# Education of Foster Youth in California

## Legislative Analyst's Office

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# Introduction—Foster Youth Are the State's Responsibility

When a court determines children are no longer safe with their biological parents and removes them from the home, the state assumes ultimate responsibility for their well-being.

At any given time, there are approximately 73,000 children considered dependents of the state of California.

The state's objective is to find permanent placements for these "foster youth" as soon as safely possible. Until that happens, the state is responsible for their custody and care, including their education.

While California has taken several steps to address the unique educational needs of foster youth, academic outcomes for these children continue to lag behind those of their peers.

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# Overview of Presentation

This presentation looks at educational outcomes and opportunities for foster youth and makes recommendations for how the state could improve its services. The presentation is organized into three sections:

I.   *Background.* Introduction to California's foster youth, their unique educational challenges, and their academic performance.

II.  *Educational Resources.* Description of educational programs and services currently available to foster youth in the state.

III. *Issues and Recommendations.* Identification of shortcomings with existing programs and services and recommendations for ways the state might improve educational opportunities for the state's foster youth.

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# I. Background on Foster Youth in California

At any given time, California supports approximately 73,000 foster children. This represents a disproportionately high percentage—nearly 20 percent—of the nation's total foster youth population.

*Foster Youth Characteristics*

- There are foster youth in every county, from every racial group, and from all socioeconomic backgrounds.
- A court's reason for removing a child from the home varies, from severe physical or emotional abuse to neglect.
- One-quarter of the foster youth in California are under the age of five. The rest are school-age.

*Foster Placements*

- The court may place foster youth with an approved relative ("kinship") or guardian, or in a licensed group or foster home.
- On average, foster youth change residential placements one to two times per year. Older children and children who remain in the foster care system for several years tend to change even more frequently, while children placed with relatives tend to change less frequently.

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## *Length of Time in the Foster System*

- The majority of foster youth are in the state's care for less than four years but some will be dependents of the state from birth to age 18.

- Foster youth remain in the care of the dependency system until the court determines one of the following applies:

  - *Reunification.* The child is returned to the home from which he/she was removed because the court has determined that health and safety risks have been resolved.

  - *Permanency.* The child has found a home situation the court considers permanent.

  - *Emancipation.* The child has achieved adult status (typically at age 18).

  - *Delinquency.* In some counties a child's foster status is terminated if the child becomes a ward of the state's criminal justice system.

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# Background—Educational Responsibilities In a Foster Youth Case

In assuming custody of a foster youth, the state also takes responsibility for his or her education. Current law requires that two individuals be tasked with monitoring the child's education.

- *Social workers* are responsible for maintaining a *health and education passport* for each foster child to track health and academic records including (but not limited to) school placements, courses completed, and school credits.

- The *right to make educational decisions for a foster child* (including, but not limited to, which school he or she will attend and what special services the school can and should provide to the child) remains with the *biological parent* unless the judge assigns an *Education Representative.* In many cases judges leave this responsibility with the biological parent, even if the child is placed in a separate living situation.

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# Background—
# Unique Challenges for Foster Youth



Foster youth face challenges in their personal lives that impact their education.

***Foster youth often arrive at school with inherent barriers to academic success and lacking academic resources.***

- Parental neglect in the formative years can impede development of school readiness skills.
- Emotional, physical, and/or psychological issues can distract from academics.
- Inadequate adult support and limited out-of-school resources (such as help with homework, access to the internet, or transportation for group projects).

***Academic success is further compromised by inconsistent attendance and school transfers.***

- Parental neglect, changes to living placements, or court-related activities can lead to high absence rates.
- Changes in living placements often lead to changes in schools, which are further complicated by problems transferring records and credits. Research shows that on average foster students fall four to six months behind academically each time they transfer schools.

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## Background—
## Educational Outcomes of Foster Youth in California

Because of their unique challenges, foster youth display lower academic performance than their peers. Specifically, they are more likely than their peers to:

- Display higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary problems.
- Earn lower grades, achieve lower test scores, and perform below grade level.
- Be retained a grade.
- Qualify for special education services.
- Drop out of high school before graduation.
- Fail to complete college.

Specific data on the academic performance of foster youth is shown on the subsequent slides.

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# Background—
# K-12 Academic Performance

National studies have found that in general foster youth score far below (15-20 percentile points) their peers on state standardized tests.

Recent studies have shown similarly poor academic performance for foster youth in California. As shown in the figures, 75 percent of foster youth perform below grade level standards, and by third grade 83 percent of foster youth have had to repeat a grade.

