



In Their Voices: Young People and Adults Supported by FosterEd Arizona

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
1. Introduction	4
FosterEd’s approach	5
Evaluation purpose	6
Hearing from young people in foster care and the adults in their lives	7
2. Educational Experiences During the Pandemic	8
Heightened educational needs	9
Inconsistent supports for online learning	10
Variation in interest and access to in-school learning	10
3. Importance of Adult Supporters	12
Setting and pursuing goals	13
Helping students graduate from high school and apply to college	13
Helping youth advocate for themselves	14
Education Liaison characteristics that facilitate positive outcomes for youth	14
4. Importance of Collaboration Among Adults	17
Maintaining school stability	18
Supporting smooth school transitions	19
Ensuring students with disabilities’ needs are met	19
FosterEd helps build the capacity of the larger systems that support foster youth	21
Adults gain knowledge and skills that allow them to better serve their students	21
Factors that facilitate effective collaboration	22
5. Conclusion and Recommendations	24
Recommendations	25
Appendix: Methodology	27



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FosterEd Arizona is a public-private partnership with a **vision that young people in foster care be positively engaged in school and learning, empowered to take charge of their educational futures, and supported by meaningful relationships with caring adults** who will consistently and effectively support young people's educational trajectories once they have exited care. The program works to create a future where students in foster care graduate from high school with a wide array of possibilities for their future by ensuring that they have (1) effective and committed education champions, (2) well-coordinated Education Teams, and (3) student-centered education engagement and plans.

The Education Team, coordinated by a FosterEd Education Liaison, supports educational needs and goals through student-centered engagement. FosterEd recognizes that needs are individualized and all youth may not require the same level of time investment. For high-school-age youth with complex educational needs, Education Liaisons provide "intensive" services throughout high school and into college to ensure those young people are on a pathway toward high school graduation and well positioned to pursue their post-high school goals. Youth with needs that can be addressed in a short period are served by Education Liaisons "responsively" for a period of 1 to 6 months. FosterEd's "universal tier" of service aims to support successful implementation of system-level policies and practices ensuring youth access academic and social-emotional interventions intended for all students.

About the evaluation

Since 2013, FosterEd has partnered with RTI International to conduct evaluations on the effectiveness of the model. Past evaluations have provided encouraging academic and social-emotional outcomes for youth participants. **But what was not clear from these evaluations was how the model worked. How did FosterEd remove the systemic barriers to accessing equitable educational experiences to produce these encouraging outcomes? How did they support youth?** This current evaluation aimed to answer these questions from the perspectives of the young people involved in the program and the Education Team members who serve as important adults in students' lives. Hearing directly from youth and team members as they navigated the educational challenges and disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic was also critical. Between November 2020 and January 2021, RTI interviewed 29 FosterEd Arizona stakeholders across the three counties served by FosterEd, including 10 youth in foster care who were supported by FosterEd, 5 Education Liaisons, and 14 adult Education Team members.

Findings

Based on interviews with 29 FosterEd stakeholders RTI found the following:

Heightened educational needs during the pandemic.

- Similar to students across the country, youth in foster care experienced heightened educational needs during the pandemic because of **disrupted structures, challenges with online learning, and increased stress levels.**
- Students had **inconsistent supports for online learning.** Some group home settings were challenging for remote learning, while others established helpful structures and routines for their young people.
- Students **varied in their interest and access to in-school learning.** Some students wanted to return to in-school learning, others preferred to stay with online learning, and still others changed their minds over time.

FosterEd Education Liaisons are important adult supporters for youth in foster care.

- Education Liaisons **helped students set and pursue their educational goals, including graduating from high school and starting college.** Students reported that their Education Liaisons kept them on track and helped them manage application processes for jobs or college. More than that, they acted as encouragers, keeping students motivated as they moved through the steps towards their goal.
- Education Liaisons **built students' capacity to advocate for themselves,** such as in communicating with teachers. Other adults working with FosterEd noted that Education Liaisons work with students in ways that build students' capacity and confidence.
- Education Liaisons were able to build **strong rapport** with youth, were **accessible** and **dependable,** were **extremely knowledgeable** about students' educational rights and

special education laws, were **proactive** and took creative approaches to meeting student needs, and were **empathic** and **passionate** advocates for youth in foster care.

- **Adult Education Team members provided equally critical supports** to help students manage the pandemic by facilitating their online learning experiences. However, some students mentioned areas that team members could improve, such as increasing time spent with students to support areas of struggle.

FosterEd enables important collaboration among adults.

- FosterEd provided **critical linkages between and within child welfare and education systems so that students receive needed services**. Collaboration with school and district staff, Department of Child Safety (DCS) specialists, and caregivers resulted in greater school stability, smoother school transitions, and more consistent and effective educational supports for students with disabilities.
- **Impact of adult collaboration on youth in foster care were not limited to students served directly by FosterEd**. FosterEd served as valuable “thought partners” to adults in the child welfare and education systems.
- **Adults partnering with FosterEd gained knowledge and skills that enabled them to better serve youth**. Because Education Liaisons act as intermediaries between DCS and school systems, they filled in gaps in knowledge of systems, policies and processes so that staff and caregivers were better able to serve youth. For example, Education Liaisons helped school staff understand educational rights and laws and helped DCS staff understand special education law and processes.
- Effective collaboration between FosterEd and adult Education Team members resulted from the **ability of Education Liaisons to build trusting relationships with adults and use effective communication practices**.



