
BEYOND THE BASICS: HOW EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES CAN BENEFIT FOSTER YOUTH

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Although advocates and policymakers have paid more attention to improving educational outcomes for foster youth in recent years,¹ these efforts have largely ignored the role that extracurricular activities can play in youths' overall academic performance. Playing on a soccer team or participating in band enhances the school experience and often has positive effects on attendance, motivation, academic achievement, and behavior. Despite this fact, few states have laws that support foster youth participation in these activities (California is an important exception). In addition, there are few existing policies guiding caregivers and others involved with foster youth on how to support their involvement in these activities. Foster youth need emotional and practical support from caregivers and caseworkers, flexibility on the part of teachers and coaches, and state laws that protect their right to fully participate in school-related activities.

I. Foster Youth Struggle With Academics, Behavior, and Identity

If any children can benefit from extracurricular activities, it is foster youth. On average, foster youth tend to have worse academic performance and more behavioral problems than other students. Thirty percent of foster youth perform below grade level.² They are more likely to need special education services.³ They also get held back at a much higher rate.⁴ In a study in Washington state, for example, twice as many foster youth repeated a grade compared with other students.⁵

The high proportion of foster youth who drop out before completing high school is especially alarming.⁶ Studies have found that between one-third and two-thirds of foster youth end up dropping out before earning a high school diploma.⁷ Those foster youth who do graduate are unlikely to move on to a four-year college. According to one study, less than 3 percent of foster youth in California attend four-year colleges.⁸

Compounding their academic difficulties, foster youth are more likely to have behavioral problems resulting in higher rates of both suspensions and expulsions.⁹ A study of students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, for

example, found that the foster youth there were three times more likely than other students to be suspended or expelled.¹⁰ A similar study in the Midwest discovered that only 28 percent of students nationally had been suspended from school at least once, compared to 67 percent of the foster youth who were involved in the study.¹¹

Among the most significant problems foster youth have is frequent school changes. Each time a foster youth changes homes – which can be frequent – they also change schools. This means they must adapt to a new peer group, new classes, and new teachers. These changes increase foster youth’s behavior problems.¹² In addition, several studies have demonstrated that school mobility is a significant risk factor for student dropout.¹³

Another issue for foster youth is identity development. In a small study of adolescent foster youth, Susan M. Kools, a professor of adolescent development and mental health at UCSF, conducted intensive interviews with the youth to determine their perceptions of their time in foster care.¹⁴ She found that foster care had a negative impact on identity development.¹⁵ The youth felt judged by both the adults and peers in their life because of their status as foster youth.¹⁶ For adolescents, peer perceptions are critically important. Kools found that being teased and ridiculed about being in foster care was particularly damaging to foster youth in their identity development,¹⁷ which resulted in them feeling disconnected and alienated from their peers.¹⁸

II. Extracurricular Activities Can Help

Extracurricular activities address all three areas of concern for foster youth discussed above, namely academic achievement, behavioral problems, and identity development. The research has shown that structure is very important, so the extracurricular activities discussed in this article are structured, voluntary, after-school activities rather than the informal, unstructured activities that youth may be involved in with their peers after school.¹⁹

Extracurricular activities are sponsored either by a youth’s school or by an outside organization, although school-based activities are preferable. They provide a unique opportunity for students to play a larger role in their school community as well as form stronger bonds with teachers, staff, and peers.²⁰ In addition, many school-based extracurricular activities have a minimum grade point average (GPA) requirement.²¹ Jay Lightner, Director of Lighthouse Group Homes in California, has seen foster youth become more motivated to do well in school just so they could continue to play on their school teams.²²

Even after adjusting for selection, participation in school-based extracurricular activities serve to “bind students to the adult-oriented values of the school.”²³ This results in higher academic performance,²⁴ including higher GPAs and an increased likelihood of college enrollment.²⁵ Students who participate in extracurricular activities also have more completed years of education than their non-participating peers.²⁶

Studies also show a strong association between extracurricular activities and reduced student dropout rates.²⁷ (For example, at-risk youth who participate in even one extracurricular activity are much less likely to drop out of school.²⁸) Reduced dropout rates have been shown to exist regardless of ethnicity or gender.²⁹ Given the high dropout rate for foster youth, this correlation is especially promising.

Involvement with extracurricular activities is also associated with decreased delinquent behavior, as measured by criminal arrests, substance abuse, and antisocial behavior.³⁰ Better behavior means that students can pay closer attention to their schoolwork.

