

CHAPTER

3



BUILDING CROSS-SYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS: EDUCATION, CHILD WELFARE, AND COURTS

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CHAPTER 3

Building Cross-System Partnerships: Education, Child Welfare, and Courts

WHY IS CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION NECESSARY?

The federal *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* directs local and state child welfare systems to coordinate with education providers. Collaboration between the child welfare and education systems is recognized as an important component of improving the education outcomes of students who experience foster care. A challenging task, it may force systems and individuals within those systems to work in new and unfamiliar ways. Fortunately, there is guidance available to assist professionals to work collaboratively and build cross-system partnerships.

The “**Guiding Principles**” and “**Ground Rules**” provided below were important components to the successful collaborative work of the Education Committee and the resulting *Texas Blueprint* report. These principles are based on the “*Blueprint for Change – Education Success for Children in Foster Care*,” a guide that was produced by Casey Family Programs and the American Bar Association Legal Center for Foster Care and Education.²³

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND GROUND RULES:

Guiding principles such as the ones below may be adapted locally or regionally to establish a shared vision for the work.

Guiding Principle #1: Children and youth in care are entitled to remain in the same school when feasible.

Guiding Principle #2: Children and youth in care experience seamless transitions between schools.

Guiding Principle #3: Young children in care receive services and interventions to be ready to learn.

Guiding Principle #4: Children and youth in care have the opportunity and support to fully participate in all developmentally appropriate activities and all aspects of the education experience.

Guiding Principle #5: Children and youth in care have supports to prevent school dropout, truancy, and disciplinary actions, and to reengage in the education experience.

Guiding Principle #6: Children and youth in care are involved, empowered, and prepared to self-advocate in all aspects of their education.

Guiding Principle #7: Children and youth in care have consistent adult support to advocate for and make education decisions.

Guiding Principle #8: Children and youth in care have support to enter and complete post-secondary education.

With the Guiding Principles in mind, ground rules set the stage for effective collaborative work. Although not officially adopted by the committee, the ground rules shaped the committee discussions and ultimately its final report. The ground rules, below, may also be adapted for one’s regional or local collaborative work:

- ⇒ The children and youth in the Texas foster care system are **our** responsibility and blame and finger-pointing will not be permitted;
- ⇒ Courts, education, and child welfare must all be represented in the discussion if a coordinated approach is to be established;
- ⇒ Lack of current funding options will not deter creative ideas;
- ⇒ All members must develop an understanding of the challenges other partners face, such as funding limitations; and
- ⇒ Communication is key to developing collaboration and continuing it in the future.



PRACTICAL STEPS FOR ESTABLISHING COLLABORATION AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS:

- Establish contacts and build relationships across systems — knowing who to call within partnering agencies is helpful for coordinating cross-system activities.
- Create opportunities to learn about one another's systems, agency jargon, decision making processes, job responsibilities, and services provided.



TIP: Take time to explain definitions and commonly used acronyms, processes, responsibilities, and constraints. All participants will benefit from understanding the organizational structure, as well as the mission, vision, and collective interests, of each partner.

- Maintain momentum and address complex problems through consistent and sustained communication.



TIP: Host regular meetings with stakeholders and community partners to identify barriers and create joint solutions.

- Learn about the wide variety of supports and resources different stakeholders provide.
- Identify high-level leadership in school districts and the child welfare system who can help to champion efforts.



TIP: Bringing people together and creating awareness amongst decision makers is an important component of systemic change and collaborative efforts.

- Establish a shared vision and goals.
- Develop strategies for collaborative work.



TIP: Identify and host opportunities for cross-system training.

Relevant cross-training topics include:

For school staff: Foster Care/CPS 101, Culture of Foster Care/Sensitivity, Impact of Trauma, DFPS Transition Supports, Foster Youth-specific Post-Secondary Opportunities, Mandatory Child Abuse Reporting, and others.

For child welfare partners: Enrollment/Withdrawal process, Student Data/Progress Tracking, Personal Graduation Planning (PGP), Surrogate Parent Training, Special Education Laws, Credit Recovery, Graduation requirements, Parent Supports, Student Supports, McKinney-Vento homeless student supports, and other services available.

