Site Visit Report:
Waterbury Educational Stability Initiative: A Collaborative Response to Trauma

https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/edcollaborations

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

Grantee: State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families

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SUMMARY

In fiscal year 2011, the Children's Bureau awarded 10 grants to promote collaboration between child welfare and education systems in order to increase educational stability for children ages 10 to 17 and who were involved with child welfare. The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) received one of these grants to implement the Waterbury Educational Stability Initiative, which provided training on trauma-informed child welfare practice and child traumatic stress to education and child welfare stakeholders, including child welfare professionals, school counselors, parent liaisons, and foster parents. The project also tried to bridge the gap between the schools and law enforcement by training the school resource officers, who are municipal police officers assigned to the schools. The following were the goals of the training:

- Educate child welfare professionals, parent liaisons, and foster parents about the effect of trauma on the children's development and behavior
- Educate child welfare professionals, parent liaisons, and foster parents about when and how to intervene directly in a trauma-sensitive manner and through strategic referrals
- Ensure that all children in the child welfare system have access to timely, quality, and effective trauma-focused interventions and a case-planning process that support resilience in long-term healing and recovery
- Help stakeholders understand trauma and how it may present itself in the children at school

The DCF Training Academy provided the training using the *Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit*, which was developed by the National Child Trauma Stress Network. The training materials provided information about case management and intervention perspectives related to trauma-informed best practices. The training covered topics such as how children respond to trauma, safety and resiliency factors, and how to assist trauma-affected children.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Waterbury (CT) Educational Stability Initiative" (http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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The DCF Training Academy provided the training using the *Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit*, which was developed by the National Child Trauma Stress Network. The training materials provided information about case management and intervention perspectives related to trauma-informed best practices. The training, which were conducted in-person and in small group teams, covered the following topics:

- Types of trauma that children experience
- How children respond to trauma
- How children react to trauma
- How to recognize posttraumatic stress disorder in children
- How children act out trauma
- How to recognize safety issues related to trauma
- How to recognize resiliency and resiliency factors
- How to identify and cope with trauma reminders
- How to manage emotional "hot spots"
- How individuals can help trauma-affected children
- How to help children define, build, and maintain new connections
- How adults can build connections for the child between school and home

(To view the training slides, see the Attachments section of this report.)

Project staff will develop a practice guide for its social workers based on this training.

Need for This Service

The impetus for the project was the need to enhance the collaboration between the child welfare and education systems and to help child welfare workers understand the importance of education in a child's life. Project staff wanted to move beyond just taking a mental health or behavioral perspective when working with children in foster care. They believed that more understanding of the educational challenges children in foster care face would decrease unnecessary removal from schools, which can disrupt their out-of-home care. (To view the Memorandum of Understanding between DCF and the Waterbury Board of Education, see the Attachments section of this report.)

Sustainability

The project will continue to focus on enhancing the collaboration and try to expand it into other districts in Waterbury. After final evaluation data are available, project staff will provide a presentation about the project and its collaborative model to other Connecticut boards of education at a statewide conference and at the national board of education to promote the project's replication.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred on Tuesday, March 13, 2013, at the Waterbury Board of Education offices in Waterbury, CT, and at the Department of Children and Families (DCF) office. The Program Director, Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, convened a meeting that included a variety of staff. The day-long meeting consisted of updates and information related to the program and included the following individuals:

- Anne Marie Cullinan, Chief Academic Officer, Waterbury Public Schools
- Nachi Bhatt, Waterbury Region Education Consultant
- Dr. Brian K. Perkins, Evaluator
- Jason Sconziano, Special Education Supervisor, Waterbury Public Schools
- Erin Mahoney, Foster and Adoptive Services Unit, Supervisor
- Scott Newgass, Connecticut State Department of Education, Consultant for School Social Work and Safe & Drug Free Schools
- Patricia Zuccarelli, DCF Area Office

LESSONS LEARNED

Challenges

- The institutional review board (IRB) process was problematic because the DCF IRB had difficulty understanding the educational focus of the project and the involvement of project staff who were not affiliated with the State. There was also confusion concerning the project's possible exemption from needing an IRB due to the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act. The IRB determined that their approval was not needed because it was an evaluation of a program and that there would be no direct contact with children (no focus groups).
- Project staff faced several barriers obtaining data on the target population (children ages 10 to 17 in the Waterbury school system who were also involved with child welfare). The project had hoped to obtain baseline data from an external organization, but the data they received did not match the request. The project then spoke with representatives from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and received some of the required data. The type of data needed was not readily available in other data systems, such as Connecticut's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System; therefore, to obtain all the data, the project's leadership had to conduct and complete a hand count of the population. The project's timeline was negatively impacted due to the additional steps, processes, etc., needed to obtain important data.
- Leadership changes in the Waterbury Board of Education (BOE) required the project to take additional time to allow for the position changes and new staff to be informed before officially moving forward.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

- The project provided foster parents with an $80 Visa cash card as an incentive to attend the training.
- To combat the extra time needed to obtain data and help get everyone connected, project leadership decreased the number of non-training deliverables, offered more training opportunities, and reorganized the project's timeline.
- The project team consists of people who respect each other and have frank discussions about project problems and solutions. It is important to carefully choose who is a part of a collaborative effort.

OUTCOMES

The following are the dates of the trainings and who attended:

- June 8, 2012: 52 pupil personnel staff (e.g., guidance counselors, school psychologists, school social workers)

- November 6, 2012: 6 school resource officers
- May 13, 2013: 38 total participants, including 36 school nurses (35 of whom were from District 1 in Waterbury) and 2 parent liaisons, both of whom were retired special education administrators working on the project
- September 26, 2012: 29 parent liaisons, who are part-time employees of the project and who are parents of children in the school system

Additionally, the project held several school-based team meetings at every school that had children who were part of the study cohort.

The project collected data on students, grades 5 through 12, who were in foster care and who had contact with someone who had attended one of the trainings. The plan was to track this cohort over time. These students were in both regular and special education classes and had varied legal statuses. Nineteen students were in the cohort, and this small number of children greatly affected the evaluation. The project included a larger number of students in the beginning, and staff thought this number would remain steady and not decrease.

The evaluator administered surveys to students who had been in an out-of-home care and who had been in contact with a training participant. The survey assessed the following:

- Who do they go to with problems after they were placed in out-of-home care?
- What are their experiences in school after they were placed in out-of-home care?
- How positive or negative are their experiences with teachers and principals after they have been placed in out-of-home care?
- How much support do they receive with their school work after they have been placed in out-of-home care?
- Are they teased in school about being in out-of-home care?
- How happy or sad are they, in general, and, specifically, about being in out-of-home care?
- How often do they attend school and how well they are doing in school while they are in out-of-home care?

While it is difficult to get a clear picture of the outcomes with just 19 children in the study, the project stated that there are positive themes relating to communication between social workers and school stakeholders (teachers and/or principals) regarding children in out-of-home care.

As of the time of the site visit, the project was still conducting the evaluation. The evaluator will collect additional data, conduct additional analyses, communicate with stakeholders, and further examine project practices. When assessing student data, the evaluator will specifically look at their perceptions of being in out-of-home care and educational outcomes, how they feel about multiple placements, if being in out-of-home care improved their educational outcomes, and, from the teachers' perspectives, why would students fare differently while in out-of-home care (e.g., emotional issues, transportation).

ATTACHMENTS

- Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit PowerPoint presentation
- Memorandum of Agreement between the Waterbury Board of Education and the Connecticut Department of Children and Families

U.S. Department of Health And Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
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