How Useful is a Community-Based Partnership Model to Support Educational Outcomes for Foster Care Youth?

Kelly Weegar, A. J. Hickey, Samantha Shewchuk, Mariama Mary Fall, & Robert J. Flynn

ISTSS 32nd Annual Meeting - November 10, 2016
Presentation Outline

1. Overview of the partnership model in Ontario, Canada
2. Evaluation purpose, scope, and questions
3. Relevant literature
4. Evaluation participants and methods
5. Key evaluation findings and recommendations
6. Conclusions and next steps
History of the Partnership Model

• In 2007, a community-based partnership initiative was implemented in Ontario, Canada to support youth in out-of-home care by increasing their awareness, participation and success at all levels of their education, including post-secondary education and employment.

• Known as the “Crown Ward Education Championship Team” initiative
What is a Crown Ward Education Championship Team (CWECT)?

• “The goal for each team is to enable better education, training and employment opportunities for youth in out-of-home care by:
  – Developing a local community-based partnership team
  – Identifying youth with child welfare status within the community
  – Creating a sustainable and responsive support system for these youth to help them make the transitions from one level of education to the next”
Local school boards

Provincial government bodies

Local child welfare organizations

Youth employment service providers

Local colleges and universities

Other, e.g., youth community groups
History of the CWECT Program

By 2012, this province-wide initiative comprised 21 teams, representing 40 child welfare agencies.

Figure 1. Spread of CWECTs in Ontario, 2008-2012.
Purpose & Scope of the Evaluation

- Given the newness of such a program in Canada, together with the lack of previous evaluations, we chose to conduct a formative evaluation
  - To find out how the CWECT program was working “on the ground”, in the opinions of its stakeholders
    - To discover how useful stakeholders saw program activities, and how helpful they felt the programs had been
    - To highlight strengths/recommendations for improvement
  - To ultimately prepare for an outcome evaluation
Evaluation Questions Addressed

1. What are the needs of the stakeholders (i.e., the local Crown Wards/youth in care, caregivers, and community organizational partners)?

2. Does the CWECT program meet the needs of its stakeholders?

3. How was the CWECT program being implemented?

4. Does the CWECT program appear to be working, in the opinion of the stakeholders?
Relevant Literature

• At present, there are no evidence-based interventions for increasing post-secondary access and retention for youth in foster care, including those with trauma histories.

• However, a number of educational advocacy programs, like CWECTs, do aim to support the educational goals of at-risk youth. These programs have produced preliminary findings that suggest positive impacts, including:
  – Less school absenteeism
  – Fewer unplanned school changes
  – Improved high school graduation rates
Other Community-Based Partnership Programs

- Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance (USA)
- Foster Youth Education (FosterEd; USA) - see http://foster-ed.org/
- Kansas Partnership for Educating Kids in Care (KPEKC; USA) – see http://kpekc.org/
- Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELSIS; UK) – see https://www.celcis.org/
Relevant Literature

- Many young people in care experience lower levels of academic achievement than youths in the general population, including lower rates of graduation or entry to and completion of post-secondary education.
- Without early mastery of basic academic skills in reading and math, young people in care are at increased risk in the shorter and longer terms of:
  - Lower educational success than is warranted by their potential.
  - Higher levels of school dropout, involvement in criminal activity, homelessness, and mental health difficulties.
Evaluation Methods

• Mixed-methods approach
  – Document analysis (e.g., meeting minutes, business plans)
  – Literature reviews
  – Interviews (phone and in-person)
  – Questionnaires (online and paper)
  – Focus groups
  – Observation
Evaluation Participants

- Two CWECTs, representing four child welfare agencies in Ontario
- Four participant groups, 203 participants total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Collection Method(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CWECT team members (N = 23) *</td>
<td>• Phone interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregivers (N = 103)</td>
<td>• Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people in care (N = 65)</td>
<td>• Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Phone interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community partners (N = 12)</td>
<td>• Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Organizations represented: child welfare agencies, employment services, school boards, colleges, universities, counselling services, provincial government.
Results & Recommendations

• Findings and recommendations for each individual CWECT and overall, by each evaluation question:
  1. What are the needs of the stakeholders?
  2. Does the CWECT program meet the needs of its stakeholders?
  3. How was the CWECT program being implemented?
  4. Does the CWECT program appear to be working, in the opinion of the stakeholders?
A Shift in Thinking...

Young people in care

Caregivers

Community partners
Question 1. What are the needs of the stakeholders?

Young People in Care

According to the online questionnaires completed by the youth, all planned to pursue some kind of post-secondary education or training:

- 70.8% aimed to go to college
- 20.8% indicated wanting to pursue university
- 20.8% planned to pursue an apprenticeship
- 4.2% planned to pursue other job training (e.g., for the military)

The majority rated the importance of post-secondary education highly

- On a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important), the average rating was 7.83
Question 1. What are the needs of the stakeholders?

Young People in Care

- Nevertheless, it was consistently reported that the primary need for young people in care is increased awareness and access to information and resources.
  - "...help researching different colleges, help with budgeting... help me develop more skills that are related to what program I want to go into."

- Many team members also commented that positive, supportive, and consistent relationships are vital to the educational success of youth in care.
Question 1. What are the needs of the stakeholders?

