

## Building Resilience in Students at the Intersection of Special Education and Foster Care Challenges, Strategies, and Resources for Educators

**Jenny Parker**  
**Jessica Folkman**

*Western Washington University*

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to inform educators (general educators, special educators, teacher educators, and administrators) about ways to teach, advocate for, and empower students with disabilities who are also engaged in the foster care system. The conclusion includes authors' suggestions for how teacher educators might incorporate the information presented here into their programs.

Taking cues from the literature in the fields of special education, resiliency, school psychology, social work, and school leadership, the authors offer myriad strategies to educators who may have the following questions:

1. What can I do in my *classroom* to support students who receive special education services and who are in foster care? How can I be a good mentor? What should I teach to foment protective factors within students who are part of this particular population?
2. What are some things I could do at a *school level* to ensure

---

*Jenny Parker is a senior instructor and Jessica Folkman is a student, both with the Department of Special Education and Educational Leadership of the Woodring College of Education at Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington. Jenny.Parker@wwu.edu & folkmaj@students.wwu.edu*

that stakeholders and educators use time and resources efficiently and effectively to serve youth standing at this intersection? What are some systems I could put into place or refine to improve outcomes?

3. What can I do to create opportunities for students in foster care who have identified disabilities *to engage with and serve in their own communities*?

4. How do I begin to navigate my way through the labyrinth of possible actions? What are some salient issues I should consider? Where can I learn more? What are some good resources for me, my students, my colleagues, and other stakeholders with respect to these issues?

5. How can teacher educators incorporate information on this topic into teacher education programs?

## Background Information about Foster Care and Special Education

### ***Introduction to Background Information***

In this section we describe the scope of the problem, how special education and foster care intersect, and systems level challenges.

To support teachers' understanding of how they can advocate for and address the needs of students who are in foster care and who also receive special education services, it is important to briefly describe the number of children who are in foster care and receive special education services, the impact that placement in foster care can have on educational outcomes, and what happens at the intersection between foster care and special education systems. It is also important to describe some of the predominant challenges that are frequently identified by researchers in the literature, including challenges with data and communication between a broad range of parties. This information describes the backdrop onto which successful, strengths-based practices can be applied to overcome such challenges and support students' achievement of personal and academic growth and success.

### ***Statistics and Overview***

In the 2012 financial fiscal year (FFY), a total of 638,000 youth were served in the public foster care system, and on the last day of FFY 2012, a total of 397,122 youth were being served in the system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013a; U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, 2013b). Of this latter number, the mean age of children in foster care was 9.1 years, and the mean time in care was 22.7 months. The most common placements for youth were in non-relative foster family homes (46%), relatives' foster family homes (28%), institutions (9%), and trial home visits (5%) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013b). According to the Casey Family Programs (2011), school-aged children in foster care experience an average of 3.1 placements in different foster care homes. Frequent changes in placement occur the longer youth are in foster care, which often result in students detaching themselves from others (Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004). Trends such as these have concerning implications that inform needed outreach and mentorship efforts that will be addressed later in this discussion.

The importance of monitoring and supporting the educational needs of students in foster care cannot be overstated. Of concern, however, is that "[t]he education of children in foster care is often overlooked as the courts and dependency care system focus on the crisis that brings the family to the court and finding a safe haven for the child" (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006, p. 268). Consequences of this oversight of the education of youth in foster care are tremendous. For example, changes in school placement can result in up to 4-6 months of lost educational progress (Calvin, Fenton, Lee, Pattison, Warner-King, Nist, & Purbaugh, 2000). This loss can significantly impact a student's academic success, especially when repeated changes in placement occur. Additional outcomes of concern for students who are in foster care include higher absenteeism, more suspension and expulsion from school, lower scores on standardized tests, more grade retention, and lower graduation rates, as compared with students not in foster care (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011). These statistics point to the critical need for students, teachers, administrators, and caregivers to remain aware and responsive to the educational needs of students, especially when students are experiencing times of transition and/or instability.

### ***The Intersection of Foster Care and Special Education***

An estimated 30% to 50% of children in foster care receive special education services, compared with 13.1% among students overall (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Among the overall student population receiving special education services in 2009, 6.9% of students qualified under the category of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in Heward, 2013). In contrast, approximately 50% of children in foster care who are enrolled in special education have identified emotional or behavioral disorders, which may be a result of histories of abuse or neglect (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003;

Zetlin et al., 2012). Although certainly not all students who are in foster care are in need of special education services, these statistics indicate that for many, the complex intersection between foster care and special education is a reality that requires the attention of teachers and administrators alike. While there is a striking disparity in the enrollment numbers in special education between students who are and are not in foster care placement, concerns exist around over-identification, under-identification, and inappropriate educational decision-making and placement.

