DESTINATION GRADUATION

Investing in the Educational Attainment of California's Youth in Foster Care

2024

Prepared By:

The Foster Youth Pre-College Collective

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ADDENDUM

tFYPC THE FOSTER YOUTH PRE-COLLEGE COLLECTIVE

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. See Addendum for more information about the educational support programs offered by our members.

First Star	Direct Services + Advocacy	Los Angeles • San Bernardino • Sacramento
National Center for Youth Law	Direct Services + Advocacy	Contra Costa • Los Angeles • Santa Cruz
Children Now	Advocacy	Statewide
Children Youth and Family Collaborative	Direct Services	Los Angeles
Pivotal	Direct Services	Alameda • Santa Clara • San Mateo
Promises2Kids	Direct Services	San Diego
United Friends of the Children	Direct Services	Los Angeles

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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

THE CHALLENGE

For youth in foster care, the first day of school has a different vibe than for other students. Many are keenly aware of the poor educational outcomes for young people in their situation. From the opening bell, they are anxious about anything that might throw them off course, increase pressure, and turn their life into another negative statistic.

There was so much going on that I didn't even care about high school. It wasn't something that was on my mind, and throughout my childhood I was kept home from school as a punishment. I'm still struggling now in college. I do a lot of studying and taking notes and stuff but once I get to the test, I fail, and that's where it matters.

- D. • Age 19 • Riverside County • College Freshman • Currently in Foster Care

? What is it like to attend middle or high school while in foster care?

Despite their best efforts, many youth in foster care see their once stellar grades slip as they enter a system they know little about, while others were already under-performing at school because of high-conflict situations at home. Sometimes teachers don't understand why they are absent so much – or why they didn't study for a test they just failed. It's hard enough to fit in and make friends when you change schools each time a family placement falls apart. Foster students are afraid to say they were meeting with their social worker, had a crisis counseling session, or spent the day in family court. They don't want the other kids to find out their secret.

There is little relief when the bell sounds again at the end of the school day. The other students will eventually head home to be with their families, but "home" is also different for youth in care. They may not have anyone in their lives to calm their fears, help with homework, or lift their mood when they feel defeated.

It doesn't have to be this way. Educational attainment is the launch pad to the success every child deserves. California's foster youth should exit care prepared and supported to start the next chapter of their lives. When they fail, it is because we have failed them. They won't raise the bar and reach for excellence if we lower expectations. They can't put the pain of the past behind them without the tools and inspiration to envision a better future.

A review of historical data shows how the odds are stacked against California's students with foster care experience. When youth are removed from their families and enter the child welfare system, the likelihood of their completing high school and progressing to post-secondary education plummets.

> *When you are out of foster care you have a life to live, but when you are in it, it is like you are in a different world. There's so much control over my life, rules and regulations, and it doesn't really expose foster youth to opportunities as it should.*
>
> - M. • San Bernardino County • 11th Grade • Currently in Foster Care

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Compared to other middle and high school students, foster youth require more intensive, frequent, and individualized supports to help them graduate high school, prepare for college, and compete in the workforce. There is no mandate for child welfare systems to ensure youth in their care complete high school and receive the skills and supports they need to prepare for post-secondary programs. In the absence of prescriptive oversight and dedicated funding, the educational progress of thousands of young people in the custody of the state is at risk. A recent opinion piece summarizes the issue:

> *"Ultimately, no one is planning toward any student's long-term goals — unless a student does it himself or herself. In most places, there is simply no single adult who can connect all of the dots for individual students over time. Without that coherent and consistent support, young people are far more likely to end up dropping out of school, unemployed or employed in low-wage and insecure jobs, involved with the criminal justice system, or living with family violence."* [1]

Every young person needs someone to turn to for guidance as they prepare for their future. It's easy to get sidetracked during adolescence. Youth in foster care often feel abandoned during this crucial developmental stage of life as they get lost within systems that are no substitute for family. The chronic instability that results from multiple disruptions and disconnections from nurturing environments keeps them from moving forward in a positive direction.

> *I felt isolated. I experienced challenges from missing my first semester in high school before entering foster care. I didn't have anyone telling me to go to school. I had to motivate myself and set an example for my siblings.*
>
> - I. • Age 19 • San Bernardino County • Recent High School Graduate • Currently in Extended Foster Care

Young people must first be seen, heard, and understood before they can fully engage in learning communities and academic support programs designed to enhance performance and shape better life outcomes. As outlined in this report, previous attempts to correct persistent issues have proven insufficient in addressing the structural inequities and intersectional factors that prevent educational attainment of youth in foster care.

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 family separation to excel in school, thousands more feel stranded by circumstances beyond their control. The truth is, to become a "success story," students in foster care desperately need more frequent, intensive direct support personalized to meet their academic, emotional, and developmental needs.

> *I felt judged as a foster youth. My file said that I was an angry, violent runaway which made adults not want to work with me. I always felt targeted. These adults weren't trained or educated to understand how to support my needs. My progress and school work were rarely acknowledged.*
>
> **- J. • Age 18 • Los Angeles County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Foster Care**

> *I had such different experiences at a younger age, I had to realize I was maturing a little faster. And so I just had a hard time sitting in the school environment. It triggered me a lot. You don't know what people go through at home.*
>
> **- A. • Age 21 • Stanislaus County • College Student • Previously in Foster Care**

Trauma weighs heavily on California's youth in care – the majority of whom are Black, Hispanic, and Native American. This dynamic necessitates a different intervention approach to help youth in care reclaim their potential. These young people don't lack the ambition or desire to be the best versions of themselves. They are missing the loving guidance and consistent encouragement that most children receive from family as they chart a path forward on their terms. Prolonged, crisis-driven instability diverts attention away from their studies and erodes their confidence to set bold life goals. As this happens, blaming narratives can surface that place responsibility on the student instead of the systems meant to serve them, further alienating the youth.

PROFILE OF CALIFORNIA'S STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE

In California, 10 counties account for nearly 79% of the state's foster care population. Children of color are disproportionately represented at every point in the system, from calls to the state central registry about suspected abuse or neglect to removal and placement into foster care. The subsequent trauma and instability for these young people make them more vulnerable to intergenerational experiences of system involvement.

More than half of youth in foster care attend secondary school in grades 6-12. Their lack of educational attainment is a glaring reflection of long-standing inequities within policies, systems, and programs that fail to acknowledge or address the root causes of disproportionate family separation rates for Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous children. Efforts to close the educational equity gap must include culturally responsive practices guided by a racial equity perspective. This approach equips affected youth to recognize and respond to the misuse of power and encourages self-advocacy, which leads to better educational and developmental outcomes.

CA Foster Care Census – Enrollment Density by County

9,872

1

CA K-12 Students in Foster Care (2022-2023)

53%
16,693

31,722

47%
15,029

- Grades K-5
- Grades 6-12
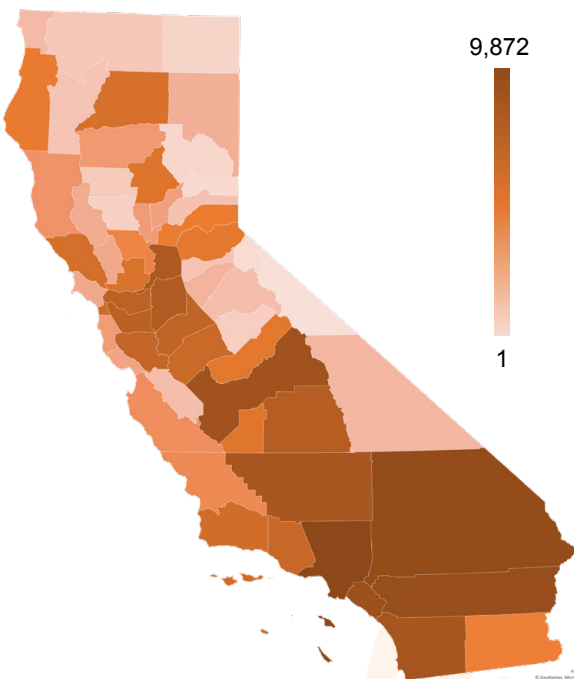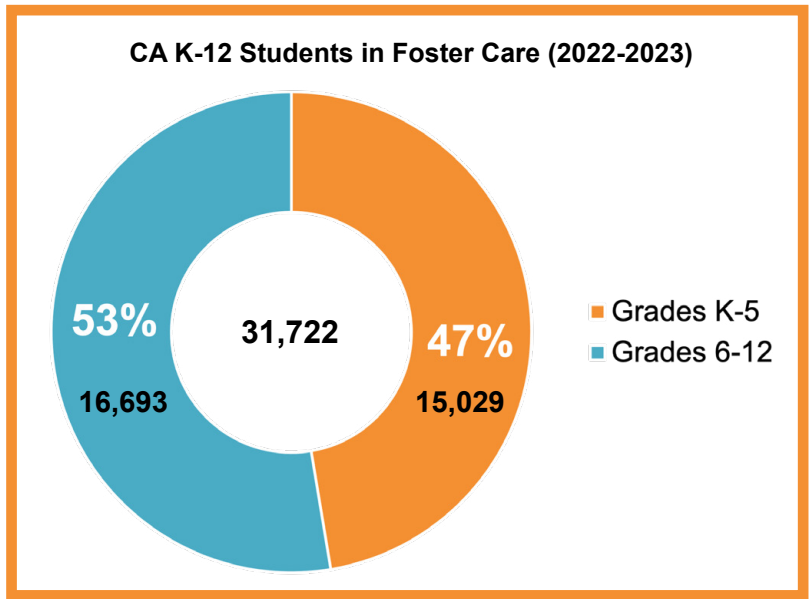
NOTE: *Foster Care Student Population includes school-age children ONLY.*
Definitions: *Adjusted cumulative enrollment is the total number of unduplicated primary and short-term enrollments at a selected entity with an enrollment start date that falls within the academic year (July 1 - June 30).*

Adjusted Cumulative Enrollment – Top 10 CA Counties vs. Remaining 48 CA Counties

21%

79%

- Top 10 CA Counties
- Remaining 48 CA Counties
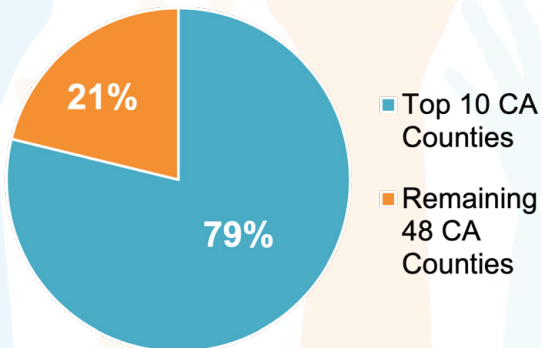
Source: CDE DataQuest 2022-2023

CA Foster Care Census – Top 10 Counties

County	Adjusted Cumulative Enrollment
Los Angeles	9,872
San Bernardino	3,644
Riverside	3,019
Orange	1,813
Fresno	1,636
Kern	1,494
San Diego	1,118
Sacramento	909
San Joaquin	789
Tulare	713

Adjusted Cumulative Enrollment
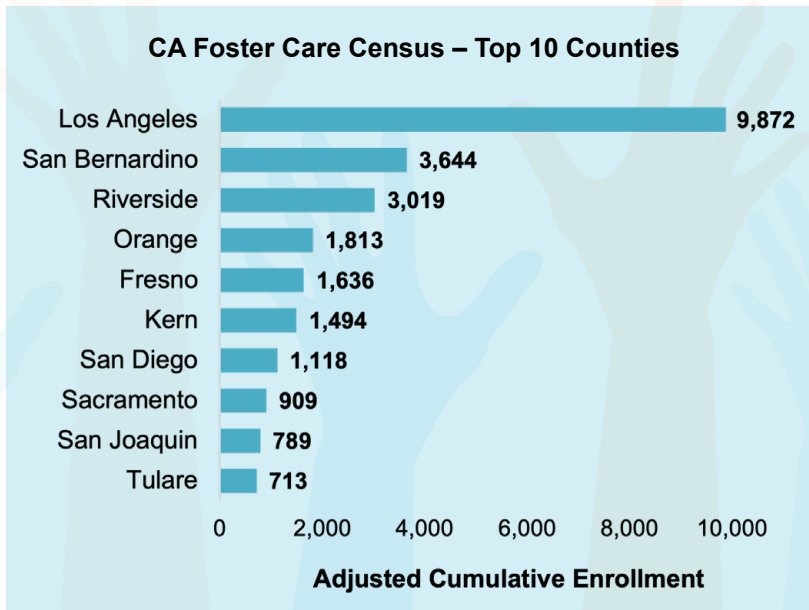
BY THE NUMBERS:
California's Students in Foster Care

CA Students in Foster Care 2022-2023 – Gender (Grades K-12)

Male
15,998
50.4%

Non Binary
103
0.3%

Female
15,621
49.2%
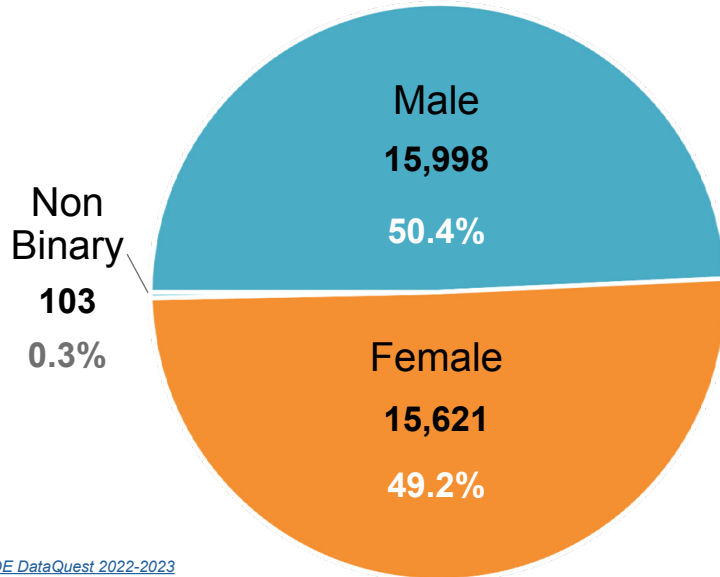
Source: CDE DataQuest 2022-2023

Race Description of CA Students in Foster Care 2022-2023

Students in Foster Care (K-12)

Legend: ■ K-12 Students in Foster Care   — % of Total Census (K-12)

