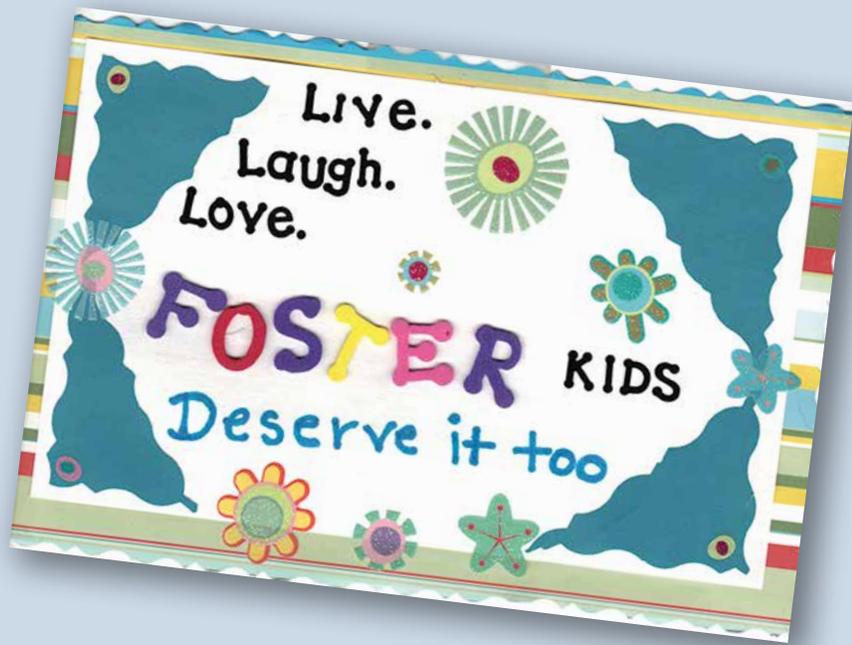


CHAPTER

1



EDUCATION & STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE: AN OVERVIEW

- TOP THINGS EDUCATORS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE
- INTRODUCTION
- NATIONAL OVERVIEW
- WHY IS MAINTAINING SCHOOL STABILITY IMPORTANT?
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CHAPTER 1

Education & Students in Foster Care: An Overview

TOP THINGS EDUCATORS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE:

Children and youth come into foster care through no fault of their own and have often experienced chaotic, abusive, and neglectful environments: Common concerns include prenatal exposure to drugs and/or alcohol and witnessing domestic violence or other criminal behavior. Students in care may have challenges related to attachment and bonding.

Children and youth in care want to be treated like other students: The school day can provide a sense of normalcy and be an escape from challenges students are facing in their home life.

Maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity is very important: Children and youth do not want to be stigmatized as “foster children” and often do not want their schools to know. Students communicate that this label has negative connotations and can be embarrassing and shameful. Maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity is highly important.

Youth in foster care have many strengths: Students in care also have friendships, caring family members, and supportive adults. These strengths should be celebrated, nurtured, and supported.

Children and youth often enter foster care with gaps in their education: Some children may not be prepared to enter their age-appropriate grade for a variety of reasons. Additionally, school moves, delays in transferring educational records from school to school, and loss of course credits contribute to gaps in students’ education.

Trauma and adverse child and youth experiences may impact a student’s learning, behavior, and socialization: As a result of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, students in foster care may show signs of depression or anxiety and may have trouble socializing with their peers and trusting new adults. School staff may benefit from additional training on the impact of trauma and how to implement trauma-informed practices in the classroom.

Students in foster care may be a mobile population: Due to a variety of external circumstances, students may have to relocate to new homes and communities. Transitions and school moves may happen quickly, meaning children and youth are not able to say “goodbye” to their current school relationships. School withdrawal procedures may not be followed; this contributes to additional challenges with school transitions.

Students in foster care have experienced tremendous loss: Students are often separated from siblings, family members, and personal belongings. Loss of important education, social, cultural, and family connections are common and compound the trauma experienced.

