

Education of Students in Foster Care



Students in foster care face unique obstacles that can disrupt their learning and impair their overall educational experience and achievement.

Students in foster care are too often chronically absent from school.

In order to succeed academically, students must be present at school and ready to learn. Recent data from the California Department of Education (CDE)¹ showed that 28% of foster youth were chronically absent (i.e., they missed 10% or more days of the school year), a rate more than twice as high than for California students overall and higher than for any other disadvantaged student group. Placement changes, school transfers, court hearings, school discipline, and parental visitation all negatively impact their school attendance, as well as their engagement with learning and ability to do well.

Students in foster care are too often suspended or expelled from school.

Due to the trauma they have experienced, foster youth may react negatively in certain situations; this may be perceived as misbehavior, contributing to their disproportionate rates of school discipline. Over the course of a school year, 15% of youth in foster care were suspended one or more times, which is more than four times the suspension rate for California students overall and higher than the suspension rates of any other vulnerable student group. In addition, youth in foster care were expelled at higher rates than other disadvantaged student groups and nearly five times the rate for all students.

Students in foster care struggle to stay on track in school.

Because of frequent absences, school transfers, and the effects of trauma that can make it difficult to focus in school, students in foster care often struggle to stay on track in school. By the eleventh grade, only 23% of foster youth were at grade level in English and only 7% were at grade level in Math. Compared to their peers not in foster care, foster youth were 1.75 times more likely to perform below grade level in English and 1.3 times more likely to perform below grade level in Math.

Too few students in foster care finish high school in four years.

Students in foster care are far less likely to earn a high school diploma in four years than other disadvantaged students. Specifically, only 56% of youth in foster care graduated high school, far less than other vulnerable students (e.g., 70% of homeless students and 81% of low-income students) and students overall (85%).

With proper supports and services, students in foster care can overcome these challenges and thrive academically.

Moving forward, it will be important to ensure:

1. Students in foster care receive targeted services and supports to help improve their academic engagement and achievement;
2. Schools receive adequate funding to meet their unique educational needs;
3. School stability for students in foster care is strengthened by keeping youth in their school of origin when it is in their best interest to do so and reducing the number of school transfers they experience; and
4. The state expands the data that it collects and shares on youth in foster care, including the number of school transfers they experience each year, in order to better support and meet the needs of students in foster care.

For more information, contact Susanna Kniffen at skniffen@childrennow.org.

¹ All data are from CDE's DataQuest, <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>