The Impact of COVID-19 on Students in Foster Care

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Children Now®

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures have further exacerbated the unique challenges that youth in foster care faced long before the pandemic[1] and now put them at even greater risk of falling behind in school. Students in foster care are disproportionately impacted by school closures, since they often lack access to the technology and support they need to participate in distance learning. Distance learning has disrupted important educational supports that schools provide to many foster youth to help them fully engage in learning and overcome performance deficits resulting from trauma and school changes. Moreover, students in foster care, who have already experienced the trauma of abuse and neglect, are experiencing added isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety brought on by the pandemic and disruptions to normal routines and visitation with family. Many encounter greater placement instability as caregivers struggle to meet their needs while balancing increasing responsibilities and coping with severely limited access to critical supports and services. All of this compounds the trauma that foster youth have already experienced and can make it difficult for foster youth to focus on school and learn.

In this paper, we highlight data that show students in foster care were less engaged than their peers in distance learning during spring 2020 school closures. We identify barriers that foster youth are experiencing during the pandemic that hinder their ability to be engaged in school and prepared to learn, and thus threaten to widen the achievement gap between students in foster care and their peers. Finally, we offer recommendations to address these challenges and help prevent additional learning loss and trauma, while ensuring that foster youth can overcome the learning loss and trauma they have already experienced.

## The Pandemic Is Expected to Widen the Foster Youth Achievement Gap

Prior to the pandemic, students in foster care fared worse than their peers on multiple measures of educational engagement and achievement due to the unique challenges they face.[2] For example, students in foster care were more than twice as likely as students overall to be chronically absent from school during the 2018-19 school year, due to placement changes, school transfers, court hearings, school discipline, and parental visitation. In addition, students in foster care were more than four times as likely as students overall to have been suspended one or more times during the year. Students in foster care were struggling to stay on track in school, as they were far less likely to perform at grade level in English and math compared to their peers. In the 2018-19 school year, only 56 percent of foster youth graduated high school, nearly 30 percentage points lower than students overall (85 percent).

During school closures this spring, students in foster care faced additional obstacles, including a lack of technology, connectivity, and a supportive learning environment, that made it difficult for them to fully engage in distance learning. In fact, in a recent survey of Transitional Housing Placement for Non-Minor Dependents (THP-NMD) programs, a majority of providers reported serving foster youth, including some in high school, who did not have a laptop, internet, or access to tutoring during school closures.[3] Unfortunately, recent studies predict that the pandemic will widen the significant achievement gaps that already existed between students in foster care and their peers.[4] This means that, compared to students not in foster care, foster youth are at disproportionate risk of falling further behind in the 2020-21 school year.

A recent report on student engagement in distance learning in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) during the spring school closures highlights this concern. The report shows that students who were in foster care or homeless were less engaged in online learning than other vulnerable student groups, including students from low-income communities, students with disabilities, and English Learners.[5] More specifically, the report illustrates students' frequency of participation in distance learning (i.e., average weekly participation) and the length of their

participation in distance learning (i.e., the total number of weeks in which students participated at least once a week). Data were disaggregated to reflect participation for various student groups, including students who were in foster care or homeless, defined as students who had an active foster court case or were in the LAUSD homeless program. Students who were in foster care or homeless had lower participation rates than the other student groups across both measures.

For example, students who were in foster care or homeless were less likely than their peers to participate frequently in distance learning, defined as participating three or more times a week on average. As shown in Figure 1, among middle schoolers, only one-quarter (24 percent) of students who were in foster care or homeless participated in distance learning frequently, which is half as likely as students overall (47 percent). Among high schoolers, one-third (32 percent) of students who were in foster care or homeless participated in distance learning frequently, considerably lower than students overall (50 percent).

