

Students in Focus: Foster youth in California's TK–12 education system — promising practices and legislation

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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 second of two briefs focusing on foster youth. The first brief addresses data and resources related to California's foster youth in TK-12 education.

IN THIS BRIEF

- ▶ Promising practices supporting foster youth
- ▶ An overview of state and federally mandated supports for foster youth
- ▶ Questions for governance teams to consider
- ▶ Relevant resources

Introduction

Foster youth in California continue to face some of the most significant educational barriers of any student group. They experience disproportionately high rates of school mobility, chronic absenteeism, and lower graduation rates compared to their peers.¹ These barriers are compounded by complex and intersecting challenges related to trauma, health, mental wellness, and the ongoing need for educational stability. Despite these challenges, students with experience in foster care (SEFC) demonstrate resourcefulness, adaptability, and leadership, all while navigating complex systems.²

There were more than 27,000 TK–12 students identified as being in foster care during the 2024–25 school year. SEFC represent a diverse population with varying cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many navigate the instability of multiple placements and school changes, while also confronting systemic inequities rooted in racial and economic disparities.^{3,4} For these students, every disruption in school placement can mean the loss of academic progress, the separation of supportive relationships, and a diminished sense of belonging.

This policy brief offers a guide for governance teams committed to equity-driven reform. It draws on promising practices from local educational agencies (LEAs) and community-based partners across the state, outlines the relevant legal and policy frameworks, and provides guiding questions for board members. By integrating research-based strategies with on-the-ground examples, the brief equips governance teams with practical tools to improve educational stability and academic outcomes for foster youth.

The urgency of educational stability

Educational stability is not simply a legal requirement; it is an equity imperative. Foster youth who remain in their school of origin are more likely to graduate, maintain higher grade point averages, and report a greater sense of connection to school.⁵ However, stability remains elusive. Data show that even when legal protections exist, implementation varies widely across LEAs. (Legal protections for foster youth are highlighted later in this brief.)

Mobility rates for foster youth are among the highest in the state, with many students changing schools multiple times in a single year.⁶ Each move disrupts access to coursework, extracurricular activities, and consistent adult mentorship. In rural areas, where service providers are scarce and distances between placements and schools are long, these challenges are intensified.⁷ However, county offices of education can provide support for small and rural LEAs and should be the first checkpoint when investigating service providers.

Addressing these barriers requires a coordinated approach that bridges education, child welfare, transportation, and community-based services. The promising practices highlighted in this brief demonstrate that when these systems align, foster youth outcomes improve dramatically.



Promising practices across California

Rural service innovation

Research indicates that child maltreatment is reported more often in rural areas than urban ones, with re-reporting rates also higher.⁸ Rural communities face unique service challenges, including transportation barriers, geographic isolation, and limited access to specialized providers. While rural counties often see lower foster care entry rates, partly due to strong extended family networks, the placement changes that do occur can cause significant disruptions to education.

One promising model is the [Children's Institute](#), developed by the Launch Program and co-facilitated with Twinpire, which aims to strengthen connections for current and former system-involved youth by fostering meaningful relationships with peers and mentors. Through these supportive networks, young people gain guidance, encouragement, and resources to help them navigate challenges and build a foundation for long-term success in their life journey. In rural communities, this could involve utilizing mobile resource vans and forming partnerships with local businesses, libraries, schools, and community centers. While initially piloted in Long Beach and designed for urban neighborhoods, the model has strong potential for rural adaptation, where in-person service delivery can support youth disconnected from resources.⁹

Policy implications include incentivizing rural districts to develop mobile outreach partnerships with community-based organizations. Such partnerships could be supported through targeted state funding formulas that acknowledge the cost of reaching geographically dispersed populations.

Exemplar LEAs

Restorative practices: Sweetwater Union High School District

Sweetwater Union High School District in San Diego County is one of California's largest secondary school districts and stands out as a model for advancing foster youth success. A central finding in a [brief](#) by the California MTSS Consortium was the district's commitment to embedding restorative and trauma-informed practices into daily school culture, showing how systemic, equity-centered approaches can dismantle barriers to success for this student population.

