



Get the Data, Share the Data, Use the Data

Recommendations from the three-state Child Welfare and Education Learning Community (CWELC) project



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Acknowledgements

This report was made possible through the generous financial support of the William T. Grant Foundation. We wish to thank the CWELC members, all of whom were volunteers in this effort for sharing their time, talents, and expertise throughout the project and in the production of this report. We also want to thank Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, the Extension Children, Youth, and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota, and the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. These three partners initiated and led the CWELC collaboration. All are members of the University-Based Child and Family Policy Consortium, which we thank for facilitating the collaboration.

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What Is the Child Welfare and Education Learning Community?

The William T. Grant Foundation-funded Child Welfare and Education Learning Community (CWELC) is a collaboration between researchers, practitioners and policymakers working to address issues at the intersection of child welfare and education systems across three states: Illinois, Minnesota, and North Carolina. Project partners include three members of the University-Based Child and Family Policy Consortium: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago in Illinois, the Extension Children, Youth and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota, and the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University in North Carolina.

The CWELC project began when practitioners, policymakers, and researchers from Illinois, Minnesota, and North Carolina gathered in 2013 to identify and better understand barriers and opportunities in child welfare and education systems in those three states. CWELC representatives continued to meet regularly through mid-2015 to discuss state-specific issues.

Discussions at the first CWELC meeting in September 2013 in Chicago, IL centered on issues of data sharing, student mobility, and evidence-based work. In May 2014, the group met again in Crossnore, NC to discuss state-specific and national challenges at the intersection of child welfare and education systems. This report is a summary of the group's efforts to share research and practice knowledge about issues of gathering, sharing, and using data across systems. In addition, this document identifies CWELC members' recommendations for moving forward to enhance collaboration across child welfare and education systems. For more information on this project, visit <http://z.umn.edu/cwelc>.

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The Landscape

The inter-related, but traditionally isolated, systems of child welfare and education, have often struggled to meet the needs of children and their families. Across the country, children involved in the child welfare system often face tremendous barriers to academic success (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

These systems, constructed to provide social services and education, often unintentionally create more roadblocks than bridges to success. Because of challenges in data gathering, use and sharing, there are often gaps between government-devised policies and the troubling realities social service providers face daily. As a result, these systems are often unable to provide the best services to children and families.

The Child Welfare and Education Learning Community (CWELC) project strives to address some of these shared challenges and bridge these two systems. Practitioners, policymakers, and researchers from child welfare and education systems in Illinois, Minnesota, and North Carolina have worked together for two years to address shared and unique challenges facing child welfare and education systems in the three states. This report summarizes challenges and opportunities identified by the group and recommends actions to better promote data gathering, sharing and use to enhance educational and health outcomes for children and families.



An estimated 3.2 million children in the U.S received aid from Child Protection Services in 2012

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012)

Only 50% of youth in foster care complete high school by age 18

(National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014)



Of the 84% of children in foster care who want to attend college, only 2-9% actually receive a B.A.

(National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014)



State of the States

While CWELC representatives have identified challenges shared by child welfare and education systems in all three member states, they also acknowledge that procedures and policies differ by state. Table 1 highlights several striking differences between Illinois, Minnesota, and North Carolina, including number of school districts, number of counties, children's length of stay in foster care, and public high school graduation rates.

Illinois has the largest number of school districts and counties, while Minnesota has the largest county geographically. In Minnesota, half of foster children will enter and exit care within a given academic year, while in North Carolina, half of foster children will enter and exit care in just over a year. In Illinois, half of foster children will still be in care more than two years after they entered.

All states exhibit disproportionately high numbers of ethnically diverse children in foster care, and all states show lower graduation rates for economically disadvantaged students – although Minnesota shows the largest deficit in this area. North Carolina and Minnesota share system structures that are state-run but county-administered, while Illinois has state-run and state-administered systems.

County-administered systems create county-specific policies and procedures while adhering to state and federal requirements. However, this local control model inherently leads to variation in processes and procedures across counties, which can cause confusion and create barriers to effective data management, sharing and use.

