

**Ensuring Educational Stability and
Supporting the Education of Youth in Foster Care**
*Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Guide for the 2020-21 School Year*



Contents

Introduction	3
Overview	4
Technical Assistance	5
Collaboration and Communication	5
Role of LEA Foster Care Point of Contact	6
Best Interest Determinations (BIDs)	7
Transportation	9
Enrollment	9
Supporting Foster Families and Caregivers	10
Trauma and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)	11
Reporting Child Abuse	12
Meals for Children	13
Additional Resources	13

Introduction

Mitigation efforts related to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Pennsylvania have required everyone to work within rapidly changing, complex circumstances, creating a variety of unique situations and conditions for students, staff, educators, caregivers, and communities. Recognizing and addressing the unique needs of our most vulnerable learners, including youth in foster care, is particularly important to address equity challenges.

School operations will likely vary among local education agencies (LEAs) for the 2020-21 school year, which may include a combination of in-person and remote learning formats. Still, LEAs and local child welfare agencies (CWAs) must be prepared to provide school stability for youth in foster care, including if school operation plans change in response to the pandemic.

Additionally, it is anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic may result in foster care placement instability for some children as well as contribute to anxiety in students associated with the unpredictability of the outbreak. School often provides children in foster care with safety, stability, consistency, and sense of community during times of crisis and uncertainty. This guide provides information related to ensuring educational stability and supporting the education of youth in foster care during the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic for the 2020-21 school year. Throughout the guide, tables summarize key points to remember to best support youth in foster care.

On June 3, 2020, PDE issued [Preliminary Guidance for Phased Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Schools](#) and on June 24, 2020, PDE issued a research report, [Considerations for Reopening Pennsylvania Schools](#). These reports, in addition to other guidance regularly updated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education [found on the COVID-19 webpage](#), provide comprehensive information and updates to federal and state guidance regarding COVID-19. The purpose of this guide is to build upon the June 3 and June 24 documents to support schools in planning effective programs and supports for students in foster care.

Overview

Youth in foster care are provided certain protections under federal education and child welfare law to ensure school stability.¹ These protections include a child's right to remain in their school of origin if determined to be in their best interest, access to transportation, and immediate enrollment. Children in foster care rely on the alignment of both education and child welfare systems to receive these protections, including other benefits of school attendance such as access to trusted peers and adults and food security.

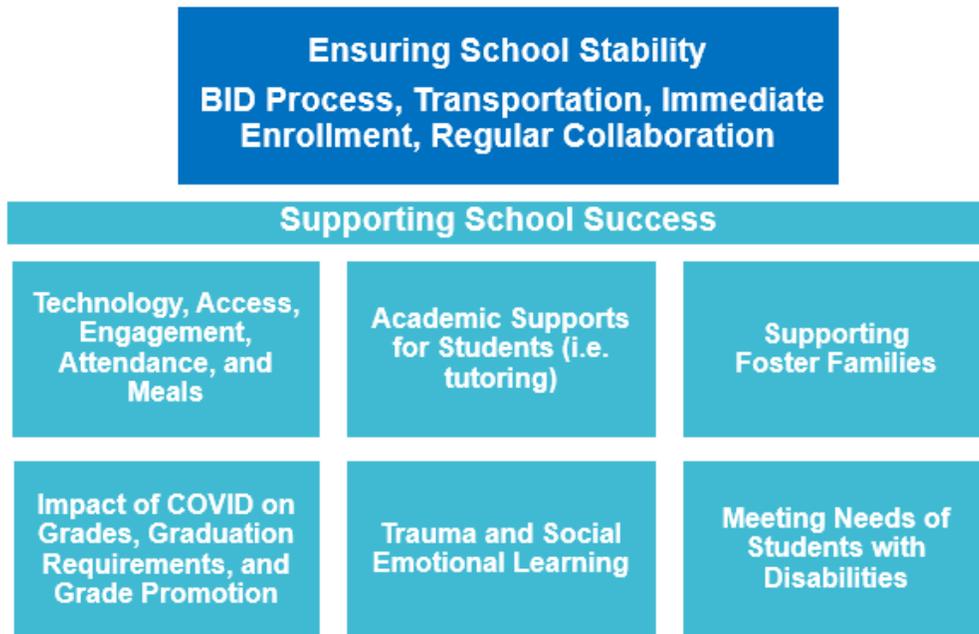
Many children in foster care reside in a different school district than the one in which they attend school. This is especially notable for the 2020-21 school year as school operations may differ among LEAs and communities. It is important to consider these variations among LEAs; however, the education protections provided to youth in foster care must continue to be met by LEAs and child welfare agencies (CWAs) through the 2020-21 school year. The following chart provides an overview of ensuring educational stability for youth in foster care while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overview: Ensuring Educational Stability for Youth in Foster Care Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic	
Youth in foster care remain in their school of origin whenever feasible and appropriate.	✓
Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) between LEAs and CWAs continue.	✓
Transportation is provided, if needed for school stability.	✓
LEAs and CWAs collaborate and communicate regularly.	✓
Youth in foster care are entitled to immediate enrollment.	✓
LEA Foster Care Points of Contact ensure youth in foster care have what they need to successfully participate in school.	✓

