



CHILDREN'S AID
AND FAMILY SERVICES

Educational Supports for Children in Foster Care



**Because Education
is the Foundation of Success**

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Education for Life

Children's Aid and Family Services is one of northern New Jersey's oldest and largest non-profit providers of human services and child welfare programs. For over a century, the agency has been improving the quality of life for thousands of disadvantaged individuals, children and families. Our mission is to preserve, protect and, when needed, provide families. The agency cares for youth, ages newborn through twenty-one, who have been removed from their birth families by the state of New Jersey due to extreme abuse and neglect or are otherwise unable to live with their families.

Each year, the agency serves approximately 330 children in foster care in our seven group homes, therapeutic family foster homes, foster and pre-adoptive homes for medically needy infants and toddlers, and children who reside in other foster homes who are in need of adoption services. Virtually all of the children have special needs due to prenatal drug exposure, the horrific conditions in which they were being raised, or a combination of both. Most of them also have learning disabilities and are in need of educational supports (e.g., tutoring, enrichment activities, educational advocacy) to build their skills, gain self-confidence, and achieve their educational goals.

The agency's core objective is to provide these abandoned, abused, and neglected children and teens with the care and supports necessary to help them to heal from their difficult beginnings and grow into healthy and productive adults. Almost all of our children are from economically disadvantaged urban communities, such as Newark, East Orange, Irvington, Jersey City, and Paterson.

Our children have endured childhoods wrought with trauma, turmoil and instability and, through no fault of their own, have been removed by the state from their families, who are unable to care for them. They are dependent on the state and their communities to provide them with the help and supports they need. These are the children we all, collectively, have committed to parent.

At Children's Aid and Family Services, our guiding philosophy that underpins the development of our programming is that children in foster care need and deserve access to the same high-quality care and supports that we would provide for our own children and grandchildren.

Our Educational Supports and Advocacy Program provides that level of care, ensuring that our children receive the services and supports they need to succeed in their educational endeavors.

Since we launched our educational program in 2009, 100% of our teens have graduated high school.

Nationally, less than 50% of teenagers in foster care graduate high school.



Thanks to philanthropic support, Children's Aid and Family Services has been able to successfully launch and sustain a full-scale tutoring program for our children in foster care. *With the help of our dedicated and talented Director of Educational Services and a legion of tutors (many of them with degrees in special education), the children are making remarkable strides in their academic pursuits. Once they leave our care, we also give our teenagers and young adults a helping hand thanks to our Thomas R. S. Burgin Parents Fund, which provides annual stipends as well as laptop computers and dorm packages for teens attending college or vocational school.*

Each of these educational programs is funded entirely through philanthropy. The continuation, expansion and enhancement of these services is dependent on ongoing funding from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Such support is vital to help us increase the number of our children who get a good education, graduate from school, have an opportunity to attend college, and achieve self-sufficiency. The human impact made on their lives is incalculable. We hope you will choose to partner with us by investing in the educational success of the children in our care.

Statement of Need

The Grim Statistics

At any one time, nearly 400,000 children who are victims of abuse and neglect are served in our nation's foster care system. Over time, too many of these children fall through the cracks in our systems of care (*i.e.*, child welfare, education, juvenile justice) to live lives marked by poverty, neglect, emotional and mental health struggles, homelessness and hopelessness. The resulting economic costs and, more importantly, the tragic loss of human potential are staggering and disheartening.

Numerous national and statewide studies of outcomes for youth leaving the foster care system have documented the sad realities of life for these youth and young adults. Youth aging out of the child welfare system experience high rates of homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and unplanned pregnancies.

This is not surprising, given that this population also experiences high incidences of abuse and neglect, trauma, separation from their families, learning and developmental disabilities, mental illness, and health problems. In addition, these young people typically lack family, community, and positive peer supports, and may not have learned or mastered the life skills needed to achieve independence and self-sufficiency.

Recent studies show some grim statistics for young adults who emancipate from the foster care system at the age of 18:

- *Less than half complete high school or receive their GED*
- *Less than 10% enroll in college and, of those, less than 2% graduate, even though 70% of youth emancipating from foster care say they want to attend college*
- *70% are homeless within two years of emancipation, and many will return to their biological parents we sought to protect them from by keeping them in foster care*
- *By age 24, only 11% earn a livable wage*
- *Three in four women, many of them with children of their own, receive some form of public assistance*

These tragic outcomes are unacceptable. No responsible parent would find these outcomes satisfactory. As we act *in loco parentis* (in place of parents) for the children entrusted to our care, our responsibility to improve the outcomes for this uniquely disadvantaged and vulnerable population of our community's children is imperative.

The Special Educational Needs of Children in Foster Care

Children in foster care are at a distinct disadvantage compared with children who grow up in a stable family. They are often required to change schools frequently, and these changes can be disruptive to students' progress in many ways, particularly when they occur during the school year or when there are multiple school moves throughout students' educational careers. The cumulative loss of instructional time frequently results in significant skill deficits in mathematics, reading, writing and general knowledge.



It has been estimated that when a student changes schools, he or she loses an average of 4 to 6 months of educational progress.

