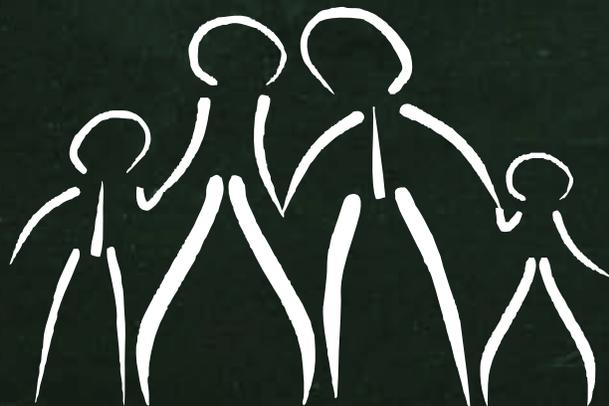


Everybody's a Teacher

Caregiver's Guide



BIG BEND COMMUNITY BASED CARE

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having, a disability that affects
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Welcome

“You don’t have
to be a teacher
to be a teacher.
Everyone can be
a teacher.”

8 year old child adopted from
foster care in *Everybody is a Teacher*
Video: Meet the Class of 2024

See video at www.bigbendcbc.org

Caregiver's Guide to Everybody's a Teacher

Everybody is a teacher!

Children learn from us: parents, caregivers and case managers. They learn from our actions as well as our words. When we take the time to explain, the child begins to understand. When we believe in the child, the child begins to believe in him or herself. And when we place a priority on education, guess what? The children will also place a priority on education. In this way, we are all teachers. We are teaching the children around us, by our own actions and words.

Quality parenting

Excellent parenting by caregivers requires a loving commitment to the child, the child's safety and well-being. "Child well-being" requires attention to the child's education. If you think about it, you will understand why Big Bend Community Based Care views Everybody is a Teacher as a means to support you, the Quality Parenting Initiative and the children we all serve.

Foster parents, group home staff, relative and non-relative caregivers can champion the child's school success by participating in school activities and meetings, assisting with school assignments, supporting tutoring programs, meeting with teachers, working with an educational surrogate if one has been appointed and encouraging the child's participation in extra-curricular activities.

Big Bend Community Based Care

In the Big Bend service area, we really believe Everybody is a Teacher. We are working on tools, like this guide, to support your efforts. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we improve outcomes in the safety, well-being and stability of children and their families.

This guide

This guide and the training we will offer to go with it, is designed to support your efforts. We anticipate it will be something you can refer to when education questions arise. Chapter 1 addresses Early Learning; Chapter 2 explains primary, middle and secondary school; and Chapter 3 discusses education when a child has or is suspected of having a disability that affects learning or access to learning.

General information

- Every child is entitled to an education. Children who have experienced abuse, neglect or abandonment need your help in making sure they get that education.
- Education begins at birth. Nurturing a child includes nurturing the mind.
- A child who is in the appropriate school and appropriate school program has fewer residential placement problems according to recent research.
- If the parents and caregivers are involved with a child's school, research says the child will do better in school.
- Principles you have learned about the importance of trauma informed care play a role in helping the child educationally.
- Principles you have learned in the Quality Parenting Initiative will help you to become engaged with the child and his or her education. You are the child's education advocate.

CHAPTER 1

Early Learning: Education
from birth to kindergarten



The first five years

The first five years of life is an amazing time. Did you know that 90% of brain development occurs before the age of five? Every experience children have impacts how they feel about themselves, how they feel about the people around them, and how secure they feel in the world. You can ensure the children in your care begin to learn and to love learning.

Parents and caregivers are the first teachers

Communication begins long before a baby utters a word. Babies tell us what they need through their cries, facial expressions, sounds, and movements. When you provide positive early relationships and experiences, you give a child the resilience to face new challenges, actively explore, and focus on the task of learning. At its heart, literacy is about communication.

- Talking with the child and encouraging the child to talk with you is an important part of early literacy development.
- Share stories, songs, and books with the children; they help the children develop literacy skills. Give the children the message that learning to read and write is important. Language, literacy and emotional development are negatively affected when no one talks, reads or sings with the child.

Choosing a child care program

The quality of the child care setting is crucial to healthy early childhood development. Look for an environment where early childhood professionals are positive, supportive, and provide plentiful and appropriate verbal interaction. The most convenient program is not always the best choice. Selecting the best child care program can seem like a daunting task, but it is important to pick the right program. Your local Early Learning Coalition (ELC) can help you in the process.

When visiting the child care provider, here are some things to look for:

- Do the children look happy, involved in activities and well-cared for?
- Do teachers give individual attention to each child?
- Are there sufficient materials such as blocks, books, puzzles, art supplies and toys for all of the children, which are available throughout the day?
- Does the staff appear to be promoting a positive learning environment? Staff should be sharing information, asking questions, and providing positive guidance to the children.
- Does the environment look healthy and safe? Check to see that the number (or ratio) of children per teacher is low and manageable; that equipment is safe, good hand washing practices are evident, and general cleanliness is apparent.
- Are there age appropriate learning experiences with a variety of activities for children, both indoors and outdoors? Such activities promote children's learning and development.

Be sure to ask:

- Does the teaching staff have experience working with children who are in out-of-home placements? Do they have any trauma-informed care training?
- Does the child care provider have specific policies and procedures governing pick up, drop off and on-site visitation that increase child safety?
- Does the childcare provider individualize the program, based on each child's unique strengths and needs?
- Is there a disciplinary policy that specifically excludes corporal punishment?

Stability is important for the young child

Routines and predictability help young children make sense of their ever-changing world. Young children who are going through out-of-home placement need as much consistency as possible to help offset their experiences during the dependency process.

1. If a child is currently enrolled in a quality childcare facility where emotional attachment has occurred, make every effort to keep the child in that facility. Not only will the child benefit from maintaining established relationships, but teachers and caregivers who know the child will be able to offer insight into the child from a developmentally appropriate perspective.
2. If the child is unable to remain in the child care facility where enrolled when placed in your home, be sure to get copies of any developmental checklists, assessments or observations of the child from the former program. Offer to share that information with the new childcare provider. This information will assist the new childcare provider as behavioral and developmental baselines are established and should be provided to the case manager for the child's official record.
3. Requests for transfers from one childcare facility to another during out-of-home placement should be given careful consideration. If a request is made because the child's behavior is more than the childcare provider can handle, consult with the case manager and the Early Learning Coalition office for a program where more behavioral supports are provided. Rarely will foster parents and relatives be allowed to move a child to another program for their own convenience.
4. Implement a routine for age appropriate early childhood activities in your residence. Improve your skills by attending training programs designed to help parents and caregivers support healthy development of the child. Look for ideas and guidance on the Ounce of Prevention and local Early Learning Coalition websites.
5. You can help the child by collaborating with the team serving the child. Strategies include supporting the child through transitions, sharing information, evaluating the child's progress over time, building your knowledge and skills regarding child development and infant mental health and sharing your knowledge with the parents and team. Use the skills you are learning in the Quality Parenting Initiative and Trauma Informed Care training.

Dependent children must be in a child care program

The Rilya Wilson Act, Section 39.604 Florida Statutes

The Florida Legislature recognizes that children who are in the care of the state due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment are at increased risk of poor school performance and other behavioral and social problems. As a result of this, the Legislature requires that children who are currently in the care of the state be provided with an age-appropriate educational program to help ameliorate the negative consequences of abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

What is required?

A child who is age three years to school entry and under court ordered protective supervision or in the custody of the Department of Children and Family Services or a community-based lead agency, must be enrolled in a licensed early education or childcare program. The child must participate in the program five days a week. You will need a court order if you do not want a child in your care to participate in a licensed early education program. Such orders are rarely issued so be sure you have a very good reason.

Absences to be reported

If a child is absent from the childcare program on a day when the child is supposed to be present, you must report the absence to that program by the end of the business day. If you fail to report the absence in a timely manner, the absence is considered unexcused. The childcare program must report any unexcused absence or seven consecutive excused absences of a child who is in state custody to the staff of the community-based lead agency.

Extra visits

Two unexcused absences or seven consecutive excused absences will trigger a visit from your case manager. The case manager will offer assistance with whatever is causing the non-attendance. You will be notified that failure to ensure the child attends the licensed early education or childcare program is a violation of the case plan. If more than two site visits are conducted pursuant to this subsection, the Case Manager must notify Children's Legal Services (CLS,) who will then notify the court of any parent or caregiver's noncompliance.

