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Educational stability policy and the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves

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A B S T R A C T

Despite recent improvements in child welfare placement stability, youth in foster care still experience high rates of school moves. Although these findings are well documented in the literature, few studies have considered the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves. The purpose of this study was to determine the proportion of school moves that can be reduced through implementation of the educational stability provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA, 2008) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), and to identify opportunities to minimize the number of transitions that children and youth in foster care experience. Findings indicate that implementation of the FCA and the ESSA is a critical, but partial, solution for ensuring the educational stability of students in foster care. This article provides an empirical rationale for states and local jurisdictions to incorporate non-regulatory recommendations in order to fill the gaps in federal regulations.

1. Introduction

Entry into foster care or a change in child welfare placement likely means a child is not only adjusting to living with a new family, but is also being separated from family, friends, neighborhood, and potentially his or her school community (Fawley-King, Trask, Zhang, & Aarons, 2017). Educational stability policies are intended to provide children and youth with continuity at school during times when they are removed from the home and they create the foundation for students to be successful in school (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Such policies also protect against school moves that are not in a child's best interest, delays in transfer of their records, and gaps in enrollment (FCA, 2008, Section 204.a.1). Thus, school stability is an important focus of public policies affecting youth in foster care.

The potential for educational stability policy to serve as a stabilizing force in the lives of students who experience foster care can be better understood by examining the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves in the context of the educational stability protections provided in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA, 2008) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). The two purposes of this Colorado-based study were to determine the proportion of school moves that can be reduced through implementation of these Acts and to identify opportunities to minimize the number of transitions that children and youth in foster care experience, specifically by considering how the stability protections apply to transitions among child welfare placement types. This study was designed to further elucidate policy gaps related to school stability and to inform local policy makers, child welfare agencies, and education agencies' decisions on whether or not to adopt recommendations in the ESSA non-regulatory guidance, including “allow [ing] a child that exited foster care during the school year to continue in that school of origin through at least the end of the academic year, if appropriate” (p. 11).

2. School moves

For students in foster care, frequent school moves can be a barrier to successful progression through the K-12 education system and to earning a high school diploma (Clemens, Lalonde, & Sheesley, 2016; Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2014). Theorists, researchers, and advocates have offered insight into why frequent school moves present a challenge for students. Coleman (1988) posits that when students change schools, the social capital or relationships that support their success are diminished. Researchers suggest that students who move during an academic year may experience discontinuity of course content, variations in teachers' instructional styles, and differences in school culture, all of which may disrupt student learning (Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers, Reynolds, & Chen, 2013; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004; Temple & Reynolds,

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1999). Progress toward graduation may also be delayed due to differences in course offerings or graduation requirements across schools of attendance (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). The negative consequences of school mobility may be particularly pronounced for students in foster care because, historically, there has been a lack of communication and coordination between child welfare and education systems (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017).

The pattern of students in foster care changing schools more than their non-foster care peers is well established in the literature (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The school mobility rate for students in foster care in Colorado is more than three times the state average (Parra & Martinez, 2015). Similarly, a California study indicated that students in foster care transferred schools at two to three times the rate of their non-foster care peers (Frerer, Sosenko, Pellegrin, Manchik, & Horowitz, 2013). Some of the school moves that students in foster care experience may be a result of child welfare placements, but the proportion of school moves that are directly associated with placements had not been explored prior to this study.

Despite the lack of empirical documentation to describe the ratio of child welfare placement to school moves, the association between these events is commonly accepted as a problem of practice. Because youth are often unexpectedly removed from the home due to family crises, school transportation solutions may not be workable on short notice. Locally available child welfare placements may also be scarce (Government Accountability Office, 2014). These issues may require youth to move schools at inopportune times. Even when a placement change is anticipated, youth indicate that the timing of the change does not always align with the school calendar, making it potentially more disruptive to their learning (Clemens et al., 2017).

3. Legislative framework

Educational stability includes both reducing school mobility and creating more seamless transitions when a school move is necessary. As of 2015, two federal laws provide a legislative framework for educational stability protections to foster care students: the FCA, which is child welfare legislation, and the ESSA, which is a piece of education law. These laws, along with joint guidance from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, have created a legislative framework for collaboration between child welfare and education agencies to improve educational stability and, ultimately, educational outcomes for youth in foster care.

Among the noteworthy components of the FCA was the requirement that child welfare agencies plan for the educational stability of a child entering care and keep them in his/her school of origin unless it is determined that it would be in the child's best interest to change schools (FCA, 2008, Section 204.a.1). A 2014 Government Accountability Report, which was written before the ESSA, indicated that barriers to the implementation of school stability protections include a lack of foster care placements in proximity to students' schools of origin, transportation costs, and unclear responsibility for transportation or educational decision-making. Uneven implementation of the school stability protections in the FCA meant that for some students, adjusting to a new child welfare placement continued to involve entering new schools and experiencing disruptions in their network of school-based support.

