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Practice Brief

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WORKING TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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The Role of Cross Systems Data Sharing at the Local Level

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Knowing the role that research and data play in system improvement, as well as the time it takes to create change, the Kansas Partnership for Educating Kids in Care (KPEKC) was established in 2012 to assess and address barriers to educational outcomes for youth in care. Believing that addressing issues at the state level alone was not enough, KPEKC also established a local task force to begin exploring what was needed and possible at the local level. A major focus for task force partners was to pilot a process for sharing data at the local level and develop and test a training component on using shared data. This brief highlights the work of the local partnership, key lessons learned, and related policy recommendations.

Identification of Need

Nationally, only about 50% of children in foster care graduate from high school. Kansas data show that only about one in three (29.6 percent) of young adults who ended foster care custody with the state in 2013 had completed the 12th grade. Many reasons exist for these low rates: multiple placement changes resulting in frequent school moves, limited awareness of the impact of trauma, and behavioral problems associated with a prevalence of mental health issues.

Policy makers, administrators, and direct service staff are committed to the success of these youth. However, in order to improve the situation, there is a need to understand who this population is and how they fare across more than one system. Unfortunately, the ability to readily merge, interpret, and use data across the Kansas child welfare and education systems is missing at both the state and local level.

Kansas is not unique in this situation. A study examining the extent to which staff has the data needed to inform practice found that resources to support evidence-based practice were inadequate in child and family-serving agencies (Barratt, 2003). Organizational supports that help build capacity to use data effectively include teaching staff to use data (Wulczyn, 2005) and analyzing the relationship between practice indicators and outcomes so that staff can adjust practice techniques used with clients (Cozens, 1999). Although more research is needed, it is clear that collaboration and data sharing between the child welfare and education systems are critical to improving educational outcomes for youth in care. Neither system can address the issue alone.

The availability of timely, matched child welfare and educational data is particularly essential at the local level. Without it, staff working with youth in various capacities do not have access to information critical to inform practice. For example, without it, a case worker may not know that a child on her caseload is struggling in the classroom and may not have timely information to share with the judge regarding the child's educational progress. School counselors may not know which youth are in out of home placements and thus, cannot factor in trauma that may be affecting the classroom

experience. Child welfare and education administrators responsible for youth in care may not know how these youth are progressing relative to their peers, and what policies are needed to address the root causes of educational instability and improve educational outcomes such as graduation rates.

Highlights from the Local Child Welfare/Education Task Force

In a process that paralleled the work at the state level, a local cross systems task force was created. Centered in an urban county, the local group was comprised of staff from the Kansas Department for Children and Families regional office, USD 501, and TFI, Inc., the child welfare contractor serving that area. Staff from the University of Kansas supported the group's efforts. The original intent was to identify crossed systems data that could be used as examples in the training package as a way to increase knowledge about data informed decision making and help tailor how the data could be interpreted and applied to policy. However, as the group convened, it became clear that cross systems data did not exist between these two systems and thus, the work of the group centered on how to create it in time to include in the pilot training.

An interesting dilemma developed in the process. As the local taskforce members explored how to cross and match data, the state level task group was also working on data merging and sharing. Questions emerged as to whether the local group should wait for the state group to finalize a data process, which, once successful, would identify which youth attending public school were in foster care placements. While the local members wanted to merge data as soon as possible, they considered waiting on the state because completing the match at the local level required time-intensive manually matching as there was no shared variable that would allow data sets from the two local systems to be integrated.

Ultimately, local partners decided to proceed with a one-time manual match so they could see what process was required, identify which variables were needed, and review the data results. Although the work took many hours, it proved quite informative.

Lessons Learned

Many lessons were learned through this early work by the local task force but four in particular are shared here.

The first lesson involved identifying what data were needed and where they resided. After completing a one-time pilot merge, local partners came to three realizations:

- a) The variables that they wanted to match and share across systems to inform policy and practice were available but only at the local level. These included grades, suspensions, expulsions, participation in sports or other activities, progress towards graduation, etc.
- b) State level agencies also had a critical role to play. Specifically, they needed to provide unduplicated identifiers for both child welfare and education systems to allow the data from the two systems to be readily merged. By providing a simple download with this information at the state level, school staff and child

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welfare contractors would be able to merge their local data quite easily. Without it, the data had to be manually matched, which was so time intensive that it ultimately made the process impractical.

- c) The data from the state needed to be refreshed at least weekly. Youth move in and out of the foster care system throughout the year. Once in foster care, some youth change placements fairly frequently, including moves that require a change in school districts and/or individual school. This movement in and out of foster care overall and in placements specifically made it difficult for local level staff to keep a current list of which students in a particular district/school were in foster care.

In summary, both state and local level partners have a critical role to play if data are to be made available to inform policy and practice and support individual students.

A second lesson related to timing issues. Members of both systems were committed to working together but had different needs and availability. Schools were strapped for time at the beginning and end of the school year and some staff did not work over the summer. The child welfare staff worked year-round but were driven by the need to upload data for federal reporting overall and specific reporting such as sharing information with judges. Additionally, the IT/data systems staff for both systems had many responsibilities and priorities, but were needed to assist in the data sharing process. All of these factors put limits on who was available and when to cross, interpret, and use data.

Third was the realization that training was needed for educators and child welfare staff to understand how to interpret the data but to do this, they needed to understand the contextual environment of each other's system. This information included topics such as the reason for multiple school placements and the process for determining credits when a student changed districts. Staff also needed to know what different data variables were available, the context in which they should be used, and how that information could be applied to improve practice.

Finally, it became clear that after the labor intensive process of matching and compiling the data was completed, there was still a significant commitment of time and resources by both systems to use the data, particularly if it was to be used in a collaborative fashion. The will was there to undertake this work but the reality of multiple priorities made it challenging. Yet, without structural supports to make this commitment possible, change cannot be expected.

Policy Recommendations

To facilitate sharing data between child welfare providers and school districts and increase cross systems engagement, the following steps are recommended. Each may be affected by local school district, child welfare provider or state policy.

- 1) Explore how collaboration between the two systems at both the local and state level can realistically occur, identify what resources are required to implement it, and advocate for those supports to be available to better serve this population. As mentioned above, there is a willingness to work together but it is one of many priorities that both systems face. Policy changes at the federal

level are increasingly requiring this type of collaboration but staff need to be provided time and resources to carry out these expectations.

- 2) Given that there is already an expectation of each system to use data, create policy to provide the data and establish expectations for how it will be used collaboratively between child welfare and education partners to improve educational outcomes for youth in care.
- 3) Youth in foster care are vulnerable to negative educational outcomes. Staff from child welfare and education systems need to better understand each other's systems, the role data can play in assessing youth progress individually and as a group, and how to make policy and practice decisions that will help youth achieve success.

Although there is room for improvement, there is also much reason for hope. Just as youth in foster care are resilient and capable of great achievements, so are the state and local staff who serve them. The pilot work through the KPEKC initiative offers specific ideas for the role data and policy can play as we strive to help our youth in care achieve their full potential.

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