## California's K-12 Foster Youth



Working at Grade Level

Working Below Grade Level



Never Retained

Retained at Least One Grade

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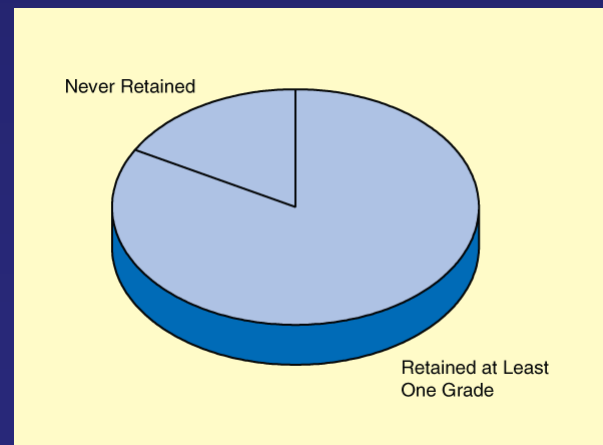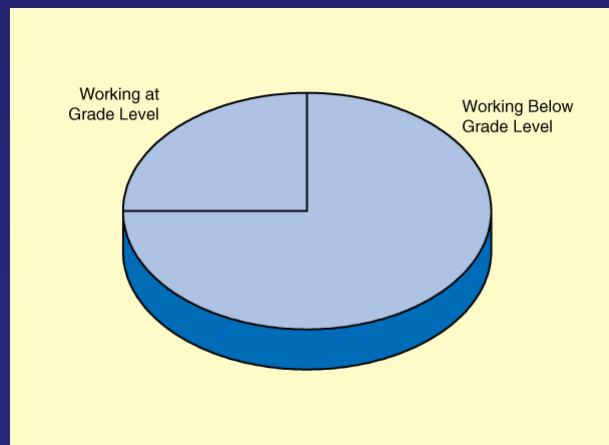
# Background—
# K-12 Completion Rates

While K-12 completion rates are low across California, foster youth are even less likely than their peers to complete the K-12 system. Only 30 percent of foster youth graduate.
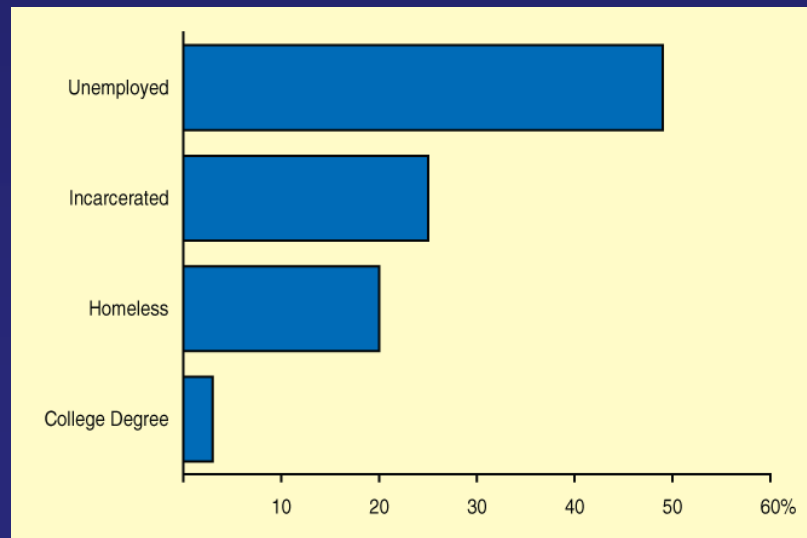


