Equal access to education Pa. needs to ease enrollment for foster children.

By Annie Steinberg, Staci Peckham and Judith Silver

This week, while children across the state are sharpening their pencils and readying their backpacks, some youngsters in Pennsylvania won't be enrolled in school. A month from now, many of them still will be waiting.

They are among the state's 23,000 foster children, kids placed temporarily in other homes because their parents cannot oversee their care. For these children, moving from home to home means changing schools and school districts frequently. Amazingly, paperwork required by school districts stands between these children and the classroom.

Children in foster care are at a higher risk of failing academically, in part because of the challenges they face gaining access to education. Despite this, the state Board of Education recently rejected proposed policy changes that would help foster children enroll in school quicker.

Access to documentation - such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, report cards or school-transfer cards - can be difficult. Other requests - preenrollment meetings with foster parents, copies of court orders, or letters of foster-care placement - also can slow down enrollment. Some children will languish in their foster home for weeks or months before getting back in a classroom.

The inconsistency among Pennsylvania's 501 public school districts is thoughtless, and it discriminates against children who do not reside with their biological parents - sometimes even children who live with other family members. Youngsters should not be punished by such bureaucratic protocols.

The bureaucratic morass prevents children from learning, jeopardizes the child's placement in a foster home, and trivializes the role of education.

Many foster children faced severe obstacles before entering the state's custody: crushing poverty, neglect, poor nutrition, physical abuse or abandonment. Some, with disabilities or developmental delays, need special education.

Few would disagree that these children desperately need a consistent educational program if they are to overcome the odds stacked against them. The longer they are kept out of school, the greater their risk of social and educational problems. We are setting them on a course for academic failure, poor self-esteem, dropping out of school, delinquency and joblessness.

Must we allow spurious, inane local procedures to take away the last vestige of well-being these children might know?

The Education Law Center - a Philadelphia-based, nonprofit, legal-advocacy group involved in education issues - proposed several simple changes to state educational policy that could benefit children in foster care. It asked the Pennsylvania Board of Education to:

Clarify that children in foster care have the right to attend school where they live.

Specify which documents and records must be provided for enrollment into all of the state's public school districts and limit the...
requirements to those that are readily available: proof of age, proof of residence, and immunization records.

Establish a deadline by which schools must enroll foster children, after the date required documents are received. For example, enroll children within two working days.

Create a way to resolve, at the state level, complaints about unlawfully delayed school enrollments.

Surprisingly, and without clear reasoning, our state Board of Education chose not to implement the recommendations. It seems ironic that while one state agency - the Department of Public Welfare - removes children from their parents' care and places them in foster homes in different school districts to protect them, another state agency bars children from entering school, denying them equal access to a public education.

With so many strikes against him, how can Johnny learn? They won't even let him in the classroom.

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