Educational Outcomes among Students Whose Lives Have Been Touched by Foster Care in Washington State

Henry Joel Crumé

University of Washington

September 2020
Students involved in the foster care system comprise a diverse and vulnerable group of learners with complex educational needs. Experiencing foster care is associated with academic struggles such as high school mobility, lower academic achievement, heightened experiences of exclusionary school discipline, and decreased school completion and access to postsecondary education. This report uses state-level administrative data from Washington State to evaluate the educational outcomes of students involved in the foster care system across several key educational benchmarks. The results indicate that students involved in foster care in Washington State experience disproportionately less educational success than their peers who are not involved in foster care.

- Students involved in foster care are more mobile: out-of-home placements increase the frequency of mid-year school transitions and decreased the number of days students spend in school during the academic year.
- Students in foster care experience exclusionary school discipline at more than three times the rate of their same-grade peers.
- Students involved in foster care meet state standards in math, science, and English/language arts at less than half the rate of their same-grade peers.
- Students involved in foster care are less likely to graduate from high school.
- Students involved in foster care have substantially lower rates of postsecondary education entrance.

The results from this report suggest that the school experiences among students involved in the foster care system are often beset by multiple challenges that have potential to impose barriers to school success. Experiencing child maltreatment and instability generate and intensify academic struggles. Lack of school stability often undermines the potential for school to function as a location to access supportive resources and relationships crucial to healthy psychosocial and academic development. It is crucial that child welfare agencies, schools, and community partners evaluate educational disparities and redouble efforts to support the school success of students involved in foster care. Additional services and support are crucial for educational success. Students in foster care need ongoing mentorship and strong advocates to ensure they received appropriate accommodation for their educational needs throughout their school experiences. This report recommends that:

- Child welfare agencies reevaluate the use of out-of-home placements and take additional steps to improve placement stability when out-of-home placements are necessary.
- Child welfare agencies build stronger collaborations with school systems to better support students and increase school stability.
- Schools reduce the use of exclusionary school discipline and develop trauma-informed disciplinary policies.
- Child welfare agencies implement increased upstream educational supports for students that provide educational continuity and greater support.
Educational Outcomes Among Washington State Students Involved in Foster Care

Students involved in the foster care system comprise a diverse and vulnerable group of learners with complex educational needs. The school experiences of students involved in the foster care system are often beset by a convergence of challenges that have potential to impose barriers to school success, as child maltreatment and instability generate and intensify academic struggles (Stone, 2007). It is crucial that child welfare agencies, schools, and community partners evaluate educational disparities experienced by students involved in the foster care system and redouble efforts to support their educational stability and success.

Experiencing foster care is widely associated with educational barriers such as increased school mobility, lower academic achievement, more frequent experiences of school discipline, and decreased school completion and postsecondary education entrance. To help address these educational barriers, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) mandated educational changes aimed at helping support students involved in the foster care system. The goal of ESSA was to strengthen communication and collaboration between the child welfare system and the school system (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). ESSA outlined schools’ responsibilities for guaranteeing school stability for students in foster care and provided guidance to ensure that students in foster care did not experience enrollment gaps. ESSA also mandated that states provide public information regarding standardized test results and school completion rates of students in foster care. This report uses state-level administrative data to evaluate the educational outcomes of students in Washington State involved in the foster care system across several key educational benchmarks including school mobility, academic achievement, school discipline, graduation rates, and postsecondary enrollment.

Data used in this report derive from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC). ERDC tracked the educational outcomes of a five-year longitudinal cohort (2012-2017) of Washington State children and youth experiencing foster care. The ERDC report used data including the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), provided by the Office of Superintendent of Public Institution (OSPI), and postsecondary education enrollment from Washington’s Public Centralized Higher Education Enrollment System (PCHEES) and the State Board for Community and Technical College (SBCTC) (Chen, Pyle, & Aldrich, 2019).

