

Ready to Succeed in the Classroom: Summary Report

Teachers' Advice, Strategies and Tips to Help Students
in the Foster Care System Succeed in the Classroom



Prepared by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning
for the Stuart Foundation and the Ready to Succeed Leadership Team
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The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning is made up of education professionals, scholars and public policy experts who care deeply about improving the schooling of California's children. The Center was founded in 1995 as a public, nonprofit organization with the purpose of strengthening the capacity of California's teachers for delivering rigorous, well-rounded curriculum and ensuring the continuing intellectual, ethical and social development of all children.

The Ready to Succeed Initiative is a Stuart Foundation effort to improve educational outcomes for children and youth in the foster care system by helping public education and child welfare systems work together more closely and effectively at the local and state levels.

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The issue of improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care is receiving some long-overdue attention, but the voices of classroom teachers have not been prominent in the discussions so far. To help fill this gap, a team from the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and funded by the Stuart Foundation convened six discussion groups in late 2009 to explore how teachers and foster children and youth interact in the classroom. The discussion group sessions were held in three California counties (Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento).

This document highlights some of the general advice and specific strategies and tips that teachers offered during these discussions. For more information about the discussion groups or the Ready to Succeed initiative under which these discussion groups were conducted, please visit the Center's Web site (www.cftl.org) or Foster Ed Connect (www.fosteredconnect.org), which collects a wide variety of resources, information, and additional links on foster care and education.

"You may not realize that you've had a foster child in your classroom — but chances are, you have."

General Advice from Teachers ... to Teachers

- **Trust** and **caring** are the most important things: build trust, show caring. If a teacher can accomplish these two things, a lot of other things — including better classroom behavior, and academic achievement — will follow.
Show them that you care. In little ways each day, take notice, listen, make a comment, ask them about something you know they care about, connect with them, and give them some extra time, if possible.
Consciously build trust, starting the first day. Make a small promise and keep it. Day by day, work on building up their trust in you.
- Keep your **expectations** high and make them absolutely clear and consistent, whether they are about learning, respect, classroom behaviors, effort, or anything else. Although teachers expressed a great deal of compassion and sympathy for their students in the foster care system, they also felt that lowering or altering their expectations for these students constituted a profound disservice to them. "I tell them the past doesn't have to shape the future," one teacher explained. "They've been dealt a bad hand, but it doesn't mean the rest of their life has to be horrible. Foster kids have to understand that the rest of their life is largely up to them. It may be hard, but they can find people to help them."



Another teacher emphasized how important it was to differentiate between disappointment that an expectation for certain behaviors was not met, versus disappointment in the child as a person: “I care about you, I like having you in my classroom . . . but this behavior can’t happen again.”

- **Have faith that every student can succeed**, no matter how unlikely it may seem in your first encounter(s).
- **Be positive**, early and often. Several teachers mentioned how important it was to praise and encourage children and youth in the foster care system with the positive reinforcement that they both lack and crave. It is essential that the praise reflects a true accomplishment, however small (e.g., “You did a good job of being nice to X today”) — because teachers noted that foster children often have particularly acute radar for insincerity. Set students up for success, praise every accomplishment, and share your positive reactions with their foster family and other teachers.
- **Create opportunities for students to succeed.** Break big tasks into smaller chunks, give students

opportunities to help you or their peers, and recognize their achievements — no matter how small.

- Be **patient** — with students, and yourself.
- Be as **flexible** as possible.
- **Don’t judge children and youth in foster care**; train yourself to consider an alternative explanation for their behavior and respond as calmly and constructively as possible.
- **Ask for help early** (before a relationship with a student deteriorates beyond repair). “The greatest behavior management tool in the classroom is the telephone,” one teacher said. “And I use it!”
- **Don’t take anything personally.** Start every day with a clean, fresh slate — and really mean it.
- **Be consistent.** Follow through 100% of the time on anything you promise to do, or don’t offer it at all. Be sincere. Children and youth in foster care (like many of their peers) “will read you like a book,” teachers warned. Any whiff of insincerity will be detected immediately and will undermine relationship- and trust-building.

“I tell them, ‘There’s nothing you can’t do.’ We have to help them believe that.”

