



Why Special Education Teachers Should Care About Foster Care

By: John M. Palladino (2004)

Each day hundreds of children are removed from their homes and placed into foster care because of known or suspected forms of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and maltreatment. Some parents pursue foster placement options for their children when no other alternatives exist for the provision of assistance they need. The problem is all too real for parents without any or adequate health insurance that provides services for youth with severe disabilities.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services reported that an estimated 528,000 youth reside in foster care. The literature confirmed that the youth's academic and behavioral needs warrant intervention services often associated with special education and include programs that serve students with learning disabilities.

Thus, it is imperative that child welfare accounts for the important voice of special education teachers in the lives of foster children it serves. Unfortunately, at present time, federal laws that govern foster care do not require the involvement of special education teachers. Although certain conscientious foster care professionals are wise about tapping into the opinions and insights of special educators, others neglect them.

As a profession, special educators must self-proclaim their roles in the lives of these vulnerable children and remind all professionals and caregivers that they, too, care about foster care. To achieve the goal, special educators would be wise to address the ten steps below.

1 - Know who's in charge

Foster care laws and practices may vary from state to state. However, it is understood that judges of juvenile courts are the ultimate authorities for foster care cases. Certain states may use a referee system whereby judges delegate their supervisory roles to lawyers who serve with the title, "Referee" (e.g., Michigan). Judges and referees determine the objectives and plans of each case. They often delegate the day-to-day supervision of foster care plans to government cases workers (e.g., Department of Health and Human Services) or to agencies (e.g., Lutheran Family Social Services). They will also assign an attorney (guardian ad litem) to each foster care case to advocate for the best interests of children.

Special educators may need to voice concerns and/or opinions throughout a child's placement into foster care. Knowing the supervisory hierarchy helps determine with whom unresolved matters should be addressed.

2 - Know the ultimate goal

Foster care services aim to reunify children with their caregivers whenever it is feasible and safe to do so. Court plans should include services, timelines, and expectations of parents that result in successful reunifications, even if it is with parents who caused the abuse in the first place. Judges and referees acknowledge the extensive research that supports efforts to restore the natural, albeit fractured, bond between parents and children. At the same time, they may order concurrent alternatives when reunification appears unrealistic (e.g., long-term foster care, adoption).

Special educators need to remember that foster care is not intended to find "better" homes for abused and neglected child, even if it is evident that foster parents and other caregivers have more resources and skills. The goal is to fix breakdowns in the family unit and restore an acceptable level of care that makes it safe for children to return home.

3 - Communicate with caseworkers

The media has highlighted poor supervision of foster care in several states and usually blames high casework-children ratios. Demands placed on caseworkers are many and include ongoing supervision of present cases while acquiring new cases each day. Caseworkers are constantly "putting out fires," writing court reports,

appearing in court, visiting with children and families, and a host of other tasks. It is no surprise to note the high burnout rate in the caseworker profession.

Special educators frustrated with lack of caseworker contact may need to accommodate for caseworkers and their responsibilities that often times eradicate any hopes of communication with school personnel. Special educators ought to suggest alternative forms of communication (e.g., emails, communication logs) and agree to meet at times and alternative locations (e.g., foster care agency) that are feasible for caseworkers' attendance.

4 - Engage foster parents

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) expanded its definition of "parent" to include foster parents. The literature reported that foster parents often lack awareness of their roles in school related matters, especially the provision of special education services. The finding is a grave concern since both foster parents and special educators must accommodate for children's special education needs, a quest that would be more streamlined if both parties worked together.

Special educators should consult with administrators and confirm their districts' and states' interpretation of foster parents' IDEA rights. They should not assume that foster parents understand their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, they should contact foster parents at the moment children with disabilities are placed into their care and review with them their roles.

5 - Be confident about confidentiality

Special educators of youth in foster care often pose the questions: "What can I share? What can I say? What about birth parent rights? What about foster parent rights?" These are no easy questions to answer. The worse response is to ignore the complexities associated with these questions and keep matters as status quo. The rights of birth parents, foster parents, and caseworkers, and the many needs of youth in foster care warrant special educators to make decisions that are fair, legal, and beneficial.

Special educators should visit with caseworkers and identify parties with legal access to information and participation. Next, they should draft plans for foster parent and birth parent involvement and receive administrative approval. The process empowers educators to follow through with their plans at times when certain parties challenge the extent of their involvement.

6 - Commit, not comply

Special education services for youth in foster care need to exceed the task of identifying the roles and responsibilities of caseworkers, birth parents, and foster parents. The services should be unique and focus on each foster youth's specific needs and goals.

Special educators should encourage foster students' self-determinations and involve them in their IEP, especially at the secondary level. Transition plans should account for services and goals to overcome systemic problems that adolescents who age out of foster care typically endure, such as: (a) unwanted pregnancies, (b) homelessness, (d) lack of health care, and (e) lack of post secondary options.

7 - Link special education and court plans

Special education services may complement foster care court objectives. For example, a court objective for a mother states: "Mrs. Smith will identify and execute three behavior modifications for her son Joey that do not include any physical reprimands." Joey's therapist follows-up with an objective that states: "Joey will accept his mother's verbal redirections and follow-through without screaming, hitting, or using profanity."

It is evident that Mrs. Smith and Joey need to improve their interactions with each other before reunification could occur. A special education teacher aware of the objectives could address the social skills or "agreeing to disagree" and "accepting 'no'" into Joey's IEP and daily interactions at school. Fine tuning IEP plans and special education services for youth in foster care could enhance chances for reunification.

8 - Earn trust

It is inevitable that special educators will experience frustrations with caseworkers, foster parents, birth parents, and other professionals and caregivers. The myriad views about what is best for children in foster care make it impossible to please all parties all the time.

Special educators should assert their opinions and insights, but do so in ways that elicit trust necessary for all

parties, even naysayers. To do so, they should listen to the input of all parties, even if it means conducting several meetings until all voices are heard. Before, during, and after the meetings, the educators should speak about each party in positive terms and model respect and dignity. Last and most important, special educators should show a willingness to adopt their practices when requested and feasible.

9 - Expand awareness

Special educators often do not receive information about foster care in their teacher preparation programs. It is important to compensate for any lack of knowledge necessary to advocate for families and children involved with foster care.

One option special educators should explore is inservice and conference options about foster care. Mental health hospitals and Departments of Health and Human Services are good starting points to learn about these opportunities. A second option is to subscribe to list serves that disseminate foster care information. The Casey Foundation (www.casey.org) is a good example. A third option is to encourage administrators to bring invite welfare speakers who could address teachers about the status of foster care in a local community and respond to questions and concerns.

10 - Care about foster care!

Most important, special educators should constantly remind themselves and their colleagues that they are ideal, stable, and nurturing presences in the tumultuous lives of youth in foster care. They are the eyes, ears, and hearts of the foster care system and are poised to voice and advocate insights that are unique and beneficial. Our nation's child victims of abuse and neglect deserve all forms of advocacy, especially that of a special educator.

Department of Special Education - Eastern Michigan University

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