Students Involved in Foster Care in Washington State

In Washington State, approximately five out of every one thousand students in public schools are reported to be involved in the foster care system each academic year. During the 2019-20 school year, OSPI reported that, in total, 5,710 Washington State students were in foster care at some time during the academic year (Table 1.1). Students in Washington State involved in foster care experience disproportionately more educational challenges than their peers. This trend mirrors national data and is supported by longitudinal studies suggesting that foster care placement is associated with high school mobility (Clemens, Klopfenstein, Tis, & Lalonde, 2017), lower educational achievement (Okpych & Courtney, 2020), and higher instances of school discipline (Kothari et al. 2018). According to Treehouse, a Washington State-based
organization working to improve the experiences of young people involved in foster care, each out-of-home foster care placement change is associated with a loss of approximately six months in academic progress. Treehouse reported that students involved in foster care are twice as likely to change schools during the academic year. These mid-year school changes are often accompanied by a loss in academic credits and barriers to participation in school activities that lead to social and academic disruptions. These disruptions have a deleterious effect on educational progress and contribute to less than half of students involved foster care in Washington State graduating from high school (Treehouse, 2020). It is crucial that attention is paid to the educational disparities experienced by students involved in the foster care system. This report’s findings suggest additional services and support are needed to ensure students involved in foster care received appropriate accommodation to meet their educational needs and achieve school success.

Tables: Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Total</td>
<td>1,082,780</td>
<td>1,097,564</td>
<td>1,114,078</td>
<td>1,127,063</td>
<td>1,134,683</td>
<td>1,147,573</td>
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<td>Non-Foster Care</td>
<td>1,077,605</td>
<td>1,092,483</td>
<td>1,108,404</td>
<td>1,120,670</td>
<td>1,128,508</td>
<td>1,141,858</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>99.52%</td>
<td>99.54%</td>
<td>99.49%</td>
<td>99.43%</td>
<td>99.46%</td>
<td>99.50%</td>
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<td>Foster Care Students</td>
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<td>5,710</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>0.48%</td>
<td>0.46%</td>
<td>0.51%</td>
<td>0.57%</td>
<td>0.54%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Note: “Foster Care Students” refers to students enrolled on October 1st, 2019 identified as being involved in the foster care system at any time during the school year.

References: Introduction


School Stability Among Students Involved in Foster Care in Washington State

Stability is central to school engagement and the efficacy of schools to function as supportive resource for students. Strong school engagement among students involved in the foster care system has potential to serve as a powerful counterweight to instability and adversity experiences (Pecora, 2012). Multiple school moves, particularly mid-year school transfers that disrupt educational continuity, pose difficulties for students’ ability to form strong relationships and connections in school. Students in foster care often navigate new schools without sufficient support while also navigating maltreatment experiences. Maltreatment experiences compound challenges for students as they navigate school experiences and negatively impacts school success (Johnson, Strayhorn, & Parler, 2020). Feelings of placement insecurity can undermine school engagement (Mihalec-Adkins, Christ, & Day, 2020) and multiple school moves hinder students’ ability to form strong relationships and connections with school communities. Qualitative research suggests that students involved in the foster care system often feel stigmatized by a “foster identity” attached to them as they move into new schools. This stigma can lead to struggles developing a sense of belonging and acceptance in new schools (Johnson, Strayhorn, & Parler, 2020).

There is broad empirical evidence suggesting that out-of-home foster care placements are associated with increased school mobility (Clemens, Klopfenstein, Tis, & Lalonde, 2017). Students in foster care experience school transfers at significantly higher rates than peers not involved in the foster care system (Frerer, Sosenko, Pellegrin, Manchik, & Horowitz, 2013). In Washington State, students involved in the foster care system are far more likely to experience school instability across grade levels (Figure 2.1; Figure 2.2) and attend significantly fewer school days (Table 2.1) than their peers.

