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# From Evidence to Impact

## A Learning Agenda to Improve Foster Youth Educational Outcomes

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# Table of Contents

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The conclusions presented here reflect themes identified through interviews and a review of existing literature; they do not necessarily represent the views of any individual or organization that participated in the process.

# Executive Summary

Despite decades of reform, California's public schools continue to struggle to effectively serve foster youth. Public schools help only 20 percent of foster youth meet English standards, help just 11 percent meet math standards and achieve a 68 percent high school graduation rate for foster youth compared to 88 percent of all students. These disparities are not a reflection of student potential. Instead they reflect systemic failures across education and child welfare.

With just over 27,000 foster youth enrolled in public schools 2024–25, the state's role as their legal guardian carries a special obligation. Targeted investments in this small group can yield transformative benefits and strengthen outcomes for all students.

## The Current Landscape

California has adopted strong laws, created county-level Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCPs) and invested billions of dollars in initiatives like the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Yet implementation remains inconsistent, with widespread noncompliance with foster youth rights, inadequate targeting of funding and uneven quality across districts.

A new analysis of Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) reveals that even in some districts serving the largest numbers of foster youth, only a fraction of funds are specifically directed to the unique needs of this population. Ten of the twenty LCAPs reviewed as a part of this analysis included no actions focused on the unique needs of foster youth despite a new state law compelling them to include such actions. Other large state efforts like CCSPP and MTSS show promise but are not tailored to the specific needs of foster youth.

## What We Know

Foster youth experience the worst outcomes of any subpopulation measured by the California Department of Education. Research consistently identifies barriers that undermine foster youth achievement including:

- **Impact of trauma**: Foster youth are three times more likely to have disabilities and face higher rates of anxiety, depression, and exclusionary discipline.
- **Chronic absenteeism**: 39 percent were chronically absent in 2022–23, far above statewide averages.

Other barriers point directly to deficiencies in how existing systems support these students, including:

- **High levels of school mobility**: Frequent moves due to placement changes, lack of transportation, and weak enforcement of stability laws disrupt learning.
- **Enrollment in low-performing schools**: Foster youth are more likely to attend schools with the lowest outcomes or alternative programs.
- **Data gaps**: Fragmented systems obscure student needs and delay timely interventions.

## What Works

Evidence points to personalized, relationship-based supports as the most effective interventions. Successful models — such as Oregon's Better Futures, Colorado's Fostering Opportunities, New York City's Fair Futures and California's own community-based programs — show that individualized coaching, mentoring and case management can improve graduation, attendance and college-going rates.

A closer examination of outcomes data reveal "bright spot" districts within California where foster youth outcomes significantly exceed state averages. An analysis of state data completed for this report identified forty bright spot Local Education Agencies (LEAs) with most clustered in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange and San Diego counties. These districts demonstrate what is possible when systems align.

## Recommendations

Improving foster youth outcomes requires systemic action in three areas that span research, practice and policy:

**1 - Implement a Learning Agenda focused in four domains:**

- Studying bright spots and system innovations to identify scalable strategies;
- Clarifying roles, infrastructure and partnerships to strengthen consistency and coordination;
- Addressing persistent barriers such as discipline disparities, absenteeism and shifting needs; and
- Examining graduation trends and exemptions to strengthen postsecondary readiness and success.

**2 - Expand Access to Targeted Supports**

- Revise LCFF to "de-duplicate" foster youth and provide supplemental funding (~$60 million annually) linked to requirements that funding be used explicitly for services that uniquely support foster youth.

- Pilot and scale targeted case management programs that assist foster youth with graduation and postsecondary transition using approaches grounded in best practices and current research.
- Strengthen foster youth supports in community schools (e.g., trained site liaisons, targeted programming).
- Leverage Medi-Cal (CalAIM) to expand access to school-based wellness and support services for foster youth.

**3 - Strengthen Accountability**

- Require consultation with district foster youth liaisons and Foster Youth Service Coordinating Programs (FYSCPs) for LCAP development to ensure the inclusion of adequate foster youth support.
- Mandate minimum investments in foster-focused interventions in low-performing districts with significant numbers of foster youth based on evidence-based practices.
- Require identification of educational rights holders in the child welfare data system for all foster youth enrolled in school.
- Require tracking and reporting of the decision making process and rationale informing all school moves and improve accountability for existing requirements related to identifying who is providing postsecondary support.
- Enhance Student Information Systems (SIS) to generate alerts related to school enrollment, student performance, and transitions for foster youth.
- Implement robust data availability about foster youth educational trajectories in the new Cradle to Career data system.
- Enhance child welfare engagement in education including more intentional integration of education into case planning and strengthening collaboration with education partners.
- Expand the role of the Child Welfare Council in developing and implementing specific recommendations and acting as a statewide oversight body to monitor progress.

## Role of Philanthropy

Philanthropy can catalyze change by:

- **Investing in research**: Ensure that research projects have the necessary resources to move forward.
- **Funding advocacy and convening**: Support multi-year campaigns to align policy, research, and practice.
- **Supporting pilots**: Invest in case management and regional demonstrations, especially in underserved areas.

# Introduction

When children experience abuse or neglect, the state is empowered to remove these children from the home and provide temporary out-of-home placements through the foster care system. Despite decades of reform efforts, educational outcomes for youth with experience in foster care in California remain alarmingly poor, reflecting a system that is fundamentally broken. These students experience some of the lowest academic achievement and graduation rates in the state, not because of a lack of potential, but due to systemic failures at every level.

As the legal guardian of children in foster care, the state has a special obligation to ensure their well-being and success; yet too often, it falls short of fulfilling that role. According to data from the California Department of Education, 27,437 foster youth were enrolled in public schools during the 2024–25 academic year — just a tiny fraction of the nearly 5.8 million students statewide.[1] But this relatively small population represents a powerful opportunity: Transforming outcomes for foster youth can create a blueprint for broader systems change that lifts outcomes for all students. Put differently, investments focused on improving outcomes of foster youth in the public education system can create a "curb-cut" effect wherein, "an investment in one group can cascade out and up and be a substantial investment in the broader well-being" or a system.[2]

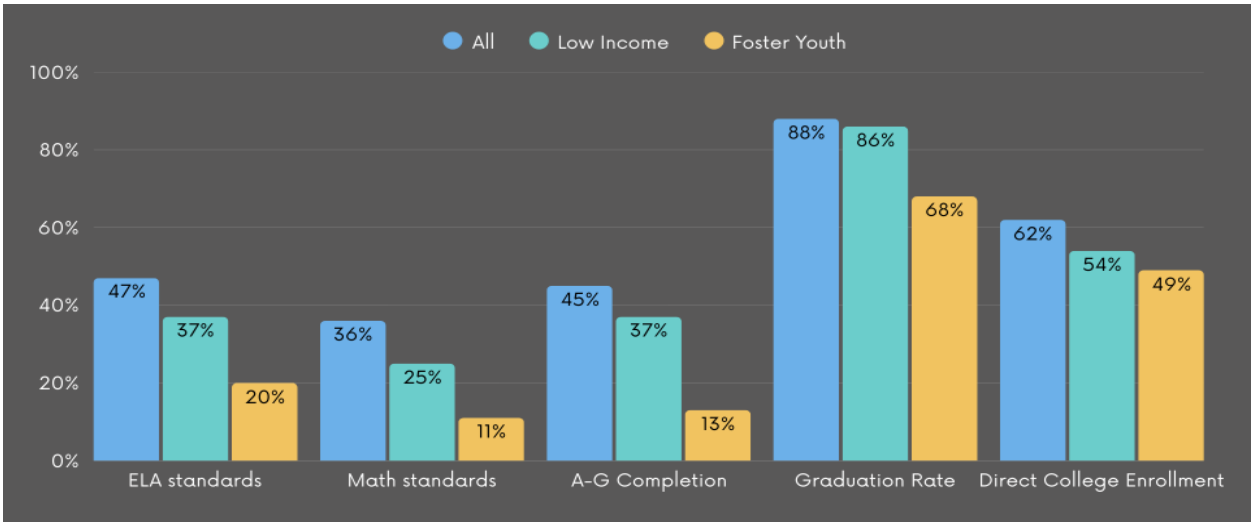
History has demonstrated that incremental fixes have proven insufficient. Bold, structural changes are urgently needed to address the root causes of these disparities and build a system that truly supports every learner.

Rather than focusing on isolated interventions, this report takes a systems-level view, highlighting how coordinated action across policy, philanthropy, research, and practice can drive lasting change. By weaving together data, practitioner experience and promising approaches, the report is meant to help policymakers, advocates and funders understand both the urgency of the problem and the levers available to address it.

### Foster Youth Educational Outcomes

The educational challenges faced by foster youth are well documented. The data summarized in Figure 1 underscore the urgency of action.

*Figure 1 - Foster Youth Outcome Data*[3]




Unfortunately, these outcomes have remained relatively consistent over the past ten years. While some improvements have been realized, including an improvement in graduation rates and school stability, little progress has been seen in college preparation and enrollment, chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, and academic achievement.[4]

# The Current Landscape

Understanding the current landscape of state policy and funding is key to identifying both the progress that has been made and the significant gaps that remain in supporting the educational success of foster youth. Over the past decade, California has implemented several key reforms aimed at improving outcomes for this population along with significant investments in K–12 education more broadly, including major investments in the establishment of community schools and implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. While these efforts have yet to yield consistent improvements in outcomes for foster youth, they have laid a critical foundation on which more targeted and coordinated reforms can build.

### Foster Youth Rights and Benefits

Beginning with the passage of Assembly Bill (AB) 490 in 2003, California has enacted strong legal protections to support the educational success of foster youth, including key rights (such as school stability, timely enrollment and credit transfer) and a requirement that school districts appoint foster youth liaisons. These protections include a strong legal presumption favoring

school stability and the requirement that Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) guide school placement decisions when a school change is contemplated.[5] In 2017, Senate Bill (SB) 12 further strengthened support by mandating that foster youth aged 16 and older have a designated adult to assist with college and financial aid applications.[6]

To further support school stability, the 2022 Budget Act allows school of origin transportation funding as an eligible expenditure in school transportation plans. As a result, school districts and COEs can get reimbursed up to 60% for eligible home-to-school transportation expenditures.[7] It is not known, however, the extent to which LEAs are taking advantage of this option.

Despite these comprehensive policies, implementation has been inconsistent, with analyses revealing widespread noncompliance. An analysis conducted by the Alliance for Children's Rights in 2020 found broad lack of compliance with school stability requirements.[8] A toolkit from John Burton Advocates for Youth designed to support counties with SB 12 compliance noted that one large county's review of 100 randomly selected case plans in 2021 revealed zero percent compliance with SB 12 requirements despite the law having been in effect for four years.[9]

## Graduation Requirement Exemptions

In certain circumstances, foster youth who complete all state graduation requirements for a standard high school diploma may be exempt from local graduation requirements. This is often referred to by practitioners as an "AB 167/216" graduation. While this exemption allows some foster youth to receive a diploma who may not have otherwise qualified, completing state graduation requirements do not qualify a student for admission to a Cal State or University of California campus as a freshman and may result in students forgoing coursework that would help to prepare them for postsecondary education.

As of 2023/2024 a new indicator was added to the DataQuest dashboard opening up the ability for advocates, educators and policymakers to track use of this exemption. For 2023-24, 15.7 percent of foster youth students graduated with an exemption from local graduation requirements compared to 1.7 percent of non-foster students.[10]

## Local Control Funding Formula

California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), enacted in 2013, is the state's primary system for funding K–12 public education. Districts receive base funding along with additional funding based on the number of students categorized as low-income, English language learners and foster youth. These students are collectively referred to as "unduplicated pupils" and are counted only once even if they fall into more than one category. As foster youth are categorically considered low-income students, this means that — despite the additional adversity faced by foster youth — no additional funds flow to districts to address their unique needs.

