december **2009**

series number: **005**

breakthrough series
collaborative

Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care

casey family programs
fostering families. fostering change.

About Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care.

Established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, the Seattle-based national operating foundation has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966.

The foundation operates in two ways. It provides direct services, and it promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy.

Casey collaborates with foster, kinship, and adoptive parents to provide safe, loving homes for youth in its direct care. The foundation also collaborates with counties, states, and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to improve services and outcomes for the nearly 500,000 young people in out-of-home care across the United States.

Drawing on four decades of front-line work with families and alumni of foster care, Casey Family Programs develops tools, practices, and policies to nurture all youth in care and to help parents strengthen families at risk of needing foster care.

For more information about this report, contact Casey Family Programs at info@casey.org or 1300 Dexter Avenue North, Floor 3, Seattle, WA 98109. Visit our Web site at www.casey.org.

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Table of Contents

I: **Introduction: Educational Challenges for Children in Foster Care** **1**

II: **Background and Overview of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative** **5**

- The Breakthrough Series Methodology 5
- Key Aspects of the BSC Methodology 6
- What Makes Teams Successful in Using the BSC Methodology? 9

III: **The Change Package** **13**

- Summary of Components 13
- Component 1: Develop Measurable Systems of Agency/Interagency Accountability 13
- Component 2: Establish School Stability and Seamless School Transition Procedures 14
- Component 3: Implement Best Practices to Maintain School Continuity and Manage Transitions 14
- Component 4: Empower Youth, Family, and Community Actions 15
- Component 5: Increase Stakeholder Investment through Training and Education 15
- Component 6: Improve Court's Knowledge, Engagement, and Oversight 15
- Component 7: Ensure Equal Access to Quality Education and Educational Support Services 16
- Component 8: Advocate and Influence Policy and Legislation 16
- Why Use a Change Package? 18

IV: **Overarching Themes** **21**

- School Mobility and Stability 21
- Cross-Systems Coordination 22
- Educational Advocacy on Behalf of Youth in Out-of-Home Care 23

V: **The Charge** **27**

VI: **Preparing for the Work** **29**

- Expert Meeting 29
- Team Selection and Support 30
- Support Available to BSC Teams 32
- National Affinity Groups 33

VII: **Promising Strategies and Practices for Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care** **35**
Cross-Systems Strategies 35
School Stability and Mobility-Focused Strategies 43
Advocacy-Focused Strategies 46

VIII: **Lessons Learned** **51**
Commitment to Improved Educational Outcomes despite Challenges 51
Making Strides across Systems to Achieve Improved Educational Outcomes 52
Impacting Agency and School Culture to Improve Educational Outcomes 53
Approaching Systems Change as a Gradual Process 54
Spreading and Sustaining Change 54
The BSC as a Foundation for Future Improvements 55

IX: **Conclusion** **57**

X: **References** **59**

XI: **Appendices** **61**
Appendix A: Change Package 61
Appendix B: Practice Tools 70
Appendix C: BSC Faculty, Planning Team Members, Staff, and Consultants 71
Appendix D: Resources 72

Figures

Figure 1: The Model for Improvement 8

Figure 2: A Framework for Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care 17

Figure 3: The Journey Begins 29

Figure 4: Pre-Work 31

Figure 5: Getting to Work: Learning Sessions and PDSAs 33

I: Introduction: Educational Challenges for Children in Foster Care

In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity, it is a pre-requisite...

—President Barack Obama

Address to Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009

Most people will agree that a quality education is an essential ingredient for the future success of all children. For the nearly 800,000 children who enter the foster care system each year, a quality education assumes even greater importance. In light of the numerous disruptive experiences faced by youth who are placed in out-of-home care, educational continuity and school stability play a heightened role in paving the path to a successful future.

School success is a precursor for long-term positive outcomes for youth in out-of-home care. Such success contributes to:

- Enhanced well-being
- A successful transition into adulthood
- Increased chances for personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency
- Increased ability to contribute positively to society[1]

Yet the reality is that all too often, children in out-of-home care do not have access to the school stability and educational continuity so essential for school success.

1 National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008).

The implications for this can have a devastating impact on the long-term positive outcomes that all children deserve. A change in home placement frequently necessitates a change in school placement. For many children in care, interruptions in education due to school transfers result in their falling behind both academically and socially. After falling behind, it becomes very difficult to regain the lost ground. Studies have revealed disturbing longitudinal findings related to educational outcomes for youth in care. Researchers have suggested that it takes approximately 4-6 months for a child to recover academically after changing schools.[2] Furthermore, changing schools during high school diminishes the chances for graduation.[3] Children in foster care have higher drop-out rates, are less likely to complete high school, and are less likely to complete post-secondary educational pursuits.[4]

Casey Family Programs' 2020 Strategy calls for comprehensive improvements in foster care, child welfare, and the systems that impact the 9 million children who will experience foster care by the year 2020 if nothing changes. Casey's 2020 Strategy identifies education among other critical factors that pave the path to self-sufficiency for children in foster care.

Casey 2020 Strategy

- Safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2020.
- Reinvest savings to strengthen families and improve the child welfare system.
- Improve the path to self-sufficiency for youth in foster care through a focus on well-being—specifically education, employment, and mental health.

In line with Casey Family Programs' 2020 Strategy is a commitment to helping youth in foster care succeed in school and complete their education. To that end, Casey's Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) convened in 2006 with the goal of providing child welfare and educational systems across the nation with a unique and historic opportunity to collaboratively strategize around challenges. Historically, child welfare and education systems have had difficulty in communicating. These are two diverse systems, but each can directly impact the educational success of children and youth in foster care. This BSC brought together nine public child welfare agencies and their associated school systems to test practice changes that would ultimately improve educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of home care. This work required innovative and courageous action and leadership to address complicated cross-systems challenges and make a lasting difference. The nine participating jurisdictions demonstrated a commitment to testing practice strategies and tools on a small scale, sharing lessons learned, and implementing the most successful of these strategies throughout their

2 Yu, Day, & Williams (2002).
3 Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy (1999).
4 National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008, December), pp. 5-6.

systems. The jurisdictions shared their successes and learning in real time over the course of two years. The BSC leveraged the expertise and knowledge of leaders in child welfare and education both to develop a framework for change and to guide the participating teams as they tested small changes targeted at practices in both child welfare and education systems. The participating teams were comprised of child welfare and school personnel, community partners, parents, and youth members. Collectively, they demonstrated a commitment to improving communication, coordinating resources, and exchanging information between systems to mitigate the negative educational outcomes that children and youth all too often experience as a result of their involvement in the child welfare system.

This report highlights the most promising practices developed by the participating teams where the focus was on improving educational continuity and school stability; these strategies influenced systems change by enhancing the way information is exchanged across systems and by coordinating resources and advocacy around educational issues. The strategies, practices, and tools that emerged as having the greatest potential for affecting systems improvements are described along with the many insights and lessons learned that shaped the teams' experiences.

II: Background and Overview of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative

The Breakthrough Series Methodology

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative was developed in 1995 by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and Associates in Process Improvement (API). This quality improvement method has grown into an international movement in health care.

Based on the success of IHI, Casey brought the BSC methodology to the field of child welfare in 2001. In collaboration with IHI, Casey launched its first BSC, Improving Health Care for Children in Foster Care. Since then, Casey has sponsored six other BSCs that address significant issues facing agencies serving children in foster care, including:

- Improving Health Care for Children in Foster Care (2001-2002)
- Recruiting and Retaining Foster Families (2003-2004)
- California State Differential Response (2004-2005)
- Supporting Kinship Care (2004-2005)
- Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System (2005-2006)
- Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care (2006-2007)
- Timely Permanency through Reunification (2008-2010)
- State of Iowa: Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System (2009-2010)

In addition to the above listed BSCs, Casey Family Programs has sponsored collaboratives in partnership with the following external partners:

- American Humane Association: Safety and Risk Assessments (2007-2010)
- Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform: Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Integration (2008-2010)
- State of California: CA Disproportionality Project (2007-2010)
- State of California: Independent Living Transformation (2007-2010)
- New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors: Safety and Risk Assessments (2008-2010)

Key Aspects of the BSC Methodology

In a BSC, teams from public and tribal child welfare agencies across the country come together to rapidly test strategies in order to improve prevailing issues in child welfare. Each team is guided and mentored by experts in the field as they develop, test, improve, implement, and spread their successful strategies. Teams share lessons learned via telephone conferences, and four 2-day meetings called Learning Sessions and a secured Internet site referred to as the Extranet. The process takes approximately 18-24 months from planning to completion.

The BSC methodology differs from a standard pilot or implementation project in several ways. The key aspects that set a BSC apart from other systems-change initiatives include the following six characteristics.

The BSC Model for Improvement is used

The BSC Model for Improvement uses Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles as the catalyst for the rapid changes that each BSC witnesses. Instead of spending a long time planning for massive changes, teams test ideas as soon as they occur. They are encouraged never to plan more than they can actually do—and if they can't complete their test "by next Tuesday," they need to make their test even smaller.

Anyone can have and test ideas

Ideas to test should come from every team participant. Frontline workers, youth, and family members involved with the system, community partners, and management all have a great deal of experience and knowledge, and all are thus a source of good ideas that can be tested.

Consensus is not needed

The BSC encourages participants to test their ideas in the field instead of talking about their ideas in a meeting room. Consensus is not needed for participants to test their ideas.

Ideas are openly shared

This methodology has the word *collaborative* in its title for a specific reason. Each participating team in the BSC benefits greatly from the successes and discoveries of the other teams. There are several levels of collaboration necessary for teams to be successful in a BSC: inter-team, intra-team, and community.

Inter-team collaboration

At the broadest level, a BSC is a collaboration of teams from across the country. While Casey supports the teams by providing access to expert faculty, we have found that teams learn best from one another. Cross-team sharing is encouraged through regular conference calls, a secured Internet site, a newsletter, and four in-person 2-day Learning Sessions. Because multistate collaborative efforts require a significant expenditure of resources, opportunities of this kind are, unfortunately, rare for most public child welfare agencies to participate in.

Intra-team collaboration

The second type of collaboration exists within each jurisdiction's BSC team. BSC core team membership represents various levels of the public child welfare agency, courts, and community-based organizations, in addition to parents and youth who have had direct involvement with the child welfare system. The extended team membership varies across jurisdictions, but it typically includes a broad representation of stakeholders. Faculty members coach these inclusive teams on how to value the voice of each team member and how to honor the voices of youth and families.

Community collaboration

The final level of collaboration challenges jurisdictions to improve the way they partner with communities and other systems in their efforts to address a specific issue. This collaboration is independent of the BSC organizational structure, reflecting a change in agency practice.

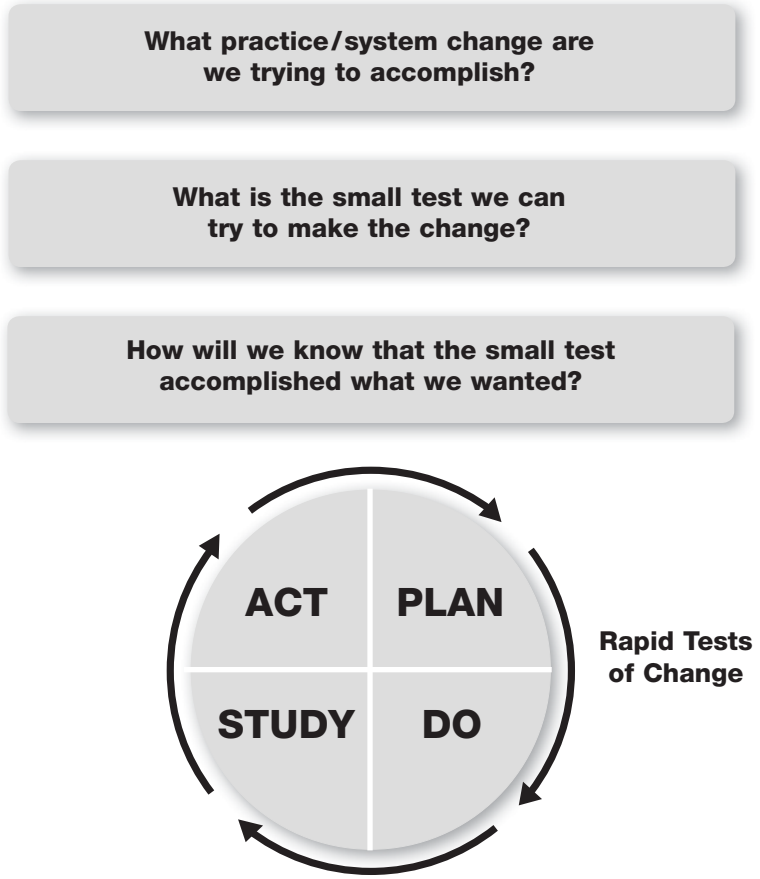
Successes are spread quickly

Many pilot projects begin and then remain in a pilot site. Or worse yet, once a "project" is completed, the pilot somehow disappears. The BSC method tries to prevent this from happening. Once a change has been tested successfully in the pilot site, the team is responsible for spreading that change throughout the agency and jurisdiction.