Students in foster care want to be empowered with decision making and engage in goal setting: Students benefit from being included in decision making and discussions related to their school success and long-term goals.

Once a child or youth enters foster care, there are many child welfare professionals working with them: These professionals can include a Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworker, a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) or guardian ad litem, and an attorney ad litem, amongst others. It is likely that these persons will contact the child’s school to get education information regarding their client.

Supports and resources are available to help youth transition out of foster care and pay for college: These can include college scholarships, tuition and fee waivers, grants, and supportive campus-based programming. Additionally, CPS programs and services are available to help youth prepare for and transition to adulthood. Educators and counselors must be aware of these opportunities and, when able, connect students to these resources.

Federal and state legislation supports students in foster care: Examples of issue areas supported by law include immediate enrollment, school stability, maintaining school placement, smooth transitions, designated school district foster care liaisons, and coordination between child welfare and education.

Representatives of education, child welfare, and the courts are committed to improving the educational outcomes of students impacted by Texas’ foster care system

INTRODUCTION:

On any given day, there are approximately 16,000 school-aged children and youth in Texas schools who are in foster care. Texas children and youth in foster care comprise a small percentage of the total student population yet face unique challenges that greatly impact success in the school environment. Before entering foster care, children and youth may have lived in chaotic home environments, experienced physical or emotional trauma, attended school sporadically, or had parents or family members who were unable to meet their physical and emotional needs.

When CPS, the child protection division of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), becomes involved with a child or youth due to abuse or neglect allegations, it seeks to ensure a child or youth's safety. If the child or youth cannot safely remain with a parent, a court awards legal custody of the child or youth to DFPS. DFPS seeks a relative or foster home to ensure the child or youth's safety and well-being. A judge oversees the case while a child or youth is in foster care. A child or youth may be in foster care temporarily or for a longer period of time, depending on the court's findings. Once in foster care, children and youth may experience several placement changes until they are placed in a permanent home. Unfortunately, more often than not, placement changes are accompanied by a change of school.

Research shows that frequent school moves have a negative impact on academic achievement for students. In some instances, highly mobile children may lose four to six months of emotional and academic growth for each school move.¹ Students who change schools frequently suffer the loss of important emotional and social connections. Additionally, when students in foster care change schools, they may lose course credits, repeat courses they have already taken, be placed in inappropriate classes or grade levels, or not be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities. Delays in transferring school records may result in serious disruptions in a student's learning and academic progress. Despite these challenges, many former foster youth report that school provided much needed consistency in their lives. Students often recall a caring teacher or school staff member who truly made a difference.

NATIONAL OVERVIEW:

Nationally, there are approximately 400,000 children in the foster care system on any given day, and an estimated 26,000 young people “age out” of our nation's foster care system annually.² These students have significantly lower educational achievement than their peers not in foster care.

To ensure successful educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care, twelve organizations joined together to form the *National Working Group on Foster Care and Education* to review studies from around the country on children and youth currently and formerly in foster care.³ According to these studies, when compared to the general student population, foster youth were more likely to be suspended or expelled, repeat a grade, or drop out; they also scored lower on statewide standardized tests and were less likely to graduate.⁴

Not surprisingly, these challenges have long-term and far-reaching effects. In 2011, the University of Chicago published the largest longitudinal study ever undertaken on the adult functioning of former foster youth. This nationally recognized study, “*Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26*,” reveals:⁵

ALUMNI OF FOSTER CARE VS. NATIONAL SAMPLE (Peers not in foster care)

*estimated percentages are listed

No high school diploma	20% vs. 6%
2-year college degree	4% vs. 10%
4-year college degree	3% vs. 24%
One or more years of graduate school	1% vs. 13%

Lower education achievement has a significant ripple effect leading to other difficult circumstances. Studies show that many foster care alumni experience higher rates of unemployment and homelessness and are more likely to face economic hardships in adulthood.⁶

Research suggests that education is a critical component to positively impacting the life path of young people who experience foster care. Success in school can be a positive counterbalance to the challenges students have experienced.⁷ Whether students are in the foster care system for short or long periods of time, their education is important for long-term success.