Classroom Strategies and Tips

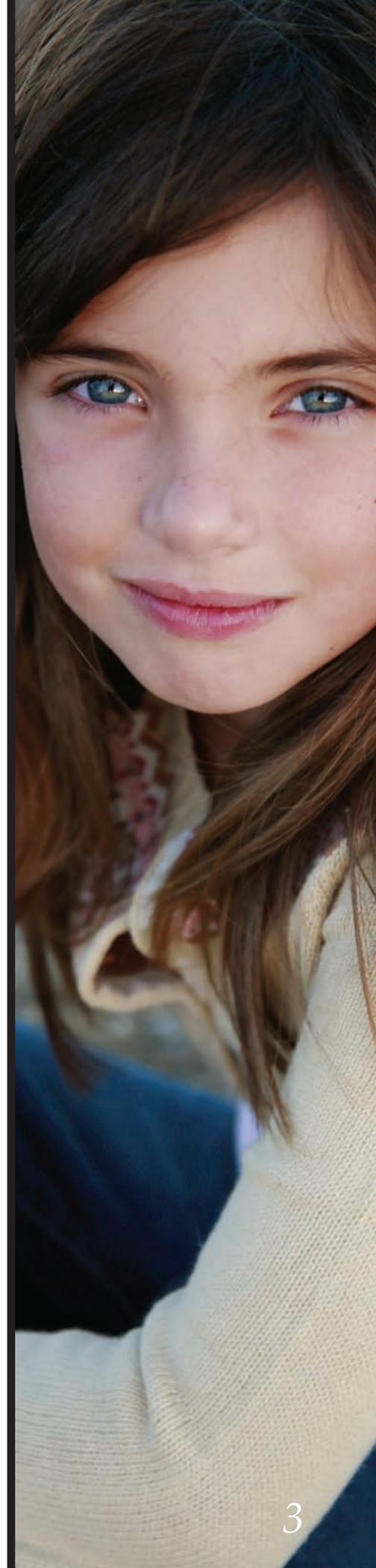
- **Putting Peers to Work:** Several teachers described buddy systems (pairing a new student with one who knows the ropes), which is routine for any new student (not just those in foster care). Others devised group assignments (with frequent allocation of “points” as feedback for the group’s interactions and work), and assigned children in foster care to buddies or groups hand-picked to be particularly helpful and understanding. One school takes this a step further and matches each child in foster care with a caring adult within the school.
- **Putting Students to Work:** Giving a child in foster care a task as a helper has worked well for many teachers, helping the students focus and giving them

a sense of being valued that is often lacking from the rest of their daily routine. Similarly, some teachers suggested looking for opportunities in which foster children could make decisions and have choices — something they lack at home.

- **Offering Extra Individual Attention:** Children and youth in foster care crave adult attention; going the extra mile to provide some one-on-one time or to identify a particular hobby or interest has tremendous pay-offs, teachers said. Listening to them, valuing what they say, taking time with them — all of these basic human courtesies have extra meaning for children and youth in the foster care system, teachers said.

- **Finding Common Interests:** To help children who feel lonely or different identify common interests with others, one teacher described a “last person standing” game that is popular in her high school classroom: innocuous questions are posed (Who likes ice cream? Who saw this movie? Who likes this band?) every other week, with responses dictated by standing or sitting — and students can quickly see who shares some of their enthusiasms and interests.
- **Bringing Structure to Chaos:** Many teachers talked about the importance of providing a predictable, structured environment for children and youth in the foster care system. With so much uncertainty in their lives and so many decisions out of their control, a structured environment may feel particularly safe — and thus be more conducive to learning.
- **Creating a Token Economy:** Some teachers experienced success in building trust and relationships with students by creating systems of rewards and competitive games. The rewards were not necessarily expensive or store-bought items (although some teachers did try to secure these from local businesses). Instead, a lunch with the teacher, extra computer time, sitting in the teacher’s chair for a class period, choosing a recess activity, or a special delicious home-baked treat were examples of rewards for good behavior.
- **Setting Students Up for Success, not Failure:** Teachers spoke often about how little success these students have experienced in every area of their lives, but especially at school. Restoring some confidence by creating small, do-able assignments (and then “praising the heck out of them,” as one teacher put it) was a common suggestion.
- **Starting Every Day with a Clean Slate.** Teachers struggled to not take a child’s behavior personally. They suggested starting each day with a clean slate as much as possible, modeling a positive, optimistic outlook to demonstrate that yesterday’s behaviors or problems need not spill over into today.
- **Avoiding Assumptions about Family Structure:** To a child in foster care, seemingly innocuous classroom projects and assignments can become painful reminders that they are different from other children in some ways. Class projects like family trees, bringing in baby pictures, or even creating Mother’s Day cards are all examples of class exercises that needlessly set foster children apart from their peers. “There are too many good projects out there to keep doing family trees,” one teacher said. “Come on, people — let’s get creative!” For example, Mother’s Day cards can be crafted for moms, or others (grandmothers, aunts, or even teachers). Several teachers emotionally recounted getting Mother’s Day cards from their students in the foster care system — often unaware until that moment that they fulfilled this role in their students’ lives.

