Focusing on Foster Youth
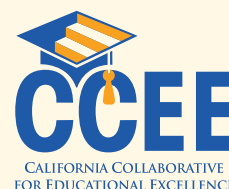
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK REPORT

The Foster Youth Learning Network
Hosted by the Alliance for Children's Rights

Focus, Actions & Recommendations
2017-2019 Initiative

ALLIANCE *for* CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

CCEE
CALIFORNIA COLLABORATIVE
for EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

About Alliance for Children's Rights

The Alliance for Children's Rights protects the rights of impoverished, abused and neglected young people. By providing free legal services, advocacy, and programs that create pathways to jobs and education, the Alliance levels the playing field and ensures that children who experience foster care are able to fulfill their potential.

About the CCEE

The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) is a statewide agency designed to work with you to help deliver on California's promise of a quality, equitable education for every student. We serve as strategic thought partners working alongside educators to build capacity, identify goals and needs, promote innovative thinking, and jointly solve problems. The CCEE offers a range of services including Professional Learning Networks (PLNs). The CCEE has supported 54 PLNs across California from 2017 to 2019.

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PLN Focus

Sponsored by the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), the **Alliance for Children's Rights East Los Angeles County Foster Youth Learning Network** focused on **establishing and improving systems for measuring and achieving continuous improvement for foster youth Local Control Accountability and Plan (LCAP) process.** This work is essential to close the wide achievement gap between foster youth and other student populations.

Much of the PLN work concentrated on building thoughtful district-level systems to support foster youth, as well as the necessity of creating and utilizing local indicators for foster youth data in the absence of and/or in addition to available state level foster youth data.

PLN participants were from the **Alhambra, Azusa, Baldwin Park, Bonita, Pomona, and West Covina unified school districts (serving collectively 2,400 foster youth).** Participants included student services directors with the power to modify current policies and practices around serving foster youth; foster youth liaisons who bring expertise on the needs of foster youth and work with them daily within the school setting; and data specialists who can pull local data out of student information systems and modify those systems as necessary to serve the work done by districts to improve foster youth outcomes (e.g., create an automatic system for issuing partial credits).

PLN Structure

The network was guided by **Carnegie's Networks for Design Improvement** model in our use of continuous improvement efforts through our expert participants working together to pursue the common aim of improving foster youth education outcomes.

The PLN had eight in-person network monthly meetings during the two-and-a-half academic years covered by the grant which focused on deepening knowledge of specific foster youth education topics through the process of identifying and collectively problem-solving around barriers to improve foster youth outcomes. Topics covered included:

- **Identifying and tagging foster youth within student information systems**
- **School stability**
- **Immediate school enrollment**
- **Disproportionate enrollment in alternative education programs**
- **Partial credits, graduation**
- **Trauma and mental health**

PLN Structure *continued*

- **Discipline and positive behavior programs**
- **Closing the academic achievement gap**
- **Special education**
- **Collecting and analyzing meaningful data to identify needs and demonstrate improvement in foster youth education outcomes**

Each of these large group conversations was facilitated through an Exploration Guide which asked relevant questions to spark conversation.

We also conducted monthly **one-on-one individualized analysis and planning sessions with each of our individual district teams** to check-in and analyze district progress on implementing best practices learned in the network meetings and review data baselines and improvements. These meetings led to further engagement between the facilitators and our district participants such as supporting their efforts in youth engagement in the LCAP process and providing trauma informed education trainings to their teachers, counselors and other relevant staff.

Barriers and Challenges

Foster youth experience significant school instability, **attending an average of eight schools while in care and losing up to six months of their education with each school change.** This instability makes it extremely difficult for a district to serve a single youth.

A **lack of consistent communication between education and child welfare systems means that kids often show up or disappear on any given day** without any notice to the school, making coordinating school stability efforts difficult, if not impossible.

Foster youth also **experience trauma which impacts their brain development, ability to learn, and behavioral/mental health needs.** Because foster youth are a disproportionately small population of students who have some of the worst education outcomes of any student population, they often require the largest expenditure per pupil to impact positive change.

Ensuring school board members, site administrators, and teachers understand the unique needs of foster youth and buy into the extraordinary measures necessary to support their success can be a difficult undertaking for any district.

