

## Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster and Out-of-Home Care

For the over 800,000 children and youth served in foster care each year in the United States, educational success is a potential positive counterweight to abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence. Positive school experiences enhance their well-being, help them make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase their chances for personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency, as well as their ability to contribute to society.

Unfortunately, the educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care are dismal. As this current research summary reveals, young people in foster care are in educational crises. However, the paucity of research on this subject (particularly data from national sources) is problematic in leading efforts for change. And change leading to their educational success is imperative—as well as the responsibility of us all.

### SCHOOL PLACEMENT STABILITY

#### School Mobility Rates

- ◆ Children and youth have an average of one to two placement changes per year while in out-of-home care.<sup>1</sup>
  - A 2001 study of more than 4,500 children and youth in foster care in Washington State found that at both the elementary and secondary levels, twice as many youth in foster care as youth not in care had changed schools during the year.<sup>2</sup>
  - In a New York study of 70 children and youth in foster care, more than 75% did not remain in their school once placed in foster care, and almost 65% had been transferred in the middle of the school year.<sup>3</sup>
  - A three-state study of youth aging out of care (the Midwest Study) by Chapin Hall revealed substantial levels of school mobility associated with placement in out-of-home care. Over a third of young adults reported having had five or more school changes.<sup>4</sup>
- ◆ School mobility rates are highest for those entering care for the first time. According to another Chapin Hall study of almost 16,000 children and youth in the Chicago Public School system, over two-thirds switched schools shortly after their initial placement.<sup>5</sup>

#### Effect of Mobility

- ◆ A 1996 study students in Chicago Public Schools found that students who had changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of educational growth by their sixth year.<sup>6</sup>
- ◆ A 1999 study found that California high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate as those who did not change schools, even when controlling for other variables that affect high school completion.<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ In a national study of 1,087 foster care alumni, youth who had had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving care.<sup>8</sup>
- ◆ In the New York study, 42% of the children and youth did not begin school immediately upon entering foster care. Nearly half of these young people said that they were kept out of school because of lost or misplaced school records.<sup>9</sup>

#### Suspensions/Expulsions

- ◆ 66.8% of youth in out-of-home care in the Midwest Study had been suspended at least once from school (compared to a national sample of 27.8%). About one sixth (16.5%) had been expelled compared with 4.6% of the national sample.<sup>10</sup>

## ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

### Test Scores

- ◆ The 2001 Washington State study found that children and youth in foster care attending public schools scored 16 to 20 percentile points below non-foster youth in statewide standardized tests at grades three, six and nine.<sup>11</sup>
- ◆ Youth in foster care in the Midwest Study, interviewed primarily after completing 10th or 11th grade, on average read at only a seventh grade level. Approximately 44% read at high school level or higher. Few excelled in academic subjects, especially relative to a comparable national sample. Less than one in five received an “A” in English, math, history, or science.<sup>12</sup>
- ◆ Chapin Hall’s research on Chicago Public School children and youth in out-of-home care indicates they lag at least half a school year behind demographically similar students in the same schools. (There is an overall achievement gap of upwards of one year. However, some of this is attributed to the low-performing schools that many of them attend). Almost 50% of third to eighth grade students in out-of-home care scored in the bottom quartile on the reading section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) test.<sup>13</sup>

### Grade Retention/Old for Grade

- ◆ In the Washington State study, twice as many youth in foster care at both the elementary and secondary levels repeated a grade compared to youth not in care.<sup>14</sup>
- ◆ Nearly 45% of youth in care in the New York State study reported being retained at least once in school.<sup>15</sup>
- ◆ In the Midwest Study, 37.2% of youth in foster care (compared with 21.5% of a comparable national sample) reported repeating a grade.<sup>16</sup>
- ◆ Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care were almost twice as likely as other students to be old for their grade, by at least a year, even after demographic factors were taken into account and comparisons made to other students attending the same schools.<sup>17</sup>

## SPECIAL EDUCATION ISSUES

### Number of Youth in Special Education

- ◆ Numerous studies indicate anywhere between one-quarter and almost one-half (23%-47%) of children and youth in out-of-home care in the U.S. receive special education services at some point in their schooling.<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ At both the elementary and secondary levels, more than twice as many foster youth as non-foster youth in the Washington State study had enrolled in special education programs.<sup>19</sup>
- ◆ Nearly half of the youth in foster care in the Midwest Study had been placed in special education at least once during the course of their education.<sup>20</sup>
- ◆ Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care between sixth and eighth grades were classified as eligible for special education nearly three times more frequently than other students.<sup>21</sup>

