

Building a Research Agenda to Improve Education Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster Care

What the Experts Say

by BethAnn Berliner and Nicole Lezin

Children and youth in foster care have been abused, neglected, or abandoned, triggering the involvement of child welfare, law enforcement, legal, and other service professionals in their lives — sometimes also resulting in their being placed away from their families, who cannot adequately care for them. As the state assumes responsibility for the care of these children and youth through the child welfare system, the most urgent concern — appropriately — is for their physical safety and emotional well-being. However, there is increasing recognition among policy, research, philanthropic, and advocacy organizations that these basic protections, while necessary, are not sufficient to help children and youth in foster care grow into successful adults.

Education is a critical but often underserved component of the care provided to children and youth in foster care. They are one of the most academically at-risk populations, performing significantly worse in school than the general preK–12 population in classrooms across the country. They also typically perform below grade level on standardized assessments.¹ In addition, the half-million children and youth in foster care in the United States are more likely than their counterparts outside the foster care system to

experience learning and behavioral problems in the home, classroom, and community. Such problems contribute to comparatively higher rates of absenteeism, grade retention, and disciplinary referrals for children and youth in foster care. They are also significantly overrepresented and underserved in special education programs, and they are twice as likely as the general student population to leave high school without a diploma.²

By almost any measure, children and youth in foster care fall behind their classmates early in

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their education trajectories. Over time, this gap widens, with predictably dismal results. As they “age out” of the foster care and public school systems at around age 18, these young adults face the challenge of independent living. The results are bleak — within two to four years, 51 percent are unemployed, 25 percent are homeless, and one in five are incarcerated.³

Schools can provide youth in foster care with needed stability and protection from potentially negative effects of domestic uncertainty and can also impart the knowledge and skills foster youth need to support themselves.⁴ Positive and successful school experiences play multiple, reinforcing roles by enhancing their well-being, forging enduring and healthy relationships, fostering resilience, and increasing chances for self-sufficiency and fulfillment as adults.

While research indicates that educators and other adults can contribute to positive outcomes for all children and youth by clearly expressing high academic and behavioral expectations and providing meaningful opportunities to participate in engaging and challenging activities, we still know relatively little about the *specific* factors that can lead to these outcomes. For example, access to high-quality preschool can positively impact young children in foster care, yet it is not well-studied or documented. In addition, research shows that classroom instruction can make a difference in student achievement, yet no research has been conducted specifically on instructional strategies for children and youth in foster care.

As a result of the lack of research-based strategies on improving education outcomes for children and youth in foster care, policymakers, educators, and others are hard-pressed to determine which interventions or combination of interventions could help this population transition successfully into adulthood.

A starting point toward strengthening policy and practice is to clearly understand what works and what doesn't work when it comes to improving education outcomes of children and youth in foster care, beginning with a key step: building a research agenda for school readiness and success, based on strategic input from experts in the field.

This Policy Perspectives paper makes the case for developing such a research agenda for school readiness

and success. The paper then presents the views of foster care experts on school readiness and school success, and how these two areas of focus can impact the education outcomes of children and youth in foster care.⁵ Finally, the need for high-quality and accurate data on children and youth in foster care, and improved data sharing across stakeholders (e.g., birth families, foster families) and systems (e.g., education, child welfare, juvenile justice, health) are discussed.

Developing a Research Agenda for School Readiness and Success: A First Step Toward Improving Policy and Practice

In 2008, the California-based Stuart Foundation launched Ready to Succeed — a statewide initiative designed to improve school readiness, school success, and data sharing across the major systems (e.g., education, child welfare, mental health, judicial) that interact with children in foster care and their families.

In 2010, Ready to Succeed released a report by WestEd and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (now a part of WestEd) that identified what we currently know — and don't know — about improving education outcomes for children and youth in foster care. *Grappling with the Gaps: Toward a Research Agenda to Meet the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care* summarizes the viewpoints of a dozen foster care experts across the country — an urban county school superintendent, a juvenile court judge, an attorney, a pediatric mental health clinician, a social services director, and several university-based researchers. Representing experienced practitioners and scholars, this group of experts offered a range of practical and theoretical perspectives on issues affecting the education of children and youth in foster care.

The experts interviewed for *Grappling with the Gaps* concurred that there are significant research “holes” and a “lack of evidence-based practices” in relation to what is currently known about the education of foster youth. While these gaps in knowledge pose significant obstacles to overcoming poor academic outcomes for foster youth, they also point to important areas for investigation that could help to strengthen policy and practice for school readiness and success.

