

## Chapter 7. What's Working for Academic Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care

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## Abstract

Children in foster care are at a greater risk of negative educational outcomes (e.g., low grades, high school dropout) than children not in foster care. Recognizing the importance of supporting the educational needs of students in foster care, momentum has grown over the last two decades at the federal, state, and local levels to prioritize the educational needs of students in foster care. Child welfare agencies, education agencies, and courts are working together to improve education policies and practices around the country. In the following chapter, an overview of the empirical evidence documenting the risk children in foster care face at school is provided. Information on important legislative efforts and policy guidance (i.e., Blueprint for Change) that have sought to address the barriers that increase the risk of poor academic functioning among these children is reviewed. Importantly, there has also been an increase in collecting and reporting on data at state and local levels to evaluate what programs are working and identify where interventions are needed for addressing the educational needs of children in foster care. Case examples of these programs are provided and discussed to demonstrate how changes in policy can be enacted at the community level.

*Abbreviations:* American Bar Association (ABA), Blueprint for Change (Blueprint for Change: Education Successes for Children in Foster Care), DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), Washington District of Columbia (DC), Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections), Hamilton Jobs and Family Services (JFS), Kids in School Rule! (KISR!), Legal Center for Foster Care and Education (LCFCE), Local Education Agency (LEA), Learning Partner Dashboard (LPD), State Education Agency (SEA)

## **Introduction**

Examining local, regional, and national data in conjunction with one another on the academic functioning of the over 260,000 school-age youth in foster care (i.e., ages 5-17) has consistently shown that these youth tend to be at a greater risk of poor school functioning compared to non-system-involved youth (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018; Trout et al., 2008). These findings appear across a wide variety of academic performance indicators and assessments. For example, youth in foster care are more likely to receive lower school grades and lower standardized test scores, as well as fail classes or drop out of high school at higher rates, in comparison to their non-foster care peers (e.g., Pecora, 2012; Zetlin et al., 2012). Moreover, concerns with poor academic functioning continue into adulthood. Studies of youth who emancipated from foster care suggest that they drop out of college or university at higher rates than those without a foster care history (Cox, 2013; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012). Data provided in Table 1 from the *Fostering Success in Education National Factsheet on the Education Outcomes of Children in Foster Care* (2018) provides a snapshot on the academic vulnerability of this population both during and after their time in foster care.

**Table 1.***Brief Overview of Academic Outcomes Among Youth in Foster Care*

<b>School Outcome of Interest</b>	<b>Foster Care Estimates</b>
% of youth in foster care who change schools when first entering care	31%-75% <sup>a</sup>
% of 17-to 18-year-olds who experienced 5 or more school changes while in foster care	34.2% <sup>b</sup>
Likelihood of youth in foster care being absent from school	About twice that of other students <sup>c</sup>
Likelihood of 17-to 18-year-old youth in foster care having out-of-school suspension	About twice that of other students (e.g., 24% vs. national general population of 7%) <sup>d</sup>
Likelihood of 17-to 18-year-old youth in foster care being expelled	About 3 times that of other students <sup>b</sup>
Average reading level of 17-to 18-year-old youth in foster care	Average level 7 <sup>th</sup> grade; 44% at high school level or higher <sup>b</sup>
% of youth in foster care receiving special education services	35.6% - 47.3% <sup>e</sup>
% of 17-to 18-year-olds in foster care who want to go to college	70%- 84% <sup>f</sup>
% of youth in foster care who complete high school by 18 (via diploma or GED)	Colorado: 41.8% Midwest Study (age 19): 63% <sup>g</sup>
% of youth in foster care who complete high school by age 21	65% by age 21 (National data) (Compared with 86% among all youth ages 18-24) <sup>h</sup>
% of youth in foster care who graduated from high school and enrolled in college at some level	31.8%- 45.3% (Compared with national college enrollment rate of 69.2% in 2015, which is slightly below the national record high of 70.2% in 2009) <sup>i</sup>

Adapted from *Fostering Success in Education [factsheet]*, National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. 2018. Where available, information on general population youth provided. <sup>a</sup> = Clemens et al. (2017); Frerer et al. (2013). <sup>b</sup> = Courtney et al. (2004). <sup>c</sup> = Zorc et al. (2013); California Department of Education (2017). <sup>d</sup> = Scherr (2006). <sup>e</sup> = Pecora et al. (2010); Courtney et al. (2004). <sup>f</sup> = McMillen et al. (2003); Courtney et al. (2004). <sup>g</sup> = Parra & Martinez (2015); Courtney et al. (2005). <sup>h</sup> = National Center for Education Statistics (2014); U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016). <sup>i</sup> = Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015); Courtney et al. (2010); National Center for Education Statistics (2014); See Pecora et al. (2010).

Although youth in foster care may face many of the same normative educational challenges as their non-foster care peers, there are a number of unique barriers or risk factors that tend to be more prevalent among youth in foster care, which in turn may increase the likelihood of poor academic functioning. These risk factors can impede educational progress from before school begins, all the way through postsecondary education. For example, youth in

foster care tend to experience a greater number of traumatic or adverse experiences compared to non-foster care youth, such as exposure to domestic violence, community violence, and maltreatment (Stambaugh et al., 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2017). These types of adverse or traumatic events, which also include the experience of being removed from their biological home and placed in care (Wechsler-Zimring, Kearney, Kaur, & Day, 2012), can increase the risk for physical and psychological problems (e.g., internalizing and externalizing concerns) which may then interfere with performance and well-being in school (McGuire & Jackson, 2018; Morton, 2018; Oswald et al., 2010). For example, internalizing concerns, such as anxiety and depression, may make it more challenging for youth to focus in class or have the motivation to complete schoolwork. Additionally, externalizing concerns may be associated with disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion, over-representation in alternative education programs for behavioral problems, and increased truancy, all of which can result in missing important school material or assignments. Traumatic or adverse experiences can also make it more challenging to function in areas of life closely associated with academics. For example, youth in foster care who experience frequent adversity may struggle with aspects of social functioning, such as with the ability to form quality social relationships with teachers or classmates, or seek out social support from others when they need help in school (e.g., Perry, 2006). In addition to the individual-level issues these youth experience, it can also be challenging for teachers, schools, and other educational-focused agencies/services to support these youth without proper training and resources (e.g., Zetlin et al., 2012).

