Truly Universal

Overcoming Barriers to School Choice for Youth in Foster Care

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Table of Contents

Click on each title below to jump directly to the corresponding section.

Foreword

We began writing this paper in late 2019. At that time, we were thinking a lot about how to make ideas like "equity" into reality for kids and families. We were also thinking about what "choice" means in the context of education, and about what happens when you put those ideas together for a population of students who have both unique legal status and a set of heightened needs that can be challenging to meet.

A lot has changed since then. Schools have been closed since March, child welfare reporting is down, and no one quite knows if things will ever go back to the way they were. But things will move forward. Kids will go to school and cities that had school choice options in the past will continue to offer them — even if the makeup of the portfolio evolves.

As this is published in summer 2020, we believe that the analysis and recommendations remain relevant and instructive. Indeed, they are particularly urgent now as states and districts are planning for the coming school year and must be intentional about how they will make that concept of "equity" into reality in the face of new and unpredictable constraints.

Introduction

School choice allows families to choose from a range of options regardless of where they live, including charter schools, magnet schools, online schools, private schools, and in-boundary schools. Regardless of the position one might take on school choice, it is clear that no choice system can be equitable until all students have real access to those choices. School choice was intended to expand options and equity, and it holds promise for many students with unique needs — including the over 400,000 youth in foster care.[1]

As many communities across the country evaluate, invest in, and expand school choice, it is vital for agencies that serve children to be mindful of the specific education challenges students in foster care experience when it comes to accessing the full range of options, including specialized schools designed to meet their unique needs.

Federal law protects one explicit school placement right for students in foster care: their right to stay in their school, what's known as their "school of origin," even if they change addresses — if that is in their best interest. The local child welfare agency and the local education agency are entrusted with that determination, mindful that school stability is a protective factor for students experiencing other disruptions. In addition to having this right, students in foster care should have the same opportunity to access any of the schools of choice as their non-court-involved peers. Navigating choice processes, however, or even just identifying the right adult to weigh in on a school choice decision, can be fraught with difficulties for youth in foster care.

When a child is placed in foster care, the decision-making rights for their education may rest with one of many possible adults. Those rights can remain with a biological parent or be transferred to another family member. They can also be assigned to a court-appointed volunteer or, in some cases, to the current foster parent. These adults have different skills and capacity to dedicate to a student in their care and may know a whole lot, or very little, about the specific educational needs of the students for whom they are making decisions.

While this paper's research is focused on youth in foster care, there are a number of ways in which concepts of equity intersect with, or overlap with, other at-risk student populations such as students with disabilities or youth experiencing homelessness. Some of the analysis and recommendations in this paper may be generalized for a broad range of students, but because youth in foster care have a unique and definable legal status that has direct bearing on their ability to access schools of choice, we center on their experience here.

About Foster Care and Youth in Foster Care

There are between 400,000 and 500,000 youth in foster care.[2] About 56% of them are children of color.[3] The median age for a child in foster care is 7.7 years old and on average, once in foster care, a child will spend a little over 20 months in care before adoption, reunification, or emancipation.[4] Approximately 28% of youth will be in care for more than two years and 6% will be in care for five or more years.[5] As of 2017, almost half of youth in foster care were in nonrelative family settings and nearly a third were in family settings with a relative.[6] Of those who were not in family placements, the majority were in institutional settings or group homes.[7]

In the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, the official federal data collection, 52% of youth in foster care are classified as male and 48% are classified as female,[8] proportions that have held steady for a decade.[9] However, it is important to note that transgender and gender-nonconforming youth are overrepresented in foster care[10] and because the federal data system does not currently collect information on gender identity or transgender status, these numbers are not accurate.

Children with disabilities are more likely to experience maltreatment and are therefore more likely to be placed in foster care.[11] In addition, severe maltreatment itself can cause serious and permanent disabilities and this maltreatment can occur before or during a placement in foster care.[12, 13] Because of variability across states in measuring the rates of disability among youth in foster care, only estimates are available and experts believe that between 30 and 40% of youth in foster care receive special education services[14] — far surpassing the nationwide average of 13%[15].

Foster parents tend to be older than other parents with school-aged children and have a household income lower than that of the general population. Only 31% of foster parents are employed full-time[16] and homes with foster children are also more likely to have a head of household or spouse with a disability.[17]

Existing Policy and Practice

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 included a new set of eight provisions developed specifically to better protect the education opportunity of students in foster care. As with all federal laws, states each create legislation to implement the federal law that can go beyond the federal minimum but cannot provide less protection. The eight provisions are:

❶ Right to attend the school of origin: States are responsible for ensuring that students in foster care remain enrolled in their school of origin even if their placement changes, unless it is determined that it is not in the student's best interest to stay in that school.[18]

❷ Right to immediate enrollment: If a student in foster care does withdraw from their school of origin, then the receiving school must immediately enroll the student, even if that student does not have the records that are normally required for enrollment.[19]

❸ Responsibility for records transfer: When a student in foster care does change schools, the receiving school must immediately obtain the student's education records from the prior school.[20]

❹ Designation of a state-level point of contact: State education agencies must identify a single point of contact in their counterpart child welfare agencies, and the point of contact must be different from the state's McKinney-Vento homeless liaison.[21, 22]

❺ Designation of a local-level point of contact: Local education agencies (LEAs) must work with state or local child welfare agencies to designate a single point of contact within their LEA if the child welfare agency notifies the LEA in writing that they have identified an education point of contact in the child welfare agency.[23]

6 **Transportation:** LEAs must work with state or local child welfare agencies to provide the transportation necessary for students in foster care to remain in attendance at their school of origin.[24]

7 **Data disaggregation:** States must collect and report disaggregated data, including student achievement and graduation rates, on youth in foster care for annual state report cards.[25]

8 **Revision to homeless definition:** Students who are designated as "awaiting foster care placement" are removed from the definition of homeless youth under the federal McKinney-Vento statute for homeless students.[26]

When it comes to equitable access to school choice for students in foster care, the full and proper implementation of these provisions are vital in order to ensure access to the universe of school options students may encounter — but they are not sufficient.[27] Unfortunately, states' progress in implementing policies to protect students in foster care varies widely, affecting students' full access to educational options. As of February 2019, only 16 states included how students in foster care are performing on state tests and how many are graduating from high school in their state report cards.[28] In addition, a recent U.S. Government and Accountability Office report found that state agency officials experienced significant staff turnover in child welfare agency organizations that prevented agency officials from arranging transportation for students in foster care.[29] The report found that staff turnover has also affected the implementation of other provisions due to loss of information and knowledge necessary to carry out new policies and practices.[30]

Aligned with, and sometimes in addition to, the tailored provisions in federal law that are designed to meet the unique needs of youth in foster care, many states, cities, and districts have adopted strategies that aim to more equitably provide access to school choice options since the federal laws alone do not address all of the policies and strategies that can increase access to school choice. Some of these strategies are universal, designed to benefit all students, and have a clear benefit for youth in foster care; others are more narrowly designed, intended to meet the unique needs of students in foster care. Combined, the protections of federal, state, and local policies for youth in foster care include several elements relevant to how they navigate school choice environments:

1. **Unified enrollment systems**

2. **Information guides**

3. **Data-sharing systems**

4. **Cross-agency partnerships**

5. **Authorizing practices and accountability requirements**

6. **Transportation**

7. **Immediate enrollment**

One increasingly common strategy for improving equity in access to school choice is a **unified enrollment system** in which the applications for local schools are aggregated into one single streamlined process. In some cities or regions, this unified enrollment system may only cover charter schools, but others include charters, magnets, and traditional public schools. This "one stop shop" for all school options helps promote equity by providing school application processes all in one place. Without unified enrollment systems, actively choosing a school usually requires parents or guardians to spend time and resources learning about and completing an enrollment application for each individual school.[31] Unified enrollment systems do not only benefit youth in foster care, but the need that they meet is one that students in foster care often experience more acutely than their peers. It is important to note, however, that unified enrollment is one strategy; it is not in itself a solution and even in cities with unified enrollment systems, additional supportive strategies are needed.

