

Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster and Out-of-Home Care

December 2006

For the over 800,000 children and youth served in foster care each year in the United States, educational success is a potential positive counterweight to abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence. Positive school experiences enhance their well-being, help them make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase their chances for personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency, as well as their ability to contribute to society.

Unfortunately, the educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care are dismal. As this current research summary reveals, young people in foster care are in educational crises. Although data are limited, particularly national data, research makes it clear that there are serious issues that must be addressed to ensure the educational success of children and youth in foster care.

SCHOOL PLACEMENT STABILITY/ENROLLMENT ISSUES

School Mobility Rates of Children and Youth in Foster Care

- ◆ Children and youth have an average of one to two home placement changes per year while in out-of-home care.¹
- ◆ A 2001 study of more than 4,500 children and youth in foster care in Washington State found that at both the elementary and secondary levels, twice as many youth in foster care as youth not in care had changed schools during the year.²
- ◆ In a New York study of 70 children and youth in foster care, more than 75% did not remain in their school once placed in foster care, and almost 65% had been transferred in the middle of the school year.³
- ◆ A three-state study of youth aging out of care (the Midwest Study) by Chapin Hall revealed substantial levels of school mobility associated with placement in out-of-home care. Over a third of young adults reported having had five or more school changes.⁴
- ◆ School mobility rates are highest for those entering care for the first time. According to another Chapin Hall study of almost 16,000 children and youth in the Chicago Public School system, over two-thirds switched schools shortly after their initial placement in out-of-home care.⁵

Negative Effects of School Mobility

- ◆ A 1996 study students in Chicago Public Schools found that students who had changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of educational growth by their sixth year.⁶
- ◆ A 1999 study found that California high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate as those who did not change schools, even when controlling for other variables that affect high school completion.⁷
- ◆ In a national study of 1,087 foster care alumni, youth who had had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving care.⁸

Suspensions/Expulsions

- ◆ 66.8% of youth in out-of-home care in the Midwest Study had been suspended at least once from school (compared to a national sample of 27.8%). About one sixth (16.5%) had been expelled compared with 4.6% of the national sample.⁹

Enrollment Issues

- ◆ In the New York study, 42% of the children and youth did not begin school immediately upon entering foster care. Nearly half of these young people said that they were kept out of school because of lost or misplaced school records.¹⁰
- ◆ A 2001 Bay Area study of over 300 foster parents found that “missing information from prior schools increased the odds of enrollment delays by 6.5 times”¹¹

ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Academic Achievement

- ◆ The 2001 Washington State study found that children and youth in foster care attending public schools scored 16 to 20 percentile points below non-foster youth in statewide standardized tests at grades three, six and nine.¹²
- ◆ Youth in foster care in the Midwest Study, interviewed primarily after completing 10th or 11th grade, on average read at only a seventh grade level. Approximately 44% read at high school level or higher. Few excelled in academic subjects, especially relative to a comparable national sample. Less than one in five received an “A” in English, math, history, or science.¹³
- ◆ Chapin Hall’s research on Chicago Public School children and youth in out-of-home care indicates they lag at least half a school year behind demographically similar students in the same schools. (There is an overall achievement gap of upwards of one year. However, some of this is attributed to the low-performing schools that many of them attend). Almost 50% of third to eighth grade students in out-of-home care scored in the bottom quartile on the reading section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) test.¹⁴

Grade Retention/Old for Grade

- ◆ In the Washington State study, twice as many youth in foster care at both the elementary and secondary levels repeated a grade compared to youth not in care.¹⁵
- ◆ Nearly 45% of youth in care in the New York State study reported being retained at least once in school.¹⁶
- ◆ In the Midwest Study, 37.2% of youth in foster care (compared with 21.5% of a comparable national sample) reported repeating a grade.¹⁷
- ◆ Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care were almost twice as likely as other students to be old for their grade, by at least a year, even after demographic factors were taken into account and comparisons made to other students attending the same schools.¹⁸