Children in foster care may also be more vulnerable to experiencing poor academic outcomes because of frequent mobility in living situation and school. At the most basic level, children in the foster care system often change home placements several times while in state or local custody (Casey Family Programs, 2018). According to the Child Welfare Outcomes 2016 (2019) report, which tracks the ability of states' foster care systems to keep children in stable living situations, the median percentage of youth who were in foster care *only less than a year* but who experienced two or more moves during that time was 15.7% among all reporting states (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2019). This number more than doubles to a median percentage of 34.6% for youth who were in foster care between one to two years, and then to 60.7% for youth in care more than two years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2019). Estimates from studies with large samples of youth in foster care suggest that youth experience between three to nine placement changes during their full time in care (McGuire et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2004; Villodas et al., 2016). Unfortunately, school placement is often tied to living placement, and frequent changes in living placements can lead to changes in a child's school as well (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Prevalence estimates indicate that up to 90% of youth will experience at least one school change while in care, with only a small percentage of these school changes being attributed to reasons besides a placement change (e.g., move in residence for a foster care family; Fawley-King, Trask, Zhang, & Aarons, 2017). For example, Colorado Department of Education's Foster Care Education Program (2019) tracked the rates of students in foster care

experiencing at least one school move during a single school year that were not because of a normative change, such as switching from a middle school to high school or leaving school because the student graduated. Among the 17 counties in the state with at least 16 students in foster care, the percentages of students in foster care with at least one school change ranged from 30.6% to 76.2%. Similar reports have been observed in states across the U.S. (e.g., California; Frerer et al., 2013). Experiencing multiple school changes is also not uncommon. For example, in a sample of over 700 youth in foster care who were close to emancipation, 34.2% reported experiencing five or more school changes throughout their time in foster care (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004).

Research has shown that changes in living situations and schools can have a negative influence on youth in foster care's ability to succeed in school. That is, the more times a child moves placements or the more times the child moves schools, the more likely it is that they will demonstrate indicators of poor performance in school. For example, Clemens et al. (2016) found a negative relation between moves and school graduation, such that the likelihood of a student graduating with their 4-year or even 6-year cohort decreased with each additional school move. There are many reasons why frequent placement and school changes may be associated with poor performance or functioning in school. On an individual level and similar to experiences of trauma or adversity, placements changes may increase the risk for a wide range of mental health concerns (e.g., internalizing concerns, externalizing concerns) that can negatively influence schooling (McGuire et al., 2018; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). On a broader system level, moving placements and school can influence a child's ability to do well in school by creating logistical challenges for the child, schools, and foster care families. This includes system-related challenges associated with placement instability and schooling such as: delayed school enrollment, issues with credit transfers and meeting graduation requirements, identification or misidentification for special education services, gaps in special education services, and inferior on-site educational programs (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018).

The body of research on the educational outcomes of students in foster care has grown significantly over the past several years. Public and private agencies, universities, and philanthropic organizations have contributed to this increase in data collection and research at the state and local levels. Taken together, this research shows a consistent theme: children in foster care face significant barriers to their educational progress. Although research on youth in foster care in general continues to be minimal, the growing empirical focus on academic functioning has helped provide a clearer picture on where these students tend to struggle and what risk factors might be contributing to these shortcomings. This information can then be used to better support these youth. One method for better supporting these youth is through creating and modifying policy and law.

## **Steps Toward Developing and Changing Education Policy**

Given the widespread issues associated with being able to perform well in school among youth in foster care, academic outcomes and improving youths' ability to succeed in school has become a focus of agencies and organizations that seek to better serve these youth. Momentum has been growing at the federal, state, and local levels to prioritize the education needs of students in foster care through the development of statutes, policies, and programs focused specifically on schooling. Despite the obstacles that the more than 400,000 U.S. children and youth in foster care experience—including the negative effects of abuse, neglect, separation, and inconsistent living situations—these children may still be able to achieve positive school experiences with the support of strong practices and policies (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018).

Federal policy has undergone a significant shift over the past two decades, adding protections and supports for students in foster care related to their education. In this section, major legislation that has been passed at the national or federal level that has led to exemplary strategies in some state and local jurisdictions will be reviewed and discussed. This includes the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). When considering the influence of these federal laws, it is important to remember that every state or local jurisdiction has different needs for their foster care and educational systems, and accountable agencies prioritize addressing their specific areas of need rather than implementing a general model. Also, as it relates to federal law reviewed in this chapter, federal regulation defines foster care as “24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the child welfare agency has placement and care responsibility” (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. DHHS, 2016, pg. 6). This definition includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes headed by relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pre-adoptive homes. This definition may vary state to state, which as a result may encompass different groups of students.

### *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*

The first notable policy change of the 2000s at the federal level that continues to have direct implications for youth in foster care specifically is the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections; 42 U.S.C. § 675) in 2008. In addition to making changes that promote permanency through kinship care and adoption and extending services to Native/Alaskan Native American children, this policy also includes goals for promoting educational stability and success for children in foster care. This was the first time that federal child welfare law included specific provisions that promoted school stability and success for youth in foster care and required collaboration between education and child welfare

agencies to achieve these goals. Broadly, Fostering Connections makes it a requirement that all children in foster care need to be immediately and appropriately enrolled in school if the student is changing schools or a living situation. This act also ensures that school-related concerns or needs should be considered in placement decision making, and when possible, keeping the child in their original school if this is in the child's best interest. To help with the process of trying to keep children in their original school, this legislation makes it possible for states to use federal funding for transportation related needs, such as if a child needs to be bussed in from outside the school zone (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). With the passing of this law, it was the first time that school stability was prioritized in federal law and marked a shift in the need for child welfare agencies to prioritize the educational needs of students in foster care. These aspects of the legislation are also a direct attempt to address the barriers and negative influence on academic functioning associated with placement and school stability.

### *Every Student Succeeds Act*

In December 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Most provisions of the law took effect in December 2016. The primary goal of ESSA is to promote equality in educational opportunity for all U.S. students, by increasing educational commitments and protections for the most disadvantaged students. ESSA requirements include establishing protections, monitoring academic performance, and ensuring proper distribution of resources for students and schools at risk of failure. Although monitoring of academic performance (e.g., graduation rates, state assessments) for students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups has long been required, ESSA added a requirement for tracking the performance of youth in foster care.

Requirements in ESSA require State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to work with child welfare agencies to ensure the education stability of children in foster care if it is in the best interest of the child. For example, this includes a presumption that children will stay in their school of origin if it is in their best interest and that barriers to achieving this goal are to be addressed, if possible, by LEAs and child welfare. Barriers can include issues such as transportation to and from school or ensuring accurate and speedy transition of school records if a move is necessary. These ESSA requirements complement those in the Fostering Connections Act. ESSA seeks to address the system-level barriers that could impede educational progress among children in foster care. This law also seeks to increase empirical evidence on how children in foster care are performing in school.



