Students in Focus: Foster youth in TK–12 education

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This brief is part of CSBA's Students in Focus series, which features briefs and fact sheets related to the educational needs of various student groups enrolled in California's public schools. These briefs are designed to help governance teams have informed discussions to ensure all students have the resources they need to succeed and thrive. This publication is the first of two briefs focusing on foster youth. The second brief *addresses promising practices and legislation related to supporting foster youth.*

IN THIS BRIEF

▸ Enrollment and demographic data

▸ Chronic absenteeism and disciplinary data

▸ Academic achievement and attainment data

▸ Questions for governance teams to consider

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Introduction

Foster youth in California's TK–12 education system face persistent and deeply entrenched challenges that significantly hinder their academic achievement and overall well-being. These students — referred to in policy and research as "students with experience in foster care" (SEFC) — often contend with instability in their home lives, frequent school changes, unmet mental health needs, and systemic inequities that collectively contribute to some of the lowest educational outcomes of any student group in the state.[1]

> *California educates the largest population of foster youth in the nation. During the 2024–2025 school year, 27,466 K–12 students in the state were identified as being in foster care.[2]*

For context, Florida (third most populous state) and Illinois (sixth most populous state) are second and third on the list of states with the highest population of youth in foster care, serving 20,177 and

19,387 respectively.[3] These youth are disproportionately students of color, disproportionately from low-income backgrounds, and disproportionately identified for special education services — intersecting vulnerabilities that demand targeted policy and practice interventions at both the state and local educational agency (LEA) levels.

For school board members, the implications are clear: addressing the needs of foster youth is not only a moral and equity imperative but also a legal and fiscal necessity. Federal and state laws, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), place explicit responsibility on schools to monitor, report, and improve the educational outcomes of this student group. This brief synthesizes the latest data, research, and trends to equip school leaders with the knowledge needed to inform policy decisions, allocate resources, and design programs that can meaningfully close the opportunity and achievement gaps for foster youth.

Demographic information

Who are foster youth?

Foster youth are children and youth removed from their homes due to allegations of abuse, neglect, or other unsafe conditions. They may be placed in a variety of settings, including non-relative foster homes (28 percent), kinship care with relatives (38 percent), therapeutic group homes (8 percent), or residential treatment facilities (4 percent).[4,5] Some placements are temporary, while others may last several years; on average, foster youth experience a placement change every nine months. The average age of entry into foster care nationally is 6 years old, and the average duration is approximately 17.5 months.[6]

While the primary goal of the foster care system is reunification with the child's biological parents or guardians, only half (51 percent) of cases end this way. Others result in adoption (27 percent), guardianship with relatives (11 percent), emancipation without a permanent family (8 percent), or cannot be accounted for (3 percent).[7] These outcomes are not just personal milestones — they directly affect a student's stability, sense of belonging, and readiness to engage in learning.

California's foster youth population

California has approximately 43,000 children in foster care, the largest number of any state.[8] Of these, 27,466 were enrolled in TK–12 schools during the 2024–25 school year.[9] Demographically, Latino students make up 55 percent of foster youth in the state, comparable to their representation in the general TK–12 population, while Black students make up 18 percent, nearly three times their representation in the overall student body.[10]

The overrepresentation of Black children in foster care reflects systemic inequities, including disproportionate child maltreatment investigations. One 2017 study found that more than half (53 percent) of Black children in the U.S. are subject to such investigations before turning 18, compared to 37 percent of all children.[11] This over-surveillance has significant implications for equity in both the

child welfare and education systems.[12] Further, education personnel play a significant role in child welfare. Educators and school personnel are the primary reporters of child maltreatment allegations, which is argued to be influenced by implicit biases toward low-income families and families of color.[13] Continuous training for educators, support staff, and volunteers who work with children is critical to addressing implicit bias and mitigating racial disparities.

