

Improving Educational Services for Foster Youth living in Group Homes:

An Analysis of Interagency Collaboration

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Abstract

Placing foster youth in appropriate educational settings and avoiding unnecessary absences from school when transferring into new homes and new schools requires collaboration between caseworkers, foster care providers, and school staff. The purpose of this research was to examine the process by which child welfare workers, foster care providers, and school staffs facilitate or impede timely placement into new school environments for foster youth when they change foster placements. The study included data on 45 newly placed group home youth served in 26 randomly selected group homes in 3 counties in a western state. Data were obtained through record reviews and interviews conducted with social workers, group home personnel, and educational staff. The data suggest that the specific tools and legal codes designed to facilitate the process of enrolling foster youth in school frequently are not used or complied with. Delays in enrollment were common, particularly for youth requiring special educational services; interagency communication among responsible parties was infrequent; and all parties too often erroneously relied on others to carry out fundamental tasks associated with school placement. Sample procedures are offered for public child welfare worker and other parties to improve coordination and educational outcomes for youth.

Key Words: Foster Youth, Education, Child Welfare, Collaboration, School Transitions

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Introduction

Placing foster youth in appropriate educational settings and avoiding unnecessary absences from school when transferring into new homes and new schools requires collaboration between public child welfare caseworkers, foster care providers, and school staff. Previous research suggests that delays in school placements are frequent yet less is known about the reasons for these delays. This study attempts to shed light on the reasons for school placement delays so that we can appropriately reform targeted areas of practice and thereby better meet the educational needs of children and youth in the foster care system.

Literature Review

There is considerable evidence indicating that foster youth experience a great deal of difficulty in the school system and are frequently not receiving the attention that they need. Recent research has suggested that children who grow up in foster care are less likely to be actively supported in school by the adults in their lives, less likely to be in college preparatory classes than non-foster children, (when matched for learning ability), and more likely to change schools frequently than non-foster children (Blome, 1997).

A statewide analysis in Washington's public school system compared the educational achievement test scores of youth in long-term foster care with other children in grades 3, 6 and 9 and examined the graduation prospects of foster youth and non-foster youth in 11th grade. This study found the following:

- “Foster youth score on average, 15 to 20 percentile points below non-foster youth in statewide achievement tests.
- Only 59 percent of foster youth enrolled in 11th grade complete high school by the end of grade 12. The completion rate for non-foster youth is 86 percent.

- Even after statistically controlling for a variety of factors, a youth that enters foster care is likely to have lower test scores and graduation rates.
- At both the elementary and secondary levels, twice as many foster youth had repeated a grade, changed schools during the year, or enrolled in special education programs compared with non-foster youth.
- Surprisingly, a youth's length of stay in foster care and other placement characteristics do not appear to be related to educational attainment. Foster youth in short-term care, for example, have on average the same educational deficits as children in long term foster care.” (Burley and Halpern, 2001, p1).

Foster youth are also placed in Special Education at a much higher rate than children not living in foster care (about 30% of foster children and about 10% of non-foster children) and due to gaps in communication between agencies responsible for their care they frequently do not receive services for which they are eligible when they change school districts. (see Ayasse, 1995; Goerge, Van Voorhis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992).

Foster youth living in group homes are particularly vulnerable due to the factors that contributed to their need for a higher level of care and because of the institutional nature of their care. A study completed by the American Institutes for Research (Parrish, , Dubois, Delano, Dixon, Webster, Berrick, and Bolus, 2001) revealed that almost half (47%) of group home youth are enrolled in Special Education and 41% of those youth in Special Education are classified as Seriously Emotionally Disturbed (19% of all group home youth). This compares to all youth enrolled in Special Education where only 3% of the children are classified as Seriously Emotionally Disturbed and to non-group home foster youth where only 9% are so classified.

Transitions between foster care placements and schools also may have a negative impact on the academic performance of youth. Conger & Rebeck (2001) found that placement transfers and

subsequent school transfers were associated with a decrease in school attendance within a year of placement. Others have found associations between an increased number of placements and delays in skills and higher expulsion rates. (Zima, Bussing, Freeman, Yang, Belin, & Forness, 2000).

