

Supporting School Attendance for Students in Foster Care

September 2023



Introduction

A crucial first step to academic success is being present at school and ready to learn. This is a particular challenge for students in foster care, who experience considerable home placement and school instability. Missing school for any reason impacts youth's engagement with learning and their ability to do well in school. Chronic absence rates spiked for all students in California since the return to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching historical highs in the 2021-22 school year.¹ The overall increase in chronic absence can be attributed to COVID-19 and other illnesses, the need to quarantine due to COVID-19 exposure, and heightened anxiety among students due to the pandemic and experiences of isolation. Higher rates of chronic absence are associated with declines in student academic performance. A recent analysis by the Public Policy Institute of California found that schools with greater increases in chronic absenteeism rates in the 2021-22 school year as compared with 2018-19 saw steeper decreases in student performance in English and math, with a pronounced impact on math scores.³ **Ultimately, being chronically absent from school can make it difficult for students to stay on track in school and eventually graduate.**

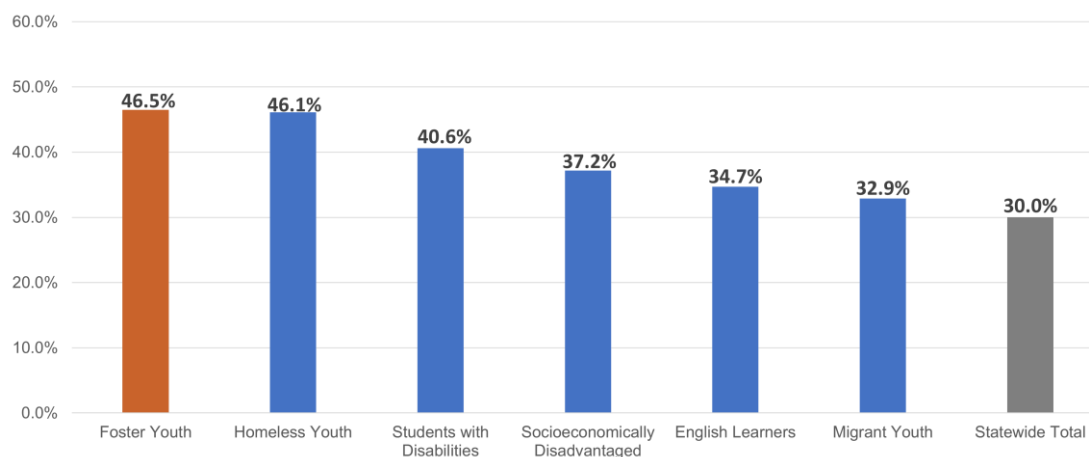
Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more days of school during the school year.²

Even prior to the pandemic, students in foster care faced unique challenges in their lives that can disrupt their learning. Youth in foster care have experienced the trauma of child abuse or neglect and the additional trauma of being removed from their homes, families and communities, which impacts their physical and behavioral health and well-being. Unmet mental health needs can make it difficult for students in foster care to feel motivated to attend school and focus in class. In addition, court and family visits and disproportionate school discipline disruptions cause students in foster care to miss significant class time. Due to the trauma they have experienced, the actions of students in foster care may be perceived as misbehavior, contributing to their disproportionate rates of school discipline. Furthermore, students in foster care often experience multiple changes in home placements, which translate into higher rates of school transfers compared to other high-need students, such as students in low-income households and those experiencing homelessness. These challenges negatively impact the ability of youth in foster care to succeed in school.

In this brief, we explore the most recent statewide school attendance, school discipline, and school stability data for California's students in foster care. In addition, based on conversations with school districts across the state with better-than-average chronic absence rates for students in foster care, we provide some best practices for engaging students in foster care in school and addressing their barriers to attendance.