Research has found that LCFF-driven increases in per-pupil spending had substantial positive effects on student outcomes overall,[11] but it is less clear if local education agencies (LEAs) are targeting funds where they are most needed.[12] The state Legislative Analyst's Office noted in 2023 that a key unaddressed issue is, "increasing transparency to ensure existing funding actually targets the highest-need schools and student subgroups."[13] A report from WestEd noted that "a persistent lack of transparency in district spending makes it unclear whether supplemental funding for LCFF-targeted students is following them to their schools."[14]

## Local Control and Accountability Plan

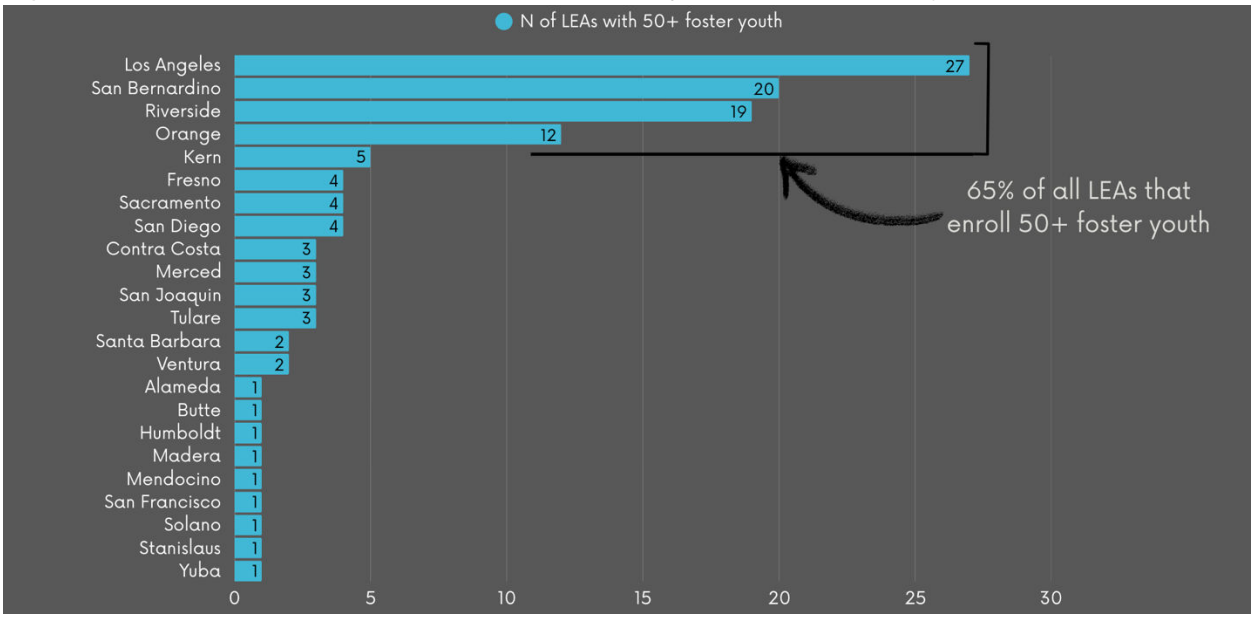
Foster youth face unique challenges and often require tailored interventions. In recognition of this, the Coalition for Educational Equity for Foster Youth (CEEFY) developed a tool to guide LEAs in designing effective strategies. Updated in 2022 by Children Now and the Alliance for Children's Rights, the tool provides recommended goals, outcomes, actions, and services that LEAs can incorporate into their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) built on existing best practices.[15] It is unclear, however, the extent to which this tool has been utilized and LEAs frequently group foster youth with other high-need students in LCAPs, leaving foster youth with interventions that may not address their unique needs.

A WestEd analysis of 2022–23 LCAPs from the ten districts with the largest foster youth populations found that nearly all planned actions served multiple student groups, with only 0.1% of total planned funding directed specifically to foster youth.[16] Of the more than 1000 districts in the state, notably, these ten districts educate 24 percent of California's students in foster care. Although SB 114, adopted in 2023, aims to improve transparency and accountability by requiring districts to include targeted actions for student groups with the lowest performance, it has been unclear whether this change has led to more meaningful support for foster youth.[17]

To answer this question, the authors analyzed 2024–25 LCAPs submitted by a random sample of LEAs that enrolled substantial numbers of foster youth (50 or more) to assess whether the change led to more targeted activities for foster youth in LEAs with larger foster student populations.[a]

A total of 120 LEAs in the state enrolled 50+ foster youth in 2024-25. These LEAs represent five percent of all LEAs in the state, but collectively enroll 65 percent of all foster youth in the public education system. Further analysis found that the majority of LEAs that serve 50+ foster youth are located in four counties: Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange (see figure 2 below).

*Figure 2 - 65 percent of LEAs that serve 50+ foster youth are located in just four counties*



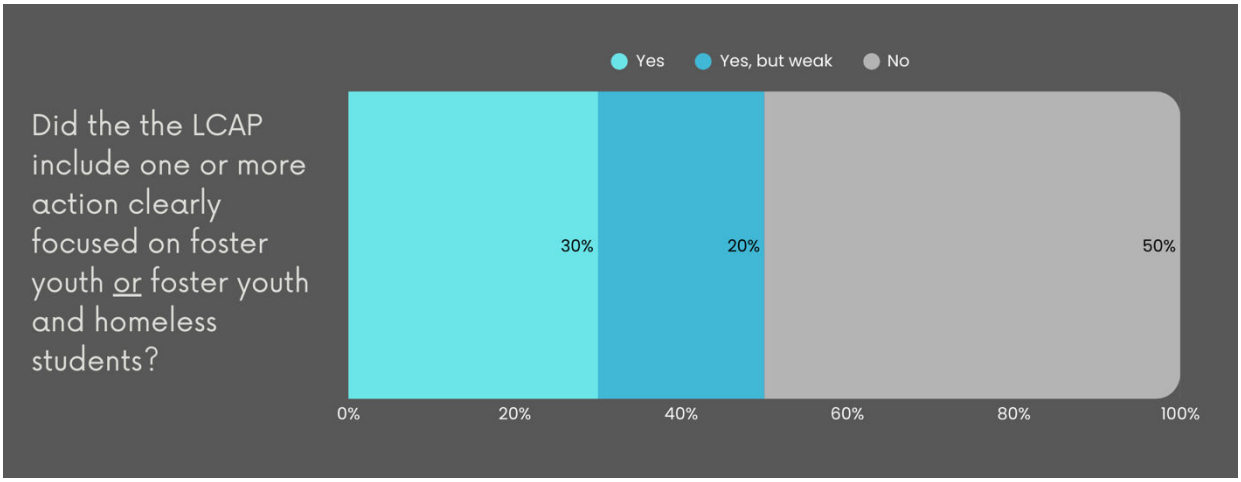

All LEAs with enrollment of 50 or more foster youth with performance data available were found to have a red indicator on one or more statewide performance measures in 2023.[18] Under SB114, each of these LEAs is required to include at least one foster youth–focused action in their LCAP.

The authors reviewed a random sample of 20 such LEAs. All but three districts in the sample had red indicators in academic performance domains (ELA standards, math standards and college/career). Ten districts had red performance indicators related to conditions and climate (suspension) and nine had red performance indicators related to academic engagement (chronic absenteeism and graduation).[19]

[a] The authors used a LEA-wide enrollment number of 50 or more foster youth as a proxy for "substantial" numbers of foster youth. Source: 2024-25 California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) Fall 1 Submission. The list of 120 LEAs includes primarily districts but does include county offices of education (N=4) and charter schools (N=3). See appendix for more details.

An examination of LCAP content for these 20 LEAs found that only half of the LCAPs (N=10) included at least one clear foster youth action (see Figure 3 below). LCAPs were considered compliant if they had either a targeted action for foster youth or an action targeting both foster and homeless students.

*Figure 3 - Half of the LCAPs included one or more action clearly focused on foster youth*




Of the 10 LCAPs with an action focused on foster youth, six contained strong actions. For example, Lynwood Unified School District listed three foster youth–specific actions, including one funded at $500,000 to, "increase and enhance the quality of instruction for Foster Youth by offering enrichment and intervention opportunities for students."[20] The other four LCAPs with foster specific actions included weak actions. The Desert Sands Unified School District LCAP, for instance, included action for a "Foster/Homeless Liaison [to] continue to provide direct support to students, staff, and families." However this action was only funded at $4,500 which amounts to about $7 per foster youth. The authors considered this too low of an investment to be considered a strong action.[21]

The other 10 LCAPs contained no foster youth–specific strategies. While foster youth were mentioned, they appeared exclusively alongside the other unduplicated student groups (English learners and low-income students), and no distinct foster-focused actions were listed in the "Limited Actions" section of the LCAP. Some districts cited actions that were labeled focused on foster youth but did not qualify on closer review.[b]

These findings point to a lack of compliance with the new LCAP requirements. This may be in part because current rules do not require that the development of strategies to address the needs of foster youth be done in consultation with the district foster youth liaison. LCAPs are also not routinely reviewed by County Office of Education Foster Youth Services Coordinating

[b] For example, Victor Elementary School District named foster youth as the focus of a $312,000 "Student Leadership" action, but the description showed the funds supported an LEA-wide program aimed at all low/underperforming students, not foster youth specifically.

Programs (FYSCPs) to ensure that strategies for foster youth comply with state law and are adequate and appropriate for the population.

Though disappointing, the authors feel that these results also illuminate a possible strategy to improve outcomes for foster youth. Foster youth are concentrated within a relatively small number of LEAs and LEAs serving substantial numbers of foster youth are located in a small number of counties. This concentration points to a potential reform approach that would focus on a narrow set of LEAs or counties as a starting place for improving outcomes statewide. In addition, while the majority of LCAPs reviewed did not show robust interventions for foster youth, several included extremely robust approaches and other strong examples likely exist within the LCAPs not included in the analysis. These LCAP "bright spots" could lead the way in the identification and spread of effective practices to serve foster youth.

A potential limitation of these findings is that LEAs may be implementing activities targeted to foster youth that are not explicitly documented within their LCAPs. To better understand the full scope of LEA engagement, future research should assess the extent to which such activities occur outside of the LCAP framework.

## Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program

Established in 2015 through Assembly Bill (AB) 854, Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCPs) play a crucial role in coordinating between Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and county child welfare agencies. These programs are housed within County Offices of Education and exist in all 58 of California's counties. They are charged with providing technical assistance to Local Education Agencies (LEAs), serving as liaisons between systems, facilitating data sharing and supporting school stability and immediate enrollment. In 2024, as a result of AB 2137, FYSCPs were further authorized to provide direct services such as tutoring, mentoring and counseling when unable to be provided by the student's school district. FYSCPs also have specific responsibilities to support transition to postsecondary education for foster youth including coordinating efforts to ensure that students apply for financial aid.[22]

## Shifting Population

In California, the number of foster youth enrolled in public schools dropped from 55,282 foster youth in the 2016-17 academic year to 27,437 in the 2024-25 academic year. This shift is likely due to a combination of factors, including a greater emphasis on preventing entries into foster care, shortening the amount of time children spend in care, and a drop in foster care referrals during the pandemic. The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) noted in a 2024 report that the decreases have largely occurred due to increasing exits from care more so than by reducing entries.[23]

Stakeholders interviewed for this report believe that the narrowing of the foster care population has contributed to an increase in the acuity level of those who remain in care. This perspective is supported by data showing that the proportion of students in foster care identified with a

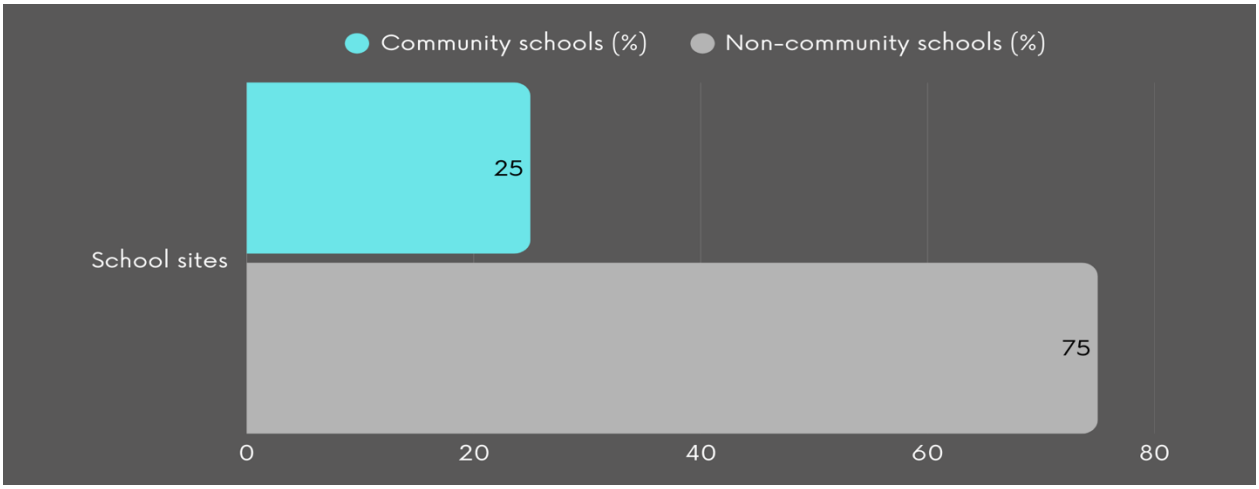
disability has grown more rapidly than among all students, with the gap widening significantly between the 2014–15 and 2022–23 academic years.[24]