In addition to ensuring school stability, LEA Foster Care Points of Contact play a vital role in supporting school success for youth in foster care. Figure 1 highlights other important topic areas that should be considered as LEA Foster Care Points of Contact provide targeted outreach to support the educational needs of youth in foster care in the 2020-21 school year. More information on each of these topic areas can be found on the [PDE COVID-19 webpages](#).

¹ The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. [See joint ED/DHHS guidance](#).

Figure 1. Important Considerations for Supporting Students in Foster Care



Technical Assistance

In response to the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, PDE established eight Educational Stability for Youth in Foster Care Regional Offices in addition to a statewide foster care point of contact. These parties continue to provide guidance and technical assistance to local education agencies and local child welfare agencies during the COVID-19 response effort. The most up-to-date contact information can be found on the [Educational Stability for Foster Care Youth in Pennsylvania website](#). You may also contact PDE’s statewide foster care point of contact, Matthew Butensky, at mbutensky@csc.csiu.org or (717) 763-1661 x171. Questions or comments may also be sent to pafostercare@csc.csiu.org.

Collaboration and Communication

Key Reminders: Collaboration and Communication <i>Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	
Collaboration among LEAs and CWAs remains critical, but especially important during pandemic response.	✓
Verify Points of Contact are up-to-date and accessible.	✓
Participate in or create opportunities to connect, collaborate, and review.	✓

It is possible that youth will be placed into foster care and reside in school districts implementing a Healthy and Safety Plan that is different from their school district of origin. Therefore, while collaboration and communication between education and child welfare professionals have always been critical to ensuring school stability for youth in foster care, the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights its importance.

LEA Foster Care Points of Contact are critical links to ensuring school stability for youth in foster care. For a current listing of LEA Foster Care Points of Contact, child welfare agency Education Liaisons, regional office coordinators, and higher education points of contact, visit the current [statewide directories](#).

The following are additional suggestions for ongoing collaboration and communication:

- Develop a local process that enables LEAs to maintain a current list of youth in foster care enrolled or residing within their school districts. For example, some LEAs in Pennsylvania already have local agreements with county children and youth agencies to provide current lists of youth in foster care on a regular basis (i.e. monthly, quarterly).
- Ensure that your agency contact information listed on the [statewide directories](#) is current and accurate. In the point of contact's absence, ensure that someone in your agency is available to address the educational needs of youth in foster care. To update contact information or provide additional points of contact, please email pafostercare@csc.csiu.org.
- Participate in opportunities provided by the statewide office or Foster Care Regional Offices to collaborate, including virtual or in-person meetings, trainings, and webinars.
- Strengthen connections and communication during phased reopening plans. Consider establishing a local meeting structure and schedule for the 2020-2021 school year to facilitate collaboration among local school and child welfare agency points of contact. For example, some county points of contacts may decide to meet virtually every other month to discuss county or community specific information. Foster Care Regional Offices and the statewide point of contact are available to assist facilitating local meetings. Submit requests for assistance to pafostercare@csc.csiu.org.

