CENTERVIEW
Insight and Analysis on California's Education Policy

Addressing the Invisible Achievement Gap

The Need to Improve Education Outcomes for California Students in Foster Care, with Considerations for Action

The trauma experienced by children and youth in foster care begins with abuse or neglect at home, though it may not end with a child's removal from the home. No matter how essential it is to a child's safety, separation from family—and, along with it, separation from friends, other adults who have been important to the child, and familiar surroundings—causes its own distress. A child's life can be further disrupted when, as happens frequently, a foster-care placement must be changed, which, in turn, often results in the child changing schools as well.

How do such challenges affect students' academic experience? While there are plenty of anecdotes about students in foster care who succeed in school despite difficult personal circumstances, new research demonstrates that, as a group, students in foster care perform at significantly lower levels than their peers in some key areas.

Compared to all other student groups in California—including those already identified with the widest achievement gaps, such as English learners, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with disabilities—students who are in foster care drop out of school at much higher rates and graduate at much lower rates, with only about 58 percent of grade 12 students earning a high school diploma.

> "At first, I moved so many times that changing schools was as messed up as my home life. But then I settled into a stable placement and got to stay in the same school and go to high school with friends. Once I got to know my teachers, finished my classes at the end of each year, and received lots of support, I knew that my future would include graduating and going off to college."
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> —Student in Foster Care

These and other findings are documented in *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1—Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools,* a 2013 study conducted by the Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd. A second report—*The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 2—How the Foster Care Experiences of California Public School Students Are Associated With Their Education Outcomes,* from the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California, Berkeley—uses the same data to examine the relationship between these education outcomes and specific characteristics of students' foster care experience. Both studies have been supported by the Stuart Foundation, which continues to provide critical leadership and resources in support of children and youth in foster care.[1] This *CenterView* draws on Part 1 of the study, providing some background on the topic and a summary of the research findings. It also suggests some possible next steps toward better meeting the education needs of this particularly vulnerable group, with the overall goal of ensuring that students in foster care thrive in school — with services and supports they need, stable school placements, and preparation to succeed in college and a career.

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1 For more information about the Stuart Foundation's longstanding work in support of children and youth in foster care, see http://www.stuartfoundation.org/OurStrategy/vulnerableYouthInChildWelfare/EducationalOpportunities.

Background on the Issue of Students in Foster Care

A growing body of research, including some studies using California county and district student samples, has identified the generally poor education outcomes of students in foster care. But the *Invisible Achievement Gap* is the first-ever education snapshot of the state's entire K–12 population of students in foster care. It is also the first study to show that California students in foster care have unique characteristics justifying their identification as a separate at-risk student subgroup and that this subgroup has a significant and, heretofore, invisible achievement gap that is not dissimilar to those of other academically at-risk subgroups, including low-socioeconomic-status (low-SES) students, English learners, and students with disabilities.

Historically, a major barrier to examining education-related issues for students in foster care has been the difficulty of identifying those who make up that population. In California, as elsewhere, privacy concerns, technical issues, and resource limitations have all served as roadblocks to the linkage of child welfare and education records that is necessary for identifying which students are in foster care. This statewide study was made possible because, some five years ago, the California Department of Education and California Department of Social Services set out, together, to enable the linkage of the state's education and child-welfare datasets.

That bold, proactive, and ultimately successful data-sharing effort reflects a state-level commitment to more deeply understand the education outcomes of students in foster care—a commitment in keeping with the state's special responsibility for these children. Whereas most children have a parent or guardian who serves as their education advocate, this is generally not the case for children in foster care. When a California state juvenile court judge removes any child from an abusive or neglectful home, the child becomes a "dependent of the court" and the state assumes parental responsibilities for the child's safety, health, well-being, and education.

