



## [ leap ]

The LEAP (Leadership Empowers All Possibilities) Council is a sub-committee of the Commission on Children, Youth and Families (CCYF) dedicated to supporting San Diego's former and current foster youth ages 13 and older.

LEAP assists its members in advancing youth leadership, advocacy and awareness by providing support, resources, social activities and volunteer activities so they can bring about positive change in the child welfare system and San Diego County.

## [ speak out ]

Over a six month period, LEAP Council members conducted focus groups called "speak outs" with current and former foster youth at Polinsky Children's Center, group homes, foster family agencies and other venues. The goal was to have youth led conversations with current and former foster youth on issues facing foster youth and recommend solutions to achieve better outcomes.

### ***Top Issues Expressed by Youth at Speak Outs***

#### Sibling Separation

The majority of the youth had come into the system with siblings and had been split up from them over time.

#### Education

Many of the youth, 72.2%, have had between 6-10 or over 10 school placements while in the child welfare system. Issues with education for youth were almost as prevalent as the issues with siblings; however, youth felt that education occupied the most important need for change. As one youth put it, "Our education should be the highest priority for the county and above everything else."

Moreover, youth that have been in a public school as well as an onsite school for a group home usually believe that public school is the better of the two. Of 13 youth that have attended both forms of educational institutions, 100% of them prefer public school and have significantly more issues with schooling at group homes than public school.

#### Transitioning from Care to Independence

Transition from dependence on the child welfare system to independence is extremely difficult.

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LEAP is a project supported by



# [ speak out ]

## Top Issues & Recommended Solutions Expressed by Youth\*

### Sibling Separation

- Youth find out their siblings are leaving at the last minute which is traumatizing.
- Siblings are not able to say goodbye which makes them feel angry and upset.
- "Separating siblings is as bad as separating us from our parents."
- There were no follow up services for those who were split up.

#### **Youth Ideas for a Solution**

- Find more foster families that take siblings, educate foster families about the importance of keeping siblings together, develop and launch a recruitment campaign for foster families to take sibling groups.
- Reduce the turnover rate for social workers, increase the number of quality social workers, increase pay and decrease case loads.
- Support building and sustaining relationships for youth with their biological parents/relatives. As they age, reassess placement options & support safe options of youth returning home after extended lengths in care.

### Education

- Youth have expressed how multiple placements for school have negatively affected their learning and motivation.
- "It messed me up, I never got settled."
- "Didn't learn much, kept moving around, it was hard to learn how to read and write."
- "Group homes teach everyone at one grade level even though we are all at different grade levels."
- "They [group homes] are only concerned with rushing you out to graduate, so it's misleading when you do graduate way under the level you should be at."
- "The education we receive at group homes will not prepare us for college."

#### **Youth Ideas for a Solution**

- Teachers and school counselors should be educated on the culture of foster care in order to better prepare themselves to serve the needs of this population, dispel stereotypes, provide them with educational resources and opportunities unique to them, and to prevent educators from crippling the youths' education by demanding less of them due to pity.
- Schools should be held accountable to the AB490 legislation and punished for non-compliance since it is the law.
- Invite community college & university outreach teams to group home sites to talk with youth about options for college, trade school & scholarships.
- Students should attend public school unless there is an extreme reason that prevents them from doing so; it is their right to attend public school.
- Reduce the turnover rate for teachers at these institutions by increasing pay or arranging a student debit relief program.

### Transitioning from Care to Independence

- Youth are still experiencing shock at how under-prepared they are and how many experience homelessness once they age out.
- Many youth say they have someone to rely on when they age out and when asked who, it turns out to be a friend no more independent than themselves.
- "We have no job experience here because we can't get out and we don't have transportation."
- ILS needs to have more hands on activities included in the program like going out and shopping for food, using an ATM, etc.

#### **Youth Ideas for a Solution**

- Develop healthy relationships with a number of adults starting at age 16 before youth age out.
- Include a healthy relationships segment in ILS to prevent domestic violence and other forms of abuse.
- Get foster parents, social workers and ILS case managers involved early in teaching youth how to do things for themselves.
- ILS classes need to be more separated throughout high school so it's not all crammed in senior year. ILS should start at age 14 or 15.
- Introduce more hands on/"field" trip experiences where the youth can actually do what they are being taught.
- Open up wait lists for transitional housing as early as age 16.5 or 17.

**\*A full report can be viewed and downloaded from the Commission's website: [sandiegoCCYF.org](http://sandiegoCCYF.org).**