The legislative framework provided by the ESSA represents a landmark advancement in the educational rights of students in foster care. Moreover, the educational stability protections in the ESSA complemented the protections introduced in the FCA and resulted in students in foster care being included for the first time in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The ESSA established the requirement that education agencies collaborate with child welfare agencies to make best-interest determinations and develop a plan for transporting students in foster care to their schools of origin (Section 1111.g.1.E, Section 1112.c.5.B). The ESSA also provided clarification regarding the interpretation of "school of origin," defining it as, "the school in which a child is enrolled at the time of placement in foster care," and further explains that "if a child's foster care placement changes, the school of origin would then be considered the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of the placement change" (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016, p. 11).

As stated in the ESSA non-regulatory guidance, "Considered together, these laws [FCA and ESSA] make clear that the educational stability of children in foster care is a joint responsibility of educational and child welfare agencies" (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, p. 5). It is expected that the inclusion of the school stability protections in the ESSA will eventually alleviate some of the challenges that the Government Accountability Office (2014) described in its report on the implementation of the FCA.

4. Policy gaps

Even with implementation of the ESSA, some students in foster care will continue to experience a substantial number of school moves that are associated with their child welfare placements. Some students will move schools because it is in their best interest do so, as it is a complex challenge to balance safety, permanency, and educational stability (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). However, others may move schools due to gaps in educational stability policies. Two such gaps are investigated as part of the current study: (a) removal episodes that close during the academic year; and, (b) transitions from a restrictive out-of-home setting to a family-like setting.

These two policy gaps were identified through a review of the available non-regulatory guidance and public comments on the foster care provisions in the ESSA. The non-regulatory guidance highlights the gaps in the educational stability that could emerge for students who exit the foster care system mid-academic year and may no longer have the right to remain in their school of origin. The American Public Human Services Association (2016) underscored (in their public comments on the ESSA regulations) the need to allow states to "broaden the definition" of school of origin and allow students who attend school in a restrictive setting to potentially re-enroll in a previously attended community school if that is in their best interest. This study examines those policy gaps.

4.1. Non-regulatory guidance on the end of a removal episode

Child welfare removal episodes can occur throughout the school year, and yet, the child's right to remain in the school of origin and to have transportation back to that school only applies for the duration of time in out-of-home care (ESSA section 1112(c)(5)(B)). Recognizing that removal episodes often do not align with school years, U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Human Services state in the ESSA non-regulatory guidance that education agencies, "should consider adopting policies that allow a child that exited foster care during the school year to continue in the school of origin through at least the end of the academic year, if appropriate" (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Human Services, 2016, p. 11). Similarly, the non-regulatory guidance encourages that, "every effort [is made] to continue to ensure transportation is provided through the end of the school year, if needed, when remaining in the school of origin would be in the child's best interest" (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Human Services, 2016, p. 17). It was expected that investigating the frequency of school moves associated with the end of removal episodes and disaggregating by permanency type would provide initial insight into the prevalence of students in foster care changing schools when a removal episode ends.

4.2. Heterogeneity of student foster care population

The population of students in foster care is heterogeneous with regard to placement type. The federal definition of students in foster care that is referenced in the ESSA implementation guidance is broad: "24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the child welfare agency has placement and care responsibility" (45 C.F.R. § 1355.20(a) as cited in U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016, p. 6). This definition does not differentiate among types of placements, such as family-like foster homes, kinship care, group homes, and residential facilities (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016).

Although the above inclusive definition of "foster care" is likely intended to ensure protections for as many child welfare-involved youth as possible, some problems with its implementation can be anticipated. If education and child welfare agencies do not pay precise attention to how implementation decisions might affect subgroups within the foster care student population, then gaps in protections may occur. Specifically, local education and child welfare agencies may face challenges in deciding how to implement the school stability protections. Two types of heterogeneity pose separate, but interrelated, problems for implementation decision-making: placement type and transitions among placement types.

4.3. Placement type

The Administration for Children and Families' Children's Bureau requires that child welfare agencies (Title IV-E) submit case-level data semi-annually through the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). In AFCARS, data are disaggregated by eight types of placements: (a) pre-adoptive home, (b) foster family home (relative), (c) foster family home (non-relative), (d) group home, (e) institution, (f) supervised independent living, (g) runaway, and, (h) trial home visit (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). These are often collapsed into three broad categories of placement types: family-like settings, congregate care, and other. The number of youth served in a particular placement differentiates family-like settings from congregate care. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (2015) definition of congregate care includes group homes (7 to 12 youth) and institutions (typically 12 or more youth).

Youth transitioning from congregate care placements are more likely to lack a school of origin than youth placed in family-like settings because this category of placements includes restrictive settings such as institutions, facilities, and detention centers that frequently provide on-site educational services. This may be particularly true in Colorado, the state where this study was conducted, because approximately 80% of congregate care placements are in restrictive settings as opposed to group homes where attending a community school is more typical (Colorado Department of Human Services, 2017). In the absence of local policies, some students in foster care may not benefit from this aspect of the school stability protections in the ESSA, because when students transition out of more restrictive environments, the definition of a "school of origin" does not extend to previously attended schools. One of the primary purposes of this manuscript was to determine how frequently school moves are associated with placement transitions from restrictive congregate care to family-like settings. The results of the data analysis can inform local conversations about the definition of a school of origin.

5. Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to determine the proportion of school moves that can be reduced through implementation of the educational stability provisions in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA, 2008) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and to describe the extent of known policy gaps. This study focused on the five-year time period just before the ESSA was enacted, when there was considerable evidence that the protections in FCA had not been implemented (e.g. Government Accountability Office, 2014). By studying the interplay between placements and school moves in prior to ESSA, initial insight is gained into which groups of foster youth are more or less likely to benefit from the educational stability protections in the ESSA and FCA. To accomplish this, the following three research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What is the ratio of school moves to child welfare placements?

RQ2: What proportion of all school moves among the population of foster students are associated with child welfare placements, and therefore, subject to federal educational stability protections?

RQ3: How does the proportion of school moves subject to the federal educational stability protections relate to placement instability?

RQ4: What is the frequency of school moves associated with known policy gaps in federal educational stability protections?

6. Method

Five years of statewide linked child welfare and education data were used to describe the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves for school-age children. The time periods youth were removed from the home, as well as school transitions that occurred preceding and following a removal episode were considered. Taking this wide lens enables the results of this study to provide insight into the degree to which federal educational stability policies have the potential to reduce instability. The results also elucidate potential gaps in existing federal policies that could be addressed locally.

First, a description is provided of the relevant sample and the process used to determine whether each school move was associated with a child welfare placement change within that sample. Then, to answer the research questions, a series of descriptive statistics and scatter plots are presented that describe child welfare placement and school mobility patterns and how they relate to one another. The results are relevant to state and local policymakers, child welfare agencies, and education agencies that must decide whether or not to adopt recommendations in the ESSA non-regulatory guidance.

6.1. Setting and sample

This study occurred in Colorado, a state with substantial geographic diversity where the vast majority of students are located in urban or suburban areas. Colorado is a county-administered child welfare state. Each of the 64 counties uses the same child welfare data system and the state human service agency has direct access to data entered at the local level. There are also 178 school districts that utilize a variety of information management systems at the local level. Each school district reports a common set of information about each student to the state education agency.

The state human service agency and education agency have a data sharing agreement. Annually, state human service agency data are used to create a flag in the education data set indicating a child was in out-of-home care between July 1st of the previous year and June 30th of the current year. The match rate for these records is approximately 93%, meaning that approximately 7% of the human services records for school age children do not have a match in the education dataset. The unmatched records could be because a child is attending a private school, was not enrolled that year in school (e.g., dropped out), or simply as a result of human error in data entry. In addition to creating a flag in the education agency data set, the human services agency provides a standard set of additional information (e.g., placement dates, placement types, reasons for placement changes) for research purposes.

The sample was drawn from Colorado Department of Education's longitudinal dataset, a product of this data sharing agreement. The

Table 1
Student-Level Descriptive Statistics.

Variable name	Mean/(SD)
Age at first removal	11.9 (4.3)
N of placements during first removal[a]	1.8 (1.7)
N of school moves during first removal[a]	0.7 (1.0)
N of school moves associated with placements during first removal[a]	0.4 (0.5)
Length of first removal episode in months[a]	8.0 (8.8)
Total length of time in care in months	9.5 (9.5)
Experienced more than one removal episode	17.1
Female	46.9
White	46.5
Black	11.3
Hispanic	35.8
Other race/ethnicity	6.4
First removal ends in adoption or placement for adoption[a]	4.6
First removal ends in guardianship[a]	5.5
First removal ends in reunification[a]	63.6
N	6405

Note. Sample includes all Colorado youth who were first removed from the home between July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2015, had their case closed by June 30, 2015, and attended a Colorado public school at any point in the same window.

[a] Sample size for all variables related to first removal is 6286 due to missing detailed data on first removal episode for 119 youth.

sample (N = 6405) in the current study consisted of all Colorado students who were first removed from the home between July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2015, had their case closed by June 30, 2015, and attended a public school at any point in the same window. These years were selected because they reflect the school years after the guidance for implementing the FCA was issued through the school year prior to the passage of the ESSA. During this time period, the percentage of youth in congregate care placements ranged from 27.5% to 34.5%; the percentage of youth in family-like placements ranged from 61.2% to 68.1%. Less than 6% of youth were in other settings such as independent living arrangements or had runaway status.

The data used to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample were based upon how local education agencies reported the data to the state education agency. Some cases had discrepancies across school records, and those were resolved by first identifying the most frequently reported characteristic; if the mode was the same, the most recently reported data were used. As shown in Table 1, nearly half of the foster care students were reported as White (47%), and just over a third of the sample was reported as Hispanic or Latino (36%). Black or African American students comprised 11% of the sample. The remaining 6% of the sample was reported in the following federal race/ethnicity reporting categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races. The sample included more male students (53%) than female students (47%).

Many of the descriptive statistics in Table 1 are anchored in the first removal episode to maintain comparability across situations. This is because, in general, students who are removed from the home more than once tend to experience less overall stability. Detailed data about the first removal episode was available for > 98% of the sample. On average, students were removed from the home for the first time at age 12 and experienced 1.8 placements and 0.7 school moves during the first removal episode. Of these school moves, just over half were associated with a placement change as described below. The vast majority of first removal episodes ended in family reunification (64%), with about 5% each ending in adoption or guardianship.

