

Special Education Advocacy Funding for Youth Experiencing Foster Care

Summary:

A collaborative group of nonprofits is calling for funding to support the special education needs of Michigan youth experiencing foster care. Specifically, the state should allocate \$2 million for special education advocacy to The Arc Michigan, increasing the capacity of Michigan's federally funded Parent Training and Information Center, Michigan Alliance-PTI to use a network of special education advocates to provide intensive support that helps youth understand their rights and options, secure needed education services in school, develop graduation plans, decrease suspensions, expulsions and dropout, and increase achievement.

Proposal - FY 23

A \$2 million allocation for special education advocacy should be targeted to youth experiencing foster care and a diagnosed or suspected disability. Funds would go to The Arc to contract with its existing network of advocates to provide advocacy and support to these youth.

Background:

Michigan students in foster care have particularly low graduation rates compared to other special populations in Michigan. In fact, only 40% of students experiencing foster care graduated in 4 years in 2019 (26% dropped out), compared to 82% statewide. This is much lower than national rates.

Youth experiencing foster care need more academic support in this moment than ever before. The pandemic and subsequent school closures and forced virtual school in the 2020-2021 school year led to significant academic declines for all students, and many have struggled with the transition back, even while schools have reduced capacity due to staff shortages. Students with disabilities face particular challenges, as services were too often reduced or not provided when students were remote.

Despite these soaring needs, MDHHS Education Planner positions were eliminated starting Jan. 1, reducing the educational safety net even more for youth experiencing foster care.

Because of their histories of abuse, neglect, trauma, placement instability and educational disruption, youth experiencing foster care require more intensive educational services to succeed, yet they often don't have anyone consistent or skilled

enough to advocate for those services. Evidence shows that the school experience of children in out-of-home care plays a key role in stability in placement. For example, Fletcher-Campbell (1990) found that failing to arrange suitable education could lead to the failure of a placement. Foster parents were unable to tolerate situations when difficult children were in the home all day, rather than school, for instance.

A 2020 statewide service assessment conducted by the Michigan Interagency Transition Team (MITT) identified a gap in services provided to transition-age youth with disabilities and their families, including housing, family supports/training, customized employment, job counseling, mental/physical health services, post-secondary education preparation and youth self-advocacy. Access to these services are either non-existent or greatly vary across the state.

The school experience is also critical for a successful transition out of foster care and the juvenile systems. Unfortunately, multiple studies have found that students in foster care are twice as likely to drop out of school and three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than students in the care of a parent or guardian. Similarly, youth in the juvenile justice system are more likely than their peers to be absent or truant, face disciplinary action, need evaluation and remedial services, perform below grade level, have a disability that qualifies them for special education services, and drop out of high school. Education is at the center of their rehabilitation needs. This population's greatest chance at ending offending behaviors is sustained and consistent attendance in school, along with a quality education and access to educational resources as needed (Chaney, 2013).

In the Yale Law Journal, Phillips (2008) argues students with disabilities need external advocates to achieve optimal outcomes because of the complexity of disabilities, formal rules of the system, lack of knowledge about the disability and system, and difficulty interacting with schools. These challenges are exacerbated for low-income homes and court-involved youth. California law requires that youth in foster care are assigned an educational liaison to provide support and ensure that decisions are made in the student's best interest (CEC § 48853.5).

Case managers are able to support school enrollment and coordination of transportation to maintain school of origin, but special education, discipline advocacy and more specialized academic support is likely outside of their capacity and expertise. We know that case managers often struggle to keep up with all their responsibilities and historically, we have seen educational needs fall through the cracks.

Since October 2020, The Arc Michigan, Michigan Alliance-PTI, Student Advocacy Center of Michigan and The Arc of Northwest Wayne have been partnering on

“Project Launch” to improve educational outcomes for youth with disabilities experiencing foster care. The Arc currently contracts with local advocacy organizations to provide system navigation and direct support and has the capacity to administer this project.