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CHAPIN HALL
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The Educational Status of Foster Children

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The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) marked a major new departure in child welfare policy. It not only shifted the focus of child welfare policy from family preservation to child safety, permanency, and well-being, but it inaugurated a new era of performance monitoring for state child welfare systems. Despite increased efforts to reduce the amount of time children spent in out-of-home placement, many of those who are in care spend considerable periods of time – often years – under the supervision of the child welfare system.

Although the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in establishing accountability measures as an outgrowth of ASFA stopped short of proposing specific standards of well-being – focusing only on safety and permanency – there is growing recognition that the child welfare system still remains the long-term parent for a significant percentage of abused and neglected children. This has begun to focus attention on educational status as a critical aspect of the broader well-being of children in substitute care.

This issue brief is an outgrowth of a sense of concern raised by researchers, policymakers, service providers, and caregivers, that those responsible for ensuring the well-being of children in care often lack a full picture of their educational status. Based on two recent Chapin Hall studies – one of youth aging out of the child welfare system in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa, and the other of Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care – the issue brief describes what these studies tell us about the educational status of children and youth in out-of-home care and examines some of the challenges confronting child welfare and educational systems in their attempts to develop strategies to work together more productively to improve educational outcomes for these children.

High Educational Aspirations, Difficulties Meeting Them

Most foster youth have high educational aspirations (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). The picture that emerges from Chapin Hall's ongoing study of youth who "age out" of the child welfare system suggests that the majority of those interviewed at age 17-18 as they contemplated their exit from the child welfare system hoped and expected to graduate from college eventually (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004).

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Many, however, are experiencing significant academic failure and will almost certainly fall far short of meeting their educational goals. Interviewed for the most part after completing 10th or 11th grade, students in the aging out study were reading, on average, at only a seventh grade level (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). Few excelled in academic subjects, especially relative to a comparable national sample. Less than one in five received an “A” in English, math, history, or science. Although grade retention nationally has risen over the past two decades, especially among Hispanic and African-American children, substantially more of these youth than a comparable national sample had repeated a grade, a situation that research indicates puts them at higher risk for dropping out of school (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004).

Foster children in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) displayed similar lags in a study begun in 2002 as part of the Chicago Public Schools Student Development Planning Initiative and continued as part of a broader body of research conducted by Chapin Hall for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. This study found that almost a quarter of students entering care were both old for grade and scored in the bottom quartile of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) reading test. Of students between the third and eighth grades, nearly a half scored in the bottom quartile of the ITBS (Smithgall et. al. 2004).

Falling Behind Early, Never Catching Up

Although schools and the child welfare system clearly face substantial challenges in collaborating to improve the educational performance of children once they are placed in out-of-home care, Chapin Hall’s study of CPS students in care suggests that students’ experiences prior to placement may contribute substantially to their educational delays. A disproportionate number enter school with significant delays and never catch up. Although our research suggests that some of the achievement gap – upwards of a year -- between children in care and other CPS students is a product of the low-performing schools that many of them attend, these students still lag at least half a school year behind demographically similar students in the same schools (Smithgall et. al. 2004).

Abused and neglected children placed in out-of-home

CHAPIN HALL RESOURCES: *Education of Foster Children*

- *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of Youth Preparing to Leave State Care*, by Mark E. Courtney, Sherri Terao, and Noel Bost. (2004)
- *Educational Experiences of Children in Out-of-Home Care*, by Cheryl Smithgall, Robert Matthew Gladden, Eboni Howard, Robert Goerge, and Mark E. Courtney. (2004)
- *An Evaluation of Ongoing Services in Milwaukee County: Profiles and Outcomes of Newly Opened Cases*, by Mark E. Courtney, Steven L. McMurtry, Andrew Zinn, Peter Power, and Katrin Maldre. (2004)