Most of our children have attended 6-10 schools prior to entering our care.

The foster children in the care of Children's Aid and Family Services generally have a history of six to ten different school placements prior to entering our care. Understandably, our children have a lot of catching up to do.

Prior to entering the agency's care, the vast majority of these children have been passed from grade to grade, despite their severe educational deficits. On average, they are

four years behind their peers in reading, general knowledge and math proficiency. As they grow into adolescence, their reading and math scores tend to decline further.

With histories of school failure, multiple foster home placements, trauma, abuse, neglect and extended school absence, the children we serve have lost a formidable amount of instructional time. They come to us believing they cannot succeed in school, and as a result, they often stop trying. Providing additional educational supports for these children is essential to their self-esteem and healthy and successful development.

Although the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees to each child deemed to have special needs a legally enforceable right to a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment, foster children with disabilities face a unique and challenging path to educational success that requires a heightened level of attention and advocacy by all stakeholders responsible for their care. Underlying many problems foster children face in accessing the help they need to succeed academically is the fact that success in our education system is often reliant on having a parent or other person to advocate on the child's behalf.

Multiple studies confirm that children in foster care often lack a knowledgeable, consistent educational advocate, and that foster parents, social workers and others who are entrusted with their care too often lack the training and awareness necessary to provide the educational advocacy that children in care especially need. As a result, youth in care often do not receive the advocacy and support they need to obtain the services and supports they are entitled to.

Given the degree of the educational needs of the children in our care, the agency's educational specialist, who is experienced in the field of special education for students with learning disabilities is an invaluable advocates for our children, in addition to providing information and supports to agency staff, case managers, birth parents, foster parents, legal guardians or court appointed "surrogate parents," as may be appropriate to each individual child's situation.

It is essential that the agency's staff and foster parents are proactive in their outreach to the schools; they must know the school leadership and engage the guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators in understanding the particular needs of our children. Most importantly, they must be educated about the legal rights of the children in care, including, but not limited to the right to: special education and related services; inclusion in the least restrictive environment; equal treatment with children without disabilities; an individualized education plan (IEP); and the right to earn a high school diploma. Utilizing the services of an educational specialist to advise agency staff and foster parents to help them to better address and assess the educational needs of the children, as well as to provide them with information regarding the child's and guardian's respective rights and responsibilities in preparation for meetings with school district staff, greatly increases the opportunities for our children to achieve educational success.

Research clearly shows that education is the leading predictor of adult success for children who are emancipated from the foster care system. Educational attainment is the number one indicator of employability and wage earning in America for persons of all backgrounds.

Educational supports are essential to facilitating higher high school graduation rates for youth in foster care.



Recent studies have identified educational supports as essential to facilitating higher high school graduation rates for youth in foster care. These supports include focused tutoring, educational skills remediation, and education of teachers and school administrators on the issues with which foster care youth are faced.

Proven Success

The agency is making great progress in laying the foundation for successful and productive futures for the children in our care. **In spite of the grim statistics, the teens in the care of Children's Aid and Family Services are beating the odds.** Although many of them come to us performing well below grade level in school, through our Educational Supports and Advocacy Program, these children are able to strengthen their academic skills with philanthropically supported one-on-one tutoring.

These are just some of the successes of our Educational Supports and Advocacy program:

- ***More than 115 students have been tutored over the past two years, with the vast majority of them making significant progress and increasing their proficiency in reading, math and writing skills.***
- ***Many of the children have made the honor roll in school, transitioned from special education into mainstream classes, and developed the organizational and study skills they need to be successful in school.***
- ***For the past four years, 100% of our teens have graduated high school, with many of them continuing to college or vocational school.***

High School and Beyond



The agency's commitment to obtaining a strong education for our children continues well into their high school careers and beyond. We are especially proud of the fact that, since 2009 when we started this program in earnest, 100% of our teens have graduated high school. A great many of these young adults have continued to college or vocational school.

As stated above, nationally, more than 50% of youth in foster care drop out of school before high school graduation—nearly twice the dropout rate for all students—and only 10% of students from foster care continue on to college or vocational school. The agency's staff and leadership are committed to helping each of our teenagers and young adults to successfully live independently and become productive and contributing members of society. To this end, the agency has established an extensive array of aftercare services for youth who emancipate from the foster care system, including the Thomas R.S. Burgin "Parents" Fund ("Burgin Fund").

The Burgin Fund inspires our youth to reach high and continues to support them into and all the way through college. Teens emancipating from foster care within the state are eligible for partial assistance with tuition, room, board, and selected educational expenses, provided they study in New Jersey. However, they have no means of financial assistance to fund the remaining portion of their educational expenses, summer and vacation housing expenses, clothing, toiletries or other day-to-day living expenses, while they are attending college or vocational schools.

The Burgin Fund provides this crucial support. As well as stipends, it funds care and dorm room packages and funds a laptop for each student. It also offers a safety net and a place these young adults can turn to for emergency financial aid. By providing our young people with the resources they will need when they leave our care, and by maintaining a coordinated array of aftercare services to support their respective journeys to adulthood, we greatly strengthen their chances of successfully transitioning to independent living.

