Transparency and Accountability for Students in Foster Care

Children Now

Background

Students in foster care face unique academic challenges that can disrupt their learning. They 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 youth in foster care to miss significant class time. These challenges negatively impact their ability to succeed in school. In comparison to other disadvantaged students, youth in foster care are more likely to perform below grade level. In the 2018-19 academic year, they 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 youth in foster care, LCFF identified them 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 students in foster care as compared to low-income students generally.

Work has been ongoing 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, the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education made 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. As a result of the change in instructions, the 2021-22 LCAPs show a slight improvement in the level of transparency provided by districts about the services and supports they provide to students in foster care. Specifically, 33% of 2021-22 LCAPs included any services or supports that were designed to meet the unique educational needs of youth in foster care, up from about 24% of 2019-20 LCAPs. However, too many LCAPs still do not provide sufficient information about the services and supports that LEAs provide for students in foster care.

Next Steps

With appropriate funding and supports, youth in foster care can succeed in school, thrive academically, and graduate adequately prepared for post-secondary education. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure:

1. Stronger accountability for LEAs by requiring them to be more transparent in their LCAPs with respect to the targeted services and supports they provide to their students in foster care;
2. Schools receive adequate funding to meet foster youth's unique educational needs; and
3. Legislation is passed to require 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.

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

---

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