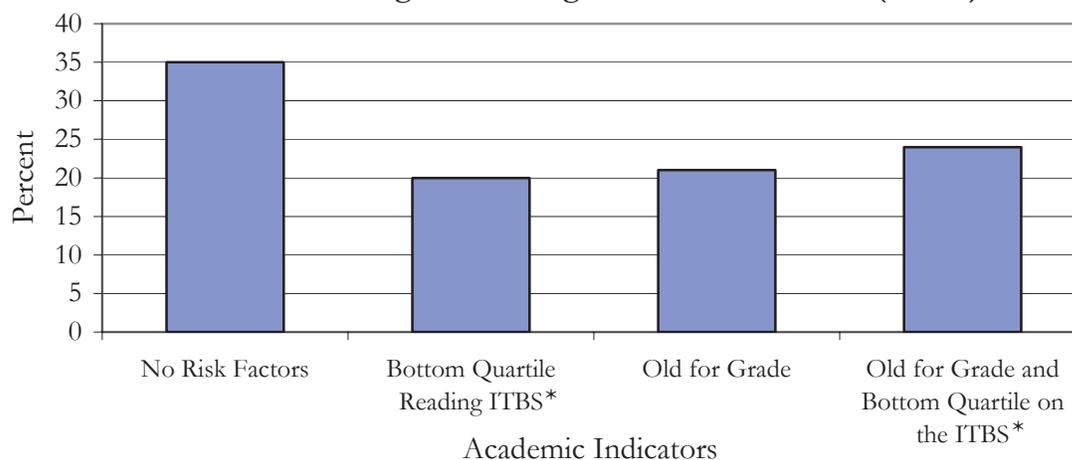
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care enter care at risk for late entry to school and are often old for grade before they are placed in care. Almost 66 percent of the 239 third through eighth grade Chicago Public School students who entered care during 2002 and 2003 were either old for their grade when they entered care or scored in the bottom quartile in reading. (See Figure 1) The year immediately after they entered care, they faced a greater likelihood of being retained in school (Smithgall et. al. 2004).

Although, compared to other similar CPS students, those in out-of-home-care do not, on average, lose ground in their reading achievement while in care, they fail to close the substantial achievement gap that separates them from other CPS students at age eight. Moreover, students who spend their full elementary career in out-of-home care tend to fall slightly further behind in reading while in care (Smithgall et. al. 2004).

The short-term result of these delays is striking. Like those in the aging out study, CPS students in out-of-home care were substantially more likely to be old for their grade. Even after demographic factors are taken into account and comparisons are made to other students attending the same schools, students in care are nearly twice as likely as other CPS students to be at least a year old for their grade. Those experiencing abuse and neglect, even if not placed in out-of-home care, are still significantly more likely than other students to be old for their grade (Smithgall et. al. 2004).

Figure 1: Indicators of Academic Difficulties among Third through Eighth Graders Entering Care during the 2003 School Year (n=239)



*ITBS: Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Ultimately, many youth in care experience emotional and/or academic problems that substantially increase the likelihood that they will never complete high school. The overwhelming majority of youth in the Chapin Hall aging out study – more than twice the percentage of a comparable national sample of adolescents – had been suspended at least once from school

(Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). Moreover, about one sixth had actually been expelled. Fifteen-year-old CPS students in care are almost half as likely as other students to have graduated 5 years later, with significantly higher percentages of students in care dropping out or being incarcerated (Smithgall et. al. 2004). (See Table 1)

Table 1. Graduation and Dropout Rates of 15-year-old Chicago Public School Students Over a 5-Year Period (September 1998 to September 2003*)

	N	Actively Enrolled (%)	Graduated (%)	Dropped Out (%)	Incarcerated (%)
In Out-of-Home Care as of September, 1998	692	3	32	55	10
Other CPS Students	21,672	2	59	36	3

*Students who transferred to schools outside of CPS (between 10 to 20 % of students) or left CPS for other reasons, such as entering residential care during the 4-year period, were excluded from the analysis.

Special Education: The Most Appropriate Response?

The special needs of children in out-of-home care are well recognized by school officials, often early in children’s academic careers. Both Chapin Hall studies suggest that a considerable percentage of children in care are classified with some sort of disability that inhibits their ability to learn. Nearly half of the foster youth in the 3-state aging out study had been placed in special education at least once during the course of their educa-

tion (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care between sixth and eighth grades were classified as eligible for special education at least three times more frequently than other CPS students. In our Chicago Public Schools study, students in care were more likely than other CPS students to be classified as learning disabled by the eighth grade. (See Table 2) Nearly all of those classified as learning disabled between the third and eighth grades were scoring below national norms in reading (Smithgall et. al. 2004).