Race	Students	%
Hispanic or Latino of Any Race	17,861	56.3%
African American; Not Hispanic	5,222	16.5%
White; Not Hispanic	5,173	16.3%
Two or More Races; Not Hispanic	1,233	3.9%
Not Reported	1,107	3.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native; Not Hispanic	540	1.7%
Asian; Not Hispanic	346	1.1%
Filipino; Not Hispanic	127	0.4%
Pacific Islander; Not Hispanic	113	0.4%
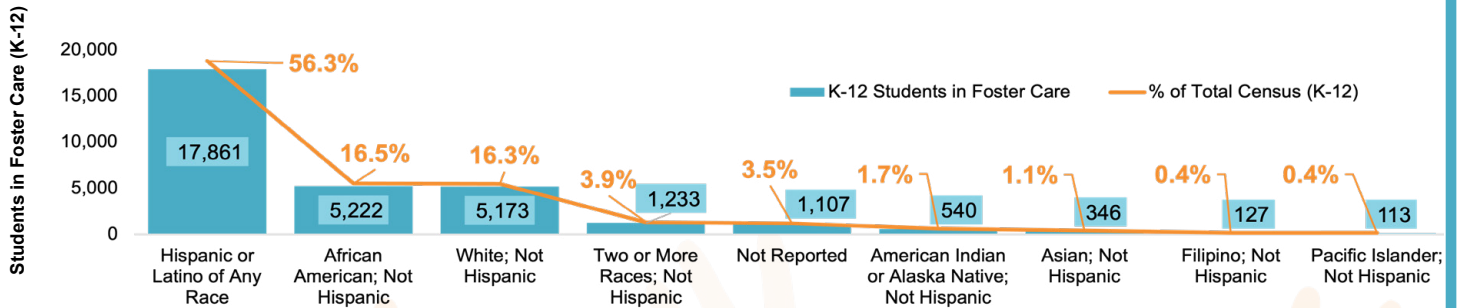
Source: CDE DataQuest 2022-2023

Race Description of All CA Students 2022-2023

All CA Students (K-12)

Legend: ■ All K-12 Students   — % of Total Census (K-12)

Race	Students	%
Hispanic or Latino of Any Race	3,284,788	56.1%
African American; Not Hispanic	273,148	4.7%
White; Not Hispanic	1,175,911	20.1%
Two or More Races; Not Hispanic	252,400	4.3%
Not Reported	131,417	2.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native; Not Hispanic	26,108	0.4%
Asian; Not Hispanic	557,190	9.5%
Filipino; Not Hispanic	127,735	2.2%
Pacific Islander; Not Hispanic	23,847	0.4%

Source: CDE DataQuest 2022-2023

Definitions: *CDE DataQuest defines "Foster Youth", based on EC Section 42238.01 (b) and includes students who are the subject of a 300 WIC petition, whether or not they have been removed from home, as well as students removed from home and that are the subject of a 602 WIC petition. The definition does not include students removed from home as part of a voluntary placement agreement.*

DISPARITIES AND YOUTH DISCONNECTION

The state identifies foster students as a priority population in both the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to school districts and funds to county-level approaches via the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCP). LCFF funds school districts to support high-needs students, as identified by the funding formula. However, these additional resources are primarily used to improve coordination efforts between school sites, school districts, and child welfare agencies. This funding is rarely allocated for direct targeted interventions for students in care.

A report by the California State Auditor found that increasing funding to school districts has not improved the educational achievement gap, and there is no clear evidence that this funding approach benefits the intended students.

Furthermore, when students in foster care move, school-based services end, and young people may transfer to schools in other districts that may not offer similar programs, so the longstanding disparities persist.[2]

Young people in care across the state lost even more traction at school during the COVID-19 pandemic as the shift to remote learning exacerbated the education system's historical inequities. Distance learning accelerated youth disconnection and learning loss. Many students experienced profound frustration and anxiety as they quickly tried to gain an understanding of the pandemic and adjust to major life changes, including the shift to virtual learning. This transition was more challenging for youth in care, particularly those in congregate care settings, without reliable access to the internet or personal computers. The "new normal" felt especially stressful and isolating for foster youth as in-person interactions and social structures abruptly vanished during school closures. A study of virtual learning during the pandemic among secondary education students in Los Angeles found significantly lower rates of participation by students in foster care than their non-foster care peers in middle and high school.[3]

> *My motivation went from 100% to 0%. I would sleep through my classes or watch shows when my video camera was off.*
>
> *- R. • Age 18 • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Kinship Care*

> *I missed the first month of high school due to COVID. I couldn't get one-on-one support because they were already too far along in the assignments.*
>
> *- J. • Age 18 • Los Angeles County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Foster Care*

A recent report estimates the pandemic erased a decade of progress in reducing youth disconnection. There is a tremendous cost associated with this alarming trend.[4] The White House Council for Community Solutions commissioned a study that 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".[5] The state needs a proactive response to address this recent spike in youth disconnection or it will risk a critical budget burden for decades to come.

> **The only people I was around during that time was my foster family, and it was very hard because they weren't very supportive mentally and emotionally. I went from being a straight A student to having a D.**
>
> - M. • Age 14 • 9th Grade • Currently in Foster Care

ACHIEVING THE GOAL

Being in foster care carries more than a stigma. It affects K-12 performance, progression to college and career programs, future earning potential, and self-sufficiency. The state has a moral and fiscal responsibility to ensure youth in care receive equitable, engaging, educational support programming grounded in best practices and focused on achieving high school graduation and post-secondary matriculation rates that match or exceed those of their peers in the general population.

> **When I was younger I had to move schools a lot. So I didn't really have any permanent friends. And it was hard to make new ones, you know?**
>
> - D. • Age 17 • Los Angeles County • 12th Grade • Currently in Foster Care

Without a renewed commitment to addressing their educational needs, the next generation of youth with lived experience in foster care will continue to struggle to keep up. Many will ultimately surrender to their circumstances, accept limitations, and languish as young adults.

This report outlines the persistent challenges facing youth in foster care, shares reflections about their educational journeys, reviews prior attempts to address the issue, and proposes collaborative solutions to close the opportunity gap for this high-needs student population.

SOURCES

[1] Korman, H, Robson, K. "Everyone's Job But No One's Responsibility" (May 13, 2019) The Hechinger Report.

[2] https://www.auditor.ca.gov/pdfs/reports/2019-101.pdf

[3] Besecker, Thomas, and Daley, Student Engagement Online During School Facilities Closures: An Analysis of L.A. Unified Secondary Students' Schoology Activity from March 16 to May 22, 2020.

[4] Lewis, Kristen. A Disrupted Year: How the Arrival of Covid-19 Affected Youth Disconnection. New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2022.

[5] Belfield, Clive & Levin, Henry & Rosen, Rachel. (2012). The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth.

STATUS OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS IN CARE

Education undeniably unlocks better life opportunities for all people; however, thousands of California's youth face a future with limited potential. Students in foster care historically fall short of expectations for K-12 academic performance, high school graduation, and post-secondary enrollment rates are significantly lower than any other student group.

Let's say you missed a couple of days of school because you had to move foster homes. Well, you don't get an extension on an assignment that you missed during that time, and that causes a lot of missed assignments.

- M. • Age 14 • 9th Grade • Currently in Foster Care

In middle school and high school, educators engage students in a learning process that focuses on academic advancement. During these formative years, young people concentrate on their studies, build self-confidence, and hone practical and interpersonal skills that contribute to post-secondary success. Ideally, families of origin take an active role in supporting their children's educational progress and positive growth. Familial relationships give youth a reliable safety net as they prepare for significant life transitions. Most adolescents count on their parents, older siblings, and extended kin for advice, comfort, and encouragement as they chart a course to young adulthood. With this secure foundation in place, young people gain the knowledge, strength, and means to pursue their goals and overcome obstacles they may encounter along the way.

? What happens when a youth enters the foster care system and family connections fracture?

The abruptness of family separation creates crushing uncertainty and causes crippling chaos for children left devastated by circumstances beyond their control. Unlike their non-system involved peers, youth in foster care frequently must cope with the aftermath of complex trauma, chronic instability, feelings of isolation, and the stigma associated with their status. As a result, adolescents in care often fall behind academically, socially, and emotionally during grades 6-12. These setbacks can turn into steep roadblocks that compromise their overall well-being, hinder educational attainment, and limit their career prospects.

Without the backstop of parental supervision in their lives, young people in foster care must assume adult-level responsibilities and make pivotal decisions on their own long before they feel ready to handle such matters and far sooner than society would typically expect. These challenges intensify as youth transition to adulthood, exit secondary education, and lose their connections to the systems and staff previously accountable for ensuring their safety, wellness, and progress.

> " *It was a war between my parents who lost custody over me. I had to miss school to attended court hearings and I was often questioned by my peers and staff.*
>
> - R. • Age 18 • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Kinship Care "

Young people who have experienced foster care deserve more than a fighting chance for a hopeful future. As state educators work to reverse learning loss for all students who struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of closing the longstanding educational opportunity gap for foster youth only intensifies.

> *My survival was my focus – where I was going to sleep and how I was going to eat – rather than my assignments.*
>
> **- J. • Age 18 • Los Angeles County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Foster Care**

System-involved youth were particularly affected by the shift to remote learning due to technology access issues and the disruption of social structures provided by in-person instruction. These students faced difficulties in school before the pandemic and, without additional intervention, will continue to underachieve long after other students catch up academically.

Teens in foster care graduate high school at a much lower rate than the general population; they experience the highest levels of absenteeism of any special population and frequently shuffle from one school community to another. The following data points (reflecting pre-pandemic reporting) illustrate the areas that need further scrutiny to reverse historically poor life outcomes associated with the unsatisfactory academic performance of these underserved students.

> *It was difficult because when the pandemic started, I was removed from my family and placed in a group home. I felt isolated. I was concerned about where I was going to live or what was going to happen to me. I was out of the loop. My teachers did what they could to help, but it was hard to be motivated in school. They tried to be involved, but it was a rocky transition with everything I had going on.*
>
> **- I. • Age 19 • San Bernardino County • Recent High School Graduate • Currently in Extended Foster Care**

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION[1]

High School Completion Rates
California Youth

The high school completion rate for California's foster youth is

28% lower

than for the general population.

All Students	87.5%
Foster Youth	63.3%
Homeless	73.9%
Disabilities	79.5%
Migrant	84%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	84.7%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
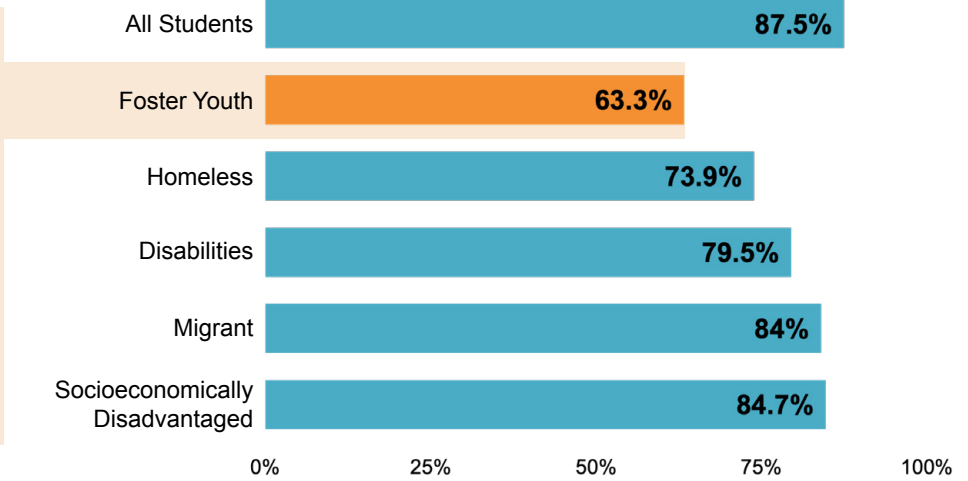
- In 2023, 2,048 students in foster care did not complete high school within four years.

- The high school completion rate for the state's **Black foster youth is even lower (59.5%).**

- Students in foster care are less likely to complete high school than all other unique needs populations. The high school completion rate for the state's foster youth is:

25% lower
than for socioeconomically disadvantaged and migrant students

20% lower
than for students with disabilities

14% lower
than for students experiencing homelessness

- Within five years, the high school completion rate for foster youth slightly improved (up 6%) but was still **23% lower** than for the general population.[2]

NOTE: Includes regular H.S. diploma graduates and non-graduate completers (i.e. CHSPE, Adult Ed, Special Ed Certificate, and GED).

❝

I was dealing with a lot of self-identity issues, because a lot of my peers found out I was a foster kid. No one made fun of me for it, but I felt like they pitied me, and I didn't like that. I don't like when people make me feel different, even if they try to sympathize with me, because it still outcasts me in a way.

- J. • 12th Grade • Currently in Kinship Care

❞

> ❝ *I got kicked out of my foster care placement at age 18. I was couch surfing and sleeping at parks and motels. My drama teacher gave me emotional support. She brought me breakfast and let me sleep in the theater sometimes. She became like chosen family to me. She accepted me.*
>
> **- J. • Age 18 • Los Angeles County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Foster Care** ❞

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE[1]

California's foster youth drop out of high school at

nearly three times the rate

of students in the general population.

High School Dropout Rates
California Youth

Group	Rate
All Students	8.2%
Foster Youth	24.4%
Homeless	17%
Disabilities	11.5%
Migrant	10.1%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	9.9%
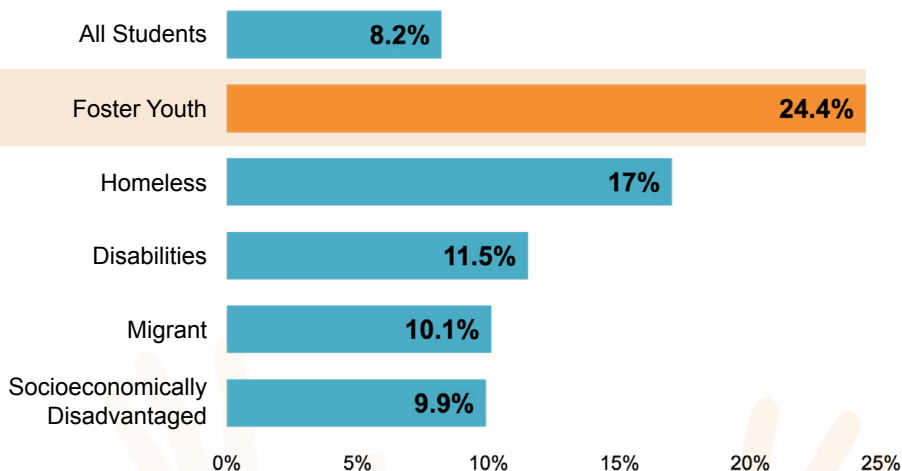
Students in foster care also drop out of high school more frequently than all other unique needs populations:

44% higher rate

than for students experiencing homelessness

double the rate

of students with disabilities

nearly two and a half times the rate

of migrant and socioeconomically disadvantaged students

NOTE: Does not include fifth year seniors or non-graduate completers.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM[3]

47.6% of California's foster youth in grades 7-12 experienced chronic absenteeism (missing 10% or more school days), which is

nearly double the rate

for students in the general population.

