Backgrounder

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Foster Care Children Need
Better Educational Opportunities

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The estimated 518,000 American children currently in foster care are among the most at-risk children in American society.[1] Research shows that adults who were formerly in foster care are more likely than the general population to succumb to poor life outcomes. Former foster children are more likely to become homeless, incarcerated, or dependent on state services.[2]

Foster children face many challenges in life. For those in long-term care, one major obstacle is the difficult transition out of state care into adulthood. Education is a key factor in determining whether a foster child successfully makes this transition. Regrettably, many foster children do not. Compared to their peers, foster children have lower scores on standardized tests and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy, and dropout rates.[3]

Policymakers should improve educational opportunities for children in foster care. One promising reform is to provide foster children with school choice options. For example, offering tuition scholarships to foster children could address common problems such as instability and persistent low expectations. Expanding school choice options for foster children would also encourage schools to tailor educational services to meet foster children's unique needs.

In 2006, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano (D) signed the nation's first K–12 tuition scholarship program for foster children.[4] In 2007, similar legislation was introduced in the legislatures of at least four states—Florida, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas. This report outlines recommendations for how policymakers could reform existing programs or enact new state

Talking Points

- Children in foster care are at greater risk of poor life outcomes than are children in the general population. The quality of a foster child's primary and secondary education is a major factor in determining whether or not the child succeeds in life.

- Compared to their peers, foster children have lower scores on standardized tests and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy, and dropout rates. Common problems for foster children include frequent school transfers and instability, persistent low expectations, and the lack of specialized instruction.

- Policymakers should implement reforms to give foster children the option of enrolling in a public or private school of their guardian's choice.

- School choice options could ensure that more foster children receive a stable and high-quality education that prepares them for a successful transition into adulthood.

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Why Foster Children Need Better Educational Opportunities

Understanding the need to improve educational opportunities for children in foster care begins by understanding the foster care system. The Code of Federal Regulations defines foster care as "24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians."[5] For a variety of reasons, children in foster care have been removed from the homes of their birth families and placed under state care. Some children ultimately are returned to their birth families or placed for adoption. Others end up in long-term foster care.

Nationally, roughly half of all foster children will spend at least one year in foster care, with 20 percent staying longer than three years and 9 percent staying for more than five years.[6] Unlike their peers in traditional families, many foster children do not have an adequate safety net or social network and cannot rely on parents or other relatives to facilitate a smooth transition out of the home and into adulthood.

A large body of research suggests that children in foster care are among the most at risk for poor life outcomes in American society. Adults who were formerly in foster care are more likely than the general population to be homeless, unprepared for employment and limited to low-skill jobs, and dependent on welfare or Medicaid. They are also more likely to be convicted of crimes and incarcerated, to succumb to drug and alcohol abuse, or to have poor physical or mental health. Women who have been in foster care experience higher rates of early pregnancy and may be more likely to see their own children placed in foster care.[7]

Warning Signs in the Classroom

Research shows that problems begin early for many foster children. For example, a study of 4,500 foster children in Washington state public schools found that children placed in foster care scored 16 percent to 20 percent below non-foster children on state standardized tests.[8] These results are consistent with national trends.

- The National Conference of State Legislatures reported that foster children had "high rates of grade retention; lower scores on standardized tests; and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates" when compared to the general population.[9]

- The *American School Board Journal* found that "foster children often repeat a grade and are twice as likely as the rest of the population to drop out before graduation."[10]

- Overall, a synthesis of available research evidence reached the conclusion that "Almost all of the reviewed studies of those who were in out-of-

1. Press release, "New Adoption Ad Campaign Launched," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, June 13, 2006, at *www.acf.hhs.gov/news/press/2006/adoptuskids_teens.htm* (April 2, 2007).

2. For a summary of the risk factors facing children in foster care, see Thomas P. McDonald, Reva I. Allen, Alex Westerfelt, and Irving Piliavin, *Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Foster Care: A Research Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America, 1996).

3. Steve Christian, "Educating Children in Foster Care," National Conference of State Legislatures, Children's Policy Initiative, December 2003, at *www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/cpieducate.pdf* (May 29, 2007).

4. Michele McNeil, "Ariz. Adds Foster-Care Voucher to School Choice Package," *Education Week*, July 12, 2006.

5. 45 Code of Federal Regulations § 1355.20(a) (2006).

6. Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Foster Care: Numbers and Trends," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, July 2005, at *www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/foster.pdf* (April 10, 2007), pp. 1 and 6.

