

EDUCATING FOSTER CHILDREN IN A COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAM

Introduction to McAdams Academy

I am Chuck Knowles, the Founder, and Director of McAdams Academy. I am 63 and have been married 43 years to my wife, Janis. We have five children, four birth, and one adopted, and 14 grandchildren. In October of 2019, Janis and I became Kinship Caregivers to a 17-year-old young lady who has since moved out on her own, has a job, and doing well. For five years, I served as the Chaplain at the Sedgwick County Juvenile Detention facility. I have a Master's in Counseling, and in 2017, I completed my Ph.D. My dissertation is titled "Fostering Behavioral Change in Students Attending an Alternative Education Program." McAdams Academy was the program used in my research.

McAdams Academy has three programs

Homeroom

With funding from Sedgwick County Crime Prevention (SCCP) in 2012, McAdams Academy was created to provide educational programming for expelled middle and high school students in Sedgwick County. We do not receive any funding or help from school districts in Sedgwick County, but we accept the students that public schools expel from their alternative education programs. We get our accredited online course work from USD 403 Otis-Bison. Our Homeroom program allows teens to earn high school credits that transfer to their transcripts; the focus is on students' behavior. Studies suggest that 50 percent of expelled youths are expelled multiple times because the root cause of their problem behavior is never addressed.

Extended Learning Program

Since 2012, McAdams started two additional programs, The Extended Learning Program (ELP) and the Day School. Our funding parameters from the SCCP grant did not allow students to stay in the Homeroom program after their expulsion was over. Every year we had requests from parents who wanted their child to continue at McAdams because of the positive changes they noticed in their students while attending our school. A few days ago, we received a call from parents of a student we had two years ago wanting to enroll their child in our program because their child struggled with the online program at his public school. With the addition of the ELP, we can keep students who no longer qualify for the Homeroom program and continue to work with them on social skills, behavior, and job skills.

Day School

The Day School was started for youths suspended from school who were involved in the justice system. Some teens are mandated to attend McAdams by their Intensive Supervision Officer (ISO) or the DA's office. Day School participants are with us for days and weeks, instead of months like the Homeroom program. We have guest speakers, take field trips, help students with their public-school homework, and work on social skills.

In the summer of 2018, McAdams Day School program started working with foster children without placements. McAdams staff is a mix of certified teachers, individuals who have experienced some of the same lifestyles and trauma in their past that our kids are currently going through, and volunteers. McAdams has a case manager working with college interns so that each student is assigned a case manager. McAdams is a trauma-informed school, and all our staff are CPI certified.

Observations about Working with Foster Children

Purpose of my testimony

Today, my purpose is to share observations that have been gleaned over the past couple of years, working with foster kids in an academic environment. I am not an expert on DCF guidelines, how judges decide what care is best for foster children, or the logic of agencies who work with foster kids. I am an observer of what I see and what I hear the kids in my programs say about the foster care system. I want to underscore that what I share today is in no way criticism of any organization or individuals involved in the foster care system.

Behavior

The first thing I noticed when working with foster kids is their behavior. We see many hurting and fearful kids, which means we see a lot of angry teens every day. There seem to be more feelings of hopelessness as we talk to our foster kids than our expelled students. Their anger is more intense, aggressive, and destructive. We see more youths in foster care with self-harm tendencies and substance abuse than we see in our other programs. Before entering the foster system, children who did not exhibit self-harm tendencies started showing self-harm tendencies after being around their foster peers. It is rare to see a foster child as they enter McAdams greet you with a positive attitude. Foster children in our program are often those kids who have a harder time getting and maintaining a long-term placement because of their behavior.

