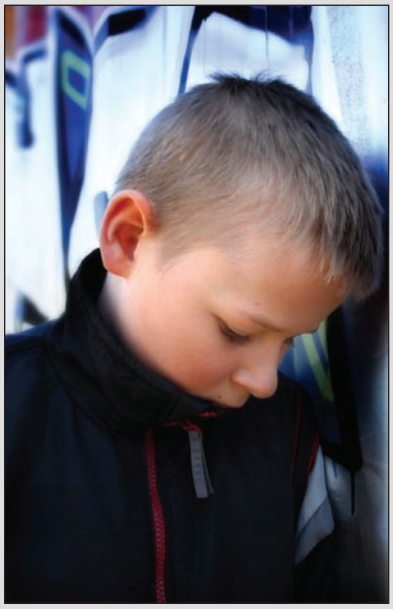
THE CENTER
FOR THE FUTURE OF TEACHING & LEARNING

CENTER VIEW
Insight and analysis on California education policy

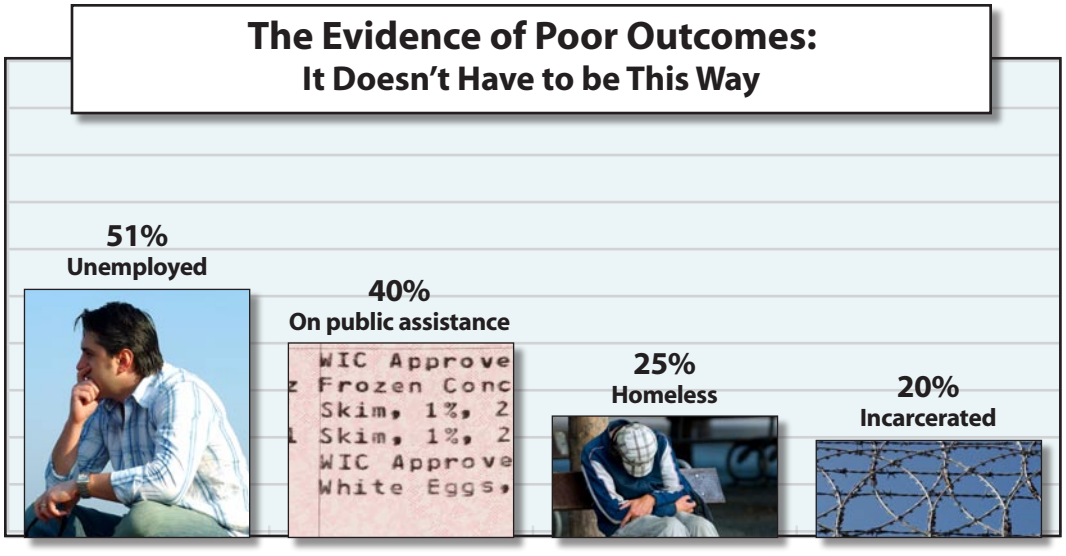
JUNE 2008



Ready to Succeed

The academic success of students in schools across the state is a top priority for California policy-makers. But for some students—English language learners, students of color, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities—the academic goals set by the state have remained stubbornly out of reach. To this list of those whose academic success has been elusive, we would add foster youth, whose demographics overlap significantly with those of students of color and those living in poverty.

By any of the measures commonly cited—test scores, dropout rates, rates of college entry and completion—the achievement gap experienced by foster youth is dramatic. This gap translates into fewer economic opportunities and more adverse outcomes, relegating many foster youth to a harsh life sentence among Californians who must struggle just to get by. The evidence of poor outcomes for these students is alarming: within the first 2 to 4 years after leaving the foster care system at age 18, 51% of these young adults are unemployed, 40% are on public assistance, 25% become homeless, and 20% are incarcerated.



The plight of foster youth is made more tragic because the state itself—and, by extension, its court, child welfare and education systems—has assumed responsibility for their safety and well-being. Removing children from a situation of abuse or neglect at home may indeed be required to ensure their immediate physical safety, but for children in foster care, all too often the intervention intended to improve their life circumstances leads to yet another form of damaging neglect by failing to address their educational needs.

It is important to note that this neglect is not the product of individual failings alone as systemic shortcomings contribute in significant ways to the difficult conditions under which many of these children learn. It is equally important to note that these systemic failures are far from inevitable. Identifying short- and long-term ways to reverse those failures was the focus of the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care, a two-year initiative supported by the Stuart Foundation. The Collaborative, jointly sponsored by the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc., aimed specifically at identifying and addressing ways in which caregivers and the child welfare, education, and court systems could create a framework to promote better educational outcomes for the foster children in their care.

> *"Together, the Center and MHAS have contributed their expertise in public education and child welfare and convened a team of dedicated professionals from both arenas to delve deeply into the challenges and opportunities that exist in the child welfare and public education systems to improve educational outcomes for foster youth."*
>
> – Teri Kook, Senior Program Officer
> The Stuart Foundation

The Current Education Status of Foster Youth

Of the half million American children who are placed in the foster care system, at least 74,000 (or 1/7) live in California. Often by the time they enter foster care, these vulnerable children and youth have already experienced maltreatment as well as significant emotional and physical trauma. These circumstances compromise their ability to function and interfere significantly with their ability to learn.