CWELC members note that school and county service providers in all three states regularly face challenges in navigating multiple school districts and county organizations, which each have unique rules and systems for data gathering, sharing and use. CWELC members are concerned that inefficient data gathering, sharing and use have negative implications for those working across child welfare and education systems at the state and local level.

Table 1: State Profiles

	Illinois 	Minnesota 	North Carolina 
Child welfare and education systems structure	State-run, state-administered	State-run, county-administered	State-run, county-administered
Number of school districts	863	339	115
Number of counties	102	87	100
Largest county geographically	McLean County (1,186 sq. miles)	St. Louis County (6,860 sq. miles)	Dare county (1,563 sq. miles)
State population (in 2014)	12.88 million	5.46 million	9.94 million
Most populated city	Chicago (2,718,782 people)	Minneapolis (400,079 people)	Charlotte (792,862 people)
Number of children in foster care (on 9/30/2013)¹	16,777	5,929	8,920
Ethnicity of children in foster care (on 9/30/2013)¹	American Indian/ Alaskan Native: < 0.1% Black: 51.3% Hispanic: 6.2% White: 40.2%	American Indian/ Alaskan Native: 20.0% Black: 16.5% Hispanic: 8.9% White: 40.4%	American Indian/ Alaskan Native: 2.5% Black: 33.8% Hispanic: 8.5% White: 47.9%
Median length of stay in foster care (months)¹	33.8 months	5.6 months	14.8 months
Number of free-lunch eligible students in 2011-2012² (National average: 426,921)	918,726	262,726	710,466
Public high school, 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for all students (2011-2012)³	82%	78%	80%
Public high school, 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for economically disadvantaged students (2011-2012)³	73%	59%	75%

¹ SOURCE: (Children’s Bureau, 2013) Data for most of the measures in Children’s Bureau reports come from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services two national child welfare-related data systems — the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

² SOURCE: (Institute of Education Sciences, 2012) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2011-12, Version 1a; and "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2011-12, Version 1a; and "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education," 2011-12, Version 1a.

³ SOURCE: (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014) Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) data.



Getting the Data, Sharing the Data, Using the Data

“We may be able to reasonably assume that kids [who receive services] are doing better, but without data, we don’t really know. It could be worse!” – CWELC member

The importance of having accurate, up-to-date information about children as they move through education and child welfare systems is a major practice and policy concern in all three states. Stability in homes and schools is especially important for students in child welfare (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003; Smithgall, C., Gladden, R. M., Howard, E., Goege, R., & Courtney, M., 2004; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010). On average, children in foster care change home placements one to two times a year, often resulting in school changes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children Youth and Families, & Children’s Bureau, 2012). The likelihood of children changing schools is highest at the time children enter foster care, and after that it is highly correlated with the number of locations at which a child in care lives during an academic year (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). However, data-gathering procedures in many states are woefully inefficient and paint an inaccurate picture of the educational outcomes of children in child welfare. Furthermore, legal restrictions on how data on children may be used also limit a comprehensive understanding of outcomes for children in child welfare.

For child welfare and education professionals, the lack of reliable, real-time information on factors such as academic progress, attendance, child welfare services, and court dates make it especially difficult to adequately support educational stability and achievement. The minimal data sharing between systems creates an “isolation effect” across levels of systems affecting everyone from practitioners to policymakers. This isolation effect means education professionals and policymakers often lack knowledge about child welfare outcomes. In addition, child welfare professionals and policymakers lack information about students’ educational progress. Ultimately, these gaps contribute to flagging academic outcomes for children in child welfare (American Bar Association, Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, & Casey Family Programs, 2008). Furthermore, when states lack accurate information about students, the crucial policymaking prioritizes anecdotal stories rather than data-informed decision-making.