We measure to gauge improvement

The BSC strives to gauge improvements over time. Each participating team is encouraged to track and report on specific measures on a monthly basis for the purpose of self-evaluation. By looking at progress in these measures as well as documenting small-scale practice changes, teams can monitor their progress and improvements over time.

Figure 1: The Model for Improvement



The BSC emphasizes rapid small-scale tests of change using the Model for Improvement developed by API. Teams conduct Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles geared toward addressing specific changes they would like to see happen in their systems. Using small tests minimizes the time spent planning and reduces the consequences of unsuccessful ideas.

Critical aspects of a successful PDSA process are defining the hypothesis of the small test of change and taking the time to determine if the intended outcome occurred. Teams who are most successful using the Model for Improvement understand the importance of not over-planning; developing a clear "prediction" of what they hope will occur during the test; keeping tests very small; and, immediately following the test, determining whether their prediction was accurate.

What Makes Teams Successful in Using the BSC Methodology?

Casey Family Programs strives to use the Breakthrough Series Methodology as a means to identify promising practices and to encourage change in the child welfare system. From the process of analysis that follows every BSC, Casey's Systems Improvement Technical Assistance Unit has identified the following key factors of team success:

Dedicated core team

While teams are selected from jurisdictions that are progressive leaders in understanding and addressing issues in child welfare such as educational continuity and school stability, ultimately their individual successes depend on the capacity of staff to fully participate in the process. All of the participating teams are able to develop and test strategies for change; not all are able to successfully implement and sustain these strategies however. Balancing the responsibility of managing cases and working toward systemic change can be overwhelming. Without the flexibility and ability to focus on BSC work efforts as opposed to case management, team members are forced to focus on their primary work efforts first.

For teams to fully benefit from the BSC experience, they must be able to access and participate in team collaboration. Teams that do not join all the collaborative calls, access the secured Extranet site, or attend all Learning Sessions do not benefit from the full experience of peer-to-peer learning.

Committed leadership

Strong senior leadership plays a significant role in the success of BSC teams. Without a strong leader willing to clear the way for this process, the work will fail to move forward. It is up to the senior leadership and day-to-day managers to remove barriers and hold team members accountable. A commitment to improving practice and changing agency culture must be championed, supported, pushed, and led by the agency leadership. A lack of this investment will produce a low-quality return on the work and impede overall systems improvement.

The leadership of the BSC teams varies significantly, and as a result, the success of teams does as well. While all teams experience challenges with resources and funding, it is apparent that teams with a strong, committed, and invested leader are better able to creatively navigate the challenges and produce innovative changes.

Integrating this work into the agency

The most successful teams find explicit ways of integrating the work of the BSC into their agency's strategic plan and priorities. The BSC methodology cannot be perceived as a new initiative; it must be viewed as a means to achieve what the agency already wants to do in a more efficient and rapid manner. By understanding the priorities of the agency, teams are more successful at prioritizing the small tests of change and concentrating on the key areas that will result in maximum system improvement.

The capacity to track and report successes

Working to change practice or change entrenched systems is difficult. Small changes in outcomes for children and families can motivate teams to "keep up the good work." Teams that regularly track the progress and success of PDSAs and measures are better able to adjust their focus if needed and to communicate their improvements effectively.

An engaged extended team

The ultimate goal of a BSC is to spread successful tests of change throughout the organization and community. The core team is a small group of individuals committed to the issue—in this case, promoting educational continuity and school stability. The core team alone is not sufficient to spread and sustain changes in practice. Others within the agency and community must be brought into the change process.

III: The Change Package

The work of the BSC on Educational Continuity and School Stability was framed by a Change Package (Appendix A). The Change Package outlines strategies and tools that jurisdictions used to improve educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. It is composed of the following elements: Collaborative Goal, Collaborative Principles, and Key Components.

Summary of Components

The eight components identified for this BSC describe how jurisdictions should focus their work at all levels. These eight broad strategies were further broken down into subcomponent areas that served as a launch pad for the small tests of change that participating teams conducted:

Component 1:
Develop Measurable Systems of Agency/ Interagency Accountability

a). Create a formal process to improve communication and coordination between the child welfare agency and school districts to facilitate information exchange around their common children.

b). Provide child welfare workers with access to an expert in educational issues to link children with educational services and resources.

c). Identify one adult to serve as the child's decision maker for school-related decisions when the birth parents are unable to do so.

d). Develop regional, preferably statewide, data systems that provide current-year and longitudinal data on students in out-of-home care for education continuity and success rates.

Component 2:
Establish School Stability and Seamless School Transition Procedures

a). Develop written protocols for school staff on any policy for allowing children in foster care to remain in their school of origin when possible.

b). Develop written protocols for school staff about what to do when a child who is in foster care is moved into a new school.

c). Inform the old and new school as soon as possible once a decision is made that a child must change schools.

d). Require that complete school records are immediately transferred to the new school once a placement change is needed.

e). Eliminate (or waive for students in foster care) school policies that require records to be transferred prior to a child's enrollment in a new school.

f). Ensure that course credits are easily transferred between schools (even from other districts or states).

Component 3:
Implement Best Practices to Maintain School Continuity and Manage Transitions

a). Provide transportation for students to their schools of origin.

b). Place children in out-of-home settings that are within the boundaries of their current schools.

c). When school transfers are necessary, they should, if possible, occur during a natural academic break, i.e., summer or school vacations.

d). Establish procedures in schools to make sure children get needed services immediately.

e). Ensure that youth of color are assessed appropriately when transferring to a new school.

f). Establish age-appropriate welcome strategies to integrate children socially into the new school.

g). Have an advocate for the child check in with the child during the first week at a new school to ensure that everything is going smoothly.

h). Ensure that caseworkers address the educational needs of youth in out-of-home care and track educational progress particularly when placement changes are required.

Component 4:
Empower Youth, Family, and Community Actions

a). Have court personnel, child welfare workers, teachers, and caregivers ask children and youth in out-of-home care what they need to support them in their school setting.

b). Educate youth about their educational rights so that they can be self-advocates.

c). Create opportunities for children and youth to raise awareness and advocate for the importance of school stability and educational continuity and its impact on students' ability to succeed academically.

d). Target foster parent recruitment in neighborhoods surrounding schools/districts with the largest numbers of removals.

e). Actively engage birth parents in their child's educational experience.

f). Engage community partners to provide resources to help address the education needs of children of color.

Component 5:
Increase Stakeholder Investment through Training and Education

a). Raise child welfare stakeholders' awareness of the importance of school stability in improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

b). Educate individuals who work with children and youth in out-of-home care about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provisions that specifically relate to foster care.

c). Use tools that help caseworkers keep the educational experiences of children a priority.

d). Educate foster parents about the importance of being involved in youth's educational experiences.

e). Require pre-service and in-service training around education for foster parents.

f). Dispel myths among school and child welfare staff about sharing educational information.

Component 6:
Improve Court's Knowledge, Engagement, and Oversight

a). Use tools to help judges, court appointed special advocates (CASAs), and educational advocates to effectively inquire about children's educational history, school status, attendance records, and special needs.

b). Educate judges on the importance of educational continuity and school stability and concrete ways to ask about it.

c). Review existing forms used in the court and child welfare systems to ensure that appropriate education information is being documented.

d). Promote court hearings in which the youth, supportive adults, and the judge discuss the child's future plans, educational aspirations, and career goals.

e). Minimize the potential conflicts between court dates or other important meetings and the student's educational/extracurricular schedules.

f). Use education experts at court hearings to bridge the gap between the court and the education community.

Component 7:
Ensure Equal Access to Quality Education and Educational Support Services

a). Ensure that children in out-of-home care are assessed appropriately, particularly in terms of educational and mental health needs.

b). Ensure that children in out-of-home care have equal access to after-school programs, extended year or summer school programs, quality tutoring, preschool programs/Headstart, and mentoring programs.

c). Partner with community colleges and other post-secondary institutions to ensure that college-bound students receive supportive services on campus.

d). Advocate for state programs that allow students enrolled in post-secondary education to remain in placement with foster parents until age 21 or older.

e). Clearly define who is responsible for transportation funding, especially if the child must travel outside of the school's catchment area.

f). Provide childcare for youth in out-of-home care who have children of their own.

g). Fund age-appropriate coaching, mentoring, and tutoring for children in out-of-home care.

Component 8:
Advocate and Influence Policy and Legislation

a). Support legislation that allows children in out-of-home care to remain in their schools of origin, if it is in their best interest, even if they change foster care placements.

b). Advocate for a federal law like McKinney-Vento (including a transportation mandate) that specifically supports children in out-of-home care.

c). Advocate for language in federal and state law that clearly identifies which jurisdiction pays for education services when children are placed out of state.

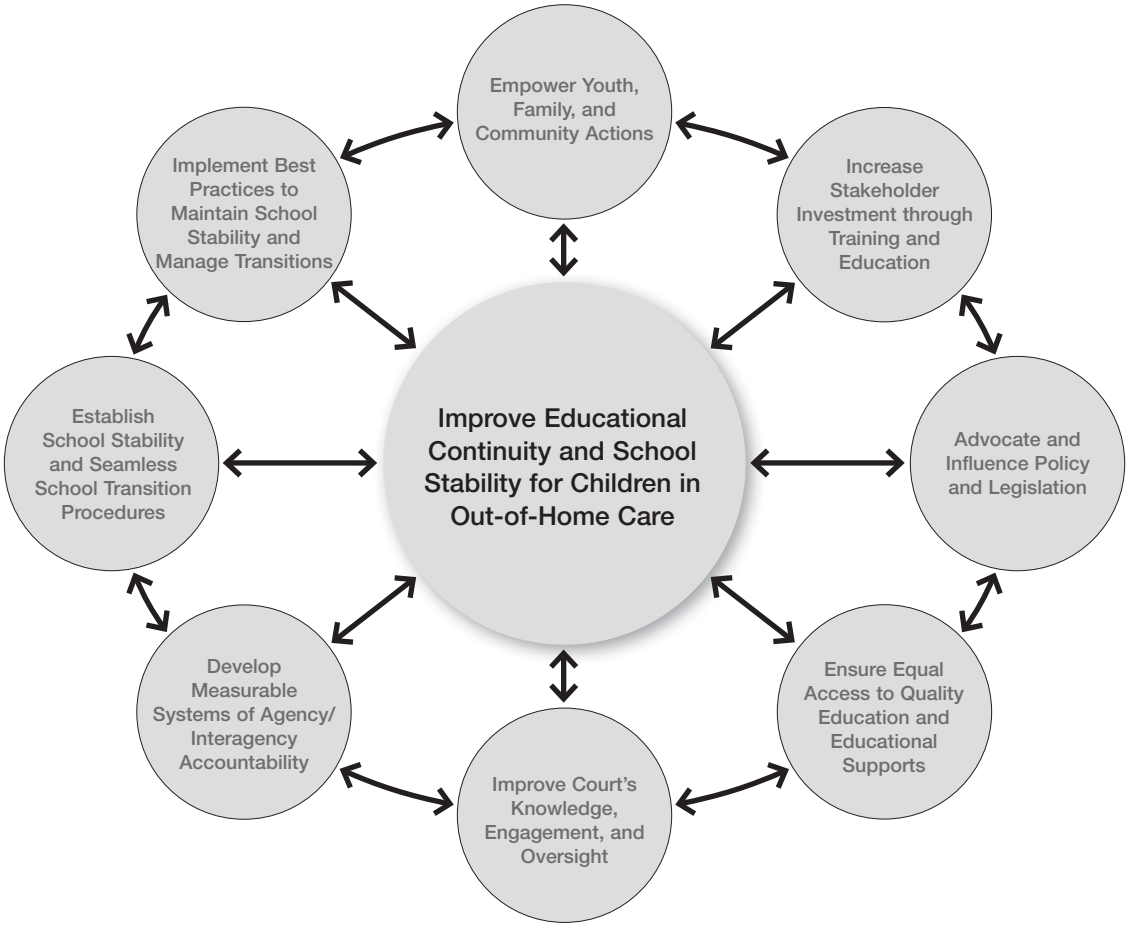
d). Implement state programs that allow students enrolled in post-secondary education to stay with foster parents until age 21 or older.

e). Create the political will of state/federal legislatures to increase funding for school transportation for children in out-of-home care.