### Advocacy Regarding Services

- ◆ In research done in 2000 by Advocates for Children of New York, Inc.:
  - 90% of biological parents surveyed did not participate in any special education processes concerning their child.<sup>22</sup>
  - 60% of caseworkers/social workers surveyed “were not aware of existing laws when referring children to special education” and over 50% said “that their clients did not receive appropriate services very often while in foster care”.<sup>23</sup>
- ◆ A 1990 study in Oregon found that children who had multiple placements and who needed special education were less likely to receive those services than children in more stable placements. In that same study, 39% of children in foster care had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 16% received special education services.<sup>24</sup>
- ◆ A 2001 Bay Area study of over 300 foster parents found that “missing information from prior schools increased the odds of enrollment delays by 6.5 times”.<sup>25</sup>

## SOCIAL-BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

### Mental Health

- ◆ In a recent study of foster care alumni in Oregon and Washington (Northwest Alumni Study), 54.4% of alumni had one or more mental health disorders in the past 12 months, such as depression, social phobia or panic syndrome (compared with 22.1% of general population).<sup>26</sup>
- ◆ In the same study, 25.2% had post-traumatic stress disorder within the past 12 months (compared with 4.0% of general population), which is twice the rate of U.S. war veterans.<sup>27</sup>

### Social-Behavioral

- ◆ Several studies have found that children and youth in foster care are significantly more likely to have school behavior problems and that they have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions from school.<sup>28</sup>
- ◆ Recent research in Chicago confirmed previous statewide research findings that children in foster care are significantly more likely than children in the general population to have a special education classification of an emotional or behavioral disturbance.<sup>29</sup>
- ◆ In the Midwest Study, by about 19 years of age, almost half of the young women had been pregnant, a significantly higher percentage than the 20% in a comparative national sample.<sup>30</sup>

## HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES

### High School Completion Rates/Drop-Out Rates

- ◆ A recent report by the EPE Research Center indicates that the nationwide high school completion rate for **all** students is 70%. More are lost in ninth grade than in any other grade (9<sup>th</sup>: 35%; 10<sup>th</sup>: 28%; 11<sup>th</sup>: 20%; 12<sup>th</sup>: 17%).<sup>31</sup>
- ◆ In the Washington State study, 59% of youth in foster care enrolled in 11th grade completed high school by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>32</sup>
- ◆ The young adults in the Northwest Alumni Study completed high school (**via diploma or GED**) at 84.8% which is close to the general population rate of 87.3%.<sup>33</sup>
- ◆ Over one-third of the young people the Midwest Study had received neither a high school diploma nor a GED by age 19, compared to fewer than 10% of their same-age peers in a comparable national sample.<sup>34</sup>
- ◆ A national study in 1994 of young adults who had been discharged from foster care found that 54% had completed high school.<sup>35</sup>
- ◆ In the Chapin Hall study of Chicago Public School youth, fifteen-year-old students in out-of-home care were about half as likely as other students to have graduated 5 years later, with significantly higher percentages of students in care having dropped out (55%) or incarcerated (10%).<sup>36</sup>

### Factors Contributing to Dropping Out

- ◆ Multiple studies on the issue suggest that retention significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out.<sup>37</sup> For example, one study found that being retained even once between first and eighth grade makes a student four times more likely to drop out than a classmate who was never held back, even after controlling for multiple factors.<sup>38</sup>
- ◆ The recent report by the EPE Research Center indicates that repeating a grade, changing schools, and behavior problems are among the host of signals that a student is likely to leave school without a traditional diploma.<sup>39</sup>
- ◆ The book, **Drop Outs in America** also suggests the following students are at-risk for dropping out: students of color, students who had been held back, students who are older than others in their grade, and English-language learners.<sup>40</sup>

## POST-SECONDARY ENTRANCE/COMPLETION RATES

### Post-secondary Entrance/Completion Rates

- ◆ The Northwest Alumni Study found that of the foster care alumni included in the research,
  - 42.7% completed some education beyond high school
  - 20.6% completed any degree/certificate beyond high school
  - 16.1% completed a vocational degree (21.9% among those age 25 or older)
  - 1.8% completed a bachelor's degree: (2.7% among those age 25 or older) (24% is the completion rate among the general population of same age)<sup>41</sup>

