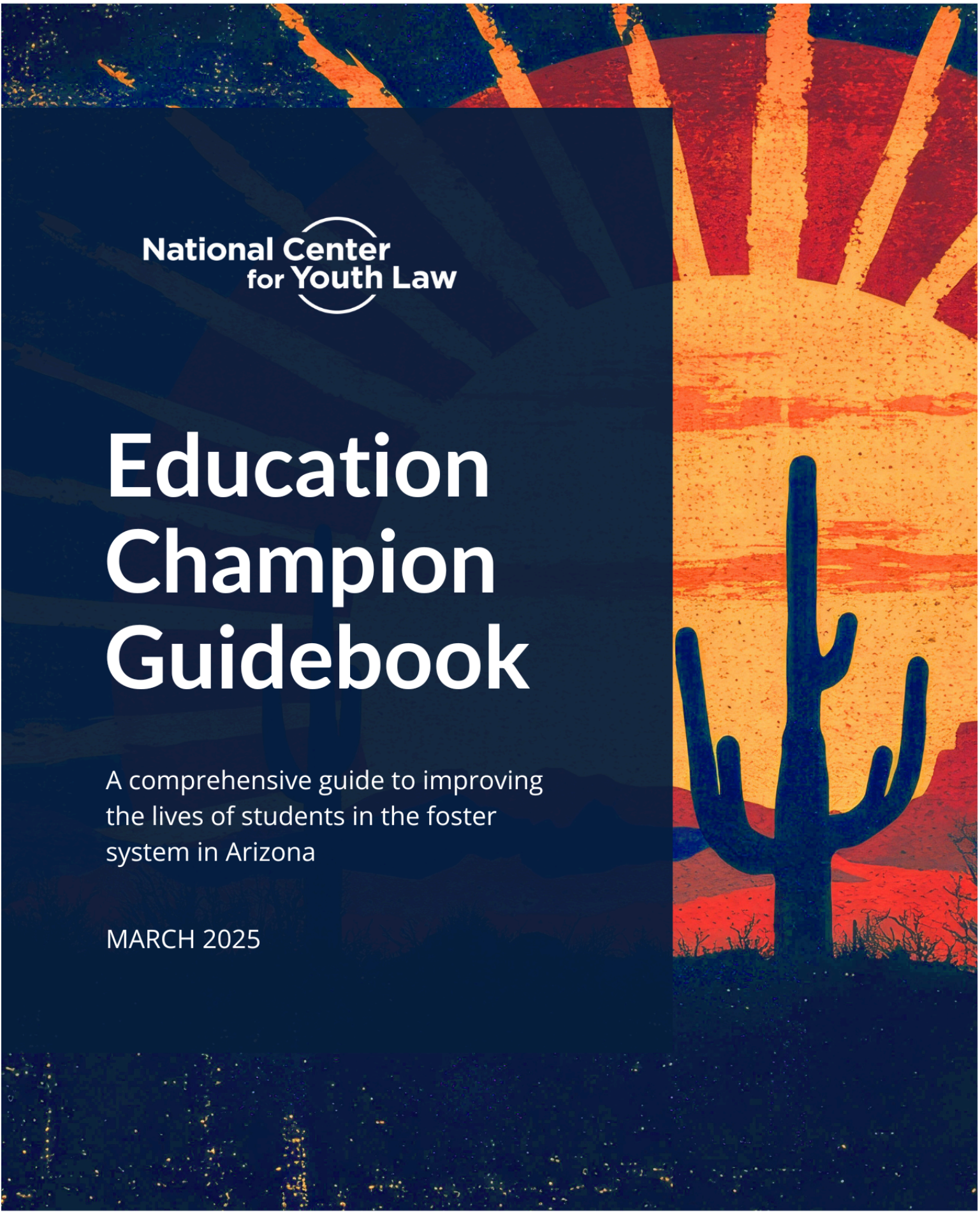


National Center for Youth Law

Education Champion Guidebook

A comprehensive guide to improving the lives of students in the foster system in Arizona

MARCH 2025

For more than a decade, FosterEd, a program of the National Center for Youth Law, has worked in partnership with the Arizona Department of Children's Services, the Office of the Governor, the Arizona Department of Education, advocates, and local leaders to produce various resources designed to help school districts, DCS, and other adults better meet the education needs of youth involved in the foster care system in real time.

