


BEST PRACTICES for Developing a District System to Immediately Enroll and Appropriately Place Youth in Foster Care in the Least Restrictive Education Setting³³



STEP 1

Determine Location and Method of Enrollment

The Network recommends districts consider a combination of different enrollment processes based on different home placements. 

School Site Enrollment — Districts have found that school site enrollment works well for youth living in foster/relative homes as it is common practice for a youth’s caregiver to walk into the school site to enroll a youth placed in their home.³⁴


District Office Enrollment — Districts have found that district office enrollment with an identified staff member (e.g., Director of Student Services or Foster Youth Liaison) works well for high needs students (e.g., STRTP youth, youth whose IEP requires a non-public school) as it can aid in the quick collection of records and appropriate education placement.


Online Enrollment — All Network districts are utilizing online enrollment practices where possible and appropriate to quickly gather relevant data to support immediate school placement.  Online enrollment can also be beneficial if data gathered online can be immediately imported to a SIS. 


STEP 2

Determine Records Collection Process

Determine Who Will Collect Records — The Network recommends coordination between registrars, records clerks, AB 490 Foster Youth Liaison, counselors, and special education administrators to ensure that all records are collected, and that efforts are not duplicated.

 **EQUITY CONSIDERATION** | If a district decides to utilize different enrollment processes for youth in different situations (e.g., youth in foster homes vs. STRTPs, youth in foster care vs. youth involved in the juvenile justice system) equity demands that these processes be closely scrutinized to ensure that youth are being enrolled in schools designed to meet their needs in the least restrictive environment and that certain youth (e.g., youth in STRTPs or involved in the juvenile justice system) are not being disproportionately placed in alternative school sites. Disproportionality should be regularly monitored through data analysis.

 **DISTRICT HIGHLIGHT** | When a caregiver fills out the online enrollment forms for Pomona Unified School District, and checks the ‘foster youth’ box, their SIS automatically sends a notification to the district’s Foster Youth Liaison so they can assist in the immediate enrollment process, including first holding a Best Interest Determination meeting to consider the youth returning to their school of origin.

 **PRACTICE TIP** | Combining Enrollment Practices: Some districts recommend utilizing a combination of all three enrollment practices described here to meet the different needs of youth in foster care. For example, youth living in STRTPs often have increased trauma/mental health needs and higher levels of school instability than other youth in care. Some districts recommend dedicating additional resources to collecting their records and identifying their needs prior to making an education placement recommendation. This often leads to more successful school placements rather than identifying youth after they have failed and trying to serve their needs when they are in crisis.

³³ See [Bonita USD Enrollment Flowchart Tool](#) for one example of a comprehensive enrollment process.

³⁴ During periods of full or partial physical school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Network recommends utilizing all safety precautions during in-person enrollment and/or utilizing technology to aid in fast enrollment without necessitating in-person contact.

Determine What Records are Essential to Make a Placement Recommendation — The Network recommends attempting to collect the most recent transcript, current/most recent Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan (if any), current expulsion order (if any), education rights holder contact information, and other forms used by social workers or probation officers to share education information. The Network also recommends checking CALPADS to determine 504 plan/special education status, school of origin, and school history. ▲

Determine the Process for Record Collection — The Network recommends making **Records Requests** in writing (preferably by fax or email) and following-up with a phone call to make sure the request was received. If it will take time to gather a complete set of records, ask if the most urgent records can be sent immediately, or even if information such as previous course enrollment, can be shared over the phone. If a youth in foster care does not bring records at enrollment, and records are not immediately available from prior schools, the Network recommends asking other adults working with the youth for those records (i.e., social workers, probation officers, attorneys that represent the youth, caregivers, education rights holders, STRTP staff, etc.).

Utilize Technology to Gather Records More Quickly — County electronic records sharing systems can efficiently help districts access and share records needed for quick enrollments.

STEP 3

Determine School Placement Process

If Youth in Foster Care has an IEP, Place According to IEP Requirements — The Network recommends coordinating records collection with special education staff at your district office to ensure timely receipt of the IEP for placement purposes.

Despite meaningful coordination and planning, because of the high mobility of youth in foster care and challenges with consistent record collection, districts may ultimately find themselves in difficult situations when attempting

to appropriately enroll a youth in foster care with an IEP. When attempting to determine appropriate school placements for these youth, the Network recommends that districts develop local practices and expectations that all youth are enrolled immediately. There are certain situations where immediately enrolling a youth who has an IEP, without knowing the details of that IEP, and which would require a placement change shortly thereafter, would not be in the best interests of the youth. + These situations might include: (1) when you cannot locate the IEP despite best efforts; (2) the IEP is more than a year old; (3) the IEP is unsigned; and/or (4) IEPs for youth coming out of a hall or camp (since IEPs within a hall/camp are often changed based on the limited resources available to students while attending at the hall/camp).