Sweetwater Union HSD's restorative practices framework — restorative circles, mediation, and trauma-informed responses — align directly with the recommendations outlined in the first brief in this series ([link](#)), which called for alternatives to exclusionary discipline and stronger support systems for foster youth. Instead of punitive measures, these strategies emphasized healing, accountability, and community building. The result was not only a reduction in disciplinary incidents but also improved student engagement and stronger relationships between youth and educators. For LEAs across California, Sweetwater Union HSD demonstrates that restorative practices are not supplemental, but foundational to equity. By following this model, districts can advance both compliance with state policy priorities and meaningful progress in ensuring that foster youth, and all students, thrive in supportive, inclusive school environments.

Transportation solutions: LA County's HopSkipDrive partnership

Meeting the [Every Student Succeeds Act's \(ESSA\)](#) school stability mandate often hinges on transportation. In Los Angeles County, a partnership between the Department of Children and Family Services, the Los Angeles County Office of Education, Los Angeles Unified School District, and the Office of Child Protection with [HopSkipDrive](#) has made it possible for foster youth to remain in their school of origin even after placement changes. HopSkipDrive provides safe and reliable travel by filling transportation gaps using customized, data-driven routing plans tailored to the LEA's requirements and priorities. This collaboration has reduced school changes, improved attendance, and provided a scalable model for inter-agency funding agreements. Smaller districts could benefit from state-supported templates for such agreements, alongside technical assistance for overcoming cost-sharing and logistical challenges.

Alternative to punitive truancy measures: Contra Costa County

[The Parent Truancy Program in Contra Costa County](#) shifts truancy enforcement from punitive responses to supportive interventions. Rather than imposing fines or penalties, the program offers court-based coaching, transportation assistance, and counseling for caregivers, many of whom are responsible for foster youth.¹⁰ Early evaluations show improved attendance rates and greater caregiver engagement, underscoring the value of trauma-informed approaches to attendance challenges.

Targeted mentorship: The Fostering Resiliency Project

Research shows that culturally responsive mentorship can improve engagement, grade point averages, and graduation rates for students who often face the compounded effects of racial, gender, and foster status marginalization.¹¹ [The Fostering Resiliency Project in South Los Angeles](#) focuses on Black male foster youth ages 12 to 20, providing culturally affirming mentorship, academic tutoring, and leadership development. The program's success suggests a need for state grants prioritizing mentorship initiatives tailored to the unique identity-based needs of foster youth. Such programs could also be integrated into district-level student support plans to ensure sustainability.

Empowering homeless and foster youth: Antelope Valley Union HSD

In spring 2025, Eastside High in Lancaster hosted [Independent City](#), where 150 foster and homeless youth from Antelope Valley Union HSD participated in a hands-on simulation of adult life. From budgeting and housing applications to transportation and education decisions, students navigated real-world challenges through interactive stations supported by local businesses and community organizations. The program, which prepares vulnerable youth for emancipation and independent living, was founded by Justin Prewitt, counselor program coordinator and founder of Independent City, and recently received a CSBA Golden Bell Award. This program serves as a great example of LEAs working with communities and businesses to meet the needs of foster youth.

Legal and policy considerations

California and federal laws provide a comprehensive framework designed to protect the educational rights of foster youth. School leaders and policymakers must understand these mandates to ensure compliance and foster equitable educational opportunities.

From mandated reporting to mandated supporting

Historically, educators have served as the primary reporters of suspected child maltreatment. However, research indicates that reports from school personnel are the least likely to be substantiated or lead to confirmed cases.¹² Shifting the paradigm from “mandated reporting” to “mandated supporting”, while still following state laws requiring reporting of suspicion of maltreatment of children, emphasizes not only identifying suspected abuse but also proactively connecting students and families to supportive services that prevent unnecessary system involvement. Training for all school staff, including teachers, counselors, and administrators should incorporate strategies to recognize trauma, reduce implicit bias, and facilitate resource navigation for at-risk students.