The nature of these transitions was examined by the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) in 2001, utilizing telephone surveys of foster care providers and foster child case record reviews. The researchers discovered that 12% of foster children experience delays of 2 or more weeks in enrolling in a new school. Group Home youth and those with emotional problems were much more likely to experience these delays. For example, a child who is missing records and/or is identified as needing Special Education services might experience delays in enrollment of more than a month. Parrish, et al (2001) found that there are considerable delays in transferring records and enrolling youth in new schools. They found that there is an average delay of 18 days in obtaining records for newly placed group home residents — 31 days for new residents with missing or out-of-date records.

Although there have been technological advances to track and store educational information for youth in foster care, Parrish et al (2001) discovered that only 20% of youth in group homes had information stored in the Education Passport (a component of the statewide mandated database known as “CWS/CMS”) where information can be made available to social workers responsible for their care. They also found that there are significant discrepancies between the perception of social services, mental health, probation, and group home staff as to how often records are lost or incomplete, how often youth have to repeat classes when course work credits are not found, whether duplication of educational assessments occurs, or whether youth experience long delays when attempting to enroll in school. Overall, group home staff perceive these problems as happening more frequently than workers from the other agencies and although group home staff perceive a great deal of cooperation between agencies, they do not perceive these collaborative activities as improving the

educational services provided to foster youth. The BASSC (2001) study also documented the degree to which child welfare services providers and educational service providers do not trust each other to serve the best interests of the children they share.

Current Research

In order to better understand the dynamics of interagency collaboration and cooperation that occurs on behalf of children being served by the foster care system and the school system we conducted an “in-vivo” study of the school enrollment process. Although there are many situations where communication between foster care social workers and school staff would be helpful, the need for communication and cooperation is particularly important during transitions – specifically when youth change foster care placements and subsequently enter new schools. Not only is it important that this transition be done quickly to minimize the number of missed school days and opportunities for learning, but it is also important that the youth be placed in classes most similar in content and structure to what he or she had experienced in the previous school. (Barring, of course, situations where the previous school program was not working well for the youth.) By gathering information from those directly involved in the process of transferring foster youth from one home to another and enrolling them in new schools as they occurred, we hoped to inform the following research question:

What are the specific problems causing delays in school attendance when a foster youth enters a new group home placement?

Methods

This study examined the educational services provided to group home youth from 26 group homes in three California counties. Group homes were stratified by county, level of care, and geographic area within the county. A random sample of ten group homes was selected from two of the counties, and six from the third county (due to a smaller overall number of group homes located in that county). Data were collected on youth residing in a group home who met both of the

following criteria, 1) the youth was placed in the group home between September 2003 and April, 2004, and 2) the youth changed schools as a result of moving into this home. The educational placement process of these youth was monitored from the date the youth entered a new group home to when they began attending school. In the case of Special Education students, we also recorded when the youth began to receive appropriate educational services, as defined by his/her most recent Individual Education Plan (IEP). Each county developed different strategies to notify researchers that a group home youth had moved to a new group home. In two counties, school based service programs for assisting foster youth maintained databases of all youth in group homes in their county. The database included the names of the youth, group home, social worker, and the date of group home placement for each youth. The database was updated every few weeks and a report was produced. Research assistants used this report to determine which youth had moved to a new group home and might be eligible for the study. In another county, the research assistant had weekly phone contact with the group homes and educational liaisons working for Child Welfare Services to determine if they had any new residents.

Measures

The instruments used for this study included

- 1) A Demographic Face sheet
- 2) School Placement Tracking Tool.
- 3) Protocol for a Structured Interview with the Child Welfare Placement Worker
- 4) Call Logs and journals of contact with social workers and school personnel

These tools were created with input from a Research Advisory Group composed of representatives from three counties' child welfare departments, county and school district Foster Youth Service¹ (FYS) coordinators, and some of the group home directors. Permission to gather data from Child

¹ The Foster Youth Service Programs are state funded, school-based programs to assist foster youth with school enrollment, records transfer, and other educational needs. For more information on these programs see Ayasse (1995).

Welfare workers for the purposes of this study was granted by the Presiding Juvenile Court Judges of each county. MSW students who were working at the various Foster Youth Services Programs in dual roles as social work interns and research assistants completed data collection.