SPECIAL EDUCATION ISSUES

Number of Youth in Special Education

- ◆ Numerous studies indicate anywhere between one-quarter and almost one-half (23%-47%) of children and youth in out-of-home care in the U.S. receive special education services at some point in their schooling.¹⁹
- ◆ At both the elementary and secondary levels, more than twice as many foster youth as non-foster youth in the Washington State study had enrolled in special education programs.²⁰
- ◆ Nearly half of the youth in foster care in the Midwest Study had been placed in special education at least once during the course of their education.²¹
- ◆ Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care between sixth and eighth grades were classified as eligible for special education nearly three times more frequently than other students.²²

Advocacy Regarding Special Education Services

- ◆ In research done in 2000 by Advocates for Children of New York, Inc.:
 - 90% of biological parents of children in foster care surveyed did not participate in any special education processes concerning their child.²³
 - 60% of caseworkers/social workers surveyed “were not aware of existing laws when referring children to special education” and over 50% said “that their clients did not receive appropriate services very often while in foster care”²⁴
- ◆ A 1990 study in Oregon found that children who had multiple foster care placements and who needed special education were less likely to receive those services than children in more stable placements.

SOCIAL-BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

Mental Health

- ◆ In a recent study of foster care alumni in Oregon and Washington (Northwest Alumni Study), 54.4% of alumni had one or more mental health disorders in the past 12 months, such as depression, social phobia or panic syndrome (compared with 22.1% of general population).²⁵
- ◆ In the same study, 25.2% had post-traumatic stress disorder within the past 12 months (compared with 4.0% of general population), which is twice the rate of U.S. war veterans.²⁶

Social-Behavioral

- ◆ Several studies have found that children and youth in foster care are significantly more likely to have school behavior problems and that they have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions from school.²⁷
- ◆ Recent research in Chicago confirmed previous statewide research findings that children in foster care are significantly more likely than children in the general population to have a special education classification of an emotional or behavioral disturbance.²⁸
- ◆ In the Midwest Study, by about 19 years of age, almost half of the young women had been pregnant, a significantly higher percentage than the 20% in a comparative national sample.²⁹

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES

High School Completion Rates/Drop-Out Rates

- ◆ A recent report by the EPE Research Center indicates that the nationwide high school completion rate for **all** students is 70%. More are lost in ninth grade than in any other grade (9th: 35%; 10th: 28%; 11th: 20%; 12th: 17%).³⁰
- ◆ Studies have found differing rates of high school completion (through a degree or GED) though the measures have been defined somewhat differently:
 - In the Washington State study, 59% of youth in foster care enrolled in 11th grade completed high school by the end of 12th grade.³¹
 - The young adults in the Northwest Alumni Study completed high school (**via diploma or GED**) at 84.8% which is close to the general population rate of 87.3%.³²
 - Over one-third of the young people the Midwest Study had received neither a high school diploma nor a GED by age 19, compared to fewer than 10% of their same-age peers in a comparable national sample.³³
 - A national study in 1994 of young adults who had been discharged from foster care found that 54% had completed high school.³⁴
 - In the Chapin Hall study of Chicago Public School youth, fifteen-year-old students in out-of-home care were about half as likely as other students to have graduated 5 years later, with significantly higher percentages of students in care having dropped out (55%) or incarcerated (10%).³⁵

Factors Contributing to Dropping Out

- ◆ Multiple studies suggest that being retained in a grade significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out.³⁶ For example, one study found that being retained even once between first and eighth grade makes a student four times more likely to drop out than a classmate who was never held back, even after controlling for multiple factors.³⁷
- ◆ The recent report by the EPE Research Center indicates that repeating a grade, changing schools, and behavior problems are among the host of signals that a student is likely to leave school without a traditional diploma.³⁸
- ◆ The book, Drop Outs in America reports research that shows the following students are at-risk for dropping out: students of color, students who had been held back, students who are older than others in their grade, and English-language learners.³⁹