Under-identification of children in foster care in special education occurs when a student has a disability, but is not properly identified as such, and as a result does not receive special education services to which he/she is entitled. For example, this area of concern was identified in focus group interviews in which caregivers of children in foster care identified instances of school failure to recognize a student's disability and provide the appropriate supports (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Under-identification for special education is concerning because it prevents some students from receiving the supportive services and protections to which they are legally entitled, and can have a cascade of negative ramifications upon student achievement.

In contrast, over-identification of children in foster care in special education occurs when a student does not have a disability and is inappropriately provided with special education services. Over-identification can result from a number of factors, such as: inaccurate assessments (including incorrectly identifying behavior problems or learning gaps as disabilities), financial incentives for institutions that serve students with disabilities, and perceptions that special education services would be most beneficial to students in foster care (Berliner & Lezin, n.d.; Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2010).

Inappropriate adaptations to curriculum and placements in restrictive settings are also areas of concern for students in foster care and special education, especially because inclusive educational practices and high academic standards are identified as key factors needed to improve educational success (Vacca, 2008). For example, coursework that is not demanding, academic settings that are overly restrictive, and inappropriate assignment of modified diplomas (e.g., diplomas that acknowledge participation rather than academic achievement), have been identified by youth in foster care and researchers alike (Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, Powers, & the Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care, 2012; Geenen, Powers, Hogansen, & Pittman, 2007).

### ***Systems Level Challenges***

The intersection between foster care and special education is complex,

and has a number of challenges identified in the literature. These challenges include ineffective data sharing and communication procedures between agencies and individuals, and the exclusion of students from their own educational decision-making processes. These challenges are briefly addressed here to inform the backdrop onto which successful strategies may be implemented, and to help identify opportunities where teachers can play an important role implementing changes at the classroom, school, and community levels.

When a student is at the intersection of foster care and special education, there are myriad entities involved in their lives, including, but not limited to: schools and local education agencies, teachers and administrators, social workers, lawyers, foster parents, and biological parents. Together, these entities must collaborate and communicate to meet the educational needs of the student. As Zetlin et al., (2010), write:

[i]t is clear that no single group or agency has the resources or expertise to provide the services and supports required to better serve this vulnerable population...effectively addressing the educational needs of foster youths requires coordination, communication, and collaboration between the [child welfare] system, the schools, family members, and foster youths. (p. 253)

However, systemic challenges such as lack of data sharing and poor communication may hinder effective coordination and communication between these entities. Challenges such as these have implications for both general education and special education personnel, and are briefly presented here to identify the context onto which educators may apply successful strategies to support information gathering and responsiveness to student needs.

Ineffective communication such as the slow transfer of school records when a student changes schools, lack of monitoring student grades, attendance, and behaviors, and the guarding rather than sharing of student case information, are all frequently cited challenges in the literature (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004; Palladino & Haar, 2011; Casey Family Programs, 2007; Watson & Kabler, 2012). According to Casey Family Programs (2007), a new school's receipt of records is often delayed due to inefficient data management, delays in transfer of records, lost or incomplete records, or barriers to data sharing such as confidentiality requirements or incompatible data management systems. Challenges related to school transfers are especially concerning for students receiving special education services, who are reported to experience a higher degree of placement instability than do youth without disabilities (Geenen et al., 2007). Similarly, challenges in data tracking to

monitor student grades, attendance, and behavior have been identified by youth advocates (Zetlin, et al., 2010). Berliner and Lezin, in their publication entitled *Policy Perspectives* (n.d.), report that data and records challenges such as these are one of the clearest priorities identified by experts in the field that needs to be addressed in order support research and inform policy to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care.

Additionally, communication and collaboration challenges between teachers, schools, local education agencies (LEAs), social workers, child welfare agencies (CWAs), biological parents, and foster parents are also frequently cited as barriers to educational success (Zetlin, et al., 2004; Palladino & Haar, 2011; Watson & Kabler, 2012; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). For example, among a survey of new general education and special education teachers, Zetlin et al., (2012), found that 83% of general education teachers and 45% of special education teachers had no background information on students in their classes who were in foster care. Additionally, 38% of general education teachers and 15% of special education teachers found out about the student's foster placement status from the child. Ineffective communication such as this may limit teachers' awareness of students' backgrounds, and restrict their ability to be responsive toward students' unique needs. Lack of information may also have detrimental effects on the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process for students in special education if the holder of educational rights is unknown or if school personnel incorrectly assume that the stakeholder with whom they are communicating has educational decision-making rights. Further complications may also arise when requesting consent for testing and service implementation.

