California's Students in Foster Care

Challenges and Promising Practices

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LEARNING POLICY INSTITUTE

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Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Executive Summary

In California, the approximately 47,000 students in foster care (in 2018–19, around 0.7% of the student population) face complex challenges arising from the instability of their living arrangements and an increased likelihood of trauma from maltreatment and removal from the home. The reasons for entry into foster care are multiple, complex, and often intertwined with the social and environmental challenges associated with poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the social and environmental challenges facing students. Because many schools, child welfare agencies, courts, and other businesses and agencies closed for much of the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years, students in foster care experienced reduced access to in-person education and supports. As the state and schools work to recover from the pandemic, sustained attention will be necessary to ensure these students have access to the services they need to succeed.

Using pre-COVID-19 statewide education data and interviews with foster youth services coordinators at county offices of education, this report examines the school conditions and education outcomes for students in foster care; the organizational, logistical, and data challenges to providing coordinated support; and promising practices for future supports. Our analysis of education data for 2018–19 found:

- Students in foster care were more likely to move schools within the school year than other students (34% vs. 5%), and many moved multiple times.

- Nearly half of all students in foster care were enrolled in the highest-poverty schools, those in which more than 80% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Furthermore, students in foster care were more likely than their peers to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools, those targeted for Comprehensive Support and Improvement pursuant to the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

- Nearly 28% of students in foster care were chronically absent (missing 10% of school days or more), as compared to an average of 12% for students not in foster care.

- Students in foster care were more than 4 times as likely to be suspended than their non-foster counterparts (15% vs. 3.4%). Suspension rates were especially high among African American students in foster care (22%).

- Just 24% of students in foster care met or exceeded standards in English language arts on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress in 2018–19 as compared to 51% for other students. For mathematics, the percentage of students in foster care meeting or exceeding standards was even lower—15% (compared to 40% for other students). Students in foster care who were highly mobile, in multiple high-need groups (e.g., English learners in foster care), or attending high-poverty schools had even lower achievement rates.

- Students in foster care graduated at lower rates (56%) than youth not in foster care (85%). Among graduates and other high school completers, students in foster care were less likely than their peers to attend college (48% vs. 64%).

Addressing the education needs of students in foster care requires the effective coordination and collaboration of agencies and organizations at multiple levels. Analysis of interviews and focus groups with county coordinators identified organizational, logistical, and data challenges to this coordination and support. Among these challenges are the following:

- Data systems are often insufficient to support individual student case management and collaboration between schools and districts and child welfare agencies. Current systems are also inadequate for evaluating program impact by analyzing trends in aggregated data. For example, integrated data from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), and district student information systems (SIS) are not readily available in many counties or for all students in foster care.

- The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) raises the visibility of students in foster care but does not necessarily provide additional resources to meet their needs. Further, because students in foster care are small in number and their needs may span multiple systems, districts may struggle to address their individualized needs.

- Lack of transportation options is a barrier to school stability for students in foster care. Students in foster care have a right to stay in their schools of origin, and the data show that they have better school outcomes when they are able to do so. However, when students are placed in resource homes (i.e., out-of-home foster care placements) outside the attendance area of their schools of origin, the time and costs of transportation can make continued attendance at those schools challenging.

- Capacity constraints in the child welfare system, such as high caseloads among social workers and lack of placement options, especially for students with the greatest needs, can make it challenging to prioritize education in placement decisions, can limit available time for best interest determinations, and can contribute to students changing schools.

Despite these challenges, coordinators identified the following research-aligned programs and processes (i.e., promising practices) that can inform future supports:

- Developing one-stop resource centers can help provide a ready web of supports. Co-locating education and child welfare staff (i.e., sharing office space) can also strengthen interagency coordination and communication, which can, in turn, improve individual student case management.

- Enacting school-level practices that promote trusting relationships with students in foster care can be a promising way to improve their educational opportunities. Some districts prioritized strong school–student relationships and employed school-based liaisons trained to support students in foster care. Liaisons get to know students deeply through frequent interactions, can assist with credit recovery, and can ensure that students in foster care understand their rights.

- Providing students in foster care with targeted social, emotional, and academic services as part of a tiered system of support can help address the range of challenges they face.

These findings point to the need for systems and practices that provide students with access to a ready web of supports so that students in foster care can receive help as soon as they need it. We suggest the following policy recommendations to better serve the educational needs of students in foster care:

1. Implement organizational structures that support cross-system collaboration.

Collaborative interagency structures grounded in shared objectives and responsibility for students and families are needed to ensure that students in foster care receive supports quickly and efficiently.

- **Create or empower cross-agency structures to improve collaboration and delivery of services.** A formalized cross-agency team, such as a children's cabinet, could improve state-level coordination and alignment. Such a body could be empowered to support the development of policies that remove barriers to interagency collaboration and break down silos from different categorical funding and service streams; it could also establish shared goals for California's children and families and support effective implementation of existing laws and protections for students in foster care.

- **Support strong implementation of community schools.** One model for delivering multi-tiered, integrated supports is through community schools, which are both a place and a set of partnerships between the education system, the nonprofit sector, and local government agencies. Access to supports offered by community schools—such as interdisciplinary teams that coordinate outreach to families, counseling and mental health services, high-quality tutoring, and transportation—can be critical to students in foster care due to their often wide-ranging needs.

  California's multi-year $4.1 billion Community Schools Partnership Program will transform all high-poverty schools, where most students in foster care are concentrated, into community schools. The program will also fund several technical assistance centers to support community school implementation. It is important that this technical assistance develop an infrastructure to identify and disseminate best practices among grantees and build on lessons learned from existing initiatives, including the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program.

- **Support the development of local interagency transportation agreements to decrease school mobility arising from changes in foster care placements.** State technical assistance through the interagency System of Care Team, such as transportation memorandum of understanding templates and best practices for implementing them, could support the development of local transportation agreements to facilitate school stability. Another function of state technical assistance could be identifying barriers that might require additional state action, including the cost of transportation.

2. Explore revising the LCFF to provide additional funding for students in multiple high-need groups.

The state could explore revising the LCFF to provide additional funding in a way that better accounts for students in multiple high-need groups—students from low-income families, students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness, and English learners—by examining evidence-based weighting for different needs. Such a reform could more equitably fund districts to support the range of needs students face, benefiting all students needing access to a web of supports.

3. Identify and implement strategies to improve student case management.

Disseminating best practices from existing efforts to connect a fragmented data ecosystem—namely, CWS/CMS, CALPADS, and district SIS—and increasing opportunities for interagency collaboration are critical steps that the state and counties can pursue to operationalize a web of supports and improve outcomes for students in foster care.

- **Establish a state grant program to support the development and statewide dissemination of best practices for data-informed, collaborative case management.** Effective local data systems are critical both for individual student case management and for understanding trends in student achievement, stability, and access to services and supports. Existing case management systems can connect otherwise fragmented data, but these systems are often not used by both education and child welfare staff. And when they are used, incomplete or missing data can hamper their usefulness. The state could help cultivate the development, implementation, and dissemination of best practices for data-informed, collaborative case management for students in foster care by establishing a program similar to California's Homeless Innovative Programs Grant, which is intended to identify and scale up innovative practices for supporting students experiencing homelessness.

- **Co-locate education and child welfare office staff.** Counties could consider co-locating education liaisons in child welfare offices, which can facilitate rapid communication of changes in a student's foster care placement as well as urgent education, health, and mental health needs. This strategy can help provide educationally relevant information to ensure educational needs are considered in decisions about foster care placements.

4. Implement school designs and practices that allow for prompt identification and stronger support of student needs.

To support ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, district and school leaders can use resources, such as the $13.5 billion for California districts in the American Rescue Plan Act, to implement school and district practices that allow for prompt identification and support of student needs. Creating relationship-centered, trauma-informed schools grounded in the science of learning and development will be important for improving outcomes for students in foster care.

- **Implement relationship-centered school practices as part of a tiered intervention system.** Districts could organize schools to focus on relationship-centered practices that ensure each student is connected to caring adults who can identify and secure supports when they are needed. Relationship-centered schools involve strategies such as advisories, "looping," and team scheduling that increases time for teacher collaboration. When implemented as part of the foundational tier in a multi-tiered system of support, these practices can support students in foster care by buffering the stresses of school and home instability and by connecting them to personalized supports and interventions.

- **Increase access to professional development that equips school staff to address the needs of students in foster care.** School staff need access to professional development that equips them to respond to the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students in foster care. Training could help staff understand the educational rights of students in foster care and focus on strategies grounded in the science of learning and development, including trauma-informed practices, restorative practices, and social and emotional learning. To support this, districts can leverage the $1.5 billion in funding provided through the Educator Effectiveness Block Grant.

Introduction

The foster care system in California is a key part of the state's system for protecting vulnerable children from harm. The goal of the foster care system is to ensure children's safety, protect children from maltreatment and neglect, place children in family-like settings, and provide families support so children can safely return home whenever possible.

While California's foster care system is administered at the county level by child welfare agencies, county education agencies, districts, and school officials play a role in responding to the educational needs of students living in foster care. This report examines the needs, characteristics, and outcomes of California students living in foster care and the challenges and promising practices of educators working to support them. First, however, we discuss the educational challenges facing students in foster care, the role of educators in the foster care system, and the key policies that frame the support for this student group.

Educational Challenges Faced by Students Living in Foster Care

Children in foster care face complex challenges to their learning arising from the instability of their living arrangements coupled with the increased likelihood of having experienced trauma. Numerous studies find that students in foster care typically achieve at considerably lower rates than their non-foster counterparts and are less likely to graduate from high school and less likely to attend college.[1] Further, children aging out of foster care, especially those without a high school diploma or GED credential, are at increased risk of social and economic instability and homelessness.[2]

School mobility disrupts learning

Although students in foster care have a right to remain in their schools of origin (see "Best Interest Determination" on p. 2), removal from the family home or changes in foster care placement can often result in students changing schools or even districts.[3] Children are then faced with the double burden of adjusting to a new school and a new home situation.[4] Research finds that unstable foster care placement can lead to students changing schools multiple times.[5]

Changing schools interrupts students' learning progression. On top of navigating new transportation arrangements and a new campus, school changes mean adjusting to new curricula and teachers. Students may find that they have missed some topics or material already covered at their new school, may encounter significant differences in teaching styles and teacher expectations, and may be less able to take advantage of resources at the new school.[6] Missing, incomplete, or delayed transfer of transcripts, assessments, and attendance information—especially when students change schools midsemester—can result in lost academic credits and challenge the receiving school's ability to serve transferring students.[7] Timely records transfer is especially important for those with an Individualized Education Plan, as reassessment in the new school or adoption of the existing plan may take some time.

Changing schools midyear can also disrupt supportive social relationships. Moving school and home at the same time can involve cutting ties with peer and friend communities, including extracurricular activities or sports. These losses reduce students' sense of belonging, which can lead to disengagement from school.[8] Students in foster care who change schools may have a fear of stigmatization in their new school and may experience feelings of isolation.[9] Moreover, home instability and the associated emotional burden can make prioritizing school difficult.[10]

Previous research finds that students who change schools, especially those who do so multiple times, are at an increased risk of lower achievement and of leaving school without graduating.[11] Other studies find that when school moves take place during the school year, are involuntary, or are accompanied by family disruption—circumstances more frequent with students in foster care—the negative impact on learning outcomes is more likely to be severe.[12]

Best Interest Determination

Students in foster care have a right to remain enrolled in their current school—known as the school of origin—when they are placed in foster care or experience a change in foster care placement. Under federal law, it is assumed that students will remain at their schools of origin, unless a school transfer is determined to be in their best interest.[13] The best interest determination (BID) is the process by which this decision is made.

The educational rights holder (ERH) is the person who holds the right to make educational decisions on behalf of the child. This may be a parent, a foster parent, or an individual appointed by a court. Under California law and rules of court, the ERH and the student have the right to make school placement decisions, in consultation with the child welfare agency and the district.[14] Under federal law, educational stability must be included in the child's case plan, including assurance that the child welfare or placing agency and local educational agency (LEA) have coordinated to ensure the child remains in the school of origin or, if remaining is not in the best interest of the child, is provided immediate and appropriate enrollment in a new school.[15] The LEA (typically the foster liaison) consults with the student and ERH, and if a school change is recommended, the liaison must provide a written explanation stating why the recommendation is in the child's best interest.[16] In the event of a school move, the liaison must facilitate proper placement and assist transfer, including school credits, records, and grades.

