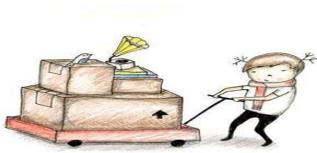


Tennessee Court Improvement Program: Did You Know?

Children in Foster Care are Entitled to School Stability when it is in their Best Interest



School Stability

A child or youth in foster care may move into a new foster home in a new area that isn't zoned for his or her home school. Does this mean that that child in foster care must change schools with each out of zone move? Not necessarily!

The school the child attended before the move is known as the **school of origin**. The school where the child is zoned after their move is called the **school of zone**.

Provisions in the law provide school stability for children and youth in foster care. School stability means a child can stay in his or her school of origin when he or she moves into care or moves into a different foster home, unless keeping the child in that school is not in his or her best interests. School stability means children and youth in care can keep the same friends, teachers, and principals for a period of time, like elementary school, middle or high school.¹

School stability is important.

One student formerly in foster care described school stability as one of the most important issues facing youth in care: "Stability is... your main issue in life and that's the biggest [thing] that you desire."²

Aside from disruptions in relationships, frequent school changes at any grade level can lead to lower scores on math and reading.³ For high school students, the consequences of frequent school changes are especially concerning. One large study that followed Colorado high school students in foster care for five years showed that as high school transfers increased, math and reading achievement decreased. The researchers also showed that high school transfers increased the risk of school dropout and decreased the likelihood of on-time graduation.⁴

School stability is important for students in foster care. Fortunately, two federal laws help support school stability: The Fostering Connections Act and The Every Student Succeeds Act.



Both laws say that children in care should remain in their school of origin even if they move away from their school zone, when it is in their best interest.

Who decides whether school stability is in the child's best interest?

Each Tennessee school district should have a policy to make Best Interest Determinations (BID) with a team that includes the school and the Department of Children's Services (DCS). A typical school stability team might include members like the student (their voice matters!), the school

¹ See Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by ESSA (Pub. L. 114-95), § 1111(g)(1)(E). Also See: TN DCS Policy 21.14

² Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis (2017). The voices of youth formerly in foster care: Perspectives on educational attainment gaps. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740916305576>

³ Castrechini (2009). Educational outcomes in court-dependent youth in San Mateo County. Issue Brief: Court Dependent Youth. Stanford, CA: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities

⁴ Clemens & Sheesley (2014). Every transition counts: Educational stability of youth in foster care. University of Northern Colorado. <https://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/pdf/reports/5-year-foster-care-trend-study-final.pdf>

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counselor, the student's teachers, the DCS Family Services Worker (FSW), the foster/ kinship family, the parent, the CASA volunteer and the guardian ad litem. If the team does not agree on best interest, then DCS makes the final decision about school stability. They have a process that you can follow after the decision to resolve disagreement. Ask the DCS FSW for information about that appeal process.

What does the Team Consider?

The team should consider how the child or youth is doing academically and socially in their school or origin, their connection to adults and students, and how close or far away the school of origin is from their new home. Tennessee's Department of Education (DOE) says that students that move more than one hour away from their school of origin can change schools without a school stability BID meeting. Although the DOE guidelines say no meeting is needed for commutes of 1 hour, if there are special circumstances, like the student is in his senior year and a transfer will mean he won't graduate, then a BID meeting might still be needed. Ask a school counselor or the child's FSW to set it up!



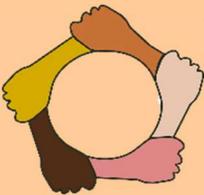
Who provides transportation if the child stays in his or her school of origin?

This should be discussed in the meeting. In Tennessee, transportation is worked out between the school system and DCS. Note that students in care can get transportation across county lines to stay in the same school, if that's what is right for a child. DCS and school systems can work out transportation together.

What if school stability is not in the child's best interests?

Then the student should be immediately enrolled in the new school.

Project Wrap Around



Young people in Tennessee's Extension of Foster Care (EFC) program told their Foster Care Review Board teams that educational instability in high school made it more difficult for them to be successful in EFC. Some young people in care lost credits, took the wrong classes, and got further behind every time they transferred schools or stepped down to a less restrictive placement. These issues caused some young people to drop out of school and lose their EFC services.

In 2017, the Tennessee Court Improvement Program partnered with the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), and the Davidson County Juvenile Court to address these concerns through Project Wrap Around. Project Wrap Around is a pilot project that seeks to improve school stability and educational outcomes for high school students in foster care. Special training, timelines and increased collaboration are all fundamental to the Project Wrap Around process. MNPS Wrap Around meetings occur when a high school student in foster care switches schools. The meetings incorporate a Best Interest Determination, a plan for transportation, and a careful review of the student's transcript. The Wrap Around Team works to identify any transcript errors and recover any coursework already completed, while charting a course toward an on-time graduation. Student services and extracurriculars are also discussed, along with special education support, if needed.

The Court Improvement Program continues to be involved in the Project Wraparound Initiative.