

Statement of Kayla VanDyke
Foster Youth, Minnesota
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee

Hearing on ESEA Reauthorization:
Meeting the Needs of Special Populations
Thursday, April 29, 2010

Chairman Harkin and Senator Enzi, and Members of the HELP Committee, thank you for inviting me to share my story and talk about some of the issues that I know affect many other homeless and foster children. I'm not an expert on policy but I have been affected by child welfare policies and I hope my experiences can help you make choices that will improve the system. I thank the Members of the Committee for their commitment to creating a better life and a brighter future for the half a million children who are living in foster care today, and for the one million children who are currently homeless.

My name is Kayla VanDyke. I'm 18 years old and have lived in seven different foster care placements and gone to ten different schools since I was four. I've experienced homelessness, have lived in a shelter, and have been separated from siblings along the way. But I'm pleased to tell you, despite the statistics that suggest that roughly half of foster care and homeless youth do not finish high school, I will be receiving my high school diploma in four weeks. I'm on track to attend Hamline University in the fall, right after I complete an internship with FosterClub, the national network for young people in foster care.

There were things that worked in my life and education and there were things that made it very hard for me to adapt. I think I've been lucky enough to have an underlying awareness of the importance of education, which has always been my main motivator. I noticed from a young age that there was one main difference between *my* family and the people I considered successful and happy: *they* had an education, my family didn't.

I went into foster care for the first time when I was four. I'm not sure how many times I moved at this time, but I stayed in placements with my sibling for nearly three years until I was given back to my mother, which is when I experienced my first school change.

Then, at the beginning of fourth grade, my family became homeless. I completely stopped attending school, so I have no fourth grade education. I remember feeling very disoriented as to where I was and why I couldn't go to school. We stayed with a family friend for a few months until we were accepted into a homeless shelter for families in Minneapolis. It was September by then, and I can remember thinking, "I should be going to school soon."

I recognize that during that time period, new federal policies under McKinney-Vento had just passed. Perhaps, had they come just a bit earlier and had they been fully carried out, things would have been different for me. Maybe a McKinney liaison would have helped to locate me and ensure that I was enrolled in school. But I'm not sure if anyone would have tracked me down even if McKinney had been enacted years earlier. That's because many school districts fail to identify and enroll all the homeless youth in their communities because McKinney-Vento is underfunded. Clearly, McKinney-Vento should be strengthened when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is reauthorized so that other homeless kids don't slip through the cracks like I did that year.

After we left the shelter and when I showed up on the first day of school for fifth grade at Lake Harriet elementary school, there was no record of my education in St. Paul, but no one pressed the issue and I was allowed to enter classes.

During this time, my academics had really suffered due to all of the school I had missed, the emotional stress I was under, and the general chaos I had experienced. I was used to being the most motivated and smartest person in the class. However, because of my educational hiatus, I could barely keep up. I was also ashamed of my home life and tried hard to hide the fact that I was living in a shelter from the other students. I became really depressed and withdrawn.

Later in fifth grade, I started receiving help from a counselor who donated her time to the shelter where I lived. She helped me overcome a lot of the emotional pain I had been experiencing as a result of my homelessness and educational struggles. In turn, I began feeling more comfortable at school and became engaged in activities. Not only did she guide me, but she also helped me gain access to resources like scholarships for summer camp - I ended up going to the YMCA camp and for once just feeling normal. Every homeless and foster youth should have a liaison or advocate like I did – someone to assist a child like me who was struggling to keep up. While McKinney-Vento provides homeless youth with liaisons, these liaisons often don't have the time, training and capacity to fulfill their responsibilities because the program is terribly underfunded. When NCLB is reauthorized, this problem should be addressed,

I also think foster youth should have access to scholarships for extra curricular activities as well as the option of having either a counselor or therapist to work as their advocate. Looking back, I realize now the huge difference these things made for me. Without access to these opportunities or my counselor, I am not sure that I would have had the motivation to overcome the difficulties I was having at home and in school. I wish that every young person who is experiencing trauma – whether it be homelessness or a challenging time in foster care – could have this experience with a person who is understanding and dedicated to providing the support a kid like me needs.

At the end of that summer, my family moved from the shelter to a low-income housing complex in Burnsville – another school move for me.