**California Foster Youth**

Complete K-12    Drop Out



**All California Students**

Complete K-12    Drop Out

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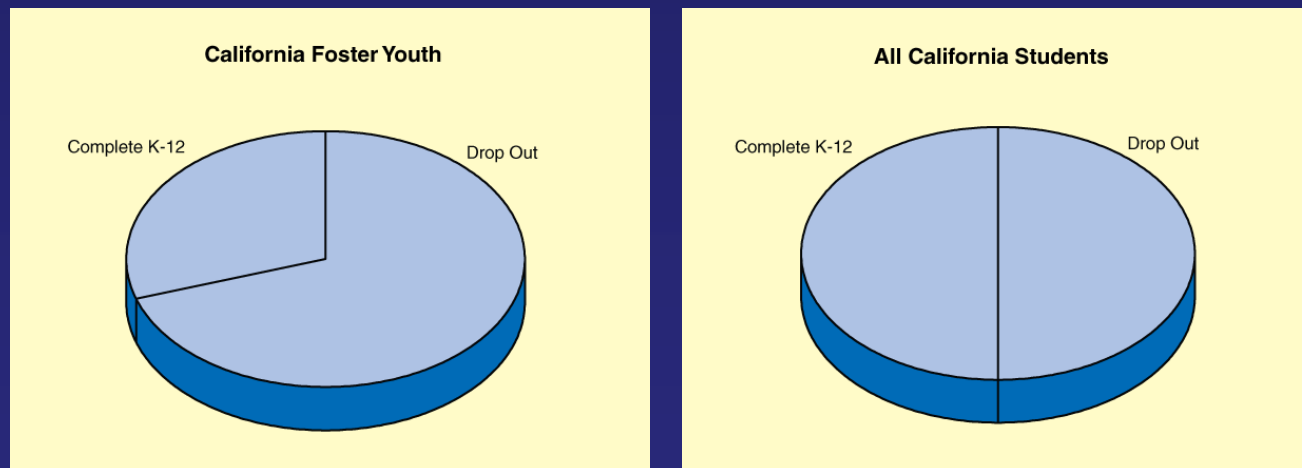
# Background—
# Post-Emancipation Outcomes

Weak K-12 performance and high drop out rates result in poor post-secondary outcomes for foster youth, with high percentages unemployed, incarcerated, and/or homeless within four years of emancipation. Only 3 percent of emancipated foster youth ever earn a college degree.

Outcomes of Emancipated Foster Youth



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# II. Educational Resources for California's Foster Youth

Because foster youth face significant educational challenges, the state has developed several protections, programs, and services specifically designed to help improve their academic outcomes.

- Foster youth rights (Assembly Bill 490).
- Foster Youth Services (FYS) programs.
- Higher education programs.
- Other support programs.

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# Educational Resources—
# Foster Youth Rights (AB 490)

In response to research showing that school stability is a key factor in improving educational outcomes, in 2003 the Legislature enacted AB 490 (Steinberg). The objective of this legislation is to preserve educational stability and continuity for highly mobile foster youth.

Specifically, AB 490 requires:

- Foster youth be allowed to finish an academic year in the same school even if changes in living arrangements mean the student moves to another school zone.
- Each school district employ a foster youth liaison to ensure compliance with AB 490 requirements.
- Schools enroll entering foster students immediately without waiting for otherwise-required paperwork.
- Schools provide foster youth access to the same resources available to all pupils (such as extracurricular activities).
- Schools transfer school records for foster youth who have changed schools within two days of a request.
- Schools accept school credits for work completed by foster youth while at a previous school.

# Educational Resources— FYS Programs



One of the primary ways the state supports foster youth in the K-12 system is through FYS programs, which provide supplemental services with the objective of improving educational outcomes for foster youth.

Under current law, FYS programs may only serve foster youth living in licensed group or foster homes, not those the court has placed with relatives or guardians.

Local entities receive competitive grants from the California Department of Education to run FYS programs.

- *57 Countywide Programs.* All but one of the state's 58 county offices of education run FYS programs.
- *6 District Programs.* Originally FYS was piloted via grants to school districts and these pilot programs remain in existence today.
- *28 Juvenile Detention Programs.* These programs are dedicated to supporting foster youth in juvenile detention.

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# Educational Resources—
# Foster Youth Services Program Offerings



Each FYS program may determine its unique mix of service offerings but each provides one or more of the following.

- *Tutoring.* All FYS programs must ensure foster youth have access to tutoring, either by providing the service themselves or by referring the student to another provider.

- *Educational Monitoring.* Some FYS programs monitor and guide the education of foster youth in their area (for example by checking students' attendance, completion of school work, and participation in college preparation activities).

- *Extracurricular Activities.* Some FYS programs offer activities (such as karate or music courses) for foster youth who cannot participate in school activities because of frequent moves.

- *Track Credits and School History.* Some FYS programs assist the social worker in completing students' education passports and making sure school records are up to date.

- *Other.* In some cases FYS staff serve as liaisons between the children's academic stakeholders (teachers and school districts) and outside stakeholders (foster parents, social workers, and courts).

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# Educational Resources—
# Higher Education



Once foster youth have completed the K-12 system, the state supports several programs to help them gain acceptance to, pay for, and complete college. Such resources include:

- *California Community College (CCC) Tuition Assistance.* The CCCs provide virtually free tuition to former foster youth.
- *Chafee Educational and Training Vouchers Program.* This program offers up to $5,000 per year to former foster youth under age 22 for post-secondary training.
- *Guardian Scholars Programs.* Available on many CCC and California State University campuses, these programs offer housing, tuition, and academic support to former foster youth.
- *Other Campus-Specific Supports.* Some state college campuses have designed local programs to support former foster youth. For example, the University of California at Santa Cruz allows former foster youth to stay in student housing year-round, rather than having to move out for the summer.