▲ **LOS ANGELES COUNTY HIGHLIGHT** | The child welfare agency and attorneys that represent youth in Los Angeles both have general email addresses that districts can utilize when struggling to get quick information about a youth in foster care. The person answering the email will look the youth up in the internal system and assist districts in getting needed information and records as quickly as possible.

+ **EQUITY CONSIDERATION / TRAUMA CONSIDERATION** | There is often a need to balance between: (1) the time it takes to collect enough records to determine an appropriate, and least restrictive, education placement for a youth; (2) avoiding the added trauma of additional re-placements; and (3) the mandate to immediately enroll youth. Equity demands that districts thoughtfully balance these concerns and put practices in place to ensure that records are collected as quickly as possible, and that youth are not kept out of class longer than is necessary while waiting on records.

Ensure Policies and Practices Reflect the Local Comprehensive School as Default Placement —

Create a practice to enroll all youth in their local comprehensive school unless their IEP requires otherwise, they have a school board-ordered expulsion (verified through documentation), or their education rights holder has determined and documented in writing that placement in an alternative education program is in the youth's best interest. When enrolling a youth in foster care in a comprehensive high school, ensure they are enrolled in the least restrictive environment and in the same/equivalent classes as at their prior school. For a helpful tool, see [Youth in Foster Care Enrollment Checklist](#).

Identify Additional Placement Process For High Need Students —

The Network recommends districts determine who needs to be involved in making a district recommendation for an alternative school placement including conversations with education rights holders, youth, district administrators, and the AB 490 Foster Youth Liaison. ✳ Social workers, probation officers, and minor's attorneys can also provide helpful information and insight. Youth play an important role in identifying their own strengths, weaknesses, and potential need for a smaller setting to be successful. ◻ For a complete process, see [Voluntary Transfer of Students Out of Comprehensive Schools](#). The Network encourages districts to gather all transcripts and partial credits and complete an [AB 167/216 analysis](#) prior to recommending a youth attend an alternative school based on credit deficiency. For students who need it, smaller, more therapeutic school settings may be more appropriate. The Network recommends districts create a policy, placement tools, and/or a screening committee to develop uniformity regarding when and how alternative school placement recommendations are made. In order to build helpful tools, interview different school site administration staff to identify the types of resources and supports on each campus. ◻ See [Transfer Meeting Worksheet](#) for a sample tool and a list of [Best Educational Interest Considerations](#). The Network recommends districts help education rights holders make informed school placement decisions and gain written agreement before placing a youth in an alternative education placement to protect against any issues with disproportionality. ✳


✳ **PRACTICE TIP** | If possible, AB 490 Foster Youth Liaisons are a helpful addition to the placement process for all youth in foster care. If a district does not have the resources to include them in all placement decisions, the Network recommends involving them in placement discussions for all STRTP youth and any other high needs youth including youth who have attended 3 or more high schools. These youth may require additional advocacy support to gather their partial credits from prior schools and/or AB 167/216 graduation eligibility analysis. Many of these youth would also benefit from developing a trusting relationship with an adult at school.

● **TRAUMA CONSIDERATION** | Youth in foster care have often not been appropriately supported in prior education settings and thus have lowered expectations of what they are able to achieve. It is essential that a youth's lower expectations of their own capabilities not become a barrier to their success in a lesser restrictive environment.

■ **EQUITY CONSIDERATION** | Youth in foster care are disproportionately represented in alternative education programs such as continuation schools,³⁵ often due to credit deficiencies or for behavioral concerns created when their past traumas are triggered. Equity demands a close review of enrollment practices to ensure that objective placement criteria do not create disproportionate outcomes and that a youth centered best interest approach is used. For example, if a district uses the seemingly objective criteria that youth X credits off-track for graduation are always placed at a continuation school, youth in foster care will likely be disproportionately placed there due to credit deficiencies caused by school instability. The Network recommends that districts create clear tools for advising a youth's education rights holder about which placement is in a youth's best interest, and ultimately applying those criteria individually to make recommendations to each youth's education rights holder about the most appropriate placement. The Network also recommends keeping track of data to see what the outcomes of those individualized decisions are and whether adjustments are needed to address significant disproportionality.

