

Educating All Foster Children Will Require Collaborative Spirit

Forum Column

By Miriam Aroni Krinsky

In caring for 30,000 children, Los Angeles is home to one of the largest foster-care systems in the nation, accounting for an astounding 1 in 10 foster youths nationwide.

When these thousands of abused and neglected children are removed from their homes and placed under the court's jurisdiction, all of us - as residents of this state and this county - undertake the obligation to "parent" them responsibly and compassionately.

For too many youths, however, we fail to provide the fundamental building block needed for a stable and successful adult future: a solid educational grounding.

In May, as part of Los Angeles' Foster Care Awareness Campaign, a coalition of child advocacy groups, judicial and community leaders and child-welfare officials tried to bring about greater recognition of the needs of, and opportunities for involvement in, our foster-care system.

As our community asks what we can do collectively and individually to better support these children, we cannot help but note the dismal educational outcomes for foster youth. Some 75 percent are working below grade level, 35 percent are in special-education classes, 46 percent do not complete high school and as few as 15 percent attend college.

These challenges, and the critical importance of this issue, provided a springboard for discussion among 150 leaders and decision makers at the 2nd Annual Los Angeles Education Summit, one of the many events that marked this May's awareness campaign.

Children in the foster-care system face tremendous academic difficulties as a result of their inherently transitory lifestyle and lack of adult support.

Too many children do not find permanence in the foster-care system and instead are moved from placement to placement. Given our county's geographic breadth, Los Angeles' foster youth historically have been forced to adjust not simply to a new home but also to frequent moves from school to school.

For every change in school, these children fall three to six months further behind their classmates, and their uphill climb becomes that much steeper. Moreover, too commonly, academic difficulties go unnoticed and are compounded by each displacement.

As Los Angeles Unified School District board member Julie Korenstein stressed to Summit attendees gathered to tackle these issues, "school stability must be more than an afterthought."

In light of the disheartening education achievement gap facing children in foster care, it is not surprising that a high percentage of former foster youths find themselves homeless, unemployed, on public assistance or incarcerated. Congressman Adam Schiff aptly observed in his keynote remarks to Summit attendees, "These children deserve the most diverse and rigorous education available, but too often it feels like we're swimming upstream to provide it for them."

The results of our collective failure can be tragic. Trinity Wallace-Ellis, a young woman who was formerly in foster care, recounted at the Summit the recent murder of her sister, a foster youth who did not graduate from high school and "ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Wallace-Ellis said that her sister's lack of a high-school diploma caused her to have negative feelings about herself and, consequently, to be drawn to people who made her feel better - people who led her to be in dangerous situations.

The lack of an education had an impact on this youth's entire life. It shaped her choice of friends, her day-to-day activities and where she spent her time.

Wallace-Ellis made an impassioned plea for all parts of our community to recognize the critical importance of an education - in her mind, the most important thing we can offer youths under our care. She challenged leaders in Los Angeles to sound a "wake-up call" in relation to these educational needs.

Admittedly, education alone cannot and will not make every fractured child whole or guarantee a better future. For some children, we may never be able to heal their broken hearts or send them home to their parents, and we certainly cannot erase the pain or the trauma some have suffered at the hands of those who are supposed to love them most.

But while we cannot undo the past, we can and must work to create a better future. The first-ever Education Summit in 2003 brought community leaders together to address the educational challenges faced by foster youths. It resulted in detailed recommendations that have become a road map for change. This year's second summit assessed how far Los Angeles has come in implementing those recommendations and what remains to be done. Attendees agreed that progress is being made and that we are slowly but surely turning the corner:

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and others have joined to create an Education Coordinating Council. This body will enable county, city, schools, courts and child welfare leaders to work together to craft new and effective strategies.

Recent changes in state law, including AB490, will promote school stability for foster youth throughout California, give them access to the same academic resources and services as other children, and encourage their placement in mainstream schools. As probation chief deputy Paul Higa observed, "education is more than schooling; it's ensuring friends, stability and extracurricular activities, as well."

Under the leadership of Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Michael Nash, our local court has made the educational attainment of youth in foster care a priority. The court is implementing enhanced training and new procedures crafted by referee Sheri Sobel, designed to ensure that bench officers inquire into and monitor the educational progress of juveniles at every proceeding.

The county Department of Children and Family Services recently created a new unit aimed at addressing the education needs of youth in care. Recent Los Angeles Unified School District policies similarly underscore the importance of school stability and will improve procedures for transfer, credit calculation and enrollment when foster youth are required to change schools.

But much more remains to be accomplished. First, we are woefully lacking in accurate data and hard statistics about foster children's educational progress and outcomes. We have insufficient records to evaluate the performance of the learning institutions we pay to educate foster youths or to monitor their progress. We need information systems to track dependent children's academic status, needs, literacy skills and achievement levels.

Without adequate information, identifying problems and advocating for meaningful solutions are impossible. Further, these data systems must be able to exchange information freely, so that all parts of our system - judges, attorneys, educators and social workers - can access them and learn how youths are progressing.

Second, we must ensure that judges, advocates, caseworkers and stakeholders are trained about pertinent laws and that they work together to define the roles and responsibilities of every part of the system in meeting the children's educational needs.

The Education Coordinating Council is a tremendous step forward. We must keep the momentum going and put the achievement of collaborative results ahead of any partisan organizational priorities.

Most important, we need to secure a commitment from the community as a whole to take joint responsibility for producing positive change. This is not just a problem of the school system, or the judges, or the lawyers, or the caregivers, or the social workers; it is our problem as a community. We need to band together and commit to the belief that no child should be emancipated without a high-school diploma, let alone without basic reading and writing skills.

Fifty years ago, in the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), the Supreme Court underscored the critical role that an education plays in the adult path that we want to craft for all youths in our community.

The court explained, "It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to achieve in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education." For youth in our foster-care system, who too often have no anchor, no mentor and no dependable family ties, a solid and stable education is that much more essential.

Through collaboration, renewed commitment and mutual respect among all facets of our community, we can break the ongoing cycle of abuse, neglect and despair and raise an educated generation ready to face the future with confidence.

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