7. McDonald *et al.*, *Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Foster Care*.

8. Claire van Wingerden, John Emerson, and Dennis Ichikawa, "Improving Special Education for Children with Disabilities in Foster Care," Casey Family Programs *Education Issue Brief*, 2002, at *www.fosterclub.org/training/upload/fosterclub_219.pdf* (May 16, 2007).

9. Christian, "Educating Children in Foster Care," p. 1.

10. Vera Institute of Justice, "Foster Children and Education: How You Can Create a Positive Educational Experience for the Foster Child," July 2004, at *www.vera.org/publication_pdf/241_452.pdf* (May 16, 2007), p. 2.

home care reveal that the subject's average level of educational attainment is below that of other citizens of comparable age."[11]

Common Problems for Foster Children in Education

Researchers have identified a number of problems that foster children commonly experience in the education and child welfare systems. These problems include instability, persistent low expectations, poor adult advocacy on their behalf, inadequate life-skills training, special education needs, and cultural sensitivities. Understanding these common problems and unique needs will help policymakers to design reforms to improve educational opportunities for children in foster care.

Instability. Frequent out-of-home placements can lead to school transfers because children can be required to change schools when they change addresses. For example, the Vera Institute of Justice reports that in New York City between 1995 and 1999, 42 percent of children changed schools within 30 days of entering foster care, based on statistics provided by the city's child welfare agency.[12]

Research evidence suggests that frequent school transfers and disruptions in the learning process can take a toll on a student's learning development. For example, a 1994 study by the General Accounting Office reported that third-grade students who had experienced frequent school changes were more likely to perform below grade level in reading and math or to repeat a grade than were students who had never changed schools.[13]

It is not surprising, therefore, that frequent school transfers would negatively affect foster children. A research synthesis reported that former foster children who experienced fewer out-of-home placements performed better in school and completed more years of education than did others in foster care.[14] A survey of former foster children found that they "strongly believed that they had been shifted around too much while in foster care, and as a result, they suffered, especially in terms of education."[15]

School transfers can create gaps in the learning cycle. They force children to adjust to new classroom settings, teachers, and classmates and cause children to lose social networks, peer groups, and relationships with adults. These changes can exacerbate the emotional instability and unrest caused by home transfers. Reducing instability for foster children is identified by researchers and advocates as a way to improve the foster care system.

Persistent Low Expectations. Surveys of adults who had formerly been in foster care have found that many were unsatisfied with their educational experiences. Respondents have reported that the foster system did not encourage high expectations for their education.[16] One survey found that older youth in foster care reported having high aspirations and resent that others had low expectations for their education. They responded that they would have benefited from stronger adult encouragement.[17]

This suggests that some of the responsibility for foster children's problems in the classroom may lie with the adults and the lack of proper adult advocacy and support. A researcher for the National

11. McDonald et al., *Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Foster Care*, p. 41.

12. Vera Institute of Justice, "Foster Children and Education."

13. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education*, GAO/HEHS–94–45, February 1994, at *http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat4/150724.pdf* (April 11, 2007). See also Russell W. Rumberger, "Student Mobility and Academic Achievement," *ERIC Digest*, June 2002, at *http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eecearchive/digests/2002/rumberger02.pdf* (April 11, 2007).

14. McDonald et al., *Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Foster Care*, p. 135.

15. Trudy Festinger, *No One Ever Asked Us* (New York: Columbia University, 1984), cited in Patrick A. Curtis, Grady Dale Jr., and Joshua C. Kendall, eds., *The Foster Care Crisis: Translating Research into Policy and Practice* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska, 1999), p. 109.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Vera Institute of Justice, "Foster Children and Education."

Conference of State Legislatures reported that "lines of responsibility and accountability for the educational outcomes of children in foster care are unclear" and that, often, "no single person or agency ultimately is held accountable for results."[18]

Special Education. The delivery of special education services is another area of potential difficulty for children in foster care. One study found that as many as 30 percent to 40 percent of all children in foster care are also in special education, a percentage that is well above the average for the general population.[19] Due to the nature of the special education and foster care systems and because foster children may be inadequately monitored, many more children could be eligible for or in need of special education services. On the other hand, some foster children currently placed in special education settings could possibly benefit from placement in a regular classroom.[20]

Researchers writing for the Casey Family Program highlighted common problems for foster children in special education:

A review of the literature and anecdotal data from the field suggest that the stories of foster children in special education are, all too often, stories of unserved or underserved children, lost records, minimal interagency communication, and confusion over the roles of birth parents, foster parents, and social workers.[21]

The nature of the special education system suggests that many foster children are being poorly served, since ensuring that a child receives necessary services often requires strong parental advocacy. Moreover, children who experience multiple placements and corresponding school transfers may experience gaps in the delivery of needed special education services.

