



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

Youth Transition Action Teams Initiative Leveraging Community Resources to Ensure Successful Transitions for Foster Youth

The Fresno County Foster Bridge Program Provides Transition Support

Submitted by: Fresno City College; the California Connected by 25 Initiative (CC25I), Fresno County, Department of Children and Family Services

Community: Fresno County, California, with some participants coming from nearby Madera County

Key Partners: County of Fresno Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Fresno Workforce Investment Board, Fresno City College (FCC), Stuart Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation

Subject: Career Pathways, Postsecondary Education, Community Services and Support

All Youth – One System Element: Education, Career Preparation, Community Services and Support

Function: Create Linkages and Connect Systems

The Challenge:

For a number of years, the County of Fresno, Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has been subcontracting a large portion of Independent Living Program (ILP) to Fresno City College (FCC). The classes are run through the Social Sciences Division of the college. According to Carol Smith Davies, ILP Coordinator at FCC, the county liked the concept of youth taking ILP classes on the college campus so they would not be so fearful of postsecondary education. Students came to FCC for 6 to 8 weeks of classes, putting in about 50 hours. During those courses, which included a lot of team building, the students established camaraderie, worked together, and by the end, developed into a cohort that wanted to continue working together. However, there was nowhere else to send them. The challenge was how to keep the youth together and keep the excitement going.

The Practice and Evidence:

The practice: In the summer of 2006, the DCFS, Fresno Workforce Investment Board, FCC, Stuart Foundation, and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation launched the Fresno County Foster Bridge Program (the Bridge), an education and career pathway program for emancipated foster youth. "The Foster Bridge Program is an intensive program designed to offer current and former foster youth the support and guidance they need in order to make a smooth transition into college and/or vocational training, explained Lisa Nichols, CC25I Coordinator at the Fresno County, Department of Children and Family Services.

The Bridge is conducted at Fresno City College and supported by the Walter S. Johnson Foundation. Twenty youth are enrolled in the first cohort, and 20 to 25 additional youth will be enrolled in each succeeding semester over the next three years. Currently, one academic counselor, Alexandra Gonzales, is fully funded to serve the youth, and a second counselor is being recruited. WIB case managers are also assigned to the program to work with WIA-eligible youth. In addition, some youth are receiving work-study aid (if they are able to handle working while studying), and they get

the full range of financial aid. WIA eligible youth receive a stipend for attendance. The county can supply money for a deposit on an apartment.

The Evidence: The first cohort participated in a math “spa” over the summer, two weeks of remedial math work taught by an FCC math professor. The skill levels ranged from below third grade math level to higher than 10th grade. “We saw that all of them got a jump start,” said Davies, who appreciated the creativeness of the FCC faculty.

While outcome data is not yet available for the first cohort, which is midway through its first semester, Davies shared some anecdotal evidence. As an ILP instructor, she had worked with many of the students previously. “I have a history with many of the students. I see their excitement, the smiles on their faces,” Davies said. “[Their expressions say] ‘Look what I’m doing and how I’m succeeding. I’ve got a future. I kind of see what you were talking about three years ago.’” A second aspect of the youths’ work together is the way they are starting to advocate for one another. Finally, said Davies, they are putting aside their preconceived notions about college. They have come to see that for many of them, they will have to do extensive remedial work. They have decided to slow their studies down a little bit, to invest in their skill levels. Davies noted that this step “is not an easy thing to do. They have some expectations. I admire them for having the wisdom to do that.”

The Details:

The process used to establish the practice: An opportunity to build on the ILP classes arose about five years ago when Davies began to coordinate a small state grant to provide basic skills for foster youth. When Davies began managing the ILP for Fresno, she went to the county, which was participating in the Family to Family initiative, and said, “FCC has some money. What are you doing? Let’s look together and collaborate.” They began looking for and discussing options that fit both the ILP and the CC25I goals. Both programs are committed to helping foster youth make a successful transition to adulthood.

Nichols described the California Connected by 25 Initiative:

The California Connected by 25 Initiative (CC25I) is an initiative that is being tested by five counties as a fifth strategy under the Family to Family Initiative to develop and implement strategies to help emancipating foster and probation youth transition to adulthood successfully. CC25I is generously supported by the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Stuart Foundation Charles M. Schwab Foundation and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation. Fresno County, Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is one of five counties that have been given the opportunity to receive grant funding to help provide a continuum of supportive services for foster and probation youth. One of specific areas Fresno County, DCFS has chosen to target is Employment/Post-Secondary Education. Foster and probation youth graduating from high school still require significant training/mentoring to be successful in employment or higher education.