The distance from the new foster placement to the school of origin and the appropriateness of the educational setting are among the factors that must be considered in a BID. Other factors can include the child's or the parent's or ERH's preferences, placement of siblings, relationships with peers and school staff, availability and quality of services, previous history of school transfers, length of commute and its impact on the child, transportation options, and whether the student has English learner or special education needs. It is important to note that transportation cost should not be a factor in determining best interest.[17]

The effects of trauma can inhibit students' ability to learn

The experience of trauma is also a key barrier to students' educational success.[18] Students in foster care are more likely than their peers to have experienced trauma due to family separation and/or the circumstances that led to being placed in foster care. While many children in foster care exhibit resilience, traumatic events can take a toll. Compared to other students, those in foster care may be at greater risk for adverse effects of trauma. For example, a study of data from the National Survey of Children's Health found that children in foster care were 4 times more likely to have diagnosed anxiety and 5 times more likely to have diagnosed depression than their non-foster peers, even after accounting for differences in a range of individual and household characteristics.[19]

The experience of trauma can inhibit students' abilities to concentrate and to take in new information and, especially in young children, can have consequences for their long-term development, school readiness, and learning.[20] Among students in foster care, the experience of trauma can also lead to behavioral issues, which can include both demanding or attention-seeking actions and "withdrawn, anxious or over-compliant behaviors."[21]

Behavioral challenges that may be symptomatic of trauma can be easily misunderstood as calculated action, which can lead to exclusionary discipline and reduced access to learning opportunities. As one study of the experiences of students in foster care noted, "Youth voiced the importance for teachers to consider that a student in foster care may have an underlying trauma history that impacts their ability to function appropriately at school, rather than taking a perspective that the student is acting purely out of choice or malcontent."[22] Previous research finds that students in foster care are suspended at much higher rates than their peers.[23] There are also large racial disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline nationally, with students of color more likely to be suspended than their white peers and with African American boys experiencing the highest rates of suspension.[24] A study of students in foster care found similar results: Students of color in foster care were suspended at considerably higher rates than their white counterparts, and these rates were higher still for students who were male and eligible for special education services.[25]

For students in foster care, feelings of affective engagement with school are a key predictor of school success;[26] however, mobility, trauma, and exclusionary discipline can work in concert to negatively impact student learning. High student mobility can lead to disengagement and feelings of isolation and can exacerbate trauma and lead to problematic behaviors and suspension that, in turn, lead to further disengagement and a risk for lower achievement. Yet each of these challenges may also be amenable to policy intervention.[27] Research finds that differences in learning outcomes between students in foster care and their peers are substantially lower after accounting for in-school factors—such as feelings of belonginess, participation in school activities, adult support, and attending class.[28] Schools and districts can thus play an important part in mitigating these risks and supporting learning for students in foster care by developing a positive school climate, by adopting restorative justice approaches rather than exclusionary discipline,[29] and by working in close partnership with child welfare and community agencies.

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Educators' Role in California's Foster Care System

Children and youth in foster care in California are primarily those whose care is overseen by a juvenile dependency court. This typically occurs following a report of suspected abuse or neglect, substantiation of the report by a child welfare agency, and concern for the safety of the child. Foster care is intended as a temporary arrangement to ensure the safety of children until they can return home or until a new, permanent home can be found. For purposes of California's educational rights

and protections, children in foster care include those removed from the home and those living with family subject to a family reunification or family maintenance plan developed by a child welfare agency.[30] While child welfare agencies and dependency courts lead the determination of whether foster care placement is called for—and where that placement will be—and ensure the well-being of children placed in foster care, educators play a role in supporting these students in school.

Educators play a key role in identifying students who may be at risk of harm. Teachers, principals, and other school and district employees are "mandated reporters"; that is, they are required by law to report when there is concern for a child's safety. Educators make up one of the largest groups reporting child maltreatment in California, accounting for approximately 20% of reports pre-pandemic and 14% of reports in the period after the onset of COVID-19.[31]

In addition, educators are responsible for identifying and supporting the educational needs of students who have entered foster care. County offices of education operate a Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) that helps local educational agencies (LEAs) within its jurisdiction identify needs and provide educational supports to students in foster care. At the district level, all LEAs designate a foster youth education liaison, with responsibility to facilitate access to students' educational rights and assist with school placement, enrollment, and transfer. (See also "Best Interest Determination" on p. 2) Understanding when a student has entered foster care requires matching data from the California Department of Social Services with data systems at the Department of Education, a process that occurs each week. Students identified through a local (i.e., county-level) match can also be entered into the system.

Under California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), a child in foster care is any one of the following:

- a child subject to a juvenile dependency court petition, whether or not removed from the home;

- a youth who is the subject of a juvenile delinquency court petition and has been removed from the home and placed in foster care;

- a youth age 18–21 in "extended foster care" enrolled in high school;

- a youth removed from the home under a voluntary placement agreement (between the parents and the county welfare department); or

- a youth who is a dependent of a tribal court.[32]

Districts with students in foster care receive LCFF funding to support their learning needs. In particular, districts receive increased funding based on the unduplicated percentage of enrolled students from low-income families, English learners, and students in foster care. However, students in foster care do not actually generate additional funding because they are already considered eligible for free meals.[33] Nonetheless, their inclusion in LCFF unduplicated counts brings important visibility to this student group and means that the needs of students in foster care should be considered in Local Control Accountability Plans, in which districts specify learning goals for included student groups and create plans to achieve those goals. County offices of education must also include measures of progress for students in foster care in the California School Dashboard, the state's accountability system.[34]

Key State and Federal Policies to Support Children and Youth in Foster Care

Over the past couple of decades, policy developments at both the state and federal levels have made progress in elevating the needs of youth in foster care and creating structures to enable counties and districts to provide targeted supports. Foundational among these is Assembly Bill (A.B.) 490. Passed in 2003, this first-in-the-nation law created a series of educational rights for students in foster care in California, including an entitlement to remain in their schools of origin following a placement change (see "Best Interest Determination" on p. 2), a right to immediate enrollment, and credit and grade protections connected to absences caused by placement changes.[35]

The California legislature passed other significant legislation to improve agency collaboration to support youth in foster care in subsequent years. In 2015, the state passed A.B. 854, establishing the FYSCP and requiring data sharing between the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services. The same year saw the Continuum of Care Reform (A.B. 403), which sought to improve the state's child welfare system by providing more appropriate services and supports in home-based settings and to reduce time spent in congregate care, a placement setting linked to higher dropout rates for youth in foster care.[36]

Later, in 2018, A.B. 2083 built on the Continuum of Care Reform by developing a coordinated, timely, and trauma-informed system-of-care approach for children in foster care who have experienced severe trauma.[37] This law requires each county to develop and implement a memorandum of understanding establishing the roles and responsibilities of agencies and other entities that serve children and youth in foster care who have experienced severe trauma. The law aimed to eliminate agency silos by creating an interagency leadership team that could facilitate more seamless coordination of services across agencies.

While state policies provide the most detailed guidance on supporting youth in foster care, policy advancements at the federal level also provide some supports. For example, transportation provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) outline the need to help students in foster care remain in their schools of origin when experiencing foster care placement changes.[38] Title IV-E of the Social Security Act also provides supports for youth in foster care. It is the primary federal funding source to support state foster care and adoption assistance programs. Amended in 2018, the law now allows states to use these funds for preventive services for children at risk of removal from home in order to stay with their parents or relatives.

Overview of This Study

This report is intended to provide additional information to stakeholders regarding the educational status of California students living in foster care and the issues the education system faces in meeting their needs and to offer research-based policy recommendations on how to improve services for these students. It examines the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of California students living in foster care?

- What are the educational experiences and outcomes of students living in foster care?

- What challenges are faced by education officials seeking to support students living in foster care?

- What promising practices (i.e., programs and processes aligned with research) have education officials adopted to support students living in foster care?

To answer these questions about the educational experiences and outcomes of students living in foster care, we conducted descriptive analyses of publicly available and restricted-use data from 2018–19 (prior to the pandemic) from the California Department of Education. To understand the key supports provided to students in foster care, the challenges in providing support prior to and during the pandemic, and the promising practices for supporting students in foster care, we interviewed 11 FYSCP coordinators across three focus groups and two individual interviews.[39] Interviews were conducted between December 2020 and January 2021. (See Appendix A for full details on our methodology.)

While this report provides much-needed information about California students living in foster care, it is limited in that it is focused on education. It does not include data from the California Department of Social Services; nor did we interview social service agency officials. Future research could investigate the combined associations of child welfare and education variables on student learning outcomes and the perspectives from child welfare and other agencies.

In this report, we first examine the characteristics and educational outcomes of students living in foster care. We then turn to the challenges education agencies face in supporting students living in foster care and the promising practices for addressing the needs of these students. We conclude with a set of policy recommendations and reflections.

California Students in Foster Care

Children and youth in foster care represent a small group of students in California, but one with complex needs. The number of students in foster care in grades k–12 in 2018–19 was 46,810, or around 0.7% of students, down from 62,610 students, or around 1%, in 2015–16.[40]

The majority of students in foster care are students of color, and African American students are disproportionately represented. In 2018–19, around 18% of California's k–12 youth in foster care were African American, compared to just 5% African American students in the overall student population. The majority of students in foster care were Latino/a (55%), which matches the percentage of Latino/a students in the statewide student population.[41] The underlying reasons for the disproportionality of African American students are multiple and include a higher incidence of child poverty, racial bias, and systemic racism; uneven availability of resources in the child welfare system; and geography.[42] As one study described, "Race and ethnicity is a marker for a complex interaction of economic, social, political, and environmental factors that influence the health of individuals and communities."[43] Although beyond the scope of this report, addressing these underlying factors will be critical to closing racial disparities in the foster care system.

California students in foster care are also more likely than the general population to identify as LGBTQ. A 2019 study using a statewide sample of California students ages 10–18 found that 30% of students in foster care identified as LGBTQ, compared to an estimated 11% among similar-age non-foster students.[44] Students in foster care are also disproportionately likely to be eligible for special education services. In 2018–19, 31% of students in foster care were eligible for special education, compared to just 13% of their non-foster peers.[45] Students in foster care also include "dual system" students—those involved with both the child welfare and the juvenile justice systems.

The reasons for entry into foster care cover a wide range of circumstances, although issues related to poverty often play a role. Consider the following: Families earning low incomes are far more likely to be involved in the foster care system.[46] Research has long noted that poverty is a risk factor for neglect.[47] As one study concludes, "The most effective way to reduce child abuse and neglect is to reduce poverty and its attendant material hardships."[48] Many children become involved with the foster care system due to reasons of neglect only—such as a family in poverty struggling to provide adequate food, housing, or clothing or a working mother who cannot find child care and has to leave young children unsupervised.[49] Data for 2019 show that neglect was among the reasons for entry into foster care in more than 4 out of 5 cases in California.[50] An inability to cope was a reason in 1 in 5 cases, parental substance abuse was cited in 1 in 10 cases, and inadequate housing was stated as a reason in 1 out of 25 cases. Other reasons for entry into foster care included physical violence, cited in 1 in 5 cases, and sexual abuse, cited in 1 out of 33 cases. Other research finds that physical violence and sexual abuse were reported more frequently among students in foster care ages 17 and over and among females.[51]

Together, these data suggest that the reasons for entry into foster care are multiple, complex, and often intertwined with a range of social and environmental factors associated with poverty. Proactively addressing the root causes of poverty is a promising strategy to support families before the risk of neglect or abuse becomes more serious and family separation is necessary.

Educational Experiences and Outcomes
of Students in Foster Care

In this section, we use both publicly available data and restricted-use data to provide insight into the education of California's students in foster care and their learning outcomes. We analyze administrative data, including enrollment records and achievement data provided by the California Department of Education, from 2018–19, the most recent year of publicly available data prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We first present findings for the educational experiences of students in foster care, focusing specifically on the following: student mobility (the frequency with which students change schools), characteristics of the schools in which students are enrolled, rates of chronic absenteeism, and rates of suspension. We then turn to educational outcomes, looking at rates of achievement on state assessments and graduation rates. We also explore how achievement on these state assessments varies with school mobility and suspension rates—understood to be key correlates of achievement.

Educational Experiences

As described earlier, frequent school changes are disruptive to students' academic progress. While some school moves for students in foster care may be in students' best interests, such as those to an educational setting better suited to students' particular learning needs, others may not. High mobility may disrupt student learning as well as social connections and access to other supports. Using enrollment records, we counted the total number of school moves that took place during the school year to understand the extent of that disruption.[52]

We also explored characteristics of the schools that students in foster care attended. Prior research shows that high-poverty schools—those with large proportions of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM)—tend to have higher rates of teacher turnover and higher percentages of teachers who are not fully certified.[53] High teacher turnover can disrupt both collegial staff relationships that support a coherent approach to teaching and teacher–student relationships that are especially important to students at risk of disengagement.[54]

Table 1 shows our analysis of student mobility as well as student enrollment in high-poverty and low-performing schools.

Within the 2018–19 school year, students in foster care were more likely to change schools than other students, and many moved multiple times. We defined mobility as the number of school moves that took place during the school year (between September 1 and June 1).[55] We found that while 95% of all non-foster students stayed in the same school throughout the 2018–19 school year, just 66% of students in foster care did so. Moreover, 13% of students in foster care (more than 1 in 8) changed schools more than once during the school year.

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Over 4 school years, half of all students in foster care changed schools more than once.
We calculated mobility among students enrolled in each of the 4 school years from 2015–16 to 2018–19, again counting only those moves that took place during the school year. Seventy-one percent of students in foster care in 2018–19 changed schools during the school year in at least 1 of those 4 years, compared to 15% among all other students. Indeed, more than a fifth (22%) of youth who were in foster care in 2018–19 had four or more such moves over the 4-year period, compared to less than 1% among all other students.

Nearly half of all students in foster care are enrolled in the highest-poverty schools.
High-poverty schools tend to experience greater resourcing challenges, including higher teacher turnover.[56] We calculated the proportion of students in foster care in schools by the proportion of its population eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM). Nearly half (49%) of all students in foster care were enrolled in schools in which the percentage of students eligible for FRPM was 80% or above, compared to 32% of their non-foster peers.[57] A further 26% of students in foster care were enrolled in schools in which the FRPM percentage was between 60% and 80% (compared to 22% for all other students). (See Appendix B.) By contrast, less than 3% of students in foster care were enrolled in the lowest-poverty schools—those in which the percentage of students eligible for FRPM was below 20%—compared to 12% of their non-foster peers.

Students in foster care are more likely than other students to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools. We looked at the enrollment of students in schools targeted for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) pursuant to ESSA.[58] These are schools that have either had low graduation rates (less than 67%) over 2 consecutive years or were among the lowest-performing Title I schools. We found that 12% of all students in foster care had a CSI school as their main primary enrollment, more than twice the rate of non-foster students (5%). This indicates that students in foster care are more frequently attending schools with poor outcomes for students. Around a quarter of CSI schools are continuation schools; that is, schools for students ages 16 and over who are at risk of not graduating and may be behind in high school credits[59]—a common challenge for many students in foster care and other highly mobile students.