Life Skills Instruction and Preparation for Independence. Foster children often lack a basic social support system, and former foster children have identified developing life skills and preparing for the often challenging transition into adulthood as important components of a successful educational experience. One survey of former foster children reported that it is "imperative that social workers put more emphasis on teaching youth life skills as well as providing more tools to secure adequate and affordable housing upon emancipation." Other surveys have similarly stressed that preparation for independent living should be a focus in the education of children in long-term foster care.[22]

Cultural Sensitivities. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 61 percent of the children in foster care in 2003 were ethnic minorities—a significant overrepresentation of ethnic minorities.[23] This suggests that many foster children are placed in mixed ethnic settings, which some researchers have identified as a potential challenge for some children. Addressing this potential problem through "culturally sensitive and culturally competent" services for ethnic minorities has been identified by researchers as a way to reduce the emotional instability that can occur when a child is separated from his or her family.[24]

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18. Christian, "Educating Children in Foster Care," p. 2.

19. Wingerden *et al.*, "Improving Special Education for Children with Disabilities in Foster Care."

20. Researchers have identified systemic problems of specific populations of students being overidentified in special education. For example, see Matthew Ladner and Christopher Hammons, "Special But Unequal: Race and Special Education," chap. 5 in Chester E. Finn, Jr., Andrew J. Rotherham, and Charles R. Hokanson, Jr., eds., *Rethinking Special Education for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Progressive Policy Institute, 2001), at *www.ppionline.org/documents/SpecialEd_complete_volume.pdf* (August 29, 2005).

21. Wingerden *et al.*, "Improving Special Education for Children with Disabilities in Foster Care."

22. Mary C. Curran and Peter J. Pecora, "Incorporating the Perspectives of Youth Placed in Family Foster Care: Selected Research Findings and Methodological Challenges," in Curtis *et al.*, *The Foster Care Crisis*, pp. 110 and 111.

23. Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Foster Care."

24. See Anthony J. Urquiza, Jane Wu, and Joaquin Borrego, Jr., "Foster Care and the Special Needs of Minority Children," chap. 4 in Curtis *et al.*, *The Foster Care Crisis*, pp. 84–95.

IMPROVE THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

In 2006, the Maryland Public Policy Institute, a state-based think tank, hired Baltimore Research, a professional research organization, to convene two focus groups to study the need for improved educational opportunities for foster children.[1] The first focus group consisted of adults who were formerly in foster care. The second group consisted of current foster parents.

The purpose was to learn about the lives of foster children, their experiences in the education system, and possible ways to improve their educational experiences. The focus groups identified many problems facing foster children, from the horrific life experiences that led to out-of-home placement to constant instability to the negative social stigma of being a child in foster care.

Both the foster parents and former foster children identified differences between schools that did a good or poor job of addressing the needs of foster children. The study found that good schools helped them to adapt to the classroom, provided free lunch and uniforms, provided services to address their unique educational and emotional needs, and quickly transferred their information once they moved to a new school.

Poor schools were said to doom them to poor performance based on their standing as foster children, to dismiss foster parents or advocates, and to allow the school bureaucracy to hold up records during a school transfer.

The focus groups reported that "[m]ost respondents across both groups did not feel that foster care children are receiving a quality education" and that "children are left to flounder once they are legal adults."[2] Both focus groups provided recommendations for how to improve the educational opportunities of former foster children: creating a mentoring program, providing tutoring, additional funding, transportation assistance, providing therapy and counseling, greater testing and evaluation, greater communication between school leaders and social services, improved teacher preparation, and better planning of long-term education goals.[3]

Unaided, foster care parents in the focus group suggested that school vouchers to help foster children attend private schools would help to address some of these common problems but that these programs should be structured to incorporate transportation costs and other practical needs.