## Community Schools

Launched in 2021, the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) has received $4.1 billion from the State of California to support integrated services at nearly 2,500 schools.[25] The model has shown promise, with initial results showing reductions in chronic absence rates post-pandemic and forthcoming research documenting improvements in attendance, suspension rates and achievement for the first grantee cohort.[26]

The authors analyzed data on school-level investments in CCSPP and found that 25% of all schools in the state have received a community schools implementation grant (see Figure 4 below).[c]

*Figure 4 - 25 percent of all K-12 schools in California have received community schools grants*



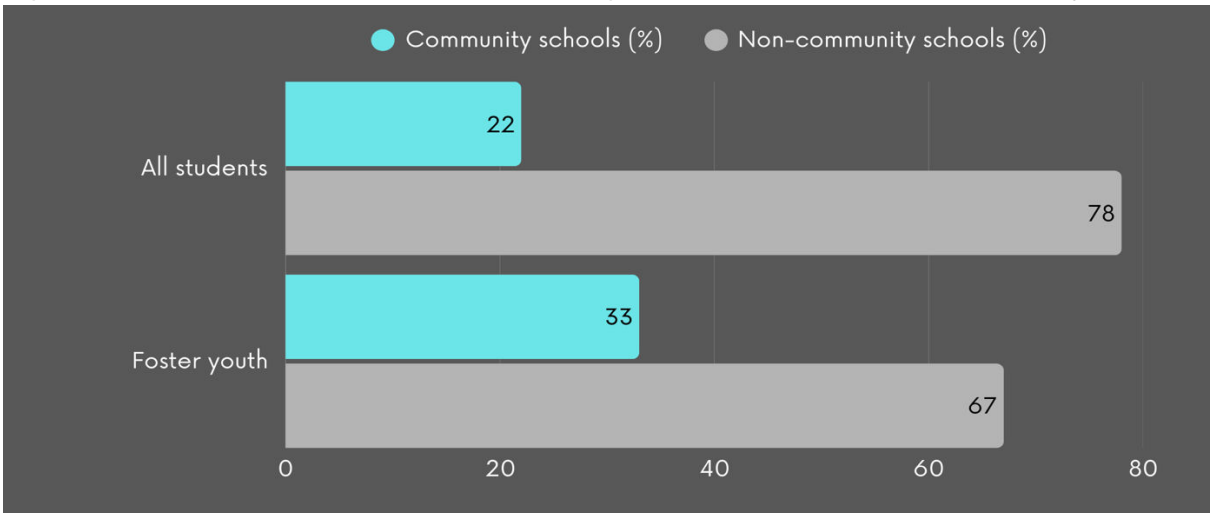

However, little evidence exists to show whether community schools effectively address the specific needs of foster youth. Stakeholders interviewed for this report expressed concern about limited focus on small, high-need populations and questioned whether staff are adequately trained to support foster youth. Moreover, the model's impact is limited to students who both attend and can remain at a community school. One criterion for LEA eligibility to apply for community school funding is having rates of child homelessness, foster youth or justice-involved youth that exceed the state average.[27] There is no mention, however, of any obligation that community schools address the unique needs of foster youth in either statute or the CDE community schools framework.[28]

An analysis conducted for this report found that while 22 percent of all students in the state attend a school that has received community school funding, the share is notably higher for foster youth, at 33 percent (see Figure 5 below). With a full third of foster youth now attending community schools, any programmatic or community school related policy changes that

[c] See appendix for data sources and methodological notes.

prioritize the needs of foster youth could have a meaningful impact on overall foster youth outcomes.

*Figure 5 - Schools with CSPP implementation grants enroll 33 percent of all foster youth*




**Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)**

Since 2015, California has invested $95 million in the Scaling Up MTSS Statewide (SUMS) initiative to help schools implement data-driven systems of academic, behavioral, and mental health support through a tiered framework.[29] While MTSS aims to tailor interventions based on student need, a five-year evaluation by UCLA's Center for the Transformation of Schools found that vague guidance led schools to focus on isolated interventions rather than systemic change. The evaluation also highlighted a lack of attention to race and culture, challenges in secondary schools and inequities in grant distribution that favored schools with greater capacity. Online training modules were found to be ineffective and limited district-level involvement hindered implementation success.[30]

Stakeholders interviewed for this report voiced concerns about MTSS that mirrored those they had about community schools — specifically, whether the framework adequately addresses the needs of small, high-need groups like foster youth. In Monterey County, the MTSS framework has been used to design an approach to addressing the needs of homeless students, but it is unknown if this approach has been replicated in other districts and no such model exists for foster youth. This model has not yet been evaluated and so its impact is unknown.[31]

It is challenging to assess whether MTSS has greater potential than current indicators suggest, as state investment to date has been relatively limited, with most funds directed toward technical assistance rather than direct implementation support for schools and districts. However, the model's focus on tailoring interventions to student needs could be particularly effective for foster youth, who often have higher levels of need that are overlooked by one-size-fits-all approaches.

**Postsecondary Support**

Significant advancements have been achieved in the range of postsecondary supports and opportunities available to foster youth. The state now funds foster youth support programs at every California Community College, California State University and University of California campus. Financial aid opportunities have expanded as well, with foster youth eligible for enhanced support through the Cal Grant program, the Student Success Completion Grant, and the Middle Class Scholarship. In addition, they receive important campus benefits such as priority registration and priority access to housing. Foster youth also have access to other supports such as transitional housing, extended foster care, and tax credits. To maximize these efforts, however, more is needed to support readiness and access.

# What We Know

Research shows that a student's connection to school, sense of belonging, and supportive relationships are critical to academic success.[32] For foster youth, factors like school mobility, trauma, and chronic absenteeism often undermine these connections, contributing to poor educational outcomes.

**School Mobility:** Students in foster care experience much higher rates of school mobility than their peers. In the 2022-23 academic year, two-thirds of students in foster care attended just one school compared to 90 percent of low-income students.[33] Changing schools can interrupt students' learning progression, a situation often exacerbated by delays in record transfers, and also may disrupt social relationships, which can result in disengagement from school.[34] Frequent or mid-year school changes — often involuntary and linked to family disruption — are especially harmful, with each move associated with declines in English and Math test scores and a higher likelihood of not graduating.[35]

Factors that contribute to high rates of school mobility include:

- Placement Instability: Changes in foster care placements often lead to school moves. Although placement stability has improved, over a quarter of youth in care for a year still experience three or more placements.[36] A reduction in congregate care options has potentially exacerbated this issue.[37]
- Inconsistent Implementation of School of Origin Laws: Uneven enforcement of school stability laws — especially limited use of Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) — contributes to school moves. Without a system to track BIDs, compliance is difficult to measure.
- Transportation Barriers: When students are placed far from their original school, long commutes and high costs often force school changes. Many counties struggle to implement required transportation agreements due to funding and logistical issues.[38]

Challenges related to school mobility can be exacerbated by a lack of compliance with record transfer requirements when school changes do take place, resulting in placement in inappropriate courses, duplication of classes and a lack of credit recovery.

**Impact of Trauma:** Foster youth can face emotional and behavioral challenges related to trauma, which hinder their academic success. They are nearly three times more likely to be identified with a disability compared to all students, a gap that has widened between the 2014-15 and 2022-23 academic years,[39] and far more likely to experience anxiety and depression than their peers.[40] Trauma can impair concentration, learning, and long-term development, especially in young children.[41]

**School Discipline**: Behavioral challenges related to trauma are often mistaken for intentional misbehavior, leading to suspensions or expulsions and reduced access to learning.[42] This is borne out by the fact that students in foster care are suspended at much higher rates than their peers. Over the past decade, students in foster care have been, **"**three times more likely to be suspended than all other student groups, meaning that an average of about one in seven students in foster care received exclusionary discipline that limited their learning time.**"**[43]

**Chronic Absenteeism**: In academic year 2022-23, 39% of students in foster care were chronically absent compared to 25% of the overall student population and 31 percent of low-income students. The instability in students' living situations and frequent school change noted above along with delays in disenrollment from a student's school of origin, lack of reliable transportation and lengthy school commutes can all contribute to absences. Other factors may include mandatory court dates and medical appointments scheduled during school hours. Further, students who feel socially disconnected or isolated within the school environment may be less motivated to attend regularly.[44]

**Attending Poor Performing Schools:** Students in foster care were more likely than students in other high-need groups to attend schools that had the lowest graduation rates or that CDE had identified as having the poorest performance. While fewer than one in four students in foster care attended a low-performing school, the percentage of students in foster care attending a low-performing school remained higher than for any other group. Foster youth are also three times more likely than low-income students to attend an alternative school.[45]

**Lack Access to Services:** Professionals interviewed for *Revisiting the Invisible Achievement Gap* noted that if students in foster care are to fully benefit from investments directed toward high-need student groups, districts must ensure that students in foster care have access to these resources. They observed that this group's higher rates of chronic absence and school mobility might pose specific access problems for students in foster care. Districts with actions and funding dedicated uniquely to students in foster care may be better equipped to facilitate student access to districtwide and school-level programs and services.[46]

**Insufficient Data Systems:** Inadequate and fragmented data systems hinder schools and child welfare agencies from effectively supporting students in foster care. Although state law requires

some data sharing, implementation is inconsistent. To improve integration, the Sacramento County Office of Education created Foster Focus, a unified platform now used by 50 of 58 counties. Los Angeles and Riverside use a separate Education Passport System and six small counties don't require a system. Despite this progress, data quality and access challenges remain including:

- **Disjointed systems** requiring staff to consult multiple platforms.
- **Delayed data**, such as attendance and grades, hindering timely interventions.
- **Incomplete information on educational rights holders**, delaying decisions such as those related to enrollment and special education services such as those related to enrollment and special education services.
- **Limited aggregate data** access in small districts due to state reporting thresholds, obscuring foster youth outcomes.
- **No documentation of why school changes occur** making it hard to assess school stability.

**Economic Challenges**: As foster youth plan their transition from high school, economic challenges faced by many students in foster care can lead these students to prioritize work over continuing their education. While more resources to support college attendance have become available in recent years, some students in foster care may not be aware of or fully understand the financial and housing support available to them in college.[47]

# What Works

While the challenges facing foster youth are complex, research points to one-on-one, personalized support as a consistently effective intervention. Whether through counseling, mentoring, or coaching, individualized support is a common feature of programs with proven results.[48] A recently published literature review commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that effective interventions were those that incorporated comprehensive wraparound services, trauma-informed practices and policies promoting educational stability. The research, "emphasized the benefits of having dedicated staff support and positive school climates prioritizing belonging and inclusion over punishment and exclusion."[49]

Examples of programs shown to produce positive results include:

- In Oregon, the **Better Futures** program served foster youth with mental health challenges through individualized coaching, peer mentoring and a summer institute on a university campus. Those who participated were more than twice as likely to pursue postsecondary education compared to a control group (65% vs. 24%).[50]
- In Jefferson County, Colorado, the **Fostering Opportunities** pilot tied funding to positive outcomes and provided weekly specialist support, improving the percentage of students on track to graduate by 26%, with better attendance and fewer suspensions, though course passage rates did not change.[51]
- The **Foster Care to College Partnership** in Washington combined mentoring, workshops and an on-campus summer program and found significant increases in college attendance rates for those who participated in mentoring.[52]
- Data obtained from **six direct support programs** operated by community-based organizations throughout California demonstrated an 88 percent high school completion rate for program participants, compared to 63 percent for foster youth overall. Seventy-eight percent enrolled in college as compared to 44 percent of foster youth statewide.[53]
- In the **Sweetwater Union High School Distric**t, exceptional results for foster youth were linked to specialized programming through the **Youth in Transition** program and the **Fostering Academic Success in Education** (FASE) program, which employed specialized social workers to address academic barriers, leading to improved GPAs, attendance and reduced tardiness.[54] The FASE program has been separately evaluated and found to increase student GPAs, reduce tardies and improve attendance.[55] The district also benefited from districtwide trauma-informed and restorative practices, expedited transcript reviews, credit coaching and wellness rooms.[56]

Broader, crosscutting approaches show similar results.