Accordingly, the experts identified key research questions that must be addressed and pursued rigorously. Conducting research would allow us to better understand the education experiences and outcomes of foster youth — a crucial first step to developing evidence-based intervention strategies, improved teacher instructional strategies, and informed policy decisions to support the education success of foster youth. Research results, the experts suggested, could help education, child welfare, and court systems serve this vulnerable student population more effectively — an imperative for their safety and emotional well-being, as well as their education success.

What the Experts Say

This section summarizes the foster care experts' viewpoints on topics closely related to the three Ready to Succeed areas of focus:

- » School readiness
- » School success
- » Improving data and data sharing

Each topic related to school readiness and school success includes research questions intended as starting points for laying the groundwork to strengthen policy and practice. The case is then made for why improving data and data sharing is crucial to effectively addressing these research questions.

School Readiness: Access to Early Intervention Services and Preschool

School readiness begins years before school itself, in infancy. Children whose first three to five years of life are rich in experiences and environments that support physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development are more likely to enter school ready to learn.

However, children and youth in the foster care system often lack these supports and environments, instead contending with the effects of maltreatment, poverty, and families under stress. These stresses, in turn, can contribute to developmental delays and disabilities that can further inhibit school readiness. Combined with limited access to preschool, the adversities faced by young children in foster care place them behind their classmates before they have even set foot in kindergarten.

Two key aspects of school readiness — access to early intervention services and preschool — and experts' viewpoints are discussed below.

Early Intervention Services

Early intervention resources and programs are designed to counter some of the adversities faced by children at risk and provide support to families so they can enhance their children's development. These resources and programs, such as Early Head Start, are available for children under the age of three, based on the results of developmental evaluations.

Despite the potential of early intervention services to interrupt and reverse a poor developmental and academic trajectory, little is known about the percentage of eligible young children in foster care who are assessed, referred to, or eventually enrolled in such services. (The exceptions are limited studies of single jurisdictions — which tend to suggest that access to these services is inadequate.)

Anecdotal information suggests there are many plausible barriers that prevent access to early intervention services, including limited or no transportation, immigration status, residential mobility, family chaos, inadequately informed foster parents or guardians (who may not recognize the need for or availability of such services), and the complexities of assessing developmental delays in a population of children who lack consistent parenting. However, these barriers have not been substantiated in any rigorous or systematic way.

Some of the researchers and practitioners interviewed believed that instead of routing young children in foster care to early intervention services on the basis of assessments for developmental delays, a more universal approach should be taken — that is, an approach premised on the belief that because all young children in the foster care system experience some degree of harm or trauma resulting in an out-of-home placement, they would benefit from a continuum of support services, beginning with early intervention.

Some experts worry that early intervention services in their current form cannot moderate the most extreme effects associated with placement away from birth families, especially within a foster care system whose capacity is already strained. The unresolved issue of whether

universal (or at least expanded) eligibility for early intervention services would benefit the foster youth population is, experts noted, an area “very ripe for investigation.”

Early Intervention Services

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » What percentage of eligible young children in foster care receives early intervention services?
- » How many are assessed? How many are referred? How many receive services?
- » What are the specific barriers that prevent young children in foster care from being assessed, referred, and ultimately receiving these services?
- » What are the value, feasibility, and/or trade-offs of universally expanding eligibility and access to early intervention services for all young children in foster care?

Preschool

Like early intervention services, access to high-quality preschool is another factor in school readiness that has great potential benefit for young children in foster care, yet is not well-studied or documented. While research has established that a high-quality preschool education is advantageous to learning and development,⁶ it is difficult to know how many foster children actually have access to high-quality preschool. The widely held assumption is that a very low percentage of children in foster care attend high-quality preschool, but there is little evidence to support this belief. As one expert noted, “We know this from our work but can’t back it up with published research.”

Plausible assumptions underlie the list of barriers to placing foster youth in high-quality preschool more routinely, but few have been studied and documented. Possible barriers to placement in high-quality preschool include residential mobility, limited number of slots available for high-quality preschool, prohibitive costs, stigma of being in foster care, challenge of meeting

parental involvement requirements, and lack of a mandate from the child welfare system requiring (or at least encouraging) enrollment in high-quality preschool.

