Educational Access Project Annual Report

July 01, 2017-June 30, 2018

Center for Child Welfare and Education

Educational Access Project for DCFS

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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We are working to increase access to education, address challenges, remove barriers, equip caseworkers and empower caregivers and youth in care.
Northern Illinois University’s Educational Access Project (EAP) partners with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to improve the educational wellbeing of children and youth in foster care. This partnership supports DCFS in its effort for youth in care to attain educational parity with youth who are not in foster care, and help them receive services that meet their educational needs.
Youth in foster care have been consistently among the most educationally vulnerable population. When Illinois youth in care experience problems with education, child welfare staff, caregivers, youth, schools, court, and others made referrals to EAP for technical assistance. Some of the issues for which they sought help included: inadequate special education services, school enrollment, school discipline, behavioral issues, academic obstacles, and school fees/funding. Many of these problems if not addressed, could impede school performance and stability. The EAP staff delivered services to help mitigate the educational issues that the youth were facing.

Almost half (46%) of issues resolved were related to academic and special education services. Nearly one in five were related to school enrollment, attendance, and record transfer. About (16%) were for behavior and/or discipline. In addition, nearly 8% of the issues were youth needing educational expertise in non-school DCFS staffing, such as Clinical Intervention for Placement Preservation (CIPP) and Child and Family meetings, to help with education planning and problem solving. Fees, funding and transportation represented another 7% of issues. Other issues included GED/ABE, early childhood, etc. (see Figure 1 below)

![Figure 1: Education Issues](image)

Just as the educational problems youth in care encounter differ in nature and degree, the steps for resolving them, and the intervention service activities also vary. EAP’s general categorization of the intervention service activities that staff utilize to address issues are consultation, meeting participation, resource provision, referral for additional services, and advocacy coaching. (For a definition of these categories refer to Appendix A.) Staff also conduct classroom observations, homeschool assessments, research for resources, etc.
The quantity of time required for some service activities differ from others. For instance, participation in meetings entail more time commitment as they generally involve: reviewing documentation in preparation for the meeting, preparing people for more informed participation, travel to and from meeting locations, participation in the meeting, and follow up.

Furthermore, while all interventions require some sort of consultation whether brief or long, very few issues are resolved using just one type of service. For instance, to address behavioral issues, staff engaged in intervention service activities, which include: participating in meetings, providing consultations, and providing advocacy coaching.

Eight education advisors provided approximately 4,000 intervention service activities on educational issues for youth in care this year. Consultation was the most frequently used intervention service activity followed by meeting participation. Below is a graph that represents the frequency with which staff engaged in each category of intervention services. This is followed by an example of the technical assistance process for resolving educational problems on the next page (page 6).
This example demonstrates a process of interventions that started with one youth referred for help with two education issues (academic & behavior) that required at least 10 interventions (including multiple consultations, advocacy coaching, meeting participation, resource provision, etc.) over a period of time. As a result, the youth got access to educational services and evaluations. She received a changed Behavior Intervention Plan allowing her to remain in the classroom during instruction time, an evaluation for a probable learning disability, and RtI services to address academic issues in the interim.
Education Planning

While working on behalf of individual youth in care to overcome obstacles and help them access educational services, EAP staff supported education planning for youth in care to enhance their education opportunities for achieving success. Staff participated in school meetings such as Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 Plan, behavior intervention planning, manifestation determination reviews, education planning meetings during hospitalization etc. In addition, EAP provided educational subject matter expertise as they took part in DCFS child centered planning meetings such as CIPP and Child and Family Team meetings, and in collaborative meetings where the focus was on education services for specific individual youth.

Children and Youth Receiving Technical Assistance Services

EAP provided services needed to overcome educational barriers and support planning that aided the educational well-being of youth in care. Caseworkers, caregivers, schools, youth, CASA, GAL, DCFS legal, and others made referrals for assistance when they encountered youth with educational issues. EAP staff provided multiple technical assistance services (4,174 interventions) during the year to resolve these issues. The nature, magnitude and complexity of the issues, as well as factors such as receptivity of schools and institutional practices, impact the quantity and types of technical assistance provided for resolution. The number of youth in care served in each quarter is show below. These youths were referred for technical assistance. The first and fourth quarters included summer breaks when some schools are not in session.

<table>
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<th>Youth Served</th>
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<td>1st Quarter</td>
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<td>290</td>
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The ages of the youth ranged from birth to over 21, and they were in grades ranging from preschool to postsecondary. All were youth in care or youth involved in one or more DCFS postsecondary education programs. Further demographic information regarding their gender, race, and age ranges are provided in figures 2, 3 and 4.
Gender
About three male youth received services to every two female youth (60% male and 40% female).

