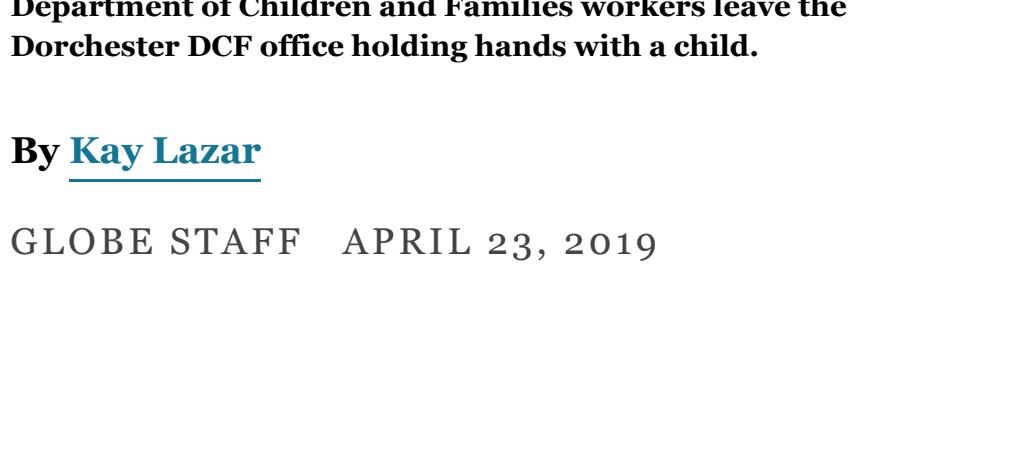


Auditor concerned that communication issues hurt foster children's education



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE
Department of Children and Families workers leave the Dorchester DCF office holding hands with a child.

By [Kay Lazar](#)

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Foster children often bounce from school to school, suffer chronic absenteeism, experience disciplinary problems, and drop out more frequently than their peers. Yet poor communication between state child welfare administrators and local schools and conflicting regulations create significant hurdles and educational delays for abused and neglected children as they [are moved from foster home to foster home](#), according to a new state auditor's report.

Amid the [communication](#) and coordination roadblocks, low-income communities often end up shouldering the financial burden for educating these children, the report said.

"Too often, the educational success of these students is hindered by a complex bureaucracy and a lack of resources and expertise, and this burden is particularly acute in low-income communities," state Auditor Suzanne M. Bump said in a statement.

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Last year, about 6,800 public school students in Massachusetts were in foster care and state education data indicate that about 45 percent of students in foster care require special education services.

Against this backdrop, education and child welfare officials often struggle to successfully coordinate to meet the needs of these students, the report said.

School districts devote "considerable time and effort to ensuring that children in foster care are receiving the right educational services," the report said.

But it said some school districts report they receive inconsistent information from the Department of Children and Families, the state's child welfare agency, while others say they receive no notice from DCF when a student in foster care arrives or leaves their district.

"Several districts reported that they have informed DCF that a foster student has been absent from school (sometimes for periods in excess of 40 days), only to find that DCF has not acted on that report, or has not acted promptly to work with the district on the absenteeism issue," it said.

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The report noted that these communication gaps can mean students endure duplicative testing and assessments that delay placement in an appropriate educational setting, while increasing the cost of providing the services.

"These children tend to bounce around from one community to another and there is no good way to track their educational history, let alone their personal history, so when they arrive at a local school district, the district is starting from scratch," said Tom Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents.

Baker administration officials said in response to Bump's report that the state education department provides training to schools, districts, and DCF staff, aimed at minimizing transitions in education for students in foster care.

Administration officials added that Governor Charlie Baker's education funding proposal filed in January includes an expansion of counseling and psychological services for schools, which would benefit children in foster care.

"While our offices will carefully review the full report, many of the auditor's recommendations are already implemented or underway," said a statement from the Executive Offices of Education and Health and Human Services. "The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Children and Families have strengthened collaboration and communication between the two agencies and local school districts, including issuing joint guidance in 2018 and all stakeholders continue to strengthen communication and coordination to better support school districts."

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Bump's report suggests that DCF and the state education department, known as DESE, collaborate on creating and maintaining an electronic "dynamic list" of students in foster care to improve tracking, but also for analysis of trends and for future financial planning. She also recommends the state create an "electronic backpack," a database that would allow school districts to quickly access education information on foster children.

The report does not indicate which state agencies should pay for these initiatives.

The report notes that providing educational services to foster children poses a "financial strain" on local schools that is not offset by local tax revenue or state funding. The state pays some money toward educating these students, but the report said it's not clear whether this reflects "the true cost" for local districts.

Bump's warning about the lack of adequate education funding for foster children comes as the state Legislature is engaged in a broader debate about how to boost state aid to school districts across Massachusetts.

Bump also suggests DCF and DESE should jointly provide training to DCF social workers and local school district staff on how to collaborate to make the best decisions for foster children's educational placements, and for sharing information.

Local school districts also are struggling to transport foster children to and from school, and to pay those costs, as foster children often are enrolled in one school district but live in another, the report said. Federal law requires that changes in school placements for students in foster care be minimized to lessen their trauma, and that unless it's determined to be in their best interest, children should remain in the school district they were in prior to foster care.

To meet those transportation needs, schools reported spending a total of \$3.2 million just last year, the report said.

Yet DCF officials told Bump's office that the department's social workers are also dedicating a significant chunk of their time, sometimes as much as 40 percent of their time, transporting children to school or family visits.

To address the financial concerns, Bump called on the state to cover the full cost of transportation for foster children.

The toll on children from this instability is considerable. Bump's report said studies have found foster students lost from three months to one year of academic achievement each time they are moved to another school.

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