Caregivers

• Similarly, caregivers from both teams stated that they needed more information to be able to guide their youth in care effectively.
  - “I need to be educated on what the necessary steps are and how to go about them (as things have changed since I went). For example, how to apply for college, residence, OSAP, etc. Also, there are so many grants available for our youths that learning about them and how to apply would be helpful.”

• Team members also stated that caregivers need more information about their important role in and influence on the educational success of youth in care.
Question 1. What are the needs of the stakeholders?

Community Partners

- Largely based on results from the team member interviews, the biggest need for community partners appears to be related to awareness and lacking information.
  - Several CWECT members noted that community partners tend to lack awareness about the needs of youth in care beyond academics (e.g., mental health needs), and could benefit from learning more about how positive school experiences and supportive relationships can significantly influence to their success.
Question 1. What are the needs of the stakeholders?

**Recommendation:** Young people in care should receive more one-to-one support to help them navigate the educational and employment process, and to allow new opportunities for relationship building.

**Recommendation:** CWECTs should continue to expand their services to support information sharing with all three stakeholder groups—young people in care, and the caregivers and community partner organizations who are essential collaborators in helping the young people reach their educational and career goals.

- E.g., information-sharing among caregivers and community partners through a variety of methods (e.g., newsletters, information sessions, or webinars).
Question 2. Does the CWECT program meet the needs of its stakeholders?

- All participants agreed that the purpose is about helping youth in care improve educational and employment outcomes, and the belief that they can be successful
  - "I think we fundamentally do share all the same beliefs – we believe in the importance of keeping the needs of youth in care at the forefront, and I think that we're all committed to doing the best we can and continuing to get better in serving those kids within the structures that we have—within whatever system we come from. That’s fundamentally why I believe that we do what we do."

- At this time, it appears that some needs of some youth are being met (e.g., information sharing and experiential learning events are taking place, such as college tours, motivational speakers, job skills training)
Question 2. Does the CWECT program meet the needs of its stakeholders?

- Information from interviews with CWECT members and program documentation confirmed that attempts have been made by both teams to share this kind of information with caregivers (e.g., evening information sessions, including guest speakers).
- However, both teams commented that it is a challenge to get caregivers to attend knowledge-sharing events, and many were not sure why.
Question 2. Does the CWECT program meet the needs of its stakeholders?

- Many members from both teams noted that there is a need to boost involvement of caregivers. Thus, the needs of caregivers are likely not being met.
- Due to difficulties reaching community partners to participate in this evaluation, we are unable to assess whether their needs are being met.
Question 2. Does the CWECT program meet the needs of its stakeholders?

Recommendation: A central website is needed to serve the informational needs of all teams and the various stakeholders they serve. This web site would alleviate the need for local teams to try to “reinvent the wheel”, and could increase their efficiency in meeting the needs of their stakeholders. The central website should be updated regularly with items about new opportunities related to the education and employment of young people in care in their region. (For an example of such a website, see: [http://www.equalfutures.org/about/](http://www.equalfutures.org/about/)).
Question 4. Does the CWECT program appear to be working?

- Team members all said they were hoping they were making a difference in terms of educational outcomes for youth in care, but had no real data/evidence to confirm this.
- However, the biggest impact seems to be in the area of fostering partnerships between child welfare, education, and employment services (e.g., supporting targeted conversations, increasing the accountability for all to adhere to a plan to support the education of youth in care).
Question 4. Does the CWECT program appear to be working?

- “We are getting much closer to talking the same language now in terms of the educational needs of these kids.”
- “I think we’re having an impact because we continue to work together, and we continue to gain more community partners. I think we gain a better understanding the longer we work together. The more we understand the perspective of others will help us in supporting kids.”
Question 4. Does the CWECT program appear to be working?

**Recommendation:** Objective data needs to be gathered on the outcomes experienced by the three main stakeholder groups—the young people in care, their caregivers, and the community partners—before a comprehensive impact evaluation could become possible.

**Recommendation:** The existing CWECTs and the broader initiative, as well as other community-based initiatives, should also ensure they access the wealth of accessible online information about effective, evidence-based methods of intervening to help young people in care to improve their educational outcomes (e.g., tutoring).
Conclusions & Next Steps

• To our knowledge, the current evaluation represents the first of its kind with such community-based partnership initiatives for meeting the educational needs of foster children and youth.

• Findings have important implications for:
  a. The local teams and the broader initiative in Ontario, Canada
  b. Other community programs aiming to minimize barriers and promote educational and employment success for young people in out-of-home care, including those with trauma histories.
Thank you for your time!

Kelly Weegar
• Email: kweeg065@uottawa.ca

Robert Flynn
• Email: rflynn@uottawa.ca

Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services (CRECS)
University of Ottawa
136 Jean Jacques Lussier
Vanier Hall, Room 5002
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5
Continuing Medical Education Commercial Disclosure

Boston University School of Medicine asks all individuals involved in the development and presentation of Continuing Medical Education (CME) activities to disclose all relationships with commercial interests. This information is disclosed to CME activity participants. Boston University School of Medicine has procedures to resolve apparent conflicts of interest. In addition, presenters are asked to disclose when any discussion of unapproved use of pharmaceuticals and devices is being discussed.

I, Kelly Weegar, have no commercial relationships to disclose.