School Placement for Students in Foster Care: Academic, Emotional & Social Considerations
Objectives

- Identify relevant questions to ask schools when determining school placement.
- Understand the general process within schools to assess and address student academic, emotional, and social needs.
- Understand the importance of timing in the assessment process.
- Identify a collaborative resource at school.
- Formulate school comparisons based on student need.
Information needed to make an informed decision regarding placement must come from 3 broad domains:

*Academic, Emotional, & Social Needs*

- Within these domains are the developmental stages responsible for growth and resiliency.
- How do schools synthesize this information?
- Who in the school would have comprehensive information about these needs?
The school can provide important information before you decide if a student stays or leaves. Knowing the questions to ask and the process used by schools to assess student needs, will help in your decision-making.

The following questions begin the process. Descriptions of these tools will be provided following the questions.
### Questions Regarding Testing

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<th><strong>Referred, in Process, or Completed?</strong></th>
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<td>Moving a student in the process of testing can cause significant disruption in the educational process.</td>
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- ✓ Has the student been referred by the teacher or parent for testing through the Student Assistance Team (SAT)?
- ✓ If so, what’s the status of the referral?
- ✓ Has the student been tested for: learning delay, gifted, EBD (emotional behavioral disorder), speech, occupational or physical therapy?
- ✓ Do test results find the student eligible for support services or special education services?
Questions to Ask: Academic & Behavioral Domain:

- Are there academic and/or behavioral concerns?
- Do you have interventions in place, such as a Behavior Intervention Plan?
- Does the teacher provide informal support in the class such as: teacher help, extra time to complete work, using other classrooms or the office if behavior or academic needs require brief time-out, how instructions are given, transitions during the day (problems during recess, lunch, etc.), bathroom accommodations (does not go alone, needs frequent bathroom breaks, etc.)
- If the student will move, can the teacher(s) write a short summary of academic or behavior issues in the classroom?
- Is attendance a concern?
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<th>Questions to Ask: Emotional Domain</th>
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<td>✓ Developmental stage: Is student at age-appropriate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral developmental stage?</td>
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<td>✓ History of change &amp; loss, at school or within family? Is the student at risk for trauma and possible re-traumatizing if remains in current school or moves?</td>
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<td>✓ Has the counselor been working with the student for specific concerns?</td>
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Does student understand the current situation as well as long- and short-term consequences?

Is the student diagnosed as having an Emotional Behavioral Disorder? This diagnosis is typically formulated by the school psychologist, following extensive testing. EBD is under the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) as a disability. Examples of ED or EBD: Post traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, Anxiety, and OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder).

If so, does the student require an “ED” classroom? (A special education classroom with trained staff and academic program for emotionally disturbed students.)
Emotional Domain cont’d

✓ Is there a concern for suicidal ideation, self-harm, anxiety, running away, or risky behaviors?

✓ Is the student able to verbalize needs, problem-solve and seek help and safety, i.e., are coping skills present?

✓ Is the student receiving counseling in the school or community and if so: How long and by whom?

✓ If the student receives counseling in the community, can the student continue with this counselor regardless of placement?
Questions to Ask: Social Domain

✔ Does student have more conflicts with peers than other same-age students?
✔ Does student have friends, and if so, are they a positive peer group?
✔ What are foster parents or parents hearing from the student about his or her experiences at school?
✔ Is student “connected” with school and community, i.e., engaged, active, and identifies self as member of the class, team, group, or as a student?
✓ Is the student a bully or victim of bullying?
✓ Is the student or are family members in a gang, if so, what gang?
✓ Is there a rival gang in the prospective new school?
✓ Is the student engaging in risky behaviors: sexually acting out, substance abuse, thrill-seeking, running away, etc.?
✓ Is the student violent with peers, staff, or property?
✓ Are siblings or family members in the school or neighborhood? If so, is family a support or a threat for the student?
How Schools Determine Academic, Emotional, & Social Needs

**Student Assistance Team (SAT):** On-site committee of school staff to identify and track specific interventions for academic or behavioral needs. In place at all schools statewide. Note SAT addresses both academic and behavioral concerns.

*Members:* Typically, the school counselor, administrator, 2 or 3 teachers, support staff and sometimes a representative from special education. Parents or guardian are notified of the meeting and invited to attend.

