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Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care

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Abstract

Children in foster care move two times per year on average. School records are not always transferred in a timely manner, which leads to a lack of services. Schools often are not aware of the legal issues surrounding foster care, such as who has legal rights to sign field trip permission slips or consent for educational evaluations. This study led to the development of an informational guideline as to how best support the school transition process for children in foster care. The Delphi technique was used to enlist the expertise of four respondent groups: foster parents, Guardians ad Litem, school psychologists, and social services workers. Data was gathered in three rounds. Round 1 gathered information the respondents believed to be pertinent when a foster child transitions schools. Round 2 synthesized and formalized information gathered from Round 1, and asked respondents their level of agreement and suggestions for improvement. Round 3 led to the development of an informational guideline to promote smooth school transitions for children in foster care for respondents to review and approve. The end product was a refined informational guideline intended for schools to utilize when a child in foster care transitions schools so that the child and school are prepared for the transition in the best possible way.

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PROMOTING SMOOTH SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Ghyslyn T. Laviolette

March 2011

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Title: Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care
Advisor: Cynthia Hazel, Ph.D.
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Abstract

Children in foster care move two times per year on average. School records are not always transferred in a timely manner, which leads to a lack of services. Schools often are not aware of the legal issues surrounding foster care, such as who has legal rights to sign field trip permission slips or consent for educational evaluations. This study led to the development of an informational guideline as to how best support the school transition process for children in foster care. The Delphi technique was used to enlist the expertise of four respondent groups: foster parents, Guardians ad Litem, school psychologists, and social services workers. Data was gathered in three rounds. Round 1 gathered information the respondents believed to be pertinent when a foster child transitions schools. Round 2 synthesized and formalized information gathered from Round 1, and asked respondents their level of agreement and suggestions for improvement. Round 3 led to the development of an informational guideline to promote smooth school transitions for children in foster care for respondents to review and approve. The end product was a refined informational guideline intended for schools to utilize when a child in foster care transitions schools so that the child and school are prepared for the transition in the best possible way.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Sam is a 13-year-old boy in eighth grade and has been in foster care for five years. He was removed from his biological parents by social services because they were engaging in substance use and distribution. His parents are no longer involved in the social services case and parental rights have been terminated. Sam has three siblings all living in different foster homes. Sam and his siblings have supervised visits once a week. He misses his siblings terribly.

It is February and Sam has just enrolled in his third school this year. He has moved foster homes many times during the past five years, and has attended approximately three schools each year since third grade. Sam is confused with his class assignments and reluctant to make friends each time he is enrolled in a new school. Sam has very few friends, and he does not trust teachers or other school staff. His grades are low, and he is reading at a sixth grade level. Sam often does not know what the school rules are, which results in him frequently breaking the rules. Sam's teachers send him to the office and he continuously receives discipline referrals. This angers Sam, as he believes his rule breaking is not his fault. He does not manage his anger well, and when in trouble Sam engages in arguments with the teachers and principal. These arguments typically end with Sam calling the adult a derogatory name, and then being placed in detention or suspended.

None of the schools Sam has attended over the past 5 years have gathered information on Sam in a timely manner, and the social services worker has not had complete educational records. Any services Sam received at one school were rarely transferred to the next school. None of his schools have had programs to help new students learn rules, connect to other students, or connect with peers. Indeed, every school change has been a difficult process for Sam.

Julia is also a 13-years-old. She too has been in foster care for a number of years. Her story is similar to Sam's. Her parents were using and selling illegal substances, she has a sister who was also removed from the home, and parental rights are now terminated. What differs is that Julia's life has had fewer changes since entering foster care than Sam.

Julia and her sister have always been placed together. She has been in four schools over the past 5 years, but each transition was managed well. The first change came when Julia was removed from her biological home, the second when she moved from a 60-day foster care receiving home to a permanent foster home, the third when Julia transitioned from elementary school to middle school, and the fourth when her foster family bought a new house in a different school district. The middle school Julia is now attending has a structured new student orientation. The school pays special attention to their children in foster care, understanding that foster children change schools frequently and often do not feel connected to others. Julia's social services worker and foster parents informed the school of her expected enrollment and established a connection prior to the school change. The school quickly obtained Julia's previous school records. Services she received at her previous middle school are continuing at her

current school. Julia has been paired with a buddy in her same grade. The buddy's job is to help new students learn school rules; become familiar with the school building, teachers, and principal; and meet other students. Julia and her buddy have many classes in common, and her buddy introduced Julia to all of her teachers. Julia also participates in the school's Check In/Check Out program. She checks in with school staff at the beginning of the day, periodically throughout the day, and again at then end of the day. This program helps new students, as well as current students who are having difficulties, build connections with adults and provides support.

As you can see by the two scenarios above, two children in very similar circumstances can experience school transitions extremely differently. Schools differ in what they know about foster children and in how they help foster children transition into their schools. Schools differ in how they undergo gathering new students' educational records and how they help new students make connections and learn school rules. Students in foster care present many challenges for school systems in gathering records and assisting students in making peer connections and progressing academically. Students in foster care are a unique population deserving of school personnel attention.

General Information About Children in Foster Care

Number of children in foster care. The number of children in foster care is increasing, which means that school psychologists, school administrators (such as principals), and special and general education teachers are serving an increasing number of children in foster care. The United States 2006 census estimated 515,000 children in foster care (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006). Jacobson (2008) estimated that the number of children in foster care exceeds 700,000 within the span of a year, and

that the numbers have doubled over the last two decades. A lower estimate is that 200,000 children are currently living in non-relative foster care. This number does not include children who live with relatives other than their parents, in group homes, or in institutional settings (McKellar, 2006).

School enrollment issues. Children in foster care often move several times prior to consistently attending a particular school or district. DeFago (2009) stated that between two-thirds and three-fourths of students in foster care must change schools, and that 65% of students in foster care have changed schools at least seven times by the time they age out of the foster care system. These frequent moves make it difficult to gather accurate educational records from students' previous schools. Though many foster parents value education and instill this value in their foster children, it can be frustrating for the foster parents to attempt to provide the school with the records requested (McKellar, 2006). Likewise, it is frustrating for school psychologists, principals, and teachers who are faced with this situation. School districts typically will not allow a student to attend school prior to proper records, such as immunization and special education records, being acquired. If they do allow the student to attend classes, services that were being provided at the previous school typically are not provided until the records are received at the new school. This delay results in the student, who has likely missed a lot of school already, missing more school or attending school without the necessary services until the records are in proper order. Frequent school changes, in conjunction with services not being provided in a timely manner, often lead to achievement gaps for students (Conger & Finkelstien, 2003). Therefore, students in foster care are at a higher risk of academic delays. To further complicate matters, it takes

a student 4 to 6 months on average to adjust to a new setting and perform at a comparable academic level as their same grade peers (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003).

Frequent moves also affect the student's ability and desire to make connections with peers, teachers, or other school personnel. They may not be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities due to school rules about attendance or having attained permission from their social services worker in a timely manner. School related activities such as clubs and sports are an important aspect of children learning how to make and keep friends, as well as learning socially appropriate behaviors (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003).

Attachment and feeling different from others. Children in foster care often feel different from their peers, as though they stand out (McKellar, 2006). Those children who frequently move from foster home to foster home have more difficulty attaching to adults, including teachers, school psychologists, and principals (McKellar, 2006). Foster children may feel stigmatized and not connected to others because of their different status than their non-foster peers.

Behavioral issues. Behavioral issues are always of concern to school psychologists, principals, and teachers. Children in foster care often have numerous behavioral issues, ranging from Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) to depression to anxiety. Children in foster care are also more likely to be recipients of suspensions and expulsions, and more likely to have a higher number of days tardy or absent than their non-foster peers (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). The feelings of stigmatization and lack of connectedness mentioned above

may lead to negative behavioral issues such as temper tantrums, fights, and refusal to complete schoolwork.

Transitions. Children in foster care go through many transitions: they move homes, must make new friends, attend different schools, learn from different curricula, learn different rules for home and school, and adjust to life away from their parents and siblings. These transitions can lead to grief, behavioral problems, and/or a lack of engagement in school and life. The frequent changes a child in foster care experiences are a contributing factor to academic and behavioral difficulties in school and at home.

Quite frequently when a child in foster care is enrolled in a new school he or she is expected to begin to learn and be at a similar pace as his or her peers. The cumulative effect of not having learned base skills and being asked to learn more difficult skills (Crowley, 2003) and the amount of time it takes for a student to adjust to a new school puts foster children at a disadvantage academically.

Promoting student success. If given a chance and proper support, children in foster care can succeed academically and behaviorally. Proper support includes school personnel having a thorough understanding of the specific issues children in foster care face every day, and children in foster care receiving services and compassion from the public school system. Proper support also means foster parents, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), school personnel, and social services workers helping children in foster care transition smoothly from one school to another by ensuring records are provided quickly and all parties understand the legal issues, such as who has custody and authority to perform which roles.

Purpose of Study

This study explored what foster parents, GALs, school psychologists, and social service workers believe to be best practices when foster children transition to a new school. This study also explored what foster parents, GALs, school psychologists, and social services workers believe to be the most important practices when integrating a child in foster care into a new school, as well as what were current practices of records, history, and information gathering when the student transitions from one school to another. The final product of this study was an informational guideline of how to manage the transition process when a child in foster care moves to a new school.

Significance of Study

The results of this study can provide schools nationally with an informational guideline to follow when a child in foster care is enrolling in their school. The intent of the informational guideline is to ease these difficult school and life changes for children in foster care and improve upon schools' knowledge of children in foster care. At this time there is a gap in schools' knowledge of children in foster care. Schools often do not know what questions to ask, or of whom to ask them, when a child in foster care enrolls in their school. Also, schools are often unaware of the legal issues of children in foster care (such as custody issues or no contact orders pertaining to biological parents).

Statement of the Problem

Children in foster care are at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to academic success. The disruption of their lives (being removed from their parents home, abuse and/or neglect experienced, and moving into a stranger's home) is devastating and foster children suffer in many areas. The frequent moves experienced while living in foster

care contributes to foster children doing consistently worse academically, as does the disservice of records not being found and/or transferred in a timely manner and/or services not being provided as soon as the chills is enrolled in a new school.

Definitions of Terms

Foster Care

Foster care is a system of care that is typically governed by social services. Children who are removed from their homes by social services are placed in the foster care system. This system is to provide a safe place for the foster child to live when they are removed from their biological parents' home.

Child in Foster Care

Any child who has been removed from his/her biological parents' home by social services and is placed in a foster home is a foster child. For the purposes of this study foster children are those children placed in a non-relative foster home. Child in foster care and foster child are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Foster Parent

The foster parent is an adult who is providing care for the foster child's daily living needs such as shelter, food, clothing, and education.

Social Service Worker

A social service worker is the social service agency's appointed person who oversees the foster child's case. The social service agency has custody of a child in foster care, and the worker is the agency's representative who oversees the foster child's situation (including school).

Guardian ad Litem (GAL)

A GAL is a court-appointed attorney who is charged with advocating for the best interests of the foster child and for reporting to the court in dependency and neglect cases.

School Transition (specific to children in foster care)

A school transition is when a foster child is moving from one school to another. The school transition could be the result of the foster child moving to a different foster home, the foster parents' moving and taking the foster child with them, or the school district choosing to enroll the foster child in another school. If it is the school district's choice to move the foster child, that move could be to an alternative school or another school within the district that is better suited to meeting the foster child's unique educational and/or social/emotional needs.

Research Questions

This study had two primary research questions:

1. What are best practices in supporting students when they transition to a different school?

2. What do foster parents, GALs, school psychologists, and social service workers believe to be best practices when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?

   a. What information should the school be gathering?

   b. What are the responsibilities of the foster parent, GAL, and social service worker when a student living in foster care transitions to a new school?

   c. What situational and/or family history should be shared with which school staff?

   d. What supports should be provided to children in foster care when they transition schools?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a more detailed overview of the challenges faced by children in foster care. Information is presented on general student mobility, student mobility specific to foster children, the academic and behavioral challenges faced by foster children, and best practices in school transitions.

Student Mobility

Crowley (2003) stated that 16% of the population changes residences at least once per year, and the United States General Accounting Office (1994) stated that by the end of third grade 1 in 6 students has attended three or more different schools. Children who are most prone to frequent moves are the poor, children of minority status, children of migrant farm workers, homeless children, immigrant children, children of military families, and foster children (Hartman, 2006). High student mobility most frequently occurs in large, urban, minority schools (Rumberger, 2003). The results of a child moving frequently include adjusting to new neighborhoods, schools, and social networks (Crowley, 2003). Children who move frequently are prone to developmental issues and behavioral problems, and are more likely to be retained, suspended, and/or expelled (Mehana & Rynolds, 1995). The number of moves a child has during his or her school career, and when those moves occur, can affect the child in different ways. Hypermobility, or having moved six or more times during childhood, is considered to be very damaging to a child's academic abilities and mental health (Crowley, 2003). Core

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principles and basic learning skills that are needed for ongoing education are taught in

Kindergarten through third grade (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000). Therefore moves occurring

prior to the third grade are more detrimental academically than moves occurring after

third grade (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000). A student having moved four or more times by the

eighth grade is at least 4 times more likely to drop out of school (Skandera & Sousa,

2002). Moves that are unplanned are the most detrimental to children and have the

highest risk of the child experiencing emotional and psychological harm (Crowley,

2003).

Student mobility and academics. Children who have not experienced frequent

moves perform better academically overall than children who have experienced frequent

moves (Crowley, 2003). The United States General Accounting Office (1995) estimated

that 40% of highly mobile students were low achievers as compared to 26% of students

who had not moved. Wood (1993) stated that 23% of highly mobile students repeat at

least one grade. Mobility during high school years decreases the prospect of a student

graduating from high school (Rumberger, 2003).

Student mobility and mental health. Children who move frequently are faced

with a variety of difficult situations. Highly mobile children "suffer psychologically,

socially, and academically from mobility and face the psychological challenge of coping

with a new school environment" (Rumberger, 2003, p. 8). Their home life and social ties

have been disrupted, often leading to feelings of alienation (Engec, 2006). Children who

move frequently loose friends and lack stability (Crowley, 2003; Julianelle & Foscarinis,

2003). This lack of stability can make it difficult for children to make new friends or

trust adults (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). Mobile children must adjust to new social expectations in order to make new friends (Rumberger, 2003). Children who move frequently often believe that putting forth the effort to make new friends is pointless because they will move again, loosing the new friends they have made (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Student mobility and behavior. Being a highly mobile student correlates with misbehavior and violence (Rumberger, 2003). The more frequently a child moves the higher the chance that child will experience behavioral problems, which may lead to missed classes and academic difficulties (Engec, 2006). When children move to a new school they must adjust to a new building, new teachers, and new school rules (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). A lack of stable social relationships hinders the child from developing confidence and competence, and from becoming a well-adjusted adult (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). There is often a lack of educational continuity and incomplete school records transferred from the old school to the new school (Engec, 2006; Crowley, 2003). Sometimes, teachers believe highly mobile students are less competent and/or commit less time to their educational needs (Crowley, 2003). Highly mobile children benefit from school personnel helping them adjust to their new school. This help is often not received and therefore the child has a difficult time making sense of what is being taught at their new school compared to their old school (Engec, 2006).