Role of LEA Foster Care Point of Contact

Key Reminders: Role of LEA Foster Care Point of Contact <i>Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	
Points of Contact ensure students' rights to school stability.	✓
Points of Contact provide targeted outreach and support to students in foster care.	✓
Points of Contact assist students in foster care to fully participate in school successfully, whether in-person, remotely, or a combination.	✓

The LEA Foster Care Point of Contact should lead LEA efforts to ensure that the educational stability and the educational needs of youth in foster care are prioritized during ongoing COVID-19 response in the 2020-21 school year.

The following suggestions highlight best practices for LEA Foster Care Point of Contact as schools reopen and respond to COVID-19 in the 2020-21 school year:

- Check-in on youth in foster care, including youth in foster care placed in group or residential settings, to ensure their engagement and participation in school instruction.
- Prioritize check-ins for youth in foster care that entered or changed foster care placements during the mandated statewide school closures in the Spring 2020. Ensure that they are prepared to begin school on time as school instruction resumes for the 2020-21 school year.
- Ensure that students in foster care are able to engage in school instruction and can access available school services through targeted support, even if residing in outside districts. Targeted support may include ensuring technology access to participate in school, access to school meals, school-based counseling, and transportation, if needed.
- Review, or work with other LEA staff to review, the attendance and engagement of youth in foster care to ensure that youth in foster care are on track for grade promotion and are not at risk for grade retention due to negative effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Ensure that youth in foster care have the same access to instruction and other educational supports provided to all other students in the district.
- Ensure that youth in foster care with IEPs, Section 504 Plans, or are suspected to have a disability are connected and referred to appropriate LEA staff and are receiving required supports during remote or blended learning.
- Collaborate with LEA staff and administration to review and discuss if compensatory/remedial education or tutoring services are available to youth in foster care receiving special or regular education. Connect youth in foster care with these additional supports when available.
- Maintain regular contact with the child’s caseworker or placing child welfare agency and communicate any challenges supporting the child’s educational needs.

To review other roles and responsibilities of the LEA Foster Care Point of Contact, refer to a description on the [Educational Stability for Youth in Foster Care website](#).

Best Interest Determinations (BIDs)

Key Reminders: Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) <i>Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	
Youth in foster care are presumed to remain in their school of origin.	✓
BIDs between LEAs and CWAs continue.	✓
BIDs consider the varied formats of school operation among LEAs (i.e. in-person, remote, or blended learning formats).	✓

BIDs are focused on the best interest of the student and are child-centered.	✓
BIDs are an important process across foster care placement types (i.e. foster families, group homes, RTFs, etc.)	✓

Youth in foster care are entitled to remain in their school of origin if it is determined to be in their best interest. LEAs and local child welfare agencies must continue to complete school placement Best Interest Determinations and should continue to use the [Best Interest Determination School Placement Form](#) during phased reopening plans and during the 2020-21 school year.

As school operation may differ among communities where youth in foster care live and attend school, continued completion of the BID process when a child enters or changes foster care placement is critical to ensuring that meaningful parties participate in school placement decisions that are child-centered and focused on the best interest of the child. For example, for some youth in foster care, the format for delivery of education by an LEA (in-person, remote, or blended) may be a significant factor in the BID process due to the child’s needs or to keep the foster care placement intact. These factors may take precedence over other common BID considerations in some circumstances. Continuing the BID process during COVID-19 facilitates open communication among education and child welfare partners and ensures that any other school and community services are provided to youth in foster care.

