Insight into the 2017 Drop in Foster Care Graduation Rates

An examination of trends in dropout events, academic proficiency, school mobility, and child welfare placement changes for the foster care classes of 2014 to 2017

Report Highlights:

Trends in annual dropout rates are a good leading indicator of 4-year graduation rates for the foster care population.

Academic proficiency levels and mobility rates are good indicators of an individual student's risk of not graduating with his or her class, but aggregate data for the population may not provide accurate indicators of a cohort's graduation rate.

Targeting dropout prevention efforts earlier, in middle school, appears critical to support foster care students towards graduating from high school.

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Abstract

The 4-year graduation rate for Colorado students in foster care decreased substantially from the 2015-2016 school year to the 2016-2017 school year, from 33.2% to 23.6%. This study examines trends in state-level child welfare and education data to uncover possible explanations for this decline. Students in the 2017 foster care cohort tended to drop out of school earlier in high school than previous cohorts of foster youth. Because of this trend, proportionally fewer youth in the foster care cohorts participated in the state end of year academic testing and, as such, proficiency levels may be misleading indicators of foster care cohort graduation rates. The results also show that school mobility decreased, but similarly, if students are not enrolled in school, then they cannot change schools. The findings of this study suggest that dropout rates, an educational indicator routinely collected at the state level, are the best available indicator of 4-year graduation rates.

Acknowledgements

Data Sources

Out-of-home placement data are from the Colorado Trails Child Welfare application. Educational data are from the Colorado Department of Education's Data Services Office. The reporting of graduation rates for students in foster care was made possible through a data use agreement between the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Department of Human Services with the University of Northern Colorado.

Suggested Citation

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Introduction

For almost a decade, approximately one in three students in foster care graduated with their class.[1,2] In 2017 that changed, and only one in four students graduated with their class.[1,2] This drop in the foster care student graduation rate was unexpected given the increased focus on improving educational outcomes for youth in foster care in recent years. This drop was also unexpected given that graduation rates for the state of Colorado as a whole have steadily risen.[1,2]

The decline in the foster care student graduation rate motivated a retrospective analysis of trends in education and child welfare indicators to gain insight into opportunities to target interventions and close the high school graduation gap.

Figure 1. 4-Year High School Graduation Rates in Colorado.
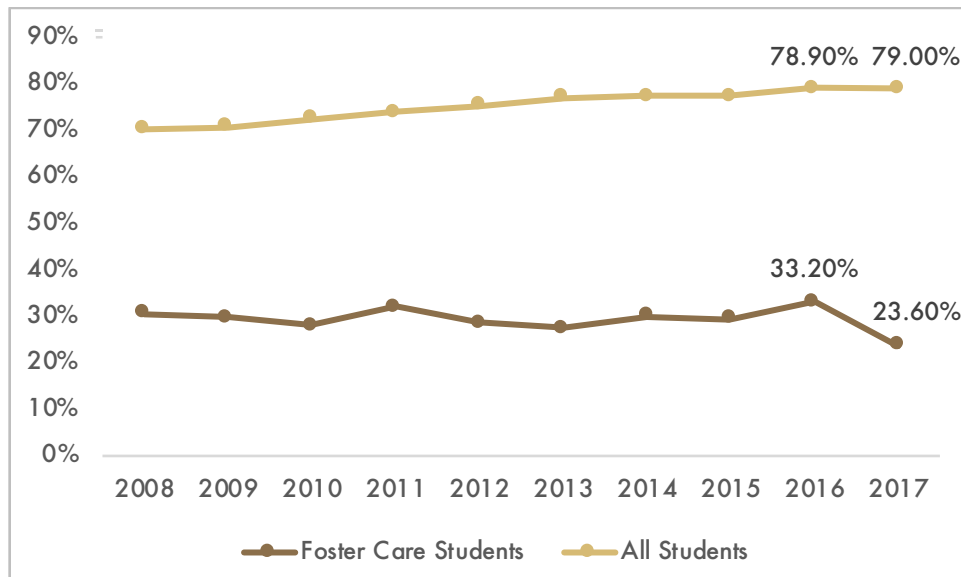
Note. Cohort sizes in Figure 1: 2008, n = 61,556; 2009, n = 62,106; 2010, n = 62,313; 2011, n = 62,039; 2012, n = 60,885; 2013, n = 60,777; 2014, n = 61,440; 2015, n = 61,790; 2016, n = 63,166; 2017, n = 64,140. Prior to the 2009-2010 school year, the state graduation calculation did not use the current "Anticipated Graduation Year" (AYG) graduation formula. For more information on the change in calculation rate to the AYG calculation, please see the Colorado Department of Education website.