Preschool

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » What proportion of young children in foster care attends high-quality preschool?
- » What are the specific barriers to attending preschool? How can they be addressed?
- » What are the long-term effects of high-quality preschool on the education trajectory for children in foster care?
- » Should public policy mandate that all three- to five-year-old children enroll in a high-quality preschool, and, if so, what would it take?
- » What is known about the developmental and education outcomes of young children in foster care who attend therapeutic preschools that provide specialized services to address emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges?

School Success: Understanding the Education Context of Foster Youth

In order to develop policies and strategies to support the school success of children and youth in foster care, it is important to fully understand the nuances of their education context — the environmental, social, and psychological factors that combine to hinder or support their education achievement. For example, foster youth face significant disruptions in family life, which can have a considerable impact on school readiness and academic capabilities. In California, youth in foster care average nine school transitions by age 18, and nearly half experience three or more residential placements before emancipation or reunification.⁷

Additionally, because they are uprooted from their homes, separated from their biological families, and frequently change schools and residences, youth in foster care often experience erratic school attendance,

difficulty completing grade-level material or accumulating school credits, difficulty making friends, and limited access to support services.⁸

Systemic obstacles also explain these compromised academic outcomes. Youth in foster care often experience delays in school enrollment and transfer of student records from one school to the next, both of which have implications for grade-level and course placements and receipt of support services. Testing and authorization for receiving special education services can also be disrupted. In addition, breakdowns in communication and sharing of case records due to confidentiality rules and incompatible data systems among the school, child welfare, and judicial systems often weaken the safety nets they are supposed to create.

Children and youth in foster care also typically face multiple risk factors for poor education outcomes, adding to the difficulty of generalizing about the causes of problems as well as the effects of interventions. “We don’t even know why their performance is so low,” one expert explained. “Is it attendance, instability in their home placement, school changes, or cognitive impairments and developmental delays?”

Four factors related to the education context of foster youth — and their impact on school success — are discussed below:

- » Foster care placement type
- » School stability and school type
- » School disciplinary policies
- » Trauma

Foster Care Placement Type

Children and youth in foster care can experience multiple types of placement, including kinship care (placement with relatives), foster families, foster agency care, group home care, or a community treatment facility. Preliminary evidence cited by the experts indicates that placement type does not seem to be correlated with education outcomes. Or, “more controversially, [it] suggests better outcomes for kids outside [kinship] family care,” reported one of the experts who studies this issue. While noting that further study is warranted, the experts caution that there are both “good and bad placements of all types” that could affect education outcomes.

Research results on the effects of placement type on education outcomes also could be skewed by children and youth diagnosed with learning disabilities; these students are hardest to place and least likely to achieve permanency either through adoption or reunification with a biological parent. However, whether permanency affects school success is yet another unknown.

Foster Care Placement Type

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » How does placement type affect school success?
- » How does residential mobility affect school success?
- » How does permanency (through adoption or reunification) affect school success?
- » What are the developmental and academic outcomes of children and youth who are placed in congregate care and/or attend residential schools? What specific attributes of these settings help or hinder youth in achieving education outcomes?

School Stability and School Type

School stability appears to support better education outcomes, while changes in school placements (as a result of changes in residential placements) are “a powerful risk factor” for poor education outcomes. These conclusions are not surprising given that significant disruptions to a student’s education routine are likely to negatively impact academic performance.

The experts believe there are still a number of important areas for further investigation related to school stability, including researching the correlation between the number of school changes and education outcomes, and examining whether the stability of remaining in the same underperforming school is better for students than transferring to a higher performing school.

In addition, little is known about whether school mobility rates vary for different types of students (e.g., special education students) and students of

different age groups (elementary, middle, and high school students).

Similarly, little is known about the types of school that children and youth in foster care attend. There has been no systematic and comprehensive examination of the proportion of children and youth in foster care who attend, for example, high- or low-performing schools; traditional, charter, alternative, or residential schools; or elementary, middle, and high schools.

School Stability and School Type

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » Which types of school do children and youth in foster care attend?
- » Does keeping children in their school of origin support school success? Does it matter if the school of origin is a low-performing school?
- » How does the number of school changes correlate to students' school success?
- » Are school mobility rates higher or lower for specific subgroups of students (e.g., those in special education or high school)?

School Disciplinary Policies

According to the experts, middle and high school students in foster care are more likely than their counterparts not in foster care to be suspended or expelled from school. This is cause for concern because when students are suspended or expelled, the likelihood that they will repeat a grade, not graduate, and/or become involved in the juvenile justice system increases significantly.⁹

While it is likely the academic success of foster youth is seriously jeopardized by school disciplinary issues, the underlying factors that lead to these suspensions and expulsions (e.g., zero tolerance school policies, lack of strong parental advocacy, years of education neglect) have not been examined.