Chronic Absenteeism
California Youth (Grades 7-12)

Category	Rate
All Students	25.2%
Foster Youth	47.6%
Homeless	43.2%
Disabilities	36.5%
Migrant	24.7%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	30.6%
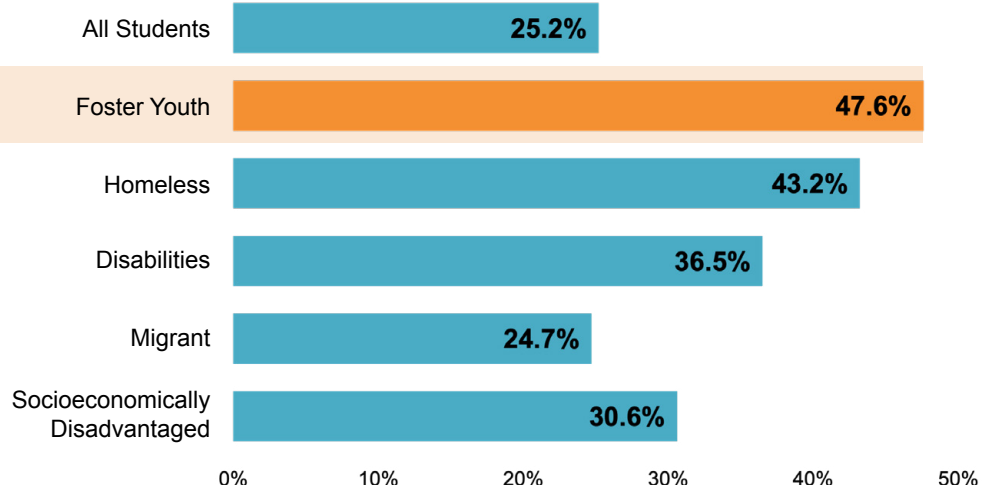
Students in foster care experience chronic absenteeism more frequently than all other unique needs populations:

nearly twice the rate
of migrant students

1.5 times the rate
of socioeconomically disadvantaged students

30% higher rate
than for students with disabilities

10% higher rate
than for students experiencing homelessness

1/3 of the state's foster youth have experienced being out of school **for more than a month** due to a placement change.[4]

2/3 of the state's foster youth have missed school due to a foster care-related reason, such as a court proceeding.[4]

> " *I had to move to two middle schools and three high schools, and different housing placements. Credits got mixed up every time I had to move school districts and I'd end up losing credits I already worked for. I rushed in the end to make up classes in order to graduate.* "
>
> - LM. • Age 20 • San Bernardino • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Kinship Care

SCHOOL INSTABILITY[5]

Nearly 8,000 of California's foster youth in grades 7-12 experienced school instability, which is

four times the rate

of students in the general population.

School Instability Rates
California Youth (Grades 7-12)

All Students	10.3%
Foster Youth	41%
Homeless	26.3%
Disabilities	12%
Migrant	14.1%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	12.2%

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%
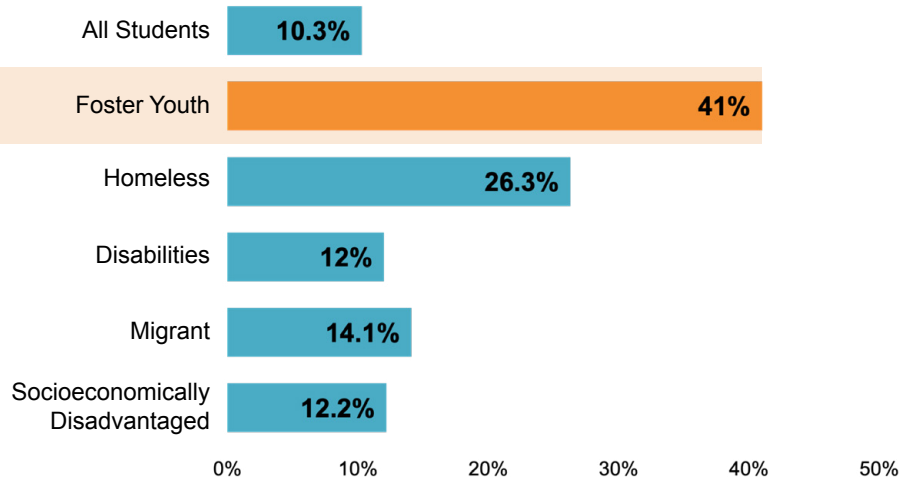
Students in foster care experience school instability more frequently than all other unique needs populations:

56% higher rate

than for students experiencing homelessness

three times the rate

of migrant students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities

1/3 of the state's youth in care have changed schools **seven or more times.**[6]

48% California students in foster care experience the most school instability during their first year in care, with almost half (48%) attending two or more schools during that period.[7]

NOTE: CDE's definition for this metric likely means school instability is under-reported for youth in care ("If a student is stable in one school and unstable in another school in the same district, the student is considered stable for the district").

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Over 4,000 California foster youth in grades 7-12 experienced a school suspension, which is

nearly four times the rate

of students in the general population.[8]

School Discipline - Suspension
California Youth (Grades 7-12)

Group	Rate
All Students	5.6%
Foster Youth	21.5%
Homeless	10.4%
Disabilities	9.3%
Migrant	7.3%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	7.2%
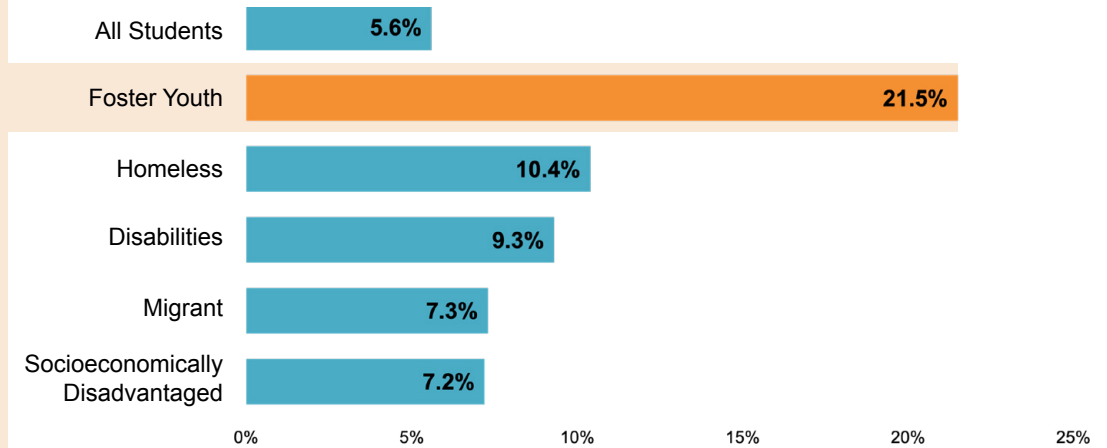
Students in foster care are suspended more frequently than all other unique needs populations:

three times the rate

of migrant students and socioeconomically disadvantaged students

double the rate

of students who are experiencing homelessness and students with disabilities

Less than 1% of the state's foster youth in grades 7-12 (121 students) were expelled from school. However, the expulsion rate for foster youth was

four times higher

than the rate for students in the general population.[9]

School Discipline - Expulsion
California Youth (Grades 7-12)

Group	Rate
All Students	0.15%
Foster Youth	0.62%
Homeless	0.43%
Disabilities	0.24%
Migrant	0.33%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	0.21%
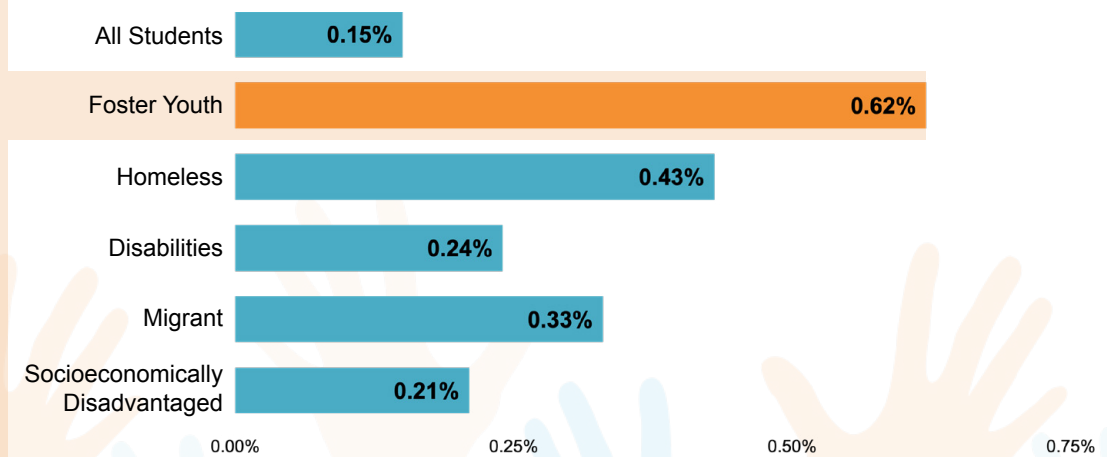
Students in foster care are expelled more frequently than all other unique needs populations:

triple the rate

of socioeconomically disadvantaged students

two and a half times the rate

of students with disabilities

nearly double the rate

of migrant students

43% higher rate

than for students experiencing homelessness

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Among California's students with unique needs, youth in foster care scored the second lowest on the state's English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics tests, with only students with disabilities testing lower.[10]

89.2 points
below standard for ELA
(compared to **13.6 points** below for all students)

127.4 points
below standard for Math
(compared to **49.1 points** below for all students)

Research shows that **over half** of California's youth in foster care are reading below a high school grade level at age 17.[11]

NOTE: 2023 data – Students are tested in Grades 3-8 and Grade 11.

> *My grades do fluctuate. I don't want that to happen in college at all. So one of my goals is to keep my grades solid for a while.*
>
> **- D. • Age 17 • Los Angeles County • 12th Grade • Currently in Foster Care**

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Only **1 in 5 California foster youth** who earns a high school diploma meets the state's minimum college freshman eligibility requirements (University of California/California State University requirements, including A-G completion).

In comparison, **more than half** of the students in the general population graduate high school having attained these admissions standards.[23]

NOTE: Data reflects those cohort graduates who a local educational agency determined met all the (A-G) requirements for admission to a University of California or California State University school.

Based on the state's College/Career Indicators, **3 out of 4 California foster youth** who graduate high school are not prepared to start college or a career, with **88.5%** of this population evaluated as insufficiently prepared to succeed in post-secondary education.[12]

NOTE: CDE's College/Career Indicator (CCI) is based on students in the graduation rate and measures how well students are prepared for success after high school. Full description of preparedness measures.

> *Everything is on my shoulders and I'm expected to know everything when I never experienced this before. Figuring out everything on my own and navigating a new college space and system – you realize how alone you are when you graduate.*
>
> **- J. • Age 18 • Los Angeles County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Foster Care**

College and Career Readiness
California Youth

Students in foster care are the **least prepared** for college and careers among California's high school graduates.[12]

Legend: Meet UC/CSU Requirements[23] ■ College/Career Readiness "Prepared"[10]

Group	Meet UC/CSU Requirements	College/Career Readiness "Prepared"
All Students	31.6%	43.9%
Foster Youth	19.6%	11.6%
Homeless	28.1%	20.4%
Disabilities	21.1%	12.3%
Migrant	31.1%	College/Career Readiness data not available
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	44.3%	35.4%
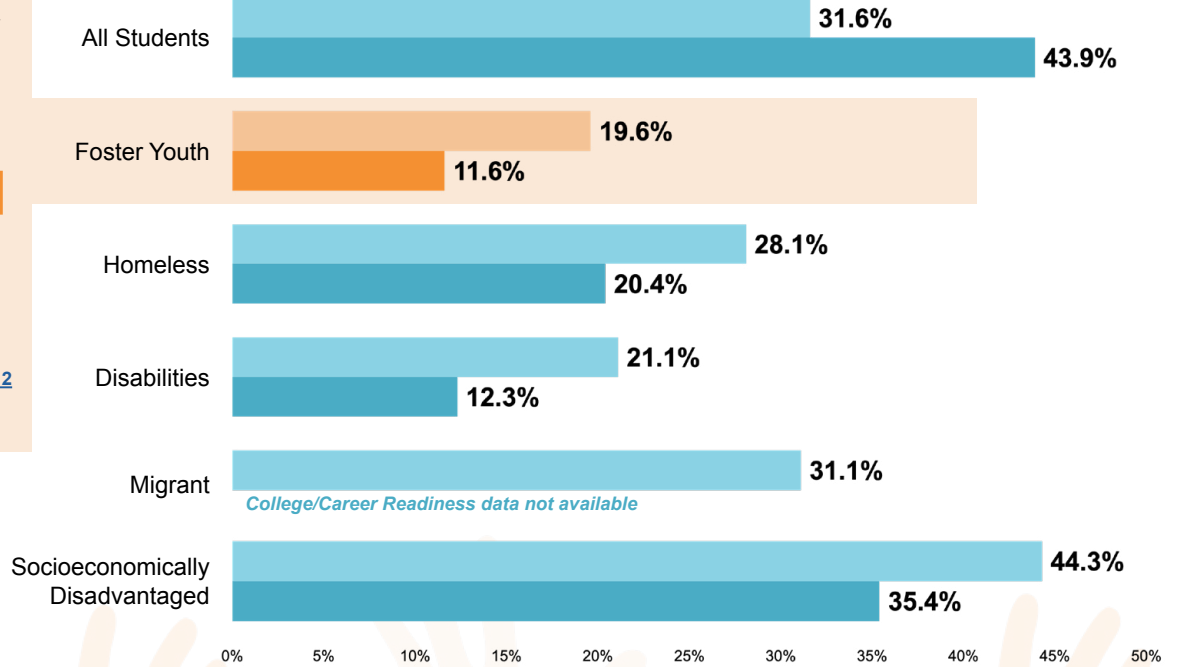
POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Nationally, **nearly 3 out of 4** youth in foster care express an interest in going to college, but **only half** enroll, and **less than 10%** receive a bachelor's degree.[13]

Less than half

of California's foster youth who complete high school enter post-secondary education within 12 months of graduation.[14]

College-Going Rate
California Youth

Group	Rate
All Students	62.2%
Foster Youth	44.4%
Homeless	44.5%
Disabilities	40.6%
Migrant	55.3%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	53.9%