The face sheet included demographic and other information about the group home youth included in the study. Demographic information included gender, ethnicity, age, school level, and other information for the group home youth. Important dates, such as the date the youth moved to the new residence and the last day they attended school in their previous school district was also included. General school information such as district of school, level in school, and type of previous school was recorded. Previous child welfare placement, county of residence and county of jurisdiction was also included. Information about special education eligibility was indicated on this form, including type of disability, availability of IEP, and special education placement. It is important to note that while the random selection of group homes and use of the data for research was unique to this study, most of the data elements we identified are routinely gathered by the FYS programs in order to assist youth enroll in school.

The School Placement Tracking Tool was designed to track the enrollment of the group home youth in school. The Tracking Tool included the date of occurrence of certain activities relevant to the enrollment of youth in school, such as, date records transferred to new school, date student began attending school, and date transportation was arranged, among others. Reasons for delay in carrying out these activities as reported by the group home provider, social worker, or school personnel were also indicated. Examples of some of the 26 reasons for delay are: “Group home not aware of responsibility;” “Policy directive;” “Student refuses placement;” or “Information not available and whereabouts not known.” The role of the person supplying the information to the interviewer was also recorded.

The Social Worker Interview form included questions about the educational status of the youth, whether this information was up to date, whether the youth's Special Education status was noted, and, if the youth was eligible for Special Education, the identity of the person responsible for authorizing the IEP. Child Welfare workers were also asked whether educational information was stored in the passport section of CWS/CMS. Staff gathering the data kept logs of the dates of each phone or in-person contact they made to gather these data elements for each subject.

Procedures

Once group homes were selected for inclusion in the study, a letter from the FYS Program was sent to the group homes that were randomly selected explaining the research project. Research assistants then worked in collaboration with the group home and FYS to create a plan for identifying eligible study participants. Procedures for identification of eligible youth varied by county and by research assistant.

Once a research assistant determined that an eligible youth had entered a group home, they contacted school personnel, social workers, and group home providers to complete the Social Worker Interview and School Placement Tracking forms. The youth's enrollment process was followed until the youth was attending school and placed in an appropriate educational placement. Researchers had no contact with the youth as a part of the study.

Results

Enrollment data were gathered on 45 newly placed group home youth, 21 in one county, 16 in another, and 8 in the third. Although additional youth may have made placement and school changes, in one county there were a number of group homes that did not respond to researchers or the school-based agency that requested information. Based on information from School District and Child Welfare staff regarding the quality of the non-responsive group homes, we think it is safe to assume that the non-responsive homes are not more efficient in the enrollment process than the group homes

that did respond and likely to be found less efficient. Consequently, our results may be skewed in a positive direction.

Transitional Issues

Our results indicate that of the 45 youth newly placed in a group home and a new school, 18% experienced no significant delay in being placed in school (“No significant delay” is defined as fewer than 5 days between the day the youth entered the group home and the day he or she began attending school, excluding holidays and weekends.) Twenty-nine percent of youth experienced a delay of between five and ten days, 18% experienced a delay of 11 to 18 days, and 20% experienced a delay of over 19 days between being placed in the new group home and starting classes at their new school. Special Education youth represented 33% of the sample and, as can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, experienced significantly longer delays in school enrollment and attendance. There were three youth who ran away from the home before being placed in school and two youth who were moved to new group homes before being placed in an appropriate educational setting - one of whom was in placement for five months without ever having attended school.

Overall, youth missed an average of 14 days of school (almost 3 full school weeks) between the day they were placed in the group home and the day they began attending school. Youth placed in regular education classes missed an average of 10 days and youth eligible for special education experienced average delays of 19 days (n=15) from the start of residence to the start of any type of educational services. The delay was considerably longer (26 days) before youth were placed in an appropriate educational program. (An “appropriate” educational program is defined as being placed in the same special education program indicated in the most recent IEP or, if different, a new IEP meeting was held to formally change the type or restrictiveness of the placement.)

[Insert Table 1 and Figure 1 about here]

In addition to school days missed as youth wait to enroll and start classes, youth often have not been in school for long periods of time prior to arrival at the new group home. Group home staff and social workers for over half of the youth we were tracking did not know when the youth had last attended school (see Table 2). Of the 27 youth for whom data were available, 60% had missed 30 or more days of school before arriving at the group home. Of the 18 regular education youth with available data, there was a median of 37 school days missed between the last day they attended school prior to entering the group home and the day they started attending a new school. (One student was out of school for over 217 days.) Of the nine Special Education youth in our sample a median of 80 days of school were missed, (see Figure 2).