1. Introduction

FosterEd Arizona is a public-private partnership with **a vision that young people in foster care be positively engaged in school and learning, empowered to take charge of their educational futures, and supported by meaningful relationships with caring adults who will consistently and effectively support young people's educational trajectories once they have exited care.** The program works to create a future where students in foster care graduate from high school with a wide array of possibilities for their future. FosterEd Arizona began in 2014 as a pilot program in Pima County. In 2015 FosterEd partnered with WestEd, a research organization, to produce *Arizona's Invisible Achievement Gap*.¹ The report documented, for the first time, systemic factors that prevent



KEY POINT

Past evaluations of FosterEd revealed encouraging academic and social-emotional results for youth. Those evaluations validated the FosterEd model but were not able explain how those supports mattered. This report features the voices of the youth and adults involved with FosterEd to explore how the program brings about positive outcomes.

¹ Barrat, V. X., Berliner, B., & Felida, N. J. (2015). Arizona's invisible achievement gap: Education outcomes of students in foster care in the state's public schools. WestEd.
https://www.azfoundation.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/AZ_Invisible_Achievement_Gap_FINAL.pdf

Arizona's students in foster care from receiving an equitable education. Students experienced more disruptions to their school lives, as evidenced by school moves, than the general population of Arizona students, and more than other underserved students such as low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities. They were more likely to attend low-performing schools and less likely to graduate.

Promising results from the Pima County pilot and these stark data on educational experiences of youth in foster care spurred the passage of legislation that led to statewide implementation of the FosterEd approach. In summer 2017, FosterEd expanded services from Pima County into Maricopa County, and in summer 2018 it began services in Yavapai County.

FosterEd's approach

FosterEd works to ensure that students in foster care have (1) effective and committed education champions, (2) well-coordinated Education Teams, and (3) student-centered education engagement and plans. **The Education Team, coordinated by a FosterEd Education Liaison, supports educational needs and goals through student-centered engagement.** FosterEd recognizes that needs are individualized and all youth may not require the same involvement. Education Liaisons provide three tiers of support: intensive, responsive, and universal. For high-school-age youth with complex educational needs, Education Liaisons provide intensive services throughout high school and into college to ensure those young people are on a pathway toward high school graduation and well positioned to pursue their post-high school goals.

In the intensive tier, Education Liaisons work directly with the youth and the adults in their lives to help these youth develop and achieve educational goals. Youth with needs that can be addressed in a short period are served by Education Liaisons responsively for a period of 1 to 6 months. Whereas the intensive Education Liaisons focus on supporting high school youth, responsive Education Liaisons serve youth in kindergarten through grade 12, often by collaborating with the adults in their lives rather than directly interacting with the students.

FosterEd's universal tier of service aims to support successful implementation of system-level policies and practices ensuring youth access academic and social-emotional interventions intended for all students. This is accomplished by providing training to education and child welfare agency partners, being available to consult with agency partners about specific issues for students in foster care without formally embarking on a responsive or intensive case plan, and developing and disseminating a recently released [Toolkit](#) of resources and recommended practices for supporting the education of youth in foster care.²

² National Center for Youth Law. (2020). Arizona foster care education toolkit. <http://foster-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FosterEd-ToolkitDesign-Web.pdf>

Evaluation purpose

FosterEd Arizona contracted with RTI International, a nonprofit research organization, to conduct an independent evaluation of the Pima County pilot and subsequently asked RTI to continue as an evaluation partner during the statewide expansion. In 2019 and 2020, RTI released statewide evaluation reports which examined the impact of FosterEd on students' social-emotional and academic outcomes.³ An analysis of survey data revealed that students served by FosterEd increased on two dimensions of social-emotional well-being: self-efficacy (an individual's belief in their ability to produce certain outcomes through their behavior and actions)⁴ and future orientation (the ability to set future goals and plans and a positive outlook on one's future).⁵ Analysis of education records found that students supported by FosterEd spent more time in school (as measured by fewer unenrolled and absent days) compared with a comparison group of youth in foster care who were not supported by FosterEd. FosterEd students also increased in English achievement relative to the comparison group as measured by AzMERIT, the Arizona state assessment.

These encouraging academic and social-emotional results validated the FosterEd model.

But what was not clear from these evaluations was *how* the model worked. How did FosterEd remove the systemic barriers to access equitable education? How did it support youth? To understand the answers to these questions, RTI and FosterEd wanted to hear directly from young people involved in the program, and from the adults in their lives, about their experiences with FosterEd. While considering this next focus for the evaluation, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, disrupting education systems across the county. The partners agreed that although some of the ways FosterEd worked with young people and the adults in their lives were shifting (e.g., communication moving to Zoom rather than in person), hearing from these young people and adults was as critical as ever. For this evaluation, RTI and FosterEd Arizona agreed to explore the following guiding questions:

- Guiding Question 1: Which adults did youth find helpful in the process to achieve their educational goals, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic? To what extent were FosterEd Education Liaisons a helpful support? In what ways were they supportive?
- Guiding Question 2: How do FosterEd Education Liaisons interact with other adults in the lives of youth in foster care? To what extent do those adults report those interactions as helping them better support youth in foster care?

³ Laird, J., & Warkentien, S. (2019). FosterEd Arizona: Preliminary evaluation final report. RTI International. <http://foster-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FosterEd-AZ-Prelim-Evaluation-Report.pdf>; Laird, J., & Warkentien, S. (2020). FosterEd Arizona: Year 2 evaluation of statewide expansions. RTI International. report. RTI International. <http://foster-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FosterEd-AZ-Year-2-Evaluation-of-Statewide-Expansion-Final-Report.pdf>

⁴ Bandura, A. (1977). *Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change*. Psychological review, 84(2), 191.

⁵ Johnson, S. R. L., Blum, R. W., & Cheng, T. L. (2014). *Future orientation: A construct with implications for adolescent health and wellbeing*. International Journal of Adolescent Medicine And Health, 26(4), 459–468.