The college-going rate is 29% lower for youth in foster care than for the general population and lower than the rate for nearly all other unique needs students, except for students experiencing homelessness and those with disabilities.[14]

18% lower

than for socioeconomically disadvantaged students

20% lower

than for migrant students

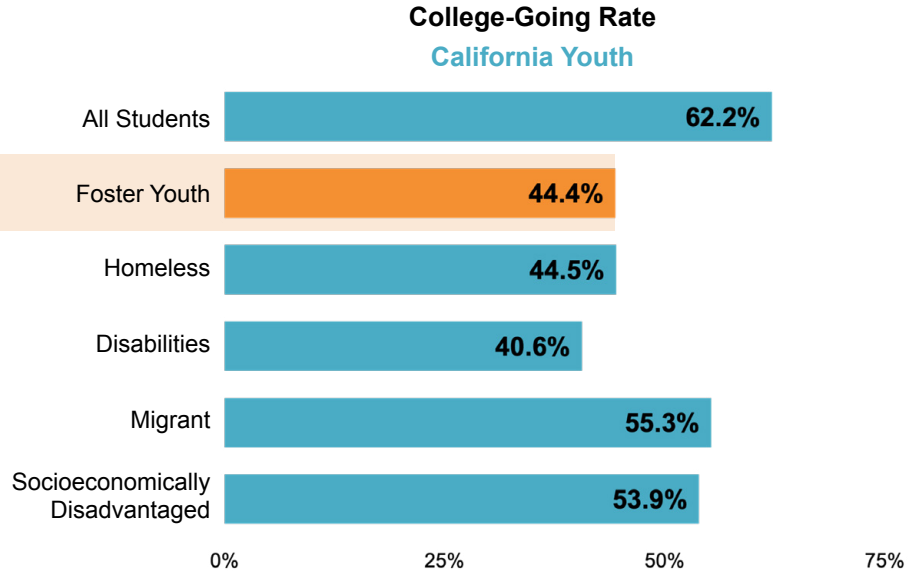- Youth with a foster care background were more likely to enroll in a two-year college than a four-year school, even among those with above-average reading levels. Of youth that go to college, 15% were undermatching.[15] Undermatching is when academically successful low-income students with similar grades and test scores to high-income students enroll in less-selective colleges.

- Students with a foster care background are more likely than any other group to fail to meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), which is required for maintaining financial aid eligibility. Of these students, **66%** meet SAP after their first year of community college. Only **58%** of Black students with foster care experience achieve the SAP standard.[16]

? What contributes to these poor outcomes for youth in care?

Although trauma from family disruption and placement in the State's care increase the likelihood of poor educational attainment, the following concrete factors and challenges also contribute to unacceptable outcomes for current and former foster youth.

Limited coordination between child welfare and education systems creates barriers for youth in care.

Federal laws such as the *Fostering Connections to Success Act* and *Every Student Succeeds Act* have specific provisions related to the education of children in foster care. These provisions aim to improve the coordination between child welfare and education systems and increase school stability for youth. However, there is often confusion between practitioners in the two systems regarding who is responsible for certain aspects of a youth's educational experience.[17]

School and placement instability impedes academic growth. Frequent life disruptions are common and stressful for youth in care.

Living placement changes harm educational outcomes even when no school change occurs.[18] When students also experience a school change, there are significant academic losses and broken connections to supportive adults, which have a lasting negative impact.

Systemic racism and implicit bias within the child welfare and education systems continue to adversely affect Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities, including the historically disproportionate number of children of color placed into foster care.[19]

African American youth are overrepresented in foster care nationwide at a rate of 1.7 times their share of the general population. California ranked among the top five states with the greatest disproportionality for this group, at a rate of 3.1.[20] In addition, nationally, Black foster youth experience higher rates of school mobility than white youth in care.[13] The state's African American and Native American foster youth were the least likely of all races and ethnic groups to meet requirements for attending a UC or CSU postsecondary institution.[21]

Data tracking is onerous and time-consuming.

The unwieldy process for accessing, coordinating, and tracking data across systems (i.e., child welfare, school districts, local service providers) takes precious time away from serving students. In a recent study, half of the foster youth practitioners in California's educational system reported issues with data access and usage, with 65% indicating they must use three or more sources to gather all the data they need to support students in care.[21]

Foster youth attend poor-performing schools.[7]

Based on the Academic Performance Index (API), the state's students in foster care are consistently more likely to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools, with around 15% of foster youth attending the lowest-performing 10% of schools, as compared to only 2% attending the highest-performing 10% of schools.

There is no uniform definition of "foster youth" to guide eligibility for critical resources.

There are at least six potential ways to describe who is considered a foster youth in California.[22] Each definition connects to a different fiscal and educational rights access policy. This lack of uniformity often creates confusion, leading to poor implementation of policies and laws meant to improve access to educational resources and benefits for youth in care.

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PRIOR ACTIONS TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS IN CARE

California is recognized nationally as a leader in advancing educational outcomes for youth who experience foster care. Through public and private financial investments, instituting administration policies and statutes, and championing innovative contemporary programming, the state has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to supporting solutions that remove barriers to educational success for young people affected by family trauma.

While some current and former youth in foster care have benefited from the state's pioneering educational policies and practices, many of these students, particularly those of color, continue to face a persistent opportunity gap that severely limits their post-secondary college and career options.

> **? What can the state do to support more widespread academic improvements for this under-resourced segment of the student population?**

A review of prior efforts to improve educational attainment for children in foster care requires examination of the advancements made over the past two decades focusing on racial justice and equity.

K-12 LEGISLATION AND PROGRAMS

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 subsequently inspired and influenced federal legislation, including the following:

THE FOSTERING CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS ACT (2008)

This act increased education rights and supports for foster youth on multiple fronts, including expanding eligibility for the **John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (1999)** and establishing a solid foundation for several critical school stability laws that accomplished the following:

► *Created a mandate giving school-age foster youth priority status for school enrollment;*

► *Allowed foster youth the choice to remain in their schools of origin; and,*

► *Placed the onus on child welfare to ensure that every young person in care has an educational case plan.*

Within five years of the bill's passage, most states amended their laws to include the protections afforded to youth in care under Fostering Connections. While this was widely considered a critical first step by the federal government, opinions vary about whether the implementation of these laws has sufficiently safeguarded the education rights of these students.

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA - 2015)

In 2015, the federal government reauthorized the **Elementary and Secondary School Act** by passing the **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**. This landmark legislation expanded many successful components of the **No Child Left Behind Act (2001)** and, most importantly, included pivotal statutes related to education. ESSA essentially builds on the school stability goals of the *Fostering Connections to Success Act* by providing additional guidance to the child welfare and education communities about their specific roles in supporting young people in care with their educational engagement. ESSA provided further instruction about school of origin rights, immediate enrollment, and timely transfer of school records.

ESSA also established the need to complete a "best interest" determination before changing a young person's school. The updated provisions instituted a new policy requiring state child welfare agencies and local education agencies to establish transportation cost-sharing agreements.

In addition to aiming to improve educational outcomes by focusing on school stability rights, ESSA put forth an important goal of seeking more educational data transparency at both the local and national levels to improve monitoring and information sharing about student performance. ESSA requires states to publish education report cards that track various data measurements, including attendance, academic progress, and school disciplinary actions. Further, ESSA requires states to disaggregate the data to report metrics by demographics and based on specific sub-groups of the student population, including designating foster youth as a unique student group. This change marked the first time in history that every state across the nation would be required to collect and share educational data on their behalf. As a result, California created the School Dashboard and was one of the first states to meet this mandate.

At the state level, California enacted several laws and funding initiatives that prioritize the expansion of educational tools, resources, and skills-building programs for youth in care. The list that follows outlines some of the key legislation that aims to remove barriers to educational attainment for these students.

AB 490 (2003)

AB 490 expanded education rights for California's children in foster care by mandating full enrollment, school of origin rights, and assigning foster care liaisons in every school district. This statute heavily influenced the national ESSA legislation and was instrumental in creating a broader federal definition of "foster youth" to determine which youth directly impacted by the child welfare system have access to these rights.

California also passed multiple bills that further strengthened school of origin rights, including:

AB 1933 (2010)

AB 1933 allows foster youth to remain in their schools of origin throughout the duration of a dependency case.

SB 1568 (2012)

SB 1568 extends school of origin rights through high school graduation for students whose dependency case ends during high school.

AB 1661 (2018)

AB 1661 ensures transportation to schools of origin by requiring school districts to collaborate with child welfare agencies to create transportation plans.

In addition to improving enrollment and attendance for youth in foster care, California advocates and lawmakers have passed several bills designed to enhance their overall school experiences to address the disproportionately higher rates of special education designations and school discipline, including suspension and expulsion.

> *I would like to see more in-home engagement because it helped me a lot when I was adjusting to entering foster care.*
>
> **- I. • Age 18 • San Bernardino County • Recent High School Graduate • Currently in Extended Foster Care**

SB 121 (2012)

SB 121 works at the intersection of foster care and special education to uphold the least restrictive environment rights established by the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**. Furthermore, it clarifies the processes for placing foster youth in non-public schools or restrictive education settings based on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and ensures that education rights holders and IEP teams are the final decision-makers regarding school placement.

AB 1909 (2012)

AB 1909 aims to codify standards for procedures related to disciplinary action against a foster youth by involving their attorneys in the expulsion process and increasing communication between the student's attorney, education foster care liaison, and caregivers.

AB 740 (2022)

AB 740 expands upon **AB 1909** and makes significant changes to local educational agency (LEA) notification requirements that apply to disciplinary actions involving students in foster care. Effective January 1, 2023, for youth in foster care, the educational rights holder, attorney, county social worker, and an Indian child's tribal social worker, if applicable, have the same rights as a child's parent or guardian to receive a suspension notice, expulsion notice, manifestation determination notice, involuntary transfer notice, and other documents and related information.

Youth in foster care frequently experience significant placement and school instability. These disruptions primarily affect older students in care, who often disconnect from education during high school. The state responded by passing several laws to address these issues.

AB 167 (2009)

AB 167 (2009) allows students in foster care to graduate high school by only completing state graduation requirements if they transferred schools in the 11th or 12th grade and could not reasonably complete local graduation requirements. This original bill does not specify any timeframe for the transfer.

AB 216 (2013)

AB 216 (2013) clarifies that students in foster care can remain in school for a fifth year to complete local graduation requirements if they cannot complete them by the end of their fourth year. This bill also asserts that students are eligible regardless of whether their child welfare status is open or closed after they are found eligible. Additionally, this bill confirms the definition of who is a foster student ("Pupil in foster care") to include any child removed from their home pursuant to WIC Section 309 or subject to a petition filed under WIC Sections 300 or 602 (Education Code § 51225.2).

SB 532 (2021)

SB 532 (2021) ensures that students eligible to remain in school for a fifth year can remain in their school of origin, consistent with federal law, to either complete the local educational graduation requirements or the statewide graduation requirements. It further allows districts to determine a student's year in school by comparing their age to the average age of students in their third or fourth year. **SB 532** also requires schools to evaluate student eligibility for an exemption within 30 days of a new school year following a school move. It exempts students if they are unable to meet the district requirements at the end of their fourth year. It also applies the exemption from district diploma requirements that are in addition to statewide diploma requirements to eligible students enrolled in adult education regardless of their age and adult education students who were eligible for the exemption while in high school.

AB 854 (2015)

The state also recognized the critical need for child welfare and education systems to collaborate and effectively communicate about the educational plans and needs of students in foster care by passing **AB 854**. This statute reworked the county-level Foster Youth Services Program into the *Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP)* and mandates coordination between education agencies, child welfare agencies, and probation. This program oversees critical improvements in communication, data sharing, rights obtainment, and resources for youth in care across the state.

> *High schools need to spend more time to learn how to prepare youth in foster care to go to college.*
>
> **- E. • Los Angeles County • 11th Grade • Currently in Foster Care**

Additionally, in 2013, California passed hallmark legislation – the **Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)**. The LCFF fundamentally changed how LEAs receive funding, how results are measured, and the provision of services and supports to ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed in school and reach their fullest potential.

LOCAL CONTROL FUNDING FORMULA (LCFF)

The LCFF allows local decision-making regarding fund utilization to plan and implement educational programs based on identified jurisdictional needs. The LCFF comprises baseline, supplemental, and concentration grants using a formula based on several factors such as the total number of students, area poverty level, student needs, and the number of students with unique needs. LEAs receive additional funding for specific student sub-groups, and, with the advent of LCFF, youth in foster care received a priority allocation status.

SUPPORTING PATHWAYS TO POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS

The state has demonstrated a strong commitment to improving access to higher education for transition-age young people after high school. In fact, California's philanthropic community has invested millions of dollars in higher education initiatives that assist college students who have experienced foster care.

SB 1023 (2014)

With the passing of **SB 1023**, the University of California's Guardian Scholars Program paved the way for the creation of the Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Education Support (CAFYES). Also known as **NextUp,** this initiative initially launched at 10 California community college campuses and recently expanded to an additional 35 campuses. NextUp programs offer students with lived foster care experience access to a dedicated campus liaison assigned to help them navigate their collegiate experience.

Two bills improved opportunities for youth in care to apply to college and access essential financial aid:

SB 12 (2017)

SB 12 ensures that a foster youth applying for financial aid is automatically verified as an "independent" student and also mandates case plans for youth in care aged 16 and older, including identifying a person who will assist them in preparing college applications.

SB 860 (2020)

SB 860 requires FYSCP coordinators to establish countywide plans with Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to ensure that each foster youth completes financial aid applications. This bill also requires data tracking and reporting of completion rates for students in care.
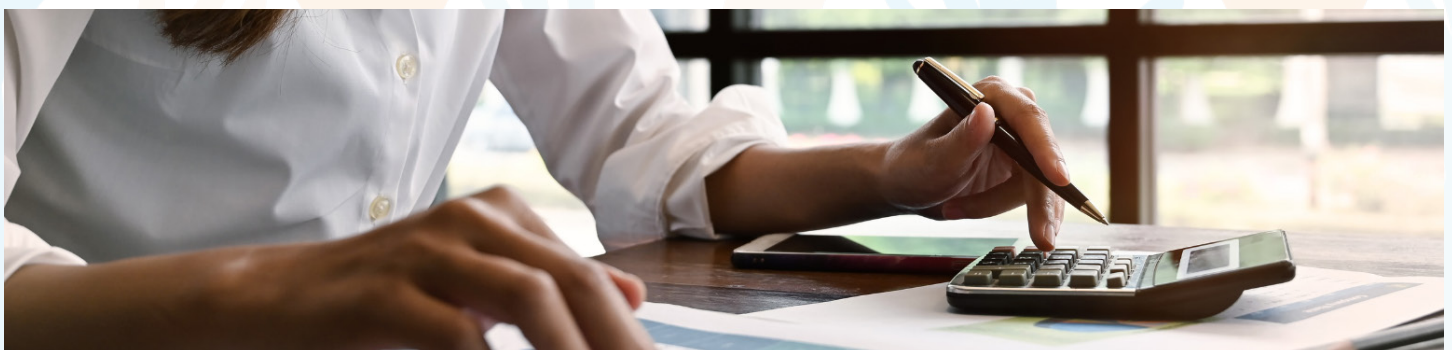
K-12 EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT COLLABORATIONS

In addition to the establishment of statutes and funding initiatives, California is home to several regional demonstration initiatives and programs that aim to improve education coordination, access, and outcomes for youth in care.