Student mobility and student needs. Unmet and unrecognized needs are additional challenges mobile children face. Julianelle and Foscarinis (2003) described three categories of negative experiences of movers: (a) unrecognized educational needs;

(b) unmet educational needs; and (c) lack of stable social relationships. Unrecognized

needs occur when it is difficult for the teacher or counselor to identify a new student's

needs due to lack of communication between the old school, new school, and

parents/guardians. Sometimes needs are misinterpreted due to this lack of

communication and collaboration, which may lead to the child receiving inappropriate

services. Unmet needs occur when a child moves so frequently that services are never

provided. In total, services are not provided in a timely manner due to several reasons:

records not being transferred form one school to another in a timely manner, the child

having moved so frequently that proper assessments/evaluations never occurred, or the

school not addressing the needs due to a belief that the child will move away soon and so

providing services is of questionable value.

General Information Pertaining to Children in Foster Care

This section focuses on information specific to children in foster care, including

reasons why foster care placements occur, demographic information of foster children,

academic challenges faced by foster children and the school system, and behavioral

challenges faced by foster children and the school system.

Reasons foster care placements occur. The goal of placing a child in foster care

is to ensure that the child is living in a safe environment. Children can be placed in foster

care for a variety of reasons such as parental illness or death, the child being beyond

control of the parents, parental neglect (including parental drug use), parental abuse,

parental abandonment, or parental unavailability (i.e. when a parent is incarcerated or

institutionalized). Abuse and neglect are the most common reasons a child is placed in foster care (DeFago, 2009; McKellar, 2006; Scherr, 2008).

Demographic information. The United States 2006 census estimated that 515,000 children were in welfare placements. Most of these children were placed in foster homes. Of these, 68% percent (approximately 350,200 children) were school-aged. Half of the placements were due to abuse and/or neglect issues (DeFago, 2009; Scherr, 2008). In comparison to the United States 2006 census, the United States Department of Health and Human Services 2007 information stated that 360,848 school-aged children were placed in foster care (71% of the total number of children placed in foster care).

According to McKellar (2006) the average age a child enters foster care is 8½-years old, and the average time a child spends in foster care is 8 years. Most foster children live in care at least 2 years (Scherr, 2008). The main outcome goal for foster children is either reunification with their biological parents or adoption (Scherr, 2008). Fifty-four percent of children in foster care return to their biological parents. Another 7% emancipate from the child welfare system. Parental rights are terminated on a small portion, and these children are then open to adoption. Some are adopted, others remain in foster care until they are old enough to emancipate. Approximately 30% of homeless adults were foster children (McKellar, 2006).

Academic challenges. Foster children often exhibit academic difficulties. Foster children are much more likely to be educationally disadvantaged compared their peers, though living in foster care does not automatically determine that a child will have

academic difficulties (McKellar, 2006; Walker, 1994). Foster children have more school absences and higher discipline referral rates than their peers (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

Areas of academic difficulties. The largest areas of academic difficulties for foster children are reading, mathematics, and written expression (Evans, 2004; McKellar, 2006). Foster children exhibit more learning and language problems than their non-foster peers (Evans, 2004), exhibit weaker overall cognitive abilities, perform much lower on standardized achievement exams in math and reading, and earn lower classroom grades than their non-foster peers (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). On average, foster children are about 1 year behind academically than their same grade peers (Shin, 2003). Thirty-one percent of foster children qualify for special education services, compared to the national average of 14% (Scherr, 2008). Foster children are more likely to have been retained at least 1 year (McKellar, 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). Special programs such as advanced courses, extracurricular activities including academic clubs, and a drive toward higher education are typically not available to or instilled in foster children (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Shin, 2003).

Early environmental and hereditarial influences on academic achievement. It is likely that many children in foster care have academic difficulties due to situations they were exposed to while living in their biological homes (McKellar, 2006) as well as stressors of being in the foster care system. As noted earlier, the majority of foster children were placed in care due to abuse and/or neglect. These children may be at a higher risk for academic difficulties due to the trauma they sustained at an early age

(Shin, 2003). Foster children's academic difficulties may also be at least partially due to their biological parents' intellectual abilities (McKellar, 2006; Speer, 1940). It was noted by Freeman, Holzinger, and Mitchell (1928) and Speer (1940) that when the biological parents of a foster child had a lower Intelligence Quotient (IQ) score, their child had a lower IQ score. This finding does not necessarily mean that a child in foster care will have a low IQ, but it is a factor of which to be aware.

Educational continuity. Foster children are highly mobile, moving an average of two times per year (Shin, 2003). Changing schools frequently leads to a lack of educational continuity (Engec, 2006) and a decrease in academic performance (Shin, 2003). Foster children who move frequently often miss large portions of the school year (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). When children move from school to school, especially at an early age, a cumulative effect occurs: core academic concepts are not learned. When children do not learn core academic concepts during their primary grades it becomes more and more difficult for them to learn more advanced content because those core concepts are not present. This leads to the child falling further and further behind academically (Crowley, 2003).

Risk for school drop out. As noted in an above paragraph, special programs such as advanced courses, extracurricular activities including academic clubs, and a drive toward higher education are typically not available to or instilled as important in foster children (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Shin, 2003). Without intervention by foster parents, social service workers, and school personnel, most foster children will not complete high

school and will be at an increased risk of utilizing public assistance or becoming involved in the criminal justice system as an adult (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

Potential positive educational outcomes. Not all is lost for foster children. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) stated, "the educational achievement of caregivers is highly related to their children's educational success" (p. 200). Foster children are influenced by many factors, including the educational aspirations and involvement of their foster parents (Shin, 2003). In many cases when children were placed in foster homes with foster parents who valued education and were of average or above intelligence, the foster children's academic abilities increased over time (Burks, 1943; Freeman, Holzinger, & Mitchell, 1928; Skodak, 1943). When a foster child is placed in a foster home that is safe, predictable, and enriching there is great potential for the foster child to exhibit academic growth (McKellar, 2006; Speer, 1940).

Behavioral challenges.

The experience of loss. As mentioned earlier, abuse and neglect are the most common reasons a child is placed in foster care (DeFago, 2009; McKellar, 2006; Scherr, 2008). Though parental abuse and neglect often leads to emotional trauma, most foster children experience great loss when they are removed from their biological parents. The removal from the biological family and being placed in foster care means the child is moving into a stranger's home. The move results in loss of parents and oftentimes siblings, relatives, pets, friends, possessions, home school, and the only home they had known (Scherr, 2008). Foster children typically move several times while living in foster care, which leads to increased difficulty in forming healthy attachments to adults

and peers (McKellar, 2006). It is difficult for a child to form healthy attachments in the midst of a traumatic event (Scherr, 2008). Foster children are often teased by their classmates and become highly defensive if asked about their family (Geroski & Knauss, 2000). The abuse and/or neglect sustained, along with moving in with strangers and feeling stigmatized by peers, may result in attachment issues.

Mental health. Traumatic events often lead to social-emotional challenges, which in turn may lead to the child acting out behaviorally. Behaviors most often seen are aggression, depression, immaturity, attention seeking, anxiety, withdrawal, defiance, over-compliance, hyperactivity, and/or a lack of social skills (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). Foster children who have been maltreated are 3 to 5 times more likely to experience depression, 12 times more likely to attempt suicide, and are at an increased risk for substance abuse (Shin, 2003). As foster children grow older they become more detached, avoidant, and/or resistant to authority figures (McKellar, 2006). They may daydream excessively, become overwhelmed easily, be disorganized by stressful situations, and/or feel stigmatized by their peers (McKellar, 2006).

School behaviors. As schools are a safe place for most children, foster children tend to express their feelings and emotions through behaviors during the school day (Scherr, 2008). Foster children exhibit a variety of behavioral problems in school. As a result of school intolerance of behavioral problems, foster children have much higher discipline referral rates compared to their non-foster peers (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). Children in foster care are 3 times as likely than their non-foster peers to be suspended or expelled (foster children suspension/expulsion rates are at 24%, compared

to 7% of their non-foster peers) (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Scherr, 2008). In fact, foster children are more likely to be staffed into special education for social-emotional difficulties than they are for academic/learning difficulties (McKellar, 2006).

Traditionally schools focus on academic achievement, not mental health issues (Florell, 2007). According to Emmerson and Lovitt (2003) "few teachers are knowledgeable about the extensive problems these children have while they are in school and once they leave foster care and are on their own" (p. 199). Both social-emotional skills and cognitive problem solving skills are needed for learning to occur (Florell, 2007). According to Florell (2007), when social-emotional skills increase, academic achievement increases; and when academic achievement increases, social-emotional skills increase.

Schools can have a positive effect on children in foster care. Schools are a place where foster children have the ability to thrive though their turmoil. Schools are a place that can provide safe and positive experiences for children (Scherr, 2004). When foster children have positive school experiences and educational success it helps to heal and counter the abuse, neglect, and separations they have experienced (Shin, 2003).

Some positive experiences the school environment can make available to foster children are after-school clubs, involvement in school sports and other extra-curricular activities, earning good grades the child is proud of, and the promotion of self-care. Schools are a place where healthy attachments can be established and trust rebuilt with adults and peers (Scherr, 2008). It is important for school personnel to welcome foster children into schools, provide interventions when they are warranted, and develop

positive relationships with foster children and their foster parents and social service workers (Scherr, 2004).

Student Mobility Specific to Children in Foster Care

All of the issues and struggles of highly mobile children in general hold true for foster children, though some of the statistics differ. On average foster children move one to two times per year while in foster care (Shin, 2003). At least 50% of foster children change school at a minimum of four times while in foster care (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). Over twice as many foster children as their non-foster peers have changed schools more than three times since the fifth grade (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004).

Foster child mobility and academics. Frequent moves often lead to academic difficulties. Frequency of school moves is negatively correlated with academic performance (Shin, 2003). The lack of educational continuity discussed for mobile children is heightened for children in foster care because foster children experience a higher number of moves. The cumulative effect of not learning core academic concepts is exacerbated when a child is in foster care (Crowley, 2003). Foster children's frequent moves can mean that they have large portions of non-attendance during the school year (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). On average it takes a student 4 to 6 months to recover academically from a school change (Shin, 2003). Since foster children move homes more than their non-foster peers, it is no wonder that so many foster children have difficulties academically.

Foster child mobility and academic records. It is often difficult to keep track of and transfer school records for highly mobile children. This is exacerbated when the

student is in foster care. Less than one quarter of foster children's academic cumulative files can be readily retrieved, and their files are often missing large portions of information (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). Foster parents are not automatically given a new foster child's academic records; therefore, foster parents do not always have those records when enrolling the student in school (McKellar, 2006). As many as one-third of foster parents do not know if a new foster child in their home had previously received special education services (McKellar, 2006). Foster children are in legal custody of social services and their social service workers have the responsibility of keeping track of records such as educational files. Three quarters of the time the social service worker could not identify where a foster child was currently attending school, with the information sometimes not being included in the case file (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). Though the social service worker is legally responsible for the foster child, he or she oftentimes is not aware of the child's school experiences or school needs, and social service agencies do not always monitor school outcomes of foster children (Geroski & Knauss, 2000; Conger & Finkelstein, 2003).

This lack of communication and record keeping results in foster children not receiving the school services to which they are entitled. When a new school does not receive the records from the old school, the new school does not know how to appropriately serve the foster child (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). Schools typically will not allow a student to enroll prior to receiving his or her educational records from the previous school. The result is the foster child missing large portions of the school year due to record transfer delays (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004) and

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missing out on activities such as involvement in school sports or clubs (McKellar, 2006). Accurate credit accumulation is also an issue at the high school level, with many foster children loosing credits when they transfer schools mid-semester or when accurate records are not attained (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

Foster child mobility and school activities. Foster children are not in custody of their biological parents. This leads to a unique situation when the foster child needs a permission slip signed for a school activity, such as field trips or school sports (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). Typically the foster parents do not have the authority to sign permission slips for school activities. It is the social service workers who have the authority to sign. This can lead to delays when trying to attain permission slip signatures because the form must go from the school to the foster child's home to the social service worker and back through the chain. Sometimes social service workers do not receive or send back the permission slips in a timely manner. To avoid these problems, some social service workers and foster parents do not tell the school the foster child's custodial status (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). However, many foster children miss out on opportunities because permission slips are not signed by their due date.

Foster child mobility and mental health. Foster children's moves often are unplanned and without forewarning. Unplanned moves are the most detrimental kind of move and lead to the highest risk of children experiencing emotional and psychological harm (Crowley, 2003). The more moves a foster child experiences the more often that child needs to make new friends and learn about new schools and new teachers. These emotional and psychological challenges may lead, and often do, to behavioral problems.

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The foster child may choose to not try to make friends, thinking, "Why should I? I'm just going to move again." (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). Non-foster classmates often tease foster children, which result in the foster children withdrawing even more (Geroski & Knauss, 2000). Forming attachments becomes difficult for foster children who move frequently. They feel like they stand out and are different from their non-foster peers (McKellar, 2006). Some homework assignments are uncomfortable because the foster child is asked to talk about his or her family. In these situations, the foster child may become defiant and defensive toward his or her teacher (Geroski & Knauss, 2000). Experiences of abandonment, stigmatization, and feelings of uncertainty combined with a lack of attachment to safe adults can lead to mental heath issues such as depression, anxiety, and behavioral diagnoses (such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or Conduct Disorder).

Best Practices in School Transitions

This section provides information about best practices in school transitions. Current practices that occur during natural school transitions and providing a constellation of services are discussed. Practices that have been devised for special populations, such as military and homeless families, are also discussed.

Schools play a large role in meeting children's educational needs so that they can learn successfully, build their self-concept, and have positive peer group experiences (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006). When schools do not provide smooth school transitions, development is compromised. Schools can provide a consistent, structured, and warm environment, and they can be proactive in promoting a safe and

stable place for foster children (Crowley, 2003; McKellar, 2006). Schools can also

prepare in advance for new students and aid in the enrollment process for incoming

students immediately upon arrival (Rumberger, 2003).

      Applying lessons from natural school transitions. Schools tend to offer

orientation programs at times of natural school transitions, such as from elementary

school to middle school/junior high school and from middle school/junior high school to

high school. These orientation programs range from one to several days and include

activities such as tours of the school, matching the student with a buddy or mentor who is

in an upper grade, and meetings with new teachers (Bartosh, 1989). Teachers and parents

are aware that these natural school transitions are often stressful and anxiety provoking

for students. Due to this awareness, teachers and parents help to prepare the student for

the transition by being sensitive to the new school environment and providing academic

and social support to meet the demands of increased academic work (both in class and

homework) and developing new peer relationships (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Middle

schools and high schools are welcoming of their incoming classes and work to establish

relationships with these new students (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students transitioning to

schools that have established and comprehensive anti-bullying programs are more likely

to be accepted into the social network of their new middle or high school (Kingery &

Erdley, 2007).

      School records should be maintained and clear. Records from the foster child's

previous schools should be obtained quickly. Foster children should be enrolled in their

new school quickly and confidentiality guidelines should be abided (McKellar, 2006; Scherr, 2008).

Support from the school and classroom levels. Benedict and White (1991) stated that foster children "may require a more expanded and intensified constellation of services than has been available in the past" (p. 54). This constellation of services could be schools providing a liaison to facilitate communication between the school district and social services and/or school districts building a collaborative partnership between the school, social services, and foster parents (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

Teachers should remember the importance of a structured classroom that is also sensitive to children's needs (Scherr, 2008). This is best practice for all children. Teachers and other school staff should be sure to explain school rules to incoming children several times over several weeks and allow time for children to understand and learn these rules. Schools should focus on the foster child's strengths and build upon existing protective factors. Identifying the foster child's protective factors can be done through the school psychologist or counselor having a conversation with the child, the social services worker, the foster family, and biological parents when appropriate. The school should take this information into consideration when determining the best learning environment for the foster child, as well as how to best interact with the child (Cushner, 2009).