The CC25I focus matched well with the purpose of the state grant money that the ILP had received.

During the time of exploration, Davies attended a convening in Sacramento, and she talked with anyone who would listen about the camaraderie happening in the classroom. The upshot was a decision to identify a goal for the many ILP extended services they were designing: they would create a pathway to help the youth continue with their education and career development after emancipation.

The Fresno partners went to the Walter S. Johnson Foundation. They discovered that the foundation was working with several other counties on similar projects. Walter S. Johnson Foundation invited them to submit a proposal. Davies was part of a group that organized

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convenings with the Fresno Workforce Investment Board (WIB) and the County of Fresno, the Housing Authority, and the juvenile justice system to discuss pathway options and develop the proposal.

The specifics of the Bridge Program grew out of the workgroup that was part of the California Connected by 25 Initiative. The process for working together to develop the plan comes out of the Family to Family model of pulling groups together that share a location or other common interest. (The Family to Family model is organized by neighborhood.) All the participants were focused on youth who are emancipating. They were asking how they could make sure the young people are getting housing, education, career preparation, and mental health services. The organizers of the convenings did some planning to help enhance the group's work. They pulled people together at the shared table and then divided them up by workgroups. The result was 45 people working on six teams. Davies credits the Department of Children and Family Services for directing the group's efforts so effectively.

In the process of setting up the program, the partners discovered that many of the youth were not yet eligible for WIA services, or for the program that Walter S. Johnson Foundation wanted to fund, due to the low level of their academic skills. "We wanted to use Walter S. Johnson Foundation and the WIB to create educational cohorts coming from the system and have them take post-secondary classes as a group, but we knew we had issues with CAHSEE and basic skills. We knew there would have to be remediation, addressing their needs," said Davies. "We were really shocked with how low they tested. WIA targets a 10th grade level. It was rare that the targeted youth were at the 10th grade level." As a result, the partners have had to redefine the thresholds, invest more time and money on remediation, take a close look on the mix of skill levels for each cohort, and slow down the process for many of the students.

The most challenging part of developing the program was coordinating the workforce development piece with child welfare services. According to Davies, "The WIB has different requirements and standards, and they think and serve differently [from child welfare services]. [Furthermore], foster youth tend to think of workforce development as just another system, and they don't navigate well in systems." Davies said that the key was getting members of the WIB governing board behind the Bridge; once the board members were in favor of the program, then many of the traditional WIB barriers evaporated. She also stressed that the Fresno County WIB really stretched to work on the program. "I really applaud them for their efforts," she said.

The strategy and practice: Davies described two strategies she and the other partners have used in their work together. First was to engage more agencies in working directly with youth. She explained, "I love putting this compilation together in front of new audiences because until people have experienced [the connections with these special youth], they don't know the depth of the students' attachment to you personally. It's nice to see others attached and care."

Second, the partners have emphasized collaboration in their work together. They have recognized that collaborating requires stepping out of comfort zones and at times breaking the mold, which has brought fresh ideas to their work. A cornerstone of the collaboration is the weekly meeting involving the Bridge academic counselor, the WIB case manager, the college, and the county. They perform triage on the cases before them, with each agency bringing its resources. For example, a youth might need help with a security deposit on an apartment. The model is similar to the wraparound approach employed in mental health services.

Both Davies and Nichols recalled one instance when a student stated he had no food in the home. "The situation was brought up during one of the triage meetings and it was decided that we would help get the student money for groceries," said Nichols. Our job specialist, who attends the

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meetings, took the student shopping and helped teach him how to budget and shop smart. The meetings are helpful and great asset to the Bridge program."

