

REPORT OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

“SCHOOL MOBILITY AND ISSUES OF
EDUCATIONAL ACCESS FOR
CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE”

December 2005

Written by: Lily T. Alpert, M.A.
School of Family Studies
University of Connecticut

Table of Contents

	Page
1. Executive Summary.....	2
2. Introduction.....	3
3. Literature Review	
Educational Status of Children in Foster Care.....	4
Policy Climate.....	9
4. The Current Study	
Method.....	12
Results	
Feedback from Foster Parent Liaisons.....	14
Feedback from DCF Social Workers.....	22
Feedback from State McKinney-Vento Liaisons.....	32
5. Summary of Themes and Next Steps.....	39
6. References.....	44

School Mobility and Issues of Educational Access for Children in Foster Care

Executive Summary

Background and Purpose of the Project:

Children in foster care are a highly vulnerable population. Often the victims of abuse or neglect, these children not only experience dramatic upheaval upon removal from their parents, but they are also likely to experience several placements over the course of their stay in care. School may be one of the only stable elements in a child's life while he or she is in foster care. The ability to remain in their home schools is likely to provide foster children with social and academic benefits that will serve as protective factors during the foster care process and into the future.

This report explores the school mobility of Connecticut's foster children and the degree to which public policies (specifically, the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act) and casework practices influence their educational experience. The report includes an in-depth discussion of the issues of mobility and access as described by various stakeholders in the state child welfare and education systems. In addition, the report offers recommendations for ways in which the education and child welfare systems might improve educational access for children in care.

Summary of Findings:

The data were collected via focus groups with foster parent liaisons, Department of Children and Families (DCF) social workers, and State Department of Education (SDE) McKinney-Vento Liaisons, and phone conversations with other DCF and SDE officials. These stakeholders discussed issues of school mobility, but also spent considerable time discussing other issues related to educational access for children in foster care. The major findings are presented below with an emphasis on their relevance to school mobility. Each finding is followed by relevant implications for policy and/practice.

(1) The quality and efficiency of service delivery, both in education and child protection systems, varies by the individual worker. When asked about their experiences in setting up educational services for foster children, all stakeholders responded with some version of the statement, "It depends." Each group of professionals reported variability in the quality and efficiency of work provided by the other. This finding is compelling and suggests a serious need for agencies to reevaluate and reinforce their recruitment, training, and quality assurance procedures.

(2) There is a need for improved interprofessional training and communication. In addition to clarification on each other's technical policies and practices, DCF and SDE also need to be informed regarding each other's goals, needs, and priorities. Interprofessional training can help educators and child protection workers combine their goals of education and building healthy families. DCF and SDE must work together on establishing plans for school stability, management of foster children in school, and data sharing.

(3) The lack of foster homes is inextricably tied to children being placed far away from their schools of origin, a practice which exacerbates the already contentious issue of transportation. All of the participants in this study described concerns related to the limited number of available foster parents. As such, the findings strongly support renewed efforts at foster parent recruitment and retention. Increased availability of foster homes will decrease mobility in general, thereby decreasing the likelihood that a child will have to change schools upon entering foster care.

(4) In order to follow through on a commitment to foster children's educational experience, this commitment must be instituted as a priority in DCF and SDE policies and practices. Educational issues (including school mobility) are marginalized when a child comes into foster care. DCF workers focus, rightly, on child safety, but in the process, are unable to simultaneously address educational needs with the same energy and resources. In order to truly improve the educational status of children in care, the issue must pervade all levels of foster care service delivery.

Introduction

Children in foster care are a highly vulnerable population. Often the victims of abuse or neglect, these children not only experience dramatic upheaval upon removal from their parents, but they are also likely to experience several placements over the course of their stay in care (e.g., Zima et al., 2000). As a result, children in care endure instability and insecurity, often for an extended period of time. For years, social science research has been clear that children suffer from the instability of foster placement (e.g., Maas & Engler, 1956) and that foster children need permanence as quickly as possible. In fact, federal laws (e.g., the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997) and case planning practices (e.g., concurrent planning; see McCarthy et al., 2003) have been designed specifically in order to expedite permanence for children in care. In short, the need for stability for foster children is not debated.

Over the course of foster placement, school may be one of the only stable elements in a child's life (Altshuler, 1997). The ability to remain in their home schools is likely to provide foster children with social and academic benefits that will serve as protective factors during the foster care process and into the future. Therefore, it is essential that state and local agencies strive to maintain children in their schools of origin despite the residential movement characteristic of foster placement.

The purpose of this report is to explore the school mobility of Connecticut's foster children and the degree to which public policies and casework practices influence their educational experience. The report begins with a brief review of the current social science literature and policy climate pertaining to the educational needs of children in foster care with an emphasis on the issue of mobility. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the issues of mobility and access as described by various stakeholders in the state child welfare and education systems. The report concludes with an overall summary and recommendations for ways in which the education and child welfare systems might improve foster children's educational access.

Educational Status of Foster Children

Academic and Mental Health Needs

Before exploring the school experience of children in state care, it is important to understand some essential academic and behavioral characteristics of this group. Foster children are more likely than non-foster children to have academic problems (e.g., Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994). In a study of 3,483 Arkansas foster children, Evans (2004) reported that their mean IQ fell in the low average to average range. Additionally, Evans (2004) found that 87% of foster children had one or more academic or language scores at or below the 25th percentile and that, across the domains tested, the children showed academic underachievement at 1.5 to 3 times the normal distribution rate. In Sawyer and Dubowitz's (1994) sample, 41% of children had experienced at least one grade retention.

Foster children are also disproportionately more likely to exhibit mental health (e.g., Stein, 1996) and behavior (e.g., Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998) problems. For example, in one study, foster children exhibited behavior problems at two and a half times the rate expected in an average community, and fell more than one standard deviation below the mean on a measure of adaptive behavior (Clausen et al., 1998). In the same study, across three sites, between 47% and 65% of children scored in the clinical range on a measure of social competence.

Residential and School Mobility

Residential mobility and school outcomes. In their study of maltreated youth, Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, and Braithwhite (1995) found that high residential mobility mediated the relationship between maltreatment and level of school achievement. In other words, high levels of maltreatment were associated with high levels of mobility, and increased mobility was related to decreased academic achievement. Tucker, Marx, and Long (1998) found that not only did school problems increase with residential mobility, but that the negative influence of

mobility was more profound for children not living with two biological parents. Studies specifically examining foster children show that foster placement instability is related to academic skill delays (Zima et al., 2000), having an Individual Education Plan (i.e., receiving some sort of special education service; Zeitlin et al., 2005), and classification as emotionally disturbed (Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & Goerge, 2005). It is important to note that these foster care studies do not clarify directionality; that is, they do not uncover whether children's special needs cause them to change placements often, or if frequent placement change leads to children's increased academic, emotional, and/or behavioral problems.

In his report on residential and academic instability among homeless youth, Wolff (2000) suggests three mechanisms linking residential mobility to poor academic achievement: educational barriers (i.e., legal and bureaucratic obstacles to enrollment in schools), disruption of social and communal networks, and family stress. These last two obstacles are particularly salient issues for children in foster care. Upon removal from their parents or caregivers, foster children are often transported to a new community. In addition to being removed from their homes and neighborhoods, foster placement may result in separation from peers, friends, and teachers who constitute foster children's networks of social support. One can also argue that the barrier of family stress is as crucial, if not more crucial, for children in foster care. Wolff (2000) describes how homeless families experience high levels of stress, which may contribute to children's poor cognitive and behavioral outcomes. It is possible that this kind of family stress is magnified in foster children, as they not only experience the stress of residential instability characteristic of homelessness, but experience withdrawal from their families, as well. One must consider this combination of losses when assessing the importance of educational stability for foster children.