The following recommendations are important to keep in mind as agencies complete the BID:

- Local child welfare agencies should continue to notify LEAs of a child’s entry into foster care or change in placement as they occur.
- Consistent with [PDE’s student enrollment and attendance guidance for all students](#), LEAs are strongly encouraged to allow a student to remain in their current school/district during the COVID-19 pandemic whenever feasible, if that is the student’s preference.
- Collaboration should include developing a plan to address the child’s education, school attendance, and transportation, **with particular consideration to varied formats for school operation among LEAs**, as that may affect the outcome of the BID.
- In the event that a BID indicates that a student in foster care needs to change schools, LEAs and child welfare partners should collaborate prior to withdrawing the student from the school of origin to ensure that the receiving school has a streamlined process for enrollment and can provide continuity of education.
- Pending any final BID, the school of origin should ensure that students in foster care continue to receive instruction or educational supports provided to all other students enrolled in the school through the local continuity of education plan.
- Remember that foster care placement may include varied placement settings such as group homes, residential treatments facilities (RTFs), formal kinship placements, and pre-adoptive homes. Youth in foster care in any of these other placement types should continue to receive a BID, as should discussions around meeting their educational needs during the ongoing COVID-19 response.

Reminder: To the extent feasible and appropriate, an LEA must ensure that a child remains in their school of origin while this determination is being made. (See ESEA sections 1111(g)(1)(E)(i) or joint ED/HHS guidance page 15, question 20).

Transportation

Key Reminders: Transportation <i>Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	
Transportation remains an important consideration as school operation may vary among LEAs for the 2020-21 school year.	✓
Youth in foster care continue to receive transportation if needed.	✓
Update existing transportation plans if needed.	✓

As referenced in [Considerations for Reopening Pennsylvania Schools](#) (page 14), transportation is anticipated to pose additional challenges in the 2020-21 school year. However, the Every Student Succeeds Act requires transportation be provided to youth in foster care if transportation is needed to ensure educational stability. LEAs and child welfare agencies must continue to work together to ensure that transportation is provided during school operation for the 2020-21 school year. Agencies should collaborate and discuss transportation options even if formats of school operation vary among LEAs sharing in transportation responsibility for a student in foster care.

LEAs of origin and LEAs of foster care residence often share transportation responsibility with child welfare agencies in order for youth in foster care to receive transportation promptly and in a cost-effective manner. These agreements are outlined in formal, written transportation plans. LEAs should review their existing transportation plans to ensure that youth in foster care who are entitled to receive transportation to remain in the school of origin continue to do so as school operation resumes in the 2020-2021 school year. If existing plans do not meet those needs, plans must be updated to ensure transportation is provided when needed. Updated transportation plans should be sent to pafostercare@csc.csiu.org.

Reminder: An LEA must ensure that a child in foster care remains in their school of origin while any disputes regarding transportation are being resolved. (See ESEA sections 1111(g)(1)(E)(i) and 1112(c)(5)(B)(i)) or joint ED/HHS guidance page 19, question 32).
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Enrollment

Key Reminders: Enrollment <i>Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	
Youth remain entitled to immediate enrollment.	✓
Documentation cannot delay enrollment.	✓
Ensure seamless, planned transitions when feasible.	✓
Consider school attendance and enrollment options when a child exits foster care.	✓
Youth remain in their current school/district whenever feasible and appropriate during the COVID-19 pandemic.	✓

As phased reopening plans are implemented and school operation resumes, students in foster care should receive education from the school placement determined through the BID process.

Under ESSA, youth in foster care are entitled to immediate enrollment into a new school if it has been determined to be in their best interest to change schools.

Documentation required for school enrollment cannot delay the enrollment process for youth in foster care. The enrolling school is responsible for contacting the student's prior school for relevant records. Given the instability and uncertainty associated with COVID-19, every effort should be made to maintain the child in their school of origin as response to COVID-19 continues into the 2020-21 school year.

When a child exits foster care, LEAs should consider school attendance and enrollment options for the child, including if remaining in the school district of origin is feasible and appropriate. LEAs should continue to prioritize the child's educational stability when a child exits care and consider each child's best interest on a case-by-case basis. LEAs are strongly encouraged to allow a student to remain in their current school/district during the COVID-19 pandemic whenever feasible, if that is the student's preference.

Reminder: Enrollment must not be denied or delayed for any population of students (e.g. students with disabilities receiving special education and related services) because documents normally required for enrollment have not been provided. (See ESEA section 1111 (g)(1)(E) or [joint ED/HHS guidance](#) page 20, question 33).