State Stories: Challenges in Data Sharing



Illinois has over 800 separate school districts in its state, resulting in challenges in sharing data and tracking students' school transitions. Each district operates as its own entity with unique rules. CWELC members noted that the city of Chicago is often considered separate from the rest of state, similar to the differential challenges faced by urban and rural areas of North Carolina. Enrollment delays and unequal or incorrect credit transfers are just two results of faulty or untimely data-sharing systems that can lead to detrimental outcomes for children served by educators and child-welfare professionals (American Bar Association et al., 2008). To address these challenges, the Illinois' Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and State Board of Education (ISBE) have endorsed a guidance document to clarify policies and procedures across systems to increase collaboration.



In North Carolina, CWELC members noted that education and child welfare practitioners in rural parts of the state experience more difficulties tracking students than do practitioners in urban areas. Professionals in rural areas often lose contact entirely with students and their families. Overall, North Carolina faces challenges creating and implementing rules, regulations, and policies that serve both rural and urban areas effectively.



Minnesota CWELC members noted a lack of responsiveness in both educational and child welfare systems as a barrier to data sharing and tracking of students. In a survey conducted by Minnesota CWELC members, child welfare professionals cited education professionals' limited understanding of the child welfare system as a major barrier to collaboration. At the same time, education practitioners reported that child welfare professionals' limited responsiveness to their attempts to communicate as a barrier to collaboration.



Get the Data: Gathering and Maintaining Accurate Records

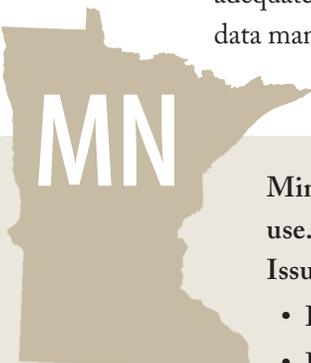
One of the biggest challenges shared by states is the lack of suitable mechanisms for collecting and maintaining information on children in foster care. Some of these challenges stem from inefficient systems of data collection and maintenance, while others are due to contextual problems that make data tracking difficult.

Collecting and Maintaining Reliable Information:

“If you depend on the caseworkers to keep that [data] consistently updated on a quarterly basis...we’re probably setting ourselves up for bad information. We probably need to evaluate what is a better way to keep that information current.” – CWELC member

Traditionally, data collection for both school and child welfare systems have largely relied on caseworkers and educators maintaining accurate records and consistently reporting the necessary data. However, data entry is time consuming, and taxes professionals who already have limited time due to high caseloads. Caseworkers reportedly spend nearly one-third of their available case-related time on documentation in automated information systems (American Humane Association, 2011).

Child welfare practitioners working directly with children and families often find the process of tracking and logging data time intensive, and it detracts from their ability to provide quality services. Furthermore, it is not always clear to professionals tasked with entering data how recording client data may benefit those clients, and so they may not give accurate data entry adequate attention. The problem is further complicated because building effective, comprehensive data management systems that are also user-friendly and flexible is costly.



Minnesota experiences less inefficiency with data collection than other areas of data use. However, this does not mean Minnesota is free of challenges in data acquisition. Issues arise in both school and county child welfare systems. These issues include:

- Inadequate time to complete documentation required prior to data entry.
- Inadequate time to enter data into systems and databases.
- Technological problems, e.g., frequent systems crashes.
- Needs of children, their families, and other clients that must override data entry and paperwork.
- Data systems that are slow, not streamlined, and not aligned with the priorities of direct service providers.
- In schools, one unique challenge is the inevitable differences in procedures from one school to another that can affect data entry, including procedures on truancy, professionals' roles, and sometimes, relationships with parents.

Contextual Challenges for Data Tracking

Understandably, there are many differences among children receiving child welfare services. The CWELC partners recognize that factors such as homeschooling, foster care placements, homelessness, and dropout rates are highly related to educational outcomes for children receiving child welfare services. Different sub-groups of children in the child welfare system pose unique challenges to each state. Furthermore, rules and regulations about what kinds of data may be collected and used can lead to an incomplete picture of educational outcomes for children receiving child welfare services.