Description of the Study: Guiding Research Questions

Research Question 1: What differences are there, if any, between the Class of 2017 and previous cohorts that may provide insight into the sudden drop in graduation rate?

Exploratory, descriptive analyses were used to gain insight into the 2017 drop in the foster care graduation rate. This study examined trends in dropout events, school moves, academic proficiency levels, and placement changes for the classes of 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Research Question 2: What routinely collected state education data are early indicators of a change in graduation rates for students in foster care?

The Colorado Department of Education includes annual dropout rates, school district mobility rates, high school graduation rates, and high school completion rates for students in foster care in its annual Dropout Prevention and Student Re-Engagement legislative report, linked here. These data points are available at the state and county levels. It is anticipated that academic proficiency data may also be routinely available at the state level with the implementation of the foster care provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which requires states to include students in foster care in their state report cards.

Definition of Foster Care 4-Year Graduation Rates:

When students initially enter 9th grade, they become part of a cohort or "Class of ….".
If a student experiences foster care at any point after initially entering 9th grade, he
or she is included in the foster care graduation rates for that cohort.

In this report, the focus is on 4-year graduation rates (i.e., those students who
reached the milestone of earning a high school diploma within four years of initially
entering 9th grade).

Key Findings

The primary conclusion of this study is that changes in dropout patterns offer more insight into the sudden decline foster care graduation rates than trends in academic proficiency, placement changes, or school moves.

Although trends in the average rate of academic proficiency for 8th and 9th grade students in foster care remained stable, this finding is not necessarily accurate because testing participation rates dropped dramatically (skewing the results).

Similarly, although the average number of school moves occurring during high school decreased, this finding may be attributable to students dropping out instead of changing schools, improvements in educational stability practice, or a combination of both.

According to one of the most comprehensive, national studies of returning high school students, "Interventions are needed to enable [returning] students who have dropped out to accumulate credits lost due to course failures, to accelerate credit accrual to advance from one grade to the next, and to meet the course credit requirements for graduation. Without early interventions to assist [re-engaged students] in making up credit deficiencies, one [student] described that they can 'lose hope, give up, and drop out again.'"[3]

This study also illustrates that child welfare placement stability was consistent over time for this cohort of foster care students.

Although the exact reasons for the decline in the foster care graduation rate are not discernable, given the increase in dropout events earlier in high school, it is clear that focusing on dropout prevention and re-engagement is necessary.

The Proportion of Students Who Dropped Out At Least Once During High School Increased Over Time.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of students in each cohort who *ever* dropped out of high school. This is not the inverse of a graduation rate because some of these students re-engaged in high school.

Figure 2 also shows an increase in dropout events occurring in the same year that students were in foster care.

Approximately 35% of students in the foster care Class of 2014 dropped out of high school at least once. For the Class of 2016 and 2017, this number increased to nearly 39%. Students move in and out of foster care throughout their high school career, and there was an overall trend in

more of the dropout events occurring in the same school year that youth were in foster care (see Figure 2). For the Class or 2014, 20.3% of the students dropped out at least once during the same year that they were in foster care. For the Class of 2017, that number rose to 31.3%.

Why are these numbers different from the dropout rates that the Colorado Department of Education reports?

CDE reports an annual rate, reflecting the percentage of all students enrolled in grades 7-12 who leave school during a single school year without subsequently attending another school or educational program.[4]

This report is designed to capture what happens throughout the high school experience for the cohorts of youth that experience foster care.