Table 1
School Mobility and Enrollment

	Students in Foster Care	Students Not in Foster Care
Total School Moves, Single Year (2018–19)		
No Moves	66%	95%
At Least 1 Move	34%	5%
• 1 move	21%	4%
• 2 moves	8%	< 1%
• 3+ moves	5%	< 1%
Total School Moves, 4 Years (2015–16 to 2018–19)		
No Moves	29%	85%
At Least 1 Move	71%	15%
• 1 move	21%	11%
• 2 moves	17%	3%
• 3 moves	11%	1%
• 4+ moves	22%	< 1%
Percentage Enrolled in High-Poverty Schools, (2018–19)	49%	32%
Percentage Enrolled in Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools, (2018–19)	12%	5%

Notes: High-poverty schools are those with 80% or more students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Figures may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Data sources: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request; Public School and District data files and Free or Reduced-Price Meal data files downloaded from https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/downloadabledata. asp; ESSA Assistance Status Data Files downloaded from https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/essaassistdatafiles.asp

Using publicly available data for 2018–19, we also looked at rates of absenteeism as well as suspension from school. Together with suspension rates, rates of chronic absenteeism are indicative of students' engagement with school and their opportunities to learn. Research has long found that chronic absenteeism is associated with lower academic performance.[60] Moreover, students who experience changes in foster care placement or school are more likely to experience higher rates of absence and have an elevated risk of disengagement.[61]

In California, chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the school days in which a student was enrolled and school was taught (typically 18 days in a 180-day school year).[62] We find striking disparities in the rates of chronic absenteeism, in the average number of days absent, and also in the rates of suspension. These are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Absenteeism and Suspension Rates, 2018–19

	Students in Foster Care	Students Not in Foster Care
Average Days Absent		
• All grades	15	10
• Grades k–8	12	9
• Grades 9–12	23	12
Chronic Absenteeism Rate		
• All students	28%	12%
Suspension Rate		
• All grades	15%	3%
• African American	22%	9%

Data source: California Department of Education, DataQuest. https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/

Students in foster care are more than twice as likely to be chronically absent compared to other students. Publicly available data show that, on average, students in foster care were absent 15 days in the 2018–19 school year, compared to 10 days for all other students. Moreover, absenteeism was especially high among students in foster care in high school. Students in foster care in grades 9–12 were absent an average of nearly 23 days, meaning that these students missed 1 out of every 8 school days. This was almost twice as many days absent as both their same-grade peers and as students in foster care in grades k–8. In total, nearly 28% of students in foster care were chronically absent, while for non-foster students, this was just 12%.

Students in foster care were more likely to be suspended than their non-foster counterparts. In addition to absenteeism, we also looked at suspension rates for California students in foster care. Exclusionary discipline can drive a self-reinforcing cycle of disengagement if it is not disrupted. Lack of engagement can lead to further disciplinary incidents, and the lost learning time also reduces students' engagement with schooling and academic motivation.[63] For students in foster care, feelings of affective engagement with school are a key predictor of school success,[64] while exclusionary discipline is associated with lower educational outcomes.[65] In addition, suspension from school does not address the underlying issues that may be behind challenges in the first place.

The suspension rate (in school and out of school) for students in foster care in 2018–19 was 15%, about the same rate as for the previous 2 years. This rate was more than 4 times the rate for non-foster students (3.4%). Suspension rates were especially high among African American students, both for students in foster care (22%) and not (9%). More than half of African American students in foster care who were suspended in 2018–19 were suspended multiple times. As we show in Figure 1, high rates of suspension are negatively correlated with achievement rates on state assessments.

Educational Outcomes

We explored whether mobility and suspension are associated with the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards on the 2018–19 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), administered to students in grades 3–8 and 11.

Students in foster care were less likely than other students to meet or exceed state standards on CAASPP. We found stark differences in achievement between students in foster care and other students. Just 24% of students in foster care met or exceeded state standards in English language arts (ELA) (compared to 51% of other students), and just 15% met or exceeded state standards in mathematics (compared to 40% of other students). (See Figure 1.) Of particular concern is that 53% of students in foster care received scores in the lowest category in ELA—"standard not met"—compared to 26% of non-foster counterparts. For mathematics, this percentage was even higher, with 63% scoring in the "standard not met" category compared to 35% for all other students. (See also Appendix B.)

Figure 1
Percentage of Students at Proficiency Standards Levels on CAASPP English Language Arts and Mathematics, 2018–19
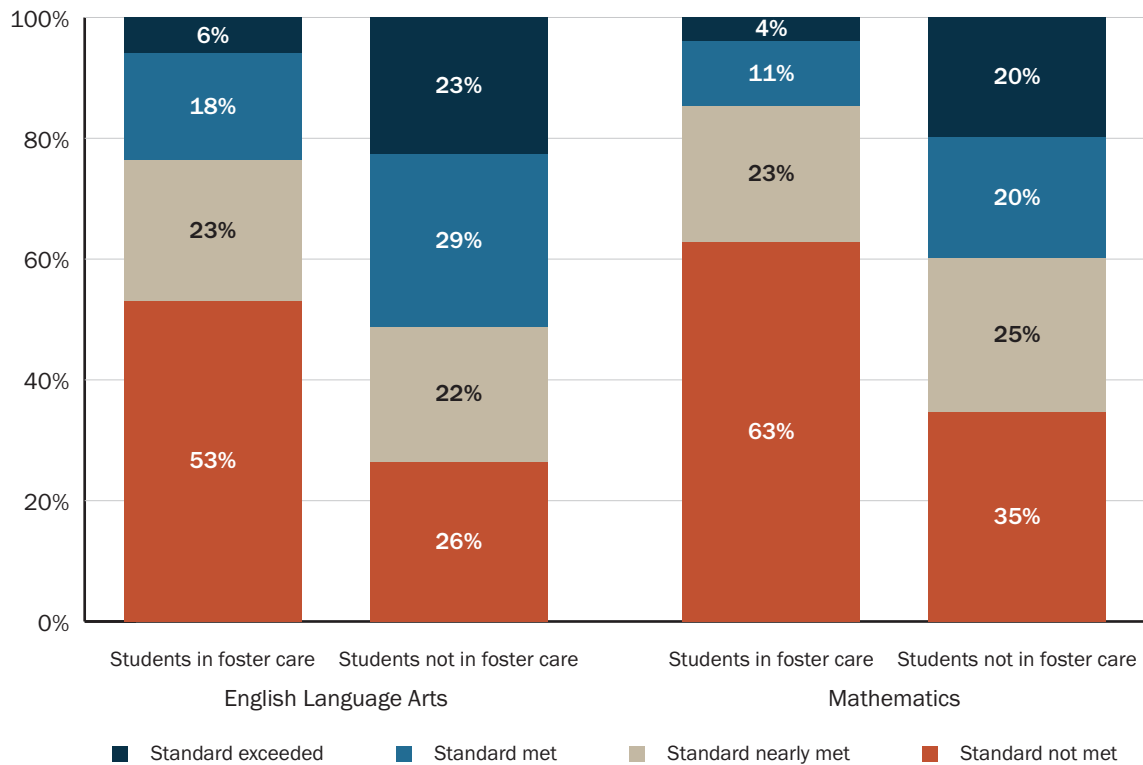

Notes: Percentages calculated for students in grades 3–8 and 11 with valid CAASPP scores. Some figures may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

For students in foster care eligible for special education and for those who are English learners, performance levels were even lower. Of students in foster care eligible for special education, 7% met or exceeded state standards in ELA, and 5% met or exceeded state standards in mathematics (compared with 16% and 13%, respectively, for non-foster students with disabilities). (See Figure 2.) As noted earlier, nearly one third of students in foster care (31%) are eligible for special education services. Among students in foster care who were English learners, only 7% met or achieved standards in ELA, and 6% did so in mathematics. These findings suggest that many students in foster care may need multiple supports to achieve their educational goals.

Figure 2
Percentage of Students Eligible for Special Education and English Learners Meeting or Exceeding State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics, by Foster Status, 2018–19
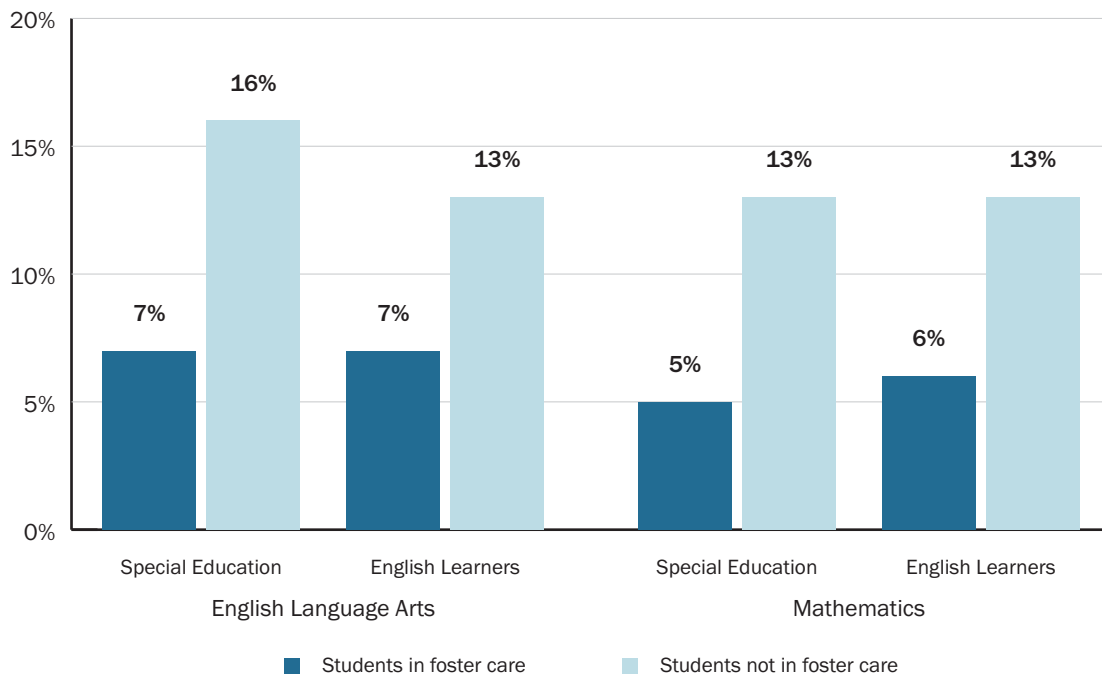
Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

High mobility is associated with lower outcomes on CAASPP. Among students in foster care who stayed in the same school throughout the school year, 26% met or exceeded state standards in ELA, and 17% did so in mathematics. By contrast, each school move was associated with a lower score in each of the tested subjects. (See Figure 3.) For example, among students in foster care who moved twice or more (around 13% of all students in foster care), less than 15% met or exceeded state standards in ELA, and just 7% did so in mathematics. High mobility was also associated with lower achievement on CAASPP for students who were not in foster care, though students in foster care were more likely than other students to change schools during the school year.

Figure 3
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics by Mobility, 2018–19
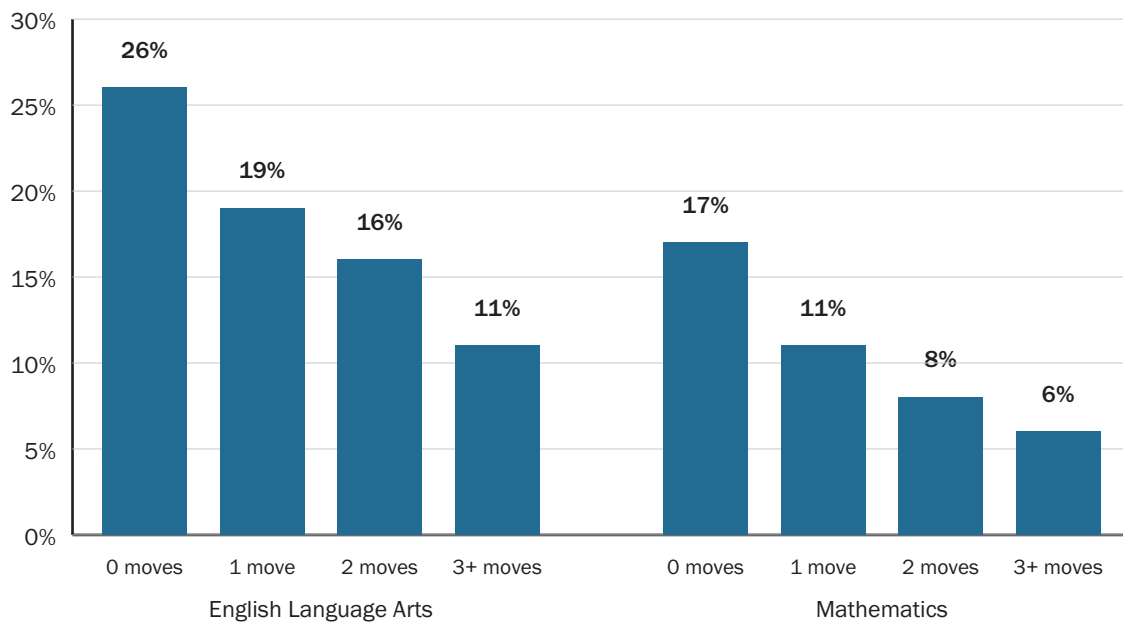
Note: Percentages calculated for students in grades 3–8 and 11 with valid CAASP scores.

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Suspension from school is associated with lower outcomes on CAASPP. Among students in foster care who received an in-school or out-of-school suspension, 11% met or exceeded state standards in ELA, and just 6% did so in mathematics. (See Table 3.) This compares to 26% and 16%, respectively, for students in foster care who were not suspended. While the percentage of students meeting or achieving state standards was also lower for non-foster youth who were suspended, it is of particular importance for students in foster care given that they are suspended at around 4 times the rate of their non-foster peers.