Support System

When my wife and I became Kinship Caregivers for Chloe, a student at McAdams, it opened my eyes to our foster system. I began to understand that the same system trying to help children is also responsible for creating some of the trauma in their lives. Initially, much of the foster care process excludes the child's point of view. Whereas potential foster parents take weeks of classes to prepare for being a foster parent, the children receive no training before they are removed from their support system. On several occasions, during morning check-ins, a foster child has asked, "Why am I here"? As the McAdams program was being explained, they would interrupt and ask, "No, why am I here?" What they were asking was, "What has happened to me, and what am I supposed to do now?" One story from a 13-year-old went something like this. He was removed from his home the night before, taken to a stranger's house to spend the night, and then, first thing in the morning, brought to another strange place called McAdams Academy. He was frightened and bewildered, and all he wanted was someone to tell him he was going to be okay. There seems to be a lag time before the agency makes contact with the child.

After having their support system removed from them, foster children are desperately trying to regain their equilibrium. Chloe's support system, as most foster children, were her peers in foster care. In fact, the foster kids start referring to one another as brothers and sisters as they start rebuilding their families. A sub-culture develops among teens in foster care circles, and that sub-culture is where they begin rebuilding their support structure, trying to find acceptance and significance. Unfortunately, that sub-culture is not a healthy source of information for teens. We often see a child's behavior move from shy or introverted to imitating their peers' outlandish behavior.

Adding to their support system's instability is the rejection foster kids sometimes experience from their birth parents. When Chloe lived with us, she was dealing with a father who was a drug addict and an unhealthy relationship with her mother. Chloe was extremely excited that both parents were going to attend her graduation. The day before graduation, her father called to tell her that he would not be attending. Her mother called the morning of the graduation to say that she was not going to attend. McAdams staff spends most of their time listening and problem-solving with our students. We help our students learn to accept their circumstances and make plans for moving forward. McAdams encourages its staff to interact with kids on social media. We let workers and guardians know that we are communicating with their teens via social media and keep records of our social media interactions.

School Attendance

When we transitioned from the summer program to the school year in August 2018, I expected the program participants to decrease as youths started going back to school. When many of the kids continued attending McAdams programs well into the school year, I directed my staff to let me know when a child spent more than three consecutive days with us. At that point, we would start questioning the students and agencies why these children were not attending a public school. This process was often exceedingly difficult and time-consuming. McAdams had a volunteer who called agencies to determine what was needed to get a child enrolled in school. As an incentive, McAdams offered to discount the agencies' services if they would enroll foster students in our ELP class.

Public Schools and Foster Kids

The lifestyle of a foster child is often in conflict with public school structure and philosophy. The result of foster children attending multiple schools in multiple school districts during their foster life is a GPA of around 1.0. It can be challenging to find a student's paper trail, such as transcripts from past schools, immunization records, birth certificates, and social security numbers. Foster children, statistically, have more emotional and behavioral issues than average students, causing classroom disruptions that take time away from the other students. Being absent from the classroom because of court appearances and doctors' appointments also cause foster kids to fall behind in academics. These things take a toll on teaching staff who are not prepared to deal with extreme behaviors.

Another more political issue affecting foster children's academic progress is the limited scope of how school districts in Kansas work together. As I mentioned, my wife and I became Kinship Caregivers for Chloe. Chloe was in our ELP program and was two and a half credits away from graduating at mid-term when she learned she had a placement outside Wichita. McAdams developed an online class allowing students to do school anywhere they moved in Kansas. We became involved because her new placement wanted Chloe to enroll in their local school district, and the school district would not allow her to finish her remaining online classes. Furthermore, they were not sure that she could graduate by the end of the school year and that she might have to take summer classes to receive her diploma.

It was too heartbreaking to see a child sobbing saying, "This isn't fair, I've worked so hard, this isn't fair." At that point, we completed the necessary paperwork allowing her to move in with us until she aged out of the system. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. We have had several teens close to earning credits that, when moving to a new placement, the local school district would not let them continue their online classes to complete their credits. In Kansas, students cannot enroll in two districts concurrently. Since the State has made other allowances to help ensure our foster kids' academic success, this seems like a pretty simple fix.