Racial/Ethnic Distribution
Three out of every five children served were African American (60%). White children represented one in three (35%) and Hispanic children represented 4%.
Age Range

The chart below demonstrates that almost half of youth served were age 14 and over (45%). One in three of the youth were between elementary school age (between 5 to 10 years old). Additionally, nearly one in 10 of children (8%) were under five.

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 youth in care. As such, EAP staff worked to build the capacity of caregivers, and professionals.

EAP staff provided information and shared resources to equip caseworkers, caregivers, youth, and POS Education Liaisons with knowledge and skills to address educational issues while using their expertise and connections to deliver individual intervention services that address problems. By doing so, EAP helped build capacity within the field for resolution of education issues youth in care experience.

Furthermore, staff worked to develop and facilitate collaboration with schools, districts, caseworkers, and others to identify and address system issues and avert further educational obstacles for youth in care. In addition, they fostered communication between schools, caregivers, DCFS, and Purchase of Service (POS) child welfare agencies to benefit the youth they served.

Moreover, EAP developed and delivered educational training workshops to equip caregivers, caseworkers, POS Liaisons, school, court, and others involved in the education of youth in care.
Educational Technical Assistance

Training/Professional Development

Building capacity in the field is imperative in the collective approach for improving the educational wellbeing of youth in foster care. Thus, EAP not only focused its services on educational resolution and service acquisition for individual youth, EAP also provided professional development for child welfare staff, caregivers, school and district staff and administrators, and other professionals involved in the education of youth in care. EAP developed curricula to educate participants about federal and state education laws relevant to youth in care, DCFS policies and school procedures and practices to help youth succeed. Training workshops increased the knowledge of professionals, caregivers and youth.

EAP conducted training workshops each quarter. They provided webinars entitled: Smooth Sailing into the New School Year, Navigating the IEP Process, Navigating DCFS Post-Secondary Education & Financial Aid Options, and When Trauma Comes to School. EAP advertised each webinar through D-NET announcements, emails, flyers and word of mouth. Staff also emailed announcements to POS Education Liaisons, DCFS staff, school personnel and community stakeholders.

A multi-disciplinary audience of 241 people participated. They included DCFS and POS Caseworkers, child welfare administrators, caregivers, community providers, school personnel, CASA, GAL, etc.

At the conclusion of each webinar, participants were encouraged to complete an evaluation form. Data aggregated from the webinar evaluations showed 95% of participants reported the training increased their knowledge on the subject, and 97% said the information was useful. Participants’ general comments indicated they valued the training. Below are some excerpts from their comments.

“This information was extremely useful as I’m a new foster parent and enrolling my three-year-old into an early childhood program today. I will definitely be able to take this information with me when moving forward with securing her educational needs.”

“Thank you for the training. This was a good reminder of what our youth are coping with and struggles that they experience in the classroom setting.”

“Very interesting presentation. Would like to see this presentation over several times as I know there are parts that need to be absorbed more as there was so much good information presented in a short period of time.”

“Great information and help with some resources that will be helpful to our students.”

“Excellent training. Learned a lot about the IDEA and the differences between the 504 Plan and IEP.”
Policy Review and Analysis
EAP provided assistance with the review and revision of policies and procedures related to education in accordance with current Federal and State laws and that promote best practice. EAP provided on-going consultation to DCFS, schools and school districts, homeless liaisons and caregivers on Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), its interpretation and application to youth in care. This included guidance and advice to clarify ESSA concerns regarding school transportation for regional school districts, caregivers, school personnel, and DCFS. Also, EAP provided support and guidance in addressing the expulsions of toddlers and preschoolers per Bill HB2663. EAP also assisted DCFS, caregivers, and schools with practice, protocol and regulatory changes in school discipline pertaining to Public Act 99-0456 (SB 100).

Supporting DCFS Education Initiatives and Serving on Committees
EAP staff supported DCFS education initiatives and served on education related committees to help improve the educational wellbeing of youth in care. Committees in which staff participated include: DCFS/CPS Collaborative with Residential and Group Homes, DCFS Youth Summit, DCFS Foster Parent Advisory Board, and DCFS Youth Advisory Board.

Developing and Maintaining Collaboration
Collaboration and shared decision-making between systems to promote educational wellbeing is another effective strategy in addressing education needs. As previously mentioned, EAP staff fostered communication between school, home and child welfare on behalf of youth in care, collaborated with school districts and court representatives to increase understanding of children’s educational rights, DCFS Educational Procedures 314, etc. Also, EAP staff collaborated with school staff and hospitals to address the educational needs of youth in care.

Supporting DCFS Postsecondary Education Programs
EAP provides support to DCFS in administering postsecondary education programs. EAP staff monitored youth involved in DCFS postsecondary education programs for compliance and processed DCFS documentation for education related expenses that could be covered by DCFS. For example: 355 applications were approved by DCFS for the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funds, and 45 applications for the Community College Payment Program (CCPP). EAP staff also helped identify university and community college resources, create awareness of DCFS financial supports available to youth in care, evaluate student applications for DCFS scholarships, etc.