State Stories: Contextual Characteristics



Homeschooling: Since the 1980s, the number of children homeschooled in the United States has gone from 10,000 to 2 million (West, 2009). North Carolina CWELC members noted that homeschooled children in the child welfare system can be difficult if not impossible to track, as some are not connected with any public school system.



Student Age: CWELC members from Illinois and North Carolina agree that older youth in child welfare systems present unique challenges to both educators and child welfare professionals. In North Carolina, youth may petition for emancipation starting at age 16, which may contribute to them exiting the child welfare system and dropping out of school before they are prepared to live on their own. Older students involved in the child welfare system are at a higher risk for substance abuse and homelessness (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). In Illinois, the child welfare system recently introduced a program called “Countdown to 21” to help practitioners better support youth between ages 18 and 21 transition to adulthood.

Models from Across the Country

“Sometimes our challenge is, 'What do we DO with data once we gather it? And, is the data necessarily what we need at that time, or is it delayed, and ultimately too late to be useful to us because the student has moved on to another school already?’ – CWELC member

Several states have begun to enact systems to better facilitate data collection on educational outcomes of children in foster care. For example, Pennsylvania has begun requiring identification of students in out-of-home care in their educational data-tracking systems. This information is entered into the same system as other educational data, creating a link between educational outcomes and out-of-home placement status. This allows schools in Pennsylvania to pull real-time data on these at-risk students and track their educational outcomes (American Bar Association et al., 2008).

In Texas in 2009, state legislation required education and child welfare agencies to evaluate the educational outcomes for children in foster care. As a result, efforts between the Department of Family and Protective Services and the Texas Education Agency have facilitated the annual sharing of aggregate data. Over 12,000 Texas schools participate in the data collection effort, and yearly reports are produced documenting the educational outcomes of children in foster care. Because all data are aggregated, no individual-level data are shared. However, the aggregate data gives state agencies a yearly snapshot of educational outcomes for students in foster care (Children’s Commission, 2012; Hinson, Kravitz, & Roper, 2014). Access to these data allows professionals in both the educational and child welfare systems to track progress and understand where more efforts are needed.



Homelessness: Minnesota CWELC members noted that students who move regularly, such as homeless or highly-mobile students, often fall off the radars of child welfare and education systems. When students cross county or school district lines, there is often a delay, or even failure in information sharing across districts or counties about student educational status and social service needs. North Carolina and Illinois CWELC members agreed this was an issue in their states as well.

Recommendations for Collecting Data

Despite federal mandates on data gathering, sharing and use, many states still struggle with gathering data that are accurate and useful. **Therefore, the CWELC group recommends leveraging technology to find effective, efficient ways for updating and maintaining records within systems.** Benefits may include increased accuracy and accessibility of data, which in turn, will free up professionals' time for more critical tasks – including engaging and supporting children and families. Furthermore, communicating how data are being used to promote accountability of systems, provide higher quality services to clients, and enable policy changes is expected to enhance buy-in of the importance of data management from practitioners.



Share the Data: Complexities and Essentials of Information Sharing

“There can be an exchange of information and collaboration and working together without [you] giving me every detail.” – CWELC member

Confidentiality Concerns

Both legal barriers and misconceptions about what can and cannot be shared about students in child welfare pose problems to practitioners who need to share relevant information. A report by McNaught (2005) suggested that child welfare professionals are often either afraid to share any information with education professionals, or tend to share too much information. Similarly, education professionals often expect child welfare professionals to share everything about their clients, even in cases where that might not be appropriate (McNaught, 2005).

Concerns about data privacy also impede real-time data sharing. Both child welfare and education professionals agree that data privacy is important in protecting children and families. On the other hand, the ability to access more complete information about children and their families often improves professionals’ ability to provide high-quality services. However, as noted earlier, even information that can be shared across systems often falls through the cracks because there is no organized tracking of these data.

