FOSTER CARE & STUDENT SUCCESS:

Texas Systems Working Together to Transform Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care

PRODUCED BY

Texas Education Agency

Children's Commission
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POSTCARDS SEEN IN GUIDE

The postcard art included throughout this guidebook is generously donated by Foster Care Alumni of America. The postcard art provides insights, shares perspective, and highlights experiences from youth and alumni who have experienced foster care. To see additional post cards and learn more about Foster Care Alumni of America visit www.fostercarealumni.org.
“MY HOPE IS THAT PROFESSIONALS IN ALL SYSTEMS AND COMMUNITIES REALIZE THAT MY STORY CAN BECOME THE NORM WHEN EVERYONE INVOLVED DOES THEIR PART TO ENSURE THE BEST INTERESTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE NOT ONLY TALKED ABOUT, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY FOLLOWED THROUGH ON. LET US STAND TOGETHER TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE.”

Growing up in foster care wasn’t the best experience for me, but it was definitely more bearable knowing that I had a constant support system from the day I entered at five years old until I aged out at 18. Too many times, children and youth in foster care are stigmatized because they are in the system. Oftentimes, they are discouraged from participating in extracurricular activities and encouraged to graduate on the minimum plan, which leads to several barriers for alumni who want to attend college. However, I consider myself truly blessed because my foster parents, caseworkers, judge, attorney, therapist, community personnel, teachers, counselors, and so many other advocates refused to allow my status as a child in foster care to prevent me from being successful.

I had my share of behavior problems that led to my being sent to in-school suspension (ISS) several times. Yet, my support system quickly guided me back on track. They helped me realize it was okay to be upset, sad, confused, and frustrated because I was in foster care, but it wasn’t okay to act out in a negative way on those emotions. Their consistent patience and understanding paid off, and I realized no matter what problems I had, they were in my corner and committed to my success. Behavior problems became unheard of when I entered high school.

Although I moved through approximately eight placements while in foster care, the adults in my life advocated to keep me in the same school for elementary, middle school, and high school. The mere fact that I never changed schools is a phenomenon practically unheard of among children and youth in foster care. Staying in the same school allowed me to have lasting friendships, participate in various extracurricular activities in my school and community, and build a large caring adult support system. Their efforts to embody the idea that “it takes a village to raise a child” helped me transition from high school to college successfully. I was able to graduate with my Bachelors in Sociology and Masters in Social Work. I still have plans of obtaining my Ph.D. My hope is that professionals in all systems and communities realize that my story can become the norm when everyone involved does their part to ensure the best interests of children and youth are not only talked about but more importantly followed through on. Let us stand together to improve outcomes for children and youth in foster care.

— An alumna of the Texas foster care system
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Welcome to the Texas Foster Care & Student Success Resource Guide. The primary purpose of this guide is to empower education professionals with information, resources, and tools to positively impact the educational experience of students in foster care. It is our hope to promote cross-system practices and collaborative strategies that improve educational stability and achievement, while increasing awareness about the complexities and challenges that impact students in foster care. Although this guide is primarily designed for education professionals, it will also be useful to caregivers, child welfare workers, child advocates, and others who work with students to help them achieve success in school and in life. Knowledgeable, caring adults play a significant role in guiding students to a successful educational experience while in the foster care system and beyond.

Thank you for considering this resource guide and for making a difference in the lives of young people who are involved with the child welfare, court, and education systems in Texas.

Defining the term “FOSTER CARE”:
For the purposes of this guide, the term foster care will be used to refer to all children and youth who are in the custody of the State of Texas due to abuse and/or neglect, regardless of their living arrangement. Detailed information about the foster care system in Texas, including different types of “substitute care” living arrangements and caregivers, will be explained later in Chapter 4.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THIS GUIDE?

- To provide educators with useful information that will guide them in creating a positive education experience for students in foster care.
- To familiarize education professionals with the complexities of the foster care system and the relevant laws and policies that influence a student in foster care’s educational experience.
- To centralize foster care and education information, while increasing awareness and promoting improved cross-system practices and partnerships that benefit students in Texas’ foster care system.

Working to achieve these goals, Texas strives to fulfill the education provisions of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 that promote school stability and require coordination across child welfare and education systems.

GUIDE BACKGROUND

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) joined with the Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families (Children’s Commission) and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to address improving the education outcomes of students in foster care. Texas was one of ten sites to be awarded a federal Children’s Bureau demonstration grant, Child Welfare — Education System Collaboration to Increase Educational Stability. The demonstration grant resulted in the Texas Trio Project: Strengthening Court, Child Welfare, and Education Connections for Youth. This Resource Guide reflects the collaborative efforts of many caring professionals working together to address the education of students in foster care.

The Texas Trio Project provided TEA, the Children’s Commission, and DFPS the opportunity to incorporate recommendations from the Children’s Commission Education Committee report, “The Texas Blueprint: Transforming Education Outcomes For Children & Youth in Foster Care” (see page 20).
HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- View the Table of Contents for specific questions and relevant topics.
- The guide provides practice tips, relevant laws, and resource sections with many links to additional information and guidance to assist you in supporting the educational success of students in foster care.
- The appendices have charts, resources and information, including a Glossary with relevant Child Protective Service (CPS) and legal terms/acronyms, to provide a better understanding of the child welfare system and terms used throughout the guide (see page 114).

Helpful tips, laws, and resources featured throughout this resource guide are noted by these icons:

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FOSTER CARE AND EDUCATION AT THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY?

1. Visit TEA’s Foster Care & Student Success webpage for more information. www.tea.state.tx.us/FosterCareStudentSuccess/

2. Join TEA’s Foster Care Education Listserv. TEA maintains a listserv to distribute information, resources and tools related to education and students in foster care. To sign up for the listserv visit:  ritter.tea.state.tx.us/list/ and select Foster Care Education.

3. For additional information, or to share lessons learned, challenges encountered, or provide feedback, please email: fostercareliaison@tea.state.tx.us

TEA looks forward to learning from each school district as they engage in this work. In addition to distributing knowledge, research, best practices, and statutory requirements, TEA plans to share results and feedback with school district officials who are working with students in foster care. TEA will continue coordinating with DFPS, the Children’s Commission, and other stakeholders to provide resources to assist schools.