EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DESTINATION GRADUATION
Investing in the Educational Attainment of California’s Youth in Foster Care

2024

Prepared By:
The Foster Youth Pre-College Collective
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

California’s students in foster care face unique challenges in getting to graduation day. These youth frequently struggle in school as they try to recover from the shock, uncertainty, and instability brought on by family separation.

Compared to other middle and high school students, the state’s 16,693 foster youth in grades 6-12 require more intensive, frequent, and individualized attention to help them graduate high school, prepare for college and career training programs, and compete in the workforce. Unless we address their specialized needs, youth in foster care will continue to pay the price by underperforming academically, dropping out of school, and settling for jobs that lower their lifetime earning potential.

It is essential to engage in intentional systems change and invest in the practices and programs proven to optimize learning for students in foster care. This report outlines their persistent barriers to educational attainment, quantifies chronically poor academic outcomes, shares solutions that build on previous attempts to address these issues, and calls for scaling interventions that have achieved success by focusing on the specific educational and social/emotional needs of this segment of the student population.

The Challenge

Academic achievement can be elusive for students with experience in foster care. As these young people attempt to cope with a profoundly traumatic life disruption, their likelihood of completing high school and progressing to post-secondary education plummets.

- Nearly 37% of California’s youth in foster care do not complete high school within a 4-year period.
- Students in foster care are nearly three times more likely to drop out of school than their peers in the general population.
- Less than half of California’s students in foster care who complete high school enter post-secondary education within a year of graduation. The college-going rate is 25% lower than for the general population.

A deeper review of the data fully reveals the uphill climb to graduation for students in care. For decades, these young people have experienced significantly higher rates of chronic absenteeism, school disciplinary action, and school mobility – even compared to other high-needs students such as those experiencing homelessness, migrants, socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, and those with disabilities.

Without prescriptive oversight and dedicated funding, the educational progress of thousands of young people in the state’s care is in jeopardy. Youth in foster care don’t lack the ambition or desire to be the best versions of themselves. They are missing the loving guidance and consistent encouragement most children receive from family. Blaming narratives can surface that place responsibility on the student instead of the systems meant to serve them, further alienating the youth.

Despite a long-time pattern of academic underperformance, there is no mandate for the child welfare system to focus on the educational outcomes of youth in care. Competing priorities and a lack of experience working with this special needs subgroup make it difficult for schools to deliver the customized, high-frequency interventions necessary to reverse unacceptable educational outcomes.
Although California identifies foster care students as a priority population in both the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to school districts and funds to county-level administrative and coordination approaches via the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCP), students in care rarely receive targeted, direct interventions. And so, the longstanding disparities persist.

Young people in care lost even more traction at school during the COVID-19 pandemic as the shift to remote learning exposed the education system’s historical inequities. Distance learning accelerated youth disconnection and learning loss. A study of the pandemic’s effect on secondary students in Los Angeles found significantly lower participation rates for foster youth than their non-foster care peers. A recent report estimates the pandemic erased a decade of progress in reducing youth disconnection, which comes at a steep cost to society. A previous study commissioned by the White House Council for Community Solutions estimated that in 2011 alone, taxpayers “shouldered more than $93 billion to compensate for lost taxes and direct costs to support young people disengaged from both education and work.”

The remarkable resiliency of these young people should not overshadow the well-documented learning challenges they face in the K-12 educational space. While some system-involved students overcome trauma and family separation to excel in school, thousands more feel stranded by circumstances beyond their control.

There are several contributing factors that hinder educational attainment for current and former foster youth:

- Limited coordination between child welfare and education systems creates barriers for youth in care.
- School and placement instability impedes academic growth. Frequent life disruptions are common and stressful for youth in care.
- Systemic racism and implicit bias within the child welfare and education systems continue to adversely affect Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities. African American youth are over-represented in the foster care system and are the lowest-performing K-12 students in California.
- Data tracking across systems and service providers is onerous and time-consuming.
- Youth in care are more likely to be attending poor-performing schools.
- There is no uniform definition of “foster youth” to assist staff in assessing eligibility and ensuring youth in care connect to critical educational rights and resources that support academic progress.