[Insert Table 2 and Figure 2 about here]

We were able to collect information regarding the reasons for the delay in enrollment and attendance for 26 of the 32 youth who were successfully enrolled in school but experienced over a 5-day delay. Of these students, almost half, (45%) of the delays in enrollment and attending school were due to the school waiting for information (in the form of paperwork) to arrive from the previous school and the rest were mostly due to administrative delays in assigning school placement after the paperwork had arrived, vacation, or confusion on the part of the group home staff about who was responsible to complete the enrollment. For the students with the longest delays the most common reason was attributed to a delay in the transfer of paperwork between school districts.

Education Passport Utilization

Research staff attempted contact with all of the child welfare caseworkers of the youth who newly entered the group homes chosen for the study. They were able to contact 32 of the 45 caseworkers. The most frequent reason for lack of contact was that the caseworkers simply did not return phone calls. Our researchers found that 5 of the 32 (15.6%) caseworkers interviewed had information stored in the Education Passport and 4 of these indicated the foster youth's special education status.

Although there were 12 youth whose social workers knew they were eligible for Special Education only 2 of those youths' caseworkers had information about the type of services they were eligible for stored in the Educational Passport section of the CWS/CMS. Those 2 had complete information about the students' specific disability and the type of special education program for which they were eligible.

When we asked the group home staff whether they had a current Education Passport available to assist with school enrollment we found that they did in only 5 of 45 instances (11%). There was no correspondence between the youth reported to have Passports by the group home and the caseworker reports. (We also interviewed 4 of the 5 caseworkers of the youth who had current Passports at their group homes.) Our study suggests that 38% of group home youth experienced two weeks or more of missed school in the transition between homes and schools – similar to, or exceeding those in other studies.

Policies and Training

We were able to gather information on school enrollment policies and procedures from 18 of the 25 group homes identified for this study. We found that 5 of those 18 had written policies or procedures explaining how to place youth in school and only 4 of the 18 had training or staff development activities relating to school placement.

Of seven school districts from which we gathered data, we discovered that 3 had some form of written policy and/or directives on the process of enrolling foster youth in school. Two of these school districts appear to have shorter than average delays. These two school districts were the only districts that provided training to group home staff on how to enroll foster youth in school. The small sample size in this study limits our ability to draw conclusions about whether the two districts with fewer delays are more effective or whether the districts with longer than average delays had a larger proportion of youth requiring special education placements which tend to take longer to arrange.

Researchers were not able to obtain any written policies for school enrollment protocol developed by the County Child Welfare agencies involved in this study (although we were aware of at least one written policy in one of the counties).

Discussion

Although data were gathered and calculated differently from previous studies they also corroborate the low rate of CWS/CMS Education Passport utilization for tracking educational placement and progress. While results showing delays in enrollment in the midst of school transitions were expected given past experience and research, it was somewhat ironic at a time when FAX machines and instant email communication are typical, that these delays would be most frequently due to “waiting for information to arrive.” In addition, when counties and school districts have well developed databases available to store the information that is needed for enrollment, it is somewhat less clear why information should take days and weeks to arrive rather than hours. In the event that current information is not entered into the existing databases or if that information is not conveyed in a timely fashion to those individuals responsible for enrolling foster youth in school, the value these databases have for enhancing collaboration is greatly diminished.

The case of “Chris” is typical of foster youth who experience school placement delays:

In the first week of March, Chris changed group home placements. The group home provider and Child Welfare worker had limited information on Chris’ educational history. In conversations with a group home staff member, who identified himself as the person responsible for enrolling youth in school, the staff member did not know when Chris was enrolled in school, when he started school, or where he went to school. The worker reported he had been on vacation when Chris moved to the group home and this had delayed Chris’s school enrollment. He was not sure who had enrolled Chris in school while he was away. He knew that Chris was eligible for special education, but did not know what type of services were mandated in his Individual Education Plan. The Child Welfare

worker also had little educational information on Chris. She did not know if he was eligible for special education services or who held educational rights. She knew the date he started school but did not have any information as to why there was a significant delay in enrolling Chris in school. The Health and Education Passport in the CWS/CMS held no educational information for Chris.