- A program operated by **National Center For Youth Law (NCYL)** in Monterey County provides individualized support to homeless youth; participants achieved a 92.8% graduation rate, far surpassing the 59% rate of nonparticipants, along with gains in GPA, attendance and school stability.[57]
- A high-intensity mentoring program in **New Hampshire** high schools — combining one-on-one mentoring, application support and modest financial incentives — led to a 6-percentage-point increase in college enrollment, while lower-intensity interventions had no effect.[58]
- The **Bottom Line** model from Boston similarly improved bachelor's degree attainment for low-income, first-generation students by helping them select better-fitting colleges and providing ongoing advising.[59]
- **GEAR UP**, a comprehensive college-readiness initiative, significantly increased GPA, graduation rates, college enrollment, and persistence, while also narrowing racial and income-related gaps. Specific supports such as college visits and financial aid counseling yielded enrollment gains of up to 17 percentage points.[60]

Other models are also worth highlighting due to their use of public funding.

- In New York City, public funding supports the **Fair Futures** program, which provides individualized coaching and social-emotional, academic, career, housing and life skills support to young people from 6th grade to age 26 across all 26 NYC foster care agencies and the juvenile probation system. A 2024 report found that 85 percent of participants were engaged in an academic/career setting versus 62 percent prior to the program's launch. A comprehensive program evaluation by Chapin Hall is currently underway.[61]
- Colorado's **Educational Stability Grant** provides grants to LEAs to provide targeted academic and social-emotional services and supports for highly mobile students, including foster youth, homeless students and migrant students. While the program has not yet been rigorously evaluated, preliminary outcomes are promising and the program is unique in that it is a state-funded grant program.[62]

Other strategies that show promise when integrated with direct support include summer intensives,[63] assistance with FAFSA completion and conducting college visits.[64]

**Evaluating Bright Spots**

For more than a decade, foster youth have faced consistently poor educational outcomes. Yet some districts perform far better than others and these bright spots can illuminate what is possible when systems work.

Using California Department of Education data, the authors analyzed LEA performance on five outcomes: school stability, chronic absenteeism, five-year graduation rate, five-year A–G completion and 16-month college-going rate.[65] The review focused on LEAs enrolling 50 or more foster youth and assessed both absolute performance and the gap between foster youth and all students.[d]

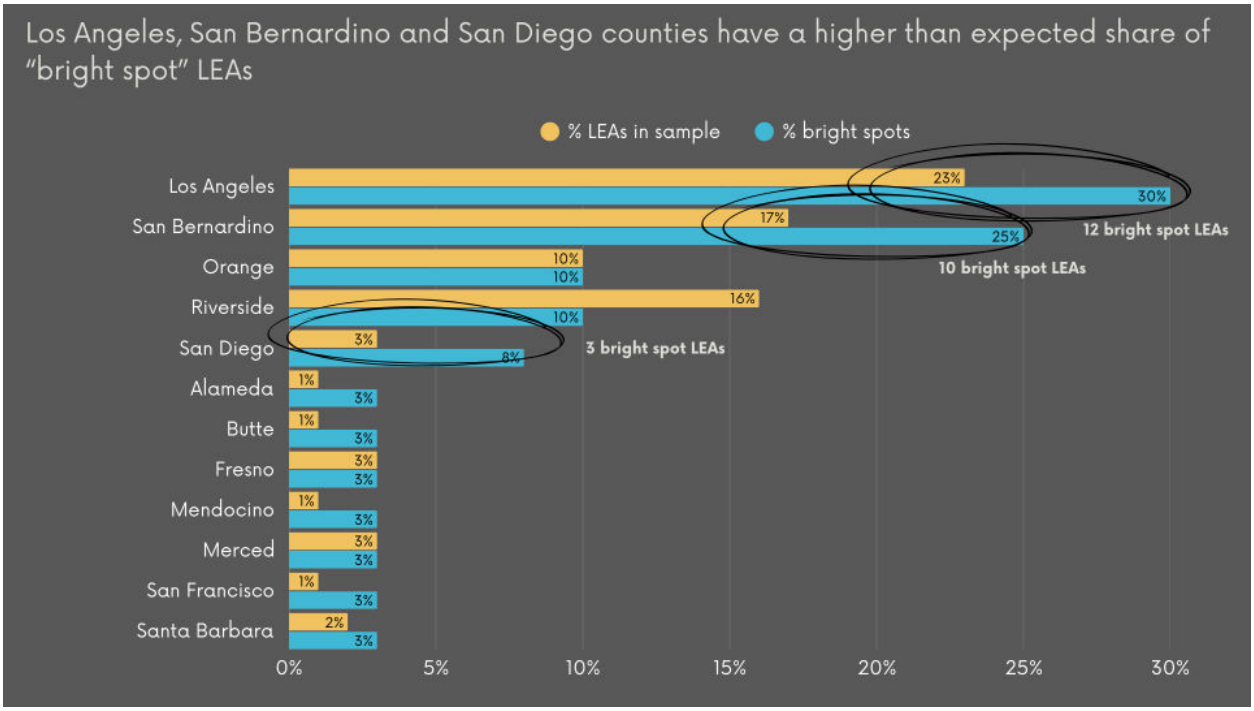
The findings are clear: outcomes for foster youth vary widely and some LEAs are achieving far stronger results (see figures in Appendix A). In each of the five outcome areas, the authors identified the 10 highest-performing LEAs. In total, 40 LEAs emerged as bright spots — 12 of which enrolled 200+ foster youth in 2024-25. These districts prove that better outcomes are possible and may point to strategies worth replicating. A review

[d] It is important to note that this exploratory exercise was not structured as a regression analysis and therefore does not include controls for student characteristics, school characteristics or other factors. See appendix for methodological notes.

of the LCAPs created by these LEAs and deeper examination of the strategies that they are prioritizing could provide a roadmap for scaling effective practices statewide.

Researchers also found that bright spot LEAs are concentrated in a handful of counties. Overall, 83% of bright spot LEAs are located in just five counties — Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside and San Diego. Notably, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and San Diego counties contain a disproportionate share of bright spots (see Figure 6 below). LEAs in Los Angeles County, for example, make up 23% of the sample but 30% of bright spots. The concentration of bright spot LEAs in only five counties and the disproportionate share of bright spots in three counties raises important questions about the relationships between FYSCP structures and strategies and district performance.

*Figure 6 - All LEAs and bright spot LEAs by county*



# Recommendations to Transform Systems and Scale What Works

Improving educational outcomes for foster youth requires more than a single solution. The challenges these young people face are complex and the systems designed to support them are equally intricate. The evidence points to a clear and promising path forward — a proven recipe for change that, if fully embraced, can make a meaningful difference.

In addition to the recommendations described below, changes that positively impact all students will likely benefit foster youth as well. Strategies such as improving instructional quality, implementing culturally responsive and inclusive instruction, reforming school discipline practices, strengthening early warning systems to identify and address learning gaps, expanding access to mental health and social-emotional supports and fostering strong family and community partnerships can all contribute to a more supportive educational environment. While such broad-based reforms are vital, an in-depth exploration of them is beyond the scope of this report and as such the recommendations below are limited to those targeted specifically for foster youth.

At the same time, issues that disproportionately affect foster youth, such as school discipline, attendance, and school climate, are also the focus of broader education advocacy efforts. Future opportunities may exist to align foster youth–specific advocacy with these wider initiatives, thereby amplifying impact and fostering more coordinated systems change.

While policy changes are an essential first step, their success depends on effective implementation, which requires adequate funding, robust and sustainable accountability systems and high-quality technical assistance. In addition, more information in certain areas could help better understand and craft effective approaches. As such, the recommendations that follow center on three key strategies:

- Broadening the field's understanding through additional research
- Expanding access to targeted supports for foster youth
- Strengthening accountability for the resources and benefits foster youth are guaranteed under current laws and systems

## Implement a Learning Agenda

While a growing body of research has documented the barriers foster youth face in the K–12 education system, significant gaps remain in understanding which strategies are most effective in improving educational outcomes for this population. These gaps hinder the development of evidence-based policies and programs tailored to the unique needs of students in foster care. This section outlines several priority areas where further research could help guide policy, practice, and investment aimed at improving outcomes for foster youth.

The authors recommend a learning agenda organized around four focal domains each with more narrowly focused areas of inquiry:

1) "Bright spots" and system innovations;
2) Roles, infrastructure and partnerships;
3) Persistent barriers to engagement and success and
4) Pathways to postsecondary readiness and success.

## 1. "Bright spots" and system innovations

California has invested heavily in reforms like LCFF, community schools and MTSS, yet results for foster youth remain uneven. Studying districts and programs with strong outcomes can surface effective practices and inform statewide strategy.

a. **Study district-level bright spots:** Given the wide variation in educational outcomes for foster youth across California school districts, as outlined earlier in this report, there is a clear opportunity to learn from "bright spots"—districts where foster youth are achieving stronger results. Research should examine these outlier districts in depth to uncover which policies, practices, staffing models and cross-system collaborations are driving success. Identifying the factors that distinguish higher-performing districts can surface scalable strategies and inform statewide guidance for improving outcomes for foster youth.

   The analysis also shows that foster youth are concentrated in a relatively small number of districts, with many of the largest-serving LEAs located in only a handful of counties. Preliminary research could therefore focus on these high-concentration areas. Moreover, while most LCAPs reviewed did not include robust interventions for foster youth, several offered especially strong approaches—and additional promising examples likely exist in LCAPs outside the scope of this analysis. Highlighting these LCAP "bright spots" could accelerate the identification and spread of effective practices.

   Finally, deeper study of districts already showing positive outcomes could provide further insights. For instance, Sweetwater Union High School District, noted earlier in this report, has implemented a program with demonstrated results. Comparing this effort to similar initiatives in other districts could generate a richer understanding of what works best and under what conditions. Another example is NCYL's education program in Monterey County for homeless students, which showed strong results that could be mined for greater understanding.

b. **Examine the impact of LCAPs**: As noted in the discussion above, just half of district LCAPs reviewed included targeted actions for foster youth and the actions included in those that did ranged considerably. While the majority of LCAPs reviewed did not show robust interventions for foster youth, several included extremely robust approaches and other strong examples likely exist within the LCAPs not included in the analysis. These LCAP "bright spots" could lead the way in the identification and spread of effective

practices to serve foster youth. Further investigation could produce additional learnings about each LEA's targeted actions and if/how the action(s) are situated within each district's context. It is also unknown whether LEAs are implementing activities targeted to foster youth that are not explicitly documented within their LCAPs. To better understand the full scope of LEA engagement, future research could also assess the extent to which such activities occur outside of the LCAP framework.

Districts could be monitored to determine if they are seeing success, and then successes could be documented and amplified so that other LEAs can replicate/adapt to their context. Outcomes could be compared to comparable districts without targeted activities to attend to gauge impact.

c. **Better understand the role of community schools:** As noted above, community schools serve a disproportionate share of foster youth, and yet little is known about how these schools address the needs of foster youth. Research could examine LCAPs to determine the degree to which these schools are employing targeted interventions as well as whether enrollment in a community school has an effect on foster youth student outcomes. Performance data could be compared between foster youth enrolled in community schools to those enrolled elsewhere to see if there are any noticeable differences in terms of engagement, academic performance, or college and career readiness.

d. **Further investigate role of CBOs and other support programs in providing targeted support**: Several community-based organizations provide programs that offer one-on-one support to foster youth to promote high school graduation and college enrollment. The Pre-College Collective reported promising results for these programs. Similar initiatives are also operated by public systems, but more rigorous evaluations are needed of both publicly and privately operated programs to fully assess their impact and to pinpoint the most effective design elements—such as the right mix of activities and appropriate staff caseload levels.

e. **Evaluate creative uses of MTSS**. As noted in the previous discussion, stakeholders interviewed for this report voiced concerns about whether MTSS adequately addresses the needs of small, high-need groups like foster youth. In Monterey County, the MTSS framework has been used to design an approach to addressing the needs of homeless students, but it is unknown if this approach has been replicated in other districts and no such model exists for foster youth. This model could be further evaluated to understand its impact and potentially make a case for widespread usage of similar approaches for foster youth.

## 2. Roles, infrastructure and partnerships

Foster youth often fall through the cracks when key roles, supports or protections are inconsistently implemented. Clarifying responsibilities, strengthening cross-system infrastructure and ensuring stronger partnerships can create the conditions for more reliable support.

a. **Clarify the role of district liaisons:** District foster youth liaisons, established under AB 490, are intended to serve as key points of contact to support the educational success of students in foster care. However, there is limited research on how this role is implemented across districts and the extent to which liaisons are equipped and empowered to fulfill their responsibilities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the scope and effectiveness of their work vary widely, depending on factors such as staffing capacity, training, district priorities and relationships with child welfare agencies. A deeper understanding of these variations, and how they influence student outcomes, is critical to strengthening the role of foster youth liaisons and ensuring that all students in care receive consistent, high-quality support.

b. **Document approaches to student transportation**: Transportation is a critical component of ensuring school stability for foster youth, particularly when students experience a placement change but wish to remain in their school of origin. While federal and state laws require child welfare and education agencies to collaborate on providing transportation, implementation varies widely, and there is limited research on how these arrangements function in practice. Each district and county often develops its own approach, leading to inconsistent access and confusion about roles, responsibilities, and funding mechanisms. Moreover, there is a lack of clarity around what tools and strategies are available to uphold not just the letter of the law, but its underlying intent—to minimize educational disruption for foster youth.