FIRST DISTRICT FOSTER YOUTH EDUCATION PROGRAM (FDFYEP)

In Los Angeles County, Supervisor Hilda Solis is credited with the creation of the **First District Foster Youth Education Program (FDFYEP)**. This program, first piloted in 2008, is designed to promote the educational attainment of foster youth by increasing the rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and student retention. FDFYEP is voluntary and open to foster youth attending schools in five school districts. This program supports youth in foster care by assisting with credit transfers, educational case planning, and by hosting an initial coordinating meeting involving parents, caregivers, and school personnel connected to newly enrolled students.

When I was in foster care, I got resources such as counseling from my social worker. They took me on outings and talked through anything I was going through. When I left to live with my grandparents, I didn't get much support. The social worker who was supposed to check in hardly visited and did not offer resources. Being unaware of resources, made things difficult.

- LM. • Age 20 • San Bernardino County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Kinship Care

PASSPORT DATA SHARING APP

Another partnership of note between child welfare (DCFS) and education (the LA County Office of Education – LACOE) focuses on improving access to student data for educators and social workers. The **Passport Data Sharing App** houses and tracks vital records and educational progress for students in care across 80 LEAs. In 2021, this mobile app gave social workers a new tool to support their field work with system-involved students.

STUDENT TRANSPORTATION

In 2017, Los Angeles was the first to pilot a countywide initiative to address transportation challenges that affect educational attainment for youth in care. This partnership involves multiple partners including HopSkipDrive, DCFS, and LACOE. During the initial pilot, 1,131 students used transportation through HopSkipDrive, and 89% of those rides were utilized for transportation directly to/from school.[1]

Despite several notable efforts and progress made to strengthen academic support for youth with foster care experience, there remain several ongoing implementation challenges to understand and address before removing the barriers to their educational attainment.

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CURRENT CHALLENGES IN CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP IN CALIFORNIA

Educational concerns for youth in foster care often take a back seat as child welfare workers fervently pursue permanency resources while addressing the trauma and safety concerns that led to home removals. Although foster youth represent a relatively small portion of California's student body, the call for system improvements, more supports, and better coordination is a shared and essential responsibility.

> **"**
>
> *I have had multiple social workers and they would ask me: 'What can we do for homecare?' But for school, they'll kind of be like, 'It's okay, just try your best.'*
>
> **- J. • Age 16 • Los Angeles County • 11th Grade • Currently in Foster Care**
>
> **"**

The primary goal of the child welfare system is ensuring each youth achieves permanency through reunification, kinship placements, adoptions, or another type of lasting relationship with at least one caring, supportive adult. Staff tasked with this immense responsibility are hyper-focused on the demands of identifying and navigating the universe of permanency connections for young people in their care.

> **?** **What happens when the academic progress of children in out-of-home care falls off the radar?**

When educational attainment isn't a stated priority, K-12 students in foster care become more susceptible to frustrating school experiences, failing grades, and disconnection that limit their access to future opportunities. There are several factors and implementation challenges that point to the need for a more robust response to the educational crisis for youth with lived experience of foster care.

ADDRESSING INSTABILITY: THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE

Unstable living arrangements directly affect student achievement. As such, there has been significant statutory work focused on ensuring foster care placements are:

- located in or close to a young person's community of origin;

- appropriate (least restrictive);

- safe; and,

- conducive to the youth's well-being.

However, due to the state's child removal rate remaining high despite recent efforts at prevention, in most counties the number of available community-based placement resources is insufficient to meet the demand.

Youth behavior is often cited as a reason for placement instability. This blaming narrative unjustly ignores the severe trauma experienced by young people as they enter foster care after the familial instability that led to removal. It is understandable that many youth display behavioral changes during this highly emotional time and long thereafter as each move reinforces the original trauma. More must be done to preserve placements and minimize disruptions, including offering comprehensive support to resource families charged with managing the complex needs of children in their care.

School mobility is another area in need of improvement.
As previously mentioned in this report, in 2003 California established the first school stability statute for students in the foster care system (AB 490). This entitled youth in care to remain in their schools of origin upon placement into care.

These rights were further enhanced in 2010 (AB 1933) by requiring youth remain eligible for their school of origin for the duration of their dependency case.

Despite these laws, mobility rates haven't changed much. When young people's lives are continuously disrupted at home or school, it compounds their trauma and thwarts attempts to make positive progress.

In addition to the factors[1] associated with a lack of appropriate placement availability, there are persistent challenges with coordination between the child welfare and education systems. Both federal and state education and social services codes mandate active collaboration between the two systems regarding school enrollment decisions. For example, ESSA requires the completion of a Best Interest Determination before changing a child's school placement. However, data obtained through a California Public Records Act Request by the Alliance of Children's Rights shows that among the districts and counties that responded to the request, only 55% of child welfare agencies, 4% of probation departments, and 38% of local education agencies reported a best interest determination process was in place five years after the passing of ESSA[2]. This finding reveals a critical failure of systems implementation and oversight that leaves staff without appropriate guidance for supporting educational access and rights for youth in care.

Transportation is another area of concern.
School of origin rights mandate youth in care are entitled to transportation to and from their schools of origin when they move to a new home placement. Complex cost-sharing agreements between school districts have led to abysmal implementation rates, with only 34% of counties having transportation agreements in place.[3]

As schools and child welfare systems endlessly debate who is responsible for transportation funding and administration, youth struggle to maintain a sense of normalcy and connection by attending familiar schools where they feel most comfortable.

Another identified practice gap pertains to educational rights holders (ERHs). ERHs are supposed to be actively involved as representatives and advocates for students in foster care to help them determine what is in their best interests concerning educational matters. Child welfare and education agencies are responsible for documenting contact information for ERHs and proactively engaging them in meaningful conversations about each student's academic needs and progress. Unfortunately, ERHs are often left out of crucial decision-making processes, like Best Interest Determination meetings, or they frequently don't happen at all. Only 35% of child welfare agencies and 8% of probation departments reported having policies to ensure all youth in care are assigned an ERH.
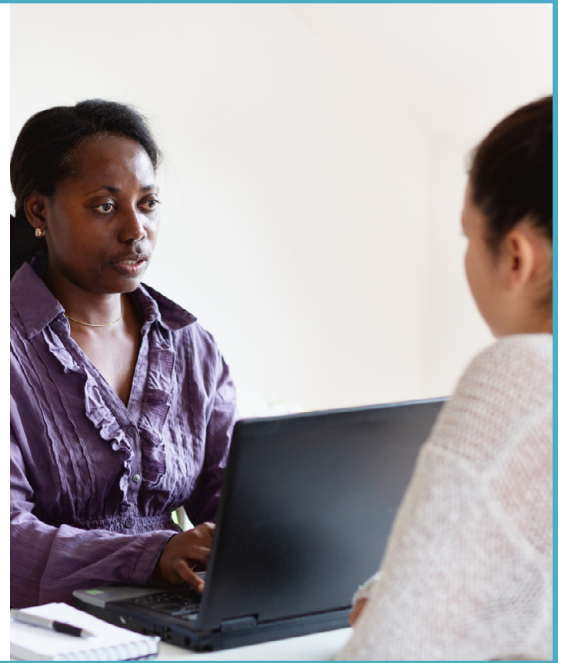
Each of these issues contributes to the staggering rates of school placement mobility for youth in care, which causes learning disruption, slows academic progress, and severs supportive social connections for youth separated from their school community.

According to a report by the Learning Policy Institute, during the 2018/19 academic year, nearly 95% of California's non-system involved students remained in the same school for the entire academic year, as compared to only 66% of students in care. Furthermore, nearly 13% of foster students experienced more than one school move during the same academic year.[4]

Existing policies require effective oversight and a commitment to resolving implementation barriers to close the opportunity gap for youth in foster care but there are no penalties for systems that come up short of expectations. As is evident by the outcomes shared in this report, students bear the brunt of failed education and child welfare policies and practices that do not provide what is necessary to advance academically.

INADEQUATE STAFFING DEDICATED TO THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF YOUTH IN CARE

At the state level, there is no dedicated public funding that ensures targeted educational interventions to students in foster care. Although the state has prioritized funding to increase the coordination of activities and improve interagency collaboration, these services have not sufficiently improved overall education outcomes for youth in foster care.

> *Resources aren't accessible to everyone, or even if they are, it can be very difficult to navigate your way into a program because there's a limit of how many people are available to help. There have been multiple times where I've been waitlisted for basic things like mental health care, because there's just not enough.*
>
> - M. • Age 14 • 9th Grade • Currently in Foster Care

AB 490 requires every Local Education Agency (LEA) in California to designate a staff member to serve as a foster youth liaison. The liaisons are meant to facilitate coordination activities such as identifying students in foster care in the data system, supporting school enrollment and changes, protecting school of origins rights, and ensuring student class credits transfer between districts. Still, this mandate does not have funding attached, and these liaisons often carry multiple titles and are responsible for other roles within a school district, limiting their effectiveness.

EXPANDING DIRECT SUPPORTS TO MAXIMIZE IMPROVED SERVICE COORDINATION

The Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) operates within the County Offices of Education (COEs). This program aims to support student learning outcomes and replaced a previous program, the Foster Youth Service Program. Established in 2015, FYSCP represented a shift for the COEs from offering direct services to having a coordinating role between LEAs and child welfare agencies on a county level. Under the reconfigured program, FYSCP supports the capacity of responsible stakeholders within a respective county to assist LEAs with providing direct services to foster youth explicitly to improve educational outcomes.

FYSCP Los Angeles[7]

The FYSCP has enhanced the coordination of multidisciplinary teams in each county, thereby increasing knowledge of the extensive needs of youth in care, improving enrollment and student identification, and elevating high school graduation rates attributed to the implementation of work related to educational rights. FYSCP reports document some promising practices in several school districts across the state that have led to improved disciplinary policies and slight increases in college-going rates primarily due to more intensive efforts focused on FAFSA completion. However, direct interventions are necessary for these coordinating efforts to have maximum effect.

> *For the most part, the social workers would say, 'What's your plan? You don't have a plan yet? Well, you need to come up with one.' They would give me ideas of things to do, but they didn't really help me navigate what was going on at school or with homework. They didn't help me try to find something that interests me, or help me pick between two careers. They would just tell me to talk to my foster parents about that or my school counselor. They never really did anything themselves.*

- M. • Age 14 • 9th Grade • Currently in Foster Care
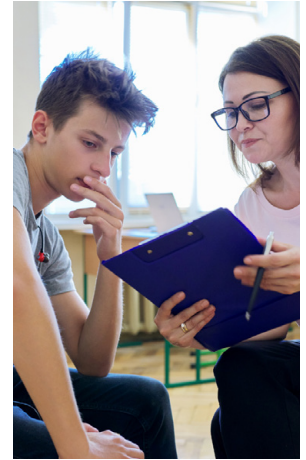
TARGETED FUNDING THROUGH THE LOCAL CONTROL FUNDING FORMULA FALLS SHORT

The Local Control Funding Formula
California's School Finance System

District Funding ($)

CATEGORICAL PROGRAMS

REVENUE LIMIT

Wealthier Districts and Higher Poverty Districts

Old Funding System

SUPPLEMENTAL GRANTS

BASE FUNDING

Wealthier Districts

SUPPLEMENTAL & CONCENTRATION GRANTS
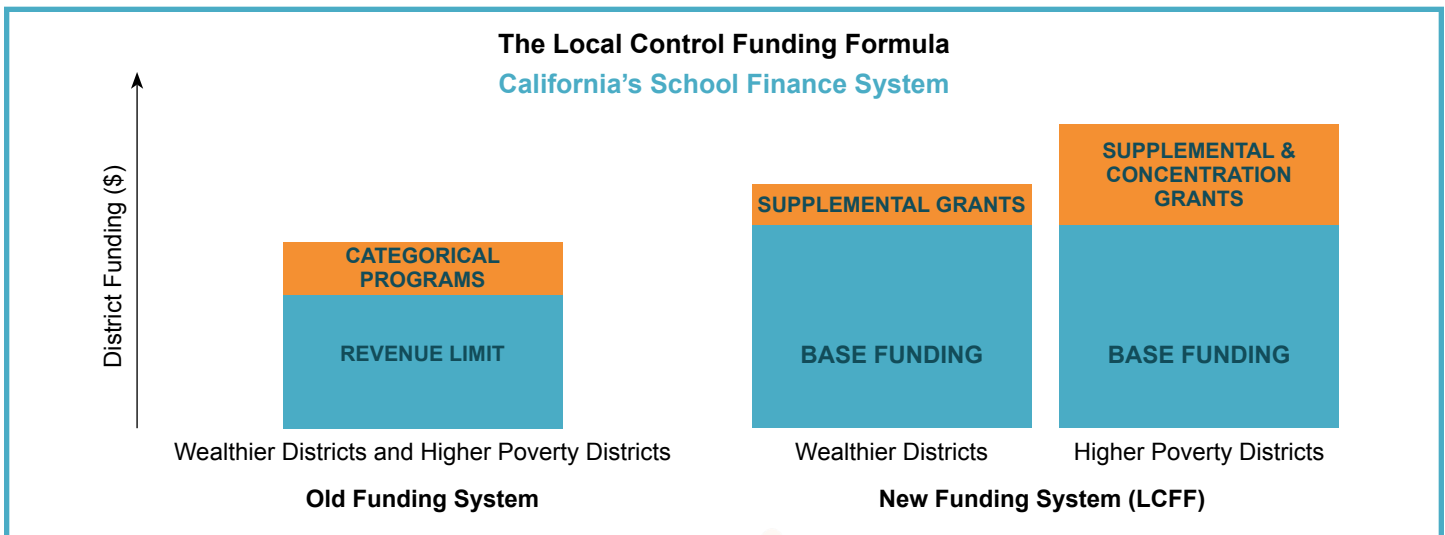
BASE FUNDING

Higher Poverty Districts

New Funding System (LCFF)

In 2013, California completely reformed the structure of education financing and accountability. The new model, the *Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)*, designated new funding structures for LEAs and changed accountability standards for achieving results. Under this new formula, each LEA is eligible for a supplemental grant adjustment based on the number of unduplicated targeted disadvantaged students enrolled in a district. Disadvantaged students are identified as English Learners, eligible for a free/reduced-priced lunch, and foster youth. While highlighting students in foster care as a priority population under the supplemental grant category was a step in the right direction, this has rarely resulted in additional resources for school districts. Because youth in foster care often fall under multiple LCFF categories (e.g., free/reduced lunch programs), they are only counted once for funding generation (unduplicated). The additional funding generated under the new formula is usually insufficient to cover the intense level of individualized support youth in care need to succeed in school.

