



*NIU Educational Access Project for DCFS*

## **Annual Report 2016**

**July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016**



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Center for Child Welfare and Education**

*Educational Access Project for DCFS*

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## **Overview**

Access to appropriate programs and services are key to creating successful educational pathways. Northern Illinois University and its Educational Access Project (EAP) partners with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to address educational problems faced by children in foster care. EAP assists child welfare staff, caregivers, school personnel, courts, and others to address foster children's educational needs by facilitating access to needed educational services and building capacity in the field that can foster academic and social development.

Through the work of EAP, children and youth accessed:

- Adequate special education services and 504 Plans to support disability needs in the educational environment
- Behavior intervention plans to address behaviors impeding school engagement or resulting in school suspensions
- School plans, programs and services to address academic needs
- Enrollment in schools and deflected school transfer upon changing residence
- Funding and fee waivers for education
- Transportation and accommodations for travel to and from school
- Postsecondary education supports

Furthermore EAP helped caseworkers, caregivers, and youth in foster care obtain information and resources to enhance their ability to advocate for and support children they serve educationally. People in the field learned how to address some of the challenges that foster children face in their journey through education. The rest of this report provides details on services provided from July 1, 2015-June 30, 2016.

## **Description of Services**

The staff of the Educational Access Project (EAP) provided expertise to address educational issues and promote access to educational planning, programs and services to help meet the needs of children and youth in the care and custody of DCFS. They provided technical assistance on behalf of children who encountered school problems.

In addition, EAP helped build capacity by increasing the knowledge of professionals involved with the children and their caregivers, assisted with DCFS postsecondary education programs, and forged collaborations that promote educational best practice.

### **Technical Assistance through Individual and Systems Intervention**

When children and youth in foster care experience problems with education, child welfare staff, caregivers, youth, schools, court, and others made referrals to EAP for technical assistance.

Some of the matters referred include: special education services, enrollment, school discipline, academic achievement, and school fees/funding. (See Appendix A). Many of these issues could impede school performance and stability. The EAP staff delivered services to help mitigate educational issues that the children and youth were facing. In addition, EAP monitored issues identified on Unusual Incident Reports (UIRs) for children who were suspended or expelled and Administrative Case Review (ACR) feedback that they received.

About 41% of issues resolved were related to academic and special education needs while almost one in five (18%) were behavior/discipline, and another 18% were enrollment/attendance related. The vast majority of UIRs were for out of school suspensions.

While EAP staff used their educational expertise and connections to deliver intervention services that address educational problems, they also provided information and shared resources to equip caseworkers, caregivers and youth with knowledge and skills to address common issues. By doing so, EAP helped build capacity within the field for resolution of common education issues foster children experience.

As educational issues vary, so do the intervention service activities required for resolution. EAP’s general categorization of the intervention service activities staff utilize to address issues are consultation, meeting participation, resource provision, referral, and advocacy coaching. These categories are defined in Appendix B. EAP staff also utilize these intervention service activities for problem resolution with suspensions and expulsions reported on UIRs needing intervention. They worked to develop supports such as behavior interventions plans to address behavioral needs. EAP also facilitates collaboration with schools, districts, caseworkers, and others to address identified system issues. An example that demonstrates the process involved in providing technical assistance to resolve issues that have been referred is in Appendix C.

**Children and Youth Served**

This fiscal year 949 (unduplicated number) children and youth were referred to EAP for technical assistance with educational issues. Many of these children and youth received multiple technical assistance services during the year to address the issues they experienced.

The complexity of the issue, the receptivity of schools, the knowledge base of the individuals involved, and the practices in the institutions are among the factors that affect the number and types of technical assistance services required for resolution.

**Technical Assistance Services Summary**

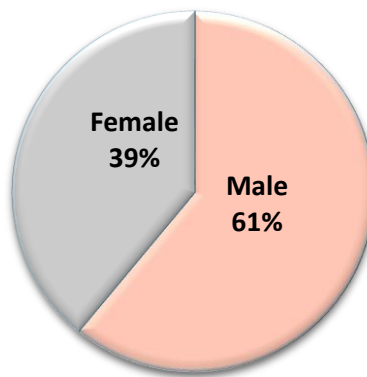
Number of Youth Receiving Technical Assistance Services (many children received multiple time during the year).	2,055
Unduplicated Count of Youth Served FY17	949

The youth who received educational technical assistance ranged from birth to over 21 years of age, were in grades preschool to postsecondary education, and were in the care of DCFS or involved in a DCFS postsecondary program. An unduplicated number of students who received technical assistance is provided in a separate list.

