Breakthrough Series Collaborative:
Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for
Children in Out-Of-Home Care

CHANGE PACKAGE

CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS

Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care. Established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, the Seattle-based national operating foundation has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966.

The foundation operates in two ways. It provides direct services, and it promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy. Casey collaborates with foster, kinship, and adoptive families to provide safe, loving homes for youth in its direct care. The foundation also collaborates with counties, states, and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to improve services and outcomes for the more than 500,000 young people in out-of-home care across the U.S.

Drawing on nearly four decades of front-line work with youth, families and alumni of foster care, Casey Family Programs develops tools, practices, and policies to nurture all youth in care and to help strengthen families at risk of needing foster care.

Casey Family Programs is sponsoring a Breakthrough Series Collaborative ("Collaborative" or "BSC") focused on Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care. This BSC brings together public/tribal child welfare agencies and school systems that are committed to improving educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. Participating jurisdictions are committed to testing strategies and tools on a small scale, sharing lessons learned, and implementing the most successful strategies throughout their system. These jurisdictions will share their successes and learnings in real time to further accelerate their achievement of improved outcomes. The Change Package that follows will serve as the foundation for the work of this BSC.

ABOUT THIS CHANGE PACKAGE

The Change Package outlines strategies and tools jurisdictions will use to improve educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. It is comprised of the following elements: Collaborative Goal, Collaborative Principles, and a Summary of Key Components. The components will help to focus the work of participating sites in the BSC. The strategies will serve as a launch pad for the small tests of change that sites will be conducting throughout this BSC.

COLLABORATIVE GOAL

The goal for participating jurisdictions in this Collaborative is: to identify, develop, test, implement, and spread promising strategies for improving practice in their education and child welfare systems to support educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care.

COLLABORATIVE PRINCIPLES

This Change Package is built upon eight principles. These principles express the values that must guide all work in developing, adopting and implementing promising practices. The principles are interrelated and work together. The order does not reflect a judgment of each principle's respective value or importance. We believe that:

1. Promoting educational continuity and school placement stability is central to improving educational outcomes and fostering a positive school experience.
2. Children deserve access to the highest quality education, including access to assessments and services delivered by knowledgeable and skilled professionals.
3. Children have strengths and resiliency, high expectations and a desire to learn and to be successful.
4. Children are connected to families and larger support systems. As such engaging families and their support systems as partners in supporting their educational experience is vital.
5. Understanding the developmental, cultural, and environmental context of a child and family are necessary to fully support a positive educational experience.
6. Collaboration between multiple agencies and service systems (e.g., child welfare, legal system, schools), the community, and children and families is necessary for supporting a positive educational experience.
7. Agency leadership must assume responsibility and provide support for adopting and implementing promising practices at all levels of the organization.
8. Improved educational outcomes for children of color are advanced by the open discussion of personal, organizational and institutional racism and the development of strategies to remedy its impact on the educational outcomes of children.

THE CHALLENGE

The issue of educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care speaks to many dynamics that shape a student's educational outcomes.

The longer a youth is in out-of-home care, the greater number of out-of-home placements he or she is likely to experience. Frequent changes in placements often yield to frequent changes in schools.[1] Researchers suggest that it takes approximately 4-6 months for a child to recover academically after changing schools.[2] Furthermore, changing schools during high school diminishes the chances for graduation.[3] The educational impact of every school change is significant. Each time youth enter a new school, they must adjust to different curricula, different expectations, new friends, and new teachers.[4] Children in out-of-home care must simultaneously adjust to a new home environment and community. The school environment often plays an important role for children in out-of-home care by proving opportunities to develop positive relationships with supportive teachers, school-based counselors and classmates. These relationships often provide a measure of protection from the disruption and uncertainty associated with out-of-home placements.[5]

At every point along the child welfare continuum children of color are represented in numbers that far exceed their relative proportion of the population.[6] Disproportionality of children of color is the result of multiple disadvantages that are social, political, economic and attitudinal in nature.[7] Specific factors leading to disproportionality in the child welfare system include poverty, classism, racism, organizational culture, service strategy and resources.[8]