POST-SECONDARY ENTRANCE/COMPLETION RATES

Post-secondary Entrance/Completion Rates

- ◆ The Northwest Alumni Study found that of the foster care alumni who were interviewed,
 - 42.7% completed some education beyond high school
 - 20.6% completed any degree/certificate beyond high school
 - 16.1% completed a vocational degree (21.9% among those age 25 or older)
 - 1.8% completed a bachelor's degree: (2.7% among those age 25 or older) (24% is the completion rate among the general population of same age)⁴⁰
- ◆ Recent longitudinal data (from the general population) suggests that 39% of students who enrolled in a public two-year institution received a credential within six years (28%--associate degree or certificate, 11%--baccalaureate).⁴¹

College Preparation/Aspiration

- ◆ The majority of those youth in out-of-home care interviewed in the Midwest Study at age 17-18 hoped and expected to graduate from college eventually.⁴²

- ◆ Another study indicates that only 15% of youth in foster care are likely to be enrolled in college preparatory classes versus 32% of students not in foster care.⁴³
- ◆ Strong academic preparation has been found to be the single most important factor in enrolling and succeeding in a postsecondary program. However, in the United States, studies of the general population have found that:
 - Only 32% of all students leave high school qualified to attend a four-year college.⁴⁴
 - Only 20% of all African American and 16% of all Hispanic students leave high school college-ready.⁴⁵
 - Between 30-60% of students “now require remedial education upon entry to college, depending on the type of institution they attend”.⁴⁶

Endnotes

Visit www.casey.org/friendsandfamilies/partners for fact sheet citations.

¹ National AFCARS data, 2002

² Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 1

³ Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 5

⁴ Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 42

⁵ Smithgall et al., 2004, p.46

⁶ Kerbow, University of Chicago, 1996, p.20

⁷ Rumberger, et al., 1999, p. 37

⁸ Pecora et al., 2003, p. 44

⁹ Courtney, et al., 2004, pg. 42

¹⁰ Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 4

¹¹ Choice, et al., 2001, p. 44

¹² Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 13

¹³ Courtney, et al., 2004, pp. 43, 45

¹⁴ Smithgall et. al. 2004, pp. 14, 17

¹⁵ Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 1

¹⁶ Advocates for Children of New York, inc., 2000, p. 45

¹⁷ Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 42

¹⁸ Smithgall et. al. 2004, p. 22

¹⁹ Courtney, et al., 2004 (47% of 732); Smithgall, et al., 2004 (45% of 1,216 sixth through eighth graders); Burley and Halpern, 2001 (23% of 1,423 third graders, 29% of 1,539 six graders, 24% of 1,597 ninth graders); Choice, et al., 2001 (36% of 303); Advocates for Children of New York Inc., 2000 (30% of 70); Zanghi, 1999 (41% of 134); Jones, et. al., 1998 (23% of 249); Goerge, et al., 1992 (29.1% of 14,714)

²⁰ Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 16

²¹ Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 40

²² Smithgall et. al. 2004, p. 58

²³ Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 6

²⁴ Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 6.

²⁵ Pecora et al., 2005, p. 34

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Courtney, et al., 2004, pg. 42; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003, pp. 6, 7; McMillen et al., 2003, p. 475; Zima et al., 2000, pp. 98, 99

²⁸ Goerge et al., 1992, p. 3; Smithgall et al., 2004, p. 58

²⁹ Courtney, et al., 2005, p. 54

³⁰ EPE Research Center, 2006

³¹ Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 1

³² Pecora, et al., 2005, p. 35

³³ Courtney, et al., 2005, p. 22

³⁴ Cook, 1994, p. 218

³⁵ Smithgall et. al. 2004, p. 28

³⁶ Studies quoted in Rumberger, 2000, p. 14

³⁷ Rumberger, 1995, p. 601

³⁸ EPE Research Center, 2006

³⁹ Orfield, G., Ed., 2004, p. 157

⁴⁰ Pecora, et al., 2005, p. 36

⁴¹ ACE Center for Policy Analysis, 2003, p.3

⁴² Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 39

⁴³ Blome, 1997 cited in Sheehy et al., 2001, p. 9

⁴⁴ Greene, 2005, p. 9

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Conley, 2005, p. xi