Governance Brief

Foster Youth: Supports for Success
by Terra Thorne

Introduction

California recently became the first state in the nation to incorporate foster youth into its education accountability framework, with the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula and the Local Control and Accountability Plans. Under LCFF and LCAP, districts must identify the steps they will take to improve the academic outcomes of foster youth. However, there is much more to learn about which services, teaching strategies or interventions will raise the academic performance and life-long success of these youth. This brief is intended to help board members better understand the specific challenges foster youth face, and the support, academic and otherwise, that will help foster students succeed. It also includes information drawn from surveys of 33 former foster youth who have achieved an important benchmark: enrollment in higher education.

Foster youth face distinct challenges

Foster youth represent a small, but particularly vulnerable group of students in California's public education system. One out of 150 California students is in foster care and two-thirds of these students are enrolled in just 10 percent of the state's school districts.[1] Although the population is small, foster youth face significant challenges that educators can help address.

Courts typically remove foster youth from their homes due to substantiated claims of abuse or neglect. Such experiences can result in trauma that puts foster youth at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse problems, and a variety of other mental health issues.[2] In addition, this population faces increased risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, homelessness and early parenting.[3,4]

These out-of-school challenges can directly affect academic success. A Washington state study found that students who experience three or more traumatic events during their childhood had three times the rate of academic failure, five times the rate of severe attendance problems, and six times the rate of school behavior problems as their peers with no known trauma.[5]

In addition, foster students typically experience higher school mobility than other students, often because of changes in placement while in the foster care system. In California, 69 percent of foster youth had three or more placements during their time in the foster care system.[6] Each change in school can result in delayed enrollment or difficulty transferring academic records, and students may lose four to six months of educational progress with each school change.[7]

Foster students lag behind even other at-risk students on a number of academic measures, including high school graduation rates, math and English proficiency (see figure 1).[8] Research also finds that the more time students spend in foster care, the less likely they are to enter community college in California. For those who do enroll, they often leave before completing their first year.
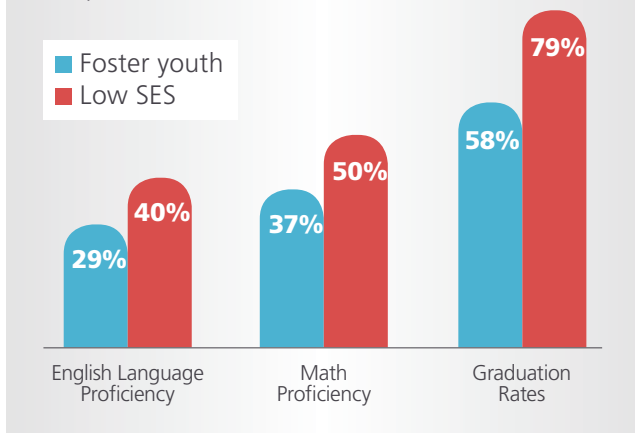
Supports for success: What the research shows

There is a small but growing body of academic literature focused on what helps foster youth overcome barriers to attain educational success. Most of this literature focuses on the role of outside influences, or external factors.

External factors

Social support is consistently identified as one of the most important factors helping foster youth and former foster youth attain successful educational outcomes.[9,10,11]

Figure 1. Measures of academic achievement, CA public schools, 2009-10

Foster youth ■
Low SES ■

	English Language Proficiency	Math Proficiency	Graduation Rates
Foster youth	29%	37%	58%
Low SES	40%	50%	79%

Social support includes relationships in which peers and adults connect with foster youth to help instill acceptance, self-confidence and understanding. It also includes offering helpful, encouraging and positive academic feedback, as well as providing critical resources such as financial aid and academic assistance. Research indicates that such support from adults and peers contributes to increased student self-confidence and sense of purpose, which in turn bolsters academic persistence and success.[12] College-enrolled former foster youth indicate social support as a key contributing factor to their academic achievement.[13,14,15]

In addition to social support, the research identifies several other external influences as important contributors to success. Meaningful participation in school and community activities can nurture feelings of belonging, and provide avenues for positive social interactions that help foster youth succeed.[16] Former foster youth enrolled in college also cited financial aid information, college advising and a challenging academic environment (such as enrollment in Advanced Placement and honors courses) as key factors in helping them prepare for college.[17]

Research also suggests that outreach efforts such as the Independent Living programs can help foster youth successfully transition out of care. A study on the influence of ILP on foster youth found that participants had more access to educational support from tutoring to financial aid resources to supports for building social-emotional skills.[18] Another study found foster youth who received consistent independent living training were almost three times more likely to graduate from high school than students who did not receive this support.[19]

Internal factors

Another area of focus of is on the role of helping students build a sense of competence, self-confidence, goal orientation, diligence, persistence and grit.[20,21,22] There are instructional practices available to help build these non-cognitive qualities. While these practices are promising, the association between internal traits and individual characteristics and student achievement is still emerging. There is much more to learn about how non-cognitive factors influence academic performance, and the best ways to build and support these factors.

Researchers have also begun to develop tools to help educators identify and measure such character development in the classroom.[23] Such instructional tools can help school districts focus on non-cognitive development. However, districts are should proceed with caution, since these tools cannot be used as part of an accountability system and labeling students as deficient can create stigma.[24]

Survey findings

With policy makers and educators in California increasingly focused on improving the academic outcomes of foster youth, the perspective of foster youth themselves is also key to understanding contributing factors to academic success. A recent survey administered by the California State University, Sacramento public policy and administration program asked former foster youth to identify the components that enabled them to make it to college, (42 percent of foster students do not graduate from high school).[25] Thirty-three foster youth enrolled at two 4-year universities in California responded.