Research is needed to examine current practices, identify effective models and develop actionable recommendations to ensure that transportation is not a barrier to educational continuity. Such an analysis should differentiate strategies by county size (e.g., small, medium, and large) as the needs and feasible approaches are likely to vary across these contexts. Further, although school of origin transportation is an allowable expenditure within school transportation plans, the extent to which Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) utilize this option remains unclear. Additional research is needed to assess both the prevalence of its use and its effectiveness in supporting foster youth.

Finally, research in this area could help jurisdictions obtain clarity on the funding needed to fully comply with transportation mandates.

c. **Monitor enforcement of school stability protections:** Reducing school mobility is a key goal of state and federal laws designed to promote educational stability for students in foster care, yet little is known about how well these protections are being implemented in practice. While statutes require that foster youth remain in their school of origin unless a change is in their best interest, questions remain about the extent to which schools and child welfare agencies are following these mandates. Research is needed to examine where breakdowns are occurring — whether due to lack of awareness, insufficient coordination, logistical barriers or resource constraints — and how these breakdowns affect student outcomes. A clearer understanding of implementation gaps and promising practices could inform strategies to strengthen compliance and ensure that foster youth benefit from the educational stability these laws are intended to provide.

### 3. Persistent barriers to engagement and success

High rates of exclusionary discipline, chronic absenteeism and other factors continue to erode learning opportunities for foster youth. Targeted research can shine a light on these issues so policy makers and practitioners can effectively address these systemic barriers.

a. **Explore school discipline disparities:** As noted previously, over the past decade students in foster care have been three times more likely than their peers to be suspended, with roughly one in seven experiencing exclusionary discipline that reduces learning time. Additional research could help clarify the underlying causes of this disparity and identify effective strategies to decrease school discipline among foster youth. Further study could also contribute to improved coordination with broader education advocacy efforts focused on promoting fair and effective school discipline practices for all students. In addition, analyses of implementation across Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) could highlight variation in practice. Identifying LEAs with comparatively weaker compliance or less effective implementation may help to surface systemic challenges and encourage improvements, while also elevating promising practices from higher-performing LEAs.

   In addition, AB 740, enacted in 2022, requires that notice of school disciplinary actions be provided to a foster child's educational rights holder, attorney, and social worker.[66] Further research is warranted to determine the extent of implementation of this requirement and to assess whether it has produced measurable impacts.

b. **Deepen understanding of chronic absenteeism**: Chronic absenteeism is significantly more prevalent among students in foster care than their peers, yet little research has explored the underlying causes of — and potential remedies for reversing — this trend. Understanding why foster youth miss school at such high rates is essential, as frequent absences are closely linked to lower academic achievement, grade retention and

increased dropout risk. Factors such as placement instability, transportation barriers, mental health challenges and school climate may all contribute, but the relative impact of each remains unclear. Targeted research is needed to unpack these drivers and identify effective strategies to improve school attendance and, ultimately, educational outcomes for foster youth. Such research could also support stronger alignment with broader education advocacy initiatives aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism across all student populations.

c. **Better understand shifts in foster youth needs**: As noted previously, stakeholders interviewed for this report believe that the narrowing of the foster care population has contributed to an increase in the acuity level of those who remain in care. This perspective is supported by data showing that the proportion of students in foster care identified with a disability has grown more rapidly than among all students, with the gap widening significantly between the 2014–15 and 2022–23 academic years. Additional research could be conducted to further unpack this trend and learn more about how the foster care population has shifted over time.

## 4. Pathways to postsecondary readiness and success

Graduation rates for foster youth are improving, but questions remain about whether these gains translate into genuine readiness for college and career. Examining trends and policies such as graduation exemptions can clarify how best to prepare students for long-term success.

a. **Unpack trends in graduation rate:** In recent years, graduation rates for students in foster care have shown encouraging improvement, suggesting the potential impact of increased attention and support for this population. However, it remains unclear what is driving this progress. Further research is needed to determine whether the gains reflect genuine improvements in academic achievement and school engagement, or if they are largely the result of greater use of graduation requirement exemptions.

In addition, it could be instructive to assess whether these improvements are concentrated in certain districts or represent a broader, statewide trend and to investigate if higher graduation rates are also leading to increases in "downstream" outcomes like college enrollment, college completion and/or employment in a living wage career. Understanding the factors behind rising graduation rates is essential to building on what's working and ensuring that foster youth are graduating not only in greater numbers, but with the skills and preparation needed for future success.

b. **Understand the implications of alternative graduation pathways:** For students who are unable to graduate high school within a four-year time frame, various options exist for them to obtain a high school diploma. For example, the student may be eligible to remain enrolled for a fifth year, may shift to an alternative or adult school, may enroll in independent study or may utilize options for graduating under state standards rather than meet the graduation requirement for their school. Understanding the implications of these choices, both on graduation rates and college enrollment could help to both better understand and guide this decision making process.

   As noted previously, in 2023-24, 15.7 percent of foster youth students graduated with an exemption from local graduation requirements compared to 1.7 percent of non-foster students.[67] A closer examination of this policy in particular is warranted to assess both its intended and unintended consequences. Key questions include how the exemption affects students' long-term trajectories relative to their peers, whether those who use it enroll and persist in postsecondary education and training at similar rates, and what the broader implications are for student success. Further research could also examine how implementation varies across districts and regions, and how those differences shape outcomes for foster youth statewide.

c. **Understand the impact of immediate enrollment on foster youth postsecondary outcomes.** Research has demonstrated that delaying enrollment into college significantly lowers the probability of earning a postsecondary credential.[68] This is contradictory to the perception of professionals interviewed for this report, who believed the opposite to be true for foster youth. Future research should examine the relationship between the timing of college entry and persistence and completion for foster youth. Such studies could help determine whether policies that encourage immediate enrollment are likely to be effective in promoting postsecondary success.

## Expand Access to Targeted Supports for Foster Youth

As discussed earlier in this report, evidence-based interventions consistently emphasize the importance of customized, one-on-one support for foster youth. Expanding this type of support is essential to making meaningful progress in improving outcomes for this population. To achieve this objective, three changes to state policy are recommended. Though each one is valuable on its own, the authors feel they will be most effective when implemented together.

a. **“De-duplicate” foster youth in LCFF:** As described earlier, school districts in California receive additional funding based on the number of students who are low-income, English language learners or in foster care. These students are collectively referred to as “unduplicated pupils,” meaning they are counted only once even if they belong to more than one category. Because foster youth are automatically classified as low-income, districts do not receive additional funding specifically to address their unique needs — despite substantial evidence that foster youth require significantly more support than their low-income peers.

To address this gap, California could revise the funding formula to provide supplemental funds based on the number of foster youth enrolled in each district. This new funding should be attached to a requirement that it be used explicitly for services that uniquely support foster youth. This could include using funding to carve out dedicated staff time for district foster youth liaisons, a position which is required by law, but unfunded, as well as establishing school site liaisons if warranted by foster youth enrollment. This aligns with recommendations issued by the California Department of Education in its 2024 report on foster youth services.[69] In addition, a list of allowable uses could be defined to ensure that funds are directed toward evidence-based approaches. Allowable uses could also include direct transportation costs to maintain youth in their school of origin, as these costs currently pose a significant barrier to school stability.

In districts where the foster youth population is too small to support a dedicated intervention, funding could be pooled and allocated to the County Office of Education’s Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program. This would allow for countywide services to be provided to students who may otherwise fall through the cracks due to low district-level numbers.

A common argument against de-duplication is that it would be too costly. However, a preliminary analysis conducted by the authors suggests that this is not the case. According to CalPADS data, 27,437 foster youth were enrolled in California’s public schools during the 2024–25 school year. The state provides approximately $11,000 per student in base funding, plus an additional 20% — about $2,200 — for each unduplicated pupil. If foster youth were “de-duplicated” and received their own supplemental allocation, it would require an estimated $60 million per year — just 0.06% of total Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) spending.

This investment is both justified and necessary. Foster youth consistently experience worse educational outcomes than any other student group, including those who are low-income or part of other special populations. In addition, the state holds a unique

responsibility for foster youth — not just as an educational provider, but as their legal parent. This role carries a higher duty of care and demands a more intentional, targeted investment to meet their needs. Finally, an investment of this scale made directly in the success of foster youth statewide could be viewed as a preventative measure that helps avoid other costs borne by the state under the status quo (e.g., costs associated with unemployment, health care, youth incarceration, etc.)

b. **Fund targeted case management:** Recent reports have cited the need for the state to identify funding to support targeted case management programs focused on high school graduation and postsecondary planning and transition for foster youth.[70] California could begin by prioritizing funding for a pilot program focused on districts or counties with the greatest number of foster youth to develop the program. Funding could also be allocated to rigorously evaluate this program so that effective practices can be identified for statewide scaling.

While every LEA in California is required to designate a staff member to serve as a foster youth liaison there is no funding attached to this mandate. As a result, these individuals' ability to serve students is extremely limited. Where they exist, services designed to focus on the unique needs of foster youth are typically provided by community based organizations rather than schools or districts. Only a handful of counties, however, have providers who offer this type of targeted support. In addition, existing providers do not have capacity to serve all foster youth students and sustaining funding for this work can be challenging.[71]

If the state were to move forward with this, parameters should be established for eligibility for program participation and how funds are used. Based on current research and identified best practices this could include the following:

Program Structure

- Funding would be provided to FYSCPs that could in turn either operate direct support programs or subcontract with community-based providers, local school districts or other appropriate entities based on local needs.

- FYSCPs would be responsible for cultivating countywide partnerships and maximizing collaboration across systems.
- Services should be delivered in person at school sites supplemented by other communication methods as needed.
- Legislation governing the program should include provisions to ensure that funded programs have access to all necessary student-level data.
- Programs should utilize an “opt-out” model to reduce application barriers and self-selection bias.

Eligibility

- Depending on funding availability, programs could begin as early as middle school or could target foster youth enrolled in high school.
- Students who exit the foster care system while enrolled in the program shall be eligible to continue to receive services.
- Bridge services shall remain available up to one year post high school graduation to support successful transition to postsecondary education and training.

Services

- Funded programs shall provide individualized, frequent, and trauma-informed support using engagement models that are strengths-based, youth-centered and data-driven.
- Programs should center cross-system collaboration and the creation of consistent and trusting relationships with supportive adults.
- Services available shall include educational support, postsecondary planning, career exploration, Social/Emotional Learning, community building activities and support to address administrative and financial barriers to high school graduation and college enrollment.[72]

c. **Strengthen support for foster youth attending community schools.** The state’s largest investment into K-12 education beyond LCFF is the $4.5 billion investment in community schools. As noted above, community schools now serve 33 percent of all foster youth in the state. This presents an opportunity to better leverage this resource to ensure that these schools are adequately meeting the needs of these students.

   There are currently no requirements in place to ensure that these schools have the expertise to address the complex and unique needs of foster youth. Requirements related to community schools could be updated to better meet the needs of foster youth by requiring that any school with a significant number of foster youth, defined by California Education Code § 52052 as at least 15 students, provide programming specific to this population. Based on school enrollment for the 2024-25 school year, an estimated 99 of the current 2470 schools that have received community schools implementation grants (about 4 percent) would meet this threshold.

In addition, all community schools could be required at a minimum to identify a school-site foster youth liaison, maintain regular contact with the local child welfare agency and receive training on the laws that govern foster youth educational rights and the needs of these students. The FYSCPs could be tapped to work in collaboration with County Office of Education divisions that provide technical assistance to community schools to provide this training. Similar requirements could also be put in place for homeless students, another population with specific rights and a high level of need that is often overlooked.

d. **CDE should develop a plan to support LEAs to better leverage Medicaid funding to serve foster youth and other student groups**: The implementation of CalAIM has created new opportunities for schools and community partners to use federal Medicaid funding (known as Medi-Cal in California) to support students directly at school sites. Service providers can now bill for roles such as peer support specialists, community health workers and wellness coaches, which align closely with services offered in school-based wellness centers. CalAIM also authorizes Community Supports — non-medical, cost-effective alternatives to traditional Medi-Cal services — including housing navigation and day habilitation, which help youth build the skills needed to succeed in community settings.