Figure 2. Percentage of Students in the Foster Care Cohorts Who Dropped Out At Least Once During High School.
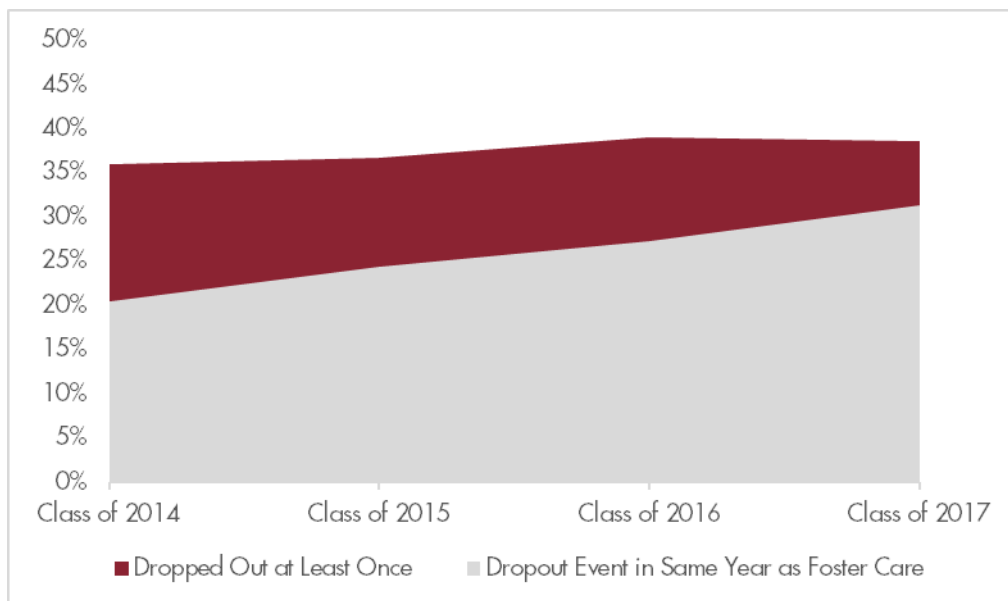
A closer look at the grade levels when dropout events occurred can inform future dropout prevention efforts.

It is not possible to say with precision if a dropout event occurred during a foster care placement, so it is reported more generally as, "during the same school year as a foster care placement." This is because many students "fade out," Colorado does not track at the state level the exact dates of dropout events, only the school year when students stop attending school.[4]

A qualitative study from the perspective of students defined the "fading out" process as follows: "Participants described a lack of motivation to go to school. They gradually disengaged. They described being unable to get out of bed in the morning. Truancy increased. Calls were not forthcoming from the schools to encourage them to return. They slipped out of their student roles. Eventually, they stopped going to school altogether."[5]

Dropout Events Early in High School Increased for Students in the Foster Care Cohorts AND Those Events Tended to Happen Before Students Entered Foster Care.

Figure 3: Across cohorts, the higher grades become lighter, while the earlier grades become darker. This indicates that, over time, dropouts tended to occur earlier in high school.

Figure 4: The trend lines below the heat map suggest that the increase in 9th grade dropouts happened in school years before students enter foster care for the first time during high school.

Dropout prevention efforts for youth who are at-risk of out-of-home placement are needed.

Figure 3. Heat Map of Dropout Events by Cohort and Grade Level.
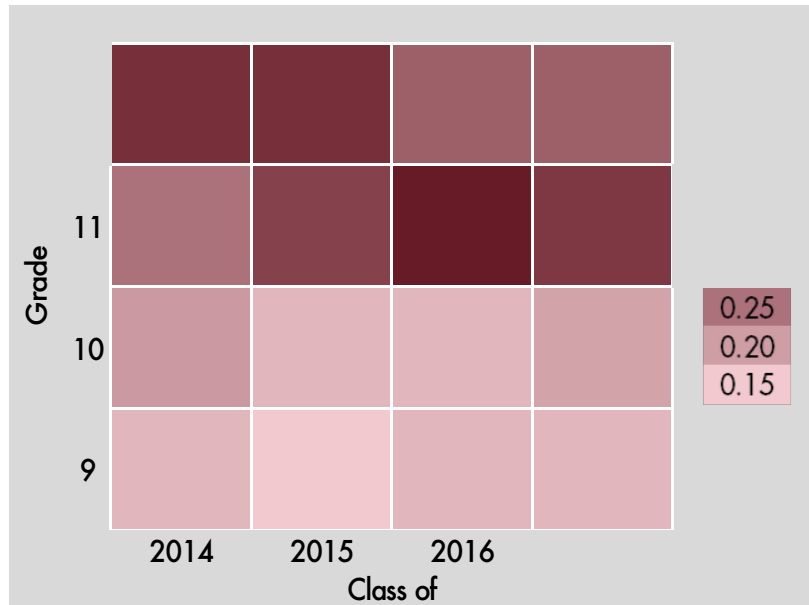
These cohort analyses include youth who were in foster care at any point during high school.

