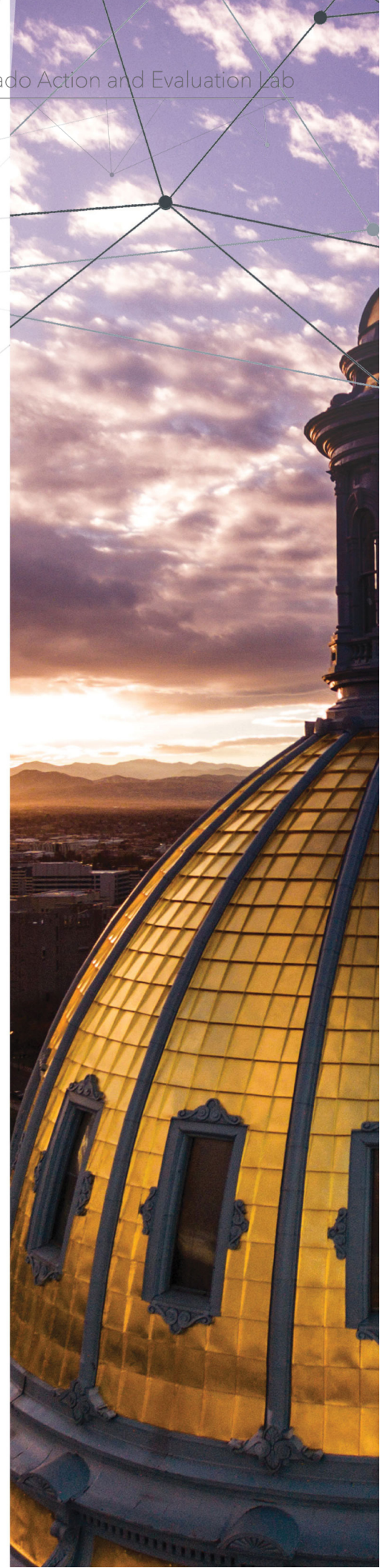




UNIVERSITY of  
**DENVER**

COLORADO EVALUATION  
AND ACTION LAB



# Educational Success of Colorado Students in Foster Care

What We Have Learned and  
Future Directions for  
Actionable Research

## Report Highlights:

*Provides a summary of the results to date of the ongoing Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care.*

*Outlines a multi-year actionable research agenda through a child welfare lens.*

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## Abstract

This report summarizes the results to date of the ongoing Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care. The Colorado Study is a longitudinal study of educational outcomes of students in foster care and factors that affect these outcomes, which is intended to inform systems-level reform. The research is conducted in partnership with the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Department of Human Services using state administrative data from 2007-08 to the present. The report concludes with outlining a multi-year actionable research agenda through a child welfare lens.

## Acknowledgements

The Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care is a partnership between Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Human Services, the University of Northern Colorado, and Mile High United Way that has recently expanded to include the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab. Comprehensive findings from the Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care can be found at [www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/](http://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/)

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## Introduction and Purpose of the Report

The Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care is an ongoing researcher-practitioner partnership that has, so far, generated a 10-year description of how students in foster care have fared in the Colorado public education system (from 2007-2008 to 2016-2017) and identified levers and opportunities for policy and practice improvements.

Because the Colorado Study has generated a significant number of research studies focused on a variety of factors related educational outcomes for foster care youth, the primary purpose of this report is to succinctly summarize the findings to date. With this information in hand, the secondary purpose of this report is to outline the possible next steps for this project and to propose a menu of potential research activities that have a child welfare lens and focus.

Overall, the Colorado Study's results to date demonstrate the detrimental relationship among placement changes, school moves, and academic success for students in foster care. The results have directly informed educational stability policy and practice solutions, including the newly enacted Colorado HB 18-1306, *Improving Educational Stability for Foster Youth*.

The primary outcomes of all Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care analyses have been defined in the ways that education systems measure their success (e.g., graduation rates). The approach was tailored to the education accountability system. This is because the research conducted through 2014 was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences.