FosterEd, implemented in Arizona from 2013 to 2025, was guided by a framework that all young people in foster care should have an Education Champion who supports their long-term educational success, an education team of engaged adults, including the education champion, parents, other caregivers, teachers, representatives from the child welfare system and behavioral health providers. The education team, coordinated by an Education Liaison, supports the educational needs and goals through student-centered engagement.

Young people's needs are individualized, and every young person needs a different level of support at different stages of development and transition.

Table of Contents

FosterEd Guidebook

Introduction to Education Liaisons

The role of an Education Liaison has been critical to ensuring that countless young people in foster care receive the care they need to remain engaged in school and learning, progressing in their education and on track to graduate. This Guidebook was written by Education Lliaisons to share their learning and expertise with others who may work in a coordination role in service to support the educational needs of foster care. The purpose of this guide is to share the key aspects of the work of an Education Liaison and provide guidance to other professionals seeking to support youth in a similar capacity. This handbook will help professionals working to support students in foster care to:

- Set personally meaningful goals
- Identify and build supportive relationships
- Identify and build Education Teams
- Develop the self-determination, persistence, problem-solving, and self-advocacy skills needed to graduate from high school and achieve their goals for the future.

This Guidebook was developed by Education Liaisons for other Education Liaisons or professionals working across child welfare and education systems and coordinating the activity of many adults in service to support the education of a young person in foster care.

There are eight components of this Guidebook:

About the FosterEd Practice Framework

The day-to-day work of Education Liaisons flows from the unique needs and assets of each young person they serve and is guided by three core practice elements.

ADVOCACY

Effective and committed Education Champions or Education Partners.

Youth in foster care, like all youth, need strong educational advocates with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to support the youth's education effectively.

COORDINATION

Well-coordinated Education Teams.