As in the child welfare system, racism, cultural bias, and lack of cross-cultural expertise in working with youth of color (e.g., African American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian and Alaska Native) are realities in the education system. These disparities directly affect the educational outcomes of youth of color[9]. For example, research indicates that African American, Latino, and Native American students are less likely to succeed in school and there is a strong association between race and ethnicity and the likelihood of dropping out of school.[10] Other populations of young people prone to discrimination and disparity in educational outcomes include youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), immigrant youth, and youth whose first language is not English.[11] While the focus of this BSC is to improve educational continuity and school stability for all children in out-of-home care, we highly encourage those working with children of color and other populations prone to discrimination to learn more about their unique education needs, and to develop strategies that support culturally relevant educational supports and services[12].

The challenge for all systems is to ensure youth in out-of-home care receive a positive school experience that will result in each young person's achieving his or her individual potential.[13] Positive school experiences enhance a youth's well-being, help them make more successful

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[1] Yu, Day, & Williams (2002a).
[2] Yu, Day, & Williams (2002a).
[3] Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy (1999)., p.3.
[4] Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 38.
[5] Christian,(2003), p.1
[6] Casey Family Programs (2005), p. 2
[7] Casey Family Programs (2005), p. 2
[8] Casey Family Programs (2005), p. 2
[9] Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 38.
[10] Yu, Day, & Williams (2002a).
[11] Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 39
[12] Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 39
[13] Yu, Day, & Williams (202a), p. 36.

transitions to adulthood, and increase their chances for personal fulfillment, economic self-sufficiency, and their ability to contribute to society.[14]

SUMMARY OF COMPONENTS

While the Principles provide an overarching foundation for this work, the components describe what jurisdictions at all levels must do to apply these principles. In this framework, there are eight components identified:

1. Develop Measurable Systems of Agency/Interagency Accountability
2. Establish School Stability and Seamless School Transition Procedures
3. Implement Best Practices to Maintain School Continuity and Manage Transitions
4. Empower Youth, Family, and Community Actions
5. Increase Stakeholder Investment through Training and Education
6. Improve Court's Knowledge, Engagement, and Oversight
7. Ensure Equal Access to Quality Education and Educational Support Services
8. Advocate and Influence Policy and Legislation

The organization of the components recognizes that changes must occur at the agency, management, and practitioner levels in order to successfully implement strategies focused on improving educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. A system must have the capacity to implement new promising practices, worked through organizational culture barriers, and have an infrastructure in place that allows for data collection and analysis. Additionally, strategies to improve educational continuity and school stability will be most successful when the practices of the child welfare and school system reflect an understanding of the long term impact that a poor educational experience has on a child.

In this Breakthrough Series Collaborative, agencies are expected to test ideas within each of the eight component areas. The diagram below illustrates the relationships between each of these component areas. The work in these component areas will not be sequential; it will be concurrent. Furthermore, work in one component area will often be linked to, if not overlapping with, work focused in another component area. This shared connectedness is what causes small tests of change in a BSC to result in system-wide improvements.

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[14] Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 8.