These improvements in academic achievement and behavior may be the result of students viewing school more positively. One study found that students involved in extracurricular activities had more positive opinions about school than those not involved.³¹ Extracurricular activities provide opportunities for students to interact with and create bonds with different peers and adults than they normally would encounter during school.³² Given that foster youth may be especially disconnected from their school community because of repeated transfers and peer criticism and judgment, extracurricular activities may facilitate a greater feeling of belonging and support. For example, when Dalton Dyer, a foster youth from Auburn, California, was asked if playing high school football eased his transition to a new school, he said “definitely.”³³ His teammates showed him around the school, gave him advice, and told him what they knew about his teachers.³⁴ Dyer’s advice for school staff to make transitions easier on foster youth is to connect the youth with other students as soon as they arrive so that they feel less lonely, which will make them more likely to get involved in the school.³⁵

Extracurricular activities provide other benefits that may help students both in school and out. These benefits include increases in particular skills, such as “task persistence, independence, following instructions, dealing with authority figures, and fitting in with peers.”³⁶ Extracurricular activities allow students to gain these skills as they interact with authority figures and different groups of peers.³⁷ Teachers are most often in charge of extracurricular activities. Building strong relationships with teachers can help foster youth feel more comfortable in their school. They will have more people to turn to for guidance, advice, and help with their academics. These

relationships may also help foster youth feel more confident participating in their classes.

One study found that consistent participation in extracurricular activities also gave students an opportunity to build interpersonal skills, which increased educational attainment in young adulthood.³⁸ As students acquire skills like leadership or athletic expertise, they may gain increased confidence in their abilities.³⁹ Additional psychological benefits include “higher self-esteem, less worry regarding the future, and reduced feelings of social isolation.”⁴⁰

In a series of “Foster Youth Speak Outs” in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, foster youth said that they want outlets such as extracurricular activities to help them deal with their sadness and loneliness.⁴¹ They want to learn about extracurricular opportunities and be supported and encouraged to participate by caregivers, mentors and caseworkers.⁴²

III. Change is Necessary to Get Foster Youth Involved

Change needs to happen at multiple levels to increase foster youth participation in extracurricular activities. At the state level, laws are needed to eliminate barriers, as well as to encourage participation. Additionally, organizations that establish policies regarding the care of foster youth can create policies to break down barriers and encourage and support foster youth to participate in activities that interest them.

A. California Leads The Way Among The States

California is one of the few states that have passed legislation eliminating obstacles to, and providing support for, foster youth involvement in extracurricular activities. In 2003, California passed AB 490, which reduced some of the educational barriers affecting foster youth.⁴³ AB 490 changed many provisions of California’s Education Code and Welfare and Institutions Code to ensure that when foster youth change schools they will have a smooth transition. In 2008, California passed AB 2096, changing provisions of the Welfare and Institutions Code to allow group home providers to use the “prudent parent standard” when determining whether to allow a youth in their care to participate in extracurricular activities.⁴⁴ These changes increased access to extracurricular activities for foster youth placed in group homes.

In 2009, California passed AB 81 – a law inspired by the National Center for Youth Law’s victory in *Dyer v. CIF*.⁴⁵ The case arose after the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) forced Dalton Dyer’s football team at Placer High School to forfeit

games it had won because Dyer did not complete certain paperwork when he transferred to Placer High due to a change in her placement. The court ruled that CIF's bylaws requiring this extra paperwork for foster youth, and not for other students transferring schools, violated state law and the Equal Protection Clause of the California Constitution. AB 81 amended California's Education Code to provide that "[a] foster child who changes residences pursuant to a court order or decision of a child welfare worker shall be immediately deemed to meet all residency requirements for participation in interscholastic sports or other extracurricular activities."⁴⁶

This legislation demonstrates California's commitment to providing foster youth access to extracurricular activities in five important ways:

1. The law makes clear that foster youth are to have access to everything that regular students have access to – including extracurricular and enrichment activities.⁴⁷
2. The law mandates that when a foster youth changes residences, the youth automatically meets all the residency requirements for participation in interscholastic and extracurricular activities.⁴⁸
3. The law prohibits any other laws or regulations from preventing foster youth from participating in extracurricular activities.⁴⁹
4. The law requires private agencies that provide foster care to have policies that promote participation in extracurricular activities.⁵⁰
5. The law explicitly states that foster youth have a statutory right to participate in extracurricular activities.⁵¹

Although a few other states have laws addressing foster youth participation in extracurricular activities, none goes as far as California. Both Arkansas and South Carolina mandate that foster youth get the same access to extracurricular activities as other students.⁵² And foster youth in Hawaii, like in California, have the right to participate in extracurricular activities.⁵³ But California does the most to address the obstacles to foster youth participation. The only thing missing from California's scheme is a provision waiving all fees for foster youth who participate in extracurricular activities (Colorado is the only state with a law that does this).⁵⁴

B. Individuals Must Also Be Involved

Foster parents, teachers, and others involved in the daily lives of foster youth are in the best position to encourage and support participation in sports and other activities. However, there are few policies to guide them. Ideally, these policies

should build on existing state statutes, such as California's, while also providing more specific information on best practices for foster care providers.

