

EDUCATION & STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE: AN OVERVIEW



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CHAPTER 1

Education & Students in Foster Care: An Overview

INTRODUCTION

On any given day, there are approximately 17,000 school-aged students in Texas schools who are in foster care. Texas students in foster care compose a small percentage of the total student population, yet face unique challenges that greatly impact success in the school environment and require specialized supports, interventions, and cross-system collaboration. Before entering foster care, students may have lived in chaotic home environments, experienced physical and/or emotional trauma, attended school sporadically, or had parents or family members who were unable to meet their physical and emotional needs.

When the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) becomes involved with a student due to abuse, neglect, or exploitation allegations, it seeks to ensure their safety. A court grants legal custody of the student to DFPS if it is determined the student cannot safely remain with a parent or legal guardian. DFPS secures a relative, foster home, or other setting to ensure the student's safety and well-being. A judge oversees the case while a student is in foster care. A student may be in foster care temporarily or for a longer period of time, depending on the court's findings. Once in foster care, students may experience several residential placement changes before they are placed in or returned to a permanent home. If the school placement also changes, students are faced with the challenge of adjusting simultaneously to both their new home environment and an unfamiliar school setting.

In the 2019-20 school year, nearly 20% of all students in foster care made at least one school move. Research shows that frequent school moves have a negative impact on academic achievement for students. In some instances, highly mobile children may lose four to six months of emotional and academic growth and educational progress for each school move.¹ Students who change schools frequently suffer the loss of important emotional and social connections. Additionally, when students in foster care change schools, despite the protections in place, they may lose course credits, repeat courses they have already taken, be placed in inappropriate classes or grade levels, or not be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities. Delays in transferring school records may result in serious disruptions in a student's academic progress. Despite these challenges, many students formerly in foster care report that school provided much needed consistency in their lives. Students often recall a caring teacher or school staff member who truly made a difference.

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NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Nationally, there are approximately 400,000 children in the foster care system on any given day, and an estimated 26,000 young people "age out" of our nation's foster care system annually.² These students have significantly lower educational achievement than their peers not in foster care.

To ensure successful educational outcomes for students in foster care, twelve organizations joined together to form the [National Working Group on Foster Care and Education](#) to review studies from around the country on children and youth currently and formerly in foster care.³ According to these studies, when compared to the general student population, students in foster care were more likely to be suspended or expelled, repeat a grade, or drop out. They also scored lower on statewide standardized tests and were less likely to graduate.⁴



33% of students formerly in foster care **enrolled in higher education** within 7 years of turning 18.



In 2017, DFPS and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board exchanged state data for the first time on the outcomes of higher education for students formerly in foster care. The data revealed that out of the 33% of students formerly in foster care who enrolled in higher education within seven years of turning eighteen-years old, 1.5% obtained a Bachelor's Degree, 0.5% obtained an Associate Degree, and 1.5% earned a certification in a technical field.⁵

Lower educational achievement has a significant ripple effect leading to other difficult circumstances. Studies show that foster care alumni experience higher rates of unemployment and homelessness and are more likely to face economic hardships in adulthood.⁶

Research suggests that education is a critical component to positively impacting the lives of students who experience foster care. Success in school can be a positive counterbalance to the challenges students have experienced.⁷ Whether students are in the foster care system for short or long periods of time, their education is important for long-term success.

Success in school can be a positive counterbalance to the challenges students have experienced.

MAINTAINING SCHOOL STABILITY

School stability is a necessary component to improving the educational experience and outcomes of students in foster care. Research highlights a link between school stability and improved graduation rates. According to the Casey Family Programs' National Alumni Study, foster youth who had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school.⁸ It is widely recognized that school mobility contributes negatively to education outcomes and has adverse effects on students in general.⁹

WHY DO MANY STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE MOVE FREQUENTLY?

Students in foster care change residential placements when their current situation is not meeting their specific needs. When a change of placement is required, and there is no available placement within the current school district attendance zone that meets the student's needs, the student may be placed outside of the attending school district. The student remains in that new residential placement until it is necessary or in the best interest for the student to move to a more permanent placement. Often, there is sufficient time to notify the school and prepare the student for transfer; however, sometimes circumstances require abrupt changes on short notice.



WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

Strengthening partnerships between educational agencies, DFPS, and court systems is essential to supporting students impacted by foster care. It is important that agencies and systems who work with students in foster care collaborate with each other and include the students themselves and their families in decision-making. Educators are critical partners in effectively meeting the needs of students in the Texas child welfare system. Through partnership and coordination, education and child welfare systems can accomplish the goal of improving the educational experience and outcomes of students in foster care.