Information guides are helpful tools for foster parents and caregivers to navigate complex education systems. Districts with choice frequently offer a plethora of school options, information about which may not always be in a centralized place. By providing guides, districts can help families understand the universe of school choice options available for their student and make informed decisions with the right information. Similar to unified enrollment systems, these guides are not only designed for youth in foster care but they are particularly critical in supporting them to access their education opportunities.

In order to address the difficulty of gathering data and information when a student in foster care moves across district or county lines, a number of states and counties have developed or are in the process of developing **centralized data-sharing systems**. These systems coordinate data and information sharing between offices of child welfare, departments of education, health and human services, and other relevant agencies to prevent delays in providing students the support they need. Because of the complexity of sharing information across agencies for youth in foster care who often have high mobility rates and who are more likely to have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to meet their special education needs, youth in foster care can receive substantial educational benefits from well-managed data-sharing that can facilitate the records transfer that ESSA requires.

Another strategy that helps promote equitable access, and one that is designed specifically for youth in foster care, is a **cross-agency partnership between departments of education and child welfare agencies** that enables coordination and can provide resources and training for both foster parents and agency staff. Many local and state education agencies have worked with child welfare agency staff to produce self-help guides and documents to help inform foster parents and caregivers about how school choice systems function and the application process for their foster child. Furthermore, partnerships between agencies may include training for child welfare staff — like social workers or court employees — to better understand how they can assist foster parents and caregivers in seeking increased access to, as well as understanding and navigating, school choice options.

Although ESSA requires data disaggregation, states retain wide latitude in how they deliver on that requirement. For example, some states have developed explicit new policies to hold education providers — from individual schools up to the state education agency — accountable in how they serve subgroups of students, including youth in foster care. By requiring reported **data to be disaggregated and include multiple measures specific to youth in foster care**, districts and other education providers can be held accountable for meeting the needs of all students in three ways: via the public accountability that comes naturally when data is transparent to stakeholders; by better equipping districts and states with the tools to hold schools accountable for outcomes including annual report cards, school turnaround, and other enforcement mechanisms; and by enabling charter school authorizers to hold their schools to higher standards of accountability by creating specific metrics for the educational outcomes of the youth in foster care enrolled in their schools.

Students in foster care have the right to remain in their school of origin under ESSA, but states and districts have protected that right in different ways. Developing ways to both coordinate and fund the **transportation of students to their school of origin** has included buses, public transit, ride-sharing services, and family reimbursement. It is important to note that the default for youth in foster care is that they remain enrolled in their school of origin in order to protect education stability and they should only move schools when it is determined that remaining is not in their best interest. Policies that protect school of origin rights are not school choice policies and are not, on their own, sufficient mechanisms to deliver choice for a family in an environment where broader choice is otherwise available.

Immediate enrollment is vital for ensuring educational continuity for students in foster care. While there are few barriers in immediate enrollment for traditional public schools, it is unclear how ESSA's immediate enrollment provision plays out in schools of choice. Charter and magnet schools typically have enrollment windows when families can apply for enrollment. Magnet school admissions can vary, but charter schools typically implement lottery systems and waitlists when they receive more applications than they are able to enroll. These processes are often defined narrowly in statute, in order to ensure a fair

process for all families, but can contradict the immediate enrollment provision under ESSA. Arguably, the ESSA immediate enrollment requirement supersedes any state's charter or magnet school laws, excluding the general health and safety requirements related to any school's physical capacity. This means that the immediate enrollment provision of ESSA is binding on charter and magnet schools too and students in foster care should be able to secure a seat in any school, regardless of whether or not they are trying to enroll within the allowed window. To address this inconsistency, some districts have already considered the option of giving youth in foster care prioritized status on charter school waitlists if a student misses a lottery deadline as a result of moving foster care placements.

To help shed light on what these policies look like in practice, we take a deep dive into case studies of four cities detailing their school choice landscapes for youth in foster care.

City Studies

I t is difficult to define the unit of analysis for how public agencies and schools serve youth in foster care, due to overlapping boundaries of school districts, municipalities, and child-serving agencies. For youth in foster care, these bureaucratic layers introduce additional complexity: One student might attend a district school while in the custody of a county agency and receive services from a city program — and moving across the street can take them out of any one of those jurisdictions, forcing a change in providers. For the purposes of this analysis, however, cities are the least imperfect unit of analysis. The full universe of school choice options typically extends beyond the boundaries of any single school district, particularly once options like online programs, independent schools, and inter-district transfers are included. However, analysis at the city level is also limited by the reality that most city boundaries are not the same as their school district's borders, nor are they the same as the county's lines.

To understand the specific strategies city leaders use to provide youth in foster care with equitable access to school choice options, this report provides a closer study of Washington, D.C.; Denver; New York City; and Los Angeles. These cities each have robust school choice ecosystems, meaningful numbers of school-aged youth in foster care, and have developed (or are in the process of developing) strategies to better support youth in foster care in accessing school choice options.

Each of these city studies examines the barriers that the city's school choice options present for youth in foster care, the ways in which local agencies are working to make school choice accessible for youth in foster care, and the supports that students in foster care need to access choice in each city. It is also important to note that school choice within a city is not limited to charter and district schools: Cities also have private

"I didn't choose this school, they just sent me here when I was placed in the group home — and after the group home closed I got to stay, even though my new placement is far away. I don't even know what the other choices are because my caseworker says this is the best school for me."

school options and other alternatives like remote or virtual programs. These options represent a relatively small slice of school choice in any city and will be discussed on their own after the following city studies. In addition, examples of specialty schools, like charters designed with the needs of youth in foster care in mind, are discussed in each city's section.

D.C., Denver, and New York City all provide important lessons for cities interested in improving access to school choice for youth in foster care. But, highlighted last, Los Angeles is a standout among these cities for its sophisticated approach. Leaders in Los Angeles understand that there is not one problem to solve in order to improve access to education opportunity — including school choice — for youth in foster care, but rather several complex and interdependent problems that implicate multiple agencies at many levels.

Washington, D.C.