A Framework for Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability For Children in Out-of-Home Care
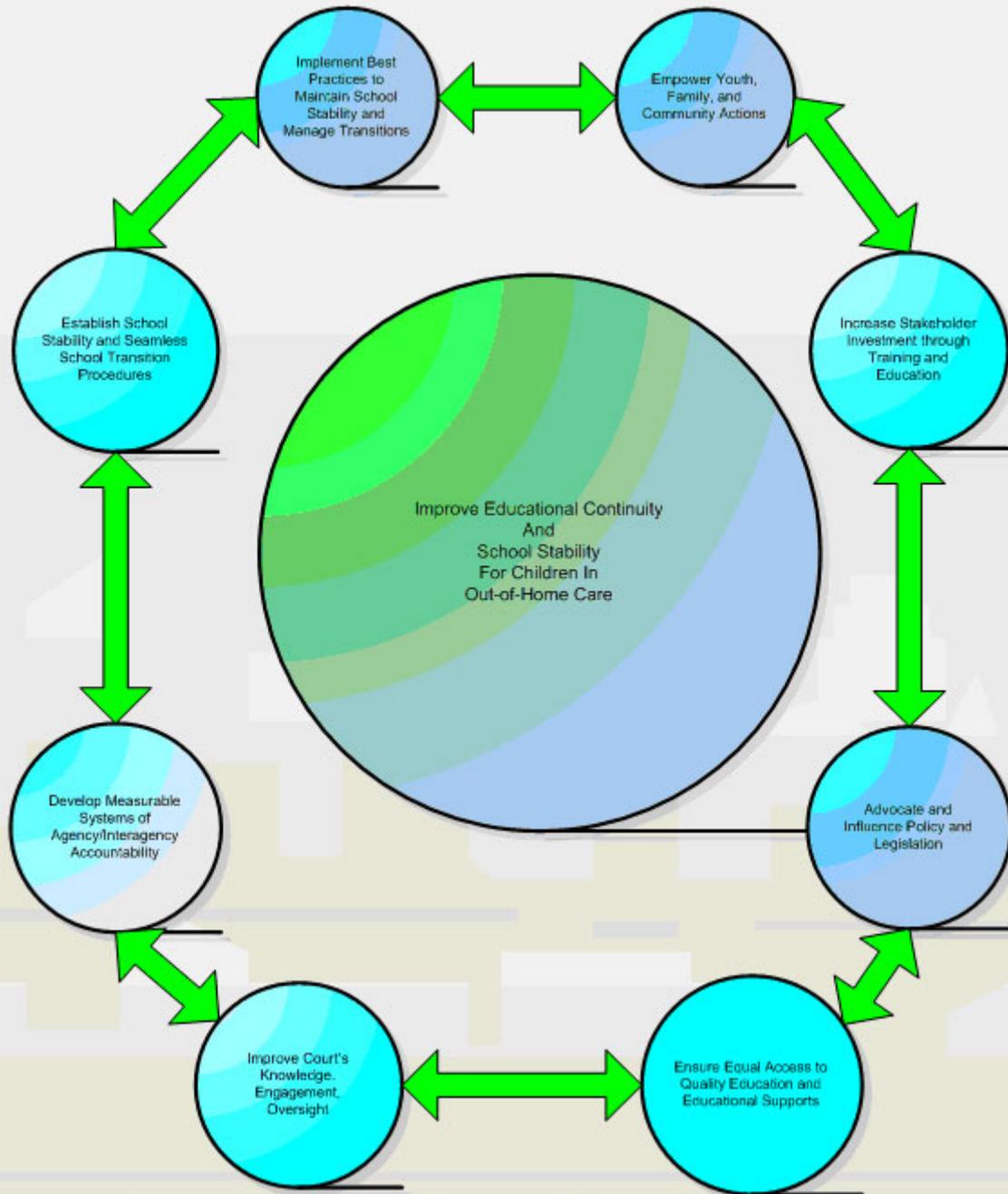
Component 1: Develop Measurable Systems of Agency/Interagency Accountability

  A. Create a formal process to improve communication and coordination between the child welfare agency and school districts to facilitate information exchange around their common children.
  B. Provide an expert in educational issues to child welfare workers to link children with educational services and resources.
  C. Identify one adult to serve as the child's decision-maker for school-related decisions when the birth-parents are unable to do so.
  D. Develop regional, preferably statewide, data systems that provide current-year and longitudinal data on students in out of home care for education continuity and success rates.

Component 2: Establish School Stability and Seamless School Transition Procedures

  A. Develop written protocols for school staff on any policy for allowing children in foster care to remain in their school of origin when possible.
  B. Develop written protocols for school staff about what to do when a child who is in foster care is moved into a new school.
  C. Inform old and new school as soon as possible once a decision is made that a child must change schools.
  D. Require that complete school records are immediately transferred to new school once a placement change is needed.
  E. Eliminate (or waive for students in foster care) school policies that require records to be transferred prior to a child's enrollment in a new school.
  F. Ensure that course credits are easily transferred between schools (even from other districts or states).