The Burgin Fund is not an endowment fund and is supported solely by donations from individuals, corporations and foundations. One-hundred percent of the contributions made to the Fund are distributed to or for the benefit of youth in the agency's care

preparing for independent living or who have emancipated from the agency's foster care programs.

- In 2012, 24 students received a total of \$31,250 in scholarships to continue their post-secondary education.

The effect of a college education on future earnings is enormous. With a 4-year degree, youth in foster care can expect to earn approximately \$481,000 more, on average, over the course of their careers than if they had only a high school diploma.

Even if they did not graduate with a degree, completing just some college work would increase their career earnings, on average, by \$129,000.



Although we are tremendously proud of children and pleased with their respective accomplishments, we know that more needs to be done for these teenagers. It is vital that we give them a fighting chance for success.

The odds are stacked against them, and we cannot afford to be complacent about their futures. By equipping them with the skills necessary to achieve educational success, we give them their best chance for healthy and productive futures.

The Educational Supports and Advocacy Program

We currently have a part-time Director of Educational Services on staff. She is a leader and well-respected specialist in the field of special education with more than 40 years of experience in the field at the local and state levels. Her knowledge of special education law and her advocacy on behalf of the children in our care are invaluable in helping to ensure that the children receive the supports they require (and are legally entitled to) to meet their educational needs. ***The Director of Educational Services position is funded entirely through philanthropy.***

The services of our Educational Director are needed by the agency on a year-round basis, as new children are continually entering the program and require proper evaluations, the appointment of educational surrogates, appropriate school placements and other educational supports. In addition, new foster parents and newly hired agency staff are continually in need of training and education regarding special education laws and the respective rights of the children in our care to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

Specifically, our Director of Educational Services advocates on behalf of the children within the schools, ensures appropriate testing and evaluations are performed in a timely manner, identifies tutoring needs, and ensures our children are receiving the special education services so essential to their academic success, including, but not limited to, speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and remedial reading assistance. In addition to a myriad of other

activities, she also provides essential training, support and expertise to case managers, foster parents, and group home staff in order to facilitate a better understanding of the special needs and learning styles of the children in our care. Our Director works also in our group homes, helping our older adolescents with guidance on the college application process and helping our group home staff to plan enrichment activities and establish a comfortable and supportive environment for our children to do their homework and prepare for exams.

Our Director of Educational Services also arranges and secures the remedial help and tutoring supports the children need to improve their academic performance. *Each year, between 100 and 120 of our children and teens are in need of supplemental educational services, such as tutoring, SAT preparation classes, various enrichment activities, and advocacy services.*

Our students differ in many ways from the general school population, and they need both creative and individual approaches to learning to ultimately achieve educational success. Tutors are utilized in our group homes to assist individual children and teens, to the extent funding is available. The agency is currently greatly in need of funding to provide tutoring supports for the foster children in our care. In addition, the agency has been successful in recruiting a number of retired teachers who volunteer their time to tutor some of the children in our care.

There are currently more than 45 children being tutored, on a regular basis, and all of our children in need of educational “surrogates” have been paired with a trained advocate to help ensure they receive the educational services they need and deserve. While the state does provide a limited amount of monies to cover some tutoring expenses, tutoring services are heavily reliant on philanthropy.

It is the gifts of generous individuals, corporations and foundations that allow us to provide these vital supports that can and do make the difference in whether our children achieve success in school and beyond.

Please Join Us by Investing in Educational Excellence for Our Children

Supporting our children in their educational endeavors helps them to build confidence and self-esteem, an essential element of the agency’s holistic approach to healing these severely traumatized youth. The educational supports our youth receive not only help to boost their academic achievement, but also instill in them a sense of pride and accomplishment. Our youth learn quickly that they can, in fact, succeed. Perhaps, most importantly, equipping our youth with the educational supports they need provides them with the confidence and belief that they can become strong, capable adults—and this can have extraordinary implications in the lives of the vulnerable children, teens and young adults we serve at the agency.



Jasmine and Sharonda are just two of the many brave, young adults who the agency has supported in their educational endeavors:

- **Sharonda recently graduated from college with a degree in psychology and is now pursuing a graduate degree in social work.**
- **In December 2012, Jasmine completed her bachelor's degree in child and family services at Montclair State University.**

With less than 2% of youth emancipating from the foster care system receiving a four-year college degree, nationally, Sharonda and Jasmine have beaten the odds. We are so proud of them and of all of our children, teens and young adults who are making remarkable progress thanks to the generous support of our donors. Collectively, we are ensuring that these resilient young people receive the educational supports they need and deserve to live meaningful and productive lives.

Each year, our Educational and Advocacy Services program requires at least \$125,000 to fund staffing and tutoring services. In addition, we seek to raise a minimum of \$50,000 a year to support the Thomas R. S. Burgin Fund to help our teenagers and young adults pursue their further and higher education goals.

The results speak for themselves. We invite you to join us in providing more opportunities for our children and young adults to shine and to achieve their full potential. Thank you for your support!