

Shared Data Reveal the Invisible Achievement Gap of Students in Foster Care

At any given time, tens of thousands of children and youth in the U.S. are in the foster care system. Many have been abused, neglected, or abandoned, and they face a challenging journey of uncertainty, often not knowing where they will live next, where they will go to school, or whether they will have contact with friends and relatives.

Child welfare professionals work diligently to support children in foster care but typically have no access to information about what happens during a large part of these children's lives—school. Similarly, educators often have no information about a student's foster care status. The lack of data makes it difficult, if not impossible, for adults to fully understand and support the academic needs of students in foster care.

"In the absence of data, students in foster care tend to become invisible in the education system," says WestEd Senior Research Associate Vanessa Barrat. "How can we provide effective educational support to these students without knowing who they are or what their academic needs are?"

For the last few years, The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd has been working toward bridging this data divide in California, the state with the largest number of children and youth in foster care. Through funding from the Stuart Foundation, WestEd staff and a number of partners brokered a first-ever data-sharing agreement between the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the California Department of Education (CDE) as a critical step toward better understanding and serving the academic needs of youth in foster care.

The initiative resulted in a recently released report, *The Invisible Achievement Gap: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools*—a first-of-its-kind analysis linking statewide data from the child welfare and education systems, giving a fuller picture than ever before available of all K–12 students in the state's foster care system.

Confirming the need for support

In most states the child welfare and education systems maintain separate data systems, with no common identifiers to track children across the systems. So, even though a state social services department typically tracks data on individuals in the foster care system (e.g., entrance and exit dates, home placement), the respective state education department usually has no access to that information and no way of tracking how many children who are in foster care also attend public schools, where they are enrolled, or how they are faring.

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This lack of cross-system data leaves both educators and child welfare professionals without basic information. For instance, a student may have to repeat an important course such as Algebra I (delaying his ability to move on to higher math) because he changed foster care placements and schools several times over the last few years, thereby missing important content. But the teacher has no way of knowing why this student is struggling in class and falling behind.

Initially, the sheer size of the child welfare and education systems' datasets made the process of combining them somewhat daunting: With about six million students, California has the largest student population of any state in the country. Manipulating and matching such large amounts of confidential data across two totally unconnected systems—CDE's California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System and CDSS's Child Welfare Services Case Management System—required intense data security and a meticulous data-matching process.

To produce the *Invisible Achievement Gap* report, WestEd staff carried out a rigorous, multistep data-matching process, resulting in a linked dataset of more than 43,000 students (ages 5–17) in foster care in California—the first set of that scope and magnitude. An analysis of this data gave an illuminating, if not totally unexpected, snapshot of the characteristics and academic outcomes of students in foster care.

The data revealed a previously unconfirmed achievement gap between students in foster care and other students in the state. For instance, on the statewide mathematics test administered in grades 2–7, students in foster care had the lowest proficiency of any group, including other at-risk subgroups such as students with low socioeconomic status (SES), English language learners (ELL students), and students with disabilities.

More generally, results from all the statewide tests showed that students in foster care were consistently outperformed by low-SES students, and they had an achievement gap similar to that of ELL students and students with disabilities. Their academic outcomes consistently fell alarmingly below those of the general student population; in English language arts and mathematics, students in foster care scored at the two lowest performance levels at twice the rate of all students statewide.

The data verified what those in the field have seen on a smaller scale—that students in foster care are a unique, at-risk group in desperate need of the kind of targeted support often provided to other at-risk subgroups. Findings also revealed a more detailed picture of how and why this population is struggling academically.

“The report highlights more than just academic difficulties—it shows that children and youth in foster care have trouble staying in school,” says Barrat. “When you look at their academic outcomes when they are actually present in school, students in foster care are at least on par with some other at-risk populations. But when you look at how they are participating in school—testing rates, dropout rates, graduation rates—they are definitely the *most* at-risk population.”

Students in foster care had the lowest participation rate of all students in California's statewide testing program, and they had a dropout rate three times higher than the statewide rate. In addition, the grade-12 graduation rate for students in foster care was just 58 percent—lower than the graduation rate of any other at-risk subgroup and far below the statewide average graduation rate of 84 percent. The poor dropout and graduation rates are particularly worrisome, as students who



do not complete high school are more likely to experience unemployment, poverty, incarceration, and health problems.

The time is now

Although disheartening, the findings are a crucial step toward addressing the challenges faced by students in foster care—particularly in an era of increased focus on data-driven decision-making. Barrat says the collaborative data-sharing process was a big accomplishment that seems to have set the stage for future interaction and data sharing between California’s social services and education systems.

“Everyone was on board, but we were walking in uncharted territories,” says WestEd Senior Research Associate BethAnn Berliner. “Individually, these systems are both very complex. The child welfare system is particularly dynamic because the majority of children come in and out in a very small time frame, one that’s shorter than the school year. Merging the two systems wasn’t easy, but we knew we needed to do it to fully serve students in foster care.”

The job of mining this groundbreaking dataset is not yet done. Researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, are developing Part 2 of the report, looking exclusively *within* the population of K–12 students in foster care to see the relationship between education outcomes and particular characteristics of the foster care experience. In addition, WestEd is releasing a brief that includes recommendations for actionable next steps: *Addressing the Invisible Achievement Gap—Areas of Focus for Improving Education Outcomes for California Students in Foster Care*. Ultimately, Barrat and Berliner hope that child welfare professionals, educators, and policymakers can use this sort of data to inform more and better interventions for students in foster care.

In California, the report and its findings arrive at a timely moment, as the state’s new school funding formula gives schools and districts additional resources to support students in foster care. Under the Local Control Funding Formula, enacted in 2013, California school districts receive supplemental grants—on top of base per-pupil grants—for each low-SES student, ELL student, and student in foster care. The funds must be used to “increase or improve services” for these at-risk subgroups.

“This report shines a bright light on issues that educators are preparing to more fully address under this new funding context,” says Berliner. “It’s no longer an open question of how students in foster care are faring academically. Now that we have solid data, we have a chance to really understand the specific risks and challenges that students in foster care face, so we can target programs and support—like dropout prevention and postsecondary preparation—to help them succeed in school and in life.”

For more information about *The Invisible Achievement Gap*, contact Nikki Filby at 415.615.3124 or nfilby@WestEd.org. The report is available for purchase or free download from WestEd.org/bookstore.