★ **EQUITY CONSIDERATION** | Although many districts are using a voluntary transfer process to place youth in foster care at alternative education sites, many education rights holders and youth report that they do not feel like they have a choice about changing the youth's school. Districts should examine their process and materials, and whether they provide the education rights holder and youth with the counseling necessary to help them identify their strengths, weaknesses, and needs, as well as their full range of options so that they can make an informed choice without making youth and education rights holders feel that they must choose any one option.

³⁵ "Alternative schools enroll six times as many students in foster care as all schools statewide." [Alternative Education in California: A Primer for Advocates and Community Stakeholders](#); National Center for Youth Law, 2021.

Develop Practices for Contacting and Working with Education Rights Holders— Make best efforts to collect names and contact information for education rights holders, minor’s attorneys, and CSWs at enrollment. This information will be important for communicating a youth’s needs in an ongoing way, seeking support for the youth outside of school, and is required for notification in the case of school discipline.” Words “school discipline” should be linked to new “Addressing and Avoiding School Discipline” section. Districts commonly struggle when attempting to contact education rights holders, minor’s attorneys and CSWs to discuss placement options. Some common best practices include: 

Consult any available county information sharing system or your county office of education for updated education rights holder information for a youth;

Ensure your SIS for youth in foster care has the capability of including caregiver, child’s attorney, child welfare worker, and education rights holder contact information (for a tool to help with this, see [Student Information System Page for Youth in Foster Care](#);

Utilize child welfare or child’s attorney contacts to quickly inquire into contact information or status of a youth’s education rights holder. For a tool to help with this, see [ERH Appointment Request Letter](#); and/or

Ask the youth for their education rights holder’s phone number.


Determine Class Placement Process — Working with school counselors, determine a class placement process for youth transferring mid-year that ensures youth in foster care are enrolled in the same grade and classes as at their prior school. Ensure there is a process for allowing access for these youth to classes that are considered ‘full’ or at enrollment limits. This can include opening new classes or sections. If the new school does not offer the course taken at the prior school, develop a process that ensures youth in foster care are enrolled in a course that meets the same graduation requirement.

STEP 4

Build Supports for Youth in Foster Care on Comprehensive Campuses


Many youth in foster care have experienced starting a new school at a large comprehensive campus


where they feel disconnected from the adults and students already there and struggle to fit into a school environment unwilling to change to meet their needs. The Network recommends that districts consider and implement trauma informed and academic interventions to help youth in foster care achieve success on these campuses to ensure their right to receive access to the same academic resources and supports as other students. Some options include ensuring:


Appropriate trauma informed training for all school staff; 


Creation of a [Youth in Foster Care Enrollment Checklist](#) to ensure youth in foster care have all the necessary tips, supplies, and academic and behavioral supports they need to be successful in school;

Space for new student orientation around important schoolwide programs such as Positive Behavior Intervention Supports;

Access to credit recovery programs for youth working to make up missing partial credits. 

 **PRACTICE TIP** | For youth in foster care with an IEP, there are separate considerations and obligations around appointment of [surrogate parents](#).

 **DISTRICT HIGHLIGHT** | Bonita Unified School District has ensured all personnel at all their schools have experienced at least one trauma informed training.

 **DISTRICT HIGHLIGHT** | Pomona Unified School District arranged for dual enrollment with a charter school so that youth can access a 7th period credit recovery class with a full-time teacher and access to online units, while also attending their local comprehensive high school.

Development of relationships between youth in foster care and staff * and peers. ● The Network recommends engaging counselors, AB 490 Foster Youth Liaisons, and teachers to introduce themselves to youth in foster care new to the school and briefly check in with them daily so that youth build connections and have a preferred adult they can go to when they need something for school or are in crisis.

* **DISTRICT HIGHLIGHT** | West Covina Unified School District schedules "Welcome Meetings" within 30 days of enrollment for any high school aged youth in foster care. These meetings include the youth, their education rights holder and/or parent, the AB 490 Foster Youth Liaison, social worker, and any teachers the youth wants to invite. In this meeting, they distribute a "Welcome Kit" including a backpack, school supplies, school spirit shirt, resource directory, and other helpful supplies for the youth. They then reconvene this group quarterly to monitor the youth's progress, check in on grades, and achievement of the goals set forth at the initial meeting.

● **PRACTICE TIP** | The Network recommends training peer mentors that can help integrate youth in foster care into the school community such as helping them find their classes, sitting with them at lunch, etc. who can be chosen due to their leadership in a certain interest group (e.g., theater, sports, skateboarding) that aligns with the interests of the youth in foster care they are mentoring.