The plot on the next page below represents the percentage of dropouts that occurred during a year when the student was currently in foster care. It is a closer look at the red color in the heat map in Figure 3.

Figure 4. Trends in Foster Care Dropout Events by Grade Level.
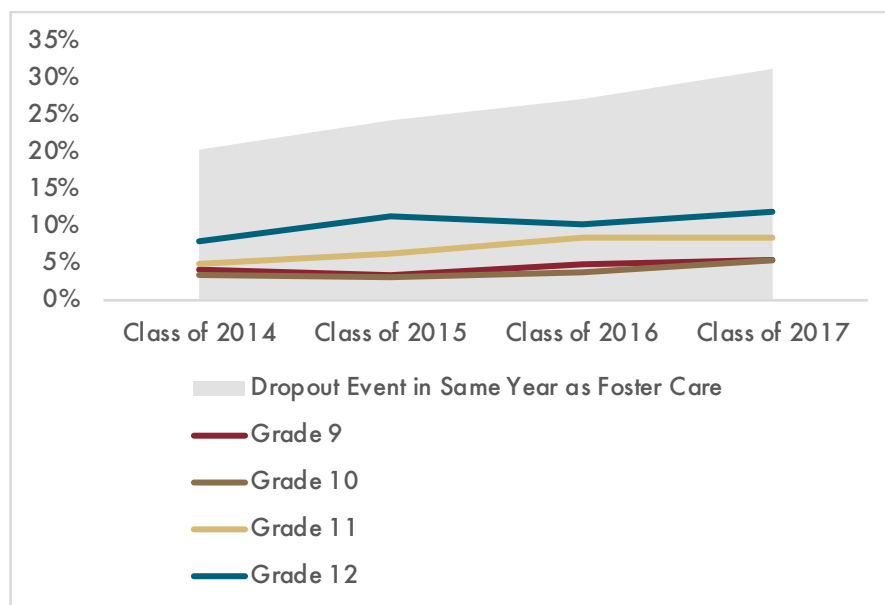
There was only a slight increase in the trend in dropout events among 9th graders who were in foster care while enrolled in that grade level (Figure 4), which when paired with the heat map (Figure 3), suggests that the majority of the increase in early dropout events happened before students ever experienced foster care placement during high school.

Dropout Events Later in High School (in 11th and 12th Grade) Tended to Happen in the Same School Years Students Were in Foster Care.

Proportionally, more of the students who dropped out in the same school year that they were in foster care were enrolled in 11th or 12th grade. Across the cohorts, the trend lines suggest this pattern increased (Figure 4). Prior research showed that Colorado foster care students enrolled in 11th and 12th grades, on average, were 16.5 and 17.5 years old[6], respectively, thus exceeding the age of compulsory attendance and approaching aging out of the foster care system. There is a clear need to support these students in continuing their high school education.

"They say, 'okay we want to get you ready.' But they start emancipating at 16. Right but then everybody drops out of school at that time. They don't realize how much it's affecting students that are younger. I understand **normal students** *have parents to go back to; they have people that love them or show them that they love, right?"*

- Foster Care Youth Participant, *Youth Perspectives on the Colorado Foster Care Education Data*[7]

TRENDS IN SCHOOL MOVES, ACADEMIC PROFICENCY LEVELS, AND PLACEMENT CHANGES

Average Number of School Moves During High School Decreased Steadily, but it is Unclear Why.