Component 3: Implement Best Practices to Maintain School Continuity and Manage Transitions

  A. Provide transportation for students to their schools of origin.
  B. Place children in out-of-home settings that are within the boundaries of their current schools.
  C. When school transfers are necessary, they should, if possible, occur during a natural academic break, i.e., summer or school vacations.
  D. Establish procedures in schools to make sure children get needed services immediately.
  E. Ensure that youth of color are assessed appropriately when transferring to a new school.
  F. Establish age appropriate welcome strategies to integrate children socially into the new school.
  G. Have an advocate for the child check in with the child during the first week at a new school to ensure everything is going smoothly.
  H. Ensure that caseworkers address the educational needs of youth in out-of-home care and track educational progress particularly when placement changes are required.

Component 4: Empower Youth, Family, and Community Actions

    A. Have court personnel, child welfare workers, teachers, and caregivers ask children and youth in out-of-home care what they need to support them in their school setting.
    B. Educate youth about their educational rights so that they can be self advocates.
    C. Create opportunities for children and youth to raise awareness and advocate for the importance of school stability and educational continuity and its impact on students' ability to succeed academically.
    D. Target foster parent recruitment in neighborhoods surrounding schools/ districts with the largest numbers of removals.
    E. Actively engage birth parents in their child's educational experience.
    F. Engage community partners to provide resources to help address the education needs of children of color.

Component 5: Increase Stakeholder Investment through Training and Education

    A. Raise child welfare stakeholders' awareness of the importance of school stability in improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care.
    B. Educate individuals who work with children and youth in out-of-home about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provisions that specifically relate to foster care.
    C. Use tools that help caseworkers keep the educational experiences of children a priority.
    D. Educate foster parents about the importance of being involved in the youth's educational experience.
    E. Require pre-service and in-service training around education for foster parents.
    F. Dispel myths among school and child welfare staff about sharing educational information.

Component 6: Improve Court's Knowledge, Engagement, and Oversight

    A. Use tools to help judges, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and educational advocates effectively inquire about children's educational history, school status, attendance record, and special needs.
    B. Educate judges on the importance of educational continuity and school stability and concrete ways to ask about it.
    C. Review existing forms used in the court and child welfare system to ensure that appropriate education information is being documented.
    D. Promote court hearings in which the youth, supportive adults, and the judge discuss the youth's future plans, educational aspirations, and career goals.
    E. Minimize the potential conflicts between court dates or other important meetings and student's educational/extracurricular schedules.
    F. Use education experts at court hearings to bridge the gap between the court and the education community.

Component 7: Ensure Equal Access to Quality Education and Educational Support Services

    A. Ensure that children in out-of-home care are assessed appropriately, particularly in terms of educational and mental health needs.
    B. Ensure that children in out-of-home care have equal access to after-school programs, extended year or summer school programs, quality tutoring, preschool programs/Headstart and mentoring programs.
    C. Partner with community colleges and other post-secondary institutions to ensure that college-bound students receive supportive services on campus.
    D. Advocate for state programs that allow students enrolled in post-secondary education to remain in placement with foster parents until age 21 or older.
    E. Clearly define who is responsible for transportation funding, especially if the child/youth must travel outside of the school's catchment area.
    F. Provide child care for youth in out-of-home care who have children of their own.
    G. Fund age-appropriate coaching, mentoring, and tutoring for children in out-of-home care.

Component 8: Advocate and Influence Policy and Legislation

    A. Support legislation that allows children in out-of-home care to remain in their schools of origin, if it is in their best interest, even if they change foster care placements.
    B. Advocate for a federal law like McKinney-Vento (including a transportation mandate) that specifically supports children in out-of-home care.
    C. Advocate for language in federal and state law that clearly identifies which jurisdiction pays for education services when children are placed out of state.
    D. Implement state programs that allow students enrolled in post-secondary education to stay with foster parents until age 21 or older.
    E. Create the political will of state/federal legislatures to increase funding for school transportation for children in out of home care.

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