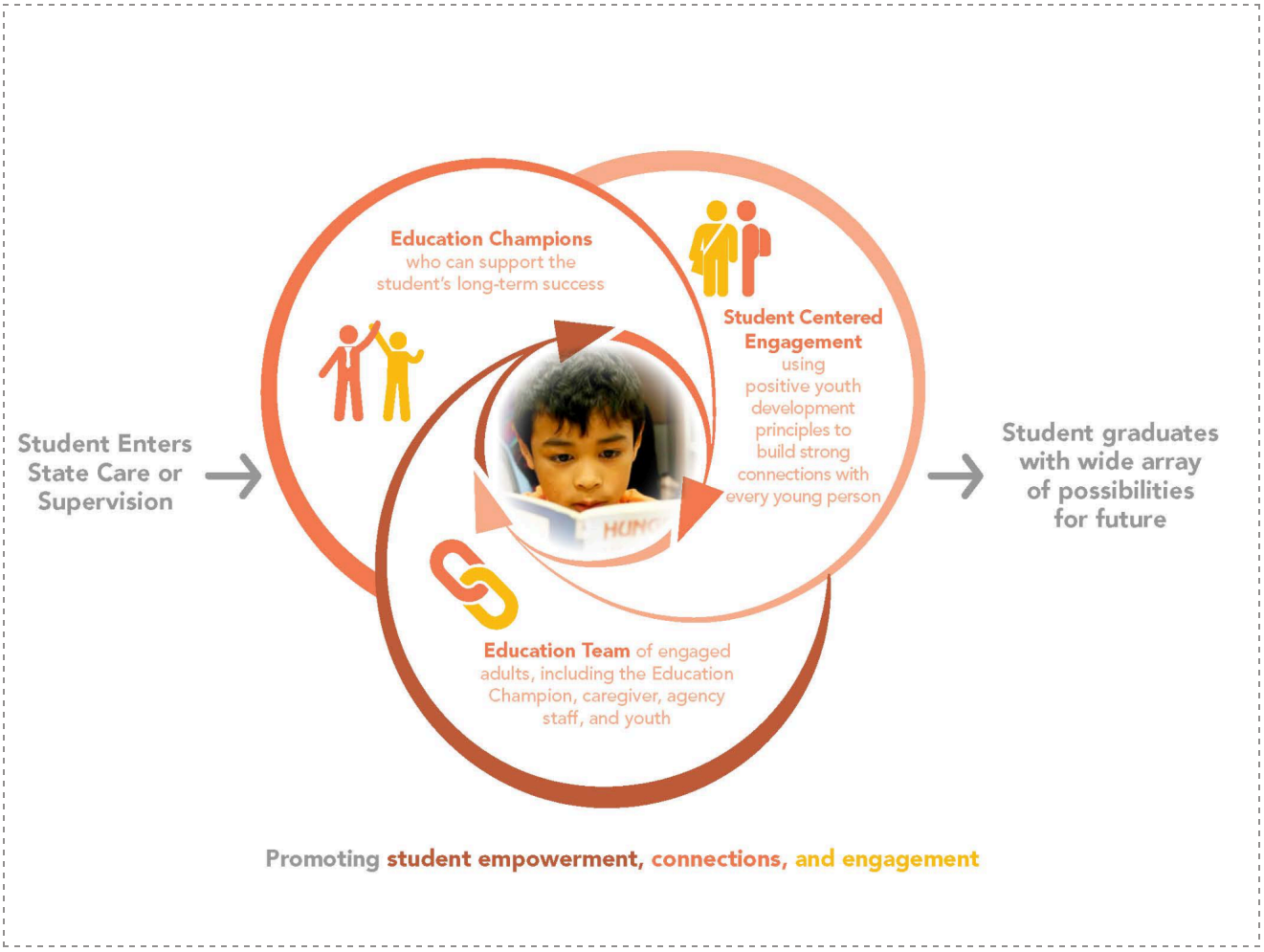
Youth in foster care are much more likely to succeed in school when the adults involved in their lives--social workers, teachers, therapists, CASAs, etc.--work together in a coordinated, collaborative manner.

FOCUS

Student-centered engagement.

Positive engagement and empowerment at school start with putting the student at the center of their education decision-making. Giving students "voice and choice" in shaping every element of their education leads to educational success, particularly for youth who have experienced the trauma and loss of control associated with involvement in the child welfare system.

Cycle of the FosterEd Framework,
A Compassionate Education Model



Important Early Steps Engaging with Youth, Their Team, and Families

We always recommend checking in with a student's school, placement, and/or DCS specialist to ensure you are familiar with any requirements they may have prior to meeting with a student. Examples of such requirements may be:

- A signed consent form or permission slip from a parent or guardian
- Fingerprint clearance card
- Photo ID on file with their front desk or registration specialist

Gathering early information to understand the student's school experience — how long the child has been at the current school, how many schools the child has been to, academic performance, special education needs — helps to ensure the early steps of work with young people are responsive to their needs. Furthermore, understanding who has educational rights provides a road map for who can join meetings, identifying safety concerns, medical concerns, documentation needs, and identifying who should be included in ongoing communications. Contact information for key adults is also important to inform Child and Family Team meetings.

Trauma-Informed Youth Engagement

We recommend using a trauma-informed approach because young people in the child welfare system often have experienced trauma in the past and/or are currently experiencing it. Furthermore, youth exposed to trauma are more likely to face challenges in the school setting.

The following terms are useful in understanding trauma:

TRAUMA

An experience resulting from a traumatic event — an event that "threatens injury, death, or the physical integrity of self or others and also causes horror, terror, or helplessness at the time it occurs," according to the American Psychological Association.