Evidence of Impact

Each of our six districts modified their existing foster youth board policies and/or administrative regulations during 2017-18 year. These updates addressed compliance issues such as ensuring they had a **partial credit policy** (as legally required), as well as equity issues such as ensuring that their partial credit policy allowed foster youth to **accumulate credits** in a way that put them on equal footing with typical students.

All of our participant districts have increased the training of their district-level and school site staff on foster youth education needs (e.g., how trauma impacts learning), their own district's updated policies and procedures, and the education laws designed to address the unique needs of foster youth.

Each district designed and implemented their own plan for how to effectively accomplish this given their local conditions.

The changes in practice paired with additional training and support produced the following examples of changes in student-level outcomes:

- **POMONA USD**

    Reduced the percentage of foster youth enrolled at alternative school sites from 57% to 2% over the course of a single year, after drastically changing its enrollment practices and creating credit recovery programs at its comprehensive high schools.

- **BONITA USD**

    Staff has demonstrated ongoing improvements in their ability to increase school stability for the youth in their district. Bonita USD went from only 15% of foster youth remaining stable over the course of a school year to 25% by changing their enrollment and disenrollment practices and ensuring that *school of origin rights* were invoked whenever appropriate and possible. This new enrollment process also led to a drastic reduction in the number of foster youth placed in alternative schools.

- **ASUZA USD**

    Increased their graduation rate from 29% to 83% and has awarded 100% of its foster students their partial credits, including one student who received a diploma who would not have graduated otherwise.

Evidence of Impact *continued*

- **WEST COVINA USD**

  Reduced the percentage of foster youth enrolled in alternative settings from 60% to 30%.

- **ALHAMBRA USD**

  Increased the percentage of foster youth who received their partial credits from 66% to 83% after implementing changes to their student information system to make the issuance of partial credits automatically calculated.

This data demonstrates that the achievement gap between the general student population and foster youth in our participating districts is significantly shrinking.

Lessons Learned

At our closing meeting for the 2017-19 network, we asked each district to discuss what they took away from their participation in the network. Many participants discussed the **level of trust** that was built among participants, how they **felt no fear or shame** in disclosing how their district was failing foster youth, and that this led to **deep conversations** about how to better serve these youth.

Participants across districts are also now **regularly contacting each other** to discuss foster youth and other district needs outside of network meetings. Participants reported satisfaction that each of the meetings **deepened their knowledge** and was worth attending.

Similarly, they reported the three-hour PLN sessions were always packed with good content and were amazed with their ability to participate without experiencing flagging attention. We believe this is also reflected in the consistent attendance of our core participants.

We had many key learnings and best practices that came out of our network meetings and the focus of our participation in CCEE's 2019-20 Bridge PLN program is to deepen and **incorporate those learnings and best practices into a guide** designed by and for districts to change their systems for educating foster youth to improve their outcomes.

For example, our districts spent countless hours figuring out how to identify and tag their foster youth in their student information systems. This task must be accomplished and continually updated to allow for local data to be gathered and utilized in continuous improvement cycles.

Recommendations for the Field

The lessons learned within the network have been shared with school district staff across the state at multiple state-level conferences/convenings since the PLN's inception:

- **California Foster Youth Education Task Force Education Summit**
- **San Diego Foster Youth Education Summit**
- **Beyond the Bench Judicial Conference**
- **Blueprint Conference for Foster Youth Education**
- **California School Board Association Conference**
- **Southern California Foster Youth Symposium**
- **Public Law Institute Training**
- **School Social Worker Conference**

Each of these presentations/conferences/convenings has included network participants and we plan to **increase these experiences and gain exposure over the next two years.**

In addition, a set of tools already developed for the network will be refined. The tools, referred to as **Exploration Guides,** analyze each of the key foster youth topics including the basics of the law, relevant data, current legislative or policy updates or actions.

Each guide includes 10-15 questions per topic to facilitate discussion among participants, identification of barriers, and creation of best practice solutions to those barriers. The **ongoing development and distribution of best practices** is one of the main focuses of our participation in CCEE's 2019-20 Bridge PLN program.

As we develop the **Best Practices Guide,** we anticipate digging deep into implementation and creating shareable policies, tools, professional development and training materials, student information system queries and other items that would aid others in improving their own practices to improve systems for foster youth.

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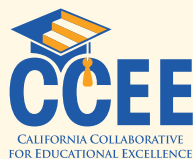CCEE
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