

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Every Youth Deserves a Good-Quality Education!

by **Duane Price**

Do you feel that the current way we are educating children in schools is thoroughly preparing them for the needs of the 21st century? Naturally, we would want to answer YES, but realistically the answer is probably NO.

Education is a systematic process through which a child or an adult gains knowledgeable information, experience, skill, and a good attitude. It makes an individual civilized, refined, cultured, and educated. Its goal is to create a unique individual. Every society gives importance to education because it is a cure-all for all evils.

The education that's being taught in most public and charter schools is deplorable. The quality of education has gradually improved throughout the years, but it's still not enough to help prepare some children to succeed today.

Unfortunately, for many youth in the child welfare system, access to fair, equal, and quality education isn't available to them. If they were home or back in their community, they may have the option to choose which school they attended. Youth in the child welfare system are essentially separated from the rest of the world.

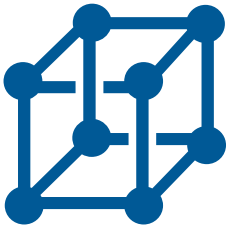
The problem is so much worse than what the outside eye sees. Entering the child welfare system can be traumatic itself, and when a youth is being removed from their home, community, and school, it causes disorganization. Leaving a familiar place and being around strangers who they aren't used to can take a huge emotional and physical toll on youth. The transition process is like an emotional roller coaster of feelings that range from happiness, sadness, anxiety, and more. The transition is slow and takes lots of patience that many youth don't have because they're not used to it. And it's not their fault. Everything is new; it's a new moment in their life that they are not adapted to and don't know what to expect next. The ideal goal is to help youth feel comfortable with as much awareness as possible.

If the youth isn't placed back with their family or close friends, they probably head to foster homes, juvenile detention centers, congregate care/residential treatment facilities, etc. Youth



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Duane Price is a student at Community College of Philadelphia and a member of NACC's National Advisory Council for Children's Legal Representation. Price also serves as a youth advocate for Youth Fostering Change in the Youth Advocacy Program at Juvenile Law Center. He hopes to continue to use his personal experience to advocate for foster youth and help make policy changes to improve the way professionals interact and work with youth and families in the foster care and juvenile justice system.

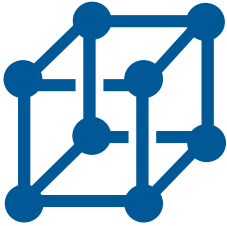


then must attend either an on-ground school or an outside school that's not of their choice and one they are not familiar with. This can create social-emotional problems that youth have to deal with alone or with limited support. Youth may also have learning and attention issues that can lead to short or long-term consequences, including disproportionate disciplinary rates, a likelihood of skipping school, social isolation, dropping out, and becoming involved with the juvenile/criminal justice system. In the child welfare system, all of this is being documented. It's a paper trail that will either follow them throughout their time in the system or for the rest of their lives, affecting their chances at success. Being in the system may already make youth feel alone and disconnected from everyone else and knowing that no one is paying attention makes it worse. Those working with youth need more training on how to build connections with youth, offer them emotional and mental support, and identify specific behaviors or moments that lead to them being disengaged from learning.

There is a big difference between living in foster homes and congregate care. In foster homes, youth have the option to attend a school that would most likely be in the neighborhood. They'll be with other youth who aren't in foster homes, and they'll also be in the correct grade. Now, for youth attending an on-ground school through a group home, juvenile detention center, and congregate care/residential treatment facility, it's a different experience. These schools aren't in their neighborhood or close to their homes, and youth are around other youth who are involved in the system. The education that's being taught is very low-quality and disorganized. This can affect the chances of youth pursuing higher education because they might be intimidated by the work they're being handed.

I can speak about this from my own experience. I remember being in middle and high school, in classes with kids ages 12–18. I went to multiple on-ground schools for years. I wasn't getting work that was even on my grade level. It would either be above my grade level or below but never precisely on target. I felt lost and confused about many things as I got older. I didn't understand how to solve a problem or comprehend certain things when someone was teaching differently for the very first time. When I was in the classroom with my classmates, I knew that I wasn't the only one who would have a hard time understanding the work given to us. In a way, I felt abandoned by the system, that no one cared for me regarding my education. It felt like it didn't matter how much I reached out for support throughout the years. The support seemed very mediocre, just like the education and tutoring. It seemed like many adults didn't want to do their jobs correctly. I won't say that I didn't receive any support during these difficult times, but the type of support I was receiving seemed like a slap in the face. It's like the people I asked or looked up to for good support services didn't see what true potential I had. So, they gave me the poorest possible version of the support I could receive. They automatically believed that I couldn't handle a good educational challenge to help me reach my full potential. Honestly, I think I was just another "youth" in the system. No youth should ever go through these types of issues.

When a youth goes back to their community or home, the system hasn't prepared them to go back to a regular public school. It is sending them back to fail or get lost. The Covid-19 pandemic showed how the child welfare system worried more about money than the quality



of education. Even though the quality was already bad, it probably got even worse. Youth in the child welfare system face this problem every day. These outcomes are unacceptable. The child welfare system should help youth meet education goals, not set them back. Being in the system shouldn't mean youth receive inadequate or no education. Every youth has a right to receive an education, and we care about our educational success and our peers' success. We want to help improve these outcomes for ourselves and youth like us facing these challenges.

Here are some recommendations to reduce educational barriers for youth with experience in the child welfare system and ensure they earn and receive their high school diploma without delay:

- 1. Help youth assess their educational strengths and needs**
- 2. Provide guidance about and assistance with accessing higher education and career opportunities**
- 3. Involve youth in extracurricular activities**

Many youth in the child welfare system do not have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities at school, or their participation is disrupted when a young person changes schools. Involvement in these activities gives youth in care the opportunity to have an average school experience.

- 4. Advocate for services to address educational needs such as tutoring, special education, or credit recovery**
- 5. Invest back into the community**

Investing back into the community encourages the growth of community-based supports and reduces the number of African American and Latinx youth entering the child welfare system.

I wish many of these factors were around when I was in the system, but I understand these factors will make a big difference in youth's lives. I know my experience was not ideal or perfect, but something beautiful came out of it. Today I'm in college hoping to become a Legal Child Advocate lawyer to help youth like myself have a better life. Every child and youth is the future of this world; and, we must make every effort to ensure that they have the best education while in care that will carry them into adulthood. ■