This high level of school mobility hinders academic achievement and school engagement. Students who experience mid-year school transitions have lower grades and test scores (Obradovic, Long, Cutuli, Chan, Hinz, Heistad, & Masten, 2009). Increased school mobility reduces reading and math achievement, particularly for elementary and high school students (Reynolds, Chen & Herbers, 2009). Conversely, fewer placement changes among students involved in foster care significantly increases the likelihood that students will graduate from high school (Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripi, O’Brien, Emerson, & Torres, 2006). These impacts are
particularly pronounced among students with special education needs (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

Students living in out-of-home foster care placement disproportionately have special education needs requiring Independent Education Plans (IEPs) (Scherr, 2007). Students involved in foster care with special education needs are also more likely to face placement instability (Geenen, Powers, Hogansen, & Pittman, 2007). For these students, multiple placement changes and school moves often delay service delivery resulting in gaps in special education services. Students sometimes experience weeks or months without appropriate special education services after moving to a new school (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). These lags in needed services increased the risk of students developing behavioral problems that lead to exclusionary school discipline experiences and decreased academic success. The child welfare system and the school system need to improved collaboration and teacher training to support students involved in the foster care systems who have special education needs (Zetlin et al., 2012). Increasing school stability is crucial for ensuring that students involved in foster care received appropriate accommodation to achieve school success.

Tables & Figures: School Stability

Figure 2.1: School Enrollment by Foster Care Status AY 2017 9th Graders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State Average</th>
<th>Non-Foster Care</th>
<th>Foster Care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stayed Enrolled as Final Enrollment Status</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in Only One School District</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in Only One School</td>
<td>93.0%</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.2: *School Enrollment by Foster Care Status AY 2017 3rd Graders.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State Average</th>
<th>Non-Foster Care</th>
<th>Foster Care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stayed Enrolled as Final Enrollment Status</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in Only One School District</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in Only One School</td>
<td>94.2%</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
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</table>


Table 2.1: *Days attended by foster care status, AY 2017.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2017 Kindergarten N</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>2017 Grade 3 N</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>2017 Grade 9 N</th>
<th>Days</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Total</td>
<td>84791</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>84912</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>85155</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care Students</td>
<td>2409</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>2776</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>2730</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Foster Care Students</td>
<td>82382</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>82136</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>82425</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**References: School Stability**


**School Discipline Among Students Involved in Foster Care in Washington State**

National data suggests that students involved in the foster care system experience incidents of school discipline more frequently than their peers (Scherr, 2007; Somers et al., 2020). Students involved in foster care often navigate school experiences amid substantial trauma and instability. These experiences necessitate increased support, therapeutic interventions, and reformed school discipline policies that consider trauma experiences rather than responding to problem behaviors with exclusionary measures. School suspensions and expulsions negatively impact students’ social and academic experiences. For students involved in foster care, these experiences of exclusionary school discipline can be particularly devastating.
and contribute to social barriers, achievement gaps, and learning delays that increase educational struggles (Kothari et al. 2018).

While the use of exclusionary school discipline is decreasing overall in Washington State (Chen, Pyle, & Aldrich, 2019), students involved in foster care receive exclusionary school discipline interventions at much higher rates than their peers. For instance, during the 2018-19 academic year, 921 or 14.3% of the 6,455 students involved in foster care received a suspension or expulsion, compared to 44,510 or 3.9% of the 1,136,386 students not in foster care (OSPI, 2020). Figure 3.1 displays this trend of disproportionate exclusionary discipline longitudinally (2014 to 2019). Additionally, in comparison to other student characteristics, such as income status and homelessness, students involved in foster care are far more likely to experience a suspension or expulsion (Figure 3.2). Students involved in foster care also are excluded from school due to disciplinary measures for more school days (Figure 3.3), significantly hampering their academic progress.

These data suggest that the child welfare system and the school system need to improve their collaborative efforts to support students involved in foster care and reevaluate the way school discipline policies are enacted. Schools should be sources of support and healing for students involved in foster care. Exclusionary school discipline practices need to be curtailed in exchange for trauma-informed disciplinary approaches and therapeutic interventions that engage and reinforce students’ feelings of acceptance within their school communities.