Findings in *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1,* suggest that, at least in the years leading up to the study period of school year 2009/10, California was not doing enough to support the education success of students in foster care. Now, however, the state has stepped up in far-reaching ways. With interagency collaboration in support of these students already underway, the state legislature has also gotten involved. By the time *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1* was released in fall 2013, California had undertaken a major shift in education funding, through adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). In the course of setting up a new funding system for California's public schools, the LCFF requires some specific changes in how California deals with students who are in foster care. The legislation calls for students in foster care to be included in the state's accountability framework, identifying them as a distinct subgroup in California's Academic Performance Index; for districts to be informed about which of their students are in foster care; for districts to submit a plan to the state on how they intend to use supplemental funding to serve this population; and for the ongoing analysis and sharing of how K–12 students in foster care are doing academically.

In this improving context, the research findings from *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1* provide a foundational understanding of the academic outcomes of California students in foster care. In doing so, they serve as impetus for further action.

Summary of New Research Findings

As of the official school census date for the study year, 2009/10, California public schools enrolled 5,969,112 K–12 students ages 5–17. Among them were 43,140 students—about 1 of every 150 students—who had spent a period of time in child-welfare-supervised foster care[2] that year. The report shows that, for school year 2009/10, two thirds of these students in foster care were clustered in just 10 percent of the state's 1,048 school districts. Some 80 percent of California districts reported serving

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2 Foster care placements for children who have been made a dependent of the court because of abuse or neglect in the home are supervised by county child welfare staff; foster care placements for children who have been declared by the courts to be a delinquent are supervised by county probation staff.

students in foster care. However, even districts that reported having *no* students in foster care at the time of the study must be prepared to respond to educate this population, which is highly mobile due to changes in foster care placement and, thus, the schools they attend.

Students in foster care constituted a distinct at-risk subgroup. In this study, students in foster care had a different demographic profile than their K–12 classmates statewide or their classmates who were classified as low SES. Students in foster care were three times more likely to be African American but less likely than low-SES students or the statewide student populations to be Hispanic or to be designated as English learners. They were classified with a disability at twice the rate of the comparison groups, and, among students with disabilities, students in foster care were about five times more likely to be classified with an emotional disturbance than other students. Students in foster care were also older for their grade level and had higher rates of enrollment in grades 9, 10, or 11 than the comparison groups, a likely outcome of grade retention and, also, a risk factor for dropping out.

Students in foster care were more likely than other students to change schools during the school year. Only about two thirds of students in foster care attended the same school for the full school year, a rate of mobility much higher than that of other students, including low-SES students, of whom 92 percent attended the same school for the full year. About 10 percent of students in foster care attended three or more schools during the

> **"It's true that children in foster care face unbelievable challenges, starting with an unsafe home situation and being separated from their family. Then, once they're in the foster-care system, many end up being moved from one placement to another, which, for school-age kids, may mean moving from one school to another…. Remarkably, some of these same students 'make it' anyway. They do well in school, graduate, and head off to college. Nothing makes me happier. … Just imagine how much more often this would happen if all of our systems—whether in education or child welfare—worked together to understand and address the unique needs of these students."**
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> —School Social Worker

school year, compared to about 1 percent of the low-SES and general student populations. Students in foster care were also more likely to be enrolled in nontraditional public schools. Enrollment in these schools suggests that students were unsuccessful at traditional schools and, thus, were transferred to other school types that were expected to better meet their needs.

Students in foster care were more likely than the general population of students to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools. California uses the Academic Performance Index (API), an annual measure of school test-score performance, to rank schools in two ways: statewide and by 100 similar schools that have comparable demographic profiles. Based on both of these rankings, students in foster care, like low-SES students, were consistently more likely than the general population to attend the state's lowest-performing schools and less likely to attend the state's highest-performing schools. Roughly 15 percent attended the lowest-performing 10 percent of schools (API decile 1), and only 2 percent attended the highest-performing 10 percent of schools.