WHY IS MAINTAINING SCHOOL STABILITY IMPORTANT?

School stability is a necessary component to improving the education outcomes and education experience for students in foster care. Research highlights the link between school stability and improved graduation rates. According to *Casey Family Program's National Alumni Study*, youth who had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving care.⁸ It is widely recognized that school mobility contributes to negative education outcomes and has adverse effects on students generally.

Why do students in foster care sometimes move frequently?

Students in foster care change placements for many reasons. An appropriate home that is best suited to meet the child or youth's needs may not be available in the student's home school district when removal from the home is required. A student may need to be placed out of the school district in a placement that meets the student's specific needs. The child or youth remains in that placement until it is necessary to move the child or youth to a more permanent home or because moving the student is in the child or youth's best interest. The majority of the time, there is sufficient time to notify the school and prepare the child or youth for transfer; however, sometimes there are circumstances that require a change to take place quickly.

Working collaboratively:

Strengthening partnerships between education, child welfare, and court systems is recognized as essential to improving the education and life outcomes of students impacted by foster care. It is important that children and young people in the foster care system are seen as "our" children and not the sole responsibility of any one system or group. Education is a critical partner in effectively meeting the needs of children and youth in Texas' child welfare system. Through partnership and coordination, we can accomplish the goal of improving the education experience and outcomes of students in foster care.



LAW: Federal Law Supports School Stability and Coordination between Child Welfare and Education Agencies

A TEA To the Administrator Addressed (TAA) Letter, "Importance of Maintaining Educational Stability for Children and Youth in the Foster Care System," August 22, 2012, provides information on *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, 2008*:

"The federal *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*, Public Law 110-351, requires state child welfare agencies to work with their state and local education systems to support initiatives to improve educational outcomes for children in foster care. On August 25, 2011, the U.S. Departments of Education and of Health and Human Services issued a joint letter to all Chief State School Officers and State Child Welfare Directors informing them of provisions in the federal law that require local education agencies and child welfare agencies to coordinate to ensure that children in foster care maintain education stability."⁹ To view the TAA letter in its entirety visit: www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2147508587



Education provisions in *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* include:

- Emphasis on the importance of school stability, maintaining the school in which the child was enrolled at the time of placement, and the need for coordination between state and regional child welfare and state and local education agencies.
- Assurance that the placements take into account the appropriateness of the current education setting and proximity to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement in foster care.
- If remaining in the same school is not in the child's best interest, the child welfare and local education agencies will work together to ensure immediate and appropriate enrollment and provide ALL of the child's education records to the new school.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEXAS DATA – NUMBERS HIGHLIGHT CALL TO ACTION:

- ⇒ Students in foster care experience educational instability and lag behind the general student population in high school completion.
- ⇒ Students in foster care are almost three times more likely to receive special education services compared to students in the general population (24.5% compared to 8.8%).¹⁰
- ⇒ Students in foster care are much more likely to be disciplined in school than other children; they receive out-of-school suspension at more than three times the rate of their peers (15.3% compared to 5.1%).¹¹
- ⇒ Children from the ages of 14–17 make up the largest percentage of children in the Texas child welfare system, totaling 23.1% of all youth in care.¹²
- ⇒ 1,410 young people aged out of foster care in 2011 and lived on average in eight different places.¹³
- ⇒ Only 45% of the children in foster care lived in their home county in May 2010.¹⁴

What does the education data tell us?