Behavioral health professionals more broadly define trauma as resulting “from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

COMPLEX TRAUMA	Describes a young person's exposure to multiple traumatic events and the wide-ranging impact of exposure to that trauma.
POLYVICTIMIZATION	Describes a young person's exposure to several forms of victimization, such as bullying, physical violence, and emotional neglect.
TOXIC STRESS	The prolonged or excessive activation of physiological stress response systems that youth experience. Youth are more likely to experience toxic stress when they have experienced complex trauma and/or polyvictimization.
POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)	A disorder that young people who were exposed to trauma may have. Typically, young people with PTSD often struggle with re-experiencing traumatic events, avoiding reminders of prior trauma, negative thoughts or feelings, and hyperarousal/hypersensitivity.

A trauma-informed approach involves:

- Recognizing the impact of trauma on a young person,
- Recognizing signs that a young person has experienced trauma,
- Integrating trauma-informed strategies into everyday practices, and
- Actively resisting re-traumatizing the young person.

Youth in foster care can experience trauma before and during their experience in the child welfare system.

BEFORE

This includes but is not limited to experiences of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, substance abuse, and loss of loved ones.

DURING

This includes but is not limited to housing instability, immigration proceedings, foster home or other placement conditions, and separation from loved ones. Youth may also be re-traumatized when they have to discuss their prior traumatic experiences with others.

TRAUMA-INFORMED YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TIPS[1]

Be aware of signs of traumatic stress in a young person.
These include but are not limited to different sleep patterns, refusal to engage in services, substance abuse, new or increased sexual activity, self-harming behaviors, or withdrawal from social settings.

Learn about "triggers."
Triggers are anything that reminds the young person of a traumatic experience (for example, a loud noise, a smell, a person of a certain age or physical appearance, or certain words). The young person will need time to build a relationship with you before they will share those triggers with you, but once you know the triggers, keep them in mind as you work with and advocate for the youth. If the youth has a mental health professional, you

[1] Additional Resources: American Psychological Association. Children and trauma; Trauma sensitivity during the IEP process; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Justice Consortium Attorney Workgroup Subcommittee (2017). Trauma: What child welfare attorneys should know. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress

can also suggest that the professional and the youth work together to identify any triggers.

Create predictability and structure in your meetings.
This includes setting meeting times well ahead of time, meeting at the same or similar locations, and ensuring the young person knows what will be discussed ahead of the meeting. Predictability and structure can reduce the young person's stress, create a better relationship between you, and reduce the possibility of triggering situations.

Ensure your meeting location is safe.
The setting should be quiet and have few distractions. Additionally, avoid meeting in places where the environment or the people in the environment might trigger the student's triggers (for example, a location with police officers present when you know the student has had a past traumatic experience involving police officers).

Reduce physical contact with the young person.
For young people who have experienced physical violence or sexual abuse, physical contact can be a major trigger.

Advocate for them to get services at school related to their trauma.
For some young people, trauma may manifest in ways that interfere with their ability to learn. You can advocate for the student to receive services at school related to their trauma, including connecting them to counselors and other school staff who employ trauma-informed strategies and techniques. The young person might also be eligible for special education or a 504 plan, and you can assist with getting those services in place.

Ask for professional help if you or the young person need it.
Talk to a young person and their caregiver about counseling or psychiatric options for the youth if they need more support. Also, since "vicarious trauma" is a common issue for people who work with traumatized young people, recognize when you need to take a break and do not be afraid to seek professional help for yourself.

Building Trusting Youth-Adult Relationships

It is important to be intentional and deliberate in building connections with students, learning about who they are, what their aspirations are, and who matters to them most. This can often be best achieved by following a sequence in early meetings with the student: learning about the student as a person, then working to understand the student's school experience, and only then progressing to the more substantive tasks of the FosterEd framework.

Building trust and establishing a positive relationship are the most critical foundations to establish with each young person[2]. Keep conversations positive and asset-based, particularly the first few times you talk with a student. It's OK to discuss challenges the student faces — in these situations, do your best to listen intently to what the challenges are and what barriers the student faces so that later you can use that information to work together with the student to identify strategies and possible solutions."

