FactSheet *December 2013*

Foster youth
New study describes demographic and achievement characteristics of California's foster youth

Introduction

The unique needs of California's students in foster care have often been overlooked in efforts to improve academic achievement for underserved and underperforming students. California's wide-ranging new funding reform, the Local Control Funding Formula, brings the challenges faced by foster youth into greater focus by 1) identifying students in foster care as among California's neediest students, 2) providing additional funding to help districts meet those needs, and 3) requiring the state to "track the academic progress of children in foster care—the first in the nation to do so."

This fact sheet summarizes a new study of California's foster youth that describes the demographic, schooling, and achievement patterns for these students. An innovation of the study is that it compares outcomes for foster youth to those of other at-risk groups of students— as well as to those of the state's K–12 population as a whole—and thus reveals challenges that might be greater for students in foster care than for other low-income pupils. This "first-ever education snapshot" of all California's K–12 foster youth is the result of a new capacity to link statewide education and child welfare data. A fundamental conclusion of the research is that California students in foster care have unique characteristics that justify their identification as a separate at-risk student subgroup and that this subgroup has a significant achievement gap compared to the other student groups.

Findings

In the 2009-10 school year, 43,140 K-12 students ages 5-17 attended California schools and were concentrated in a relatively small number of districts: two-thirds were enrolled in just 10 percent of the state's school districts.

» Forty-three percent of foster youth were Latino, 26 percent African-American, 23 percent White, and 2 percent Asian. Every group showed an equal percentage of males and females.

» Foster youth were much more likely than low-income students, as a whole, to be 1) African-American, 2) classified with a disability—particularly an emotional disturbance—, 3) overage for their grade, and 4) enrolled in grades 9-11. Foster youth were less likely than low-income students overall to be Latino or to be English learners.

» Approximately one-third of foster youth changed schools at least once during the school year while only about 9 percent of other low income students did so. They were also much more likely to attend nontraditional public schools, suggesting that they "were unsuccessful at traditional schools".

» Students in foster care were consistently more likely than the general student population to attend the state's lowest-performing schools and less likely to attend the state's highest-performing schools: approximately 15 percent attended the former while only 2 percent attended the latter.

» On statewide tests of English language arts and math, foster youth showed an achievement gap similar to English learners and to students with disabilities and were consistently outperformed by low-income students.

» Students in foster care were less likely than all comparison groups to graduate from high school. The graduation rate for all grade-12 students statewide was 84 percent, but for students in foster care, it was just 58 percent—the lowest rate among the at-risk student groups.

Figure 1: Percentage proficient or above in English language arts on the California Standards Test, California public school students grades 2-11, 2009-10
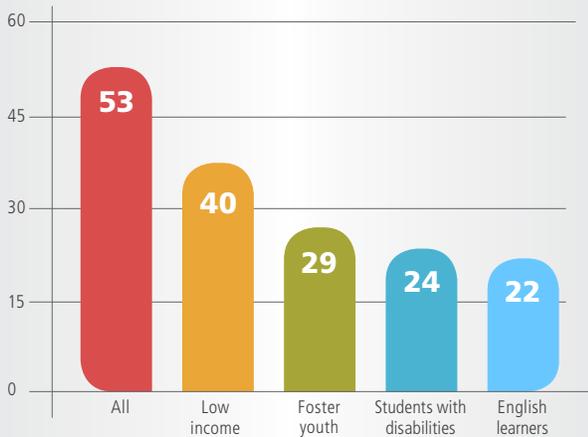