Socioeconomic and language status

Poverty is a major driver of child welfare involvement, and is often conflated with neglect.[14,15] Many families enter the system because they cannot meet basic needs such as housing, food, or child care, conditions that also directly affect a child's academic readiness and performance. Foster youth are also more likely to experience homelessness: 1.3 million students nationwide and 246,000 in California were identified as homeless in 2024.[16] Additionally, in the 2020 CalYOUTH study that followed foster youth from ages 17 to 23, tracking their transition from foster care to independent adulthood, researchers found that one in four California foster youth become homeless after leaving foster care.[17]

Approximately 13 percent of foster youth in California are English learners (ELs), meaning they require targeted language development services in addition to academic and social-emotional supports.[18] LEAs should be mindful that foster youth learning English will need an added layer of support when identifying services to ensure their success.

Disability status

Nearly one-third (31 percent) of foster youth in California receive special education services, more than double the rate for all students.[19] This overrepresentation often reflects the compounded effects of trauma, developmental delays, and school instability. However, it also raises concerns about systemic bias and whether special education identification is always accompanied by effective, culturally responsive support.

To address these challenges, LEAs must ensure that individualized education programs (IEPs) are trauma-informed and regularly reviewed to reflect students' evolving needs. Providing comprehensive, school-based services such as mental health counseling, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy can help foster youth build the skills needed to participate successfully in general education classrooms. Collaboration between special education staff, general education teachers, and child welfare professionals is essential to coordinate interventions, monitor progress, and facilitate smooth transitions whenever appropriate. Furthermore, districts can leverage state and federal resources — including the California Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program, the LCFF, and Title I funding — to provide targeted supports for this vulnerable population. County offices of education are responsible for coordinating these services and should be the first point of contact for districts in seeking out supports for foster youth.

From a policy perspective, LEAs should closely examine patterns of special education identification to ensure equity and prevent foster youth from being overclassified due to trauma or school instability. Early intervention and wraparound services are critical not only to address learning gaps and social-emotional challenges but also to potentially reduce the need for long-term special education placement, which could lead to isolation and restrictive placements. Ongoing professional development for educators and support staff is critical to recognize the intersections of trauma, disability, and cultural factors, allowing students to access general education classrooms whenever possible. County offices of education can support districts with professional development for staff. Additionally, LEAs should establish protocols for regular re-evaluation of foster youth in special education to determine when students can transition to inclusive settings, promoting both academic rigor and social integration.

Academic opportunities and achievement

State assessment performance

State testing data highlight the significant academic achievement gaps for foster youth. In 2024, just 25 percent met Level 3 standards of proficiency (meeting grade level standards) for science, 20 percent met or exceeded English language arts (ELA) standards, and only 11 percent met or exceeded mathematics standards.[20] Foster youth scored below low-income peers in math, and the modest progress made before the pandemic has been erased, with current rates mirroring those from more than a decade ago.[21] Those figures are a cause for concern, as they indicate that the vast majority of foster youth are performing below grade-level expectations in core academic subjects. These data indicate that systemic interventions are needed not only in remediation but also in providing access to rigorous, grade-level curriculum and highly qualified teachers.

College and career readiness

Fewer than one in five foster youth graduates complete the A-G requirements necessary for admission to University of California and California State University campuses.[22] This drastically limits post-secondary options, often relegating students to less selective institutions or forcing them to delay college enrollment. While 49 percent of high school graduates with foster care experience enroll in college within a year, this is still far below state averages.[23] Of note, foster youth are eligible to attend any college for free per Senate Bill 307. While eliminating the cost of higher education is significant, school boards can be instrumental in sharing that information with the community and removing barriers to access in qualifying for tuition-free college.

A lack of access to college preparatory coursework, advanced placement (AP) courses, and career technical education (CTE) pathways contributes to these disparities. Schools with high concentrations of students of color, including foster youth, are four times more likely to employ uncertified teachers compared to schools with low concentrations of students of color, a factor that directly impacts instructional quality.[24] School boards can support new teachers with mentorship programs and ongoing professional development, and support uncertified teachers by developing alternative credential pathways.[25] There is little to no data on foster youth AP exam results, underscoring the lack of access and equity in AP course opportunities for foster youth compared to their peers. This matters because when students have access to and successfully complete AP coursework, they earn college credits while still in high school, which reduces the cost of higher education and increases the likelihood of graduating on time or even earlier, creating a stronger pathway to post-secondary success and reducing college student loan debt.