Unfortunately, communication challenges are not limited to agencies and administrators alone, but also include communication challenges with the students themselves. Youth lacking information about their own situations, including why they were taken out of their homes, when their placements would change, and why they were in particular school settings or educational tracks, is a theme reported by researchers in the literature (Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004; Geenen et al., 2007; Del Quest et al., 2012). Further, Geenen et al., report student voices recalling their own exclusion from the educational decision making process:

...on several occasions youth participating in the project have been presented with transition plans for exiting out of care that were created exclusively by professionals (often the caseworker) with little or no input from the youth; as a result the plan does not reflect the goals and interests of the young person (2007, p. 25).

Exclusion of student voice in educational decision-making processes can have several consequences. If student input is not included when planning transitions or other student outcomes, it precludes meaningful participation and appropriate goal setting tailored to the individual child. Exclusion of any kind also serves as a source of disempowerment to the student. Recognizing these consequences, this discussion will address opportunities for teachers to mitigate these challenges and advocate for student empowerment and involvement in their educational decision making processes.

## Successful Strategies

### ***Introduction to Successful Strategies***

In this section we summarize research-based best practices that support children and youth in foster care who receive special education services. We begin with strength-based approaches, and then describe strategies at three levels—classroom, school, and community.

### ***Strengths Based Approach***

Despite the systemic challenges that exist at the intersection of foster care and special education, there is a wealth of literature that discusses the resiliency of youth, which informs strategies that teachers and other adults in students' lives can use to support the success of children in foster care. As described by Zimmerman (2013) "...a resiliency paradigm orients researchers and practitioners to positive factors in youth's lives that become the focus of change strategies designed to enhance strengths" (Zimmerman 2013, p. 381). This paradigm provides the framework for our paper's subsequent discussion of successful practices; therefore, the topic of resiliency and its guiding principles will first be briefly discussed here.

According to the National Education Agency (2011), "students who are resilient have strengths and characteristics that help them succeed in school despite the difficulties they may face in their lives" (Chapter 4-1). Characteristics of resilient people include: social competency, possession of problem-solving skills, critical consciousness, autonomy, and sense of purpose and future (Benard & Burgoa, 2002, as cited in NEA, 2011). Most importantly, however, one critical feature of resiliency is its universality. As described in Benard's culminating work, *Resiliency: What We Have Learned* (2004), resiliency is "...a universal, developmental capacity of every human being" that is developed from the environmental factors of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution" (Benard 2004, p.43). Masten (2001), as

cited in Hass and Graydon (2009), powerfully refers to this universal strength in all individuals as "ordinary magic."

Benard (2004) extensively discusses the ways in which these three environmental factors may be overlaid onto multiple domains in a child's life, including school, family and community. Similarly, Werner (2005), found three factors that contribute to resiliency in youth: protective factors within the individual (e.g., temperamental characteristics, self-help skills, beliefs of self-efficacy, and high expectations); protective factors in the family (e.g., having at least one person who provided emotional support and stability); and protective factors in the community (e.g., relationships with community elders, peers, teachers). These environmental, or protective, factors have the potential to exist within classroom and school settings. Therefore, they are extensively referenced in this paper to inform the individual- and systems-level opportunities that teachers can use to help students develop their innate strengths and resiliency to succeed and thrive. Benard (2004) further postulates that protective factors have not merely an additive effect upon children's lives, but that they offer benefits across domains (e.g., a protective factor in the school can increase success for children in the home, school, *and* community).

### ***Classroom Level Strategies***

Within the classroom, teachers play important roles in their students' lives as an informed, consistent, and caring adult figure, as an educator of academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills, as an advocate, and as a liaison to community resources. These roles are especially important when teachers are working with students who are in foster care and who also receive special education services.