School discipline experiences among students involved in foster care are often navigated amid substantial adversities and new school settings where students have few peer and school staff connections (National Working Group on Foster Care Education, 2011). Exclusionary disciplinary measures further isolate students from peer and school staff relationships and undermine academic continuity. Schools and child welfare agencies need to better support students when placement changes are made and help students build supportive and welcoming school relationships.

**Figures – School Discipline**

Figure 3.1: Percentage of foster care and non-foster care students enrolled in Washington State who received a short-term suspension, long-term suspension, emergency expulsion, or expulsion for a discipline related incident, 2014-15 – 2018-19 school years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Foster Care Students</th>
<th>Non-Foster Care Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-16</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-17</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-18</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-19</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OSPI (2020) [https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300](https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300)
References School Discipline


### Academic Achievement Among Students Involved in Foster Care in Washington State

Students involved in the foster care system have often experienced significant trauma and instability that make them especially susceptible to academic struggles (Stone, 2007). Nationally, students involved in the foster care system experience far more academic barriers than their peers. Involvement in the foster care system is associated with decreased academic performance (Somers, Goutman, Day, Enright, Crosby, & Taussig, 2020) and heightened risk for not meeting state grade-level standards in math, science, and reading. Students involved in foster care also experience higher rates of academic challenges that necessitate special education supports (Kothari, Godlewsiki, McBeath, McGee, Waid, Lipscomb, & Bank, 2018).

These academic struggles and barriers to school success often arise due to a confluence of traumatic experiences, instabilities in foster care and school placement, and a lack of communication between schools and child welfare agencies resulting in students not receiving the level of support necessary to meet their educational needs (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). In many cases, teachers do not receive specialized training on how to support students involved in foster care (Zetlin et al., 2012). These academic challenges often result in lower academic achievement. Black and Indigenous (BIPOC) students involved in the foster care system are particularly vulnerable to experiencing academic challenges (Chen, Pyle, & Aldrich, 2019).

In Washington State, OSPI data suggests that students involved in foster care meet state standards in English Language Arts (ELA), Math, and Science at substantially lower rates than
do their non-foster care student peers, and that these disparities are pronounced for BIPOC students (Figure 4.1). Longitudinal data from m2012-2015 show these disparities persisting (Figure 4.2; Figure 4.3; Figure 4.4) (Chen, Pyle, & Aldrich, 2019). There is a crucial need to draw attention to the substantial disparities in academic success among students involved in foster care, and to directly address the racial disparities experienced by BIPOC students involved in the foster care system with respect to academic achievement.

**Figures: Academic Achievement**

Figure 4.1: Percentage of Washington students that met grade level standards, by foster care status in AY 2018-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Non-Foster Care Students</th>
<th>Foster Care Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 4.2: Percentage of Washington State foster care and non-foster care public high school 9th grade students that met the state English and Language Arts (ELA) standard from 2012-2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Foster Care Students</th>
<th>Non-Foster Care Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Average</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIAN</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>78.4%</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Foster Care Student N=1,896 | Non-Foster Care Student N=66,298
References Academic Achievement


**High School Completion and Access to Postsecondary Education Among Students Involved in Foster Care in Washington State**

Completing high school is an important social and economic milestone and provides access to employment opportunities and postsecondary education. Accordingly, much like their peers, students involved in the foster care system are motivated to graduate from high school and most aspire to attend college (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Torres-García, Okpych, & Courtney, 2019). However, notwithstanding these aspirations, students involved in the foster care system have substantially lower rates of high school graduation, college entry, and college graduation than their same-grade peers (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013; Okpych & Courtney, 2020). For instance, Day et al. (2011) found that students involved in foster care were less likely to complete postsecondary education than low-income students and first-generation students who had not been involved in the foster care system. These findings suggest that schools and the child welfare system often do not sufficiently support students involved in foster care to graduate from high school and navigate college experiences.