In Washington, D.C., the advantages of both a robust public transportation system and limited complexity of geographic boundaries that define the federal district have resulted in a focus on agency cooperation for family education as the primary strategy for improving equity in school choice. The public agencies involved in foster care and in school choice work closely together to conduct outreach, provide information guides for foster parents, and support them through the application process. The child welfare agency has also established data-sharing agreements with its education partners that are used to analyze student performance and provide targeted interventions in an effort to improve educational outcomes of youth in foster care.

About Foster Care and School Choice in D.C.

Washington, D.C., offers a variety of school choice options to families including charter schools, selective high schools and programs, career and technical education, private schools, virtual schools, and their right-to-attend school or in-boundary school.[32] Nearly half of all students in Washington, D.C., attend a charter school.[33] In addition, though the Opportunity Scholarship Program serves a limited number of students (about 1,600), it provides vouchers to low-income students to attend private school.[34]

There are four main government agencies in D.C. that help support students in foster care: the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), D.C.'s state education agency; the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), D.C.'s child welfare agency; DC Public

Charter Schools Board, an independent government agency of the district that is the sole public charter authorizer; and DC Public Schools, the traditional public school district.

As of January 2019, the Child and Family Services Agency served about 621 youth in foster care in school-based pre-K through grade 12.[35] Students in the care of D.C.'s Child and Family Services Agency are eligible to attend any public school within the boundaries of the District. However, D.C. has a high number of foster homes located outside of the District, and about 100 of those 621 youth attended public schools in surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia, following a determination that it was in their best interest to do so.[36] Of youth in foster care who attend school in Washington, D.C., only 34% attend charter schools[37] compared to the 47% of all students in the District.[38]

Unified Enrollment and Partnership with the City's Child Welfare Agency

Washington, D.C., has a unified enrollment system called My School DC for the District's public school choice options. In operating My School DC,[39] the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) conducts family and community outreach with a special emphasis on reaching at-risk youth, including youth in foster care. In addition, My School DC operates a telephone hotline for families without access to broadband internet at home.

My School DC works closely with the District's Child and Family Services Agency to support the agency's education specialists, social workers, and other staff by providing them with information about D.C.'s unified enrollment system, which they can use to support youth in foster care and families directly. In partnership with My School DC, the Child and Family Services Office of Well Being hosts an annual awareness campaign that begins as soon as the enrollment lottery opens. During this campaign, agency staff promote the purpose and importance of the lottery along with contact information, and links to resources for families. Agency staff who have been trained also advertise their availability to provide help to any social worker working with families who need assistance in the application process. In addition, My School DC provides training to local legal services organizations including an overview of how the lottery system works, dates and deadlines, and how the holder of a student's education rights should engage with the city's school choice opportunities.

My School DC and Child and Family Services have also produced a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) specifically for foster parents. The FAQs answer questions on a range of topics such as paperwork necessary to verify guardianship, how to determine a student's zone school, and which student's placement address to use for the lottery application.[40] Of particular note is who can apply on behalf of a child in foster care. A child in foster care can have any adult in their life apply for the lottery on their behalf, potentially reducing barriers if a legal guardian or education rights holder is unavailable to sufficiently research the array

of school choice options available or complete the lottery application on time. However, only the education rights holder can ultimately enroll the child in school after the lottery closes.

Finally, the Child and Family Services Agency also hosts community events to help educate stakeholders about the lottery process. In 2018, My School DC and Child and Family Services Agency piloted a partnership with the agency's "grandfamilies" program that focused on helping inform grandparents, who often provide kinship care[41] both within and outside of formal foster care structures, about the lottery system. These efforts are intended to draw adults in the life of a child in foster care who may not have access to all the necessary information and technology needed to make an informed decision about school choice opportunities for students in foster care.

The Effect of Application and Enrollment Procedures and Timelines

The high school application deadline for entering the My School DC lottery is the beginning of February of the current school year, and the middle and elementary school deadline is in the beginning of March. Meeting these deadlines is crucial to getting the best returns in the lottery application. But youth in foster care are not always able to plan their lives so far in advance. Even when foster parents have received the benefit of good training and resources from My School DC and Child and Family Services, many youth enter foster care after these enrollment deadlines pass, significantly reducing the opportunity of enrolling in certain schools with long waitlists, which may be the best fit for the student.

In the event a student in foster care applies after the lottery deadline has passed, they are still allowed to apply on a first-come, first-served basis. As charter schools are limited by the enrollment capacity when the lottery is run, students in foster care are placed on waitlists with the general student population. Students in foster care are only guaranteed immediate enrollment that ESSA requires for in-boundary schools. In fact, the only exception for any charter school waitlist is through a lottery preference, which allows a student to surpass other waitlisted applicants if they meet certain criteria, such as a sibling preference. D.C.'s definition of siblings is all children who share a guardian, which is inclusive of children in foster care.

Data and Information Sharing

The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) has a data-sharing agreement with the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE), D.C.'s state education office. Per that agreement, CFSA populates the State Longitudinal Education Database (SLED) with a daily automated feed of the placement information, court status, and social worker assigned to each youth in CFSA's care. In return, the education agency provides designated child welfare personnel direct

access to its SLED system and Special Education Database System (SEDS), where they can access real-time school enrollment and achievement test data and the special education records of any D.C. youth in foster care enrolled in a D.C. public school.

Additionally, CFSA has negotiated agreements with the District of Columbia Public Schools, the DC Public Charter School Board, and Prince George's County Public Schools, which grant them quarterly access to student-level performance data, such as the attendance, grades, and GPA of each of the youth in foster care enrolled in their schools. While CFSA is working to access performance data on its youth attending private schools and smaller school districts outside of the city's boundary, CFSA's data-sharing agreements provide access to educational performance data on the vast majority of youth in foster care. The agency has subsequently developed practices to analyze the performance data to identify trends and target at-risk youth with appropriate educational interventions.

Examples of Specialized Schools for Youth in Foster Care in Washington, D.C.

Specialized schools of choice designed for youth in foster care are relatively uncommon, though many cities have one or two. These schools tend to be charter schools that offer things like small class sizes, interest-driven curricula, personalized learning opportunities, and additional mental health and social support, as well as sometimes offering part-time residential options. With few exceptions — like single-gender schools — public charter schools cannot exclude eligible students from enrolling and so none of these schools only serves youth in foster care, even where the needs of youth in foster care are central to their design. In general, youth tend to be matched with these schools via foster care service providers, rather than selecting from among the entire universe of options.

It should be noted that there are other specialized charter schools that were not designed to serve youth in foster care specifically but have developed expertise in serving youth in foster care because of the demonstrated needs of their enrolled student population.

Monument Academy is a weekday boarding charter school for students in the fifth through eighth grades. The mission of Monument Academy is to provide students, particularly students in foster care, with academic, social and emotional support and life skills to be successful in college, their careers, and in their communities. The school focuses on experience-based learning, personalized learning, and social-emotional well-being to ensure that all of their students are sufficiently supported.[42]

Denver, Colorado

Colorado has choice laws that permit any student to attend any public school in the state,[43] and Denver's primary focus in increasing equity in school choice for youth in foster care is on solving transportation challenges. This is part of a broader problem for all students within the city's school choice environment.[44] For now, those efforts are mostly limited to ensuring that students can remain in their school of origin as required by federal law. However, these efforts do protect some degree of choice for youth in foster care because — once a student is enrolled in a school of choice — that school becomes their school of origin, and they are then able to stay in that school as long as it remains the best fit for them.

