

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. 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 2024-25 academic year, they had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (37%), suspensions (13%), expulsions (0.3%), and high school dropouts (21%) compared to other high-need student groups. They also had the lowest graduation rate (67%).ⁱ

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 requiring 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. In 2023, the State passed new requirements for LEAs to include specific actions in their LCAPs to address instances where a school or student group receives the lowest performance level – or a “red” status indicator – on one or more measures of the California State Dashboard. With this change, LCAPs hold greater potential to improve accountability for vulnerable student groups and essentially guide education in California. Based on our analysis of a sample of 2025-26 LCAPs, the potential for increased accountability for students in foster care remains to be realized. Although compared to the previous year, the latest LCAPs show an increase in the level of transparency provided by districts about the services and supports they plan to provide to students in foster care, the percentage that do so is still far too low. Specifically, about one third (35%) of 2025-26 district LCAPs included any services or supports that were targeted to meet the unique educational needs of youth in foster care. And this is considerably lower than nearly half (47%) of 2023-24 district LCAPs that included services and supports for youth in foster care, just prior to the new requirements. The data indicates that more work remains to be done to improve transparency in LCAPs around targeted services and supports for students in foster care. In the coming year, we will work with partners to consider how the LCAP instructions might be enhanced to ensure LEAs provide greater transparency in their LCAPs around planned services and supports for youth 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 or work opportunities. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure:

1. 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, including by providing transportation and reducing the number of school transfers they experience;
2. Stronger accountability and transparency for Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) by monitoring the impact of the new requirement in Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) for LEAs with low performing student groups, particularly students in foster care;
3. Schools are adequately resourced and providing the targeted services and supports needed to meet the unique educational needs of youth in foster care; and
4. Legislation is passed to require LEAs to report how they are spending LCFF supplemental and concentration grant funds, including how much of this funding is directed to students in foster care.

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