A 2019 report by the state auditor documented the implementation challenges and failures of the LCFF funding approach and its companion accountability system, the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), which was set up to monitor progress. This report highlighted several missed opportunities to support the educational attainment of foster care students. For example, the state does not explicitly require LEAs to spend or track spending of concentration and supplemental grants for the targeted student groups.[5] Additionally, the report noted that any unspent targeted funds from these grants could roll over into the general fund during the following year. Consequently, the supplemental funding allocation provided to LEAs to boost the academic achievement of youth in care generally does not result in direct targeted interventions.

LEAs also lack clear guidance and oversight regarding funding usage reporting. Students in foster care are directly affected by the intrinsic inequities of the LCFF. State educators and advocates recognize the need for revisions to remove barriers that prevent students with unique needs from receiving financial support that should promote better educational outcomes.

Lastly, the federal and state governments increased funding to LEAs to help address severe learning loss and disengagement among high-needs students during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2021 report by advocacy organizations in California reviewed the LEA Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (an accountability tool that temporarily replaced LCAP during the pandemic) and found similar deficiencies as those identified in the state auditor's report. LEAs widely failed to identify strategies to engage high-needs students (including youth in foster care) and did not have utilization plans for fiscal resources.[6]

This report did acknowledge LEAs that successfully identified promising practices for assisting high-needs students, including recommendations to integrate social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices into the school environment and to offer customized, frequent, individual supports for students in the priority populations.

SOURCES

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REVIEW OF PROMISING PRACTICES

California is home to a group of innovative nonprofits that use highly relational, customized interventions to build a ladder to academic success for young people in foster care. These transformational community-based programs achieve a nearly 90% high school graduation rate, with more than 77% of participating youth enrolling in post-secondary education.
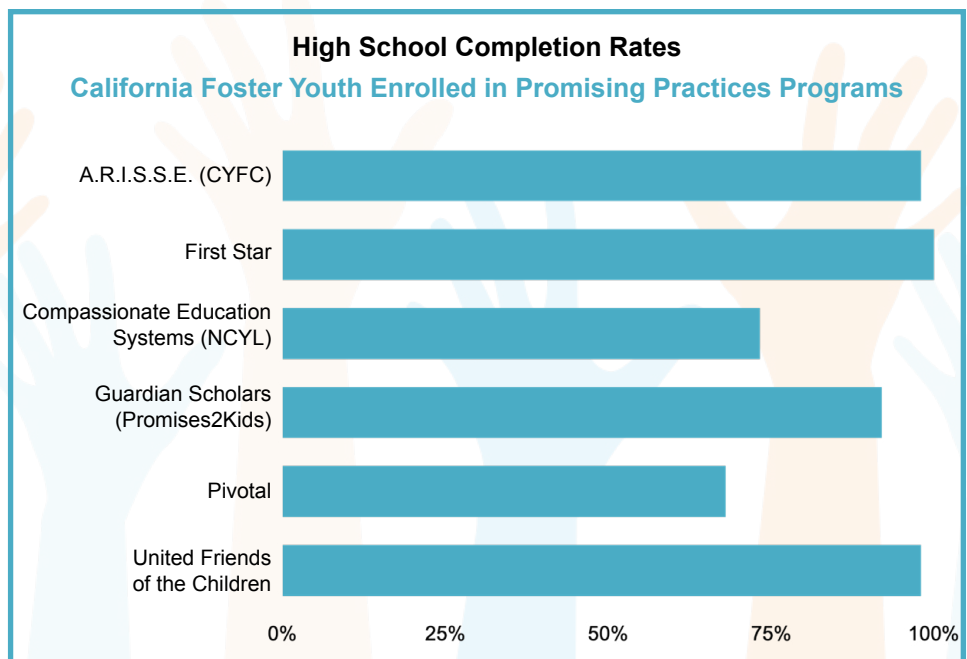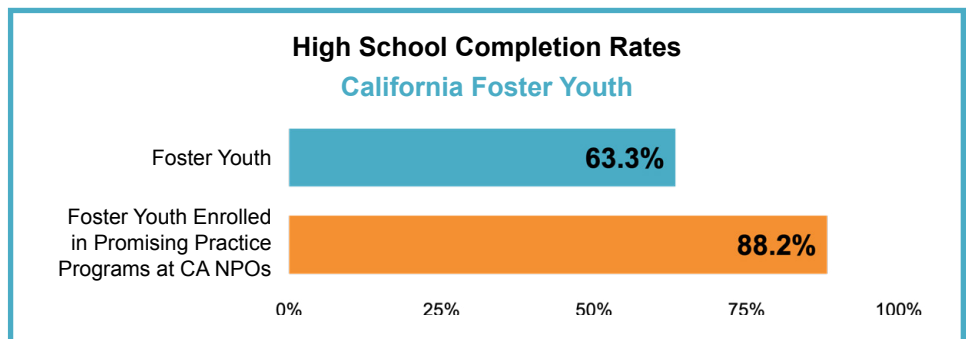
Across the state, school districts and government agencies strive to ensure all K-12 students advance academically and in life. These entities work tirelessly to teach skills, promote social-emotional learning, and provide healthy, safe environments where young people can acquire knowledge. Despite these ongoing efforts, challenges persist for some students known to have unique educational barriers. As evidenced by the historical data cited in this report, current lesson plans and learning protocols don't deliver the comprehensive, customized supports and services that students with experience in foster care need to keep pace with their peers in the general population.

In response to this unacceptable reality, nonprofit educational service providers and advocates have stepped in to fill the gap and create sustainable solutions that level the playing field for youth left vulnerable by trauma, family separation, and the subsequent disruptions they endure while in foster care. External evaluations of these model programs[1] illustrate the significant benefits of grounding educational interventions in trusting, empowering relationships between caring adults and young people who need stabilizing support. Programs that achieve positive results (as reviewed in this report)[2] are youth-driven and guided by trained experts dedicated to addressing the academic and developmental needs of students with foster care experience.

Program evaluators attribute improvements in educational attainment to a highly customized, motivational approach that allows young people in foster care to regroup, set goals, and stay on track at school.

The positive outcomes for students enrolled in these programs demonstrate that youth who receive consistent, one-on-one support are far more likely to improve academically, graduate high school, and enroll in post-secondary education.

For example, students with a foster care background participating in the highlighted programs exceeded the statewide rates for high school graduation (24.9 points higher) and post-secondary matriculation (33.5 points higher).

High School Completion Rates
California Foster Youth

Foster Youth	63.3%
Foster Youth Enrolled in Promising Practice Programs at CA NPOs	88.2%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

High School Completion Rates
California Foster Youth Enrolled in Promising Practices Programs

A.R.I.S.S.E. (CYFC)
First Star
Compassionate Education Systems (NCYL)
Guardian Scholars (Promises2Kids)
Pivotal
United Friends of the Children

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

College-Going Rates
California Foster Youth

Foster Youth	**44.4%**
Foster Youth Enrolled in Promising Practice Programs at CA NPOs	**77.9%**

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

> ❝
> *They are really cool. They been with me since I entered eighth grade, so we've literally grown up together. They always tell me that they see how much I've grown. They always have support for me, like all these college classes and workshops on women empowerment and financial aid.*
>
> **- J. • Age 16 • Los Angeles County • 11th Grade • Currently in Foster Care**
> ❞

College-Going Rates
California Foster Youth Enrolled in Promising Practices Programs

A.R.I.S.S.E. (CYFC)	
First Star	
Guardian Scholars (Promises2Kids)	
Pivotal	
United Friends of the Children	

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
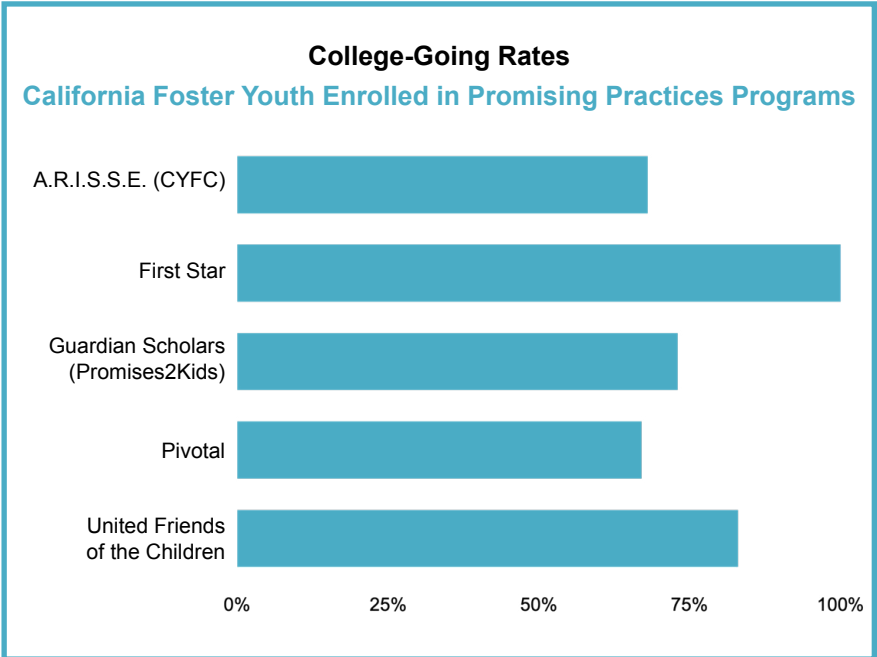
These encouraging results point to an untapped potential for scaling and replicating effective program models spearheaded by nonprofit educational support service providers. Meaningful academic improvements are achievable by leveraging the expertise and experience of organizations with a history of delivering life-changing interventions to youth in foster care. Participants in these best practice programs receive intensive foundational supports that give these young people what they need to stabilize and improve academically, including:

- 💬 **Individualized, frequent, and trauma-informed interventions for youth in grades 6-12**

- 🤲 **Service provision that follows the youth regardless of their system status (i.e., if they exit care while enrolled in the program)**

- 👥 **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**

A review of these programs also found that they consistently adhere to eight guiding principles that contribute to student success:

Strengths-based

Guided by each youth's unique interests, talents, qualities, abilities, and needs.

Youth-centered Engagement

Encouraging youth agency, prioritizing youth voice and empowerment, and supporting youth-led goal-setting.

Future-focused

Visioning and opportunity exposure to help youth visualize, prepare for, and build hope for their futures.

Youth Identity Development

Culturally relevant programming with staff that reflect young people served and have a deep commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and racial justice practices.

Data-driven Practice

Regular tracking of a youth's history, academic outcomes, and goals. Observe and respond to trends and results to evaluate and refine programs.

Continuity of Care

Consistency is critical for young people who have experienced trauma, school mobility, and life disruptions.

Collaborative Integrated Approach

Unite efforts to improve educational outcomes for youth in care by teaming with key stakeholders across systems (i.e., child welfare, education, courts), as well as community-based service providers, caregivers, and advocates.

Positive Connections to Caring Adults

Supportive, consistent and trusting relationships with adults promote a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and permanency.

Guiding Principles

For effective program models spearheaded by nonprofit educational support service providers

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8

> *Talking helps a lot. It helped me manage my emotions and grow as a person. I liked being a part of a learning community when I started community college, because it helped me build rapport with the professors and my peers who have lived foster care experience. This gave me a community and helped me understand how to navigate college.*

- I. • Age 19 • San Bernardino County • Recent High School Graduate • Extended Foster Care

Finally, successful programs reviewed for this report supplement foundational supports grounded in evidence-based interventions with a menu of complementary services across six program pillars. These offerings assist youth in care with developing new skills, exploring college and career options, navigating life transitions, and forming supportive connections to peer mentors, professionals, and community resources.

PROGRAM PILLARS

Complementary Services to Promote Educational Success for Youth in Foster Care

Grades 6-12 Educational Support

- Academic Remediation
- Counseling
- Credit Recovery
- Homework Assistance and Tutoring
- Study/Test Taking Skills
- Educational Rights Access/Awareness
- Caregiver Engagement
- Service Referrals

Post-Secondary Educational Support

- Test Prep *(SAT/ACT)*
- Application Assistance *(Financial Aid, College, Career Training Education)*
- Campus Tours
- College Readiness/Immersion Programs
- Linkages to Campus Resources

Career Exploration

- Assessments
- Mentoring
- Internships/Job Shadowing
- Job Application Assistance
- Professional Networking and Exposure Opportunities

Social/Emotional Learning Development

- Assessments
- Interventions that build competencies, such as self-efficacy, self-awareness, decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills
- Counseling and Therapeutic Supports

Financial Assistance

- Academic Scholarships
- Emergency Assistance
- Enrichment Funds
- Youth Stipends/Incentives

Community-Building

- Alumni Initiatives
- Cultural/Social Events
- Strengthening Peer Connections
- Service Learning Programs
- Youth Leadership Groups

> *They would take turns picking me up [from school], give me food, and we would just talk about the week, the day, whatever what was on my mind. It was good to have that type of support because I wasn't getting that at home. It also instilled a different energy in me. It made it easier for me. Now that I'm older, I see it was necessary because it made it a habit, which is what we need.*
>
> - A. • Age 21 • Stanislaus County • College Student • Previously in Foster Care

> *The program requires us to meet twice a month for check-ins. For example, we just talked about FAFSA, and now I have to start applying for that. I also attend events once a month that are really cool. They encourage me to keep continuing my path, and to not give up just because it's hard.*
>
> - I. • Age 19 • San Bernardino County • Recent High School Graduate • Extended Foster Care

SOURCES

¹ The review of promising practices included the following program models: A.R.I.S.S.E (Children, Youth and Family Collaborative); Better Futures (Pathways to Positive Futures Research and Training Center); First Star; Compassionate Education Systems (National Center for Youth Law); Guardian Scholars (Promises2Kids); Pivotal; and, United Friends of the Children.

² See Addendum for more information about the Promising Practices programs shared in this report.

