

Site Visit Report: Solano County Project HOPE

Award #: 90C01073/01

Cluster: Child Welfare - Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability

Grantee: Solano County (California) Office of Education

Contact: Becky Cruz, Program Manager and Project HOPE Project Director, Solano County Office of Education, BCruz@Solanocoe.net

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SUMMARY

As part of a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant awarded in 2011, the Solano County (California) Office of Education (SCOE) and the Child Welfare Services (CWS) division of the Solano County Health and Social Services Department implemented Project HOPE (Help, Opportunity, Preparation for Education) to improve academic outcomes for youth in foster care. This infrastructure-building grant was part of CB's Child Welfare/Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability grant cluster. In addition to SCOE and CWS, the Project HOPE advisory group included representatives from juvenile justice, juvenile probation, foster home providers, juvenile court, mental health, Solano County Community College, foster parents, a youth advocate, and case management agencies.

Prior to receiving the CB grant, SCOE had implemented its Foster Youth Services (FYS) program to ensure the needs of youth in foster care were met within the school districts in Solano County. To enhance information sharing between SCOE and CWS, the two agencies drafted an interagency agreement, but information was not always shared in a timely manner. Additionally, new legislation and changing policies generated the need for a new agreement. The CB grant presented an opportunity for SCOE and CWS, as well as other community stakeholders, to work together to create new data-sharing guidelines and develop new programs to assist CWS and SCOE staff meet the educational needs of youth in foster care.

During the grant period, Project HOPE was able to achieve the following:

- Establish a process that notifies SCOE within 24 hours of a youth's change in foster placement
- Integrate data between SCOE and CWS data systems to provide easier access to student information
- Establish a transportation protocol to help minimize the number of school changes for youth in foster care
- Place two SCOE M.S.W. level Student Support Specialists in the CWS office to help caseworkers navigate the education system
- Amend the interagency agreement to include new State-level education legislation and policies
- Provide training on educational rights and the foster care system to partner agency staff

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Information Sharing Between Education and Child Welfare Agencies" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>)



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As part of a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant awarded in 2011, the Solano County (California) Office of Education (SCOE) and the Child Welfare Services (CWS) division of the Solano County Health and Social Services Department implemented Project HOPE (Help, Opportunity, Preparation for Education) to improve academic outcomes for youth in foster care. This infrastructure-building grant was part of CB's Child Welfare/Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability grant cluster. In addition to SCOE and CWS, the Project HOPE advisory group included representatives from juvenile justice, juvenile probation, foster home providers, juvenile court, mental health, Solano County Community College, foster parents, a youth advocate, and case management agencies.

Prior to receiving the CB grant, SCOE had implemented the award-winning¹ Foster Youth Services (FYS) program to ensure the needs of youth in foster care were met within the school districts in Solano County. The program manager began the FYS program to assure that SCOE staff knew which students were under the jurisdiction of the court and CWS. This information would help them ensure that youth received services that could improve their educational outcomes and prepare them to transition to postsecondary education and/or independent living. In 2008, the juvenile court judge in Solano County, frustrated that the educational needs of youth in foster care were not being met, chaired a committee to create an interagency agreement that would allow for information sharing between SCOE and CWS. Even with the interagency agreement in place, however, information was not always shared in a timely manner between the two systems. Additionally, new State legislation and policies generated the need for a new agreement and a streamlined ability to share information. The CB grant presented an opportunity for SCOE and CWS, as well as other community stakeholders, to work together to create new data-sharing guidelines and develop new programs to assist CWS and SCOE staff meet the educational needs of youth in foster care.

The goal of Project HOPE was to improve educational outcomes for youth between the ages of 10 and 17 years under the jurisdiction of CWS and the Solano County Courts. The following were the objectives of the project:

- Improve interagency collaboration
- Develop countywide protocols
- Improve data sharing
- Develop educational case planning

During the grant period, Project HOPE was able to achieve the following:

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¹ FYS has been awarded ING's American's Promise Alliance 100 Best Community for Young People award four times since the inception of the program.

(Note: See attachments for the current interagency agreement)

VIRTUAL SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The virtual site visit occurred between January 30, 2013, and June 3, 2013, via phone interviews and emails with project staff. The following interviews were conducted as part of the virtual site visit:

- Lisette Estrella-Henderson, Associate Superintendent, Solano County Office of Education (SCOE) and Becky Cruz, Program Manager and Project HOPE Project Director, SCOE, Foster Youth Services (FYS) (January 30)
- Linda Orrante, Deputy Director (retired) Solano County Health and Social Services Department (SCHSSD) (February 19)
- Karl Porter, Program Manager, SCHSSD (March 27)
- Tad Kitada, Evaluator (March 29)
- Becky Cruz (April 5)
- Becky Cruz; Sonia Ortega and Narisa Orosco Woolworth, Student Support Specialists, SCOE (May 13)
- Kamber Sta. Maria, Counselor/Coordinator, Foster Youth Success Initiative/Youth Empowerment Strategies for Success - Independent Living Program, Solano County Community College (June 3)

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The following components of the project were discussed:

- Impetus
- Successes
- Challenges
- Early results
- Evaluation process
- Sustainability

In addition, information was obtained from the project's semiannual reports for the reporting periods of October 2011 through March 2012 and April 2012 through September 2013.