Impact of Uninterrupted Scholars Act

In January 2013, the federal Uninterrupted Scholars Act was signed into law, giving child welfare agencies across the nation access to the education records of children receiving child welfare services. This act aims to facilitate the exchange of information between child welfare agencies and schools, and to encourage greater collaboration. However, a 2014 report from the Government Accountability Office revealed that, despite passage of the act, many states still experience difficulties in accessing and transferring student records effectively (United States Government Accountability Office, 2014).

Exploration of Data-Sharing Agreements

Many states have begun to explore the potential of establishing data-sharing systems between their child welfare and education systems. Although not all states are exploring real-time information sharing, some states have had success with data-sharing techniques that provide information to professionals in a timely manner. Some data-sharing mechanisms allow for a link between existing data systems in education and human services departments that oversee child welfare services, while other mechanisms use a third party to link and analyze the data.

Leveraging the Uninterrupted Scholars Act and guidance from the U.S. Department of Education, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Illinois State Board of Education negotiated an intergovernmental agency agreement that permits the sharing of education data (“Intergovernmental Agreement by and between the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services for Cooperative Sharing and Use,” n.d.). The two state agencies are currently working through technical issues regarding the interoperability of their data systems and the implementation of confidentiality protections to which caseworkers must agree before accessing education records. When this agreement is fully implemented, DCFS staff members who are involved in a child’s case will be able to access the child’s education records with relative ease.

The agreement clearly states that the purpose of sharing education information is to ensure a child receives appropriate support and services. Successful implementation of this agreement for that specific purpose in Illinois will require support at the systems level to facilitate access to the data and support at the field level so that caseworkers and teachers are positioned to act upon the information shared. Currently, 24 states (including Illinois) and the District of Columbia have established systems to link their K-12 data systems with their foster care data systems. Minnesota and North Carolina are not among these states (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education and Data Quality Campaign, 2011).

Collaboration in Practice

In an effort to learn more about child welfare and education professionals’ experiences of barriers to, and factors important for, collaboration across systems, the Minnesota CWELC group conducted a short survey of child welfare and education professionals in spring 2014. Results from the survey indicated that on average, education professionals experienced a greater number of barriers to collaboration than did child welfare professionals. The most important factors for facilitating collaboration across systems included regular meetings with clients and the responsiveness of other professionals to communication. You can read the full report of these findings here: <http://z.umn.edu/cwelcreport>.

CWELC members in North Carolina conducted a similar survey, but with some different results. The average number of barriers to collaboration identified by both social service and education professionals were similar. Child welfare professionals identified the education professionals’ understanding of the county child welfare systems as the most frequent factor to successful collaboration. Educators identified the responsiveness of the county child welfare professionals as the most frequent factor leading to successful collaboration. You can read the full report of these findings here: <http://z.umn.edu/ncreport>

The Minnesota CWELC team also held a series of focus groups with child welfare and education professionals to learn more about collaboration across systems. Data from the focus groups held in Minnesota are still being analyzed; however, emerging findings indicate that relationships are at the core of effective collaborations. Many focus group respondents said that building and maintaining relationships with key players across systems has been the most useful way of effectively collaborating to provide high-quality services. Focus group respondents also expressed frustration with barriers to data sharing, but noted many initiatives across Minnesota are promoting data sharing. These efforts include social service

collaboratives that work to coordinate their services for the benefit of families, and local data-sharing agreements and partnerships between service providers and schools. You can find more information and access the full report here: <http://z.umn.edu/mnfgreport>

Models from Across the Country

Currently several states, including Washington and California, are leading the way in sharing data across systems. Since 2003, Washington has been creating policies and procedures to support educational success in foster care students. These efforts include creating data-sharing agreements between state agencies, facilitating swift transfer of information and records between schools by providing school district level sharing agreement templates, and aggregating data on educational outcomes of children in foster care. More recently, Washington has proposed implementing specialized student education plans for social workers to review and submit as a part of case file documents, and creating a specialized training track for social workers focused on adolescents (Washington State Children's Administration and Department of Social and Health Services, 2011).