Accountability for foster youth funding

State law requires that supplemental and concentration funds designated for foster youth programs be spent as intended.¹³ School boards play a critical role in monitoring the allocation and impact of these funds through policy adoption, oversight of spending reports, and evaluation of program outcomes. Reviewing data for foster youth on the California Department of Education's California School Dashboard and reviewing supports and services provided for students in foster care in an LEA's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) can inform decisions and improve access to services and accountability. Enhancing transparency and fiscal accountability ensures that resources improve both the quality and consistency of educational services for foster youth.

Addressing disparities in system involvement

Disproportionate representation of Black, Latino, and low-income students in the child welfare system underscores the importance of examining school-level contributions to these inequities. Implicit bias can influence disciplinary decisions, reporting patterns, and referral practices, contributing to higher rates of foster care entry among historically marginalized groups.¹⁴ LEAs should implement data-driven audits to identify disparities in referrals, disciplinary actions, and access to support services. School policies should actively aim to mitigate these inequities through culturally responsive practices, restorative approaches to discipline, and proactive student support programs.¹⁵

Federal and state mandates

Several key legislative measures at both the federal and state levels shape the responsibilities of LEAs in serving foster youth.

At the federal level, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandates school stability protections, requiring that foster youth remain in their school of origin unless it is not in the child's best interest. ESSA also encourages interagency collaboration between LEAs, child welfare agencies, and community partners to reduce disruptions in education and promote academic continuity.

At the state level, California has built upon these federal mandates with a series of laws designed to safeguard the educational rights of foster youth:

- ▶ [Assembly Bill 490 \(2003\)](#) established foundational protections, including immediate enrollment in school upon placement changes, access to partial credits, and school-of-origin rights.
- ▶ [AB 167 \(2009\)](#) and [AB 216 \(2013\)](#) guaranteed school-of-origin protections, immediate enrollment, and access to partial credits for foster youth who change schools mid-term.
- ▶ [AB 1933 \(2010\)](#) further reinforced these protections by ensuring that foster youth can continue in their school of origin across grade levels, supporting stability and continuity in learning.

- ▶ **AB 12 (2010)** extended foster care eligibility to age 21, allowing youth to access ongoing educational, vocational, and social supports during the transition to adulthood.
- ▶ **Senate Bill 578 (2011)** addressed additional protections for foster youth to receive partial credit for coursework completed at other schools and prohibiting LEAs from requiring foster youth to retake a course that the student already completed at another school.
- ▶ **AB 740 (2022)** provided rights to a foster youth's educational rights holder, attorney, and social worker to be notified of disciplinary action taken against a foster youth.
- ▶ **SB 578 (2023)** emphasized trauma-informed considerations in placement and school decisions.
- ▶ **AB 2137 (2023)** streamlined direct service delivery through Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs.
- ▶ **AB 2508 (2023)** mandated college savings deposits to promote postsecondary access.

Recent state legislation includes:

- ▶ **AB 896 (2025)** requires enhanced data sharing between LEAs and child welfare systems, as well as increased fiscal accountability for funds intended to support foster youth.
- ▶ **AB 689 (2025)** provides emergency support measures to protect foster youth in crisis situations.

LEAs play a critical role in translating legal requirements into actionable practices. Governance responsibilities include supporting and allocating funding for staff training on foster youth rights, reviewing interagency transportation agreements to ensure school stability, approving LCAP goals targeted toward foster youth, and establishing oversight structures that monitor compliance through audits, reporting, and data-driven evaluation. By integrating these legislative mandates into district policies and practices, boards help ensure that foster youth receive equitable, consistent, and trauma-informed educational opportunities.

Conclusion

California's foster youth face systemic barriers that can impede educational attainment, yet evidence-based programs and policy alignment offer a pathway toward greater equity. Local innovations, ranging from mentorship programs and interagency transportation partnerships to trauma-informed truancy initiatives, demonstrate that targeted interventions can significantly improve stability, academic achievement, and student well-being.