Once a child is enrolled in a good child care program, am I done?

Enrolling a child in a quality child care facility is just the first step. You should have regular communication with the child's main teacher and participate in any enrichment activities offered by the program. It is your responsibility to take the child to the program at a consistent time and provide any needed supplies. Working with the child at home continues to be important.

What can I share with the child care professionals?

You can share all of the information needed for enrollment and you can share trauma history with the ELC staff and professionals who provide the direct child care so they can recognize traumatic reactions, reminders, and triggers. The information will help the program-based personnel identify when a child may be having a traumatic reaction as opposed to behavioral problems due to other reasons. Remind childcare personnel that anything that is shared with them is to remain confidential. This information should not be shared with other staff in the child care program that do not have a current professional relationship with the child, or with parents of other children that attend the child care program. Delivering a reminder for confidentiality can assist personnel who may have a tendency to share information about children with each other without realizing they are supposed to keep it confidential.

What can I learn from the child care professionals?

- During your discussions with the teacher, ask if there have been any screenings or assessments completed on the child. If so, what were the results and what do the results mean?
- Ask the teacher to share observations or anecdotal notes about the child.
- Ask for ideas about activities you can do at home to help the child, especially if the child is not meeting developmental benchmarks.
- Ask if the teacher notices any behaviors unusual for a child that age. If you have information that may indicate the need for further evaluation from a qualified professional - act on it.
- Your case manager and your local Early Learning Coalition are resources to help guide you and the child through any next steps.
- You can also contact Child Find, which locates children who are suspected of having a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Child Find coordinates services for diagnostic screening, placement, training and support if the child is determined to have a disability. Visit www.fdlrs.org for more information about Child Find.



“When I had a foster parent who came to the school when I was doing something good, I began to think doing good was a way to get fun attention.”

Youth Formerly in Care.

They are so young, why early intervention?

The purpose of early intervention is to lessen the effects of the disability, delay and/or trauma. These programs and/or services are most effective when started as soon as the delay, disability and/or trauma are identified. Services are designed to meet a child’s needs in any developmental area including: physical development, cognitive development, communication, social or emotional development, and adaptive development.

Why is it critical that I follow through after the assessment?

Infants and toddlers who have experienced abuse and neglect, or who have been exposed to prenatal maternal alcohol and/or substance abuse, have higher rates of physical and emotional problems. These health conditions and developmental delays can have serious consequences for children as they grow and intervention is more successful when it begins earlier. Getting the child needed services as quickly as possible will assist you in being a quality parent and help the child succeed.

What is an Individualized Family Support Plan?

An Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a written plan for children with disabilities who are birth through five years of age. The IFSP and the IEP provide information about the services necessary to facilitate a child’s development and enhance the family’s capacity to support that development. If the child is age birth through two years, he or she will have an IFSP. If the child is between three and five years of age an IEP is generally used. Through the IFSP or the IEP process, family members (biological and substitute), service delivery providers and other professionals work together as a team to develop and implement the plan. A good plan can enhance the stability of a residential placement and support successful reunification.

Reading to the child

Reading ability is strongly related to academic and vocational success. Supporting language development and school readiness as early as possible will substantially improve the opportunity for a child's success in school and in life.

- For all parents and caregivers of children, reading every day is very important.
- Engage the child in a conversation about what you are reading, getting the child to tell you details from the story.
- You can do many simple activities, such as reading signs while in the car with the child or singing the alphabet song with the child.
- Ask the child to tell you a story, encouraging the child to use both imagination and experience as the child is telling the story.
- Keep books in your home in a place visible and accessible to the child.
- Is there a nearby library? Check to see if they have a storytelling program for little ones.
- Teach the child respect for books and rules by getting the child a library card, checking out books and then returning them.
- Anything you do to encourage reading and language development will help the child.
- Florida's Common Core State Standards (CCSS) place an emphasis on reading both informational text and literary text.
- Engage the child in discussions related to the reading material; reference specific details of the text or have the child tell you what happened next (learning sequencing.)

School readiness

School readiness means more than being in a classroom on time. In general, it means that a child has developed some basic skills, which assist the child in learning new skills in an individual or group setting. For example, can the child open a milk carton or a lunch box? Does the child know how to wait for his turn? Think about the skills the child will need and practice them at home. For additional ideas, check the Ounce of Prevention website at www.ounce.org and the Early Learning Coalition website at www.elcofnwflorida.org and www.elcbigbend.org.

A child who is ready to learn makes a smooth transition to school and can focus on learning. Self esteem is built by experiencing success. Repetition helps children learn and succeed. Recognizing their efforts and successes builds confidence. Your satisfaction as a foster parent will increase as you watch the child grow in successes.

Partners

In the Big Bend Service Area, we work closely or have partnered with:

The Early Learning Coalitions

www.elcofnwflorida.org

www.elcbigbend.org

For referral to the listed programs and services, contact your local ELC:

Early Start

Early Steps

Florida First Start

Head Start

VPK

Healthy Families

The Ounce of Prevention

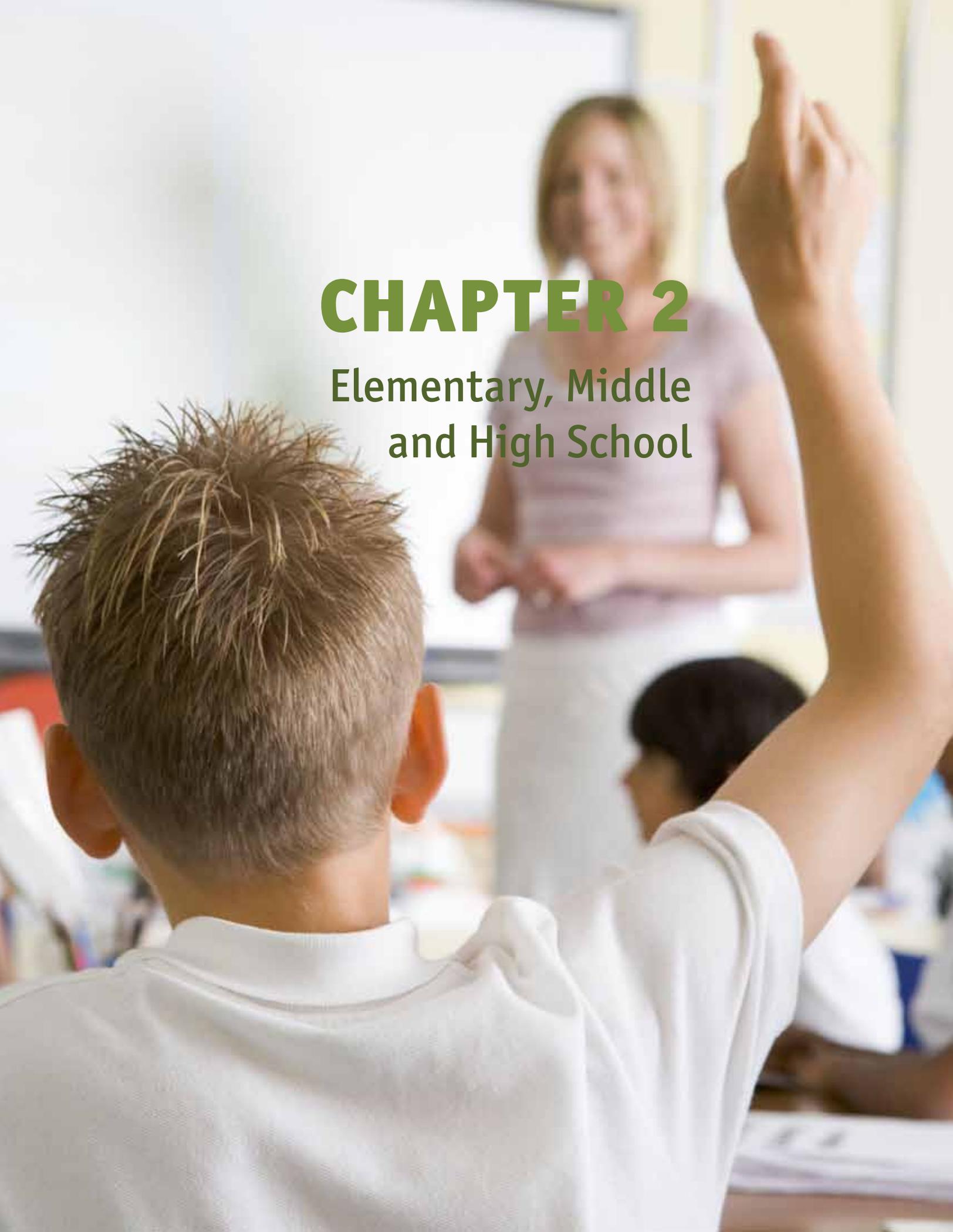
www.ounce.org

Quality Parenting Initiative

www.qpiflorida.org

The School in your neighborhood



A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the back of a young boy's head and shoulders are visible; he has short, spiky brown hair and is wearing a white t-shirt. His right arm is raised, with his index finger pointing upwards. In the background, a female teacher with blonde hair, wearing a light purple top and white pants, stands smiling. Other students are partially visible in the background, including one with dark hair. The setting appears to be a bright, modern classroom with whiteboards.