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008¹⁰ requires state child welfare agencies to work with their state and local education systems to support initiatives to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care. In 2015, federal education law was reauthorized and, for the first time, included educational stability provisions for students in the child welfare system. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) strengthened and mirrored the educational stability mandates of the Fostering Connections Act. It did so by requiring state and local education and child welfare partnerships, collaboration, and accountability to increase educational stability and improve educational outcomes.



LAW: Federal Education and Child Welfare Provisions

Child Welfare Law: Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 includes:

- Emphasis on the importance of school stability, maintaining the school in which the child was enrolled at the time of placement, and the need for coordination between state and regional child welfare and state and local educational agencies.
- Assurance that the residential placement of the child in foster care takes into account the appropriateness of the current educational setting and the proximity to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement.
- If remaining in the same school is not in the child's best interest, the child welfare and local educational agencies will work together to ensure immediate and appropriate enrollment and provide ALL of the child's educational records to the new school.

Education Law: Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of December 2015 includes:

- Mandatory collaboration between child welfare and educational agencies at both the local and state level to ensure school of origin protections, transportation, best interest decision-making, and dispute resolution processes are jointly established and followed.
- Designation of state and local level points of contact at both the educational and child welfare agencies to support implementation of ESSA education stability provisions for children in the foster care system.
- Collaboration on the best interest decision-making processes between educational and child welfare agencies to determine factors that influence whether remaining in the school of origin is in the best interest of the child.
- Education and child welfare joint development of local written transportation procedures and "additional cost" sharing of transportation when it is in the best interest of children in foster care to remain in their school of origin.
- Development of dispute resolution processes for disagreements between child welfare and educational agencies on how to cover costs of transportation to sustain school of origin attendance.
- Reporting of disaggregated data by state and local educational agencies on the academic achievement and graduation rates of students in foster care.

TEXAS FOSTER CARE DATA

NUMBERS HIGHLIGHT CALL TO ACTION

- ⇒ Students in foster care experience educational instability and lag behind the general student population in high school completion.
- ⇒ Students in foster care are almost 2.5 times more likely to receive special education services compared to students in the general population.¹¹
- ⇒ Students in foster care are much more likely to be disciplined in school than other children; they receive out-of-school suspension at more than two times the rate of their peers.¹²
- ⇒ In 2019, children from the ages of 14–17 made up approximately 17% of children in the Texas child welfare system.¹³
- ⇒ 1,212 young adults aged out of foster care in 2019 and lived, on average, in six different placements.¹⁴
- ⇒ Only 39% of the children in foster care were living in their home county¹⁵ in August, 2019.¹⁶

Students in foster care are **2.5 times** more likely to receive special education services.

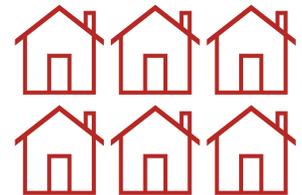
Students in foster care:



All Students:



1,212 young people aged out of foster care in 2019 and lived on average in **6 different placements.**



THE HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF THE TEXAS FOSTER CARE PEIMS CODE

In 2013, Texas law established the identification and reporting of students in foster care through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Identifying and reporting the number of students in foster care attending Texas public schools helped to ensure that they received applicable educational supports.

In 2015, ESSA included students in foster care as a sub-population for data collection and analysis by state and local educational agencies. State report cards are now required to include disaggregated information, including the graduation rates and academic achievement of students in foster care. The existing PEIMS code for students in foster care helped Texas fulfill the new ESSA data collection requirements beginning in the 2016-2017 school year. Texas public schools can now make data-informed decisions when building infrastructures and mechanisms to support academic interventions for students in foster care.

Data Reveals Achievement Gap

State and federal report cards now include education data for students in foster care.¹⁶⁶ This information reveals a significant achievement gap between students in foster care and their peers. Students in foster care have the lowest graduation rate and highest dropout rate of all highly mobile student groups. TEA encourages local educational agencies to set up systems and processes to monitor and assess the academic progress of students in foster care.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

GRADUATION RATES

In 2019, high school graduation rates for students in foster care decreased from 63.4% to 62.6%. These rates are significantly behind their peers statewide, which have held steady at 90.0%.¹⁶⁷

Students in foster care are **graduating at lower rates** than their peers statewide.

Students in foster care:



All Students:



DROPOUT RATES

In 2019, 25.0% percent of students in foster care dropped out of school, while less than 6.0% of their peers in the same graduation class cohort dropped out of school.¹⁶⁸

In Texas **1 out of every 4 students,**



25% in foster care **dropped out of school,** compared to 5.9% of their peers in 2019.

2018-2019 STAAR Results

Academic achievement data reveals the percentage of students in foster care who approached, met and mastered grade level for the 2018-19 school year on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The STAAR is a series of statewide tests that helps reveal how students are doing in school. The goal is to ensure students are learning what they should be and are on-track to graduate from high school ready for college, a career, or the military.