It is unclear from these findings if the reduction in school mobility during high school is a result of policy and practice improvements or simply because students are dropping out earlier in high school and therefore not changing schools as much.
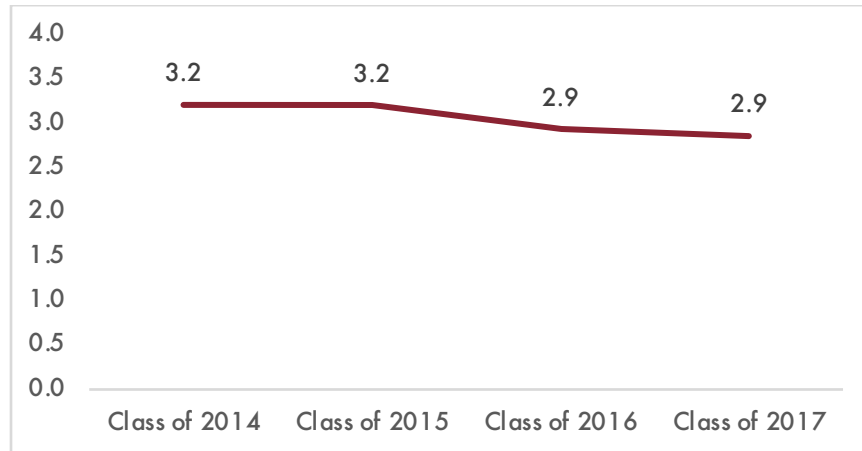
The reason for the decrease in the average number of school moves during high school is unknown. For example, it could be a result of changes in policies and practices to keep youths in their schools-of-origin. It could also be because during this same time frame, students who dropped out tended to do so in earlier grades; if they were not in school, then they would not have transferred to new schools. It is also possible that the decrease in the average number of school changes is a combination of early dropout events *and* policy and practice improvements.

Trends in Academic Proficiency were Stable for 8th and 9th Graders, but This May Be Misleading.

The percentage of our population who took math and reading exams dropped across all grades for the Class of 2017. The two plots below show a clear decrease in the proportion of each cohort who took the exams.

Looking back to the eighth and ninth grade academic proficiency levels for students in the Classes of 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017, the trend in math and reading proficiency is stable. Specifically, the percent of students showing proficiency in 8th grade math was 20.1%, 19.6%, 20.5%, and 21.0% across cohorts. In 9th grade math, 10.1%, 10.1%, 10.5%, and 10.4% of students were proficient across cohorts. In reading, the percent of 8th grade students showing proficiency was 40.8%, 37.7%, 39.0%, and 38.0% across cohorts. In 9th grade reading, 33.8%, 39.4%, 37.9%, and 35.3% of students were proficient across cohorts.

The stable aggregate proficiency levels of students in foster care may be misleading because the proportion of students in the foster care cohorts who took the tests decreased substantially. This decline in test participation cannot be attributed to the 2015 change in state testing and the increased opt-out rates associated with the transition to PARCC tests. Most students in the Class of 2017 would have been in 8th and 9th grade in 2013 and 2014, years when the TCAP test was administered. This is also is why 10th grade testing is not reported in the trend lines below; the

