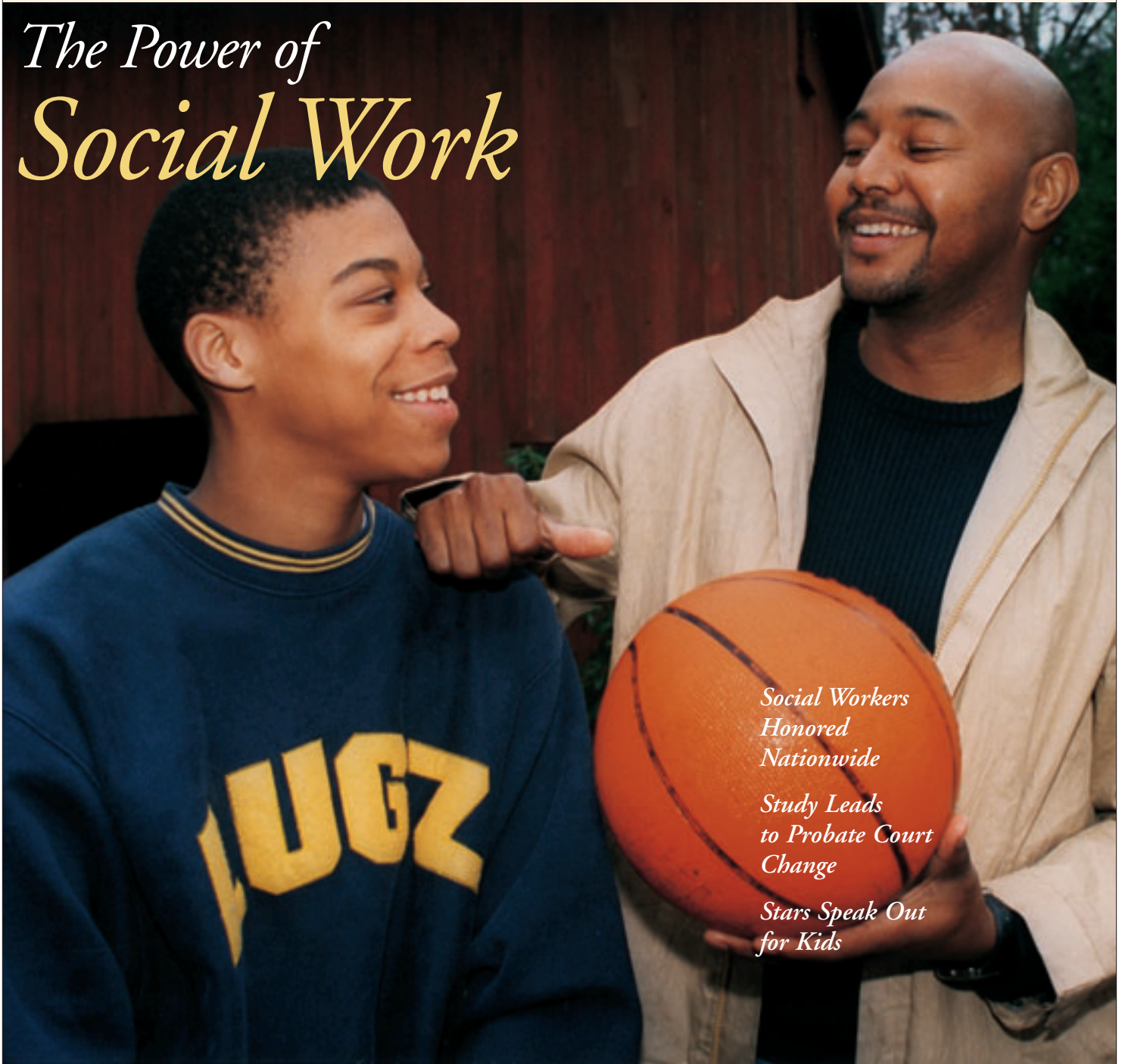




Voice

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The Power of Social Work



*Social Workers
Honored
Nationwide*

*Study Leads
to Probate Court
Change*

*Stars Speak Out
for Kids*

Improving Educational Outcomes for Foster Youth

View from Washington



by Robin Nixon, Director
National Foster Care Coalition

One of the most significant issues facing children and youth in foster care today is education. A host of factors related to placement, placement changes, and the impact of abuse, neglect, and family disruption contribute to high school graduation rates that are often less than 50 percent among foster youth aging out of the system. In the face of school reform demanded by federal legislation (No Child Left Behind), by states' increasing use of standardized tests, and by struggling state budgets, it is challenging to help foster youth achieve increased success in school.

A number of national organizations have partnered over the past several years in efforts to identify the educational challenges facing foster youth and to begin developing effective strategies for addressing those challenges at the national, state and community levels. Additionally, there have been a number of federal and state legislative initiatives intended to strengthen education-related support for young people in foster care. Most significantly in 2002-2003, Congress funded the Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program, which provides financial support for post-secondary education and training activities through each state's Independent Living Program. At the state level, California established the Higher Education Outreach and Assistance Act for Emancipated Foster Youth, which creates significant mandates for the public higher education system to enroll and retain former foster youth in the university and community college systems. These resources should help larger numbers of foster youth

attend college or vocational training programs.

While recent legislation and funding provide vital support for older foster youth, we must focus increased effort on helping foster youth succeed in middle school and high school. Increased resources will not help foster youth if they are not prepared for or motivated to attend post-secondary training and education programs. Our efforts must encompass not only straightforward educational support, but also improvements in child welfare services that increase stability and support higher achievement.

Steps we can take right now to contribute to positive change for foster youth in education include:

- 1) Ensure that children who come into placement, or who change placement, can stay in the same school;
- 2) Utilize data information systems to track education and health records and facilitate school enrollment;
- 3) Provide high-quality educational support through tutoring, mentoring, and the establishment of high standards for non-public educational services provided in residential settings; and
- 4) Coordinate review of educational progress and needs among educators, child welfare staff, and court personnel responsible for case reviews.

A good education is one of the best ways to ensure that children and youth experience success in the workplace and achieve economic well-being as adults. For children

and youth whose lives are complicated by being in foster care, educational success is arguably even more vital to their longer-term achievement of positive outcomes. We, as child welfare professionals and as community members who care deeply for foster youth, must increase our efforts to strengthen educational supports and to ensure that every young person in care has the opportunity to succeed.

¹ For more information, contact the following organizations:

- Millicent Williams, Child Welfare League of America, mwillia@cwla.org
- Susan Weiss, Casey Family Programs, sweiss@casey.org
- Mary Mentaberry, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, mmentaberry@ncjfcj.org
- Casey Family Programs Education Checklist for Judges and Educational Advocacy Toolkit, Contact John Emerson, Casey Family Programs, jemerson@casey.org
- Scholarships and support programs, Orphan Foundation of America, www.orphan.org

² For more information, see the National Resource Center for Youth Services, www.nrcys.ou.edu

³ California Codes
Education Code Section 89340-89347
[may be accessed at: www.leginfo.ca.gov]

⁴ For more information on efforts to implement these strategies, contact:

- The Community College Foundation, www.communitycollege.org
- Millicent Williams, CWLA, mwillia@cwla.org
- The California Youth Connection, www.cal-youthconn.org
- John Emerson, Casey Family Programs, jemerson@casey.org