Dalvin Baker, ILP Supervisor for Fresno County, Department of Children and Family Services, explained the weekly meetings this way:

The goal of the Foster Bridge Program is to provide the necessary supports to ensure the success of each youth who enters this program. A "behind the scenes" support the Bridge Youth don't see is the weekly Bridge Triage meetings that occur. Fresno County Independent Living Program, Fresno County Workforce Connection, and Fresno City College participate in these Triage meetings. The purpose of this meeting is to debrief about each youth. The Triage Team talks about each youth and the weekly progress they are making in college, as well as in other aspects of their life. Triage identifies the successes as well as the weaknesses each youth encounters on a weekly basis. We applaud the successes and identify what worked in order for that youth to reach that success. For the weaknesses, we work on developing a plan to overcome that obstacle so that youth could be successful in their continued growth. This is the perfect opportunity for the entire team to sit down and get on the same page with every youth. Each Triage member brings a different "piece" of that youth to the table, as we each work with the youth in a different capacity. As such, we begin working on the successful growth of the "entire" youth, not just one aspect of the youth. Each Triage member attends these meetings with one purpose in mind...to help each youth reach their full potential!

The Bridge is in the middle of working with its first cohort of 20 youth. The plan is for each cohort to be in the program for at least two years. The academic counselor not only serves youth in the Bridge program but also provides the foster youth community with a person at the campus they can go to for educational counseling issues. The counselor will serve as a touch point for the youth, a person they can go to who will be there consistently throughout their time in the program. The first semester has been intensive for the youth. "Lots of emotional stuff is coming up for them as they shift from being cared for to being independent," said Davies. "We anticipate a little less of that in the second semester."

The first Bridge cohort will continue taking general education courses in the spring, but once they identify a career interest, they may move into a certificate program. If they are eligible, they will do so with guidance from the WIB case manager. For example, if a youth wants to go into auto mechanics, the WIB case manager makes sure the young person has the math and reading skills at the level required for that certificate program. If a participant wants to become a lab technician, the case manager will make sure she has the core essential skills. Other WIA services can include career explorations, job shadowing, and/or internships.

Even when individual Bridge participants embark on a career preparation path of their choosing, they will still be connected to their cohort and Bridge supports. "I would suspect after a year or two they'll be off on their own career pathway, but they can still check in," said Davies.

The goal is to start another 20-25 youth next semester and each semester thereafter for the two following years. However, it has been difficult to recruit youth whose test scores match the requirements. "One of our biggest challenges at this time is recruiting the youth that fit the criteria. Some of youth are testing way below the 7th and 8th level and others are testing high above the 7th and 8th grade level," Nichols said. "But we are most definitely planning a cohort for Fall [2007]."

Evaluation: The main objective for the project is retention. In addition, the partners are using the outcomes measurements required by their funding sources. They are tracking how many youth are enrolled, staying enrolled, passing classes, and making progress toward a certificate or a degree,

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receiving a certificate, completing benchmarks. Along with certificate outcomes, the WIB is also tracking employment and wages. The county is looking to see if the youth are staying independent, not getting involved in the criminal justice system, and they are tracking any mental health issues.

Lessons Learned:

Some of the lessons have come from challenges. The first has been the pervasive low skill levels youth bring, which has shown the partners that they must be prepared to provide a great deal of remediation. Second, the partners are finding the program isn't necessarily for everyone, so they are looking at the marketing. The outreach has presented its own difficulties. It has been hard to locate and attract a pool of youth coming out of a diversity of caregiving environments, i.e., kin care or long-term foster care placements in private homes. This challenge has led the partners to realize that they need multiple approaches to recruitment (See "What's next" below.)

Other lessons have emerged from successes. The partners discovered that youth who are enrolled in the county's transitional living program have done quite well. "It helps us keep track of them," said Davies. On another front, cross-agency collaboration has shown Davies and the partners that understanding each other a little better is powerful. "When you can understand [other agencies] and their goals, it helps current and future interactions," Davies explained.

What's next for this promising practice?

The next step is fine-tuning the recruitment process. The county has been taking the recruitment lead because they work with the youth. A handbook has been developed that targets a youth market, and provides a clear description of the program and commitments. The county is also recruiting aggressively, targeting youth in placements that have in the past been overlooked because they traditionally do not seek ILP services. The recruitment effort has also entered the ILP classes on campus, which approximately 400 students attend each year. Davies said they would also be making sure they keep putting the message out repeatedly so the youth start to get the idea that the Bridge might be a good opportunity for them.

Where to go for more information

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Links:

Fresno County, Department of Children and Family Services
www.fresnohumanservices.org/ChildrenandFamilyServices/FamilyToFamily/CC25I.htm