School mobility. In addition to experiencing residential mobility, children in foster care often experience change(s) of school (e.g., Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, &

Courtney, 2004). A child may transfer schools as a result of being placed in a foster home in a new community, or the child may be transferred to a facility containing its own school.

According to Slater and Smith (1993; as cited in Kelly, 2000), California foster children attend an average of nine different schools before turning 18. In another sample, 36% of foster children (aged 6-12) assessed had attended two or more different schools in their lifetime with the total number of school moves ranging from zero to nine (Zima et al., 2000).

There is a considerable body of research highlighting the relationship between school mobility and decreased academic achievement (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber 1996; Nelson, Simoni, & Adelman, 1996; Temple & Reynolds, 1999. Additionally, see Mehana & Reynolds (2004) for a comprehensive meta-analysis). For example, frequent school changes have been associated with higher rates of absenteeism (Nelson et al., 1996), lower scores in reading and mathematics (Temple & Reynolds, 1999), increased rates of high school dropout (Swanson & Schneider, 1999), and elevated likelihood of retention and enrollment in special education (Alexander et al., 1996).

Some researchers (Alexander et al., 1996; Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Temple & Reynolds, 1999) note that although school mobility has been significantly related to these poor academic outcomes, the effects of mobility may be increased or decreased depending on the additional presence of family and child factors related to race, mother's education, family economic level (Alexander et al., 1996), and child's pre-mobility level of achievement (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Temple & Reynolds, 1999). Mehana and Reynolds (2004) also note that "reason for move" must be considered as a factor influencing the impact of school mobility. This issue of intervening factors represents an important caveat for those analyzing research in this area; confounding variables need to be teased out in order to understand the effect of each on mobile children's achievement. Unfortunately, children in foster care experience *both* school mobility (e.g., Zima et al., 2000) *and* non-education-related disadvantages such as low socioeconomic status, racial

minority, and alternative family structures (not to mention the trauma of separation from caregivers). Though these variables may influence child outcomes in different ways, it is unfortunately safe to say that foster children are likely to experience the negative effects of some, if not all of these risk factors.

In summary, both residential and school mobility appear to influence foster children's success in school in a negative way. The research makes a compelling argument for exploring current practices that involve the frequent transfer of children from placement to placement and from school to school. How do the child welfare and education systems work together to serve foster children, and what barriers exist to the delivery of quality services? The next sections explore these questions.

Administrative obstacles. As noted above, mobility, in and of itself, can be detrimental to children in state care. Unfortunately, the child welfare and education systems sometimes contribute to this problem by handling the movement of children inefficiently. In focus groups with students, caseworkers, and educators, Altshuler (2003) uncovered several areas of miscommunication and even animosity between school personnel and child protection workers. Caseworkers and educators each described a lack of trust in the other; caseworkers did not trust that schools held high academic standards for children in care and educators felt that caseworkers withheld pertinent information from them, hindering educators from maximizing students' education. A related problem pertains to lack of uniformity in setting up education placements for children in foster care. In their focus groups with foster parents and child protection workers, Smithgall et al. (2004) found that the individual who initiated enrolling a foster child in school (i.e., the foster parent or the child protection worker) "and the ease of that process varied considerably, and roles did not appear clearly defined for...caseworkers or foster parents" (p. 57).

Another obstacle to educating children in care pertains to the transfer of school records. In a study by Parrish and colleagues (2001) over half of group home operators and social service staff surveyed reported that records are delayed “frequently” or “almost always” and that they have waited anywhere between 40 and 82 days to receive necessary documentation. Zeitlin, Weinberg, and Luderer (2004) reported needing between three weeks and eight months to track down foster children’s educational records. Moreover, they describe that the task of finding such records is often a true treasure hunt; the searcher may follow multiple pathways and contact any combination of schools, caseworkers, and educational districts before finding the needed information. A delay in the transfer of school records from old to new school may result in a delay in implementing a child’s previously existing Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in the new school (Zeitlin et al., 2004), or a delay in assessment and identification of academic disabilities (Kelly, 2000), both of which register as violations of state and federal laws protecting special education students. For example, as Kelly (2000) explains, implementing the protections of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) involves a series of steps and adherence to a procedural timeline. If this timeline conflicts with the often unpredictable trajectory of a foster care case, educational services for the foster child may not be readily obtained.

Finally, researchers cite inaccurate and incomplete records as impediments to effective service delivery. In Zeitlin and colleagues’ (2004) study, when records were ultimately retrieved, they often lacked critical data such as grades/transcripts, attendance data, and record of school mobility. Parrish et al. (2001) report a similar problem among records received when a child is transferred to a group home; of the child welfare records reviewed in their study, only 55% of the records surveyed contained school-related information.

Despite these barriers to educational access, the literature does note some promising practices. For example, Zeitlin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2004) have reported the utility of an

Educational Specialist (ES) in the state of California. The ES was a “liaison from the local education agency who was co-located in the child welfare agency office. The ES worked alongside child welfare agency workers, and as workers identified school problems for individual cases, the ES sought to secure appropriate and effective educational programs and services from the child’s school district” (p. 423). In a second study, these researchers (Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005) compared child protection offices piloting an Education Initiative involving an ES to control offices not participating in the Initiative. At baseline, case records from pilot and control groups did not differ on the presence of education related forms. However, at the 18-month post-test, case records from pilot offices contained more current education information for children than case records from the control offices.

In fact, the employment of liaisons is a popular method for bridging information gaps among child welfare and education stakeholders. For example, in Connecticut, foster parent liaisons are used to link foster parents to the appropriate resources within child welfare agencies. Similarly, Connecticut’s child welfare personnel work with in-house educational consultants and Department of Education policy liaisons to ensure that children in foster care have access to services provided by state and federal laws. All three of these liaisons are explored in this report.

Policy Climate

Reauthorized in 2002, the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act ensures the educational stability of homeless youth. The law states that these children are entitled to remain in their schools of origin despite changes in residence. Moreover, the law mandates that transportation and other resources be provided in order to ensure the maximum educational opportunity for these students. In addition to promoting stability for children in unstable situations, the McKinney-Vento Act specifies that a liaison be employed in each school district in order to help child welfare workers and other stakeholders make sure that children are protected under the law when eligible.

Among its definitions of “homeless youth,” the law includes children who are “awaiting foster care placement.” At the state and local level, agencies and governments have cited McKinney-Vento eligibility in order to serve children who have run away from foster or group homes, or are living in shelters, emergency foster homes, and diagnostic centers (Child Welfare League of America, 2005).

When the McKinney-Vento legislation was reauthorized in 2002, it outlined that some foster children could indeed be classified as “homeless” and, therefore, be eligible for protection under the law. At that time, however, foster children in Connecticut were not considered “homeless” and, as a result, were not covered under the law. Shortly thereafter, the State Department of Education (SDE) received a statement from the federal government supporting states’ flexibility in determining children’s eligibility under McKinney-Vento and foster children remained ineligible.

After the 2002 reauthorization, SDE received very little guidance regarding the application of the law to children in foster care. One SDE memo sent by the Bureau of Special Education¹ noted that McKinney-Vento was “not applicable to situations in which the Department of Children and Families (DCF) has placed a child in foster care, regardless of the anticipated duration of the foster care placement” (p.3). Other than this memo, SDE received no additional direction on the matter until 2005.