6.2. Mobility variables

6.2.1. School moves

School moves were counted if students entered a Colorado public school outside of the typical academic progression as defined by Colorado Department of Education. The total number of school moves referred to all such nonstructural school moves occurring during the sample window, regardless of whether students were removed from the home at the time (i.e., a transition from middle school to high school over the summer was not counted). The school moves count was inclusive of public schools (including on-line and charter schools), but did not include transitions into private schools or facility schools. An entry into a public school from a private school was counted. The school moves count included school entries for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

6.2.2. Placements

Placements were defined as an initial child welfare placement or a change in placement that occurred while a child was removed from the home. This included placements in family-like, congregate care, or other settings. The first placement was counted when a student entered out-of-home care. Subsequent placements were counted if the AFCARS rules indicated that it was considered a placement change (Children's Bureau, 2017). The total number of placements included those occurring across all removal episodes during the sample window.

6.2.3. Associated school moves and placements

No agency currently tracks whether child welfare placements result in school moves. Therefore, it was necessary to establish procedures for reliably inferring which school moves resulted from placements. The comprehensive process for arriving at the operational definition of associated moves is described in Section 6.3.

School moves were considered to be associated with an initial child welfare placement or change in placement if they occurred within a defined time window around that placement. The time windows were defined differently for placements that occurred during the academic year versus the summer:

1. Initial or new placements beginning during the academic year (August 10–April 30, excluding the first week of December): the school move was considered to be associated with the placement if school entry dates occurred between three days prior to and 21 days after the start date of the new placement. *Note*: For a new placement that began during the first week of December, a school move was considered to be associated with the placement if school entry date occurred between three days prior to the placement start date and January 10.
2. Initial or new placements beginning in the summer (May 1–August 9): the school move was considered to be associated with the placement if school entry date occurred between three days prior to the start date of the new placement and August 31.

6.3. Business rules: Associated school moves and placements

Direct observation of seven years of school entry data and child welfare removal dates, expert review, and a survey to identify typical practice were used to operationalize which school moves were associated with child welfare placements. The process for using observational data included: (a) defining the school year and the summer, (b) determining window size for both the academic year and the summer for when a school move was likely to be associated with a placement change, and, (c) cross-validating the business rules through case-level analysis and consultation. State agency leaders and data analysts reviewed findings from the observational data for validity. Court Appointed Special Advocates (i.e., volunteers typically appointed to only one foster youth at a time) were surveyed to determine if length of time between placement change and school moves that they observed in practice matched the business rules.

6.3.1. Defining the school year and the summer

The need for different business rules for the academic year and

summer were anticipated; however, the specific date range that defined each block of time necessitated investigation. The data reflected an overall distribution of enrollment patterns that aligned with expected student mobility. Specifically, there was a steady-state amount of baseline churn throughout the school year and substantial enrollment bumps in August and January. This finding was expected because the majority of students were not in the midst of a removal episode at any given time. For analytic purposes, the start of the school year was defined as August 10, the date on which the number of new enrollments started to rise above the steady-state level. The end of the school year was defined as April 30, the date on which new enrollments dipped below the steady-state level. Review of these findings with experts and practitioners suggests that when residence changes occur after April 30, children tend not to be enrolled in a new school until the following fall when the next academic year begins.

6.3.2. Window size

For removal episodes starting during the academic year, the window was defined as three days prior or 21 days post placement change. This is because there was some evidence of anticipatory school moves that occurred up to three days prior to a placement change and a clear return to baseline in the number of school entries three weeks after removal from the home. While there were bumps in baseline enrollment numbers at the beginning of each month, December proved an exception. An enrollment bump occurred between January 1 and 10. Expert and practitioner review suggests that students removed from the home in the first week of December may not be enrolled in a new school until January due to winter holidays. Therefore, school moves for students removed from the home in the first week of December were identified as associated with a placement change as long as they occurred between three days prior to the removal episode start date and January 10.

For placements that started and continued throughout the summer, the window was defined as three days prior to the start of the placement and up until August 31. As previously described, students removed from the home after April 30 tend not to enroll in a new school that same academic year; rather, they typically enroll in a new school for the following fall. Thus, for the purpose of this study's business rules, summer began on May 1. In general, there is no hurry to enroll students when school is not in session, so a school move occurring any time during the summer after removal was considered associated with the placement change as long as the new school entry occurred prior to August 31.

6.3.3. Cross-validating business rules

The research team consulted with data custodians to confirm the quality of the data reported to the state, enlisted experts on Special Education, Division of Youth Corrections, and Facility Schools to provide information on school transitions for their respective populations, and surveyed CASA volunteers about the transition timeframes they observed between child welfare placements and new school enrollment. These checks reinforced the validity of the approach taken in developing the business rules based on observed patterns in the data.

Throughout the process of creating the business rules, it became evident that there is not always a 1:1 mapping between a placement change and a school move. For example, a single placement change may be associated with multiple school moves within the 21-day window after the placement change or, more often, over the summer. Multiple school moves were associated with a single placement change for about 3% of the sample. Similarly, a single school move could be associated with multiple child welfare placements if the placements all occurred within the 21-day window prior to new school enrollment. Multiple placements were associated with a single school move for about 1% of the sample. The distinction between the number of school moves associated with a single placement change and the number of placements associated with a single school move will be relevant for answering research questions two and three below.