Supporting Foster Families and Caregivers

Key Reminders: Supporting Foster Families and Caregivers <i>Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	
Make foster families feel well supported through targeted outreach.	✓
Ensure foster families are aware of LEA plans and updates.	✓

COVID-19 has produced a range of challenges in teaching and learning for families, including for foster families and caregivers. COVID-19 is anticipated to increase foster care placement instability due to circumstances such as foster families' and caregivers' availability to supervise and support children's learning. LEA Foster Care Points of Contact should play a role in making sure foster families and caregivers feel well supported in their child's education to reduce the frequency of foster care placement instability due to COVID-19.

The following are suggestions for LEA Foster Care Points of Contact to support foster families and caregivers:

- Reach out to foster families and caregivers through targeted outreach, especially at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, or as youth in foster care enroll into school. Outreach may include letters or phone calls to determine how the pandemic is affecting family circumstances.
- Ensure that foster families are aware of the current name and contact information of the LEA Foster Care Point of Contact in your school district so that they may reach out with

any questions or concerns. For example, some LEAs already send a letter to foster families with this information at least once in a calendar year.

- Ensure that foster families and caregivers are aware of any updates as district plans are made or changes occur. Verify that call or email lists of foster parents or caregivers are current.
- Communicate any challenges supporting the educational needs of youth in foster care with the child's foster family or caregiver in a language understandable to the student and foster family/caregiver.

Reminder: PA's KinConnector helpline assists families in kinship care situations, such as grandparents raising their grandchildren, identify local, state, and federal resources. KinConnector can be reached by calling 1.866.KIN.2111 (1.866.546.2111). Assistance is available Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Find out more [about KinConnector](#).

Trauma and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Youth in foster care have experienced trauma and exposure to [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#). Social and emotional learning has become more widely accepted as one of the possible Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) that buffer the negative impacts of traumatic incidents.² The number of incidents of childhood trauma occurring as a direct or indirect result of the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to be higher. For youth in foster care, COVID-19 may add to existing anxieties youth experience as a result of entering or being in foster care.

Reaching out to youth in foster care is especially important during the COVID-19 response. Youth may feel isolated or detached from in-person school activities during implementation of modified school instructional plans for the 2020-21 school year. While some youth in foster care may not be reporting daily to school buildings, educators can still extend social emotional support to these vulnerable youth. As referenced in [Considerations for Reopening Pennsylvania Schools](#) (page 20), the CDC recommends multiple strategies to support students' sense of connectedness to their school setting.³

PDE has developed a resource list to support educators' and caregivers' efforts to maintain a positive learning climate while students are physically separated from their teachers and classmates due to COVID-19. The list is organized by the three elements of a positive learning climate that have been shown to contribute to welcoming schools and support positive youth development - safety, support, and social & emotional learning. To access these resources, visit the [Promoting Positive Learning Climates Online and at Home webpage](#).

Additional trauma and SEL resources and activities can be found at the following links:

- [CASEL: CASEL CARES: SEL Resources During COVID-19](#)
- [Child Trends: Resources for Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being During the](#)

² [Responding to ACEs with HOPE: Health Outcomes from Positive Experiences \(2017\)](#).

³ [School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors among Youth \(2009\)](#).

[COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

- [Harvard University Center on the Developing Child: COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [Sesame Street: Caring for Each Other during COVID-19](#)
- [Teaching Tolerance: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus](#)
- [Building Resilience During Difficult Times with SuperBetter](#)
- [10 Guided Meditation Strategies for Kids](#)

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Reporting Child Abuse

Educators understand their important role in reporting child abuse; however, child abuse referrals have been down since school closures were mandated in the 2019-20 school year.⁴ As some students may not physically be present in school buildings during phased reopening plans in some communities for the 2020-21 school year, educators' continued engagement with students is critical. Virtual meetings, phone calls, emails, meal distribution, and other platforms, forums or activities offer opportunities to identify potential safety needs and concerns. Educators should let students know they are a supportive, caring adult in their lives and check-in regularly regardless if students are present in school buildings or participating in school remotely.