Figure 1. Percentage of Students that Participated Frequently in Distance Learning (3 or More Times a Week, on Average)
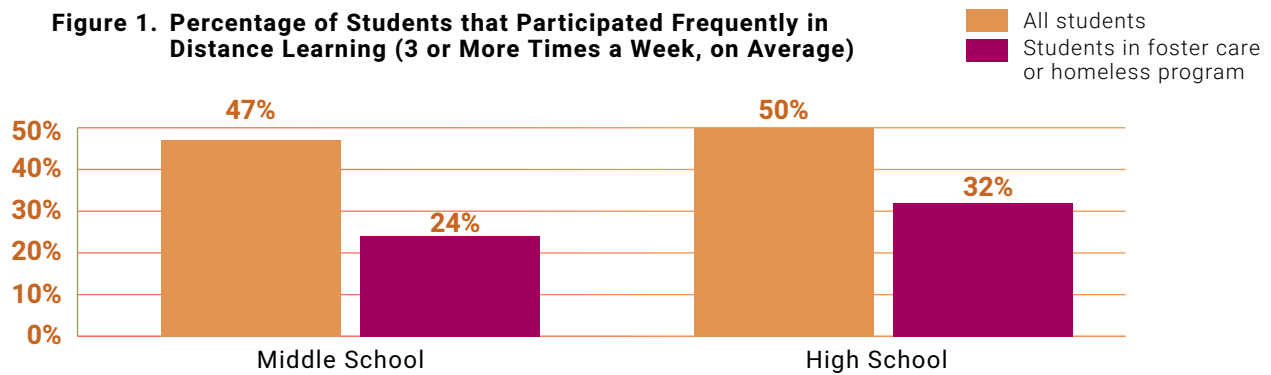
Further, students who were in foster care or homeless participated in fewer total weeks of online learning than their peers during the nine weeks of online instruction. As shown in Figure 2, only half (52 percent) of middle school students who were in foster care or homeless participated in four or more weeks of distance learning, compared to 75 percent of middle schoolers overall. In high school, 61 percent of students who were in foster care or homeless participated in four or more weeks of online learning, compared to 80 percent of all students.

Figure 2. Percentage of Students that Participated in Distance Learning for 4 or More Weeks
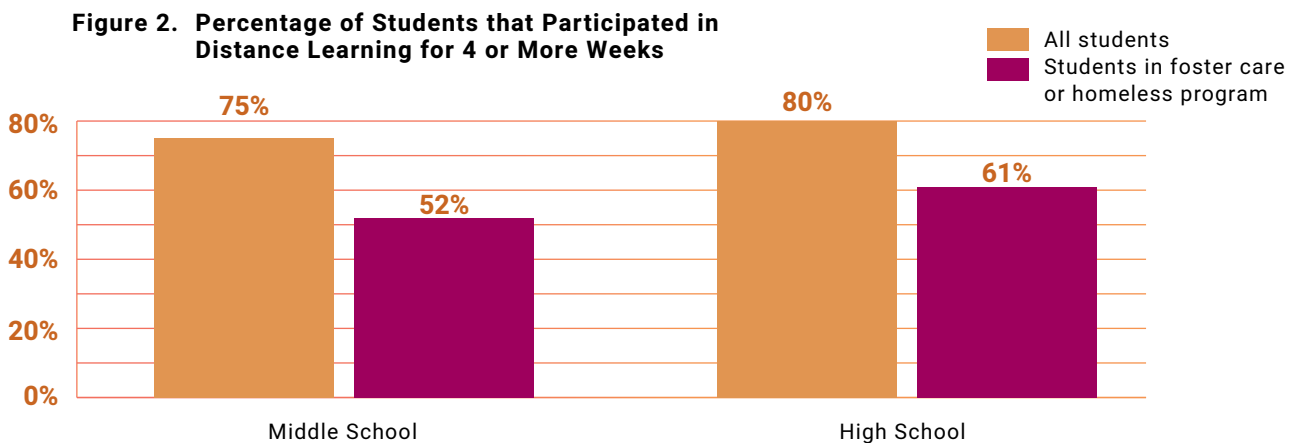
Due to the distinct barriers they faced before and during the pandemic, students in foster care were less engaged in online instruction during spring school closures than their peers. Targeted supports and services must be put into place to prevent the educational outcomes of youth in foster care from dropping even further as distance learning continues during the current school year.

Recommendations for Immediate Steps to Ensure Foster Youth Are Engaged and Ready to Learn

As the current school year gets underway, students in foster care need critical supports and services more than ever to help them recover from learning loss, heal from the additional trauma caused by the pandemic, and prevent further loss. Below, we provide recommendations of immediate steps that stakeholders should take in three key areas to ensure that foster youth are engaged and ready to learn during the pandemic and beyond.