### *Influence of Federal Policy on State and Local Policy*

The enactment of ESSA and Fostering Connections had a notable influence on state-level policy. Although several states had policies requiring points of contact and school stability prior to ESSA, the pace of state and local legislation on supports for youth in foster care has accelerated since ESSA was passed in 2015. State and local policies sometimes expand on the protections established by ESSA. Pursuant to ESSA requirements, all state education agencies have identified foster care points of contact (2015; 20 U.S.C. § 1112, pp. 55-56) who are responsible for the oversight of the state's implementation of ESSA's foster care provisions, including collaboration with child welfare. Moreover, many states have also identified a counterpart within their state child welfare agency, though this is not required by ESSA or other federal laws (McNaught & Peeler, 2017). The points of contact in the SEA and state child welfare agency frequently collaborate to publish state guidance, resolve local disputes, provide technical assistance to local points of contact, and motivate or facilitate additional state legislation.

Specific examples of these practices can be seen across the U.S. For example, the state of Nevada passed Assembly Bill 491 (AB 491) in 2017, which requires the use of best interest decision-making guidelines, the establishment of local points of contact for each agency, the preparation of an annual statewide report with data on foster care students specifically, and the submission of academic information for youth in foster care to the courts every year. Nevada's AB 491 also went beyond ESSA's protections by giving students in foster care the right to transportation to support school stability for the entire school year, even if the child exits foster care prior to the end of school year. (ESSA asserts the right to transportation only while a child is in foster care.) New York also expanded ESSA's protections with Education Law §3244- "Education of Children in Foster Care" (2018). In addition to reiterating ESSA's protection of the students' right to remain in their school or origin and to immediate enrollment, New York's education law clarified responsibilities for how support is provided to students in foster care by providing guidelines on the sharing of transportation costs between child welfare and education agencies.

In an effort to further support the implementation of best practices and sharing of information on federal and state laws as it relates to youth in foster care and education, several states have hosted statewide or regional meetings and trainings to bring together local points of contact. Additionally, states have provided local agencies with joint guidance and tools such as best interest determination guides and transportation agreements to help guide the work and ensure school stability and academic success for children in foster care. For example, to support the implementation of both ESSA and New York's Education Law §3244, New York released a toolkit for schools with information about the requirements of the laws, timelines for ensuring proper application of the requirements, and example forms for setting up transportation needs.

As these laws encourage, state and local child welfare and education agencies must work together to identify barriers and challenges to meeting the goals set for youth in care and identify solutions to overcome these obstacles. Frequently, each of these systems sees the other

as the source of the problem. But often, both agencies will need to make changes. Working together to identify barriers and possible solutions ensures all partners have a common understanding of the mission and plan for moving forward. Success depends on an openness to learn about and address each agency's requirements, obstacles, and opportunities and recognize that these complex issues require sufficient staff time and resources to assess and solve.

## Blueprint for Change

Despite efforts described above, the research evidence suggests that there are still many ways to positively support these youth through policy efforts at the federal, state, and local levels (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). To assist local and state child welfare agencies, courts, and schools in supporting students in foster care, the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education (LCFCE) created the Blueprint for Change: Education Success for Children in Foster Care (Blueprint for Change; Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014). Believing that collaboration is the key to achieving practice, policy, and cultural change to support education stability and achievement for children in foster care, the LCFCE combined efforts with the National Working Group and Education Advisory Group to establish a tool for change and identify goals that would address the global issues that challenge the education success for children and youth in foster care while highlighting national, state, and local examples. The National Working Group heightens national awareness of the education needs of students in foster care by promoting promising practices across the country, while the Education Advisory Group serves as an advisory board to the National Working Group and includes leading education organizations with a commitment to advancing educational stability and achievement for youth in foster care. Together, these groups consist of more than 23 national child welfare and education organizations, including the American Bar Association (ABA) Center on Children and the Law, Education Law Center, and Juvenile Law Center. As a result of these collaborations and efforts, the LCFCE created the Blueprint for Change: Education Success for Children in Foster Care (Blueprint for Change; Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014).

The Blueprint for Change consists of eight goals and 56 corresponding benchmarks that create a framework or checklist for direct case advocacy and system reform to assist local and state child welfare agencies, courts, and schools in supporting students in foster care (Table 2). The *Goals* highlight the support and service needs of youth that must be addressed to facilitate education success for children in foster care. The eight goals are written from a youth's perspective as a constant reminder that the work should serve youth. The *Benchmarks* are the more specific and concrete elements of each broader goal. This outline can be tailored for a variety of individuals who work with youth in foster care, including caseworkers, caretakers, legal advocates, and judges. Moreover, the Blueprint for Change can be used to identify a jurisdiction's strengths and areas for improvement. In the ensuing paragraphs, each goal and its benchmarks are provided and reviewed.

**Table 2.**

*Blueprint for Change Goals and Benchmarks*

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Benchmarks</b>
<b>Goal 1:</b> Youth are entitled to remain in their same school when feasible	<b>1-A</b> Youth's foster care placement decisions take school stability into account, and school stability is a priority whenever possible and in the child's best interests. <b>1-B</b> Youth have sufficient foster home and permanent living options available in their home communities to reduce the need for school moves. <b>1-C</b> When in their best interests, youth have a legal right to remain in the same school (school of origin) even when they move outside the school district, and schools that retain children are not financially penalized. <b>1-D</b> Youth are entitled to necessary transportation to their school of origin, with responsibilities clearly designated for transportation costs. <b>1-E</b> Youth have necessary support and information to make school of origin decisions; youth, birth parents, caseworkers, foster parents, courts, attorneys, schools, and educators are trained about legal entitlements and appeal and dispute procedures. <b>1-F</b> Youth with disabilities continue in an appropriate education setting, regardless of changes in foster care placements, and transportation is provided in accordance with the youth's Individualized Education Program (IEP).
<b>Goal 2:</b> Youth are guaranteed seamless transitions between schools and school districts when school moves occur	<b>2-A</b> Youth have a right to be enrolled immediately in a new school and to begin classes promptly. <b>2-B</b> Youth can be enrolled in school by any person who has care or control of the child (i.e., caseworker or foster parent). <b>2-C</b> Youth enrollment and delivery of appropriate services are not delayed due to school or record requirements (i.e., immunization records, birth certificates, and school uniforms); designated child welfare, education, and court staff facilitate and coordinate transitions and receive training on special procedures. <b>2-D</b> Youth education records are comprehensive and accurate, and promptly follow youth to any new school or placement; records are kept private and shared only with necessary individuals working with the youth. <b>2-E</b> Youth who arrive in a new school during the school term are allowed to participate in all academic and extracurricular programs even if normal timelines have run or programs are full. <b>2-F</b> Youth receive credit and partial credit for coursework completed at the prior school. <b>2-G</b> Youth have the ability to receive a high school diploma even when they have attended multiple schools with varying graduation requirements. <b>2-H</b> Eligible youth with disabilities receive the protections outlined in federal and state law, including timelines for evaluations, implementation of an IEP or an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), and placement in the least restrictive environment, even when they change school districts.
<b>Goal 3:</b> Young children enter school ready to learn	<b>3-A</b> Young children have all the appropriate health interventions necessary, including enrollment in the Medical Assistance Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) Program, and receive comprehensive evaluations and treatment. <b>3-B</b> Young children are given special prioritization and treatment in