On the Move, an organization partnering with schools in Napa, Sonoma and Solano counties, has been an early adopter of this model and is developing a toolkit to document their approach. Establishing systems to help other schools replicate this strategy could expand access to services for foster youth and other high-need students. Moreover, leveraging Medi-Cal in this way offers promise beyond foster youth: for example, Medi-Cal could provide a pathway for community schools to sustain services currently reliant on one-time state funding.

## Strengthen Accountability

While many rights and benefits currently exist in state law for foster youth, implementation of these rights is not consistent. Additional accountability mechanisms are necessary to help ensure that foster youth are receiving the rights and benefits to which they are entitled. This should include the following changes:

a. **Strengthen LCAP requirements.** The current LCAP (Local Control and Accountability Plan) template covers a three-year cycle that began in the 2024–25 academic year. A

new template will take effect starting in 2026–27. As detailed earlier in this report, recent changes intended to improve accountability for student groups underperforming on outcome metrics have not effectively ensured that foster youth are meaningfully and consistently addressed in district LCAPs. This highlights the need for stronger accountability measures.

To that end, state statute could be revised to require consultation with district foster youth liaisons during the development of LCAPs, as well as consultation with Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCPs) on activities related to foster youth outcomes. Additional resources would be required to ensure that FYSCPs had the capacity to take on this responsibility. In addition, districts with more than 15 foster youth enrolled — and in which foster youth fall into the lowest performance level on at least one state accountability metric — could be required to identify specific minimum spending on targeted interventions for this population. CDE (and/or other groups) could also provide LEAs with a menu of validated best practices from which they can choose, minimizing the need for LEAs to develop interventions from scratch and promoting the use of evidence-based strategies and cross-district collaboration.

b. **Require identification of Education Rights Holders (ERH) in data systems**. Welfare and Institutions Code 16010 currently makes inclusion of ERH information optional. New requirements could be put in place that require child welfare agencies to identify the educational rights holder for each school aged foster youth in the health and education passport and update this information as needed at least every six months.

   Once this change is adopted, California's new child welfare data system — the California Automated Response and Engagement System (CARES), currently under development — could be leveraged to strengthen accountability. For example, when a record is created, the worker could indicate that the ERH is the biological parent (the default unless a court appoints an alternative). The ERH data field could then be directly linked to the biological parent field, reducing the need for duplicate data entry. A reminder could also be triggered when a youth turns 18 to update the ERH to the student themselves unless otherwise precluded.

c. **Create more accountability for existing policies.** There are currently limited accountability mechanisms in place to ensure that existing education rights are enforced

for children and youth in foster care. Educational agencies, child welfare agencies and court appointed ERHs all have specific legal obligations related to school stability.[73]

When school changes occur, however, there is no mechanism for ensuring that each party fulfilled its obligation or understanding the basis for decisions that were made. Increasing transparency around these practices would not only promote greater compliance but would also generate valuable insights to inform future policy development.

- Adopt legislation such that when a school change occurs, case workers are required to document the reason for the change, who was involved in the decision (including confirmation that the ERH consented) and how the decision was made. CARES could be leveraged to create a tool that both facilitates the BID process and strengthens accountability. Additionally, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) could be required to compile and publicly report this data, disaggregated by county, at specified intervals to increase transparency and accountability.
- CDSS and county child welfare agencies could leverage new data systems to track compliance with existing requirements to identify a postsecondary support person for all youth over age 16 in the youth's case plan. Additionally, the legislature could require CDSS to compile and publicly report this data, disaggregated by county, at specified intervals to increase transparency and accountability.

d. **Enhance data systems to better support student identification, service delivery and interagency coordination.** In addition to items (b) and (c) above, CDSS could configure CARES to automatically integrate school change updates from CalPADS to streamline data management and reduce the burden on social workers to manually enter this information.

   In addition, LEAs could configure their Student Information Systems (SIS) to generate alerts related to school enrollment, student performance, and transitions. For example, an automatic trigger could notify designated staff, such as AB 490 Liaisons or counselors, after three consecutive absences or upon the disenrollment of a foster youth. This could prompt staff to investigate the student's status, consult with the ERH as to whether a BID should be considered and if a transfer has occurred, ensure timely transfer of records and implementation of partial credit protocols.

e. **Implement robust data availability in the new Cradle to Career data system.** The rollout of the new Cradle to Career data system, which links data across K-12 and postsecondary educational systems along with workforce data presents an opportunity for gaining a better understanding of foster youth educational trajectories. The C2C platform should include robust integration of foster youth data into, including information

on educational attainment, transitions into and through college, workforce participation, and related patterns. This will enable policymakers, practitioners, and advocates to better understand trajectories, identify disparities, and design targeted interventions to improve long-term outcomes for foster youth.

f. **Strengthen child welfare engagement in foster youth education.** Child welfare systems could expand their focus on educational success, defining it as a core responsibility alongside safety and permanency, recognizing that strong academic outcomes are critical to long-term stability and well-being for youth in foster care. Approaches could include more intentional integration of education into case planning, strengthening collaboration with education partners, training staff to advocate for educational rights and supports, and tracking outcomes to drive improvement.

g. **Expand the Child Welfare Council's role in education.** California's Child Welfare Council (CWC) is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the extent to which child welfare and foster care programs and the courts are responsive to the needs of children in their joint care.[74] The Council has been instrumental in elevating issues such as prevention and early intervention, permanency and addressing the needs of victims of commercial sexual exploitation. The CWC could form an ad hoc committee focused on improving educational outcomes for foster youth that could develop and implement specific recommendations and act as a statewide oversight body to monitor progress and ensure CDE, FYSCPs, LEAs and other stakeholders address areas where improvement is needed.

# Role of Philanthropy

Philanthropic organizations can be key partners in moving this work forward and supporting the work to improve better outcomes for foster youth. This could include:

**Supporting future learning:** Funding for research—particularly in areas related to equity initiatives—is steadily diminishing, leaving critical gaps in knowledge that directly affect the ability of policymakers, practitioners, and communities to make informed decisions. This is a key area where philanthropy can play an essential role. By providing flexible, mission-driven funding, philanthropy can ensure that research such as the potential projects described in this report has the resources to move forward. Philanthropic investment not only sustains the research itself, but also allows for deeper engagement with affected communities, supports dissemination strategies that reach practitioners and policymakers, and helps bridge the gap between evidence and action. In doing so, philanthropy can catalyze innovation, amplify underrepresented voices, and ensure that equity remains at the center of research agendas.

**Supporting policy change:** Implementing the policy changes described above would be a significant undertaking, likely requiring a multi-year effort and the collaboration of multiple advocacy organizations. Philanthropy could play a key role by convening interested advocacy

groups to develop a coordinated strategy and by funding advocacy organizations to lead or partner in the work. A partner or consultant with significant policy expertise would likely need to be engaged by philanthropy to help to facilitate this effort.

**Supporting pilot programs:** philanthropy could support pilot projects in regions with limited existing capacity, to refine the proposed models and build infrastructure in areas where proposed services are not yet available. For example, while programs for high school aged foster youth have been fairly robustly implemented in certain communities with a strong provider base, such as Los Angeles and San Diego Counties, other regions of the state would be building the infrastructure from scratch and support from philanthropy could help to position these regions to maximize future potential state funding.

Other possible investment opportunities could include supporting pilot projects to implement suggested policy changes to develop a case for widescale implementation. For example, funding could support a subset of districts to include their foster youth liaison in the LCAP review process and collaborate with their FYSCP.

# Conclusion

The findings in this report make clear that while California has taken important steps to strengthen protections, expand resources, and invest in systemic reforms, the educational outcomes of foster youth remain far behind those of their peers. The evidence shows that these disparities are not the result of lack of potential, but of structural shortcomings in funding, accountability, and implementation. At the same time, bright spots across the state and in other jurisdictions demonstrate that better outcomes are possible when supports are targeted, relationships are prioritized, and systems are designed with the unique needs of foster youth at the center.

Moving forward, the task is to transform how education, child welfare, and community systems work together to support students in care. This means ensuring that funding formulas recognize the distinct needs of foster youth, that accountability systems track and enforce the rights already guaranteed to them, and that research and practice continue to surface and scale the strategies that work. It also means recognizing the state's heightened responsibility as the legal

parent of these children—an obligation that demands more intentional, consistent, and sustained action.

Despite the challenges, there is reason for hope. California has built a foundation of policies and initiatives that, if strengthened and better aligned, can deliver meaningful change. Stakeholders across education, child welfare, philanthropy, and advocacy are increasingly united in their commitment to this work. With strategic investment, stronger accountability, and a focus on scaling effective models, the state can close long-standing gaps and create a system where foster youth are not the exception, but a leading example of what is possible when all students are given the opportunity to thrive.

# Appendices

## Appendix A - Research questions to guide the learning agenda

| Item | Potential Research Question/s |
|---|---|
| **1. Bright Spots and System Innovations** | |
| a. Study district-level bright spots | Which LEAs demonstrate better than expected outcomes for foster youth (i.e., bright spot LEAs) when controlling for a range of factors?<br><br>What policies, practices, staffing models, cross-system collaborations (including partnerships with CBOs) and other factors or conditions distinguish LEAs where foster youth outcomes are strongest and what specific challenges and successes do these programs experience? |
| b. Examine the impact of LCAPs | To what extent do LEAs that include foster youth-specific actions in their LCAPs achieve better outcomes than comparable LEAs without such actions?<br><br>Does the level of investment dedicated to foster youth-specific activities in LCAPs correlate with differences in outcomes?<br><br>To what extent are activities targeted to foster youth occurring outside of the LCAP framework? |

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| c. Better understand the role of community schools | Does enrollment in a community school affect foster youth outcomes compared to peers in non-community schools?<br><br>What interventions within community schools most effectively meet foster youth needs?<br><br>To what extent are districts leveraging community schools to address the needs of foster youth? |
| d. Further investigate role of college preparation programs in providing targeted support | Which college preparation program elements (e.g., caseload levels, staffing models) are most strongly associated with improved outcomes for foster youth?<br><br>How can partnerships between programs operated by CBOs and schools/LEAs be structured to maximize reach and impact?<br><br>Are there any promising models that could be replicated or scaled up? |
| e. Evaluate creative uses of MTSS | In what ways has MTSS been utilized to meet the needs of foster youth and with what results?<br><br>Do any of the bright spot districts use MTSS? If so, if/how does that facilitate timely support of foster youth?<br><br>What is the role of MTSS in supporting the needs of foster youth? |
| **2. Roles, Infrastructure, and Partnerships** | |
| a. Clarify the role of district liaisons | What types of tasks do foster youth liaisons typically take on?<br><br>How do foster youth liaison roles, training and authority vary across LEAs, for example variations in responsibilities, number of hours allotted, ratio to foster youth, etc.? |

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| | Where is the foster youth liaison role situated within the broader school, district, and support services structure, and in what ways does this placement vary across LEAs?<br><br>Are there any correlations between how foster youth liaison responsibilities are implemented and foster youth outcomes? |
| b. Document approaches to student transportation | How is transportation currently being provided to support foster youth (e.g., who provides the transportation services, where does funding come from)?<br><br>What are the successes and challenges in providing transportation?<br><br>What models of collaboration and funding for transportation most effectively ensure school stability for foster youth?<br><br>To what degree are LEAs leveraging state matching funds for school of origin transportation.<br><br>What additional funding or other resources would be needed to effectively address foster youth transportation needs? |
| c. Monitor enforcement of school stability protections | To what extent are existing school stability protections being implemented and where are breakdowns occurring?<br><br>What are the successes and challenges in local practices?<br><br>What strategies or accountability mechanisms are most effective in ensuring compliance with requirements? |
| **3. Persistent Barriers to Engagement and Success** | |

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| a. Explore school discipline disparities | What factors contribute to disproportionately high suspension rates among foster youth and how do these vary across districts or school types?<br><br>Which alternative approaches show the strongest promise for reducing disparities and maintaining learning time for foster youth?<br><br>Has implementation of AB 740's school-discipline notice requirements improved outcomes for students in foster care? |
| b. Deepen understanding of chronic absenteeism | What are the primary drivers of chronic absenteeism among foster youth and how do their relative impacts vary in the post-pandemic context (e.g., placement instability, transportation challenges, school climate, mental health, absences due to court hearings and other child welfare related appointments)?<br><br>Which interventions most effectively reduce chronic absence for foster youth? |
| c. Better understand shifts in foster youth needs | How has the foster youth population shifted over the past decade with respect to acuity and the depth of service needs?<br><br>What factors have contributed to changes in the level of acuity and depth of service needs among foster youth over the past decade? |
| **4. Pathways to Postsecondary Readiness and Success** | |
| a. Unpack trends in graduation rate | What factors are driving recent improvements in foster youth graduation rates? |