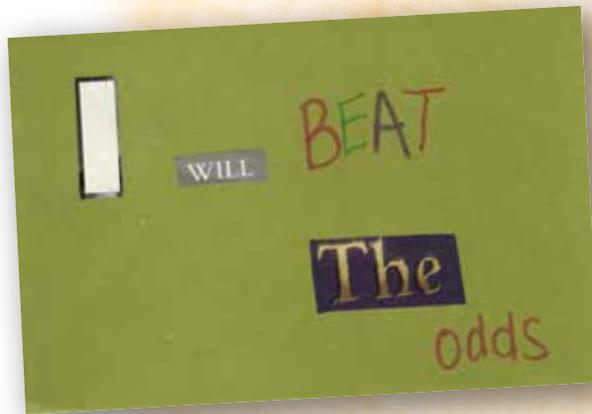
The baseline education data for students in foster care tells a tale of compelling need for targeted intervention and focused coordination to improve education outcomes. Historically, little was known about the education outcomes of students in foster care until the mid 2000's. To this end, TEA and DFPS developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to share data files in order to analyze how Texas foster students fare in school each year.

As a result of the MOU between DFPS and TEA, since 2008 the agencies compile and share statewide aggregate data annually. More recently, this information has been used to analyze trends, tell stakeholders of progress, set goals, and inform state level planning. Reviewing, understanding, and analyzing data are important elements to informing policies and developing new practices statewide and locally. Although state-level data and processes have been developed, local school districts have not yet had the opportunity to develop systems specifically to monitor and assess the educational progress and achievement of students in foster care. Infrastructure and mechanisms are necessary to support data-informed decisions and academic interventions locally for students in care to help close the achievement gap for this population.

Data Reveals Achievement Gap

TEA's Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data 2010–2011, available through the existing TEA and DFPS MOU data match, reveals that an achievement gap exists between students in foster care and students statewide. This gap is represented by the graduation and dropout school leaver codes. The leaver status of students in foster care who left public schools in grades 7–12 because they graduated from high school was only 40.7%, while 70.7% of students statewide left school because they graduated. The leaver status of students in foster care who left public school in grades 7–12 because they dropped out was significantly higher, with 28.7% of students in foster care leaving school as a dropout, compared to 8.4% of students statewide leaving school as a dropout.¹⁵ Access the full report at: www.yourhonor.com/myprofile/assets/WhatDoesTheDataTellUs.pdf

Note: The graduation and dropout leaver percentages above are NOT rates. These numbers represent school leaver reasons. These are the number of students who graduated or dropped out during the year divided by the total number of students who left during that school year. Currently the agencies do not track longitudinal education data for cohorts of students in foster care, which would be necessary in order to calculate graduation and dropout rates.



“ALTHOUGH I AM A CHILD IN FOSTER CARE AND THE STATE OF TEXAS IS MY LEGAL GUARDIAN, IT DOESN'T MEAN MY DREAMS MUST DIE. A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION WILL HELP ME TAKE ONE CRUCIAL STEP OF MANY I WILL TAKE IN LIFE TO ACHIEVE MY DREAMS. THE QUESTION IS: WILL I SAY BECAUSE OF YOU OR IN SPITE OF YOU...I REACHED MY DREAMS?”

RECENT UPDATE

TEA was charged by the 83rd Texas Legislature to collect data through TEA's Public Education Information Management Systems (PEIMS) on students in foster care through a PEIMS indicator code.¹⁶ Guidance and information related to how districts will input and track students in foster care in the PEIMS system will be made available in future agency communications.

What are the demographics of Texas' students in foster care?

Students in foster care represent varying racial or ethnic groups and socio-economic demographics, with children of color overrepresented in the child welfare system. *Disproportionality* is a term used to describe the over or underrepresentation of a particular group, in comparison to their percentage in the general population.¹⁷ There is research available to increase understanding of the theories regarding the disproportionate representation of children of color in foster care, including parent and family risk factors, community factors, and organizational and systemic factors.¹⁸

In Texas' foster care system:¹⁹

- African American children and youth are the most overrepresented racial group in the foster care system. Of the 17,108 young people removed from their homes in 2011 by CPS, 4,482 were African American, totaling 26.2% of all children removed. This percentage is considered to be disproportionate, considering that African-American children and youth represent only 12.1% of the total child population in Texas.
- 6,983 Hispanic children and youth were removed from their homes, totaling 40.8% of all children removed from their homes. Hispanic students are disproportionately underrepresented, considering they represent 47.8% of the total child population in Texas.
- 5,129 Caucasian children and youth were removed from their homes, totaling 30% of all children removed from their homes. Caucasian students are disproportionately underrepresented, considering they represent 36.3% of the total child population in Texas.
- 34 Native American children and youth were removed from their homes, totaling .2% of all children removed from their homes. Native American children are removed proportionally with their percentage in the overall child population in Texas.
- All other races are categorized as “Other,” totaling 2.8% of all children removed from their homes. Children in this category are disproportionately underrepresented, considering they represent 3.6% of the total child population in Texas.