In February 2005, DCF and SDE reevaluated their position on foster children’s eligibility under McKinney-Vento, and issued a joint memo (State of Connecticut Department of Education, personal communication, February 15, 2005) stating that Connecticut did, in fact, have foster children who qualified as “awaiting foster care” and must therefore be afforded services under the law. Specifically, all children in “emergency or transitional placements” qualified for protection. Additionally, children in a foster home with a plan to be moved within

¹ See http://state.ct.us/sde/deps/special/Updates/Update_32.pdf

30 days and children experiencing more than three placements in a 12-month period were permitted to be eligible for McKinney-Vento services on a case-by-case basis.

According to these criteria, certain types of foster placements clearly fell into the eligibility categories (i.e., diagnostic centers, shelters); with other types of placements, however, the eligibility requirements were slightly more ambiguous. For example, in the event that a “30-day placement” lasted more than 30 days, at what point would the child no longer classify as eligible? In such a situation, the school district responsible for the child in question would be left wondering just exactly how long their responsibility for the child would last. In addition, the “three or more placements” criterion had the potential to be problematic. Upon the child’s third placement, which school would be considered the school of origin? These dilemmas exist today.

Additional confusion arises when McKinney-Vento obligations overlap with the existing mandates of the nexus towns involved in the school placement of a child in care. McKinney-Vento supplies guidelines for which school district is supposed to pay for transportation to the school of origin when a child switches residences. The two districts must come to an agreement on how to share the costs; if an agreement cannot be reached, the towns are to share the cost equally. However, when a foster child also needs special education services – as described above, such a situation is common – the nexus town (the town in which the child would be living if he/she had not come into care, usually where the parents are currently living), is responsible for paying for such services. When a “no-nexus” determination is made (when parents are unavailable, e.g., if a parent is in prison or has abandoned his/her child in care), the town where the child is placed assumes responsibility. As can be seen by this brief description, the overlap of policies and the numerous permutations of placement possibilities combine to create a very complicated system.

The application of McKinney-Vento to foster children is a relatively new procedure. SDE has no system in place for tracking foster children who apply for McKinney-Vento protections

via DCF child protective services. It is assumed that DCF workers and agencies monitor this aspect of a child's case as they monitor and manage all other aspects of the case. The DCF office-based educational consultant is responsible for making sure that frontline workers are knowledgeable about the McKinney-Vento law and for intervening when there is an issue pertaining to needed services. SDE-based McKinney-Vento liaisons are available in each school district to help child protection workers negotiate the delivery of services to eligible children.

The Current Study

The goal of the current study was to examine the school mobility of Connecticut's foster children and to assess the extent to which they are covered under the McKinney-Vento legislation. Qualitative data were collected in order to tap the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders in both child welfare and education communities. It is important to keep in mind that the data presented in this report come from those individuals who agreed to participate in focus groups and interviews. Though strong themes emerged within and across groups of stakeholders, the results should not be considered representative of the perspectives of all members of these groups.

Method

Interviews with Foster Parent Liaisons

In Altshuler's (2003) focus groups, both educators and child welfare workers noted that foster parent involvement is essential to a child's success in school. However, some note that foster parents often encounter significant obstacles in obtaining the appropriate services for the children in their care (Kellam, 2000). In order to access the perspective of foster parents, a focus group was held with foster parent liaisons at The Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents (CAFAP). These liaisons are foster or adoptive parents, employed by CAFAP but located in DCF offices, whose role is to link foster parents with services offered by the child welfare system. These workers are in a unique position, as they are familiar with both the

concerns and needs of foster parents and the inner workings of foster care agencies. Often, they are the first address for foster parents in need of assistance with educational issues pertaining to the children in their care.

A focus group was held with these liaisons at the CAFAP office. Eight liaisons participated in the meeting, which lasted approximately one half hour. A semi-structured interview schedule was used in order to be sure that essential topics were covered. The session was audiotaped and transcribed and then analyzed for recurring themes.

Interviews with DCF Caseworkers

Ten DCF child protection workers from three area offices took part in a focus group dedicated to understanding DCF workers' perspectives on school stability and the implementation of McKinney-Vento with children in care. The meeting was held at one of the area offices and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Again, the session was taped, transcribed, and analyzed for themes.

Feedback from McKinney-Vento District Liaisons

As noted above, the McKinney-Vento Act mandates the employment of an SDE-based liaison in order to ensure that children protected under the law receive the services to which they are entitled. The statewide coordinator of McKinney-Vento services attempted to arrange a focus group of district liaisons, but the group was ultimately unable to meet. In order to incorporate their perspective into the current report, the questions from the focus group interview schedule were emailed to the McKinney-Vento district liaisons. They were asked to answer the questions and return the form to me, either by email or post. Six responses were received via email and post. One respondent asked to be interviewed by phone rather than mail in her response.

Results: Foster Parent Liaisons Focus Group

The mission of the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents is to “strengthen foster and adoptive families and relative caregivers through support, training, and advocacy with the aim of nurturing child safety, well being, and stability in partnership with child welfare professionals and the entire community” (www.cafap.com). The foster parent liaisons (FPLs) in the focus group reflected this mission, explaining that their role is to help foster parents obtain the services they need in order to help the children in their homes.

Interestingly, when asked to discuss some of the problems foster parents face regarding education for their foster children, the FPLs did not immediately mention issues pertaining to school mobility. Instead, they spoke extensively about foster children’s experience in the school setting. As the conversation progressed, the liaisons did discuss problems related to school change, and spoke in-depth about DCF social workers’ casework practices, access to special education services, and how these lead to different educational outcomes for children.

Foster Children’s Experience in School

The FPLs had several concerns regarding the treatment of foster children in the school setting. They felt that classroom teachers were not prepared to deal with the special needs of foster children; either teachers went “overboard with sympathy” and did not hold the foster children accountable for behavior and assignments, or they showed a complete lack of sensitivity to the children’s unique circumstances. This issue of teachers’ practices was particularly relevant to the in-class management of children’s behavior. FPLs reported that when foster children are disruptive in class, the teacher often responds by sending the child to the office or calling the foster parents to come and take the child home. FPLs felt strongly that this was an unacceptable method of classroom management, with one liaison describing the practice as “educational neglect.”

Additionally, the FPLs noted that when working foster parents are repeatedly asked to leave work in order to pick disruptive children up from school, these foster parents may request that the child be removed from the foster home, stating that they cannot constantly take off from work in order to come to the school. In this way, school adjustment problems may lead to a child's residential mobility, which, in turn, may also lead to additional school mobility. In listening to the FPLs' accounts, it became clear how foster home placement and educational issues are tied to one another and how problems in one realm may lead to disruption in another. The discussion reinforced the fact that foster care is indeed a system, and that there are several possible points of entry for those attempting to minimize problems such as school mobility.

FPLs mentioned additional problems regarding teachers' treatment of foster children. One issue pertained to teachers' continued use of activities involving family trees and baby photos, and school events such as "moms' days and dads' days." The liaisons noted that such activities are often highly stressful for foster children whose physical and psychological ties to their biological parents may be tenuous. Another common problem dealt with teachers not having access to or reading the IEPs of children in care and, therefore, not providing appropriate services for foster children with special needs. This problem relates to other matters such as efficiency of records transfer and distribution of special education resources, which are described below.

Policy Knowledge and Solving Education-Related Problems

Some FPLs were new to the agency and were not familiar with the McKinney-Vento law. When asked specifically about pursuing services under the law, some of the FPLs did mention that school psychologists and surrogate parents may play important roles, but emphasized that, when dealing with school-related issues, the DCF office-based educational consultant was their first point of contact for assistance. These consultants are DCF employees located at each regional office whose purpose is to manage school-related issues of children in care. The FPLs

reported working closely with the educational consultants and felt satisfied with their follow-through on solving school-related problems. They reported deferring to the consultants' expertise, allowing them to take responsibility for seeing the issue through to resolution.