About Foster Care and School Choice in Denver

Colorado has 178 school districts[45] and 64 counties.[46] Control of most education decisions, including education decisions that affect youth in foster care, is given to each of those 178 local districts. In addition, each county has its own human services agency serving youth in foster care. In Denver, there is a single city and county entity, but that entity is not perfectly geographically mapped to the school district. In the city and county of Denver, there are an estimated 821 students in out-of-home care in October 2018.[47] Data on students in foster care are limited, since the county human services agency manages foster care services but does not share boundary lines with the school district and there are discrepancies between the two agencies' data sets.

The school choice environment in Denver is robust; it includes charter schools, magnet schools, career and technical education, private and parochial schools, and virtual schools. Of students in Denver Public Schools, 21% attend a charter school.[48] Denver is also home to 52 district-run "innovation schools" that are not charter schools but are exempt from some district policies, state statutes, and collective bargaining agreements.[49] Those working in the Denver education sector have generally observed that youth in foster care face challenges in enrolling in charter schools and are believed to do so at lower rates.[50] Limited data of rates of youth in foster care taking advantage of the full universe of school choice options suggests that this is true.

Transportation Needs for Youth in Foster Care in Denver

The primary focus of Denver's city leaders is to ensure transportation to meet the minimum requirements of ESSA's "school of origin" provision. As a general rule, transportation is not provided to students attending schools of choice or students living outside the walk zones of their school, but students in foster care are entitled to transportation to their schools of origin.

In 2018, Colorado passed legislation to comply with ESSA's provisions to protect students in foster care, which includes guaranteeing that students in foster care have the right to stay in their school of origin until the end of the academic term, so long as that is determined to be in their best interest.[51] In order to fund implementation, the state allocated $2.75 million[52] for transportation for students who need to travel outside of their district boundaries in order to remain in their school of origin.

However, controversy erupted when an amendment was added to the legislation allowing the school board of a receiving district to provide transportation for all students crossing district boundaries, not just students in foster care, easing student moves into that district.[53] Several districts fought against this amendment due to concerns that certain districts would attract more students and undermine school district boundaries. As a result, a Denver judge blocked the provision.[54] While the pending lawsuit does not affect access to funding for students in foster care,[55] some argue the legal process for removing the amendment has created unnecessary bureaucratic processes[56] for counties and inhibited its full implementation.

As the law currently stands, only county departments have access to the state transportation funding; therefore, districts must work with their county's department of human services to develop a transportation agreement.[57] The local county then covers 10% of transportation costs, the district where the school is located covers another 10%, and the remaining 80% is billed to the state for students in foster care. Some Colorado county

departments of child welfare, including Denver County Human Services, have contracted with private companies, including HopSkipDrive, a company that specializes in providing transportation to children by vetted drivers.[58]

In January 2019 (the most recent data), only eight out of 64 counties have made use of the state's transportation dollars — just 2% of the allocated $2.75 million.[59] While counties and districts are, of course, free to provide ESSA's required school of origin transportation on their own dime, there is no evidence to suggest that they are doing so. This limited uptake of state dollars suggests that students are still frequently moving schools when they change home placements rather than being given access to the transportation necessary to remain in their school of origin. Students may be experiencing additional and unnecessary destabilization due to transportation barriers — exactly what ESSA's provisions are designed to prevent.

Unified Enrollment

Similar to D.C., Denver has a school choice open enrollment window in the winter that allows students to enroll in any school in the state for the next academic year, limited by the enrollment capacity of the school.[60] However, since enrollment must take place during that window, students and families with access to transportation, ability to research options, and time to actively plan ahead have an advantage in securing seats. Students in foster care typically do not have such an advantage and may not be able to enroll on time or for the school that is the best fit.

Timing further complicates enrollment in a school of choice when youth enter foster care or change placements during the school year. Youth in foster care do not benefit from any formal preferences in Denver, but unofficial practices can be flexible, often allowing students in foster care to transfer outside of standard lottery and application deadlines.

In Colorado, district discretion plays a big role: If a student in foster care has to change schools after an application or enrollment deadline has passed, there is no official policy to guarantee immediate enrollment into a charter school or other schools of choice. However, Denver Public Schools will typically work with students in foster care to accommodate delays in enrollment into a school of choice and will help prioritize their enrollment.

There are a few considerations to prioritize specific groups of students during a school's enrollment period. For example, students who live within district boundaries or who have a sibling in a particular school are prioritized over the general pool of students. But even if a child is placed in a foster home where other children attend a school of choice, the student in foster care is not guaranteed to receive any sibling preference to enroll in the same school.

The Role of Shared Access to Student Information

A team across several Colorado agencies is developing a pilot to build an integrated data platform to link education and child welfare information for students in foster care to address the significant limitations to effective data and information sharing across the state. Currently, the Colorado Department of Human Services and the Colorado Department of Education share names and student identifiers for children in out-of-home placements under a data-sharing agreement. Although youth in foster care can be placed into foster care or change their placements at any time, these data are currently sent once a month — and there have been technical difficulties in making the data transfer seamless. Additionally, case workers have up to 60 days to fully enter their case notes and data into the system, resulting in additional delays and real consequences. For example, a student could change placements two or three times without anyone at the school knowing that there was any instability at all.[61] Right now, the only way that county child welfare staff can get accurate, real-time education data is to make each request individually to whomever has been designated as a district's point of contact.

Examples of Specialized Schools in Colorado

Denver does not have schools dedicated specifically to serving youth in foster care, but there are other alternative education campuses that tend to serve high proportions of youth in foster care.

New Legacy Charter School is a charter school authorized by the state just outside of the Denver boundary, dedicated to supporting parenting teens with a high proportion of youth in foster care.[62] New Legacy's goal is to support all students through graduation, in part by providing services and interventions that traditional schools do not have. One notable support, given the lack of transportation options, is a partnership with a rideshare vendor through Denver's contract with HopSkipDrive to guarantee continued access once New Legacy is deemed a child's school of origin. Additional supports include the small size of the school, therapists, advocates, and a homebound instructor.

New York City, New York

Similar to Washington, D.C., New York City has the features of a strong public transit system and agencies that operate with shared geographic boundaries. New York City is the unusual case where the boundaries of the city, the school district, and the child welfare agency are the same. While the system was not designed to benefit youth in foster care, it has the effect of making the navigation across systems somewhat less complex than in other cities. This has focused New York City's leaders on the creation of family and youth self-help guides for navigating school choice as well as strategic outreach and support.