*The **Key Findings** section of this report synthesizes what has been learned to date about the educational outcomes for Colorado students in foster care.*

*The **Test the Hypotheses** section of this report outlines a multi-year actionable research agenda designed to inform advancements in child welfare practice and investments.*

In order for child welfare agencies to invest in additional solutions, more information is needed on if and how educational success relates to the outcomes for which child welfare agencies are accountable. This includes preventing children from entering foster care.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this report, connections are made to the collaborative child welfare and education accomplishments that target improving educational stability. Colorado is a national leader in policy and practice in this area.



## Key Findings

### Every transition counts, and placement changes count the most.

Placement changes have an even greater negative effect on academic growth than school moves. This is compounded when placement changes trigger a school move. Simultaneously adjusting to new caregivers and schools sets students behind and increases the risk of dropping out.

*“Stability is the biggest issue, because that’s your main issue in life and that’s the biggest [thing] that you desire. And school is like the most normal it gets for stability...”*

- Foster Care Youth Participant, *The Voices of Youth Formerly in Foster Care: Perspectives on Educational Attainment Gaps*<sup>2</sup>

- For each placement change, the risk of dropout increases by 14.1%.<sup>3</sup> Each placement change is associated with a 2.5% reduction in academic growth in reading.<sup>4</sup>
- For each combined school and placement change, the risk of dropout increases by 16.8%.<sup>3</sup> Each combined school and placement change is associated with a 3.7% reduction in academic growth in reading.<sup>4</sup>
- Colorado Department of Human Services has reported that placement instability for children in care in Colorado increased slightly from 2014 to 2018, from 3.5 to 4.1 (defined as placement moves per 1000 days of out-of-home care for children entering care in the last 12 months).<sup>5</sup>
- Students in foster care for six months or longer changed schools 43% of the time that they entered care or changed placements.<sup>6</sup>
- Students in foster care for less than six months changed schools 23% of the time that they entered care or changed placements.<sup>6</sup>
- In the 2013-14 academic year, 42.8% of students who experienced an out-of-home placement also entered or exited an educational environment for reasons other than grade promotion.<sup>7</sup>

### School mobility has recently decreased, but there is more work to do.

The average number of school changes among students in foster care during high school has steadily decreased from 3.2 to 2.9 between 2014 and 2017.<sup>8</sup>

- The reason for the decrease in school mobility is unknown. For example, it could be a result of changes in policies and practices to keep youth in their schools-of-origin. It could also be because during this same time frame, students who dropped out tended to do so in earlier grades; if they were not in school, they would not have changed schools.<sup>8</sup>
- School moves happen before, during, and after foster care, but two out of three school moves are associated with a change in foster care placement. This is for students in K-12, not just in high school.<sup>6</sup>
- The most mobile 10% of students experienced six or more school moves during high school.<sup>8</sup>
- For each school change, the risk of dropout increases by 10.1%.<sup>3</sup>
- Each school move occurring without a placement change is associated with a 1.2% reduction in academic growth in reading and a 1.8% reduction in academic growth in math.<sup>4</sup>
- Minority students of both genders, and especially Black students, are more likely to experience frequent school changes than White students in foster care.<sup>9</sup>



*Stability for Foster Youth*<sup>10</sup>, provides funding for transportation to keep students in their schools-of-origin, when in their best interest or at least until the end of the academic term they are in foster care. HB 18-1306 also allows school districts to be flexible with prerequisites and graduation requirements for students with out-of-home placements during high school.

Prior to HB 18-1306, Colorado Department of Education and Colorado Department of Human Services spearheaded important practice changes to improve educational stability. In 2012, Colorado Department of Education launched the Foster Care

Education Program to help students in foster care excel academically, complete courses, advance to the next grade, and continue on a path to postsecondary success.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Colorado Department of Human Services led revisions to the Colorado Children's Code, which provides important details about how and when to determine if it is a child's best interest to remain in their school or return to a recently attended school. Together, the Colorado Departments of Education and Human Services have provided training and technical assistance to help counties develop MOUs and procedures for implementing best interest determinations and transportation plans to keep youth in their schools-of-origin when it is in their best interest.