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# Educational Resources—Support Programs



In addition to academic-centered programs, the state also funds two support services that help foster youth access educational resources.

- **Independent Living Programs.** These county-based programs serve youth ages 16-21 by teaching skills necessary to find housing, manage finances, and run a household.
- **Foster Care Ombudsman.** The Department of Social Services maintains a Web site and help line that assists foster youth in learning about and accessing needed programs and services.

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# Educational Resources—
# Access to Mainstream Programs and Services

Foster youth are also eligible to access the services available to all public school students. Because of their unique educational challenges, foster youth tend to have a disproportionately high need for the following services.

- *Pre-Kindergarten* including daycare and school readiness classes.
- *Special Education* including specialized instruction and speech therapy.
- *Special needs services* including mental health counseling, behavioral interventions, and other individualized services.
- *Alternative schools* including court schools, juvenile halls, and alternative schools.
- *Tutoring* including after school lessons and homework assistance.
- *College preparation assistance* including counseling services and the Advancement Via Individual Determination program.
- *Higher education resources* including financial aid and college assistance programs offered to low-income students.

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## III. Issues With Existing Programs and Recommendations for Improvements

Despite additional state programs and resources, foster youth continue to display poor educational outcomes. This could be partially due to continued shortcomings and inefficiencies with existing programs and services. Specifically, we find that:

1. *Many foster youth continue to lack dedicated educational monitoring.*

2. *Participation restrictions for the FYS program prevent many foster youth from accessing needed support services.*

3. *Running the FYS program through multiple providers leads to inefficiencies and gaps in services.*

4. *Transportation funding issues restrict access to education for both K-12 and post-secondary foster youth.*

In the subsequent slides we describe some of these issues in more detail and offer recommendations for how the Legislature could improve educational opportunities for foster youth through better implementation of the FYS program and expanded transportation services.

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# Recommendations—
# Reprioritize to Make Improvements

Our recommendations are intended to be cost-neutral. While the state may choose to invest additional dollars in the FYS program at some point, we envision improvements in FYS programs by reallocating existing resources. Specifically, we believe the state and local programs must *reprioritize* the way existing funds are spent in order to improve educational opportunities for foster youth. In formulating the recommendations that follow, we kept these principles in mind:

- Local FYS programs should continue to have *flexibility* in making specific implementation decisions, with *improving educational outcomes* as the overarching goal behind all expenditure decisions.

- *Academic monitoring*, *educational stability*, and *transportation* are key drivers of academic success and are, therefore, worthy of higher prioritization.

# Issue 1—
# Foster Youth Lack Dedicated Educational Monitoring

*Many foster youth continue to lack dedicated educational monitoring.* There are many individuals involved in overseeing foster youth's education, including judges, biological and foster parents, educational representatives, social workers, teachers, and FYS program staff. However, because health and safety issues are often of primary concern in foster cases, in many cases explicit attention to a student's educational progress is overlooked. Specifically, the following are often true:

- *Many foster youth lack an individual to provide educational guidance.* Because of frequent moves and health and safety issues, in many cases foster youth do not have access to individuals who are focused on helping monitor and advise their educational progress. Many foster youth need supplemental support including advice on class selection, help with missing credits, and dealing with transfer-related issues.

- *Many education passports are incomplete or inaccurate.* Social workers are responsible for tracking school credits, school and class placements, and other basic information in these official documents. These are supposed to be historical records for facilitating school transfers, as well as a means by which social workers and other stakeholders can monitor and track the students' educational progress. In many cases, however, these data are not well maintained.

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Recommendations—
Require FYS Programs to Monitor Foster Youth Education



*We recommend expanding the responsibilities of county FYS programs to ensure foster youth receive adequate and consistent educational guidance and monitoring.* Specifically, we recommend that as a condition of receiving grant funding, all FYS programs offer the following services for the most high-need foster youth.

- *Academic Counseling.* Currently, FYS programs are required to offer tutoring but any other services for foster youth are at the discretion of the local program. We recommend academic counseling be an explicit responsibility for every FYS program for all foster youth who are not in a relative or guardian placement.

- *Completion of Education Passports.* To improve completion rates and accuracy of educational records for foster youth, we recommend tasking FYS with providing the academic details needed to complete this tracking document for foster youth living in a group or licensed foster home. This data can be gathered during academic counseling and provided to the Child Welfare Services (CWS) agency in a manner approved locally. This may require local data sharing arrangements between CWS, school districts, and FYS programs.

