

IMPROVING SCHOOL STABILITY: AN EXPLORATORY
STUDY OF THE WORK OF THE AB 490 LIAISONS IN CALIFORNIA

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There is a growing body of research that documents how vulnerable and academically at risk foster children are and that a high percentage of this population experience poor educational outcomes. Foster youth are more likely than other children to have academic and behavioral trouble in school, including higher rates of disciplinary referrals, grade retention and placement in special education classes, and lower performance in the classroom and on standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics (Courtney et al., 2007; Smithgall Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004; Zima et al., 2000). Contributing to the wide range of school problems of this population of children are the high levels of residential mobility and school transfers that children in foster care experience (Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995). Highly mobile foster children often miss large portions of the school year, lose academic credit due to moves made mid-semester, and have incomplete education records due to missing transcripts, assessments and attendance data (Parrish, et al., 2001; Zetlin, Weinberg & Luderer, 2004).

California Assembly Bill (AB) 490, which took effect on January 1, 2004, was a legislative effort to correct some of the educational problems that children in foster care face, particularly the impact that school instability has on educational progress. This comprehensive set of laws applies to all children who are dependents or wards of the juvenile court, who are in out-of-home placement, and whose cases are supervised by child welfare or probation agencies. It mandates that educators, school personnel, social workers, probation officers, caregivers, advocates, and juvenile court officers work together to serve the educational needs of children in foster care.

Through a number of provisions, the legislation emphasizes a stable school placement, placement in the least restrictive educational program, and access to the same academic resources, services, and extracurricular and enrichment activities as other children. A student in foster care must be immediately enrolled in a school even if school records are missing. If a home placement changes, the law allows the foster child to remain the school of origin until the end of the school term if in the best interest of that child. School districts must accept partial credits for entering foster youth who are transferring mid-semester. Lastly, each local education agency (LEA) must designate a staff person as a foster care education liaison (AB 490 liaisons) to ensure proper placement, transfer of records within two days, and enrollment of foster youth (AB 490, 2003).

This is the first comprehensive statewide survey of the AB 490 liaisons since the law went into effect in January 2004. The purpose of the survey, which is exploratory in nature, is to examine the level of implementation of the law since 2004, to understand better the roles and duties that have been assigned to the AB 490 liaisons, and to develop recommendations on what is needed to improve the law and assure its implementation.

Method

Sample

The sample in this exploratory study consisted of 94 AB 490 liaisons from county offices of education (COEs) (intermediate educational agencies between local school districts and the California Department of Education) and school districts that responded to a survey sent to 928 AB 490 liaisons throughout California. The 94 respondents represent approximately 10% of all the AB 490 liaisons in California. Although this is a

low response rate, most individuals serving as AB 490 liaisons also have other job responsibilities and may have been assigned this role without awareness or training of the challenges that foster youth face enrolling or progressing in school. In addition, there is a high rate of turnover in the position. The 10% return rate on the survey is most likely the consequence of a lack of time, interest, and/or how they came to be assigned the position. Thus, the ability to generalize the survey findings is limited; however, the patterns revealed by this small sample of AB 490 liaisons alert us to who serves as liaison, the kinds of services the liaisons perform, lingering problems preventing enrollment and attendance of foster youth, and the progress being made toward the implementation of the AB 490 mandate.

Instrument

The survey consisted of a total of 30 questions and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey was adapted from one administered to McKinney-Vento liaisons in New York State to assess the effectiveness of education liaisons in serving homeless students in New York public schools (Ascher & Phenix, 2007). Twelve questions required respondents to select multiple choice responses, 5 questions presented rating scales in which respondents indicated whether the activities occurred always, sometimes, or never, and 13 were open ended questions that requested descriptions of the respondents' responsibilities as AB 490 liaison, barriers to educating foster students and promising practices for serving foster students within their districts, and the kinds of training and networking in which they participated.