Figure 6. Percent of Students in the Foster Care Cohort Who Took the Math End of Year Assessment in 8th and 9th Grades.
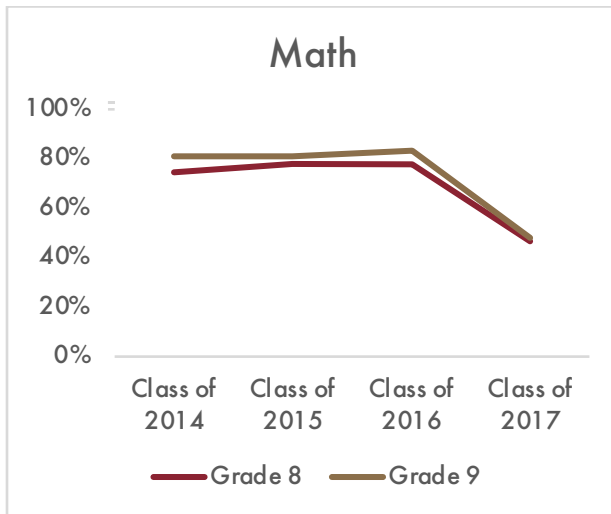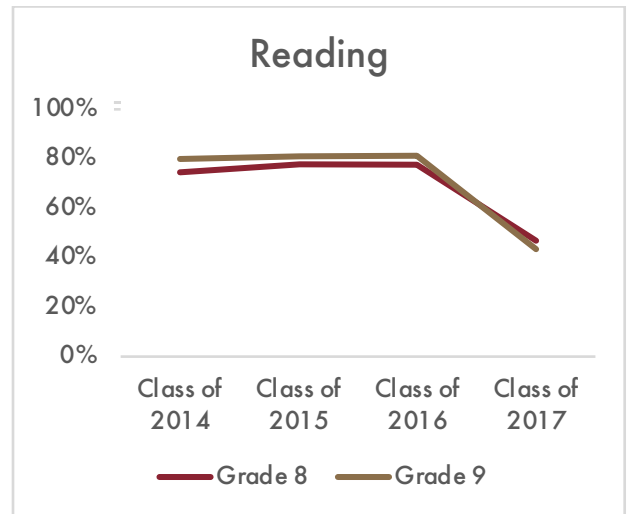
Figure 7. Percent of Students in the Foster Care Cohort Who Took the Reading End of Year Assessment in 8th and 9th Grades.

Thus, the finding that the average rate of academic proficiency for 8th and 9th grade students in foster care remained stable is not as meaningful for the Class of 2017 because, proportionally, more students did not participate in the test. The relatively low participation in end-of-year tests can be attributed in part to the increase in 9th grade dropouts. Students who drop out before the end of the school year typically do not take the end-of-grade tests.

Trends in Placement Changes were Stable, which Suggests an On-Going Need to Incorporate Educational Planning and Supports into Placement Transition Plans.

Students who experience foster care during high school typically experience three to four placements during their high school career.

The average number of placement changes during high school remained stable across cohorts.
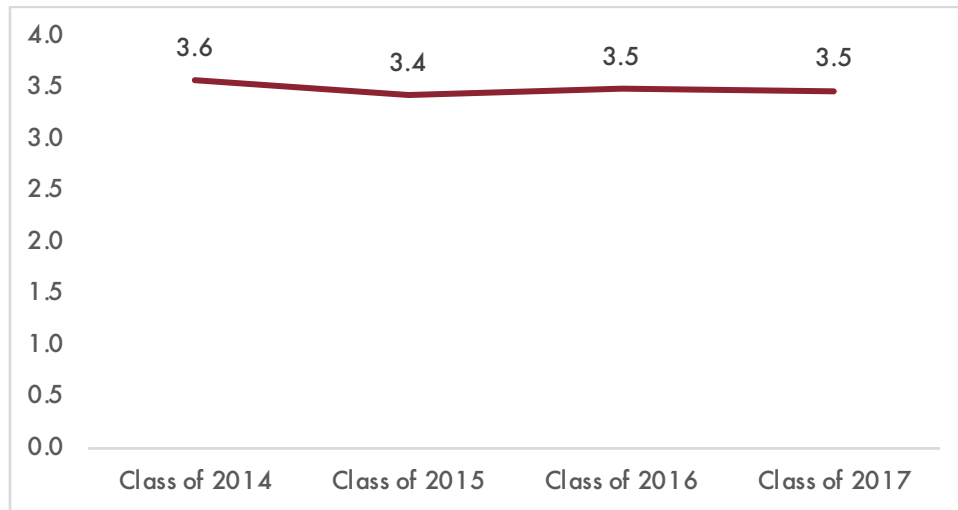
Although these placement-related findings do not offer insight into the sudden drop in the graduation rate, when paired with prior research, they do reinforce the importance of providing educational supports during residential transitions. For example, prior research has shown that placement changes have an even greater negative effect on academic growth than school moves; for each placement change, the risk of dropout increases by 14.1%.[6]

Do students typically attend fewer schools than the number of foster care placements?