Hearing from young people in foster care and the adults in their lives

Between November 2020 and January 2021, **RTI interviewed 29 FosterEd Arizona stakeholders across the three counties served by FosterEd**: 10 young people in foster care and supported by FosterEd, 5 Education Liaisons, and 14 other adults in the lives of these young people (i.e., adult Education Team members). The young people were in high school or had recently graduated (one was in grade 9, three in grade 11, three in grade 12, and three graduates). The adult Education Team members included parents and caregivers (2), Department of Child Safety (DCS) Specialists (i.e., social workers) (5), district or school staff (3),⁶ and other professionals such as court personnel and nonprofit service providers (2). Details about the methodology of planning for and conducting the interviews are included in the Appendix.

This report presents themes identified across the interviews, organized into the following sections:

- Section 2: Pandemic educational experiences of youth in foster care
- Section 3: Supports young people receive from Education Team members
- Section 4: How FosterEd supports adults to support youth in foster care
- Section 5: Recommendations for improving and expanding FosterEd supports

⁶ One district staff person and two school staff people were interviewed. To maintain the anonymity of the one district respondent, all quotes or sentiments from this group are attributed to “school staff” respondents.



2. Educational Experiences During the Pandemic

FosterEd aims to develop the resilience of youth in foster care to adapt to various challenges they face in their personal and educational spheres. But the pandemic brought on unexpected challenges in the education system that impacted all students, including youth in foster care. To honor students' current reality, it was important to learn about their educational experiences during the pandemic. Doing so would allow for better understanding of the supports provided (or not provided) to youth during this challenging period.



Key Findings

Youth in foster care experienced heightened educational needs during the pandemic because of disrupted structures, challenges with online learning, and increased stress levels.

Group home settings for remote learning can be challenging. Some established helpful structures and routines for their young people.

Education Liaisons played a critical role ensuring that school staff knew the unique challenges faced by and the educational rights of youth in foster care.

Heightened educational needs

Reports from across the county reveal many students are struggling with heightened educational needs as the pandemic has disrupted their school routines and structures.⁷ The young people and adults associated with FosterEd also described upturned educational lives as the pandemic hit, resulting in some students withdrawing from postsecondary education and some high school students failing courses at alarming rates as their attendance in online classes faltered. One Education Liaison explained that students are confused by the changing school structures, such as schools moving from a two-semester school year to four-term school year. Under the new structure, students take fewer courses at a time but with longer class periods. The Education Liaison explained, “[Classes] are all 90 minutes each, whereas before, in-person classes were only 45 minutes. A lot of students are struggling with having to sit for 90 minutes online, and with condensed schedules. Full semesters now happen in shorter periods.”

“Attendance is the number one thing that I engage with students on a daily basis. A lot my students are just not attending online class. Sometimes for days and days on end.”

– FosterEd Education Liaison

Many students and adults described **challenges with online learning, including students feeling overwhelmed with many assignments**. Activities that previously occurred in the context of an in-person classroom with dedicated class time became assignments posted onto online platforms. For example, one student described having to log workouts for a physical education (PE) class on an online portal, when before the pandemic the PE teacher would simply observe the student doing the PE activity in the school yard. Another student described a school-issued laptop not working. Adults and students explained that in-person schooling pre-pandemic provided students with more structure and daily accountability as well as connections with teachers and peers.

“They keep overwhelming me with a lot of online work, even for the electives... I'm getting frustrated... When I was in school, I had a chance to do the work in class and finish it there.”

– Student

Stress mounted as youth in foster care missed friends and typical teenage life experiences and felt isolated. One student described contracting COVID-19 and falling behind on schoolwork as they struggled to breathe and needed to sleep throughout the day.

⁷ Taylor, K. (2021, January 21). *13,000 school districts, 13,000 approaches to teaching during Covid*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/us/schools-coronavirus.html?referringSource=articleShare>; Goodnough, A. (2021, January 21). *With students missing online classes, teachers are going to students*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/us/coronavirus-schools-washington-dc.html>

Inconsistent supports for online learning

As schooling moved into the home, young people, Education Liaisons, and school staff described varying conditions for that transition. Education Liaisons acknowledged that the **pandemic required caregivers to provide unprecedented educational supports**. One Education Liaison explained that a group home where some of the students live has done an “amazing” job of creating structures, schedules, and individualized spaces for online schooling for the young residents. Another group home has not created routines or adequate spaces to support young people with online schooling. Some of the young residents attend a charter school that relies entirely on asynchronous work (i.e., students do not log on for class at a certain time, they submit their work online at any time). Other young residents in the home attend a district school with synchronous online class time. The students attending the charter school stay up late and sleep until late morning, creating friction for the district students who are expected to keep to a more traditional school-day schedule. According to the Education Liaison, the students in that group home are struggling a lot.



The group home setting has been a huge challenge. We have one student who was doing very well in a typical learning environment, but remote learning just doesn't work for kids who are easily distracted when they don't physically have a nice, quiet environment to do their schoolwork. At the high school level, a lot of them are almost embarrassed to sit on the computer when they might have other kids in a group home that are doing completely different activities.”

– School Staff

A student living in a shelter described staff as not sufficiently respectful of the time needed to attend virtual school. The staff would get upset if the student was not taking care of shelter responsibilities. The student noted having online school most of the day and not being able to do some of the things the staff wanted done at certain times because of class. The student acknowledged being frustrated, and staff told them they were being disrespectful.

One Education Liaison acknowledged the strain of the pandemic on everyone: “The placement will engage [with us] and be supportive... [but] we're finding placements are really burnt out, students are really burnt out, teachers are really burnt out.”

Variation in interest and access to in-school learning

Some students wanted to return to in-school learning, others preferred to stay with online learning, and still others changed their minds over time. An executive order signed by Arizona Governor Doug Ducey helped make in-school learning a possibility. The executive order specified that certain categories of students, including youth in foster care, had the right to come to school campuses during the pandemic.