About Foster Care and School Choice in New York City

New York City hosts a number of school choice options, including charter schools, magnet programs, career and technical education, virtual schools, and private schools. Some of the district-run schools of choice are currently in political turmoil, given vigorous debates about admissions to specialized magnet programs and the recommendation of a mayoral-appointed panel to eliminate gifted programs and screened schools entirely.[63] New York City has a unified enrollment system, which includes a common website and application process for district school options, and a separate common application for charter schools. About 10% of students in the city attend charter schools.[64]

There are about 8,300 youth in foster care in New York City.[65] Of these children in foster care, about 310 attend charter schools, which represents less than 4% of the total population of school-age children in foster care.[66] Unless their rights are terminated or limited in court, birth parents retain the authority to make educational decisions on behalf of children in foster care, including those pertaining to enrollment.

New York City's Unified Enrollment System

The New York City Department of Education operates a unified enrollment system for traditional public schools and non-charter specialized middle and high schools. The Office of Student Enrollment is the central hub for enrollment in these school options, although specialized schools often require additional application requirements such as testing or auditions for interested students and families.[67]

Charter schools work together with charter school partnerships, such as the New York City Charter School Center, which provides families with information on how to apply to charter schools. Important application instructions include the option to apply through the common online charter school application or directly applying to a charter school itself. Furthermore, the Department of Education's Office of Enrollment provides technical assistance and liaises with charter school systems.[68]

Partnership Between the NYC Department of Education and Administration for Children's Services

The New York City Department of Education and the New York City Administration for Children's Services have partnered together to more effectively serve students in foster care. The city's child welfare agency contracts with 26 foster care providers[69] to support the city's youth in foster care and all of those providers are required to have at least one education specialist on staff — a role that many other cities do not require.

At the New York City Department of Education, the Office of Student Enrollment is among a number of offices addressing the needs of vulnerable student populations, including students in foster care. At in-person high school admissions fairs in the fall, the office staffs an in-person hub for students in temporary housing and in foster care in order to provide them with the additional guidance that they may need, creating flexibility for a more personalized advising approach. The Department of Education also provides free MetroCards, school supplies, book bags, and more to students in foster care. In addition, staff from the Department of Education regularly work with the Administration for Children's Services to train the foster care agency education specialists on the high school application and enrollment process.

Resources for Foster Parents

The NYC Department of Education is notable among these four cities in that the school district itself provides a comprehensive education guide for foster parents, including information about charter and private school options. In addition, the city's Administration for Children's Services has produced a comprehensive "Foster Parent's Guide to Education" that provides foster parents with information on how to navigate the school systems of New York City and resources available to foster parents from birth to beyond college, which includes a section on the rights and supports pertaining to special education.[70] This self-help guide is given to every foster family and outlines the rights of youth in foster care to support their success in school and maintain their stability. In addition, the guide provides resources like contact information for gifted and talented programs and basic information for accessing charter schools in the city, including that charter schools have a separate enrollment process and selection is based on a lottery, and providing general timing of charter school applications.

Data and Information Sharing

All of the city's public school student information is centralized into a single database, and the Department of Education has an agreement with the Administration for Children's Services to authorize a monthly data match in which the child welfare agency sends a file listing all school-aged children in foster care, which are matched against all children in the department's education data system in categories for attendance, school information, academic indicators, and others. Initially, those foster care providers that are contracted under the city agency were not themselves allowed to access this education data, but that use was granted by an amendment to the data-sharing agreement. Despite this access, the system itself is archaic and difficult to use, prompting ACS to encourage providers to obtain access through foster parents to individual web-based student accounts.

Examples of Specialized Schools for Youth in Foster Care in NYC

Broome Street Academy Charter High School was created as a partnership with The Door, a nonprofit youth development organization. Broome Street primarily serves a vulnerable student population, including, but not exclusively, students in foster care. Through their partnership with The Door, Broome Street has supplemental funds and is able to provide more resources for students, including sufficient social workers on staff to ensure that caseloads are manageable. The Broome Street model provides academic, social, and mental health services[71] to address the needs of their students, and the school is currently piloting a study with its charter authorizer on the effect of mental health services on graduation and other student performance indicators.

The Mott Haven Academy Charter School combines family support services with a rigorous academic program. Through a partnership with the New York Foundling, a nonprofit organization for children, youth, adults, and families, Mott Haven is able to offer families and students a comprehensive support system. Mott Haven Academy's use of differentiated instruction, small teacher-to-student ratio, and subject-specific instructional specialists enable students, particularly students who need additional support, to receive more individualized instruction.[72]

New Visions AIM II Charter High School (AIM II) serves students who have experienced significant obstacles to earning a high school diploma, including students involved in foster care. AIM II provides supports, experiences, and opportunities for students who have previously struggled in school or are at risk of dropping out, including customized and rigorous curricula, socioemotional support, and work-based experiences.[73]

Los Angeles, California

I n Los Angeles, a student in foster care is more likely to encounter multiple, overlapping agencies and service providers but is also more likely to experience systems that are more sophisticated in their approach. In addition, students in foster care in Los Angeles benefit from leaders who are oriented toward identifying systems-level solutions, rather than the student- or family-level individual interventions that are prominent in other cities. Some of these elements are unique to California or have special relevance in a city as geographically dispersed and as populous as Los Angeles.

While much work remains to be done, the multifaceted approach by leaders and the engagement of organized stakeholders offers an instructive example for other cities.

About Foster Care and School Choice in Los Angeles

The City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, and the Los Angeles Unified School District are three distinct entities with overlapping, but very different boundaries. As youth in foster care tend to be highly mobile, students in Los Angeles County are frequently crossing school district boundaries, and each district has its own sets of resources and practices. Students moving from one district to another often change providers, programs, and even eligibility categories — with their documentation sometimes lagging far behind. This creates recurrent barriers in accessing education opportunities as students move across district lines. As a result, bureaucratic processes and responsibility for how school choice concerns are addressed for youth in foster care are inescapably complicated. For students requiring IEPs, the absence of vital records further complicates their ability to receive the necessary supports and services critical to their success.

The Los Angeles County Office of Education oversees all 80 school districts in the county and the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services is the child welfare agency for youth in foster care. The county's Children's Court supports youth in foster care.

For this analysis, the focus is primarily on the Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified) because it encompasses the lion's share of the City of Los Angeles. It is also, by far, the largest of the 80 school districts in Los Angeles County, serving over 607,000 students in kindergarten to grade 12 in district and charter schools overseen and approved by LA Unified.[74] During the 2018-19 school year, LA Unified served approximately 6,764 students in foster care, more than 1,000 of whom attend charter schools.[75] Youth in foster care are underrepresented in LA Unified affiliated and independent charter schools and during the 2017-18 school year, they enrolled in charter schools at a rate of 13%[76] compared to almost 26% of all LA Unified students.[77]

While there are some school choice options connected to the other school districts in Los Angeles County as well as non-district options like private schools, LA Unified alone has a robust ecosystem of school choice options, including 277 charter schools[78] and 311 magnet school programs.[79] In addition, LA Unified offers options such as alternative schools, career and technical schools,[80] virtual schools,[81] schools designed to meet the needs of pregnant minors,[82] career and technical education, and schools of advanced studies. About half of Los Angeles students in public schools participate in school choice programs.[83] There are also a number of private schools within the boundaries of the school district, which LA Unified services if a special education assessment deems it necessary. Transportation is only available for magnet programs and for students who live within a school's boundaries.