THE COST OF BUSINESS AS USUAL

Due to their poor academic outcomes, youth with foster care experience attain lower levels of education than their peers, which impacts their ability to earn a living wage when seeking employment.

As demonstrated in this report, students in foster care face unique challenges that make it difficult to stay on track in school. As a result, youth in foster care are far less likely to earn a high school diploma in four years (63.3%) than students overall (87.5%)[1], and they are nearly three times more likely to drop out of high school (24.4%) compared to students overall (8.2%)[2]. In addition, nationally, less than 10% of youth with a foster care background will earn a bachelor's degree.[3]

Behind this alarming data are the dashed dreams of thousands of young people with limited career options due to a lack of educational attainment.

? What are the consequences of inaction?

EDUCATION FAILURES COMPROMISE FUTURE EARNING POTENTIAL

Higher levels of education are associated with higher earnings and lower unemployment rates. Compared to high school graduates, youth who drop out of high school earn substantially less, have higher unemployment rates, are more likely to engage in criminal behavior, and more likely to require public assistance.[4] Further, individuals who earn a college degree benefit the economy because they experience increased employment rates, decreased poverty rates, and lesser use of public benefits.[5]

Educational Attainment	Median Usual Weekly Earnings	Unemployment Rate
Bachelor's Degree	$1,334	3.5%
Associate's Degree	$963	4.6%
Some college, no degree	$899	5.5%
High school diploma	$809	6.2%
Less than a high school diploma	$626	8.3%

> *After experiencing retail jobs, I heard from many people they wished they would have stayed in college. It is hard to keep a full-time job that barely pays for my living expenses. I am still struggling even though I have this security job. I would rather have a good paying career, which higher education will provide.*
>
> **- D. • Age 17 • Los Angeles County • 12th Grade • Currently in Foster Care**

National statistics show that, in 2021, individuals age 25 and over with a Bachelor's degree earned more than twice as much per week than those with less than a high school diploma. In addition, individuals with a Bachelor's degree were much less likely to be unemployed than those with less than a high school diploma.[6]

Additionally, research shows that young adults with prior foster care experience work fewer hours and are more likely to earn an income that is below the federal poverty level compared to their peers without foster care experience.[7]

THE ECONOMIC COST OF IGNORING BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

When children in foster care receive an incomplete education, they subsequently experience reduced earning potential as young adults in the workforce. This educational deficit not only impacts their ability to achieve financial independence but also has an adverse economic impact on society as a whole. Without a living wage, these young people will face severe financial hardship after they leave foster care, forcing many to rely on public benefits for medical, housing, and other social services they need to survive. Moreover, young adults with lower levels of education do not have the necessary skills or training to fill positions that contribute to an optimally functioning state workforce. Finally, adults relegated to low-income jobs also contribute far less tax revenue to federal and state budgets.

For example, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that, compared to youth who graduate high school, the **average high school dropout** in America causes a

lifetime economic burden of $272,000

based on lower tax contributions, higher reliance on public benefits, and higher rates of criminal activity.[8]

Previous research has shown that children who experienced abuse or neglect are

twice as likely

to become unemployed adults and are more likely to receive public assistance compared to youth who did not suffer abuse or neglect.[9]

A recent California study estimated that each youth who has experienced abuse or neglect faces a

$183,301 lifetime loss of future employment and earning[10]

due to reduced productivity.

ELIMINATING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP IMPROVES THE BOTTOM LINE

Low educational attainment among California's students in foster care has long-term financial implications for the youth themselves and for the state's economy. An investment in support services that close the opportunity gap directly benefits these young people in terms of higher earnings and lower unemployment while providing significant cost savings to the state.

The annual cost of the proposed program interventions is approximately $8,000 per student. If youth in foster care participate in support programs throughout their four years in high school plus an additional year as they transition to post-secondary education and career programs, the total cost would be $40,000 per youth.

Compared to the state's estimate of the fiscal costs related to youth who have experienced abuse or neglect, this proposed investment represents a savings of approximately $143,000 per youth served. Based on the national estimate of the cost of youth who do not complete high school, the cost savings associated with funding these much needed interventions could reach $232,000 per youth served.

To summarize, based on the estimated cost savings ($143,000 to $232,000 per youth), a $40,000 allocation per student in foster care would

yield savings to society of 3.5 to nearly 6 times the investment.

COST OF PROPOSED PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS

Annual Cost per Youth	Program Duration	Total Program Cost
$8,000	5 years	$40,000

COST OF NOT IMPLEMENTING PROPOSED PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS

	Est. Lifetime Cost per Youth	Benefit of Program *(Total Cost - Program Cost)*
California Estimate: Youth who have experienced abuse or neglect	$183,301	$143,301
National Estimate: Youth who drop out of high school	$272,000	$232,000

The consequences of inaction would leave thousands of young people at risk of leaving foster care without the appropriate education, skills, and financial means they need to avoid entering another system. Research shows that youth with foster care experience are more likely to become incarcerated,[11] homeless,[12] or reliant on public assistance[9] as young adults.

Moreover, students in foster care who participate in the proposed program interventions will be in a better position to earn more, achieve self-sufficiency, and contribute to a productive economy.

SOURCES

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THE OPPORTUNITY

Youth healing from the trauma of family separation deserve to flourish in school, not languish on a waitlist to receive essential services. A state investment would provide transformational social, emotional, and academic support to middle and high school students in foster care who need a solid path to college and career readiness on their way to self-sufficiency.

Take the time to put yourself in our shoes. Think for a minute… what would you do? The system failed me. The system didn't understand how to meet my needs. I had to navigate my own resources, like getting housing vouchers, without any support.

- J. • Age 18 • Los Angeles County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Foster Care

What will it take to reverse historically low high school completion and post-secondary readiness rates for youth in foster care?

Recent improvements in service coordination between K-12 schools and child welfare agencies have not significantly changed the academic trajectory of students facing systemic barriers to success and in danger of exiting school prematurely.[1] Without a commitment to providing more profound, consistent, individualized interactions tailored to their specific needs, young people will continue to struggle in school and later in life.

As the review of promising practices in this report states, students without sufficient family structures respond well to relationship-centered academic supports led by community-based, nonprofit educational service providers (NPOs). Programs that achieve desired results for youth in care rely on highly trained, compassionate staff and peer role models with extensive child welfare and education system knowledge and motivated by a strong commitment to social justice and equity. Assessment of different models also indicates high-frequency touch points lead to academic improvements and positive growth for students served.

> *They literally make me feel at home when I go to a meeting. I sometimes feel like I don't even have to talk. I love that for me. Because I do work a lot. And I do hard work. So when I can step into a space and can step back and just listen, I appreciate that.*
>
> **- R. • Age 18 • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Kinship Care**

THE DRIVERS OF SUCCESS
A Trio of Integrated Foundational Supports

The developmental and educational needs of students in foster care are often misunderstood and underestimated. Youth with a history of complex trauma require a different, more intensive, and holistic approach than is typically available in K-12 settings. These young people significantly benefit from individualized coaching, peer mentoring, or specialized educational case management informed by best practices.

Three foundational supports directly contribute to academic progression for students in care. Whether offered to youth at home, at school, or in the community, service delivery is always grounded in stable, trusting relationships between program staff and students. Dedicated practitioners motivate, equip, and advocate for youth to set goals and guide them through high school completion and subsequent progressive post-secondary educational and career development tracks aligned with their interests and goals.

FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORTS
To Improve Educational Outcomes for California's Youth in Foster Care

1:1 Intensive Customized Interventions	Frequent Interactions	Continuous Program Delivery Beyond System Involvement
Ensure Youth Graduates High School and Pursues College or Career Goals	**Keep Youth on Track to Achieve Success**	**Support Stable Transitions**
• Led by highly trained practitioners • Trauma-informed • MODALITIES: Individualized Coaching OR Peer Mentoring OR Specialized Educational Case Management (+Service Referrals)	• Weekly/Biweekly Contact • Individual Sessions • In-Person and Virtual Check-ins • Supplemented by Group Sharing/Peer-to-Peer Learning Opportunities	• Maintain connections with youth experiencing major life transitions (i.e., post-high school graduation, exiting foster care, change in living arrangement) • Extend the duration of services to include recent high school graduates pursuing post-secondary education to advance college and career success
FOCUS:	**FOCUS:**	**FOCUS:**
Encourage youth's social/emotional development, positive growth, motivation, and plan for academic success	Provide consistent, nurturing support to promote youth's well-being, monitor educational progress, and address urgent concerns	Build community, strengthen relationships, and offer practical skills and stabilizing supports that give current and former foster youth every opportunity to reach their full potential as independent, young adults

> *It's going to be all up to me, you know? And that's mainly what I'm scared of is that I'm going to forget something little and it's going turn into something big. And it's going to be too late by the time I realize it. I'm just trying to prepare myself so that doesn't happen.*
>
> **- D. • Age 17 • Los Angeles County • 12th Grade • Currently in Foster Care**

Students participating in community-based education programs excel academically due to the emphasis on frequent, one-on-one interactions and stabilizing supports, which continue uninterrupted (by placement changes or dependency case closure) throughout their educational journey. Effective interventions involve program staff who engage each student to create a customized plan that emphasizes academic advancement and positive youth development. Program participants receive additional support from other trained personnel and peer mentors, who provide skills-building workshops, make service referrals, and host college and career exposure activities. This integrated teaming approach gives students in foster care a safe space to escape their feelings of "otherness" among their peers in the child welfare system, gain confidence, unleash their ambitions, and master academic and life skills to carry them into young adulthood.

STABILIZING SUPPORTS AND LEARNING RECOVERY
The Role of NPOs

Without reliable and consistent connections to nurturing adults, youth with lived foster care experience are far more likely to fail in school. According to a 2022 report about these students in California,[2] education and child welfare agencies responsible for these young people face competing priorities and capacity issues that directly affect academic performance.

> *"Capacity constraints in the child welfare system can impede the effectiveness of educational supports for students in foster care. Given the interconnectedness of education and child welfare agencies in supporting students in foster care, challenges in one agency or at one level of the system can also create obstacles to serving youth in others."*
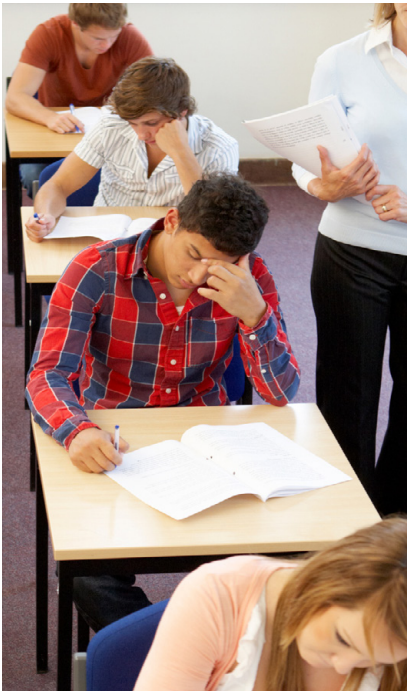
There are consequential trade-offs when the urgent nature of child protection takes precedence over school stability: education attainment, more often than not, becomes a low priority. Social workers managing high caseloads are under intense pressure to quickly find foster homes that will accommodate youth removed from their families. Unfortunately, for students in foster care in grades 6-12, placement changes are relatively common and lead to significant school disruptions.

Young people shaken by family separation don't acclimate well to new homes, different teachers, and unfamiliar learning environments. Multiple school absences are likely, and further delay learning recovery as these youth lose access to a sense of community and belonging. Nonprofit educational service providers are ideally suited to step in and help our young people in care navigate life changes, complete grade-level academic courses, graduate high school, and enter post-secondary programs that position them for future success.

Community-based NPOs have greater flexibility and agility than government agencies and school systems to deliver intensive, ongoing academic supports tailored to the needs of one segment of California's large, diverse population of K-12 students. Also, youth in foster care who participate in educational programs offered by non-governmental entities are less likely to experience service interruptions if their system status changes or they switch schools.

> *I am excited to be in college and for what the future has in store for me. I want people to know it is not easy. Not every kid has a perfect foster care life. Foster youth need more resources and support systems to get through school and attend college. Even life at home can be a struggle being in an unknown environment.*
>
> **- J. • Age 18 • Los Angeles County • Recent High School Graduate • Previously in Foster Care**

NPO-led programs focus on youth empowerment, social and emotional development, and community-building that connects young people with lived experience to each other and to supportive adults who help them heal from trauma, advance their education, and navigate major life transitions. These components also have a lasting positive impact on the state's economy and public health.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO RECLAIM POTENTIAL AND ADDRESS INEQUITY

Fortunately, California is home to several NPOs with decades of expertise and experience helping students in foster care meet their challenges head-on. These direct service providers fill a critical void by removing barriers to learning, finding collaborative solutions, and offering services that demonstrably improve educational outcomes for youth in care. Their programs yield impressive results and highlight the value of entrusting NPOs to serve children who need emotional healing and academic course correction.

Based on longstanding disappointing academic results and well-documented pandemic-related learning loss, the future status of California's youth in foster care is at the tipping point. As a state, we must work together within and across systems to ensure current and former foster youth can move past crisis and toward their goals. If we believe in every young person's promise and potential, we must care enough to invest in their education and well-being.

An annual state budget allocation establishes a pipeline of essential resources for NPOs, educators, and government partners seeking to scale academic support programs and replicate intensive interventions that have proven to lift barriers to educational attainment for young people in care. This funding will build the capacity of a continuum of community-based approaches, spur statewide innovation, and encourage more cross-agency collaboration at the local level.

Lastly, a sustainable public funding source might also help address entrenched racial equity issues that particularly widen the educational opportunity gap for children of color.
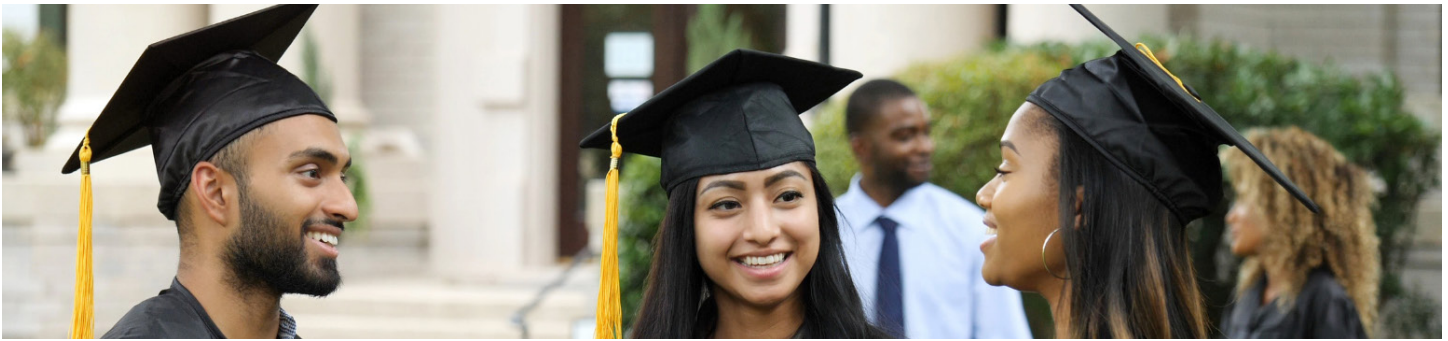
Despite good intentions, previous efforts by the government on behalf of youth with lived experience of foster care have fallen short of expectations. We can't continue to compromise the vision for our children – in particular children of color – by continuing with old models that aren't working. Now is the time to expand services that encourage young people in foster care to reclaim their potential, earn a high school diploma, and pursue post-secondary education and career pathways that lead to gainful employment and financial stability.

