Educational Planning for Transitional Age Youth

Students involved in the foster care system comprise a diverse group of learners with complex educational needs. Research indicates that youth in foster care are more likely than their non-foster care peers to be absent from school, have special education needs, and to experience traumatic life events. They are also less likely to graduate high school and to attend/graduate from college. Experiencing foster care is associated with academic struggles such as high school mobility, lower academic achievement, heightened experiences of exclusionary school discipline, and decreased school completion and access to postsecondary education. School experiences among students involved in the foster care system are often marked by multiple challenges that have potential to impose barriers to school success. Experiencing child maltreatment and instability may generate and intensify academic struggles. Lack of school stability often undermines the potential for school to function as a location to access supportive resources and relationships crucial to healthy psychosocial and academic development. It is crucial that DCF team members, schools, and community partners evaluate educational disparities and heighten efforts to support the school success of students involved in foster care.

Additional services and support are crucial for educational success. TAY may benefit from ongoing mentorship and strong advocates to ensure they received appropriate accommodation for their educational needs throughout their school experiences. Referrals to **Sun Scholars, Inc.,** or volunteer tutors may be helpful for some youth. Referrals to the **Connecticut Justice Foundation** may also be helpful to help schools reduce the use of exclusionary school discipline and develop trauma-informed policies. The Education Division is primed to assist the regions in planning for TAY.

Youth who are committed abused, neglected, uncared for, or for whom the Commissioner is the statutory parent, shall be in full-time attendance in a secondary school (high school) program, adult high school credit diploma program or general equivalency diploma (GED) program.   Adult high school or GED programs may be approved by the team in lieu of secondary school on a case-by-case basis. Youth are required to complete the adult high school or GED program by age 21.

 All educational planning efforts serving TAY can be guided through these overarching goals
 (From *Blueprint for Change: Educational Success for Children in Foster Care.*
 Retrieved from https://www.fostercareandeducation.org/)

1. Youth are entitled to remain in their same school when feasible
2. Youth are guaranteed seamless transitions between schools and school districts when school moves occur
3. Young children enter school ready to learn
4. Youth have the opportunity and support to fully participate in all aspects of the school experience
5. Youth have supports to prevent school dropout, truancy, and disciplinary actions
6. Youth are involved and engaged in all aspects of their education and educational planning and are empowered to be advocates for their education needs and pursuits
7. Youth have an adult who is invested in his or her education during and after his or her time in out-of-home care

8. Youth have supports to enter into, and complete, postsecondary education

Educational Planning Requirements in DCF:

Research shows that the vast majority of youth in foster care want to attend some form of college or higher education. In order to do that youth have to graduate high school or obtain a GED. All youth shall be encouraged to remain in and graduate from secondary school. In the event that it is in the best interest of the youth to pursue alternative means to secondary education completion, the Transitional Specialist shall seek prior approval from the team and the USD-II Superintendent. The Transitional Specialist shall prepare a memorandum to the USD-II Superintendent which shall also include the prior approvals. The following documents shall be included in memorandum:
- school transcripts;
- test scores;
- GED practice and test scores;
- anticipated Post-Secondary Education or Employment Plan; and
- anticipated time frame for GED completion.

Youth who have been approved to attend a GED program shall be required to accept additional support services, to include tutoring, in order to complete the program within six months. These youth shall be encouraged to also enroll in a post-secondary education program or employment training.

Transitional Specialists shall encourage all youth to remain in and graduate from high school. Youth with a GED are eligible for post-secondary educational programs only if approved by the regional team and PSE specialist.

Challenges of youth in foster care that Transitional Specialists can assist with include (but are not limited to):

Frequent moves - both in living situation and educational placement
Non-attendance
Difficulty and delays in enrolling in school
Delays in obtaining records and ability to make appropriate placements
Delays in delivering special education or other special services
Identification of special education eligibility
Lack of technology in foster homes and/or other out of home settings
Overly restrictive discipline policies; suspension and expulsion
Interagency coordination gaps
Regional office educational planning and advocacy efforts may be augmented through the following activities:

- Promote collaboration among DCF, schools, and educational advocates.

- Share workforce development opportunities about the specific needs of foster and adopted children and youth, including attachment issues, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, the effects of trauma, grief and loss, and other common issues in foster care and adoption.
- Encourage parents and the school system to use legal mechanisms to identify and support children and youth with special needs.
- Every child should have identified educational goals, and individuals in his or her life who can help the child meet those goals.
- Records transfer and school enrollment policies and procedures to allow the prompt, appropriate school placement of every student.
- Avoid placing a youth into special education status simply because he or she is in foster care; ensure that each student receives a comprehensive assessment of his or her individual capabilities and needs.
- Prevent unnecessary school moves; if such moves are necessary, ensure easy transfer of records and prevent loss of credits.
- Implement credit recovery programs to help students who have lost credits due to moves.
- Contact a school to remove any policy or practice barriers so that foster children and youth can fully participate in extracurricular activities, arts, and sports.
- Encourage schools to promote anti-bullying programs as there may be increased likelihood of bullying for foster and adopted children and youth with special needs.
- Educate and engage all parents and caregivers about their rights and the rights of their children and youth and the importance of caregivers' proactive role in supporting the desired educational outcomes for the children and youth in their care.
- Engage students in their education; empower them to advocate for their own educational needs and goals.
- Ensure that the schools communicate clearly and regularly with foster children's and youth's caregivers *and* workers.
- Ensure that both their foster parent and worker are at IEP meetings and understand and agree to the plan; make allowances for birth parents, foster parents, and adoptive parents to jointly attend such meetings.
- Connect TAY to post-secondary educational opportunities, and provide them with mentors and other supportive services to increase success during post-secondary education.

