

# Education of Students in Foster Care



## 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 2022-23 academic year, they had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (39%), suspensions (14%), expulsions (0.3%), and high school dropouts (24%) compared to other high-needs student groups. They also had the lowest graduation rate (61%).<sup>i</sup>

In the past 20 years, California policymakers have enacted many policies to help students in foster care overcome the distinct obstacles they face to academic success. With the passage of AB 490 in 2003, California made significant improvements to address the unique educational needs of students in foster care, including allowing them to remain in their school of origin after they change placements if it is in their best interest to do so. 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-need student groups needing extra education supports, along with English Language Learners and low-income students.

As part of the LCFF accountability system, local educational agencies (LEAs) must annually submit Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) that demonstrate how they are using LCFF funds to improve students' academic performance and outcomes. To improve transparency around the targeted educational supports available to students in foster care, the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education made a significant change to the LCAP instructions 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 2022-23 LCAPs show an improvement in the level of transparency provided by districts about the services and supports they provide to students in foster care. Specifically, 43% of 2022-23 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.

Beginning with the 2024-25 LCAPs, the State now requires LEAs to address in their LCAPs the low performance of a school and/or student group, such as students in foster care, as identified by a "red" status level on the California School Dashboard. In those cases, LEAs must include a "focus goal" in their LCAP, which must be specific, measurable, and time bound, to address areas of low performance.

## 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 and transparency for LEAs by monitoring the impact of the new requirement in LCAPs for LEAs with low performing student groups, particularly students in foster care;
2. Schools are adequately resourced and providing the targeted services and supports needed to meet the unique educational needs of youth in foster care;
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;
4. The state expands the data that it collects and shares on youth in foster care, including enrollment by school setting and the number of school transfers they experience each year, in order to better support and meet the needs of students in foster care; and
5. Legislation is passed to require LEAs to report how they are spending supplemental and concentration grant funds, including how much of these funds is directed to students in foster care.

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<sup>i</sup> DataQuest, California Department of Education, <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>