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early childhood programs (including Head Start, Early Headstart, and preschool programs). **3-C** Young children receive developmentally appropriate counseling and supports in their early childhood programs with sensitivity to their abuse and neglect experiences. **3-D** Young children have caretakers who have been provided information on the children’s medical and developmental needs, and who have received training and support to be effective advocates. **3-E** Children under age 3 with developmental delays, or a high probability of developing such delays, are identified as early as possible, promptly referred for evaluation for early intervention services, and promptly evaluated and served. **3-F** Young children at high risk of developmental delays are screened appropriately and qualify for early intervention services whenever possible. **3-G** Children under age 3 who have been involved in a substantiated case of child abuse and neglect, who have been identified as affected by substance abuse or withdrawal symptoms resulting from prenatal drug exposure, or who have experienced a substantiated case of trauma due to exposure to family violence are referred to the early intervention system for screening. **3-H** Children with disabilities ages 3 to school age are referred and evaluated, and receive appropriate preschool early intervention programs.

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**Goal 4:** Youth have the opportunity and support to fully participate in all aspects of the school experience

**4-A** Youth are entitled and encouraged to participate in all aspects of the school experience, including academic programs, extracurricular activities, and social events, and are not excluded because of being in out-of-home care. **4-B** Youth receive the additional supports necessary to be included in all aspects of the school experience. **4-C** Youth’s records relating to his or her education and needs are made available to necessary individuals working with the youth, while respecting the youth’s privacy. **4-D** Youth’s appointments and court appearances are scheduled to minimize their impact on the child’s education, and children are not penalized for school time or work missed because of court or child welfare case related activities. **4-E** Youth are not inappropriately placed in nonpublic schools or other alternative school settings, including schools for students with disabilities. **4-F** Youth receive supports to improve performance on statewide achievement tests and other measures of academic success (such as attendance and graduation). **4-G** Youth are surrounded by trained professionals that have the knowledge and skills to work with children who have experienced abuse and neglect; school curricula and programs utilize the research on trauma informed care. **4-H** Youth with disabilities are located, evaluated, and identified as eligible for special services. **4-I** Youth with disabilities receive the special help they need to learn content appropriate to their grade level or, when that is not possible, the content that is appropriate to their learning level. **4-J** Youth with disabilities receive their education in regular classrooms (with the necessary supports and accommodations) whenever possible.

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**Goal 5:** Youth have supports to prevent school dropout,

**5-A** Youth are not disproportionately subjected to school discipline or school exclusion, and are not placed in alternative schools for disruptive students as a means to address truancy or as a disciplinary measure. **5-B** Youth have access to school counselors and other school staff familiar with the needs of children who

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truncy, and disciplinary actions	<p>have experienced abuse and neglect, and the staff has mastered effective remediation strategies. <b>5-C</b> Youth have advocates at school disciplinary and other proceedings who are trained on procedures related to dropout, truncy, and discipline. <b>5-D</b> Youth at risk of truncy or dropping out have access to programs and supports designed to engage them in school. <b>5-E</b> Youth who have dropped out of school have access to programs and supports designed to reintegrate them into a school or a General Educational Development (GED) program. <b>5-F</b> Youth with disabilities have behavior intervention plans in place to minimize inappropriate school behaviors and to reduce the need for disciplinary action or referral to the police. <b>5-G</b> Youth with disabilities receive the procedural protections outlined in federal law so that they are not punished for behavior that is a symptom of their disability.</p>
<p><b>Goal 6:</b> Youth are involved and engaged in all aspects of their education and educational planning and are empowered to be advocates for their education needs and pursuits</p>	<p><b>6-A</b> Youth are routinely asked about their educational preferences and needs, including their view on whether to change schools when their living situation changes. <b>6-B</b> Youth receive training about their educational rights commensurate to their age and developmental abilities. <b>6-C</b> Youth are given the opportunity to participate in court proceedings, and their engagement is supported with transportation and accommodations to decrease the impact on school attendance and schoolwork; attorneys, guardians ad litem, CASAs, and judges are trained on involving youth in court, and encourage youth participation. <b>6-D</b> Youth participate in school and child welfare meetings and planning about their education and their future. <b>6-E</b> Youth are surrounded by school and child welfare professionals with appropriate training and strategies to engage youth in education planning. <b>6-F</b> Youth with disabilities actively participate in the special education process, especially in transition planning for post-school education and employment, and are provided with the supports necessary to effectively participate.</p>
<p><b>Goal 7:</b> Youth have an adult who is invested in their education during and after their time in out-of-home care</p>	<p><b>7-A</b> Youth are entitled to have a knowledgeable and trained education advocate who reinforces the value of the youth's investment in education and helps the youth plan for post-school training, employment, or college; efforts must be made to recruit appropriate individuals (i.e., foster parents, birth parents, child welfare caseworkers, teachers, and guidance counselors). <b>7-B</b> Youth exiting care (because of age or because their permanency objectives have been reached) have significant connections to at least one adult to help the youth continue education pursuits. <b>7-C</b> Youth have an education decision maker at all times during a child welfare case who is trained in the legal requirements relating to education decisions for children with and without disabilities. <b>7-D</b> Youth with disabilities who are eligible for the appointment of a surrogate parent have access to a pool of qualified, independent, and well-trained individuals who can serve in that role, and are assigned a surrogate in a timely manner, but no later than 30 days after a determination that a surrogate is needed.</p>

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<p><b>Goal 8:</b> Youth have supports to enter into, and complete post-secondary education</p>	<p><b>8-A</b> Youth are exposed to postsecondary education opportunities and receive academic support to achieve their future education goals. <b>8-B</b> Youth in care and youth who have exited care (because of age or because their permanency objectives have been reached) have financial support or tuition fee waivers to help them afford postsecondary education. <b>8-C</b> Youth have clear information and concrete help with obtaining and completing admission and financial aid documents. <b>8-D</b> Youth have access to housing during postsecondary school vacations or other times when school housing is unavailable. <b>8-E</b> Youth over 18 can remain in care and under the courts' jurisdiction to receive support and protection while pursuing postsecondary education. <b>8-F</b> Youth have access to academic, social, and emotional supports during, and through completion of, their postsecondary education. <b>8-G</b> Youth with disabilities pursuing higher education goals receive the supports to which they are entitled to under federal and state laws.</p>
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### *Goal 1: Youth Are Entitled to Remain in Their Same School When Feasible*

Given the high rates at which youth in foster care change living and school placements each year and the negative consequences on academic well-being associated with these changes (e.g., DHHS, 2019; McGuire et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2004), placement and school stability has become a primary focus of policy change. Youth in care are entitled to educational stability, and schools and child welfare agencies must make efforts to keep them in their same school whenever possible, as established by the Fostering Connections Act (2008) and ESSA (2015). To further build on these requirements, the Blueprint for Change benchmarks for this goal provide an outline for measuring whether the requirements are being met. For example, it provides reminders about prioritizing school stability and ensuring the youth's foster care placement decisions take school stability into consideration. Additionally, the benchmarks for this goal encourage youth, parent, foster parent, school, and other team member participation in the best interest decision for school placement as well as considering any disabilities and ensuring transportation to the school of origin when applicable.