A few things have happened in this area that provide hope. The Council on Accreditation, a child and family services accrediting organization, is one group that recognizes the importance of extracurricular activities for foster youth and writes its standards accordingly. These standards state that foster parents, group living services, and youth independent living services are to encourage and support youth to participate in "age-appropriate educational, social, recreational, and community activities."⁵⁵

Similarly, participants in a Foster Care Youth Summit in 2007⁵⁶ recognized the importance of extracurricular activities and recommended that foster youth be encouraged to participate.⁵⁷ They stated that funding exists for increasing extracurricular opportunities, but acknowledged that people need to be made more aware of this funding.⁵⁸

California promotes involvement in extracurricular activities through Foster Youth Services (FYS) programs, which provide activities for foster youth who cannot participate in their school's activities because of frequent moves.⁵⁹

IV. Next Steps

We know that extracurricular activities can improve academic achievement, alleviate behavioral problems, and foster identity development in young people. We also know that there are systemic barriers to foster youth involvement in these activities. Facilitating foster youth participation requires the coordination of state and local policymakers, individual stakeholders, caregivers, school districts, and the foster youth themselves.

Following are steps to eliminate obstacles and provide the encouragement and support foster youth need to get involved:

- Other states' adoption of legal schemes similar to California's that eliminate systemic barriers to participation, with a fee waiver like Colorado's.
- Encouragement and support from caregivers, teachers, and others. For example, group home Director Jay Lightner makes extracurricular involvement a priority for foster youth in his group homes. He said that "we are looking for any niche a kid wants to be involved in – karate, music, tumbling. Anything that interests them, we'll sponsor it."⁶⁰

- Specific policies should be developed for caregivers (foster parents, group homes and the like) that provide guidance on how best to support and encourage the foster youth in their care.
- Flexibility of coaches and teachers who lead extracurricular activities to excuse tardiness, or to provide supplies and transportation.

Research is also needed around foster youth participation in extracurricular activities. It could be used to inform laws and policies by answering questions like:

- What percentage of youth in foster care participate?
- What are the characteristics of foster youth who participate in extracurricular activities?
- What are the characteristics of the placements of foster youth who participate in extracurricular activities?
- What barriers to participation are identified by foster youth, caregivers, group homes, school teachers, and staff?
- Are foster youth more likely to participate in extracurricular activities that take place in, or out, of school?
- Are there any specific benefits or consequences to participation compared with other students?

V. Conclusion

The typical school experience involves more than just attending class and earning credits – it is also about being a part of a school community. An increased focus on removing the barriers to foster youth participation in extracurricular activities, as well as actively encouraging involvement, could yield many benefits for this often overlooked population of youth.

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1. These improvements have included things such as physically getting foster youth to school, making sure they are enrolled even if all of their paperwork is not in place and making sure they receive credits for their completed work when they transfer schools mid-year.
2. Elisabeth Yu et al., *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care* (CWLA Press 2000)

3. Peter Leone & Lois Weinberg, Addressing the Unmet Educational Needs of Children and Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems 9 (The Ctr. for Juvenile Justice Reform 2010).
4. *Id.* at 10.
5. National Working Group On Foster Care And Education, Fact Sheet: Educational Outcomes For Children And Youth In Foster And Out-Of-Home Care 3 (2008) (citing Mason Burley & Mina Halpern, Educational Attainment of Foster Youth (Washington State Institute for Public Policy 2001)).
6. Leone & Weinberg, *supra* note 3, at 9.
7. *Id.* at 12.
8. Indep. Living Program, Cal. Dep't of Soc. Serv., Annual Statistical Report (2002), www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/res/pdf/Soc405a/2002/SOC405AOct01-Sep02.pdf.
9. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, *supra* note 5, at 2.
10. Leone & Weinberg, *supra* note 3, at 21 (citing Los Angeles, Data Match Results: Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services, and Los Angeles County Probation Department (Education Coordinating Council 2006)).
11. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, *supra* note 5, at 2 (citing Mark E. Courtney et al., Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Chaplain Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago 2004)).
12. Rae R. Newton et al., *Children and Youth in Foster Care: Disentangling the Relationship Between Problem Behaviors and Number of Placements*, 24 Child Abuse & Neglect 1363, 1371 (2000).
13. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, *supra* note 5, at 5.
14. Susan M. Kools, *Adolescent Identity Development in Foster Care*, 46 Fam. Rel. 263 (1997).
15. *Id.* at 266.
16. *Id.*
17. *Id.* at 266-67.
18. *Id.* at 267.
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20. Nancy Darling et al., *Participation in School-Based Extracurricular Activities and Adolescent Adjustment*, 37 J. Leisure Res. 51, 53 (2005).
21. Interview with Jay Lightner, Director, Lighthouse Group Homes (August 12, 2010).
22. *Id.*
23. Darling et al., *supra* note 20, at 71-72. See also Joseph L. Mahoney et al., *Promoting Interpersonal Competence and Educational Success Through Extracurricular Activity Participation*, 95 J. Educational Psychol. 409, 416 (2003).