One Education Liaison described a situation in which a student returned to in-school learning. However, the student was told by a school staff member that because of their disruptive behavior, they were no longer welcome at the school. The Education Liaison contacted the principal to discuss the situation and together they strategized how to provide the student with appropriate supports and to inform the school staff member about the unique needs and specific educational rights of youth in foster care. The Education Liaison noted understanding that school staff may not be aware of all the nuances of educational rights for students in foster care and the complexities of some of their situations. **This Educational Liaison and some colleagues have seen their role as helping to inform adults about these students' rights and then partnering with the adults to ensure those rights are honored.** They have approached these conversations by saying, "How can we think creatively about this?" Framing it this way has helped to bring all the partners to the table to work collaboratively and effectively.



3. Importance of Adult Supporters

Youth in foster care experienced challenges with their educational experiences that were similar to challenges faced by many students across the country but that were also unique to their circumstance. In what ways, if any, had adults (caregivers, teachers, DCS Specialists, and FosterEd Education Liaisons) helped them with their schooling during the pandemic? This section explores whether there were adults who were not particularly helpful to youth, and investigates whether students wished adults had provided additional supports. It summarizes students' thoughts and



KEY FINDINGS

Young people described how Education Liaisons have helped them set and pursue goals, including graduating from high school and starting college, and helped them advocate for themselves.

Interviewees noted that Education Liaisons build strong rapport with youth, are accessible and stay on top of students' issues, are extremely knowledgeable about students' educational rights and special education laws, are proactive and take creative approaches to meeting students' needs, and are empathic and passionate advocates for youth in foster care.

incorporates observations that adults shared about how FosterEd works with young people. It focuses on the behavior and impact of the Education Liaisons on the youth being served.

Setting and pursuing goals

Many of the students noted that what they found helpful about FosterEd is that the Education Liaison helps them pursue their goals. For example, a few students mentioned telling their Education Liaison they wanted to get a job, and the Education Liaison then **helped the students look for and apply for jobs**. Another student described talking with an Education Liaison about places where the student wants to travel.

“ Having [Education Liaison] there to help me with my goals makes it a lot easier for me to reach them.”

– Student

Researching those together online motivated the student to do well in school. One student explained that an Education Liaison helped achieve a goal of better advocating for themselves with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Another explained that an Education Liaison helps them focus on a long-term goal of going to college, and when they start to get sidetracked, the Education Liaison will give a “gentle reminder” of what must be done to reach that goal. A court representative echoed the important role that Education Liaisons play in helping students set and pursue goals, including being encouragers and helping them understand the steps that are needed to achieve their long-term goals and expressing confidence that they can reach their goals.

Helping students graduate from high school and apply to college

Graduating high school and being prepared to pursue their postsecondary interests is an education goal for all FosterEd students, and most of them described their Education Liaisons as playing critical roles in supporting them in achieving these goals. This involved helping students transfer credits from previous schools and, in one case, helping a student enroll in an online school that allowed for completing credits faster and therefore graduating on time, which was important to that student. **Education Liaisons also helped students stay**

“ We were at the end of the high school year and [my Education Liaison] helped me out in the last bit. I don't know what I would do without that support.”

– Student

motivated as the pandemic hit during the spring of their senior year. A caregiver explained that their two foster youth wanted to drop out of high school, but the Education Liaison was a constant presence, encouraging the students to keep pushing through and telling them: “you got this.” One of the students graduated last spring and the other is now half-way through senior year.

Students reported that FosterEd helped them apply for and start college. The process felt overwhelming for many students. Having Education Liaisons walk them through the process, including working together to complete applications and financial aid forms, was very helpful to students. One professional described collaborating with an Education Liaison at the start of the

pandemic to assist students who were in the midst of applying to colleges. The Education Liaison helped the students complete scholarship forms and arrange for letters of reference, while the professional focused on helping students take virtual assessments for course placements. It was a chaotic time, but they were focused on not letting the pandemic derail these students from starting college.

One of those students started college but then withdrew during the first semester after struggling because it was entirely virtual. They plan to talk with the Education Liaison about when to re-enroll, and re-apply for grants “so we can get me on track.”

Helping youth advocate for themselves

FosterEd supports youth in foster care by helping them learn how to advocate for themselves. One student described an Education Liaison helping them to prepare for team meetings by first meeting together to discuss the students’ goals and desired supports, then helping them communicate those to the other adults on the team. A few students mentioned how their Education Liaisons **helped them communicate with their teachers**. The students mentioned feeling uncomfortable asking for help when they were failing a class or not knowing how to get in touch with their teachers after they had been absent from virtual learning. The Education Liaisons helped them navigate their discomfort and other barriers to get the help they needed. One professional observed that Education Liaisons assist students in ways that build their own capacity and confidence.






“ [The Education Liaison] does not just do everything for [students] but comes alongside them, gives them security while they handle tasks, because [the Education Liaison] knows they need to learn how to advocate for their own lives.


– Professional

Education Liaison characteristics that facilitate positive outcomes for youth

Why are Education Liaisons effective in their role? Youth and adult Education Team members named numerous positive characteristics that make them effective (Table 1). They noted that Education Liaisons are accessible and stay on top of students’ issues, are extremely knowledgeable about students’ educational rights and special education laws, are proactive and take creative approaches to meeting student needs, and are empathic and passionate advocates for youth in foster care.

