

EDITORIAL

Improving outcomes for state's foster kids

Legislators should make the 'electronic backpack' a standard educational tool for students in foster care.

By **The Editorial Board**, Updated January 19, 2020, 2 hours ago



State Auditor Suzanne Bump has testified in favor of using an "electronic backpack" for school students in foster care. ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Students who bounce from one foster home to another often bounce from one school system to another. That kind of tortured educational odyssey brings with it predictable consequences — lower graduation rates, higher absenteeism, and dimmer futures.

But there's no reason this state and the children in its care have to accept that as a given when technology — and a legislative mandate to use it — can provide a way out and a hand up to thousands of young people.

The notion of an [“electronic backpack”](#) that puts a foster child's educational records all in one place is now getting a serious look by state lawmakers. It's hardly a new idea. Several California counties have been using the concept for the better part of a decade, often for a wide range of information in addition to school records.

In a state where officials purport to care deeply about education, it's simply unacceptable to have a four-year high school graduation rate for students in foster care of less than 56 percent. That was the figure in the [first annual report released by the Department of Families and Children](#) at the start of 2020. DCF wants to boost that number, but its goal is modest: 67 percent.

“We can't use technology to undo much of the damage that has been done to our children in foster care, to eliminate the trauma, to cure the pain — physical and emotional — that our children in foster care often suffer,” state Auditor Suzanne Bump testified at a hearing of the Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities. “We can't use technology to repair unstable families or even to find a new forever home for children in foster care, but we can use technology to provide better educational continuity for our children in foster care.”

Bump first raised the education data issue in [an audit last spring](#) that found school districts had to expend “considerable time and effort to ensuring that children in foster care are receiving the right educational services.” The fact that about 45 percent of students in the foster care system require individualized education plans — sometimes in their current “home” district, sometimes outside it — makes it even more important to have thorough information.

That audit also documented the department's apparent inability to get a handle on chronic absenteeism among students in foster care. “Several districts reported that they

have informed DCF that a foster student has been absent from school (sometimes for periods in excess of 40 days), only to find that DCF has not acted on that report,” the audit noted.

The electronic backpack can’t solve everything, but it certainly would help cut through the bureaucratic nightmare these students — and the educators, social workers, and foster parents trying to serve their needs — often have to endure.

The [House version of a bill](#) to require DCF to implement electronic backpacks was filed by state Representative Kay Khan of Newton, cochair of the committee. A similar bill has already received committee approval in the Senate and been moved on to Senate Ways and Means. Both bills would give DCF a year to implement the proposal.

Both bills would restrict access to the electronic data to those with a genuine need to know.

[San Diego County](#) has been using electronic backpacks since 2006 for an even wider range of information for its foster children, including medical records, all the while protecting the privacy of families and children by limiting access to each category of information. And that could surely be a logical *next* step for Massachusetts.

But for now the state has to take the first step — putting education records in every foster child’s “electronic backpack.” Massachusetts owes its foster kids that much.

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