The strategies, examples, and reflective questions outlined in this brief provide actionable guidance to strengthen leadership practices, inform policy decisions, and inspire systemic change. When combined with legislative compliance, dedicated funding, and a commitment to culturally responsive programming, these approaches can transform the educational experiences of foster youth, ensuring that all students can thrive academically and socially.

Questions for governance teams to consider

Governance teams are responsible for oversight and policy guidance that ensures equitable access to education for foster youth. The following reflective questions provide a framework for evaluating current practices, allocating resources, and fostering collaboration with community partners.

Program implementation and equity

- ▶ How are foster youth identified and supported across all schools in our LEA?
- ▶ Do educators and support staff receive ongoing training on foster youth rights and trauma-informed practices?
- ▶ Are programs culturally responsive and sensitive to the diverse needs of our student population?

Budget and resources

- ▶ What proportion of supplemental and concentration funds are dedicated to foster youth programs?
- ▶ Are external grants, partnerships, or community-based resources being leveraged to expand services?
- ▶ How are funds being monitored to ensure alignment with foster youth needs and legal mandates?

Evaluation and accountability

- ▶ How many school changes do foster youth in our LEA experience annually, and what impact does this have on their academic progress?
- ▶ What metrics are used to assess program success for foster youth?
- ▶ How is our LEA addressing chronic absenteeism and school mobility among this student population?

Partnerships

- ▶ Which community-based organizations, social services, and child welfare agencies does the LEA partner with to support foster youth?
- ▶ How are interagency data-sharing and communication protocols structured to ensure coordinated services?
- ▶ What systems are in place to provide immediate enrollment and credit transfers for students moving placements?

Student and caregiver voice

- ▶ In what ways are foster youth and caregivers involved in shaping our LEA's policies, programs, and resource allocation, including LCAP development?
- ▶ How does the LEA solicit and incorporate feedback to improve services and supports for foster youth?
- ▶ Are students and caregivers in our LEA engaged in continuous dialogue to identify emerging needs and measure program effectiveness?

Resources

California school leaders can access a wealth of nonprofit, county, state, and community resources to support foster youth programming and policy implementation. These resources provide technical assistance, funding guidance, training, and research-based tools. Listed below are other organizations that are empowering and providing services for foster youth along their educational journeys.

California Youth Connection (CYC): CYC is a youth-led organization that develops and grows leaders who empower each other and their communities to transform the foster care system through legislative and policy change. CYC youth members lead the movement to improve the systems that impact their lives through local and statewide advocacy efforts. They also lead through partnering with the CYC's board and executive director to set the organization's priorities. [California Youth Connection – Our Voices, Our Future](#)

California Chafee Grant for Foster Youth: The California Chafee Grant for Foster Youth awards up to \$5,000 a year to eligible foster youth. The Chafee Grant may be used at any eligible California college or university, or career or technical school. Students attending schools in other states may also qualify. [CSAC - Chafee Grant Home](#)

The Foster Youth Pre-College Collective: This coalition is dedicated to increasing educational attainment for California's foster youth. Its member organizations, listed below, deliver direct services, advocacy, and community-based programs across multiple counties. Collectively, these organizations have achieved a high school graduation rate of 88 percent among participating students, with 78 percent continuing to post-secondary education, demonstrating the effectiveness of coordinated support and targeted interventions. [The Foster Youth Pre-College Collective](#)

County and state resources

Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCPs): Operated through county offices of education to coordinate services across districts, including counseling, tutoring, and transportation assistance. [Program Coordinators - Foster Youth Services \(California Department of Education\)](#)

FYSCP Hub: FYSCPs was established by the Legislature in 2015 so that county offices of education could support interagency collaboration and capacity building, both at the system and individual pupil level. The purpose of the FYSCP is to expand access to services and to assist LEAs in the delivery of direct services for foster youth with the explicit goal of improving foster youth educational outcomes. [FYSCP HUB - FYSCP Coordinator Role](#)

California Department of Education — Foster Youth Education: Provides guidance on laws, policies, and funding programs for foster youth. [Foster Youth Services - Parents/Family & Community](#)