California has created a Memorandum of Understanding between state agencies to increase data-sharing efforts. Through this increased data sharing, substantial information has been gathered about the outcomes of children in foster care and is beginning to inform agency processes and procedures. In addition, throughout this process, agencies have begun to reach common understandings of terms, strengths and barriers related to data-sharing efforts (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; California Child Welfare Council, 2012; Wiegmann, Putnam-Hornstein, Barrat, Magruder, & Needell, 2014).

Recommendations for Sharing the Data

In order for data to be useful, it needs to be shared flexibly, while still being sensitive to the necessary confidentiality of children and families receiving services. Data sharing needs to occur both at the practice level and the systems level in order to better inform how professionals work with children and families and to create policies that support rather than hinder positive change.

Child welfare and education professionals need real-time data to provide the best quality services for children and families.

CWELC members emphasize the importance of establishing real-time data sharing for professionals across systems in order to more effectively work with children and families. Although there are confidentiality and data systems concerns, developing a way for practitioners to share information with one another can begin with the question: If multiple providers working with one family were in the same room, what information would they need to know in order to coordinate their services?

One of the foundations of successful social work practice lies in building relationships with clients, as well as with other service providers. Data sharing should support that relationship-building process, not hinder it. Therefore, CWELC members suggest development of tools that allow for flexible information sharing between educators and child welfare practitioners about indicators of educational progress for students receiving child welfare services. It is becoming increasingly common for school districts to provide child welfare case workers with a login to their academic data system to get real-time information reported by teachers on a student's attendance, completed assignments, or grades. Use of technology like this can make it easier for practitioners to share important information to better support student learning and educational outcomes.

Policy makers need up-to-date aggregate data to make the most effective policy decisions.

CWELC members acknowledge the challenges of aggregating massive amounts of data in real time. However, having accurate, timely education data on children in the child welfare system is essential to making informed policy decisions that support positive practices. CWELC members recommend the construction of flexible and adaptable data aggregation systems that allow agencies to view de-identified monthly reports to track the educational outcomes of children in child welfare systems. In many states, this would require sharing information across several large governmental departments, which is cumbersome and complex. But this added data sharing would raise a level of accountability for the outcomes of children in child welfare systems.



Use the Data: The 'Now What?' of Information Sharing

“Information is accountability in and of itself sometimes.” – CWELC member

Once data are gathered and shared effectively, how will the information be used? It is essential for professionals and policymakers to be well versed in the information they access and use it to inform decisions about policies and procedures. In short, gathering and sharing the data is only effective if the data are subsequently used for the benefit of children and families.

Informing Practice: The Benefits of Using Real-Time Data in Practice

Without real-time data sharing, there are significant barriers to using data effectively to provide comprehensive and coordinated services for children and families. Without up-to-date and accurate information, families may receive duplicated or insufficient services, leading to further burdens on already stressed children, families, schools, and social service providers.

When asked what a better data sharing system would look like, many Minnesota child welfare and education professionals emphasized the need for one, uniform system that would connect all parties involved in supporting the child and family and keep all parties updated on progress and use of resources in real time.

Accountability and Enforcement

In addition to providing necessary information about educational progress and the successes of children in the child welfare system, access to data increases the accountability of agencies to one another and raises the bar on enforcement of policies. With the current sluggish and diverse systems of data gathering, sharing and use, responsibility for providing services can become diffused across large systems – effectively holding no individual entity accountable for gaps in services. Therefore, increasing efficiency of data sharing and use will enable more effective and consistent enforcement of policies and procedures.



“I think if you’re talking about resources for families or clients then just a central – I don’t know – web based program or something so every person who’s seen that family can [enter data on] the resources they’ve given them...” –

Minnesota focus group participant

Informing Policy: Importance of Up-to-Date, Aggregate Data

“We have no predictive analytics in our world. When you start talking about what kids come into child welfare that are going to make it or not make it, or are going to a foster home or group home, we just have no [aggregate] data about our kids.” – CWELC member

One of the biggest benefits of gathering and maintaining accurate data systems is using data as a marker of progress. Without accurate, up-to-date data, it is difficult for policymakers to make informed decisions about policies that aim to serve children and families. Because of barriers in data gathering and sharing, many states do not have an accurate picture of educational outcomes for children in child welfare. Lacking an accurate baseline of data, it is difficult to discern whether youth’s outcomes are improving or declining as a result of policy and practice changes. In short, it’s virtually impossible to measure change without accurate data.