Expansion of the McKinney-Vento Act. The McKinney-Vento Act was designed to alleviate the negative effects of frequently moving schools for homeless children (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003) and states that homeless children have the right

to stay in their home school regardless of their shelter's location (Hartman, 2006). In December 2001 the McKinney-Vento Act was reauthorized as part of the No Child Left Behind legislation (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). This reauthorization provided a definition of homeless for educational systems. The Act's definition of homeless includes children and youth who are living in shelters; shared housing due to loss of private housing; motels, hotels, trailers, or camp grounds due to a lack of adequate private housing; and vehicles, public spaces, abandoned buildings, public transit stations, or similar spaces (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

The major premise of the McKinney-Vento Act is for homeless children to remain in their home school while living in any of the above settings and states that the school district is obligated to provide transportation for the child to and from school (Hartman, 2006). The Act also requires that homeless children be enrolled in school immediately, even when the documentation typically required for enrollment is not available. This clause in the Act eliminates enrollment delays that so often occur for highly mobile students due to loss of documentation such as immunization records, birth certificates, and special education records (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). Under the Act schools are also obligated to provide all services appropriate and necessary, including special education services, to homeless students.

Though foster children are not homeless, it could be argued that their unique situations of high mobility could be covered under the McKinney-Vento Act. The frequency with which foster children move should offer them the right to stay enrolled in their home school. Since foster children experience so many transitions, and those

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transitions often have negative effects, it often would be best to keep the foster child in the same school when a foster home move occurs, especially mid-year moves (Hartman, 2006).

Learning from the department of defense. Military families are highly mobile, typically changing posts every 3 years. This means many children of military families are also changing schools about every 3 years. Smrekar and Owens (2003) stated that the student population turnover rate for the Department of Defense's (DoD) school system is 37% each year. DoD teachers see this turnover as a part of the system rather than a problem. DoD teachers work within the parameters of high mobility of students and families (Smrekar & Owens, 2003).

The Department of Defense (DoD) has an exemplar school transition program for their students of military families. The DoD timely transfers academic records, is efficient in their record keeping, and is clear about specified course transfer agreements and graduation requirements. Interestingly, the DoD's transfer of records is timely even when the student moves to a non-DoD school (Hartman, 2006). However, records often do not arrive with DoD students who are transferring in from a non-DoD school. When this occurs, the DoD staff rapidly conducts an informal assessment of the student's academic progress. This assessment includes asking the student a standard set of questions related to course content and subject material covered in his or her previous schools. This standard procedure offers DoD school staff an immediate, individualized, and flexible response to the student's academic abilities and needs (Smrekar & Owens, 2003).

Public schools can apply the DoD's practices by keeping well maintained records on children in foster care and providing those records to the next school quickly. Public schools can also learn from the assessments the DoD conducts with incoming students when they do not yet have records. Children in foster care can be given a short academic assessment by a special or general education teacher or by the school psychologist to determine their academic level and ensure appropriate instruction and/or services.

Solon City School's recommendations. Caitlyn Cushner of Solon City Schools in Ohio is one of the few professionals actively doing work to promote smooth transitions for foster children from a school-wide initiatives approach. Ms. Cushner suggests that schools partake in the following practices when a foster child enrolls:

- Request background information about the foster child's situation;

- Explain both behavioral and academic expectation to the foster child;

- Determine the foster child's academic needs;

- Help the foster child to build positive relationship and positive interpersonal and social skills;

- Teach the foster child skills such as problem solving, organization, goal setting, coping strategies, self-advocacy, self-sufficiency, and communication;

- Establish a relationship with the child's foster parents and facilitate the foster family's involvement in the child's education; and

- Determine the appropriate level of involvement of the child's biological parents -

- this will involve a conversation between the school team and the child's social services worker.

The school psychologist can aid in promoting a smooth school transition for foster children during their school enrollment. This can be done by gathering information from

the previous school, foster parents, and social service worker; providing recommendations around classroom assignments; teaching classroom and school expectations to the foster child and providing feedback on practice; encourage the foster child to participate in extracurricular activities; and working with the foster child to develop answers to questions about their family, including how to politely say no to answering such questions.

Summary

School moves are difficult for children in general, and even more so for children in foster care. During a school move, foster children have the added stress of being removed from their biological (or previous foster) family, friends, relatives, and teachers. Students who move frequently are at a higher risk for academic difficulties, behavioral issues at school, and mental health challenges. Foster children who move frequently are at an even higher risk in these areas. They are also at a higher risk of not receiving necessary services, being placed in special education, being suspended or expelled, and/or being diagnosed with mood or behavioral disorders. Schools do not always know how to support foster children upon their enrollment, or the nuances of the foster care or social services system.

Smooth school transitions for foster children need to be thoughtful and sensitive to the children's needs. There are general practices in place that schools can draw from to develop good programming for transitioning foster children into their schools. The Department of Defense's practices are exemplar as students transfer schools. The McKinney-Vento Act provides protections that could be expanded to include school

transitions for foster children. Most middle and high schools already have orientation programs in place for incoming students from elementary and middle school, respectively. These practices can be utilized when a foster child, or any child, enrolls in their school mid-year. Caitlyn Cushner of Ohio's Solon City Schools has established recommendations for smooth school transitions for foster children. Many school know how to provide a constellation of services to their students, and these practices can be adapted for foster children's unique needs.

There are many resources available for schools to draw from to help promote smooth school transitions for foster children. The wheel does not need to be recreated. Schools only need to have an understanding of the unique circumstances of foster children and the child welfare system and then apply, maybe with some adaptations, existing practices and programs. Through being thoughtful around school transitions, and being sensitive to the foster child's needs, schools can promote smooth school transitions for children in foster care.

Chapter 3: Method

Purpose of Study

This study explored what foster parents, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), school psychologists, and social service workers believe to the most important practices when foster children transition to a new school. This included practices when integrating a student in foster care into a new school and practices in gathering academic records, history, and other pertinent information when the student transitions from one school to another. The final product of this study was an informational guideline of how to best manage the transition process when a student living in foster care moves to a new school. The primary research questions were:

1. What are important practices in supporting students when they transition to a different school?

2. What do school foster parents, GALs, school psychologists, and social service workers believe to be important practices when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?

    a. What information should the school be gathering?

    b. What are the responsibilities of the foster parent, GAL, and social service worker when a student living in foster care transitions to a new school?

    c. What situational and/or family history should be shared with which school staff?

    d. What supports should be provided to children in foster care when they transition schools?

Delphi Research Design

  The Delphi method has its origins in Greek mythology and is named after the Greek town of Delphi. It is said that the oracle Pythia resides in Delphi's temple. The ancient Greeks, including Apollo (god of light, purity, and the Sun), would travel to Delphi's temple and ask Pythia for insight into the future. Pythia would spin about in a frenzy and make utterances, which were then interpreted as predictions of the future. In today's research practice the Delphi technique is not used to make a prediction about the future, but allows a group of experts to come to a consensus on a particular topic. The Delphi technique is based in a rational, scientific paradigm (Fish & Busby, 1996) and has been in existence for 60 years. The RAND Corporation was the first to develop, name, and use the Delphi technique. The RAND Corporation developed the technique in the early 1950's to gather highly educated specialists' (experts) hypotheses on the most likely Soviet missile targets, the types of weapons needed to destroy said targets, and response scenarios to those targets being hit.

  Reid (1988) defined the Delphi technique as "a method for the systematic collection and aggregation of informed judgments from a group of experts on specific questions or issues" (p. 232). Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson (1975) define Delphi as "a method for the systematic solicitation and collation of judgments on a particular topic through a set of carefully designed sequential questionnaires with summarized information and feedback of opinions derived from earlier responses" (p. 10). Powell (2003) said that the Delphi technique is "in essence a series of sequential questionnaires or 'rounds' interspersed by controlled feedback, that seek to gain the most reliable

consensus of opinion of a group of experts" (p. 376). Clayton (1997) stated that Delphi

technique is a "technique for collecting judgments that attempts to overcome the

weaknesses implicit in relying on a single expert, a one-shot group average, or round-

table discussion" (p. 374). In essence, the Delphi technique is a way for a group of

experts to discuss a topic related to their field (through written responses and synthesis of

those responses provided by a researcher) and come to a consensus of that train of

discourse. The assumption is that when forming an opinion on a particular topic many

heads are better than one (Dalkey, 1972). Experts in a field of study are asked questions

about an idea or series of thoughts in their field. The experts' answers to the questions

are gathered, summarized, member checked, and a consensus is usually found. The

Delphi technique should explore the topic under discussion, determine how the experts

view the topic, evaluate similarities and differences in the expert's views, and

disseminate all of the information gathered to the respondents (Linestone & Turoff,

1975). Linestone and Turoff (1975) stated that it is possible and valuable to find

consensus through a collective of human intelligences. It is important to note that when

the Delphi technique is used, the concern is always the opinion of the experts (Pickard,

2007). This technique can provide a motivating environment for respondents, and the

feedback disseminated can be novel and interesting to respondents (Dalkey, 1972).

Pickard (2007) listed six rules for the Delphi technique: (a) only experts are used,

(b) all data is collected in writing, (c) there is a systematic attempt to produce a

consensus, (d) panel members are given anonymity from one another, (e) at least two

rounds are used, and (f) the goal is consensus among the experts. Each round consists of

asking the expert group its opinion about a topic, with the subsequent rounds being a synthesis of the previous rounds. The purpose of several rounds is to establish response stability (Linestone & Turoff, 1975). This response stability is akin to saturation and reliability; all responses begin to have the same content.

The Delphi technique utilizes a series of rounds to collect data. The number of rounds depends on when saturation occurs – in other words the content (data collected) begins to converge. The researcher can stop his or her data collection rounds when a consensus is reached or he or she has sufficient information to complete the study (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975). Some Delphi studies have as few as two rounds; others may have five or more rounds. Linestone and Turoff (1975) recommend that at least two data collection rounds be used. The number of respondents varies from study to study, and there is little research on the number of respondents that is appropriate for the Delphi technique. Clayton (1997) proposed the following: when the respondent group is homogeneous (all expert respondents being drawn the same discipline) the minimum number of should be between 15 and 30 people, when the respondent group is heterogeneous (expert respondents being drawn from two or more disciplines) the minimum number should be between five and ten people.

The scientific merit of a Delphi study differs from a quantitative research study. Credibility in Delphi findings can be sought in several ways. This includes a clear decision trail from round to round, justification of expert groups chosen, and justifiable consensus levels (Powell, 2003). Validity is related to the expertise of the respondents. If the respondents are experts in their field, validity is assumed to be high (Fish & Busby,

1996). Criteria for a respondent to be included as an expert in his or her field is typically defined by the researcher as there are no standards on this process. Predictive and concurrent validity can be assessed through comparing findings to other sources (Powell, 2003). Comparing the consensus rates between the respondents during each round can show reliability: the higher the consensus, the higher the reliability (Fish & Busby, 1996).

Some advantages to using the Delphi technique are its efficiency, cost effectiveness, ability to gather large quantities of information without the expert panel needing to convene in person, and ability to find consensus on a topic by a group of experts (Beech, 1999). Drawbacks to the Delphi technique are the potential influence of dominant individuals over the group, communication that may be biased and/or irrelevant, and potential pressure for the group to conform (Dalkey, 1972).

This study lends itself well to the Delphi technique because developing an informational guideline for schools to follow when foster children are enrolling will take the collaborative efforts of each expert group: foster parents, school psychologists, GALs, and social service workers. Delphi is a good place to start inquiring about smooth school transitions for children in foster care because there are few resources for best practices in foster children's school transitions.

Respondents

This study enlisted the expertise of primarily four respondent groups: (a) foster parents, (b) Guardians ad Litem (GAL), (c) school psychologists, and (d) social service workers. An "other" category was also was also an option, as some members of the

national organizations this study used to recruit respondents did not fit into one of the four professions listed above.

The respondents were recruited through the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA), the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law (ABA), the Colorado Society of School Psychologists (CSSP), and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Respondents who did not fit into one of the four respondent groups were accepted if they were a member of one of the associations above and had worked with foster children for a minimum of 3 years. Each of the associations granted the researcher permission to post a letter on their listserve inviting their professional members to participate in this study. Each initial posting included a Survey Monkey link containing the Round 1 questionnaire. (See Appendices A, B, C, and D for the association approval letters and Appendices E, F, G, and H for the invitation letters).

Overall demographics. A total of 24 respondents began this study and 18 competed all three rounds of questionnaires in this study, an attrition rate of 25%. Five respondents (21%) completed Round 1's questionnaire only, and one respondents (4%) completed Round 1 and 2's questionnaire, but not Round 3's questionnaire. The respondents to this study were a heterogeneous group representing seven professional fields that working with foster children. Heterogeneity of respondents strengthens the findings when using the Delphi technique (Clayton, 1997). The number of respondents who completed this study (18) was above the recommended minimum of five to ten respondents for a heterogeneous group (Clayton, 1997). Respondents were largely female and represented 17 states. The attrition rate from Round 1 to Round 2 was 21%

and the attrition rate from Round 2 to Round 3 was 5%. The overall attrition rate was 25%. GALs and social services workers had the largest attrition rate (50% each). Table 1 summarizes the number of respondents for each round.

Table 1. *Number of Respondents by Round*

Respondent Group	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Foster Parents	5 (21%)	5 (25%)	5 (28%)
Guardians ad Litem	2 (8%)	2 (10%)	1 (6%)
School Psychologists	9 (38%)	6 (30%)	5 (28%)
Social Services Workers	2 (8%)	1 (10%)	1 (6%)
Other	6 (25%)	6 (30%)	6 (32%)
Total	24	20	18

Foster parents. Foster parents were chosen because they are often responsible for enrolling the foster child in school. They are also the people whom the schools routinely call if there is a concern with a student, rather than the social services worker or GAL. Foster parents are in the unique position of providing insight from the viewpoint of day-to-day caretaking of these students. They are pivotal in preparing a child who is leaving their home for the changes they are about to experience and for welcoming new foster children into their home and community, including the school.

Criteria for foster parent respondents were being a member of the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) and having been a foster parent for a minimum of 3 years. This criterion was chosen because foster parents who are active with the NFPA have access to the most current information regarding foster parenting. Being a foster parent

of 3 years was chosen because of having several years of experience as a foster parent as well at having had a period of time to attend trainings regarding foster parenting. Having met the above criteria for inclusion in this study denoted the respondent as an expert in this field (foster parents).

A total of five foster parents, all female, responded. All five respondents completed each round of this study (attrition rate = 0%). The number of years of experience foster parents had in working with foster children ranged from 5 to 25 years, mean=11.2 years. Four foster parents had eared a Bachelors degree (80%) and one foster parent had eared a Masters degree (20%). Each foster parent lived in a different state: Colorado, Florida, Iowa, North Carolina, or Virginia.

Guardians ad Litem. Guardians ad Litem (GALs) were chosen because they are often the foster child's attorney. GALs go to court to make sure the foster child is receiving appropriate services. GALs are often educational surrogates as well, which means they are responsible for making educational decisions in lieu of the biological parents (especially if parental rights have been terminated).