Figure 2: Percentage proficient or above in mathematics on the California Standards Test, California public school students grades 2-7, 2009-10
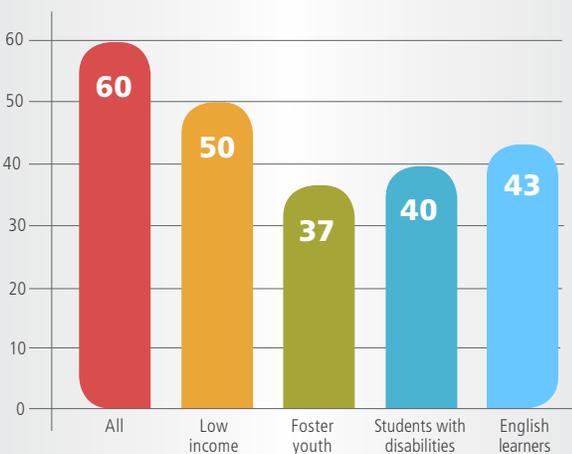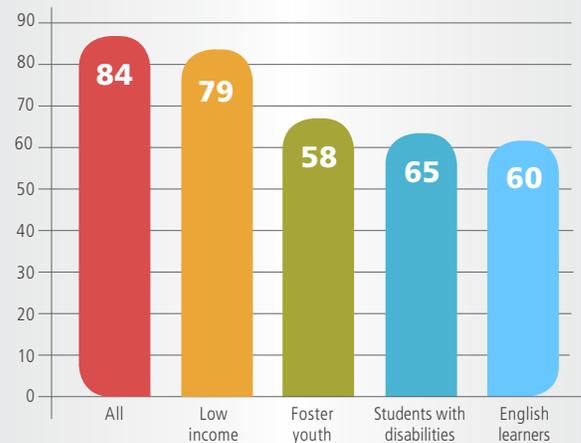

Figure 3: Percentage of grade-12 graduates, California public schools, 2009-10

Conclusion

The over 43,000 K-12 students in foster care face a range of educational, social, and emotional challenges and are struggling in California schools. Yet evidence indicates that when they receive adequate academic and social supports they can persist and succeed in school. By identifying these students as high needs and by beginning to track who they are and how they are faring, the state's new accountability reforms provide a springboard for beginning to more assiduously address these challenges.

Recommendations

» Act now: the challenges that these students face are significant and urgent.

» Identify foster youth and their achievement outcomes in your district.

» In addition to test scores and dropout rates, look at data for other factors for high risk students: absenteeism, suspension, and expulsion, as well as the pre-school and postsecondary experiences, of these students relative to other at-risk student groups.

» Use all of these data to guide investments in improving outcomes for foster youth.

Further information

Barrat, V. X., & Berliner, B. (2013). *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools.* San Francisco: WestEd. This report is available online at http://bit.ly/JJ8GY3

CSBA Sample Policies and Policy Briefs

(See www.csba.org/LCFFToolkit > Plan > Tools & Resources for hyperlinks to these resources)

CSBA Policy Brief: Educating Foster Youth: Best Practices and Board Considerations (March 2008)
http://bit.ly/1ccbvg9

CSBA's sample policy for foster youth: BP/AR 6173.1 – Education for Foster Youth (November 2010)
www.csba.org/pnb.aspx

Other Resources

(See www.csba.org/FosterYouth)

Frequently Asked Questions about AB 490: Foster Youth Educational Rights; Casey Family Programs, May 2006
http://bit.ly/1dntPzh

Fact Sheet: Foster Care Education; Casey Family Programs, 2005
http://bit.ly/IW5BmF

Grappling with the Gaps: Toward a Research Agenda to Meet the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care; WestEd, The Center for Teaching and Learning, Stuart Foundation, April 2010
http://bit.ly/1jjfz1M

Education of Homeless Children and Youth; National Coalition for the Homeless, September 2009
http://bit.ly/1bQtmD4

Educating Children in Foster Care; Casey Family Programs, 2007
http://bit.ly/1kjjA4p

Blueprint For Change: Education Success for Children in Foster Care; American Bar Association, Casey Family Programs, 2008
http://bit.ly/1hmju9F

Mythbusting: Breaking Down Confidentiality and Decision-Making Barriers to Meet the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care, American Bar Association, 2005
http://bit.ly/IW7cZS

Foster Care in California Achievements and Challenges; Public Policy Institute of California, May 2010
http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=905

My So-Called Emancipation From Foster Care to Homelessness for California Youth, Human Rights Watch, May 2010
http://bit.ly/19dsa2x

Education of Foster Youth in California, Legislative Analyst's Office, May 2009
http://bit.ly/18See8k

What Can We Do for Our Foster Youth? Op-ed by CSBA Delegate, Region 5 Carrie Du Bois
http://bit.ly/1kjkWfq

Related links

**California Department of Education
Foster Youth website**
http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/fy/

California Youth Connection
http://www.calyouthconn.org/

Casey Family Programs
http://www.casey.org/

The Center for Child and Youth Policy
http://ccyp.berkeley.edu/

National Center for Youth Law
http://www.youthlaw.org/

School Enrollment Procedures for Foster Youth
http://bit.ly/1jjhvHP

10 Facts Every Foster Youth Should Know
http://www.fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov/10facts.html