CHAPTER 2

Elementary, Middle
and High School

School enrollment

Immediate enrollment

The most normal thing for a child is to go to school. The law requires each child in care be immediately enrolled in school. Children in care can be enrolled without a birth certificate and immunization record. However, those documents must be provided to the school within 30 days. If you have difficulty with enrollment, and the school does not have a foster care liaison, ask your case manager to help you. A standard registration form has been developed to facilitate enrollment. This form will help you collect information the school needs. Obtain the form from the case manager.

Ready to learn

You are the person acting as the parent for the child and must work with the school to ensure that the student's needs, such as required school uniforms and required school supplies, are identified and provided to the child immediately. Some schools require specific notebooks or planners. A delay in purchasing can result in problems for the student. Many times a school will keep a closet of gently used uniforms or donated supplies for students who are in need of them. Check with the school to find out if this help is available. If not, check with the Big Bend Community Based Care (BBCBC) office near you.

School stability

Why the emphasis on school stability?

Children who are happy in a stable school setting have fewer residential placement disruptions. School may be the only positive constant in a child's life. Change of schools, especially when not at natural breaks like summer vacation, can be emotionally and academically challenging. Child welfare professionals will work to locate a placement in the same school attendance area or school district. If this cannot be accomplished, the first option will be to transport the child back to the original school. If that is not practical, a new school will be located.

What can I do if the child cannot stay in the same school?

First, recognize the loss the child will experience as a result of the move. Look for ways you can help the child feel safe and secure in the new environment to minimize the trauma of a move. Make arrangements to have someone show the child around the new school before he or she begins attending. If possible, have the child meet the new teacher before entering the class. Be sure the child has a uniform, if one is required; and all the supplies on the teacher's list. Think of additional ways you and the child's team can smooth the transition.

“I am in the 11th grade, and I have attended seven different high schools. Each move made it so much harder for me.”

Young Adult in the Independent Living program



Attendance

On time, every day

All children/youth must regularly attend school. As a caregiver, you should view school as part of your responsibility to the child. Make getting the child to school on time a priority. Every effort should be made to schedule medical appointments at times other than during school hours. When this is not possible, alert the school to scheduled appointments that will interfere with classes.

At the beginning of the school year, or when the child is enrolled, get a testing calendar from the school. Consult with the case manager to be sure that hearings are not set on the days the child is in testing. You may also want to ask about other critical dates for school functions. If you do a good job of making sure the child is regularly attending school, you will be demonstrating to the child your respect for the importance of his or her education as well as supporting the school district.

School policies

Each school district develops a policy for school attendance. School districts may differ on the definition of excused and unexcused absences, required documentation for absences and parental notification when a student is absent or tardy. For this reason, you are encouraged to ask for a copy of the attendance policy from the school and follow the established policies and procedures.

Absences

If the student is missing time from school, what is the reason?

- If the reason is health related, be sure the child is getting the needed medical care. If the health related reason is expected to continue, contact the school counselor, school social worker or school nurse for help in determining the most appropriate option for the student's health and continued education. Find out about relevant educational options, including homebound services, that the school system may provide.
- If the child seems depressed, withdrawn or fearful of school, work with the school counselor and child welfare resources to address any trauma symptoms or mental health issues. Be concerned if the child is often isolating him or herself from adults and peers. Seek advice from a Mental Health professional.
- Some children miss class because they feel embarrassed at being behind; some act out in class for the same reason. There are ways to make up work and to make progress such as tutoring programs or remediation classes. Ask the teacher what is available from the school. Also, check resources in the community. If you suspect a disability is interfering with learning, talk with the teacher and request the school's problem-solving team address the child's needs.

Excused absences

Every effort should be made to schedule all appointments at times other than during school hours.

- At the beginning of the school year, or when the child is enrolled at the school, get a testing calendar from the school. Consult with the case manager to be sure no hearings are set on the days the child is in testing.
- Try to schedule medical appointments during non-school hours. When school hour appointments are necessary, alert the teacher and school staff in advance.
- Contact the teacher and school about anything significant going on in the student's life that may affect school performance or explain absences.
- If the reason is because the child is embarrassed about being behind in school, ask the teacher about options for catching up such as tutoring programs or remediation sessions. Also check for homework and remedial assistance programs in the community. If an absence is excused, the child is allowed make-up missed work for credit as long as the work is turned in within the time frame given by the teacher.
- By communicating with the school, you will be demonstrating your respect for the importance of being in school, for the school and for the child.

Be a good partner

Attendance counts every day. However, on two days a year, attendance is counted not just for the child but also to determine state funding levels for schools. It will help the school, and therefore the child and community, if all children in your care are in school on those days. Inquire of the school or the case manager to know those days. This little thing is really a big thing for reinforcing partnerships with schools.

Maintaining Confidentiality

People are human

In a gentle way, remind school personnel that anything that is shared with them about the child's history is to remain confidential. This information should not be shared with anyone in the school that does not have a current professional relationship with the child, with parents of other children, or with other children that attend the school. Improper sharing of this information violates several laws. More importantly, it can hurt or embarrass the child.

The law is on your side

Confidentiality is an important protection of the privacy rights of a child and family, but was not intended to deny children access to needed services, especially education services. There are several places in both state and federal law, which permit you to share information with schools in order to obtain education services. You should only share information related to the child, summarizing the abuse or neglect. Remember that most of our children go home and their parents will need to keep working with the school. So, share and be thoughtful about what you share.

Helping the child make progress

It's the little things

Little things make a big difference. If you ask how school is going, most children will say fine. It is better to ask about the favorite thing that happened in school today or about how hard the homework was, to open the door to a real conversation as opposed to the answer the child thinks you want to hear. Questions about friends, extra-curricular activities, school lunch, etc. will give you a good sense about how the child is doing while sending the child a message that education is important.

Some little things are really big

It is *extremely important* for the child's foster parent, and anyone who is involved in the child's life, to attend parent/teacher conferences, school open houses, programs like school plays, athletic events, and especially graduation. Be an engaged parent. It is hurtful for a child not to have someone present when all other children have someone. Everyone needs to have someone in their life share in their successes. If you only pay attention to children when they are acting inappropriately, there is no incentive to act appropriately.

School conferencing

Schools are willing to meet with parents (and people acting as parents like foster parents and relative caregivers.) Some schools even require parent/teacher conferences each year. A simple call to schedule a conference is all it takes.

In a meeting with the school liaison or teacher you can learn:

- Is the child placed at age/developmentally appropriate grade level?
- Is the child performing on or above grade level, especially in reading and math?
- Is the child behind due to missing school? Is there a way to make up the work?
- Is the child on schedule with credits for promotion and/or graduation purposes? Has anyone given the child's record, including any education plan, a careful review, especially after a change in placement or a SIPP or DJJ program? There are ways to obtain credit even when the transfer is mid-semester, so discuss it with the school's counselor.
- If the child is not on grade level or having other academic performance issues, what is your plan, with the school and the case manager, to help the child become proficient?
- If the school is a Needs Improvement School under No Child Left Behind guidelines, the school district is responsible for providing tutoring services free of charge. If the school the child attends is a Title I school, the school may provide free tutoring services as well. Ask the teacher and follow through on any recommendations. If tutoring is not available without charge, purchasing tutoring services may be a great use of a child's Master Trust funds, especially for children on SSI.
- Is the child the subject of any education plan (IEP, 504, EP)? If so, get a copy and review. If not, and you believe the child needs help, ask the teacher the process for getting academic or behavioral assistance for the child.

