

Foster kids: State funding stays at school child attends

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requires the approval of the two school districts.

Particular problem in Oregon

The issue of foster children moving from one home to the next is particularly problematic in Oregon. Nearly 14 percent of children in Oregon's foster care system experience three or more changes in foster placements while in care, largely because of a shortage of foster homes.

Some counties have "placement instability rates" of 20 percent or higher, compared with a national target of 13 percent or less, according to the Status of Oregon's Children County Data Book 2004, an annual report published by the nonprofit advocacy group Children First for Oregon.

The toll is not only social and emotional, McKechnie said, but also academic.

"Children who transfer schools can lose three to six months of academic process," he said, adding that children may move to schools with different curriculum or textbooks and "they're likely to be lost."

It is unclear how many children the legislation would affect. Based on rough estimates, the Oregon Department of Human Services has earmarked \$700,000 to provide transportation to and from school for 375 foster children each year.

Kevin George, Oregon DHS foster care program manager, said the agency supported the intention of the legislation but balked at the unfunded mandate. DHS — not local school districts — is responsible for the additional costs. As a result, George said, other programs, such as music lessons and special therapy for foster children, may have to be cut.

"From a philosophical sense, it makes all the sense in the world," George said. "But we did not get new money for this and that limits our ability to pay for other things."

Those who pushed for the legislation say it likely would take a couple of years for DHS workers, the court system, schools, foster parents and attorneys to become familiar with the new rules.

Strong bipartisan support

The legislation, which had strong bipartisan support, requires DHS to try to place children in foster homes within the child's established school attendance boundaries.

It also requires schools to transfer records quickly — within 10 days — when foster children change schools.

Several recent studies have shown that foster children change schools more often than most children and, consequently, face poor educational outcomes, such as lower grades and weakened reading and math skills. Research also shows that changing schools reduces the odds of graduation.

The issue was highlighted by the Casey Foundation's "Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study." The study, released this spring, showed that 65 percent of foster care alumni in Oregon and Washington experienced seven or more school changes, including 30 percent who changed schools 10 or more times.

The foundation recommended trying to reduce the number of times a foster child changes homes and schools.

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