

Director Hertel
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Dear Director Hertel,

We are writing today to express our concerns regarding the educational outcomes of youth experiencing foster care — especially those with disabilities — and the recent decision to eliminate the foster care education planner positions. Our hope is that this may be a moment, especially given pandemic-related needs, that we do more for the education of youth experiencing foster care, not less.

We know that Michigan students in foster care have particularly low graduation rates compared to other special populations. In fact, only 40% of students in foster care graduated in 4 years in 2019 (26% dropped out), compared to 82% statewide. This is [much lower than national rates](#).

A 2020 statewide service assessment conducted by the Michigan Interagency Transition Team (MITT) identified a gap in services provided to transition-age youth with disabilities and their families, including housing, family supports/training, customized employment, job counseling, mental/physical health services, post-secondary education preparation and youth self-advocacy. Access to these services are either non-existent or greatly vary across the state.

Youth experiencing foster care need more academic support in this moment than ever before. The pandemic and subsequent school closures and forced virtual school in the 2020-2021 school year led to significant academic declines for all students, and many have struggled with the transition back, even while schools have reduced capacity due to staff shortages. Students with disabilities face particular challenges, as services were too often reduced or not provided when students were remote.

With the recent changes to the Education Planner position, we wonder what will be different this time? How will case managers now be able to manage these duties without the support of education planners when in the past that has been challenging?

Because of their histories of abuse, neglect, trauma, placement instability and educational disruption, youth experiencing foster care require more intensive educational services to succeed, yet they often don't have anyone consistent or skilled enough to advocate for those services. Evidence shows that the school experience of children in out-of-home care plays a key role in stability in placement. For example, Fletcher-Campbell (1990) found that failing to arrange suitable education could lead to the failure of a placement. Foster parents were unable to tolerate situations when difficult children were in the home all day, rather than school, for instance.

The school experience is also critical for a successful transition out of foster care and the juvenile systems. Unfortunately, multiple studies have found that students in foster care are twice as likely to drop out of school and three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than students in the care of a parent or guardian. Similarly, youth in the juvenile justice system are more likely than their peers to be absent or truant, face disciplinary action, need evaluation and remedial services,

perform below grade level, have a disability that qualifies them for special education services, and drop out of high school. Education is at the center of their rehabilitation needs. This population's greatest chance at ending offending behaviors is sustained and consistent attendance in school, along with a quality education and access to educational resources as needed (Chaney, 2013).

In the Yale Law Journal, Phillips (2008) argues students with disabilities need external advocates to achieve optimal outcomes because of the complexity of disabilities, formal rules of the system, lack of knowledge about the disability and system, and difficulty interacting with schools. These challenges are exacerbated for low-income homes and court-involved youth. California law requires that youth in foster care are assigned an educational liaison to provide support and ensure that decisions are made in the student's best interest (CEC § 48853.5).

Case managers should be able to support school enrollment and coordination of transportation to maintain school of origin, but special education, discipline advocacy and more specialized academic support is likely outside of their capacity and expertise.

But education planners have a place. In 2012, Metis and Associates completed a rigorous quasi experimental design study for Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative focusing on educational outcomes for youth participating in Opportunity Passport. The research design enabled Metis to assess high school and GED graduation rates for participants before and after the implementation of education planner positions. Metis was able to identify statistically significant post policy increases in high school diploma and GED completion rates for Opportunity Passport participants, related to the work of MDHHS Education Planners.

We believe education planners should be maintained to continue coordinating educational services and providing technical support for caseworkers. We also believe education planners could play a critical role in identifying youth with more extensive educational needs and connecting them with other resources. If education planners are not reinstated, data should be collected to understand the impact of this. Whether or not education planners are maintained, **we recommend the following three steps to better support the education of students experiencing foster care:**

- MDHHS should allocate funds for special education advocacy, increasing the capacity of Michigan's federally funded Parent Training and Information Center, Michigan Alliance-PTI utilizing a network of special education advocates. Student Advocacy Center has committed to partnering with MAF to share best practices in how to specialize education advocacy for this population.
- MDHHS should consider allocating funds to Fostering Success Michigan to provide statewide infrastructure to the professionals working with these students to increase communication and sharing of information by those serving youth including the following: technical assistance, professional development, networking opportunities, data collection and dissemination, and funding connections to help students get to and through college. For example, in Florida, the Department of Children's Services funds the Positive Pathways Program, to bring together all of the professionals working with the students, increasing contact and communication so no students fall through the cracks.

- Looking forward, leaders of key Michigan state departments should work with key stakeholders in 2022 to develop an action plan for improving education outcomes for children and youth in foster care.

We look forward to hearing back from you on these recommendations and appreciate you taking the time to consider these requests. Please refer to the end of the letter for more background on our organizations and our relationship with the education of children experiencing foster care.

Sincerely,



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Background:

We are a group of nonprofits dedicated to the well-being of children.

Student Advocacy Center, founded in 1975, works to keep all students in school, particularly those experiencing foster care, homelessness, harsh discipline and other barriers to school success. SAC has proactively worked with abused, neglected and delinquent youth since 1994 and has had a contract with the Washtenaw County Department of Health and Human Services to provide intensive educational advocacy, planning and support since 2007. In 2006, SAC's model of education advocacy was exemplified in recommendations made to the Legislature by the Interdepartmental Task Force on Service to At-Risk Youth Transitioning to Adulthood. The Task Force recommended our model be

expanded statewide so that more children in foster care could be provided an education advocate to increase the number finding school success and graduating.

Michigan Alliance-PTI is one of 100 federally funded parent training and information centers in the country, charged with providing information, support, and education for families who have children and young adults (birth to 26 years of age) who receive (or may be eligible to receive) special education services. MAF has a network of special education advocates around the state. Since October 2020, MAF, SAC and The Arc of Northwest Wayne have been partnering on “Project Launch” to improve educational outcomes for youth with disabilities experiencing foster care.

Michigan’s Children is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career. For thirty years, MC has connected youth and family voices and other lived experiences with policy decision makers to inform priorities, especially regarding foster care.

Fostering Success Michigan (FSM) is a statewide initiative that began in 2012 and is focused on postsecondary access and success for youth with experience in foster care. FSM works to build a holistic pipeline of educational support across the state, bringing together professionals, students and supportive adults to share best practices, resources, and networking opportunities to increase postsecondary access and success for this population. Education Planners were an important part of the FSM Network, as they facilitated connections for youth with 30 campus based support programs across the state dedicated to providing on site support for youth with experience in foster care. FSM partnered with Education Planners to provide resources to students including information about campus support programs, funding options, and opportunities to learn about and explore college.

As part of the “Project Launch” collaboration, Michigan Alliance-PTI and SAC have been identifying best practices and gaps that youth experiencing foster care with disabilities experience. We learned that ed planners supported caseworkers and assisted with school enrollment, transportation and tricky situations. But they often did not have the capacity to attend school meetings, maintain close communication with students, or provide the intensive support done by Student Advocacy Center in Washtenaw County, where a smaller caseload of students in foster care is referred when they are failing, being suspended or having other school barriers. SAC meets weekly with the student (an evidence-based practice), attends all school meetings, frequently checks attendance and grades, maintains communication with GALs, caseworker and referee, and attends court hearings. We also learned that MRS is not consistently connected with students in foster care.