57% of students in foster care scored at **Approaches Grade Level or Above** on the STAAR in all subjects and all grades compared to their peers at 77%.

28% of students in foster care scored at **Meets Grade Level or Above** on the STAAR in all subjects and all grades compared to their peers at 49%.

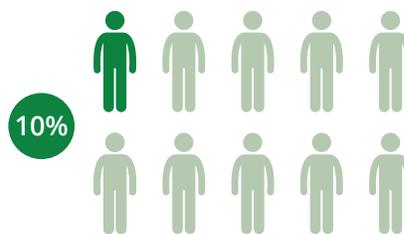
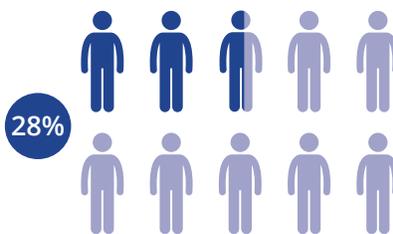
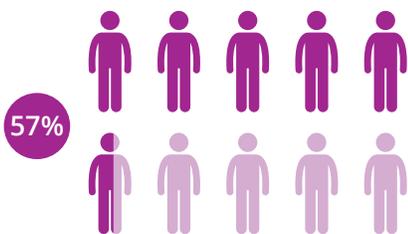
10% of students in foster care scored at **Masters Grade Level or Above** on the STAAR in all subjects and all grades compared to their peers at 23%.

→ Approaches Grade Level or Above

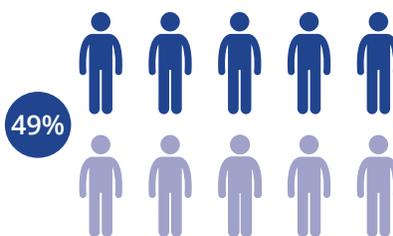
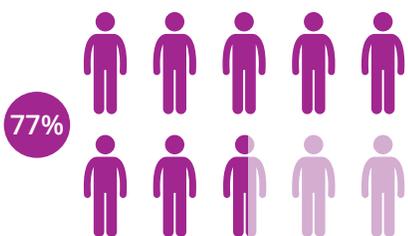
✓ Meets Grade Level or Above

⚙ Masters Grade Level or Above

Students in Foster Care:

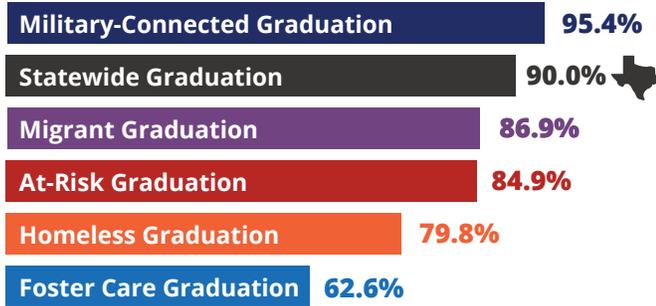


Student Peers:

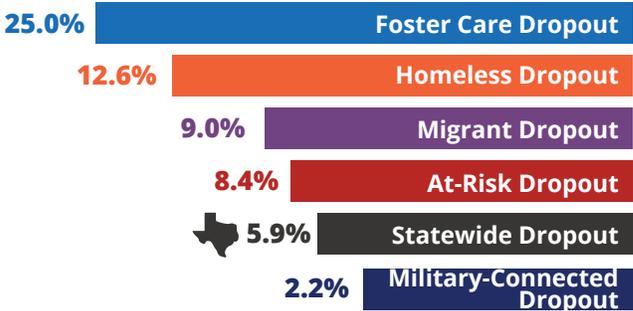


The chart below provides a look at graduation and dropout rates among highly mobile students, at-risk students, and all students state wide. Of these groups, students in foster care have the lowest graduation rate (62.6%) and highest dropout rate (25.0%). This data demands attention and action.

