



6th Annual Convening

Fostering Success:
Partnering Pathways 2015

June 2-3, 2015

Education Reach for Texas convening participants gathered at the beautiful Bill J. Priest Campus to network and discuss best practices for supporting foster care alumni access to and persistence through higher education. About 120 participants attended the 6th annual convening.

The Education Reach for Texans mission is to empower Texans to champion postsecondary success for foster youth and alumni. Education Reach for Texans seeks to eliminate barriers to success and build support programs for alumni of care attending public colleges and universities in the state of Texas. We are part of an emerging network of organizations across the nation seeking to improve the success of former foster youth in postsecondary education.

Day One

WELCOME: Board Director, Wade Bradfute welcomed attendees to the convening. Immediately following Dr. Joe D. May, Chancellor of Dallas County Community College spoke on the import role community colleges play in addressing poverty issues in the communities they serve. He discussed job numbers in Dallas as well as industry demands for well-qualified, knowledgeable employees. He emphasized the need for all types of students in higher education, not just the type seeking a bachelor's degree. He highlighted the many options students have, including certificate programs, on their post-secondary path.

PLENARY SESSION – WHY WE ARE HERE: The conference committee organized a leadership panel of former foster care youth to discuss many obstacles in overcoming barriers to achieve post-secondary success. These notes are organized by the questions asked to panelist. Their answers inform child welfare and post-secondary representatives of the challenges faced by youth aging out of care who may want to access their tuition waiver.

Who inspired you to go to college?

- Me. I wanted to make something better of myself
- I wanted to join the military. My foster mom encouraged me to have a backup plan, so I took AP courses to activate my tuition waiver.
- I only went to college initially to lock in my tuition waiver; I didn't want to go to college. Now, I want to be an example for my family to show my nieces and nephews they can do it too.

Why did adjusting to college pose challenges?

- Financial issues. If I would have had guidance about how to apply for ETV, I would've done better.
- I wanted to get into extended foster care. I was embarrassed because I didn't want to seem dumb asking questions about higher education.
- I was still working full time. I aged out of care when in high school. I took out money for loans that I should not have. I didn't access after care services. CPS file said I would probably have a child. No one discussed higher education with me.

Why wouldn't youth want to access extended foster care?

- Its not promoted enough. Youth don't want to follow more rules. The rules in foster care are ridiculous. They don't let kids be kids. We need to promote normalcy in foster care.
- At age 18, youth have a chance to be free of the rules and be autonomous.

Why don't youth access the tuition waiver?

- I wasn't prepared to enter college
- I was scared
- The fear of not knowing
- People having poor expectations of me, so I didn't think I could do it
- Embarrassed because I didn't want to seem stupid
- Not knowing how to access benefits. Don't just tell us about benefits; show us how to access them, step by step.
- I just wanted to go out to make money, but didn't find any opportunities
- Now that I'm older I feel more prepared
- Everything was done for me in care. I was lost when I was on my own.

What role does high school play in accessing higher education?

- Too many placements in foster care
- Peers influenced me not progress academically
- The "light" didn't come on until about age 25 that I needed to do something with my life

What advice would you give to make for a better experience for foster alumni in higher education?

- Need guarantors for loans and apartments. Would be great to have someone to play this role.

- Have somebody we can call and go to for help
- Someone to show you the specific resources you are interested in accessing
- If there was a program for foster care alumni on my campus when I started, I would've been done with college by now.
- Students aging out of Region 7 all talk about the program at Texas State because we they have a program there

What can we do to encourage college for foster alumni?

- Circle of support meetings – this is where I heard about higher education
- If students knew who had higher education foster care alumni programs, students would choose the schools on that list
- First time I thought about college was when I attended the Education Reach convening
- You need to reach out sooner.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS: The day ended with several breakout sessions with a student track, a foster parent/agencies track, a new college programs track, and an existing programs track. All session titles and power points are found on the 6th annual convening website.

Day Two

LEGISLATIVE UPDATES AND CPS TRANSFORMATION: Lisa Black kicked off the second day of the convening discussing legislative updates and the Child Protective Services (CPS) overview. She shared a charge from Dr. John Specia labeled “CPS Transformation.” Consultants reviewed CPS issues such as employee turnover and staff multi-tasking on non-necessary actions. CPS Transformation partners are Casey Family Programs and the Stevens Group consulting firm. Results of the consultants review included a list of new priorities and outcomes for CPS in Texas.

CPS Transformation 3 New Priorities

1. Ensuring children’s safety, permanency, well-being
2. Developing a professional and stable workforce
3. Establishing an effective organization and operation

Overarching goals of Priorities

1. Increasing case worker tenure
2. Decreasing case worker workload
3. Improving quality outcomes for children and families served by CPS

CPS Transforming in Phases

Initial phase: Creating teams of state and regional staff that set priorities. These teams identify changes and develop strategies for implementing change. Teams include Reunification and Permanency, investigation and family based services team, continuous learning team.

New Strategies for CPS

- Developed new model that emphasizes mentoring
- Created a new training model: when employees come in the first 30 days, they do on the job training. The agency is saving money and staff time by condensing initial training from 3 months to 30 days.