As a consistent adult in the lives of students who may experience frequent changes and instability, teachers are in a unique position to mentor and support youth through caring relationships. Benard (2004) characterizes caring relationships as ones comprised of compassion, respect, active listening, and high expectations, and identifies caring relationships as one of the three environmental protective factors for youth. Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, and Tracy (2010) identify important attributes of non-kin mentors to youth in foster care, including actively reaching out to establish and maintain contact with youth, and providing honest and caring feedback to youth. At policy forums in Michigan in 2010, youth who had aged out of foster care identified another theme: "Youth in foster care want caring and competent teachers who are aware of their personal challenges and available during the school day" (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012, p.1011). Additionally, in their book, *Families, Professionals, and Exceptionality*,



Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, and Shogren (2011) identify the need for a caring adult such as a teacher to provide follow-through and be reliable in order to build trust with students, families, and other stakeholders. By developing these relationship attributes with their students in foster care, teachers can play an important role to support and encourage their students.

Due to systems-level challenges such as delays in data records and slow or non-existent interagency communication, it is doubly important for teachers to be proactive in efforts to learn as much as possible about the individual student with whom they work. These efforts include reaching out to students to learn about their life circumstances, interests, academic prior knowledge, and strengths. Tools such as in-class surveys about students' interests and which types of activities and topics are reinforcing to students can also be used to provide information that teachers can use in the classroom to help students experience early success and to facilitate a positive classroom experience. From this information, teachers can choose carrier content and personalize instruction to make it both relevant and interesting to students who may have a high likelihood of poor school performance. Additionally, by building rapport and trusting relationships with students, caregivers, and other important individuals in the students' lives, teachers can secure more complete, comprehensive information to better guide instructional programming.

Teachers should also remember to teach according to evidence-based best practices, and to recognize that teaching is not limited to academic skills, but includes interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as well. It is especially important that these teaching priorities are kept in the forefront for students who are in foster care and are receiving special education services. For example, some research demonstrates that teachers and administrators focus primarily on difficult behaviors from students who have disabilities, and do not pay as much attention to academic programming as to behavior interventions (Palladino & Haar, 2011; Burrell, 2003). Additionally, the focus of the foster care system is upon immediate personal safety, for which the price may be academic continuity. Taking a page from best practices for teaching all students with disabilities, teachers can fill in gaps in prior knowledge with high quality, explicit instruction (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007).

Explicit, evidence-based instruction can mitigate gaps in prior knowledge not only for academic subjects, but also for teaching social skills, problem solving, goal setting, and other pro-social skills. For example, if a student lacks knowledge of how to apologize properly, teachers can explicitly teach this skill, and have students practice through role-plays and repetition. Teachers are also in a unique position to teach intraper-

sonal skills that build resiliency and are demonstrated by those who are resilient. As identified by Benard (2004), it is important for teachers build their understanding and awareness of resiliency and strengths-based approaches, and to learn how to recognize resilience in one's self in order to model it and see it in others. To accomplish these recommendations, educators should familiarize themselves with the literature on resiliency, and take the time to reflect on examples within their own lives.

### ***School Level Strategies***

The role of the teacher extends beyond the classroom, and into the school halls and offices, as well as into the community. As such, teachers can be a powerful influence in developing systems, processes, and cultures in their schools that support the needs of students in foster care who receive special education services.

Frequent challenges exist at the systems-level around communication and data sharing between schools, caregivers, students, and agencies. Teachers can build upon their awareness of these challenges by asking questions and advocating for improvements in authentic, expedient, and inclusive communication. For example, teachers may want to inquire if there is a communication protocol that is used by the school to facilitate information sharing between each stakeholder connected with the student in question. If a protocol does not yet exist, teachers can offer to be a part of its development and implementation. In addition, it is also important for teachers to maintain communication and collaboration with one another. This communication should involve special education and general education teachers and administrators, and should expand across elementary and secondary grade levels. The importance of early academic remediation and practice for skills such as self-determination is addressed in the literature (Barth, 1990; Geenen et al., 2007), and collaboration can provide a critical link in ensuring a continuum of high quality instruction that serves as early remediation, early intervention, and opportunities to develop academic, communication, and social skills for all students.

At the school level, teachers also play an important role as advocates for their students. As a team member in IEP meetings, teachers should always strive to stay informed and abreast of special education law and legislation to support their critical role on the IEP team. This not only includes advocating on behalf of students, but also supporting the establishment of school-level protocol in which students are provided with the information they need to become empowered advocates for themselves.

The following list presents three of many potential systems changes to school protocol that could be implemented to empower students: (1)

teach students about their rights and educational opportunities so they do not fall prey to professionals who may, even inadvertently, deny them a range of options based upon legal and ethical considerations, (2) ensure student input into decisions regarding their education, placement, and other services, and (3) encourage and teach self-advocacy and self-determinism to develop student agency in decisions regarding their own lives. In these ways, school-level priorities and practices can help students self-advocate, and provide them with skills and sense of empowerment from which they can continue to draw and build from throughout their lives.