The Change Package components recognize that change must occur at the organizational, management, and practitioner levels in order to achieve improvements in educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. A system must have the capacity to implement new promising practices, work through organizational culture barriers, and have an infrastructure in place that allows for data collection and analysis. Additionally, strategies to improve educational continuity and school stability will be most successful when the practices of the child welfare and school systems reflect an understanding of the long-term impact that a poor educational experience has on a child.

In this Breakthrough Series Collaborative, agencies tested ideas within each of the eight component areas. The figure below illustrates the relationships between each of these areas. The work in these component areas was concurrent. Moreover, work in one area was often linked to and overlapped with work focused in another area. This shared connectedness is what causes small tests of change in a BSC to result in system wide improvements.

Figure 2:
A Framework for Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care



Why Use a Change Package?

Using a Change Package gives teams several advantages:

- The Change Package helps agencies to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. The intention of a BSC is not to create an entirely new body of knowledge. Instead, a BSC is intended to fill the gap between what is known as a "promising practice" and what is actually practiced in the field. The Change Package helps teams prioritize their work in order to focus on the most important areas of improvement. It also serves as a catalyst to generate ideas that move jurisdictions toward system and organizational culture change.
- It is intentionally comprehensive. The Change Package calls for improvements at all levels of child welfare system functioning including working directly with families, shaping policy, and collaborating with other systems, organizations, and communities. Making improvements at all levels helps ensure that the changes made during the BSC are sustainable.
- The Change Package guides the work of the team. They use the Change Package as a way to assess where they need to make changes and determine where they want to focus strategies and small tests of change, as discussed in the Model for Improvement.

IV: Overarching Themes

A review of available research about educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care underscores the need for an increased focus on the educational challenges of youth in foster care and a renewed commitment to improvement in the child welfare and educational systems that serve them. The literature clearly recognizes a quality educational experience as a precursor for the future success of youth in care. A closer look at the barriers to a quality educational experience for youth in care reveals three overarching issues: school mobility and stability, cross-systems challenges primarily between child welfare agencies and educational systems, and the lack of advocacy on behalf of youth in care at the individual, state, and federal levels.

School Mobility and Stability

- **Children and youth in out-of-home care have on average 1 to 2 home placement changes per year while in care.**
- **Of more than 1,000 alumni from foster care surveyed in a Casey Family Programs national study, 68% attended 3 or more elementary schools; 33% attended 5 or more.**
- **In Chapin Hall's 2004 study of almost 16,000 Chicago youth, over two-thirds switched schools shortly after placement.[1]**

While we know that many factors contribute to poor educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care, school mobility issues have been identified as major barriers to school success by numerous studies.[2] School stability is often the critical first step towards educational success in that it directly impacts a student's opportunity to benefit from an educational environment where he or she can be assured consistent academic and social support.

1 National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008, December), p. 2.
2 National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008, December).

The negative impact of multiple school placements on academic achievement is well documented. A review of the literature reveals that the longer a child is in out-of-home care, the greater the number of home placement changes he or she is likely to experience, which often yields more frequent changes in school settings.[3] Researchers have suggested that it takes approximately 4-6 months for a child to recover academically after changing schools.[4] Furthermore, changing schools during high school diminishes the chances for graduation.[5] The educational impact of every school change is significant. Each time youth enter a new school, they must adjust to different curricula, different expectations, new friends, and new teachers.[6] Children in out-of-home care must simultaneously adjust to a new home environment and community. The school environment often plays an important role for children in out-of-home care by providing opportunities to develop positive relationships with supportive teachers, school-based counselors, and classmates. These relationships often provide a measure of protection from the disruption and uncertainty associated with out-of-home placements.[7] In short, maintaining stability for these educational relationships is critical.

Maintaining school stability requires specific attention to logistical issues that often pose major barriers to school stability, for example, the lack of transportation resources necessary to enable students to remain in their school of origin after a change in placement, or the lack of transportation necessary to facilitate a seamless transition when a school change is necessary after a change in placement. These practical challenges emerge as significant considerations in work efforts focused on improving school stability.

Cross-Systems Coordination

- In a 2000 New York study of 70 children and youth in foster care, 42% did not begin school immediately upon entering foster care. Nearly half of these young people said that they were kept out of school because of lost or misplaced school records.[8]
- The CFSR study found that 18 of 46 states (39%) had “educational records missing from case file or not provided to foster parents” and 12 states (26%) had “issues with school/agency relationships, communication or cooperation” limiting their ability to meet the Educational Needs outcome on their review.[9]

The lack of coordination between systems working in a parallel vs. in a collaborative process poses a huge barrier to educational continuity and school stability. It is not uncommon for youth in out-of-home care to experience interruptions in their education due to delays in the transfer of records and credits during school changes.

3 Yu, Day, & Williams (2002).
4 Yu, Day, & Williams (2002).
5 Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy (1999).
6 Casey Family Programs (2004).
7 Christian (2003).
8 Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (2000).
9 Christian (2003).

Furthermore, differences in systemic federal regulations such as those pertaining to privacy, e.g., Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) for child welfare and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) for educational systems, at times complicate the ease with which systems can exchange vital information such as the name of a student's assigned social worker, the name of the educational rights holder, grades, test scores, or diagnostic testing results.

In addition to potential barriers created by federal regulations, systems have differing local mandates and internal institutional cultural norms that may impede effective communication if not mutually understood. This plays out regularly as systems with distinctly different policies, procedures, and cultures attempt to simultaneously service children in care. Effective and efficient service delivery is often hampered by unspoken dynamics if these differences are not openly acknowledged and addressed.

In sum, these systemic challenges underscore the need for cross-systems training and communication to improve the coordination of services necessary to achieve positive educational experiences for youth in care.

Educational Advocacy on Behalf of Youth in Out-of-Home Care

- Multiple studies indicate that children in foster care often lack a knowledgeable, consistent educational advocate.[10]
- Further studies indicate that foster parents, social workers, and judges who are entrusted with the welfare of the child in care too often lack the training and awareness to provide the educational advocacy that children in care especially need.[11]
- In the 2003 CFSR study, it was found that one-third of the states reviewed failed to provide appropriate educational advocacy for children and youth in foster care.[12]

For children in out-of-home care, all too often there is an absence of education decision makers who have the legal authority to bring educational matters to the forefront during case planning and court proceedings. As a result, youth in care often do not receive the advocacy and support necessary to navigate efficiently across systems to obtain services that they are entitled to. Cross-systems challenges are exacerbated by the lack of a clear understanding of caretakers' and students' rights. What's more, navigating the regulations, policies, and laws pertaining to special education services can be a daunting task. Without strong educational advocacy within and across systems serving youth in care, their chances of getting services that they are entitled to is limited, further compromising the quality of their educational experience. A quality education requires youth and guardians who are informed and empowered to be active participants in decision making.

10 National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008, December), p. 4.
11 Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (2000).
12 Christian (2003).

At the time this BSC was underway, there was no federal legislation supporting the educational rights of students living in out-of-home care. The McKinney Vento federal legislation (Title VII-B) supports the educational rights of students who are homeless and those "awaiting foster care" placement. The interpretation of "awaiting foster care" is left to states; this has, in some cases, broadened the interpretation in this federal act to include all children in foster care. There is considerable variation among jurisdictions regarding the interpretation of "awaiting foster care"; this has serious implications for the services that are provided to youth in out-of-home care.[13]

What Is McKinney-Vento?

The McKinney-Vento Act guarantees youth who are homeless, including all those lacking a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" and those "awaiting foster care" placements, the right to remain in their original school when they must change living arrangements, transportation to their schools, and school-based liaisons to help them navigate the education system. When determinations to remain in their school of origin are made for McKinney-eligible children, these decisions apply for "the duration of homelessness" or for "the remainder of the academic year" 42 U.S.C. §1432(g)(3)(A)(i). The extent to which these rights apply to youth in out-of-home care varies from state to state, but many children in foster care are currently covered under the McKinney-Vento Act. Federal legislative efforts are currently underway to expand these protections to all youth in care.[14]

Resource:

Educational Stability and Continuity for Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Care Fact Sheet:
http://www.abanet.org/child/education/publications/Stability_Fact_Sheet.pdf

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) was enacted on October 7, 2008, after the close of this BSC. This federal legislation requires states to promote educational stability and ensure that youth in care are enrolled in school promptly. The law's provisions related to education for youth in foster care coincide with component areas 3 and 8 of the Change Package. It has been hailed as "the most significant and far-reaching reform to federal child welfare policy in more than ten years."[15] The new law aims to promote permanency and improved outcomes for children in foster care through policy changes in six key areas: 1) support for kinship care and family connections, 2) support for older youth, 3) coordinated health services, 4) improved educational stability and opportunities, 5) incentives and assistance for adoption, and 6) direct access to federal resources for American Indian tribes.

13 American Bar Association. Educational Stability and Continuity for Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Care Fact Sheet: http://www.abanet.org/child/education/
14 Legal Center for Foster Care and Education (2008).
15 Fostering Connections Resource Center. Supporting Implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, Public Law 110-351 (n.d.) About the Law. Retrieved, November, 8, 2009, from: http://www.fosteringconnections.org/about_the_law?

V: The Charge

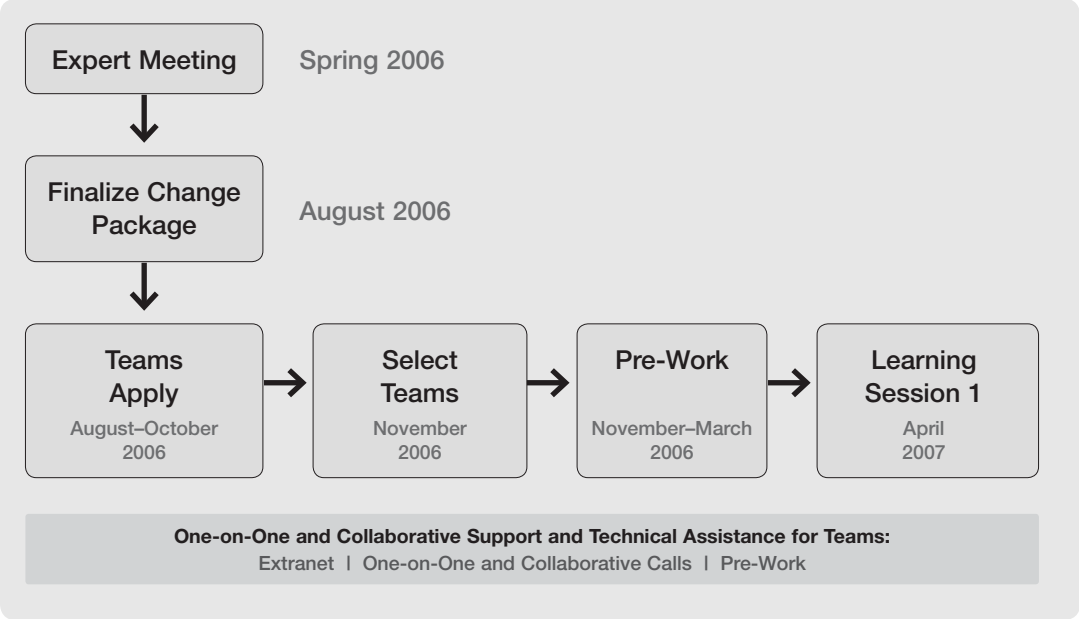
The challenge for all systems is to ensure that youth in out-of-home care receive a positive school experience that will result in each young person achieving his or her individual potential.[1] Positive school experiences enhance a child's well-being, help him or her make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase the chances for personal fulfillment, economic self-sufficiency, and the ability to contribute to society.[2]

The jurisdictions selected to participate in this BSC shared the vision of improved educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care and sought to address the challenges described by developing, testing, and studying small practice changes in the eight component areas identified by the Change Package. The most successful of these small tests of changes were built upon and spread throughout the jurisdiction.