Data Collection

The data for the survey were collected statewide from AB 490 liaisons from both the COEs and the individual school districts within each county. The California Department of Education website provided contact information for the AB liaisons from the COEs. The authors sent emails to each of the AB 490 liaisons in California's 58 COEs. The emails asked each of the COE liaisons to send a list of all the school district AB 490 liaisons within their county. If the county liaisons did not initially respond, they received telephone calls at their COE office and were asked to send the information. Of the 58 counties, contact information for the school district liaisons was received for 53 of the counties. Five COEs did not respond. In total, there were 928 COE and school districts for which the authors received contact information on AB 490 liaisons.

The authors sent an email to each AB 490 liaison for which there was contact information. The email contained a detailed letter regarding the survey, the reason for the survey, instructions on how to find the survey online and on how to complete it, and assurances that all the responses were confidential. The liaisons were assured that all responses would be confidential and that there was no way to connect responses to specific individuals, counties or school districts. This process was initiated in June of 2007 and was repeated in order to obtain updated contact information for the new school year in September of 2007. The survey was set up through the Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. website and all survey results were sent directly to the website's private folder. Because the responses were confidential, the authors had no way of identifying who responded. The first time the authors sent out emails, 60 responses were received. With the second emailing, 34 more responses were returned.

Results

Frequency tables were computed for the multiple choice and rating scale items using SPSS. The open-ended responses were submitted to thematic analysis. For the thematic analysis, first, each author was randomly assigned a third of the questions to analyze. Next, the authors sorted all responses to a particular question into relevant categories so that patterns explaining regularities between responses became apparent. To check the validity of the emerging themes, the other authors reviewed the data within a theme and discussed whether the theme and interpretation fit based on their perspectives and substantial knowledge of the topic. Discrepancies were discussed until the authors reconciled all disagreements.

Multiple Choice/Rating Items

Profile of Survey Respondents

Of the 94 AB 490 liaisons who responded to the survey, 95% are employed by a school district while the remaining 5% are liaisons at county offices of education (COE). They work for school districts and county offices that vary in size. Most (83%) work for a district or COE with fewer than 25,000 students, 15% work in a district or COE with between 25,000 and 50,000 students, and 2% work in a district or COE with over 50,000 students. As far as the number of foster youth enrolled in their districts, 48% work in districts or COEs with fewer than 50 foster youth, 15% work in districts or COEs with between 51 and 100 foster youth, and 3% work in districts or COEs with more than 500 foster youth. Six percent have no foster youth enrolled in their district or COE, and 7% did not know how many foster youth were enrolled in their district or COE.

Fifty-four percent had held the position of AB 490 liaison for over 24 months while 23% had worked as an AB 490 liaison for 12 to 24 months, 17% worked for 6 to 12 months and 6% worked for less than 6 month. Most respondents (84%) were assigned AB 490 responsibilities in addition to many other duties. Ninety-two percent spent less than 25% of their time carrying out the duties of an AB 490 liaison while 8% spent between 25-50% of their time. The other assignments held varied from administrator to secretary (see Table 1). The majority of respondents stated that they were the sole staff person assigned to the AB 490 liaison position. Most of those who did have staff support—whether it be an attendance and welfare officer, administrative assistant, school nurse or secretary—reported that the person was only available part time.

Table 1: Distribution of Other Responsibilities Held By AB 490 Liaisons

School or district administrator	25%
Director of pupil personnel services	16%
Title 1 or bilingual coordinator	11%
Special education coordinator	11%
School counselors, school social workers, school psychologist	9%
Attendance officer or registrar	3%
Assorted other roles: child welfare and attendance liaison, McKinney-Vento homeless liaison, health services director, after-school coordinator, volunteer coordinator, secretary	30%

Profile of Foster Youth Served

The foster youth for whom the AB 490 liaisons were responsible lived in a variety of residential settings. In the survey the respondents were given 6 categories of residential settings: “with relatives,” “in foster homes,” “in group homes,” “with biological parents or legal guardians,” “in emergency shelters,” or “in residential treatment facilities”. The highest percentage of youth lived in foster homes most or some of the time (90%). This was followed by youth living with relatives most or some of the time (89%), in group homes (79%) and with biological or legal guardians (58%). Forty-two percent had lived in an emergency shelter some of the time while 21% had lived in a residential treatment facility some of the time.