Not graduating from high school limits young people’s employment and long-term educational opportunities and often precipitates many forms of economic and social disadvantage during the transition from adolescents to adulthood. In Washington State, the overall graduation rate among all students has been steadily increasing over the last five years. This increase has also been observed among students involved in the foster care system. However, despite gains, less than half of students involved in the foster care system graduate from high school with their high school class (Figure 5.1). Among the class of 2019, the state average for high school graduation was 80.9%. In stark contrast, students involved in foster care in the class of 2019 graduated at only 46.2% (Figure 5.1), and this trend was particularly pronounced for BIPOC students involved in foster care (Figure 5.2). Less than 40% of Black and Indigenous students involved in the foster care system graduated from high school in Washington State in the class of 2015 (Chen, Pyle, & Aldrich, 2019). Students involved in foster care in Washington State are also far more likely than their peers to earn a General Education Development (GED) credential (Figure 5.3).

It is clear from these data that students involved in the foster care system in Washington State need increased support in school. Low graduation rates among students in foster care need to be addressed with supportive resources, such as mentoring programs and Independent Living Services (ILS) that connect older students in foster care to supports that will help them graduate
high school (Day, Riebschleger, & Wen, 2018). For instance, Kim, Ju, Rosenberg, & Farmer (2019) found that receiving ILS services significantly increased the high school graduation rates among students involved in foster care and increased the likelihood that they would go on to postsecondary education opportunities. In a study of Washington State students involved in foster care, Burley (2010) found that mentoring programs were significantly associated with increased graduation rates. These mentoring and ILS services need to be expanded for older youth in foster care. The child welfare system should work more closely with schools to ensure that all students involved in foster care have access to ILS services and graduation supports. These supports are crucial. Older youth involved in foster care are more likely to disengage academically and less likely than their peers in the general public to attend college. The confluence of challenges throughout school that lead to lower rates of high school completion have a profound impact on access to postsecondary education entrance and college graduation. Without strong supports in place, older youth involved in foster care youth are less likely to go on to postsecondary education and become particularly vulnerable to experiencing economic and employment challenges in early adulthood (Curry & Abrams, 2015). These trends are particularly pronounced in the disparities among students who go on to four-year universities and persist with all postsecondary education entrance. These findings in Washington State should be viewed as a critical feedback loop for schools and the child welfare system. Greater emphasis and support need to be provided for students involved in the foster care system and more students need to be provided with extend foster care services that support their educational transitions from adolescence into adulthood.

**Extended Foster Care**

The creation of Extended Foster Care (EFC) programs over the last decade has been aimed at better meeting the needs for young people involved in the foster care system as they transition from adolescence into adulthood. Compelling research findings established the need for states to provide support for transition-age-youth in foster care throughout early adulthood. One of the most influential studies that motivated the creation of EFC programs, the *Midwest Youth Study*—a comprehensive longitudinal study with youth involved in foster care who were aging out of the child welfare system in three Midwestern U.S. States from 2002 to 2010 (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011)—found that a fifth of foster care alumni became homeless within one year of leaving care. Youth who were formerly involved in the foster care system were 30% less likely than peers in the general population to have earned a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate by age nineteen, and by age twenty-five, only 3% had completed a college degree, compared to 28% in the general population (Courtney et al., 2011). These findings, and many others like them, helped solidify a growing consensus that child welfare agencies needed to offer supportive services to youth involved in the foster care system beyond age eighteen. In response, the United States Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Pub. L. No. 110–351, § 201, 122 Stat 3949). Fostering Connections generated considerable opportunities for states to improve the educational experiences of youth involved in foster care who have reached the age of majority. Washington State was one of the early adopters of extended foster care, and the results do far have been promising. In a recent study of education attainment among participants in EFC, Miller, Bales, & Hirsch (2020) found that students who participated in extended foster care had significantly higher high graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment...
These data suggest that EFC is working well in Washington State for students who can participate. However, EFC is a voluntary program and requires young people to meet certain criteria to participate. Not all students involved in foster care have been able to access EFC services. From 2006 to 2018, the percentage of youth involved in foster care who received ECF services increased from 5% to 80%. Due to data suggesting that ECF is efficacious in supporting youth involved in foster care, ILS and EFC services should be expanded for all students involved in the foster care system.

