Dear Families,

At the time of this writing and publication, there are still a lot of unknowns about the upcoming school year. We know that, as our current health crisis continues to change the way we interact with one another and school representatives, there will continue to be questions and needs for more support. Please know that we are committed to meeting those needs as they arise. We encourage you to reach out to our support team at any time if you have questions or concerns.

The Team at the Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center

Partnering with School Staff for Supportive Classroom Practices

Before we know it, school will be back in session. As you may have learned during our time sheltering in place, and the home schooling that came along with it, communication is key to a successful school partnership. However, the amount of communication you have with the school the child in your care attends may vary widely and often depends on school district policies. Some schools may speak freely with foster parents, while others may require signed releases of information from the birth parents first. Schools can communicate on some level; for example, attendance, grades, or certain behavior issues. However, there is information protected by HIPPA laws that foster parents cannot be provided without consent.

A school guidance counselor shared that communication can be complicated due to the legal aspects of a foster care placement. "I want foster families to know that we are not being nosy or judging in any way if we ask a lot of questions about who we can or should communicate with and who is able to make academic and medical decisions. We just want to make sure we are involving everyone we can to help the student succeed."

When, or if, you can share information with a teacher, you may want to provide strategies for how to work with the child in your care. Many school districts are moving towards trauma-sensitive classrooms and teachers have various amounts of training in understanding trauma and its related behaviors.

Teachers can identify signs of trauma by looking for fight, flight, or freeze behaviors. An example of a fight behavior would be yelling or arguing with a teacher when they ask for an answer to a math problem. Flight behaviors don't just mean running away. It can also look like a student zoning out, falling asleep in class, always keeping their hoodie up, or hiding under a desk or table. Freeze behaviors can be a student appearing confused when spoken to or staring blankly when asked a question.

How can you support teachers if these types of issues come up? Here are some suggestions you could

provide to school staff:

- Create a sense of safety. Give the student additional space when they need it. For example, allow them to leave a group and complete work on their own if they are feeling stressed out.
- Give the student a sense of control over their environment, such as where they would like to sit or how they would like to complete an assignment.

- Create a sense of connection. Check in often to see how they are doing. Build a relationship beyond academics.

Teachers won't always know when they have a child in foster care in their classroom and you may not be able to share that with them. However, these strategies are good for all children in general, in and out of school.

Special Education Services
Understanding School Acronyms

"How was school?"

"Good, I saw my OT in the morning then I had to take a test in the resource room because of my ADHD. It was modified, so I think I did pretty well."

"Huh?"

In some cases, the children in your care will have an Individualized Education Plan, commonly referred to as an IEP. An IEP is collaboratively designed to meet a student's unique needs in school. It is more than just a written legal document which lays out the program of special education instruction. It is a list of services that must be followed by teachers and other staff in order for students to make progress and thrive in school.

Depending on the level of school involvement you are granted in your specific situation, you may have access to the written plan, or you may just hear the child in your care or their teacher talk

about services which may include accommodations, modifications, or both.

⇒ **Modifications** change *what* a child is taught or expected to do in school.
⇒ **Accommodations** change *how* a child learns or accesses the curriculum.

For example, a student with dyslexia may struggle to read a novel at the same pace as the rest of the class. An accommodation could be to let a student listen to the book using technology. This accommodation would allow the student to keep up with the rest of class as they read the same book. A modification, on the other hand, could be that a student only has to read certain parts of the book. Or, they may be assigned a different book to read that is at an appropriate reading level.

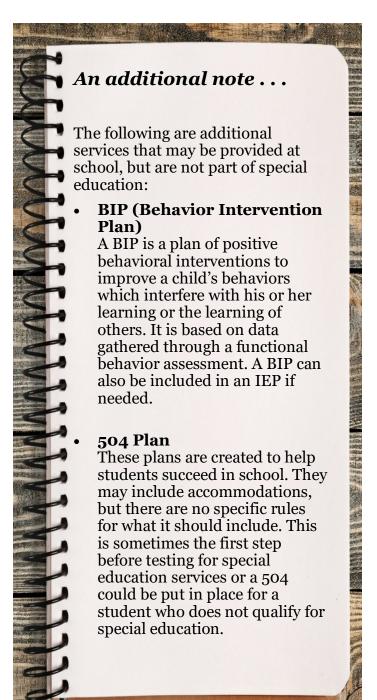Following are some commonly used terms and acronyms you may hear from birth parents, teachers, or the child in your care. It is important that the

child is aware of the services they should be getting so they can advocate for themselves in school.

- **OHI: Other Health Impairment**
Students with conditions such as attention deficit hyper-activity disorder (**ADHD**) as a medical diagnosis may have an IEP under the category of OHI. The diagnosis means that the student may have a heightened awareness that makes it challenging to stay focused in the typical education environment and may adversely affect a child's educational performance.

- **SLD: Specific Learning Disability** (also referred to as learning disability or **LD**) A student may have a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or to do math calculations.

- **ED: Emotional Disturbance** (previously referred to EBD) An IEP for ED seeks to help children who have one or more conditions that adversely affect educational performance. This may include an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. It may also apply to children who have a hard time maintaining relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate behaviors, unhappiness, or depression.

- **PT/OT: Physical or Occupational Therapy** These services may be provided in the classroom or in another room. **OT** helps a child with special needs improve performance in several areas such as self-care, academic assignments, and other activities in which they are required to participate. It may also focus on social skills and interactive play. The primary focus of **PT** is on the rehabilitation and treatment of physical disorders that affect functional ability, general mobility, and potential movement.