Outcomes and Metrics
- 99.9% of youth gained access to needed student centered planning, programs, services, evaluation and/or assessment.
- 100% of youth gained access to needed financial support or waivers or assistance applying.
- About 95% of training participants reported an increase in their knowledge through their participation in the training sessions.
- About 96.5% client satisfaction survey respondents reported they were satisfied with the services.
- About 99.6% of technical assistance provided had a completed referral form.
Client Satisfaction

EAP provides an online continuous survey to measure client satisfaction with EAP services. Youth in care, DCFS and POS caseworkers, caregivers, school personnel, court representatives and others who receive assistance from EAP to address educational needs of youth in care and youth in DCFS postsecondary education programs provide feedback on the survey. They have the ability to rate their level of satisfaction and comment on their overall experience with EAP.

This section of the report aggregates data obtained from the online client satisfaction feedback for the period from 7/1/17 to 6/30/18.

Nearly all of the people who completed survey expressed satisfaction with the service they received. There were 178 survey respondents. Of these, about 97% said staff service was helpful and staff was helpful and 98% would seek future help from EAP.

“The staff goes out of their way to ensure the success of the student.”
~Caseworker

The demographic composition of the respondents is demonstrated in the table below.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Respondents Population</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
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<tr>
<td>Child welfare caseworkers, administrators, education liaisons, etc.</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caregivers</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (school, court, CASA, unspecified, etc.)</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
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Many respondents took the time to complete additional comments. Following are statements taken from the comment section of the survey. They represent the opinions and feedback of individuals who have received EAP services. The quotes are verbatim with the exception of the actual names of the staff who provided the services. Specific EAP staff names have been replaced by identifiers such as EAP Staff A, EAP Staff B, etc.

**Client Satisfaction Quotes about EAP Service**

“EAP Staff A has been great to work with. Every time I have had an issue with a school or a child has had an issue with a school, EAP Staff A has been able to assist in resolving the issue. It is also nice to have an added advocate with connections in the school districts to help accomplish what is best for the child.” - Caseworker

I meet with EAP Staff B and she was extremely helpful and knowledgeable. She has made cogent suggestions and was instrumental in me finding a school for my foster daughter. She also has provided resources and made herself available for extra meetings and info sessions. Her assistance equipped with what I needed to make the best decisions for my daughter who is in special education and I look forward to working with her in the future.” - Caregiver

“EAP Staff C is a strong advocate for getting the educational needs of our youth in care met. She is passionate about her job and goes the 'extra mile' to insure that our youth get the services they so desperately need. Her resourcefulness is an asset, as she has developed relationships with school personnel that have helped facilitate achieving the established goals for our children.” – Supervisor

“EAP Staff D is very professional, always on top of whatever educational issue I have with a student. Always available for unscheduled consultation regarding a student. Very accommodating to sharing information at meetings. EAP Staff D does not mind assisting in any way that she can.” – School

“EAP Staff E has always gone beyond the call of duty. She has and is very helpful and is a very caring person. She has been thorough, efficient, and has always taken good care of all our situations. The services that are available are exactly what we need and we have been serviced well. Thank you very much.” – Student

**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.
Advocacy, support and collaboration are among the key things EAP does to enhance the wellbeing of youth in care. 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 revise DCFS procedures, and contributed to education initiatives and workgroups that benefit this population. EAP’s work also involved building the capacity of child welfare professionals, caregivers, school and others through training workshops and service intervention.

Addressing educational needs of youth in care requires a collaborative effort. EAP continues to be committed to advancing access to appropriate educational services as youth forge pathways towards successful adulthood.

“We NEED the EAP staff. They provide exceptional assistance to our youth in care. They are invaluable to our children, and should ALWAYS remain in place. Our youth need them!!”
-Caseworker

“I just want to say thank you guys for all the love and support you guys have given me Thank yall. I really appreciate it everything you guys are doing and still doing.”
Appendix A: Intervention Services to Address

Education Issues to Meet Students Needs

- **Consultation**
  Collaborative problem solving process that facilitates the assessment and resolution of education issues of specific concern.

- **Meeting Participation**
  Active involvement and collaboration with others, using staff expertise to facilitate timely effective resolutions.

- **Referral**
  Assessing the needs of the client and directing them to the appropriate services to meet the need.

- **Advocacy Coaching**
  Relationship-based process led by staff with specialized educational knowledge and skills to build capacity. Coaching is individualized and focused on educational goal setting, achievement and effective advocacy.

- **Resources**
  Identification and dissemination of materials based on the needs.

- **Other**
  Classroom Observation.
  Homeschool Monitoring.
  Discipline hearing participation, etc.