Highlighted findings from the survey

» More than 70 percent of respondents indicated social support was an important factor in helping them transition to college.

» Of the respondents who identified an individual as a source of social support, half cited teachers, counselors or other mentors whom they met in their school environment. Given the instability that many foster youth face in their home lives, school may provide a stabilizing environment from which this population can draw support.

» Many students cited support programs for foster youth and at-risk students (e.g., Foster Youth Services and Upward Bound) as key factors helping them along their academic path.

» There is a clear emphasis among this student group that receiving guidance and information about college during their high school years was critical to their success. When asked what factors were important in their transition to college, information about financial aid was cited the most frequently (87 percent of respondents) followed by advising about college (84 percent).

While the survey captured student perceptions about what helped them enroll in college, it did not establish whether the assessed factors actually influenced their academic performance. Additionally, the group of students surveyed represents a small and likely unique portion of the overall foster youth population, so results should not be generalized to broader populations. Nonetheless, the survey findings provide some important insight about how these 33 students accounted for their own success.

One of the most important lessons from the survey is that the students did not rely on only one source of support. Rather, respondents named several sources of encouragement that helped them succeed at enrolling in college. Interconnected supports also boosted student's self-confidence and belief that higher education was attainable. One previous study calls these caring relationships "turnaround people" because they not only provide students with emotional and social support, but they also help youth understand their own strengths and abilities.[26] Such relationships can be key in creating a college-going mindset, one that allows foster students to become comfortable with the concept of college, to have information on how to apply to school, and receive the social and emotional support that facilitates their personal growth and helps them succeed.

The Local Control Funding Formula

California included foster students as a targeted subgroup under the LCFF in recognition of their distinct needs. The funding system, enacted in 2013, dedicates a greater portion of current school funding towards improving outcomes for foster youth, low-income students and English language learners.[27]

With this targeted funding comes greater accountability. LCFF also requires districts and county offices to develop a Local Control and Accountability Plan, which identifies strategies, goals and measures of academic progress across student groups.[28] While still in its early implementation, evidence indicates that school districts need greater understanding of their foster youth and how best to serve them. A review of 100 LCAPs in 2014 showed that most school districts did not identify distinct goals for foster youth.

More often, districts addressed foster youth needs within their goals for low-income students.[29] Given the unique challenges that foster youth experience, school districts and their boards are encouraged to develop programs and services to accommodate this unique student group. As part of this, it is critical to first Identify effective practices for helping foster youth achieve their academic goals.

The importance of foster youth data

As a result of LCFF's inclusion of foster youth as a specific group for targeted improvement, there are new data-sharing requirements to help with accountability and tracking student improvement. The California Department of Social Services, for example, shares information with the California Department of Education, which then tries to identify the student's current school and education history. CDE then passes the information along to school districts. However, this data-sharing relationship is still relatively new, and as a result, the information school districts receive may not yet be complete. An additional concern with regard to sharing these sensitive data is how to protect students and share the data that will help inform appropriate and timely support, without infringing on students' privacy unnecessarily.

Questions and considerations for school boards

As important decision makers in their districts and counties, board members are responsible for asking questions and thinking strategically about improving the educational success of foster students. Board decisions regarding policies, goals and budgets directly impact the district's ability to meet foster youth needs. Each district or county board of education faces different challenges including demographics, geography, history, conditions in the local community, and the number of foster students enrolled. The following questions can help board members better understand their local context and how best to support the foster youth in their communities:

1. How many foster youth attend school in your school district? Where do they attend school? What information is district staff gathering about them?

2. Is the school district taking advantage of the new data-sharing agreements between the child welfare and social services systems and the education system to learn all it can about these students? If so, what measures are taken to balance the need for protection of students' confidentiality with that for information in order to best serve them?

3. Do school staff — certificated, classified, and/or administrative — receive any training or professional development for understanding and working with foster youth? If so, what and how often?

4. Does your school district have a policy in place regarding credit transfer for foster youth? Has it adopted the Partial Credit Model Policy ?

5. LCFF requires involvement from the community in the development of the LCAP — does your school district engage foster youth and foster parents?

6. Does your LCAP include strategies and goals for addressing the unique needs of foster youth as well as metrics to assess progress and make adjustments as needed?

7. Are there cross-agency partnerships that exist or could be developed in your district focusing on foster youth that might assist the school district to meet their needs?

8. How can your district best collaborate across systems due to the number of agencies involved in a foster student's life (e.g., child welfare, FYS, mental health services, the courts)?

Conclusion

The goal of ensuring that all students have equal opportunity to achieve their potential should remain a top priority for board members. Foster youth are a particularly vulnerable population: An understanding of who they are and effective strategies for addressing their needs is essential to ensuring their success. CSBA will continue to focus on how board members can best improve outcomes for California's diverse student population and how to support foster youth to meet and overcome their unique challenges.

For further information:

Please visit CSBA's foster youth webpage at csba.org/fosteryouth for a helpful Fact Sheet on foster youth and to view short videos on how to support foster youth success.

CSBA provides related sample board policies and administrative regulations, on foster youth. The most relevant is BP/AR 6173.1 - Education for Foster Youth, which will refer districts to other appropriate policies.

Endnotes

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20 See Endnote 9

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22 See Endnote 12

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24 Shifrer, D. (2013). Stigma of a label: Educational expectation for high school students labeled with learning disabilities. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 54(4), 462-480.

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26 See Endnote 9

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