Teachers have good ideas

Ask the teacher for ideas on what would work. Especially inquire if the teacher knows the student's learning style. That information will be helpful to more efficiently care for the child; for example, if the child is a visual learner, a written schedule or picture schedule for tasks may help stabilize a placement.

Share

If there are things that need sharing in order to help the child, have you done so? Share appropriate trauma history with the school counselor and teacher. The information will help the school identify when a student may be having a traumatic reaction as opposed to behavioral problems for other reasons. With this information, the school can develop appropriate interventions related to the trauma.

When should I ask for a conference?

Upon receiving the child into your care, or if any problems arise at any later time, ask for a conference. If the student is having problems, ask the teacher's preference for communicating with him or her about the student. Teachers will welcome parents/caregivers who want to be partners with the schools and to be engaged with the child's progress.

Poor performance, seeking possible solutions

If the student is not performing well in school or has serious disciplinary or truancy problems that suggest a possible disability, ask the school to begin problem-solving. For a child who has experienced trauma, some additional support or a safety plan at school may resolve problems. Meanwhile, you can be looking at the child's files to see if he or she has had vision and hearing tests recently to rule out a need for glasses or a hearing deficit. When the school begins their problem-solving process and implements interventions, ask for a time frame for expecting progress. You may also want to review the situation with the case manager. If the interventions do not appear to be working, consider asking the school for more help and review the ideas at the PS/RtI website at www.florida-rti.org. The option to seek an independent educational evaluation is appropriate when a parent disagrees with an evaluation the school district has done.

Always ask the child what he or she thinks might be helpful. You may find a simple solution in the answers. See Chapter 3 *When a child has or is suspected of having a disability* for more information. See the publication *Ensuring a Strong Start, Promoting a Bright Future* by the Department of Education, at www.florida-rti.org/_docs/RtI-Parent-Brochure.pdf. It provides an overview of Response to Intervention, with ideas on how parents can be involved, key questions for parents to ask, and recommendations for parents if they believe their child is struggling.

Parent Portals

Schools are establishing internet access to student records and typically call it a Parent Portal. The goal of a Portal is to support the parents and encourage and facilitate engagement in their child's education. From a Portal, a parent, or someone acting as a parent, can access the child's school schedule, grades, assignments, and communicate with his or her teachers. DCF and Big Bend are working to get you access to the Parent Portals in the schools our children attend. Using the portal will keep you informed and increase the likelihood that you can be of assistance to the child.

“Everyone else had volunteer or real jobs and things from outside of class.”

“I felt like it was something else I had missed by being in foster care.”

Quotes from a Focus Group of Youth Formerly in Care.

Chapter 2

“My case manager asked me about school. No one else ever cared enough to ask. I began to think school might matter to her, and maybe it should matter to me.”

Young Woman formerly in
Foster Care



Standardized testing

Florida now has a mixture of testing. Florida Writes, FCATs, and End of Course exams are the typical tests. In Florida, they are used to grade teachers and schools as well as assess school performance of the child. They can be anxiety producing and are often called high stakes testing. Many schools provide support and information related to reducing test-taking anxiety. Ask the teacher or counselor how the child will be tested and the dates of the tests for your student.

Practice hints include:

- Be sure you note the dates and do not schedule appointments on those days.
- Plan for any anxiety the child may feel about the tests. Talk about it.
- Be engaged with the activities scheduled by the school as test preparation.
- Check to see if your school provides supports and information for students and families on reducing text anxiety.
- Be sure the child gets good rest the night before and an especially healthy breakfast on test days. Drinking water or juice to be hydrated is also important.
- Above all, affirm to the child you know the test is important, but it is not as important to you as is the child.
- Accommodations for testing situations may be appropriate for certain students with disabilities. Ask the teacher or review the child's IEP or 504 Plan.

The national standardized tests

Here are some things you may need to know about the most common national tests:

- The Pre-SAT test determines eligibility for the National Merit Scholar program, which is a college scholarship program. It is not used for college admission but is good practice.
- The Pre-ACT test is a valuable tool for the student to see their strengths and weaknesses so they may develop a plan for success when they take the SAT or ACT.
- The SAT and ACT require a fee to take them. **Any child who is eligible for free and reduced lunch may receive a voucher/fee waiver for the SAT and ACT tests.** This may be obtained from the school guidance counselor
- Students in care should be encouraged to take these tests. *SAT and ACT Concordant scores may be used in some circumstances where the student does not pass the FCAT.*

School involvement

The research is clear that involvement with the school by the parents/caregivers and by the child makes a huge positive difference in education outcomes.

Student engagement

Students who are engaged with school do better in and outside of school. Student engagement includes, but is not limited to, a child's active involvement in his or her own education and planning; and participation in school activities.

Student decision making

Schools have many programs to teach children to engineer their own lives, beginning with school. Ask the school counselor. Whether the student has special training or not, consult the child about education decisions. Empower the child to make decisions by explaining options with upsides and downsides of each. If the child owns the decision, he or she will work harder and be more successful.

Student activities

Consistent participation in school and extracurricular activities gives students an opportunity to build interpersonal skills, which increases educational attainment. Studies show a strong association between extracurricular activities and reduced student dropout rates. Involvement with extracurricular activities is also associated with decreased delinquent behavior. Does the child participate in school activities? Which ones? If not, why? Are there strategies that you as a parent can use to help the student become more involved in school activities?

Extracurricular activities

Facilitate a feeling of belonging and decrease the sense of isolation or loneliness common in these students. Whether the child is interested in athletics, chess club or drama club, activities outside of the classroom are learning opportunities that should be encouraged. Foster youth may be especially disconnected from their school community because of repeated transfers. Ask the new school to waive barriers to participation if the student participated at a former school and wants to do so at the new school. If a student desires to participate in the school's athletic program, it is required that the student get an athletic physical before they can participate. Also, students have to maintain a specific grade point average according to Florida High School Athletic Association. If the student is struggling academically, he or she may need support, such as tutoring.

“We want a hand up, not a hand out.”

**“Tell them we need real experiences
so we can learn.”**

From a Focus Group of Youth
Formerly in Care

Field trips

Field Trips are an important complement to the school curriculum. A major component of the learning process is to explore the world culturally, socially, and academically, which is a purpose of field trips. Scheduling court hearings, doctors' appointments, or keeping the child home on the day of a field trip disrupts the child's educational process. Withholding field trips should never be used as a punitive measure for a child's behavior. If a child is to attend a field trip that is outside the state, contact CLS in order to obtain a judicial order granting permission. Under the normalcy rules, a foster parent can sign permission forms for all other field trips. Some trips should be paid for by the foster parents. Pricier trips may be a good expense for the child to contribute through allowance or by finding a way to earn extra money and others may need a special request through your case manager for extra funds including withdrawing the needed amount from the child's Master Trust, if one has been established. If none of the above works, contact your case manager.