6.4. Analytic strategy

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the findings, with histograms or weighted scatter plots illustrating the distribution and slope relative to the 45-degree line.

7. Results

The results are presented in terms of three distinct interplays between child welfare placements and school moves. The first interplay discussed is the ratio of school moves to placements within the initial removal episode and then across the full five year time period under investigation. The discussion of these results provides context for the overall instability of the population. Next, the proportion of school moves that are subject to ESSA and FCA are identified by describing the proportion of all school moves that are associated with child welfare placements. This second interplay illustrates the proportion of school moves that can be reduced through implementation of the educational stability provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA, 2008) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Finally, the interplay between the school moves that are subject to federal educational stability protections and placement instability is described. This third, and final, interplay demonstrates that implementation of the educational stability policies may be especially critical for students who experience multiple child welfare placements. The results of these three interplays are described in further detail below.

7.1. Research question one

The purpose of the first research question was to describe the relative stability of students in the child welfare system. The ratio of school moves to child welfare placements provided insight into how much school instability students in the system experience compared to placement stability. This ratio was first examined within youth's first removal episode. Then the observed period of time was widened to July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2015 (i.e., the school years between when the guidance for implementing the FCA was issued through the school year prior to the passage of the ESSA).

7.1.1. Ratio of school moves to placements within the first removal episode

The ratio of school moves to child welfare placements for students in foster care was calculated for the first removal episode, regardless of the number of placements within the removal episode (see Table 2). The ratio was essentially constant for students in care for length of time categories of six months or longer. This indicated that for every placement change, there were 0.43 school moves on average (range = 0.42 to 0.44). Students in care for less than six months experienced, on average, fewer school moves per placement change than those students with longer removal episodes—at 0.23 school moves for every placement change. These ratios provided context for analyses of relative stability across a five-year timeframe, including periods when youth were at home and during removal episodes.

Table 2
Ratio of school moves to child welfare placements by length of stay in out-of-home care.

Length of stay in out-of-home placement	Ratio of school moves to placements
≥ 36 months	0.43
24–35 months	0.44
12–23 months	0.42
6–11 months	0.42
< 6 months	0.23

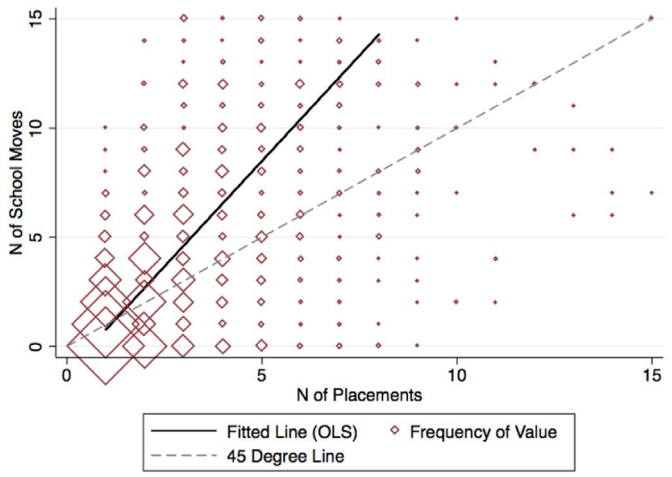

Fig. 1. Placement and school instability among students who experienced foster care. Students who experienced only one placement tended to have relatively few school moves; however, those students who experienced placement instability tended to have even more school moves than placements. Includes students first removed from the home between July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2015, had their case closed by June 30, 2015, and attended a public school (N = 6405).

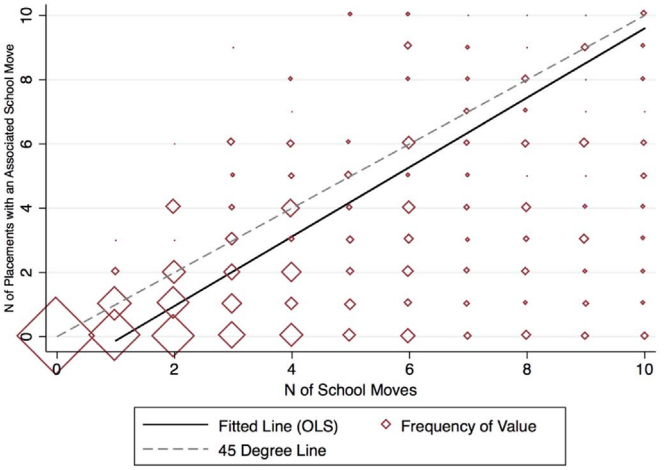

Fig. 2. Total number of school moves against the number of placements that had a school move associated with it. Describes the proportion of school moves that potentially could be reduced through educational stability policy implementation. Includes students first removed from the home between July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2015, had their case closed by June 30, 2015, and attended a public school (N = 6405).

7.1.2. Ratio of school moves to placements across five years

Instability is not bound to the time period students are in foster care. Considering a five-year time period enabled the research team to address the first research question by determining the ratio of school moves to child welfare placements (see Fig. 1). Students in foster care, on average, experienced more school moves than placements over the observed time period, which included time both in and out of foster care. In Fig. 1, observations above the 45-degree line represent students who experienced relatively more school moves, and those below the 45-degree line represent students who experienced relatively more placements.