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| | Do districts with rising graduation rates also show stronger outcomes in college enrollment, persistence, career readiness and long-term employment outcomes? |
| b. Understand the implications of alternative graduation pathways | What factors influence decisions about whether a foster youth who is not on track to graduate in four years remains enrolled for a fifth year, or instead pursues options such as graduation exemptions, alternative education, independent study, or adult education programs?<br><br>How do graduation rates and college enrollment and attainment outcomes differ for foster youth who remain enrolled in high school for a fifth year compared to those who utilize graduation exemptions, alternative education, independent study or adult education pathways?<br><br>How does implementation of graduation exemptions vary across LEAs and what are the equity implications of those differences?<br><br>How do graduation exemptions affect foster youth's postsecondary enrollment, persistence and employment compared to peers who graduate without exemptions? |
| c. Understand impact of enrollment timing on postsecondary persistence and completion | What is the effect of enrolling in postsecondary education immediately after high school on persistence and completion outcomes, relative to delayed enrollment? |

# Appendix B - Research methodology

## LCAP compliance analysis

For this analysis, the authors first determined which LEAs had one or more red performance indicators for foster youth in 2023 and were therefore required under SB 114 to include at least one action focused on foster youth in their 2024-25 LCAP. To do this, they downloaded the LEA level LCAP Required Actions List, which, "identifies the LEAs (District Non-Charter and Charter Schools) that have a red performance indicator for at least one of the 13 Non-ALL student groups in at least one of the statewide indicators (ELA Academic, Math Academic, Chronic Absenteeism, English Learner Progress, Graduation Rate, Suspension Rate) OR a 'very low' performance indicator for the College/Career Indicator, based on the 2023 Dashboard."[75]

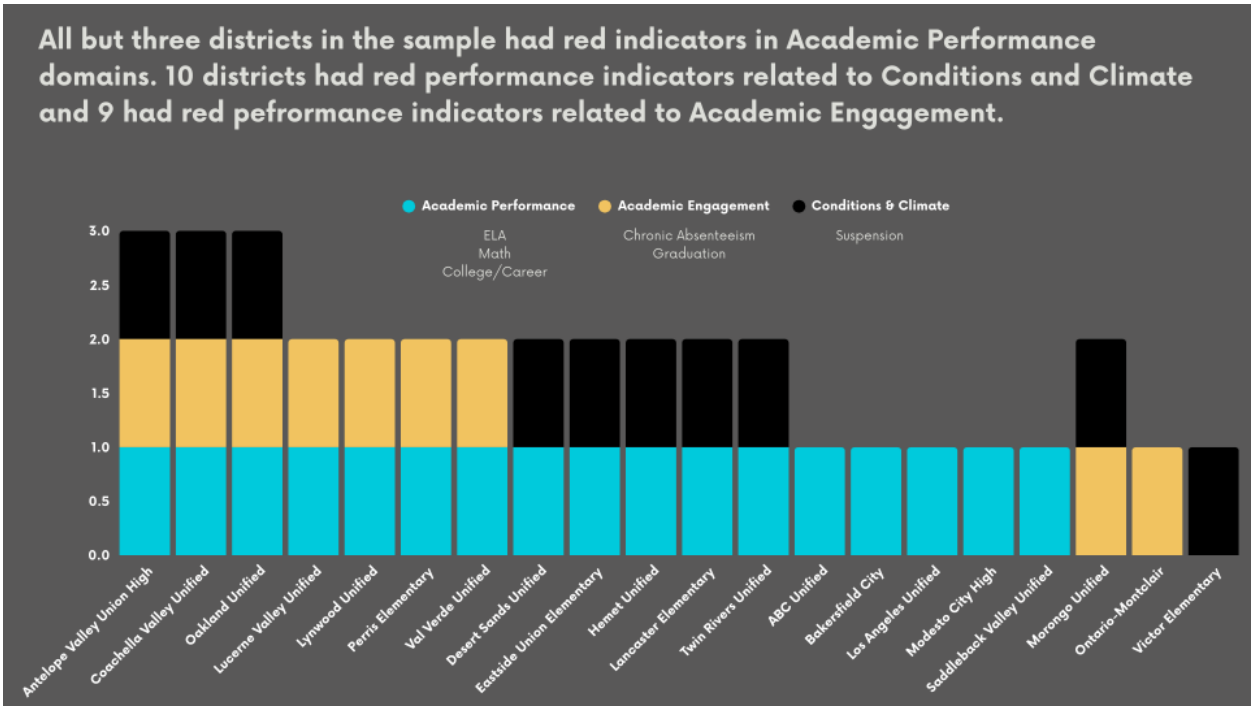
This list was merged with CALPADS enrollment data for the 120 LEAs that enroll 50+ foster youth.[76] Performance data was available for a total of 109 of the 120 LEAs and the analysis proceeded with a focus on these 109 LEAs.

Next, the authors drew a random sample of 20 LEAs from the list of 109 LEAs. Authors downloaded the LCAP for each of the 20 LEAs in the sample and reviewed the LCAP using the following review methodology:

- First, the authors reviewed the "Limited Actions" section of each LCAP to look for limited actions specifically targeted at (1) foster youth and/or (2) foster youth and homeless students
- Second, they reviewed the "2024-25 Total Planned Expenditures" table to identify any actions that name foster youth or foster and homeless youth as the focal student group. Note: if an action included foster youth along with the other two unduplicated student groups (i.e., English Learners and low-income students) it was disregarded. In cases where LEAs named foster and low-income students and the action description sounded applicable, actions were given a further review.
- If foster youth were called out in the "Limited Actions" section and/or the "2024-25 Total Planned Expenditures" table, the authors reviewed the relevant actions documenting the action description and amount invested in these actions.
- If foster youth were not called out in either of these sections, the authors performed a key word search for foster youth to determine if there may be an action focused on this group that was somehow miscategorized.

The authors catalogued relevant actions and associated data in a spreadsheet and used this to complete the analysis included in this report.

*Figure A1 - Red performance indicators by type amongst the 20 LEAs included in the LCAP review*




## Community schools analysis

For this analysis, the authors queried the CDE Funding Results page for funding results related to CCSPP (key word “community school”) prioritizing grants related to the four rounds of implementation grant funding that have been awarded as of September 2025. While this query yielded useful data related to investment amount and LEAs that received CCSPP grants, it did not include a list of schools who were the ultimate recipients of these grants.

To get school level data, the authors searched the State Board of Education website to find previous meetings where CCSPP implementation grants were on the agenda (one example is the May 2022 meeting). Authors tracked down relevant attachments for these meetings including MS Word documents that list school recipients along with their School Site CDS (County-District-School) Code. The authors extracted CCSPP school site information, compiled it into a .csv file and merged it with CALPADS 2024-25 enrollment data using CDS as the matching key to create an analysis file.

*CCSPP investments included in the analysis*

| Year | Announced | Type | About | LEA List | Amount |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2021-22 | August 10, 2022 | Implementation | Proposed funding results for fiscal year 2021-22 for the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) Implementation Grant. | LINK | $38,200,122 |
| 2023-24 | October 3, 2023 | Implementation | Proposed funding results for the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) Implementation Grant Cohort 2 | LINK | $749,312,500 |
| 2023-24 | October 28, 2024 | Implementation | Proposed funding results for Cohort 3 of the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) Implementation Grant | LINK | $1,298,063,500 |
| 2025-30 | May 7, 2025 | Implementation | Proposed funding results for Cohort 4 of the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) Implementation Grant. | LINK | $618,214,000 |

## Outlier analysis

For this analysis, the authors downloaded the most recent enrollment and outcomes data for all LEAs in the state from the following sources:

- Enrollment: CALPADS UPC Source File (TK/K–12) - LEA level data (2024-25)
- Stability rate: CDE - Stability Rate Data (2023-24)
- Chronic Absenteeism Rate: CDE - Chronic Absenteeism Data (2023-24)
- Graduation Rate: CDE - Five-Year Cohort Graduation Rate and Outcome Data (2023-24)
- A-G Graduation Rate: CDE - Five-Year Cohort Graduation Rate and Outcome Data (2023-24)
- College-Going Rate: CDE - College-Going Rate for HS Completers (16-month) (2021-22)

The authors cleaned and merged data from these sources and narrowed the sample to the 120 LEAs that enrolled 50+ foster youth in 2024-25. The authors then created a scatter plot for each outcome area using absolute performance of foster youth as the y-axis and difference between foster youth and all students as the x-axis. Finally, the authors inspected the scatter plot outputs to identify 10 LEAs as bright spots for each outcome area.

The authors acknowledge that 10 bright spots was an arbitrary number and that other LEAs have performance levels that are similar to those of the LEAs that are called out as bright spots.

The primary goal of this analysis was to understand the level of current variation. Future analyses can build on this exploratory research with methods that control for student, school and/or district characteristics to establish a more rigorous way to identify bright spot LEAs.