Initially, foster kids were just in our Day School, but now they are enrolled in all three of our programs. We had one volunteer contacting schools and detention facilities throughout the US to find transcripts and records needed to enroll youths in Kansas schools. When McAdams made it a priority to get kids enrolled in school, we started seeing foster kids who had fallen through the cracks. It just takes more time and a lot of phone calls to help foster kids succeed academically.

Our programs currently have foster students enrolled in public school but are not doing well because of remote learning. So, we provide them with tutoring and accountability to help them stay on track. We also work with places like Kansel. When a foster child, working on their GED, exhibits extreme behavior, they can work online at McAdams while we deal with their behavior.

McAdams Practice and Philosophy

Adults are Key

The ABCs of McAdams are Academics, Behavior, and Community. Our philosophy is based on restorative principles that hold kids responsible for their actions while teaching them healthy ways of dealing with their destructive behavior. Consequences for students' behavior may include writing apology letters, replacing or repairing items they damage, or working off the cost of the damages by doing various jobs on campus. Most of our students are very bright young people, but their behavior ruins their chances of succeeding in life and allowing our community to reap the benefit of their talents. A child may be another Einstein, but if they are not pro-social and cannot function in society because of poor behavior, their academic accomplishments will be of little use. In reality, it is not the program that helps affect change in a child's life; it is a loving adult. An adult who will take time to listen and work with a child will impact that child more than any first-class program.

Limitations

Every day we go over expectations and set goals. Every child at McAdams has their own set of needs; we see them as individuals. Behavior is addressed when it happens, and kids are always given a chance to apologize and start fresh. We wand our students and lock up their personal belongings; they do not have access to them until their transportation arrives to pick them up. We do not allow any food from the outside to be brought into the building. We lock up their phones during the day. Nothing good comes from a teenager being on a cell phone all day.

Meeting Needs

The day is spent listening to the kids' concerns and determining how we can best meet their needs. We may let them make phone calls to workers or parents, depending on the crisis at the moment. Our caseworkers spend time locating foster kids' personal belongings and dealing with students' hygiene issues. Our staff has taken students to the YMCA to shower and change into clean clothes given to them from our clothing pantry. We have installed a washer and dryer that is available for foster kids to do their laundry.

Thinking Outside the Box

Motivating foster teens is always a challenge. McAdams newest elective class is 3-D printing; students can earn a certificate and a high school credit when completing the course. We have a music class where students have fun trying to play different instruments. They learn how to read and write music and record their own songs. Volunteers teach in our woodworking shop. A local "Junk Artist" volunteers two days a week; it is always surprising what students will make in that class. McAdams has a working relationship with a local barber college; even though to date we have not had a student complete their Barber license, but we are still hopeful. Our students can shadow business owners, exposing them to a variety of opportunities. Volunteers teach home economic classes. In sewing classes, students have made stuffed animals and blankets.

McAdams and Family

McAdams believes that family is key to the success of our students and community. Therefore, we offer counseling and support to parents, grandparents, and foster parents. We help parents with clothing and food. At Christmas, we take parents shopping and work with churches to provide gifts and Christmas meals.

Suggestions

As I mentioned at the onset, I am not an expert on foster care policies. Some of these suggestions may already be in effect.

- Include Foster care decisions more from the child's point of view instead of the agencies'.
- Avoid the lag-time. Have a support system for the child the moment they are removed from the home.
- Develop systems that prevent foster children from being in unstructured settings with other foster youths for long periods.
- Develop course work and a support system for foster parents fostering kids with emotional and behavioral disorders and aggressive behavior.
- Eliminate the paper trail. Streamline the enrollment process in public schools.
- Make it possible for Kansas schools to work together so that foster kids can complete online classes from different school districts.
- Restructure the requirements that allow children to be removed from the home.

In Closing

Once children know you care, their behavior is easier to work with, and they become willing to learn. Children really want to please adults and do well, but adults often get offended by their behavior and give up on them too soon. We need to be committed to stick with them long enough to teach them the tools they need to succeed.