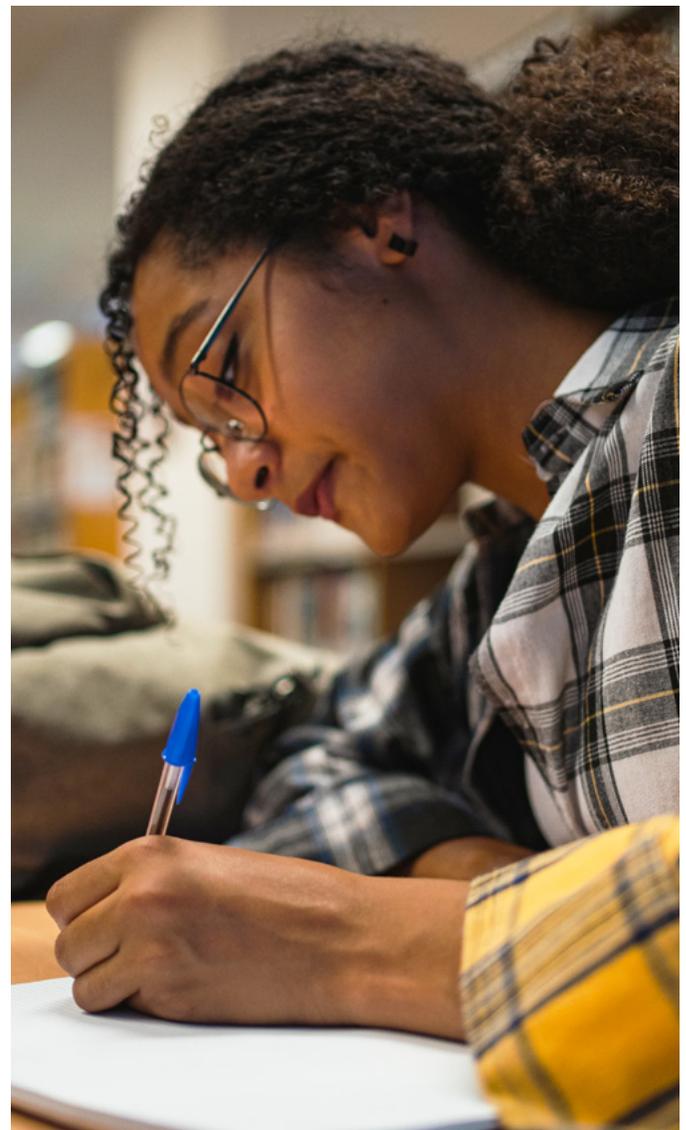
California Foster Care Ombudsperson: Offers support and advocacy for foster youth, helping ensure that their rights are upheld and concerns are addressed. [Foster Youth Resources | FYH](#)

Foster Care Bill of Rights: Outlines the entitlements of foster youth, including access to education, health care, and safe placements, and serves as a guide for educators and caregivers to uphold these rights. [Foster Rights Poster](#)

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 0415 – Equity



- ▶ BP/AR 0460 – Local Control and Accountability Plan
- ▶ BP 3540 – Transportation
- ▶ BP 3541.2 – Transportation for Students with Disabilities
- ▶ BP/AR 3515.3 – District Police/Security Department
- ▶ BP 3515.31 – School Resource Officers
- ▶ AR 3553 – Free And Reduced-Price Meals
- ▶ BP 5111 – Admission
- ▶ BP/AR 5113.1 – Chronic Absence and Truancy
- ▶ AR 5113.11 – Attendance Supervision
- ▶ AR 5125 – Student Records
- ▶ BP/AR 5141.4 – Child Abuse Prevention and Reporting
- ▶ BP 5147 – Dropout Prevention
- ▶ BP/AR 5148.2 – Before/After School Programs
- ▶ BP 6146.1 – High School Graduation Requirements
- ▶ BP/AR 6164.5 – Student Success Teams
- ▶ BP/AR 6171 – Title I Programs
- ▶ BP/AR 6171.3 – Education for Foster Youth

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Endnotes

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