Students in foster care had the lowest participation rate in California's statewide testing program. Each spring in past years, California students in grades 2–11 have taken a series of tests through the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program, which looks at how well schools and students are performing in key subject areas. The test-taking rates for the general student population in English language arts and mathematics

for any of the STAR tests in spring 2010 were similar to those of low-SES students, English learners, and students with disabilities: Their test-taking rates overall were about 97 percent, gradually decreasing to between 85 and 90 percent in grade 11. Rates for students in foster care were consistently lower. Even in the elementary grades, just over 90 percent of the students in foster care enrolled in fall 2009 took a STAR test in spring 2010. The test-taking rates also decreased steadily from grade 8, with only about 75 percent of students in foster care participating in the STAR Program during their last year of testing.

Statewide testing showed an achievement gap for students in foster care and other at-risk student groups. The California Standards Test (CST) results showed that the performance of students in foster care consistently fell short of proficiency in English language arts, elementary mathematics, and secondary mathematics courses in algebra I and algebra II. Their test results showed an achievement gap similar to that of English learners and students with disabilities, and students in foster care were consistently outperformed by low-SES students. Test results for students in foster care fell into the two lowest performance levels for English language arts and mathematics at twice the rate of those for the statewide student population. Students who test at these lowest performance levels are particularly worrisome to teachers because these students are the furthest away from reaching proficiency in the tested courses.

High school students in foster care had the highest dropout rate and lowest graduation rate. To be on track to graduate from a California public high school, students are required to pass both the English language arts and mathematics parts of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), offered for the first time in grade 10. Just under half of students in foster care passed the CAHSEE in grade 10, a passing rate considerably lower than the percentage for all students statewide and for low-SES students (76 and 66 percent, respectively). Students in foster care were also more likely than all other student groups to drop out of school. During the 2009/10 school year, the single-year dropout rate for students in foster care was 8 percent, compared to the statewide rate of 3 percent. Dropout rates for the other at-risk groups were 3 to 5 percent. The dropout rate for students in foster care increased at each higher grade level for grades 9–12, peaking at 14 percent in grade 12. Overall, grade 12 students in foster care graduated at a rate of only 58 percent, the lowest rate among at-risk student groups, compared to 84 percent for students statewide.

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Considerations for Action to Improve Education Outcomes for Students in Foster Care

From policymakers to practitioners, California's education community has been committed to providing high-quality public education for all students. To that end, reform efforts have focused on eliminating the achievement gaps for racial/ethnic minority students, English learners, students raised in poverty, and students with disabilities—all long recognized in California statute as distinct at-risk student subgroups. With the passage of the LCFF, California students in foster care are now also included as a district at-risk subgroup, and this study paints a clear picture of just how poor their academic outcomes have been. Given this, the education and child welfare communities are now poised to collaborate in new ways, identifying and developing policies and practices to improve outcomes, including leveraging the supports that already exist for students in foster care that may help close the gap.

The policies and practices presented as considerations below reflect general themes from discussions among California practitioners and policy experts in both education and child welfare who were convened by CFTL and/or the

Stuart Foundation at various points during the research for *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1* and as the report was released. While participants in these conversations initially viewed the findings from the specific perspective of their own work in either education or child welfare, as discussions deepened a cross-system perspective emerged reflecting the importance of collaborative effort to best meet the unique needs of students in foster care.

These considerations are framed within the context of California's recent education-funding shift as it relates to students in foster care, the related timelines for system-wide implementation of this ambitious change, and the urgent nature of the challenge identified in *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1.* The considerations are what we can and should do *now*, to maintain the momentum gained both from recent state action and from the report's spotlight on the unmet needs of students in foster care. Considerations and practical steps—for both state and local actors—focus on

- Operationalizing interagency data sharing

- Developing a collection of promising practices

- Using data to improve services to students in foster care that lead to improved education outcomes

- Supporting additional research related to students in foster care.

