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Foster-Care Kids Need a Sound, Stable Education

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A legislative measure would safeguard their chances for successful lives.

By Miriam Krinsky

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Nearly 100 times every day, a child in California is placed in foster care. The state's population of foster-care children today is larger than the combined enrollment of our three largest universities.

Far too often, we fail to meet the basic mental health and emotional needs of these children. In too many cases, more is done to traumatize, rather than heal, these young people and their families.

For foster children, a sound education may be their only hope for the future. Yet studies show that 75% of children in foster care are performing below their grade level, 35% are in special education, 46% do not complete high school (compared with 16% of non-foster-care students) and as few as 15% attend college.

It thus should be no surprise that many of these children, when they leave our foster-care system, don't become successful or stable adults. Within the first few years after emancipating from the foster-care system, more than 50% are unemployed, 40% are on public assistance or incarcerated and 25% end up homeless.

For many who move from foster-care home to foster-care home, school is the one place they find stability, the one place where they are nurtured and supported by peers and teachers and are able to feel good about themselves and their accomplishments.

Experts agree that school stability is key to academic success. Yet the typical foster child experiences multiple placement changes, which in turn lead to multiple school placements.

Getting used to new teachers, making new school friends and keeping up with continually changing lesson plans is traumatic even under the best of circumstances.

But the youngsters are not even allowed to enroll in the new school until school records are forwarded — which, according to a recent study, takes up to 2 1/2 months.

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An effort to fix these problems is moving forward.

A measure by Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento), cosponsored by Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica), would enable children residing in foster homes to finish the semester in their school of origin; for the child who must transfer to a new school, immediate enrollment would be guaranteed regardless of the status of school records.

This initiative is the least we can do in our role as "parents" of our state's most vulnerable and needy children.

As California Chief Justice Ronald M. George observed, how we treat these children "says much about us as a society — and will determine what our society will look like in the future."

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