[2] Resource: Effective Engagement Strategies

Keep the conversation flowing naturally. If the student wants to talk more about a particular topic, spend some time exploring that subject. Provide as much information about yourself as you are comfortable sharing while maintaining proper professional boundaries. Establish the two-way nature of the relationship early. It is important that the students understand your role, how long you will be working with them, what you will be doing to support them, and what you are not able to assist with. In your first meeting with the student, you should focus on getting to know one another and describing to the student what your role as an Education Partner can look like.

Quality relationships cannot be forced; they occur naturally. Some engagements with students will develop quickly, and others may take a while to establish. Allow students the time they need to build trust and show them through your actions and willingness to take it at their pace that you are there to support them.

Importance of Building Self-Confidence[3]

Empowerment is a core part of FosterEd's definition of success and self-confidence is a central component of empowerment. Accordingly, all work with students should be done to promote self-confidence. While there are many possible definitions and ways of thinking about empowerment and self-efficacy, a simple framing for our purposes is that the concepts refer to "the belief in one's ability to succeed in achieving an outcome or reaching a goal." For brevity's sake, "self-confidence" will be used throughout this document.

An internal belief, self-efficacy, is related to whether a student believes they have sufficient control over their environment in order to succeed. High self-confidence reflects in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and environment and allows students to become advocates for their own needs and supports. Decades of research show that self-confidence is a valid predictor of students' motivation and learning.

[3] *Content in this is adapted from Transforming Education's "Introduction to Self-Efficacy" and the National Association of School Psychologist's "Self-Efficacy: Helping Children Believe They Can Succeed"*

Students with high levels of self-confidence participate more in class, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer negative emotional reactions when encountering difficulties than students with lower self-confidence. High self-confidence can also motivate students to use specific learning strategies and to engage in self-directed learning.

More specifically, self-confidence contributes to each of the following:

- **Better goals:** Students who feel they have enough control over their environments to enable them to accomplish certain tasks are more likely to set challenging goals and commit themselves to achieving them. Recognized self-confidence toward a particular task is a better predictor of success than actual ability. In a study of math effort, regardless of ability level, students with high self-confidence completed more problems correctly and reworked more of the ones they missed.

- **Motivation to succeed:** Self-confidence affects how much effort students put forth and how long they persevere when tasks are challenging because students with high self-confidence understand that they, more than other people or circumstances, determine outcomes and future results. For 9th and 10th-grade students, academic self-confidence predicted final course grades and the types of goals that students set for themselves.

- **Openness to risk:** Strong self-confidence leads students to take chances in their work, exploring topics and subjects that are new to them since students who are confident in their abilities to perform and to react to challenges are less worried about failure. This extends beyond class, as students with high self-confidence are more likely to consider a variety of career options as worth pursuing. Once a path is chosen, they also tend to prepare more and show persistence in pursuing their goals.

Strategies to Enhance Self-Confidence[4]

Some strategies FosterEd Liaisons have used in their work with students to promote self-confidence include:

Give students opportunities to control their environment.

Creating opportunities for children to make decisions, use and practice their skills, and try different paths to achieve their goals will help build self-confidence. A prime example of this is giving or suggesting a student be given as much control as possible during school meetings (i.e. IEP meetings, 504 plan reviews, etc.).

Support the student in taking ownership of their experiences, tasks, and goals as much as possible.

If the student can achieve a goal or complete a task independently, let them do so. If the student needs some help with a goal or task, work in partnership with the student.

Seek out shared learning opportunities.

Observing someone else perform a task or handle a situation can help the student perform the same task by imitation. For example, if the student needs to develop a plan for completing a large assignment, the Education Partner can model how to map out the steps for completing the assignment as well as setting deadlines for various steps in the process. Shared experience can be even more effective if the student has an opportunity to see someone they think of as a peer succeed at a task.

[4] *Resource:* Self-Advocacy & Youth Leadership Video - Facilitated by Raising Special Kids.

Notice, analyze, and celebrate successes.