- ◆ Recent longitudinal data (from the general population) suggests that 39% of students who enrolled in a public two-year institution received a credential within six years (28%--associate degree or certificate, 11%--baccalaureate).<sup>42</sup>

### College Preparation/Aspiration

- ◆ The majority of those youth in out-of-home care interviewed in the Midwest Study at age 17-18 hoped and expected to graduate from college eventually.<sup>43</sup>
- ◆ Another report states that only 15% of youth in foster care are likely to be enrolled in college preparatory classes versus 32% of students not in foster care.<sup>44</sup>
- ◆ Strong academic preparation has been found to be the single most important factor in enrolling and succeeding in a postsecondary program. However, in the United States, studies of the general population have found that:
  - Only 32% of all students leave high school qualified to attend a four-year college.<sup>45</sup>
  - Only 20% of all African American and 16% of all Hispanic students leave high school college-ready.<sup>46</sup>
  - Statistics suggest that between 30-60% of students “now require remedial education upon entry to college, depending on the type of institution they attend”.<sup>47</sup>

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### References

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- Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (2000, July). *Educational Neglect: The delivery of educational services to children in New York City’s foster care system*. Data collection included 281 surveys filled out by the following individuals in New York City: social workers/case workers (34%), foster children (25%), law guardians (16%), foster parents (5%), biological parents (7%), Committee of Special Education chairpersons (7%), and early intervention specialists (5%).
- Barber, J. G., & Delfabbro, P. H. (2003). The first four months in a new foster placement: Psychosocial adjustment, parental contact, and placement disruption. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 30(2), 69-85. Intake and four-month follow-up measures were obtained from social workers for 235 children (ages 4-17) referred into a new foster care placement over a 12-month period in the Australian State of South Australia. Adolescents in this group were also compared to a normative sample of 985 adolescents in the general population.
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- Choice, P., D’Andrade, A., Gunther, K., Downes, D., Schaldach, J., Csiszar, C., & Austin, M. (2001). *Education for foster children: Removing barriers to academic success*. Berkeley, CA: Bay Area Social Services Consortium, Center for Social Services Research, School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley. Data included telephone surveys of foster parents for 303 school-age children in nine Bay Area counties.
- Conley, D. (2005). *College Knowledge: What it really takes for students to succeed and what we can do to get them ready*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cook, R. (1994). Are we helping foster care youth prepare for the future? *Children and Youth Services Review*. 16(3/4), 213-229. Data were collected via in-person and telephone interviews of 810 young adults aged 18-24 years old 2.5 to 4 years after leaving foster care. These cases were chosen by probability sampling and represented a national estimate of 34,600 youth.

- Courtney, M.E., Terao, S. & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Wave One of Longitudinal study in three waves following 732 youth age 17 or 18 still in jurisdiction in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin as they age out of foster care. Youth were also compared to 19 year olds who were part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, as a comparison national sample.
- Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., & Bost, N. (2005). *Evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Longitudinal study in three waves following 736 youth age 17 or 18 still in jurisdiction in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin as they age out of foster care. Wave Two (current report) included 603 (82%) of the original interviewees. Includes both urban and rural placements with contrasting policy and service delivery environments. In this report, the outcomes of 282 young adults (43%) still in care were compared to 321 (53%) who had already been discharged. Also compared to 19 year olds who were part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.
- Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2006, June). *Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Policy and Rates. Diplomas Count 2006, first edition. Education Week*. Graduation rates were calculated by the EPE Research Center using the Cumulative Promotion Index method, developed by EPE Center Director, Christopher B. Swanson.
- George R.M., Van Voorhis, J., Grant, S., Casey, K., & Robinson, M. (1992). Special-education experiences of children in care: An empirical study. *Child Welfare, 71*(5), 419-437. Study looked at all students enrolled in Illinois schools and found that 29.1% of students in foster care were in special education.
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- National AFCARS data (2002). National 2002 AFCARS case level data available from the Child Welfare League of America's National Data Analysis System (NDAS) indicate a mean of 2.5 placements with an average stay of 22 months in care (or a median of 2 placements for a median length of stay of 12 months. (Personal Communication, Carrie Friedman, March 23, 2005). Note that the placement change rate is inflated by the large percentage of children who have a short-term shelter care placement before being placed in a regular foster home.
- Orfield, G., Ed. (2004) *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*. Harvard Education Press: Cambridge, MA.