## **Students who enter high school behind are more likely to dropout.**

**Most students in foster care enter high school behind, especially in math. Students who were not on grade level in math or reading the prior year have a 58% and 81% increase in the risk of dropout, respectively.<sup>3</sup>**

- In 2014, only 13% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in foster care were at or above grade level in math. This is compared to 52% for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students overall.<sup>12</sup>
- Academic growth is a comparison of a student's test scores from one year to the next. On average, academic growth percentiles in reading, writing, and math are at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile for the general population but hover around the 43<sup>rd</sup> percentile for students who experienced foster care at any point during 3<sup>rd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the grades when Colorado students take state tests.<sup>4</sup>
- At the 43<sup>rd</sup> percentile, the academic growth of students in foster care is below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile necessary for students to maintain one full year's progress in a year's time.<sup>4</sup> Thus, on average, students in foster care

*“You're going from school to school, you're finding new social people. It causes you to not care about school. I might care about school. I ain't here to learn, I'm here to make new friends. I mean, I'm not going to be here long enough to see what I can do, so I have fun as opposed to learn. I don't care to learn. I'm not even going to have the chance to learn. I'm going to be going to a different school, so who cares... Why should I care to graduate when you're not caring to keep me on a stable level so that I can get the education I need?”*

**- Foster Care Youth Participant, *The Voices of Youth Formerly in Foster Care: Perspectives on Educational Attainment Gaps*<sup>2</sup>**





start each school year below grade level and fall further behind year after year.<sup>4</sup>

- Across all three tested subject areas (reading, writing, and math), average academic growth is lowest prior to removal from the home.<sup>4</sup>

These findings suggest that substantial academic support is needed for all students at risk of entering foster care. Moreover, academic support is generally needed after foster care cases are closed. In planning academic supports, research has consistently demonstrated that it is faster and easier to catch students up in math than in reading and writing.<sup>13, 14, 15</sup>

### **More time in family-like settings is associated with students doing better in school.**

**For each month that a student is in a family-like foster care setting, the risk of dropout decreases by about 2.4%, assuming all other indicators remain constant (e.g., there are no additional school changes).<sup>3</sup>**

- For a full 12 months more of family-like foster care, the decrease in risk of dropout is 32.7%, compared to being either in congregate care or not in out-of-home care.<sup>3</sup>
- For every three months students were placed in family-like foster care settings, their academic growth percentile was 2.1 points better than those students who were at home or in congregate care.<sup>4</sup>

*“I had an incredible foster home and my foster parents cared that I was going to school... And I had a school counselor tell me that I could only go to community college, and my foster parent went down there and got in her face and was like you can't tell people that.”*

**- Foster Care Youth Participant,  
*The Voices of Youth Formerly in Foster Care: Perspectives on Educational Attainment Gaps*<sup>2</sup>**



## Test the Hypotheses: Multi-Year Research Agenda

Colorado has tapped into the expertise of state and local leaders, advocates, direct service providers, and youth to generate, refine, and prioritize potential solutions to remove systems-level barriers to academic success for students who experience foster care. The following hypotheses provide suggestions for next steps in this line of research.

*In 2015, the Colorado Department of Human Services appointed a 32-member educational outcomes steering committee. This committee guided the development of practice solutions to improve educational stability for youth who experience foster care and made recommendations for changes to the Colorado Children's Code. In 2017, the Governor's Cabinet launched a task force that informed the drafting of HB 18-1306, Improving Educational Stability for Foster Youth.*

### **H1: Investing in transportation and implementing newly enacted educational stability policies leads to permanency and/or better academic outcomes.**

Recent legislation provides a unique opportunity to learn about the impact of improved transportation and best interest determination processes on educational stability.

The implementation of HB 18-1306 is likely to roll out rapidly in some counties and gradually in others. Counties that make substantial changes to practice provide the state with the opportunity to evaluate the causal impacts of educational stability investments. The findings can be used to continuously improve the implementation of the educational stability policies and the distribution of transportation funding and can help to maintain the momentum for statewide implementation.