Educators can ask these questions to children to monitor their well-being:

- How is everyone getting along today?
- Can you share with me one word for how you are feeling today?
- Are you worried about anything?
- What are you doing for fun?

Educators can recognize signs of concern including:

- Students with technology/internet access but lacking virtual attendance.
- Incomplete homework over a long period.
- No contact with family after repeated phone calls or messages.
- Child communicates they feel unsafe, you see or hear a dangerous environment, or you notice a significant change in child's mood or behavior.

Educators should make an extra effort with children who:

- Have a history of abuse or neglect, drug use, or discussed/attempted suicide.

⁴ [Human Services: Pennsylvanians Must Remain Vigilant about Preventing Child Abuse and Keeping All Kids Safe \(June 2020\)](#).

- Are responsible for the care of other children or live in a high stress family situation with limited support.
- Require assistance due to physical, mental, behavioral disabilities or delays.

Reminder: School personnel are mandated reporters by law. When you make a report in good faith, you are protected against civil/criminal penalty or adverse employment action. If you have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse, report it immediately online at [Keep Kids Safe PA](#) or call 1-800-932-0313.

Meals for Children

Students not receiving meals at school may experience food insecurity. PDE offers an [interactive map](#) that provides information on schools and districts distributing meals at no cost to children age 18 and under. This map is updated regularly but is not exhaustive. Contact a school or district for more information and to confirm the availability of food.

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture offers a [list of resources](#) that provide information on how to access and obtain emergency food assistance in communities across the state.

Visit the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services [website](#) to find a food pantry near you.

Additional Resources

State Resources

PA Department of Education COVID-19

<https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx>

PA Department of Education Resources for Families

<https://www.education.pa.gov/about/Resources/ResourcesFamilies/Pages/default.aspx>

PA Department of Human Services COVID-19

<https://www.dhs.pa.gov/providers/Providers/Pages/Coronavirus-2020.aspx>

Educational Stability for Youth in Foster Care in Pennsylvania COVID-19 Information

<https://www.pafostercare.org/covid-19-information/>

PA Partnerships for Children COVID-19 Resources

<https://www.papartnerships.org/covid-19-resources/>

Federal Resources

U.S. Department of Education COVID-19

<https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus>

U.S. Children's Bureau COVID-19

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/covid-19-resources>

Federal Letter on Foster Students in Postsecondary Education

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/housing_support_covid19.pdf

National Foster Care and Education Resources

Factsheet: How Can LEAs Support Students in Foster Care During COVID-19?

<http://fostercareandeducation.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?portalid=0&EntryId=2104&Command=Core> Download

Factsheet: How Child Welfare Agencies Help Students in Foster Care During COVID-19?

<http://fostercareandeducation.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?portalid=0&EntryId=2107&Command=Core> Download

Factsheet: How Can Courts Support Educational Needs of Students in Foster Care During COVID-19?

<http://fostercareandeducation.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?portalid=0&EntryId=2106&Command=Core> Download

National organizations and websites

American Bar Association Center – Legal Center for Foster Care and Education

<http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/>

FosterClub COVID-19

<https://www.fosterclub.com//c19>

Hop Skip Drive 2020-2021 Student Transportation Planning Checklist

<http://go.hopskipdrive.com/e/598071/ecklist-Opportunities-2020-pdf/7mvr8/263803331?h=aVwrKmRT2dmDTISNoIW8cnrpgut4-rt6WiQCPKwm0M8>

National Association. For the Education of Homeless Children and Youth COVID-19

<https://naehcy.org/educational-resources/covid-19-resources-guidance/%20>

One Simple Wish COVID-19 Response

<https://www.onesimplewish.org/covid19>

SchoolHouse Connection COVID-19

<https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/covid19-and-homelessness/>

Together We Rise: Responding to Coronavirus Impacting Foster Youth

<https://www.togetherwerise.org/covid-19/resources/>

Think of Us COVID-19

<https://thinkofus.helpjuice.com/>

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