Stakeholders for Youth in Foster Care Education

Advocacy groups, including community-led parent and youth organizations, such as the Partnership for Equitable Access to Public Schools (PEAPS) and the Coalition for Educational Equity for Foster Youth (CEEFY), have championed a number of initiatives that would better support students in foster care in accessing school choice. For instance, PEAPS has recently advocated for centralized online information for the multitude of charter school applications, the collection of more nuanced enrollment data for youth in foster care, and revision of interdistrict transfer rules that currently allow home districts to block students from transferring to another district. Previously, CEEFY was instrumental in outlining important goals and actions for local education agencies to incorporate into their Local Control Funding Formula in order to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care.[84]

The LA County Office of Education Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program has also divided LA County into five regions that each hosts a regional learning network that provides support to foster youth liaisons, who help coordinate services among the region's

community-based organizations, the Department of Children and Family Services, and school districts.[85] Staff within LA Unified say that the learning network has been helpful in connecting with district liaisons and that LA County has been quick to take suggestions from the learning network and implement them.[86]

Finally, LA Unified participates in a foster youth advisory council made up of youth in foster care. This council empowers youth in foster care, who help lead initiatives for other students in foster care. Those initiatives include leadership training, college and career awareness, and advocacy. With the support of staff, students on the council also engage with the state legislature on bills specific to youth in foster care.[87]

Data and Information Sharing in Los Angeles

California is one of the states that tracks education outcomes and graduation rates of students in foster care in their report cards,[88] and LA Unified is one of the first districts in the country to provide disaggregated data for youth in foster care and to further disaggregate that data for youth in foster care in charter schools. In July 2019, LA Unified Board Member Kelly Gonez introduced a successful resolution[89] to collect and disaggregate data on access to choice programs across multiple dimensions — one of which is foster care. This data will allow both the district and the community to better understand who is applying to choice programs and ultimately enrolling in them. The resolution requires data on how often youth in foster care change schools and multiple measures of their academic, social, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the district has signed a data-sharing MOU with LA County that provides access to information from eight school districts and one to two community colleges.[90]

Another promising strategy at the county level is the Los Angeles County Office of Education's youth in foster care information system pilot called the Educational Passport System, which integrates demographic and academic data from school districts and data from the Office of Education, Department of Children and Family Services, and LA County Probation Department.[91] The system is intended to help support youth in foster care with enrollment and appropriate education placements across school districts and the child welfare system. However, despite LA Unified being fully enclosed within the LA County boundaries, the district's academic records are currently not part of this countywide system. Since 2019, LA Unified has launched a new integrated system called the Whole Child Data Integration platform, which provides student information in one place for teachers, counselors, administrators, and other practitioners.[92] The dashboard aggregates student data from a number of district databases such as attendance, subject area performance, foster care status, or homeless status, allowing practitioners to have the whole picture of a child's needs. The My Integrated Student Information System is one database that is included in the Whole Child Data Integration platform, which provides vital information on students' education progress.[93] Due to technological challenges, the focus has been on enhancing the current system rather than integrating into the countywide system.[94]

While LA Unified is making progress in using data to better support students in foster care, overall data and information sharing among agencies, districts, and schools is still severely limited. Currently, LA Unified is only uploading records to the Education Passport System when a record is requested by other districts. There is just one clerical staff person able to respond to those district records requests. According to staff in LA Unified's Student Support Programs department, the ability to access real-time documentation such as academic transcripts and immunization records is critical and would save significant staff time currently spent trying to identify, locate, and request all these documents.

Ultimately, the recently enacted resolution will require LA Unified to develop a comprehensive data set focused on the mobility patterns and rates across the district — but it will not solve the critical problem of information-sharing at the student level that's essential for good service delivery.

The Role of California's Local Control Laws

California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) is the state's funding mechanism that gives LEAs the autonomy in creating funding formulas, paired with accountability via Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP). In designating youth in foster care as essential subgroups of students for consideration under both the LCFF and LCAP, California became the first state to force disaggregation of both data and resources for youth in foster care. A Foster Youth Education Toolkit, created in partnership with several advocacy organizations and California state agencies, is designed to help LEAs to meet the requirements of LCFF and LCAP for youth in foster care. It provides comprehensive information for school districts on the education rights of youth in foster care and step-by-step procedures that help ensure youth in foster care fully benefit from the laws designed to protect them.[95]

LA Unified previously operated the Foster Youth Achievement Program, which provided specialized school counselors for students in foster care. However, under the superintendent's direction, the school counselor staffing structure is shifting in this school year to centralize counseling services so that counselors are serving more diverse student needs across the district's specialized populations and traveling to fewer school campuses. Advocacy groups, organizing around the specific requirements for youth in foster care in LA Unified's LCAP and LCFF, have expressed concern that the change could dilute services.[96]

Transportation Needs for Youth in Foster Care in Los Angeles

In partnership with the private vendor HopSkipDrive, a Foster Youth School Stability Transportation Pilot involving 1,131 youth in Los Angeles found that youth in foster care and caregivers experienced transportation as one of the biggest barriers to simply accessing their schools of origin (the study did not analyze access to schools of choice).[97] Students and caregivers were willing to travel over 24 miles on a school bus route in order

to remain enrolled in their school of origin.[98] One of the primary barriers to transportation was the difficulty that both education and child welfare staff experienced in engaging a foster student's education rights holders in making the decision about whether remaining in that school of origin was in the best interest of the child.[99] Staff at both child welfare and education agencies reported that they could not reach the education rights holders — sometimes because they simply lacked current contact information. In addition, education staff reported a lack of consistent notification from the child welfare agency to school districts when a student in foster care changed placements, further complicating transportation challenges.[100]

The Effect of Application and Enrollment Procedures and Timelines

LA Unified currently offers a unified enrollment system for magnet schools and programs, dual language schools, schools for advanced studies, and certain affiliated charter schools.[101] There is also a pilot common application for the district's charter schools (linked to the unified enrollment program called Apply LA),[102] but fewer than half of the charter schools in Los Angeles have joined the current iteration of this platform. The remaining charter schools have their own independent application systems, and youth in foster care and foster parents must research each school individually. While this fragmentation may just be a nuisance to some families, for youth who may not have any adult in their lives who is able to help explore or explain the various options available to them among the unified enrollment system and the individual charter schools, it means that access is effectively impossible.[103]

The effect of enrollment windows linked to school year start dates is another significant challenge for youth in foster care. The rigid timing for application and enrollment limits access to choice for youth in foster care who have high mobility rates and move placements frequently, unpredictably, and without regard to the timing of the school year. There are policy exceptions that youth in foster care are afforded, such as the ability for immediate enrollment, which is required under ESSA. While the state law in California has an enforcement mechanism to ensure immediate enrollment, the extent to which this policy is implemented in any state or school district is unknown.[104]

In addition, in Los Angeles, charter schools operate as their own local education agencies and should be accountable for guaranteeing youth in foster care the same rights to immediate enrollment, but it is unclear how charter schools ensure immediate enrollment for students in foster care who miss the deadline due to a change in placement, whether all charter schools are compliant, or how anyone would know if they aren't.