Table 1. Characteristics of Education Liaisons that facilitate positive youth outcomes

Characteristic	Representative quote
<p>Builds rapport with young people</p> 	<p>Student: "[The Education Liaison] wouldn't just talk about school but ask me about how I was doing at [the group home]. She would talk about school but would also talk about stuff in my own life."</p> <p>School staff: "[The Education Liaison] develops good rapport with the kids... FosterEd gives them another adult in the school community to count on."</p> <p>Caregiver: "In talking with my daughter, [the Education Liaison] will say, 'I get this is hard,' and 'I'm on your side.'"</p>
<p>Accessible and dependable</p> 	<p>Student: "[My Education Liaison] is the type of person I can go to. She's my go to person."</p> <p>School staff: "I can call [the Education Liaison] on [their] cell phone at any given time and [they] will address the situation or look into the situation for me or with me. That's been great. I can always count on [them] if I bring up, 'hey, I noticed something about this kid, could you look into that?' [They] always follow through."</p> <p>Caregiver: "With the tutor I had to work with DCS on approvals ... and they're busy and it's hard for them to stay on it. [The Education Liaison] stayed on it. Tagging everybody like probably daily. Have you done this yet? ... [They're] the one that stays on it ... goes over and beyond and does everything possible."</p>
<p>Acts as a consistent and stable presence</p> 	<p>Caregiver: "[The young person has] been involved in FosterEd for several years before [they] even came to live with me, and [they] had pretty high turnover in placements... It was really helpful for [them] to have that consistency because [the Education Liaison] been with [them] the whole time to help [them] through [their] changes or placement and helping [their] academics maintain."</p>
<p>Knowledgeable</p> 	<p>DCS Specialist: "[Education Liaisons are] very knowledgeable about special ed issues that as a case manager, you don't know the laws, you don't know the key words or phrases to tell the school or to get an IEP meeting going."</p>
<p>Proactive and creative</p> 	<p>DCS Specialist: "They're really proactive... When I send a referral ... [the Education Liaison] is on it, and [they're] immediate... contacts me, wants to know exactly what's going on. And then comes up with a plan for next steps and makes those outreach efforts ... I think the fact that they're so proactive and on top of it is huge."</p> <p>DCS Specialist: "[The Education Liaison] will think outside the box and not only look at what the IEP may have in place but also think of other supports that could be added to the IEP at the next IEP meeting."</p>

Characteristic	Representative quote
<p data-bbox="203 258 456 321">Empathic and passionate advocate</p> 	<p data-bbox="537 258 1398 390">School staff: "I think that FosterEd hired the right people to do this work. I think that that empathy and compassion and passion for [students in foster care] definitely comes through and shines through their work."</p> <p data-bbox="537 407 1409 640">Professional: "It's just more convenient for the caregiver to take them to the school that is closest in their neighborhood. And they're not really thinking about the long-term impacts changes of schools has on kids' overall development and well-being. And I feel like the FosterEd people ... they don't have the incentive to do what's convenient, or what's cheaper... they're able to literally be a voice for children's rights when it comes to their education."</p>



4. Importance of Collaboration Among Adults

FosterEd Arizona's framework for supporting youth involves an Education Team of engaged adults, including parents, other caregivers, teachers, representatives from the child welfare system, and behavioral health providers. Other adults in the youths' lives (e.g., coaches or engaged relatives) may also be team members. The Education Team, coordinated by an Education Liaison, supports educational needs and goals through student-centered engagement.

This section describes how Education Liaisons work with adult Education Team members. They provide critical linkages between and within child welfare and education



Key Findings

FosterEd supports collaboration among adults connected to youth in foster care. This collaboration results in greater school stability, smoother school transitions, and more consistent and effective educational supports for students with disabilities.

Adults partnering with FosterEd gain knowledge and skills that enable them to better serve students.

Impacts are not limited to students served directly by FosterEd. Education Liaisons are valuable "thought partners" to adults in the child welfare and education systems.

FosterEd Education Liaisons are effective collaborators with adult Education Team members because they build trusting relationships and communicate effectively.

systems so that students receive the services they need. Specifically, Education Liaisons collaborate with team members to support school stability and transitions and identify and implement supports for students with disabilities. This section also describes how interactions with the Education Liaisons improved other adult Education Team members' ability to support students, specifically in the improvement of knowledge and skills. We highlight the qualities and characteristics of Education Liaisons' working styles that adult team members find beneficial and effective for serving students.

Maintaining school stability

Education Liaisons, students, and adult team members described various ways Education Liaisons helped maintain students' school stability. Positive relationships with adults and peers support healthy development among young people. Being able to maintain those relationships can be particularly important for youth in foster care who experience disruption in their home lives. Two federal laws, the 2008 federal Fostering Connections to Success Act and the 2015 federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), granted youth in foster care rights to stay in their school of origin if it is in their best interest.

Adult team members and students reported that FosterEd holds schools accountable for ensuring students' school stability rights are met. For example, one student explained being told they could not go back to their school because their living placement was outside of the school boundaries. However, the Education Liaison informed the student that they could still attend the school even if they were out of the boundaries. Learning this piece of information helped ease the mind of the student. In another situation, the Education Liaison solved a student's transportation issue so that the student could remain at their school of origin.

Education Liaisons collaborated with adult team members to ensure students' school stability rights were being honored. For example, after an Education Liaison and DCS staff collaborated to dispute a decision to move a student from their school of origin, they are working together to develop a dispute resolution process so that future decisions that negatively impact students can be resolved. Another Education Liaison notified a student's lawyer about a school transfer decision, and as a result the lawyer convinced the judge to issue a court order for the student to remain in their current school.



That kind of made me feel like, wow, I still have a chance to go there. So, I felt like that was really helpful and that kind of motivated me a lot."

– Student, upon hearing from an Education Liaison that they could stay in their current school even though they were changing placements

Supporting smooth school transitions

In some circumstances, moving students from one school to another school would benefit the student and better meet their needs. The current school may lack sufficient supports and appropriate structures for a particular student. In those situations, Education Liaisons spearheaded that process and **collaborated with team members to ensure students' needs were met before and after the transition happens**. A school staff member explained that they were able to more effectively support a new student who transferred to their school because the Education Liaison had worked with the student for some time and could describe the student's challenges and strengths.