Following is information on students' gender, race/ethnicity, and age.

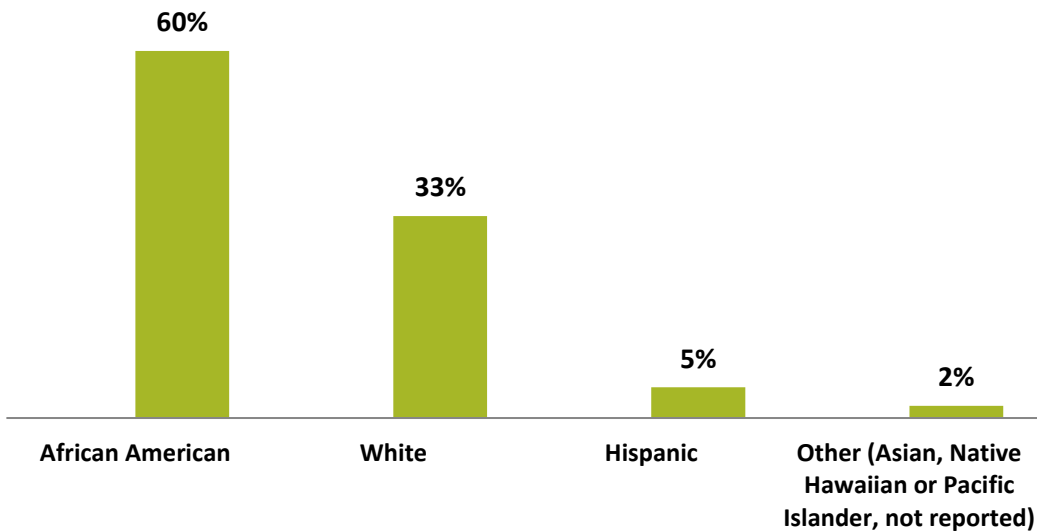
### Students' Gender

Sixty-one percent of students served by EAP were male and 39% were female.



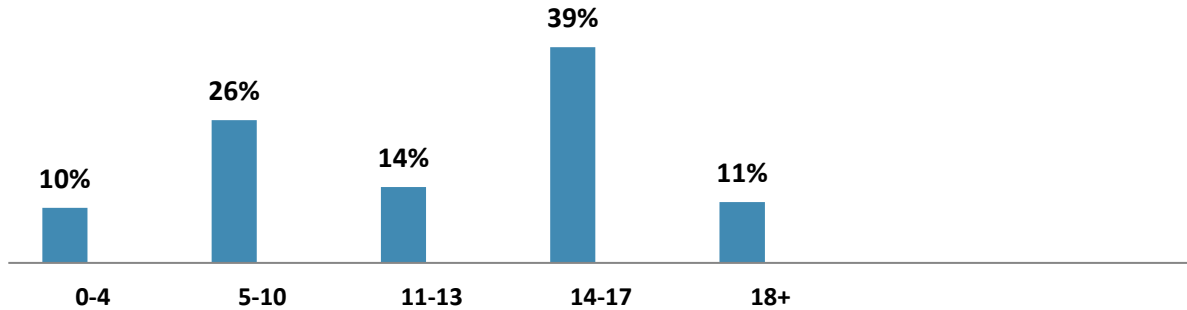
### Racial/Ethnic Distribution

The largest percentage of children served were African American (60%). White children represent 33% and Hispanic children 5%.



## Students' Age Range

The chart below demonstrates that half of the population of youth served were 14 and over.



## Educational Planning

EAP staff supported education planning for children in foster care to enhance their education opportunities for achieving success. This involved EAP staff participating in school meetings such as IEP meetings, 504 Plan meetings, behavior intervention planning meetings, expulsion hearings; and DCFS planning meetings such as CIPP and Child and Family Team.

## Building Capacity and Fostering Communication between Systems

Increasing the knowledge of caregivers and professionals and equipping them to understand issues related to the education of the population they serve is critical to the educational success of foster children and youth. As such, EAP staff worked to build the capacity of caregivers and professionals to support children's educational needs in addition to using their educational expertise and connections with schools, districts and agencies to address educational concerns for individual children. EAP staff also built communication lines between systems, fostered communication between schools, caregivers and DCFS/POS that benefit the children served. In addition, EAP maintained a list of POS Education Liaisons, initiated contact with new liaisons to offer support, and invited all education liaisons to training.