Issues Related to School Mobility

When asked specifically to reflect on the subject of school mobility, FPLs said that they do often experience children changing school placements. More importantly, the liaisons associated school change with residential change. For example when asked whether or not children simultaneously switch schools when they switch foster placements, one liaison responded, “[DCF workers] try to keep [foster children] in the same school. They try to put them in the same community. We don’t have the luxury of a lot of foster homes.” In short, FPLs did not seem to immediately consider the possibility of residential change combined with school stability.

This begged the question: When a child does experience a change of residence, under what circumstances might the child stay in his/her current school and under what conditions might he/she change schools? The answer to this was a unanimous, “It depends on the worker.” FPLs reported that a foster child’s retention in his/her original school depends on the extent to which the worker makes the “extra effort” to advocate for educational stability, secure transportation from the new home to the old school, or persuade the foster parent to transport the child. FPLs noted that in order to allow children to remain in their schools of origin, some “dedicated” social workers and case aides go so far as to pick children up from the foster home themselves and drive them to school. This practice was viewed by FPLs as evident of workers’ “commitment,” but also acknowledged as “going above and beyond” for children in care.

The liaisons reported that social workers did not have clearly defined guidelines for negotiating children’s educational placements. As one liaison put it:

It's not...written in the policy that if you move [a child] from one town to another town, you have to maintain her in her school system she's currently in *if* all the following apply. It's just a matter of whether [the worker] feels like going through the extra effort -- which it will be a lot of extra effort.

It is worth noting at this point that not all of the focus group participants agreed that school stability is always optimal when a child changes residences. Although they appreciated the benefits of school stability in some cases, they raised several scenarios in which retaining the child in his/her original school could be detrimental. For example, one liaison pointed out the waste of time involved in transporting a child long distances to and from school. This same FPL also noted that school change might benefit the child if the school district of the new home is better than that of the previous placement. Some of the liaisons also felt that it is more important for a child to establish peer relationships in the new residential neighborhood than it is to maintain peer relationships at the original school. These opinions fit with the FPLs' personal experiences with children in care, but seem to be contrary to the importance of school stability as it is outlined in the social work literature above. In short, when asked if school stability is important for foster children, the answer, again, seemed to be: "It depends."

Finally, FPLs stated that the ease of school transition for foster children also depended on case-specific factors. For example, they noted that the efficiency of records transfer often depends on whether or not the social worker has filled out the appropriate paperwork. They also commented that the immediacy of enrollment of children in school depends on the enrollment protocol in the particular town or city. They reported that different towns call for different immunizations upon enrollment, that enrollment occurs at different places in different areas (i.e., at the school versus at the Board of Education), that foster parents are permitted to enroll students in some areas and not others, and that the inclusion of foster parents in IEP planning varies by town. Liaisons agreed that, as a result of this variation, they advise foster parents on a

town-by-town basis, and derive their advice based on their knowledge of the rules and regulations of different municipalities.

Access to services. Another important topic raised during the discussion was foster children's access to special education services. As noted above, foster children have a higher than average rate of special education needs. The focus group participants felt that because special education services are so expensive for schools, schools' attempts to limit spending result in foster children's limited access to the services they need. Because foster children are believed to be highly mobile, FPLs reported that teachers and administrators often justify this lack of implementation based on the idea that the foster child will only be in the school temporarily; when a foster child enters a new school, the school may delay assessment or the implementation of an existing IEP in order to avoid having to commit resources to a child who is "going to leave anyway."

In fact, the liaisons expressed a concern that non-provision of services occurs across the board with special education children – not solely with those in foster care. FPLs felt strongly that, in general, parents should not take for granted that school systems will automatically be forthcoming with special services. They were concerned that school districts rely on parents' ignorance of the law in order to be withholding. Moreover, the liaisons reported that when parents do insist on receiving the services to which their children are entitled, the delivery of services is often framed as a "favor" or a secret:

...I'll give you a for instance. I'm from [Town A]. It's a wealthy school district. We have a wonderful reputation for Special Ed. The law states that children with educational needs that exceed the 9 month school year should be offered extended school year services. Well the way [the town's] gotten around that so they don't have to provide transportation, which is the most expensive part of the extended year school for Special Ed. kids, is that they *offer* free summer school to all

Special Ed. students...I said “I want transportation this is actually extended school year”...And he said to me – the director of Special Ed. – he said “I’ll tell you what,” he said, “we’ll call it ‘extenuating circumstances’ and I’ll give it to you”...It’s their way of taking resources which – I’m not even faulting a lot of them – they’re taking limited resources, particularly in this day and age, and they’re extending them. And this is the way they see it. They see themselves as being able to offer more services by cutting corners, if you will, in other ways, in other areas.

Liaisons’ recommendations. The FPLs’ criticisms gave rise to several recommendations for improvement within the system. First, they felt strongly that educators need more training on how to deal with foster children in school. Such training would help teachers and administrators understand the needs of foster children and how to manage them in the classroom, thereby ensuring that foster children receive an education equal to that of their non-foster care peers. Second, the liaisons suggested that child welfare workers would benefit from clearer guidelines as to what efforts need to be made in order to effectively serve foster children’s educational needs. Two problematic perceptions – that social workers vary with respect to their level of commitment to the children on their caseloads and that social workers “bend the rules anyway” when managing cases – highlighted this need for more uniform practices among child welfare staff. Third, FPLs insisted that school systems need to be more forthcoming in the delivery of services that they are obligated to provide to foster children and special needs children in general. They added that foster parents need to be well educated regarding the existing laws, the precise services to which the children in their care are entitled, and what to do in order to advocate for them.

Summary

In summary, the foster parent liaisons in this focus group believed that school mobility was an important issue, but did not consider it to be a primary problem related to foster children's educational access. However, the problems they did discuss (i.e., variability of "effort" of social workers, lack of uniform municipal regulations, etc.) reflect system-wide issues of information sharing, standard setting, protocol, and service quality that are intimately tied to the way foster children experience their education while in care. In this way, the FPLs' criticisms and suggestions raise three important issues for the present discussion surrounding school mobility.

(1) Educational outcomes must not "depend on the worker." The FPLs described a highly problematic situation in which case outcomes for children depend on the diligence of individual social workers. Furthermore, worker "diligence" was often described as workers truly going above and beyond the call of duty (e.g., waking at 5am in order to drive children to school) for children on their caseload. This scenario highlights the need for social workers to be held accountable to uniform (yet, reasonable) standards of practice. Furthermore, it calls on agency administrators and funding bodies to provide social workers with the resources that allow them to succeed in meeting those standards for all of the children whom they serve.

(2) Stakeholders must reach a consensus regarding the importance of school stability. The FPLs interviewed did not necessarily agree that foster children should always be maintained in their school of origin when they change placements. Although they recognized the importance of school stability in some cases, they also believed that under other conditions, switching a child's school might be necessary or beneficial. If school stability is considered by foster care administrators to be important for children's adjustment in care (as the literature reviewed above suggests), it is necessary for DCF and SDE to bring all stakeholders on board with this goal and to agree to only change children's educational placements under the most extenuating of circumstances.

(3) Address the jurisdiction of individual towns and cities. Finally, the liaisons mentioned repeatedly that the protocol for accessing educational services for foster children differs between towns and cities across Connecticut. The lack of uniformity leads to delays and confusion when children move across town lines. This situation calls for two important next steps. The first is to assess whether or not individual municipalities have the authority to design their own education policies under federal laws such as IDEA and McKinney-Vento. If towns and cities do, in fact, have this authority, state-level agencies might consider revisiting the utility of allowing for this interjurisdictional heterogeneity. Given the problems of discontinuity described above, policymakers may decide that increased statewide uniformity in some areas may lead to greater efficiency and increased service quality.