Chris did not begin school until mid May. He missed more than 34 days of school from when he moved to the new group home until the day he started classes. Neither the group home nor the social worker was sure if the new educational placement was educationally appropriate as designated by his Individual Education Plan.

While some of the youth may have had complicated social and emotional difficulties that required a careful consideration of their needs – and which could reasonably result in a delay of school placement - these situations accounted for only 2 or 3 of the instances where the youth experienced delays of more than 11 days. The other situations, where information was simply slow to arrive, remain unexplained. Some of these delays may have been due to systemic and/or institutional neglect. As can be observed in the data described previously and according to reports from the research staff, there were numerous instances where information needed for school enrollment was either not available or not provided, phone calls were not returned, and line staff were either not aware of or not executing their responsibilities to enroll foster youth in school.

The difficulty encountered in gathering written policies from each county and school district was somewhat surprising given that each of the counties we were working with have had active collaborative groups focused on developing better communication between schools, group homes and child welfare staff. These collaborative groups, coordinated by their respective County Offices of Education came into existence in or around 1999 after the Foster Youth Services program was expanded by the State Legislature to address the educational needs of all group home youth in California. While they have, in many cases, forged successful working relationships between

agencies working on behalf of foster youth and many school staff and social workers have become familiar with their services, there appear to be areas of needed improvement to create a sustainable infrastructure. Such an infrastructure would include detailed written materials at each school, group home, and county child welfare office regarding the process of school enrollment for foster youth as well as information on a student's right to a free and appropriate public education.

Recent California legislation (AB490, 2004), which took effect mid-way through the period of this research, may help to address some of those issues by requiring the appointment of a school liaison at each school district and outlining more detailed procedures on how to mitigate the transitional issues foster youth encounter. However, if the new legislation and written policies are not fully integrated into practice – i.e. easily referenced, widely distributed, and/or commonly known - they will have minimal value in improving educational services and outcomes for foster youth.

Recommendations

In order to improve the efficiency of the process by which group home youth are transitioned from one school to another when moving between homes we recommend the following:

- Child welfare agencies should establish clear and easily available written policies and procedures for enrolling foster youth in school. These policies should be distributed to both child welfare staff and to all licensed care facilities in the County.
- Child Welfare agencies should require at least minimal educational information (i.e. name and location of most recent school of attendance and Special Education status) to be updated in an Education Passport or similar document/database each time a youth is moved.
- Local Educational Agencies should establish clear and easily available written policies for enrolling foster youth and assign district liaisons to ensure that those policies are followed at all school sites.

- Group Homes should have clear written policies and procedures for enrolling youth in school and obtaining Educational Passports or similar documents.
- All of the involved agencies should provide periodic training on the educational needs of foster youth and the details of their school enrollment policies.
- Individual service providers at all of the involved agencies should respond in a timely manner to inquiries and requests for information made by staff from other agencies on behalf of foster youth to assist with their enrollment and/or review of educational placement issues.

Because school placement requires information and action from public child welfare workers, group home staff, and school personnel, we have developed flow charts to describe each individual's role and responsibility during the school transition phase (see Figures 3 – 5). Although the details are specific to California, in the context of federal law, we believe they are highly applicable in other state settings.

[Insert Figures 3, 4 and 5 about here]

Conclusion

The responsibility of attending to the educational needs of foster youth can not be assigned simply to one or the other of the involved service systems. Although it would be easy to assign this responsibility to the schools, assigning them the sole responsibility in this regard ignores the fact that they are reliant on parents or guardians to tell them about their children's educational history and needs. Most parents of children who have missed significant time in school or who have special learning needs, know that they need to discuss those issues with teachers, counselors, and administrators at the school. In contrast to the historical knowledge held by most parents, group home staff, who may have just met a youth for the first time, may have no knowledge of the youth's

educational history. Neither they nor Child Welfare workers may know how to best address any special educational needs and/or determine in which classes the youth should be enrolled. Moreover, although Child Welfare workers are responsible for overseeing all of the needs of youth living in out-of-home care it is really beyond the scope of their duties or expertise to perform as skilled advocates in negotiating the labyrinth of the educational system for youth with unusual educational needs. In sum, the educational, social, emotional, and legal issues that are involved with youths' transition into, or between, group homes and subsequently into a new school require a range of expertise and knowledge not held by any one person in any one of the agencies involved.