1 Casey Family Programs (2004).
2 Yu, Day, & Williams (2002).

VI: Preparing for the Work

Figure 3: The Journey Begins



Expert Meeting

In 2006, a group of national content experts and Casey staff convened for a day and a half to define the prominent issues and develop the Change Package that would guide the work efforts of the Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care BSC. The participants' areas of expertise included child welfare, education, the judicial system, social services research, and youth and families with direct experience with the child welfare system. The group came up with 100 recommendations for specific strategies that could be employed to improve educational continuity and school stability. The Change Package components were developed from these recommendations.

Team Selection and Support

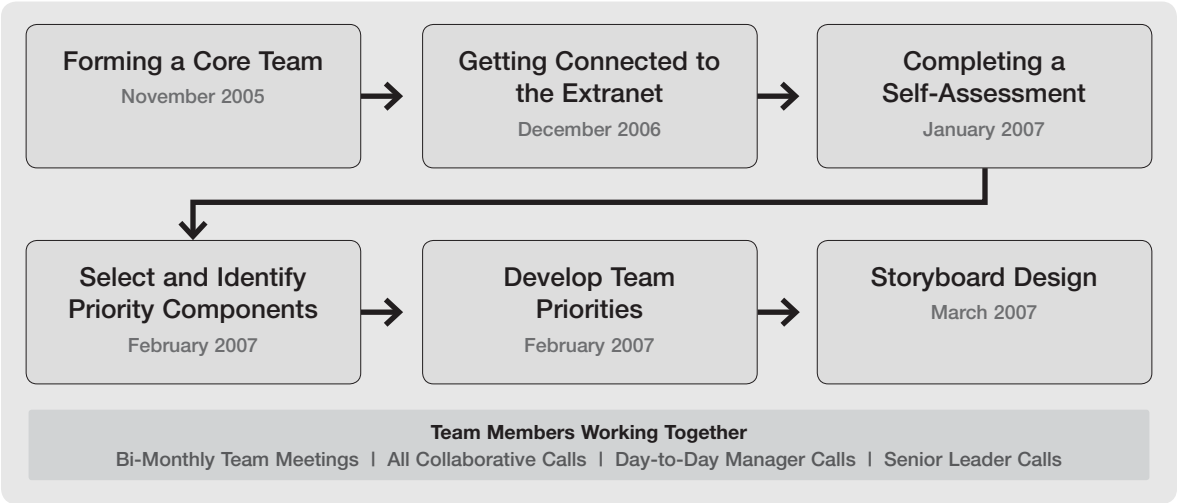
Participating Teams

- **Catawba County, North Carolina**
  Department of Social Services
- **Fresno County, California**
  Department of Children and Family Services
- **Los Angeles, California**
  Department of Children and Family Services, Pomona Office
- **Commonwealth of Massachusetts**
  Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Department of Children and Families
- **Sacramento County, California**
  Department of Health and Human Services, Child Protective Services Division
- **San Diego County, California**
  California Health and Human Services Agency
- **District of Columbia**
  Child and Family Services Agency
- **Vermont Agency of Human Services**
  Department of Children and Families
- **Virginia Beach, Virginia**
  Virginia Beach Department of Human Services

The nine public child welfare agencies selected to participate in the Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability BSC demonstrated enthusiasm for improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care, and they had the infrastructure necessary to make systemic change. The selected teams exhibited a desire and commitment to innovation and a willingness to implement rapid widespread changes in their organizations. This commitment to change was evident at the leadership level (Public Child Welfare Administrator, Director Commissioner) in that senior leaders removed barriers and supported changes throughout the system. In addition, the participating jurisdictions had a documented history of including birth families, resource families, and youth in case-planning activities for children in out-of-home care as well as in policy development and implementation efforts.

The selected teams were headed and led by public child welfare agencies including state- and county-administered agencies. They were identified as leaders in the realm of educational continuity and school stability because of their demonstrated capacity for using measurement tools, primarily the state's SACWIS system to track educational outcome data as well as for their willingness to ensure that all core team members had email and Internet accessibility to facilitate the exchange of information and support across teams.

Figure 4: Pre-Work



The BSC commenced in September 2006 with a pre-work period. The purpose of this period was to prepare participants for the work of the BSC. This included becoming familiar with the methodology and the Change Package, acquiring additional information about the systemic challenges impacting educational outcomes for youth in care, finalizing team composition, and defining their target sites.

Team Composition

Each jurisdiction was required to commit to assigning seven core team members who could fully engage in the two-year Collaborative. The seven team members included a senior leader representing executive-level leadership within the child welfare agency (e.g., state or county commissioner, agency director); a day-to-day manager representing a mid-level supervisor/manager within the child welfare agency; a child welfare staff member; a data specialist; an education partner from the corresponding school system; and youth and parent representatives, each having previous direct experience in the child welfare system. The seven core team members were complemented by an extended team that included additional representatives from the child welfare and education systems, community partners, and additional parent and youth representatives.

Target Site

The target site is the location within the public child welfare agency or school system where the work of each jurisdiction was initially concentrated. The process for identifying a target site varied from one jurisdiction to the next. Teams defined their target sites as a specific geographic area served by the agency, a regional office, or a specific supervisory unit or school district.

Self-Assessment

During the pre-work period, teams rated their jurisdiction's strengths and needs based on the component areas in the Change Package. Their work efforts were prioritized and guided by these assessments.

Support Available to BSC Teams

BSC faculty

During the two-year collaborative process, participating teams benefited from the expertise of a national faculty (Appendix C) that supported learning across teams and provided technical assistance via teleconference calls and the Extranet, and by contributing to four in-person Learning Sessions. The BSC faculty consisted of a chair and eight members whose experience and perspectives mirrored that of core team members. The faculty guided the work of the teams by sharing insight and perspective on the various challenges to educational continuity and school stability facing youth in foster care. The faculty advanced ideas and information about organizational and systemic improvement from multiple perspectives, e.g., the public child welfare agency, the school system, the judicial system, the community, and youth and parents.

BSC staff

In addition to the expertise of the BSC faculty, participating teams received support from Casey Family Programs staff. Staff assisted teams with understanding and applying the BSC methodology, developing effective strategies for improving educational continuity and school stability, identifying and testing small tests of change, and developing methods for collecting and using data within their systems to support the implementation and spread of identified promising practices.

Learning sessions

Teams came together for four in-person Learning Sessions during the BSC. Learning sessions provided teams with an opportunity to exchange information and share their strategies for improving educational outcomes for youth in care. Moreover, this was a time when collaborative members could access the experience of their peers and the faculty as they openly reflected on their specific challenges and lessons learned. The time periods between Learning Sessions are referred to as *action periods*. During action periods, cross-team learning continued through a variety of mediums including regular conference calls, monthly newsletters, and a secured Extranet site.

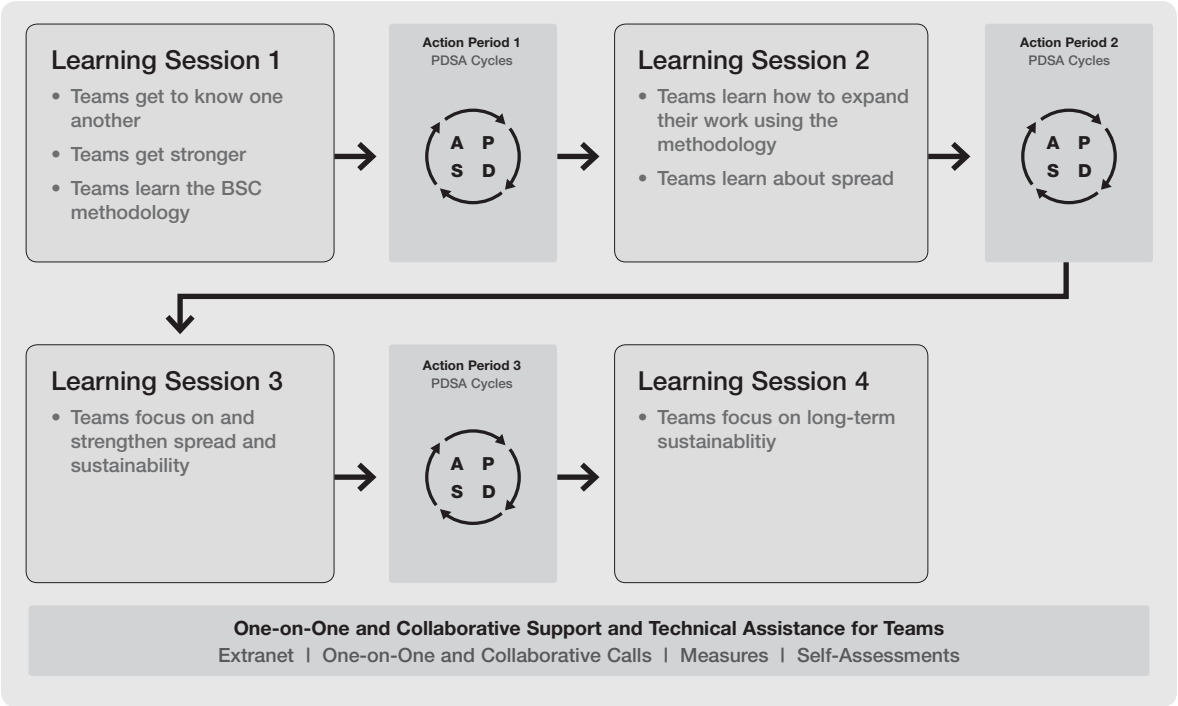
The Extranet

The Extranet is a secured Web site that can only be accessed by BSC participants. It was the primary way that information was communicated among Collaborative members. Teams posted PDSAs, tools, and resources that were beneficial to the entire Collaborative in forwarding the work of improving educational outcomes for youth in care.

National Affinity Groups

With teams composed of child welfare, school, community, and constituent members from across the country, the BSC provided a unique opportunity for national stakeholders and leaders to form peer groups or affinity groups. These groups worked together to advance educational continuity through the lens of their specialized professional and personal expertise. Birth parents, youth, community partners, and child welfare and educational professionals came together in affinity groups during Learning Sessions and special conference calls. As a result of the opportunity to convene throughout the BSC process, they were able to share, strategize, and spread small practice changes based on their particular role and relationship with the systems.

Figure 5: Getting to Work: Learning Sessions and PDSAs



VII: Promising Strategies and Practices for Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care

This section highlights the strategies that participating teams developed in efforts to improve educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. Using the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) methodology, teams tested, studied, and adjusted practice changes focused on the 8 component areas identified in the Change Package. Ultimately, those that were most conducive to achieving the desired educational outcomes were spread beyond the target site. As the work progressed, it became evident that the strategies being tested fell into the three previously discussed themes that incorporated multiple component areas simultaneously:

Cross-Systems Strategies

School Stability and Mobility-Focused Strategies

Advocacy Strategies

These three overarching themes frame the presentation of the most promising practices and strategies developed by the participating teams.

Cross-Systems Strategies

The development of cross-systems strategies was framed by components 1, 5, and 6 of the Change Package. During the BSC, child welfare and education systems partnered to strategize around changes that better integrated the work between systems that impact educational outcomes for youth in care. The emergent promising practices engaged child welfare agencies, school systems, the courts, and other key community partners.