### *Goal 2: Youth Are Guaranteed Seamless Transitions Between Schools and School Districts When School Moves Occur*

Sometimes, school moves cannot be avoided or moving schools may be in the best interests of the child. For example, federal and state policy prioritize placement in the care of kin over other placement options, regardless of whether it requires a change in school (Johnson, Speigman, Mauldon, Grimm, & Perry, 2018). School moves may result in delayed enrollment or delayed provision of educational support services at the new school. There can be lasting negative impacts of enrollment and service delays, including losing critical classroom time or

education material (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018), increased social and behavioral concerns, and even complications with the child welfare placement (Clemens, Klopfenstein, & Lalonde, 2018).

When school moves occur, there should be minimal disruption to the youth's education, which means enrollment even without normally required records, such as immunizations, education records, or birth certificates. ESSA requires the enrolling school to immediately contact students' prior school for relevant records and the prior school should immediately transfer those records; ESSA also requires schools to enroll children in foster care even if typically required records are not immediately available (ESSA, 2015; 20 U.S.C. § 1111). In addition, federal joint guidance for ESSA (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. DHHS, 2016 pp. 20-21) requires that schools ensure a child in foster care is regularly attending and fully participating in school and that their education needs are being met.

Building on ESSA, the Blueprint for Change also provides guidance for ensuring students graduate on time and receive their earned school credit, such as suggesting that differences in high school requirements (if a student changes high schools) not delay graduation. Further, the benchmarks provide guidance on who can enroll a child in the new school (e.g., caseworker, foster parent), and assert that no single entity (e.g., the schools, courts, or welfare system) or need of the child (e.g., special education or Individual Education Program) should delay school enrollment and transition.

### *Goal 3: Young Children Enter School Ready to Learn*

Children in foster care often demonstrate higher rates of physical, developmental, and mental health problems, and may enter into foster care with more unmet medical and mental health needs, than children in the general population (Szilagyi et al., 2015). These conditions can negatively impact academic functioning by interfering with focus, cognition, and emotional regulation, and may also correlate with increased risk of missing school or moving placements (McMillen et al., 2005; Seltzer et al., 2017).

Given the variety and prevalence of children with mental and physical health needs, it is important to identify children who may be at risk as early as possible and provide services for these children given the benefits of early intervention (Leslie et al., 2005). This is the primary focus of Goal 3 in Blueprint for Change. Goal 3 asserts the importance of referring young children in foster care for both (a) assessment or screening services to identify areas of concerns, and (b) treatment or intervention services if a concern is identified that may negatively impact academic functioning. This includes linking young children to a full range of screening and early intervention services. For example, child welfare systems, schools, and even primary care services could refer young children in foster care for assessment of language delays (Stock & Fisher, 2006), developmental delays (Leslie, Gordon, Ganger, & Gist, 2002), and social-

emotional issues (Jee et al., 2011), in addition to academic and learning disorders (Evans, Scott, & Schulz, 2004).

#### *Goal 4: Youth Have the Opportunity and Support to Fully Participate in All Aspects of the School Experience*

In addition to classroom education, an important part of the school experience is participation in extracurricular or non-instructional school activities. This can include participation in activities such as school clubs, sports, and music. Participation in these types of activities may help promote academic well-being given associations between participation in extracurricular activities and enhancement in a sense of community, quality social engagement, a sense of mastery, and improved self-value (e.g., Conn, Calais, Szilagy, Baldwin, & Jee, 2014; Klitsch, 2010). However, youth in foster care may not have access to these activities because of certain program or activity requirements, such as having available finances to cover to the costs of these activities, transportation, or residency requirements (e.g., living in a certain area for a set amount of time). Thus, the Blueprint for Change provides guidance on how to ensure these requirements do not serve as barriers to participation. For example, this might include equal participation in an after school or extracurricular activity by allowing students to participate in these activities despite moving in the middle of a school year after an activity has started.

Additionally, schools may provide further educational opportunities to supplement work in the classroom, such as tutoring services or additional support through IEP services (e.g., special education or study halls classes to help youth catch up on work), as well as opportunities for youth who might want to go beyond the standard educational trajectory (e.g., access to advanced placement classes). However, youth in foster care are often prevented from accessing these various types of school services, which again can stem from issues with transferring of school records following a school change or lack of financial resources (Piel, 2018). Barriers to participation for youth in out-of-home care should be clearly identified and dismantled to enable equitable access to services, supports, and opportunities. As described in the Blueprint for Change, specific policies and additional supports designed to improve academic achievement and broaden access to all aspects of the school experience can aid in effectively responding to these needs. Lastly, in further considering of all these services or activities a student in foster care may receive, this goal in the Blueprint for Change also reminds providers and individual working with these youth that specific demands of youth in foster care (e.g., attending court appearances) should not interfere with a child's participation in school and school-related activities.



### *Goal 5: Youth Have Supports to Prevent School Dropout, Truancy, and Disciplinary Actions*

Studies indicate that youth in foster care have dropout, truancy, and disciplinary rates far higher than the general student population (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). When students are removed from the classroom because of behavioral problems or other disciplinary actions, or these students do not show up to school, this can reduce their exposure to important classroom material, which in turn can further negatively impact academic functioning (e.g., Pickens & Tschopp, 2017). Additionally, dropping out of school and not finishing at least a high school education or GED has been found to be connected with poor functioning in adulthood, such as issues with housing instability and criminal activity (e.g., Berzin, 2008). These concerns are also associated with and can be exacerbated by other environmental factors for youth in foster care, such as evidence demonstrating that youth who experience frequent moves may be more likely to act out, skip school, or drop out altogether (e.g., Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009).