Transformation Outcomes and Goals:

- Building a culture of permanency: Held the first annual permanency summit in Austin, Texas; CPS is planning permanency summits in each Texas region
- Implemented a new structured decision making model – this is a risk assessment tool that rolls out October 2015
- Established a new CPS practice model
- Developed a continuous learning model – CPS Professional Development
- Rolled out new job descriptions for CPS case worker positions
- Developed new performance evaluations that are less time consuming
- Creating more comprehensive interviews and screening for staff coming into the agency
- Partnering with Title IV E departments
- Streamlining investigation and Federal Protective Services policy CPS
- Working on streamlining conservatorship policies
- Looking into improving contracts with local services
- Providing services more quickly during the investigation stage

Legislative Updates: Bills Signed by the Governor in 2015

Senate Bill 200: Bill looking at consolidating agencies. DFPS will remain a stand-alone agency until next session.

Senate Bill 125: Requires a developmentally appropriate trauma informed assessment within 25 days of coming into care. Looking at utilizing the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) comprehensive assessment. According to the CANS assessment manual, the assessment is an “integration tool designed to support individual case planning and the planning and evaluation of service systems.”

Senate Bill 1407: The Normalcy Bill – Mandates DFPS uses its best efforts to normalize the lives of children and youth in the conservatorship of the department.

House Bill 3748: Bill would require all institutions to designate a liaison for all students formerly in foster care and assist them in college readiness and success. Also, the bill would require the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to designate a liaison to students in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). Lastly, a memorandum of understanding between DFPS and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board would be required to exchange student information to evaluate educational outcomes for students formerly in foster care.

Senate Bill 1889: Changes the definition of abuse and neglect to help families who turn to DFPS as a last resort to access residential treatment for youth who have mental health issues.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: Marva Hammons, Executive Vice President for Child Protective Services and Casey Family Programs shared a brief history and the mission of Casey Family Programs.

She discussed the landscape of foster care alumni and education in Texas. Casey wants to transform systems and families using wide collaborative nets in child welfare. Casey listens to the community and treats children families and communities as the experts. Hammons shared Casey’s visions for helping youth thrive instead of just survive. Casey focuses on **four pillars for building communities of hope:**

“Seeing that there is hope for the future is what education does for you.”

1. Safely reduce the need for foster care by 50% by the year 2020
2. To demonstrate how every child can have a safe and permanent family
3. Support more effective investments in children and families
4. Build a shared vision for communities of hope

“We know that a strong education can provide the counterbalance to so many predicted negative outcomes of foster care.”

She warned participants to be mindful of the toxic stress in foster care children’s lives. Adversity is a burden to these children that can last a lifetime. Their overstimulation limits their ability to organize thoughts. Relational permanency can alleviate this stress when children know that they are supported physically and mentally.

Hammons stressed Casey’s commitment to supporting opportunities for foster care youth to obtain education and employment for successful futures. They need a strong community, attachment to their culture, a strong education, and a supportive community. Students need incentives to getting a college degree. Casey partners with Education Reach for Texans to achieve the goals of supporting foster care alumni post-secondary success. She mentioned obstacles that get in the way of post-secondary success. In 2008-2009, Casey did an investigative study on the affects of foster care on alumni in Michigan and Texas (N=200; alumni in their early 20s). They found the following:

- Less than 50% graduate high school
- Slightly less than 50% were employed at 10 hours or more/week
- 40% of alumni experienced homelessness
- Most youth said they experienced at least 1 self-disclosed mental health problem in their lifetime

Hammons addressed what Education Reach participants can do about these outcomes. First, we need to encourage a “strong, inspiring education.” We must cast wide collaborative nets to support their post-secondary goals. Lastly, we must encourage students to be self-advocates. She moved into addressing what foster care alumni can do to change these negative outcomes. They can:

1. Contribute to building communities of hope with a sense of urgency for your own future
2. Take an active role in the future you want to create
3. Participate in lifelong learning
4. Don’t get stuck in a job that brings you no joy

Hammons concluded by sharing that even though organizations collaborate to support post-secondary success for alumni, foster alumni must do most of the work on their own. Self-advocacy is the key to their lifelong success.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS: All session titles and power points are found on the 6th annual convening website.

ALUMNI JOURNEY: Alumni from foster care join every year on a panel to discuss their journey through foster care and beyond. Tym Belseth, a foster care alumni and representative of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, moderated the session with three alumni, one of which is still in college and two who have graduated with a bachelors degree.

EDUCATION REACH FOR TEXANS: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE: Education Reach VP and Treasurer Sheila Bustillos gave an update on current and future projects collaboratively designed to investigate best practices in championing post-secondary success for foster care alumni. She mentioned a national study by Chapin Hall due to release findings in the next couple of years on best practices from organizations supporting alumni in post-secondary education. She stressed the importance of keeping a current listing of post-secondary institutions with foster care alumni support programs on the Education Reach for Texans website. She also encouraged participants to join the organization's listserv. She shared a national vision (offered by John Emerson, Casey Family Programs) for joining national organizations like Education Reach for Texans to aggregate best practices from a state level to a national level. There are 10 states that will participate in the project. First, there will be a national conference call with all 10 states. They will report back on best practices, challenges, and accomplishments. The next steps after this call will be to conduct a meta analysis to acquire a list of national best practices for foster alumni. Four new states are joining the national charge to support foster alumni in post-secondary education: New York, Maine, Idaho, and Colorado. She thanked everyone for their work and support for this initiative.

CLOSING REMARKS: Gregg Williams, Education Reach for Texans Board Member, concluded the convening for 2015.

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Convening Planning Team

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Note: Document collaboratively prepared by Sheila Bustillos, VP and Treasurer for Education Reach for Texans and the Education Reach for Texans Advisory Board