But then, a little less than two years later, my siblings and I re-entered the foster care system. We were placed in a respite home for sixth months, but then were moved again to a foster home which required yet another school move. I really wanted to stay at my old school where I was doing well academically and had finally found a best friend. But as a foster youth who was never quite sure about where I would be moved next, I didn't want to inconvenience my new family by asking for rides to my old school, even though it was minutes away, and even though I would have been able to attend the school because Minnesota, unlike other states, has an open enrollment policy. It never really occurred to me that attending my old school would even be an option.

Just like the McKinney-Vento Act gives homeless youth the option of remaining in their old schools, NCLB should also provide foster youth with this option. Transportation must be provided for this option to be real. I think that remaining in one's old school should be offered up as an option, for kids like me who don't think to ask, or feel like they shouldn't rock the boat for fear of losing their place to live.

In 9th grade, my sister and I were moved out of our foster home due to abuse that was taking place. I moved to another school, but since it was a move up to high school, many of the other kids were new, too. It was at this time that I started to recognize the impact that my many school

moves had on my education. All the schools I attended taught portions of the courses at different times, so when I moved schools I might completely miss one half of the year's lessons and relearn what I had already learned at the other school. When NCLB is reauthorized, the new law should minimize the number of times foster and homeless youth have to change schools. When they must move, the reauthorized NCLB should ensure that their records are transferred, that they don't lose school credits, and that they receive the help they need to bridge any gaps that might occur because they changed schools.

In 10th grade, I changed homes one more time, this time for good. This also meant another change in schools. I've lived in my current placement for three years. The stability this provided me allowed me to connect with people at my school and in my community. These people include my foster mother, social worker, therapist and two counselors from my previous schools, who all worked as a team to help me accomplish my goals and connect me to resources. Not only did they help me catch up academically, but they were also crucial in helping me stabilize my emotions. It was amazing – to have a team of people who cared about my success and could help me accomplish my goals. Every homeless and foster child should have a team like I did. When NCLB is reauthorized, the law should help ensure that child welfare and school district staff work better together to address the educational needs of every foster youth.

My sophomore year was successful because I had a support group that gave me choice, support and access to things I was interested in. At this time, I was able to experience something that I think is pretty unheard of in foster care. I was able to become an exchange student. When I came back from my exchange experience, I chose to go to a different high school that was smaller and more catered to my educational interests. Yes, it was a school move, but it was *different* — because I got to *choose*. I finally had a stable loving home and a school I felt comfortable in. The result was that my grades finally started reflecting what I was capable of intellectually.

However, it couldn't erase the fact that I had skipped major steps in my linear education. Math and Science have always been my weakest subjects and despite my efforts to learn what I have missed, the fact that I have gaps in my education has hindered my ability to both learn and take crucial tests. Like many other homeless and foster children who score significantly lower than their peers on standardized tests, I failed the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment of math and only scored a 21 on my ACT. While that may not seem so bad, it is for someone who knows they're capable of more. The effect of this has also snowballed into my having difficulties getting into college. Since coming to my current school, I've been mostly an A and B student, but I know the inconsistencies in my education have hindered my ability to excel in areas like math and science.

Not to worry — my social studies and English skills have made up for my short-comings and I've been accepted into college. It may not be the first college of my choice, but I know that I will succeed.

I also know that if it were not for the support I received and my awareness of how important education was for me to get out of the poverty cycle, I could have ended up like my sister or like many other foster youth. While my sister is currently surviving, she never had the chance to pursue higher education or receive support in achieving her goals. In fact, because of the school and placement moves she experienced, she barely finished high school. I know there are a lot of stories like my sister's. That's why my ultimate goal would be that more young people have good supportive experiences like I did in my sophomore year.

To summarize, for the half million children in foster care and over one million children who are homeless, the following NCLB reforms are critical

- School stability must be ensured. Foster youth should be able to stay in the same school when it's in their best interest. Transportation must be provided in order for this to be possible.
- Young people should be allowed immediate enrollment in school and their educational records must be transferred promptly.
- Dedicated liaisons & coordinators should be provided for all foster and homeless youth. These critical adults must have the training, time and capacity to serve vulnerable children who are caught up in the type of circumstances I experienced.

We all know that when we invest in the quality of a young person, we ensure that, as adults, they have the opportunity and ability to achieve their potential, enjoy a higher standard of living, and help make our country stronger.

Thank you all again for this opportunity.