Please see the accompanying Tip Sheet on Educational Planning for Transitional Age Youth in this practice guide.

Resources:

Courtney, M. E., Roderick, M., Smithgall, C., Gladden, R. M., & Nagaoka, J. (2004). The educational status of foster children. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Courtney, M.E., Terao, S.T., Bost, N. (2004). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of Youth Preparing to Leave State Care. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Del Quest, A., Fullerton, A., Geenen, S., Powers, L., & The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care. (2012). Voices of youth in foster care and special education regarding their educational experiences and transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34,* 1604–1615.

McMillen, J.C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thompson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare, 82*, 475-495.

Tip Sheet

V.I.T.A.L. Steps Applied to Case Practice

Focus: Educational Planning for Transitional Age Youth

Best Practice Summary: Educational stability for youth in foster care is important so they can continue their education without disruption, maintain important relationships, and have the opportunity to achieve college and career readiness. Youth should be involved in planning for life after high school as early as possible but certainly no later than age 16. Services should stem from the individual youth's needs and strengths, ensuring the planning considers his or her interests, preferences and desires for their future.

Educational opportunities vary depending on the interests and abilities of each youth. From college to vocational and training programs to adult education to hands on learning, education is essential and should be available to all youth.

Planning for college for some of youth is an exciting yet overwhelming process. There are many components to the college admissions process that requires knowledge, expertise and compassion. The resources of the DCF Post-Secondary Education Consultants can be included in this process. DCF also provides financial assistance for post-secondary school education expenses to students up to their 23rd birthday or end of academic year. A resource that will further support our college enrolled youth is **the SUN Scholars, Inc**. This support offers youth an array of services to support their post-secondary educational, career and social-emotional goals. SUN Scholars, Inc. will provide services based on a four-domain framework that includes: academic mentoring, career development, advocacy and alumni networking supports. Referrals are made through the Educational Division, PSE team.

Other post-secondary education opportunities are available that can lead to a **certification in a vocational or employment training program**. This starts with a PSE plan that includes the details of the program along with supporting documents. This plan is sent to the PSE Consultants for review.

Many of our youth though require the assistance with credit retrieval or tutoring. **Credit retrieval** includes a wide variety of educational strategies and programs that give high school students who have failed a class the opportunity to redo coursework or retake a course through alternative means- and thereby avoid failure and earn academic credit. Credit retrieval can help a youth with completing their course work and earning their high school diploma. To accomplish this credit retrieval and other educational supports a referral to the **DCF Virtual Academy** for under credited, under achieving youth is an option.

Sometimes tutoring is needed to help support a youth through a difficult class or academic year. **The TSS Division and the Educational Division can help find tutors for these youth by utilizing volunteers from Wesleyan University as well as the SUN Scholars Inc. Please free to outreach to either Division for brainstorming and/or support. The TSS and Educational Divisions can help facilitate a referral to the Connecticut Justice Foundation, an organization of pro-bono attorneys that help advocate for DCF involved youth.**

Goals for activity: Case planning and resources.

Children in foster care are far more likely to change schools during the school year, to be in special education classes, and to fail to receive passing grades than their general population counterparts. Nationwide, only about half of youth raised in foster care end up finishing high school and less than 3% graduate from a 4-year college (https://nfyi.org/issues/education).

VITAL Values and/or Essential Practice Principles in Action
- **Voice and choice** by including the youth in the development of their educational plan that best meets their interests and abilities.
- **Core practices** of fortifying and supporting; assess and understanding the youth's educational journey that leads to successful outcomes and long- term stability.
- Increasing the youth's self-confidence in academic performance.

For Coaching and Support of Skill Development in Supervision
Consider how the core practices (Engage and Exchange Information, Assess and Understand Strengths, Fortify and Support, Reflect and Adjust) are applied in these situations. Does the current educational plan lead the youth to specific educational accomplishments on which he/she can build upon?
What steps do we need to take to encourage the youth to attend his school? Has the TTS education division been consulted to look at resources that may help support the youth's plan? Have you and the young person gone together to look at educational alternatives, speak with staff and students and perhaps develop another plan? This just might reinvigorate him/her to give their education another chance.

Suggested CQI Checklist
Education Planning

[ ] Does the case plan reflect the youth's input into their education plan and how that has been supported or modified based on your work with them?
[ ] How have we included credible messengers, supportive adults and peers in the effort to engage the youth in school and highlight the benefits of an education?
[ ] Has any barriers that appear to prevent the youth from completing their education been addressed? What are they and what was done?

Level of Mastery Demonstrated: Consider the level of skill demonstrated by staff on this task.

Foundational: The team member is at an early stage of core practice and skill acquisition. The team member is supported in learning the skills. The team member has an opportunity to develop skills. Coaching agendas may target specific skills for development. The skills are demonstrated and actively coached by team leaders.

Rising: The team member occasionally applies the practices and skills independently. Coaching agendas focus on generalizing skills. The team member demonstrates increasing understanding of the practices. Skills are demonstrated and coached by team leaders.

Secure: The team member consistently applies skills independently to a wide range of settings and aspires to apply knowledge and understanding. There is a range of evidence that shows a deeper understanding of concepts and that skills are sustained over time.