Exchanging information with the school system to improve educational outcomes

> *It was very sobering to realize that many of the school district employees had never seen our (DCFS) forms. One of the forms allows sharing of information to comply with FERPA laws...*

—Participant
Pomona, California

In Pomona, California, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) partnered with the Pomona Unified School District and successfully developed mandatory cross-trainings for school systems and DCFS personnel.

The training for school district employees came about after the BSC team discovered that none of their school system counterparts had ever seen forms used by child welfare workers to authorize the exchange of vital education information about children in care with the school system. This exposed a major training need. The team took this back to their senior leaders and, from there, collaboratively developed and arranged for four trainings in the school district.

The BSC team subsequently attended the agency's core training for new workers to find out what new workers were being taught. They found that not enough practical educational information was being shared with new workers. They subsequently modified the agency core training curriculum to include practical information about educational planning and communicating effectively with school districts. After testing the training with new workers, the next stage of their strategy involved adapting their education training for experienced workers. Over time, the Pomona team sought to spread this strategy as a mandated training activity for all 3000 social workers in the agency.

> *Communicating with the education systems is challenging as youth are attending schools in DC, Maryland, and Virginia.*

—Participant
District of Columbia

The District of Columbia (DC) team strategized around unique challenges impeding the exchange of information regarding youth in care between the agency and its associated school systems. The child welfare agency started out by providing schools with information about youth in care. In turn, the DC school system started providing CFSA with youth's standardized test scores, grades, attendance records, and special education status in an aggregate report. This exchange enhanced educational planning for youth in care by making their educational information more readily available.

Another approach tested by the team was the dissemination of a one-page information sheet entitled *CFSA Information for School Personnel* (Appendix B). This was issued to teachers during the new teacher orientation and at the Teacher Back-to-School rally at the beginning of the school year.

The Catawba, North Carolina team tested and eventually institutionalized the practice of agency program managers sending lists of school children in foster care to three school systems in their target site twice per month. They anticipated that this small change in practice would facilitate an easier transition for everyone including students, caretakers, and staff. Over time, the practice of the agency sharing information with the school districts evolved into an exchange of information. It became apparent to an educational partner that the school district needed to report back to the agency about the progress of the listed youth in care. The two systems began to collaborate as to what needed to happen to spread the practice of inter-system communication to neighboring counties.

The Vermont team created a directory of school system personnel and resources that social workers could easily access on their desk tops. The team worked with a contact in the school system to glean pertinent information for the directory. The directory has reportedly improved communication between the Department of Children and Families and schools in their target site. The team planned to spread this strategy to another district.

Co-locating agency personnel in the school system

The Fresno County, California team assigned five Independent Living Program (ILP) social workers to work out of high schools in their target site. Having the social workers based in the school increased the interaction and coordination of services with school-based youth-in-care liaisons. The enhanced coordination of these service providers resulted in successful outcomes for the youth in these schools. For example, at Sunnyside High School, the team arranged for the social worker to meet with the youth-in-care liaison on a monthly basis to review the needs of youth in care enrolled at the school. During these meetings, they identified services, including whether youth needed tutoring, support with studying, and/or assessment. Furthermore, the Fresno team's target site school district implemented a regularly scheduled meeting to review the educational progress of youth in care who were enrolled in target site schools. Meeting participants included ILP staff and counselors, the youth-in-care liaison, and on occasion, the vice principal. This practice enabled the Fresno team to identify and address systemic barriers that have historically prevented educational assessments from being completed in a timely manner.

During the study phases of these practice changes, the Fresno team surveyed youth in target site schools about their experiences with the practice of coordinating services. In one instance, they planned a party for youth during which a focus group was convened to explore how service providers could do better for next year's freshmen. The youth shared that they liked having an ILP social worker located in the school. In addition, they provided favorable feedback about the increased support and advocacy resulting from the coordination of services. This positive feedback contributed to the team's decision to increase the number of school-based social workers from five to eleven.

The team reported that regular and consistent interaction between ILP social workers and youth-in-care liaisons became an expectation beyond their target site schools. It was the team's goal to spread this practice change across their jurisdiction.

The Fresno County team also developed a related strategy to effect better communication between Department of Children and Family Services and the school district. The agency and school district entered into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that authorized the exchange of information about the youth they were jointly serving. By the end of the BSC, Fresno received verbal approval to spread their MOU to all 54 school districts.

The Massachusetts team co-located three social workers in three schools within their target site. This arrangement facilitated the exchange of information between systems providing the agency access to the schools' data systems. Workers were able to enhance schools' data systems by adding fields to collect information about the custody and placement status of students in care. The co-location of social workers in schools was mutually beneficial in that it built trust between the systems and raised awareness about the specific educational needs of students in out-of-home care.

Endless Dreams

The Endless Dreams video and training curriculum is a resource developed by Casey Family Programs to inform teachers about the unique educational needs of youth in foster care. It also offers policies, procedures, and practices that can improve educational success. During the BSC, several teams used the video to orient school personnel and foster improved communication between child welfare agency and school systems.

> *School staff in schools outside the target sites are beginning to receive the Endless Dreams presentation.*
>
> —Participant
> San Diego County, California

The Massachusetts team used the video to generate discussion with school faculty in their target site school district about specific challenges that both agency and education systems were experiencing. As a result of this discussion, agency staff reported an increased understanding and awareness about the experiences that teachers had with children in care. The team spread the use of the video across their jurisdiction, primarily as a tool to orient new teachers.

Foster care designees in schools

The Catawba County, North Carolina team trained foster care designees in their three target site school systems. The designees were key education stakeholders, e.g., assistant principals and guidance counselors. Designees were trained to attend to the unique needs of youth in foster care. The team reported that having foster care designees in schools made a difference in the educational experience of foster youth in care. In addition to providing students in out-of-home care with more specialized attention, it allowed the systems to communicate more than they ever had before. By the final learning session, the team had prepared over 50% of their existing foster care designees to become trainers for prospective foster care designees.

Informing schools about the transfer of educational rights

In Sacramento County, California, the JB 535 is a form completed by Child Protective Services (CPS) workers to inform schools about who has the authority to make decisions about a child's education when parents' rights have been limited by the courts. In response to the observation that the form was consistently being completed incorrectly, the child welfare agency started meeting with Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) and Sacramento Child Advocates (SCA), attorneys who represent children under the care of CPS, to explore what could be done to improve the process. They came up with step-by-step instructions for completing the form and invited staff from SCOE and SCA to participate in a training about how to complete the form. The training strengthened relations between the systems and offered social workers someone they could talk to if they needed technical support with filling out the forms. The team reported that the increased cross-systems collaboration as a result of the implementation of this strategy was an unexpected and invaluable benefit of participation in the BSC.

Sharing information with the courts to improve educational outcomes

Recognizing that the court system has an influential role in improving educational outcomes for children in care, participating jurisdictions also developed strategies and tools to improve the exchange of information and strengthen relationships with their respective court systems.

> *Social workers began utilizing an educational checklist, which includes items that are on the judges' checklist as well as additional important items related to the educational needs of youth in foster care. It supports social workers in being prepared for court and allows important educational information to become a part of the Court record.*
>
> —Participant
> District of Columbia

> *It started out as this small thing and it turned into something that completely impacts practice and totally redesigns how we approach making placement change decisions because now we have to factor in education and provide that information to the court and in our court reports.*
>
> —Participant
> Fresno County, California

The climate was ripe for an agency/court collaboration in Virginia Beach. The agency was participating in the BSC, and their juvenile judges were participating in a court improvement process. The BSC team introduced the idea of creating a judicial checklist (Appendix B) to their juvenile judges during their court improvement meetings. Judges were interested in the idea of improving communications regarding youth's education with other systems and increasing the focus on education during court hearings. The entire BSC team offered input into the development of a judicial checklist, then requested feedback from social workers and judges to determine what information they thought would be helpful to include. The team collected baseline information for approximately three months before the judicial checklist was implemented as a tool that target site supervisors submitted to the court with service plans. Subsequently, they spread the practice of submitting the judicial checklist with service plans to the court throughout the city.

> *With the judicial checklist, we took the small steps, refined them, and went back to the judges and got their feedback several different times before we actually implemented it. That has been very helpful in terms of improving the amount of time that education gets mentioned during an actual court hearing.*
>
> —Participant
> Virginia

Capturing education information in court reports

The Catawba County team shared a similar success using a judicial checklist to ensure that education information is included in court reports and proceedings. The team's frontline worker noted that there was minimal information about education in court reports. The frontline worker proceeded to create a template that asked specific questions about the child's educational progress:

- What school is the child attending?
- What was the school of origin?
- Is the child passing?
- Is the child on grade level?
- What is the child's course of study?

These questions provided important information to the judge and generated increased dialogue during hearings about children's educational progress. The frontline worker tested the judicial checklist with one court report and eventually spread the use of the checklist to his team and other units in the agency. With the succession of tests, the tool was tweaked based on the feedback received.

> *It's not spread through the whole jurisdiction, but has spread about two-thirds of the way. It has changed some of the foster care social workers' viewpoints about education. It was not the administration making this change; it was Mitchell making this change…the discussion has come to the forefront and people who had not previously been asking these questions are asking them now.*
>
> —Participant
> Catawba County, North Carolina

Using Family Team Meetings (FTM) and Team Decision Making (TDM) to impact educational outcomes

> *Educational liaisons are going to almost all TDM meetings and discussing education issues in the TDM. The information is captured on a document and clerical staff enters it into the CWSCMS system.*
>
> —Participant
> San Diego County, California

> *We have always talked about the difficulties and obstacles in education and CPS working together. Through the BSC and the TDM process, we have really increased the collaboration between the two systems and we have raised the level of importance of education in a child's life. That is not to discount the importance of the other PDSAs but in terms of systemic issues, it is probably our most important PDSA.*
>
> —Participant
> Sacramento County, California

The Sacramento County, California team reported that education and child welfare are connecting and communicating more frequently as a result of their participation in the BSC. One of the most successful and meaningful PDSAs this team tested provided the opportunity for the agency and school systems to work together. The PDSA involved using the Team Decision Making (TDM) process to increase collaboration between the agency and school systems, and raise the level of importance of education, as the systems strategized to improve services to youth in out-of-home care. Being able to document systemic changes opened new avenues and increased understanding and collaboration between systems. The team attributed their successful outcomes to the diverse voices at the table during TDMs. They empowered youth to share their side of the story with

the support of youth-in-care liaisons. In turn, the liaisons partnered with social workers to identify and examine gaps in service and how they could be addressed. For example, the team reported that during a TDM, a youth in care expressed the desire to become more involved in after-school activities. The liaison was able to provide information immediately about after-school activities and commit to seeking out financial assistance that would enable the child to participate in those activities.

> *Many of the GALs that represent our youth have informed several members of our team that they have noticed that families are now planning and discussing the educational needs of youth in the FTM.*
>
> —Participant
> District of Columbia

The District of Columbia team tested a practice change that involved the inclusion of educational planning during Family Team Meetings (FTMs). They began by allotting time during FTMs for discussion and planning regarding education issues and needed services. They documented specific educational information and recommended referrals for service in the FTM plan. The team saw dramatic improvements around educational planning for youth in their target site. As a result of discussing educational planning during FTMs, the percentage of youth with an educational plan increased from 33.3 percent to 80 percent.

The Pomona team engaged TDM facilitators as champions for emphasizing the need for children to stay in their school of origin whenever possible. To accomplish this, TDM facilitators partnered with participants at the meeting to brainstorm solutions that could enable youth to remain in their home school. When a school transfer could not be avoided, participants were provided with the agency forms necessary to transfer students during the TDM. This practice facilitated a smoother transition. As a result of these efforts, TDM facilitators noted greater efficiency with enrolling youth in school. In some instances school transfers were happening in less than a day. Moreover, agency staff were coming to TDMs prepared with the child's educational folders so that educational information was readily available. School system personnel reported being more aware of educational requirements for children in out-of-home care, and caregivers were better prepared to address youth's educational needs.