As expected, placement instability and school instability were positively related. Examining Fig. 1, the solid line is a bivariate linear regression line with a constant term, but no additional covariates. While the graph is truncated at 15, the regression line is estimated based on all the data points. The OLS line falls above and is considerably steeper than the 45-degree line, which indicates that as the number of child welfare placements increased, the number of school moves increased even faster. This is consistent with students who experienced the most placement instability having, on average, dramatically higher school mobility, even during times when they were not removed from the home. Some school moves experienced by these students may have been unrelated to placements, and it is also possible that when a student changed a placement, multiple school moves ensued.

On average, child welfare-involved youth experienced 3.2 school moves over the five-year sample period. Twenty-five percent of all non-structural school moves occurred in the year immediately preceding the student's first removal from the home, and 14% in the year after last case closure. The remaining proportion of school moves (approximately 61%) occurred during a removal episode or between removal episodes in the same year a youth was in out-of-home care. These findings indicate that while episodic placements were certainly a salient feature of these students' lives, there was also a pervasive theme of general instability in terms of schooling.

7.2. Research question two

The second research question builds upon the results of research question one by describing the proportion of all school moves among the population of foster students that are subject to the educational stability provisions in the ESSA and the FCA. The educational stability protections apply to situations where a child welfare placement triggers a school move. Thus, to answer this question, a frequency-weighted scatter plot illustrates the total number of school moves against the number of placements that had a school move associated with it (Fig. 2). The dashed line again is at 45°, and observations on this line represent students for whom every school move was associated with a child welfare placement. The solid linear regression line indicates that, on average, the total number of school moves exceeded the number of associated placements with an associated school move. The more school moves a student experienced, the greater the proportion of those moves subject to educational stability protections.

As noted in Section 7.1.2., on average, students in the sample changed schools just over three times during the observed timeframe, including periods when they were at home and when they were removed from the home. In Fig. 2, the solid regression line goes through the mean of three school moves total and two school moves associated with placements. This can be interpreted as representing the two school moves that were subject to the ESSA and FCA protections and one that was not. Only those school moves associated with an initial or new placement can be mitigated (or their effects minimized) through implementation of existing federal educational stability policies.

7.3. Research question three

The third research question focuses on those school moves previously identified as being associated with a placement (i.e., relevant to implementation of ESSA and FCA). The weighted scatter plot illustrates that implementation of the educational stability policies may be especially critical for students who experience multiple child welfare placements because they tend to have multiple school moves associated with each placement change. In Fig. 3, the 45-degree line reflects students for whom every placement change results in a single school move. The solid estimated regression line indicates that, on average, students with low numbers of placements also experienced low numbers of associated school moves. However, as placements increased, the proportion of those placements with a co-occurring school move increased dramatically. This means that the more often a student changed placements, the more typical it was for them to move schools at the same time, or even to have multiple school moves in close proximity to a placement change. As before, the regression line is estimated on the full set of data even though the axes in Fig. 3 are truncated at 10 moves to facilitate interpretation. The steep slope of the regression line illustrates that the bulk of the truncated data is above the 45-degree line,

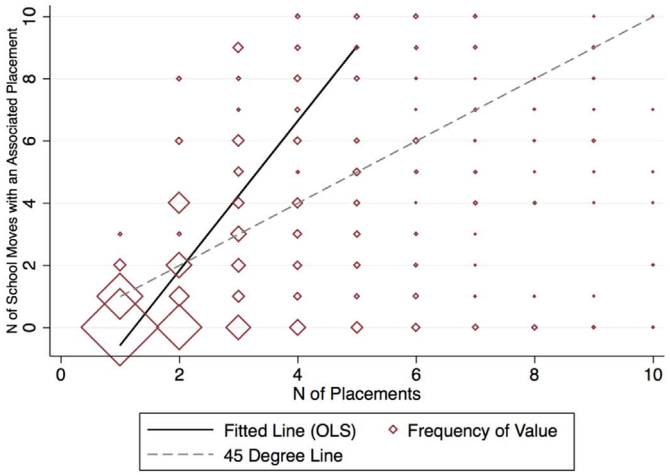

Fig. 3. Total number of placements against the number of school moves with an associated placement. Illustrates that implementation of the educational stability policies may be especially critical for students who experience multiple child welfare placements. Includes students first removed from the home between July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2015, had their case closed by June 30, 2015, and attended a public school (N = 6405).

reflecting high numbers of associated school moves.

Fig. 3 demonstrates the variance in experiences among foster students. While 75% of the sample underwent two or fewer placements over five years and a commensurate (or lesser) number of school moves, the most mobile 10% of students experienced four or more placements and seven or more school moves. Thus, particularly for the most vulnerable students in unstable residential settings, there is a great deal of school mobility that the ESSA can help to reduce or mitigate.

7.4. Frequency of associated school moves associated with known gaps in the educational stability protections

The fourth and final research question focuses on the two policy gaps identified through a review of the available ESSA non-regulatory guidance and public comments on the foster care provisions in the ESSA. The non-regulatory guidance highlights the gaps in the educational stability that could emerge for students who exit the foster care system mid-academic year and may no longer have the right to remain in their school of origin. Public comment raised the issue of expanding the "school of origin" definition to include recently attended community schools for youth who are transitioning out of a restrictive setting where they attended school on-site.