Teachers can also play an important role in sculpting the culture of their schools to support students and encourage skills that support resiliency. For example, as discussed in Benard (2004), schools can support students' development of resiliency by promoting the environmental protective factors of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their communities. Teachers familiar with these environmental factors can model and advocate for their use in the broader school setting by establishing school-wide mentoring programs between teachers and students, students and students, or students and community members, or advocating for the implementation of school-wide service learning projects. The benefits of mentoring, including non-kin mentoring, and formal and informal mentoring, is widely discussed in the literature as a source of support, guidance, and encouragement that helps youth overcome challenges and achieve personal goals and academic success (Munson, et al., 2010; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Del Quest et al., 2012; Hass & Graydon, 2009).

### ***Community Level Strategies***

In addition to having opportunities to impact change at the classroom and school levels, teachers can also serve as a liaison between students and valuable community resources such as community members, volunteers, and leadership opportunities. These liaison activities may include integrating service learning projects into classroom and school-wide activities, using cooperative learning in the classroom, and connecting students with other individuals in the community from whom they can receive mentorship or provide mentorship to others.

Integration of service learning opportunities into curriculum is one way that teachers and schools can support students with disabilities who are in the foster care system to build their involvement in the community and connections with local assets such as individuals, organizations, and activities. For example, Benard and Burgoa, 2002, as cited in NEA, 2011, call for opportunities for meaningful participation in school and community

to promote protection in students at risk of school failure. Further, Haas and Graydon (2009) presented results of their study, in which they followed successful participants who had been in foster care, and where success was defined as participation in post-secondary education. A common characteristic they found among successful individuals was that they had some type of community involvement including church activities, volunteer activities, or hobbies that took place in the community.

Local agencies and schools can also play a critical role in growing local expertise and empowering these youth to return to the school to help others. For example, inviting former students to return as guest speakers may be a good way for those who have faced adversity to reclaim their experiences in a positive manner. Borrowing an example from powerful media in the disability world, in the film *Who Cares about Kelsey?* (Habib, 2011), the producer/director followed a tough as nails girl with a documented disability as she navigated her rocky way through the completion of high school. The documentary culminates with her return to the high school after graduation to share her story with current students who may have similar challenges. In this way, Kelsey was able to reclaim her own experience and positively impact the lives of others in her community. Additionally, as addressed in Hochman et al., (2004), it is also important to consider that the value of sharing expertise is not limited to students alone:

Former foster youth, parents, and foster parents were eager to use their own experience to help guide others. They wished to be role models, advocates, recruiters, mentors and policy-shapers, helping children and families navigate the system and making it more responsive and effective. (2004, p. 11)

There are many ways in which community connections can provide students with a heightened sense of inclusion and empowerment as contributors to their community. This sense of empowerment can serve as a lasting source of strength and contributor to resiliency that can positively affect students throughout their lives. At the conclusion of their 2009 article, Haas and Graydon summarize the finding that successful students were involved in their communities, and therefore suggest that future programs contain this important component, pointing out that:

Perhaps more importantly, such activities [volunteerism; involvement in community activities] provide opportunities to develop a sense of belonging and practice critical prosocial skills such as problems [sic] solving, altruism, and autonomy ... Perhaps more importantly, such activities allow youth to move beyond simply being passive recipients of services, and help to being active contributors to the families and communities in which they live. (2009, p. 462)

## Discussion

### ***Implications for Teacher Education***

The authors of this article have provided a framework from which teacher educators may begin to positively address how to teach students who have disabilities and who are being served in the foster care system. Teacher educators have an opportunity to engage with this topic from a proactive stance. The perspectives and layout walk through the salient topics involved, and the resources allow teachers and teacher educators to enter the discussion with different levels of background knowledge. In addition, many of the successful strategies addressed in this article—including strengths-based approaches—sets a tone of positivity, proactivity, and hope that should be a universal tenant within all teaching approaches. For example, Benard (2004)'s book *Resiliency: What We Have Learned* is a critical contribution to the literature. Introducing resources such as this with pre-service teachers is an excellent opportunity for early educators to develop an early perspective and approach to teaching that incorporates these strength-based practices and guides their future teaching efforts.