No. The count of school moves (Figure 5) shows each time a student changes schools after initially entering 9th grade. The average number of school moves for the Class of 2017 was 3.2, which means that cohort of students attended 4.2 schools on average.

The number of schools attended, on average, is more than the average number of placement changes.

education data are early indicators of a change in graduation rates for students in foster care?

Trends in annual dropout rates are a good leading indicator of 4-year graduation rates for the foster care population.

Academic proficiency levels and mobility rates are good indicators of an individual student's risk of not graduating with his or her class, but aggregate data for the population may not provide accurate indicators of a cohort's graduation rate.

Previous findings suggest that academic proficiency in 8th and 9th grade, placement changes, and school moves are early warning indicators that **individual students** in foster care are likely to be off-track for graduation.[8,9,10] These early warning indicators are appropriate for identifying **individual students who are at risk for dropping out, but they are not sufficient for explaining graduation rate trends in entire classes of students.** Essentially, the individual indicators that can be used to identify specific students who are at risk of dropping out (e.g., academic proficiency, placement changes, etc.) are not as useful when averaged across a cohort for anticipating the future graduation rates of any given class.

This is because averages on indicators like academic proficiency or school moves only capture data from the youth who are still in school. Given that the trend for students in this foster care cohort was to drop out of school earlier in high school, complete academic proficiency data was not available because proportionally fewer students took the tests. Similarly, if students were not enrolled in school, then they could not change schools. The findings of this study suggest that the dropout rate is only educational indicator routinely reported by CDE that can anticipate changes in the 4-year graduation rate for students in foster care.

Despite these circumstances, the findings of this study can be clearly applied towards better supporting students in foster care.

Implications

In this section, the results of this study and prior Colorado research are connected to recommendations for how to close the educational attainment gap for students who experience foster care in Colorado.

Nationally and locally, there are promising dropout prevention models for students who experience foster care.

Caseworkers, guardians *ad litem*, court-appointed special advocates, and judicial officers play an important role in recognizing the need for educational supports for students at-risk for out-of-home placement.

HB 18-1306, *Improving Educational Stability for Foster Youth,* offers new protections and funding to reduce the number of school moves to only those in a child's best interest.

HB 18-1306 offers school districts the flexibility to waive specific courses required for graduation if similar course work has been satisfactorily completed in another jurisdiction or if the student has demonstrated competency in the content area, which can help students who have lost credits due to school mobility to graduate on-time. Other students will need support and stability until age 21 to develop the skills and accrue the credits to earn a high school credential.

Additional dedicated resources are needed to systematically support the educational success of youth who have experienced foster care and close the educational attainment gap.

First, the results of this study show that over time, students who have experienced foster care are tending to drop out of school earlier in high school (Figure 4). This suggests that academic supports should extend earlier into middle school so as to assist with the transition to high school in order to set these students up for success.

Nationally and locally there are promising dropout prevention models. A recent study of the Treehouse program *Graduation Success*,[11] which significantly raised graduation rates for foster youth in Seattle, also emphasized that academic supports need to start in middle school and extend through high school. The program utilizes educational specialists who work one-on-one with the same students from middle school through high school. One educational specialist described her role as, "We're a little bit of a teacher, a little bit of a mentor, a little bit of a parent, a little bit of a friend."[12]

A similar program to the Treehouse program called *Fostering Opportunities* launched on a small scale several years ago in JeffCo Public Schools. This approach is being expanded over the next

four years to serve up to 80 students at a time. School-based specialists will be assigned to students who have experienced foster care who are in grades 7 to 10. These specialists will meet with their students on a weekly basis and ensure that teachers, caseworkers, and caregivers have timely and reliable information about how to support the youth's academic success. The specialists stay connected with the students through planned and unplanned school moves. This mobile approach to dropout prevention and student engagement services is designed to increase attendance, ensure credit accumulation, reduce suspensions, and ultimately, improve graduation rates for students who have experienced foster care.

Second, the results show that the increase in early dropout events is happening before students ever experience a foster care placement during high school (Figure 3). Students who are at-risk for out-of-home placement, as indicated by an open child welfare case, should have access to these additional supports—not just students already in out-of-home care.

