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Miryam J. Choca: Help foster kids make the grade

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SPECIAL TO THE BEE

Participants in a groundbreaking Education Summit spoke with one voice this week, calling upon California to make educating its 75,000 foster youth a statewide priority. A diverse group of present and former foster youth, educators, probation officers, judges, attorneys, social workers and child advocates is ready to go to work and asked policymakers to join them. The group made that clear at the summit when it presented a series of detailed policy recommendations Tuesday to a bipartisan panel of state legislators and members of the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care.

The list of recommendations addresses early childhood through postsecondary education, including an array of obstacles encountered daily by our state's foster youth. At the top is the importance of prioritizing education in every part of the youths' lives. Too often it is unclear who, if anyone, is responsible for ensuring the educational outcomes of children we take into our "charge" when we bring them into our child welfare system. Education goals and outcomes need to be integrated into the care of foster youth at every stage of the youths' development.

Participants also issued a call for better implementation of legislation already on California's books to promote school stability for these youth, give them access to the same academic resources and services as other children and prevent them from languishing in classrooms that fail to provide the type of education essential to their academic achievement.

Foster youth commonly live a "life in motion" marked by multiple homes and a parade of schools. For every change in school, children fall three to six months further behind their classmates. For foster youth, time out of school is exacerbated by barriers to enrollment, missing or delayed record transfers, unnoticed academic difficulties and the absence of a permanent connection with an adult committed to overseeing their educational development.

The struggle for school success continues for the thousands of California youth who age out of foster care. When they leave the system, fewer than half will have achieved a high school diploma and many will "graduate" instead to homelessness, unemployment and despair. Within two years after aging out, one in five former foster youth will end up in our jails. Behind these statistics lies a staggering loss of individual talent and community potential.

Summit participants called for a comprehensive approach to change these outcomes. They emphasized the need for: immediate attention for children to age 5, a key time in development; a range of supports for their school years; a statewide data system to track educational progress; early steps for college preparation; and statewide standardization and implementation of the model programs burgeoning across California on select college campuses. Those programs provide scholarship and critical mentoring, housing and counseling supports to foster youth enrolled in college.

The first-ever statewide Education Summit, sponsored by the California Foster Youth Education Task Force, Casey Family Programs and the Child and Family Policy Institute of California, represents a growing commitment in the state to ensure that our most vulnerable youth make the grade. Only by working together and creating a commitment to education that is woven into the fabric of the state's foster care system, summit attendees emphasized, can we make it possible for these youth to attain a solid education and reach their potential dreams. These officials' voices underscored the need for our entire community to strive to do better; we owe it to all our children to keep them on stable ground as they chart a path to a successful adult future.

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