*Goal:* Apply specific strategies (such as academic skill or behavior intervention) and monitor progress over a period of time (typically weeks). May result in a SAT referral for formal testing (e.g. special education, support services, etc.) Students may not be formally tested without parent/guardian permission.
Some schools may have a SAT committee that might be more or less active than other schools.

SAT committees may have numerous referrals to monitor progress, or very few.

The Public Education Department requires all students be evaluated through the SAT process if there is to be formal testing, (for special education, emotional behavioral disorder, gifted, speech, physical therapy, etc.)

When considering placement, the student’s referral status in this process must be considered. Applying and measuring intervention effectiveness can take weeks. Moving a student in this process delays identifying areas of strengths or weakness.
| ✓ Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act provide fair and equal access to education for students who have a physical or mental disability. |
| ✓ A 504 plan is a specific plan (not an IEP) that addresses a particular challenge that interferes with the student’s education. |
| ✓ Typically written by the SAT committee, can be long-term (and reviewed over time) or temporary if the disability is short-term. Example: Student with broken leg in wheelchair may leave before the bell rings. |
| ✓ Parents or guardian must be present when a 504 plan is written. |
| ✓ Moving a student will impact the 504 plan. |
| ✓ A new school must comply with a 504 plan or write a new one in that setting. |
Why the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is Important

- If formal testing finds the student requires individualized support, an IEP is written with parent or guardian present.
- The program details specific supports to meet the unique needs of the student, can include special classroom, small group learning, support services (OT, speech), specific accommodations during testing, modified teaching strategies, additional staff, etc.
The IEP is a statement that the school will address identified areas of need and will monitor student progress.

The IEP must be followed in a new school.

If a new school is considered, it must be able to meet the IEP requirements, such as special ed classroom, test accommodations, gifted program, etc.

A school faces legal complications if not in compliance with the IEP.

Some schools may not have the staff or program to meet the IEP requirements.
Putting it Together

Placement decisions must include all aspects of a student’s life: academic strengths and weaknesses, emotional strength, and social connections and identity.
How much weight does each domain carry?
Scenario: 8 year old boy in foster care

- Mom in rehab with 12-year history of addiction, rehab, and relapse. Extended family is not a placement option.
- Boy was sexually & physically abused for 2 years by a relative, (now in jail), extended family still in the neighborhood of current school.
- Currently being tested for learning delay—2 grade levels behind in school. Testing is not complete.
- Acts out sexually toward other students (exposes self, pins girls down & gropes them), SAT has recommended EBD evaluation—has not started evaluation process. Has no friends.
- Has a Behavior Intervention Plan: Adult supervision to the bathroom, reward system by teacher for positive behavior.
- Has been in counseling for 1 year at local counseling agency.
Prioritize

In groups of 3, review the scenario and prioritize the 4 areas to consider in placement.

Rank 1 = Most Important to 4 = Least Important

SAT referral
Academic Needs
Social Skills/Identity
Emotional Skills/Needs
What did you consider?

How did you rank them and why?
What was easy?
What was difficult?
What information would you want to have immediately when determining placement?
Does the student’s opinion carry weight?
How would you begin to gather information regarding each area?
Information Resources at School

*School Psychologist:* Most school districts use the school psychologist for testing students for emotional behavioral disorders.

*Social Worker:* Many social workers may work with a small proportion of students in a school.

*Principal:* Administrators *may* have useful information, but may not be comprehensive.

*School Counselor:* A member of SAT, has access to student assessments and teachers; broad knowledge of the majority of students and available programs.
Who to Ask?

The school counselor should be able to answer the questions within all domains. Counselors are familiar with the comprehensive program, can gather relevant information from records and staff, and should be able to assess if placement would be in the student’s best interest. If the counselor is unfamiliar with a potential school, counselors routinely contact the other school’s counselor for consultation and collaboration.
Comparing Schools

Can current school or new school meet student needs in each area?

What is the counselor’s opinion regarding placement? What is known about the new school?

Would a move be beneficial in the long-term or create more disruption within all areas?

How much support is in place in either school?
Final Thoughts

All areas within a student’s life are crucial in developing success.

A decision in one area must include the others, as they are not exclusive.

Across all areas is the student’s need to belong, be supported, experience mastery, and be valued.

By collaborating with the school, you are providing the opportunity for children to reach these goals.