Models from Across the Country

Some states have attempted implementing easily adaptable ways to share and use data to improve service providers’ ability to meet their clients’ needs. These efforts are more common on a local level. In Minnesota for example, the NW Hennepin Family Service Collaborative uses an online System of Care referral interface to facilitate more informed, coordinated care. This referral system allows service providers to refer a client for multiple services with one click of a button. All partners in the collaborative work out data-sharing agreements and designate one contact person for professionals to follow up with if necessary. Partners must keep the information up to date, indicating if and when clients have received services so that the lead case manager for each client is properly informed (NW Hennepin Family Service Collaborative, 2015).

In Ohio, the Cincinnati Public Schools and the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS) partnered on an infrastructure-building project to improve communication about students in foster care to enhance stability of services for these students. Partners in this effort built a data sharing system to permit service providers and schools to access information from each other about students in foster care. As of January 2013, this effort was serving 167 students in protective custody to provide more coordinated services between JFS and Cincinnati schools (Children’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

At the state-wide level, some states are making strides in collecting and using aggregate data to inform policy decisions. In Colorado for example, a data-sharing agreement between their Department of Human Services and Department of Education has informed legislation to improve stability and access to services for children in foster care. Colorado enacted legislation in 2008 that requires school districts to designate a child welfare liaison. This liaison works within their district and their county to ensure foster children are able to smoothly transfer to other schools in the area (Martinez & Wheeler, 2014).

In Minnesota and Illinois, data sharing between state human services and education agencies occurs through partnerships with universities. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago previously housed the Integrated Database on Child and Family Services, which linked information from multiple service agencies. In Minnesota, a similar agreement currently exists between several state agencies and the University of Minnesota’s Center for the Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (Minn-LLink). However, these data are only used in aggregate, and do not provide opportunities for real-time data sharing for professionals.

Using the Data Recommendations

Once data are gathered and shared across systems, the information must be used to track progress, make practice decisions, and develop policy recommendations in order to be useful. Data may be most effective where processes are continuously evaluated and changed to improve quality, thus creating a system that perpetually learns from and builds upon existing information.

Importantly, although sharing and using data are essential to providing quality services, CWELC members emphasize that data cannot replace conversations and connections made across professions and systems. Relationship building is key to providing the highest quality services for children and families. In addition, not every child welfare or education professional needs access to all information in order to provide quality services, so flexible and adaptive information sharing systems are essential. Cross-system data sharing and use should be a tool in a practitioner's tool belt, but cannot be the only source of information.

In addition, federal policies must address questions of accountability in child welfare and education systems. Historically, child welfare agencies have not been held accountable for education outcomes because child welfare systems do not have any jurisdiction in education systems. Increasing data sharing and use raises questions about which agencies should be held accountable for what outcomes. Data must be used in a way that supports effective practice and promotes policies that will have the greatest impact on educational outcomes for children in child welfare.

Conclusions

Data must be gathered, shared, and used flexibly, while always maintaining the utmost protection of the privacy of children and families. To do this effectively:

- Child welfare and education professionals need to be supported in gathering data.
- Data-sharing agreements must be established to protect student confidentiality while facilitating coordinated care between child welfare and education systems.
- Data systems must be co-developed by professionals from both child welfare and education agencies to gather, share and use information in easily adaptable ways.
- Data must be aggregated regularly to maintain system accountability and promote informed policy decision-making.
- Data must be shareable in real time to aid child welfare service providers and educators in making informed decisions that enable the delivery of coordinated services to students in child welfare.

When information is gathered, shared and used appropriately, professionals across systems can more effectively promote positive health and education outcomes for children in child welfare.

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