### ***Suggestions for Teacher Education Programs***

1. Make resources addressed in this article, such as Benard (2004), required reading for pre-service teachers in all endorsement areas, not merely those in special education programs.
2. As part of their coursework, have pre-service teachers conduct research to increase their familiarity with local resources for youth in foster care (e.g., Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for Children, Big Brothers Big Sisters, or other local non-profits). While these resources may not be specific to youth who receive special education services, they are important community assets with whom future educators may collaborate.
3. Invite guest speakers from different agencies that serve youth in foster care (e.g., social service agencies, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for Children, Big Brothers Big Sisters) to share their perspectives and experiences with pre-service teachers. Encourage guest speakers to articulate the ways in which teachers can serve as collaborators and partners with these organizations to respond to the needs of youth.
4. Teacher education programs should adopt a strengths-based framework for working with each student, including those with disabilities and those who are in the foster care system. Use and

application of such a framework should be a consequential part of teacher education programs.

5. Pre-service teachers should be exposed to the expectation that they should be collaborating with families, students themselves, other teachers, administrators, and social services personnel to work in the interests of students. Role-plays of high- and low-stakes meetings are an excellent way to practice specific skills necessary for successful professional collaboration.

6. Teacher candidates should be taught about the exigencies around full inclusion. Instruction on co-teaching structures, meeting with social service personnel in preparation courses, effective instruction, and effective communication skills all increase the likelihood of student success.

### ***Conclusion and Key Resources for Further Understanding***

Special education teachers and other educators have both a privilege and a responsibility to meet the unique, and often pressing needs of their students who are in foster care. While this paper provides an overview of some key challenges, successes, and strength-based approaches that teachers can utilize to support the needs of their students in foster care who receive special education services, a wealth of additional information exists. It is recommended that readers continue to explore these valuable resources to further their understanding and familiarity with strength-based approaches and resiliency frameworks, intersections between foster care and special education systems, and successful approaches for teaching, mentorship, and advocacy. Table 1 includes resource information on books, reports, websites, and articles that educators can access to further their research and understanding of these critical topics.

Although there are myriad challenges that students who are in foster care and special education may face, there is tremendous potential for them to succeed and thrive. Classroom level, school level, and community level strategies present opportunities for teachers and administrators to build characteristics of resiliency and respond to the needs of students who may be at the complex intersection of special education and foster care. As such, with a little bit of “ordinary magic,” teachers, personnel, families and other stakeholders can help transform children into strong, self-reliant, and confident adults.

---

 Table 1: Resources for Further Information
**Resiliency**

Information on resiliency and environmental protective factors in family, school, and community contexts:

Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Available for purchase: [www.wested.org/resources/resiliency-what-we-have-learned/](http://www.wested.org/resources/resiliency-what-we-have-learned/)

Information on specific actions that teachers can take to support student resiliency:

National Education Association. (2011). *C.A.R.E.: Strategies for closing the achievement gaps* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: National Education Association. Available for download: [www.nea.org/care-guide](http://www.nea.org/care-guide)

**Special Education**

Information on special education law and advocacy:

Wrightslaw [Website], [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com)

Information on the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA):

U.S. Department of Education. *Building the legacy: IDEA 2004* [Website], <http://idea.ed.gov/>

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. *IDEA—The Individuals with Disabilities Act* [Website], <http://nichcy.org/laws/idea>

Key terms for special education:

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. *Key terms to know in special education* [Website], <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/keyterms>

**Advocacy**

Information on advocacy for youth:

Calvin, E., Fenton, R., Lee, A., Pattison, B., Warner-King, K., Nist, J., & Purbaugh, J. (2008). *Make a difference in a child's life: A manual for helping children and youth get what they need in school*. Seattle, WA: TeamChild and Casey Family Programs. Available for download: <http://www.teamchild.org/index.php/education/manual/>

**Foster Care**

Resources that address child welfare and foster care issues:

Casey Family programs publications on foster care and child welfare [Website], [www.casey.org/resources/publications/directory/subject/](http://www.casey.org/resources/publications/directory/subject/)

Youth Law Center. *Resource library* [Website], <http://www.ylc.org/resource-bank/>

Resources that address child welfare and foster care legislation:

Children's Defense Fund. *Fostering connections to success and increasing adoptions*

*act* [Website] [www.childrensdefense.org/policy-priorities/child-welfare/fostering-connections/](http://www.childrensdefense.org/policy-priorities/child-welfare/fostering-connections/)

*Children's Rights Organization* [Website], [www.childrensrights.org/](http://www.childrensrights.org/)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. Federal laws [Website] [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws-policies/federal-laws](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws-policies/federal-laws)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. *Major federal legislation concerned with child protection, child welfare, and adoption* [Website] <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/otherpubs/majorfedlegis.cfm>

### ***Educational Liaison Model***

Information on the Educational Liaison Model:

Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L. A., & Shea, N. M. (2006). Improving educational prospects for youth in foster care: the education liaison model. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 41*(5), 267-272.

Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L. A., & Shea, N. M. (2010). Caregivers, school liaisons, and agency advocates speak out about the educational needs of children and youths in foster care. *Social Work, 55*(3), 245-254.

### ***Effective Communication***

Information on effective communication strategies for teachers:

Turnbull, A., Turnbull, H. R., Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., & Shogren, K. A. (2010). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust* (6th Edition). Boston, MA: Pearson.

### ***Student Voices***

Select articles that highlight student voices, experiences, and perspectives:

Barth, R. P. (1990). On their own: The experiences of youth after foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work, 7*(5), 419-440.

Burrell, S. (2003). *Getting out of the "red zone": Youth from juvenile justice and child welfare systems speak out about the obstacles to completing their education and what could help*. Washington, DC: Youth Law Center.

Day, A., Riebschleger, J., Dworsky, A., Damashek, A., & Fogarty, K. (2012). Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 1007-1014.

Del Quest, A., Fullerton, A., Geenen, S., Powers, L., & The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care. (2012). Voices of youth in foster care and special education regarding their educational experiences and transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 1604-1615.

Hass, M., & Graydon, K. (2009). Sources of resiliency among successful foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*, 457-463.



Hochman, G., Hochman, A., & Miller, J. (2004). *Foster care voices from the inside*. Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.

Merdinger, J. M., Hines, A. M., Osterling, K. L., & Wyatt, P. (2005). Pathways to college for former foster youth: Understanding factors that contribute to educational success. *Child Welfare, 84*(6), 867-896.

McMillan, C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thomspson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare, 82*(4), 475-495.

Munson, M. R., Smalling, S. E., Spencer, R., Scott Jr., L. D., & Tracy, E. M. (2010). A steady presence in the midst of change: Non-kin natural mentors in the lives of older youth exiting foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*, 527-535.

Osterling, K. L., & Hines, A. M. (2006). Mentoring adolescent foster youth: Promoting resilience during developmental transitions. *Child and Family Social Work, 11*, 242-253.

Zetlin, A. (2006). The experiences of foster children and youth in special education. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 31*(3), 161-165.

### **Service Learning**

Organizations that support service learning opportunities and community development:

*National Youth Leadership Council* [Website], <http://www.nylc.org/>

*The Asset-Based Community Development Institute* [Website], <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/abcd09/>

### **References**

- Barth, R. P. (1990). On their own: The experiences of youth after foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work, 7*(5), 419-440.
- Berliner, B., & Lezin, N. (n.d.). *Building a research agenda to improve education outcomes for children and youth in foster care: What the experts say*. WestEd. Retrieved from [www.wested.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/1372694634pp1201.pdf](http://www.wested.org/wp-content/files_mf/1372694634pp1201.pdf)
- Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
- Burrell, S. (2003). *Getting out of the "red zone": Youth from juvenile justice and child welfare systems speak out about the obstacles to completing their education, and what could help*. Washington, DC: Youth Law Center.
- Calvin, E., Fenton, R., Lee, A., Pattison, B., Warner-King, K., Nist, J. & Purbough, J. (2000). *Make a difference in a child's life: A manual for helping children and youth get what they need in school*. Seattle, WA: TeamChild and Casey Family Programs. Retrieved from: [www.teamchild.org/docs/manual/Entire%20Manual%202008.pdf](http://www.teamchild.org/docs/manual/Entire%20Manual%202008.pdf).
- Casey Family Programs. (2011). *Foster care by the numbers*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. Retrieved from: <http://www.casey.org/Newsroom/Media-Kit/pdf/FosterCareByTheNumbers.pdf>
- Casey Family Programs. (2007). *A road map for learning: Improving educational*