Because of this complexity, enrolling group home youth in appropriate educational settings requires joint responsibility and a team approach. It may also require designated individuals within each organization to take the lead on ensuring timely communication, the transfer of information, and identifying situations that need special attention. Simple acts such as returning phone calls in a timely way, expediting paperwork in time sensitive situations, and speaking to one another using a minimal amount of technical jargon can facilitate this team work tremendously.

While it is true that many foster youth experience social and emotional problems that complicate their educational needs, most need only a small amount of assistance and guidance in order to negotiate the educational system. In all situations, the occasion where a youth must transfer to a new home and consequently a new school presents a critical transition. Long unnecessary absences from school, especially in high school, can have serious deleterious effects on a student's abilities to learn material, pass competency exams, earn credits, and eventually graduate. Speeding up these transitions and minimizing the disruptiveness of changes in educational settings by sharing accurate, up-to-date information regarding the student's coursework and special educational needs is one of the most crucial roles those working with foster youth can play to enhance their likelihood of succeeding in school and beyond.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Number of youth experiencing significant delays in starting a new school:

Delays for Foster Youth entering a new school after moving to a new group home:	Youth in Regular Education	Youth in Special Education	Total	Percent
No Significant Delay	8	0	8	18%
5 – 10 days between the start of group home placement and the first day of school attendance	9	4	13	29%
11- 18 days	5	3	8	18%
19 or more days	4	5	9	20%
Ran away or moved before attending new school	2	3	5	11%
No Data	2	0	2	4%
Total	30	15	45	

Figure 1: Days of School Missed after arriving in Group Home

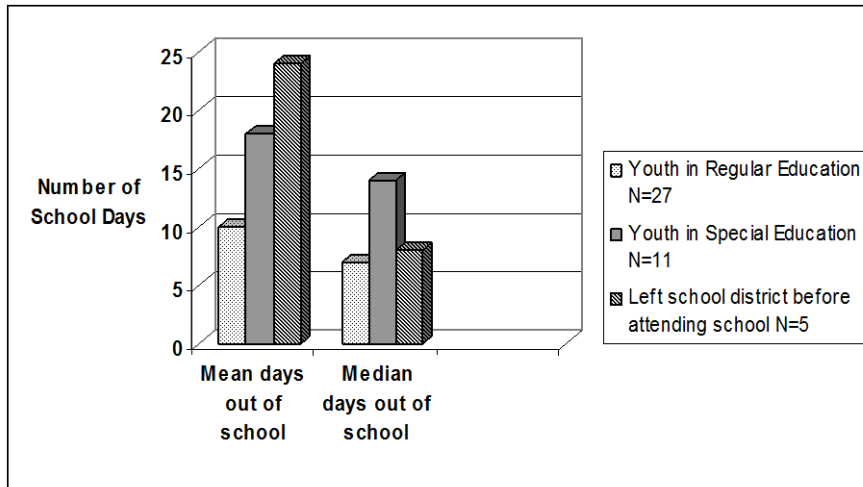


Table 2: Availability of information for previous school attendance:

	Youth in Regular Education Classes	Eligible Youth in Special Education services
Number of youth with no information about the last day they attended school in the previous district	12	6
Number of Youth with available information on their last day of school attendance	18	9
Total number of Youth	30	15

Figure 2: Median number of school days lost in transitioning from one group home to another

(N = 27)

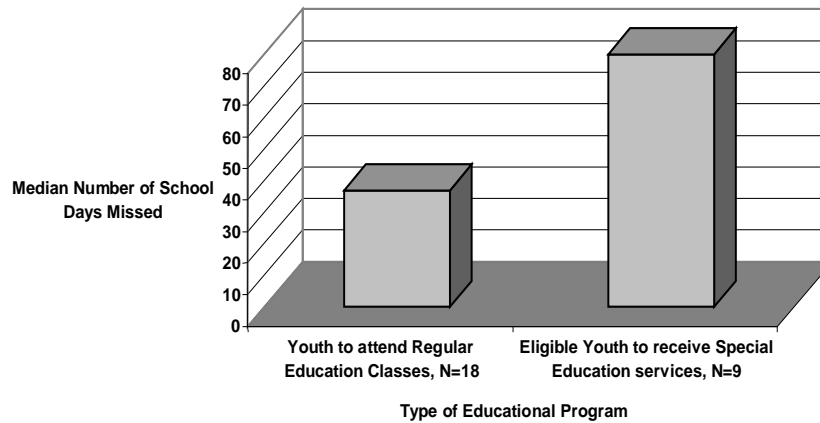


Figure 3: Social Worker or Probation Officer Responsibilities for placing a Foster Child in School