Results: DCF Social Workers Focus Group

This focus group consisted of ten frontline social workers from three DCF offices. All of the participants were involved in casework with families of children in out-of-home foster care placements. As in the discussion with the foster parent liaisons, this session began with a discussion of school stability and mobility, but wound up focusing largely on other education issues such as maintenance of children in schools and classrooms, and the influence of the lack of resources on casework. Specific to the subject of school mobility, social workers spoke at length about transportation and the difficulties involved in getting foster children to and from school when residential placements change.

Issues Related to School Mobility

Relative importance of educational stability. Social workers acknowledged the importance of trying to place a child in his/her school district of origin, and they reported trying to work with the Foster Adoption Service Unit (FASU; the DCF unit responsible for recruitment, licensing, and support of foster parents) to place children in homes close to their home schools. However, the participants agreed that when a child comes into care, finding an immediate placement is their top priority. Due to the shortage of available foster homes in the state, social workers reported that “whatever home they find, you take.” As a result, a child being placed in his/her home school zone is “very rare.”

Transportation. The participants mentioned that transportation was a key problem related to school mobility. They reported frustration with negotiating transportation with local school districts and using a realm of strategies to get the children on their caseloads to and from school every day. One social worker described the seriousness of the problem of setting up transportation:

...[I]t's something I cringe at when you've got to remove a kid...Because then you've got to get on the phone with the school department and see what they can do for you, and it seems often to be like a political battle.

Social workers confirmed the practice, noted by foster parent liaisons, of DCF social workers and case aides taking it upon themselves to drive foster children to and from school. The workers "hope and pray" that the children's foster parents will transport their foster children to school,² but they note that much of the time, foster parents are unwilling to do so, and the burden of transportation falls on the worker. The participants agreed that, after going through the mandated foster parent training, foster parents are well educated regarding their obligations to "take these children on as though they're your own" but noted that when pressing foster parents to follow through on their obligations, workers must tread lightly:

You remind [foster parents] of their trainings. You know, you remind them that when you went through...foster care training, the expectations were laid out to you. And you can have that talk as the ongoing worker and see how that goes. And if you think you need more support you can go to your supervisor and the FASU worker and the FASU worker's supervisor, and usually an agreement's made, but sometimes it's not. And then, ultimately, [the foster parent] can very well turn around and say, "Well then take the kid." And now you've just disrupted that placement. So you can push the envelope but [foster parents] can push right back, and they know they can push right back.

When foster parents are not available to transport children, social workers reported using a variety of strategies to ensure that children's educational placements are not disrupted. They reported driving the child themselves or enlisting a case aide to pick up and/or drop off the child. The participants also said that sometimes they are able to find another staff member who lives

² See Smithgall et al. (2004) for a discussion of foster parent perspectives on transportation issues.

close to the foster home in question who can get the child on the way to/from work and reported sending out office-wide emails to find such a person. These strategies work sometimes; success also depends on whether or not DCF cars and car seats are available at the same time as a driver. When more than one child on a worker's caseload needs to have transportation coordinated in this way, these difficulties multiply.

Not all foster parents were described as noncompliant. In fact, the social workers noted that some of their foster parents were especially helpful. Some of the participants described sharing the driving load with parents, with one person being responsible for drop off and the other for pick up from school. However, social workers also noted that even the most supportive foster parents have difficulties providing school transportation. Workers representing the rural Northeast corner of the state pointed out that, due to their large catchment area, children may be placed in a town an hour's drive away from their school of origin. Under these circumstances, the shortage of foster homes and the pressure of transportation come together to create an insurmountable dilemma; when an overloaded foster parent is caring for four foster children coming from schools all over the region, it is unreasonable to expect that parent to drive each child to and from his/her school of origin. One worker noted that a recent restructuring of DCF's regional areas helped somewhat in terms of reducing offices' geographic coverage and increasing placements closer to the child's original home.

Transfer of records. The social workers also noted difficulties in obtaining educational records once a child's school is changed. They reported that not having a child's records can lead to delays in enrollment at the new school, testing, and implementation of IEPs. They highlighted that this problem is often prominent in cases of first-time removal; when a first child comes into care it may take some time for the assigned worker to track down school-related paperwork. Social workers pointed out that when it comes to enrolling children, some schools and school districts are more efficient than others; whereas some districts immediately provide records and

readily enroll foster children, others are less flexible and workers report bureaucratic delays. One worker also noted that schools also vary on how willing they are to keep children enrolled when foster placement moves them out of the school's catchment area.

Assessment and implementation of services. The participants also reported that educational testing, Pupil Personnel Team (PPT) meetings, and implementation of special education services are often delayed for children in state care. This scenario was common, not only at the point of school change, but throughout foster children's experiences in school. The workers noted that they often receive invitations to PPT meetings at the last minute, after the meeting has already been held, or not at all.

Agency-based educational consultant. When the social workers confront obstacles such as those noted above, they often turn to the agency-based educational consultant. They stated that the educational consultant informs the social workers of recent policy changes; that he/she sometimes attends PPT meetings in order to support the social worker and clarify jargon; and that he/she helps make the appropriate connections when social workers' efforts at contacting education officials are unsuccessful. The participants were satisfied with their experiences working with the educational consultants. One worker did point out that his office shares an educational consultant with another office and, as a result, it is sometimes difficult to get a hold of this person when issues arise.

Understanding of current policies. It was unclear from the participants' responses exactly how fluent they were with the details of the McKinney-Vento Act; some of the workers seemed to know more about the law than others. For example, one worker spoke about driving a child living in a shelter to and from school each day, yet children in shelters are included among those children entitled to transportation services under the McKinney-Vento legislation. The participants agreed that it was important to know all relevant policy information in order to be prepared when advocating for a child or challenging decisions made by education officials.

One of the participants expressed the opinion that McKinney-Vento protections should apply to all children in foster care:

Well, if you asked what would make things easier, you know reading the McKinney-Vento Act, I think there's a lot of good aspects that will make things easier for educational stability, but it only applies to homeless kids. I don't see why certain aspects of that Act don't apply across the board, such as being able to enroll kids in school before you have all their immunization records and everything else. To me it seems even a child in a foster home should be able to be enrolled in school immediately. Same with accessing special services, or being able to finish your year at the previous school you were at....I don't see why [a foster] child shouldn't be able to finish the school year in their previous district, regardless if they're homeless or not.

Other School-Related Issues

Management of special needs. In addition to discussing issues of school mobility, the focus group members spoke at length about foster children's experience in school. Here, the workers echoed some of the statements made by the foster parent liaisons, particularly on the subject of schools' and teachers' management of foster children's unique needs.

Social workers mentioned that foster children are often sent home for behavior problems, but instead of calling on the foster parent to intervene, the workers reported that schools called them at the DCF office directly. They agreed that the "famous line" from these school phone calls was "Come get him," meaning that the DCF worker should come to the school and pick up the child. Workers noted that the foster parent, not DCF staff, should be the first line of contact regarding school discipline, as the foster parent lives with the child and therefore is likely to have greater influence over the child's day to day behavior. Similar to the foster parent liaisons, the social workers also agreed that sending children home from school disrupts their learning. The

workers felt strongly that if a child cannot be maintained in a standard classroom due to behavioral issues, than it is the school's responsibility to create an alternative so that the child continues to be educated.

One alternative mentioned by the participants was the school recommending removal to a different school specifically designed for hard-to-manage children, Hartford Transitional Learning Academy (HTLA). The workers were skeptical about the utility of this kind of move, describing HTLA as a chaotic place where the children perpetuate each other's behavior problems. Workers reported trying to work out other educational options before transferring children to HTLA.