Additional funding would strengthen and expand customized support programs offered by NPOs and other community-based education service providers that are committed to using the same foundational supports and complementary services that have yielded positive results for youth in care.

The cost modeling chart[3] is based on the average cost per student among six California-based promising practice support programs with a track record of improving academic outcomes and post-secondary readiness for youth in care.

OPTION 1: Grades 6-12		
Target Population (CDE Data)	Annual Cost per Student	Annual Services* Budget
20,065	$8,000	$160,520,000

OPTION 2: Grades 9-12		
Target Population (CDE Data)	Annual Cost per Student	Annual Services* Budget
12,662	$8,000	$101,296,000

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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[2] Burns, D., Espinoza, D., Adams, J., Ondrasek, N. California's Students in Care: Challenges and Promising Practices (July 2022) Learning Policy Institute.

[3] CDE DataQuest Report: Count of Matched Foster Students by County of Enrollment and Grade.

CONCLUSION

Students in foster care have unique challenges in getting to graduation day. These youth frequently struggle to recover from the shock, uncertainty, and instability brought on by family separation. Unless we address their specialized needs and allow them to catch up to their peers, they will continue to pay the price.

Education is the single most effective driver to achieving self-reliance and sufficiency. As was evident during the recent pandemic, trauma, social isolation, and chronic stress dramatically affect young people's ability to concentrate, learn, and excel academically. California's youth in foster care have done nothing wrong, yet they continue to face challenging obstacles that lead to historically poor outcomes as they become young adults.

The compounding reality of disproportional placement of African American and other youth of color into the child welfare system also perpetuates long-established racial injustice and inequity patterns. Investment in educational attainment can effectively stop the domino effect that sees older youth leave foster care only to enter yet another costly system that limits their potential and restricts future opportunities.

When educators, child welfare leaders, and community-based organizations work together, we can reverse the alarming trends we see for system-involved children. We have a moral obligation to do what it takes to minimize the lifelong negative impact of foster care on the youth who experience it. **Destination Graduation** is achievable if we commit to strengthening education and career pathways for these students as a priority goal.

California is well known for its innovative leadership and deep commitment to solving structural and systemic issues through persistent advocacy, cross-sector collaboration, and a legislature that listens and takes action that changes lives for the better. With additional funding, we can expand on recent efforts to close the educational opportunity gap for our youth. However, students currently in care do not have the luxury of time. Although systemic change is slow, incremental, and often subject to the shifting political climate, public funding for effective direct services would be an essential precursor to more sweeping, lasting change.

This report offers a blueprint for success by sharing the foundational supports, promising practices, and intensive interventions led by nonprofit educational providers. These offerings prove the effectiveness of using a highly relational, trauma-informed approach when serving special needs students who have endured the pain of family disruption.

Youth in foster care deserve every chance to match and even exceed the educational outcomes regularly achieved by students in the general population. Now is the time to create a public funding stream dedicated to accomplishing this goal. Together, we can help thousands of young people move beyond their trauma, determine their own futures, and become shining examples of the power of education to transform lives.

ADDENDUM

PROMISING PRACTICES: Summary Descriptions

Organization: First Star, Inc.

Model Program: First Star Academies for Foster Youth

Participants:

Grades 8-12 • Post-secondary Students

Youth Served:

170 Annually (California)

Locations:

Los Angeles • San Bernardino • Sacramento

Contact:

Lyndsey C. Wilson • Chief Executive Officer • lyndsey.wilson@firststar.org

First Star partners with universities and child welfare agencies across the country to make a long-term investment in foster youth and change the course of their lives, from abuse and neglect to academic achievement and self-sufficiency. The Academies are long-term college readiness programs for high school foster youth that include both four immersive residential summers on a university campus, and monthly sessions during each school year. During the residential sessions, the youth are not only supported by highly qualified professionals, but also by peer mentors who are former foster youth attending the host university. Throughout all four years, Academy staff provides holistic, long-term education case management to the youth and their families to sustain the progress youth make during the university-immersion sessions.

Organization: Children Youth and Family Collaborative (CYFC)

Model Program: A.R.I.S.S.E© (Academic Remediation Intervention Support Services Education)

Participants:

Grades K-12 • Post-secondary Students

Youth Served:

1,850 Annually

Locations:

Los Angeles

Contact:

Lydia Cincore-Templeton • Chief Executive Officer • lydia@cyfcla.org

CYFC's mission is to facilitate multi-systems collaboration to ensure that foster youth graduate from high school, persist in college and transition to rewarding careers and lives. Founded in 1993, the agency delivers its ARISSE and College Level Up programs, which integrate multiple evidence-based practices, including tutoring, educational case management, college access and post-emancipation planning to foster youth at 65 schools in eight school districts. ARISSE received the prestigious Promising Practice designation from an external evaluation for the US Department of Education Innovation in Education Initiative. The program also provides college retention supports to foster youth enrolled in post-secondary education.

Organization: National Center for Youth Law (NCYL)

Model Program: Compassionate Education Systems (formerly FosterEd)

Participants:

Grades 6-12 • Recent High School Graduates Pursuing Post-secondary Education

Youth Served:

250 Annually

Locations:

Partner Sites: Los Angeles • Monterey • Santa Clara • Santa Cruz • Contra Costa

Contact:

Michelle Francois • Senior Director of Compassionate Systems • mfrancois@youthlaw.org

The Compassionate Education Systems initiative ensures students who are in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or involved with the probation system graduate high school with the widest array of possibilities for their futures. School-based interventions are highly collaborative and involve an asset-based, compassionate approach to youth-centered goal-setting and engagement that ensures each student's voice leads educational decision-making. Youth development professionals partner with students to improve academic, social, and emotional outcomes and build relational trust between students and school personnel.
At the community level, the Initiative helps agency and school professionals understand relevant laws and policies; strengthens systems that serve children and families; increases regional collaboration; and develops model policies. Six comprehensive reports published by external evaluators support improved outcomes in four demonstration sites (2019-2022).

Organization: Pivotal
Model Program: Pivotal Coaching

Participants:

Grades 9-12 • Post-secondary Students

Youth Served:

519 Annually

Locations:

Alameda • Santa Clara • San Mateo (Silicon Valley)

Contact:

Matt Bell • Chief Executive Officer • matt.bell@pivotalnow.org

Pivotal supports young people in and from foster care to realize their educational and career goals and ensure their equitable access to opportunity. The organization provides education and employment support programs that are youth-led, strengths-based, and future focused. Pivotal also works to strengthen and align the ecosystem by engaging stakeholders within government, schools, nonprofits and businesses, and by amplifying the voice of foster youth through advocacy. The Research Institute Foster Youth Initiative (RIFYI) at San Jose University's School of Social Work conducted an external program evaluation (2010-2012).

Organization: Promises2Kids
Model Program: Guardian Scholars

Promises2Kids' mission is to create a brighter future for foster children. The organization's Guardian Scholars program supports current and former foster youth with mentoring, case management and a financial scholarship to pursue their educational dreams, determine a career path, and advance to complete their vocational training, community college or university education. Guardian Scholars are mentored by peers with lived experience of foster care, adults in the community who stay connected to the youth after they exit foster care, and professionals that help them build career skills and gain access to the workplace after they graduate.

Participants:
Grades 9-12 • Post-secondary Students

Youth Served:
341 Annually

Locations:
San Diego

Contact:
Tonya Torosian • Chief Executive Officer • tonya@promises2kids.org

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Organization: United Friends of the Children
Model Program: Education Program

United Friends of the Children's Education Program provides support to foster youth throughout their educational journey. Individualized coaching assists youth with defining and achieving their educational goals. Program activities include academic counseling, workshops, college tours, socio-emotional skill-building, tutoring as well as emergency and enrichment funds. Counselors take a holistic approach, serving as mentors, coaches, and advocates to address a range of barriers impacting each youth's path to academic success. Child Trends conducted an external program evaluation (2016-2019).

Participants:
Grades 6-12 • Post-secondary Students

Youth Served:
344 Annually

Locations:
Los Angeles

Contact:
Matt Strieker • Chief Executive Officer • matt@unitedfriends.org

Better Futures

Participants:

Ages 16-19 (high school seniors and GED students)

Youth Served:

36 (Study Participants)

Locations:

Portland, Oregon

Contact:

Jennifer Blakeslee • Regional Research Institute, Portland State University • jblakes@pdx.edu

Organization: Pathways to Positive Futures, Research and Training Center

Model Program: Better Futures

Better Futures is a 10-month program serving high school students in foster care who have self-identified mental health stressors and are interested in pursuing college or career training. The model focuses on post-secondary preparation, career exploration, and mental health empowerment to improve quality of life, high school completion, and post-secondary enrollment outcomes. Participants attend a four-day, on-campus Summer Institute guided by "near-peer" undergraduates with lived foster care experience and/or mental health challenges. Youth also receive one-on-one, biweekly coaching and five mentoring workshops that bring together young people, peer mentors, coaches, and guest speakers for information sharing and mutual support. This peer-reviewed model (2015) is rated by the California Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare as Supported by Research Evidence.

PROMISING PRACTICES: Foundational Supports Chart
Closing the Educational Opportunity Gap for Youth in Foster Care

Foundational Support	Model Program	Goal/Description
1:1 Intensive, Customized Interventions • Individualized Coaching • Peer Mentoring • Specialized Education Case Management • Service Referrals	✓ A.R.I.S.S.E. *(Children Youth and Family Collaborative)* ✓ First Star ✓ Compassionate Education Systems *(National Center for Youth Law)* ✓ Guardian Scholars *(Promises2Kids)* ✓ Pivotal ✓ United Friends of the Children ✓ Better Futures	**Ensure youth graduate high school and pursue college or career goals** • Encourage youth's social/emotional development, positive growth, motivation, and plan for academic success. • Establish and maintain motivation in the youth even through their toughest life challenges. • Build a bridge to stability and permanency by creating a practical life plan.
Frequent Interactions • Weekly/Biweekly Contact • Individual Sessions • In-Person and Virtual Check-ins • Supplemental Group Sharing and Peer-to-Peer Learning Opportunities	✓ A.R.I.S.S.E. *(CYFC)* ✓ First Star ✓ Compassionate Education Systems *(NCYL)* ✓ Guardian Scholars *(Promises2Kids)* ✓ Pivotal ✓ United Friends of the Children ✓ Better Futures	**Keep youth on track to achieve success** • Provide consistent, nurturing support to promote youth's well-being, monitor educational progress, and address urgent concerns. • Some models feature multiple weekly contacts. • Interactions may be less frequent for high school graduates pursuing post-secondary college or career pathways (frequency is based on individual need).
Continuous Program Delivery Beyond System Involvement • Maintain Connections through Life Transitions • Extended Duration of Services	✓ A.R.I.S.S.E. *(CYFC)* **Service Duration:** 16 years ✓ First Star **Service Duration:** 7-10 years ✓ Compassionate Education Systems *(NCYL)* **Service Duration:** 6.5 years ✓ Guardian Scholars *(Promises2Kids)* **Service Duration:** 7-15 years ✓ Pivotal **Service Duration:** 10 years ✓ United Friends of the Children **Service Duration:** 12 years	**Support stable transitions for young people that lack a traditional family safety net** • Build community, strengthen relationships, and offer practical skills and stabilizing supports that give current and former foster youth every opportunity to reach their full potential. • Continuity of care/services is especially important for young people who have experienced so much instability in their lives. • Service provision "follows" youth regardless of system involvement status. • Assist youth during significant periods of transition and instability (i.e., placement changes, exiting/aging out of the foster care system; post high school graduation; moving from adolescence to young adulthood).

PROMISING PRACTICES: Program Pillars Chart
Closing the Educational Opportunity Gap for Youth in Foster Care

Program Pillar		Model Program						
		A.R.I.S.S.E. (Children Youth and Family Collaborative)	First Star	Compassionate Education Systems (National Center for Youth Law)	Guardian Scholars (Promises2Kids)	Pivotal	United Friends of the Children	Better Futures
Grades 6-12 Educational Support	Academic Remediation	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
	Credit Recovery	✓	✓					
	Counseling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Homework Assistance/ Tutoring	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
	Studying/Test Taking Skills	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
	Educational Rights Access/ Awareness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Caregiver Engagement	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
	Service Referrals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Post-Secondary Educational Support	Test Prep (ACT/SAT)	✓	✓		✓			
	Application Assistance (College/CTE)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Campus Tours	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	College Readiness/ Immersion Programs	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
	Linkages to Campus Resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Program Pillar		Model Program						
		A.R.I.S.S.E. (Children Youth and Family Collaborative)	First Star	Compassionate Education Systems (National Center for Youth Law)	Guardian Scholars (Promises2Kids)	Pivotal	United Friends of the Children	Better Futures
Career Exploration	Assessments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Mentoring		✓		✓	✓		✓
	Internships/Job Shadowing				✓	✓	✓	✓
	Job Applications	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Professional Networking/ Exposure	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Social/ Emotional Learning Development	Assessments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Build Competencies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Linkages to Counseling & Therapeutic Supports	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Financial Assistance	Academic Scholarships		✓		✓	✓	✓	
	Emergency Assistance	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Enrichment Funds				✓	✓	✓	
	Youth Stipends/ Incentives	✓		✓	✓	✓		

Program Pillar		Model Program						
		A.R.I.S.S.E. (Children Youth and Family Collaborative)	First Star	Compassionate Education Systems (National Center for Youth Law)	Guardian Scholars (Promises2Kids)	Pivotal	United Friends of the Children	Better Futures
Community-Building	Alumni Initiatives		✓			✓		
	Cultural/ Social Events	✓	✓		✓		✓	
	Strengthening Peer Connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Service-Learning Programs		✓		✓		✓	
	Youth Leadership Groups		✓		✓	✓	✓	