Resources for Foster Parents

The LA County Office of Education also provides a number of structures and resources that benefit youth in foster care in LA Unified and beyond. The County hosts a quarterly liaison meeting where school district liaisons discuss current statistics of youth in foster care and share resources to support youth in foster care.

In addition, the County Department of Children and Family Services has produced many guidance documents and fact sheets to help foster parents, youth in foster care, and caregivers navigate the education pathways for youth in care. Materials also include resources to help youth in foster care navigate the college application and financial aid processes. Some documents are also offered in Spanish to aid the Spanish-speaking members of Los Angeles' large English language learner population.[105]

Although the Department of Children and Family Services offers these guidance documents, there is an opportunity to improve the documentation and resources provided to families and caregivers. The Department of Children and Family Services creates documents for caregivers that outline all of the legal requirements that districts are expected to meet, but those materials tend to contain legal language that is difficult to understand, and the documents do not often give sufficient information for families to connect with any actual person or office in order to find more support. Nonprofit organizations, such as Alliance for Children's Rights, have also developed resources to assist school districts in meeting the educational needs of youth in foster care.[106]

Sidebar 5

Examples of Specialized Schools for Youth in Foster Care in Los Angeles

Optimist Charter School opened in September of 2013 within the Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services Organization that houses boys referred by the LA County Department of Probation and other counties throughout California. Optimist Charter is designed to primarily serve youth in foster care and youth on probation. Optimist Charter School has a core curriculum and electives such as art, music, and vocational opportunities in addition to structured therapeutic programs. The educational program involves youth care counselors, therapists, nursing staff, and probation officers. Administration can have direct contact with their residents and work directly with the school staff to provide a united, team approach.[107]

Future is Now Preparatory Academy aims to meet the unique needs of students in Los Angeles starting in fall 2020. Future is Now, a charter school, will be primarily focused on serving foster and homeless youth in a semi-residential setting.[108]

RISE High was designed to meet the needs of youth in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, and other students with diverse learning needs. RISE High shares spaces with nonprofit organizations that provide wraparound services in downtown Los Angeles and other high-need areas to provide highly mobile students with a number of access points to the school model and network of adults and peers.[109]

Five Barriers to School Choice for Youth in Foster Care

1. **Transportation:** ESSA requires that states provide transportation for youth in foster care for whom remaining in their school of origin when they move placements is in their best interest. But this rule has not been fully implemented. Even where states have enacted legislation or policy, and districts have appropriate policies in place, there are still many challenges to effective implementation. For example, budgets, bureaucratic barriers, and cross-jurisdictional confusion all contribute to students losing this important protection.

2. **Charter school and other school choice applications and lotteries:** None of these four cities offers any formal priority placement for youth in foster care who have missed the application window for a charter school lottery — either because they were placed in foster care after the window had closed or because they changed placements. The common practice for youth in foster care who miss a lottery deadline is the same as it is for any other student: adding students to a school's waitlist on a first-come first-serve basis. As a principle, this practice poses significant challenges for students in foster care because they tend to be highly mobile and placements in foster care often do not align with enrollment seasons; therefore, they are much more likely to miss these limited windows. It also arguably conflicts with ESSA's immediate enrollment provision, which ideally would prevent this very problem.

3. **Sibling Preference:** Currently, sibling preference is one of the most common ways that a student can receive priority for enrollment in a school that is at capacity, but there appear to be few examples of schools that extended that sibling preference to foster siblings along with biological or adopted children. In addition to the obvious effect that this limitation has on youth in foster care, it is an example of the many bureaucratic obstacles that exist for families who are — or would like to be — foster parents. It is not unreasonable to hypothesize that the continued perception of foster parenting as an unusual family structure contributes to the crisis-level lack of family-based foster care placements across the country.[110]

4. **Data systems:** A lack of centralized data systems linking education data like IEPs and course completion with other child-serving systems exacerbates a foster student's ability to be academically successful when moving schools. Retrieving student data and information when a student moves schools, especially when they cross district or county lines, is a source of universal frustration. Only a few states and counties have some form of centralized data systems, but even those come with severe limitations or are only in the nascent stages of development.

5. **Knowledge of school choice options:** Learning about school choice options takes significant time and resources from an adult who is engaged in a student's life and knowledgeable about their education needs — a person who many youth in foster care do not have in their lives. As a result, only some families are able to understand the full universe of options students have. This problem is especially acute for youth in foster care when all of the adults in their lives are juggling competing priorities, or when policies limit engagement in the school choice process to a single education rights holder, who may not live in the same home as the student and who may not even be someone that the child knows.

Other Policies and Practices

Private School Choice

Each of the four cities profiled above is working to increase access to school choice for students in foster care. While these cities have made some progress, challenges still remain. It is worth noting, however, that their efforts to date have focused primarily on how students in foster care access *public* school options.

Some states also offer programs that support students in foster care in accessing *private* school options. Washington, D.C., is the only city profiled here that provides publicly funded vouchers, but several other programs across the country do so as well. In fact, a handful of states offer private school choice programs that explicitly provide scholarship opportunities for youth in foster care.

Arkansas' Succeed Scholarship Program provides a private school voucher for students in foster care or students with an IEP.

Oklahoma's Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program provides a private school voucher to students with special needs, and since 2017, has expanded eligibility to include foster children, adopted foster children, and children in custody of the Office of Juvenile Affairs.[111]

In 2019, Florida enacted the Family Empowerment Scholarship private school program grants for students in foster care, families receiving food assistance, or households whose income does not exceed 300% of the poverty level.[112]

Data and information on the participation rates of students in foster care in private school voucher programs is not readily available. Frequently, private schools have smaller enrollments and that small size triggers privacy protections for youth in foster care who might be made identifiable — so as a general rule, private schools do not report foster care-specific data.

Some resources do exist to guide state policymakers in creating private school scholarships or programs for youth in foster care. The American Federation for Children has a model law named the Foster Child Scholarship Act that details an ideal scholarship program that would provide students in foster care with tuition scholarships to access public and private school options. The model policy outlines basic elements including eligibility requirements, responsibilities of resident school districts, and accountability standards.[113]

It is important to note, given the high number of students in foster care who have special needs, that private schools are not required to comply with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Whereas all forms of public schooling are required to provide services to students with special needs, private schools are not required to guarantee that students with special needs will be appropriately served. In practice, that may mean that taking advantage of a private school voucher program effectively waives a student's rights under federal and state disability civil rights laws.

Online Education Programs

There are a few programs focused on supporting students who need credit recovery and trauma-informed care, which can be achieved by the individualized instruction that virtual school environments can provide.