Considering the negative influence of these factors, the Blueprint for Change provides several benchmarks for this goal aimed at emphasizing the need for appropriate support, programs, and interventions to keep students in foster care engaged and in school. Rather than simply disciplining these students, the benchmarks seek to remind agencies working with these youth that the use of certain school policies (e.g., the use of alternative schools for disruptive students) and possible individual services (e.g., access to counselors and school advocates) should take into account the unique experiences of these youth. For example, this might include referring students for additional mental health and academic services as a first step, as opposed to sending these youth to an alternative school first. This may also include providing education/training to school staff and personnel on how to work with youth in foster care with experiences of trauma or who have a disability.

### *Goal 6: Youth Are Involved and Engaged in All Aspects of Their Education and Educational Planning and Are Empowered to be Advocates for Their Education Needs and Pursuits*

There are certain decision points where youth in foster care are guaranteed participation (e.g., independent living plans for older youth), but this is not always the case for education planning and decision making. Concerns have been raised about not only youth's involvement in educational decision making but also youth's knowledge about academic processes. For example, studies suggest that youth lack necessary knowledge about how to plan and prepare for future education beyond high school (e.g., Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Kirk & Day, 2011). This is not surprising, given evidence demonstrating a lack of knowledge among youth in foster

care about how to seek services for other health and well-being needs (e.g., accessing mental health services; Munson, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2011). As a result of lack of knowledge about the educational process, educating youth has even become the focus of some academic support services (e.g., Kirk & Day, 2011). Further, direct involvement or participation in the decision-making processes may have a positive influence on youth's willingness to follow through with any created plans and view of themselves; youth involvement also gives direction and guidance to the professionals and adults advocating on their behalf (e.g., Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2011).

To address some of the concerns about youth's involvement in educational planning and the services that may influence academic well-being (e.g., special education or tutoring services), the Blueprint for Change reminds providers and agencies about the importance of educating youth on their academic situations and opportunities, as well as having youth involved in any decision making related to academic well-being if deemed age and developmentally appropriate. This can include participation in court proceedings, school meetings, the special education process, and transition planning for postsecondary education or jobs, with the goal of assisting youth in becoming advocates on their own behalf. For example, where feasible given age and development, youth should participate in a school of origin best interest determination.

### *Goal 7: Youth Have an Adult Who Is Invested in Their Education During and After Their Time in Out-of-Home Care*

Several lines of research have demonstrated the benefit youth in foster care experience when having a supportive adult to help them achieve their education goals and pursuits. For example, research on the use of educational liaisons or specialists with expertise in both school and child welfare processes, who can serve as an advocate and support these youth, has shown to positively influence academic performance and well-being (e.g., Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Additionally, studies on the role of caregiver and teacher social support consistency demonstrate the benefits of these sources of support on educational outcomes among youth in foster care when they are involved in a youth's academics (e.g., Cheung, Lwin, & Jenkins, 2012; Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003).

ESSA (2015) requires that school districts, child welfare, and other youth serving agencies involved in the academic decision making of a child collaborate and share information when working with students in foster care. To further extend on ESSA, the Blueprint for Change details how these systems can further support youth by providing them with well-trained and knowledgeable adults who can support their academic well-being when necessary. When possible, this should include an adult with expertise on the legal requirements and available resources for youth in foster care in a school context. It is also critical that all students in foster care, and in particular students with disabilities, have an available adult who has the authority to make education decisions on their behalf and can consider all factors including the input of

the youth. It is also critical that youth have adults available to advocate for their rights and needs and to serve as mentors as they navigate the educational system.

### *Goal 8: Youth Have Supports to Enter Into and Complete Postsecondary Education*

Like other students, youth in foster care have aspirations of wanting to attend postsecondary education after high school. For example, large scale studies on youth in foster care have shown that between 40%-80% of youth in foster care express interest in wanting to attend a two-year or four-year college or university (e.g., Courtney et al., 2004; Kirk et al., 2013; Lemus et al., 2017). However, studies consistently indicate that youth who age out of foster care attend college less frequently than their non-foster peers, and, if attending, drop out at higher rates than their peers with no history of being in foster care (Gillum et al., 2016; Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

To achieve their full potential, older youth in care and those exiting care in or near adulthood need support and opportunities to participate in a wide range of postsecondary programs. Research shows that education outcomes improve when youth can stay in care beyond age 18 (e.g., Courtney & Hook, 2017). Moreover, research suggests that these youth may need specific services while in college or other postsecondary education endeavors that take into account aspects of their foster care history when addressing needs related to career and college counseling, assistance with applications and financial aid, and support while participating in their educational program of choice (Randolph & Thompson, 2017). Blueprint for Change provides guidance on how services can support youth's aspirations to complete postsecondary education both while in foster care and after emancipation from care. For example, starting while youth are typically still in care (i.e., 18 years of age or younger), services can be provided that expose youth to various experiences or requirements for obtaining education beyond high school. Additionally, given the evidence demonstrating a link between having access to services through foster care after age 18 and academic success (e.g., completing a postsecondary degree; Courtney & Hook, 2017), there is also guidance in the Blueprint for Change in Goal 8 on what types of services (e.g., financial aid, emotional and behavioral support) youth could receive to better support their academic aspirations.

### *Blueprint for Change in Practice: Blueprint for Change Strategy (Washington, DC)*

As is the case with children in foster care across the country, children in foster care in the District of Columbia (DC) face similar struggles with demonstrating equal academic outcomes as

youth not in foster care or meeting the minimum standards of education for in the school districts. For example, district testing completed in 2013 showed more than half of DC youth in care were not on grade level in reading and math per DC Public School standards (Peeler, 2016). Recognizing a need for increased education outcomes, the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) partnered with the ABA Center on Children and the Law to provide structure and guidance to the CFSA education strategy. Using the “Blueprint for Change” framework created by the LCFCE, CFSA aligned existing education efforts with new opportunities to create a comprehensive framework and vision for education stability and success for children and youth in CFSA’s custody. CFSA leadership, with guidance from the ABA, engaged in a 12-month review of CFSA policies and practices. Staff from all parts of the agency and external education partners provided input and ideas to shape CFSA’s new education strategy. The result was the CFSA-specific Blueprint for Change, which identified the agency’s strengths in addressing education issues, uncovered gaps and areas for improvement, and recommended changes through an action plan. The plan recommended action in six areas, which includes 70 strategies and over 140 specific actions or activities designed to make a difference in the lives of children in care. The six identified action areas and strategies were:

- 1) Revise child welfare agency policy to support practices and internal collaboration, including: (a) A comprehensive practice-focused education policy, (b) Complimentary business process standards to accompany the policy, (c) Inclusion of current issues and laws, (d) Clear roles and responsibilities, and (e) Clarification of different types of education decisions and who can make them for youth in CFSA custody.
- 2) Provide education-focused training including pre-service and in-service training for staff, an education resources clearinghouse on CFSA’s website, and peer-to-peer learning for foster parents.
- 3) Strengthen practice to include education considerations in case plans and meetings by: (a) Assigning education specialists, (b) Putting information and data directly into the hands of social workers to improve education performance and interventions, (c) Creating practice tools for efficient communication with schools such as student contact sheets and information sharing, and (e) Implementing an incentive plan for middle and high school youth for achieving short-term educational goals.
- 4) Coordinate internally to share knowledge, resources, and supports.
- 5) Collaborate with external education partners through memorandums of agreement, a court education subcommittee, and improved partnerships with community nonprofits and organizations.
- 6) Improve data collection and use by accessing data from multiple sources, sharing data, analyzing data to guide practice change, and monitoring results of services.