1. Maryland Public Policy Institute, "Focus Group Study: Foster Care Families, Children, and Education," December 2006, at *www.mdpolicy.org/docLib/20061130_FosterCareFocusGroupStudy.pdf* (April 10, 2007).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. *Ibid.*

Addressing Common Problems by Improving Educational Options

One way to improve educational options for children in foster care would be to allow them to attend a public or private school of choice using a tuition scholarship. Foster children could be offered education vouchers on a voluntary basis to enroll and remain in a public or private school of their or their guardians' choice. Such a program could be geared to address common problems such as instability, persistent low expectations, poor adult advocacy, life-skills training needs, special education needs, and cultural sensitivities.

Improving Education Stability. Giving foster children the opportunity to attend a school of choice could help to address the common problem of educational instability. A scholarship or choice option would allow them to remain in the same school (whenever geographically possible) even when placed in a new home setting.

The Vera Institute of Justice, an advocacy organization for foster children, observed that "keeping school as a point of stability can help foster children succeed educationally and give them peers and caring adults to help them weather the changes at home."[25] Allowing for greater choice in education

could accomplish this goal in many cases and address a common problem for many foster children who experience frequent transfers.

Maintaining Peer Groups and Friendships. Enabling greater stability could also yield social benefits. Surveys of foster children have identified building a sense of community and maintaining peer groups as important factors in their development. It stands to reason that allowing a child to stay in the same school could positively influence some foster children by allowing them to maintain long-term friendships and peer groups. This could help to provide a sense of belonging and community for foster children, who often lack strong social networks at home.

Improving Learning Opportunities. For other children, a school transfer may be the key to better educational opportunities. Many foster children could benefit from the opportunity to attend a higher-quality school of choice.

Research studies of existing school choice programs have reported that students receiving vouchers to attend a school of choice improve academically when compared with their peers who remain in public schools.[26] Other research evidence suggests that school choice programs improve participating families' satisfaction with their children's schools.[27] Therefore, having the option of attending a school of choice would likely improve the learning opportunities of many foster children.

Improving Special Education Services. School choice programs have also been found to benefit children eligible for special education services. Since 1999, Florida has allowed children eligible for special education services to receive a voucher to attend a school of choice through the McKay Scholarship Program.

According to the Florida Department of Education, 17,300 students participated in the McKay Program during the 2005–2006 school year.[28] A survey of participating families published in 2003 found that parents were more satisfied by their school of choice. Moreover, 86 percent responded that their school of choice had provided all services required under federal law, while only 30 percent had found that their public schools provided all services.[29] Following Florida, Utah and Arizona have enacted similar programs to provide school choice options to children with disabilities.[30]

With as many as 30 percent to 40 percent of foster children enrolled in special education, many more foster children with special needs would likely benefit if given access to programs similar to the McKay Program. Additional education options could address some of the common problems for foster children in special education, such as poor tracking, monitoring, and uneven delivery of special education services. Scholarships or school choice options could ensure uninterrupted special education services for children during a home placement.

Cultural Considerations. Meeting the cultural needs of ethnic minority children placed in foster care has been identified by researchers as an important factor to consider. Allowing children to attend a school of choice could give foster parents the flexibility to address a child's cultural needs by selecting a school of choice.

Encouraging Innovation. Foster children face challenges in life that are different from those faced

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25. Vera Institute of Justice, "Foster Children and Education."

26. Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp. 150–154.

27. For example, see U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993 to 1999," NCES 2003–031, May 2003, p. 25, at *http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003031.pdf* (August 14, 2006).

28. Florida Department of Education, Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice, "John M. McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities Program," July 2006, at *www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/McKay/files/Fast_Facts_McKay.pdf* (May 16, 2007).

29. Jay Greene and Greg Forster, "Vouchers for Special Education Students: An Evaluation of Florida's McKay Scholarship Program," Manhattan Institute *Civic Report* No. 38, June 2003, at *www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/cr_38.pdf* (May 16, 2007).

30. Dan Lips and Evan Feinberg, "School Choice: 2006 Progress Report," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1970, September 18, 2006, pp. 3–4, at *www.heritage.org/Research/Education/upload/bg_1970.pdf*.

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by the general population. For example, former foster children have identified the need for more life-skills instruction to help to prepare them for the transition to independence in adulthood.

Allowing foster children to attend a school of choice could create an environment in which schools would have new incentives to deliver services that meet these specific needs. For example, a group in Baltimore City has proposed creating a public charter school that focuses on providing a quality education to foster children.[31] A specialized school like this could employ teachers and counselors who are trained and prepared to meet foster children's unique needs. For some foster children, attending such a school could be an improvement over the traditional school setting.

