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Advocates push education reforms for foster kids

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MIAMI (AP) -- Federal lawmakers said during a national town hall meeting Wednesday that they are working to help foster children succeed in school, citing dismal statistics including a 50 percent graduation rate among foster youths.

Foster children typically move one to two times a year, often changing foster homes and schools. Only three percent receive a bachelor's degree, said U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, a Louisiana Democrat.

"It's not because they don't want to work hard, it's because if you had to move four times in elementary school and five times in high school you might fall behind as well. It's emotionally very difficult," said Landrieu, co-chair of the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth.

She addressed the town hall online from D.C. along with other lawmakers.

The town hall, held in Sacramento, Calif., by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, highlighted a growing movement to make sure nearly half a million U.S. foster children thrive academically. Advocates say many foster children already struggle to overcome past abuse and are further traumatized switching schools, making it difficult to find friends and achieve academic stability.

A 2008 federal law says children must remain in the school they attended before entering foster care. But states

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have struggled to implement its broad and sometimes vague demands and say they can't afford the additional transportation costs of keeping foster children in their original school instead of the one closest to their new home. And since the law has no penalties for education officials who violate it, many ignore it. U.S. Sen. Al Franken, a Minnesota Democrat, is proposing legislation addressing that issue.

But creating broad, meaningful change has been difficult as officials try to cut through bureaucracy of multiple agencies.

"This requires a great deal of cooperation between two federal agencies, between the federal government and state government and within state government a collaboration with what local school districts are doing. You don't always get that cooperation very easily," said Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa.

The departments of Education and Health and Human Services sent school districts and state child welfare officials an unprecedented letter in August reminding them of the federal law and encouraging states to find ways to implement it.

The agencies will meet in November and hope to "send the message that education and child welfare are prepared to work together," said George Sheldon, acting assistant secretary of Administration for Children and Families and former head of Florida's child welfare system.

He encouraged school districts and child welfare workers to work closely with foster parents to ensure foster children are hitting academic goals.

Child advocate Andrea Moore is spearheading an effort in Florida called "Everybody's a Teacher," which unites child welfare and school officials with foster parents and community leaders.

"The current statistics would make anyone who cares about children cry. We all talk about breaking the cycle of abuse and helping these victims become self-sufficient survivors and they can't do that without an education," said Moore.

Part of her program trains foster parents to understand they are the child's first educator, encouraging them to use games and songs to help with math and reading skills.

The movement is also working to make sure all foster children are enrolled in early education programs. Fifty-percent of foster children in northwest Florida are under the age of 5, said Moore.

Several former foster youth also told lawmakers Wednesday they felt voiceless as they bounced around the system with few familiar faces to encourage them at school.

"If your own child was performing below grade level you would do everything within your power to reach their full potential," said Derrick Riggins, a former Florida foster youth who went on to get a master's degree and now interns on Capitol Hill.

"Oftentimes when children come into the system their education suffers. It is not acceptable. We must address why so many foster kids are falling behind academically."

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