We can increase self-confidence by teaching students to identify successes and to accurately assess their contributions. This not only helps children build positive self-perceptions, but it also creates positive emotion, which in turn leads to more creative thinking and enhanced problem-solving.

Name strengths, often and consistently.

Identify a strength or skill that the student can use to their advantage. For example: “You have such a great ability to speak up for yourself; how might that help you in this situation?” or “I’ve seen you use your sense of humor to help you in other situations; is there a way it can help you here?”

Praise effort in addition to the result.

Process praise, in which students are praised for their efforts and the strategies they used to bring about success. For example, encouragement like: “You did well because you kept at it and tried different ways to solve the problem,” can lead to greater mastery, persistence, and achievement than simply praising students for something such as being smart. Emphasizing effort and strategy helps students focus their attention on variables they can control — how hard they try and the strategies used.

Provide specific feedback.

Rather than generalized comments such as “You did great” or “excellent job,” challenge yourself to describe in detail what the student did that was great or excellent. Examples could include, “It was great how assertive yet respectful you were with your DCS Case Specialist when asking for that document you needed,” or “You made a great choice by independently going to your teacher for help when you were struggling last week.”

Be honest and realistic.

When the student fails or has a setback, don't pretend it didn't happen. It is far better to acknowledge the struggle and identify specific strengths they might use next. When we help students pay attention to their strengths and help them figure out how to use them better, we are teaching them self-confidence.

Teach goal setting.

Teaching students how to set realistic goals and strategies for persisting in achieving those goals when they encounter obstacles helps them to experience greater mastery in life.

> Let the student take ownership of their experiences, tasks, and goals as much as possible. If the student can achieve a goal or complete a task independently, let them do so. If the student needs some help with a goal or task, work in partnership with the student rather than simply doing the task for them.

Effective Goal Setting

One of the ways in which we empower youth to continue to make positive progress toward their own education is by providing them with the space and opportunity to identify both short-term and long-term goals.

As an Education Partner, questions you might wonder about include:

- *What does the student see as their immediate needs in regard to their education? What short-term goals might they set for themselves to help meet those needs?*

- *What does the student want to accomplish, or see themselves accomplishing throughout a longer time period (ex. throughout the entire academic year)? How can I support the student by actively setting goals for these long-term accomplishments, keeping them accountable for these goals that they set for themselves, and working with them to make progress on these goals?*

On the logistical end, it is important to have a system in place to track these goals. Tracking goals can help both you and the student stay organized, track progress and maintain accountability in working towards these goals.

Goal Categories

There are 4 main goal categories:

Social Capital

This includes goals to help youth build relationships with adults and friends that improve their connectivity to resources and opportunities. An example of this would be a goal for a youth to seek out and build relationships with a mentor. For more context, see this issue brief from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. If a young person needs to move schools, this might be an appropriate goal category to consider so that you help the youth focus on building meaningful adult resources/connections at their new school.

Social Development

These goals would help youth develop social/emotional learning skills. This might include something like setting a goal for a 3rd grader to start playing a musical instrument. A goal for a 5th grader might be something like practicing skateboarding at the skate park two times a week with a new friendship they are building. If a young person is getting into a lot of trouble in school, social development goals are a youth-centered way to build SEL skills.

Academic

These are goals specific to completing coursework, improving grades, taking a challenging course, credit accrual, etc.

Other

It might be that the young person identifies something that does not easily fit in any of the above boxes, which is why there is another category.

Goal Status

It is also important to ensure that we are tracking the progress being made toward goals. To help track this, we use the following goal statuses to indicate progress:

CURRENT	COMPLETED	UNMET	NOT APPLICABLE
The goal is currently in progress, and being worked on by the student	The goal has been successfully completed by the student	Unmet goals are those not accomplished by the established deadline or by the end of program participation.	Not applicable goals are goals that are identified as no longer relevant to the student.

Develop SMART goals

S=Specific, M=Measurable, A=Achievable, R=Realistic and T=Timely

Using SMART goals can be helpful in developing realistic goals as well as timelines for accomplishing those goals.

