



## BUILDING CROSS-SYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS: EDUCATION, CHILD WELFARE, AND COURTS



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**POSTCARD:** Provided by Foster Care Alumni of America - "Together we can."

# CHAPTER 3

## Building Cross-System Partnerships: Education, Child Welfare, and Courts

### CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION IS NECESSARY

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) direct local and state child welfare systems and educational agencies to partner in the implementation of educational stability provisions for students in foster care. Coordination between the child welfare and educational systems is vital to improving the educational outcomes of students who experience foster care. Child welfare system, educational agencies, and legal system stakeholders must work together to remove barriers, strengthen partnerships, and work in new and different ways to institute shared practices that promote education success of students in foster care.



The “Guiding Principles” and “Ground Rules” provided below were important components to the successful collaborative work of the Education Committee and the resulting Texas Blueprint report. These principles are based on the **“Blueprint for Change — Education Success for Children in Foster Care,”** a guide that was produced by Casey Family Programs and the American Bar Association Legal Center for Foster Care and Education.<sup>20</sup>



### GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND GROUND RULES

Guiding principles such as the ones below may be adapted locally or regionally to establish a shared vision for the work. Ground rules can also set the stage for effective collaborative work. The ground rules below may also be adapted for regional or local collaborative work:

- Guiding Principle #1

Children and youth in foster care are entitled to remain in the same school unless it is not in their best interest.
- Guiding Principle #2

Children and youth in foster care experience seamless transitions between schools.
- Guiding Principle #3

Young children in foster care enter early grades ready to learn.
- Guiding Principle #4

Children and youth in foster care have the opportunity and support to fully participate in all developmentally appropriate activities and all aspects of the education experience.

**Guiding Principle #5**

Children and youth in foster care have supports to prevent school dropout, truancy, and disciplinary actions, and to reengage in the education experience.

**Guiding Principle #6**

Children and youth in foster care are involved, empowered, and prepared to self-advocate in all aspects of their education.

**Guiding Principle #7**

Children and youth in foster care have consistent adult support to advocate for them and to make education decisions.

**Guiding Principle #8**

Children and youth in foster care have support to enter and complete post-secondary education.

**GROUND RULES**

- ⇒ Students in the Texas foster care system are our collective responsibility; finger-pointing is counterproductive and divisive.
- ⇒ Courts, education, and child welfare must all be represented in the discussion if a coordinated approach is to be established.
- ⇒ Collaboration requires people within systems to work in new ways. The student must remain at the center of decisions for collaboration to work most effectively.
- ⇒ Assume best intent of the person you are working with to support win-win collaborative solutions.
- ⇒ Do not let a lack of current funding options deter creative ideas.
- ⇒ All members must develop an understanding of the challenges other partners face and remain open to learning more about the system they are working with.
- ⇒ Communication is key to developing collaboration and continuing it in the future.

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**PRACTICAL STEPS FOR ESTABLISHING COLLABORATION AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS**

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- Establish contacts and build relationships across systems—knowing who to call within partnering agencies is helpful for coordinating cross-system activities.
- Use preexisting ESSA implementation template forms to track collaboration efforts around transportation, best interest decisions, point of contact documentation, and any dispute resolution processes.
- Create opportunities to learn about one another's systems, agency jargon, decision-making processes, job responsibilities, and services provided.



**TIP:** Take time to explain definitions and commonly used acronyms, processes, responsibilities, and constraints. All participants will benefit from understanding the organizational structure, as well as the mission, vision, and collective interests of each partner.



- Host, convene, or participate in a local or regional foster care consortium that meets regularly with education, child welfare, and community partners to identify barriers and create joint solutions.
- Maintain momentum and address complex problems through consistent and sustained communication.
- Learn about the wide variety of supports and resources different stakeholders provide.
- Identify high-level leadership in local educational agencies and the child welfare system who can help to champion efforts.



**TIP:** Bringing people together and creating awareness amongst decision-makers is an important component of systemic change and collaborative efforts.

- Establish a shared vision and goals.
- Develop strategies for collaborative work.