Importantly, the lower rates of achievement among students who were suspended does not imply a direct causal relationship. For example, students who are suspended from school may be those who are already struggling academically. However, this finding nonetheless underscores the importance of providing supports to students who exhibit problematic behaviors and who may be at risk of disengaging from school.

Achievement rates were higher for those students in foster care in low-poverty schools. While just 2.5% of students in foster care attended the lowest-poverty schools, among students in foster care in those schools, nearly 40% met or exceeded standards in ELA, and nearly 28% did so in mathematics. This compares to 21% in ELA and just 13% in mathematics among students in foster care in the highest-poverty schools. (See Table 3.)

Students in foster care graduate at lower rates than students who are not in foster care, and those who do graduate are less likely than their peers to meet the entry requirements to California's 4-year public universities. In addition to measures of achievement on state assessments, we also looked at rates of educational attainment. For 2018–19, the 4-year adjusted

cohort graduation rate for students in foster care was 56%; for other students, the rate was 85%. While that rate is low relative to their peers, the graduation rate among students in foster care increased 5 percentage points between 2016–17 and 2018–19 (from 51% to 56%).

Upon graduation, students in foster care were less likely than their non-foster peers to have met the requirements for entry to a University of California or California State University campus. Among students who graduated in 2018–19, the percentage of graduating students in foster care meeting the A-G requirements was just 20%, compared to 51% for all other graduating students.[66] This means that just 11% of students in foster care in the class of 2019 graduated from high school prepared for a 4-year state university.

Table 3
Student Achievement on CAASPP by Suspension and School Poverty Rate, 2018–19

	Students in Foster Care: Percentage Meeting or Exceeding State Standards	
	English Language Arts	**Mathematics**
Suspended During School Year		
• No	26%	16%
• Yes	11%	6%
School Eligibility for FRPM		
• 0 to <20%	40%	28%
• 20% to <40%	31%	19%
• 40% to <60%	28%	17%
• 60% to <80%	23%	14%
• 80% to 100%	21%	13%

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Students in foster care were less likely than their peers to attend college upon completing high school. A different measure of educational attainment is the college-going rate, or the proportion of students completing high school in a given academic year who are enrolled in higher education the subsequent year. Among high school completers, 48% of California students in foster care were enrolled in a postsecondary institution within 12 months of completing high school.[67] For all other students, this rate was above 64%. (These data are for 2017–18, the most recent year available.)

Taken together, these findings illustrate the considerable challenges to school success facing students in foster care. For example, the strong negative relationship with educational outcomes for students in foster care who change schools multiple times underscores the importance of school stability. Additionally, not only are students in foster care less likely to finish high school than their peers, but if they do, they are also less likely to subsequently enroll in a postsecondary institution. In the next sections, we provide data from foster youth services coordinators, outlining the challenges to effectively supporting this student group as well as identifying several promising practices from which others may learn.

What Are the Challenges, and What Works to Support Students in Foster Care?

Our quantitative analyses show the educational impact of some of the challenges students in foster care face. (See also Appendix B.) To better understand how districts work to coordinate support for students in foster care and the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of school services, we interviewed 11 Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) coordinators. (See Appendix A for details.) These county-level coordinators play a key role in supporting students in foster care. They ensure records transfer properly for youth who change schools, work across agencies at the county level, and work with districts and schools to build capacity and ensure that students in foster care have access to the services they require. Common services that students in foster care may require include instructional support, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, emancipation services, training for independent living, and transition to postsecondary education.[68] In interviews with FYSCP coordinators, we were particularly interested in learning the challenges to supporting students in foster care, additional issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, and promising practices aligned with research to support the education of students in foster care in California.

Challenges

Our interviews revealed several challenges that negatively impact the effectiveness of educational supports for students in foster care: insufficient data systems and data management, funding concerns, high costs and the time associated with coordinating transportation for students to attend their schools of origin, and capacity constraints in the child welfare system. As described below, some of these challenges were amplified in 2020–21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Insufficient data systems and data management are barriers to supporting students in foster care.

Students in foster care live at the intersection of multiple agencies and programs. State law, therefore, mandates some data sharing between local educational agencies (LEAs) and child welfare agencies. For example, LEAs must share education records, which can include grades, credits earned, and the number of school transfers, with child welfare agencies. In return, child welfare agencies must share records related to a student's educational needs and notify LEAs any time a placement change occurs.[69] Despite laws requiring interagency data sharing, coordinators identified two major challenges in this area: First, inadequate availability of integrated data systems impeded efficient case management; and second, issues in accessing aggregated data inhibited evaluating program impact and conducting data-based planning.

Effective case management relies on the availability of timely student-level data. These data are different than summative, end-of-year data typical of standardized assessments. Data useful in case management are more likely to be real-time, easily accessible, and provide a broader picture of a student's performance and well-being. They may include information on student attendance, grades, assessments, and progress toward educational goals.

Interviews revealed that the quality of data systems varied across counties. In some cases, these systems worked well. For example, two coordinators described using custom integrated data systems for effective data sharing across agencies. In one case, the county office of education and the local department of children and family services collaboratively designed the data system specifically to share information on students in foster care.

More frequently, however, coordinators highlighted gaps in data systems that resulted in poor data quality and impeded educators' abilities to effectively share and receive data on students in foster care. For example, integrated data from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), and district student information systems (SIS) are not readily available in many counties or for all students in foster care. Consequently, some county education staff needed to use multiple data systems to accomplish a single objective. In one case, up to seven different systems were needed to bring together data, such as attendance, case management plans, and discipline incidents, for a single student. An integrated data system jointly used by education and child welfare agencies could enable more effective case management to support students in foster care. To maximize the system's benefit, these staff could be supported with joint professional development on data use.

> In one case, up to seven different systems were needed to bring together data, such as attendance, case management plans, and discipline incidents, for a single student.

Coordinators also described challenges related to missing information in data systems. For example, two coordinators highlighted that there were many instances in which data on the educational rights holder (ERH)—the person responsible for making educational decisions based on the best interest of the child—were not included or were not available to LEAs and their data systems. One report found a wide variation in the quality and completeness of ERH data across counties, suggesting that the issue of inaccessible or missing ERH data may not be uncommon in California.[70] Similarly, another report examining one Bay Area county found that in 2019, ERH information was available in court records, but was not readily available to LEAs, for approximately 90% of students in foster care in the county. After identifying this issue, county education and court staff collaborated to increase ERH identification rates.[71] Inaccessible or missing ERH information can create obstacles to providing adequate and individualized supports for students in foster care, since some decisions must be approved by the ERH.

While student-level data are needed to provide individualized supports, aggregate data at the district or county level are useful to see broader trends and to assess the quality of program offerings. However, coordinators described issues in accessing aggregated data, a second data systems challenge.

Many counties with small districts and those with few students in foster care experience unique challenges when trying to access aggregate data. For example, rural districts may lack adequate county-level data systems and may instead rely on the California School Dashboard to fill gaps. This statewide dashboard provides summative data on how schools and districts are meeting student needs based on state and local indicators.[72] While useful for understanding trends in student performance, the dashboard is not well suited for assessing program impact. Further,

because the number of students in foster care in a given district may not meet the dashboard's minimum "n-size" reporting limit of 15, these data may not make the performance of students in foster care fully visible.[73] Students in foster care in small districts can, in effect, become invisible without county-level grouping and reporting. In one case, there was no straightforward way for educators to understand the academic needs of students in foster care, including attendance patterns, discipline rates, or school moves at the county level. Instead, they had to look at individual student files and draw inferences about county-level academic needs for students in foster care. Coordinators stressed the need for a safe, secure, and streamlined way to access aggregate data on students in foster care while ensuring that only those who need to know that data have access to it.

More detailed school mobility data is one area for improvement of aggregated data several coordinators discussed. County data systems may not capture the reason behind a school move—as documented in a best interest determination (BID) process—only that a school change happened. This leads to an incomplete picture. For example, current data reporting focuses on school stability, only showing when a student changes schools but not whether the change was made in the student's educational best interest. This represents a gap in data reporting, as one coordinator noted:

> It doesn't feel like we as a state have gotten a great [handle] on if the provisions that have been applied regarding school stability are making a difference for the number of youth staying in their schools of origin or if it's changing outcomes related to graduation rate[s].

Coordinators, districts, and counties need data systems that are able to document additional details to better assess the impact of school moves for individual students and broader efforts to support school stability. Without more detail, districts, educators, and coordinators struggle, at the aggregate level, to distinguish school moves that may have a positive educational impact, such as attending a school with siblings or having increased access to specific courses, programs, extracurricular activities, or more suitable special education services. By contrast, educationally disruptive school moves, such as a foster care placement that is far from the school that the student was attending and wishes to continue attending, may negatively impact a student's education. Each of these, among others, is a factor to be considered during the BID process.[74]

Together, this evidence suggests that inefficient data systems and data-sharing processes are significant challenges hindering agencies' abilities to support students in foster care. Though some coordinators felt data systems worked well, many expressed that data systems did not provide accurate, complete information. There was no consensus on a single data system or approach to information sharing that could best serve students in foster care. For example, one large county designed its own system because an existing proprietary system available statewide was too expensive for all of its districts to adopt. However, smaller counties may not be able to develop custom systems with existing resources.

The LCFF raises the visibility of students in foster care but does not necessarily provide additional resources to meet their needs.

While the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has increased attention on students in foster care, coordinators in rural counties and those with smaller numbers of students in foster care described the persistent challenges that districts face in meeting the individualized needs of students in foster care. They noted that the additional LCFF dollars for high-need students, including students in foster care, may be insufficient to support their unique and, at times, intensive needs. As discussed above, students in foster care are categorically eligible for free school meals.[75] Thus, despite higher needs, their identification as a student in foster care does not yield additional funds to the district beyond that of students from low-income backgrounds.

Coordinators from more rural parts of the state described some challenges this can create. Smaller districts face financial hurdles in their efforts to support this student group because it is small in number. One coordinator explained:

> I appreciate that LCFF has lifted up foster youth as an unduplicated pupil group. For [small] districts of our size and with our number of foster youth, it just doesn't really make a financial difference.… Districts really struggle to figure out what they are going to do that is only for foster youth [with the money available].

The coordinator added that students in foster care deserve individualized advocacy and support, "but it's not realistic to expect a school district to take that on with [the current level] of supplemental money a year." Without adequate resources, districts may be unable to provide the individualized supports these students often need to overcome disruptions and barriers to their learning. In small districts or ones with few students in foster care, it is especially challenging to provide programs tailored to the needs of students in foster care.

Coordinators expressed concern about bunching distinct high-need student groups together. Because students in foster care make up only a small portion of California's student population—less than 1% of all k–12 students, compared to students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (60%) or English learners (18%)—their needs may not get as much attention as other student groups. As one coordinator described:

> Those three student groups get lumped together, and each one has very unique needs. And generally, what we see is that districts do a blanket support system for all of those students that doesn't necessarily fit for each group, and so it can make those academic supports difficult for foster youth.

As this coordinator explained, because the LCFF requires unduplicated counts, it does not distribute additional resources to districts in a way that reflects the unique and compound challenges that students in multiple high-need groups face.

Transportation is a barrier to school stability for students in foster care.

While in foster care, a student may experience placement changes. As discussed earlier, our analyses found that around a third of students in foster care changed schools during the 2018–19 school year. Further, the data show that students in foster care, on average, have worse school outcomes when they experience school changes.

Multiple FYSCP coordinators identified the time and distance required for transportation as a frequent barrier to keeping students in their schools of origin after a foster care placement change. Coordinators explained that when determining the educational option that is in the child's best interest, ERHs, in some cases, must weigh the benefits of maintaining school stability against daily multi-hour commutes for any student with a placement that is far from their school of origin.

> Multiple FYSCP coordinators identified the time and distance required for transportation as a frequent barrier to keeping students in their schools of origin after a foster care placement change.

Foster care placement changes can mean that a student moves to live within the bounds of a different school district from their school of origin, or even to an entirely different county. A limited supply of foster care placement options exacerbates this problem. Data from the California Child Welfare Indicators Project show that around 22% of children were not placed in their supervising counties in 2020. This varied somewhat by placement type, with a larger percentage of out-of-county placements for those placed in group homes or short-term residential therapeutic programs (45%).[76]

Transportation cost is a significant factor in school stability. Coordinators noted that rural counties or small school districts, in particular, may have less flexibility to reroute existing buses. Partnering with private transportation offered useful flexibility in some counties but could also be prohibitively expensive in others. As one coordinator remarked, "For districts that don't have their own transportation, they may be contracting with a private transportation company…. It's disgustingly expensive." A 2020 report found that per-student transportation costs for students in foster care varied from as low as $167 a year to as high as $4,000 a year.[77] These high costs mean that many districts cannot provide adequate transportation for students in foster care, which could lead to a school move even when it is in the student's best interest to remain in their school of origin. Moreover, transportation reimbursement rates for caregivers need to be regularly updated so as not to act as a barrier to transportation.[78]

Interagency and interdistrict transportation agreements are a related challenge. Federal law requires child welfare agencies and school districts to adopt agreements for transporting students in foster care to school. In practice, many counties find it more effective to adopt countywide agreements that districts sign on to. Still, counties are experiencing challenges in establishing transportation memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between their districts and local child welfare agencies. As of 2019, just 55% of counties had an ESSA-mandated transportation plan in place.[79] Misaligned priorities about transportation agreements can complicate county agency collaboration. Even when there is a shared commitment to developing an agreement, MOUs can still take years to develop. In one county, for example, the transportation MOU took 5 years to pass. In some cases, coordinators felt the MOU development process was arduous, in part because districts and child welfare partners were intimidated by the potential costs of transportation.