Some of the experts suspect that the disruptions in schooling caused by disciplinary sanctions can also destabilize students' home placements. Anecdotal data

“confirm the problem,” one expert noted, “but what’s missing is what to do about it.”

School Disciplinary Policies

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » What are the sources (e.g., zero tolerance school policies, lack of strong parental advocacy, years of education neglect) of the disciplinary problems faced by youth in foster care?
- » Are middle and high school students in foster care disproportionately transferred to alternative schools due to disciplinary infractions?
- » Are high school students in foster care disproportionately referred to General Educational Development (GED) programs and disciplinary placements?
- » Are there promising ways to prevent suspension, expulsion, and dropping out for middle and high school students in foster care?

Trauma

Trauma involves a physical and/or psychological wound or an experience that is emotionally painful, distressing, or shocking and causes lasting mental and physical effects. Most youth in foster care suffer from some sort of trauma — such as prenatal drug exposure, family violence, neglect, abandonment, or frequent changes in custodial care — all of which place them at risk for developing physical, emotional, or behavioral problems that impede learning.¹⁰

The effects of these traumas can also cause neurological and hormonal impairments that are associated with setbacks in behavior regulation, language acquisition, motor skills development, and acquisition of basic academic skills, all of which are necessary for school success.¹¹ Thus, traumatic early life experiences can at least partly explain why youth in foster care often struggle academically and have poor education outcomes.

Despite its relevance to academic outcomes, brain-science research about the effects of trauma on learning has not yet filtered into the classroom — at least not in

the form of interventions and teaching tools to address common consequences of trauma, such as learning difficulties or problematic behaviors.

The experts did not agree on whether some degree of trauma should be assumed for children in foster care. One view was, “Every child in foster care is in trauma, period. We need to work with that fact.” A more nuanced view was, “These kids are vulnerable to stress and schools need to find ways to compensate.” Yet another expert questioned routine assumptions about the extent of trauma altogether: “It may be a myth that as a general population, kids in [foster] care have trauma.” This remains an open question because there is little quantifiable data on the proportion of children and youth in foster care with trauma symptoms that interfere with learning.

Trauma

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » How many children in foster care have trauma symptoms that impede learning?
- » What can schools do to assess and monitor traumatized children?
- » How can schools help traumatized children perform better academically?
- » What are effective school-based mental health models to help traumatized children?
- » What types of professional development can help teachers understand how trauma affects cognitive and socio-emotional functioning, and how these affect learning?

School Success: Investigating Education Strategies and Supports for Foster Youth

In addition to gaining a clearer understanding of the education context of children and youth in foster care, investigating how particular education strategies and supports affect the school success of foster youth is crucial to informing beneficial policies and practices. Sparse research exists on education strategies that are aimed specifically toward foster youth. In part, this is due to methodological challenges. The foster

care population is relatively small and, in most school systems, hard to identify, making it difficult to disaggregate data about students in the foster care system from the larger student population in which they are embedded.

The research questions proposed by the experts are an important starting point to exploring potential benefits, pitfalls, and assumptions behind a range of education strategies and supports for foster youth.

Five education strategies and supports discussed below are:

- » Instructional strategies
- » Tutoring and mentoring
- » Special education
- » Adults as education advocates
- » Resilience

Instructional Strategies

Research tells us that classroom instruction can make a difference in student achievement.¹² However, all experts agreed, “We know virtually nothing about what happens in classrooms” for children and youth in foster care. Little research exists about effective instructional practices specifically for this population or about the roles of teacher skills, training, and support in improving academic outcomes for youth in foster care. This, however, does not necessarily mean that instructional practices specifically geared toward foster children and youth are the answer.

Because children in the foster care system are not a homogeneous group and they lag behind their peers for a variety of reasons, including those mentioned previously — residential placement type, school stability and school type, school disciplinary policies, and/or trauma — some of the experts believed it does not make sense to develop instructional strategies based solely or primarily on foster care status.

Some experts interviewed suggested, “Any good-quality instructional method for any academically at-risk child would be good for a child in foster care.” Bolstering this argument is the fact that confidentiality protections often prevent teachers from knowing which of their students might be in the foster care system. As one expert asked, “How can we expect teachers to

adjust their instruction if they aren't even clued in that their students are foster kids?"

Experts noted that children and youth in foster care often are concentrated in underperforming schools, a context that also needs to be taken into account when exploring effective instructional strategies and teacher roles.