When asked if there are school-age children in foster care in their districts or county who are not attending school, 56% did not know if school-age foster children were not attending school while 38% were sure that there were some foster children who were not attending. They felt that a third of those not attending school were truant; 13% were awaiting special education placement; 7% were awaiting general education placement; 7% were awaiting assessment; and 7% were awaiting the arrangement of transportation. Respondents (71%) indicated that most of the time foster youth are immediately enrolled in and attended school; however, 18% reported that these youth are sometimes prevented from enrolling due to no proof of residency. Less often, foster youth are prevented from enrolling because the caregiver or guardian is not present at the time of enrollment, the district or COE does not have an appropriate placement, there are no special education records, or the youth has been expelled.

Job Responsibilities of AB 490 Liaisons

When asked how they, the AB 490 liaison, learn that a student in foster care is enrolling in their schools, 21% indicated that the school registrar notifies them; 14% receive notification by the child welfare agency; and 14% are notified by the caregiver. Twenty percent indicated that they are notified but did not specify who notifies them or the manner in which they are informed. Fourteen percent noted that they are not notified.

As AB 490 liaison, they reported that they performed a variety of services for the foster youth in their schools. Sixteen percent advocated for education services, 14% facilitated the transition of school records, 13% informed parents or caregivers about educational opportunities; 12% participated in enrollment discussions for transportation needs (i.e., remaining in school of origin); 11% identified students in foster care; 8% assisted in enrolling students in foster care; 3% calculated partial credits; and another 3% did miscellaneous tasks such as attending meetings related to foster youth, talking with foster youth, arranging mental health services, and educating staff about foster care, among others.

When asked specifically whether they attend IEP meetings or refer foster youth for special education evaluations, less than a fourth indicated such involvement. Similarly less than a fourth indicated that they attended meetings convened by the child welfare agency to address home placement issues (i.e., team decisionmaking meetings [TDMs]), wraparound meetings, or family group decision making meetings). Noteworthy, however, is that respondents overwhelmingly (75%) confirmed that AB 490 requirements were considered when making decisions about placement in these meetings.

AB 490 responsibilities performed by other agencies

Many of the AB 490 liaisons who work for school districts reported that the Foster Youth Services Coordinator from their COE performed some of the responsibilities in their county mandated by AB 490. To a lesser extent, personnel from the social service agency, in particular, child welfare education liaisons and Independent Living Program (ILP) workers, assisted with some AB 490 tasks. The survey respondents also mentioned probation officers and other law enforcement personnel, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and Family Resource Center staff.

Improving communication and coordination between child welfare and the education agency, including informing the school that a student is enrolling, gaining access to school records, mediating disputes, identifying who has education rights, and providing trainings on the requirements of AB 490, was the major focus of most of the activities engaged in by the other agencies. One county had created a website that identified educational resources.

Training Received by AB 490 Liaisons

Forty-two percent of the respondents indicated that they had received training on AB 490 by the COE in their respective counties. Sometimes the COE provided formal training; at other times the training occurred through ongoing meetings. Seven percent of the respondents noted that their training had occurred at state or national conferences. Child welfare was named in 2% of the cases as having provided the training. In 17% of the responses, liaisons identified trainings, workshops, or meetings as where they had received their training on AB 490, but did not specify the training agency. Sixteen percent of the liaisons identified having learned about the requirements of AB 490

through written literature or handbooks, online materials, or through watching a video. Consulting with the previous AB 490 liaison provided needed information about the law for 4% of the liaisons. Sixteen percent of the liaisons indicated that they either had received no training or their training had occurred on the job.

Barriers to Educating Foster Students

A sure sign that schools are beginning to incorporate AB 490 provisions into their procedures and practices were respondents perceptions of (a) how often problems occurred that prevented students from immediate enrollment and attendance in their schools and (b) the time that it took their schools to address barriers to enrollment and attendance. In fact, problems occurred only some of the time and most problems appeared to be resolvable in less than a week. There were also a sizable number of respondents who felt that some problems never occurred. As further evidence that progress is being made, less than a third of the respondents indicated that a continuing problem was the lack of coordination by different stakeholder groups (see Table 2).