Prior Actions to Improve Educational Outcomes for Students in Care

California is recognized nationally for supporting innovative approaches to improve educational outcomes for youth who experience foster care. From public and private financial investments to instituting administration policies and statutes and championing new programs, the state has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to finding solutions that respond to issues facing young people affected by family trauma.

Since 2003, national and state legislators have passed several laws to strengthen educational support for youth in care. Some of these reforms originated in California and inspired and influenced federal legislation. While there has been some progress in enhancing coordination and lifting barriers over the past two decades, many issues persist due to gaps between policy and practice, inadequate staffing, insufficient service provision, and flaws in funding and implementation that fall short of expectations.
With high-frequency, individualized support, foster youth are more likely to stay engaged within traditional learning communities. As detailed in the *Destination Graduation* report, community-based organizations (CBOs) play a pivotal role in filling service gaps, interfacing with child welfare and education systems, and ensuring that youth in foster care receive the attention and skills they need to graduate high school and confidently transition into college and career programs of their choice.

Intensive programs led by several California-based nonprofit educational service providers demonstrate what is possible when youth in care receive purposeful, consistent, trauma-informed academic assistance that meets them where they are. Three integrated foundational supports directly contribute to academic progression for students in care:

1. **Individualized, frequent, and trauma-informed interventions for youth in grades 6-12**
2. **Service provision that follows the youth regardless of their system status (i.e., if they exit care while enrolled in the program)**
3. **Support after high school graduation to ensure young people are ready, confident, and connected to a supportive community as they enter college, trade school, and other career training programs**

These programs achieve impressive results year after year and show that teaching skills, promoting social-emotional learning, and providing healthy, safe environments for young people in foster care definitively lead to better educational attainment.

A review of promising practices also found that student success largely depends on adhering to guiding principles that carefully consider and respond to the specific needs and circumstances of students in foster care navigating an often unstable educational journey.

Finally, each organization with a track record of favorable outcomes offers an array of complementary services that promote educational progress, encourage career exploration, provide financial assistance, focus on socio-emotional learning, and build networks of support that connect foster care students to other young people who share similar experiences.
All young people deserve a quality education that prepares them for future success. Despite good intentions, previous attempts by the government to boost the educational attainment of youth with lived experience of foster care have yet to meet expectations. We can’t continue to compromise the vision for our children – in particular children of color – by continuing with old models that aren’t working.

A dedicated, sustainable public funding source would give more California students in foster care access to meaningful, engaging educational programming grounded in best practices. Now is the time to expand services to encourage foster youth to reclaim their potential, complete high school, and pursue post-secondary education and career opportunities that lead to gainful employment and financial stability.

Working more collaboratively within and across systems is imperative to help current and former foster youth move beyond their trauma and toward their life goals. The promising practice programs featured in this report currently serve over 3,000 students annually. Public funding would increase the capacity of direct service providers to scale programs and intensive interventions that have proven to lift barriers to educational attainment for youth in care. New investment also would start to address entrenched racial equity issues in education that have long plagued BIPOC communities.

As older youth age out of the foster care system with lower levels of education, they struggle to achieve financial stability. Reduced earning potential has lifetime consequences for these young adults and has a negative economic impact on society. A commitment to advancing the educational success of middle and high school foster care students will effectively decrease future costs for unemployment, public assistance, emergency housing, and other social services.

The Opportunity to Transform Lives vs. Business as Usual

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The National Center for Education estimates that the average high school dropout in America causes a lifetime economic burden of $272,000 due to lower tax contributions, more reliance on public benefits, and higher rates of criminal activities. Based on these estimated costs, a $40,000 allocation per student in foster care would yield an economic savings of 3.5 to 6.0 times the proposed investment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPTION 1: Grades 6-12</th>
<th>Target Population (CDE Data)</th>
<th>Annual Cost per Student</th>
<th>Annual Services* Budget</th>
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*Includes High-end Foundational Supports + Program Pillars

Cost Modeling uses a three-year average (academic years) to calculate the cohort populations.

