voices heard.

Get to know me for who I am, NOT what I'm in.

The stigma of foster care has negatively impacted the lives of many young people who have spent time in out-of-home care. Many young people who are involved with the foster care system grow up believing that they are incapable of achieving success. One NFYAC member remembers a school policy that prevented her from being allowed to bring school textbooks home *simply because she was in foster care*. The messages inherent in these types of policies and practices send damaging and discouraging messages to young people about their value and their potential for success. Negative assumptions about and low expectations for foster youth are so pervasive in our society. We need to “raise the bar” for young people in foster care, refrain from labeling them, and make sure that we’re communicating belief and confidence in their ability to accomplish great things and fulfill their dreams. As one NFYAC member exclaimed, “Talk to me about getting a PhD., not just a GED!”

Focus on what’s “right” about me, not just what’s wrong.

Many young people in foster care have experienced abuse and neglect, and as a result, may be dealing with a range of issues. While young people need to be supported in accessing treatment and/or counseling when necessary, the child welfare system tends to focus on the problems and challenges and does little to highlight the strengths of individuals and families. Members of NFYAC call for a shift in deficits or failure focused thinking when dealing with young people. Young people need support in identifying their strengths, thinking about their potential, and highlighting their interests and aspirations. When caring adults focus on what’s right with young people, the possibilities are endless.

Help adults in my life, especially my teachers and guidance counselors, understand the system with which I'm involved.

The general public does not have an understanding of foster care and the young people that are involved with the system. We need to build awareness and educate the public about the unique strengths of and challenges facing youth in care. It is especially important to provide information, resources, and training to educators – and to involve young people and foster parents in the design and delivery of such staff development opportunities. Young people in foster care possess a wealth of information about the system. Their knowledge, insights, and expertise represent an untapped resource that is invaluable to the adults who work with them.

Connect me with information.

Young people need to have access to information and support in navigating many of the resources that exist. Whether it’s information about scholarship opportunities, health insurance, college tours, or community programs that support educational success, young people also need to develop their own strategies for managing multiple sources of information. Members of

NFYAC articulated the importance of ensuring that young people have opportunities to manage information about themselves and specifically highlighted “educational passports” as an effective tool. Lastly, young people need to be connected with information about state and federal policies that have the potential to impact their foster care and educational experiences – the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the Education and Training Vouchers programs are examples of key federal policies.

Respect our privacy.

“Would _____ please come to the office? Your social worker is here.” Many of the members of NFYAC remember hearing their names called over the intercom system at school and these announcements often included pieces of personal information that didn’t need to be shared with the entire school. Others recall that sensitive information about their circumstances was unnecessarily accessible to students and administrative personnel working in school offices.

The issue of confidentiality is a sensitive one for many young people in foster care, particularly in school settings. While members of NFYAC understand that there are times when information about the lives and families of young people in care needs to be shared, there is also a sense that the information sharing is not always conducted in a manner that prioritizes the privacy of the young people involved. NFYAC members highlighted the fact that many young people in foster care do not want information about their family history or living situation shared with their peers or other adults not involved with their educational planning. In school settings, administrators, teachers, social workers, and counselors can support young people by using discretion with sensitive and personal information, maintaining confidentiality of records, and respecting their right to privacy.

Teach me to take care of myself.

“Life skills development begins with learning to tie your own shoes – it’s not something that starts when you turn 16!” Developing the skills needed to take care of oneself occurs over time. This process begins in childhood and continues throughout the lifespan. Young people in foster care need both formal and informal learning opportunities to acquire, practice, and utilize basic living skills. These skills include “tangible” or competency-based skills like completion of high school and the pursuit of post-secondary education as well as “intangible” skills such as a sense of self confidence and purpose and the ability to make good decisions.

Develop federal and state policies that promote our success.

While there has been much legislative activity benefiting young people in foster care during the last five years, much remains to be done. Members of NFYAC are committed to supporting and partnering with decision makers at the local, state, and federal levels to craft legislation that prioritizes the health and well-being of foster youth in our country.