

# Promising Strategies to Support Students in Out-of-Home Care

A student living in out-of-home care means a student who has been placed in a residential setting outside of the student's home by a county, state, or tribal child welfare agency. This can include shelter care; the home of a relative other than a parent; foster care; a group home; or a residential care center for children and youth.

Students placed in out-of-home care may change schools as a result of their placement. Changing schools can mean a break of meaningful relationships with friends, teachers, counselors, or even services they may be receiving. Creating opportunities for educational stability can help build a safe and stable space for children who might already be experiencing instability or trauma in their life. With thoughtful practices in the right structures, we can provide the backdrop all students need to feel welcome and empowered to make informed decisions, seek help when needed, and have the tools they need to realize their academic goals.

## Why is educational stability important?



### Reunification is the likely outcome

Sixty percent of children in out-of-home care reunify with their parents<sup>1</sup> and in a majority of placements it is likely the student would return to living in the original district of residence.

### School changes can result in growing disparities

Nationally, up to 75% of youth in foster care change schools when they are first placed. Additionally, approximately one-third of 17-18-year-olds in care have experienced five or more school changes<sup>2</sup>. Research shows any move is associated with nearly a half-year loss in educational attainment<sup>3</sup>.



### We must do better for our students

Our schools are only graduating 50% of Wisconsin children in out-of-home care<sup>4</sup>. Nationally, our schools are two times more likely to suspend children in out-of-home care as other students and three times more likely to expel<sup>2</sup>.

### Continuity in services can mean equity for students

Placement in out-of-home care and finding a permanent home are not the bookends of students' needs. A school's ability to provide continuity in high quality services aimed at students' needs results in a higher likelihood of fidelity in research-based practices leading to more equitable outcomes for our students in out-of-home care.<sup>5</sup>



### Stability offers a greater chance at success

"No matter the source of hardship, the single most common factor for children who end up doing well is having the support of at least one stable and committed relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult."<sup>6</sup>

# Promising Strategies

The following are suggested strategies for responding to the unique experiences of students in out-of-home care, to create an academic environment where they have the potential to thrive. The suggested strategies assume three overarching factors.

- Each school district will vary in their capacity to adequately and equitably address the needs of a student that is experiencing the disruption and potentially traumatic experience of out-of-home care placement.
- Districts should consider their local resources, district goals, district and school needs, and school improvement strategies as they explore the following suggestions.
- District collaboration with their local child welfare agency at the outset of developing a plan will better meet the needs of students in out-of-home care. Keeping the lines of communication open between agencies as they identify gaps in services and explore possible solutions can help recognize and prepare for unintended consequences or common pitfalls that students placed in out-of-home care may face.

## Widening the Net of Services

- Ensure students in high school are on track to graduate. Provide credit recovery options or resources when a student needs help to get back on track.
  - Work to break down any barriers that may exist for a student near graduation, such as finding an extra cap and gown. Ensure the student has what they need to participate in events important to high school seniors such as senior pictures, yearbooks, and prom.
  - Find scholarships or support systems that can connect students to activities that keep them fully engaged and participating at school.
  - Be sure to celebrate a student's successes - educational staff may provide the most consistent relationships a student has during his or her high school career.
  - Be sure students are aware of their opportunities even after they turn 18. Some schools offer structures for students to continue towards their diploma until age 21, and services through local human services agencies can often continue as long as the student is still in school.
- Provide students access to their school of origin for the remainder of the school year even after their placement in out-of-home care has ended (for high school students, this opportunity could be extended throughout grades 9-12).
- Provide the same supports to students awaiting foster care as you would to students in foster care.
  - Target long-term educational opportunities to those youth exiting from out-of-home care to ensure programming isn't just dropped once their placement ends.
  - Prepare for students you may not have yet. Building a collaborative relationship with your local Child Welfare Agency. Something simple such as providing a copy of the yearly school newsletter when student joins your school can help a student feel welcomed.

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### Questions to Consider:

- Where are the gaps in services?
- How are you accelerating growth/positive change for students placed in out-of-home care?
- What evidence-based strategies will you use to increase access for students placed in out-of-home care?
- What successful practices are working for the Child Welfare Agency? How can you support that work or apply it to district strategies?