Since implementing this CFSA-specific Blueprint for Change, CFSA saw an increase in data-driven decisions related to staffing and budgets and was able to bridge silos within the agency. Additionally, external partners reported to CFSA that they valued CFSA’s education strategy vision and role as a leader to improve educational outcomes. With increased data collection, CFSA staff were able to track improved outcomes and target student support services.

To see more about CFSA's education practices and policies, see <https://cfsa.dc.gov/page/educationresources>.

## What's Working?

As more data on the educational outcomes of youth in foster care is published and changes in policy that influence education are enacted, an increasing number of organizations and practices have been developed from these data and policies to specifically address disparities in educational outcomes among youth in foster care (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). These programs are building off the policies established at the national level, such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008) and ESSA (2015), as well as at the state or local levels. The primary goal of these programs is to increase educational support, services, and advocacy for students in foster care to promote academic success through ensuring that the multiple systems involved in the educational needs of these children are collaborating and sharing information to determine what is in the best interest of the child.

Although the exact strategies and focus may vary program to program, these programs also seek to support students in foster care at all stages of their educational trajectory. For example, beginning in early childhood, some programs are increasing early intervention opportunities and screening to ensure children enter school ready to learn. Toward the latter end of time in care, other programs are targeting services for students in foster care to help them prepare for and complete postsecondary education. Additionally, across all ages of children in care, programs are working to ensure school placement stability. To provide established examples of these efforts already used in practice, the following educational programs from across the country are described in the sections below: Kids in School Rule! (KISR!), ABA Education Barriers Project, and Treehouse.

### *Kids in School Rule! (KISR!)—Cincinnati, Ohio*

KISR! is a collaboration between the Hamilton County Jobs and Family Services (JFS), Cincinnati Public Schools, Hamilton County Juvenile Court, and Legal Aid of Southwest Ohio. This program is aimed at promoting education outcomes for students who are in JFS custody and enrolled in the public school system. Collaboration, regular data sharing, and student-specific advocacy are integral to the success of this program. JFS has created staff positions specific to the KISR! program called "KISR! Education Specialists." These Education Specialists work with caseworkers, courts, schools, and legal advocates to support education stability and success. Each school in the public school system has a "KISR! Liaison" who communicates with the school-specific JFS KISR! Education Specialists, flagging potential issues and ensuring

students are on track for grade promotion and graduation. In Juvenile Court, magistrates use customized judicial bench cards to help prioritize education when KISR! students come before the court. Judicial bench cards are tools that assist judges in addressing important topics in court by providing easy to follow and straightforward questions to ask during a hearing, which in turns helps to ensure that aspects of a child’s education are reviewed during proceedings. Additionally, KISR! Education Specialists submit education court reports before hearings to share information on the student’s grades, attendance, disciplinary issues, special education, school stability, and any concerns the school or JFS sees with the student.

Finally, at Legal Aid, an education advocate and attorneys lead and coordinate the KISR! collaboration to ensure that different entities in the child welfare system coordinate and share data collections to boost individual student outcomes and drive program priorities. Legal Aid promotes communication among partners and the community and provides advocacy for students and families on enrollment, disciplinary removals, and special education. To share data between all of these important partners, Education Specialists and advocates use LPD (Learning Partner Dashboard), a website program designed and managed by the Cincinnati Public Schools. LPD allows both JFS and the school system to merge certain data elements that help track student outcomes and performance. KISR! has frequent data matching and real-time access to school portals, allowing advocates of the student across agencies to have timely access to the student’s information.

Since starting with 22 pilot schools in 2008, KISR! has expanded to all 60+ public schools in Cincinnati and has served over 2,200 students to date. According to program evaluation data from 2012 to 2017 published in collaboration with the ABA Center on Children and the Law, LCFCE and the University of Northern Colorado, there have been several positive educational outcomes noted for youth in KISR!. For example, students in the KISR! program had a higher senior graduate rate (i.e., 95%) in 2017 and had more students meeting the third grade reading guarantee benchmark between 2013-2017, as compared to students in the Cincinnati Public Schools overall (e.g., graduation rate in 2017 for non-KISR! students = 74.7%). Additionally, from 2013 to 2017, the percentage of students in the KISR! program who had a 90% or greater attendance rate increased from 68% to 86.1% by the end of 2017. Within this same timeframe from 2013-2017, the average percentage of students who experienced no school moves was 74%, and the average percentage of students with no disciplinary referrals was 61% (compared with 32% in the 2012-2013 academic year; Kids in School Rule!, 2018).

### *ABA Education Barriers Project—Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania*

The ABA Education Barriers to Permanency Project focuses on improving education outcomes for children in foster care as a key component to permanency and life success. The project combines the expertise of two successful ABA Center on Children and the Law projects—the ABA Permanency Barriers Project and the LCFCE. The Education Barriers Project guides its work around three principles: 1) School stability strengthens placement stability and may speed

permanency for children and families; 2) School success guides life success; focusing on the full educational experience (including needs and support) improves school and life outcomes; and 3) Collaboration between schools, child welfare agencies, and courts is key to supporting students in foster care (McNaught, 2019). Education ties into permanency for children in families because sometimes school instability or out-of-school discipline may lead to living placement disruption, trying to keep a child in their school of origin may make it more challenging to find living placement, frequent school changes may impact the ability for the child to form adult connections, and it is possible that school placement may delay reunification with parent(s) (ABA Center on Children and the Law, 2020; McNaught, 2019).

By collaborating with the school system, child welfare agency, and dependency court, the Education Barriers Project helps local jurisdictions identify and address the education needs of students in foster care. The Education Barriers Project is intended to be an intensive 2- to 3-year project in a specific county or local jurisdiction and begins with identification of education needs of children in foster care for that specific jurisdiction. Notably, a key resource that helps this program properly identify the educational needs of children in foster care is the Blueprint for Change. When working with the various systems to identify and address needs, the program goes through a series of steps to ensure there is individualized and appropriate support provided for that jurisdiction. First, the program works to identify the strengths and challenges of the child welfare agency, education, and court systems in the jurisdiction regarding the support of education success for students in care. This is completed through an extensive information gathering process where the program reviews broader agency documentation, policy, and outcomes, as well as more individual information such as youth's case files. Further, the program may also conduct focus groups with child welfare agency staff, local school districts, and the legal community or have these individuals complete self-assessments on identification, policies, and data on students in foster care to gather more information on agency functioning.