Another school response to behavior problems that arose in discussion was suspension. The participants noted that the children on their caseloads frequently get suspended, forcing the workers to "come get them," and leaving children with gaps in schooling. One worker related a story of a teenager in care who learned how to get herself suspended by arriving late to class. The worker approached the principal, saying that the school was "giving her what she wanted" and requesting that the school make efforts to work with the child rather than suspend her. The worker was shocked when the principal handed her a copy of the administrative manual and refused to deviate from the outlined criteria for suspension.³

On the whole, the workers felt that teachers were ill equipped to deal with foster children. One worker even felt that, to some degree, teachers actually had some fear of children in care:

[Educators] feel like these kids are dangerous. And...I think a lot of the educators are very intimidated by kids. I think they feel like, you know, a lot of these kids act up, they're live wires, [educators] don't know what's going on in their minds,

³ Suspension as a response to foster children's behavior problems and concerns regarding this tactic have been reported in other samples, as well (Smithgall et al., 2005). This practice is worth investigating further. A better understanding of the extent to which educators rely on suspension, the circumstances under which they decide to suspend a student, and the relationship between being in foster care and the likelihood of getting suspended may influence child protection and education staff to consider alternative disciplinary measures.

and [educators] don't want to really approach them. They don't know how to speak to them. And even though this is supposed to be their expertise, I don't think they're experts.

Stigmatization of foster children. The participants felt that foster children become labeled by school faculty and administrators when their status as "DCF-involved" is known. Workers believed that once a student is labeled as a DCF child, any behavioral incidents involving the child were considered more severe:

I swear that when schools find out a kid's DCF-involved, it's like the school will always be calling you with incidents. If it's a little incident that little Johnny who's DCF-involved compared to this other child who lives with his parents and not DCF-involved – same incident but we'll get all these calls: "What are you [DCF workers] gonna do? What are you gonna do?"

The workers stated that it was impossible for schools not to "find out" that a child is in DCF custody. Whether it be that the social worker has to come to school to sign something, or that a child gets picked up from school by a foster parent of a different race, school personnel become aware of the child's status and, according to the focus group members, the child becomes stigmatized. In short, there was a sense from the respondents that, in some cases, they wished a child's DCF status could be less obvious.

School-DCF communication. However, when asked what schools needed in order to manage foster children better, the workers agreed that the schools needed to communicate better with the DCF staff. The participants suggested that educators receive training on the child welfare system and the needs of foster children in the same way that child welfare workers receive training on the education system. These recommendations paralleled those of the foster parent liaisons. At this point it was clear that the workers' wish was not that the children's DCF

status be hidden from educators, rather that educators be more aware of the children's needs and work in conjunction with DCF workers to help the children succeed.

It is important to note that, despite their frustrations with the education system, the focus group members acknowledged that schools and school districts are likely as overwhelmed and stressed as the child welfare system. The workers appreciated the many demands placed on teachers, teachers' responsibility for dealing with the needs of all of their students, and the reality of limited school budgets:

I think...[teachers] look at it as though, "We're the educators, we need to get through lesson plan 1 through 15, and I don't have time to be dealing with Johnny who's got behavioral issues and emotional issues. And well social workers, they're supposed to have background for that thing so instead of me dealing with it let me just call the social worker who I think has the background for this thing"...[M]aybe [teachers are] overwhelmed. Maybe their class numbers are too high. Maybe they're expected to get through too many lesson plans. Maybe they teach too many classes on too many days. I don't know. And that's kind of the same thing we go through. We have a ton of cases and a ton of crises, and we have a ton of emails and phone calls and a ton of court work. And so you've got two systems that are overworked trying to work together but not working together because we don't have time for all that. We don't have time for you and you don't have time for us.

Summary

In summary, the DCF social workers in this focus group were not primarily concerned with school mobility as far as detrimental effects described in the literature are concerned. They acknowledged the importance of school stability but regretted that, in light of the shortage of

foster homes, placing a child close to his/her home school is a rarity. More problematic for social workers were the logistic and bureaucratic obstacles associated with mobility.

As was the case with the focus group of foster parent liaisons, the social workers discussed problems that – whether they dealt specifically with school stability or not – represented systemic barriers to foster children receiving a stable, high quality education. In this way, the social workers’ comments highlight the following as important issues related to the discussion of school mobility. Some of these reinforce and supplement the messages gleaned from the comments of the foster parent liaisons:

(1) Educational outcomes must not “depend on the school.” The participants noted that the efficiency of enrolling foster children in school, setting up assessments and PPT meetings, and implementing services varies with each school. As mentioned above, this situation suggests the need for uniformity of regulations across schools and districts.

(2) Educational outcomes must not “depend on the foster parent.” Foster parents must be held responsible for taking foster children in “as if they were their own.” If transportation cannot be provided by the relevant school district(s), social workers should be able to turn to foster parents for help. That said, foster parents must be *supported* in their efforts to care for foster children. Although foster parents should be held accountable for the job they agreed to do, they must not be saddled with unachievable expectations (e.g., driving four foster children to four separate schools all over Northeast Connecticut). This issue cannot fully be resolved until more foster homes become available; hence, renewed recruitment efforts are essential.

(3) School transportation must not be the responsibility of the individual social worker. Though the practice is an incredibly admirable one, social workers should not feel obligated to take personal responsibility for school transportation. DCF staff have neither the time nor the resources to take on this responsibility; alternatives must be found either through

agreements with foster parents or policy change (either within DCF, SDE, or both) allotting additional funds for transportation.

(4) DCF workers and educators must be kept abreast of policy changes. The participants noted the importance of knowing the latest policies regarding educational access of children in state care. However, there was some sense that the workers did not feel fully informed regarding all of the details pertaining to McKinney-Vento. Similarly, the workers' comments suggested that educators and school administrators also need to adhere to policies that obligate them to provide an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment to children in care.

(5) Both the child welfare and education systems lack necessary resources. Without doubt, the child welfare system is in need of increased resources, both financially and in the form of additional foster homes. In specifically tackling the issue of school mobility, increased resources may reduce the chances of placing children far from their schools of origin, and thereby limit the transportation burden. Social workers acknowledge that the school system is overburdened, as well. Increased resources to schools and districts will likely allow schools to increase the quality of foster children's education in various ways. In short, increased support will allow both agencies to work more closely with one another as they try to meet the needs of children in care.

Results: Feedback from McKinney-Vento District Liaisons

Six district-level McKinney-Vento liaisons responded to a series of write-in questions pertaining to the delivery of services to foster children covered under the law. In addition I was able to discuss these questions with a seventh liaison in a phone conversation. The respondents represented districts from around the state, some of which were larger than others. All of the participating liaisons noted that “McKinney-Vento liaison” was not their sole position; rather, these individuals were responsible for managing McKinney-Vento cases in addition to, or as part of, their larger, full time position (e.g., Director of Pupil Services and Special Education). Some of the liaisons estimated the percentage of time they devote to McKinney-Vento issues; one reported spending as much as 10% of her time on such cases, but others gave estimates of 5% (1 liaison), 2% (2 liaisons), and less than 1% (1 liaison). Personnel time spent on McKinney-Vento issues is likely to vary by district. For example, larger districts and those that contain more shelters and safe homes are more likely to have more children covered under the law.

