

Capacity Building Series

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SPECIAL EDITION # 37

Improving the Educational Outcomes of Children and Youth in Care

Teachers matter ...

"I went to another teacher I knew taught the same course for help when I would miss class. I found this teacher's way of explaining helped me better understand the material. I continued to ace all my math tests."

- Youth in Care,
Graduated high school 2011

According to the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies' (CAS) *Gateway to Success: Cycle Three*, since 2006-07, the number of Crown wards, ages 19 and 20, successfully completing high school and/or attending a postsecondary institution increased by 4 per cent from 42 to 46 per cent. Although not directly comparable, due to differences in methodologies, Ontario's high school graduation rate for 2011-12 was 83 per cent.

What can we do as educators to support these vulnerable learners? This monograph serves as an introduction to the educational challenges children and youth in care face and offers some practical suggestions for teachers seeking to better support them.

Identifying Children and Youth in Care

Identifying children in care of or receiving CAS services can be a challenge for schools and teachers. In Ontario, there are 46 CASs and in 2012-13 there were 24,841 children and youth in care (approximately 50 per cent were Crown wards) and 47,925 in ongoing protection cases.

Sometimes schools become aware that a student has been taken into care by a change in home address or legal guardianship. They may also be informed by the direct involvement of the CAS. However, this is an unreliable way of identifying children and youth in care since not all children and youth in care wish to have their

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Student Achievement Division

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support every child
reach every student



status disclosed. Still others may be very open about their lived experience and wish to share their perspective with peers and staff. First and foremost, it is important to respect the wishes of the student when discussing his or her status or exploring educational supports. Keep in mind, though, that some students may wish to access supports available through school, but are fearful of the potential stigma that could result from their status becoming known. Further, not all students view school as a safe place to put aside home realities.

For educators who may be unfamiliar with the legislation for children and youth in care, here are the custody scenarios that students may be dealing with:

Society Wardship: A court may order that a child will be a ward of a CAS for a specified period, generally not exceeding 24 months, according to the *Child and Family Services Act*. During this time, the CAS takes on the rights and responsibilities of a parent.

Crown Wardship: A court may order that a child will be a permanent ward of the Crown in Right of Ontario. The CAS having care of the child must exercise the rights and responsibilities of a parent, until such time as another Court order is made (i.e., for adoption and termination of Crown wardship), the child attains the age of 18 or marries.

Temporary Care Agreement: The child's parent or guardian and the child (if 12 years of age or older) voluntarily sign a written agreement for a CAS to have care and custody of the child for a specified period of time (not exceeding 12 months). Under the agreement, the parent or guardian maintains parental rights except those they agree the CAS can exercise pursuant to the agreement.

Temporary Care and Custody Order: A court may order that a child be placed in the temporary care and custody of the society where a protection application is being adjourned for more than 30 days.

Continued Care and Support for Youth Agreements: Eligible youth, ages 18–20, can receive financial and other supports from a Children's Aid Society to help them build on their strengths and meet their goals during their transition into adulthood.

Once in the custody of a Children's Aid Society, placement may range from group care to customary care. Here is the range of placement scenarios:

Group Care: Staffed and often more structured than other types of placements.

Foster Care: Provides a family-like home. Length of placement can range from a couple of days to years.

Kinship Care: Provided for children who are in the care of a child welfare agency and are placed with a member of their extended family or community.

Customary Care: Is the care and supervision of a First Nation, Métis or Inuit child by a person who is not the child's parent, according to the custom of the child's Band or native community.

Blamed for not having parents ...

"In high school, teachers blamed me for not having parents by assuming it was my own fault and a result of rebellion, when this was not the case."