A recent federal Government Accountability Office report reached similar conclusions. In particular, a majority of surveyed state education agencies said helping districts determine how to fund the additional transportation costs was challenging.[80] While transporting students within a county can come at a high cost, transporting between counties can be even more challenging. For example,

transporting a student with an out-of-county placement may fall outside existing cost-sharing MOUs or may have different cost-sharing implications. In one case a coordinator shared, the county reimbursed its school districts for the additional cost of transportation to maintain the school of origin only for those dependents of the county who were attending school within the county.

Transportation costs to families can also lead to students needing to change schools. This is particularly the case when a student's family is ineligible for reimbursement for school transportation. For example, caregivers (including licensed foster parents, approved relatives, certified foster parents, small family licensees, and nonrelated extended family members) are legally entitled to reimbursements for "reasonable travel" to and from a student's school of origin.[81] However, when students have returned to their biological families under a family maintenance plan, the family may not be eligible for Social Security Act Title IV-E maintenance funds—federal funding intended to support the daily living costs of youth in foster care. Students in family maintenance are not "in foster care" as defined under federal law. Yet they are still eligible for school-of-origin protections under California law. As one coordinator described, this discrepancy can create an additional burden to families in these situations who may already be navigating financial, housing, or employment challenges.

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. For this study, we spoke only to representatives from education agencies but, through these interviews, identified some constraints within the child welfare system that directly impact school stability.

In addition to their own resource challenges, all FYSCP coordinators noted that their colleagues in child welfare work hard but also face capacity constraints. These challenges included heavy caseloads for social workers and a lack of suitable foster care placements, especially for students with the greatest needs. While these challenges are important, they do not represent an exhaustive list of barriers to collaboration or challenges related to maintaining school stability because many are specific to each individual student's context. Nevertheless, these challenges bring to light some of what education and child welfare agencies navigate when serving students in foster care.

One challenge frequently mentioned was the high caseloads social workers carry, which can make it difficult for agencies to collaborate. For example, high caseloads can leave social workers with little time to prioritize education issues, such as maintaining school stability, when new placements are needed. While a student's education and well-being are priorities across agencies, the safety of the child is the central concern for social workers, particularly when a child or family member is in crisis and a placement needs to be quickly located. As an unfortunate side effect, school stability may become a lower priority.

The BID process is one example of this tension. Under ideal circumstances, BIDs on school placement take place in advance of, or in conjunction with, decisions about foster care placement. However, when placement options are limited or placement moves need to happen rapidly for the safety of the child, this may not be possible. As a result, discussions of school stability receive less attention. Timely communication about pending foster placement changes is particularly important

for students receiving special education services, as state law requires at least 10 days' written notice to both the current LEA and the receiving special education plan area before removal if the student has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).[82] As one coordinator described, "That doesn't even come close, even with our best efforts of communicating [with the child welfare agency] about when a new child is brought into care or when somebody is potentially changing residence." Despite daily communication about placement moves and potential moves, some placement changes happen suddenly, and it is not always possible to provide adequate notice before a student changes schools. The coordinator quoted above estimated that only in a minority of cases in their county did BIDs happen before a change in foster care placement. One report found considerable variability in the timing, consistency, and policies for BIDs across counties.[83]

There will always be a need to make quick decisions to protect some children in the foster care system. Ensuring both the child welfare and education systems are designed to be responsive to such moments can have a major impact on the life and educational outcomes of students in foster care. Without deep collaboration across agencies, education agencies will be left reacting to placement changes rather than planning for them, and students will experience disruptive changes.

A second constraint was a scarcity of placement options and the implications for school instability. Coordinators noted that a shortage of skilled caregivers and services for children with the most acute needs may lead to more placement instability. The need for high-quality, short-term residential therapeutic care, for example, can sit in tension with the intent to keep students in their schools of origin. California's Continuum of Care Reform (Assembly Bill 403) sought to reduce the reliance on congregate care as a placement option for students in foster care, limiting such stays to those in short-term residential therapeutic programs (STRTPs).[84] Multiple studies had found lower school stability and educational outcomes associated with placement in congregate care.[85]

However, a corollary of eliminating group homes was that it also reduced the total available supply of residential placements for children in crisis. Many group homes did not convert to STRTPs, limiting the placement options for children with the most intensive needs (e.g., students who have experienced severe trauma or are in crisis, who are involved in gang-related activity, and/or who are dealing with substance abuse issues). With fewer but higher-quality options, students in foster care may be placed far from their schools of origin when receiving intensive, short-term services, requiring them to change schools if reasonable transportation is not available. In some cases, the nearest STRTP may be in a different county.

Likewise, FYSCP coordinators in one focus group raised concerns about placement availability for students in foster care who have become involved in the juvenile justice system. As one coordinator described, there is a need for more placements that can support these youth because otherwise, "They are just going to be in juvenile hall ... and [we know] how damaging that can be to a youth." Another coordinator noted the lack of services to address substance abuse, saying:

> We don't have a lot of support services for youth dealing with any of the substance abuse issues.... It's so limiting when you have really specific needs that need to be met, but we just don't have the facilities that can help.

When there is a lack of placements that can provide adequate and appropriate support, children are more likely to be moved far distances to receive care, which frequently requires a school move.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified some challenges in foster care services.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on students and families and a disproportionate impact on marginalized groups, including students in foster care. For example, a 2021 survey of California youth ages 18–24 years who were or had been in foster care found that more than a quarter had been laid off from a job since the pandemic began, and 1 in 5 had experienced homelessness, with rates even higher among African American youth.[86] The same study found that all survey respondents had experienced negative educational consequences, with 28% having stopped taking classes since the pandemic began and 12% having dropped out of school or college altogether.[87] At the state level, California policymakers increased funding to mitigate the many challenges. For example, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed an executive order in 2020 to invest $42 million in resources for youth in foster care, with some of the funds targeted to support caregivers and social workers.[88] In a 2020 letter to county offices, the California Department of Social Services also expanded the Extended Foster Care Program, temporarily allowing youth in foster care to remain in the system beyond their 21st birthdays, in an effort to prevent youth who age out of the system from experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.[89]

To gain greater understanding of the challenges posed by the pandemic, we asked interviewees about how the COVID-19 pandemic had complicated efforts to support students in foster care. Coordinators cited several concerns, including the reduced access to teachers and social workers, lack of engagement in online learning, and potential implications for mobility in some counties, but also noted the efforts by county agencies to support students during remote learning.

From early in the pandemic, reports suggested that the public health crisis had negatively impacted the well-being of families, including foster parents, due to the increasing presence of stressors such as greater financial insecurity, increased burden on parents and caregivers, and elevated stress due to social isolation.[90] Without adequate support, children in these circumstances can be at elevated risk of maltreatment.[91] Additionally, with schools closing their doors, many children across the country lost in-person access to teachers and social workers, who are also mandated reporters.[92]

Coordinators in three counties expressed concern that referrals for child protective services had decreased during distance learning. Early news reporting seemed to validate these concerns: The number of phone calls county child welfare services in Los Angeles received with reports of allegations of maltreatment was down by 50% as of May 2020.[93] Additionally, data from California's Child Welfare Indicators Project showed an 18% decline in maltreatment allegations and a 16% decline in entry into out-of-home care from 2019 to 2020, and measures of timely visits by caseworkers that had been stable for the previous 5 years were down sharply during 2020, before again increasing in 2021.[94] By contrast, a coordinator from a county that had offered hybrid and in-person learning options during the pandemic noted that referrals in this jurisdiction had remained at more usual levels.

Coordinators also expressed concern about student engagement with learning during the pandemic. Three coordinators indicated that many students in foster care were either not signing in to online classes or were not participating in learning during these classes. Reports from early in the pandemic likewise noted a lower frequency and duration of participation in online classes for students in foster care, with lack of access to computers and unreliable internet cited as contributing factors.[95] Underscoring this concern, one coordinator reported increased absences among students in foster care in the elementary and middle school grades in particular, whereas previously attendance issues had mostly been a challenge at the high school level.

Another coordinator emphasized that the impact of COVID-19 and the need for distance learning statewide had negatively impacted all students but was especially challenging for students in foster care who were receiving family maintenance services. These are students who still live with their family of origin (i.e., their biological mother and father) and whose caregivers accept services and corrective supports.[96] The coordinator noted that students in these circumstances were less likely to have the technological devices, internet connectivity, and workspaces in place for distance learning in the home.

Coordinators expressed concern that engagement with remote learning could extend beyond technology and connectivity issues. They felt disruptions to student engagement underscored the importance of teacher–student relationships as a foundation for successful learning, especially for students in foster care. One coordinator observed:

> We have the technology, but is there anything being done to help guide teachers and school staff on how they can still make those meaningful connections virtually? Because I feel like that is significantly hindering the engagement.

The pandemic appeared to have had a differential impact on mobility depending on the location and mode of learning. For example, a coordinator from a large county reported that differences among school districts in the county—with some choosing distance learning and others teaching in hybrid mode—had influenced placement decisions and thus increased school mobility for some students. By contrast, a coordinator from another county noted that the ability to connect to school virtually meant some students in foster care were able to maintain enrollment in their schools of origin even if a placement change moved them far away, resulting in fewer school changes.

Coordinators also described efforts made by county offices to support students in foster care during the pandemic. For example, one county office worked with foster family agencies and other partner organizations to expand training to foster parents and caregivers. Trainings ranged from mental health and wellness, such as recognizing the signs of depression and anxiety, to setting up ergonomically correct workspaces for online learning and creating a schooling schedule that works in households with more than one child.

While coordination across multiple agencies is no easy task, we heard consistently across our interviews that challenges in one agency, or in the system overall, can negatively impact school stability for students in foster care. Overall, our interviews identified several areas in which challenges remain, including data systems, resource allocation, transportation, and capacity within the child welfare system. Despite these challenges, we also heard how all agencies involved in supporting students in foster care keep children at the center of their work and strive to overcome barriers to advocate for the needs of each child.

Promising Practices

Analysis of our interviews also revealed several promising practices aligned with research that can support students in foster care. These practices include fostering interagency collaboration through one-stop resource centers and co-located positions for county-level case management staff; adopting school-level practices to promote strong relationships; and providing targeted social, emotional, and academic supports for students in foster care.

Developing one-stop resource centers and increasing co-located staff facilitates interagency collaboration and can help provide a ready web of supports.

Students in foster care sit at the intersection of multiple systems. The child welfare system is charged with student safety, and schools and districts are charged with student education. In addition, family courts, community and health organizations, and, depending on the circumstances, probation officers may also play important roles. Support for students in foster care thus involves not only action within each organization but better alignment between them.[97]

Because much of the decision-making that impacts students in foster care happens at the county level, collaboration among county partners is particularly important for ensuring that these students receive access to a ready web of critical services and supports. Research has noted that improving educational outcomes for students in foster care requires successful collaboration between child welfare and education agencies, such as aligning agency goals and improving mutual understanding of agency processes.[98] Coordinators described two strategies to improve interagency collaboration: one-stop resource centers and co-locating FYSCP staff within child welfare offices.

> Research has noted that improving educational outcomes for students in foster care requires successful collaboration between child welfare and education agencies, such as aligning agency goals and improving mutual understanding of agency processes.

The first strategy was exemplified by Kern County's Dream Center, a one-stop resource center equipped to provide and connect youth to a web of services and supports. Staff from the county office of education, the Department of Human Services' Independent Living Program, child welfare social workers, housing coordinators, behavioral health staff, and probation officers work in close collaboration at the site.[99] The center serves as a one-stop shop for youth in foster care, particularly those close to aging out of the system. In total, there were 1,372 children and youth identified as foster students in Kern County in 2019–20.[100] The center is equipped to provide an array of services for these youth, from assistance accessing housing, health care, tutoring, and job training to offering laundry and shower facilities, emergency hygiene supplies, and medical services. The Dream Center demonstrates how developing partnerships with county agencies, aligning goals, and coordinating community resources can particularly benefit youth in foster care. Kern's efforts at eliminating agency silos is also replicable. The Dream Center's work inspired neighboring Tulare County to develop its own one-stop shop to serve youth in foster care.

Coordinators described co-location as a second promising strategy for increasing interagency collaboration. Co-location typically involves FYSCP staff sharing office space with other county agencies, and vice versa, to ensure that staff responsible for serving students in foster care are located in close physical proximity to one another. The resource centers, described above, are one model; a more common model is education case managers sharing office space with child welfare social workers. All coordinators we talked to described this practice as critically important for improving communication across agencies; strengthening individual case management, such as by providing an opportunity for FYSCP staff to participate in Child and Family Teams—an integrated

team of family and community caregivers and professionals working collaboratively to support a child or youth in foster care; and providing educationally relevant information about the needs of students in foster care.

Research finds that co-location can help overcome barriers to interagency collaboration through better understanding of partner agency policies and procedures and improved data sharing.[101] Education liaisons serve as a valuable bridge between agencies—collaborating with social workers and helping ease their caseloads and working with students on academic goals and with school personnel and foster parents in addressing academic or behavioral issues that could result in school changes.[102] Co-location can help further increase their impact. For example, an evaluation of FosterEd's Education Team model in Santa Cruz—an initiative of the National Center for Youth Law in which education liaisons were co-located in county education and child welfare offices as part of a multiagency team—found improved attendance and grade point averages for students in foster care who received this support.[103] During an interview, a coordinator described how co-location can help support students in foster care. The coordinator shared how one of their case managers, who is co-located in the child welfare office, was able to join discussions about foster care placements that arose at short notice simply by being present and was able to contribute and provide input to the conversations to help maintain schools of origin.