School Stability and Mobility-Focused Strategies

The issue of school stability and mobility is the focus of component areas 2 and 3 of the Change Package. School stability emerged as a primary area of focus for teams as this issue was central to the charge of improving educational outcomes for youth in care.

In the spirit of collaboration, teams approached school stability and mobility issues from multidimensional perspectives that enlisted agency and school personnel, the courts, caregivers, and youth to brainstorm and strategize around small changes in practice that could be affected rapidly, studied, and adjusted during future cycles of testing with more families. Teams experimented with diverse and creative strategies to reduce the number of school placements that youth in care were subject to.

Promoting school stability

In San Diego County, California, keeping kids enrolled in the same school after removal was the focus of many of their practice changes. The team started with their target site, which included seven schools, and has since spread changes to the entire region.

The San Diego team approached school stability by assessing educational needs when children first enter foster care. Team participants partnered with Neighborhoods for Kids, a program offering a new way of looking at the foster care system in the county. Together, they explored alternative ways for children in care to remain in their own communities. The program is physically placed in the agency between the court intervention and the placement units. The program staff captured information about every child coming into agency custody and requested TDM meetings after every removal. This front-end approach to emphasizing school stability was reportedly very successful.

Another effective strategy the team tested and implemented was sending educational update emails to school and agency staff. A “check it out” email (Appendix B) was sent out every Friday by the education liaison housed in the agency. The email highlighted available resources in support of educational stability, e.g., pertinent laws, links to educational services for children in care, YouTube videos, and other creative and informative tools. Moreover, each edition featured a story about a young person who was able to stay in his or her home school. The communication was well received by school and agency personnel, becoming an anticipated event every Friday.

With these and other successful strategies, by the close of the BSC, the San Diego team celebrated the fact that approximately 54 percent of school-aged children were remaining in the same school in contrast to only 15 percent at the start of the BSC.

In Vermont, the team’s day-to-day manager started providing a brief educational continuity training during case staffings. This practice change grew out of the team’s “Tips of the Week” email (Appendix B), a weekly communication that alerted agency social workers about specific actions necessary to ensure youth’s educational stability and continuity while in care. The team saw a big increase in the level of interest in educational continuity within the agency as a result of these initiatives.

The Vermont team celebrated a major breakthrough with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Education and the Department for Children and Families (DCF). The MOU outlined a uniform procedure by which children who are in the custody of DCF and are "state placed" could maintain their school placement despite a change in foster care placement. The MOU also provided a procedure for children who are not considered "state placed" to remain in their home school.

The Fresno County team tested a proactive approach to maintaining school stability. When there was a plan for reunification during the school year, social workers took the initiative to request that youth attend a school within their families' school district at the beginning of the year. This measure decreased the likelihood of a school placement disruption during the school year when the planned reunification occurred. The agency and school district saw a significant increase in requests for inter-district transfers from agency (DCFS) social workers during the first week of school. This increase signified that workers were planning ahead to promote school stability for youth in care.

Strategizing to address school enrollment issues

In Pomona, California, there was concern that when students entered or exited out-of-home care placements, there was no systemic way for school personnel to track vital information about them, including information about the assigned agency social worker and who had the authority to consent on the student's behalf. The team created a checklist for front desk school personnel that identified key information regarding children in out-of-home care. The checklist provided the school with an agency contact person and reminded them about their obligation, per state legislation, to enroll students in school even when documents were missing, to complete specific agency forms, and to arrange for caretakers to register youth in foster care in the free school lunch program. The school site checklist was tested and refined within the team's target site schools. Eventually it was presented to the Educational Coordinating Council, which proposed that its use be spread districtwide and written into policy.

The Pomona team also created a related checklist designed as a tool for child welfare personnel to track the education status of youth in out-of-home care. The School Stability Checklist facilitated a smooth transition by reminding social workers and agency staff to:

- Complete all required education-related documents upon placement or exit from out-of-home care.
- Provide notification to the school that the child is in care.
- Document the child's school of origin and the school the child will be transitioning to when a school transfer is necessary.

The tool was implemented as a small test starting with one worker and one unit and eventually spreading to an entire office. The change met with such success that the executive office proposed the use of the checklist be implemented district-wide and written into policy.

Transportation

The lack of transportation resources to enable youth to continue in their school of origin after a foster home placement or a foster home replacement was a barrier to school stability shared by most if not all of the participating teams.

The Catawba County team identified the issue of transportation as a challenge to school stability. With three school systems within Catawba County and not enough foster care placements within any one school district, they needed innovative strategies that would allow youth to remain in their school of origin. Their ideas included reimbursing foster parents to transport children to and from school using existing contracts with drivers that the school system had in place and school buses. The team's long-term goal is to increase transportation resources in every school zone.

> *We have several of our major school districts agreeing to transport children that are initially removed and placed in emergency shelters back to their school of origin until a permanent placement is found. We have also worked with foster parents and while this isn't the norm yet, we have had foster parents transport children back to their school of origin even when it has been for several weeks and involved lengthy commutes.*
>
> —Participant
> Fresno County, California

Advocacy-Focused Strategies

Teams tested ideas focused on component areas 4, 7, and 8 of the Change Package, which identified key determinants of educational stability and continuity including the empowerment of youth, family, and community and advocacy efforts to promote and influence education-related policy and legislation.

Caregiver resources

The District of Columbia team focused on increasing foster parents' knowledge and understanding of their responsibilities related to the educational issues of youth in their care. Even though preliminary survey findings revealed that foster parents were involved in their child's education, core and extended team members continued to encounter foster parents who were not actively involved around the issue of education. The team's foster parent representative talked to a subset of foster parents at an in-service training and found that foster parents were evenly split into two categories: actively involved in the educational status of the child in their home or did not feel that this was their role as foster parents and therefore they were not involved in the educational status of the child in their care.

To increase foster parent involvement in children's education, the team developed and tested a "Caregiver Guide" (Appendix B). After several revisions based on feedback, the guide was finalized and disseminated to foster parents agencywide. Moreover, parts of the guide's content have been incorporated into the agency's foster parent pre-service and in-service training.

The Virginia Beach team created and implemented an in-service training for foster parents to educate them about special education requirements and what their role should be regarding Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings; in addition, the training addressed what foster parents' legal rights are, i.e., what they can and cannot do on behalf of the children in their care.

Identifying the education rights holder

The Fresno County team made it a priority to identify the education rights holder for children at every hearing. This practice included assessing how well the identified education rights holder was doing in the role. When the rights holder did not seem engaged in the child's education, the team arranged joint phone calls with the youth representative and/or the community representative to have discussions to see how in the future he or she could be better supported in the role. The team reported that this strategy had a huge positive impact on developing caregivers as advocates.

Empowering constituents to improve educational outcomes

The Notebook Exchange is a tool created by the Virginia Beach team to support communication regarding the educational experiences of youth in foster care and related issues between birth parents and foster parents. The notebook exchange promoted collaboration between foster parents and birth parents by allowing them to share information, exchange ideas, and discuss concerns related to the child's educational needs among other well-being factors.

The notebook included daily progress charts, updates on milestones and "firsts," pictures, school drawings, progress reports, and test papers, among other items.

These written discussions reportedly decreased anxiety around sharing information between birth parents and foster parents. Birth parents benefited from having a weekly snapshot of their child's progress at school and in the foster home. Foster parents reportedly became more understanding of birth parents' genuine concern for the child and the importance of keeping birth parents informed and involved while their child is in care. This practice supported a smoother transition for children from foster care who returned home.

In efforts to inform high school students about their educational rights, the youth representative of the Pomona team created an educational rights bookmark. The bookmark (Appendix B) includes useful information such as the benefits of registering for free lunch, a summary of the AD40 legislation, and other available emancipation services. The bookmark was professionally printed and distributed to foster youth in care via school partners and independent living program staff county wide.

The Sacramento County team developed a wallet-sized, youth-friendly card about educational rights that included a Web address for additional information. The Fav 5 Card (Appendix B) is being distributed at various youth venues and meetings around the county.

The San Diego County team invited youth in care to all staff meetings to share their stories about the impact of being able to stay in the same school. Their youth representative was among those who conveyed a powerful testimonial about the importance of school stability. These all-staff convenings included education partners from the school systems. Together, the agency and education personnel partnered to advocate and educate using spirited activities to engage participants. Not only did the team report success in getting the message out, these meetings also forged even stronger relationships and collaboration between constituents, the agency, and the school system.

Using data collection to improve educational outcomes

Throughout the BSC, teams were encouraged to track and report specific measures on a monthly basis. By doing so, they were able to monitor their progress and improvements in areas identified as central to improving educational outcomes for youth in care. As defined in component area 1 of the Change Package, the development of formal processes to improve communication and coordination between systems was integral to the success of the teams' work efforts. Moreover, having access to statistics that demonstrated improvements in the areas that teams strategized for systems changes was invaluable to the promotion and spread of promising practices across jurisdictions.

> *Data on the percent of children who did not experience school disruption due to placement or replacement demonstrates a success. When we first measured it in January 2008, it was at 45% and we went to as high as 86% in June. It came to workers' awareness and it became more of a focus, "How did we achieve this?" It will be interesting to see what the fall brings. I expect to see better results.*
>
> —Participant
> Catawba County, North Carolina

Educational data management strategies

> *Clerical staff was very happy to be a part of this PDSA; they were able to see the impact of their work—the fruits of their labor.*

—Participant
Pomona, California

Entering school information in the agency database became a focus of the Pomona team's work during the BSC. At the outset, only 3 percent of youth in their target site office had pertinent education information in the correct place in the database. Consequently, in the event of an emergency, education information could not easily be found. The team strategized around updating education information in the agency database starting with one unit as a test site. The unit clerk was asked to update those cases that did not reflect current education information. Subsequently, this was spread to another unit. Within three months, they went from 3 percent to over 90 percent of cases having updated education information in the database. This dramatic improvement piqued the interest of administrators and other offices in the jurisdiction. The team scheduled meetings with other offices to explain what the process looked like and how they were able to achieve such marked gains. While the spread of this practice did not necessarily mean that other offices replicated the team's process exactly, it gave other sites valuable information to consider.

The Virginia Beach team discovered that agency workers were not consistently completing screens dedicated to capturing education information within their database because they were not mandatory. The team designed a PDSA within their target site that required all workers to enter education data into those non-mandatory screens. As the practice was tested, they identified additional information like making sure workers had youth report cards and standard of learning scores in case records. The team reported going from being very inconsistent to having 100% of non-mandatory education screens completed in the target site.

The San Diego County team implemented and spread the practice of reserving two hours during the year when agency staff input and updated education data in the system. This practice met with enormous success. Now the entire county is doing this twice per year in the fall and spring.

VIII: Lessons Learned

By the close of the two-year Collaborative, teams reflected on many lessons learned. Woven into their accomplishments were challenges that served to inspire ingenuity around problem solving within and across systems to improve educational outcomes for youth in out-of-home care.

Commitment to Improved Educational Outcomes despite Challenges

The challenges encountered by teams included unanticipated external factors that impacted the teams at different times during the course of the Collaborative. Reorganizations, changes in legislation, highly publicized cases, and resource limitations were among those unexpected factors. In spite of significant obstacles, teams demonstrated commitment to the process. In many cases, seemingly insurmountable challenges proved to be the glue that unified teams and reinforced their resolve to continue in the work.

The collaborative as a whole had to exercise the flexibility and openness to change endorsed by the BSC methodology in order to accommodate the unforeseen challenges that emerged during the BSC process. Each of the nine participating teams had a story to tell about a challenge encountered along the way. Nonetheless, their resolve and dedication to systems improvement did not allow them to lose sight of their collective goal. In effect, the Plan Do Study Act process played out in the day-to-day activities and experiences of teams. Teams adjusted and evolved in response to attrition, increased workloads, organizational crises, and new policies that detracted from the work. By the close of the Collaborative, teams recognized the value of maintaining flexibility and openness as essentials for building strong and resilient partnerships.