Table 2: Barriers Preventing Enrollment and Attendance and Time Taken to Address

Barriers Preventing Immediate Enrollment and Attendance	% of Respondents Indicating Occurred Some of the Time	% of Respondents Indicating Never Occurred
Lack of awareness of foster care status of student	43%	40%
Lack of knowledge about AB 490 provisions	39%	50%
Special education placement is not readily available	27%	59%
School or district administrators refuse to enroll students immediately	26%	65%

Transportation within the district or county office is not readily available	22%	65%
Special education transportation is not readily available	20%	64%
Barriers Addressed	% of Respondents Indicating Problem Resolved Within a Week	% of Respondents Indicating Problem Resolved Within 1 Week to 1 Month
Placement of students within appropriate special education environment	59%	23%
Special education transportation provided	53%	27%
Support of school, district, or COE administrators obtained to enroll FY	80%	8%
Provision of transportation within district or county	65%	14%
Coordination Within Stakeholder Groups	% of Respondents Indicating Lack of Coordination Sometimes Causes Problems	% of Respondents Indicating Lack of Coordination Never Causes Problems
School staff (i.e., teachers, school counselors, nurse)	32%	56%
Department of Social Services/Child Welfare Agency	38%	34%
Special education program/IEP team	31%	57%
Emergency shelters	22%	46%
School transportation office	17%	68%
Juvenile court/child attorneys	14%	38%
CASA	14%	38%

Agencies or non-profits providing tutoring and other academic supports	12%	48%
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Thematic Responses

Most Satisfying Part of Job as AB 490 Liaison

Almost half of the respondents noted their helpfulness as a resource to the school staff, and that the foster youth were the most satisfying part of their job as AB 490 liaison. They kept foster parents, foster youth, and school personnel informed about the foster youth’s progress in school and of services that the foster youth needed. They identified who the foster youth were at the school, advocated for the foster youth, and helped schools identify services and programs that would benefit the foster youth. They served as the contact person for various agencies and personnel who needed to communicate with the school. Some liaisons met individually with foster youth and helped connect them to needed tutoring, school clubs, and after-school programs. Some liaisons helped foster youth, especially foster youth residing in group homes, transition to the new school or continue to attend a school when their group home placement changed. A fourth of the liaisons reported facilitating enrollment and record transfer for the foster youth. Some liaisons calculated partial credits for foster youth and tracked their progress while they were enrolled in the district. Liaisons also led staff in-service trainings about the requirements of AB 490 and kept staff informed about changes in the laws related to foster and homeless youth.

Most Challenging Aspects of Job as AB 490 Liaison

Respondents reported that the area where they faced the greatest challenges involved communication between child welfare and education. It appears to be a

problem in two areas: 1) failure to notify the education liaisons that a student has moved into or out of the school district; and 2) lack of information about the student from the placing agency. Among the specific problems identified were: child welfare does not complete the change of schools form; students leave the school but are not checked out; delay in getting information about the student to the school; difficulty in contacting social workers; no way of knowing who the foster youth in the school district are; the requirement that the student be enrolled immediately in an appropriate program but not having sufficient information to do so; providing transportation; no education passport; and no information on who is the holder of education rights for the student.

Respondents admitted that there were also problems within the school district in obtaining and sending school records within the two-day timeline required by the law. One liaison reported that the school registrars do not recognize the need for transferring records in a timely manner and therefore delays occur. There was also concern expressed about the placement decisions that were being made. Two examples given include a student changing placements near the end of a school year and placement decisions being made without input from an educator.

Another challenge cited by the respondents was the vagueness of the job description of AB 490 foster care liaison. One went so far as to say, “I have no true knowledge of my actual task responsibilities.” Others felt that they did not have sufficient time to do the job because of other duties that they have within the school district.

AB 490 is an unfunded mandate, and this continues to be a problem. Respondents reported that this is especially a barrier for them in providing transportation

to assure that the student can remain in the school of origin as well as paying for needed services such as tutoring and counseling services.

A number of liaisons reported that it was a challenge to keep informed about changes in the law and policy. Other challenges that were reported included working with schools that do not want to give partial credits, addressing the disproportionate number of youth placed in non public schools and alternative education settings, and dealing with uncooperative caregivers.