A DCS Specialist described how an Education Liaison facilitated a transition to a school that could better meet a student's behavioral needs. The DCS Specialist said, "There were so many steps prior to a [special day school] accepting a youth. [The Education Liaison] helped me with the application process and ensured that the youth was always receiving the most appropriate and supportive education."

Another DCS Specialist mentioned that Education Liaisons facilitate the transfer of transcripts and other school records when students move schools. In their experience, without the support of FosterEd, school records transfers can take months, but Education Liaisons can expedite the time frame considerably.

Ensuring students with disabilities' needs are met

Studies show that students experiencing foster care are 2.5 to 3.5 times more likely to receive special education services than students who are not in foster care.⁸ A prior FosterEd Arizona evaluation report documented that almost half (45%) the students supported by the program had either an IEP or 504 plan, and an additional 1% were being evaluated for special education services.⁹ Education Liaisons support youth with special education needs by advocating that students be assessed if they are not designated as having a disability and ensuring schools provide accommodations and services described in students' IEPs or 504 plans once they have been assessed and found eligible. For example, one caregiver noted that an Education Liaison helped establish a student's 504 plan so that the student was provided with needed visual aids in class.



If we didn't have that professional collaboration and that working relationship, I wouldn't know as much about the student to help them... It was like being on the same team... For this student, I really had to have the full picture. If [the Education Liaison] was not involved, and I was just going off the prior IEP, I would have no clue."

– School staff

⁸ National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018). National factsheet on the educational outcomes of children in foster care. <https://fosteringchamps/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/NationalEducationDataSheet2018-2.pdf>

⁹ Laird, J., & Warkentien, S. (2020). FosterEd Arizona: Year 2 evaluation of statewide expansions. RTI International. <http://foster-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FosterEd-AZ-Year-2-Evaluation-of-Statewide-Expansion-Final-Report.pdf>

To ensure students' needs are met, Education Liaisons collaborated with adult team members such as caregivers, DCS Specialists, and school staff. According to the adult team members, this collaboration was **especially helpful to ensure continuation of students' IEPs when students transfer schools since the receiving school may not know that the IEP exists.**

For example, as reported by a DCS staff member, an Education Liaison shared in-depth knowledge of a newly transferred student to school staff which clarified the student's IEP and accommodations when that information was not yet officially transferred. Another Education Liaison assisted a school staff member with transferring a student's IEP information to the special education contact at the new school.

Adult team members also found Education Liaisons' support with the coordination of the IEP process helpful, especially because Education Liaisons could follow through on next steps that the team members were unable to coordinate. This included meeting one-on-one with a student's guardian to get the necessary paperwork or gathering the needed signatures. One caregiver described in detail how an Education Liaison continually followed up during the testing process.

Education Liaisons typically attend IEP meetings of students receiving intensive services. Their presence in IEP meetings was helpful to caregivers because Education Liaisons served as advocates for students that caregivers could trust. A caregiver mentioned that an Education Liaison would meet with them after the meeting to review decisions and decide next steps.

Education Liaisons' depth of knowledge of special education, advocacy, and collaboration provides continuity and support for students with disabilities as well as their caregivers and other service providers.



The biggest thing is that [the Education Liaison] attended [IEP] meetings. And [the Education Liaison] was really good backup support for me, being there and talking with the school."

– Caregiver

One adult team member shared some overall concerns not about the FosterEd model itself, but about the unintended consequences of assessing so many students in foster care for special education services. They worried that there is not enough evidence to demonstrate that this identification and the associated services are always beneficial for these students. "We already know," they explained, "that there's a pipeline from being in a foster home going into the prison setting, [and] we know... there's a pipeline from special education going into the prison setting. And so now we're combining the two." However, a FosterEd staff member also reported the reverse could be true— without appropriate services youth may more easily become justice involved. The adult team member did not recommend that FosterEd discontinue supporting students to meet their needs, but highlighted the complexity of relationships between youth in special education and youth in foster care's disproportionate involvement in the juvenile justice system.

FosterEd helps build the capacity of the larger systems that support foster youth

DCS Specialists, school and district staff, and other professionals described the value FosterEd provides beyond the students directly served by the program. A court representative explained that because FosterEd provides strong educational support for some of their youth, they can provide more attention and support to other youth. A DCS Specialist explained the key role that FosterEd plays in meetings that involve district representatives, an educational coordinator from juvenile court, state education specialists, and other stakeholders. The group identifies organizational barriers that keep these professionals from serving youth in foster care as best they can and troubleshoots how to remove the barriers.



I wouldn't be able to successfully assist all the youth that need education assistance. When I first came on before FosterEd was in the picture, I was assisting almost 500 kids a year just on my own. And I was getting extremely overwhelmed... and with them in the picture, they've not only reduced that number so where I can concentrate and focus on the youth that I'm working with, but they've also obviously assisted a lot of those kids and made them successful... It's just amazing. I wouldn't be able to do what I do without them."

– Court representative

School and district staff and DCS Specialists expressed appreciation that **Education Liaisons can provide advice about young people who are not currently served through FosterEd**. A district staff member explained that FosterEd has offered to consult and be a thought partner even in circumstances when FosterEd is not serving the student directly. A DCS Specialist mentioned reaching out to an Education Liaison to ask quick questions about which form to fill out to request an education records transfer and what to do if the educational rights holders are unavailable to provide necessary consent. Education Liaisons provide quick consultations in situations like these as well as help adults think through how to improve systems and practices to better support all youth in foster care.



FosterEd has agreed to be a thought partner with other issues, including BID [Best Interest Determinations]... That's been just incredibly helpful. I can't emphasize that enough."