Youth in Care,
Graduated high school 2012

Supporting Children and Youth in Care in the Classroom

Children and youth in care face the same problems as other students. These may include pressures and challenges concerning race, gender, sexual orientation/preference, disability and religious or cultural tensions. However, in addition to these challenges, they often face issues relating to their child welfare status, including abuse, loss, changes in placement, family supports and living semi- or fully independently. Some who have been through such life challenges report feeling the need to grow up before their peers and of having missed out on the rights of childhood. Discussions of overcoming the challenges faced by children and youth in care must include the recognition that these students are living “amidst a staggering amount of disruption, deprivation, negative peer influences and abuse in other parts of their lives” (Burrell, 2003).

Children and youth in care are also connected to other systems – whether youth justice, mental health, family court or the shelter system – which adds another layer of complexity and challenge to their lives. In this context, Grant and Zweir (2011) caution that we need to “take into account students’ intertwining identity axes” or we risk “reproducing patterns of privilege and oppression, perpetuating stereotypes, and failing at the task we care most deeply about: supporting all students’ learning across a holistic range of academic [and] personal ... outcomes.”

A recurring theme throughout the academic literature that is resonant with stories of lived experience is the importance of a “caring adult.” Educators and school staff who make the effort to build relationships with children and youth in care can have a deeply meaningful impact on their success in school. For many youth, the school is a safe place. A caring adult in the school reinforces this notion of the school as a safe place.

How to Provide Support

Students in care have said that they want to be acknowledged for their strengths, given help when it is needed and treated in the same manner as other students. They have emphasized that when there are challenges to overcome, they appreciate discreet support and accommodations to help them through the difficulties. Here are some ways to provide support:

- Identify one or more caring adults in the school who can commit to touching base regularly with students and help them focus on their strengths and abilities.
- Ensure that students are involved in their educational plans, envisioning short- and long-term goals, and identifying strengths and needs.
- Make positive phone calls to foster parent(s) and/or case workers and celebrate successes.
- Talk with students and help them connect to activities that interest them.
- Encourage and support positive relationships with peers in and out school.

(Adapted from Alberta Education, 2011)

Forced to the periphery ...

“The stigma attached to being a youth in care is an overriding concern for youth in care. They have already faced the challenge of being forced to leave their home because their home lives are disruptive and unhealthy for a multitude of reasons. Unfortunately for youth in care, the next challenge they face is trying to fit back into a society that asks them, ‘What did you do?’ They are continually forced to the periphery of society ... ”

National Youth in Care Network

When learning takes a back seat ...

“Learning will take a backseat to survival; there are just some basics of life that are more important than getting good grades, such as safety, sleep and nutrition.”

– Former Student in Care

Remember ...

We all share a responsibility to protect children from harm. Ontario’s *Child and Family Services Act* provides protection through requirements for professionals and officials who interact with children to report suspicions of abuse. The *Act* defines the phrase “child in need of protection” and sets out what must be reported to a CAS; these include physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and risk of harm. If a child discloses abuse, it is important to listen to them, to be supportive, and to report the abuse to CASs or police without interpretation.

As educators, we occupy a privileged position in the life and development of a child and we are often best situated to identify and report signs of abuse. It is important to remember that absolute certainty of abuse is not required prior to making a report – only reasonable grounds that a child is or may be in need of protection. For more information, visit the Ministry of Child and Youth Services website.

A Joint Protocol for Student Achievement

In the fall of 2014, the Ministries of Education and Children and Youth Services will release a Joint Protocol for Student Achievement. This protocol sets minimum expectations of collaborative practices and processes to support the educational success of children and youth in care or receiving services from a CAS.

Many school boards and societies have already developed positive, collaborative practices and relationships. The protocol builds upon best practices and leverages the knowledge of those who have already started this important work. Its purpose is to address the educational success of children and youth in care by:

1. Establishing joint principles and priorities that place the needs and circumstances of the child/youth at the centre of school board and CAS decision-making.
2. Establishing “care teams” to form a circle of support around the student that acts to promote the student’s interests and reflects the child/youth’s own views and wishes.
3. Promoting greater understanding of the educational supports and opportunities available to children and youth in care.
4. Identifying mechanisms to allow for children and youth in care or entering care to remain in their school of origin when their residence changes to ensure stability and continuity.

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