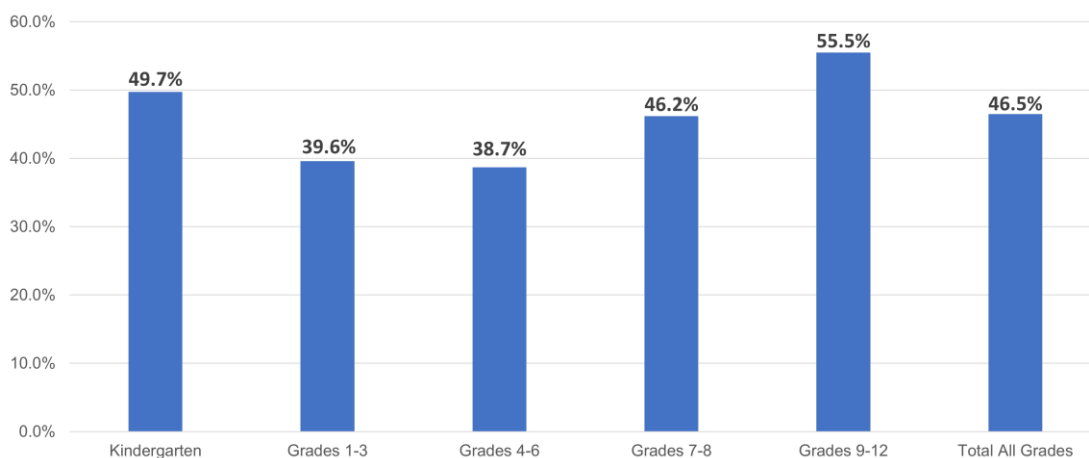
What the Data Show

During the 2021-22 school year, there were over 43,000 students in foster care enrolled in K-12 public schools in California. Due to the unique challenges they face, students in foster care are more likely to be chronically absent from school than other high-need students. As shown in Figure 1, **nearly 47 percent of youth in foster care were chronically absent during the 2021-22 school year, a rate that is one and a half times higher than for California students overall.**⁴

Figure 1. Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Student Group, 2021-22

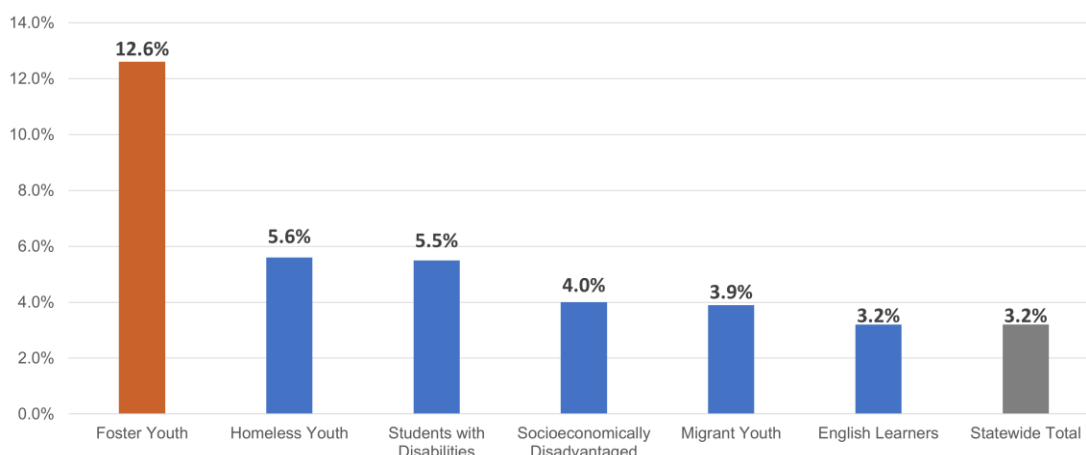
On average, students in foster care missed 23.5 days of school during the 2021-22 school year, compared to 16.7 average days of school missed by California students overall. In addition, **students in foster care had fewer of their absences marked as excused (37.9%) compared to students overall (51.3%).**⁵ This is significant because California law requires that students with excused absences be allowed to complete all assignments and tests missed during their absence.⁶ Therefore, students in foster care with unexcused absences may face barriers to staying on track in school if they are unable to make up the work they missed during their absences. Furthermore, students may be excluded from extracurricular activities or eventually taken to court if they accumulate enough unexcused absences.⁷

Notably, chronic absence rates for students in foster care vary by grade level. As shown in Figure 2, chronic absence rates were highest among students in foster care who were in kindergarten (50%) and those in grades 9-12 (nearly 56%).⁸ Because kindergarten is not required in California, we often see high rates of chronic absenteeism in this grade.