Priority of School Stability

Much like the DCF social workers discussed above, the McKinney-Vento liaisons (MVLs) reported feeling that school stability was important, but acknowledged that, in foster care cases, the child’s well-being and placement in a safe foster home took top priority. Two MVLs offered examples of factors that might take precedence over school stability. One wrote that “[f]inding the best possible foster home and helping reunite the child with the biological parent – if appropriate – should be the first priority” and added that “[a] child in a poor foster placement will not be able to focus on school, whether [the school placement] is consistent or otherwise.” Another MVL stated that school stability should be a “moderate factor” when considering “all available data” for a DCF child. She noted that school stability would *not* be advisable if remaining in the school of origin involved the child traveling long distances each day or kept the child in a harmful neighborhood or with dysfunctional peers. However, this MVL

did note that if a child is succeeding in the school of origin, every effort should be made to keep the child there. In short, when reflecting on the priority of school stability, the MVLs (much like the Foster Parent liaisons, above) acknowledged that stability was important, but believed that it was not crucial (or even desirable) for all foster children all the time.

Communication with Relevant Stakeholders

Communication with DCF workers. The MVLs reported some mixed feelings regarding their communication with DCF personnel. Some mentioned having good working relationships with DCF staff, reporting that they contacted children's social workers when school placement and McKinney-Vento eligibility issues arose. However, several MVLs reported communication barriers with DCF. Some felt that "too much [child information] is identified as confidential" and that, as a result, educators do not always have all of the information they need in order to provide the best possible services for foster children. Another MVL felt that DCF too often makes demands on the educational system at the last minute (e.g., placing a child in foster care and then asking the relevant school district to arrange the new school placement or transport a child the next day).

Inter-district communication. The MVL responses not only highlighted communication obstacles between school districts and DCF, but also barriers between school districts, themselves. Several MVLs reported that when a child changes schools, districts of origin are often inefficient when it comes to transferring children's records to the new district. In fact, one MVL noted that she relies on DCF workers to assemble school information about the child in question, rather than access this material through the child's former school district.

McKinney-Vento Knowledge and Available Resources

The MVLs who responded to the survey seemed well-informed regarding the details of the McKinney-Vento law. One MVL did note, however, that despite the availability of McKinney-Vento guidelines and criteria, and the efforts of MVLs to stay updated and informed,

child eligibility and service provision are often decided on a case-by-case basis. Still, MVLs identified several resources and memos to which they refer for clarification and guidance when making decisions. Several MVLs reported turning to the State McKinney-Vento Coordinator for assistance with problems related to placement and cost responsibility, and noted that he was helpful in bringing cases to resolution. In addition, MVLs use the Local Homelessness Education Liaison Toolkit provided by the National Center for Homeless Education (<http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/toolkit/toolkit.pdf>).

Safe Homes and Shelters

The MVL with whom I spoke on the phone represented a school district containing two shelters and two safe homes. As such, she was able to provide detailed information regarding the provision of McKinney-Vento services to children living in these facilities. As noted above, children living in safe homes and shelters qualify as “homeless” under the McKinney-Vento legislation. Therefore, DCF often requests services (including those related to school stability) for children in these residences, citing their eligibility under the law.

A problem arises, however, when children remain in safe homes and shelters for an extended period of time. These placements are intended to be temporary; children are permitted to reside there for 30 days with the possibility of a 15-day extension. Despite this rule, the MVL noted that children frequently stay in shelters and safe homes well beyond the established timeframe. Some of the children in this particular district have lived in a shelter or safe home for over 200 days, and in the fall of 2005, several began their second consecutive school year as residents of a “temporary” facility. The MVL noted that this situation reflects DCF’s misuse of the shelter and safe home system. The practice allows DCF to draw on McKinney-Vento resources for children whose placements, though technically “temporary,” are in fact much less transitory than the types of scenarios outlined by the law as constituting “homelessness.”

The placement of children in safe homes and shelters poses another problem for enrolling DCF-involved children in public school; this problem is specific to those children who have been in, or are candidates for placement in, residential treatment facilities. When DCF places a child in a residential treatment facility, the case is first processed by a Placement Review Team (PRT). This team generates paperwork regarding the child's background before coming into care, the planning goals for the family, and any special needs the child may have. When such a child transfers from a residential treatment facility to a public school, the receiving school district has access to this information and uses it to appropriately place the child. However, when a child who would have otherwise gone to a residential facility goes directly to a safe home or shelter, the PRT process does not take place. As a result, the school district may not receive necessary information that might influence the child's public school placement.

The MVL noted that this lack of information is especially problematic in light of the fact that residential placement is usually reserved for children with serious behavioral problems. These children may be dangerous to themselves or to others (e.g., have a history of violent behavior, criminal activity, etc.). Because of their special needs, children in a residential treatment facility are often restricted to the boundaries of a facility's campus. These children attend school at the facility; they are not permitted to leave the grounds and, as such, do not attend the local public schools. When these children wind up in shelters and safe homes instead, they do enroll in the local schools where their behavioral issues may be disruptive.

In summary, foster children placed in safe homes and shelters become involved with the McKinney-Vento law in a complex way. These children experience school mobility, but in addition, the appropriateness of their new school placement may be compromised depending on the way in which DCF transmits the child's background information to the new district. From a legal and financial perspective, the practice of allowing children to remain in these "temporary" placements for long periods of time poses a serious problem for education personnel

administering McKinney-Vento funded services. As such, conflict often arises between DCF and school districts regarding which children are and are not protected under this law.

Definition of “Feasibility”

Another area of contention between school district personnel and DCF workers is the determination of the “feasibility” of a foster placement. When DCF makes a placement decision that calls on a school district to provide services for a child, the school district has a right to appeal that decision if it believes that providing such services is unfeasible. According to the McKinney-Vento law, an argument for unfeasibility must pertain to a child-related issue; the district may not simply argue that it cannot cover the services financially. The MVL respondents suggested a number of possible child-related arguments. For example:

- Transporting the child from home to school involving traveling unreasonably long distances.
- The academic success of the child in the decided upon school placement.
- Concerns regarding truancy or relationships in the community.
- Special education needs that the district cannot provide.

However, one MVL stated that, although district personnel know that an appeal must be child-related, it is unrealistic to think that financial considerations are “not on people’s minds” when deciding to challenge a DCF decision. Indeed, two other MVLs alluded to financial concerns in discussing feasibility criteria.

Transportation. The financial concerns in question are largely related to transportation, a troublesome theme that emerged in conversations with all the stakeholders interviewed for this project. One MVL felt that policymakers’ understanding of how much it costs to transport a child to and from his/her school of origin is unrealistic. She noted that such transportation involves the district contracting with private companies, and can cost upwards of \$300 per day for one child. Another MVL echoed this sentiment, writing that “the major obstacle

to providing services under the McKinney-Vento grant is that the money [we receive] for the services we provide is far too little.” This respondent called on DCF to absorb some of these costs.

The transportation funding issue involves, not only how much transportation costs, but who is responsible for paying for it and when. Some MVLs reported great difficulty in negotiating transportation costs with other districts when children change placements. Although some noted that a cost-sharing agreement is usually reached, others reported that problems arise when districts do not “cooperate and pay their fair share.”

Summary

The MVLs who participated in the survey provided important information regarding the school mobility of children in foster care. Unfortunately, because a focus group with these participants was not possible, the data they provided are somewhat limited. The one in-depth phone conversation with one of the MVLs yielded rich details, but the remainder of the information presented above comes from short write-in responses with which I was unable to follow up. Despite this drawback, the MVLs, as a group, offered an administrative perspective on the processes and problems related to providing McKinney-Vento services to children in foster care. They also provided an education system perspective, supplementing and balancing the DCF-based opinions provided by Foster Parent liaisons and DCF social workers.