- outcomes in foster care*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. Available online: [www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/casey/roadmapforlearning/](http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/casey/roadmapforlearning/).
- Day, A., Riebschleger, J., Dworsky, A., Damashek, A., & Fogarty, K. (2012). Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 1007-1014. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.02.001
- Del Quest, A., Fullerton, A., Geenen, S., Powers, L., & The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care. (2012). Voices of youth in foster care and special education regarding their educational experiences and transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 1604-1615. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.04.018
- Emerson, J., & Lovitt, T. (2003). The educational plight of children in schools and what can be done about it. *Remedial and Special Education, 24*(4), 199-203.
- Geenen, S. J., Powers, L. E., Hogansen, J. M., & Pittman, J. O. E. (2007). Youth with disabilities in foster care: Developing self-determination within a context of struggle and disempowerment. *Exceptionality, 15*(1), 17-30.
- Habib, D. (Producer & Director). (2011). *Who cares about Kelsey?* [Documentary]. United States: DH Photography, LLC.
- Hass, M., & Graydon, K. (2009). Sources of resiliency among successful foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*, 457-463. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.200810.001
- Hochman, G., Hochman, A., & Miller, J. (2004). *Foster care voices from the inside*. Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.
- Hosp, M. K., Hosp, J. L., and Howell, K. W. (2007). *The ABCs of CBM: a practical guide to curriculum-based measurement*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Jones, L. (2012). Measuring resiliency and its predictors in recently discharged foster youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 29*, 515-533. doi:10.1007/s10560-012-0275-z
- Kaplan, S. J., Skolnik, L., and Turnbull, A. (2009). Enhancing empowerment of youth in foster care: supportive services. *Child Welfare, 88*(1), 133-161.
- McMillen, C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thompson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare, 82*(4), 475-495.
- Merdinger, J. M., Hines, A. M., Osterling, K. L., & Wyatt, P. (2005). Pathways to college for former foster youth: Understanding factors that contribute to educational success. *Child Welfare, 84*(6), 867-896.
- Munson, M. R., Smalling, S. E., Spencer, R., Scott, L. D., & Tracy, E. M. (2010). A steady presence in the midst of change: Non-kin natural mentors in the lives of older youth exiting foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*, 527-535. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.11.005
- National Education Agency. (2011). *C.A.R.E.: Strategies for closing the achievement gaps* (4th ed.). Retrieved from: <http://www.nea.org/care-guide>.
- National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. (2011). *Education is the lifeline for youth in foster care: Fact sheet. Research highlights on education and foster care*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund. Retrieved from: <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/education-is-the-lifeline-for.pdf>

- Osterling, K. L., and Hines, A. M. (2006). Mentoring adolescent foster youth: promoting resilience during developmental transitions. *Child and Family Social Work, 11*, 242-253.
- Palladino, J. M., & Haar, J. (2011). Special education administrators' response to the educational needs of foster care youth: Collaborative or disjointed? *Journal of School Leadership, 21*(6), 762-788.
- Stone, S. (2007). Child maltreatment, out-of-home placement, and academic vulnerability: A fifteen-year review of evidence and future directions. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*, 139-161. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2006.05.001
- Turnbull, A., Turnbull, H. R., Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., & Shogren, K. A. (2011). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2013a). *Trends in foster care and adoption* (FFY 2002-FFY 2012). Retrieved from: [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/trends\\_foster-care\\_adoption2012.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/trends_foster-care_adoption2012.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2013b). *The AFCARS report, No. 20*. Retrieved from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport20.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *Digest of education statistics, 2011* (NCES 2012-001). Retrieved from: [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/ch\\_2.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/ch_2.asp)
- Vacca, J. S. (2008). Breaking the cycle of academic failure for foster children—What can the schools do to help? *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*, 1081-1087. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.02.003
- Watson, C., & Kabler, B. (2012). Improving educational outcomes for children in foster care. *NASP Communique, 40*(5), 27-29.
- Werner, E. (2005). Resilience and recovery: Findings from the Kauai Longitudinal Study. *Research, Policy, and Practice in Children's Mental Health, 19*(1), 11-14.
- Zetlin, A. (2006). The experiences of foster children and youth in special education. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 31*(3), 161-165. doi: 10.1080/13668250600847039
- Zetlin, A., MacLeod, E., & Kimm, C. (2012). Beginning teacher challenges instructing students who are in foster care. *Remedial and Special Education, 33*(1), 4-13.
- Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L. A., & Kimm, C. (2004). Improving education outcomes for children in foster care: Intervention by an education liaison. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 9*(4), 421-429. doi: 10.1207/s15327671espr0904\_5
- Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L. A., & Shea, N. M. (2006). Improving educational prospects for youth in foster care: the education liaison model. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 41*(5), 267-272.
- Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L. A., & Shea, N. M. (2010). Caregivers, school liaisons, and agency advocates speak out about the educational needs of children and

youths in foster care. *Social Work*, 55(3), 245-254.

Zimmerman, M. A. (2013). Resiliency theory: A strengths-based approach to research and practice for adolescent health. *Health Education and Behavior*, 40, 381-383. doi:10.1177/1090198113493782