Recommendation 1: Ensure students in foster care have the technology and connectivity they need to fully engage in distance learning

Devices and Connectivity: For the 2020-21 school year, most local educational agencies (LEAs), including school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education, will provide instruction to students in a distance learning format all or part of the time. Yet foster youth often lack reliable access to devices and internet connection. As shown in Figure 3, a recent survey conducted by the Alliance for Children's Rights revealed that only half of caregivers reported that each child in their care had received their own device to participate in distance learning. The other half of caregivers faced challenges when multiple children needed to access online instruction at the same time. While most caregivers (87 percent) reported having high-speed internet access in their homes, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) reported experiencing connectivity issues once a week or more during distance learning, including one-quarter (23 percent) who experienced connectivity issues multiple times a day.[6]

Figure 3. Caregivers Reported Barriers to Distance Learning for the Youth in Their Care

Each youth did not receive their own device — **50%**

Youth experienced internet connectivity issues at least once a week — **62%**
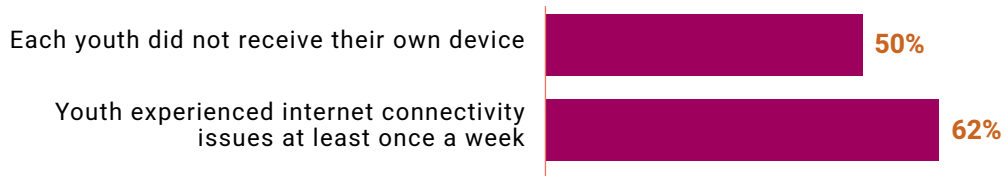
To fully engage in online learning, students in foster care need immediate access to technology, including laptops and internet connectivity. These students and their caregivers also need training (including in their first language) to navigate the technology and online platforms. Access to technology also allows foster youth to stay virtually connected to family and friends they are unable to physically visit during the pandemic, helping to lessen the isolation they often feel.

Policymakers should increase funding for technology and connectivity so that foster youth have the resources they need to participate in online learning. LEAs should prioritize cross-systems outreach and coordination to determine whether the needed resources will be provided through the LEA or child welfare system. LEAs, County Office of Education Foster Youth Service Coordinating Programs (FYSCPs), and county child welfare agencies should collaborate to ensure foster youth receive priority access to laptops and internet hotspots. Each student in foster care should receive their own device, rather than sharing one device per household. In particular, youth living in congregate care settings or homes with multiple youth may need additional wireless hotspots or access to high-speed internet to provide greater internet connectivity and ensure that all youth in the home or facility can easily access online instruction. Additionally, some students in foster care, including those with disabilities, may need additional devices, software, or equipment to facilitate their learning, such as text-to-speech software or a larger computer monitor to connect to their laptop. Others, particularly those in congregate care settings, may benefit from noise-cancelling headphones to help reduce distractions in the home.

Liability for Technology: As state and local entities work to provide needed distance-learning supports to students, the many challenges faced by foster youth need to be taken into account. Threats of fines or fees can impede access to resources and thus are already waived for foster youth in other areas of education policy. Students in foster care should receive devices and internet hotspots as gifts, rather than as loans, so they are not obligated to return the technology if they transfer schools. In addition, foster youth and their caregivers should not be held liable to pay for devices if they are damaged, stolen or lost—just as Education Code Section 49014 relieves students in foster care from responsibility for fines or fees related to textbooks or educational materials that are damaged, lost or stolen. Instead, child welfare agencies should sign any waivers required by school districts, as child welfare is ultimately responsible for students in foster care.

Recommendation 2: Provide students in foster care with the supports to mitigate learning loss and help them succeed academically

Student Engagement: Prior to the pandemic, students in foster care were already less engaged in school than their peers, as shown by their high rates of chronic absence. A recent national student survey found that more than two-thirds of students overall did not feel connected to their school (69 percent) and did not feel like part of their school community (70 percent)[7] during distance learning. Unfortunately, foster youth who already felt disconnected from their schools prior to the pandemic may be even more likely than students overall to be further disengaged in a distance learning environment. At the same time, for other foster youth who found school to be a stabilizing factor in their otherwise unstable lives, losing access to teachers and campus resources may weaken their connections to school.

As students in foster care return to school with additional trauma and amidst ongoing uncertainty, teachers and other school staff must provide trauma-sensitive responses in order to keep foster youth connected and engaged with education. As most schools have reopened in a distance learning format, LEAs must prioritize supporting frequent connections with students in foster care. For example, LEAs should ensure that their attendance tracking systems for online instruction flag students in foster care and develop a plan for prioritizing the re-engagement of foster youth. District foster youth liaisons and county FYSCPs should collaborate to timely and regularly check in with foster youth—virtually, by phone, or in-person—to address any barriers to online instruction, encourage their engagement in school, and connect them with needed supports from both within and outside of the educational system.