## Training/Professional Development

Another component of EAP's capacity building approach is the provision of professional development for child welfare staff, caregivers, and others involved in the education of children and youth in foster care. EAP developed training material that informs the field about policy and approaches to help children in foster care thrive educationally. This year, EAP's training

workshops provided opportunities to increase participants' knowledge on content that include: preparing for back to school, DCFS Educational Procedures 314, DCFS education planning, education advocacy, special education, Section 504, postsecondary education, and academic supports.

The first quarter EAP delivered two in-person training workshops in each of the four DCFS regions. All subsequent workshops were delivered via webinar statewide. Training was announced on the D-NET. In addition, staff emailed announcements directly to POS Education Liaisons, DCFS staff, school personnel, and others. Training audience was interdisciplinary and included DCFS and POS caseworkers, child welfare administrators, caregivers, community providers, school personnel, etc. Participants had the opportunity to share feedback on training evaluation forms at in-person trainings and surveys on webinars. There were 232 attendees. The combined evaluation from training workshops indicate that 93% of participants report the training increased their knowledge on the subject. Evaluation comments also indicated participants were satisfied with the training. Following are a few verbatim excerpts from evaluations:

- “Great information. I learned a lot.”
- “Great training, very informative. This will definitely help me in my job as an intact worker. Thank you for the training.”
- “Helpful- I am a supervisor at CASA and found information helpful- Thank you.”
- “This should be a mandatory training for all placement workers and supervisors, and foster parents.”
- “This training was very informative. I will be able to use this information in my daily work.”
- “I am glad this training was held via webinar.”

## **Policy Review and Analysis**

EAP provided assistance with the review and revision of policies, procedures and protocols related to education in accordance with current Federal and State laws and that promote best practice. EAP supported the revision of components of DCFS Educational Procedures 314 and the booklet entitled: *School Support for Youth in Care: A guide for school personnel, community agencies, and others in Illinois.*

## **Supporting DCFS Education Initiatives and Serving on Committees**

EAP staff supported DCFS education initiatives, served on education related committees and participated in workgroups to help improve the educational wellbeing of DCFS involved youth. Some of the committees have a statewide impact and others were region specific. Committees in which staff participated include: DCFS/CPS Collaborative with Residential and Group Homes, McKinney-Vento Eligible Children and Unaccompanied Youth Foster Parent Group, Regional Quality Council, Foster Pride Training committee, DCFS Youth Summit, and Foster Parent Advisory Board.

## **Developing and Maintaining Collaboration**

Collaboration and shared decision-making between systems to promote educational wellbeing is more effective in addressing education needs. As previously mentioned, EAP staff fostered communication between school, home and child welfare on behalf of children in foster care, collaborated to identify and address systemic issues and participated in committees.

## **Supporting Postsecondary Education**

EAP provided support to youth who are involved in postsecondary education programs administered by DCFS. Staff monitored youth involved in DCFS postsecondary education program for compliance and processed DCFS documentation for education related expenses (304 students received tuition waivers and/or book vouchers, 207 students received Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funds, and 26 students received the Community College Payment Program (CCPP) payments. Staff also assisted with college planning, identified university and community college resources, and created awareness of DCFS supports available to foster care youth.

## **Data Sources**

The primary data used for the annual report are retrieved from EAP staff documentation and client feedback entered into the NIU secure-web-based database. In addition, the report contains information from documentation maintained by EAP Post Secondary Education Specialist staff related to the DCFS postsecondary education programs.

## **Outcomes and Metrics**

- About 99 % of youth gained access to needed adequate student centered planning, programs, services, evaluation and/or assessment.



- 100% of youth gained access to needed financial support or waivers or assistance applying.
- About 93% of training participants reported an increase in their knowledge through their participation in the training session.
- About 97% client satisfaction survey respondents reported they were satisfied with the services.
- About 87% of technical assistance provided had a completed referral form.

## **Client Satisfaction**

Information in this section of the report is derived from the online continuous survey used to measure client satisfaction about EAP services. People who use this tool include: students, DCFS and POS caseworkers, caregivers, CASA, schools, and others who seek/ receive assistance from EAP to address educational needs of children and youth in care and/or DCFS postsecondary programs. The individuals rate their level of satisfaction with EAP services and are able to comment on their overall experience with the service. EAP staff inform individuals about the opportunity to give feedback about their service online.

There were about 179 survey respondents, and 97% reported they were satisfied with EAP services. The following excerpts are taken from the comment section of the survey. They represent the opinions of people who received services expressed in their language. Comments are verbatim; specific EAP staff names have been replaced by other identifiers (EAP staff A, B, etc.).