Operationalizing interagency data sharing

Educators and child welfare professionals have long seen the importance of being able to share information about children and youth in foster care so as to identify their needs and coordinate services. Some California counties and school districts have carefully worked out data-sharing agreements to enable secure data transmission with appropriate safeguards for individual privacy. Now legislation requires this statewide.

While there are many technical steps to making data available, there are equally challenging steps to making sure that the right people—those with authority to act—get

the data in a timely way and are able to interpret and use the information for improving student outcomes.

Related responsibilities exist at all levels and in all sectors:

State: One aspect of the state's LCFF requires CDE and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to enter into a memorandum of understanding under which CDSS will share data with CDE about which students are in foster care. The data, provided weekly by CDSS, are to be included in—and provided to local districts through—the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System. According to its website, CDE currently anticipates that this functionality will be implemented in the 2014/15 school year.

Local: If students in foster care are to prosper academically, educators and child welfare professionals need to be working more closely to support these children and youth. Having educators receive information about which students are in foster care is important but not likely sufficient for designing and providing targeted supports that will help individual students prosper in the classroom. Once the CDSS data are available, educators and child welfare professionals must be able to discuss the needs of individual students to help ensure that useful education supports are provided. To that end, the child welfare system—along with the juvenile court, which approves placements and makes other important decisions about dependents of the court—needs ready access to information about individual students' education experience, performance, and needs. Discussions about how best to share such information can help to solidify the ongoing communication across education and child welfare sectors that is important for implementing new solutions, as discussed below.

Operational steps for interagency data sharing may include:

- Enter into MOUs for data sharing, including confidentiality safeguards.

- Ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to the task.

- Develop the necessary technical infrastructure.

- Define staff roles for both providing and accessing data.

- Establish clear communication protocols that identify which school and child welfare personnel should receive what specific data about children and youth in foster care and for what purpose.

Developing and growing a collection of research-based practices

While this first analysis of statewide data in California reveals the extent of the need to better serve students in foster care, there are places that have already been working to better meet the needs of this student population. As educators around the state begin to focus more closely on this population, they will benefit from ideas about what to do. We need to start sharing promising practices now, and add to the collective knowledge base over time. What's needed is an infrastructure for identifying and collecting these practices, providing them to county offices or districts upon request, connecting educators and child welfare professionals in a community of practice, and refining the programs and supports based on new data and findings.

The budget package that created the LCFF provides $10 million to establish a new regional support network, called the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, to advise and assist local education agencies in achieving goals that each agency identifies in its required three-year Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). This network and the resources it references will need to address the many components of the overall LCFF initiative, and meeting goals for students in foster care is key among them.

Some practices may come from research on characteristics associated with students in foster care—such as school mobility. On the child welfare side, the goal is to reduce changes in home placements. On the education side, it's to minimize disruptions caused by mobility, including reducing the number of different school placements and ensuring that a student's school records can be accessed quickly when a student switches to a different school,

allowing more continuity in instruction and participation in critical programs, such as special education services and afterschool activities. What is already known about how to do such things should be gleaned to inform and improve policy and practice.

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Improving K–12 education outcomes for students in foster care necessarily requires addressing issues along the full continuum of students' academic progression. Strategies at the elementary level may be very different from those that will be effective at the high school level. The lead-up to school is also critical, as is students' transition into post-secondary education. Pathways and support structures that connect K–12 and higher education are needed to address the needs of students in foster care who often lack family guidance and support during this challenging transition.

Operational steps around best practices may include:

- Identify and share examples from places that have already moved ahead to address the needs of children and youth in foster care, as well as from research.

- Develop an online collection of relevant research and promising practices.

- Provide hands-on support to individual districts to strengthen LCAPs by including promising supports to students in foster care.

- Create opportunities for networking that can launch a community of practice.