Figure 2. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Students in Foster Care by Grade Level, 2021-22

High rates of suspension and expulsion among students in foster care contribute to their chronic absence, as suspensions and expulsions lead to additional missed days of school among students in foster care as compared to other high-need students. As Figure 3 shows, **students in foster care were suspended from school at a rate (12.6%) about four times higher than for students overall (3.2%) and significantly higher than for other high-need students.**⁹ In addition, **students in foster care were expelled from school (0.4%) at a rate four times higher than for students overall (0.1%).**¹⁰

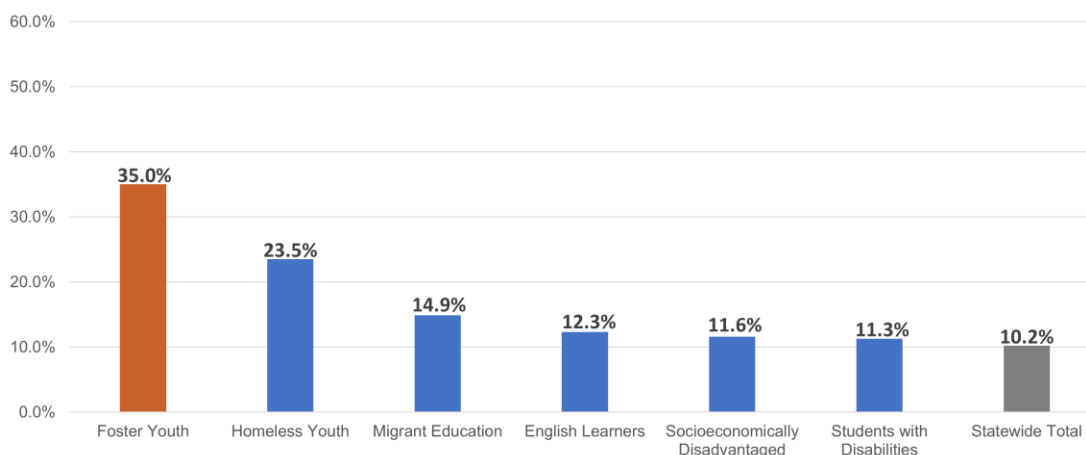
Figure 3. Suspension Rates by Student Group, 2021-22



Finally, due to frequent home placement changes, students in foster care transfer schools much more often than students overall, leading to high school instability rates, which contribute to increased days of school missed. Shown in Figure 4, **more than one third (35%) of students in foster care changed schools one or more times during the 2021-22 school year, compared to only 10 percent of students overall.**¹²

School instability is defined as not having stable enrollment in one school for the entire school year.¹¹ This typically means that a student changed schools one or more times during the school year.

Figure 4. School Instability Rates by Student Group, 2021-22



As the data show, chronic absence is a substantial challenge among students in foster care, and several contributing factors (i.e., school discipline and school stability) need to be considered in order to address the barriers to attendance among students in foster care.

Best Practices for Improving Student Attendance

Research shows that certain school conditions contribute to better attendance among students generally, including positive engagement with families, positive school climate and a welcoming environment, supportive student-teacher relationships, culturally relevant instruction, and restorative rather than punitive discipline practices.¹³

Through conversations with 10 school districts and county offices of education (COEs) that had better-than-average chronic absence rates among students in foster care in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years¹⁴, we identified several best practices local educational agencies (LEAs) can employ to improve or maintain school attendance for students in foster care.

