

Pandemic-Driven Learning Loss Amongst Students in Foster Care



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures have further exacerbated the unique challenges that youth in foster care faced long before the pandemic and now put them at even greater risk of falling behind in school. Students in foster care are disproportionately impacted by school closures since they often lack access to the technology and support they need to participate in distance learning. Distance learning has disrupted important educational supports that schools provide to many foster youth to help them fully engage in learning and overcome performance deficits resulting from trauma and school changes. Moreover, students in foster care, who have already experienced the trauma of abuse and neglect, are experiencing added isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety brought on by the pandemic and disruptions to normal routines and visitation with family. Many encounter greater placement instability as caregivers struggle to meet their needs while balancing increasing responsibilities and coping with severely limited access to critical supports and services. All of this compounds the trauma that foster youth have already experienced and can make it difficult for foster youth to focus on school and learn.

Prior to the pandemic, students in foster care fared worse than their peers on multiple measures of educational engagement and achievement due to the unique challenges they face. For example, students in foster care were more than twice as likely as students overall to be chronically absent from school during the 2018-19 school year due to placement changes, school transfers, court hearings, school discipline, and parental visitation. In addition, students in foster care were more than four times as likely as students overall to have been suspended one or more times during the year. Students in foster care were struggling to stay on track in school, as they were far less likely to perform at grade level in English and math compared to their peers. In the 2018-19 school year, only 56% of foster youth graduated high school, nearly 30 percentage points lower than students overall (85%).ⁱ

During school closures this spring, students in foster care faced additional obstacles, including a lack of technology, connectivity, and a supportive learning environment, that made it difficult for them to fully engage in distance learning. Unfortunately, recent studies predict that the pandemic will widen the significant achievement gaps that already existed between students in foster care and their peers. This means that, compared to students not in foster care, foster youth are at disproportionate risk of falling further behind in the 2020-21 school year. In fact, a report on student engagement in distance learning in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) during the spring school closures highlights this concern. The report shows that students who were in foster care or homeless were less engaged in online learning than other vulnerable student groups, including students from low-income communities, students with disabilities, and English Learners.ⁱⁱ

Next Steps

Students in foster care need critical educational supports and services more than ever to help them recover from learning loss, heal from the additional trauma caused by the pandemic, and prevent further loss. In 2021, Children Now will collaborate with child welfare and education stakeholders to:

1. Ensure students in foster care have the technology and connectivity they need to fully engage in distance learning;
2. Ensure that resources are available to provide students in foster care with the supports to mitigate learning loss and help them succeed academically; and
3. Elevate the need for additional supports for caregivers, who play an important role in supporting youth in foster care in their education, to prepare caregivers to support foster youth in the distance learning environment.

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ⁱ All data are from CDE's DataQuest, <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

ⁱⁱ Los Angeles Unified School District, Independent Analysis Unit (July 2020). Student engagement online during school facilities closures: An analysis of L.A. Unified secondary students' Schoology activity from March 16 to May 22, 2020. Retrieved from <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202020%200707%20-%20Student%20Engagement%20Online%20During%20Closures.pdf>