RESOURCES: Foster Care and Education

The Texas Department of Protective and Family Services: www.dfps.state.tx.us

Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families, *Transforming Education Outcomes for Children and Youth in Texas Foster Care*: education.texaschildrenscommission.gov/

Texas Education Agency, *Foster Care & Student Success*: www.tea.state.tx.us/FosterCareStudentSuccess/

Children's Bureau, The Child Welfare Information Gateway, "What is Child Welfare—A Guide for Educators": www.childwelfare.gov/pubs//cw_educators.pdf

Casey Family Programs, "Education is the Lifeline for Students in Foster Care"—*an overview of research and application to practice related to education and students in foster care*: casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/EducationalOutcomesFactSheet.pdf

FosterCareMonth.org, "What Teachers and Educators can do to Help Youth in Foster Care"—*an excellent brief that provides information on effective strategies and guidance for how educators can best support the academic needs of students who experience foster care*: www.fostercaremonth.org/GetInvolved/Toolkit/Support/Documents/What Teachers and Educators Can Do.pdf

From the School Psychologist, "Supporting Students In Foster Care": www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/Foster_Children_Sept%202011.pdf

"The Texas Blueprint: Transforming Education Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster Care"—*a roadmap to improve education outcomes by legislative, policy, and practice changes within the Texas education, child welfare, and court systems, including recommendations regarding judicial practices, data and information sharing, multi-disciplinary training, school readiness, school stability and transitions, school experience, and post-secondary education*. texaschildrenscommission.gov/media/98/thetexasblueprint.pdf

Fostering Connections

Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008-Education Provisions"—*a two-page FAQ addressing commonly asked questions*: www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/child/education/publications/qa_fostering_connections_final.authcheckdam.pdf

National implementation website with many tools, resources, and best practices related to *Fostering Connections to Success & Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*: www.FosteringConnections.Org

👉 Helpful tools, analyses and research on the education provisions on FosteringConnections.org website: www.fosteringconnections.org/resources/topic_tar?id=0002

The Finance Project, Connected by 25, and Youth Transition Funders Group, "Meeting the Education Requirements of Fostering Connections" — *an informative paper with practical charts and guidance for child welfare professionals, also beneficial for educators*: jimcaseyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/FCWG_EducationLessonsLearned.pdf



RESOURCES: Disproportionality and Child Welfare

Texas Health and Human Services Commission, The Center For Elimination of Disproportionality and Disparities: www.hhsc.state.tx.us/hhsc_projects/cedd/

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission, The Center For Elimination of Disproportionality and Disparities, “Achieving Equity for Texas’ Most Vulnerable Citizens” — *a resource guide and online training addressing racial bias in child abuse and neglect reporting*: cedd.learnpointlms.com

Casey Family Programs, “Disproportionality and the Child Welfare System — The Disproportionate Representation of Children of Color in Foster Care”: www.ncsl.org/print/cyf/fostercarecolor.pdf

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), Technical Assistance Bulletin, May 2012, “Disproportionality Rates for Children of Color in Foster Care,” — *provides a comprehensive breakdown of each state’s child welfare data, as it relates to disproportionality rates for children in foster care.* www.ncjfcj.org/sites/default/files/Disproportionality%20Rates%20for%20Children%20of%20Color%202010.pdf

Child Welfare Information Gateway, January 2011, “Addressing Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare”: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/racial_disproportionality/racial_disproportionality.pdf