

NYC's New Office of Foster Care is Fully Launched and Making Headway, Amid Challenges

By Susanti Sarkar



Support coordinators at New York City's new Office of Foster Care provide foster families with services like arranging children's bus routes and facilitating communication with drivers. Photo by Jannis Lucas / unsplash.com.

Bronx foster mom Jean Pennant is used to the hectic routine of school pickups and dropoffs. She has taken care of 14 foster children over the last decade.

Currently, she has five children in her home, including a 2-month-old baby and an 11-year-old on the autism spectrum who must be taken to school in his old neighborhood more than an hour away in Queens — on top of frequent visits to a neurologist.

“It doesn’t matter how nicely we do it, foster children are taken from their homes, from their places of familiarity,” said Pennant, a registered nurse. “I’m trying to normalize everything, but how normal can I make that life when they’re already traumatized, and now they have school so far away?”

Pennant’s foster kids are among the roughly 6,500 kids in out-of-home care who show up in New York City’s public classrooms with unique challenges. As a group, foster youth are more likely than their peers to struggle in school and less likely to graduate on time, if at all.

But their needs are now being addressed by a dedicated [Office of Foster Care](#), which the local Department of Education launched in 2023. In interviews, advocates and school officials said students and their families are now receiving more individualized help and resources through the office’s nine-person team. The staff includes five foster care support coordinators, a data manager and a training associate.

In its first year and a half, the team has served as a resource for teachers who need to know when and how to contact a child’s birth parents, social workers or temporary guardians. The office has gathered initial data on students’ academic progress and improved communication between families and school staff. Workshops focusing on the distinct needs of kids being raised in the child welfare system are being held at elementary and middle schools in nine of the city’s 32 districts, with plans to expand the staff training to high schools and districts citywide.

Pennant said the support coordinators — who work with school counselors, superintendents and foster care agencies — have arranged her foster children’s bus routes and facilitated communication with the driver, making her feel more secure when she sends the children off each weekday morning.

Under state law, these students have the right to attend the school they were enrolled in before entering foster care. But due to a shortage of drivers and yearslong disputes over city contracts, reliable [school buses](#) are hard to come by.

A spokesperson for the city’s education department said schools are notifying staff at the Office of Foster Care within a day when a student’s address changes so they can quickly arrange transportation. The staff also make sure that school counselors are available to help the children navigate the difficulty of moving through different homes and schools.

According to the most recent data available, chronic absenteeism among students in foster care has gradually decreased since the office opened, from roughly 63% at the end of the

2022 academic year to 55% last year. Students are deemed “chronically absent” after missing at least 10% of school in an academic year.

“It is a continued priority at New York City Public Schools to provide students in foster care with the resources they need to thrive,” city spokesperson Chyann Tull said in an emailed statement. “There is still more work to do, but we remain committed to creating an equitable learning environment for every New York City student in foster care.”

Brooklyn City Council Member Rita Joseph was key in advocating for the office, first announced in 2021. Joseph, who chairs the city’s education committee, said since it’s been up and running, school officials have been more responsive to parents and employees of nonprofit foster care agencies, reimbursing them promptly for travel costs.

She agreed there is “always room for improvement,” in a school system that can feel like “a big, black hole” at times.

“For so long, foster students have been in our care in New York City public schools,” Joseph said in an interview, “but no one ever even knew they existed until this bill and this office was created.”

One in four New York City students who spent time in foster care during their high school years graduated on time in 2019, compared to three-fourths of students in the broader population, according to the [latest study](#) from the city’s Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. [Legislation](#) authored by Joseph requires city officials to better track their educational outcomes, including disability evaluations and transportation needs.

Data released so far shows that during the 2023-2024 school year, more than 2,300 students in foster care had a disability — with learning disabilities being the most common, affecting 652 students. More than 2,200 students were enrolled in a special education program.

Joseph’s legislation also required the education department to release key statistics on the suspension rates of school-age foster children, which are typically higher than the general student population. But the council member said that information — due last November — has yet to be released.

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Meanwhile, New York City schools issue suspensions to students in foster care at almost four times the rate of all other students, a 2023 report by the nonprofit Advocates for Children revealed. When foster youth are suspended, they fall further behind in school. If these suspensions aren't tracked, the data can't be used to craft alternatives that are less punitive, Joseph said.

Brenda Triplett, director of educational achievement at another local nonprofit, Children's Aid, echoed this concern but noted there is new help available. A retired public school teacher, Triplett currently oversees roughly 750 foster kids placed through her agency who attend city schools.

She and her colleagues are routinely present at suspension hearings, where Triplett said the new foster care coordinators have served as "a strategic inside connection."

"They have been able to troubleshoot from within, and that's been immensely helpful — especially when we are battling suspensions," she said.

There have been other benefits as well. Birth parents who've lost temporary custody are often blocked from accessing their children's education records and they frequently miss parent-teacher conferences because they're no longer being notified. The new team is tasked with helping biological parents remain up to date on their children's academic lives.

Erika Palmer, a supervising attorney at Advocates For Children who helped lobby for the new office, called working with its staff a "positive experience" for the parents involved.

"We wanted there to be someone to serve as that liaison so that parents could continue to be involved with their kids' education while their children were in foster care," Palmer said. "And I'm hopeful that now that schools are more mindful of parents' rights."

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