In addition to creating opportunities for county-level education staff to step in and support education-related needs, co-location can also help strengthen relationships across agencies. As another coordinator said:

> Co-location is so critical. It just builds trust, it builds rapport, [and] it increases access…. It's really nice to be able to come alongside the social worker or the probation officer and just say, "Let me take this education piece off your plate. Let me handle this. You pass that on to me—let me work my relationships with the school districts to handle that."

These kinds of daily interactions can build strong relationships between staff and agencies. They help ensure that desired outcomes, such as school stability, are on the radar of child welfare staff even as they are forced to juggle a number of other competing priorities. Likewise, education liaisons gain greater appreciation for the multiple priorities that social workers are balancing. While limited office space can be a barrier to co-location, some coordinators described splitting costs across agencies and using dollars from Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to cover operating costs for co-location.

School-level practices to create relationship-centered schools can promote positive development and learning for students in foster care.

Positive adult and peer relationships play an important role in supporting students, especially those at risk of falling behind in their learning.[104] Given the challenges of their circumstances, the educational pathways of students in foster care are often characterized by disruption in relationships. In addition, when challenging experiences manifest as behavioral difficulties, exclusionary school discipline can further challenge relationships with teachers and school staff.

The science of learning and development indicates that a student's development is optimally supported when all aspects of the educational environment address major developmental needs (e.g., the need for strong relationships; social, emotional, and cognitive learning opportunities; and a system of supports to address individual circumstances).[105] Research finds that schools organized to promote supportive and culturally responsive educator–student and student–peer relationships help foster individual development and contribute to school climates associated with increased engagement and achievement.[106] Such "relationship-centered" schools also emphasize the role of educative and restorative approaches to dealing with problematic behaviors, reducing the use of exclusionary discipline and lowering the risk of disengagement.[107]

Coordinators in focus groups and interviews shared several strategies that districts used to prioritize strong relationships in schools. One such approach was to provide school-based liaisons trained to support students in foster care. When liaisons are school based, they get to know students deeply through frequent interactions. As one coordinator explained, an essential educational support is to "just keep showing up" for them. A student in foster care can be thriving one month and struggling the next if, for example, a new foster care placement is proving challenging. With strong relationships, liaisons can be trauma responsive, helping students in foster care navigate challenging periods while also supporting school staff to create caring, safe environments. Further, this level of individualized support also allows liaisons to assist with credit recovery and to ensure students in foster care know about their rights—critical steps for educational access.[108] However, coordinators noted this can be challenging in smaller districts. In some cases, county-level liaisons filled the role of providing direct support to students in foster care.

Another strategy for fostering positive relationships is to create spaces in which students in foster care can elevate their needs and advocate for themselves. This is an approach taken by the Kern High School District in Kern County with its Youth Empowering Success (YES!) clubs. These are on-campus groups of high school and middle school students in foster care that meet periodically with the assistance of a counselor or social worker. The groups serve both as support groups for students in foster care and as forums to receive particular support or presentations from educators and other professionals on topics selected by the students. By creating spaces for students in foster care to elevate and advocate for themselves, the clubs represent a powerful model of student engagement.

YES! clubs can also involve field trips or other special events to help students in foster care participate in the community. The activities culminate with an annual conference attended by a range of stakeholders involved in the support of students in foster care: foster parents and staff from foster family agencies, child welfare agencies, probation offices, juvenile courts, and other community organizations. Conference speakers include both students in foster care and these stakeholders. The events not only allow for a two-way exchange of information, giving voice to students in foster care and their needs, but also provide a forum for connecting the broad array of agencies and organizations involved in providing that support. In this way, the YES! conference serves as a youth-led joint professional development opportunity for system providers.

Students in foster care can benefit from targeted social, emotional, and academic supports provided as part of a tiered system of support.

Another promising practice is providing individualized supports—academic, social, and emotional—that can help remediate and accelerate students' learning. This support could make up for a loss of instructional time due to absences, exclusionary discipline, and school mobility, which, as the quantitative data above show, is an urgent concern for students in foster care.[109]

The nature of these supports differs with each student and their specific needs, age, and development. A growing body of research suggests benefits to student learning from integrated approaches that span different domains of support and levels of need and that address areas of need at the school, home, and community levels.[110] Access to such a web of supports can help address academic and nonacademic barriers to student learning. These can include access to mental health services, support for transitions, timely assessment for academic needs, screening for special education, support for school engagement, and an evaluation of credits for high school students.

Social supports, including advocacy, help navigating social systems, and emotional support, can also help promote resilience. Students in foster care can often find their attention divided between academics and dealing with the challenges of home instability and uncertainty about the future.[111] Social supports from adult mentors—including foster parents, teachers, caseworkers, and community members—can provide important respite from stressors outside the school, providing stability and allowing students to prioritize education.[112] Teachers can contribute to student success by showing their interest in students' graduation outcomes, paying attention to the credits their students need to graduate, and providing flexibility with class options to make up credits—especially for students in foster care who have changed schools.[113]

California has promulgated a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework to align academic, behavioral, and social and emotional learning for all students, which, when well implemented, holds promise for supporting students who have experienced trauma.[114] A goal of this comprehensive framework is to redesign the process for providing supports so that students can have their needs quickly identified and be matched with evidence-based practices that increase in intensity based on the identified issue.

Within this context, coordinators described the importance of targeting supports to students' specific needs. As one coordinator explained:

> If the environment can be consistent and predictable and safe and positive, and you're providing supports from a multi-tiered perspective, then that really benefits foster youth. Let's get a really clear picture of what your academic needs are. Let's not just have this sweeping thing, but from a formative assessment perspective, what are the standards that you are not mastering? And then really target instruction.

Tutoring is one kind of academic support that is available in many districts. Coordinators noted that tutoring can provide important mentorship and support and help students develop study skills. However, they emphasized that tutoring also needs to be intensive, aligned with the curriculum, adapted to students' specific learning needs, and, ideally, provided over a sustained period if it is to have a sizable impact on long-term learning outcomes.[115]

Another coordinator described the importance of targeted supports to meet students' social and emotional needs:

> Through mobility, [foster youth] wind up missing a lot of school time, and whether they miss school time or not, just the shock of being pulled out of your home and placed into a separate home … I mean, just all the emotional things you're dealing with at that time [is a lot]. So making sure you have the social [and] emotional support there … making sure those youth feel supported at school and then having the real concrete academics behind it [is important].

These remarks speak to the importance of providing social and emotional supports in tandem with academic supports. Coordinators described a trauma-informed approach to education, with schools that are environments in which educators are cognizant of how the experience of trauma can negatively impact student behavior and learning and in which students experience safety and trust and have access to rich learning experiences. This kind of whole child design aligns with research showing that students learn best when social and emotional learning and academic learning work in concert with each other.[116]

For example, several foster youth coordinators expressed concern about the potential for overidentification of students in foster care for special education services, adding important nuance to the quantitative data shared earlier. One coordinator shared, "When [students] fall behind, [we have to] help them get up to where they need to be because I think we see a lot of our foster youth being remediated, [such as being] placed in special education when tutoring for even a year would probably help to catch them up." In some cases, the response of a student in foster care to trauma or a variety of academic, emotional, or behavioral challenges may be misunderstood as a learning difference. "I think we should be really careful to separate out what is trauma and what is a true learning difference," one coordinator cautioned. The same coordinator expressed excitement for the focus on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)—an element of an MTSS—in their county. When well implemented, they said, it "creates an environment that all children can learn in, especially children who have experienced trauma, like students in foster care."

One model for delivering multi-tiered, integrated supports is through community schools. Community schools are both a place and a set of partnerships between the education system, the nonprofit sector, and local government agencies.[117] They are designed to bring together a comprehensive range of services and resources at the school site in response to these "whole child" needs. By coordinating academic, mental health, physical wellness, social and emotional, and other supports, community schools contribute to a whole child approach to education.[118] For example, in Alameda County, the Seneca Family of Agencies is partnering with school districts and charter schools to create and strengthen community schools with a focus on students with disabilities, students engaged in the juvenile justice system, and students dealing with the effects of trauma. (See "Coordinating Whole Child Services" on p. 30.)

> By coordinating academic, mental health, physical wellness, social and emotional, and other supports, community schools contribute to a whole child approach to education.

Coordinating Whole Child Services

The Seneca Family of Agencies (Seneca) is a nonprofit organization that provides a coordinated continuum of care and services to families and students who have experienced trauma, including students in foster care. Seneca has operations in Alameda County as well as in a number of other California counties and in Washington state. In addition to providing school-based mental health services, Seneca supports school redesign work through implementation of its whole-school model of MTSS—Unconditional Education. This model is anchored by a core principle: An educational system can be designed to serve all students well only if the needs of its most vulnerable students are considered first.

Seneca has found that implementing a continuum of community- and school-based services is difficult to accomplish with education funding alone. As a result, the agency partners with county mental health, social welfare, and juvenile justice systems to facilitate the coordination of resources and expertise that is required to comprehensively meet student needs. In particular, Seneca's partnerships with county mental health agencies allow it to access state and federal funding through contracts under the Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment benefit (a federal entitlement to preventive health and mental health services for children enrolled in Medi-Cal) and California's Mental Health Services Act. These funds support Seneca's ability to develop tiered systems of support at school sites, engage in broader school climate and culture work, deliver services to students and families, and provide professional development to teachers.

Seneca's Unconditional Education coaches work at a single school site for at least 3 years. The primary function of coaches is to improve the internal capacity of each school by facilitating initial resource mapping; identifying funding streams; leading the Coordination of Services Teams; providing professional development to school practitioners; and facilitating 6- to 8-week cycles of intervention, in which collaborative school-based teams make data-informed decisions about intervention adjustments (e.g., moving students up or down a tier).

Summary of Findings and Policy Considerations

This report provides a snapshot of the educational experiences and outcomes of students in foster care in California. It provides analyses of state enrollment, achievement, and attainment data and discusses findings from interviews with Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) coordinators regarding the challenges and promising practices to provide supports for students in foster care. Our data analyses reveal the following findings about students in foster care in California:

- Students in foster care were more likely to move schools than other students, and many moved multiple times. While 95% of all non-foster students stayed in the same school throughout the school year, just 66% of students in foster care did so. Thirteen percent of students in foster care moved schools multiple times during the school year; that rate was less than 1% for non-foster students.

- Nearly half of all students in foster care were enrolled in the highest-poverty schools, those in which more than 80% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Furthermore, students in foster care were more likely than their peers to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools, those targeted for Comprehensive Support and Improvement.

- Compared to their peers, students in foster care were more than twice as likely to be chronically absent, missing 10% or more of school days they were expected to attend. Nearly 28% of students in foster care were chronically absent. For non-foster students, this was just 12%.

- Students in foster care were also more than 4 times as likely to be suspended than their non-foster counterparts (15% vs. 3.4%). Suspension rates were especially high among African American students in foster care (22%).

- Just 24% of students in foster care met or exceeded standards in English language arts on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) in 2018–19 as compared to 51% for other California students. For mathematics, this rate was 15% (compared to 40%). These rates were lower still for students with high rates of school mobility, those in multiple high-need groups (e.g., students eligible for special education and English learners in foster care), and those enrolled in high-poverty schools.

- Students in foster care graduated at lower rates (56%) than youth not in foster care (85%), and those who did graduate were less likely to meet college and university entry requirements. Ultimately, among graduates and other high school completers, students in foster care were less likely than their peers to attend college upon completing high school (48% vs. 64%).

Interviews with FYSCP coordinators suggested a number of challenges to supporting students in foster care:

- Data systems are insufficient to support individual student case management and collaboration. For example, integrated data from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), and district student information systems (SIS) are not readily available

or complete in many counties. Further, increasing access to interagency training for education and child welfare staff could support more effective collaborative use of these data systems.

- The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) raises the visibility of students in foster care, but its use of unduplicated counts of high-need students does not necessarily provide additional resources to meet their needs. Further, because students in foster care are small in number and their needs may span multiple systems, districts may struggle to address their individualized needs.

- Lack of transportation options is a barrier to school stability for students in foster care. Students in foster care have a right to stay in their schools of origin, and the data show that they have better school outcomes when they are able to do so. However, when students are placed in resource homes (i.e., foster care placements) outside the attendance area of their schools of origin, the time and costs of transportation make continued attendance at those schools challenging. A dearth of interagency and interdistrict transportation agreements complicates efforts to ensure students in foster care have accessible transportation to remain in their schools when the commute would be reasonable.

- Capacity constraints in the child welfare system, including high caseloads among social workers and lack of placement options, especially for students with the greatest needs, can make it challenging to prioritize education in placement decisions and can contribute to students changing schools.

- The COVID-19 pandemic amplified some challenges in foster care services. These included fewer referrals to child welfare services and disruptions to student attendance and engagement with learning. Some students in foster care had reduced access to technology and the workspaces needed for distance learning.

Interviews with FYSCP coordinators also suggested a number of research-aligned promising practices:

- Developing one-stop resource centers and increasing co-located staff facilitates interagency collaboration and can help provide a ready web of supports. For example, Kern County's Dream Center is staffed with professionals from multiple county agencies (e.g., education, human services, behavioral health, housing) and is equipped to provide an array of services for youth in foster care, from assistance accessing housing, health care, tutoring, and job training to offering laundry and shower facilities and medical services.

- Co-locating (i.e., sharing office space) education and child welfare staff can strengthen interagency communication. This improved communication can, in turn, improve individual student case management and make it more likely that students who change their foster care placements can remain in their schools of origin.

- Enacting school-level practices that promote trusting relationships with students in foster care can be a promising way to improve their educational opportunities. Some districts prioritized strong school-level relationships and employed school-based liaisons trained to

support students in foster care. Through frequent interactions, these liaisons get to know students deeply, can assist with credit recovery, and can ensure that students know about their rights as students in foster care.