Several teachers noted that school office staff need training and reminders about using the emotionally laden “Mom” term to describe any female adult calling or visiting the school. A casual “His mom is on the phone,” or “His mom is in the office” could set off a strong reaction for a child who knows his “mom” is in prison, for example, or in another city. Alternatively, some



*“There are too many good projects out there to keep doing family trees.
Come on, people — let’s get creative!”*

children want their foster mom referred to as “mom.” Teachers suggest asking children directly, instead of assuming anything: “What do you call the people at your house?”

- **Asking Students for Advice:** As part of a Breakthrough Series Collaborative experience, one high school’s leadership team went to the source, asking youth in foster care attending their school to help them better understand and respond to their needs as well as the needs of incoming students in care. Over several years, the group progressed from meetings, to guest speakers, to a homeroom just for foster youth, to having foster youth educate teachers and administrators about ways they were (and were not) helpful.
- **Understanding Behaviors and Responding Appropriately:** Many teachers observed that the disruptive classroom behaviors of children and youth in the foster care system (as well as others) could be interpreted more constructively as pleas for attention or other reactions, and met with more nuanced responses than immediate disciplinary action. Some behaviors or outbursts may have nothing to do with anything that happened at school. For example, one teacher noticed that a child in foster care in her classroom was distraught and uncooperative on certain Mondays — the ones after a family visitation with siblings and a drug-addicted parent. Being alert and understanding about triggers like this may help teachers keep an outburst or disruptive behavior from escalating.
- **Engaging Foster Parents and Families:** Teachers suggested reaching out to foster parents, who may not see themselves as their foster child’s education advocate.

(If a foster parent does not respond to these overtures, teachers suggested identifying someone who does or could play that role, such as a social worker or Court Appointed Special Advocate.) Several teachers observed that phone calls from teachers to foster parents usually involve negative feedback about a problem at school. Even when these are necessary, they suggested making positive calls as well to praise a child’s efforts or accomplishments — and to make a point of starting off the relationship with a positive call early in the child’s tenure in the classroom.

- **Using In-Classroom Assessments:** Because of frequent placement and school changes, many students in the foster care system have accumulated knowledge and skills very unevenly — as one teacher described it, with gaps “like Swiss cheese.” Some students missed key concepts in a particular course or curriculum; others missed a subject entirely. The gaps, teachers noted, made it particularly important to conduct some type of quick assessment — especially because formal records (such as a student’s cumulative file) tend to be tardy and, too often, incomplete and therefore unhelpful. Teachers relied on a wide variety of assessments, ranging from formal ones used district-



wide to informal ones such as having a new student read aloud, or write a paragraph about herself.