## Family and Youth Engagement

- Build a welcoming environment.
  - Learn students' names and how to correctly pronounce them.
  - Call previous schools to connect with any staff who knows the student's history. Learn what inspired their former student, what worked well, and how they were able to best support their interests.
  - Build staff skills and self-drive to create a welcoming environment. Every staff member that works at the school or has contact with students can help by understanding the perspective of children and youth coming from diverse backgrounds. Supporting staff to effectively build relationships and support students can lead to stronger engagement in school and academics.
- Create opportunities to ensure students are active in driving their education and their voice is heard.
  - Identify any and all opportunities where students can make a choice in their future and give them that choice. (e.g. choosing their locker location, choosing the next book for the teacher to read, students building class norms collectively, collective choice regarding field trips or art projects.)
  - Ask students: What motivates you? What are your biggest concerns and your greatest hopes?
  - Remember to listen. Encourage students to repeat their hopes and voice what they need multiple times when speaking with staff and adult decision makers.
- Consider ways to engage youth at a systematic level with your school and district.
  - Add a Youth Advocate to your staff.
  - Build input loops that include youth in out-of-home care so they can provide meaningful feedback on policies, practices, and programming.
- Unless the parent's rights are removed, create ways to engage birth families in positive and meaningful opportunities with school.

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### Questions to Consider:

- What do students need most to expand their opportunities for academic success?
- Where are the gaps in services?
- Has the IEP team, including the parent, been involved to address and support special education needs for students with IEPs?



## Asset Mindset



- Recognize students bring with them strengths and incredible resilience, and actively seek out and build upon those assets.
  - Encourage each student to become involved in extracurricular activities. Ensure the student is aware of the opportunities and potential transportation options available.
  - Make sure staff have the time and make the effort to celebrate and recognize students in out-of-home care. It may be that a student has stronger relationships with the adults at their school than at home, and taking that time to celebrate a birthday, personal accomplishment, or their extra effort can mean a lot.
- Create a school culture where students are encouraged in their areas of interest and success. Provide students with opportunities and supports to fully participate in all aspects of the school experience.
  - Students in out-of-home care have similar aspirations to attend post-secondary education. Learn about each individual student's goals; don't make assumptions about their experiences that might prevent their own versions of success.
- Build trauma-informed, positive behavioral interventions and when appropriate find alternatives to suspension and expulsion.
  - Train staff on the basics of the child welfare system, the demands it makes on children, and the consequences for a child's development.
  - Offer professional learning on trauma-informed practices and work to implement systems that encourage trauma-sensitive decision making.
  - Make sure staff is trained and has the information necessary to make decisions in the best interest of the student. There may be times when trauma or post-traumatic stress symptoms are misdiagnosed as other behavioral or academic needs. Being responsive to student experiences and history can help make sure a student receives the right supports at the right time.
- Be flexible and willing to adapt school requirements.
  - There may be court or therapy sessions a student must attend and having flexible homework or attendance practices can help ensure the student has the space to continue their success.
  - Understand that more time may be necessary for a student to complete a project, and this does not mean they do not want to participate. It may be difficult to gather the materials for a particular project, especially if it involves bringing examples of their past or input from a family member. For example, it may be hard to bring in a baby picture or research their family tree, so allow additional time leading into those types of activities.

