Transparency and Accountability for Students in Foster Care

Background

Students in foster care face unique academic challenges that can disrupt their learning. Foster youth have experienced the trauma of child abuse or neglect and the additional trauma of being removed from their homes, families and communities. Students in foster care often experience multiple changes in home placements, which translates into high rates of school mobility compared to other vulnerable students. In addition, court and family visits and disproportionate school discipline cause foster youth to miss significant class time. These challenges negatively impact foster youth's ability to succeed in school. In comparison to other disadvantaged students, foster youth are more likely to perform below grade level. In the 2018-19 academic year, foster youth had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (28%), suspensions (15%), expulsions (nearly 0.4%), and high school dropouts (28%) compared to other high-needs student groups. They also had the lowest graduation rate (56%). [i]

In 2013, the Legislature overhauled the education financing system and passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Acknowledging the distinct experiences of foster youth, LCFF identified foster youth as one of three high-needs student groups needing extra education supports, along with English Language Learners and low-income students. Students in each of these three groups generate additional funding based on an "unduplicated count," meaning each student is counted only once even if they meet the criteria for more than one of the student groups. As part of the LCFF accountability system, school districts must annually submit Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) that demonstrate how they are using LCFF funds to improve students' academic performance and outcomes. Yet LCAPs do not hold school districts accountable for providing differentiated services and supports to foster youth as compared to low-income students generally. Children Now reviewed a sample of local educational agencies' (LEAs) LCAPs from 2017-18 and found that only about 30% of LCAPs included any services or supports that were designed to meet the unique educational needs of foster youth. Instead, many LEAs provide services that address the needs of high-needs students generally (e.g., tutoring) and report that it targets all three unduplicated student groups.

Children Now has been working to improve transparency around the targeted educational supports available to students in foster care and elevate the need to broaden the data collection and analysis of their educational experiences. For instance, we secured a significant change to the instructions for the LCAP that now encourages LEAs to specifically describe the supports they provide to meet the needs of students in foster care.

Next Steps

With appropriate funding and supports, foster youth can succeed in school, thrive academically, and graduate adequately prepared for post-secondary education. In the coming year, Children Now will collaborate with child welfare and education stakeholders to elevate the need to:

1. Strengthen accountability by requiring school districts to be more transparent in their LCAPs with respect to the targeted services and supports they provide to their students in foster care; and
2. Pass legislation requiring LEAs to report how they are spending supplemental and concentration grant funds, including how much of these funds are directed to students in foster care.

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[i] DataQuest, California Department of Education, https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/