Improving Foster Parents' Experience. Improving educational opportunities for children in foster care could have additional benefits beyond the classroom. One common challenge in the foster care system is recruiting and retaining foster parents. The National Conference of State Legislatures has reported that "turnover among foster parents is extremely high; some agencies lose from 30 to 50 percent of their caregivers every year."[32]

In many communities, attracting quality foster parents is an ongoing problem. Policymakers have sought to address this problem through promotional efforts or by increasing stipend amounts.

However, other factors may affect a foster parent's decision to continue as a caregiver. For example, in a government survey of foster parents who were leaving the foster care system, 46 percent cited having "no say in the child's future" as a top reason for leaving.[33] Reforms that improve the educational experience of foster children and give families the opportunity to choose a quality school for their child would likely improve the overall foster care experience and thus help to alleviate the shortage of foster parents.

Four Principles of Reform

Federal, state, and local policymakers should amend existing programs to improve education options for foster children. As policymakers design these reforms, they should consider four important principles.

- **New education options for foster children should be structured to address potential legal and constitutional questions.** Specifically, if a scholarship program allows foster families to choose a religious school for the child, policymakers may face state-level constitutional challenges and the practical question of who should be authorized to make the decision on behalf of the child.

  Policymakers should work to address these questions in a manner that allows for the greatest flexibility for foster families to find the best educational opportunities for the child while maintaining proper oversight and checks and balances. Legislation to create scholarship programs for children in foster care should place the authority to choose in the hands of a guardian or the person deemed by the state to have the authority to act on behalf of the child.

- **Opportunity scholarship programs should be structured to ensure that they do not create adverse incentives for placement and adoption.** For example, it would be problematic if adoption—the goal of many foster children—was seen as a detriment to a child's schooling. One option would be to continue the scholarship to the child after adoption. Similarly, while families would be unlikely to place their child in foster care to take advantage of a scholarship program, policymakers could eliminate any such incentive by offering similar education options to all parents or to specific populations, such as students from low-income families.

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31. Jean Marabella, "City's Foster Children Should Not Be Forgotten," *The Baltimore Sun*, December 1, 2006.

32. Steve Christian, "Supporting and Retaining Foster Parents," National Conference of State Legislatures *State Legislative Report*, Vol. 7, No. 11 (April 2002), p. 1, at *www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/fosterparents.pdf* (May 29, 2007).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

- **Scholarship programs should be designed to address non-tuition costs and considerations arising from school choice.** When asked whether or not a school voucher program would benefit their foster children, a focus group of former foster parents responded that a voucher would be beneficial if it factored in non-tuition costs such as transportation and school uniforms. To address this issue, scholarships could be designed to spend a percentage of funds on transportation and other costs.

- **Policymakers should consult with people and organizations in the foster care community when designing their initiatives to ensure that policies best meet foster children's needs.**

What Federal, State, and Local Policymakers Should Do

With these principles in mind, federal, state, and local policymakers should make certain specific reforms.

Congress should expand the allowable uses of the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program. One way to improve educational opportunities for children in foster care would be to reform the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program to give states greater flexibility in deciding how to distribute scholarships to foster children. On June 25, 1999, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 380 to 6 in favor of the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Act,[34] a proposal designed to support the transition of foster children into independence in adulthood.[35]

The act doubled the amount of federal funding to support services for youth aging out of foster care to $140 million annually. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the funding increase was coupled with a measure to provide states with "more flexibility to design programs to improve the transition of older foster children from state custody to independent living." The law also offered states "an additional $60 million in discretionary funds for education and training vouchers for former foster care youth." According to the CRS:

> [The law's general purpose was to] help eligible children who are under the age of 18 obtain a high school diploma, prepare for additional vocational training or post-secondary education, explore careers, learn other life skills (including job retention, budgeting and financial management), avoid substance abuse, and make other healthy life decisions.[36]

Specifically, the $60 million could be used as education and training vouchers for higher education and other post-secondary institutions, such as for-profit technical training programs.

However, the education aid offered by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act may come too late in many cases because it targets foster children 16 years old and older. Foster children in the K–12 education system have a number of unique needs. Providing education choice and flexibility in K–12 could provide them with a more solid educational foundation, helping them to achieve academic success, social stability, and adult self-sufficiency. Congress should give states the flexibility to use funds allocated through the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program to promote K–12 education options for younger children in foster care if state leaders believe that this would be the best use of funds.