Following the information-gathering phase, the program then works with identified representatives from the various agencies in the jurisdiction to develop strategies that address the jurisdiction's education barriers. This is most often completed through helping agencies establish better coordination between each other, making suggestions on how to modify existing policy or create new policy, identifying needed areas of training for agencies, and establishing regular information sharing. Additionally, to support the education and dissemination of these changes and other policy needs, the program will provide targeted technical assistance to train educators, child welfare staff, and the legal community through trainings, technical assistance, and resource development based on the identified needs of the jurisdiction. Moreover, to help support lasting change, the jurisdiction and the program work together to build infrastructure that can sustain progress and address current and potential future needs through ongoing collaboration, local policies, and practice change (McNaught, 2019). At the end of each project, there is also the measuring and presentation of program evaluation data that summarizes outcomes across key areas of the project, such as changes in policies and procedures that

support students in the jurisdiction, as well as outcome data on student educational success (e.g., graduation rates, school stability).

One example that illustrates the entirety of the Education Barriers Project process is a recent collaboration with Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania (ABA Center on Children and the Law, 2018). In this jurisdiction, several local partners were involved in the efforts to address the needs of the students in foster care, such as the child welfare agency, courts, Court Appoint Special Advocates, local service agencies, and over 12 participating school districts. The collaborative team meets regularly and has subcommittees focusing on court/legal practices, school and child welfare collaboration, and information and data sharing. Following review of the county's previously established policies, common practices, and current student data in the first part of the project, several recommendations were created and enacted. One area of work was communication, as the child welfare agency and school districts increased information sharing and are able to identify students for targeted supports. For example, the project implemented an enrollment letter that the child welfare agency sends to the appropriate school district each time a student enters foster care or has a change in placement. This enrollment letter provides the school district with necessary information such as the student's current address, date of the best interest decision, any transportation needs, and who holds education decision-making rights for the student. Also, the county identified education decision making as an area in need of clarification and improvement which led to the creation of a new education decision-making policy that outlines when an education decision maker is needed for a youth and the process for appointing one. Moreover, to further support the education and dissemination of changes and policy in the county, the ABA Center on Children and the Law provided training on special education, education decision making, and information sharing in response to identified needs of the county. Additionally, Westmoreland County created a Foster Care Toolkit that is provided to school districts annually and includes tools to help schools meet the needs of students in foster care such as an information sharing guide, new school checklist, and a best interest determination flowchart (ABA Center on Children and the Law, 2018). Following these changes and many others, Westmoreland County has seen some positive changes in the educational outcomes of its students in foster care. For example, the county reported an increase in school stability for students in foster care, such that there was a 10.5% increase from the previous year in students in foster care remaining in their school of origin in the 2018-2019 school year (D. Traill, personal communication, December 13, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This data was gathered by the Westmoreland County Children's Bureau and is currently unpublished. The Legal Center for Children and the Law obtained this data through direct correspondence with Dawn Traill, their Program Specialist for Quality Assurance.



### *Graduation Success—Treehouse, Washington*

The Graduation Success program at Treehouse in Washington state works with middle and high school students in foster care to create individualized plans to help them reach academic success. Their goals include ensuring children in foster care graduate from high school and closing the achievement gap between youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers (Treehouse, 2020). To achieve these goals, Graduation Success monitors students' academics, behavior, and attendance while connecting students with academic resources such as tutoring, college counseling, and career preparation. Graduation Success also works with youth in care to address common obstacles, including transitioning between schools, retrieving course credit, addressing special education needs, and also providing funding opportunities to cover academic-related costs (e.g., athletics, art and music programs). Another important part of Graduation Success is the use of "Check and Connect," an evidence-based, comprehensive student engagement intervention that improves graduation rates for youth that receive the intervention. Check and Connect involves in-school mentors who partner with Treehouse's Education Specialists to provide timely monitoring of a student's attendance, behavior, and grades (University of Minnesota, 2014). With support from this program, in-school mentors are able to check in with students regularly and help connect students to additional resources within the school if they identify concerns within the student's progress.

For those schools not involved in the Graduation Success Program, the Treehouse Educational Advocacy program works with schools, social workers, foster families, and youth in foster care to resolve difficult issues and remove barriers to school success. The Educational Advocacy program serves youth in foster care in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade throughout Washington (Treehouse, 2020). The Treehouse Education Advocacy program is in partnership with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families. Additionally, Treehouse also has a post-high school program for young adults who were in foster care, Launch Success, which is available to those who completed Graduation Success. This program provides variety of services for young adults, such as help with managing college enrollment, guidance on career choices, an option to apply for funding that covers school or job supplies, and assistance in obtaining housing.

Initial program data on Graduation Success appears to show the program is meeting its goals of increasing academic success among students in foster care. In 2018, students in foster care who were in Graduation Success had a higher 4-year (69%) and 5-year extended (82%) graduation rate, as compared to non-program youth in foster care in the state of Washington (43% 4-year and 49% 5-year extended graduation rate; Treehouse, 2018). Moreover, the 5-year extended graduate rate for students in foster care who were in Graduation Success was higher than the extended graduation rate for all students in Washington state in 2017 (89% vs. 82%; Treehouse, 2017). These rates were equivalent in 2018, such that both Graduation Success and the state's overall 5-year graduation rate were 82% (Treehouse, 2018).

## Conclusion

A supportive educational environment is important for the social, psychological, physical, and emotional development of any youth, but it is especially imperative for students in foster care for whom their educational environment may be the only constant throughout their early life. It is easy to think about education as an issue best addressed at an individual level, but in reality, only broad, systemic efforts to reform education for children in foster care and provide support for students, families, advocates, judges, teachers, and foster parents will truly elevate the current system to where it needs to be. Comprehensive, collaborative approaches to supporting students in foster care are the key to helping this incredibly vulnerable population achieve academically as is evidenced by the programs highlighted in this chapter.

Fortunately, the federal requirement that states annually report their educational data—specifically including data about students in foster care—should help foster the development of programs like those listed above as the urgency of effective intervention is becoming abundantly clear. Improving supports for students currently in care, but also furthering research about this population and what works when it comes to intervention, is what will ultimately produce the changes needed to close the achievement gap between students in foster care and their non-foster peers and assure that students in foster care have equal opportunities to achieve. Investing in this specific sect of the child welfare field will not only improve the lives and outcomes of students in foster care across the United States but will ultimately strengthen the greater community, economy, and society.

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