– School staff

Adults gain knowledge and skills that allow them to better serve their students

Education Liaisons not only collaborate with adult team members to serve students, but they also **build the capacity of adults to better meet students' needs**. Because Education Liaisons act as intermediaries between DCS and schools and districts, they fill in staff's gaps in knowledge of systems policies and processes so that staff members and caregivers are better able to serve youth.

Education Liaisons built the capacity of adults in four key areas: understanding of educational rights and law, understanding of special education law and processes, understanding of processes to support youth, and effective communication with schools and districts (Table 2).

Table 2. Knowledge and skills gained by adult Education Team members

Knowledge or skill	Representative quotes
Understanding of educational rights and law for youth in foster care 	School staff: “[The Education Liaison] has helped me learn a lot about the way that the [social service system] system works... The laws are always changing and every student’s situation is different as well. So, I definitely lean on [the Education Liaison] for the [educational] rights that the students have, what needs to happen as far as their situations.”
Understanding of special education law and processes for youth in foster care 	DCS Specialist: “I’ve become more familiar with the IEP process. It is so confusing. I feel like I at least know the steps, such as making a request in writing to a school if I want a child evaluated for an IEP. I’ve learned that’s really key.”
Understanding of processes to support youth in foster care 	School staff: “Honestly, if I didn't have [the Education Liaison] to explain a lot of these things to me and all the different organizations, I would have never received that background. [The Education Liaison] basically educated me on kind of what the world looks like outside of high school for foster youth.”
Effective communication with schools and districts 	Professional: “I’ve learned from FosterEd... exactly who to speak to.... how a specific school district operates in regard to their processes. So some schools, let’s say [District 1], you have to reach out to the individual school to request specific information or records. Whereas with [District 2] you reached out to one specific location which is their center where they hold all the records. And you know... my assumption was just call the specific school, and then when I reached out to FosterEd they said, ‘No, this is where you go, and this person is the person that you need to speak to for x, y, and z.’”

Factors that facilitate effective collaboration

How are FosterEd Education Liaisons able to collaborate effectively with adult team members to serve students? Adult team members named two factors: **trusting relationships** and **effective communication**. Team members reported trusting relationships with Education Liaisons who facilitated collaborative partnerships. For example, one school staff member noted how Education Liaisons were embedded in the school community such that school staff trusted Education Liaisons

with information about students. DCS staff noted the honesty and transparency between Education Liaisons and DCS staff that facilitated the ability to work productively on behalf of students. Education Liaisons noted the importance of cultivating partnerships with different stakeholders supporting students.

In addition to building trusting relationships, team members appreciated Education Liaisons' effective communication. Education Liaisons communicated regularly either through phone, email, or text and were extremely responsive to caregivers, DCS Specialists, and school staff alike. For one DCS Specialist, quickness of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic decreased due to not sharing a workspace but did not diminish effectiveness of collaboration. Team members noted that this responsiveness ensured that information about students did not fall through the cracks. When needed, Education Liaisons met with team members in person to communicate important information. Team members also noted that Education Liaisons were extremely accessible whenever information was needed. Only one team member, a caregiver, noted that communication with an Education Liaison could improve.



5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Past evaluations of FosterEd revealed encouraging academic and social-emotional results for youth. Those evaluations validated the FosterEd model but were not able explain *how* those supports mattered. In this evaluation, RTI heard directly from the people involved with FosterEd to explore how FosterEd supports young people. As a result, a clearer picture appeared of how the relationships that students form with Education Liaisons become a protective factor. Education Liaisons are advocates for youth to get the resources and supports they need (e.g., special education accommodations) and help youth through various processes, such as transitioning between different schools or moving from high school to college. Education Liaisons consistently follow through, not only with youth but also with adult Education Team members.



KEY POINT

Young people and adults supported by FosterEd described Education Liaisons as critical supporters of youth in foster care and the adults in their lives.

FosterEd helps to fill knowledge and service gaps between child welfare and education systems.

The interviewees recommended continuing to implement the FosterEd program as it is currently designed. They recommended expanding it to serve more young people and increasing awareness of the program.

Even with supports from FosterEd and their team, young people still face challenges and are struggling, particularly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some youth enrolled in high school and postsecondary institutions stopped attending classes, and other youth experienced isolation or other health challenges. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that FosterEd provides support not only for youth but also for various adults who support youth in foster care.

Education Liaisons have deep knowledge of both the child welfare and education systems and, by working directly with students and the adults in their lives, develop a deep understanding of the young people they support. With this intersecting knowledge and understanding, Education Liaisons translate complex laws and navigate complex situations in ways that ensure better coordination between and within the various systems that support youth.

Recommendations

We asked young people and adult team members for recommendations to strengthen the FosterEd program and the ways Education Liaisons support young people. Three themes emerged.

Continue to implement the FosterEd model as designed

Most adult team members and youth recommended that FosterEd continue to provide the same services to youth in Arizona and had no suggestions on how Education Liaisons could improve. When youth in foster care were asked whether the FosterEd model or Education Liaisons could improve or change how they work, youth gave no recommendations. One student said, “[The Education Liaison] is really engaging and has always helped me.” Another student said, “[The Education Liaison] has only been helpful to me, like, I have never been frustrated.”

Hire more Education Liaisons to expand FosterEd services

Many adult team members recommended that FosterEd should expand and provide more services to youth because of its effectiveness. One DCS Specialist recommended it should expand to all counties in Arizona. Another team member said, “The only way I could say improve is if [FosterEd] were able to have more Education Liaisons. I mean, honestly, if there were more FosterEd Liaisons... that's the only improvement. Other than that... [Education Liaisons are] amazing.” Both Education Liaisons and team members noted Education Liaisons are often at capacity and that students with varying needs are on waitlists to receive services in some counties.