Specific Strategies for Enrollment and Attendance

While procedures for enrollment and promoting attendance are the same for all students, some districts rely on AB 490 provisions to better support foster youth. Many liaisons indicated that foster youth are immediately enrolled at schools in their district. This occurs because in those districts administrators, secretaries, and registrars have received training by the COE or district liaisons on AB 490 enrollment procedures. A few districts receive a notification from the child welfare agency when a child has been placed in the district. In some small school districts, ongoing communication between school staff facilitates enrollment of foster youth. In one district, a centralized site where all education documentation is stored is particularly helpful for foster youth who move around. As one liaison described it, “We have a tiered structure of communication and support beginning with the enrollment office and including the school counselor, District Social Worker, [child welfare] Social Worker, and the district liaison. We all work together to ensure the compliance of AB 490 and to monitor attendance and academic progress.”

Placements tend to occur immediately except when foster youth have Individual Education Plans (IEPs). One liaison reported, “Immediate enrollment for regular education students. Some times delay in placing special education students in a contract program because we do not have the accommodations in our district for some students or arranging contracted special education transportation.” If school records are missing, the AB 490 liaison is often called upon to conduct a search for records. It is also the AB 490 liaison’s responsibility to contact the caregiver or placing agency and track the foster youth’s progress and attendance.

Districts monitor attendance of all students, and many utilize School Attendance and Review Boards (SARBs) and outreach counselors when truancy occurs. Some districts have unique procedures, “Administrative staff intervention, parent/guardian contact and truancy abatement, for any student having attendance issues.” A frequent responsibility of AB 490 liaisons is to monitor attendance of the foster youth population and work with the caregiver (foster parent or group home staff) and social worker when attendance problems occur. One liaison noted, “I work with the student and foster care person immediately.” Prevention programs are available in some districts as well as after-school tutoring and academic Saturday school. One district assigns Adult Mentors to foster youth.

Promising Practices for Serving Students in Foster Care

The liaisons were asked to describe any promising practices that their school districts or COEs had developed to serve the needs of students in foster care. They are identified below.

Educational surrogates. One county developed a unique educational surrogate program to supply surrogate parents for students in foster care who do not have parents to sign consent for special education assessments or services. The Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) in the county had been responsible for providing educational surrogates; however, the need for surrogate parents was far greater than the supply of volunteers. The school district AB 490 liaison and others in the school district collaborated with a community based organization to expand the supply of volunteers. This collaboration included recruitment, training, and the provision of technical assistance to volunteers appointed as surrogate parents. The school district provided support on background checks, identifying students who needed surrogate parents appointed, and matching surrogates to specific students. Many of the volunteer educational surrogates are parents of school district students.

Mentoring/Tutoring. Another county developed a mentoring program that involved school administrators, counselors, teachers, and community volunteers as mentors. This county also provided information to students in foster care and their guardians on an ongoing basis regarding work-related opportunities, academic counseling, and medical services. As relevant information became available, the AB 490 office mailed it out using mailing labels of students in the district who had been identified as having guardians. The district research office, using its database, supplied these labels. The district's legal counsel had approved this plan whereby the names and addresses of students with guardians were only provided to the AB 490 office so as to maintain confidentiality.

The Tutor Connection Program trains future teachers about the unique needs of foster youth and then has them serve as volunteer tutors. This program wraps academic support for children in foster care and systems improvement work all in one program.

Database. The COE in one county developed a Foster Youth Service information system that linked the school district with the court, probation, social services, and the COE with an online database. Another county is in the beginning stages of creating a database that will keep track of students in foster care and how many contacts are made with each child. One AB 490 liaison created an enrollment worksheet that other school districts in the county have adopted. This database helps the liaison keep track of new enrollments and disenrollments.

Court orders, MOUs, and grants. One county has a standing court order between school districts, probation, and the children and family services. This partnership has helped to focus the participants on finding appropriate school placements in which students can be successful educationally as well as to ensure student stability.

One AB 490 liaison reports that the AB 490 agreement between their partner agencies, the school districts and the COE, has significantly helped to set the rules and guidelines for how they work with foster youth. Another county has a Safe School Student grant that helps them coordinate services.