- **Resource Room:** Most schools have a resource room in which students can spend no more than 60% of the school day. It provides a quiet place where students can get help in small groups or one-on-one, take tests, or take a break from the general classroom.

An additional note . . .

The following are additional services that may be provided at school, but are not part of special education:

- **BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan)**
A BIP is a plan of positive behavioral interventions to improve a child's behaviors which interfere with his or her learning or the learning of others. It is based on data gathered through a functional behavior assessment. A BIP can also be included in an IEP if needed.

- **504 Plan**
These plans are created to help students succeed in school. They may include accommodations, but there are no specific rules for what it should include. This is sometimes the first step before testing for special education services or a 504 could be put in place for a student who does not qualify for special education.

Overcoming Roadblocks to Success

A study from the Vera Institute of Justice funded by the Anne E. Casey foundation found that many children in foster care face roadblocks affecting their academic performance that other children do not face. These may include:

- Concerns about maintaining ties with their biological parents and caring for siblings that often distract them from schoolwork.

- Mandated court appearances and doctors' appointments that cause them to miss school frequently.

- Trauma-driven behavior problems, including aggression and withdrawing, which keep them from focusing on school.

- Children in care often avoid social interactions with peers in order to keep their foster status hidden.

- Frequent school changes interfere with their ability to make friends and get to know their teachers.

The study found that children often blamed themselves—not foster care or the schools—for their poor academic achievement. However, the adults in these children's lives often lacked a full picture of their educational needs. Often, communication from the school was focused on behavior, rather than academic achievement. In addition, caseworkers were rarely kept in the loop regarding grades or report cards. And, to top it off, school staff usually had little knowledge of a child's foster care background and how the demands of the system might explain missed tests or assignments.

As foster parents, we know that you have your hands full with many responsibilities. However, we want to help you feel empowered to and supported in taking on an active role in promoting academic success. One of the characteristics that all the children in care share is that there are several adults accountable for their well-being. Ideally, responsibility for the children's academic progress will be shared by foster parents, biological parents, and those in the child welfare and educational systems. Your relationship with the child in your care will only improve when you are able to join the child in basking in the feeling of pride that comes with a job well done.

Beyond High School
Post Secondary Plans

Cordelia Cranshaw, an adult who was formerly in foster care, found that college unexpectedly gave her the stability she had always been looking for. "For the first time in my life, I didn't have to worry about things that were a perpetual distraction from academics, things that no child should be preoccupied with. I had a meal plan, I had housing; I was taking full advantage of the resources available to support my journey out of the foster-care system." Cordelia went on to become a social worker herself so she could use her own lived experience to motivate youth currently in foster care as they make their way after high school.

Without stable homes and built-in family support, many youth in care struggle to keep up with their peers. Unfortunately, they often achieve at lower levels academically and are at a higher risk of dropping out of school than their peers. According to the National Foster Youth Institute, only about 10% of youth who were formerly in foster care enrolled in college, and only 4% of these individuals obtained a bachelor's degree.

Regardless of statistics, many youth in care aspire to pursue a post-secondary school education. The following is a list of career and college readiness preparations that families can begin during the high school years.

College knowledge
- Learn how the admission selections process works
- Explain ways to financially afford post-secondary education
- Be aware early in high school of the academic requirements for work at the college level.

Helpful websites to guide the way include College Board and Common App.

Explore post-secondary options
- Learn about specific colleges, universities, and trade schools (e.g., location, population, demographic percentages, housing, etc.)
- Understand admissions requirements (e.g., minimum GPA and SAT/ACT scores, high school courses, essays, specific major department requirements, etc.)
- Keep track of application deadlines for admission
- Plan to visit schools of interest to create excitement and familiarity

Education affordability
- Maintain a list of potential scholarships and accompanying deadlines
- Learn about the different types of financial aid
- Find out what kind of documentation you will need in order to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA
- Also, be aware that if a child was placed in foster care after the age of 13, that person will be considered an independent on the FAFSA application and will not be required to report any parental income.

The familiar African proverb states that "it takes a whole village to raise a child." This is especially true for adolescents who have been in foster care who must successfully navigate their way to post-secondary education. As Cordelia said, "Sometimes, a young person is just one connection, or one resource, away from a life-changing opportunity. It is important that these young adults have a listening ear when needed and a support system to buoy them up when they don't believe in themselves."

Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Helping Kids in Care Change Schools](#)
- [Helping Children and Youth in Care Achieve School Success](#)

Other [Library](#) Resources

- *Lost at School—Why our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them,* by Ross W. Greene, PhD
- *Saved by the Bell: Surviving High School,* by Youth Communication (multiple authors)

Courses & Webinars

- [Let's Talk: School Challenges](#)

Additional Web Resources

- [Scholarship Information](#)
- [What is an IEP?](#)
- [IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#)
- [National Foster Youth Institute](#)
- [What Keeps Children in Foster Care from Succeeding in School?](#)
- [Student Voice: The Long Road Out of Foster Care Including Beauty Pageants and Lots of Studying](#)
- [How to Prepare Foster Care Adolescents for Post-Secondary Education](#)
- [Youth Transition Toolkit](#)
- [College Board](#)
- [Common App](#)
- [FAFSA: Free Application for Financial Aid](#)

The team at the Wisconsin Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center are always here for additional information, resources, and support.

Please contact us at:

414-475-1246 | 800-762-8063
info@wifostercareandadoption.org

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