Academic Supports: Many students in foster care already are performing far below grade level in English and math. In order to mitigate learning loss among foster youth, LEAs should provide quality tutoring, mentoring and counseling services to all students in foster care who need them. The services should be targeted and flexible to meet the unique needs of each individual child or youth. Foster youth must be able to easily access the support of teachers and tutors to receive academic support during distance learning.

Because foster youth are at disproportionate risk of falling further behind this school year, LEAs should prioritize in-person instruction or supports for students in foster care, especially those with disabilities, whenever it is possible to do so safely. For example, during periods of distance learning, some districts plan to provide "student support hubs," which will offer optional on-campus supports for students in foster care and other vulnerable students. Supports will include access to teachers and tutoring, help navigating technology for youth and caregivers to increase their comfort with distance learning, and access to food and health resources.[8] However, LEAs implementing support hubs should also offer alternative individualized supports for foster youth and caregivers who are not comfortable participating in in-person supports due to health concerns.

Mental Health Supports: Although all youth are facing challenges during the pandemic, students in foster care, who have already experienced abuse or neglect and the effects of trauma that make it difficult to focus, are disproportionately impacted by these obstacles. Research has found that half of all children and youth in foster care have endured four or more adverse childhood experiences[9] and they are up to six times more likely than their peers to experience mental health challenges.[10] They are now at even greater risk as they struggle with the severe stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The added isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety they are enduring, as well as disruptions to normal routines, visitation with family, and access to critical supports, are devastating to the well-being of children and youth in foster care. These stressors can make it difficult for foster youth to focus, thereby impairing their learning.
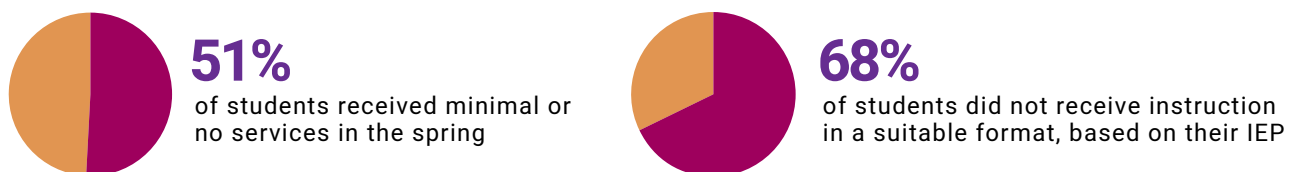
In fact, a recent study of THP-NMD providers, some of whom served K-12 youth, found that the pandemic is having a negative impact on the mental health of youth in foster care, as most providers reported serving youth that experienced depression, anxiety, or another mental health condition as a result of the pandemic.[11]

In coordination with child welfare agencies, LEAs should screen all students in foster care for trauma and to assess barriers to their engagement. LEAs should also collaborate with child welfare agencies to ensure foster youth have regular, coordinated access to mental health and other wellness supports and services, including telehealth visits, to help address their trauma and help maintain stability in their school and home placements.

School Stability: Students in foster care have the right to stay in their school of origin after they change placements, unless their educational rights holder decides it is in their best interest to transfer schools. Distance learning allows for foster youth to remain in their school of origin while participating in online instruction, even when their new placement is a considerable distance from their school of origin. However, some foster youth still transferred schools during distance learning in the spring because students or caregivers were not aware of foster youth's right to continue attending their school of origin. Students who transfer schools during distance learning may have to learn a new online instruction format at their new school. They will also likely struggle to build relationships with peers and teachers since distance learning methods are isolating, creating an additional barrier to learning and school engagement. LEAs should develop or update policies around foster youth's school-of-origin rights to reflect the distance learning context. Additionally, they should regularly train all staff responsible for enrolling or disenrolling students on the importance of maintaining foster youth's school stability and processes to support foster youth in remaining at their school of origin, including during distance learning.