Training. The Casey Family Programs “Endless Dreams” video is shown each year to train school office managers, health technicians/school nurses, beginning teachers, and counselors. The video helps the school personnel to become aware of the specific needs of the highly transient student foster care population and to refer any issues related to this population to the AB 490 liaison.

Effective School Support Services

When asked to identify effective school support services, a third of the respondents named a variety of services including Student Study/Success Team (SST) meetings, outreach counselors, and ongoing staff development offered through the district. Two respondents spoke specifically about how their districts handle students with care and concern and another commented on how administrators are committed to funding services. Another third of the respondents noted the good communication and collaboration that occurred between the schools, the placing agency and caregivers. In one county, many of the services are located within one department and that facilitates coordination. Two respondents identified programs such as Tutor Connection and ILP as providing helpful support to the foster youth. Lastly, the availability of alternative programs and community schools was identified as a vital service.

Networking with Other AB 490 Liaisons

Two thirds of the respondents indicated that they network with other liaisons from their county. Many see networking as an important and necessary part of their work. One respondent stated, “In order to validate the importance of this position, I think it is necessary to ask the professionals to come together to make sure we are all on the same page as to what the law says and what has made best practices. In our region, our local school districts meet once a month to discuss current frustrations and successes. It is extremely helpful.”

Over a third of the liaisons regularly attend meetings, which are held every 1 to 3 months and are organized by either Foster Youth Services or the Child Welfare and Attendance Office. Other AB 490 liaisons met less often with their counterparts in

neighboring districts and some relied on emails and phone calls to seek advice, arrange for services, or keep informed of changes in district or state AB 490 policies and practices. Some liaisons had no formal contact but had AB 490 district liaison lists that they used when needed. A few liaisons mentioned attending the annual state convening of foster youth liaisons. One third of the liaisons either did not respond or indicated that they have no contact with other liaisons. A handful of liaisons noted that there is not enough time to meet. One stated, “Our COE does not support collaboration among our foster youth liaisons”.

Discussion

The respondents made a number of suggestions to meet the challenges they face as AB 490 liaisons. First and foremost was to engage in more collaboration with social services to improve the working relationship. This, it is believed, will address some of the problems that have arisen when the district does not receive timely notice that a student has been placed in or removed from the district. It could also lead to implementation of the education passport.

The respondents also recommended that they be given more time to dedicate to the position, namely, that it be a full-time position within the school district, and that they have full-time support staff to assist them in their work. Another suggestion involved the liaisons within the county meeting regularly to network and to share common problems and solutions. It was also felt that there needed to be more training.

They wanted to be included in decisions affecting foster youth, particularly placement decisions. If they had educational information on the student prior to the student’s placement, they would be in a better position to provide the appropriate

education services. They also would be able to inform child welfare about the education options available if the child were placed in a particularly area.

Those who responded to the survey strongly urged that caregivers be given better training that would emphasize the importance of education in a child's life. In addition it was felt that caregivers needed more support to help them work with the children in their home. Finally, adequate funding would solve some of the transportation issues as well as increase community resources and staff, thus improving the liaisons ability to respond to the intent of AB 490.

Conclusion

In sum, this exploratory study, with feedback from 10% of AB 490 liaisons in California, sheds light on continuing barriers to the implementation of AB 490 as well as the progress being made to better support foster children and youth as they move through school. The role of the AB 490 liaison appears to provide the structure and organization to facilitate at least some collaboration between the child welfare and education systems. Students in foster care have an advocate at the school to help them enroll, see that their records are transferred, and troubleshoot for them when things go awry. The COE and districts need to increase their commitment to the liaisons – they need to acknowledge the important role that the liaisons are playing in addressing the needs of the foster student and be supportive so that the liaisons have the time and training to do their job. Because of AB 490 there is more awareness by school and child welfare personnel about barriers to educational progress. The result is movement toward more timely enrollments of foster students, the provision of special education and school support when needed, and more communication between child welfare and school staff. Much more still needs to be

accomplished to support the educational potential of foster students; however, these preliminary data show that, in California, through the work of the AB 490 liaison, some counties and districts are moving in a positive direction toward that end.

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