24. Amy F. Feldman & Jennifer L. Matjasko, *The Role of School-Based Extracurricular Activities in Adolescent Development: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions*, 75 Rev. Educ. Res. 159, 193 (2005).
25. Jacquelynne S. Eccles & Bonnie L. Barber, *Student Council, Volunteering, Basketball, or Marching Band: What Kind of Extracurricular Involvement Matters?*, 14 J. Adolescent Res. 10, 25 (1999).
26. *Id.* at 180 (citing Jacquelynne S. Eccles et al., *Extracurricular Activities and Adolescent Development*, 59 J. Soc. Issues 865 (2003)).
27. Feldman & Matjasko, *supra* note 24, at 182. See also Deana B. Davalos et al., *The Effects of Extracurricular Activity, Ethnic Identification, and Perception of School on Student Dropout Rates*, 21 Hisp. J. Behav. Sci. 61, 72 (1999); Joseph L. Mahoney & Robert B. Cairns, *Do Extracurricular Activities Protect Against Early School Dropout?*, 33 Developmental Psychol. 241, 248 (1997).
28. Joseph L. Mahoney, *School Extracurricular Activity Participation as a Moderator in the Development of Antisocial Patterns*, 71 Child Dev. 502, 503 (2000).
29. Davalos et al., *supra* note 27, at 72.30
30. Feldman & Matjasko, *supra* note 24, at 193.
31. Davalos et al., *supra* note 27, at 73.
32. Darling et al., *supra* note 20, at 53.
33. Interview with Dalton Dyer, in Auburn, Cal. (August 6, 2009).
34. *Id.*
35. *Id.*
36. Elizabeth Covay & William Carbonaro, *After the Bell: Participation in Extracurricular Activities, Classroom Behavior, and Academic Achievement*, 83 Soc. Education 20, 20-21 (2010).
37. *Id.* at 40.
38. *Id.* at 416.
39. Jonathan F. Zaff et al., *Implications of Extracurricular Activity Participation During Adolescence on Positive Outcomes*, 18 J. Adolescent Res. 599, 620 (2003).
40. Feldman & Matjasko, *supra* note 24, at 193.
41. Cal. Youth Connection, Summary of Foster Youth Speak Outs 6.
42. *Id.* at 11.
43. Leone & Weinberg, *supra* note 3, at 27.
44. A.B. 2906, amending Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code §§ 362.05, 727 (Deering 2010).
45. See www.youthlaw.org/litigation/ncyl_cases/child_welfare/dyer_v_cif/ for more information on this case.
46. Cal. Educ. Code § 48850(a)(2).

47. Cal. Educ. Code §§ 48850, 48853 (Deering 2009). See also Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code §§ 361,726, 16000(b).
48. Cal. Educ. Code § 48850(a)(2).
49. Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code §§ 362.05(a), 727(4)(a).
50. *Id.*
51. *Id.* at § 16001.9(a)(13).
52. Ark. Code. Ann. § 9-27-103 (2010); S.C. Code Ann. § 59-38-10(D) (2010).
53. 2010 Haw. Sess. Laws 1.
54. Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-32-138 (2009).
55. COA's (Eight Edition) Standards §§ 7.02(a), 8.02, 9.01(e) (2010).
56. The summit was sponsored by the San Bernardino County Children's Network Policy Council and the Department of Behavioral Health.
57. San Bernardino County Children's Network, (2007), www.sbcounty.gov/childnet/fostercareyouthsummit.htm.
58. *Id.*
59. Legislative Analyst's Office, Education of Foster Youth in California PowerPoint Presentation (May 28, 2009), available at www.lao.ca.gov/laoapp/PubDetails.aspx.
60. Interview with Jay Lightner, Director, Lighthouse Group Homes in California (August 12, 2010).