Students with Disabilities: Up to half of foster youth nationally have disabilities and need special education or related supports to help them learn, due in part to the trauma they have experienced.[12] Yet during the pandemic-related school closures, many students with disabilities did not receive the supports they needed to engage in distance learning. For example, as shown in Figure 4, a recent survey of parents of LAUSD students with disabilities found that more than half (51 percent) of special education students received minimal or no services in the spring. More than two-thirds (68 percent) did not receive instruction in a suitable format, based on the needs identified in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).[13] Further, foster youth who needed but had not yet received an assessment before the pandemic and those who developed a disability or had an existing disability exacerbated during the pandemic receive a timely special education assessment to determine what services are appropriate to meet their needs, due to the special education waivers found in SB 117. Policymakers recently repealed these timeline waivers. Therefore, LEAs should ensure that students with disabilities timely receive the special education assessments and services they need.[14]

Figure 4. Parents of LAUSD Students with Disabilities Reported Challenges to Spring Distance Learning

51% of students received minimal or no services in the spring

68% of students did not receive instruction in a suitable format, based on their IEP

During periods of distance learning, LEAs must, by state and federal law, provide the services and supports required in the IEPs of students with disabilities to address their needs with adaptations appropriate for a distance learning format. In addition, for all foster youth with IEPs, their IEP teams must evaluate whether they need additional supports to be able to fully engage in a distance learning format.

Further, LEAs must develop, consistent with the available protocols about online administration, valid and reliable ways to provide special education assessments for students during distance learning so that students with disabilities can access the additional educational supports they need to succeed in school.

Recommendation 3: Support caregivers so they can help foster youth thrive

Caregivers play an important role in supporting youth in foster care with their education. As shown in Figure 5, in a recent survey by the Alliance for Children's Rights, 39 percent of caregivers reported that they are not comfortable providing academic support to the youth in their care during distance learning. In addition, 42 percent of caregivers reported that they are not comfortable supporting youth in their care with technology needs.[15] During the pandemic, caregivers are expected to serve as educators and supervise online learning for the youth in their care while, for many, also working full-time jobs. Some caregivers have multiple children in their care who are different ages and attend different school districts, creating a daunting task of coordination and supervision. Many relative caregivers are of advanced age, unskilled with technology, and/or speak a primary language other than English.

Figure 5. Caregivers Reported Barriers to Supporting Youth in Their Care During Distance Learning

Caregivers are not comfortable supporting youth's academic needs — 39%

Caregivers are not comfortable supporting youth's technology needs — 42%
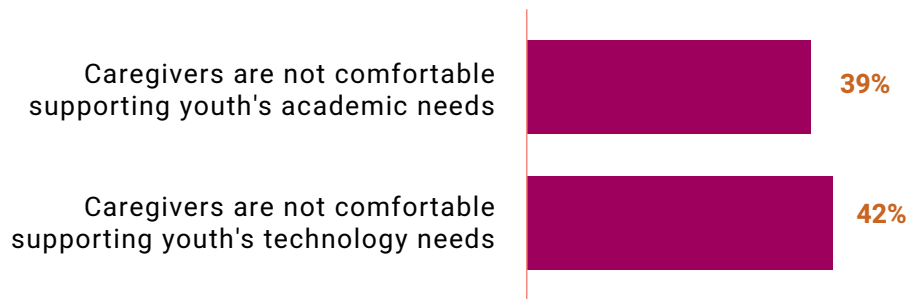
Child welfare agencies should expand training of resource family parents and providers to provide guidance on how to support student learning, particularly in a distance learning format. In addition, child welfare agencies should provide additional supports to caregivers and providers during this time, including help to access child care for students so caregivers can continue to work or by providing learning support stipends to caregivers who have lost work or had their hours cut because they need to be home with the youth in their care to support distance learning.

LEAs can support caregivers by providing consistent communication about expectations and ongoing training and support for online instruction. Additionally, LEAs should ensure that caregivers know whom to contact if the students in their care experience obstacles with technology or need additional supports like tutoring. District foster youth liaisons and county FYSCP programs should work together to reach out to caregivers and providers to ensure they understand how to support foster youth with distance learning. As noted above, some districts plan to create "student support hubs" for vulnerable youth, including access to tutoring. These hubs could provide dedicated time and space for students in foster care to access tutoring and other supports, while being supervised by teachers and school staff, thereby providing occasional respite for caregivers.

Conclusion

For students in foster care, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new barriers while, at the same time, exacerbating the challenges they faced before the pandemic. As a result, foster youth are at disproportionate risk of falling further behind in school. Now more than ever, students in foster care must receive targeted supports and services to help them stay connected to school and overcome learning loss so they can thrive in school and be prepared for college and career.

Credits and Acknowledgments

Children Now is on a mission to build power for kids. The organization conducts non-partisan research, policy development, and advocacy reflecting a whole-child approach to improving the lives of kids, especially kids of color and kids living in poverty, from prenatal through age 26.

Learn more at www.childrennow.org.

Endnotes

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Note: The sample consists of 206,050 total middle school and high school students, including 7,360 students who were in foster care or homeless.

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