



Educational Services for Student in Foster Care

The education of children in foster care and state care presents an extraordinary challenge to the school systems of Massachusetts. Students transitioned into foster care have been traumatized, taken from homes they have known, and frequently moved during their time in the program. To have any measure of academic success, these vulnerable children require high levels of educational and emotional support. Federal law and regulations, along with state law and regulation in the areas of both child welfare and K-12 education, provide a complicated context for the required academic and human services.

The Office of State Auditor Suzanne M. Bump has conducted a study that highlights challenges that strain the current system for providing education services for students in foster care. These include communication and cooperation roadblocks between child welfare and local education staff, confusion caused by federal law, a shortage of transportation resources, increasing demand, and a disproportional impact on resource-constrained communities. In it, Bump lays out steps to overcome the challenges that hinder academic success for these students and strain local government resources.

“We have a responsibility to ensure that every student in the Commonwealth has the opportunity to reach their full education potential, but we must recognize the unique challenges faced by students in foster care. Too often, the educational success of these students is hindered by a complex bureaucracy and a lack of resources and expertise, and this burden is particularly acute in low-income communities.”

-Suzanne M. Bump State Auditor

Key Findings & Recommendations

Challenge: Local School Districts expend significant resources to fund educational services for students in foster care.

- ⇒ The state should assume the full expense of providing educational services to students in foster care and state care.

Challenge: School district officials devote considerable time and effort to ensuring that children in foster care are receiving the right educational services.

- ⇒ DCF and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) should cooperate on maintaining a dynamic list of students in foster care and their current placements, as well as their schools of origin and other data.
- ⇒ The Commonwealth should implement an electronic backpack for foster care students.
- ⇒ There is a need for resources to support proper education credentialing.

Challenge: DCF should ensure that its staff adheres to the procedures in the DCF / DESE joint guidance from January 2018.

- ⇒ DCF and DESE should cooperate to provide training to DCF and school district staff on how to collaborate on placement decisions (best-interest determinations) and how student information should flow.
- ⇒ DESE and DCF should encourage the use of Special Education Surrogate or Guardian Ad Litem arrangements for students in foster care.
- ⇒ DCF should provide proper written documentation to districts alerting them to the gain or loss of students.

Challenge: Proper transportation arrangements are a challenge for districts that must return students to their schools of origin.

- ⇒ The Commonwealth should provide transportation funding for children in foster care.
- ⇒ DCF and DESE should complete the process to provide proper documentation for the commonwealth to receive reimbursement for transportation expenses under Title IV E of the Social Security Act.
- ⇒ Support the legislative commission examining aspects of school transportation funding.
- ⇒ In addition to fully funding required transportation reimbursements, the legislature should consider funding an appropriate number of subject matter experts for DESE to provide substantial technical assistance to districts as they seek to control costs while enhancing service delivery.

“Due to placement disruptions and a high rate of specialized educational needs, children in foster care face immense challenges in the classroom. The Commonwealth must do everything it can to help these students succeed. As state lawmakers work to revamp the Commonwealth’s education funding formula, I encourage them to use this report as a resource and take action on its recommendations, to ensure children in our state’s foster care system can meet their full academic potential.”

-Mary Bourque, Superintendent of Chelsea Public Schools

“Teachers and administrators throughout the Commonwealth are committed to meeting the academic needs of students in foster care. Too often, though, their efforts are hindered by an inadequate system of competing laws, regulations, and funding mechanisms. This report offers concrete steps the Commonwealth can take to ensure these students’ academic needs remain front-and-center. I look forward to working with Auditor Bump, lawmakers, and our state’s educational leaders to make these recommendations a reality.”

-Thomas Scott, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents

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