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

Student Support Specialists: Two Solano County Office of Education (SCOE) staff members with backgrounds in education and child welfare were co-located in the Child Welfare Services (CWS) office. The specialists had an identified workspace, were assigned a CWS computer and telephone, and were provided county email addresses. Additionally, they were issued CWS badges to allow them access to the building and help integrate them with CWS staff. The Student Support Specialists' roles included the following:

- Assist CWS permanency caseworkers in ensuring that the educational needs of youth in foster care were met
- Help the caseworkers obtain school records and understand the education system
- Access academic performances status and school discipline records
- Support the caseworkers in preparing for Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for youth on their caseload
- Attend IEP meetings with the caseworkers

- Attend the monthly Permanency Planning and Family Maintenance and Reunification Units meetings to stay current on CWS issues and share information with CWS staff
- Meet with youth in foster care
- Assist in the preparation of education case plans for each youth in foster care, including helping the youth plan for postsecondary education
- Arrange tutoring for youth
- Meet with co-located Mental Health staff to share information about available services with their staff

Data sharing: Prior to the grant, SCOE and CWS already voluntarily shared data, but the Children’s Bureau grant allowed the data sharing to expand and improve. Prior to the grant there generally was a delay in notifying the school of placement changes. The school system now receives an electronic notification within 24 hours of a placement change. In addition, real-time data from the school system is integrated into the California Child Welfare Services/Case Management System, which allows CWS caseworkers to obtain information on youth in foster care, including but not limited to, attendance, grades, behavioral issues, and credits toward graduation.

Transportation protocol: SCOE and CWS established a transportation protocol to allow youth in foster care to remain in their schools if their placement changes and if remaining in the same schools is in their best interests. The protocol indicates that the school system will provide transportation for the youth.

Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI): FYSI was created by the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office to address issues current and former foster youth may experience in the higher education system. Although the program is not funded through the community college system, Solano Community College (SCC) funded a fulltime staff member to help youth, currently or formerly in foster care, successfully navigate the community college system, to teach them basic life skills, and to provide them with resources and connections to assist them in reaching their educational goals. SCC FYSI, in collaboration with Project HOPE and the SCOE Foster Youth Services program, also prepares youth to transition into postsecondary education by offering continuous support throughout their senior years in high school and conducting a summer bridge program to prepare these youth for college entrance in the fall. The Student Support Specialists refer youth to the transitional program as part of their education plans.

Interagency agreement: Project HOPE hired a consultant to review new and amended State legislation and policies regarding the education of youth in foster care. The consultant also amended the interagency agreement to reflect these changes and identify any actions required by each agency due to the legislation. As a result of this process, the project determined that the agreement would need to be a living document in order to accommodate new and changing legislation and policy. (The current interagency agreement is attached to this report)

Challenges

Staff reduction in child welfare: The number of child welfare staff has been reduced by 25 percent since the beginning of the grant, which has increased the workload for current staff.

Student Support Specialists’ availability: Due to staffing and funding constraints within SCOE, neither of the Student Support Specialists were located full-time at CWS. Although their hours increased throughout the grant, it is likely that only one Specialist will be placed in the CWS office on a part-time basis after the grant ends.

Time constraints: County-level staff reported that planning and implementing the project within the 17-month grant period was challenging.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

Collaboration, commitment, and transparency. The project attributes a lot of its success to strong collaboration, commitment, and transparency by the two primary partners, SCOE and CWS, as well as to the commitment of the other community partners.

Leadership. CWS staff indicated that the leadership and vision of Project HOPE's director, who also is the program manager of the SCOE Foster Youth Services program, has greatly improved educational outcomes for youth in foster care in Solano County.

Training. The project provided numerous trainings to child welfare staff, school system personnel, foster parents, and juvenile probation staff. Training topics included educational rights, the foster care system, and the components of the local interagency agreement.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation

Tad Kitada, a private consultant, is completing a process evaluation of Project HOPE. Mr. Kitada began the evaluation process by reviewing the 2008 interagency agreement, as well as legislative and policy changes since 2008. He then amended the agreement accordingly. In addition, the evaluator reviewed how the agencies exchange information and solve problems. The evaluator reported:

1. Improvement in how information is exchanged between the Solano County Office of Education (SCOE) and the Child Welfare Services (CWS) of the Solano County Health and Social Services Department including increased timeliness in reporting of placement changes.
2. Increased knowledge of staff from SCOE, CWS, and other community partners as a result of the training provided. Prior to a training for educators on foster care education laws, attendees received a Likert survey to measure their knowledge on foster care education related laws. The survey results indicated that not all attendees knew the law as it related to the educational rights of youth in foster care. The post-training surveys indicated that 100 percent of the attendees had an increase in knowledge about foster care education laws.

Project staff reported that CWS caseworkers accessing the Student Support Specialists increased steadily over the grant period. The evaluator reviewed and monitored the co-location of the Student Support Specialists and reviewed their access logs, which track questions asked by CWS caseworkers and the supports provided by the Specialist. According to information provided by project staff, some CWS caseworkers reported that they would not have known education related information if it were not for the co-located staff; others reported they do not always have the capacity to make calls seeking education related information. Therefore, the co-location of the Student Support Specialists improved the SCOE's ability to meet the educational needs of youth in foster care.

Because this project is the result of a short-term (17-month) infrastructure-building grant designed to establish procedures and processes, not all of the intended outcomes were achieved or measurable by the end of the grant period. Although project data do not yet show evidence of improved outcomes for youth, the evaluator believes over time the project will be shown to have improved youth's graduation rates, reduced their need for special education services, improved their attendance, and decreased their behavioral issues.

Sustainability

Project HOPE plans to continue its efforts after the grant ends. The project partners indicated that they are committed to improving educational outcomes for children in foster care and will continue to collaborate, communicate, and exchange data. However, there is concern that without additional funding, SCOE will only be able to co-locate one Student Support Specialist on a part-time basis.

ATTACHMENTS

- [Solano County Interagency Agreement](#)