For example, San Diego Mission Academy is a virtual charter school in California that uses a personalized learning model for students in grades six through 12. Many of the school's students have experienced significant disruptions to their education, including students in foster care. The personalized learning model helps address specific academic needs of students, while the school also provides training for staff in delivering trauma-informed support.[114]

Connecticut's Department of Children and Families offers the Virtual Academy for youth who are involved in one of the department's programs, including foster care. The Virtual Academy is a supplementary program for students already enrolled in school full-time. The mission of the Virtual Academy is to provide opportunities in remediation, credit recovery, and credit accumulation as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, their full-time schooling.[115]

Virtual schools may be one option to support students in foster care who are unable to receive the necessary resources in a traditional school setting. At the time of this paper's publication, COVID-19 had pushed the vast majority of students to rely on virtual instruction. The circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the significant digital divide for underserved students; approximately 14% of households do not have access to an internet service,[116] and high-poverty schools are less likely to offer live online instruction.[117] Currently, it is too early to determine the effectiveness of virtual instruction at this scale and its ability to fully support students in foster care. This uncertainty necessitates further research to make informed policy recommendations on accountability, teacher certification requirements, and curricular quality of virtual school programs.

Schools Focused on Serving Youth in Foster Care

As highlighted in each city study, local leaders may offer tailored school options — charter and otherwise — that specialize in serving youth in foster care, among other vulnerable populations of students. These schools consistently offer intensive social-emotional and academic support, as well as wraparound services in health care and housing and referrals to clinicians for their students, and many of them have sophisticated special education programs. However, these schools are few and far between with their own enrollment caps and geographic challenges, serving only a small percentage of youth in foster care. Furthermore, not all specialized schools have been proven to meet the complex needs of youth in foster care and may vary in student outcomes.

Given that cities may not have sufficient resources to create specialized schools and given that not all youth in foster care would be best served in these environments, all schools should take lessons from specialized schools to better support youth in foster care. For example, many of these schools provide additional school counselors, therapists, and partnerships with community organizations that have the expertise to help families and youth.

> ## Voices of Students in Foster Care
>
> "What I really love is music, that's always been my thing and I've always been in band or orchestra before I was in foster care. But this school doesn't have anything like that. What if there was a school that was all about music? Man, I want to be there tomorrow."
>
> – Student Attending Specialized Charter High School

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES

States should reduce burdens for local governments to access state transportation funding available for youth in foster care.

Transporting youth in foster care to school, including simply remaining in their school of origin (a requirement under ESSA), can be a complex and expensive task for districts — particularly when school district boundaries do not align with the boundaries of the local child welfare agency and students can end up being moved across school boundary lines, school district lines, or even across state lines.

Federal, state, and local funding are all used to support transportation to support school stability. However, there are many differences in child welfare and education systems, including differences in budgeting and procedures to provide and pay for transportation. Challenges arise due to these differences, including reimbursement timelines, documentation, and the required county match of state funding rates. These requirements burden local education agencies and child welfare agencies, resulting in low participation rates in statewide transportation policies. Therefore, states should take into account bureaucratic barriers in transportation initiatives and make it as simple as possible to disseminate and use the available transportation funding.

State laws should include foster siblings, including unrelated children in a single foster family, as members of any sibling preference category for charter school lotteries and waitlist policies — and that should be incorporated for any charter school that implements a sibling preference.

There are very few ways for students to move up on a waitlist or have a better chance in a lottery for a school that is at capacity, but one of the few preferences is for siblings of students who are already enrolled. While some states define siblings broadly (such as any two children who share a guardian), others not explicitly naming children in foster care as part of the sibling preference rely on subjective judgment when making priority enrollment decisions.

Expanding these sibling preferences to youth in foster care will ensure the universe of school choice options is made available for foster parents so that they can support the education of their foster children just as they support the education of their biological and adopted children.

Due to the high potential for mobility and transience of students in foster care, education agencies should partner with departments of health and human services and departments of child welfare to develop centralized data systems.

Students in foster care often change placements and schools without complete records, leaving both schools and human services agencies without the information that they need to deliver effective support.

An ideal data system holds real-time and up-to-date information that protects student privacy while facilitating responsive services. This information should include, but is not limited to, a student's academic and health records, IEP and 504 records, as well as information about a student's education rights holder and other key contacts. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and other federal and state privacy laws constrain how, when, and with whom data can be shared and provide sufficient guidance to ensure that systems filter data visibility carefully.

Many states have existing state longitudinal data systems (SLDS) that may already include data on youth in foster care. Rather than building separate and potentially duplicative systems between a state's department of education, health and human services, and child welfare agency, policy leaders should explore ways to tap into existing data systems and build out data linkages.

Furthermore, states must develop robust data governance structures. Data governance structures provide state and local agencies defined roles and responsibilities needed to ensure clear processes for collecting and reporting education data and accountability for data quality and security. While data-sharing agreements are an important part of cross-agency collaboration, strong data governance helps address some of the personnel and political challenges that can inhibit collaboration.

All schools, including charter schools, should be required to immediately enroll students in foster care up to their building capacity, even if it exceeds their enrollment cap during the school year, in order to guarantee seats for students in foster care who may have missed an application or enrollment deadline. This may require changes to state statute, implementing regulations, or authorizer policies.

Schools of choice in high demand make enrollment selections via lotteries and waitlists. Typically, these schools are constrained from offering additional seats to anyone because they cannot exceed the total enrollment ceiling in their charter agreements.

Since foster care placement may be unpredictable and students in foster care may change placements during or after the school application period, state policymakers and authorizers should ensure that all schools — including charter schools — can and do immediately enroll students in foster care with priority, outside of any enrollment windows or waitlist constraints. Authorizers and policymakers should ensure that all schools (not just charter schools) also receive appropriate — or even additional — per-pupil funding aligned to the actual days in attendance for students in foster care, even when over any enrollment cap.

Applications to schools of choice should be open to any trusted adult in a youth's life.

Enrollment in a school of choice can require multiple steps with varying levels of formality. Requiring an education rights holder, the person with legal rights to make education decisions, to validate every step is a unique barrier for youth in foster care because their education rights holder may not be someone who has the capacity or interest in engaging in all of the research that school choice can require.

A student's legal education rights holder should be responsible for only the most essential requirements of the school choice process (e.g., authorizing official enrollment into a new school). By minimizing the burden on education rights holders and clearly communicating the policy to families who are operating in highly scrutinized legal circumstances, districts can empower foster parents or other trusted adults in a child's life — who may have the resources and capacity to assist in navigating school options — to support informed decisions about the student's education.

Documents and resources for foster parents must be available, accessible, and comprehensive in order for parents and families to fully understand the rights and choices for the student in foster care.

Even in cities with abundant school choice options, information about those opportunities is not always provided to foster parents and education rights holders and when it is, it can be confusing, contradictory, overly legalistic, or presented in a format that is not accessible to them.

Resources provided to foster parents should include all of the information typically provided on school choice options available including deadlines, what information schools will need for enrollment, key contacts, rights to immediate enrollment, and how to access legal services. Furthermore, all important information and resources should be consolidated in a single location, preventing adults involved in a foster student's life from having to navigate several web pages or contacting various offices to get the information they need.

In addition to having this information in a simple and readable format, education and care agencies should make targeted efforts to reach foster parents through several different agency contacts and at multiple points in time. Education and care agencies should be particularly mindful of reaching foster parents because they are more likely to be low-income, without the resources to actively research school options; people with disabilities who may experience mobility challenges or encounter obstacles to accessibility; or elderly caregivers who may not have regular internet access.

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.