- Pecora, P.J., Williams, J., Kessler, R.C., Downs, A.C., O'Brien, K., Hiripi, E., & Morello, S. (2003). *Assessing the effects of foster care: Early results from the Casey National Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. Case record reviews and interviews were conducted for 1087 alumni served by the 23 Casey Field offices in operation in 1998. Youth served by Casey offices between 1966 and 1998 were included in the study sample if they had been placed with a Casey foster family for 12 months or more and had been discharged from foster care for at least 12 months.
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- Smithgall, C., Gladden, R.M., Howard, E., Goerge, R., Courtney, M. (2004). *Educational experiences of children in out-of-home care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. This report compared children in the Illinois Chicago Public Schools system. Data were pulled from the Integrated Database on Child and Family Services' Child and Youth Center Information System and matched using probabilistic record matching with the Chicago Public Schools Student Information System to almost 16,000 students. Academic performance indicators used included elementary students' scores on the reading section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the percent of elementary students who were at least one grade level behind for their age, and high school dropout rates. Also conducted were 31 in-person semi-structured interviews with DCFS and private agency caseworkers, foster parents, and school staff.
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child home interviews and teacher telephone interviews from a randomly selected sample of 302 children aged six through twelve years living in out-of-home placement in or near Los Angeles County.

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## Endnotes

Research compiled by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education.

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- <sup>1</sup> National AFCARS data, 2002
  - <sup>2</sup> Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 1
  - <sup>3</sup> Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 5
  - <sup>4</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 42
  - <sup>5</sup> Smithgall et al., 2004, p.46
  - <sup>6</sup> Kerbow, University of Chicago, 1996, p.20
  - <sup>7</sup> Rumberger, et al., 1999, p. 37
  - <sup>8</sup> Pecora et al., 2003, p. 44
  - <sup>9</sup> Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 4
  - <sup>10</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004, pg. 42
  - <sup>11</sup> Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 13
  - <sup>12</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004, pp. 43, 45
  - <sup>13</sup> Smithgall et. al. 2004, pp. 14, 17
  - <sup>14</sup> Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 1
  - <sup>15</sup> Advocates for Children of New York, inc., 2000, p. 45
  - <sup>16</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 42
  - <sup>17</sup> Smithgall et. al. 2004, p. 22
  - <sup>18</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004 (47% of 732); Smithgall, et al., 2004 (45% of 1,216 sixth through eighth graders); Burley and Halpern, 2001 (23% of 1,423 third graders, 29% of 1,539 six graders, 24% of 1,597 ninth graders); Choice, et al., 2001 (36% of 303); Advocates for Children of New York Inc., 2000 (30% of 70); Zanghi, 1999 (41% of 134); Jones, et. al., 1998 (23% of 249); Goerge, et al., 1992 (29.1% of 14,714)
  - <sup>19</sup> Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 16
  - <sup>20</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 40
  - <sup>21</sup> Smithgall et. al. 2004, p. 58
  - <sup>22</sup> Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 6
  - <sup>23</sup> Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 6.
  - <sup>24</sup> White, 1990 qtd. in Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 8
  - <sup>25</sup> Choice, et al., 2001, p. 44
  - <sup>26</sup> Pecora et al., 2005, p. 34
  - <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>28</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004, pg. 42; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003, pp. 6, 7; McMillen et al., 2003, p. 475; Zima et al., 2000, pp. 98, 99
  - <sup>29</sup> Goerge et al., 1992, p. 3; Smithgall et al., 2004, p. 58
  - <sup>30</sup> Courtney, et al., 2005, p. 54
  - <sup>31</sup> EPE Research Center, 2006
  - <sup>32</sup> Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 1
  - <sup>33</sup> Pecora, et al., 2005, p. 35
  - <sup>34</sup> Courtney, et al., 2005, p. 22
  - <sup>35</sup> Cook, 1994, p. 218
  - <sup>36</sup> Smithgall et. al. 2004, p. 28
  - <sup>37</sup> Studies quoted in Rumberger, 2000, p. 14
  - <sup>38</sup> Rumberger, 1995, p. 601
  - <sup>39</sup> EPE Research Center, 2006
  - <sup>40</sup> Orfield, G., Ed., 2004, p. 157
  - <sup>41</sup> Pecora, et al., 2005, p. 36
  - <sup>42</sup> ACE Center for Policy Analysis, 2003, p.3
  - <sup>43</sup> Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 39
  - <sup>44</sup> Blome, 1997 cited in Sheehy et al., 2001, p. 9
  - <sup>45</sup> Greene, 2005, p. 9
  - <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>47</sup> Conley, 2005, p. xi