> *Throughout significant agency turmoil, work on education issues has been sustained and continues to be considered an important issue.*
>
> —Participant
> District of Columbia

> *The most difficult part has been addressing the concerns that staff present in terms of workload and barriers. This is one of the single biggest shifts in practice that our Department has taken on in some time. While staff recognize the importance of keeping youth in their school of origin, it has been hard for staff to take on these new requirements. The logistics have also been difficult to work out.*
>
> —Participant
> Fresno County, California

> *One of the primary difficulties continued to be the need to stay focused and to move forward with so many focus areas occurring at one time because of the mandates with AB490, the New Rules of Court, and the BSC components.*
>
> —Participant
> Sacramento County, California

> *Due to budget issues, obtaining funding for the Education Liaison position has been a challenge.*
>
> —Participant
> Catawba County, North Carolina

Making Strides across Systems to Achieve Improved Educational Outcomes

This cross-systems approach to effecting change in child welfare was the first of its kind in Casey's experience with the BSC. While engaging child welfare agencies and their associated school systems yielded many positive and lasting outcomes, it also exposed entrenched barriers to true collaboration across systems. These barriers called for new and innovative strategies for improving interactions across the systems that impact the lives of children in out-of-home care.

> *There has been some collaborative training, which has been a really positive thing. People have mentioned getting to know one another by first name and the benefits of working together to develop and provide the training instead of the usual 'you train on your side, I'll train on my side.'*
>
> —Participant
> Sacramento County, California

> *We have a very strong relationship and open communication between our system and the school district that has the vast majority of our kids and that relationship just gets stronger and stronger.*
>
> —Participant
> Fresno County, California

Beyond understanding the BSC methodology as an agent for systems change, the cross-systems approach required a new kind of dialogue between systems. Agencies, their associated school systems, courts, and community partners engaged in honest and courageous conversations about the misconceptions and differences in values and professional culture that often hinder true partnership across systems. This ongoing exploration and communication served as a foundation for the cross-training, team decision-making approaches, and cross-systems efforts that emerged as promising practices. Teams reported having a better appreciation and understanding for their cross-systems partners' perspectives, knowledge, and challenges. By the end of the Collaborative, relationships between the various systems that serve children in care were strengthened. The BSC experience laid the foundation for future cross-systems approaches to problem solving in the participating jurisdictions.

Impacting Agency and School Culture to Improve Educational Outcomes

Across the board, teams reported successes that could often not be expressed statistically. Shifts in the culture of the education and child welfare systems and the way they interacted were frequently described as the teams reflected on the impact of participating in the BSC. The transformation of the culture of the systems was difficult to measure but arguably among the most powerful end products of the two-year collaborative.

At the close of the BSC, many teams reported that their most notable positive outcome was the relationship forged between the school and the child welfare agency. In the past, many of these systems acted separately with limited appreciation for what each other did. During the course of the BSC, their mutual respect increased as did their sense of cohesion. This allowed systems to work together towards the mutual goal of meeting the educational needs of youth in care.

Approaching Systems Change as a Gradual Process

> *In the beginning we were very ambitious, biting off more than we could chew.*

—Participant
Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Many teams reflected on the process of embracing systems change incrementally, from the bottom up in contrast to the traditional large, top-down approaches to systems reform. Over time, teams learned to approach systems change in "small chunks" that reflected the perspectives and expertise of youth, parents, diverse professionals, and community partners who often do not have a voice in planning for change. This incremental approach to the large and complex challenges affecting educational outcomes for youth in care required a entirely new way of doing things. For many teams, it was only during the latter working stages of the collaborative that they could fully appreciate the process of starting small and spreading successes. In retrospect, many teams attested to the utility of this approach to change and they shared plans to continue using it beyond the formal BSC experience.

Spreading and Sustaining Change

> *We did have a big emphasis on trying to engage and develop those who were in our spheres of influence as stakeholders: principals, assistant principals, front office staff, student support folks, judges, and child welfare staff. This has developed people's interest and commitment to this work. It doesn't really have a measure—the 'belief' piece is hard to measure…*

—Participant
Catawba County, North Carolina

The second half of the BSC redirected the focus of the teams' efforts to spreading and sustaining change in their systems. Teams identified successful strategies by collecting data and feedback and subsequently strategized to spread successes across their respective jurisdictions. This process brought in extended team members who included stakeholders from every system and at every level in the continuum of care. Teams engaged and developed youth, parents, caregivers, community groups, the court system, administrators, and political leaders, to name a few, as champions for systems change. Teams reflected on the impact of having supportive leadership within their organizations as being central to the spread and sustenance of their change efforts. Many participating teams were recognized as trailblazers and were invited to present their work at state-level forums. This recognition served to forward the spread of successes as well as fuel the momentum needed to sustain the changes made during the BSC. Teams learned the importance of engaging key stakeholders from diverse perspectives as champions for change as an essential strategy for sustaining long-term change beyond the BSC. A year later, it is clear that the teams were indeed successful.

The BSC as a Foundation for Future Improvements

The Massachusetts team experienced tremendous long-term success with strategies implemented during their work in the Collaborative. Among their most promising practices was the co-location of agency social workers in the school system. By the close of the Collaborative, the team reported that their senior leadership was exploring ways to continue the effective cross-systems strategies initiated by their work in the BSC.

A recent article published in the *Children's Bureau Express*[1] spoke to the many "impressive initiatives" that the Massachusetts DCF has engaged in to ensure that children in care attend school. This overview attests to the jurisdiction's ongoing efforts since the end of the BSC to affect improved educational outcomes for youth in care.

The lasting impact of the Fresno County team's work was also documented in the *Fresno Bee*.[2] The newspaper article profiled the County's innovation in addressing the education needs of children in out-of-home care, specifically by the placement of social workers in schools, now in its second year.

> *Our leadership in both agencies is very committed to education as a priority for our youth. From that perspective, we are supported from the top down. We have developed policies and the infrastructure so there are clear expectations and guidelines for our staff. We will continue to train them. We are continuing the twice-monthly meetings. Right now we have one educational liaison and we have secured a grant to have three more. One will be focused on children 0-6 and getting them into Head-Start and pre-school. Another will be K-6, working with the elementary school students on their educational needs. One will be focused on junior high and then we have the ILP workers who are based in the high schools. It is a three-year grant so hopefully in that time we will be able to figure out how to sustain those positions without the grant money. I think that demonstrates how committed our leadership is to education as a priority and keeping it on everybody's radar to make sure we are focusing on the educational needs of our youth*
>
> —Participant
> Fresno County, California

The Pomona team reported a marked change in their agency and schools' systems as a result of their participation in the BSC. Many of their practice changes focusing on education have spread countywide. The team shared that they have been seen as "trailblazers" whose "can-do" attitude has invited excitement about education across the county.

1 Children's Bureau (2009).
2 Branan (2009).

IX: Conclusion

The Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care BSC was successful in bringing child welfare and education systems together in a unique and historic approach to systems change and improvement. The two-year collaborative generated renewed interest, energy, and focus around education as a key indicator of present and future well-being for all children, but most notably children placed in out-of-home care.

In line with Casey Family Programs' 2020 Vision, this renewed commitment across nine jurisdictions nationwide continues to manifest in better practices and approaches among their public child welfare and school systems. The promising practices highlighted in this report continue to evolve and spread beyond the formal end of the BSC. Time will tell how the small improvements initiated with one child, one teacher, one judge, or one social worker will translate into improved educational outcomes for the thousands of children who will enter and exit foster care. It is clear that commitment to and the belief in the power of collaboration, flexibility, and ingenuity can go a long way in changing educational outcomes for children in care. The ways that the nine participating teams worked through challenges to improve practices demonstrates that through collaboration everyone plays a role in paving the path to a successful future for youth in care.

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XI: Appendices

Appendix A:
Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-Of-Home Care

Change Package

Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care. Established by UPS founder Jim Casey, the Seattle-based national operating foundation has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966.

The foundation operates in two ways. It provides direct services, and it promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy.

Casey collaborates with foster, kinship, and adoptive parents to provide safe, loving homes for youth in its direct care. The foundation also collaborates with counties, states, and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to improve services and outcomes for the more than 500,000 young people in out-of-home care across the United States.

Drawing on four decades of front-line work with families and alumni of foster care, Casey Family Programs develops tools, practices, and policies to nurture all youth in care and to help parents strengthen families at risk of needing foster care.

Casey Family Programs is sponsoring a Breakthrough Series Collaborative ("Collaborative" or "BSC") focused on Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care. This BSC brings together public/tribal child welfare agencies and school systems that are committed to improving educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. Participating jurisdictions are committed to testing strategies and tools on a small scale, sharing lessons learned, and implementing the most successful strategies throughout their system. These jurisdictions will share their successes and learnings

in real time to further accelerate their achievement of improved outcomes. The Change Package that follows will serve as the foundation for the work of this BSC.

About this Change Package

The Change Package outlines strategies and tools jurisdictions will use to improve educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. It is comprised of the following elements: Collaborative Goal, Collaborative Principles, and a Summary of Key Components. The components will help to focus the work of participating sites in the BSC. The strategies will serve as a launch pad for the small tests of change that sites will be conducting throughout this BSC.

Collaborative Goal

The goal for participating jurisdictions in this Collaborative is: to identify, develop, test, implement, and spread promising strategies for improving practice in their education and child welfare systems to support educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care.

Collaborative Principles

This Change Package is built upon eight principles. These principles express the values that must guide all work in developing, adopting and implementing promising practices. The principles are interrelated and work together. The order does not reflect a judgment of each principle's respective value or importance. We believe that:

1. Promoting educational continuity and school placement stability is central to improving educational outcomes and fostering a positive school experience.
2. Children deserve access to the highest quality education, including access to assessments and services delivered by knowledgeable and skilled professionals.
3. Children have strengths and resiliency, high expectations and a desire to learn and to be successful.
4. Children are connected to families and larger support systems. As such engaging families and their support systems as partners in supporting their educational experience is vital.
5. Understanding the developmental, cultural, and environmental context of a child and family are necessary to fully support a positive educational experience.
6. Collaboration between multiple agencies and service systems (e.g., child welfare, legal system, schools), the community, and children and families is necessary for supporting a positive educational experience.
7. Agency leadership must assume responsibility and provide support for adopting and implementing promising practices at all levels of the organization.

8. Improved educational outcomes for children of color are advanced by the open discussion of personal, organizational and institutional racism and the development of strategies to remedy its impact on the educational outcomes of children.

The Challenge

The issue of educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care speaks to many dynamics that shape a student's educational outcomes.

