

Sharing data across education and child welfare systems

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SUMMARY

Mollie Bradlee, a Foster America fellow and now Deputy Director of Office of Children, Youth, and Families at the Colorado Department of Human Services (CO DHS), supported an effort among the state's child welfare and education agencies, county child welfare agencies, and local school districts to share data to better support the educational needs of youth in foster care.

THE OPPORTUNITY

In Colorado, 24 percent of youth in foster care graduated high school on time, compared to 80 percent of students statewide. One challenge in supporting the educational needs of youth in care is that foster care and education are administered by different entities: the former at the county level and the latter by local school districts. The separate administration of foster care and education results in challenges in sharing information, making it hard to even identify which students in a school district are in foster care. CO DHS set out to integrate child welfare and education data, resulting in a more holistic picture of a young person's history and needs, to inform how child welfare and education systems work together to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care.

THE SOLUTION

Convene a broad set of cross-sector stakeholders. CO DHS first set out to identify and convene a broad set of stakeholders to explore the question of education and child welfare data-sharing. CO DHS brought together a number of different stakeholders, including representatives from child welfare, school districts, philanthropy, and technology. While identifying prospective members for the coalition, CO DHS considered those already working to address the data-sharing challenges, as well ensuring that the diversity of Colorado's regions and school districts were represented. Additionally, volunteers from Code for America, a nonprofit organization that enlists technology and design professionals to work with public sector entities to improve their use of technology and design, joined the coalition to lend their technical expertise and capacity to build a prototype of the data integration solution.

Understand data systems and address barriers to integration. The coalition set the goal of integrating data so that child-level education and child welfare data can be viewed in one application. The coalition discussed core design principles and objectives for the data integration, such as highlighting opportunities for student supports and interventions. With design principles and objectives in mind, the group identified data fields that would be important to collect and integrate, potential barriers in collecting and sharing that data, and ways to address those barriers. Key questions the coalition considered in identifying barriers to data collection and sharing include:

- How often would the data need to be collected?
- When would the data need to be updated?

- Where does the data live?
- Which authorities and policies govern the storage and use of that data?

The group is currently working on a survey of each party's data system to validate the data fields of interest and confirm that data is currently being stored in a way that would be able to be integrated with data from other systems.

Draft data-sharing agreement. The coalition understood that any data-sharing agreement needs to be compliant with data use regulations laid out in policies like the Uninterrupted Scholars Act and Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. Following the examples of successful data-sharing and integration that already happened within some Colorado counties, the coalition drafted a multi-county, multi-district data-sharing agreement that will enable county agencies and school districts to share education and child welfare records across county lines.

THE RESULT

Data-sharing and integration between schools and child welfare will provide both entities with a holistic view of the child's educational needs to better identify, design, and coordinate services that will improve the educational outcomes for youth in foster care.

Furthermore, the success of the project may provide a blueprint for Colorado to move forward on other data integration efforts, such as those among child welfare, education, public health, and juvenile justice, to improve the state's ability to serve children, families, and communities in a more effective and coordinated way.