- “EAP staff A was extraordinary in assisting me in emergency/ crisis situation. If it were not for her a minor would have not graduated from elementary school today. I truly appreciate her assistance. “
- “EAP staff B did an incredible job answering all of my questions while also making helpful suggestions regarding our situation. I was amazed and thankful on how quickly EAP staff B responded to my email/voice message. EAP staff B is definitely an asset to this program!”
- “The staff really cares about the youth children, I really appreciate all this! Thank you for being here for all of us!”
- “This is a vital service for our youth in DCFS. We need this to continue as it assists our youths to excel in college and become outstanding members of our society.”
- “EAP staff C is very knowledgeable, friendly, and helpful. EAP staff C returned my phone call within a few minutes, and emailed the resource I requested within the hour.”
- “Since dealing with EAP staff over several years, they have always been responsive and knowledgeable in helping us get our clients into services.”

## **Conclusion**

As with all children, educational engagement and achievement contribute to the well-being of children in foster care. Yet many of them must overcome hurdles systemic to the foster care experience, to achieve educational parity with their non-ward peers.

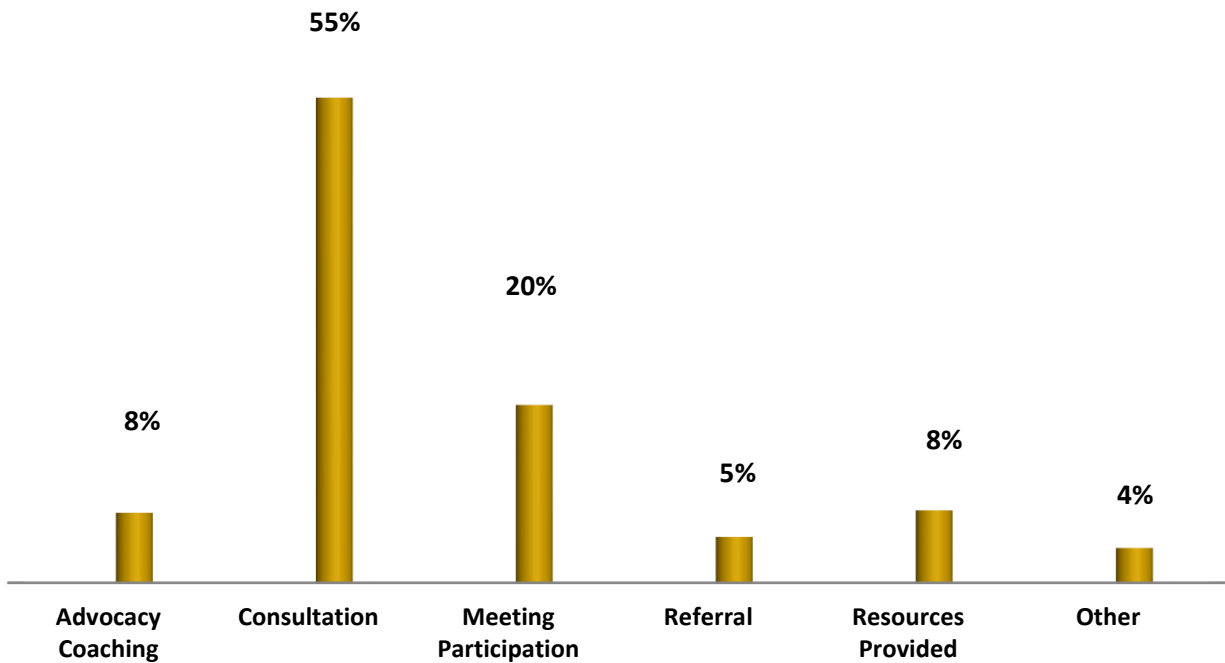
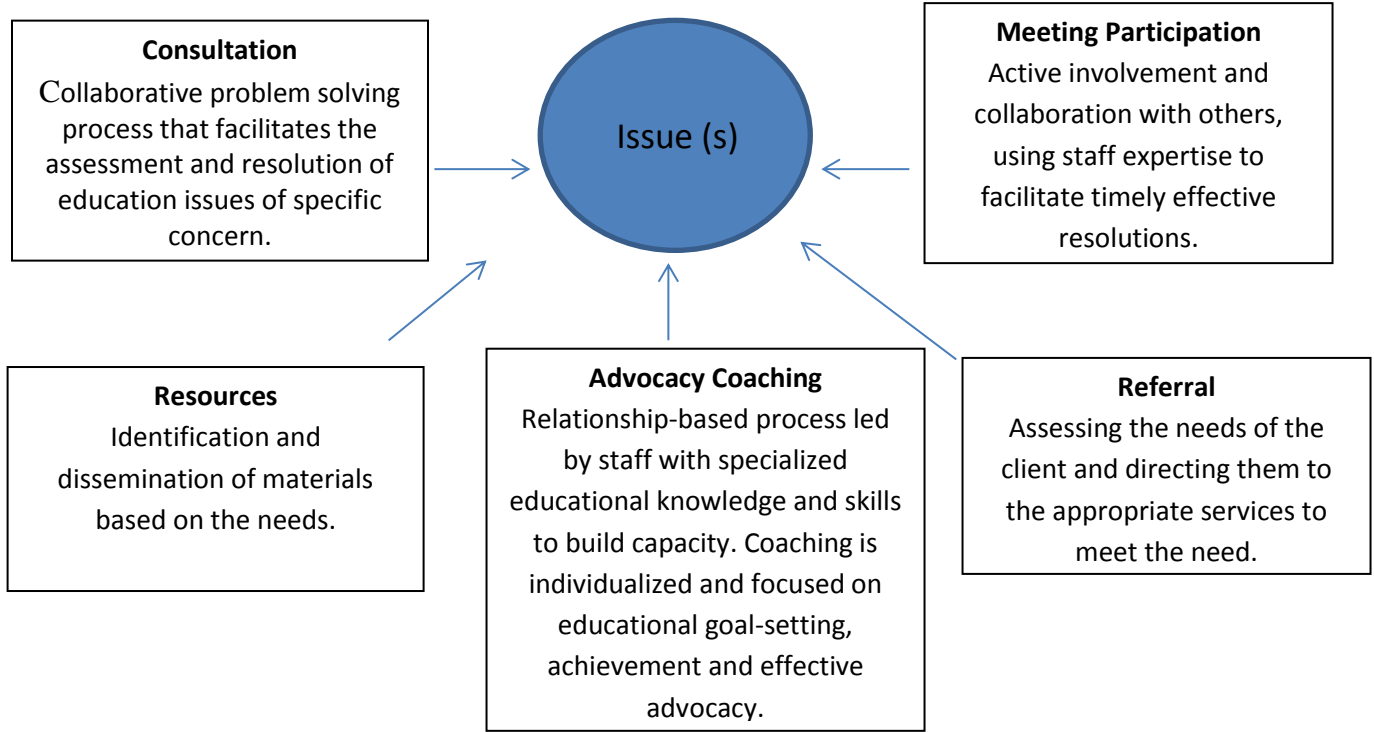
Moreover, good success requires diligent inquiry to assess each child's strengths and needs, expertise and collaboration to interpret what is in their best interest, and skills to effectively advocate across systems for their support. To promote educational success for children and youth, EAP staff gathered information, reviewed school documentation, consulted with parties involved, participated in school and DCFS meetings, conducted homeschool monitoring visits, conducted classroom observations, provided advocacy coaching, and advocated for appropriate educational programs and services to meet student's needs. Staff also supported DCFS involved youth in postsecondary education programs, helped draft revisions to DCFS policies and procedures, and contributed to education initiatives and workgroups that benefit this population. EAP's work also involved building the capacity of child welfare staff, caregivers and others through training workshops and service intervention.