Instructional Strategies

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » What instructional strategies should classroom teachers use to improve academic outcomes for children and youth in foster care?
- » Should instructional strategies be developed based solely or primarily on foster care status?

Tutoring and Mentoring

Because youth in foster care often experience gaps in schooling, developmental delays, and below-grade-level performance, they often receive academic tutoring to help them with literacy, basic content knowledge, and "learning-to-learn" skills. For older foster youth, tutoring can also entail direct instruction for gateway courses tied to grade promotion or preparation for a high school exit exam.

Given the likely absence of stable relationships with adults in their lives, mentors are another important source of support for foster youth, providing them with opportunities to establish enduring connections and healthy relations with caring adults outside their families. Mentors can serve as role models and guides, and encourage new interests and high academic, behavioral, and career aspirations.

Studies of the effectiveness of tutoring and mentoring interventions have examined these programs for general student populations at risk of poor performance and school failure, but not specifically for students in foster care.

Tutoring and Mentoring

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » What are effective academic remediation strategies for students in foster care?
- » What are effective social, emotional, and behavioral strategies that support learning for students in foster care?

Special Education

For foster youth who are identified as having a learning disability, special education services can provide additional advocacy, therapeutic supports, independent living skills and planning for emancipation, and continuity of services through age 21. The experts reported that children in foster care enter special education at higher rates than the general K–12 population and exit at lower rates, "but we don't yet know why." They added that the earlier that children enter foster care, the more likely they are to be placed in special education — but the reasons why are also unclear.

The extent to which children and youth in foster care are overrepresented, misidentified, and underserved in special education is a topic for which "there is some evidence and a lot of strong opinion," as one expert put it. Experts suggested that the overrepresentation of foster youth in special education could be driven by a number of possible factors:

- » The challenge of making accurate assessments when information from parents and teachers is incomplete or unobtainable
- » The influence of financial incentives (e.g., group home operators receive higher fees when students qualify for special education services)
- » The perception among foster parents, teachers, and case workers that special education services are generally beneficial for children and youth in foster care

Experts also speculated that misidentification for special education services may occur because behavior problems can masquerade as delays and disabilities — and because assessments don't make the distinction between the different underlying causes. Thus, some

foster youth with behavior problems may be incorrectly referred for special education services. Comprehensive screenings, including developmental histories, can help determine if learning challenges are related to a disability or to emotional or behavioral issues that may require different types of interventions.

More research is needed to quantify the number and proportion of children and youth in foster care who participate in special education, as well as their eligibility, what specific services they receive, and developmental and education outcomes. “There is no direct, clear evidence that special education works for them. We need to investigate and might find that one plus one doesn’t equal two for this population.” Whether special education improves disruptive behaviors, difficulties regulating emotion, and learning gaps that affect many children and youth in foster care remains an open question.

“If there were another way to get these children the mental health services they need, they wouldn’t be in special education,” the experts concluded. However, because mental health services in schools are generally inadequate or nonexistent, special education “is the only game in town.”

Special Education

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » To what extent are children and youth in foster care overrepresented, misidentified, and underserved in special education?
- » Can special education alleviate the disruptive behaviors, extreme emotions, and learning gaps typical of many children and youth in foster care, or are other types of services and supports needed?
- » Are there assessments capable of distinguishing between behavior problems associated with the foster care experience, versus developmental delays and disabilities?
- » How can the transition from early intervention services to special education in elementary school be strengthened?

Adults as Education Advocates

Given the wide range of people involved in making education decisions about youth in foster care — case workers, teachers, birth and foster parents, kin, and judges — lines of responsibility and accountability can easily become blurred. With their parents either absent or in a non-custodial role, the lack of a consistent and knowledgeable adult to oversee and advocate for the education interests of children and youth in foster care can result in delayed academic progress and other poor education outcomes.¹³

Without parents to advocate for their education interests, children and youth in foster care rely on other adults in their lives to navigate the school, child welfare, and judicial systems. However, foster parents, educators, case workers, judges, and others often lack the knowledge, skills, training, or support to advocate effectively for the education supports foster youth need. Gaining a better understanding of the necessary training and support can enable these adults to become effective advocates for the foster youth in their lives.

Adults as Education Advocates

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » How can education advocacy be made more effective among adults involved in the lives of children and youth in foster care (e.g., birth and foster parents, educators, case workers, judges)?
- » What roles and responsibilities do these adults have for the education outcomes of children and youth in foster care?