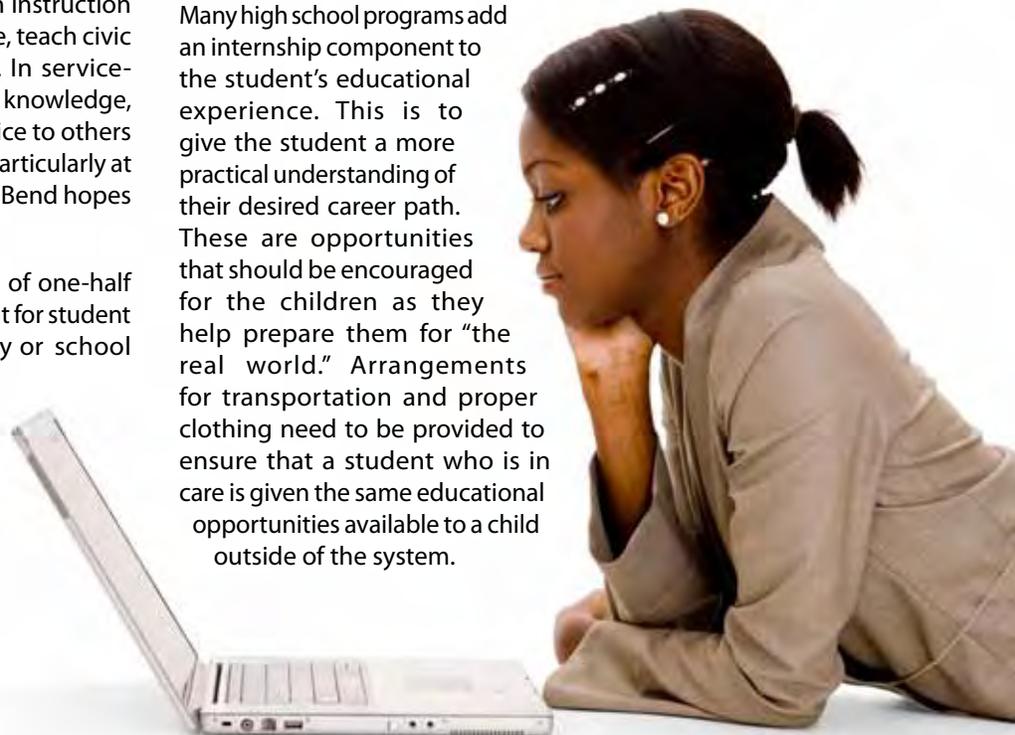
Service learning

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. In service-learning projects, students practice/apply skills, knowledge, and behaviors they need to learn through service to others in their school or community. All students, and particularly at risk students, benefit from service learning. Big Bend hopes to begin such projects within the next year.

District school boards may award a maximum of one-half credit in social studies and one-half elective credit for student completion of non paid volunteer community or school service work. Students choosing this option must complete 75 hours of services in order to earn the one-half credit in either category of instruction. Service learning credit may help a child be eligible for scholarships, such as Bright Futures, that assist in paying for college.

Internships and work based learning programs

Many high school programs add an internship component to the student's educational experience. This is to give the student a more practical understanding of their desired career path. These are opportunities that should be encouraged for the children as they help prepare them for "the real world." Arrangements for transportation and proper clothing need to be provided to ensure that a student who is in care is given the same educational opportunities available to a child outside of the system.



Career planning and the Middle School Career Exploration class

In order to be promoted to 9th grade, all middle school students must complete a career and education planning course, which requires the creation of an academic and career plan for high school using the electronic Personal Education Electronic Planner (ePEP). The planner can be found on the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS) website at www.FACTS.ORG. The course may be offered in 7th or 8th grade. It may be a standalone course or integrated into an existing course.

- It is important to note that this is a starting place for planning for the future. As the child has more experiences, interests and goals may change. They will have the opportunity each year during the registration process to make changes to their academic and career plan, including course selections. As the foster parent, you can help the child review and update the plan.
- The materials at flchoices.org and facts.org are designed to support the exploration and planning. Caregivers (and when appropriate, parents) have important roles to play and should be involved in the process. There are activities offered at school for students and also for the parents/caregivers when the child is in this class. Be sure you attend. See the Parent Primer on Career Exploration at www.fldoe.org/workforce/pdf/parent_primer06.pdf
- The results of the child's career exploration through the school should be reflected in the Educational Component of the child's Case Plan after the age of 13. The computer based plan created at school will identify career goals and the education path to that goal. The Transition Plan for older youth should be built on this important work done at school.
- Your work as a caregiver includes supporting the child in learning about the world around him, helping explore possibilities, and establishing dreams for a wonderful future. Career Exploration is not something that happens only in a class. Offer guidance towards biographies of people with careers. Arrange introductions to people with careers of interests. Help children learn what they would need to do to succeed in a chosen career.

Role of the caregiver

Foster Parents (including group homes, relatives and shelters) play a pivotal role in the education of children in care. Encouraging the child to participate in school related events and activities, including providing transportation, is only one way a foster parent can make a difference. Modeling involvement by being involved yourself sends a powerful message to the children. You are acting as the parent for education purposes and your best role is as the child's advocate.

Homework

Homework reinforces the work learned in school. It also provides an opportunity for a student to learn study skills that are important for future successes.

- If you do not know the child has homework, you need to find a way to have the child tell you or you need to communicate with the teacher.
- Maintain a quiet time and place for doing homework. Be sure there is adequate lighting for studying
- Some children respond to displays of good homework at home (often called "refrigerator art" by educators).
- Your positive reinforcement sends a message of caring and support to the child. Wanting to be rewarded for good work is as much a motivator for a child as an adult.
- If you know what the child is studying, you can speak with him or her about the subject and can schedule enrichment activities around that subject. For example, studying fractions and cooking using measuring cups and spoons use the same language and provide a visual use of the math material.

Preparing for graduation

Diploma options

The right graduation program is the one that best fits the abilities, interests, and goals of the individual student. Students should consider the educational benefits of each program and select the program that will best prepare him or her for the chosen postsecondary education or vocational training career path. You will be acting as a good parent when you help the child gather information on the options and choices.

- Diploma decisions can impact future education and employment. Current information should be used so that informed choices can be made by the young adult.
- Many teens in care are interested in “special diploma” options or a GED program because they are so far behind in credits that they may be told they can’t graduate on-time with a regular diploma. Passing the GED test is sometimes more difficult than successful completion of a high school program. Graduating at the same time as peers is nice, but finding out you may not be able to get directly into college or the military is often a very unpleasant surprise.
- Work with the child and the school counselor to ensure that the child’s record reflects credit for all of their schooling and identify options for making up credits – e.g. summer programs, dual enrollment and on-line (virtual) schooling.
- It is important to be sure the youth is making a truly informed choice when selecting the diploma option. Your participation and guidance is essential. Talk with the child. Help make lists of “pros and cons” or other strategies to teach planning and decision-making skills.

“I was the only one in class with nothing to put on my first resume.”

Youth Formerly in Care.

Graduation requirements

We will know we are succeeding when all of the students who are in foster care complete their graduation plan. Too many of the youth in care have given up on themselves; we need to be certain we do not give up on them. Some children have been told such negative things, they think they cannot succeed. Positive messages can have a great influence on the child. As the caregiver, you can change the youth’s future by reversing negative messages. It is important to know graduation requirements in order to help youth make and work on a better plan.

- You can ask the school counselor or go to the Florida DOE website at www.bsi.fsu.edu/schoolimprove/studentprogression/highschgradreq.htm to get more information on graduation requirements as they may vary from year to year. The year the student entered ninth grade will determine the policies in effect that apply to the student.
- All teens and their caregivers need information in order to make the best decisions about diploma options. Some options will preclude certain career choices. For example, students exiting with a GED may have additional courses or criteria to meet before possible entry into the military. So, for any child who wants to go into military service, continuing through to a regular diploma would be important. Also, two years of foreign language is a requirement to attend most colleges and universities. If a student has the potential to attend college, foreign language is extremely important.
- You can suggest places to look for information (including Facts.org and flchoices.org). You can help the child by modeling a process for weighing options to make good choices, an important life skill.

High School programs

Many high schools now have workforce oriented programs that assist a student in following a career path. Because those programs are specific to each school, they are not explained here. However, there are some programs common to all schools:

Dual enrollment options

Dual enrollment is an acceleration program that allows high school students to simultaneously earn credit toward high school completion and a career certificate, or an associate or baccalaureate degree at a Florida public institution. There is evidence that dual enrollment increases overall academic performance for high school students.

For youth we support, dual enrollment may reinforce the idea that going to college is possible. Students should be helped to understand that the amount of work necessary to succeed in dual enrollment courses may be greater than in high school courses, so the reward is bigger. Many students say the courses are harder but more interesting. Others tell us that taking these courses helped ease them into the study habits needed to succeed in college. Your role is to help the child think through the pros and cons and make an informed choice. Encouraging strong academics is really important for anyone acting as a parent.

Advanced Placement classes

Most high schools offer Advanced Placement (AP) classes which allow students to take a college-level course at the high school. If the student passes the test at the end of the course, they may receive credit from the college or university that they attend, at the discretion of the college or university. Schools are supposed to make every effort to ensure that their AP classes reflect the diversity of their student population. It is important to make sure the student is willing to accept the challenges and hard work of an AP course and is willing to take a high stakes end of course test.