Tables & Figure: School Completion

Figure 5.1: Washington State public high school student graduation percentage over four years, by student characteristics 2014-19.


Figure 5.2: Percentage of Washington State foster care and non-foster care public high school 2012 9th grade students that graduated in four years (Class of 2015), by race/ethnicity.


Note: Foster Care Student N=1,542 | Non-Foster Care Student N=63,571
Figure 5.3: Percentage of Washington State foster care and non-foster care public high school 2012 9th grade students that earned a GED (Class of 2015).


Note: Foster Care Student N = 289 | Non-Foster Care Student N = 2,621

Figure 5.4: College enrollment in four-year institution in 2016-2017 by foster status and race, 2012 9th graders.


Note: Foster Care Student N = 162 | Non-Foster Care Student N = 14,433
References School Completion


**Discussion and Limitations**

The results from this report are based on administrative data summarizing the educational outcomes of students involved in foster care in Washington State. This report’s findings indicate that students in foster care experience significantly less educational success than their peers who are not involved in foster care. Students involved in foster care experience increased school transitions and decreased the number of days students spend in school during the academic year. Students in foster care experience exclusionary school discipline at more than three times the rate of their same-grade peers. Students involved in foster care also achieve less academic success, meeting state standards in math, science, and English/language arts at less than half the rate of their peers. Among the class of 2019, students involved in foster care graduated from high school at a rate of 46.2%, compared to the Washington State average of 80.9%; and students involved in foster care had substantially lower rates of postsecondary education entrance.

These results suggest that the school experiences among students involved in the foster care system are often beset the convergence of challenges that have potential to impose barriers to school success. Experiences of child maltreatment and instability generate and intensify academic struggles and a lack of school stability and often undermines the potential for school to function as a location to access supportive resources and relationships crucial to healthy psychosocial and academic development. The results from the data used in this report are also accompanied by several limitations. The data used in this report are aggregates and do not reflect the diversity of educational experiences among students involved in foster care. This type of administrative data should inform practical strategies for improvement but be understood as only
partially representing the educational experiences of students in foster care. Individual-level data is needed to better understand the diversity of educational needs and successes experienced by students in foster care.

**Recommendations**

It is crucial that child welfare agencies, schools, and community partners evaluate these educational disparities and redouble efforts to support the school success of students involved in foster care. Collaborative, supportive structures for students in foster care that augment school success are needed. Schools and school districts should reduce barriers for students in foster care. Supporting students in foster care beyond traditional academic needs is crucial. School-based initiatives and child welfare and community partnerships could help redirect and limit the development of issues that inhibit school engagement and are associated adverse educational results. Schools are the primary location of psychosocial development during adolescence and are uniquely situated to identify risk factors and augment promotive factors. This report’s findings suggest that for many students involved in the foster care system in Washington State, school experiences have not included sufficient supports. These findings can help schools to prioritize strategies in which administrators, teachers, and staff work with child welfare agencies to identify risk factors early on and direct appropriate interventions to students. This report highlights the critical need to focus attention on improving educational outcomes among students involved in foster care and the persistent disparities that exist for this vulnerable student population. For students involved in foster care, additional services and support are crucial for educational success. Students in foster care need ongoing mentorship and strong advocates to ensure they received appropriate accommodation for their educational needs throughout their school experiences.

- Child welfare agencies need to reevaluate the use of out-of-home placements and take additional steps to improve placement stability when out-of-home placements are necessary.
- Child welfare agencies need to build stronger collaborations with school systems to better support students and increase school stability.
- Schools need to reduce the use of exclusionary school discipline among students involved in foster care and develop trauma-informed disciplinary policies.
- Child welfare agencies need to implement upstream educational supports for students that provide continuity for education needs and greater support.