**Variation by LEA on five outcomes**

*Figure A2 - Variation in stability rate by LEA*

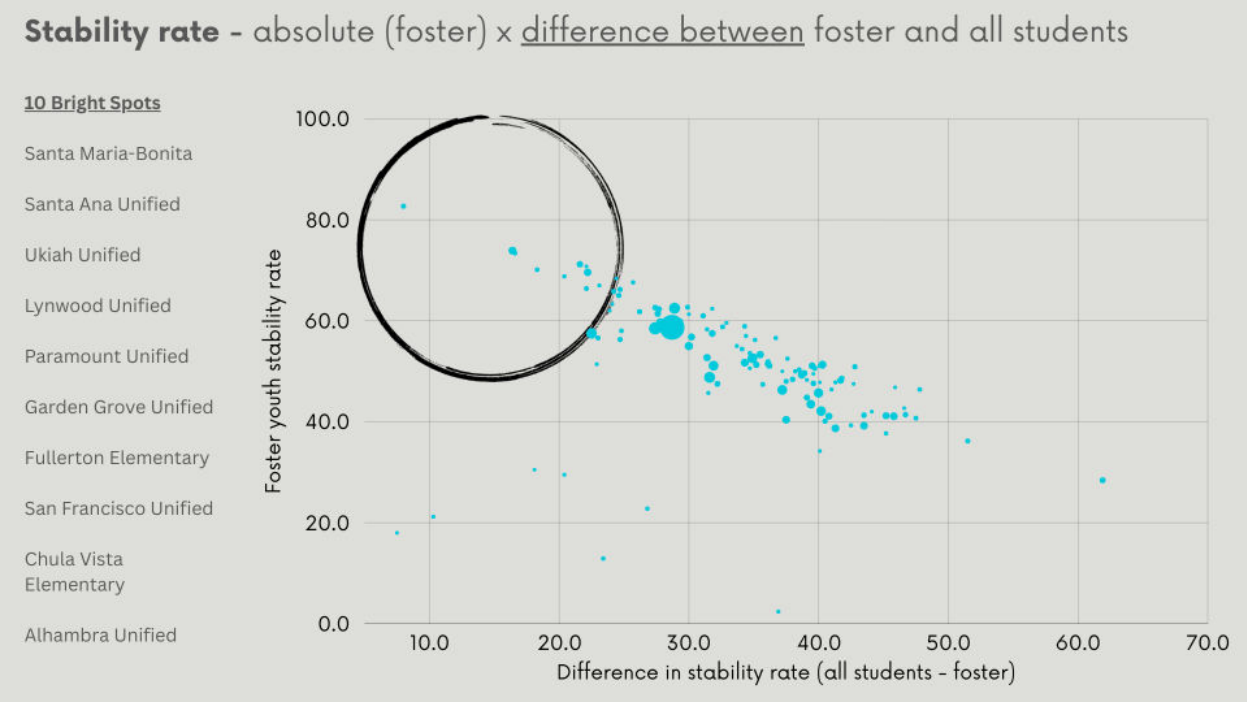


*Figure A3 - Variation in chronic absenteeism by LEA*

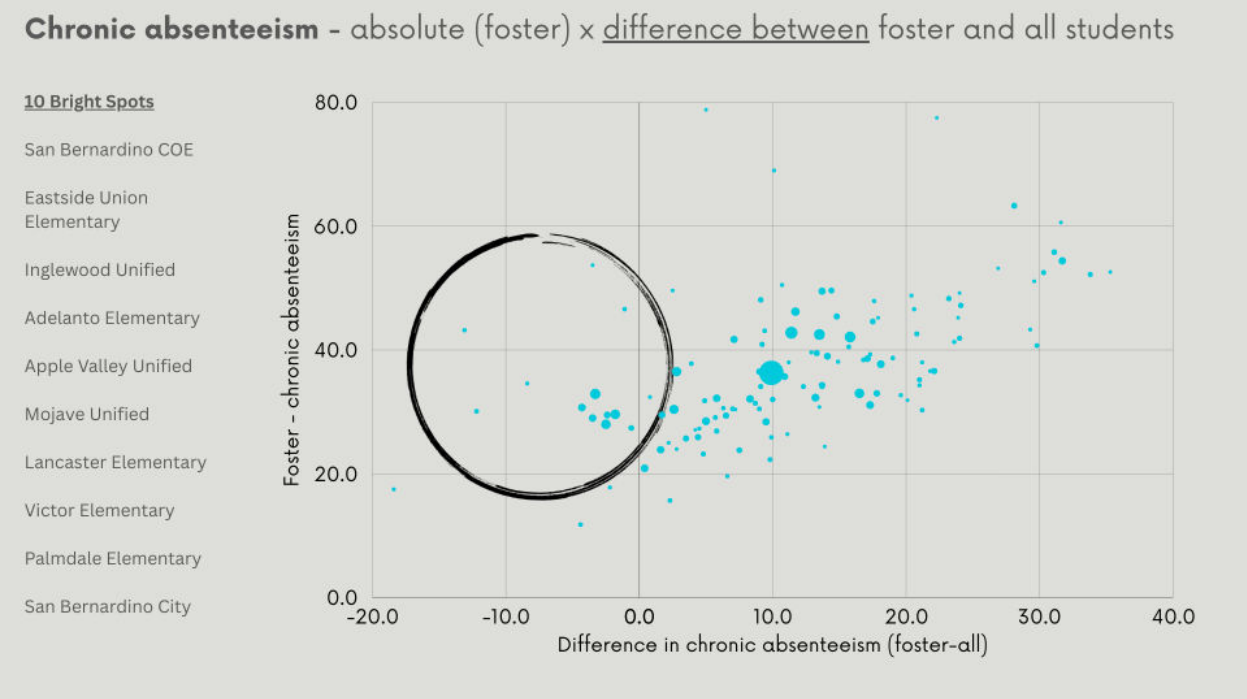



*Figure A4 - Variation in 5-year graduation rate by LEA*

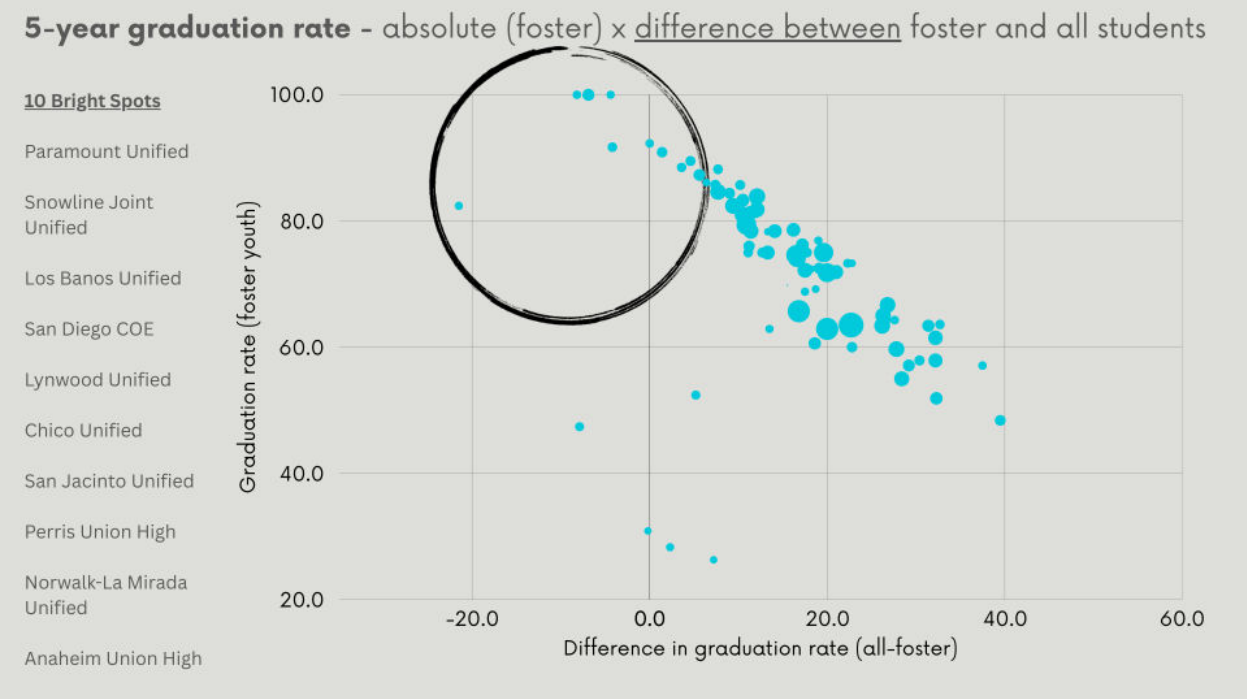


*Figure A5 - Variation in 5-year A-G graduation rate by LEA*

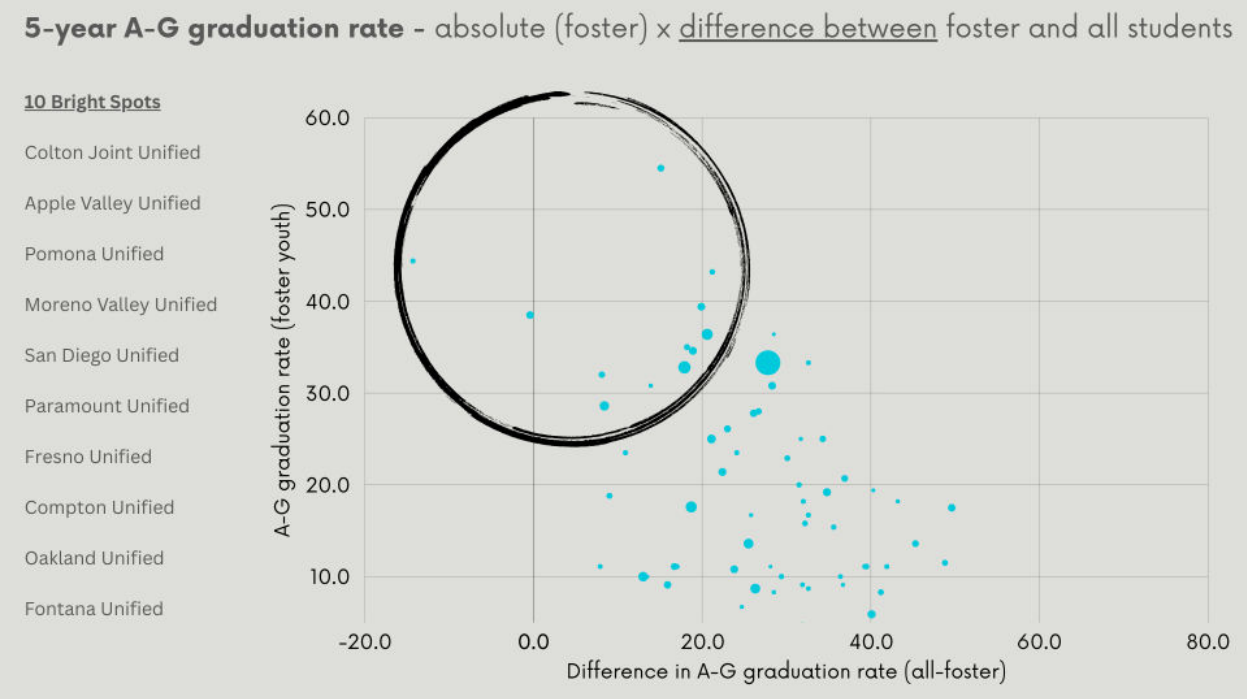
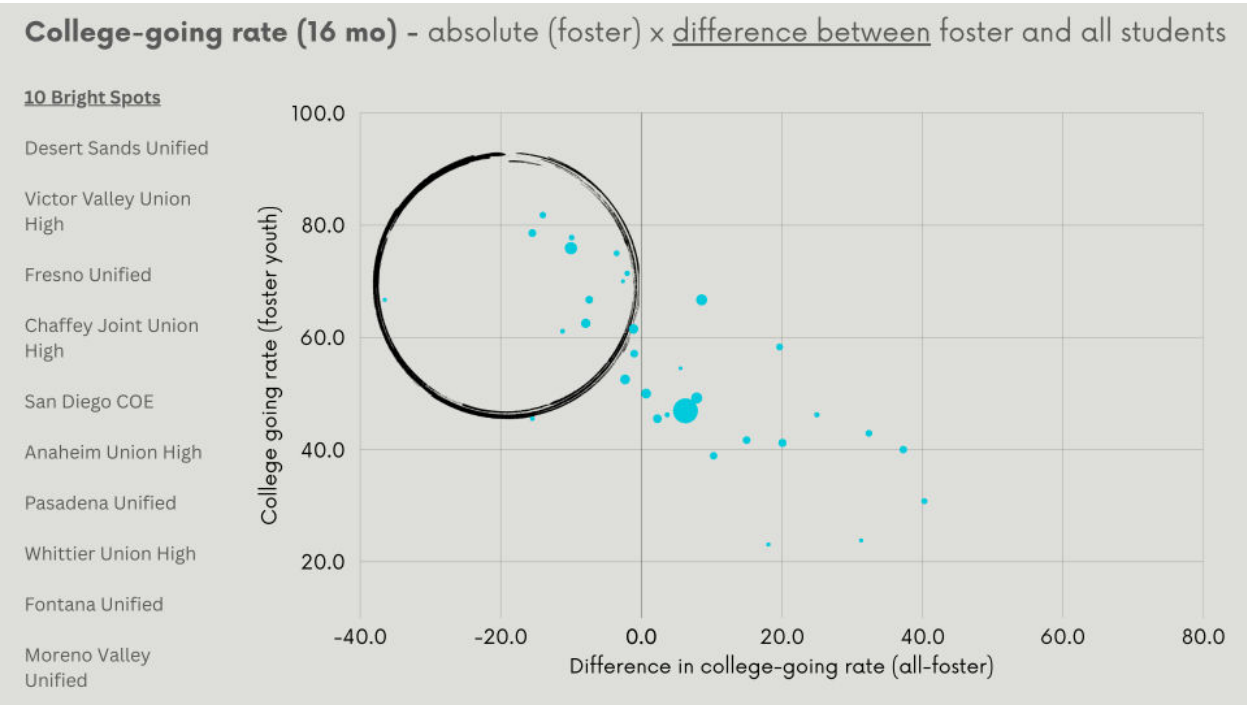



*Figure A6 - Variation in 16-month college-going rate by LEA*



Full list of bright spot LEAs and 2024-25 foster youth enrollment

| District Name | 2024-25 foster youth enrollment |
|---|---|
| Fresno Unified | 541 |
| Lancaster Elementary | 396 |
| San Bernardino City Unified | 342 |
| Palmdale Elementary | 340 |
| Moreno Valley Unified | 315 |
| Santa Ana Unified | 226 |
| Adelanto Elementary | 224 |
| Compton Unified | 224 |
| Victor Valley Union High | 221 |
| Fontana Unified | 216 |
| Apple Valley Unified | 213 |
| San Francisco Unified | 205 |
| Victor Elementary | 179 |
| San Diego Unified | 173 |
| Pomona Unified | 154 |
| Garden Grove Unified | 151 |
| Desert Sands Unified | 150 |
| Oakland Unified | 136 |
| Snowline Joint Unified | 129 |
| Anaheim Union High | 122 |
| Chaffey Joint Union High | 114 |
| Pasadena Unified | 105 |
| San Jacinto Unified | 99 |
| Santa Maria-Bonita | 95 |
| Colton Joint Unified | 94 |
| Norwalk-La Mirada Unified | 90 |
| Eastside Union Elementary | 89 |
| Lynwood Unified | 83 |

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|---|---|
| Perris Union High | 81 |
| Ukiah Unified | 78 |
| San Bernardino County Office of Education | 75 |
| Chico Unified | 67 |
| Paramount Unified | 66 |
| Inglewood Unified | 63 |
| Los Banos Unified | 61 |
| San Diego County Office of Education | 61 |
| Chula Vista Elementary | 60 |
| Whittier Union High | 55 |
| Fullerton Elementary | 54 |
| Alhambra Unified | 50 |

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