Criteria for being a GAL respondent was having attained a law degree, being a board certified attorney in their state, being a member of the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law (ABA) and having been a GAL for a minimum of 1 year. Having a law degree ensured that the GAL had graduated from an accredited program and that the GAL's state of residence recognized him/her as capable of representing the legal needs of clients. Being a member of the ABA ensured that the GAL was a board-accredited attorney. Having been a GAL for at least 1 year meant that

the attorney had some experience in representing foster children. Having met the above criteria for inclusion in this study denoted the respondent as an expert in this field (Guardians ad Litem).

Two GALs responded, both female. One GAL completed all three rounds, and one completed Round 1 only (attrition rate of 50%). Years of experience in working with foster children ranged for 6 to 8 years, mean=7 years. Both had earned a Juris Doctorate degree. One GAL lived in Alabama and the other in Pennsylvania.

School psychologists. School psychologists were chosen due to their unique position in schools. School psychologists are typically involved when a child is being evaluated for or is being provided services/interventions beyond general education. School psychologists are trained in mental health and developmental issues of school age children. They are also involved in behavioral interventions. School psychologists can serve as a consistent support person for foster children at school as well.

Criteria for being a school psychologist respondent was having attained either a Masters, Educational Specialist, or Doctoral Degree in School Psychology or a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology with a school focus, being a member of either the Colorado Society of School Psychologists (CSSP) or the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and having worked with foster children for a minimum of 1 year. Having a degree in school psychology ensured that the school psychologist has the minimum training required to perform the nationally accepted functions of a school psychologist. Being a member of CSSP and/or NASP indicated that the school psychologist is an active member of the school psychology community. Having at least 1

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year of experience in working with foster children in schools ensured that the school psychologist has some awareness of the special needs of foster children and the nuances of their situation. Having met the above criteria for inclusion in this study denoted the respondent as an expert in this field (school psychologists).

A total of nine school psychologists responded to Round 1 of this study. Eight were female (89%) and one was male (11%). Six of the initial nine completed Round 2's questionnaire (67%) and five completed Round 3's questionnaire (56%). The attrition rate was 44% for school psychologists. Experience in working with foster children ranged from 3 years to 32 years, mean=11.9 years. One school psychologist had earned a Masters degree (11%), two had earned an Educational Specialist degree (22%), and six had earned a Doctoral degree (67%). Three school psychologists lived in Colorado, the other six lived in one of the following states: Alabama, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, or Wisconsin.

Social service workers. Social service workers were chosen because each foster child is assigned a social services worker. They are the gatekeeper to many services and take the role of "custodial parent" in most foster care situations. Very little can happen in a foster child's life without the approval of his or her social service worker. Though the researcher initiated contact with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) twice, NASW did not respond to participating in this study. Social service workers were recruited through the National Foster Parent Association and the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law.

Having a Masters of Social Work ensured that the respondent had completed a formal program in Social Work. Having worked with foster children for at least 1 year ensured that the social worker had experiences school transitions for foster children and was aware of the nuances of those transitions. Having met the above criteria for inclusion in this study denoted the respondent as an expert in this field (social service workers).

Two social service workers responded, both female. One completed only Round 1's questionnaire, and one completed all three rounds of questionnaires (an attrition rate of 50%). Experience in working with foster children ranged from 2 to 20 years, mean=11 years. Both had earned a Masters degree. One social worker lived in North Carolina and the other in Pennsylvania.

Respondents who chose the "other" category. Respondents who did not describe themselves as a member of one of the above respondent groups were able to choose "other". "Other" respondents were accepted because of their unique experiences in working with foster children, specifically their experiences in working with foster children during school transitions. If the respondent had worked with children in foster care for at least 3 years, their experience was deemed as sufficient to accept their responses (they were considered an expert in their field). Their perspectives also widened the heterogeneity of responses, which strengthens results when utilizing the Delphi technique.

Six respondents fell into the "other" category, all female. Three (50%) were Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), two (33%) were Educational Liaisons, and

one (17%) was an Educational Advocate. Each of these six respondents completed all three rounds of this study. Years of experience in working with foster children ranged from 4 to 12 years, mean=7.8 years. These six respondents lived in six different states: Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia.

Instrument Development

Round 1's questionnaire was developed from research available pertaining to the academic and behavioral needs of foster children, foster care placements, student mobility, and current practices in school transitions. This questionnaire was piloted by having been sent to four pilot respondents: a social services worker, a foster parent, a school psychologist, and a former GAL. The purpose of the Round 1 Questionnaire pilot was to determine the length of time to complete the survey and make certain respondents understood the questions (see Appendix I for the pilot study questionnaire). The pilot respondents provided the researcher with suggestions to improve upon the questionnaire's readability and layout. The finalized Round 1 questionnaire was based on the suggestions received by the pilot respondents (see Appendix J for Round 1 questionnaire).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized three rounds of questionnaires with each respondent group: Round 1, Round 2, and Round 3. Two data collection time periods were used due to the National Association of School Psychologist's (NASP) research posting approval process having been more time consuming and involved than the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law (ABA), the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA),

or the Colorado Society of School Psychologists (CSSP) research approval process. Data collection with respondents from the ABA, NFPA and CSSP began in May 2010 and ended in July 2010. Data collection with respondents from NASP began in October 2010 and ended in November 2010.

Round 1. Respondents were invited to participate in Round 1 of this study through an invitation letter posted on the ABA, NFPA, CSSP, and NASP list serves. (The invitation letter for ABA can be found in Appendix E, for NFPA in Appendix F, for CSSP in Appendix G, and for NASP can be found in Appendix G). The invitation letters posted contained a Survey Monkey link to Round 1's consent letter and questionnaire (see Appendix J for Round 1 questionnaire). Respondents were asked to complete the Round 1 questionnaire within 2 weeks of the listserve posting date. They were also asked to provide their e-mail address so that the Round 2 questionnaire could be sent directly to each respondent. Their e-mail addresses were collected and kept separate from all responses to questions.

Round 1 questionnaire consisted of eight questions. At the close of Round 1 data collection, responses to the eight questions were analyzed for emergent themes. When a similar response was found at least three times for the same question, it was determined to be an emergent theme. The higher the number of similar responses, the greater in importance the theme was determined to be. A total of ten themes emerged from Round 1 data: social service worker responsibilities, foster parent responsibilities, GAL responsibilities, school responsibilities, the school gathering the foster child's family history, the school gathering mental health and behavioral history of the foster child,

custody arrangements and court orders being shared with the school, the foster child's

medications being shared with the school, with whom social/emotional/behavioral should

be shared, and preparing the foster child for the transition.

After Round 1's themes were determined, the development of Round 2's

questionnaire began. The ten themes were developed into statements, which became

Round 2's questionnaire (see Appendix K for Round 2's questionnaire).

Round 2. A Survey Monkey link to the Round 2 questionnaire was e-mailed to all

Round 1 respondents. Respondents were asked to complete Round 2's questionnaire

within 2 weeks of the link having been e-mail to them. They were also asked to provide

their e-mail address so that the Round 3 questionnaire could be sent directly to each

respondent. Their e-mail addresses were collected and kept separate from all responses.

Round 2's questionnaire consisted of ten statements and asked respondents if they

agreed or disagreed with each statement. Respondents were also offered an opportunity

to provide further comments, suggestions, and feedback to each of the ten statements. At

Round 2 data collection closure, responses were analyzed for levels of agreement and for

any new emergent themes (from feedback, comments, and suggestions provided). Levels

of agreement on each of the ten statements were high, ranging from 53% to 100%

agreement depending on the statement. No new themes emerged from Round 2's data

analysis.

The responses to these ten statements were analyzed for over-arching categories.

Six categories emerged out of Round 2's data: collaboration as a team, knowing the

parties involved in the foster child's life, confidentiality, gathering past records,

communication between all parties involved in the foster child's life, and supporting the foster child during the transition. Categories were determined by the content of the ten statements. For example, information that addressed the school and foster parents talking to one another was deemed communication, information that addressed how to help the foster child become familiar with a new school was deemed supporting the foster child.

This information was utilized to develop Round 3's questionnaire, which contained six sections that was a draft guideline to promoting smooth school transitions for foster children (See Appendix L for Round 3 questionnaire). These six sections were: collaboration as a team, knowing the parties involved in the foster child's life, confidentiality, gathering past records, communication between all parties involved in the foster child's life, and supporting the foster child during the transition.

Round 3. A Survey Monkey link to the Round 3 questionnaire was e-mailed to all Round 2 respondents. Respondents were asked to complete Round 3's questionnaire within 2 weeks of the link having been e-mail to them. They were also asked to provide their e-mail address if they would like either a copy of the informational guideline once completed or the full dissertation. Their e-mail address was collected and kept separate from all responses.

Round 3's questionnaire consisted of seven sections and asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with these sections. Respondents were also offered an opportunity to provide further comments, suggestions, and feedback to each of the seven sections. At Round 3 data collection closure, the level of agreement was assessed and any additional feedback was analyzed. The level of agreement for each of the seven sections ranged

from 89% to 100%. If two or more respondents offered the same comment or suggestion it was incorporated into the appropriate section of the draft informational guideline as part of the final product.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter describes the findings for each Round's questionnaire. Findings are presented by each question in Round 1's questionnaire, by each statement in Round 2's questionnaire, and by each section in Round 3's questionnaire. Data analysis is presented by all respondents as one group, rather than broken into analysis by each respondent group. Again, when using the Delphi technique the goal is to find consensus among respondents. Consensus is stronger when analysis is completed using a heterogeneous group rather than using a homogeneous group.

Round 1 Findings

Round 1's questionnaire consisted of demographic information (discussed in the Method chapter) and eight open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to freely write their thoughts on each question. Twenty-four respondents completed Round 1's questionnaire (see Appendix J for Round 1 questionnaire).

Question 1. What information should the school gather when a student in foster care enrolls in their school?

Eighteen respondents (75%) stated that the new school should gather educational information on the foster child (including names of all previous schools attended, immunization records, transcripts/report cards, extracurricular activity involvement, special education/504 status, previous disciplinary actions, ability level information, and achievement level information). Twelve respondents (50%) stated that medical

information should be gathered, including general medical history of the child, physical disability status, mental health diagnoses, and prescribed medications. Ten respondents (42%) stated that contact information for the foster child's foster family, caseworker, biological family (unless rights had been terminated), and Guardian ad Litem (GAL) should be gathered. Six respondents (25%) stated that information about the foster child's biological family should be gathered, specifically the biological parent's names and the level of allowed involvement with the foster child. Six respondents (25%) stated that legal information such as custody arrangements, no contact orders, visitation rights, and the status of dependency and neglect case should be gathered.

Question 2. How should the foster child be prepared for a transition to a new school*?*

Twenty respondents (83%) stated that a tour of the new school should be scheduled for the foster child. Fourteen respondents (58%) stated that a time should be scheduled for the foster child to meet and talk with teachers and staff at the new school prior to first day of attendance. Five respondents (21%) stated that the foster child should be informed in advance that the transition was going to occur. Five respondents (21%) stated that the foster child should be given appropriate time to say good-bye to the previous school (teachers, staff, class mates) prior to a school transition occurring.

Question 3. What are the responsibilities of the foster parent when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?

Thirteen respondents (54%) stated that the foster parent should communicate with the foster child's teachers to monitor school progress or concerns. Twelve respondents

(50%) stated that foster parents should schedule a visit at the new school for the foster child to meet his/her teachers. Nine respondents (38%) stated that foster parents should know the foster child's education history and gather educational records from the previous school to provide to the new school. Seven respondents (29%) stated that foster parents should serve as the liaison between the school and social service worker, informing the social service worker of the foster child's academic progress and/or challenges. Seven respondents (29%) stated that foster parents should make sure that the foster child had all necessary supplies and materials for school (including appropriate clothing, notebooks and writing utensils, and school books).

Question 4. What are the responsibilities of the Guardian ad Litem when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?

Twelve respondents (50%) stated that GALs should serve as an advocate to promote the best interest of the foster child, including insurance that the foster child was being placed in the least restrictive setting and that Free and Appropriate Public Education standards were being abided. Nine respondents (38%) stated that GALs should have copies of all legal documents pertaining to the foster child and his/her case, including health records, custody orders, Individualized Education Plans, and report cards. Two respondents (8%) stated that they did not know what the GALs responsibilities were when a child in foster care transitions to a new school.

Question 5. What are the responsibilities of the social services worker when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?

Twelve respondents (50%) stated that social service workers should arrange a meeting with teachers and staff at the new school to discuss the foster child's needs and progress. Fourteen respondents (58%) stated that social service workers should have all of the foster child's enrollment information (medical records, report cards/transcripts, IEPs, and 504s) and ensure that the foster child was promptly enrolled in the new school.

Question 6. What situational and/or family history should be shared with the school?

Fifteen respondents (63%) stated that information that affected the foster child's academic success should be shared with the school. Twelve respondents (50%) stated that mental health or behavioral issues that may occur at school or affect the foster child's academic success should be shared with the school. Seven respondents (29%) stated that custody arrangement and court order information should be shared with the school. Four respondents (17%) stated that information around safety (harm to self or others, parental abuse) should be shared with the school.

Question 7. Who is allowed to provide this (situational and/or family history) information to the school (i.e. – foster parent, social services worker)?

Nineteen respondents stated (79%) that the social services worker should provide this information to the school. Nine (38%) stated that the foster parent could also provide this information to the school.

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Question 8. Should this information (situational and/or family history) be shared with all school staff or particular school staff?

Fifteen respondents (63%) stated that situational and/or family history should be shared with the school on an as-needed basis. Thirteen respondents (54%) stated that situational and/or family history should be shared with the school counselor, school social worker, and/or school psychologist. Six respondents (25%) stated that situational and/or family history should be shared with the foster child's classroom teacher. Four respondents (17%) stated that situation and/or family history should be shared with the school principal and/or vice principal.

Round 2 Findings

Round 2's questionnaire consisted of 10 statements (see Appendix K for Round 2 questionnaire). Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with each statement and to provide additional feedback about each statement. Twenty respondents completed Round 2. Below are the findings for each statement.

Statement 1. When a foster child transitions to a new school the social service worker is responsible for providing all academic enrollment information to both the new foster parent and new school (including report cards; IEP, 504, ILP and/or RtI plans' and immunization records), should ensure the child is in the least restrictive setting, inform the school of custody arrangements (including who is and is not allowed to have contact with the child), should be present when the child is enrolled, and should maintain contact with school staff. Do you agree with this statement?

Fourteen respondents (70%) agreed with this statement and six respondents (30%) disagreed with this statement. Of those who disagreed, four (20%) stated that it is the foster parent's responsibility to do all of these activities, and one (5%) stated that it is the school's responsibility to gather all previous school records.

Statement 2. When a foster child transitions to a new school the foster parent is responsible for gathering, knowing, and understanding the child's educational history; facilitate the child's school enrollment; taking the child to the new school for tours and/or a "meet and greet" with teachers', making sure the child has all necessary educational materials and supplies (notebooks, pencils, crayons, etc.); providing help with homework and scheduling tutoring if necessary, and to facilitate communication between the new school, social service worker, foster family, GAL, etc. Do you agree with this statement?

Fourteen respondents (70%) agreed with statement and six respondents (30%) disagreed with this statement. Comments of those who disagreed consisted of it being the social service worker's responsibility to gather all of the educational information and provide it to the foster parent. One respondent (20%) stated that this is a lot of responsibility for foster parents and wondered if they are trained in these responsibilities.