Other Important Goal-Setting Considerations

In addition to the individual goals you will support students with, it is important to ensure each student has some other foundations in place to support their educational journeys:

- Up-to-date Notice to Providers (be sure the school registrar has a copy of this). This can come from the placement, directly, or from the DCS Specialist.
- Adequate school supplies[5] .
- A safe and quiet space to work with you. If you are meeting at a group home, you don't want to meet at the dining table when everyone is home.
- Reliable transportation to and from school. Work with the ESSA Point of Contact at your student's District to address any transportation concerns.
- Education Rights Holder(s), in case the student has special education needs or may be in need of special education services.

Having these elements in place helps to prevent future obstacles to educational success for young people experiencing foster care. Without these pieces in place, they may experience roadblocks while pursuing their goals.

[5] Resources include: AVIVA (Tucson); Spreading Threads, School Clothes (Tucson); More Than A Bed (Tucson); Arizona Helping Hands - The Foster Alliance (Maricopa County); Clothing & School Supplies (Statewide)

Education Partner Checklist

The checklist below provides suggested activities associated with serving students as an Education Partner. Please note, however, that it's very likely that you will need to have a higher level of engagement with some youth in order to help the student be successful in accomplishing their goals.

Initial Student Meeting Steps:

- ☐ Receive communication regarding a student in need of support.
- ☐ A consent form is needed in order to be able to work one-on-one with the student to obtain the necessary signatures. If the student is 18 or older, they will need to sign a release of information to consent to working with you.
- ☐ Contact the student (or caregiver if you do not have student information) to set up an initial meeting.
- ☐ Introduce yourself, your name, pronouns, and anything else you'd like to pass on. Ask the student for their name, and pronouns, and see if they are willing to talk more about themselves, their interests, etc.

- ☐ Directly ask the student if they want to partner with you and explain what your partnership can look like.
- ☐ If the student wants to work with you, begin rapport-building with the student. Inform the student that you are a mandated reporter and what this means.
- ☐ If the student declines your support, ensure they have a way to contact you if they change their mind, and then allow them space.
- ☐ If the student wants some time to think about it, ask them if you can check in with them again in a week. If they say yes, ask them how they'd prefer you to contact them and follow up with them in that way.
- ☐ Talk about when and where the student wants to meet next and how they want to communicate with you. Also share own communication preferences — how to best and quickly get in touch[6]. Check for understanding: ask if they are comfortable with you sending them a reminder before your next meeting together.

Monitoring and Checking In[7]

- ☐ After the first or second meeting, if it feels appropriate, establish an ongoing flow of meetings that feels best for both of you (ex: one hour every other Tuesday in-person).
- ☐ Work together on identifying goals (things the student wants to work on, which can be anything from better time management, organization, getting better grades...) and work on an initial plan on how to accomplish those goals together.
- ☐ Record and celebrate milestones achieved along the way toward achieving established goals.
- ☐ Create a shared document to record and celebrate milestones.

[6] Additional Resource: Tools to Engage with Students Online
[7] Additional Resource: Increasing Student Engagement

Planning Ahead

- ☐ Regularly look ahead with students at upcoming deadlines and key dates.
- ☐ Talk about what support can look like leading up to those events and adjust meeting frequency as needed.

Closing Engagement With Youth

After the student has accomplished all relevant goals, it may be time to talk about closing engagement. Closing engagement with a student can be difficult for all parties and should be handled delicately and respectfully, and should be individualized. Some students may be ready to close out of their partnership with you quickly while others may feel they need more time. Establish a plan together for what that will look like. Be clear on expectations for future communication and support.

It may be rewarding for both of you to celebrate your achievements together at this time. This can look like many things and should be respectful of what makes the student feel most special and celebrated.

During this time, it is important to communicate with any necessary adults in the student's life and to ensure they know of your engagement ending. Be sure those adults have the resources they need to continue supporting the student and/or that they are able to re-engage with you or another point person if needed in the future. Develop an Engagement Closure checklist and make sure the student and relevant adults in their lives have a copy of this upon completing your involvement with the student.