The current study's findings can inform where to focus attention on the implementation of the ESSA, and these findings can also inform conversations about what, if any, additional educational stability protections are needed. For instance, the first part of Table 2 describes school moves associated with the end of a removal episode. Although the end of a removal episode was not counted as a change in placement for the purposes of AFCARS reporting, 27% of end of removal episodes had an associated school move. Most notably, one in three students who were reunified with their family changed schools when their removal episode ended. This suggests that end of removal episodes are transitions with school stability implications.

The second part of Table 3 reports the percentage of placement transitions that are associated with a school move. For context, placement transitions that are *not* known policy gaps are presented first: transitions from family-like to family-like settings and transitions from group home to family-like settings. The finding that 52% of students who transition from non-group homes (i.e., the restrictive types) to congregate care do move schools highlights the need for further exploration of the definition of "school of origin" and why more of these youth are not immediately enrolled in a new school.

Table 3
Percent of end of removal episodes and during removal episode transitions with an associated school move.

	% with school move
End of removal episode	
All end of removal episodes	27%
Removal episode ending in adoption or placement for adoption	13%
Removal episode ending in guardianship	21%
Removal episode ending in reunification	35%
During removal episode	
First removal	31%
Transition among family-like settings	42%
Transition from group home to family-like setting	40%
Transition from other (i.e. restrictive) kinds of congregate care to family-like setting	52%

8. Discussion

This study describes the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves over a five-year time period (July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2015). Within this time period, the youth in the current study were removed from their homes for the first time and their child welfare cases were closed. Thus, while this study provides insight into the school stability of these youth before, during, and after out-of-home placements, not all students were included in the dataset for the full five years. For this reason, the findings are interpreted and applied in terms of relative stability, or the interplay, between the types of instability (placement and school). The findings are also considered in light of the ESSA and the FCA educational stability protections for students in foster care.

8.1. Relative stability of students in foster care

Understanding the relative stability of students in foster care requires considering not just the time they are in care, but also the potential for instability before and after the removal episode. Students typically change schools more frequently in the school year before they are removed from home than the school year after they are in foster care. Those students who are reunified with their families are most likely to have school moves immediately following the end of a removal episode.

The interplay between child welfare placements and school moves is likely to differ within the foster care population. Students who have more than two child welfare placements tend to have even more school moves than placements. Students in foster care for longer than six months also have greater ratios of school moves to placements than those in short-term out-of-home care. Thus, plans for implementing and expanding the ESSA and the FCA educational stability protections might consider not just the foster care student population as a whole, but also subsets of the population.

8.2. Considerations for implementation of the ESSA and the FCA

The educational stability protections in the ESSA and the FCA focus on reducing school mobility and seamless transitions when a school move is necessary. Approximately two-thirds of school moves for students in foster care are subject to these educational stability protections. The primary school stability protections include the right to remain in the school of origin and be provided transportation to that school. Embedded in these protections is the reciprocal requirement for child welfare and education agencies to determine whether school moves associated with changes in child welfare placements are in a student's best interest, a process often referred to as a best interest determination (BID; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department

of Health and Human Services, 2016). The protections encouraging seamless transitions include immediate enrollment in the new school, transfer of records, and the ability to fully participate in the school community (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Linking and then disaggregating placement and school enrollment data can inform estimates of the staff and other resources needed to implement ESSA educational stability protections.

8.2.1. Example of applying information to resource planning

The following is an example of how findings reported in this study can be used to inform estimating resources needed to conduct Best Interest Determinations (BIDs). As previously described, the findings of this study are most applicable to Colorado. With replication of the data analysis in other states, similar processes can be used to plan for necessary resources.

In Colorado, the education agency reports mobility incidents that occur in the same year as out-of-home placement, and this study revealed that approximately two out of three child welfare placements had an associated school move. Thus, it may be reasonable to estimate the number of BIDs needed by multiplying the number of placements changes for school age children by 0.66. Best practice suggests that BIDs should be conducted in person when possible (Colorado Children's Code, 2016). Whether the ultimate decision is for a child to remain in the school of origin or move to a new school, BIDs are an opportunity to bring together relevant parties to discuss the student's educational needs and strengths. Non-regulatory guidance suggests that students should remain in their schools of origin during the BID process, but qualifies "to the extent feasible and appropriate" (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, p. 13, 15).

Emergency removals from the home may require different resources to conduct BIDs than planned child welfare placements (e.g., those with 30 days or more notice). Given that many states require a response in < 24 h (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016), it is anticipated that emergency removals or changes in placement are likely to pose substantial logistical challenges for maintaining students in their school of origin (until or unless it is determined that is in their best interest to change schools). Thus, to obtain a rough estimate of the resources needed to conduct BIDs with short notice, it is recommended to analyze local data on the prevalence of emergency versus planned removals.