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<th>COST OF PROPOSED PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS</th>
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<td>Annual Cost per Youth</td>
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<tr>
<th>COST OF NOT IMPLEMENTING PROPOSED PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS</th>
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<td>California Estimate: Youth who have experienced abuse or neglect</td>
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<td>National Estimate: Youth who drop out of high school</td>
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Conclusion

When educators, child welfare leaders, community-based organizations, and government agencies work together, we can overcome the obstacles to success that have shattered the dreams of system-involved youth for decades. We have a moral obligation to do what it takes to minimize the lifelong negative impact of foster care on the young people who experience it through no fault of their own. By creating a public funding stream dedicated to improving their educational attainment, we can help these young people heal from past trauma and build the futures they want for themselves.

California has the opportunity to deepen its commitment to solving the deep structural and systemic issues that prevent thousands of young people from moving forward in a positive direction. We envision creating a sustainable public funding source that provides the state’s foster youth with the support they need to graduate high school and successfully pursue progressive post-secondary educational and career development pathways aligned with their interests and goals. To achieve this vision, we must invest in scaling customized, trauma-informed, and consistent interventions that make a significant difference for this special needs population. This support is especially critical for youth of color who are disproportionately placed in the child welfare system due to long-established racial injustice and inequity issues.

Successful programs led by experienced non-profit service providers require an infusion of new resources to reach more young people in foster care. These CBOs have demonstrated the transformational value of one-on-one coaching, peer mentoring, specialized educational case management, and complementary services informed by best practices. Destination Graduation is achievable if we commit to closing the opportunity gap for these students as a priority goal.
Sources

1. CDE DataQuest 2022-2023.
2. CDE DataQuest: 2022-2023 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Outcomes.
3. Ibid.
4. CDE DataQuest 2021-2022 College-Going Rate for CA High School Students.
The Foster Youth Pre-College Collective (tFYPC) is dedicated to closing the educational opportunity gap for California’s young people in foster care. Member organizations include six direct service providers that offer transformational, community-based programs that achieve a combined high school graduation rate of 88.2% for students in foster care, with 78% of participating youth enrolling in post-secondary education.

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Foster Care Alumni Advisors

**Junely Merwin**
Graduate Student • California State University Fullerton
M.S. Higher Education
Foster Youth Rights Activist • Parenting Student Advocate

**Moses Ramirez**
Masters of Education • Stanford University

**Julie Segovia**
PhD Candidate • Tufts University
VP, Research, Policy and Learning • HopeWell

**Taylor Turntime**
Masters of Public Policy • University of California Irvine
Foster Youth Advocate
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report reflects the tireless efforts and invaluable expertise of many individuals and organizations united by a mission to lift barriers to success for children and youth in foster care. We greatly appreciate everyone’s commitment to collaboration and steadfast determination to ensure every young person receives the support they need and deserve to excel in school and life.

We also wish to recognize the contributions of all of the lived experience experts who shared their candid personal reflections about what it is like to be a student while in foster care. Their stories and perspectives shaped the themes and framework of this report and hopefully will inspire more champions to join the movement to close the educational opportunity gap.

REPORT CREDITS

Content Strategy and Development
Lyndsey Collins Wilson
First Star, Inc.
Jessica Maxwell
Consultant
Maria Puglisi
Right Tree Consulting
Danielle Wondra
Children Now

Marie-Christine Busque
Pivotal

Creative Design
Hailey Woods
West Woods Design

Research Associate
Kristen Gast, MSW

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Matt Bell • Marie-Christine Busque • Elise Cutini • Maria D’Souza • Rashida Elimu • Michelle François • Janice Frew • Crystal Garcia • Karina Garcia • Susanna Kniffen • Amy Lemley • Robin Winston-León • Faye Luepton • Maritza Medina • Margaret Olmos • Stephanie Ortega • Jessica Petras • Debbie Raucher • Eric Shamp • Matt Strieker • Lydia Cincore-Templeton • Tonya Torosian • Lyndsey Collins Wilson • Danielle Wondra • Francisco Zamudio

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