- Because students in foster care experience a range of challenges, they can benefit from targeted social, emotional, and academic supports as part of a tiered system of support. For example, in Alameda County, the Seneca Family of Agencies, a nonprofit organization, partners with county mental health, social welfare, and juvenile justice systems to facilitate coordination of resources and implement a model aligned with multi-tiered systems of support that comprehensively meets student needs, especially those who have experienced trauma.

Recent policy reforms reflect growing recognition among California decision-makers that children in foster care benefit from stable relationships and supportive services. However, effective implementation of policy reforms remains a work in progress, and further policy reforms may need to be considered. Improving educational outcomes will require the state and localities to fully implement multiple practices and policies across several sectors. As no single agency on its own can improve the educational outcomes for students in foster care, there is a need for collective accountability. Further, unless reforms address the compound drivers of instability and barriers to educational opportunity for students in foster care, California risks continuing to underserve these students.

It is important to note that this report does not fully examine the complex factors that lead children and families to become involved in the foster care system in the first place. For example, poverty is a risk factor for neglect,[119] which can result in placement in foster care. In situations in which abuse is not a contributing factor to a family's involvement with child welfare, proactive supports that address the underlying causes and consequences of poverty may reduce the risk of child maltreatment and reduce the need for family separation.[120]

Instead, this report focuses on education's role in supporting students in foster care. The following policy considerations are intended for practitioners as well as state and local policymakers. We suggest the following policy recommendations to better serve the educational needs of students in foster care:

1. Implement organizational structures that support cross-system collaboration.

Cross-agency collaboration is important for serving students in foster care. This study found, for example, that frequent interactions between county, district, and school liaisons helped them advocate for students in foster care. Collaborative structures at the state and local levels, grounded in shared objectives and responsibility for students and families across partner agencies, are needed to ensure that students in foster care receive supports quickly and efficiently.

Create or empower cross-agency structures to improve collaboration and delivery of services.

A formalized cross-agency team, such as a children's cabinet or an existing body charged with addressing system gaps, could improve state-level collaboration and alignment, particularly if empowered to support the development of policies that remove barriers, break down silos from different categorical funding and service streams, and strengthen cross-system coordination and

alignment. Such a body could also establish shared goals for California's children and families; engage in efforts to identify state and local barriers to interagency collaboration; and propose enabling policies that support effective implementation of existing laws and protections, such as using best interest determinations to make school-of-origin decisions for students in foster care. The team's work could be informed by insights from the Cradle-to-Career Data System and existing state technical assistance efforts, such as the Children and Youth System of Care Team created under Assembly Bill 2083 and community school technical assistance centers currently under development. The work of this interagency body would benefit not only students in foster care but also other highly vulnerable students and those in need of continuously integrated services, such as students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families.

Support strong implementation of community schools.

Because students in foster care are concentrated in high-poverty districts, it is important that state and local decision-makers invest resources into these schools. In 2021 and 2022, California invested $4.1 billion in the California Community Schools Partnership Program, which will transform all high-poverty schools into community schools, a site-based strategy for provisioning students with a whole child education by coordinating partnerships between the education system, the nonprofit sector, and local government agencies and by promoting strong family and community engagement.[121] Because students in foster care can have a wide range of needs, access to supports offered by community schools, such as interdisciplinary teams that coordinate trauma-informed supports, high-quality tutoring, and structures that enable trusting relationships, can be critical.

In addition to community school grants, the program will fund several technical assistance centers to support community school implementation.[122] As the state builds its technical assistance capacity, it will be important to develop infrastructure that helps identify and disseminate best practices among grantees and that builds on lessons learned from existing initiatives, including the FYSCP. Given the size of the state and regional differences in needs and assets, this infrastructure should also allow for regional variation in technical assistance, informed by local contexts, while still providing coordinated statewide supports.

As counties are expanding or launching new community school networks, they could consider strategies for involving their FYSCPs to build on existing coordinative efforts for students in foster care. In addition to ongoing FYSCP funding, the state provided an additional $30 million in the fiscal year 2021–22 budget for FYSCPs and waived restrictions that limited their ability to provide direct support services to students in foster care using this one-time funding. These supports may include tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and direct interventions addressing reengagement, learning recovery, and educational case management.[123] Counties could consider connecting FYSCP work, direct services, and funding streams with efforts to develop networks of community schools to ensure that the community school strategy thoughtfully integrates existing work to serve the needs of students in foster care. Counties can also consider options for leveraging coordination to implement programs and resources that specifically target the needs of students in foster care, like Kern County's Dream Center.

With resources from recent state budget and federal stimulus bills, districts will have access to various funding streams that could be used to support community schools and address complex student needs. In addition to community school grant funding, districts can leverage LCFF

resources, including an ongoing $1.1 billion allocated in 2021 for staffing in high-need schools, to support implementation. Additionally, community schools are an allowable use of funds for American Rescue Plan Act federal relief dollars.

Support the development of local interagency transportation agreements to decrease school mobility arising from changes in foster care placements.

Transportation can be the critical link allowing students in foster care to remain in their schools and maintain stable relationships, even after a foster care placement change. State technical assistance could support the development of local transportation agreements to facilitate school stability. As of 2019, just 55% of counties had a mandated Every Student Succeeds Act transportation plan in place.[124] California could provide technical assistance through its Children and Youth System of Care Team, a state-level interagency team that provides guidance and technical assistance to counties, county offices of education, and regional centers on the development and implementation of memorandums of understanding (MOUs), on serving students in foster care who have experienced severe trauma. Technical assistance could involve developing transportation MOU templates and disseminating best practices for transportation agreement development and implementation.

The state has taken critical steps toward this by sharing the transportation MOUs for Los Angeles and San Diego counties as examples of how to craft these MOUs. San Diego County's MOU includes clear cost-sharing provisions, including for inter- and intradistrict transportation, and has broad representation among signatories from the county superintendent, the Superior Court, the county health and human services program, the county probation department, and school districts.[125] Los Angeles County's MOU establishes an approach for cases when students in foster care are placed outside of the county and clarifies that short-term residential therapeutic programs will be responsible for providing transportation for youth in their care.[126] More support is needed beyond disseminating these models. For example, Assembly Bill 2083 MOU implementation guidance can be revised to define transportation plan expectations more clearly.[127] The state might also share model MOUs developed by rural or remote counties, where transportation challenges are distinct from urban areas.

One function of state technical assistance on transportation could be identifying barriers that might require additional state action, including the cost of transportation. The ability to provide transportation will vary significantly across and within counties, depending on existing school busing routes, rerouting costs, caregiver capacity to provide transportation, reimbursement rates, and the availability of private providers.

2. Explore revising the LCFF to provide additional funding for students in multiple high-need groups.

This report highlighted that the LCFF brings important visibility to the needs and performance of students in foster care. However, when allocating additional funding, the formula only counts students in high-need groups (i.e., students from low-income families, students in foster care, and English learners) once. Because of its use of unduplicated counts, the LCFF does not distribute additional resources to districts in a way that reflects the compound challenges that

students in multiple high-need groups face. For example, students in foster care who are also English learners score in English language arts and mathematics at levels substantially below English learners not in foster care.

The state could explore revising the LCFF to provide additional funding in a way that better accounts for the needs of students in multiple high-need groups by examining evidence-based weighting for different needs. Such a reform could more equitably fund districts to support the range of needs students face, benefiting all students needing access to a web of supports.

3. Identify and implement strategies to improve student case management.

This study revealed both a major challenge to case management in the form of inadequate data systems and a promising practice of co-locating staff to improve case management. Disseminating best practices of existing efforts to connect a fragmented data ecosystem— namely, CWS/CMS, CALPADS, and district SIS—and increasing opportunities for interagency collaboration are critical steps that the state and counties could pursue to operationalize a web of supports and improve outcomes for students in foster care.

Establish a state grant program to support the development and statewide dissemination of best practices for data-informed collaborative case management.

FYSCP coordinators shared that effective local data systems are critical both for individual student case management and for understanding trends in student achievement, stability, and access to services and supports. Implementation plans for the statewide Cradle-to-Career Data System will support the analysis of county- and district-level trends; however, the system will not support individual case management for the foreseeable future due to the complexity of navigating local data-sharing agreements and practices.

In California, existing case management data systems, like Foster Focus and the Los Angeles County Office of Education's Educational Passport, can connect otherwise fragmented data, but these systems are not used everywhere in the state, and where they are used, they are not always employed by both education and child welfare staff as joint case management tools. Additionally, data quality can be a challenge; in particular, incomplete or missing data can hamper collaborative case management. The reasons behind these challenges may be multiple and complex and can include high caseloads and high turnover among child welfare staff; system-use costs that can make participation prohibitive, particularly in districts with very few students in foster care; a lack of available staff with the capacity or training to use these systems; and difficulty developing cross-agency data-sharing agreements that address privacy concerns and clearly articulate planned uses for shared data. The state could help cultivate the development, implementation, and dissemination of best practices for data-informed, collaborative case management by establishing a program similar to the state's Homeless Innovative Programs Grant, which is intended to identify and scale up innovative practices that improve the educational stability, access, and academic achievement of students experiencing

homelessness.[128] Innovative practices can be disseminated through the California Department of Education; the California Department of Social Services, which administers the state's child welfare programs; and the Foster Youth Program Technical Assistance Provider.

Nationally, a similar federal investment (through the federal Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability Grant program) funded 10 pilot programs and led to the development and expansion of innovative cross-sector collaboration and collaborative case management data practices to support students in foster care.[129] For example, one grantee, Kids in School Rule! (KISR!), was a collaboration between Cincinnati Public Schools, the Hamilton County Job and Family Services Department, the juvenile court, and the local nonprofit Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati to support students in foster care. Federal funds were used to expand to all district schools a pilot, real-time data dashboard that integrated data from the district and the Job and Family Services Department. The integrated data system was used for case management and also to inform judges of critical education issues when students came before the court.[130] Data elements include a permanency plan and placement type from child welfare information systems and education data that are updated daily, including grade point average, attendance, discipline referrals, and aggregate measures of educational risk generated from other data points.[131] In addition to expanding the integrated data system, the project also established liaisons at each school to support students in foster care; a handbook detailing procedures and responsibilities for each project partner; and specialized training for social workers, school staff, and judges related to the program. Over 3 years, 97% of KISR! seniors graduated—exceeding the district's overall graduation rate—and attendance, school stability, and promotion rates increased for students in foster care served by the program.

Co-locate education and child welfare staff.

Linked data systems are critical for effective case management, but students in foster care may have urgent needs that cannot wait for data entry and review. Counties could consider co-locating educational staff working as case managers in child welfare offices, which can facilitate rapid communication of sudden changes in a student's foster care placement as well as urgent education, health, and mental health needs. FYSCP coordinators shared that this strategy can help build trust between agency staff and provide educationally relevant information to help ensure educational needs are taken into account when making decisions about foster care placements, which in turn can help improve school stability or support smoother transitions for students when school changes are necessary.[132]

4. Implement school designs and practices that allow for prompt identification and stronger support of student needs.

To support ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, district and school leaders can use resources, such as the $13.5 billion for California districts in the American Rescue Plan Act, to implement school- and district-level practices that allow for prompt identification and support of student needs. Creating relationship-centered, trauma-informed schools grounded in the science of learning and development will be important for improving outcomes for students in foster care who face multiple barriers to engagement.

Implement relationship-centered school design and practices as part of a system of tiered interventions.

The various sources of instability that students in foster care face—from family separation to moving placements or facing exclusionary school discipline—make it critically important that they feel connected to and engaged with their school communities. Districts could organize schools to focus on relationship-centered designs that ensure each student is connected to caring adults who can identify and secure supports when they are needed.[133] Relationship-centered school designs include check-in and advisory structures. In effective advisory systems, each teacher advises and serves as an advocate for a small group of students (usually 15–20), often over 2 to 4 years. Teachers facilitate an advisory class that meets regularly to support academic progress, teach social and emotional skills and strategies, and create a community of students who support one another.[134] Another approach involves developing schedules that give teams of teachers time to meet to talk about specific students and their needs and progress. A further approach is looping, in which the same group of students has a teacher for more than 1 year. Equally important for older students in foster care are practices to elevate students' voices and needs through engagement in student-initiated projects on topics of concern or leadership in advisories and clubs, such as Kern County's YES! clubs.

When implemented as part of the foundational tier in an MTSS, these school designs can support students in foster care by buffering the stresses of school and home instability and by enabling prompt referrals to higher tiers of personalized supports and interventions, when needed.

Increase access to professional development that equips school staff to address the needs of students in foster care.

Students in foster care are more likely to have faced trauma and to have experienced higher rates of school and home instability. School staff, including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, mental health professionals, and front-office staff, need access to professional development that equips them to respond to the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students in foster care in productive and compassionate ways, rather than resorting to exclusionary discipline. Training could help school staff understand the educational rights of students in foster care and focus on strategies grounded in the science of learning and development, including trauma-informed practices, restorative practices, and social and emotional learning. To support this professional learning, districts can leverage the $1.5 billion in funding provided through the Educator Effectiveness Block Grant. These funds will be expended over 5 years and can be used for professional learning on, among other things, strategies to implement trauma-informed practices and social and emotional learning and practices to create a positive school climate, including restorative justice and MTSS.[135]

Conclusion

California's students in foster care are a student group too often underserved. Students in foster care may experience a range of challenges that create barriers to school success. These can include the experience of trauma and school mobility as well as exclusionary discipline that contributes to high absenteeism. Moreover, difficulties in accessing supports and services have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges, students in foster care can and do succeed when provided with access to resources and academic and social and emotional supports tailored to their specific learning needs.