Using data to improve services to foster youth that lead to improved education outcomes

Providing ready access to real-time data about students who are in foster care will only lead to improved education

outcomes for these students if the data are used to inform local planning, whether for broad programming or for designing individual interventions. California schools have long been required to develop an annual improvement plan for state and federal accountability purposes, generally called the Single Plan for Student Achievement. Now, under the LCFF, an additional plan—the LCAP, mentioned above—is required for districts, to show how resources will be allocated to meet state and local priorities. Each of these two plans requires explicit attention to meeting the needs of students in foster care. Coordinated with each other, as they are meant to be, they can provide a sound base for taking action.

Single Plan for Student Achievement: The inclusion of students in foster care as a distinct subgroup in California's Academic Performance Index provides a new opportunity to regularly track their achievement gaps and plan deliberately to close them.

Local Control and Accountability Plan: Districts must demonstrate that they will increase or improve services for unduplicated pupils (i.e., low income, students in foster care, and English learners) in proportion to the additional LCFF funding generated by these students.

The planning process itself is important. These plans call for collaboration and input from a variety of stakeholders. For students in foster care, the planning process is an important opportunity for educators, child welfare professionals, and community advocates to engage and better understand the specific needs of these students and

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to identify local strategies to address those needs. This planning process is intended to both lead to creative local solutions and build the commitment to see them through.

Operational steps around using data for program improvements may include:

- Engage in inter-agency planning that engages educators, child welfare professionals, and concerned community members (e.g., foster parents, court-appointed special advocates) in identifying or developing new strategies to improve outcomes.

- Allocate available resources to support activities aimed explicitly at improving outcomes for students in foster care, recognizing that they have a profound and distinct set of needs.

- Build will and capacity to improve education outcomes for this population through professional development and technical assistance.

- Set realistic goals and specific plans for reaching those goals.

- Monitor and adjust as plans are implemented.

Supporting additional research related to students in foster care

While California has enough information to begin developing strategies to address the needs of students in foster care, there still is a great deal to learn about these students and what services and supports might improve their education outcomes. Part 2 of *The Invisible Achievement Gap* study is designed to add to the knowledge base by showing the associations between different kinds of foster care experiences students have (e.g., number and types of home placements) and students' education outcomes. Meanwhile, findings from Part 1 of the study suggest the value of further research in the following topics:

Effective approaches for improving education outcomes for students in foster care. Because the education challenges and outcomes for students in foster care have been largely invisible, there is little empirical

data to identify what approaches are most effective in meeting their needs. To the extent possible, approaches to be examined should include programs and services that are comprehensive in nature, addressing students' educational, instructional, emotional, social, behavioral, and developmental needs.

Efficacy of an individualized education plan for students in foster care. Local education agencies have maintained individualized education plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities that identify specific education objectives and specialized services to support students in meeting the objectives. Could a similar individualized approach be helpful for students in foster care, to help guide their education and lead to academic improvements? Could such plans, shared with child welfare professionals and the juvenile courts, help inform their decisions about students in foster care?

The impact of high-quality preschool on the success of children and youth in foster care. Does attending a high-quality preschool provide children in foster care with a better start at school, and do any positive impacts extend through children's schooling?

The appropriateness of current special education placements and services for students in foster care. *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1* reveals a disproportionately high percentage of special education designations for students in foster care. It is not known if the placement and services that these students receive are effective in meeting their education needs. It is also not known if many other students in foster care might be in need of special education services but go unidentified due to the relative frequency with which they may be changing schools.

The relative value of placing students in foster care in high-performing schools or of keeping them at their schools of origin, even if those schools are low performing. This proposed research topic focuses on an issue that divides many educators from many child welfare professionals. Education research clearly documents the value of placing the most educationally vulnerable students in high-performing schools. On the other hand, child welfare research and practice clearly support keeping children and youth near their families and in familiar communities when their lives have already been disrupted by being removed from their homes and put in foster care. Research on this topic could be especially helpful in informing both foster home placement and school enrollment decisions.