“ I think that what they're doing is good, reaching students' goals. That's good because a lot of kids probably wouldn't know where to go, or they just need that little patience.”

– Student

Increase awareness and visibility of FosterEd

To take better advantage of FosterEd services, a few adult team members recommended increasing awareness of the roles that FosterEd can play to support youth in foster care, especially at the school level. For example, one school staff member working with an Education Liaison to complete a special education evaluation mentioned that they were not clear on what FosterEd was and what services could and could not be provided, despite collaborating on behalf of a student. Another school staff member mentioned that knowledge of the FosterEd program was limited to the “administrative bubble” at the school. A DCS Specialist recommended that school and DCS staff understand the “middleman” role the Education Liaison can play to support coordination between the two entities.

A decrease in awareness of FosterEd services due to the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned by Education Liaisons, as evidenced by the reduced number of referrals in some counties from school staff and DCS Specialists. Because of remote working, Education Liaisons were no longer on site to collaborate with team members and raise awareness of how Education Liaisons could support youth.

Appendix: Methodology

RTI worked with FosterEd Arizona staff to schedule 30-minute virtual interviews between November 2020 and January 2021. Those interviewed included 12 young people, 5 FosterEd Education Liaisons, and 14 other adults in the lives of FosterEd young people (e.g., teachers, caregivers, DCS case managers) from across Maricopa, Pima, and Yavapai counties. Participants were offered \$20 e-gift cards as a show of appreciation for their time. One of two RTI researchers conducted each interview following semi-structured interview protocols (one for young people, another for Education Liaisons, and a third for other adults).

As interviews began, participants were thanked for their time, encouraged to be candid with their feedback, and told that any information they shared would be kept anonymous. Participant feedback was combined and summarized to help FosterEd continue to learn how best to support young people in foster care to achieve their educational goals. Permission to audio record the interviews was sought so that a Zoom text transcript of the call would be available to the interviewer after the call.

To help the young people feel comfortable with the interview process, their FosterEd Education Liaisons started the Zoom call 5 minutes before the RTI researcher logged on, using the time to remind the young person of the purpose of the interview, answering any questions they had at that point, and helping the young person change the identification that appeared on Zoom so that only their FosterEd ID appeared and not their name. The RTI researcher then joined the session and, once the young person felt comfortable, the Education Liaison dropped off the call.

Images were incorporated into the youth interviews to give the young person something engaging to react to, rather than following a standard question and answer format that could be intimidating. For example, early in call, the RTI researcher shared two images on Zoom and said, "I'm interested in how school is going for you right now. Do you see the two pictures on the screen? Picture 1 is of a person who feels like things are going well, and Picture 2 is of a person who is frustrated. Which picture best represents how you feel about school now? Picture 1 or Picture 2?" After the young person answered with the picture number, the RTI researcher asked, "Can you tell me why you selected that picture?" After the young person responded, the RTI researcher asked, "Are there parts of school that ever represent the picture you didn't select? If so, what? If not, why not?"

The desire was to hear from a range of young people and adults across the three counties served by FosterEd. Education Liaisons were asked to nominate young people who had been supported by FosterEd for at least 3 months and represented a mixture of genders and grade levels. The Education Liaisons nominated 26 young people from which RTI selected 12 to interview to achieve variation. The Education Liaisons then reached out to the selected young people on RTI's behalf to invite them for an interview. Six of the originally selected 12 either did not respond to the request or

indicated they did not want to be interviewed. In these circumstances, replacements from the list of 26 were selected. In the end, 10 young people were interviewed.

With regard to adults, the desire was to interview one to two Education Liaisons from each of the three counties, supporting young people in an intensive and a responsive capacity. Yavapai, being a county with a low population, has one Education Liaison who supports young people in both intensive and responsive categories, and that person was interviewed. For the other two counties, FosterEd nominated a responsive Education Liaison and an intensive Education Liaison, and those four people were interviewed.

Other adults connected to young people (e.g., caregivers, school and district staff, DCS case managers) in the three counties served by FosterEd were also interviewed. FosterEd nominated 35 adults, from which 14 were selected. Three of those originally selected ended up not being available (i.e., they originally agreed to be interviewed but then were not available when it was time to conduct the interviews). Replacements were selected from the list of 35.

Once the interviews were completed, the transcripts were coded by the two RTI researchers using Dedoose, a qualitative software analysis program. A coding structure was developed, informed by the guiding questions and a preliminary debriefing meeting of two RTI researchers. The pair met half-way through the coding process to discuss emerging findings and coding challenges and to reach a consensus about how to address the coding challenges.

A clear limitation of this report relates to the nomination process for respondents, and the agreement from the selected respondents to be interviewed. RTI instructed FosterEd to nominate youth and adults who had a range of experiences with FosterEd, and not just recommend potential respondents whom they felt would answer positively about FosterEd, as doing so would limit what we could learn from this study. We explained that from the nominated lists we would randomly select individuals to invite for an interview. Nevertheless, Education Liaisons suggested people with whom they had been in contact during the pandemic, particularly for the youth interviews.

Education Liaisons explained that some of youth they support were difficult to stay in touch with during the pandemic. Previously, Education Liaisons met regularly with students at their schools and sometimes at their placements. Once schools shut down and social distancing was recommended by public health agencies, their communication shifted to texts, phone calls, emails, and video calls. Some students rarely responded to their Education Liaison. Although the Education Liaisons did not automatically exclude such youth from the nomination list, the difficulty in scheduling the youth interviews reflected the fact that some did not respond to multiple requests for interviews or told the Education Liaison they were not comfortable being interviewed. Thus, their voices are not included in this report. It is possible that the youth interviewed had a more positive experience with FosterEd than the youth not interviewed.

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