8.3. Considerations for expanding school stability policies

The findings from this study suggest that maintaining educational stability services beyond the time a youth is in out-of-home care (i.e., at least until the end of the school year even if a removal episode ends midyear) will improve educational continuity. As a population, students who experience foster care face substantial school instability (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens & Tis, 2016; Frerer et al., 2013). These frequent school moves are associated with low high school graduation rates (Clemens et al., 2016). The current study adds to the literature by illuminating that the majority of these school moves are not associated with changes in child welfare placements. This finding suggests that child welfare-involved youth, not just those in foster care, are a *highly mobile* student population. Further, this study provides empirical support for implementing policies and practices that encourage attention to educational stability before, during, and after child welfare placement.

8.3.1. Expanding protections beyond end of removal episode

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommended that local education and child welfare agencies consider extending the educational stability protections beyond the end of a removal episode and to the end of the school year. Extending these protections would be most beneficial for students who are reunified with their families after their time in foster care or who are discharged to legal guardianship. These protections are needed because reunification is associated with a high frequency of school moves and with the risk of recurrent maltreatment. Between 17 and 35% of reunified children experience recurrent maltreatment within five years (Connell et al., 2009). Connell et al. (2009) also found that children were almost twice as likely to experience recurrent maltreatment when returning home from non-relative foster care compared with those returning from kinship placements. In addition to the risk of reoccurring maltreatment, reunification can be a tumultuous and even traumatic experience for youth involved in child welfare (Gauthier, Fortin, & Jéliu, 2004). Given these risks, educational stability that continues beyond reunification may aid in the transition process and provide a critical support system for youth.

8.3.2. Expanding protections to students transitioning to less restrictive environments

Federal guidance does not address application of the BID process or identification of a school of origin when a youth is transitioning from a more restrictive to less restrictive environment. In the current study, 52% of the time that a youth transitioned from a restrictive congregate care setting to a family-like setting, the youth also experienced a school move. This percentage is small considering the majority of these youth likely attended a school on-site or in a restrictive environment, and therefore changing educational environments was likely necessary when they transitioned to a family-like setting. Transferring to a high school equivalency (e.g., GED prep program, dropping out of school, and delay in enrollment of > 21 days) is likely to be the primary reasons why there was not an associated school move.

State-level guidance could be used to fill in this gap in protections. For example, Colorado's Model School Stability Agreement describes how school stability protections can be extended to include youth who attended school on-site or in a restrictive environment by recognizing that students may have meaningful connections at a previously attended school (Colorado Children's Code, 2016):

> If the student is enrolled in a facility school (including Residential Child Care Facilities and secure detention facilities) at the time of a placement change to a less restrictive setting, and the facility school is no longer the least restrictive environment, the school of origin is the last public school the student attended for at least one complete term/semester prior to entering the facility school OR another school where the student had a meaningful connection in the past two years. (p. 5).

The law does not require extending the definition of "school of origin" in this way; however, this Colorado example, which is supported by findings from the current study, illustrates one manner of closing a gap in the existing ESSA educational stability protections.

9. Limitations

This study is designed to be purely exploratory and descriptive. To keep the interpretation of results as straightforward as possible, the researchers did not account for the fact that different students entered the study at different points in time and, therefore, faced different distributions of risk. In future analyses of similar data, it may be appropriate to account for differential patterns of risk. Furthermore, the sample was limited to students who entered and exited foster care within a five-year time period. Students who are in foster care for longer than five years may experience different mobility patterns.

The validity of the business rules and the results of this study are most relevant to geographical areas similar to where this research was conducted. Colorado has substantial geographic diversity, and the vast majority of students are located in urban or suburban areas. Colorado is also a county-administered child welfare state and, as such, the findings are most generalizable to local control states. Furthermore, the findings reflect the time period between when the FCA guidance was released

prior to the requirement to implement the educational stability protections in the ESSA. Decisions to generalize findings or apply the business rules for identifying school moves associated with child welfare placements from this study to other states should take into account these contextual factors.

10. Directions for future research

Directions for future research could include additional examination of the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves, as well as further investigation into how the combination of these events relates to educational outcomes. Moreover, the business rules that were developed to identify school moves associated with child welfare placements provide the foundation for a future study that could determine whether there is a more pronounced effect on academic achievement or progress when students simultaneously experience a school move and a placement change. Additional knowledge could also be gained by replicating this study in other states and perhaps taking a confirmatory approach to validating the defined business rules. Nationwide, there is a noticeable gap in evidence-based interventions to support successful progression through the K-12 system for highly mobile students who experience foster care (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2016; Institute for Education Sciences, 2016). Finally, this study's finding that the majority of child welfare-involved students' school moves happen outside of removal episodes indicates the need for research to develop interventions that support these youth until they reach an educational attainment milestone, not just until case closure.

11. Conclusion

Implementation of the FCA and the ESSA is a critical, but partial, solution for ensuring the educational stability of students in foster care. The findings from this study provide an empirical rationale for states and local jurisdictions to consider additional guidelines to incorporate the non-regulatory recommendations. To better support current and former foster care students, gaps in federal regulations should be addressed, in addition to extending existing protections for students until at least the end of the school year and potentially expanding the school of origin definitions. The findings from this study also highlight the propensity of this population to experience frequent school moves before they enter out-of-home care, suggesting that efforts to mitigate the negative effects of educational instability that occur prior to removal may benefit students.

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