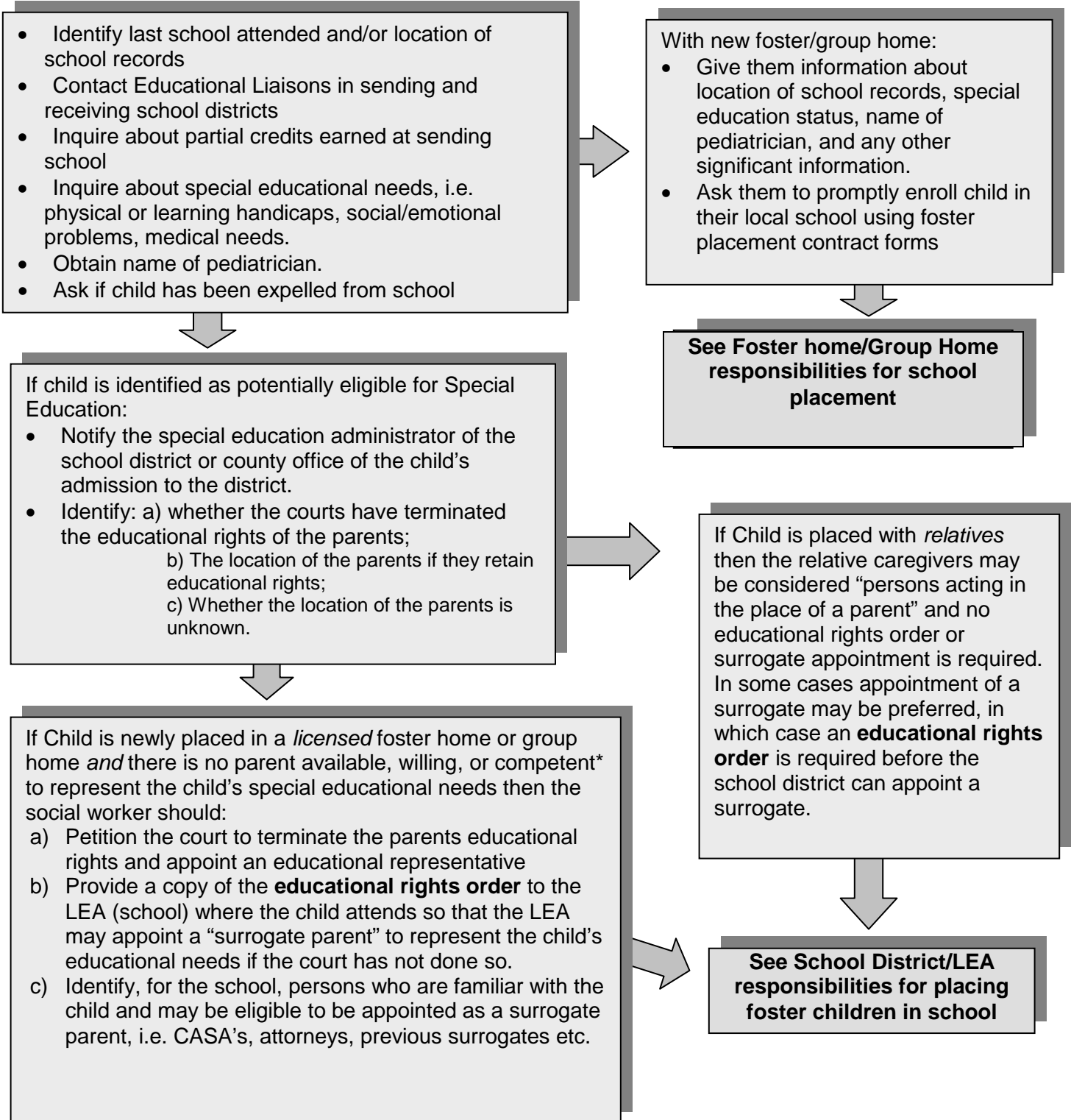


Figure 4: School District and/or Local Educational Agency Responsibilities in Placing Foster Children in School

