

TOPIC:

The Importance of Stability in a Foster Youth's Education

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Micro Training Course Developed

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT TRAINING CREDIT:

*Read through this self-study

*Fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire

*Return to ACRF for 1.0 hour of training credit.



In 2015, President Obama signed into law the **Every Student Succeeds Act** or **ESSA**. In reality, ESSA has existed since 1965 and was previously called the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* and the *No Child Left Behind Act*. While ESSA addresses many aspects of education for children and youth, it was the first time this national educational legislation specifically mentioned foster youth. Previous child welfare legislation had required that OCS take into account educational stability for foster youth, but this is the first time that the

expectations and accountability were set from the school side as well. This self-study aims to educate parents about how trauma impacts a youth's ability to learn, as well as, clear up the policies surrounding how ESSA has guided OCS' decisions regarding a youth changing schools while in foster care.

Overview of How Trauma Impacts Learning

First, let's take a brief look at what research tells us happens with a youth's brain when he or she experiences a traumatic event. Most of the statistics regarding childhood trauma estimate around 60% of children report experiencing a traumatic event within the last year. Experiencing a very stressful event causes the brain to be flooded with stress hormones, making it difficult for the brain to receive new information or interpret that information and save it for later use.

How does this apply to a youth in foster care? The abuse or neglect a youth experiences often keeps the part of their brain responsible for Fight, Flight or Freeze on full alert all of the time instead of allowing it to rest like the brain of a youth who is not experiencing high amounts of stress. This may make it difficult for youth to concentrate in school, to study for a test, complete homework, adjust to new environments, and build trusting connections and relationships.

When we recognize how trauma can impact a youth's ability to learn new information, stay focused, and build connections and relationships, it's much easier to see why ESSA and OCS have rules around the importance of maintaining the current school when a youth is placed in foster care. Many research studies have found that youth in foster care are much more likely than their peers to struggle academically and fall behind in school. When a disruption happens in a family and a youth changes home environments, often school is the one thing that can remain a constant. They maintain connections to their friends, teachers and other administrators whom they have built relationships with. These important people in a youth's life can see and recognize changes in a youth's behavior and mood and can often provide informal support to help. Youth in foster care also experience struggles maintaining extracurricular activities like after school clubs, sports, and other community based activities purely because of school changes.

School of origin

DEFINITION: The school where the child is currently enrolled or would be enrolled in the immediate future if he or she had not entered custody.

Overview of ESSA and OCS

ESSA lays out several ways the Office of Children's Services should operate in order to cause the least amount of disruption for a youth's education when they enter the foster care system.

The first is that foster youth need to remain in their school of origin.

- *School of origin* is defined as the school where the child is currently enrolled or would be enrolled in the immediate future if they had not entered custody. If the youth’s foster care placement changes, the school of origin is the school the child was enrolled in immediately before the placement change occurs.

Another way ESSA provides guidance for OCS is in regards to transportation for youth to remain in their school of origin.

- OCS and the school districts of Alaska must work closely together to provide limited transportation for youth when their school of origin lies outside of their normal district boundaries. Each school district and region of OCS addresses this area of ESSA unique to the needs of the area.
- Formerly, McKinney-Vento funds were available through the Child in Transition programs to assist youth who were awaiting foster care placement, but since the passage of ESSA, these funds are no longer available through school districts to help with foster youth transportation.

ESSA also provides guidance in the event there is a concern that the school of origin is no longer in the best interest for the youth’s education. OCS, along with the staff from the school of origin and other folks involved in the youth’s life (guardian ad litem, birth parents, community supports) hold what is called a **Determination of Best Interest Meeting**. If you’d like to request and participate in this meeting, talk with your youth’s caseworker.

- When the team is discussing whether changing a youth’s school would be in their best interest, there are several things that need to be considered. A few examples are below:
 - How long is the current placement expected to last?
 - How many schools has the child attended this year and in past years?
 - How well is the youth likely to handle any disruptions in instruction?
 - Does the child have siblings who attend one of the schools?
 - Does the youth have any special instructional needs better met by one school?
 - Is the youth strongly connected to the school and/or involved in school related or extra-curricular activities?

Before a student is allowed to change schools, there must be a *Determination of Best Interest* meeting and it must be agreed that it is in the youth’s best for the school setting to change. A foster parent cannot make this decision alone.

If you have question whether it might be in the best interest for a youth in your home to attend a school different than their school of origin, consider these things:

- These decisions shouldn’t be made alone. Always work closely with a youth’s team. The OCS caseworker, GAL, ICWA worker (when applicable), teachers, and other team members all need to come together when making big decisions regarding a youth’s education.
- When the youth returns home to birth parents, will they be able to maintain the youth in school she changed to without additional supports? The goal of reunification must be considered in these decisions.
- Are you requesting a change in school because of convenience for you, or is it truly in the best interest of the youth to attend the school within your home’s boundaries?

If you’d like to request and participate in a Determination of Best Interest Meeting for the youth in your home after reviewing the list of things to consider above, talk with your youth’s case worker.

A couple things ESSA and OCS do not do:

- Allow foster families to change the school of origin of foster youth without first having the Determination of Best Interest meeting and coming to agreement is made that it is in the best interest of the youth for the school setting to change.
- Provide unlimited funding and transportation when a foster family is unable to or unwilling to provide necessary transportation for a youth to remain in their school of origin.