Discipline: Suspensions and expulsions

Disciplinary data reveal stark inequities for students in foster care. In the 2023–24 school year, 14 percent of foster youth students were suspended for at least one day, compared to just 3 percent of their non-foster peers.[26] The disparities deepen when examining racial intersections: Black foster youth, particularly males, face the highest suspension and expulsion rates, with 20 percent suspended and 0.2 percent expelled, which is substantially higher than their peers from other racial and ethnic groups.[27, 28]

For school leaders, these numbers signal more than disciplinary imbalance — they reflect systemic issues such as disproportionate punishment for minor infractions, the need for trauma-informed disciplinary practices, and insufficient access to preventative behavioral supports. National and state research consistently shows that exclusionary discipline contributes to lost instructional time, lower achievement, and increased likelihood of dropping out.[29]

Acknowledging the significant role trauma plays in shaping student learning, the California Surgeon General's office introduced an online training, Safe Spaces: Foundations of Trauma-Informed Practice for Educational and Care Settings. This free training, available in English and Spanish, is designed for educators and school staff and serves as a practical entry point for LEAs seeking to establish trauma-informed school cultures.[30] When LEAs make this resource accessible to all personnel — from teachers to classroom aides to campus supervisors — they can create learning environments where students feel recognized, supported, and ready to participate fully.

Policy implication: LEAs should integrate restorative practices and embed trauma-informed practices within school discipline policies. These shifts require both professional development and active monitoring of suspension data disaggregated by foster youth status.

Chronic absenteeism

In the 2023–24 school year, 37 percent of foster youth students in California were chronically absent — defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year — compared to 20 percent of their non-foster peers.[31] Chronic absence has long-term consequences for academic achievement and high school completion, and it is particularly concerning for SEFC given their heightened risk for school instability.

Post-pandemic data show that chronic absenteeism has worsened for all student groups, but foster youth continue to experience rates far higher than other high-need populations such as students experiencing homelessness or English learners.[32] Causes include frequent school moves, transportation barriers, mental health challenges, and caregiver transitions. LEAs are authorized to implement attendance recovery programs pursuant to Senate Bill 153 (2024), which includes independent study (short- and long-term) and attendance due to emergency conditions.

Policy implication: LEAs should ensure foster youth have transportation continuity, provide case management or attendance coordinators to address attendance barriers, and use real-time attendance monitoring to intervene early.[33] Per California Department of Education (CDE) guidance, "the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) transportation requirements apply even if a local educational agency does not otherwise provide transportation to students who are not in foster care."[34] LEAs should also ensure they meet all legal requirements for foster youth, including those that require providing partial credits, not requiring retaking courses completed at other schools, and a waiver for completing additional graduation requirements.

Graduation and dropout rates

Graduation rates for foster youth have improved over the past decade, but the gap remains wide. In 2023–24, 64 percent of foster youth graduated high school compared to 87 percent of their non-foster peers.[35] This represents a 23-point gap. Encouragingly, the graduation rate for foster youth has increased by 10 percentage points in the last seven years.[36] However, dropout rates remain the highest of any student subgroup: 25 percent of foster youth dropped out in 2023–24, compared to 9 percent of non-foster students.[37] High school students in foster care are also less likely to have a stable enrollment year over year; only 67 percent maintained stable enrollment in 2023–24 compared to 91 percent of non-foster peers.

Policy implication: Graduation and dropout gaps cannot close without addressing school stability and ensuring that foster youth have access to credit recovery, competency-based learning, and supportive transition planning beginning well before 12th grade.