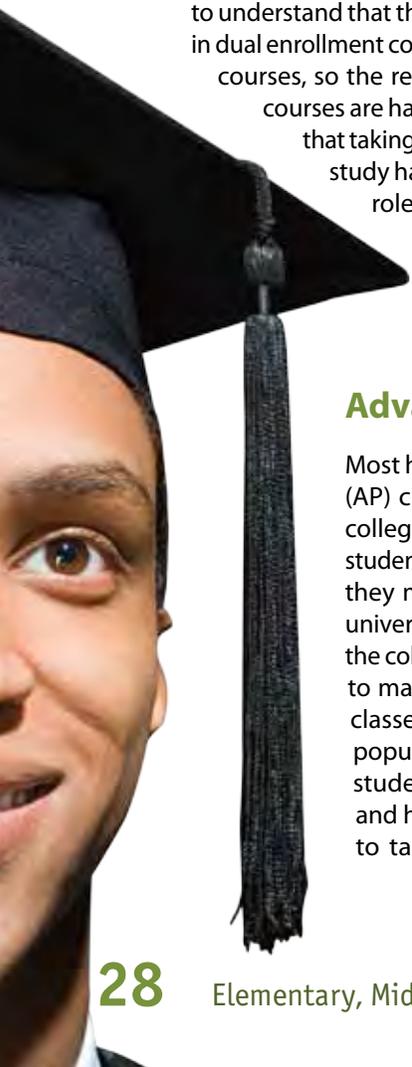
International Baccalaureate (IB)

Is a pre-university program for highly-motivated students that can be completed to earn college credit. IB emphasizes critical thinking and understanding of other cultures and points of view. A diploma is awarded at the completion of the IB program which allows graduates access to universities worldwide.

Virtual school

Florida now provides e-learning, either full time or on a course by course basis, in order to fill gaps or serve unique needs. Reasons to use Virtual School may include resolving scheduling conflicts, taking courses not offered by a home school, allowing for more flexible scheduling and pacing due to personal circumstances, completing courses for credit recovery for timely graduation, and taking courses for acceleration.

- Access may be available as part of the student's full day curriculum, after the school day, and during the summer term. The law clearly states that school districts may not limit student access to courses. However, involve the school counselor to determine if the course is academically appropriate for the student based upon the student's academic history, grade level, and age.
- In every Florida Virtual School course, teachers and students interact regularly through e-mail, voice mail, telephone conversations, and instant messenger. Teachers are available from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, as well as during weekend hours. Students are encouraged to contact the teacher when there is a need of any kind. Teachers speak via telephone with students and their parents at least once per month.
- While Virtual School is a good option for catching up or taking needed courses, it is not a preferred option for many of the students in care because he or she may not have the learning experience provided by interaction with others in the classroom setting.



Many young people are attracted to the GED option because it is rumored to be easy and quick.

Neither is true.

GED

General Educational Development (or GED) tests are a group of five subject tests which, when passed, certify that the taker has American high school-level academic skills. The five tests are: Language Arts (Writing), Social Studies, Science, and Language Arts (Reading). The successful candidate has to read at least at the 9th grade level. Although people refer to the GED as the General Educational Diploma or the General Equivalency Diploma, neither is correct. The GED is actually the process of earning the equivalent of a high school diploma, which is called a GED certificate or credential. Many young people are attracted to this option as it is rumored to be easy and quick. Neither is true. Youth should look at the requirements for admission to post-secondary schools, licensing of some professions and other options that may be limited before choosing a GED.

Reading

Reading ability is strongly related to academic and vocational success. Children learn to read up to third grade and then need to begin reading to learn. Students who are not reading at grade level in third grade begin having difficulty comprehending the written material central to the educational process in the grades that follow. Supporting struggling readers as early as possible in their educational careers will help substantially bolster their success in school and in life. Reading every day is really important. Reading to the younger ones and having them tell you the story is critical. So is reading with children when they are beginning to read. But the obligation to promote reading does not end with elementary school.

- Are there books and magazines in your home?
- Does the child ever see you reading?
- Is there a nearby library and does the child have a library card?
- Newspapers and magazines are good reading material.
- Anything you can do to encourage reading will help the child.

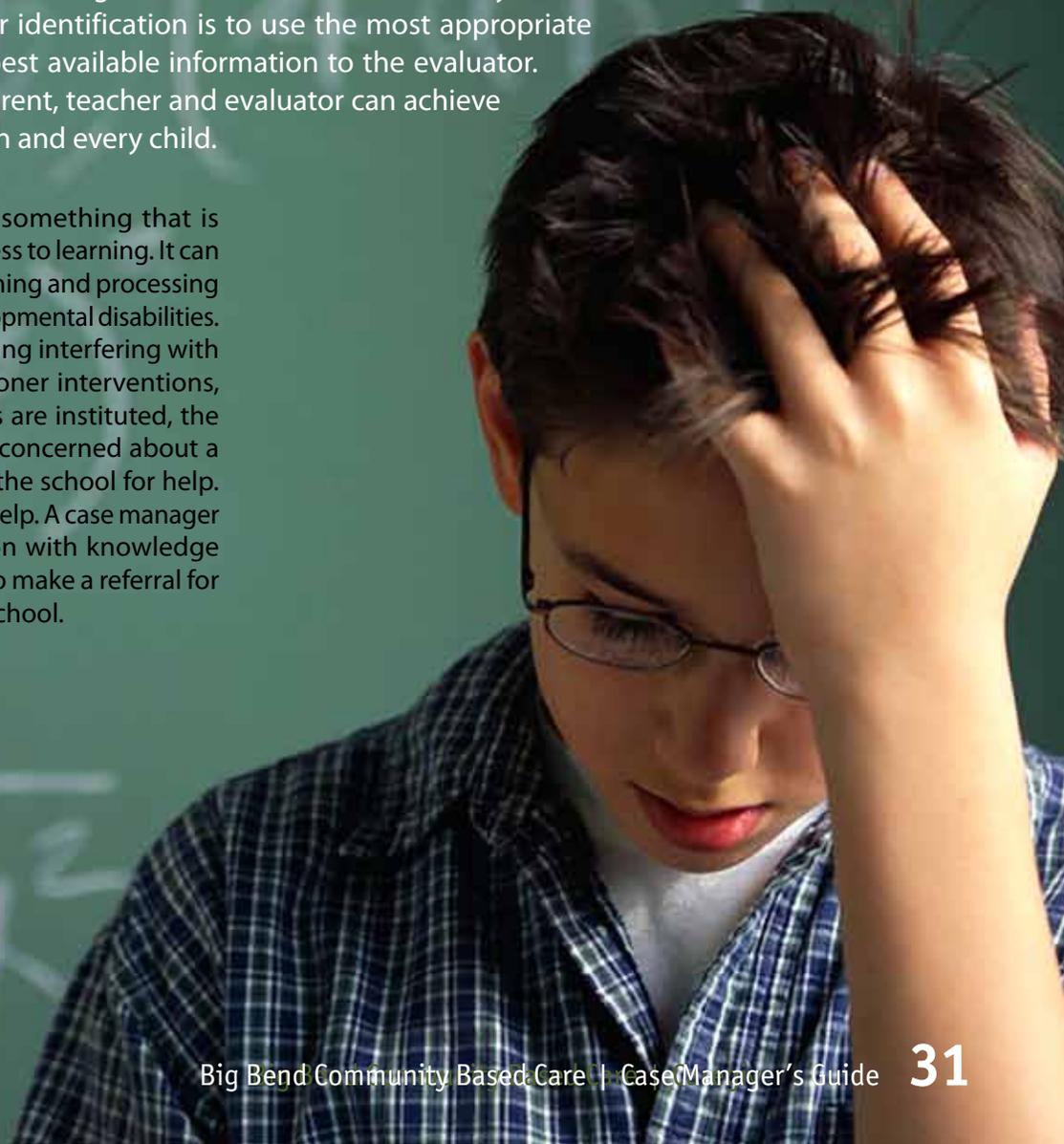
CHAPTER 3

When a child has, or is suspected of having, a disability that affects learning or access to learning

What do I do First? Identifying a disability

According to research between 25 and 50 per cent of the children in out-of-home care have a disability that affects learning. Some advocates worry that children in care are over-identified, that is, too easily labeled with a permanent disability when in fact the child has missed too much of his or her education to be easily assessed or has suffered significant trauma and needs only a short term intervention. The key to proper identification is to use the most appropriate assessments and provide the best available information to the evaluator. Working together, the foster parent, teacher and evaluator can achieve accurate and fair results for each and every child.