Supporting the educational needs of students in foster care involves partnership among schools, districts, county offices of education, and the many organizations and agencies that support child welfare. Effective collaboration is essential for providing this student group with the resources and tools they need to have full access to education and to succeed in the future. Over recent years, California has enacted a number of legislative steps to build this collaboration and create supports for students in foster care. Despite these efforts, improvements in the educational outcomes for students in foster care have been modest, and challenges remain.

Drawing on quantitative data analysis and interviews with key county foster youth services coordinators, this report identified several strategies that can help support learning outcomes for students in foster care. These include school-based teams and professional learning for trauma-informed practice; community schools to integrate services; co-location and county-level structures for closer interagency cooperation; and state actions to improve data sharing, interagency collaboration, and technical assistance. Recent investments in education by the state may provide an opportunity to advance implementation of these and other measures to support the educational success of students in foster care.

Appendix A: Methods

Data Sources and Analysis

This report drew on two sources of quantitative data and one source of qualitative data. The quantitative data sources were (1) publicly available cumulative enrollment, attendance, discipline, and graduation data from the California Department of Education for 2018–19, and (2) administrative data from the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and from the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) for 2015–16 to 2018–19. The latter was provided to the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) by the California Department of Education under special request. The qualitative data were collected from focus groups and interviews with 11 coordinators from the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) conducted between December 2020 and January 2021. The 11 interviewees represented 11 counties from 9 regions of the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association and spanned urban, suburban, and rural areas of California.

Quantitative data sources and analysis

Analysis of student-level data provided under request combined several data sets from the state's CALPADS system:

- Enrollment data (2015–16 to 2018–19): School enrollment and period of attendance data were used to calculate student mobility (i.e., the frequency of changing schools in a given school year).

- Demographic data (2018–19): Variables included race/ethnicity and gender.

- Discipline data (2018–19): Information on the number of disciplinary interventions in a school year and action taken (e.g., suspension or expulsion) was included.

- Students in foster care and special education (2015–16 to 2018–19): Indicators included data on whether a student is identified as a student in foster care and/or as eligible for special education services.

The data also included outcomes data from CAASPP:

- Student-level achievement data (2018–19): Information included achievement levels for the tested grades, 3–8 and 11.

- Demographic data (2018–19): Race/ethnicity data were drawn from this data set to reconcile differences in CALPADS.

- Other student-level variables: English language status and tested dates, economic status, migrant status, and special education status variables were used.

To begin our analyses, we defined the 2018–19 school year using two dates: September 1, 2018, to June 1, 2019. We excluded enrollment records with an exit date prior to September 1, 2018, or a start date after June 1, 2019. To estimate mobility, we included movements among primary enrollments (i.e., those in which a student appears on a register, roll, or list while not concurrently attending

another school and that covered all or part of the 2018–19 school year) or short-term enrollments (i.e., those that lasted for less than 30 calendar days and that occurred during the school year). Primary enrollments of fewer than 3 days were excluded from these counts.

CALPADS data sets were cleaned and merged with the cleaned CAASPP file using a unique student identifier. We dropped nonvalid observations (those falling outside the 2018–19 school year or of insufficient duration) and those for students whose grade level of longest duration was not in grades k–12. We retained records for students with at least one valid enrollment in grades k–12 during 2018–19 or students who completed the CAASPP assessment. Our final analytic sample yielded 6,329,209 unique records, including those for 46,340 students in foster care. For analyses of achievement, we restricted the data set to the 3,256,134 students enrolled for the CAASPP English language arts and mathematics assessments, including 21,659 students in foster care. Valid CAASPP scores were obtained for 3,162,910 unique records in English language arts and 3,170,971 in mathematics, including 19,747 and 19,624 students in foster care in each subject, respectively.

We supplemented our analytic sample with information from publicly downloadable files, linked using the corresponding school and district identifiers. Variables included school proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and whether a school was eligible for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI).

Qualitative data sources and analysis

Qualitative focus groups and interviews were conducted with FYSCP coordinators. FYSCP coordinators were selected for this study because they play a critical role in coordinating and expanding access to services at the county level and assisting local educational agencies in the delivery of direct services.

Eleven coordinators were interviewed in total. Three focus groups and two individual interviews were held, with each lasting 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted between December 2020 and January 2021. The interviews used a semi-structured protocol. Questions addressed the educational supports most needed by students in foster care in each county, how county and local agencies work individually and collectively to provide those supports, the factors that enhance or hinder service provision, and examples of effective practices in each jurisdiction.

Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by two researchers. Themes and categories were deductively analyzed to understand respondents' perspectives on ongoing challenges that continue to interfere with local efforts to supports students in foster care and promising practices to support these students. Researchers individually developed categories of findings during this analysis and met to compare and refine categories.[136] Further refinement followed transcription review from a third researcher. Findings included in this report are ones that might particularly help policymakers understand the impacts of recent state policy reform as well as persistent challenges that can negatively impact the educational experiences of students in foster care.

Limitations

Quantitative analyses for this project used data received from the California Department of Education. This project did not analyze data from the California Department of Social Services, such as those regarding placement in foster care. Previous research finds that factors such as the type

of placement, number of placements, and time in foster care are also associated with differential educational outcomes.[137] Future research could investigate the combined associations of child welfare and education variables on student learning outcomes.

In addition, we interviewed FYSCP coordinators from county offices of education, given their role in coordinating the broad range of services needed by students in foster care. This report identified interagency collaboration as an important factor in student access to services. Future research could involve interviews with stakeholders from child welfare and other agencies to gain further insight into effective modes of collaboration.

Appendix B: Data Tables

Frequency tables in this section represent the samples used in descriptive analyses drawing upon data supplied under special request from the California Department of Education.

Table B1
Demographics for Students in Foster Care, 2018–19

	Total		Students Not in Foster Care		Students in Foster Care	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Gender						
• Female	3,051,045	48%	3,028,984	48.2%	22,061	47.6%
• Male	3,277,191	52%	3,252,936	51.8%	24,255	52.3%
• Nonbinary	973	0%	949	0%	24	0.1%
Total	**6,329,209**	**100%**	**6,282,869**	**100%**	**46,340**	**100%**
Race/Ethnicity						
• Native American / Alaskan	33,077	0.5%	32,582	0.5%	495	1.1%
• Asian	591,510	9.3%	591,011	9.4%	499	1.1%
• Pacific Islander / Hawaiian	29,795	0.5%	29,657	0.5%	138	0.3%
• Filipino/a	144,928	2.3%	144,752	2.3%	176	0.4%
• Hispanic / Latino/a	3,471,688	54.9%	3,445,239	54.8%	26,449	57.1%
• Black	354,871	5.6%	347,215	5.5%	7,656	16.5%
• White	1,440,434	22.8%	1,432,463	22.8%	7,971	17.2%
• Two or more races	262,736	4.2%	259,780	4.1%	2,956	6.4%
• Missing	170	0%	170	0%	0	0%
Total	**6,329,209**	**100.0%**	**6,282,869**	**100%**	**46,340**	**100%**
Students With Disabilities						
• No	5,513,102	87.1%	5,481,302	87.2%	31,800	68.6%
• Yes	816,107	12.9%	801,567	12.8%	14,540	31.4%
Total	**6,329,209**	**100.0%**	**6,282,869**	**100%**	**46,340**	**100%**

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Table B2
Total School Moves (Primary and Short Term) in 2018–19

	Students Not in Foster Care		Students in Foster Care	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total School Moves (Primary and Short Term)				
• No moves	5,967,422	95%	30,400	66%
• 1 move	272,220	4%	9,769	21%
• 2 moves	35,966	1%	3,884	8%
• 3+ moves	7,261	0.1%	2,287	5%
Total	**6,282,869**	**100%**	**46,340**	**100%**

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Table B3
High Mobility by Race/Ethnicity, 2018–19

	Students Not in Foster Care		Students in Foster Care	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Race/Ethnicity				
• Native American / Alaskan	383	0.9%	50	0.8%
• Asian	918	2%	45	0.7%
• Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	218	0.5%	‡	‡
• Filipino/a	264	0.6%	‡	‡
• Hispanic / Latino/a	25,876	60%	3382	55%
• Black	5,666	13%	1254	20%
• White	7,328	17%	897	15%
• Two or more races	2,574	6%	510	8%
Total	**43,227**	**100%**	**6,171**	**100%**

Note: ‡ indicates suppression due to small cell size. High mobility is defined as two or more school moves during the school year.

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Table B4
Number and Percentage of Students by School Poverty Level, 2018–19

	Students Not in Foster Care		Students in Foster Care	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Percentage of School Population Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals				
• 0 to <20%	751,781	12%	1,142	2%
• 20% to <40%	1,067,438	17%	3,743	8%
• 40% to <60%	1,049,883	17%	6,489	14%
• 60% to <80%	1,384,020	22%	12,050	26%
• 80% to 100%	2,016,801	32%	22,799	49%
• Unknown	12,946	0%	117	0%
Total	43,227	100%	6,171	100%

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Table B5
Number and Percentage of Tested Students and Achievement Levels in English Language Arts, 2018–19

Grade	Number of Valid Scores	Percent Meeting or Exceeding	Standard Not Met		Standard Nearly Met		Standard Met		Standard Exceeded	
			Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All Students										
3	442,660	49%	124,116	28%	103,665	23%	98,247	22%	116,632	26%
4	435,323	49%	135,749	31%	84,233	19%	98,354	23%	116,987	27%
5	454,564	52%	129,259	28%	90,389	20%	127,388	28%	107,528	24%
6	457,431	50%	116,240	25%	112,435	25%	142,547	31%	86,209	19%
7	471,504	51%	124,437	26%	104,814	22%	156,562	33%	85,691	18%
8	461,481	49%	118,406	26%	115,051	25%	149,400	32%	78,624	17%
11	439,947	57%	93,941	21%	94,054	21%	132,726	30%	119,226	27%
Total	**3,162,910**	**51%**	**842,148**	**27%**	**704,641**	**22%**	**905,224**	**29%**	**710,897**	**22%**
Students Not in Foster Care										
3	439,524	49%	122,535	28%	102,908	23%	97,747	22%	116,334	26%
4	432,364	50%	134,090	31%	83,657	19%	97,864	23%	116,753	27%
5	451,743	52%	127,750	28%	89,819	20%	126,848	28%	107,326	24%
6	454,653	50%	114,800	25%	111,716	25%	142,040	31%	86,097	19%
7	468,713	52%	122,960	26%	104,150	22%	156,011	33%	85,592	18%
8	458,788	50%	116,979	25%	114,359	25%	148,916	32%	78,534	17%
11	437,378	57%	92,553	21%	93,453	21%	132,296	30%	119,076	27%
Total	**3,143,163**	**51%**	**831,667**	**26%**	**700,062**	**22%**	**901,722**	**29%**	**709,712**	**23%**
Students in Foster Care										
3	3,136	25%	1,581	50%	757	24%	500	16%	298	10%
4	2,959	24%	1,659	56%	576	19%	490	17%	234	8%
5	2,821	26%	1,509	53%	570	20%	540	19%	202	7%
6	2,778	22%	1,440	52%	719	26%	507	18%	112	4%
7	2,791	23%	1,477	53%	664	24%	551	20%	99	4%
8	2,693	21%	1,427	53%	692	26%	484	18%	90	3%
11	2,569	23%	1,388	54%	601	23%	430	17%	150	6%
Total	**19,747**	**24%**	**10,481**	**53%**	**4,579**	**23%**	**3,502**	**18%**	**1,185**	**6%**

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Table B6
Number and Percentage of Tested Students and Achievement Levels in Mathematics, 2018–19

Grade	Number of Valid Scores	Percent Meeting or Exceeding	Standard Not Met		Standard Nearly Met		Standard Met		Standard Exceeded	
			Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All Students										
3	444,866	50%	119,018	27%	102,439	23%	123,275	28%	100,134	23%
4	437,414	45%	108,246	25%	132,603	30%	108,987	25%	87,578	20%
5	456,345	38%	160,960	35%	121,992	27%	76,676	17%	96,717	21%
6	459,016	39%	157,018	34%	125,183	27%	85,467	19%	91,348	20%
7	472,985	38%	172,405	36%	121,562	26%	87,380	18%	91,638	19%
8	462,238	37%	188,483	41%	104,426	23%	73,102	16%	96,227	21%
11	438,107	32%	199,254	45%	97,601	22%	80,566	18%	60,686	14%
Total	3,170,971	40%	1,105,384	35%	805,806	25%	635,453	20%	624,328	20%
Students Not in Foster Care										
3	441,749	50%	117,465	27%	101,669	23%	122,705	28%	99,910	23%
4	434,464	45%	106,813	25%	131,624	30%	108,585	25%	87,442	20%
5	453,534	38%	159,233	35%	121,307	27%	76,410	17%	96,584	21%
6	456,254	39%	155,273	34%	124,527	27%	85,208	19%	91,246	20%
7	470,207	38%	170,563	36%	120,960	26%	87,117	19%	91,567	19%
8	459,558	37%	186,571	41%	103,953	23%	72,891	16%	96,143	21%
11	435,581	32%	197,147	45%	97,333	22%	80,443	18%	60,658	14%
Total	3,151,347	40%	1,093,065	35%	801,373	25%	633,359	20%	623,550	20%
Students in Foster Care										
3	3,117	25%	1,553	50%	770	25%	570	18%	224	7%
4	2,950	18%	1,433	49%	979	33%	402	14%	136	5%
5	2,811	14%	1,727	61%	685	24%	266	9%	133	5%
6	2,762	13%	1,745	63%	656	24%	259	9%	102	4%
7	2,778	12%	1,842	66%	602	22%	263	9%	71	3%
8	2,680	11%	1,912	71%	473	18%	211	8%	84	3%
11	2,526	6%	2,107	83%	268	11%	123	5%	28	1%
Total	19,624	15%	12,319	63%	4,433	23%	2,094	11%	778	4%

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

Endnotes

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