The longer a youth is in out-of-home care, the greater number of out-of-home placements he or she is likely to experience. Frequent changes in placements often yield to frequent changes in schools.[1] Researchers suggest that it takes approximately 4-6 months for a child to recover academically after changing schools.[2] Furthermore, changing schools during high school diminishes the chances for graduation.[3] The educational impact of every school change is significant. Each time youth enter a new school, they must adjust to different curricula, different expectations, new friends, and new teachers.[4] Children in out-of-home care must simultaneously adjust to a new home environment and community. The school environment often plays an important role for children in out-of-home care by proving opportunities to develop positive relationships with supportive teachers, school-based counselors and classmates. These relationships often provide a measure of protection from the disruption and uncertainty associated with out-of-home placements.[5]

At every point along the child welfare continuum children of color are represented in numbers that far exceed their relative proportion of the population.[6] Disproportionality of children of color is the result of multiple disadvantages that are social, political, economic and attitudinal in nature.[7] Specific factors leading to disproportionality in the child welfare system include poverty, classism, racism, organizational culture, service strategy and resources.[8]

As in the child welfare system, racism, cultural bias, and lack of cross-cultural expertise in working with youth of color (e.g., African American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian and Alaska Native) are realities in the education system. These disparities directly affect the educational outcomes of youth of color.[9] For example, research indicates that African American, Latino, and Native American students are less likely to succeed in school and there is a strong association between race and ethnicity and the likelihood of dropping out of school.[10] Other populations of young people prone to discrimination and disparity in educational outcomes include youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT),

1 Yu, Day, & Williams (2002a).
2 Yu, Day, & Williams (2002a).
3 Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy (1999)., p.3.
4 Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 38.
5 Christian,(2003), p.1
6 Casey Family Programs (2005), p. 2
7 Casey Family Programs (2005), p. 2
8 Casey Family Programs (2005), p. 2
9 Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 38.
10 Yu, Day, & Williams (2002a).

immigrant youth, and youth whose first language is not English.[11] While the focus of this BSC is to improve educational continuity and school stability for all children in out-of-home care, we highly encourage those working with children of color and other populations prone to discrimination to learn more about their unique education needs, and to develop strategies that support culturally relevant educational supports and services.[12]

The challenge for all systems is to ensure youth in out-of-home care receive a positive school experience that will result in each young person's achieving his or her individual potential.[13] Positive school experiences enhance a youth's well-being, help them make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase their chances for personal fulfillment, economic self-sufficiency, and their ability to contribute to society.[14]

Summary Of Components

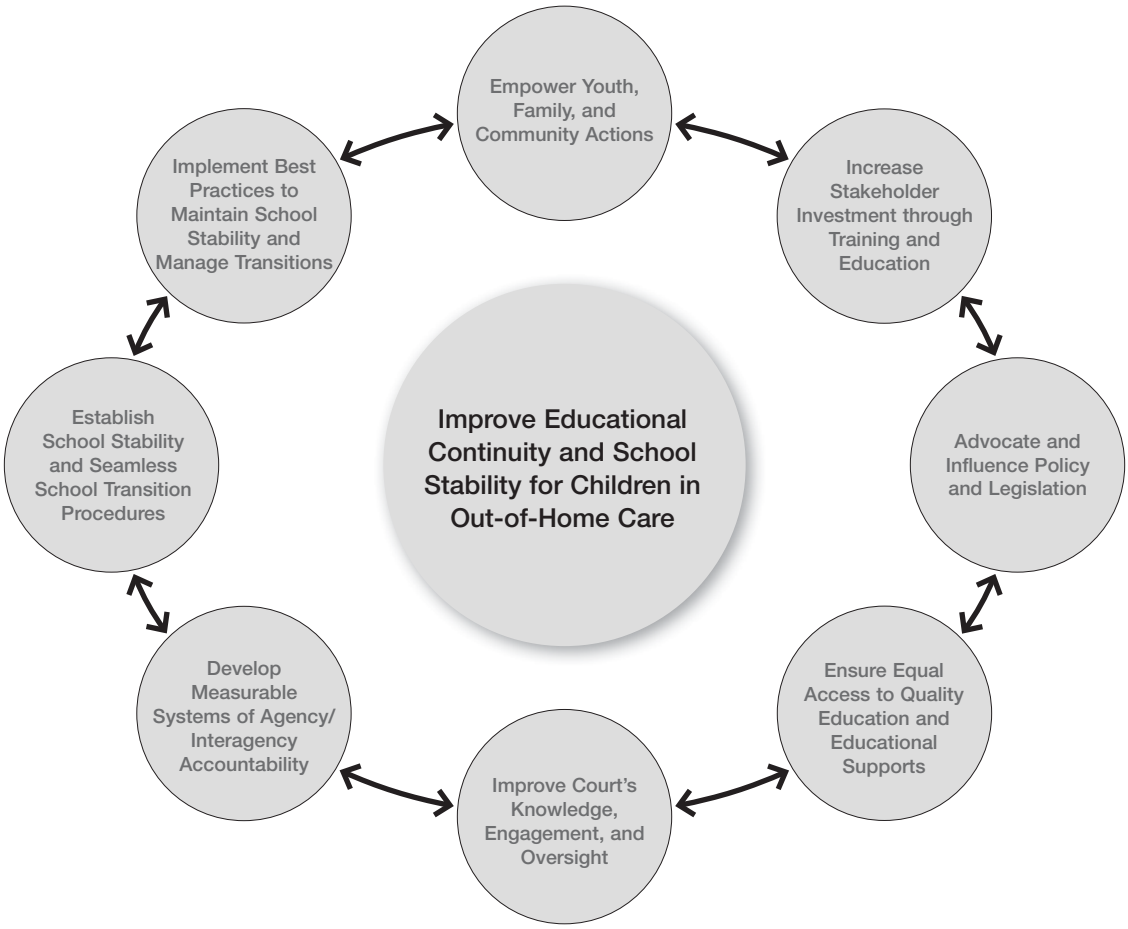
While the Principles provide an overarching foundation for this work, the components describe what jurisdictions at all levels must do to apply these principles. In this framework, there are eight components identified:

1. Develop Measurable Systems of Agency/Interagency Accountability
2. Establish School Stability and Seamless School Transition Procedures
3. Implement Best Practices to Maintain School Continuity and Manage Transitions
4. Empower Youth, Family, and Community Actions
5. Increase Stakeholder Investment through Training and Education
6. Improve Court's Knowledge, Engagement, and Oversight
7. Ensure Equal Access to Quality Education and Educational Support Services
8. Advocate and Influence Policy and Legislation

The organization of the components recognizes that changes must occur at the agency, management, and practitioner levels in order to successfully implement strategies focused on improving educational continuity and school stability for children in out-of-home care. A system must have the capacity to implement new promising practices, worked through organizational culture barriers, and have an infrastructure in place that allows for data collection and analysis. Additionally, strategies to improve educational continuity and school stability will be most successful when the practices of the child welfare and school system reflect an understanding of the long term impact that a poor educational experience has on a child.

11 Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 39
12 Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 39
13 Yu, Day, & Williams (202a), p. 36.
14 Casey Family Programs (2004), p. 8.

In this Breakthrough Series Collaborative, agencies are expected to test ideas within each of the eight component areas. The diagram below illustrates the relationships between each of these component areas. The work in these component areas will not be sequential; it will be concurrent. Furthermore, work in one component area will often be linked to, if not overlapping with, work focused in another component area. This shared connectedness is what causes small tests of change in a BSC to result in system wide improvements.



Component 1:
Develop Measurable Systems of Agency/Interagency Accountability

A. Create a formal process to improve communication and coordination between the child welfare agency and school districts to facilitate information exchange around their common children.

B. Provide an expert in educational issues to child welfare workers to link children with educational services and resources.

C. Identify one adult to serve as the child's decision-maker for school-related decisions when the birth-parents are unable to do so.

D. Develop regional, preferably statewide, data systems that provide current-year and longitudinal data on students in out-of-home care for education continuity and success rates.

Component 2:
Establish School Stability and Seamless School Transition Procedures

A. Develop written protocols for school staff on any policy for allowing children in foster care to remain in their school of origin when possible.

B. Develop written protocols for school staff about what to do when a child who is in foster care is moved into a new school.

C. Inform old and new school as soon as possible once a decision is made that a child must change schools.

D. Require that complete school records are immediately transferred to new school once a placement change is needed.

E. Eliminate (or waive for students in foster care) school policies that require records to be transferred prior to a child's enrollment in a new school.

F. Ensure that course credits are easily transferred between schools (even from other districts or states).

Component 3:
Implement Best Practices to Maintain School Continuity and Manage Transitions

A. Provide transportation for students to their schools of origin.

B. Place children in out-of-home settings that are within the boundaries of their current schools.

C. When school transfers are necessary, they should, if possible, occur during a natural academic break, i.e., summer or school vacations.

D. Establish procedures in schools to make sure children get needed services immediately.

E. Ensure that youth of color are assessed appropriately when transferring to a new school.

F. Establish age appropriate welcome strategies to integrate children socially into the new school.

G. Have an advocate for the child check in with the child during the first week at a new school to ensure everything is going smoothly.

H. Ensure that caseworkers address the educational needs of youth in out-of-home care and track educational progress particularly when placement changes are required.

Component 4:
Empower Youth, Family, and Community Actions

A. Have court personnel, child welfare workers, teachers, and caregivers ask children and youth in out-of-home care what they need to support them in their school setting.

B. Educate youth about their educational rights so that they can be self advocates.

C. Create opportunities for children and youth to raise awareness and advocate for the importance of school stability and educational continuity and its impact on students' ability to succeed academically.

D. Target foster parent recruitment in neighborhoods surrounding schools/ districts with the largest numbers of removals.

E. Actively engage birth parents in their child's educational experience.

F. Engage community partners to provide resources to help address the education needs of children of color.

Component 5:
Increase Stakeholder Investment through Training and Education

A. Raise child welfare stakeholders' awareness of the importance of school stability in improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

B. Educate individuals who work with children and youth in out-of-home about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provisions that specifically relate to foster care.

C. Use tools that help caseworkers keep the educational experiences of children a priority.

D. Educate foster parents about the importance of being involved in the youth's educational experience.

E. Require pre-service and in-service training around education for foster parents.

F. Dispel myths among school and child welfare staff about sharing educational information.

Component 6:
Improve Court's Knowledge, Engagement, and Oversight

A. Use tools to help judges, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and educational advocates effectively inquire about children's educational history, school status, attendance record, and special needs.

B. Educate judges on the importance of educational continuity and school stability and concrete ways to ask about it.

C. Review existing forms used in the court and child welfare system to ensure that appropriate education information is being documented.

D. Promote court hearings in which the youth, supportive adults, and the judge discuss the youth's future plans, educational aspirations, and career goals.

E. Minimize the potential conflicts between court dates or other important meetings and student's educational/extracurricular schedules.

F. Use education experts at court hearings to bridge the gap between the court and the education community.

Component 7:
Ensure Equal Access to Quality Education and Educational Support Services

A. Ensure that children in out-of-home care are assessed appropriately, particularly in terms of educational and mental health needs.

B. Ensure that children in out-of-home care have equal access to after-school programs, extended year or summer school programs, quality tutoring, preschool programs/Headstart and mentoring programs.

C. Partner with community colleges and other post-secondary institutions to ensure that college-bound students receive supportive services on campus.

D. Advocate for state programs that allow students enrolled in post-secondary education to remain in placement with foster parents until age 21 or older.

E. Clearly define who is responsible for transportation funding, especially if the child/youth must travel outside of the school's catchment area.

F. Provide child care for youth in out-of-home care who have children of their own.

G. Fund age-appropriate coaching, mentoring, and tutoring for children in out-of-home care.

Component 8:
Advocate and Influence Policy and Legislation

A. Support legislation that allows children in out-of-home care to remain in their schools of origin, if it is in their best interest, even if they change foster care placements.

B. Advocate for a federal law like McKinney-Vento (including a transportation mandate) that specifically supports children in out-of-home care.

C. Advocate for language in federal and state law that clearly identifies which jurisdiction pays for education services when children are placed out of state.

D. Implement state programs that allow students enrolled in post-secondary education to stay with foster parents until age 21 or older.

E. Create the political will of state/federal legislatures to increase funding for school transportation for children in out of home care.

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Appendix B:
Practice Tools can be found at:

www.casey.org/bsc/education.htm

- DC CFSA Information for School Personnel
- Virginia Beach Judicial Checklist
- San Diego's Check It Out Email Sample
- Vermont's Tip of the Week Sample
- Pomona's School Stability Checklist for Child Welfare Personnel
- Pomona's Educational Rights Bookmark
- DC CFSA Education Guide for Caretakers
- Sacramento's Fav 5 Card

Appendix C:
BSC Faculty, Planning Team Members, Staff, and Consultants

Collaborative Chair

Millicent Williams, Child Welfare Consultant

Collaborative Faculty and Planning Team

Berisha Black, Casey Family Programs
Edward Bush, Riverside Community College
Kathleen McNaught, American Bar Association, Center for Children and the Law
Diane Robie, Eckerd Youth Alternatives
Debbie Staub, Casey Family Programs
Norma Sturgis, Los Angeles Unified School District
Susan Weiss, Casey Family Programs

Collaborative Staff

Kathy Barbell, Casey Family Programs
Tracey Campfield, Casey Family Programs
Kary A. James, Casey Family Programs
Andrea Murray, Casey Family Programs
Kerrin Sweet, Casey Family Programs

Collaborative Consultant

Lorrie Lutz, L3 P Associates, LLC

Appendix D:
Resources

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Principle Author:
Andrea Murray

Casey Family Programs
1300 Dexter Avenue North
Floor 3
Seattle, WA 98109-3542
206.282.7300

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