Addressing educational needs of foster children and youth requires a collaborative effort. EAP continues to be committed to advancing access to appropriate educational services as youth forge pathways towards adulthood. "Free the child's potential and you will transform him into the world." Maria Montessori.

## Appendix A Types of Educational Issues



## Appendix B Intervention Services to Address Education Issues to Meet Students Needs



## Appendix C Example of Educational Technical Assistance

### Referral

Foster mother contacts the education advisor with concerns that her foster daughter has been removed from class several times for talking back to the teacher and failing most of her subjects. The foster daughter has an IEP for Emotional Disturbance (ED)

### Addressing the Need

- EA Reviews IEP and other educational records
- EA sees a need for an additional evaluation for SLD (Specific Learning Disorder)
- EA attends the IEP, assists in revision of the Behavioral Intervention Plan to include positive behavioral strategies and eliminates removals from the classroom as an intervention
- EA Requests an evaluation for SLD and obtains consent from the foster mother to evaluate; during the interim requests academic assistance for student through Rtl
- EA provides the school and foster mother with resources on the effects of trauma and education

### Technical Assistance Summary

#### Intervention

Consultation and advocacy coaching with caregiver

- Consultation with school
- Consultation with caseworker
- Meeting participation
- Resources given to caregiver and school

#### Follow Up

Determine if evaluation was completed and attend eligibility conference. if Rtl is helping grades improve and if the BIP has reduced the number of behavior needing to be addressed.