Resilience

Resilience has been defined as “struggling well” or as the capacity to rebound from adversity. It is “an active process of endurance, self-righting, and growth in response to crisis and challenge.”¹⁴ The Administration on Children, Youth and Families indicates that resilience is one of the core components that contribute to the well-being of children served by the child welfare system. Because foster youth are often exposed to significant environmental, psychological, and emotional challenges

and stressors, resilience is particularly crucial to enable them to successfully develop the necessary skills needed to thrive in school and life.

Unfortunately, many children in foster care struggle and fare poorly — within the school system and elsewhere. But not all of them do. More research on the factors contributing to resilience and high academic performance for children and youth in foster care is needed. This research can help us to better understand what protects foster youth in the face of adverse life events and how to foster resilience for those students more vulnerable to risky behaviors and negative outcomes.

Resilience

Research Questions to Strengthen Policy and Practice

- » What can we learn from children and youth in foster care who are resilient and thrive? What factors contribute to resilience and high performance in school for this population?
- » In what ways are the education outcomes of children and youth in foster care similar to or different from those of other vulnerable student populations? Should they be considered a distinct subgroup? What do these outcomes suggest about risk and protective factors for children and youth in foster care?

Improving Data and Data Sharing Across Stakeholders and Systems

In order to effectively address the above research questions proposed by the experts, two key components must be implemented:

- » High-quality data systems that can collect, store, track, and summarize a range of disaggregated data on children and youth in foster care
- » Improved data sharing across stakeholders (e.g., birth families, foster families) and systems (e.g., education, child welfare, juvenile justice, health)

More accurate and timely education data, and improved data sharing, would make it possible to address the questions posed by the experts, as well as answer questions about what works to improve academic performance, which in turn could strengthen

policy and practice related to the education of children and youth in foster care.

Effective delivery of services is often hampered by misplaced, delayed, inaccessible, or incomplete records, resulting in duplicative or inadequate services, overlooked special education eligibility, loss of academic credits, or setbacks to graduation. Effective data sharing is also frequently hindered by confidentiality requirements and incompatible information-management systems. As one expert expressed, “We don’t know *what* we don’t know since disaggregated data generally don’t exist.”

As noted in *Grappling with the Gaps*, data systems that track children and youth in foster care and their education outcomes face the ongoing challenge of striking a balance between (1) providing aggregate trend data that is useful to policymakers and researchers, and (2) yielding individual, identifiable data that can guide day-to-day actions and interventions. However, attempts to create a system that strikes this balance and improves the coordination of foster youths’ progress through the education system often are hindered by a lack of data and, where data exist, barriers to sharing it.

For example, there is often little coordination among education, child welfare, and court data at the state level. In addition, at the local level, jurisdictions vary widely with respect to information sharing on individual cases and interpretation of laws governing confidentiality. Thus, educators are not receiving the information they need in order to appropriately respond to the education needs of students in foster care.

Consistent data collection and data sharing at the state and local levels are needed to identify issues, track trends, and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programs. A coherent student database that links with other systems affecting the lives of children and youth in foster care was at the top of the wish list of the experts interviewed in *Grappling with the Gaps*. “We don’t need further study about data sharing. We just need to do it.”

Conclusion

Collectively, the research questions identified through the Ready to Succeed Initiative and the *Grappling with the Gaps* report, and highlighted in this Policy Perspectives paper, form a starting point for a research agenda that could help fill the gaps in what we know about children and youth in foster care and the factors that

shape their education outcomes. Finding answers to these urgent questions should spark interest, innovation, and action to improve, as one expert noted, “a system in crisis that has kids jumping all over the place.”

Because the research questions proposed by the experts address multiple, interconnected issues — from residential placement to the effects of trauma to instructional strategies — further developing and carrying out the research agenda could inform policy and practice decisions for education and child welfare leaders, as well as for leaders in other related systems, such as juvenile justice and health.

Foster youth experience significant long-term consequences as a result of poor academic experiences — including lower employment rates, lower wages, and higher rates of arrest and homelessness.¹⁵ Results from the proposed research can help us develop evidence-based interventions to accelerate the academic success of this most vulnerable population of students — success that is urgently needed for the lives of the half million children and youth in our nation growing up in foster care.

Endnotes

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5 Rather than presenting a comprehensive review of the literature on foster care children and youth, this paper summarizes the viewpoints and strategic input from the dozen foster care experts interviewed for *Grappling with the Gaps: Toward a Research Agenda to Meet the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care*.

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