Although the MVLs did express concerns about children’s school mobility as it relates academic and social outcomes for children, the respondents focused more on their ability to provide services to under the law. Their responses highlight several themes that educators and DCF personnel should bear in mind when making decisions regarding foster care and school placement:

(1) Improved communication between stakeholders is necessary. The MVLs’ responses indicated that communication problems exist both between DCF and school districts,

and between school districts, themselves. In many instances, MVLs felt they lacked important child academic and developmental information necessary for making informed school placement decisions. This issue may call on DCF to reevaluate the “confidentiality” of child information. There seems to also be a need for education and DCF personnel to clarify which parties are responsible for transmitting school records when a child is placed in a new school district.

(2) Particular attention must be paid to districts with more shelters and safe homes.

There appears to be a serious need for DCF administrators to clarify the regulations for placing children in safe homes and shelters and to adhere to those regulations. Given the limited amount of McKinney-Vento funds, regions that have more shelters and safe homes are more likely to struggle in providing services to eligible children; this situation should not be exacerbated by the misuse of temporary facilities. Additionally, one should consider the possibility that inattention to this matter may have consequences for the continued existence of shelters and safe homes. As one informant suggested, the financial and bureaucratic burdens associated with the McKinney-Vento law may influence communities not to construct safe homes and shelters at all. Such decisions would result in decreased services for the State’s neediest children and families.

(3) There is a need to revisit the cost of transportation. Transportation emerged as a critical problem for all stakeholders interviewed. All three discussed issues of who should be responsible for providing transportation and when, but the MVLs highlighted the idea that the cost of transporting children to their schools of origin may be prohibitive altogether for any party. If it is the case that enough money simply does not exist to provide this service, DCF and education administrators must begin to think of funding alternatives.

Summary of Themes and Next Steps

The informants contributing the data for this report provided a wealth of information regarding foster children’s access to, and experience with, educational services in Connecticut. Their responses dealt with school mobility as well as with related educational issues such as special education and discipline. The participants described a complex web of intersecting policies and practices and the implementation of these in diverse areas of the state. They described their best efforts at serving the state’s neediest children and discussed the reality of barriers to that service delivery.

Their responses highlight some important differences between the perspectives and priorities of education and child protection personnel.⁴ However, when taken together, their feedback paints a picture of how DCF and SDE collaborate to meet the educational needs of children in foster care. Strong themes cut across the three groups. These themes may be used by all groups as starting points as they work together to improve foster children’s educational experience. These are presented below along with suggestions for future investigation and action.

(1) The quality and efficiency of service delivery, both in education and child protection systems, varies by the individual worker. When asked about their experiences in setting up educational services for foster children, all stakeholders responded with some version of the statement, “It depends.” Each group of professionals reported variability in the quality and efficiency of work provided by the other. This finding is compelling and suggests a serious need for agencies to reevaluate and reinforce their recruitment, training, and quality assurance procedures. Elucidation of procedures will not only lead to more uniform service delivery, but it will improve collaborating agencies’ understanding of what to expect from one another.

⁴ This report taps several professional perspectives but does not represent all of the relevant stakeholders in the matter of foster children’s educational experience. It is important to note that teachers and school administrators are not included in this report. A more comprehensive study of the issues presented here should include feedback from these individuals.

(2) There is a need for improved interprofessional training and communication.

SDE and DCF need more than just clarification on each other's technical policies and practices; they also need to be informed regarding each other's goals, needs, and priorities.

Interprofessional training can help educators and child protection workers combine their goals of education and building healthy families. DCF and SDE have already collaborated in the field of early childhood education with their inclusion of family-strengthening prevention elements in early childhood education programs (Gruendel, 2005). The two agencies must now work together on establishing plans for school stability, management of foster children in school, and data sharing.

(3) The lack of foster homes is inextricably tied to children being placed far away from their schools of origin, a practice that exacerbates the already contentious issue of transportation. All of the participants in this study described concerns related to the limited number of available foster parents. As such, the findings strongly support renewed efforts at foster parent recruitment and retention. Increased availability of foster homes will decrease the likelihood that a child will have to change schools upon entering foster care. Indeed, an increase in available foster homes will alleviate problems surrounding mobility in general, allowing children to remain in their home neighborhoods close to family, friends, and social support networks.

A related issue pertains to the training and accountability of foster parents. Foster parents should be educated regarding the importance of residential and school stability for children in care. In addition, social workers must clarify the extent to which foster parents will be responsible for transporting children to and from their schools of origin. That said, foster parents must not be saddled with unrealistic expectations for transporting children to far away schools, especially when those foster parents care for multiple children and/or work outside the home. Of

course, the likelihood that a foster parent would be burdened in this way would decrease with an increase in available foster homes.

(4) In order to follow through on a commitment to foster children’s educational experience, this commitment must be instituted as a priority in DCF and SDE policies and practices. The information collected in this report suggests that educational issues are marginalized when a child comes into foster care. DCF workers focus, rightly, on child safety, but in the process, are unable to simultaneously address educational needs with the same energy and resources. In order to truly improve the educational status of children in care, the issue must pervade all levels of foster care service delivery. Some family court systems are already taking steps toward this prioritization by using the TeamChild/Casey Educational Checklist (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), 2005). The Checklist contains a variety of questions that a judge may ask during a hearing that pertain to the educational needs of children in foster care. Judges report that using the checklist changes the culture of the courtroom. A technical report on the field testing of the Checklist notes: “Once the Checklist had been used repetitively and stakeholders (e.g., caseworkers, attorneys, Guardians *ad litem*) realized that questions with respect to the child’s education were going to be asked from the bench, they began to regularly include educational information in their reports to the court in anticipation of those questions being asked” (NCJFCJ, 2005, p. 4).

Another way to institutionalize education as a casework priority is to enhance mechanisms for compiling and sharing child data. Within any agency, a strong data and research infrastructure is critical for both administrative and research purposes (Duran, Wilson, & Carroll, 2005). DCF has already taken steps toward this goal by exploring the Results Oriented Management Tool (ROM). This data management system will allow DCF to engage in more sophisticated tracking of cases and to conduct research on factors influencing case progress (Department of Children and Families, personal communication, May, 25, 2005). In addition to

streamlining data management for its own sake, DCF and SDE should develop database linkages so that each agency can access necessary child welfare and educational information about children in care. Such linkages would alleviate current problems of records transfer reported by both child welfare and education professionals. The Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut has prepared a Toolkit to help state agencies maximize their systems of data collection and sharing (see Duran et al., 2005).

If the educational experience of foster children is of importance to child protection and education officials, this importance must be written explicitly into agency- and state-level education and child welfare policies. Moreover, such policies must be enforceable; they must contain non-negotiable standards for service delivery, best practice guidelines for how to meet those standards, and incentives for local districts and agencies to stay in compliance. Creating such policies will involve the collaboration of legislators, agency administrators, frontline service providers, and child and family development researchers.

Currently, there is no longitudinal cost/benefit analysis indicating the advantages of increased spending on school stability practices. However, it is likely that increased attention to foster children's education while they are young will decrease some of the negative outcomes (e.g., low rates of high school graduation, high rates of unemployment and incarceration, etc.) already reported for foster youth (see Courtney et al., 2005). In this way, bolstering foster children's educational connections makes sense as good prevention and is likely to be cost effective.

In Conclusion

School stability for children in foster care is undeniably a complicated matter. The issue involves a cornucopia of stakeholders and is fraught with legal, bureaucratic, and financial obstacles. As such, those wishing to improve foster children's educational experience may be

intimidated in their attempts to make change. It is therefore essential that we view this complex network of stakeholders, policies, and practices not as a spider web in which we might get stuck, but as a room with many doors. We must take advantage of the fact that this issue offers so many points of entry for change making and, of course, we must always remember that no matter our professional role, we all strive to provide children in care with the rich and rewarding education they deserve.