### **H2: Medicaid utilization at the county level is correlated with academic success.**

**The ABC's of success in school are attendance, behavior, and course completion. Health care is essential for regular school attendance. Mental health and trauma-informed care can improve school behavior. Together, these services can help students complete their courses.**

Although youth in foster care represent only 3% of all children receiving Medicaid in the U.S., they account for 15% of those receiving Medicaid behavioral health services.<sup>18</sup> However, a more comprehensive understanding of patterns of Medicaid usage among youth in foster care is necessary to inform human services allocations to better meet the needs of these youths.<sup>19</sup>



Specifically, further investigation is needed to determine the relationship between Medicaid utilization and academic success. If there is a positive correlation between Medicaid utilization and academic success, then one next step could be to map Medicaid use among youth in foster care by geographic region to identify areas where Medicaid resources are underutilized relative to other areas. In doing so, technical assistance and resources can be directed as appropriate toward enrolling youth in Medicaid and addressing barriers to accessing services.

A negative correlation between Medicaid utilization and academic success among youth in foster care would suggest that high utilizers of physical and mental health services also struggle in school. There is a growing body of literature on best practices for supporting the educational needs of youth with chronic illnesses and supporting re-entry to school post-hospitalization.<sup>16, 17</sup> However, this research is not typically tailored to the unique experience of youth who are currently in foster care or involved in the child welfare system.

### **H3: The labor market returns on education investments by age 25 for students previously in foster care are larger than for the general population.**

**Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative estimated that, on average, young people would earn \$8,500 more per year with a high school credential.<sup>26</sup> That estimate is based on studies of national data for the general population of 18-year-olds, not just former foster youth. If, in fact, the labor market outcomes are even greater for students previously in foster care than for the general population, then it may be cost effective to invest substantially more in coordinated services targeted toward this subpopulation to increase the chances of educational and career success.**

Colorado has a growing number of pilot programs aimed at supporting the educational success of students currently and formerly in foster care. HB 18-1306 included the creation of a grant program starting with the 2019-20 fiscal year intended to allocate grants to education providers targeting educational services and supports to highly mobile students. Understanding the return on such investments can inform future resource allocation decisions around sustaining and expanding promising pilots.

### **H4: Earning a high school or postsecondary credential is a 2Gen strategy to break the cycle of child welfare system involvement.**

**Educational success is expected to have long-term positive social and economic effects, especially for the children of youth formerly in foster care.**

CDHS is encouraging a two-generation or 2Gen approach across Colorado agencies, programs, and services. A 2Gen approach is, “A mindset for designing programs and policies that serve children and parents simultaneously. For example, an adult education program designed to also provide quality care for young children.”<sup>24</sup> In the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of





Former Foster Youth, more than half of women formerly in foster care had at least one child by the age of 21 and approximately 7% of those children were currently in foster care or with adoptive parents.<sup>25</sup> Improving educational outcomes for current and former foster youth who are now parents themselves may put the entire family on a path to permanent economic security. There could be long-lasting, positive impacts on their current and future children. A longitudinal study would be able to examine these outcomes more closely.

### **H5: Students who are successful in school are less likely to change placements or re-enter foster care.**

**Every time a child changes placements, they get further behind in school. It is possible that getting further behind in school fuels behaviors that reduce residential placement stability, resulting in a negative cycle.**

Placement changes have been described as the single greatest threat to a child's wellbeing,<sup>22, 23</sup> and they tax limited child welfare resources.<sup>20, 21</sup> Thus, a goal of the state has been to reduce placement changes.

Much of the research to date explaining instability in foster care is focused on child welfare related factors (e.g., behavioral health and supports,<sup>27</sup> foster parent training,<sup>28</sup> etc.). One recent study of 122 youth found no significant relationship between changing schools and adjustment to a new foster care placement, but more research is needed with larger samples to determine if there is a connection between educational success and placement stability.<sup>29</sup>

The Colorado Study line of research could be extended to better understand if there is a negative, cyclical effect, and foster care students who are successful in school are less likely to change placements or re-enter foster care. Further examining the relationship between placement changes and educational outcomes may inform investments in educational, mental health, and other supportive services when youth enter a new placement, are reunified with family, or adopted.

## **Implications for Data Sharing**

Linking data across siloed systems can create a more comprehensive description of a population and provide greater insight into opportunities to improve service delivery or policies than examining data from agencies separately. Colorado is a national leader developing practice and policy solutions aimed at improving educational outcomes for youth in foster care because state agency child welfare and education data are shared for the purposes of research and analytics. The multi-year research agenda presented above was designed to leverage existing data sharing agreements and elucidate how expanding data sharing can lead to actionable information.