Health and well-being impacts on education

Mental health

Students in foster care often enter the education system having experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences including abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence.[38] These experiences can lead to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which in turn impact attendance, behavior, and academic performance.[39] Up to 75 percent of children in foster care experience developmental delays, and mental health needs often go unmet due to service gaps, especially during placement transitions.[40] Without coordinated mental health supports embedded in schools, these students are at risk for disengagement and dropping out.

Physical health

The physical health profile of foster youth also reflects heightened vulnerability. Approximately 80 percent of children entering foster care have at least one physical health issue, such as asthma, anemia, or vision/hearing impairments.[41] About 10 percent are considered "medically sensitive," meaning any foster children that have been exposed to substances in utero or were born prematurely, adding complexity to their health and developmental needs.[42]

The health of foster youth cannot be separated from their educational outcomes. Children's health challenges directly impact school attendance, concentration, and performance in the classroom. For example, something as common as uncorrected vision or hearing problems can lead to lower reading proficiency and disengagement from instruction. Similarly, children managing chronic illnesses such as asthma may miss weeks of school over the course of a year, further widening achievement gaps.

Because of frequent placement changes, foster youth often experience disruptions in their health care, leading to fragmented medical histories and gaps in treatment. This lack of continuity increases the likelihood that chronic conditions worsen over time and that developmental delays go unaddressed. Racial disparities persist here as well: Black children in foster care are less likely to receive routine and preventive care but more likely to access emergency care for chronic conditions compared to their white peers.[43]

> **Policy implication:** LEAs should strengthen cross-system coordination with health care providers and child welfare agencies, ensure school nurses and health personnel are aware of the unique needs of foster youth, and adopt trauma-informed approaches that recognize the intersection of health and learning. Without these supports, foster youth will continue to face avoidable barriers to both wellness and academic achievement.

LEAs can play a crucial role in bridging health care gaps by integrating school-based health centers, expanding partnerships with county health departments, and ensuring case managers have real-time access to students' health records.[44] Districts should seek support from their local county office of education to assist with coordination of services for foster youth.

Conclusion

The educational disparities experienced by foster youth in California are not inevitable — they are the result of systemic gaps that can be addressed through targeted investment, policy alignment, and intentional collaboration between schools, child welfare agencies, and community partners. As the state with the largest foster youth population, California has both a unique challenge and an opportunity: to become a national leader in ensuring that foster youth graduate from high school prepared for college, career, and life.

For governance teams, the path forward requires sustained attention to data, courageous policy choices, and the unwavering belief that every at-promise student, regardless of placement history, deserves the opportunity to thrive.

Questions for governance teams to consider

The following are questions governance teams should consider when deliberating policies and programs for foster youth in their LEA.

Strengthen school stability protections

▸ How does our LEA's enrollment process ensure that foster youth are supported, and their learning loss minimized?

▸ What supports does our LEA provide to ensure foster youth can remain in their school of origin during placement changes (e.g., transportation, funding)?

Invest in trauma-informed and healing-centered practices

▸ How does our LEA ensure all educators, administrators, and staff are trained in trauma-informed practices on an ongoing basis?

▸ What does our LEA do to embed healing-centered, restorative practices and mental health supports into the daily school experience for foster youth?

▸ How does our LEA partner with mental health professionals to support foster youth's academic and emotional well-being?

Close the achievement gap through rigorous academic access

▸ How does our LEA ensure foster youth have equitable access to college preparatory, AP, and CTE courses?

  » What does our LEA offer to provide continuity and academic support to increase the likelihood of successful completion of these courses?

▸ What processes does our LEA have in place to reduce bureaucratic barriers and provide targeted academic advising for foster youth?

▸ How does our LEA's data dashboard process monitor foster youth academic outcomes?

  » How is that data used to guide interventions?

▸ How and what does our LEA do to provide access to school academic counselors to support college-going opportunities?

Address attendance and engagement

▸ How does our LEA's attendance and engagement system identify foster youth at risk of chronic absenteeism, and what interventions are triggered?

▸ What supports does our LEA offer (e.g. mentorship, tutoring, family engagement) to foster a sense of belonging and sustained encouragement for foster youth?

