

EDITORIAL

Better Odds for Foster Kids

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has embraced a blueprint, released last fall by a statewide task force, to improve the odds for California's 91,000 foster children. The governor appears to understand that these children too often drift for years from one stranger's home to another, their prospects for high school graduation and a decent job dimming each time they have to stuff their clothes into duffel bags. The state reform plan aims to make local child-welfare workers more accountable while giving them new tools to help fragile families. Here are three concrete steps the state can take toward those broad goals.

- **Keep salvageable families intact.** Many parents are too dangerous or incompetent to keep their children. But some kids would do better at home if their mothers and fathers sobered up or learned to control their tempers. Yet the federal dollars that pay for parental 12-step classes and therapy for acting-out kids flow only after social workers dump children with a relative or stranger, perversely encouraging the breakup of families worth saving. Los Angeles County officials, with 29,000 children living away from their parents, hope to get a waiver to use their federal funding to help preserve some families. Seventeen states already are asking for this flexibility; not all will win it. To succeed, California must quickly submit the application on behalf of Los Angeles County and push hard for Washington's approval.
- **Open courthouse doors.** State laws that shroud foster cases in secrecy protect incompetent social workers and dangerous caregivers more than vulnerable children. A bill by Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento), AB 2627, would open these proceedings to public scrutiny while still allowing judges to close courtrooms and shield identities in cases where children could be harmed.
- **Foster successful adults.** Last spring, then-Gov. Gray Davis signed AB 408, which directs social workers to connect teenagers to a familiar adult mentor as they leave foster care at age 18 or so. The law aims to keep teens from drifting into homelessness or jail when they can't return to messed-up parents and aren't adopted. Schwarzenegger wants lawmakers to repeal AB 408, inexplicably insisting the bill will cost too much. The governor might usefully compare the cost of tracking down an old neighbor or an uncle or a favorite teacher with the cost of jailing troubled kids who have no skills and think no one cares about them. Lawmakers should hang tough on this one.

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