Table 2. Percent of Eighth Grade Chicago Public School Students Classified as Disabled and Receiving Special Education Services (June 2003)

	Number of Students (N)	Not Classified (%)	Classified as Learning Disabled (%)	Classified as Having an Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (%)	Classified with Another Type of Disability (%)
Out-of-Home Care	395	55	19	18	8
Other CPS	27,549	84	12	2	3

How accurate these assessments are and how well targeted these services are as a result, is not always clear, however. Interviews with caseworkers, school staff, and caregivers, revealed varying understandings of the special education process and their own roles in the process. Taken together, our quantitative findings and qualitative research with professionals suggest that transitory behavioral problems stemming from placement disruptions or entry into care may lead to erroneous labeling of children as emotionally or behaviorally disordered (Smithgall et. al. 2004).

Changes in Placement, Changes in Schools

Although Illinois and other states have made important gains finding permanent homes for many children in out-of-home care, a significant number continue to remain in care for substantial periods of time. For example, of the 542,000 children in out-of-home care in the U.S. in September 2001, the most recent period for which national data are available, 238,000, or 44 percent, had been in care two years or longer (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Thus, many children remain in out-of-home care long enough for their stays to have a significant impact on their educational experience.

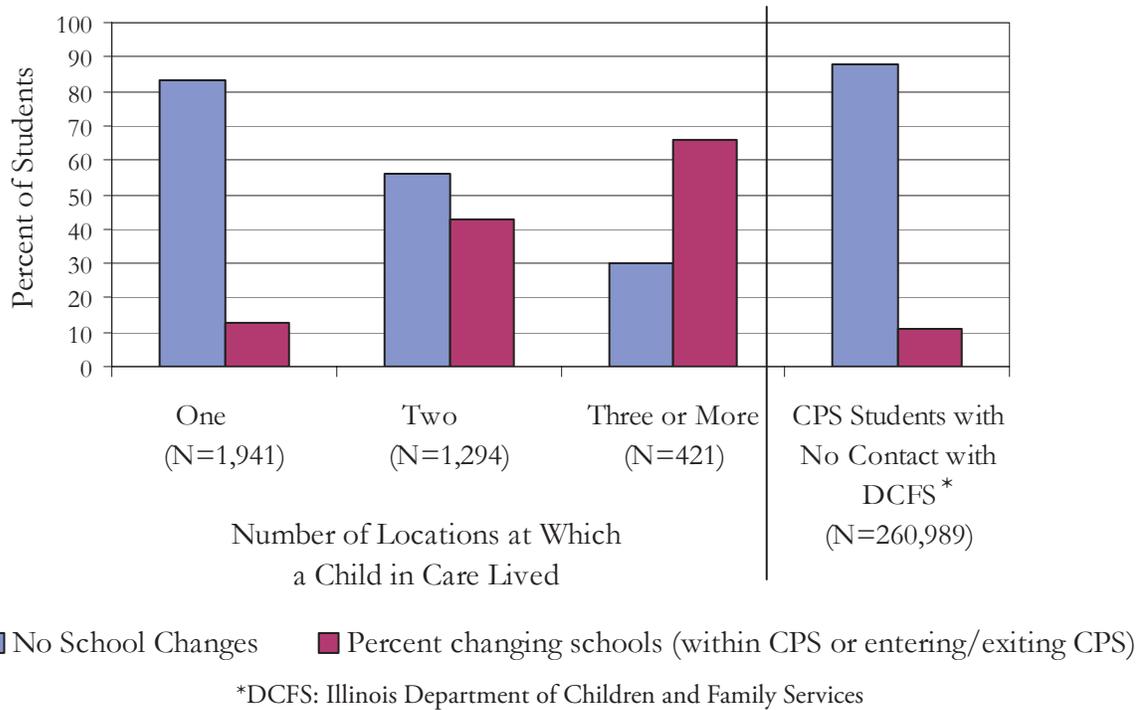
These long stays in care also create the opportunity for instability in their living arrangements to affect their schooling. Placement instability not only heightens the risk that foster children will be forced to change schools, disrupting their educational instruction and social relationships, but also the possibility that important school records will not be transferred in a timely

fashion. This is particularly true when school changes occur during the academic year.