- **Identification and monitoring:** Ensure that school districts, school sites, and school staff are aware of which students are students in foster care and have a regular process for monitoring attendance and academic progress for these students. Some districts have created an alert within their student information system that notifies school staff when a student in foster care has missed a certain number of days of school so staff can be aware that the student may be struggling with attendance. Staff can then reach out to the student and caregiver to help address any barriers to attending school or to determine if the student may have changed schools.
- **Communication:** Communicate regularly with students and caregivers so they understand the importance of attendance and to ensure they know about resources available to them. Prioritize youth input by asking the students themselves what supports or services they believe would positively impact their academic and personal success. In addition, encourage caregivers, social workers, courts, therapists, and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) to schedule student appointments after school so students don't miss school time.
- **Coordination and collaboration:** Establish strong coordination and collaboration between systems serving students in foster care, including among school districts, COEs, and child welfare agencies. Strong relationships among stakeholders serving youth in foster care will better ensure that LEAs are aware when youth in foster care change home placements and/or schools and will allow for stakeholders to more quickly address attendance issues for youth in foster care.
- **Address barriers to attendance:** Provide resources for students and caregivers that might positively impact students' attendance at school, such as backpacks with school supplies, food, clothing, hygiene kits, transportation, and connections to mental health services.
- **Positive connections with adults:** Ensure each student in foster care has at least one adult on campus with whom they have a connection, such as a teacher or a counselor, so they feel like someone knows who they are and cares if they're at school. Provide regular training for teachers to make sure they know how to support students in foster care and ensure they are trained in trauma-informed practices.
- **Extracurricular activities:** Encourage participation in extracurricular activities so students in foster care feel better connected to their schools. Some districts and COEs create extracurricular activities specifically for students in foster care, and some provide mentoring programs for students in foster care.

Conclusion

Students in foster care face unique obstacles to academic engagement and achievement due to trauma, missed days of school, home placement changes and school transfers. These challenges contribute to students in foster care missing significantly more days of school than other students, leading to them falling behind in school. By implementing the best practices identified above, local educational agencies can better ensure that students in foster care can overcome the challenges they face to attending school and being ready to learn, which will support students in foster care to improve their academic outcomes and thrive in school.

Credits and Acknowledgements

Writing, research, data analysis, and policy analysis provided by: Danielle Wondra, Sara Fung, Susanna Kniffen, Rob Manwaring, Amanda Miller McKinney, Jessica Sawko, Vincent Stewart, and Laine Wheritt.

A special thanks to Hedy Chang and Cecelia Leong, Attendance Works; Sheila Silan, El Dorado County Office of Education; Hugo Lopez, Ontario-Montclair School District; LaDay Smith, Oro Grande School District; Mireya Chavez-Martinez, Romoland School District; Elizabeth Lopez, Salinas City Elementary School District; Stephanie Johnston Austin, San Diego County Office of Education; Kim Corneille, Santa Cruz County Office of Education; Shannon Cunningham, Saugus Union School District; Diana Chapero, Victor Valley Union High School District; and Martha Arellano, Walnut Valley Unified School District.

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Endnotes

- 1 Márquez Rosales, B., Seshadri, M., & Willis, D. J. (2023, August 10). *California's dramatic jump in chronically absent students part of a nationwide surge*. EdSource. <https://edsources.org/2023/californias-dramatic-jump-in-chronically-absent-students-part-of-a-nationwide-surge/69543>
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- 3 Hill, L. and Prunty, E. (2023). Implications of Chronic Absenteeism for Student Learning. *Public Policy Institute of California*. <https://www.ppic.org/blog/implications-of-chronic-absenteeism-for-student-learning/>
- 4 California Department of Education (2022). *2021-22 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, by Student Group*. DataQuest. <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/AttChrAbsRate.aspx?aggllevel=State&cds=00&year=2021-22>
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- 9 California Department of Education (2022). *2021-22 Suspension Rate, by Program Subgroup*. DataQuest. <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqCensus/DisSuspRate.aspx?year=2021-22&aggllevel=State&cds=00>
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- 11 California Department of Education (2022, October 5). Information about the Stability Rate Report. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/srinfo.asp>
- 12 California Department of Education (2022). *2021-22 Stability Rate, by Student Group*. DataQuest. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/StbStudentReport.aspx?aggllevel=State&cds=00&year=2021-22>
- 13 Jordan, P. (2023). *Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic*. Future Ed and Attendance Works. <https://www.future-ed.org/attendance-playbook/>
- 14 Note: Based on 2020-21 data from the California Department of Education, [DataQuest](#), the 10 LEAs we spoke with for this report had between 26 - 253 students in foster care enrolled and between 4.4% - 20.2% chronic absence among their students in foster care, compared to a statewide chronic absence rate of 34.5% for students in foster care. In 2021-22, the LEAs had between 21 - 263 students in foster care enrolled and had between 10.5% - 27% chronic absence among their students in foster care, compared to a statewide chronic absence rate of 46.5% for students in foster care.