Making Middle School Successful: Skills for Foster Parents and Kin
A Grant Proposal

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Being successful in the 21st century requires at minimum a high school diploma, a general equivalency diploma (GED), or a skill from trade school therefore education is critical for a successful future (Jimenez, Pasztor, Chambers, & Fujii, 2014).

There are several risk factors that have been identified for students transitioning to middle school. They include: children leaving the security of elementary school where they had one teacher every day throughout the academic school year, children are approaching puberty which have their own set of physical and socio-emotional risk factors, and children entering middle school are often the youngest, newest and sometimes physically the smallest children there.

A range of negative social, physical, psychological, and emotional outcomes such as higher rates of homelessness, teenage pregnancy, substance use, physical and mental health problems, and limited social supports are associated with lower educational attainment for young people in the child welfare system which inhibit academic achievement (Crawford et al., 2011). Not only do children who have entered the child welfare system have the challenges of middle school transition, but they have the additional stress of adapting to life with relatives they may or may not know, or with foster parents whom they would not know (Crawford et al., 2011).

Educational delays and emotional stress are associated with both maltreatment and multiple moves which leave children needing extra support including a consistent advocate (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Due to the risks that exist in middle school, parental involvement is needed to positively influence middle school success.

This grant proposal was developed and sought funding for a series of three workshops that would be implemented throughout three sites across Los Angeles County.

This project aims to develop a program to empower and educate foster parents and kinship caregivers with skills that can help them make a difference in the quality of their children’s new middle school experience.
Social Work Relevance

- According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008), the mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and empower those people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.

- This program aims to support collaboration among the foster parents, relatives, school and child protection staff to help ensure that the children in care are successful in school and, hence, successful in life.

- Development of strong partnership programs in schools can affect academic and nonacademic outcomes of children who have been placed in the child welfare system therefore schools must advocate for school-home-community relationships through the advocacy of social workers (Sheldon, 2007).

- Providing services to these at-risk populations is essential in promoting social equality and justice. It will allow the foster parents and kinship caregivers build knowledge on how to promote academic achievement amongst those children in their care.
Cross-Cultural Relevance

- This project also has multicultural relevance for ethnic minority children and families, who are disproportionately represented in foster care. While children of color do not differ from other children in their vulnerability to abuse and maltreatment, about 50% of the children that entered the child welfare system were children of color (McRoy, 2014, p. 680).

- Children in the foster care system who have, for years, been documented as being at risk for school challenges on the basis of coming from families with low socioeconomic status, being of color and disproportionately represented, and having special education needs (Altshuler, 1997).

- Cultural identity goes beyond ethnicity and can include sexual and gender identity as well. While many children in middle school may not yet be identifying or questioning their gender identity others may. Youth in the child welfare system who are sexual minorities face a host of additional risk factors, including parental rejection, bullying, and isolation. Therefore, attention must be given to middle school-age children who may need additional support as they transition from elementary to middle school (Duchesne et al., 2009).
Target population

The program’s goal is to assist foster parents and kinship caregivers in either enhancing or learning skills on how to make middle school successful for the children in their care. Therefore, the intended target population for this program is foster parents and kinship caregivers who have children enrolled in the 6th grade at any Los Angeles Unified School District middle school in Los Angeles County.

Strategies used to identify and select a funding source

A thorough search for local and state funding opportunities were conducted. This research generated possible sources of funding for the program based on the criteria that they funded projects related to the child welfare population in the state of California.

Funding Source Identified: The Stuart Foundation

The Stuart Foundation is dedicated to helping children and youth in foster care that are attending public school districts in California and Washington (Stuart Foundation, 2009a, para.1). Its areas of commitment fall under two categories: education systems and vulnerable youth in child welfare. More importantly, the foundation invests in projects that provide opportunities for youth, family, and community engagement.
Sources used for the needs assessment

- The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest school district in the United States with a total K-12 enrollment of 651,322 students. The student enrollment for the 2012-2013 academic year for middle school (grades 6-8) children was 112,749. There are a total of 84 LAUSD middle schools throughout the Los Angeles County, with about 1,800 students in each middle school (LAUSD, 2014).
- First, conduct an interview with a school social worker at an elementary that was typical of the type of school where this program would be needed.
- Second, gathering information from various resources such as scholarly journals, child welfare agencies, statistics from local, state, and federal government websites that demonstrates a need for such program for foster parents and kinship caregivers that relates to providing knowledge and skills to them about how to become involved in the educational lives of the children in their care in order for those children to thrive in middle school.
- The third component would be to obtain the perspective of the LAUSD Pupil Services Unit to further obtain information on trends that are seen in students who are living with foster families and kinship caregivers in order to identify specific needs. The specialized personnel within this LAUSD unit are dedicated to enhancing educational outcomes and academic achievement for students living in foster care which also includes those students living with kinship caregivers (LAUSD, 2014).