The first hypothesis (H1) regarding the impact of recent transportation and educational stability policies could be explored by relying heavily on the existing K-12 education and child welfare data sharing agreements and also collecting additional data on Best Interest Determination processes and/or transportation expenditures.

The second hypothesis (H2) about Medicaid utilization and academic success could be explored through expanding data sharing between CDHS and Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF) and overlaying the Medicaid data HCPF collects with aggregate education data.

The third and fourth hypotheses (H3 and H4) regarding labor market returns and breaking the familial cycle of child welfare involvement would require implementing the reciprocal aspect of the CDE-CDHS data sharing agreement to define the sample of youth and then utilizing a state integrated data system.

*“State integrated data system” refers to the infrastructure and governance for cross-agency data sharing that the state and the Colorado Lab are currently working to develop in support of research and analytics.*

Reciprocal data sharing in this context means that CDE would provide student-level information to CDHS on the educational attainment of youth who have experienced foster care. Although the data sharing agreements currently in place allow for this reciprocal sharing, this aspect has not been utilized yet. Data sharing to date has been one-directional, with CDHS sharing information with CDE to create linkages for educational research and accountability purposes.

The fifth hypothesis (H5) examining the potential relationship between academic success and placement stability could best be answered by establishing a research partnership between the state or local child welfare agencies and one or multiple school districts to conduct these studies. District-level data, such as grades and academic growth, which are collected throughout the school year, may offer more information, since entry into foster care, placement changes, and re-entry happen throughout the year.

## Conclusion

The initial work of the Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care dovetailed with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) and informed complementary state-level legislation, HB 18-1306, which focused on educational stability for students in foster care. The state of Colorado is truly leading the way towards ensuring educational stability for foster care students through changes in state policy, child welfare rule, technical assistance to districts, and funding for transportation. Colorado is well positioned to begin planning for a causal evaluation of the effects of these educational stability efforts.



The recent passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act shifts the focus towards supportive services that help to prevent children from entering foster care in the first place. Findings from the Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care also indicate the need to focus on educational success for youth at-risk of entering foster care. In addition to testing the hypotheses outlined in the above section, the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab looks forward to partnering with state and local agencies to identify further opportunities to examine educational outcomes in the context of the current child welfare prevention focus.

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## Key Definitions

**Academic Achievement:** Academic achievement data are Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) or Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) end-of-year test results, which were administered through 2014. Data reported are for students who took a given assessment in the same year they were in foster care

**Academic Growth:** Academic growth is the subject-specific comparison of a student's achievement test score (e.g., math test score) compared to the previous year's test score.

**Age at First Removal:** The age of the youth when he/she was removed from the home for the first time.



**Dropout:** A student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completion of a high school diploma or its equivalent and who does not transfer to another public or private school or enroll in an approved home study program.

**Four-year Completion:** Earning a high school diploma or equivalency (e.g., GED) within four years of completing 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

**On-time Graduation:** Earning a high school diploma within four years of completing 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This does not include earning a GED or other certificate of completion.

**Placement Changes:** Placement changes are defined as an initial child welfare placement or subsequent child welfare placements that are counted as a change in placement, including to family-like, congregate care, or other settings.

**School Changes:** A count of the number of times a student enters a new or previously attended school after initially enrolling for the school year. School changes include entries into traditional public schools and juvenile detention centers in the same year as an out-of-home placement. High school cohort analyses begin the count at the initial entry into 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

**School Mobility:** A broad term encompassing all entries and exits into a school or district that are not part of a typical or normal academic progression. In the Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care, the term school mobility is typically used as an overarching construct and narrower terms, such as *school changes* or *school transfers*, are applied to analytic strategies.

**Students in Foster Care:** Children and youth who experience an out-of-home placement and are enrolled in a Colorado public school during the same state fiscal year. Out-of-home placements include congregate care settings such as group homes, residential childcare, detention and youth corrections, and psychiatric facilities, as well as family-like settings such as foster care, certified and non-certified kinship, and even youths in independent living arrangements. The out-of-home placement could be brief (e.g., a few days) or cross multiple years.

**Time in Care:** The total amount of time that a youth has spent in out-of-home placements.