**TIP:** Identify and host opportunities for cross-system training on topics such as:

**For school staff:** Foster Care/DFPS 101, Community Based Care, Culture of Foster Care/Sensitivity, Confidentiality, Impact of Trauma, DFPS Transition Supports, School Stability, the Role of the Surrogate Parent, Post-Secondary Opportunities Specific to Youth in Foster Care, Human Trafficking, Mandatory Child Abuse Reporting, and others.

**For child welfare partners:** Enrollment/Withdrawal process, Student Data/Progress Tracking, Personal Graduation Planning (PGP), Surrogate Parent Training, Special Education Laws, Credit Recovery, Graduation Requirements, Parent Supports, Student Supports, McKinney-Vento Homeless Student Supports, and other services available.

- Involve youth, foster care alumni, and their families in planning and collaborative efforts.
- Include other stakeholders and relevant community partners.



**TIP:** Foster parent organizations, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and guardians ad litem, Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) staff and others involved with transition planning, cottage homes, emergency shelters, residential treatment centers, juvenile justice representatives, foster care alumni, child placing agencies, faith-based organizations, and non-profit organizations are all potential groups to involve in cross-system partnerships.

- Identify needs, opportunities, and solutions for improving district practices and policies.
- Use data to track progress.
- Celebrate successes and victories to keep the collaborative momentum going!

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION EFFORTS

Staff at the state and local levels who collaborated to address the education of students in foster care have shared insights on cross-system collaboration:

- ✓ It is important to develop a common language and create cross-system training opportunities and information-sharing forums to gain insight from multiple perspectives.
- ✓ Building trust between schools and child welfare organizations is essential to removing barriers, blame, and assumptions.
- ✓ Patience is integral as a large, multi-disciplinary cross-section of stakeholders work together to understand each system's organizational processes and constraints.
- ✓ Youth voice must be represented in your collaborative efforts by including children and youth who have experienced foster care.
- ✓ Each victory in your coordination matters and should be celebrated along the way.



## COLLABORATION IN ACTION – FOSTER CARE CONSORTIA

Texas local educational agencies (LEAs) coordinate with child welfare partners to address the education of students in foster care. Throughout the state of Texas, Education Specialists from DFPS are taking the lead in partnering with Foster Care Liaisons from LEAs and Foster Care Champions at regional education service centers (ESCs) to coordinate and facilitate foster care consortia to identify and eliminate barriers, provide cross-systems training, and share meaningful resources to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care.



Texas Leadership Initiative Training Collaboration

Regional foster care consortium meetings bring together key points of contact, such as DFPS and LEA program personnel, community organizations, and external partners such as the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), foster care program staff, faith-based organizations, independent living transitional service providers, and many more. This collective effort is an ongoing, grassroots approach to addressing often complex and nuanced circumstances specific to students in foster care, and provides a safe place to share and build capacity to strengthen systems and bolster programs to meet the needs of this student group. Foster care, ESSA, transportation, graduation, student identification, tuition and fee waivers, and roles and responsibilities of school and DFPS personnel are just a few topics covered during these solution-focused meetings.

DFPS developed a guide to assist anyone interested in creating, hosting, facilitating, or taking part in a foster care education-focused consortium (see below).



## RESOURCES: Building Cross-System Partnership and Collaboration

DFPS, [“Regional DFPS Education Consortia: The Building Blocks to Engaging Community Stakeholders.”](#)

An informational how-to guide on building regional and local foster care education consortia based on the Regional DFPS Education Consortium model.

Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, [“Making it Work: Child Welfare and Education Agencies Collaborating to Ensure School Stability for Children in Foster Care.”](#) A brief with practical tips on how education and child welfare systems can build partnerships.

Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, [“When Working Together Works: Academic Success for Students in Out-of-Home Care.”](#) An informative brief with practical tips on collaboration and coordination between child welfare and education partners.

Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, [“Making the Case: Engaging Education Partners in Addressing the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care.”](#) An informative brief on the importance of including and engaging education partners.

Casey Family Programs, [“Breakthrough Series Collaborative: Improving Education Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care.”](#) A how-to guide for building effective cross-system collaboration and partnerships to support students in foster care.