At school, a disability has to be something that is interfering with learning or the access to learning. It can include emotional, behavioral, learning and processing issues as well as cognitive and developmental disabilities. All of which mean there is something interfering with the child's ability to learn. The sooner interventions, modifications or accommodations are instituted, the better the child will do. If you are concerned about a child and suspect a disability, ask the school for help. For young children, ask the ELC for help. A case manager is considered an important person with knowledge about the child and has the right to make a referral for assessment for disabilities at the school.



Review the child's records

It may be helpful to review the child's medical history including previous psychological evaluations, mental health treatment, and parents' mental health and substance abuse history. For young children, review the Ages and Stages screening from ELC or, if appropriate, the Kindergarten Readiness Screening by the school system. Previous reviewers may not have been looking for signs of delay or disability. Look at incident reports and the initial abuse reports for trauma issues. Use your common sense and your knowledge of the child. Ask the caregiver, GAL and treatment team for help.

Here are questions to ask yourself and things to look for in the child's records:

- Are there any case notes that indicate developmental or trauma concerns? Consider reviewing the abuse report that caused the child to come in to care for possible causes.
- What does the Comprehensive Behavioral Health Assessment say about developmental milestones or other disability indicators?
- If the child is not doing well in school or at childcare what is the poor performance (academic, school readiness, or behavior) attributed to? Does that explanation seem correct to you? If not, think about why not.
- Is there a current educational or developmental assessment? If so, what does it say?
- Does the child perform daily activities of life at an age appropriate level (for example: bathing, dressing, toileting, feeding, and communication)?
- Has anyone assessed the child's IQ? Is it below 69 or above 130?
- Has there been excessive absenteeism due to health or behavioral problems?
- If school-aged, is the child performing far below age/grade level, educationally, developmentally or socially? Has the child fallen behind same age peers? How far behind and why?
- Is the child speaking in a clear manner or with an expected grasp of language for his or her age?
- Is there any untreated medical condition that needs to be explored?
- Has the child ever experienced a head injury, either in an accident or as a result of abuse?
- Does the child seem very smart, but is not doing well in school?

If any answers to the questions raise concerns, you need to take action. It is important to rule out any organic cause so be sure to seek out medical help if that seems warranted. If your answers indicate the child is having a problem, take the information you found to the school to support referral for further assessment plus follow up. Be sure the child has had a vision and hearing screening to rule out the most obvious and easiest matters to be addressed. .

Individual evaluation

An individual evaluation is a way of collecting information about a student's learning needs, strengths, and abilities. It is used to make decisions about whether a student has a disability and is eligible for exceptional student education services. The school will ask you to sign consent for evaluation if a disability is suspected. No decisions about services for a child with disabilities or a gifted child can be made until after the individual evaluation is completed and reviewed. During the individual evaluation step, information will be gathered to determine if the student is eligible for services. Specific tests of learning ability and aptitude will be selected and administered by a qualified professional. It is recommended that the test administrator attend the initial IEP meeting to discuss implications of the test scores with the team participants and guide development of the initial IEP to ensure it is written to specifically address the student's learning needs including giftedness and disabilities.

Education decision-maker or surrogate (IDEA) parent

For the IDEA's requirements to work effectively, every child with an eligible disability (or who needs an evaluation to determine if the child has a disability) must have a legally recognized decision-maker sometimes called the *Surrogate (IDEA) Parent*. A Surrogate Parent is a person willing and able to advocate on the child's behalf. Foster parents should be acting as parent and can also act as the Surrogate (IDEA) Parent. If the parental rights were terminated, a person must be designated as the education decision-maker. That person may be appointed by the school system or by the Dependency Court. There are some cases where parental rights may be intact but the Court has reason to believe the parent is not available or safe to participate in school decisions. In those cases, CLS will get someone appointed and prepare an Order that will be accepted by the school.

- For Exceptional Student Education purposes, you may be able to be the IDEA Parent and sign needed documents. If the placement is expected to be long term and you have knowledge of the exceptional student education process and the education needs of the child, you would be the best Surrogate (IDEA) Parent.
- Group home staff and therapeutic foster parents cannot act as the parent for IDEA purposes under federal law. Case Managers are also prohibited from acting as the decision-maker for IDEA purposes.
- The best choice may be the biological parent because so many of our children return home. If the parent participates with you in the special education decision making, the parent will learn the process for the time after reunification. Also, the schools offer many specialized parenting classes that may be helpful in supporting reunification. The schools have training on the IDEA process and working with a child with disabilities for parents and you can encourage the parent to attend and attend yourself.

Do not hesitate to ask for help. There are agencies and people who are specialists in this area and willing to help you help the child. Ask at the school for helpful suggestions, ask the case manager or CLS or call the Parent Network on Disabilities to inquire about advocates who may be able to assist. In more difficult cases, you may want to seek assistance from Disability Rights Florida.

The Evaluation is done, now what do I do?

You help the school set up a meeting with all of the “players” called either a staffing or an IEP Team Meeting. The child is required to be invited in Florida beginning at age 14 and may be asked before that age. (Research says youth involved in creating their IEP do better in school.)

Although some district procedures vary, in general:

- A staffing may be called to decide what should be assessed or examined to discover the child’s abilities and possible disabilities.
- A staffing will be called to review the testing, determine if the child is eligible for exceptional student services and write the Individual Educational Plan.
- Each year, or upon any move, a review is held to check on the child’s progress and to determine if more or less or different services are needed.

What is an IEP, EP or a 504 plan?

School systems have three types of Plans they use to address the needs of students with disabilities:

1. The **IEP** (Individual Educational Plan) is the formal document that is produced after evaluation and a team meeting regarding special education and related services called exceptional student education in Florida. Essentially, it guides the school and its staff in educating an individual child with eligible disabling conditions. The IEP addresses the whole child and anything needed to support the child in accessing or participating in school. It contains educational progress measures for the goals established and proper measurements for attaining each goal. It describes the services needed, specifying how and where they will be delivered to the child. Only after the IEP is written, identifying services and needs, should school placement be discussed. In all cases, the least restrictive school environment consistent with the child’s needs is the most appropriate.
2. An **EP** is the plan required by Florida law for gifted students. An EP is much like an IEP. Some gifted children have other issues and may have a full IEP that addresses both the giftedness and the disabilities.
3. A Section **504 Plan** is required by a civil rights act and broader than IDEA. It covers all disabilities, not just those cited in IDEA. A Section 504 Plan typically only addresses the removal of real or artificial barriers that would otherwise impede the child’s access to an education or the education environment. Most 504 plans deal with some type of medical condition where the child may need an accommodation.

Both IEPs and 504 plans are required to be developed for any qualified child with a disability to provide a “free appropriate public education” (FAPE) regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. Under Section 504, FAPE consists of the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the student’s individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of non disabled students are met.



Writing the IEP

There are books about writing IEPs and yet all you really need to do is know the child's strengths and weaknesses and use your common sense. Think about what supports and services may be needed for this child to make real progress in school and ask for them. Children with disabilities can and do learn if taught in the correct way.

Present levels of academic performance and functional achievement

The statement of the student's present level of academic performance and functional achievement identifies the strengths of the student and guides decisions about education needs. The school creates statements on how the student is performing in academic, social, emotional, or other areas including activities of daily living, skill mastery and grade levels. The data presented to the team should create a "baseline" upon which future progress can be measured.

Related services

As part of the IEP meeting, the team should determine whether a related service is essential for the student to benefit from the education service and for the student to accomplish the goals on the IEP. Related services may include: Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Counseling, Speech/Language Therapy, and Transportation to the IEP placement site.

Practice hints:

- Consider including information on behavior or emotions that may be triggered in school but are related to the trauma(s) the child has experienced.
- Ask questions about learning style and be sure the IEP reflects teaching geared to the child's learning style.
- Make sure the goals and implementation are measurable so everyone can see if they are working over time.
- Think about what you can do to support the child's progress.
- It is always ok to bring someone with you who has some expertise either in the IEP process or on a subject that will be discussed such as a particular disability or the need for a service.
- IEPs are called Individual Family Service Plans (IFSPs) for infants and toddlers. See Chapter I for more information on IFSPs.

Gifted students

Florida includes gifted students in Exceptional Student Education. A student who is gifted has high cognitive abilities, learns more easily than do other students, and needs a special instructional program and services in order to make appropriate educational progress. In order to be eligible for programs and services for students who are gifted, a student must meet state established special requirements. Just as with other exceptionalities, an assessment process will be conducted and then, if the child is eligible, proceed to making a plan.

