Keeping Foster Youth in College: Local Groups Share Strategies

By Erica Hellerstein

A group of social workers, child advocates, and therapists gathered in downtown Oakland last week to learn what some area programs are doing to keep foster youths in college.

The event was spearheaded by California College Pathways and featured speakers from Beyond Emancipation, a community-based organization that provides services to foster youth, and A Home Within, an organization that offers long-term free psychotherapy to current and former foster youth.

They discussed programs and strategies to improve the educational outcomes of college-bound foster youth, including techniques for working with young people with a history of trauma.

“You all know the really grim statistics in terms of former foster youth entering college,” Katie Durham of Beyond Emancipation said as listeners quickly jotted down notes, “but even more grim is the percent of foster youth who actually complete post-secondary education.”

According to a recent report by the Institute for Evidence-Based Change and the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California-Berkeley, California students in foster care are “more likely to have lower achievement test scores and perform below grade level” when compared to their peers.

“They also are twice as likely as non-foster youth to drop out of high school,” the report said. “Of the foster youth who attend college, a much lower proportion earns a postsecondary degree compared to the general population.”

The b2b Learning Community, Durham explained, offers services to foster youth to encourage them to stay in school. A partnership between Beyond Emancipation and Laney Community College’s Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS), it provides Laney College students with the financial, academic and emotional support services they need to complete a two-year degree.

“We together as partners wanted to design and implement a program that was first and foremost designed to nurture students identity and belief in themselves to be successful scholars and professionals,” Durham said.
B2b offers services including:

- Case management and coaching,
- Assistance with housing and employment,
- Academic counseling, financial aid resources, and tutoring,
- Leadership development and community building activities,
- Activities and group coaching sessions during school breaks,
- Paid campus and community based internships

It also facilitates one-on-one and group coaching sessions that have “really become a core and central and innovative component of the program,” Durham said.

In the 2012-2013 academic year, 20 current and former foster youth were active in b2b, and seven students completed two full years of the program.

“We’re pretty excited about these outcomes in just our third year of b2b,” she acknowledged, adding that the program’s “comprehensive level of support is really what’s needed over this two year period.”

Following Durham’s presentation, Toni Heineman and Seralyn Ruff of A Home Within spoke about relationship-based practices and therapy. They introduced A Home Within’s model of therapy, which incorporates eight therapeutic practices that can be utilized to build and sustain relationships with foster youth:

1. Engagement — being completely present with a client;
2. Environment — creating a safe space for clients;
3. Empathy — looking at a client’s situation through his or her eyes;
4. Egocentrism — putting a client at the center of the therapist-patient relationship; 5) Enthusiasm — maintaining interest in client’s life;
5. Evidence, — integrating a wide range of information into practice;
6. Endurance — being prepared for long-term treatment; and
7. Extending — terminating a relationship with a client and letting him or her know about the ending early on.

“We all know that the single most important factor for healthy development for a child is at least one positive caring relationship with an adult,” Heineman said. “And we also know that for foster youth, this hasn’t happened in a lot of their lives. Our goal is to make sure that does happen.”

Folding relationship-based practices into therapy can help a client overcome reluctance to form relationships, Ruff explained.

The event ended with an interactive exercise in which audience members split into small groups and discussed the eight “E” factors in relation to their own organizations.

Haydee Cuza, a former foster youth and the interim executive director for Youth in Mind (http://yimcal.org/), a statewide advocacy organization for young people affected by mental health, attended the event.

“I appreciated when the presenter of A Home Within said, ‘It’s not about treating them like foster youth, it’s about working with them with where they are,’” Cuza said.

“You do feel like people look at you differently when you disclose that sometimes,” she continued. “But when the presenter said that, it really gave people permission to take that label away, and work with young people for who they are.”

*Erica Hellerstein is a graduate student at UC Berkeley’s School of Journalism. She wrote this story as part of Fostering Media Connections’ Journalism for Social Change program.*

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