



Collaborative Quality Improvement

Division of Child Protection & Permanency



2023 BRIEF #3: SUPPORTING THE EDUCATION OF NJ'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Overview

The Division of Child Protection and Permanency (CP&P) is New Jersey's child protection agency within the Department of Children and Families (DCF). CP&P is responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect and, if necessary, arranging for the child's safety and connecting families to appropriate services and supports.

When CP&P determines that a child of school age must be removed from their living situation to ensure safety, the Division prioritizes maintaining the child in their school and ensuring the appropriate educational supports are in place to facilitate their academic success. Social interactions with classmates, peers, and school staff can serve as a source of stability and well-being in a child's life, particularly when the child has been separated from family.ⁱ Additionally, movement between schools can present a barrier to academic achievement.ⁱⁱ The term *educational stability* refers to the continuity of a child in his or her educational setting at the time of placement or the facilitation of a smooth and timely transition to a new school when continuity in the pre-placement school is not in the child's best interest. In addition to promoting educational stability, CP&P aims to ensure that each child in foster care is developing, learning, and progressing at a rate commensurate with their age and ability, and any child with a disability or special needs receives necessary evaluations and recommended support for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).^{iii iv}

KEY FINDINGS

- For most families that experienced separation (79%), children were maintained in their pre-placement school or had positive, planned school changes.
- Appropriate interventions were in place to address academic challenges 82% of the time.
- There is opportunity for CP&P to improve communication with school personnel regarding each child's academic performance and progress.



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Areas of Strength

EDUCATIONAL STABILITY:

Among families with children in out-of-home placement (n=150), **educational stability was present for all children in 79% of families**, meaning each child remained in their pre-placement school or had a positive, planned school change.

ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT:

In 69% of families reviewed, children showed evidence of poor academic progress. Among families in which children experienced academic challenges (n=103), **appropriate interventions were put in place 82% of the time**. Interventions included tutoring or other specialized services to address the child's educational needs directly.

Area for Improvement

ONGOING COMMUNICATION WITH SCHOOLS:

Engaging with schools and gathering information from school personnel pertaining to the child's education is an important part of a CP&P caseworker's job. CP&P staff use this information to corroborate and clarify information gathered while working with families. Information from school staff also provides additional context about the children CP&P serves and can enhance the opportunity for a holistic assessment of strengths, needs, and provision of the most relevant and appropriate services to address children's needs. This review found that CP&P staff maintained ongoing, high-quality communication with school personnel regarding the child's academic performance and progress in only 51% of cases.



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SUMMARY

Maximizing educational stability and ensuring appropriate educational supports are in place can help to facilitate youth's academic success.^v Findings from this record review highlight CP&P's strengths and areas for improvement in meeting the educational needs of the children it serves out-of-home. For most families with children in out-of-home placement, CP&P ensured youth remained in their pre-placement school and that appropriate interventions were in place when children experienced academic challenges. However, this review also found that CP&P staff can improve the frequency and quality of communication with school personnel regarding each child's academic performance and progress.

What's Next?

CP&P will use the annual CoQI record review findings to develop improvement plans for applicable offices that include strategies to maintain practice areas of strength and to improve practice in other areas. As part of the local office performance improvement process related to the education of the children, CP&P staff will work to enhance supervisory practice to include guidance around collecting information from school staff regarding children's performance and progress.

Methodology

DCF's Office of Quality conducts independent case record reviews to ensure that CP&P facilitates educational stability and progress among youth entering the foster care system and to identify opportunities for Collaborative Quality Improvement (CoQI). The record reviews assess educational stability for children in out-of-home placement, and CP&P's efforts to mitigate instability. In this review, educational stability considers the number of times a child in placement changes schools in a 12-month period and the reason for school changes.ⁱ When a child experienced change in an educational setting that was *unplanned* or when a child moved to a *more restrictive* educational setting, they were considered unstable. This review also examined whether caseworkers had regular communication with school staff around children's academic progress and that any assessments and other information shared related to the children's education were comprehensive. Additionally, if there was evidence of poor academic progress, this review examined whether interventions were in place to address academic challenges.

For the current review, Office of Quality staff assessed the cases of 150 families that had a school-aged child in out-of-home placement between October 2022 and June 2023. Families were eligible for review if they became involved with the agency due to a concern of abuse or neglect and received ongoing supportive services from a CP&P caseworker for a period of at least 4 months. The review included families served across 33 CP&P local offices, representing 72% of CP&P local offices statewide.

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Education of Children in Out-of-Home Placement: <https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/CP-P-VII-A-1-700.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ Clemens, E. V., Lalonde, T. L., & Sheesley, A. P. (2016). The relationship between school mobility and students in foster care earning a high school credential. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 68, 193-201.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Education of Students with Disabilities: <https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/CP-P-VII-A-1-200.pdf>
- ^{iv} Educational Services: <https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/CP-P-VII-A-1-100.pdf>
- ^v Pecora, P. J. (2012). Maximizing educational achievement of youth in foster care and alumni: Factors associated with success. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(6), 1121-1129

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