The twice-exceptional student

An educational plan (EP) for a gifted student addresses only the “giftedness”. Some gifted students are also identified as having a disability, and are commonly referred to as being twice exceptional. For those students, a full IEP or a 504 Plan may need to be written. Identification may become difficult when the student is bright enough to be somewhat successful in the classroom despite learning disabilities. The focus for these students is: appropriate identification, instruction and remediation for the disability, a continuing need for social and emotional support and fostering the area(s) of giftedness. While students who are gifted often show inattention symptoms in learning environments that are not sufficiently challenging, students with ADHD typically show inattention symptoms regardless of the environment.

Gifted dropouts

Studies indicate that gifted students drop out for the same reasons other students do. They don't like school or are bored, they're failing school, they're pregnant, they want to get a job, their parents didn't finish school, their home life doesn't particularly support learning, etc. The dropout rate for these students places them at risk. Be careful to look for “underachievers”, students whose abilities are not shown in class or on tests due to other factors like school disruptions, traumatic experiences, or emotionality.



Interim meetings to tweak the IEP

If the child is not making expected progress or is having unexpected issues, ask for an Interim IEP meeting so the school based team can consider challenges and opportunities and amend or modify the IEP.

Transition IEPS (TIEP)

In Florida, the IEP team will begin addressing transition services for students during the eighth grade or the year in which they turn 14, whichever comes first.

- Students must be invited to these meetings and you should encourage attendance. There is training that can be requested of the school to help prepare the youth for the meeting and teach the youth successful strategies for self-advocacy.
 - Diploma Options with benefits and challenges should be considered in addition to exploring community resources. TIEPs should be coordinated with the transition components of the youth's dependency case plan so that both plans reflect the youth's goals and desires and meet his or her needs.
- Helpful information on Transition IEPs can be found in the publications:
 - Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Families**
www.fldoe.org/ese/pubxhome.asppdf/Transition.pdf
 - Transition Guide for Children in the Foster Care System**
www.disabilityrightsflorida.org/resources/publications

Parent engagement

Keep parents involved and empowered to make education decisions for their children whenever possible. Most of our children return to their parents and work with the schools on an on-going basis. Remember, special education procedures can be daunting for parents; you can provide essential advice and support. The school should provide the parents mandated notices, include the parents in IEP development, and notify them of changes, unless the Court determines it is dangerous or not in the child's best interests. As a foster parent, you should also respect the parent's rights. However, as the present caregiver, you know how the child is doing today and are essential to the process.

Partners

In the Big Bend Service Area, we work closely or have partnered with:

The Early Learning Coalitions

www.elcofnwflorida.org

www.elcbigbend.org

Department of Children and Families

www.dcf.state.fl.us/initiatives/everybodysateacher



For referral to the listed programs and services, contact your local ELC:

Early Start

Early Steps

Florida First Start

Head Start

VPK

Healthy Families

The Ounce of Prevention

www.ounce.org

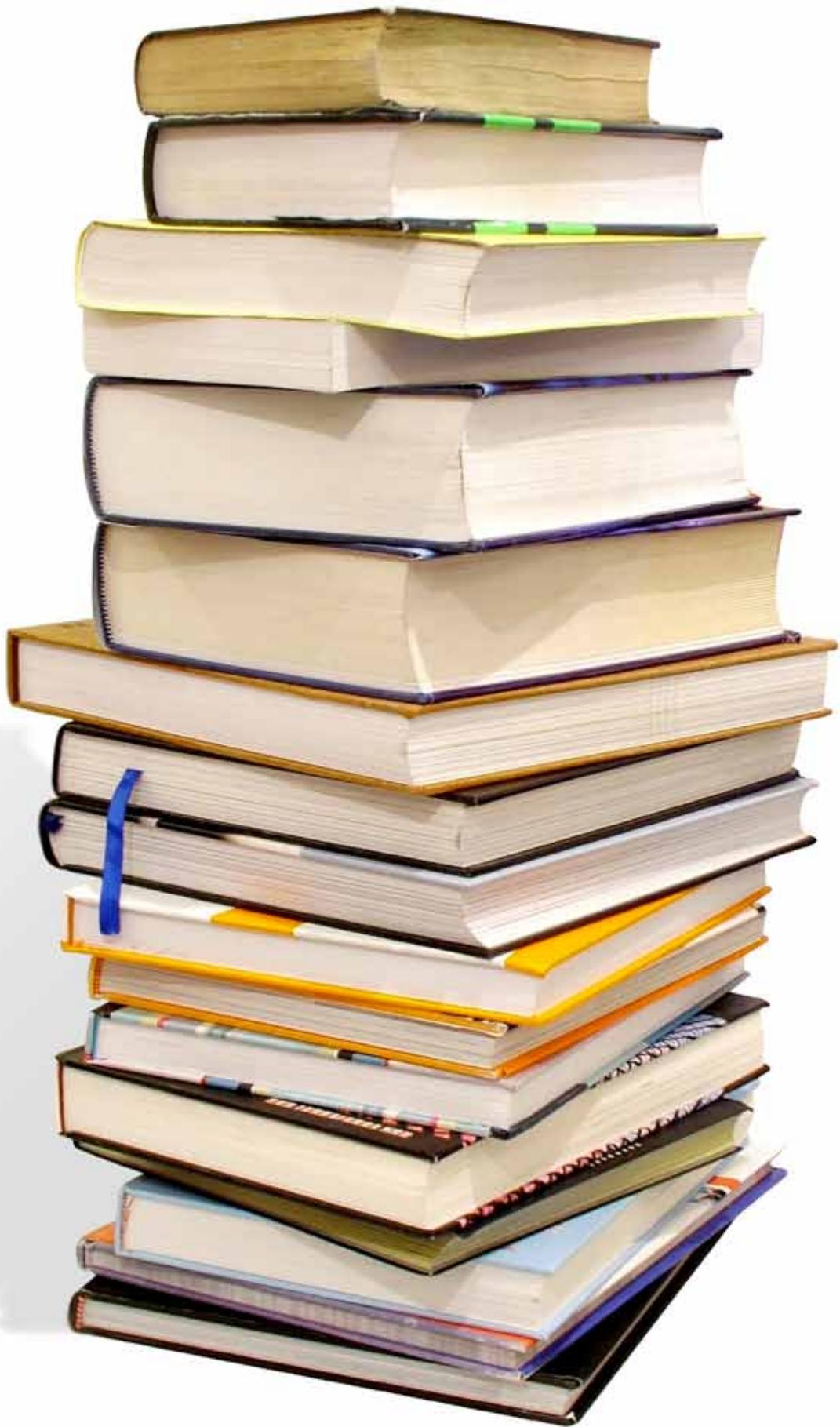
Quality Parenting Initiative

www.qpiflorida.org

TCC Fostering Achievement Fellowship

www.fosteringachievementfellowship.org

The School in your neighborhood



“Education can be a challenge for children who frequently change homes and schools.

We need to do better.

Concentrated efforts, such as this initiative, focus energy and resources on improving educational outcomes for our children.

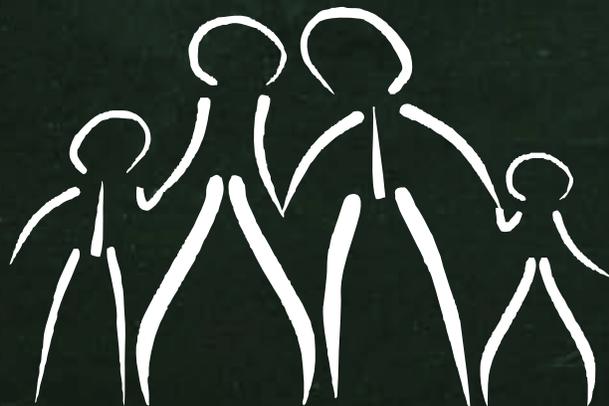
We need the parents, foster parents, group home staff, relative and non-relative caregivers, schools and the community, all to be part of our efforts.

Everybody is a Teacher!”

Mike Watkins
Chief Executive Officer
Big Bend Community Based Care

Everybody's a Teacher

Caregiver's Guide



BIG BEND COMMUNITY BASED CARE