Statement 3. When a foster child transitions to a new school the Guardian ad Litem is responsible for monitoring the transition, communication with the school (principal, school psychologist, school counselor) about the child's educational history, and have copies of all educational records (including health, educational

plans, grades), attend school meetings, visit with the child, and ensure the transitions is in the best interest of the child. Do you agree with this statement?

Nine respondents (45%) agreed with this statement and eleven respondents (55%) disagreed with this statement. Six respondents (30%) stated that, in their experience, the GAL very rarely spoke with the foster child or with the school staff directly.

Statement 4. Upon enrollment, the new school should ALWAYS gather information about a foster child's education history; contact information for foster parents, social service workers, GALs, etc.; and legal information such as custody and no contact orders. The school should gather behavioral, mental health, and family history information if it affects the foster child's educational performance. Please indicate the order of importance of gathering this information (1=most important, 5=least important).

Ten respondents (50%) stated that educational information is the most important to be gathered, six respondents (30%) stated that contact information is the most important, two respondents (10%) stated that legal information is the most important, one respondent (5%) stated that mental health information is the most important, and one (5%) respondent stated that family history is the most important information for the school to gather.

Table 2. *Statement 4 Responses*

	1	2	3	4	5
Educational	10 (50%)	4 (20%)	3 (15%)	3 (15%)	0
Contact	6 (30%)	6 (30%)	4 (20%)	3 (15%)	1(5%)
Mental Health	1 (5%)	6 (30%)	6 (30%)	7 (35%)	0
Legal	2 (10%)	3 (15%)	4 (20%)	4 (20%)	7 (35%)
Family History	1 (5%)	1(5%)	3(15%)	3 (15%)	5 (25%)

Statement 5. Do you agree that family history, such as abuse/neglect and/or drug/alcohol challenges should be shared with the school?

Seventeen respondents (85%) agreed with this statement and three respondents (15%) did not agree with this statement. Comments included nine (45%) having stated that it depends on the challenges of the foster child, six (30%) having stated that the sharing of family history should be restricted to key school personnel (such as the school psychologist or counselor) and then dispersed to other school personnel (such as the teacher) as necessary, and two (10%) stating that this information be kept strictly confidential.

Statement 6. Do you agree that mental health and/or behavioral issues of the child should be shared with the school?

One hundred percent of respondent agreed with this statement. Comments from respondents included three (15%) having stated that only key school personnel should have this information first and then disperse to others as necessary, three (15%) having stated that mental health information should be shared on a need-to-know basis, three

(25%) having stated that mental health information should be shared with the school only if it affects the foster child's academic success, and two (10%) having stated that this information should be used to develop a plan to support the foster child.

Statement 7. Do you agree that custody arrangements and court orders should be shared with this school?

Nineteen respondents (95%) agreed with this statement and one (5%) disagreed. Comments included seven respondents (20%) having stated that the school needs to know custody arrangements to ensure the safety of the foster child and two (10%) having stated that this information is important but schools must keep it confidential.

Statement 8. Do you agree that the child's list of medications should be shared with the school?

Fifteen respondents (75%) agreed with this statement and five (25%) disagreed with this statement. Comments included four respondents (10%) having stated that the foster child's prescriptions should be shard with the school only if they are being administered at school, three (15%) having stated that the school nurse is the best person to hold this information, and four (20%) stated that this information should be shared so that the school can be made aware of potential side effects.

Statement 9. Often social/emotional/behavioral information is sensitive and should only be shared with particular school staff (such as the school psychologist, counselor, or social worker). At times it would be helpful to share such information with other school personnel also (such as the nurse or teachers). Who do you believe should be involved in deciding what information should be shared with whom? (For

example – the school psychologist and social worker; the foster parents, school counselor, and social worker).

Five respondents (25%) stated that the foster parents, school counselor or psychologist, and the social services worker should decide what information is shared with whom. Four respondents (20%) stated that the school counselor or psychologist and the school social worker should decide what information is shared with whom. Four respondents (20%) state that the foster parent and social services worker should decide what information is shared with whom. Two respondents (10%) stated that the school social worker should decide what information is shared with whom. One respondent (5%) stated the school psychologist, one respondent (5%) stated that social services worker, one respondent (5%) stated the school psychologist and guidance counselor, and two respondents (10%) stated that sharing social/emotional/behavioral information depends on the particular foster child's situation.

Statement 10. When a foster child is enrolled in a new school he or she should be prepared. Preparation for a smooth transition includes: a tour of the school prior to the first day of attendance; meeting teachers, the principal, and other school staff prior to the first day of attendance; a skill assessment conducted to ensure proper course placement; providing the child's daily schedule prior to first day; having a prepared answer to questions about family; and regular contact with the school counselor or school psychologist. Do you agree with this statement?

Fourteen respondents (70%) agreed with this statement and six respondents (30%) disagreed with this statement. One respondent (5%) added that the transition should make the foster child feel the same as his or her non-foster peers.

Round 3 Findings

Round 3's questionnaire consisted of six sections of the draft informational guideline to promote smooth school transitions for foster children. Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with each section of the draft informational guideline, to critique each section, and to provide feedback as to its completeness. Eighteen respondents completed Round 3 (see Appendix L for Round 3 questionnaire).

Section 1. Collaborating as a Team. Foster children have many professionals involved in their lives, ranging from foster parents to caseworkers, teachers to the bus driver. It is important to work as a collaborative team when a foster child is transitioning to a new school, and continue to work as a team while the child is enrolled in school.

As a school, knowing who the key persons are in a foster child's life and which of those persons should be part of the decision making team is imperative. Each school would benefit by appointing a person (such as the school psychologist or counselor, nurse, or principal) to be the primary school contact person for foster children. Members of the collaborative team may vary somewhat for each foster child. In almost all cases the social services worker and foster parents should be on this team, as well as the foster child's teacher, school psychologist, and/or school counselor. Older foster children should be part of the collaborative team, as the

foster child oftentimes has the most information about his or her academic and behavioral needs. Other team members may be chosen in response to the foster child's specific needs.

The general responsibility of this team is to:

- **Provide a timely enrollment of the new student.**

- **Provide and gather all pertinent information about the child (see the "Records Gathering" section below).**

- **Provide the foster child with the support needed for him or her to succeed in school.**

- **Communicate with one another so all parties are aware of the foster child's academic successes and needs.**

One hundred percent of respondents stated that this captures how persons involved in a foster child's life can work as a team. One respondent (5%) stated that though in agreement, this expectation might not be practical. Additional suggestions were to add the Court Appointed Special Advocate, Guardian ad Litem, biological parents, and the child as potential team members, and to identify a point person to coordinate communication.

Section 2. Parties involved in the foster child's life. As stated above, there are many professionals who are involved in a foster child's life. Though as a school district you may not have contact with every one of these persons, best practice is to know who is involved. The school district should also have signed permission stating communication is consented between the school and these persons (a signed

Release of Information). The social service worker typically has authorization to

sign such a release.

Having the contact information of these professionals is vital.

- **The school should have names and numbers for the foster child's (not every**
  foster child with have all of the professionals listed below involved):
  - o **Foster Parent**
  - o **Case Manager**
  - o **Social Service Worker**
  - o **Biological parents, unless parental rights are terminated or social**
    services and the courts are not allowing communication with the
    parents, such as when there is a no contact order
  - o **Guardian ad Litem**
  - o **Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)**
  - o **Educational Surrogate, if one has been appointed**
  - o **Primary Care Physician**
  - o **Therapist/counselor, if the foster child is seeing one**
  - o **Psychiatrist, if the child is seeing one**
  - o **Probation officer, if the child has one – which will be only if the child**
    has legal charges against him or her

All 18 respondents (100%) agreed that it is important for the school to know and

have contact information on all parties involved in the foster child's life. One respondent

(6%) stated that legally this information should be in the foster child's academic file.

Feedback included making sure the school has this list in one place that is easy to reference, develop a guideline of who at the school is able to/responsible for contacting outside parties, and keeping this information confidential.

Section 3. Confidentiality. Before addressing what information should be gathered about a foster child confidentiality must be discussed.

As a school district, specifically as teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and school counselors, it is natural that we want to know everything about a child in order to serve him or her appropriately. When working with foster children we may not be privy to all information. However, pertinent information necessary to serve the child's academic needs should be shared with the school. This does include information about the foster child's behavioral and social/emotional needs as they affect the child's learning and behavior in the school environment. The foster child's social service worker typically has the most, and most accurate, information about the foster child. The school personnel designated as the primary contact person should contact the foster child's social service worker for the information listed in the "Records Gathering" section.

The district is responsible for keeping information and records confidential. It may be necessary to keep sensitive information in a secure space separate from the foster child's academic file. Information, such as abuse history, should not be kept in the on-going academic file. As with all students, conversations about a foster child should not be held in the hallways or lunchroom. The collaborative team (discussed above) should decide who is privy to information about the foster child.

For example, the school nurse should know medications the foster child is prescribed and their side effects, especially if they are being administered at school. The foster child's teacher should know when the child must go to the nurse for his or her medications. The bus driver does not need to know the child is prescribed medication. Neither do teachers who do not have direct contact with the foster child.

Again, all 18 respondents (100%) agreed with this section as written. Feedback included identifying a central contact person to maintain all of this information and that schools should establish a protocol around confidentiality pertaining to foster children.

Section 4. Records Gathering. Having an understanding of the foster child's academic needs will drive the collaborative team's decision-making process for service provisions. Confidentiality must be adhered to throughout this process. Information such as behavioral challenges should be gathered as needed when it pertains to the academic success of the foster child. The school does not need to be informed that a foster child has bedtime wetting accidents, as this may not affect learning. The school does need to be informed if a foster child is physically aggressive towards other children, as an aggressive child does affect the academic setting. Typically the social service worker has final determination in what information is shared with the school. It is best practice to ask for all information that is necessary to meet the foster child's academic needs.

- **Student enrollment**

  - Typically the foster parent enrolls the foster child in school.

  - Best practice would be for the social service worker to also be present at enrollment. However, due to large caseloads and busy schedules this may not be realistic.

- **Information the school should request (some of these items are enrollment requirements for all new students):**

  - Educational history:

    - Report cards

    - Standardized test scores

    - Individualized Literacy plans

    - Individualized Learning plans

    - Response to Intervention plans

    - 504 Plans

    - Individualized Educational Plans

    - Progress monitoring data

  - Behavioral/social/emotional history as it pertains to the foster child's academic success and the learning environment:

    - Any diagnosis that affects the foster child's academic success

    - Existing behavior plans

    - Progress monitoring data

    - Current therapist/counselor

- - - Current psychiatrist

    - List of medications

  - Family history:

    - Medical history

    - Abuse/neglect history

    - Drug history

    - Custody information

  - Legal information:

    - Custody orders

    - No-contact orders

    - Juvenile records the foster child may have

    - Name of probation officer and court presiding over the case

- Information should be gathered by:

  - School personnel designated as primary contact:

    - If school secretary or another school employee is designated to collect enrollment data, this does not need to change.

    - Additional information, such as social/emotional/behavioral, should be collected by the designated school contact person.

      - This could be the:

        - School psychologist, social worker, or counselor

        - Principal

        - School nurse

- **Contacts who have the above information:**

  - Social Worker

  - Foster Parent

  - Biological parents (unless parental rights are terminated or there is a no contact order)

- **School personnel who should be privy to the above information:**

  - The collaborative team should make this decision

  - Often case by case basis – but one or two designated school persons should be the school's primary contact

- **Information storage:**

  - Educational information in the foster child's academic file

  - Family history and social/emotional/behavioral information may need added layers of security and not be stored in the academic file.

    - The collaborative team should make a decision as to where this information will be stored.

    - Could be with the:

      - School counselor

      - School psychologist

      - School social worker

      - School nurse

      - Principal

Sixteen respondents (89%) agreed with this section and two respondents (11%) disagreed with portions of this section. Suggestions for improvement included that family history, abuse history, and/or the foster child's legal information not being pertinent to the school and that a comment be included that not all of this information may be provided to the school depending on what the social service worker believes is necessary for the school to know.

Section 5. Communication between the school and parties involved.

- **Frequency:**
  - **Will depend on the needs of the foster child.**
  - **A minimum of once per marking period, but more frequently may be the case.**
- **Contact initiated by:**
  - **The designated school contact person.**
  - **This could be the:**
    - **School psychologist**
    - **School counselors**
    - **School social worker**
    - **Principal**
    - **School nurse**
- **Persons the school should update:**
  - **Social Services Worker**
  - **Foster Parents**

- o **Case Manager**

- o **Therapist/counselor**

- ▪ **Contact with biological parents**

  - o **The school should be aware of its state's statues on the continued involvement of biological parents of foster children.**

    - ▪ **In many states educational rights are intact for the biological parents of foster children, even though the biological parents do not have physical custody of the child.**

  - o **The school needs to know if there is a no-contact order in place and what it states. (A no contact order may mean that the biological parents are not allowed to have contact with or gather information about the foster child).**

- ▪ **Documentation:**

  - o **Documentation of team meetings and conversations with both school personnel and outside professionals should be documented with the date, time and a short summary of the conversation.**

    - ▪ **This helps ensure everyone knows of decisions and changes as they are made.**

Sixteen respondents (89%) agreed with this section as written. Two respondents (11%) made the following suggestion for change: add teachers and outside parties (such as social services workers, foster parents, and GALs) to the list of school persons who can initiate contact.

Section 6. Supporting the foster child. When a foster child is entering a new school, that school should provide the following to aid in the child's adjustment:

- **Prior to the first day of attendance:**

    o **Provide the child a tour of the school.**

    o **Hold a 'meet and greet' with the child's teachers, principal, and other staff he/she will have consistent contact with.**

    o **Assign the child a buddy or mentor, maybe from an upper grade.**

    o **Provide his/her daily schedule.**

- **Within the first week of school:**

    o **Teach the child expected behaviors (school rules, Positive Behavioral Support system if there is one).**

        ▪ **These expected behaviors should be visited consistently throughout the first weeks or months of the child's enrollment.**

    o **If academic abilities are unknown conduct a skill assessment to determine the child's academic level and needs.**

    o **Hold a meeting between the child and the school psychologist or counselor to discuss how the child can navigate questions about family.**

    o **Determine how frequently contact between the school, foster parent, and social service worker should occur.**

All respondents (100%) agreed with this section, with one respondent (94%) offering that schools should not be "over meeting with the child and making them feel like they are not normal".

Summary

Responses to the three rounds of questionnaires were synthesized with the final product being the development of a draft informational guideline to promote smooth school transitions for children in foster care. Respondents agreed (with at least 89% of respondents in agreement for any one Section) that schools should be aware of the following broad issues when a child in foster care enrolls in their school: collaborating as a team, parties involved in the foster child's life, confidentiality, records gathering, communication between the school and parties involved, and supporting the foster child.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This section discusses the findings of this study based on the research questions and how they led to the development of the Informational Guideline's Sections. It also discusses the merits of the Informational Guideline and ends with considerations of the study's limitations and next possible steps.

What are Important Practices in Supporting Students when they Transition to a Different School?

This question was answered through the existing literature on school transitions, as the three rounds of questionnaires were specific to school transitions for foster children, an area where little research currently exists.

Schools are in a position of providing a consistent, structured, and warm environment for students (Crowley, 2003). Schools can be a safe and stable place for children, including children in foster care (McKellar, 2006). Schools should prepare ahead of time when a new student is enrolling in their school (Rumberger, 2003). They should also maintain clear academic records.