Compared to other children, foster youth are more likely to:

- **Have academic and behavioral problems in school**
- **Have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals**
- **Have been held back in school (50%)**
- **Have not completed high school (46%)**
- **Fail to go on to a 4-year college (fewer than 3% do so)**
- **Be placed in special education (25-52%, compared to 10-12% of the general student population) — often because of a learning disability or emotional disturbance**

The Hurdles in Their Way

> *"There are 15 people responsible for my education, but not one of them reads my report card or calls my teacher."*
>
> –Foster Child

As foster children move through the public school system, they are likely to encounter systemic and structural barriers beyond the profound trauma to which they have already been exposed. Frequent changes in foster care placements often mean changes in schools—a lack of stability that leads to a bewildering array of teachers, administrators, classmates, and routines. Too often, records of their academic history—if they exist at all—do not follow these students in a timely way, magnifying the disruption. These ruptures in routine can quickly manifest themselves in academic and behavioral problems in school, performing below grade level, delayed learning and developmental skills, being held back one or more grade levels, and, ultimately, dropping out of school altogether.

Beyond stabilizing school placement, there are other ways in which these students can be helped, including initial and ongoing assessment of their academic progress. What these children know and are able to do, according to the state's academic standards, as well as their language, social, and emotional functioning, should be assessed regularly in order to determine the design and implementation of effective instruction. But all too often there are gaps in these assessments due to, among other things, absences during testing periods and lost records. For foster youth, reliance on standardized testing as the primary determinant for placement and progress is unlikely to be adequate. Timely and accurate assessment becomes critical in order to know how best to help these children learn and grow academically.

Another barrier to educational achievement is the absence of a single person whose interest, authority, and accountability can make a difference in a foster child's educational outcomes. Even when many caring individuals and professionals are involved in a foster child's life—judges, social workers, foster parents, counselors and birth parents—they often focus on other aspects of a child's life that may claim greater urgency on a day-to-day basis. As one foster child lamented, "There are 15 people responsible for my education, but not one of them reads my report card or calls my teacher."

In California, as in most other states, systems for communicating information about foster youth between segments of the social services and education systems—county welfare, mental health agencies, offices of education, and school districts—are extremely limited. Although both the child welfare and education systems maintain databases, they are not linked and information is not shared because of confidentiality concerns. Moreover, child welfare agencies and the courts often do not inform educational institutions about factors that may influence these students' educational outcomes, such as a student's foster status and who has the right to make educational decisions for the student.

> *"I just think we have such a wealth of information [about the student] that isn't being shared, and it's hurting the child."*
>
> –School Psychologist

This general lack of knowledge about a child's status in the foster care system, coupled with their often frequent movement between schools and districts due to changes in the home placement, means that school personnel often are unaware of students' specific needs. As a result, school personnel

may be unable to provide the appropriate interventions or supports. In some cases they may have difficulty even ensuring that the foster youth receive credit for their work when they are moved to another school. One school psychologist expressed her frustration, "I just think we have such a wealth of information [about the student] that isn't being shared, and it's hurting the child."

The Center View

To address the issues highlighted above, the Collaborative identified three key policy areas—School Readiness, School Success and Data Sharing—to focus improvements that lead to better educational outcomes for foster children and youth. Recommendations within each area include measures to strengthen and increase access to high quality preschool; ensure school stability and increase training, support and incentives for educators; and improve the collection and sharing of data related to the educational progress of foster care youth. Detailed recommendations from the Collaborative's report can be found at www.cftl.org/fostercare.

The data behind these recommendations demonstrate how year after year the state, in its *in loco parentis* role for foster children, accepts educational outcomes that few parents would tolerate for their own children. The educational neglect this dismal record represents is particularly tragic because academic success could, for many foster children, improve not only their transitions to self-sufficiency and adulthood, but their overall well-being during and after their school years. During the development of this report a number of former foster youth were consulted whose experiences demonstrated that success is possible in spite of the overwhelming challenges they faced. The voices of these now successful adults encourages our belief that increased opportunity can lead to positive outcomes.

Ready to Succeed puts forward a compelling case to bring into sharper focus the educational status of foster children as well as the state's progress toward ensuring that they have the opportunities due them to succeed in school. We urge the policy community to address those aspects of these children's lives that most undermine academic success which are within the state's control. First among them is the disruption in their education that is caused by constant changes in placements. Additional areas ripe for attention include early and ongoing assessments of students' strengths and challenges; access to preschool, interventions (both in the classroom and out of school) which are backed by reliable research; and teacher and student supports that lead to improved educational outcomes. Finally, teachers need to have access to the critical data, in a form they can use, to provide the kind of education these students need.

> *"We give them not less, but the same—and for these kids, the same is simply not enough."*
>
> –Teacher