▸ How does our LEA's staffing model ensure foster youth have dedicated liaisons or coordinators for attendance and engagement?

Integrate health and wellness supports

▸ How does our LEA provide school-based mental health services that are coordinated with child welfare agencies?

▸ What does our LEA do to ensure continuity of medical and behavioral health care for foster youth during placement transitions?

▸ How do our LEA's cross-agency data-sharing practices reduce service gaps and promote overall well-being for foster youth?

Resources

The following resources support foster youth in K-12 education.

California Department of Education
Foster Youth Services Program Resources
These resources relate to foster youth service coordinating programs.
https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/fy/resources.asp

Educational toolkits and reports

Alliance for Children's Rights Comprehensive Education Toolkit for Youth Who Are Systems-Involved
This toolkit supports adults and the youth they work with in meeting the educational needs of foster and probation youth, recognizing that these groups often overlap, face similar barriers to equity, and are protected by the same education laws. https://alliance-forchildrensrights.org/resources/comprehensive-education-toolkit/

School Instability Among Foster Youth in Los Angeles County
Research report highlighting transportation interventions and stability outcomes. https://transformschools.ucla.edu/research/school-instability-among-foster-youth-in-los-angeles-county-risk-factors-and-perspectives-of-the-countys-transportation-initiative/

The Foster Youth Pre-College Collective (tFYPC) highlights the collaborative efforts of numerous individuals and organizations committed to removing barriers to academic success for children and youth in foster care. The report emphasizes the critical role of lived experience experts, whose personal reflections on navigating school while in foster care informed the report's framework and themes, providing authentic insights that can inspire further advocacy and action to close the educational opportunity gap. https://tfypc.org/destination-graduation/

Nonprofit partners and community resources

John Burton Advocates for Youth: Offers policy advocacy, technical assistance, and training programs designed to improve educational outcomes for foster youth. https://jbay.org/

United Friends of the Children: Provides housing support, college readiness programs, and mentoring services for foster youth in Los Angeles. www.unitedfriends.org

Twinspire: Together We Inspire: Delivers mentorship, leadership, and financial literacy programs for foster youth statewide. www.twinspire.org

The "You Belong" Initiative (YMCA of Los Angeles): Provides safe spaces, wellness programs, mentorship, and leadership opportunities for foster youth. Pilot programs offer free memberships to relative caregivers and foster parents, enhancing family engagement. https://dcfs.lacounty.gov/free-ymca-la-memberships-for-youth-in-foster-care/

GAMUT board policies and administrative regulations

CSBA GAMUT Policy and Policy *Plus* subscribers have access to the most up-to-date CSBA sample policy language. The following are sample board policies (BP) and administrative regulations (AR) that have been developed for LEAs to use as starting points for adopting policies to support foster youth.

▸ BP 0200 – Goals for the School District

▸ BP/AR 0460 – Local Control and Accountability Plan

▸ BP 3540 – Transportation

▸ AR 3553 – Free And Reduced-Price Meals

▸ BP 4131 – Staff Development

▸ BP 5111 – Admission

▸ BP/AR 5113.1 – Chronic Absence and Truancy

▸ AR 5125 – Student Records

▸ BP 5141.5 – Mental Health

▸ BP/AR 5141.52 – Suicide Prevention

▸ BP/AR 5144 – Discipline

▸ BP 5147 – Dropout Prevention

▸ BP/AR 5148.2 – Before/After School Programs

▸ BP/AR 6020 – Parent Involvement

▸ BP 6141.4 – International Baccalaureate Program

▸ BP 6141.5 – Advanced Placement

▸ BP 6146.1 – High School Graduation Requirements

▸ BP/AR 6159 – Individualized Education Program

▸ BP 6164.2 – Guidance/Counseling Services

▸ BP/AR 6164. – Student Success Teams

▸ BP/AR 6171 – Title I Programs

▸ BP/AR 6173.1 – Education for Foster Youth

▸ BP/AR 6178 – Career Technical Education

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