



PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL STABILITY AND SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE

Jointly developed by the MA Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE)

Changing schools can be incredibly disruptive – especially for students coming into DCF care and custody. Research shows that school transitions significantly interfere with learning and that even a single change can delay educational progress for up to 6 months.¹ In addition, nearly 75% of children and youth who enter DCF Foster Care² will be reunited with their families within 12 months, with the median time to reunification about 6 months, according to DCF data. Maintaining community and school connections also helps support more timely and successful reunifications for families.

The federal **Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008** promotes improved lifelong family relationships and academic performance for children and youth who enter out-of-home placement, by mandating that public child welfare agencies, including the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF), support placement and school stability for children and youth in foster care.

DCF and **ESE** have committed to working together at the state and local levels to ensure that students in foster care have access to the stable and high-quality educational experiences they need to support their school and life success. Schools/School Districts and DCF Area Offices may want to consider identifying a specific individual or **liaison to work together** to support educational stability and achievement for DCF involved students.

EDUCATIONAL PROVISIONS OF THE FOSTERING CONNECTIONS ACT:

- Ensure that foster children and youth are enrolled in and attending school;
- Consider educational stability when identifying foster placements;
- Place foster children in proximity to their school of origin when possible;
- Coordinate with local school districts to ensure students can remain in the school they were attending prior to entering foster care or prior to any change in placement, unless it is not in the student’s best interest; and
- Ensure that foster children are enrolled, without delay, in a new school if the student needs to change schools.

What Research Tells Us
Why Educational Stability is So Important for Children and Youth in Foster Care¹

- Each time a child changes school, she/he loses approximately 6 months of knowledge and skills.
- Delayed re-enrollment and irregular attendance results in missed school days and poorer academic outcomes for children in foster care.
- Test scores are lower for children in foster care, especially when they are not in stable placements.
- 75% of children in foster care are behind at least one grade level.
- Children in foster care are twice as likely as peers to drop out of school.
- Even one fewer placement doubles the likelihood that a student will graduate high school prior to leaving foster care.

¹ “Education is the Lifeline for Youth in Foster Care.” Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, October 2011. <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/EducationalOutcomesFactSheet.pdf>

² For purposes of this document, “foster care” refers to placements with foster or pre-adoptive parents/families or in congregate care.

MAKING "BEST INTEREST" EDUCATIONAL DECISIONS: WHO DOES WHAT?

When a child or youth is first entering foster care and/or changing foster homes, DCF must consider a number of factors to promote safety, stability and wellbeing. A key consideration is the **proximity** of the foster home to the child's school. Other factors will also include the importance of placing children with kin or relatives, placement with siblings and the ability of the foster home to meet the child's needs.

The Foster Connections Act requires DCF, in the placement process, to collaborate with a student's school to determine and document **the educational setting "best interest" decision** in order to promote stability and minimize disruption for the student.

To determine "best interest" decisions regarding whether a student can or should remain in their current school, DCF and the child's school, in collaboration with the student, parents, foster parents or other placement providers, should consider such factors as:

- Student's age & grade level
- Student's preference, when age appropriate
- Time of academic year & academic performance
- Current educational goals & services, IEP
- Individual skills, needs & social connections
- Anticipated length of time in placement and whether reunification is the family goal
- Number of placements to date
- Ability to maintain family relationships & engagement
- Clinical/behavioral issues
- Safety issues
- Distance/length of time to school
- Availability of transportation

WHAT DCF AREA OFFICES WILL DO	HOW SCHOOLS CAN HELP
<p>⇒ Initiate, coordinate and make educational "best interest" decisions in collaboration with the student, school, parents, foster parents and/or other placement providers.</p> <p>Educational planning to meet the student's identified educational needs and goals will occur and become part of the DCF Service Plan. Educational planning information must be updated any time the student's placement or school changes.</p>	<p>⇒ Support DCF in making sound educational "best interest" decisions and educational plans by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sharing information about the student's academic and school performance - collaborating in the "best interest" discussions with DCF and others any time the student enters DCF foster care or changes placement
<p>⇒ Work with the school to arrange for the student to remain in the current educational setting, whenever possible including working with them on ideas for a community-based placement and transportation options that will enable the student to remain in the same school.</p>	<p>⇒ Consider the feasibility and options for keeping the student in his/her current school by helping to identify potential kin or other placement options for the student within their community and considering transportation opportunities.</p>
<p>⇒ If it is not in the student's best interest to remain in the current school, work with the new school to facilitate enrollment without delay in the new school. The DCF social worker must request all paperwork necessary for enrollment to be transferred to the new school, usually within 2-3 days after the student changes placement.</p>	<p>⇒ When the student needs to enroll in a new school, WITHOUT DELAY:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the current school transfers the student's records, and - the new school enrolls the student.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

DCF

Susan Stelk, Manager of Education Services,
617-748-2340 or susan.stelk@state.ma.us

ESE

John Bynoe, Associate Commissioner
Center for Student Support
781-338-6303 or jbynoe@doe.mass.edu