At times of natural transitions, such as from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school, schools already support transitions by providing orientations, academic and social support, and help develop peer relationships by assigning a buddy or mentor to students incoming to the building (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Incoming students are taught school rules and expectations as they make this

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transition. Students are provided many learning opportunities over the first several weeks

or months to learn and understand these expectations (Scherr, 2008). This same approach

can be taken when children in foster care enroll in a new school, whether it be at the

beginning of the year or mid-year.

Children in foster care may require a larger constellation of services, including

facilitation of communication between parties involved in the child's life and building

collaborative partnerships with agencies such as social services (Benedict & White, 1991;

Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). Several programs already in existence serve as

models to promote smooth school transitions for children in foster care. These programs

include the McKinney-Vento Act, the Department of Defense, and Ohio's Solon City

School's recommendations for foster children who are changing schools. These

programs suggest several points, including gathering appropriate educational, social

service, and familial records; assessing the child's needs upon enrollment; supporting the

child's social, emotional, and behavioral needs during the transition; helping the child to

build meaningful relationships with adults and peers, and teach the child skills to help

him or her be successful academically.

Though the findings of this study related to school transitions for children in

foster care specifically, respondents were in general agreement with existing research on

school transitions. Respondents agreed on six general areas of focus during school

transitions: collaborating as a team, knowing the parties involved in the child's life,

maintaining confidentiality, gathering previous school records, maintaining

communication between the school and other parties involved in the child's life, and supporting the child during the transitions.

What do Foster Parents, Guardians ad Litem, School Psychologists, and Social Service Workers Believe to be Important Practices when a Student in Foster Care Transitions to a New School?

Schools are an environment where safe and positive experiences can occur for children (Scherr, 2004) and where trust and healthy attachments can be built with peers and adults (Scherr, 2008). As foster children move from school to school, it is important for the new school to gather all previous academic records, including any special education services that were provided at the previous school. Maintaining communication between the school, foster parents, social service worker, and other professionals involved in the foster child's life is important. Supporting the foster child in learning rules and expectations at the new school is also important.

The McKinney-Vento Act sets a standard of enrolling homeless children in school immediately, even when previous school records or documentation (such as birth certificate and immunization records) are not available (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). The Department of Defense keeps well-maintained records, and conducts assessments of incoming students without previous educational records (Smrekar & Owens, 2003). Caitlyn Cushner of Solon City Schools in Ohio has developed an extensive list of suggestions to follow when a foster child enrolls in one of their schools (Cushner, 2009).

As stated above, the respondents to this study agreed upon six general areas of focus when a foster child transitions to a new school: collaborating as a team, knowing

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the parties involved in the child's life, maintaining confidentiality, gathering previous school records, maintaining communication between the school and other parties involved in the child's life, and supporting the child during the transitions. To elaborate on these areas, when children in foster care enroll in a new school, the school should support the child's transition by having ensured that the child has had a tour of the school and a chance to meet his or her teachers prior to the first day of attendance. The child should have his or her schedule prior to attending and be assigned a mentor or buddy to teach the social aspects of changing schools. Within the first weeks of school, the child should be taught the expected behaviors and school rules and be given the opportunity to practice and review these expectations. The school should also determine the child's academic and social/emotional needs and hold a meeting between school personnel (such as the school psychologist or school counselor) to discuss how to best cope with questions about family. Communication between the school and other parties involved in the foster child's life should continue, and the school should determine how frequently communication should occur. Confidentiality of sensitive information should be maintained. Much of the foster child's historical information should not be stored with the academic file, but rather in a separate file with the school psychologist, school counselor, or school nurse. Those professionals involved in the foster child's life (foster parents, school personnel, social service worker, etc) should work together as a team to provide the best possible school experience for the child in foster care.

What Information Should the School Be Gathering?

Foster children move schools frequently, averaging two moves per year (Shin, 2003). These frequent school moves lead to a lack of educational continuity, making it difficult for new schools to gather academic information from previous schools (Engec, 2006). Foster children exhibit social-emotional and behavioral challenges, leading to higher suspension and expulsion rates than their peers (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Scherr, 2008). Foster children are also in care for a variety of reason, ranging from parental substance abuse to abuse and neglect of the child (McKellar, 2006; Scherr, 2008).

Caitlyn Cushner and Tracey Scherr are two of the few professionals who are actively working toward awareness of foster children and academic success, including promoting smooth school transitions. Both suggest that schools should request information pertaining to the foster child's current situation (Cushner, 2009; Scherr, 2008). Findings of this study expanded upon the general suggestion to request current situational information.

Respondents to this study agreed that information should be gathered pertaining to the child's educational records: behavioral, social, and emotional history as it affects the child's academic performance; legal information such as custody arrangements and no-contact orders; and family history including general information about why the child is in foster care. This is a lot of information to gather, organize, maintain, and keep confidential. Respondents also agreed that a school contact person should be appointed to organize the gathering and communication of information between school personnel and between the school and other parties involved in the child's life. All information

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gathered should be kept confidential, and information that is not academic in nature should be stored separate from the child's permanent academic file.

What are the Responsibilities of the Foster Parent, GAL, and Social Service Worker when a Child in Foster Care Transitions to a New School?

There was no previous research available on the responsibilities of foster parents, GALs, or social services workers when a child in foster care transitions to a new school. Findings in this area were new contributions to the field of education and working with foster children.

Foster parent responsibilities. The foster parent should enroll the child in school, communicate with the child's teachers to monitor academic and behavioral progress, be familiar with the child's educational history and provide that information to the school, update the social service worker on the child's academic and behavioral progress, and provide the child with the school materials he or she needs.

Social service worker responsibilities. The social service worker should be present when the child is enrolled in school, ensure the child is enrolled promptly, provide the school with academic records, and should meet with the child's teachers and staff (such as the school psychologist or school counselor) to discuss the child's strengths and needs.

Guardian ad Litem responsibilities. The GAL should have all copies of all legal documents pertaining to the child's case and serve as an advocate for the child.

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What Situational and/or Family History Should be Shared with which School Staff?

There was no previous research available on what information about a child in foster care should be shared with whom at a school. Findings in this area were new contributions to the field of education and working with foster children.

As stated above, there is a lot of information that the school should gather on a child in foster care. However, much of this information is sensitive and it may not be necessary to share all information with every school staff member. Academic records, including Individualized Education Plans and 504 Plans, should be shared with the teachers who will be providing the services necessary. Custody arrangements and no contact orders should be shared with the principal, front office staff, and teachers. Behavioral, social, and emotional information should be shared in a limited fashion, with the school psychologist or school counselor holding the information and deciding with the foster parents and social service worker if teachers should also be provided with and how much of if this information.

What Supports Should be Provided to Children in Foster Care when they Transition Schools?

There was little previous research available on how a foster child should be supported when transitioning. Findings in this area added to Caitlyn Cushner's work at Solon City Schools in Ohio.

Foster children should be supported by their new school as soon as (or even before) they are enrolled. Providing the foster child is an opportunity to meet teachers and other school staff, become familiar with the school building, and be taught expected

school expectations and behaviors are very helpful during the school transitions process. Also, assigning the foster child a mentor or buddy will help the foster child become comfortable in the school building and provide an opportunity for him or her to meet peers.

There are orientation programs existing at the middle and high school levels that could be adapted to meet the needs of foster children who enroll in a new school. Positive Behavioral Support systems that are established at the school building level can also be utilized to help a foster child to adjust to a new school.

The Informational Guideline for Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care

This study resulted in the development of an informational guideline for promoting smooth school transitions for children in foster care (see Appendix M). Each data collection rounds' findings built upon previous rounds and lead to the development of the informational guideline. The six areas addressed in the informational guideline are Collaborating as a Team, Parties Involved in the Foster Child's Life, Confidentiality, Records Gathering, Communication Between the School and Parties Involved, and Supporting Children in Foster Care During a School Transition.

The importance of the informational guideline. Children in foster care are disadvantaged compared to their non-foster peers. Their lives are disrupted due to being moved from their biological parents homes. This leads to school moves and the extreme likelihood of the child not receiving the proper support and services when enrolled in a

new school due to delays in gathering records or the school becoming aware that the child is in foster care.

There is almost no research on children in foster care and school transitions. The National Association of School Psychologists Best Practices in School Psychology V (Thomas & Grimes, 2008) contains one chapter pertaining to children in foster care. Caitlyn Cushner of Solon City Schools in Ohio has developed a course of action for when a child in foster care enrolls in their schools, but that is one district nationally. The Department of Defense and the McKinney-Vento Act contain elements that could be pertinent to smooth school transitions for children in foster care, but they are not current applied to foster children.

The Informational Guideline fills a gap in the field of working with foster children in education. It is intended to serve as a tool to help educational professionals understand the nuances of the foster care system and working with foster children within an academic setting. Through this increased understanding by educational professionals, foster children's academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs are at an increased likelihood of being met.

Sustaining the Implementation of the Informational Guideline

The Informational Guideline for Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care contains a plethora of information and suggestions. At first glance this could be overwhelming for school personnel. Most schools, however, have existing strategies and programming available that can be utilized to implement the 6 Sections of the Informational Guideline. For example, a new team specific to transition

planning and supporting of foster children does not need to be developed. If the foster child enrolls in a new building with existing eligibility for special education services, his or her Individualize Education Plan Team at the building could serve at the team implementing the 6 Sections of the Informational Guideline. If the foster child is not eligible for special education services, the building's Response to Intervention team could serve as team implementing the 6 Sections. Another example is around supporting the foster children. Many schools are implementing Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) programming. The majority of PBS programming at the Universal level is about making sure students understand school rules and expectations around academics and behaviors, and in all areas of the building (such as the classroom, cafeteria, and play ground). When a foster child enrolls in a PBS school, programming to teach expectations already exists. Also, middle and high schools typically have existing orientation programming for their incoming students (5th or 6th graders for middle school, and high school Freshmen) whether or not they are a PBS school. This orientation programming could be implemented with the incoming foster child, including at times other than the first week of school. Of most importance is that once a school adopts the Informational Guideline it is implemented with fidelity, as with any program implemented in a school.

Limitations

This study utilized a qualitative method that is not well known or often implemented. This may lead to questioning pertaining to the choice of methodology.

One of the respondent groups was Guardians ad Litem (GAL), however only two GALs responded. This was counteracted by the acceptance of CASA workers. Though

CASA workers are not attorneys, they are familiar with the legal rights of children in foster care and serve as someone promoting the best interest of the child from a legal standpoint and they work closely with the courts and GALs.

As with GALs, only two social service workers responded. Though the researcher contacted the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) two times requesting permission to recruit respondents through their organization, the researcher did not receive a reply from NASW. Social service workers were recruited through the National Foster Parent Association, leading to a much smaller respondent pool of social service workers. This low number of social service worker respondents may mean that the information provided is not representative of social service workers in general.

This study did not include general or special education teachers, school administrators, school social workers, or school counselors. The perspectives of these professional groups were, therefore, not represented. Information gathered from these additional groups could change the breadth and/or depth of the Informational Guideline

Next Steps

The researcher has presented the literature review and preliminary finding at the Colorado Society of School Psychologists' 2010 Annual Conference, and has been accepted for a poster presentation of these findings at the National Association of School Psychologists' 2011 Annual Convention. The researcher intends to distribute the Informational Guideline to the respondents of this study.

Future endeavors are to copyright and publish the Informational Guideline for the use of school districts nationally; publish articles on these findings and the importance of

supporting foster children in newsletters and journals such as the *Communiqué, School Psychology Quarterly,* and *School Psychology Review*. Additional research ideas include soliciting input from respondent groups such as general and special education teachers, school administrators, school social workers, and school counselors and a study on the accuracy and effectiveness of the Informational Guideline.

Next steps in this research at the policy level include the potential to lobby at the national, state, and/or local (district) level to incorporate the 6 Sections of the Informational Guideline into law/policy for children in foster care; develop and deliver trainings to school personnel on the Informational Guidelines at the local, state, and national levels; incorporate the Informational Guideline's information into students' Individual Education Plans, 504 Plans, and transition planning (including transitioning to post-secondary education and other post-secondary endeavors of children in foster care); and widen the scope of the Informational Guideline to be useful for social service workers, GALs, and foster parents (including tweaking the Informational Guidelines for these professional groups specifically and developing trainings for these professional groups).

Next steps at the school-building level include establishing what schools can do at the classroom level to promote smooth school transitions for foster children, stress at the building level the imperativeness of including general and special education teachers as part of the foster child's transition planning team, and stressing the importance of including the foster child as a team member (especially with older foster children). The

researcher is planning on implementing these school-building level next steps in her

practice.

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Appendix A

Approval Letter – American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law

April 10, 2010

Ghyslyn,
I will post your email on the American Bar Association Center for Children and the Law List Serve upon hearing from you with IRB approval. I hope that you hear back soon. Please let me know and we can follow up again (and more directly!) if enough people don't respond right away. I think people will be very interested and volunteer, but know everyone is stretched for time!

Because of your interest and expertise in this issue, you may be interested in joining our listserv and staying up-do-date --www.abanet.org/child/education/listserv

I realized I didn't mention on our call that you should get in touch with Debbie Staub at Casey Family Programs who is a PhD in Education and is their child welfare/education specialist. She is absolutely fantastic!! She will be a fabulous resource for you and will be a good contact for your Dissertation. Her email is dstaub@casey.org. Please let her know I gave you her contact information.

Good luck!
Kristin
Kristin Kelly
Staff Attorney
American Bar Association
Center on Children and the Law
740 15th Street NW, Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 662-1733
Fax: (202) 662-1755
www.abanet.org/child

Appendix B

Approval Letter – National Foster Parent Association

From: "National Foster Parent Assoc." <info@nfpaonline.org>
Date: Thursday, April 8, 2010 8:37 am
Subject: RE: attn: Jean Fiorito/research project
To: Ghyslyn Laviolette <glaviole@du.edu>

Good morning--
I am sorry this has taken so long to get resolved. Your study was cleared yesterday by the committee with a recommendation to post it on the NFPA website. There will be a meeting this evening to finalize the approval if you can get the following info to me. What would be extremely helpful is if you could send a simple paragraph summing up your study, who you would like to have contact you (who are your identified types of folks), how to contact you and the dates that you would like for contact.

I appreciate your efforts. As soon as I receive your note, I will take care of it with the committee and have your request put on the NFPA website.

Have a nice day.

Jean Fiorito
National Foster Parent Association

Appendix C

Approval Letter – Colorado Society of School Psychologists

On Wed, Jun 2, 2010 at 7:30 PM, CSSP <cssponline@gmail.com> wrote:
An important message from CSSP:
Hello CSSP Members,

Please see attached for an opportunity to participate in a research study that focuses on school transitions for foster children.

This email was sent by the CSSP board member fcrepeau-hobson

Appendix D

Approval Letter – National Association of School Psychologists

Hi Ghyslyn,

The NASP Research Committee has approved your request to recruit NASP members for your research via the NASP Listservs. I have contacted the Listserv coordinator to let him know that you have been approved.

Please include this language in your Listserv postings to indicate that your study has been approved by NASP: "The NASP Research Committee has reviewed this study and granted the researcher(s) permission to recruit NASP members as research participants."

Best of luck with your research.