## Support with Caring Adults



- Connect students with an advocate or someone invested in their success. Designating school personnel as a point person helps to establish a responsible party to ensure the student meets their goals.
  - Identify a specific staff member that is knowledgeable or connected to services who can advocate for the student and mentor the student in how to advocate for themselves.
- Create a system that allows time and space for an advocate or caring adult to connect meaningfully with students placed in out-of-home care.
  - Build in time for the staff member to connect with the student during the day.
  - As a staff member, make time to connect with the student, their biological parents, and their foster parents on positive topics or just to connect and update on their progress.
- Implement a trauma responsive approach to your work with students.
  - When enrolling the student, do not disclose or redisclose information that might identify the student as being placed in out-of-home care. This is especially crucial during enrollment or when there are significant changes occurring in the youth's life.
  - Work with teachers and staff to plan alternative options for school projects that require family history or a family member to complete. Students may not live with a biological relative, and it may be difficult to pull information about family vacations, interviewing a grandparent or parent, or building a family tree.
- Build relationships across systems.
  - Strengthen communication between the child welfare and educational agencies to help identify important deadlines or dates. When both agencies are able to schedule together, they can coordinate services, testing dates, court or family therapy, and provide flexibility when other services may be needed.
  - Know who to call to coordinate. Define the roles and responsibilities and identify any leadership who may need to be connected in order to align decision making with the needs of your students and programs.
  - Take the time to ensure both systems understand the foundational terms, programs, and goals of one another. Minimize acronyms or jargon and try to get to the root of coordination.
  - Build and maintain consistent and sustained communication structures. Consider regular meetings that include stakeholders.
  - Plan, build goals, track data, and adjust your implementation in a shared vision of success.

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### Questions to Consider:

- What positive relationships does the student have, previously, currently?
- What actions can staff take to encourage positive relationship building?

## Wisconsin Resources

- Wisconsin DPI's Trauma Sensitive Schools Initiative <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health/trauma>
- Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health/framework>
- Student Records and Confidentiality <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pupil-services/school-social-work/contents/confidentiality/student-records>
- Family and Community Engagement <https://dpi.wi.gov/excforall/family-and-community-engagement>
- School Meals <https://dpi.wi.gov/school-nutrition>
- Youth Services Paying for College <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youthservices/college>
- Badgercare <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/badgercareplus/index.htm>
- DCF Kinship Navigator <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/kinship/navigator>
- Preparing for Youth Engagement: Youth Voice, Youth-Adult Partnership, Youth Organizing by ACT for Youth [http://actforyouth.net/resources/pm/pm\\_preparing-youth-engagement\\_0818.pdf](http://actforyouth.net/resources/pm/pm_preparing-youth-engagement_0818.pdf)
- Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council Healthy Relationships Guide <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/yac-healthy.pdf>

## Citations

1. 2018 DCF Out-of-Home Care Report <https://https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/reports/pdf/ohc.pdf>
2. National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care, American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, 2018 <https://fosteringchamps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/NationalEducationDatasheet2018-2.pdf>
3. MacArthur Foundation How Housing Matters Policy Research Brief <https://housingmatters.urban.org/sites/default/files/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/How-Housing-Matters-Policy-Research-Brief-Frequent-Moves-in-Childhood-Can-Affect-Later-Earnings-Work-and-Education.pdf>
4. DPI WISEdash Public Portal. High School Completion <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/17880?filtersetId=0145ab00-84a5-4c8f-93b9-0d632163dd88>
5. Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, and Tis. 2018. The effects of placement and school stability on academic growth trajectories of students in foster care <https://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/pdf/Academic-Growth-Trajectories.pdf>
6. InBrief: The Science of Resilience, Harvard University Center on the Developing Child <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-science-of-resilience/>

# Promising Strategies Planning Tool

Consider what practices your district or child welfare agency can implement. The guide below can help you outline some of the considerations and steps needed to begin planning for implementation. Review the Promising Strategies suggested above as well as the Questions to Consider as your work through this planning document.

## Who?

Identify the essential stakeholders for implementing your strategy. Consider who is at the table helping to develop this plan and who is not present. Is there anyone else you should bring in to help inform your practice more holistically? Who else can help the implementation be more successful?

LEA main contact: \_\_\_\_\_

CWA main contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Essential stakeholders (consider students with experience with the child welfare system who are able to participate, as well as families or members of your local community):

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

## Why?

What do your students tell you?

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What does the data tell you? Where are successes? What are areas in need of improvement?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What needs have you identified? What is the root cause of those needs?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## How?

What are the highest leverage activities? What will have the greatest impact with minimal capacity?

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What are the potential consequences to be aware of?

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How will the identified root cause be addressed?

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What steps will you take?

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Who is responsible?

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What is the timeline?

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How will you track adult practices?

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What will you measure to track success?

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## What?

Write out three clear and concise first steps so you and your colleagues can start moving towards action with your determined strategy.

Summarize your strategy:

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1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_