Congress should provide opportunity scholarships to foster children in Washington, D.C. In 2004, President George W. Bush signed legislation to create a school voucher program for low-income students in Washington, D.C., where the federal government has direct authority over the local government and school system.[37] Through this pro-

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34. Public Law 106–169.

35. Tom DeLay, "Rescuing Abused Children: Can Congress Help Our Kids?" Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 642, July 27, 1999, at *www.heritage.org/Research/Family/HL642.cfm*.

36. Emilie Stoltzfus, "Child Welfare: The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program," Congressional Research Service, January 13, 2004.

37. Lips and Feinberg, "School Choice."

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gram, more than 1,800 disadvantaged students are attending private schools using tuition scholarships. The program's popularity is evident, given that 6,500 students have applied for scholarships over the past three years—approximately 11 percent of the eligible students in the city.[38]

Since the federal government has oversight over the District of Columbia, Congress should create a new scholarship program that is geared specifically to serving foster children living in Washington, D.C. As of July 2006, 2,546 children were in foster care in the District. Approximately 1,800 of them were of school age. As of January 31, 2006, 40 percent of the children in the District's foster care system had experienced four or more placements while in care, and 17 percent had experienced more than three placements during the previous 12 months.[39] Many of these children are likely facing the educational challenges outlined in this report and could benefit from a new opportunity scholarship targeted toward foster children living in the District.

States should provide opportunity scholarships to foster children. In 2006, Arizona created the nation's first opportunity scholarship program for children in foster care.[40] Under this program, approximately 500 children in foster care will be awarded $5,000 tuition scholarships starting in fall 2007. To date, similar legislation has been introduced in Florida, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas.[41] The American Legislative Exchange Council has created model legislation to provide opportunity scholarships to children in foster care.[42]

States and localities should facilitate public school choice and open enrollment for foster children. States and local governments should implement reforms, such as widespread public school choice, to ensure that, whenever geographically possible, foster children are not forced to transfer schools when they experience home transfers.

Education leaders should develop charter schools for foster children. Another way to improve education options for children in foster care would be to create new charter schools that focus on serving foster children. Across the country, approximately 4,000 charter schools are operating in 40 states and the District of Columbia.[43]

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that agree to meet certain performance standards set by the state but are otherwise free from the bureaucratic rules and regulations that encumber traditional school systems. For this reason, charter schools can be created to serve specific purposes or populations of students. A successful charter school model could be created to serve children in foster care by addressing their unique needs. Such a charter school could offer a positive educational experience for children in foster care. Foster children would then have the voluntary option of enrolling in charter schools if they believed that such schools would provide a better educational opportunity.

Conclusion

The estimated 518,000 children in foster care in the United States are among the most at-risk chil-

38. Washington Scholarship Fund, "D.C. School Choice Program Sets Record for Enrolled K–12 Students in Third Academic Year," September 26, 2006, at *www.washingtonscholarshipfund.org/092606.asp* (June 1, 2007).

39. Center for the Study of Social Policy, "An Assessment of Multiple Placements for Children in Foster Care in the District of Columbia," July 2006, at *www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/Assessment_of_Multiple_Placements_for_Children_in_Foster_Care_in_the_District_July_2006.pdf* (May 29, 2007).

40. Dan Lips, "Help Foster Children on Education," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, July 14, 2006.

41. Angela Cheatham, "Foster Children at the Center of School Voucher Debate," *All Headline News*, April 7, 2007, at *www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7006975188* (May 29, 2007); Ben DeGrow, "Scholarships for Foster Children Proposed in Maryland," *School Reform News*, April 1, 2007, at *www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=20830* (May 29, 2007); SB 1786 and HB 1423, 105th Tennessee General Assembly, 2007; and HB 3867, Texas House of Representatives, 80th Sess., 2007.

42. American Legislative Exchange Council, "New Model Legislation Offers Foster Kids Hope for a Better Life," January 10, 2007, at *www.alec.org/news* (April 10, 2007).

43. Center for Education Reform, "National Charter School Data: New School Estimates 2006–2007," at *www.edreform.com/_upload/CER_charter_numbers.pdf* (April 10, 2007).

dren in American society. Research shows that foster children are more likely to be at risk of poor life outcomes. Early warning signs of these problems appear in the classroom, where foster children are typically behind their peers academically.

Policymakers should work to improve learning opportunities for foster children by expanding their education options. Opportunity scholar-ships and other reforms geared to providing new education options could ensure that more foster children receive a stable and high-quality education that prepares them for a successful transition into adulthood.

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