Jeff

Jeffrey L. Charvat, PhD
Director, Research and Information Services
National Association of School Psychologists
4340 East West Highway
Suite 402
Bethesda, MD 20814
301-657-0270, ext. 244
jcharvat@naspweb.org
www.nasponline.org

Appendix E

Invitation Letter Posted on the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the
Law List-Serve

Dear ABA Center for Children and the Law List-Serve,

My name is Ghyslyn Laviolette, a School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate at the University
of Denver currently working on my Dissertation: Promoting Smooth School Transitions
for Foster Children. The end product will be a Best Practices in Foster Children's School
Transitions tool for school districts, social service agencies and foster families/caregivers.

I am looking for participants in this study; specifically foster parents/caregivers,
children's attorneys/GAL's/CASA workers, social service workers, and school
psychologists. The study will be conducted in three rounds. During the first round,
participants will be asked to answer open-ended questions pertaining to important factors
to consider when foster children transition schools. During the second round, participants
will be asked to review and rank the summarized data collected from the first round.
During the third round, participants will be asked to review a Best Practices in Foster
Children School Transition tool draft that will be developed from rounds one and two
data.

If you are interested in participating in this study please click on the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/F369CGX

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Ghyslyn Laviolette M.Ed.
School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
glaviole@du.edu
303-709-6507

Appendix F

Invitation Letter Posted on the National Foster Parent Association's List-Serve

Dear NFPA Listserv members,

My name is Ghyslyn Laviolette, a School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Denver currently working on my Dissertation: Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Foster Children. The end product will be a Best Practices in Foster Children's School Transitions tool for school districts, social service agencies and foster families/caregivers.

I am looking for foster parents who are willing to participate in my dissertation research. The study will be conducted in three rounds. During the first round, participants will be asked to answer open-ended questions pertaining to important factors to consider when foster children transition schools. During the second round, participants will be asked to review and rank the summarized data collected from the first round. During the third round, participants will be asked to review a Best Practices in Foster Children School Transition tool draft that will be developed from rounds one and two data.

If you are interested in participating in this study please click on the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/F369CGX

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Ghyslyn Laviolette M.Ed.
School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
glaviole@du.edu
303-709-6507

Appendix G

Invitation Letter Posted on the Colorado Society of School Psychologists' List-Serve

Dear CSSP members,

My name is Ghyslyn Laviolette, a School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Denver currently working on my Dissertation: Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Foster Children. The end product will be a Best Practices in Foster Children's School Transitions tool for school districts, social service agencies and foster families/caregivers.

I am looking for school psychologist who are willing to participate in my dissertation research. The study will be conducted in three rounds. During the first round, participants will be asked to answer open-ended questions pertaining to important factors to consider when foster children transition schools. During the second round, participants will be asked to review and rank the summarized data collected from the first round. During the third round, participants will be asked to review a Best Practices in Foster Children School Transition tool draft that will be developed from rounds one and two data.

If you are interested in participating in this study please click on the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/F369CGX

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Ghyslyn Laviolette M.Ed.
School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
glaviole@du.edu
303-709-6507

Appendix H

Invitation Letter Posted on the National Association of School Psychologists'
List-Serve

Dear NASP Listserv members,

My name is Ghyslyn Laviolette, a School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Denver currently working on my Dissertation: Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Foster Children. The end product will be a Best Practices in Foster Children's School Transitions tool for school districts, social service agencies and foster families/caregivers.

The NASP Research Committee has reviewed this study and granted the researcher permission to recruit NASP members as research participants.

I am looking for school psychologists who are willing to participate in my dissertation research. The study will be conducted in three rounds. During the first round, participants will be asked to answer open-ended questions pertaining to important factors to consider when foster children transition schools. During the second round, participants will be asked to review and rank the summarized data collected from the first round. During the third round, participants will be asked to review a Best Practices in Foster Children School Transition tool draft that will be developed from rounds one and two data.

If you are interested in participating in this study please click on the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/F369CGX

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Ghyslyn Laviolette M.Ed.
School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
glaviole@du.edu
303-709-6507

Appendix I

Pilot Questionnaire

Demographic Information
(This information will be stored separately from your responses to ensure confidentiality)

1. Please check one:
   a. Foster Parent
   b. Guardian ad Litem
   c. Social Services Worker
   d. School
   e. Other_____
2. Number of years have been the above:
3. State of residence:
4. Gender:
   a. Male
   b. Female
5. E-mail address (to ensure you receive each round of questions/data synthesis):

Round One Questions:
1. What information should the school gather when a student in foster care enrolls in their school?
2. How should the foster child be prepared for a transition to a new school?
3. What are the responsibilities of the foster parent when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?
4. What are the responsibilities of the Guardian ad Litem when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?
5. What are the responsibilities of the social service worker when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?
6. Who is allowed to provide this information to the school (i.e. – foster parent, social services worker)?
   a. Should this information be shared with all school staff or particular school staff?

Feedback Questions:
1. How long did it take you to complete this questionnaire?
2. Do you have any suggestions around wording of the questions?
3. What other feedback do you have re: this questionnaire?

Round 1 Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study that will develop a document that contributed to the understanding of current practices and perceived best practices in promoting smooth school transitions for children in foster care. In addition, this study is being conducted to fulfill the researcher's Dissertation research requirements. Ghyslyn Laviolette, School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate, is conducting this study. Results will be used to inform further research in the transitioning of children in foster care, develop a checklist to promote smooth school transitions for children in foster care and to fulfill graduation requirements. Ms. Laviolette can be reached at glaviole@du.edu or 303-709-6507. This project has been approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board and is supervised by the Dissertation course instructor, Dr. Cynthia Hazel, Department of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, chazel@du.edu, 303-871-2961

Your participation will involve electronic responses to three Rounds of data collection. In Round One, participants will electronically answer several open-ended questions via a Survey Monkey questionnaire. Round One data will be collected and synthesized for emergent themes. Those themes will inform Round Two's questionnaire development. In Round Two, an e-mail will be sent to participants containing a Survey Monkey link to Round Two's questionnaire, where participants will be asked to rate their level of agreement on Round One's themes and to provide additional feedback. Round Two data will be analyzed and utilized to develop a list of items schools should be aware of and/or ask about when a foster child enrolls in their school. A Survey Monkey link to this list of items will be e-mailed to participants electronically as Round Three's questionnaire. Participants will be asked to review the list and provide feedback on its accuracy and/or other suggestions.

Participation in each round of this study should take about 20 minutes of your time. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. The risks associated with this project are minimal. Potential risks include: the need to conform to others responses, potentially harshly criticized data synthesis. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interview at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be identified by code number only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you to the Researcher. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will use only paraphrased wording. A synthesis of each Round's data (rather than each participant's individual responses) will be shared with participants in the subsequent round, however. Should any

information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may print this page for your records. By completing and submitting this questionnaire you are stating that you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Thank you for your participation and time.
Sincerely,

Ghyslyn Laviolette, M.Ed.
School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
glaviole@du.edu
303-709-6507

Demographic Information. (This information will be stored separately from your responses to ensure confidentiality)

1. Which of the following describes you (check all that apply):
    a. Foster Parent
    b. Guardian ad Litem
    c. Social Services Worker
    d. School Psychologist
    e. other_____
2. Please enter your state of residence:
3. Gender
    a. Female

        b. Male
4. Please state the number of years you have worked with foster children:
5. Please state your highest degree earned:
6. Please provide your e-mail address. This is to ensure you receive each Round of questions and data synthesis, and will be kept separate from your responses to the Questionnaire.
7. Would you like a summary of the findings once this Dissertation study is complete?
        a. Yes
        b. No
8. Would you like an electronic copy of my entire Dissertation once it is complete and accepted by the University of Denver?
        a. Yes
        b. No

Round One Questions
1. What information should the school gather when a student in foster care enrolls in their school?
2. How should the foster child be prepared for a transition to a new school?
3. What are the responsibilities of the foster parent when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?
4. What are the responsibilities of the Guardian ad Litem when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?
5. What are the responsibilities of the social service worker when a student in foster care transitions to a new school?
6. What situational and/or family history should be shared with the school?
7. Who is allowed to provide this information to the school (i.e. – foster parent, social services worker)?
8. Should this information be shared with all school staff or particular school staff?

Round 2 Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

Welcome to Round Two of Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care.

Thank you for having participated in Round One of my study. You are now invited to participate in Round Two. Participation in Round Two of this study should take about 20 minutes of your time. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interview at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be identified by code number only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will use only group averages and paraphrased wording. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may print this page for your records. By clicking the "next" button below and completing and submitting this questionnaire you are stating that you understand and agree to the above. Please submit your responses as soon as possible. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to

participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Thank you for your participation and time.

Sincerely,

Ghyslyn Laviolette, M.Ed.
School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
glaviole@du.edu
303-709-6507

Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care - Round Two Questionnaire

Section 1:
The information in this section is a synthesis of the data collected from Round One of this study. Each Round One question was analyzed for similarities and differences. Here you will be asked to determine our agreement of the data and have the opportunity to add comments and suggestions on the data synthesis.

1. When a foster child is enrolled in a new school, he or she should be prepared. Preparation for a smooth transition includes: a tour of the school prior to the first day of attendance; meeting teachers, principal, and other school staff prior to first day of attendance; a skill assessment conducted to ensure proper course placement; daily schedule prior to first day; hae a prepared anser to questions about family' and regular contact with the school counselor or school psychologist.

   Do you agree with this statement?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:

2. When a foster child transitions to a new school the social service worker is responsible for providing all academic enrollment information to both the new foster parents and new school (including report cards; IEP, 504, ILP and/or RtI plans; and immunization records), should ensure the child is in the lease restrictive setting, inform the school of custody arrangements (including who is and is not allowed to have contact with the child), should be present when the child is enrolled and should maintain contact with school staff.

Do you agree with this statement?
  a. Yes
  b. No
  Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:

3. When a foster child transitions to a new school the foster parent is responsible for gathering, knowing and understanding the child's educational history; facilitate the child's school enrollment; taking the child to the new school for tours and/or a "meet and greet" with teachers; making sure the child has all necessary educational material & supplies (notebooks, pencils, crayons, etc.); providing help with homework and scheduling tutoring if necessary; and facilitate communication between the new school, social service worker, foster family, GAL, etc.

   Do you agree with this statement?
     a. Yes
     b. No
     Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:

4. When a foster child transitions to a new school the Guardian ad Litem is responsible for monitoring the transition, communicating with the school (principal, school psychologist, school counselor) about the child's educational history and have copies of all educational records (including health, educational plans, grades), attending school meetings, visit with the child and ensuring the transition is in the best interest of the child.

   Do you agree with this statement?
     a. Yes
     b. No
     Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:

5. Upon enrollment the new school should ALWAYS gather information about a foster child's educational history; contact information of foster parents, social service works, GALs etc; and legal information such as custody and any no contact orders.

   The school should gather behavioral, mental health, and family history information if it affects the foster child's educational performance.

6. Please indicate the order of importance of gathering this information (1=most important):

	1	2	3	4	5
Educational					
Contact					
Mental Health					
Legal					
Family History					

Please add any other comments/suggestion you have about what information school should gather:

Section 2:
Mental health and family history is often very sensitive for a child in foster care. However, the school having background information can help teachers and staff (such as the school psychologist or school counselor) better support the child. Please respond to the following questions:

1. Do you agree that family history, such as abuse/neglect and/or drug/alcohol challenges should be shared with the school?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:
2. Do you agree that mental health and/or behavioral issues of the child should be shared with the school?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:
3. Do you agree that custody arrangements and court orders should be shared with the school?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:
4. Do you agree that the child list of medications should be shared with the school?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:
5. Often social/emotional/behavioral information is sensitive and should only be shared with particular school staff (such as the school psychologist, counselor or social worker). At times it would be helpful to share such information with other school personnel also (such as the nurse or teachers). Who do you believe should be involved in deciding what information should be shared with who? (For

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example - the school psychologist and social worker; the foster parent, school counselor and social worker).

    a. Yes

    b. No

Please add any comments/suggestions you have here:

Section 3:

Please provide your e-mail address. This is to ensure you receive each Round of

questions and data synthesis, and will be kept separate from your responses to the

Questionnaire.

Round 3 Questionnaire

Dear participant,

Welcome to Round Three of Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Children in Foster Care.

Thank you so much for taking part in Rounds One and Two of this study. It is now time for Round Three, the final round.

The following pages will each have one full section of the draft informational guideline. This draft includes information and suggestions for SCHOOLS to follow when a foster child is enrolling. You will be asked to comment on each section for its completeness. Please make any and all suggestions you have for each section. The last page will provide you an opportunity to make general/overall suggestions about the tool (deletions, additions, changes, etc)

Again, by clicking "next" at the bottom of this page you have consented to continued participation in this study.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Best,
Ghyslyn Laviolette, M.Ed.
School Psychology Ph.D. Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
303-709-6507
glaviole@du.edu

Draft Informational Guideline for Promoting Smooth School Transitions for Foster Children

The intention of this Best Practices Guideline is to provide school district personnel (Administrators; Teachers and Para-educators; School Psychologists, Counselors, and Social Workers; school nurse) with information that will aid in smooth school transitions for foster children enrolling in their schools. Collaborating as a team, parties involved in the foster child's life, confidentiality, record attainment and communication between parties involved will be addressed.

Section 1: Collaborating as a Team

Foster children have many professionals involved in their lives, ranging from foster parents to caseworkers, teachers to the bus driver. It is important to work as a collaborative team when a foster child is transitioning to a new school, and continue to work as a team while the child is enrolled in school.

As a school, knowing who the key persons are in a foster child's life and which of those persons should be part of the decision making team is imperative. Each school would benefit by appointing a person (such as the school psychologist or counselor, nurse or principal) to be the primary contact for foster Children. Members of the collaborative team may vary somewhat for each individual foster child. In almost all cases the social services worker and foster parents should be on this team, as well as the foster child's teacher and school psychologist and/or counselor. Older foster children should also be part of the collaborative team, as the foster child often times has the most information about his or her academic and behavioral needs. Other team members may be chosen in response to the foster child's specific needs.
The general responsibility of this team is to:
- Provide a timely enrollment of the new student
- Provide and gather all pertinent information about the child (see the "Record Attainment" section below)
- Provide the foster child with support needed for him or her to succeed in school
- Communicate with one another so all parties are aware of the foster child's academic successes and needs

Do you agree with the content of this Section? YES   NO
Please provide comments or suggestions below:

Section 2: Parties involved in the foster child's life

As stated above, there are many professionals who are involved in a foster child's life. Though as a school district you may not have contact with every one of these persons, best practice is to know who is involved. The school district should also have signed permission stating communication is consented between the school and these persons (a signed Release of Information). The social service worker typically has authorization to sign such a release.
Having the contact information of these professionals is also vital.
- The school should have names and numbers of the foster child's (not every foster child with have all of the professionals listed below involved):
  - Foster Parent
  - Case Manager
  - Social Service Worker

- o Biological parents, unless parental rights are terminated or social services and the courts are not allowing communication with the parents, such as when there is a no contact order
- o Guardian ad Litem
- o Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)
- o Educational Surrogate, if one has been appointed
- o Primary Care Physician
- o Therapist/counselor, if the foster child is seeing one
- o Psychiatrist, if the child is seeing one
- o Probation officer, if the child has one – which will be only if the child has legal charges against him or her

Do you agree with the content of this Section?   YES   NO
Please provide comments or suggestions below:

Section 3: Confidentiality

Before addressing what information should be gathered about a foster child confidentiality must be discussed.