Child welfare caseworkers, guardians *ad litem*, court-appointed special advocates (CASAs), and judicial officers may be best positioned to recognize when students who are at-risk for out-of-home placements could benefit from additional educational supports.[18] The American Bar Association's Legal Center for Foster Care and Education developed a judicial checklist that can serve as a guide to judges asking questions about a foster care youth's school stability. Questions include: School stability since last hearing?; School records being accessed as needed?; Needs addressed for special education/504 evaluation, identification, and supports, if applicable?; and other pertinent questions.[13]

Third, the results of this study show that there has been an increase in dropout events associated with being in foster care in 11th and 12th grades. This finding implies that students in 11th and 12th grade who cannot see a path to graduation and who remain in foster care are more likely to drop out of school. Students in foster care who are older likely need additional supports to stay in school and reach the milestone of earning a high school diploma.

In Colorado, recently passed legislation, HB 18-1306 offers substantial educational supports to foster youth towards the goal of graduating from high school.[14] Foremost, the bill allows education providers to waive course requirements or provide competency-based measures to satisfy graduation requirements. This is critical when working with foster youth who have experienced frequent school moves. It will be important to document any changes in the graduation rate for foster care students after the policy changes outlined in this significant bill have taken effect.

"Yeah, it's crazy. I started out at West High School [in District A] and then I moved down to [District B], and then I moved back to [District A] my senior year of high school. When I came back, they changed it... and you needed like 22 credits to graduate, but then you needed like some 200-odd hours of class time. I had the credits, but since I didn't have the class time, I couldn't graduate on time.

- **Foster Care Youth Participant,** *Youth Perspectives on the Colorado Foster Care Education Data[7]*

Key Provisions in Colorado HB 18-1306, *Improving Educational Stability for Foster Youth:[14]*

Credit Accrual and Course Waivers:
- Ability to waive course or program prerequisites or other requirements for placement in courses or programs
- Ability to waive specific courses required for graduation if similar course work has been satisfactorily completed in another jurisdiction or the student has demonstrated competency in the content area.
- For students who transfer schools in 12th grade, ability of previous school to issue a diploma if the student meets the prior school's graduation requirements.

Best Interest Determination:
- Creation of a standard and deliberate process for determining, in coordination with the education provider, parents, if appropriate, guardian *ad litem*, and the child or youth, whether it is in the best interest of a child or youth in out-of-home placement to remain in his or her school of origin when the child or youth is placed in out-of-home placement or experiences a change in placement.

Transportation:
- Establishment of systems-level plan for how necessary transportation to the school of origin is provided, arranged, and funded for the duration of a child's or youth's time as a student in out-of-home placement, including the equitable allocation of costs.

Grant Program (Ultimately Not Funded):
- Creation of the Education the Educational Stability Grant Program to provide academic and social-emotional services and supports to highly mobile students.

Finally, some youth who experience foster care will continue to need more than four years after initially entering 9th grade to earn a high school diploma. Previous research has documented that students in foster care enter high school behind academically,[15] often drop out for a period of time,[15] and have experienced trauma that impedes learning.[16,17] These realities very frequently lead to multiple course failures. For some students, staying in foster care to age 21 could provide the support and stability necessary to graduate from high school.

Conclusion

Large gaps in the educational attainment between youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers describe a clear need more academic and dropout prevention services are needed. While this study did not elucidate causes for the 2017 drop in foster care graduation rate, it does offer some insight into where to focus additional support.

In addition to continuing the educational stability efforts, increased attention and investment in dropout prevention services and supports is needed. Priorities for dropout prevention investments may include: (1) transition to high school, (2) youth at-risk of out-of-home placements, and (3) youth approaching aging out of foster care.

There are a number of promising models for coordinating dropout prevention services across systems that serve youth. A few of the national and local models are mentioned in the implementation section of this report. In addition, previous Colorado-based research has emphasized the importance of bringing students who are behind academically up to grade level.[6] 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, as compared to foster care peers who are on grade level.[6] Implementing promising practices systematically is likely to require additional dedicated resources and funding.

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