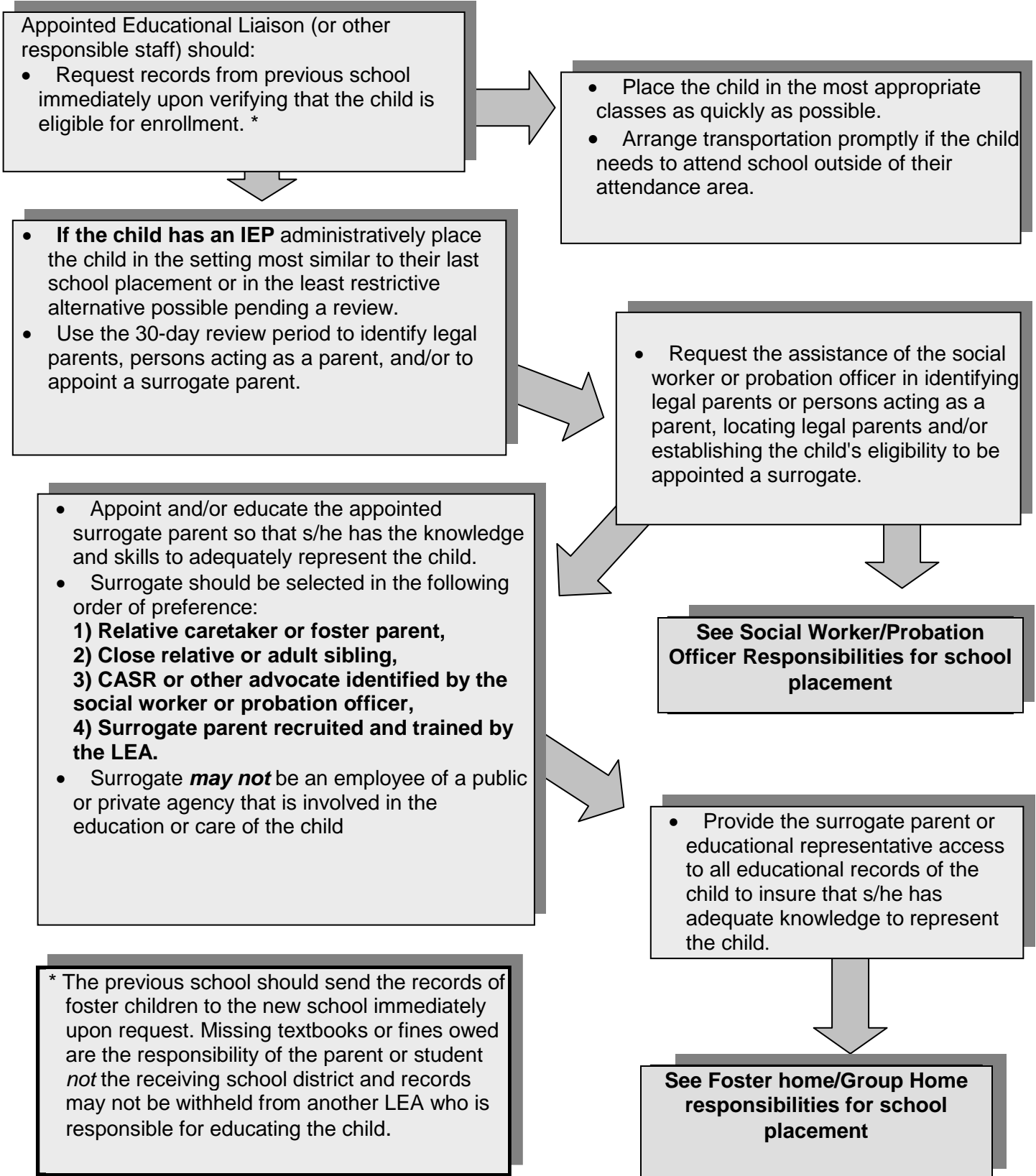


Figure 5: Foster Home or Group Home Responsibilities for Enrolling Foster Children in School