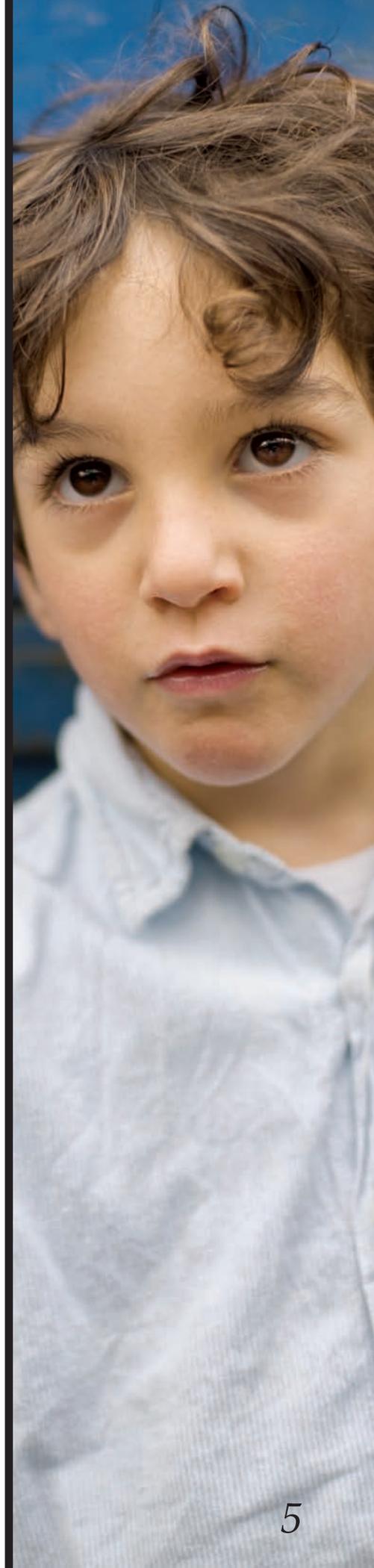
- **Engaging Students in Enrichment Activities:** Teachers described programs such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), which is designed to close academic achievement gaps by offering students intensive support and guidance, as ideal for students like those in the foster system. Unfortunately, students must enroll in AVID at the beginning of a semester, putting it out of reach for students whose placement and school changes don't coincide with school schedules. Still, teachers suggested seeking out these or similar enrichment programs within schools, districts and communities and making sure that students in foster care had access to them whenever possible.
- **Linking to School Activities Outside the Classroom:** Sports, clubs, tutoring, band — all of these can help students in the foster care system connect to a school community, develop a talent or interest, and interact with peers and caring adults. However, students in care experience additional barriers if they wish to participate in after-school activities, ranging from a lack of transportation to difficulties obtaining needed supplies. Teachers suggested working with others in the school community to overcome barriers that allow children and youth in the foster care system to participate in after-school activities — and educating coaches and other adults about initially giving these children some additional leeway if needed regarding supplies and equipment, tardiness, and other rules that might restrict or discourage their participation.

Conclusion

Several teachers had stories of the children and youth in foster care in their classrooms who persevered and succeeded, sometimes returning to an elementary school classroom to proudly announce their college acceptance or calling a special education teacher to explain that the teacher's crucial support long ago had led the student to enter that field.

These success stories are important reminders that many foster children do manage to overcome the many obstacles they face. Understanding exactly which factors help them succeed — and could help others as well — is a missing part of the evidence base, as noted by researchers interviewed for a parallel report on research gaps.

As teachers gain a greater understanding and awareness of the barriers foster children face, are able to access more systematic approaches to assessment and deploy more constructive responses to puzzling or disruptive behaviors, we hope that this part of the Ready to Succeed initiative will help teachers do what they do best: engage their students and help them find their own unique path to success in school, and beyond.



An Overview of Assembly Bill 490

Some teachers in these discussion groups were not aware of the education-specific rights that children and youth in foster care gained with the passage of AB490 (Steinberg), Chapter 862, which became law in January 2004. Its provisions establish specific education rights for children and youth in foster care in California — as well as responsibilities for school personnel, judges, attorneys, social workers, probation officers, and caregivers. These provisions are designed to give children and youth in foster care access to the same educational opportunities and resources as other students and to have all their education placement decisions made according to the child’s best interests.

Among AB490’s provisions are those that specify that children and youth in the foster care system should have:

- the ability to finish the school year in their school of origin (if that is determined to be in the child’s or youth’s best interests), even if a change of placement puts them in a different school or district
- the ability to be enrolled in a new school immediately, even if records are not available
- their school records transferred quickly (within 2 days) from their former school to a new one when a placement change requires a change in schools
- full or partial credits for previous coursework calculated and accepted by schools.

In addition, AB490 requires that every school district appoint an Educational Liaison to ensure that students in the foster care system have access to these services.

Assembly Bill 490 Resources

The National Center for Youth Law’s Web site (www.ncyl.org) offers many AB490-specific resources, including roles and responsibilities for specific audiences (caregivers, school personnel, judges, attorneys and advocates, social workers, and probation officers), as well as an implementation guide for schools and current lists and contact information for California’s Education Liaisons, by district.

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning

Working to improve education for all students by strengthening the teaching profession

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