- Involve youth and alumni from foster care in planning and collaborative efforts.
- Include other stakeholders and relevant community partners.



TIP: Foster parent organizations, CASA and guardians ad litem, PAL and transition planning groups, group homes, emergency shelters, residential treatment centers, juvenile justice representatives, foster care alumni, child placing agencies, faith-based organizations, and non-profit organizations are all potential groups to involve in cross-system partnerships.

- Identify needs, opportunities and solutions for improving district practices and policies.
- Use data to track progress.
- Celebrate successes and victories to keep the collaborative momentum going!

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE *TEXAS TRIO PROJECT*:

The *Texas Trio Project: Strengthening Court, Child Welfare, and Education Connections for Youth* was a collaborative initiative funded by a national demonstration grant to build capacity for cross-system functioning between TEA, DFPS, and the Children's Commission. The project also conducted a local level pilot with the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and DFPS Region 6. Working at both the state and local levels collaboratively to address the education of students in foster care provided many lessons:

- Developing a common language and shared goal is important.
- There is a large learning curve.
- Taking time early on to learn about collaborative partners and their interests is essential.
- There are numerous opportunities for cross-systems and integrated training.
- Hearing from multiple perspectives provides new insights.
- Work to remove assumptions and blame — building trust is essential.
- Be patient. Understand that each system may operate within constraints and organizational processes that impact the ability and timeliness of coordination.
- Involve a large multi-disciplinary cross-section of stakeholders and ensure that youth's voice and those who've experienced foster care are represented.
- Celebrate victories and successes along the way!

COLLABORATION IN ACTION – INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT (ISD) EXAMPLES:

While it can appear overwhelming, below are a few examples of how Texas school districts are coordinating with child welfare partners to address the education of students in foster care.

Austin Independent School District (AISD):

AISD is developing a robust and collaborative initiative to support students in foster care. The AISD school district foster care liaison holds regular and on going meetings with community stakeholders to promote shared understanding, raise awareness, increase communication, and improve district practices that recognize and support students in foster care. The district is working with the Travis County Model Court to implement a pilot project utilizing CASA workers as education advocates. AISD is also working with Austin Community College to increase coordination among central Texas area district liaisons and the higher education community. Lastly, the district is developing support tools and quick guides for principals, counselors, teachers, and caregivers within the district, which specifically target the unique education needs of students in foster care. This initiative is an example of district leadership and community partnership committed to improving the education of students.

Houston Independent School District (HISD):

As part of the *Texas Trio Project*, HISD partnered with DFPS, TEA, and the Children's Commission. This partnership provided a rich learning foundation for local and state stakeholders. The collaboration modeled the importance of building relationships across systems to best support students. Monthly meetings between HISD staff, state and local representatives from DFPS, TEA, and the Children's Commission provided opportunities to improve support systems for children and youth in foster care. Many cross-system training needs and challenges were identified. Likewise, opportunities to strategize and develop cross-system solutions began and continue.



TIP: Please notify TEA at fostercareliaison@tea.state.tx.us of collaborative efforts that a district is engaged in to support education of students in foster care.

TEA plans to compile best practices and to share lessons learned from local initiatives to improve the education of students in foster care throughout the state. Visit www.tea.state.tx.us/FosterCareStudentSuccess/ and sign up for the TEA Foster Care Education Listserv to receive information as it becomes available.



RESOURCES: Building Cross-System Partnership and Collaboration

“Making it Work: Child Welfare and Education Agencies Collaborating to Ensure School Stability for Children in Foster Care” — *a brief with practical tips on how education and child welfare can partner.* www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/education/issue_brief_collaboration2012.authcheckdam.pdf

“When Working Together Works: Academic Success for Students in Out-of-Home Care” — *an informative brief with practical tips on collaboration and coordination between child welfare and education partners.* center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/wwtw.pdf

“Making the Case: Engaging Education Partners in Addressing the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care” — *an informative brief on the importance of including and engaging education partners.* www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/education/issue_brief_engaging_education2012.authcheckdam.pdf

“Breakthrough Series Collaborative: Improving Education Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care” — *a how-to guide for building effective cross-system collaboration and partnerships to support students in foster care.* www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/BreakthroughSeries_Education_FR.pdf