Both Chapin Hall studies revealed substantial levels of school mobility associated with placement in out-of-home care. Of the adolescents interviewed in the 3-state aging out study, over a third reported five or more school changes (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). In Chicago, school mobility was highest among those elementary school students entering foster care – over two-thirds change schools – and lower for children in care for two or more years (28 percent) and those exiting care (20 to 25 percent). School mobility among children in out-of-home care is highly correlated with the number of locations at which a child in care lives during an academic year. As Figure 2 shows, children in care who reside in the same location throughout the academic year have school mobility rates very similar to CPS students who have not had any contact with DCFS. Those whose entry into care, exit from care, or placement changes necessitate a change in residence experienced significant higher rates of school mobility.

This school mobility is not limited to those who have been in care for extended periods of time. In fact, school mobility rates are highest for those entering care for the first time. According to the CPS study, an overwhelming majority – 66 percent – switches schools shortly after initial placement. When this school change leads to grade retention, which it often does, this early educational disruption in a foster child’s life can ultimately reduce the likelihood of completing high school (Smithgall et. al., 2004).

Figure 2: School Mobility for Students in Out-of-Home Care and Other Chicago Public School Students During the 2002-2003 Academic Year



The Challenge for Caseworkers: Knowing the Schools

Caseworkers face numerous challenges in helping to make sure a child gets a high-quality education – finding an appropriate school for a particular child, securing the special services children might need, motivating children to stay in school, or helping them prepare for and choose among post-secondary education options. The size of worker caseloads – in Illinois, averaging nearly 14 children in 2003 -- with children of all ages distributed among many different schools and districts, makes it difficult for caseworkers and others in the child welfare system to understand the schools they are working with and form sustained, professional relationships with educators there. Worker turnover and case reassignment add to the challenges. Of children in out-of-home care for the full 2003 academic year, 45 percent had two or more different workers assigned to their case during that time (Smithgall et al., 2004).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Academic, emotional and behavioral difficulties clearly stand in the way of school success for children in out-of-home care. Initial entry into care or repeated placement can disrupt the continuity of educational instruction, inhibit the formation of relationships with peers and supportive adults, and may interfere with important academic and mental health services. The results of Chapin Hall’s research highlight the importance of addressing the educational needs and supporting the educational successes of students as they enter and remain in out-of-home care. Efforts to improve the educational performance of students in care will require ongoing collaborative efforts between the child welfare and education systems. However, given that most children who enter out-of-home care are young children, it should be possible to develop and target a number of interventions that reach children early in their academic careers.

Targets of Opportunity

Reduce school mobility for children in out-of-home care

- Develop placement or transportation arrangements that allow students to remain in the same school when they change placements
- Shift school changes, whenever possible, to summer months to minimize impact on the student's academic progress

Avoid unnecessary special education placement

- Assure that special education placement focuses on long-term needs rather than the child's reaction to crisis
- Consider alternative interventions to address short-term behavioral problems
- Provide remedial education services instead of special education when appropriate

Reduce dropout rates

- Keep foster youth academically on track by providing academic support, such as tutors, and monitoring to maintain consistent school attendance
- Ensure that youth in out-of-home care remain in school until they graduate from high school

Improved Communication Between Schools and the Child Welfare System

- Inform teachers, principals, and school staff immediately when a child is placed in foster care
- Promote sustained contact between teachers, school social workers, child welfare workers, foster care providers, and relevant others to provide continuing support for foster children

Collaboration and Team Building Between Schools and the Child Welfare System

- Establish a mechanism for coordination of services, particularly around mental health services
- Strengthen collaboration between child welfare and education authorities to ensure that practices, programs, and policies are meeting the educational needs of children in care

Professional Development and Training Between Schools and the Child Welfare System

- Child welfare and education authorities should collaboratively develop training for foster care providers, child welfare workers, teachers, and principals
- Training of foster care providers, child welfare workers, teachers, and principals should focus on issues relating to education and navigating the child welfare and education systems

Strengthen Reporting Systems for Educational Indicators

- Establish a system for formal data sharing between child welfare and education systems to facilitate cooperation in providing support to foster children
- Provide regular reports of school outcome indicators, such as attendance and grades, to monitor the progress of wards in school and build better accountability for school outcomes

References

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