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# Issue 2—
## FYS Program Restrictions Limit Foster Youth Participation

***Participation restrictions for the FYS program prevent some foster youth from accessing needed support services.*** Currently, FYS programs may only offer services to students living in group or licensed foster homes. Foster youth who are placed with relatives or guardians or who attain a permanent placement are not viewed as "high-need" because it is assumed their relatives or guardian caregivers can provide any needed support. However, the academic challenges these youth face do not disappear when they are placed with a relative or permanent guardian and many of these students display similarly poor outcomes as other foster youth.

# Recommendation—
# Modify Eligibility Restrictions for Foster Youth Programs

***We recommend changing FYS program guidelines so they can provide limited services to all current and recent foster youth.*** All current and recent foster youth would benefit from some level of supplementary educational assistance.Specifically, we recommend FYS programs be able to offer tutoring and short-term assistance (such as answering questions and making referrals) to students who are placed with relatives or guardians as well as students who may have placed out of the foster system within the past five years.

More intensive services, such as academic counseling and tracking of school records, should continue to be reserved for the most high-need foster youth—those living in group or licensed homes and those classified as delinquents.

***Running multiple types of FYS programs leads to inefficiencies and gaps in services.*** Currently, most FYS programs (57) are run through county offices of education (COEs) and these programs serve the majority of foster youth. However, a limited number of additional FYS programs operate from school districts (6) or are exclusively targeted at foster youth in the delinquency system (28). Consequently, in several counties there are multiple FYS programs in operation. Several problems can result.

- Unnecessary duplication of paperwork and transferring of responsibilities, and loss of relationships when foster youth move within a county.

- Confusion for stakeholders (teachers, social workers, foster parents) regarding which FYS program is serving which foster youth.

- Gaps in services for "delinquent" foster youth. Lack of clarity who is monitoring educational records and progress, especially when exiting delinquency system.

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# Recommendation—
# Consolidate FYS Programs at COEs

***We recommend consolidating FYS programs at the COE level.***
Specifically, we recommend eliminating the separate district-run and delinquency FYS program grants and shifting the funding and responsibilities to the existing COE programs. This change would eliminate unnecessary confusion and duplication of effort, streamline service delivery, and help ensure consistency of services for all foster youth, including delinquents.

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# Issue 4—
# Transportation Issues Restrict Access to Education

*Transportation funding issues restrict access to education for both K-12 and postsecondary foster youth.* Foster youth often lack the resources and assistance to help them get to school and school-related activities. Specifically:

- Although AB 490 protects the right of K-12 foster students to stay at their "schools of origin" for the remainder of the school year even when they change living placements, the law does not clarify who bears the cost if this arrangement requires student transportation. The result is often that no entity will bear the cost, and many foster youth are forced to transfer schools in the middle of the year despite the AB 490 laws that are supposed to protect against this.

- California currently has no designated funding stream to help provide transportation services for foster youth. Current and emancipated foster youth frequently cite this as a primary barrier to enrolling in and completing college, as they do not have the means to reliably get themselves to both school and work (to support themselves through school).

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# Recommendation—
# Develop Means for Foster Youth to Get to School



*We recommend the Legislature convene a workgroup to address the transportation needs of K-12 and postsecondary foster youth.* Specifically, we recommend a group consisting of representatives from the Legislature, state departments, county CWS agencies, school districts, and FYS entities devise a transportation funding model that will improve current and emancipated foster youth's access to educational activities. The funding model should:

- Discourage midyear school transfers and create incentives for social workers to find new placements for foster youth within the same school attendance area.

- Enable compliance with AB 490 and allow foster youth who are moved to a new school attendance area to complete the year at their school of origin.

- Maximize use of federal foster care transportation dollars.

- Allow local flexibility regarding mode of transportation while clarifying financial responsibility.

- Provide transportation assistance to current and emancipated foster youth (ages 16-21) to assist them with school-related transportation needs.

- Address cross-county placements.

# Recommendations—Summary

Foster youth face many challenges, particularly with regard to their education. We believe that by implementing the following recommendations, the state can help improve educational opportunities for these needy students.

1. *Expand FYS program responsibilities to include academic counseling and completion of education passports.*

2. *Change FYS program guidelines so they can provide certain services to all current and recent foster youth.*

3. *Consolidate FYS programs at COEs.*

4. *Convene a workgroup to address the transportation needs of K-12 and postsecondary foster youth.*

# Thank you

For more information on any of the items in this presentation, please contact the Legislative Analyst's Office:

*Stefanie Fricano*

*916-319-8336*

*www.lao.ca.gov*

For more information about FYS programs in general, please see the following link to the Department of Education:

http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/fy/

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