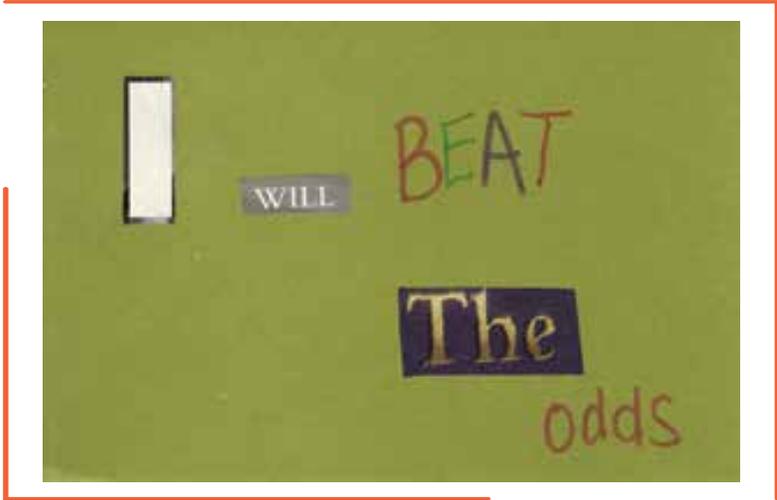
Graduation Rates



Dropout Rates

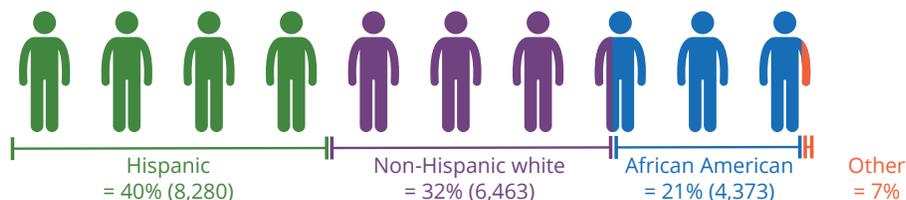


“ ALTHOUGH I AM A CHILD IN FOSTER CARE AND THE STATE OF TEXAS IS MY LEGAL GUARDIAN, IT DOESN'T MEAN MY DREAMS MUST DIE. A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION WILL HELP ME TAKE ONE CRUCIAL STEP OF MANY I WILL TAKE IN LIFE TO ACHIEVE MY DREAMS. THE QUESTION IS: WILL I SAY BECAUSE OF YOU OR IN SPITE OF YOU... I REACHED MY DREAMS? ”

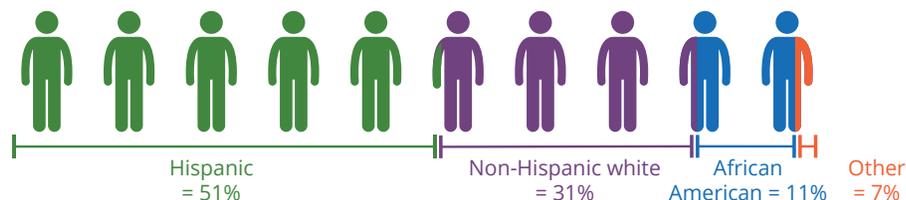


DEMOGRAPHICS OF TEXAS STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE¹⁷

Students in Foster Care:



Total Population of Students in Texas:



Child Welfare and Disproportionality

Disproportionality is a term used to describe the over- or under-representation of a particular group in comparison to their percentage in the general population.¹⁶⁹ Children of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system. There is research available to increase understanding of the theories regarding the disproportionate representation of children of color in foster care, including parent and family risk factors, community factors, and organizational and systemic factors.¹⁷⁰

- African American children and youth are the most overrepresented racial group in the foster care system. Of the 20,540 children and youth removed from their homes in 2018 by DFPS, 4,373 were African American, totaling 21% of all children removed. This percentage is disproportionate, considering that African American children and youth represent only 11% of the total child and youth population in Texas.
- 8,280 Hispanic children and youth were removed from their homes, totaling 40% of all children removed from their homes. Hispanic students are disproportionately underrepresented, considering they represent 51% of the total child population in Texas.
- 6,463 Caucasian children and youth were removed from their homes, totaling 32% of all children removed from their homes. Caucasian students are slightly underrepresented, considering they represent 31% of the total child population in Texas.
- All other races are categorized as “Other,” totaling 7% of all children removed from their homes. Children in this category are removed proportionally, considering they represent 7% of the total child population in Texas.



RESOURCES: Disproportionality and Child Welfare

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, [“FY 2018 Disproportionality Analysis.”](#)

Pursuant to DFPS Rider 14 of the 2018-2019 General Appropriations Act, 85th Legislature, the analysis provides DFPS information on the racial and ethnic breakdown of children in the seven largest counties in the state of Texas.

Child Welfare Information Gateway, [“Racial Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Welfare.”](#)

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), Technical Assistance Bulletin, [“Disproportionality Rates for Children of Color in Foster Care.”](#) Provides a comprehensive breakdown of each state’s child welfare data, as it relates to disproportionality rates for children in foster care.

Casey Family Programs, [“Disproportionality and the Child Welfare System: The Disproportionate Representation of Children of Color in Foster Care.”](#)



RESOURCES: Foster Care and Education

[The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services](#)

[Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families, Foster Care and Education](#)

[Texas Education Agency, Foster Care & Student Success](#)

Children's Bureau, The Child Welfare Information Gateway, "[What is Child Welfare? A Guide for Educators.](#)"

[The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education](#)

[Casey Family Programs, Education resources](#)

[HHSC Child Welfare Information Gateway, Fostering Connections](#)

[U.S. Department of Education, Foster Care](#)

[Data Report from DFPS/Children's Commission/TEA](#)