As a school district, specifically as teachers, administrators and school psychologists and counselors, it is natural that we want to know everything about a child in order to serve him or her appropriately. When working with foster children we may not be privy to all information. However, pertinent information necessary to serve the child's academic needs should be shared with the school. This does include information about the foster child's behavioral and social/emotional needs as the affect their learning and behavior in the school environment. The foster child's social service worker typically has the most, and most accurate, information about the foster child. The school personnel designated as the primary contact should contact the foster child's social service worker for the information listed in the "Record Attainment" section.

The district is responsible for keeping information and records confidential. It may be necessary to keep sensitive information in a secure space separate from the foster child's academic file. Information, such as abuse history, should not be kept in the on-going academic file. As with all students, conversations about a foster child should not be held in the hallways or lunchroom.   The collaborative team (discussed above) should decide who is privy to information about the foster child. For example, the school nurse should know medications the foster child is prescribed and their side effects, especially if they are being administered at school.   The foster child's teacher should know when the child must go to the nurse for his or her medications. The bus driver does not need to know the child is prescribed medication. Neither do teachers who do not have direct contact with the foster child.

Do you agree with the content of this Section? YES   NO
Please provide comments or suggestions below:

Section 4: Records attainment

Having an understanding of the foster child's academic needs will drive the collaborative team's decision-making process for service provisions. Confidentiality must be adhered to throughout this process. Information such as behavioral challenges should be gathered as needed when it pertains to the academic success of the foster child. The school does not need to be informed that a foster child has bedtime wetting accidents, as this may not affect learning. The school does need to be informed if a foster child is physically aggressive towards other children, as an aggressive child does affect the academic setting. Typically the social service worker has final determination in what information is shared with the school. It is best practice to ask for all information that is necessary to meet the foster child's academic needs.

- Student enrollment
    - Typically the foster parent enrolls the foster child in school
    - Best practice would be for the social service worker to also be present at enrollment. However, due to large caseloads and busy schedules this may not be realistic.
- Information the school should request (some of these items are enrollment requirements for all new students):
    - Educational history
        - Report cards
        - Standardized test scores
        - Individualized Literacy plans
        - Individualized Learning plans
        - Response to Intervention plans
        - 504 Plans
        - Individualized Educational Plans
        - Progress monitoring data
    - Behavioral/social/emotional history as it pertains to the foster child's academic success and the learning environment:
        - Any diagnosis that affects the foster child's academic success
        - Existing behavior plans
        - Progress monitoring data
        - Current therapist/counselor
        - Current psychiatrist
        - List of medications
    - Family history
        - Medical history
        - Abuse/neglect history
        - Drug history
        - Custody information

- o Legal information
  - ▪ Custody orders
  - ▪ No-contact orders
  - ▪ Juvenile records the foster child may have
  - ▪ Names of Probation Office and Court presiding over the case
- ▪ Information should be gathered by
  - o School personnel designated as primary contact
    - ▪ If school secretary or another school employee is designated to collect enrollment data, this does not need to change.
    - ▪ Additional information, such as social/emotional/behavioral, should be collected by the designated school contact person
      - • This could be the:
        - o School psychologist, social worker, or counselor
        - o Principal
        - o School nurse
- ▪ Contacts who have the above information
  - o Social Worker
  - o Foster Parent
  - o Biological parents (unless parental rights are terminated or there is a no contact order)
- ▪ School personnel who should be privy to the above information
  - o The collaborative team should make this decision
  - o Often case by case basis – but one or two designated school persons should be the school's primary contact
- ▪ Information storage
  - o Educational information in the foster child's academic file
  - o Family history and social/emotional/behavioral information may need added layers of security and not be stored in the academic file
    - ▪ The collaborative team should make a decision as to where this information will be stored
    - ▪ Could be with the:
      - • School counselor
      - • School psychologist
      - • School social worker
      - • School nurse
      - • Principal

Do you agree with the content of this Section? YES   NO
Please provide comments or suggestions below:

Section 5: Communication between the school and parties involved

- Frequency:
  - Will depend on the needs of the foster child
  - A minimum of once per marking period, but more frequently may be the case
- Contact initiated by:
  - The designated school contact person
  - This could be the:
    - School psychologist
    - School counselors
    - School social worker
    - Principal
    - School nurse
- Persons the school should update:
  - Social Services Worker
  - Foster Parents
  - Case Manager
  - Therapist/counselor
- Contact with biological parents
  - The school should be aware of its state's statues on the continued involvement of biological parents of foster children
    - In many states educational rights are intact for the biological parents of foster children, even though the biological parents do not have physical custody of the child
  - The school needs to know if there is a no-contact order in place and what it states. (A no contact order may mean that the biological parents are not allowed to have contact with or gather information about the foster child).
- Documentation
  - Documentation of team meetings and conversations with both school personnel and outside professionals should be documented with the date, time and a short summary of the conversation.
    - This helps ensure everyone knows of decisions and changes as they are made.

Do you agree with the content of this Section? YES   NO
Please provide comments or suggestions below:

Section 6: Supporting the Foster Child

- When a foster child is entering a new school, that school should provide the following to aid in the child's adjustment:
  - Prior to the first day of attendance:
  - Provide the child a tour of the school

- o Hold a 'meet and greet' with the child's teachers, principal, and other staff the child will have consistent contact with
- o Assign the child a buddy or mentor, maybe from an upper grade
- o Provide his/her daily schedule

- Within the first week of school:
  - o Teach the child expected behaviors (school rules, PBS system if there is one)
    - These expected behaviors should be visited consistently throughout the first weeks or months of the child's enrollment
  - o If academic abilities are unknown conduct a skill assessment to determine the child's academic level
  - o Hold a meeting between the child and the school psychologist or counselor to discuss how the child can navigate questions about family
  - o Determine how frequently contact between the school, foster parent, and social services worker should occur.

Do you agree with the content of this Section? YES NO
Please provide comments or suggestions below:

Appendix M

An Informational Guideline for Promoting Smooth School Transitions
for Children in Foster Care

The intention of this Informational Guideline is to provide school district personnel (Administrators; Teachers and Para-educators; School Psychologists, Counselors, and Social Workers; school nurse) with information that will aid in smooth school transitions when children in foster care enroll in their schools. Collaborating as a team, parties involved in the foster child's life, confidentiality, records gathering, communication between parties involved, and supporting the transition for the child will be addressed.

Collaborating as a Team

Children in foster care have many professionals involved in their lives, ranging from foster parents to caseworkers, teachers to the bus driver. It is important to work as a collaborative team when a child in foster care is transitioning to a new school, and continue to work as a team while the child is enrolled in school.

As a school, knowing who the key persons are in a foster child's life, and which of those persons should be part of the decision making team, is imperative. Each school would benefit by appointing a person (such as the school psychologist, school counselor, nurse, or principal) to be the primary contact for children in foster care who are enrolled in their school. Members of the collaborative team may vary somewhat for each individual foster child, and existing teams can be used (such as the foster child's IEP team or the school building's RtI team) rather than establishing yet another building team. In almost all cases the social services worker and foster parents should be members of this team, as well as the foster child's teacher and school psychologist and/or counselor. Older children in foster care should also be part of the collaborative team, as the child often has the most information about his or her academic and behavioral needs. Other team members may be chosen in response to the foster child's specific needs, and may include the child's Court Appointed Special Advocate, Guardian ad Litem, and biological parents.

The general responsibility of this team is to:

➢ Provide the timely enrollment of the new student.
➢ Provide and gather all pertinent information about the child (see the "Records Gathering" section below).
➢ Provide the foster child with support needed for him or her to succeed in school.
➢ Communicate with one another so all parties are aware of the foster child's academic successes and needs.

Parties involved in the foster child's life

As stated above, there are many professionals who are involved in a foster child's life. Though you may not have contact with every one of these persons, best practice is to know who is involved. The school district should also have signed permission stating communication is consented between the school and these persons (a signed Release of Information). The social service worker typically has authorization to sign such a release. This information should be kept confidential, the school should designate a specific area to keep this information, and a staff member should be assigned the responsibility of initiating contact on the school's behalf. Having the contact information of outside professionals is also vital.

- ➢ The school should have names and numbers of the foster child's (not every child in foster care will have all of the professionals listed below involved):
  - o Foster Parent
  - o Case Manager
  - o Social Service Worker
  - o Biological parents
    - ▪ Unless parental rights are terminated or social services and the courts are not allowing communication with the parents, such as when there is a no contact order.
  - o Guardian ad Litem
  - o Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)
  - o Educational Surrogate (if one has been appointed)
  - o Primary Care Physician
  - o Therapist/counselor (if the foster child is seeing one)
  - o Psychiatrist (if the child is seeing one)
  - o Probation officer (if the child has one – which will be only if the child has legal charges against him or her)

Confidentiality

Before addressing what information should be gathered about a child in foster care confidentiality must be discussed.

As a school district, specifically as teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and school counselors, it is natural to want to know everything about a child in order to serve him or her appropriately. When working with children in foster care school personnel may not be privy to all information. However, pertinent information necessary to serve the child's academic needs should be shared with the school. This does include information about the foster child's behavioral and social/emotional needs as they affect the child's learning and behavior in the school environment. The social service worker typically has the most, and most accurate, information about the child. The school personnel designated as the primary contact should contact the social service worker for the information listed in the "Records Gathering" section below.

The district is responsible for keeping information and records confidential. It may be necessary to keep sensitive information in a secure space separate from the foster child's academic file. Information, such as abuse history, should not be kept in the on-going academic file. As with all students, conversations about a child in foster care should not be held in the hallways, break room, or other public areas. The collaborative team (discussed above) should decide who is privy to which information about the child. For example, the school nurse should know medications the child is prescribed and their side effects, especially if the medications are being administered at school. The child's teacher should know when the child must go to the nurse for his or her medications. The bus driver does not need to know the child is prescribed medication; neither do teachers who do not have direct contact with the child.

Records Gathering

Having an understanding of a child in foster care's academic needs will drive the collaborative team's decision-making process for service provisions. Confidentiality must be adhered to throughout this process. Information such as behavioral challenges should be gathered as needed when it pertains to the academic success of the child. The school does not need to know the specifics of why the child is in foster care, though general information can be beneficial. The school does need to be informed if a foster child is physically aggressive towards other children, as an aggressive child does affect the academic setting. Typically the social service worker has final determination about what information is shared with the school. It is best practice to ask for all information that is necessary to meet the foster child's academic needs.

- ➢ Student enrollment
  - o Typically the foster parent enrolls the child in school.
  - o Best practice would be for the social service worker to also be present at enrollment. However, due to large caseloads and busy schedules this may not be realistic.
- ➢ Information the school should request (some of these items are enrollment requirements for all new students):
  - o Educational history:
    - ▪ Report cards
    - ▪ Standardized test scores
    - ▪ Individualized Literacy plans
    - ▪ Individualized Learning plans
    - ▪ Response to Intervention plans
    - ▪ 504 Plans
    - ▪ Individualized Educational Plans
    - ▪ Progress monitoring data
  - o Behavioral/social/emotional history as it pertains to the foster child's academic success and the learning environment:
    - ▪ Any diagnosis that affects the foster child's academic success
    - ▪ Existing behavior plans

- Progress monitoring data
- Current therapist/counselor
- Current psychiatrist
- List of medications
  - Family history:
    - Medical history
    - Abuse/neglect history
    - Drug history
    - Custody information
  - Legal information:
    - Custody orders
    - No-contact orders
    - Juvenile records the foster child may have
    - Names of Probation Office and Court presiding over the case
- Information should be gathered by:
  - School personnel designated as the primary contact
    - If school secretary or another school employee is designated to collect enrollment data, this does not need to change.
    - Additional information, such as social/emotional/behavioral, should be collected by the designated school contact person.
      - This could be the:
        - School psychologist
        - School social worker
        - School counselor
        - Principal
        - School nurse
- Contacts who can provide the above information to the school:
  - Social Worker
  - Foster Parent
  - Biological parents (unless parental rights are terminated or there is a no contact order)
- School personnel who should be privy to the above information:
  - The collaborative team should make this decision.
    - Often case-by-case basis – but one or two designated school persons should be the school's primary contact.
- Information storage:
  - Educational information should be stored in the child's academic file.
  - Family history and social/emotional/behavioral information may need added layers of security and should not be stored in the academic file.
    - The collaborative team should make a decision as to where this information will be stored.
    - Could be with the:
      - School counselor
      - School psychologist

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- School social worker
- School nurse
- Principal

Communication Between the School and Parties Involved

Communication between teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, foster parents, the social service worker, the student, and the student's biological parent (in some instances) is very important for all parties to have an understanding of the child's successes and needs. This communication is a large task that involves coordination, effort, and time. Assigning a school staff member as the contact person can ease this process for the school, foster family, and social services. A contact person means that there is one point of contact at the school (leading to minimal confusion) whom is to initiate contact from the school's perspective, and for other parties (foster parents, social service worker, outside therapist, etc) to contact directly when they have questions about the foster child's school day.

- ➢ Frequency of contact:
  - o Will depend on the needs of the child.
  - o A minimum of once per marking period, but more frequently may be necessary.
- ➢ Contact can be initiated by:
  - o The designated school contact
    - ▪ This could be the:
      - School psychologist
      - School counselors
      - School social worker
      - Principal
      - School nurse
  - o Social service worker
  - o Foster parents
  - o Foster care agency case manager
  - o Guardian at Litem
  - o Biological parents
    - ▪ Always check that the biological parents are allowed to be involved first. If there is a no contact order or parental rights have been terminated it is unlikely that the biological parent is allowed to have information on the child.
- ➢ Persons the school should update:
  - o Social Services Worker
  - o Foster Parents
  - o Case Manager
  - o Therapist/counselor

- ➢ Contact with biological parents:
  - ○ The school should be aware of its state's statues on the continued involvement of biological parents of children in foster care.
    - ▪ In many states educational rights are intact for the biological parents of foster children, even though the biological parents do not have physical custody of the child.
      - • This means that the biological parents should be part of the special education team and they retain the rights to accept or deny services.
      - • When parental educational rights are intact, the school will need the biological parents approval signatures for special education services.
  - ○ The school needs to know if there is a no-contact order in place and what it states. (A no contact order may mean that the biological parents are not allowed to have contact with or gather information about the foster child, but educational right could still be intact).
- ➢ Documentation
  - ○ Outcomes of team meetings and content of conversations with both school personnel and outside professionals should be documented with the date, time, and a summary of the content.
    - ▪ These records should be kept confidential and with the more sensitive records on the foster child, NOT in the educational cumulative file.
    - ▪ Keeping track of meetings and conversations helps ensure everyone knows of decisions and changes as they are made.

Supporting Children in Foster Care During a School Transition
When a child in foster care is enrolling a new school, that school should provide the following to aid in the child's adjustment.

- ➢ Prior to the first day of attendance:
  - ○ Provide the child a tour of the school.
  - ○ Hold a 'meet and greet' with the child's teachers, principal, and other staff with whom the child will have consistent contact.
  - ○ Assign the child a buddy or mentor, maybe from an upper grade.
  - ○ Provide his/her daily schedule.
- ➢ Within the first week of school:
  - ○ Teach the child expected behaviors (school rules, PBS system if there is one).
    - ▪ These expected behaviors should be visited consistently throughout the first weeks or months of the child's enrollment.
  - ○ If academic abilities are unknown conduct a skill assessment to determine the child's academic level.

- o Hold a meeting between the child and the school psychologist or school counselor to discuss how the child can navigate questions about family.
- o Determine how frequently contact between the school, foster parent, and social service worker should occur.