Projected Budget Range

- The total amount requested from the Stuart Foundation to carry out this program is totaled at $232,595. The host agency will contribute with an in-kind donation in the amount of $4,000. A community nonprofit would be asked to contribute with an office space in the amount of $6,000, for a total program $242,595.

Projected Budget Categories

- The program budget includes salaries for a full-time LCSW/MSW Program Director, a part-time Program Facilitator, a part-time Program Evaluator, a full-time Program Assistant, two MSW interns, three experienced foster parent or kinship caregiver, and six child care workers. It also includes costs for program supplies, printing, transportation, telephone, snacks and refreshments for meetings, and administrative fees.
Program Summary, Description, and Objectives

- Project Inspire, as its name implies, aims to empower and educate foster parents and kinship caregivers with skills that can help them make a difference in the quality of their children’s new middle school experience.
- Project Inspire was created to provide valuable information to caregivers on how they can actively participate in the academic lives of the children in their care and also inspire them to be successful in school.
- Caregivers of middle school aged students often find themselves confused as to how they can become involved in the children’s schooling (Hornby & Witte, 2010, p.60).

The specific objectives are for participants to:

1. Know the importance of children’s success in middle school as a foundation for obtaining a high school diploma, essential for being a productive community member.
2. Recognize risks unique to middle school transition.
3. Know how to establish teamwork with school personnel such as counselors and administrators, teachers, principals, and school social workers.
4. Feel confident in their ability to talk with their children about the importance of going to and staying in school.
5. Be able to help the children in their care identify and avoid middle school challenges.
6. Know how to engage birth parents to support their children’s academic well being.
7. Know how trauma can impact children’s academic and social relationships.
8. Be able to establish teamwork or a collaborative relationship with the children’s social workers to access support, overcome barriers and get additional resources, and involve the children’s birth parents to the fullest extent possible.
9. Create coping strategies for children and themselves when school challenges arise.
10. Know how to advocate for the children in their care.

The meetings will have a maximum of 15 caregivers therefore a total of 45 caregivers would be served per month. That equals to a total of 315 caregivers being served for the total length of the program.
The proposed program activities will start in advance of the academic school year, continuing for a total of 10 months. There will be a series of three meetings (meeting #1, meeting #2, meeting #3) that will be offered to foster parents and kinship caregivers who have children enrolled in the 6th grade at any of the LAUSD middle schools in the target sites. The three meeting cycles will be offered once a month in a total of three target site locations throughout Los Angeles County: East Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Van Nuys. The series of meetings will be offered in Spanish and English.

Meeting #1, “Welcome to Project Inspire and Going to Middle School,” will include welcome and participant introductions; overview of the program and its rationale; participant objectives; a day in the life of a middle school student.

Meeting #2, “Childhood Trauma, Risks and Challenges of Middle School,” covers welcome back, participant reintroductions, bridge from previous week, and risks and challenges that middle school aged students encounter. Specific topics include: puberty challenges, peer relationships and pressure, and demands of schoolwork.

Meeting #3, “Building healthy connections with professionals and learn how you can be a voice in the life of your child in care,” includes topics feature the importance of having positive relationships with the children’s birth parents, DCFS children’s social workers, and school staff, as well as techniques and skills to empower the creation of those healthy relationships.

Program Evaluation

There are four levels of evaluation that can be used for training purposes. Due to time and budget constrains, this program utilizes “Level 1- Participant Satisfaction.” This survey asks whether or not the training was useful, valuable, and comfortable. The program evaluator will be responsible for confirming that proper evaluation is conducted using the data collected from the evaluations at the end of each meeting. Effective evaluations are intended to enhance the effectiveness of the program and lead to future program development.
Lessons Learned/Social Work Implications

Lessons Learned

- Grant search, selection, and writing process.

Social Work Implications

- Education promotes upward mobility, providing numerous opportunities for underserved populations (Pecora, 2012, p. 1122). Children who are involved in the child welfare experience several challenges and barriers that may hinder their ability to get an adequate education (Pecora, 2012, p. 1121).

- Social workers must recognize the educational obstacles faced by many foster youth, and the involvement of their caregivers is essential. Providing skills and information on how to create a strong academic support system is required so that middle school is successful for children in care.

- On a macro level, social workers can advocate for this population and bring awareness to the barriers that foster youth may encounter in their middle school years and how crucial it is that the adults in their lives make an impactful difference.

- Policies can be established that promote family and community involvement in education for underserved populations such as those in child welfare. Special attention also must be given to sexual and ethnic minorities.

- Offering supportive services, such as those described in Project Inspire, not only serve to empower. These supports also help ensure that this vulnerable population is treated with dignity and respect. Advocating for these services is essential to helping at-risk youth become successful adults.
References

• Allen, B., & Vacca, J. S. (2010). Frequent moving has a negative effect on the school achievement of foster children makes the case for reform. Children & Youth Services Review, 32(6), 829-832. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.02.001


