

California Foster Youth Outcomes: Recommended Practices from Four Successful School Districts

Students in foster care represent one of the most vulnerable and academically at-risk student groups enrolled in California schools. The California Department of Education (CDE) monitors the educational outcomes for foster youth through the California School Dashboard (Dashboard). In reviewing data from the 2019 Dashboard, the CDE Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) has identified four local educational agencies (LEAs) that have shown significant improvement on one or various state level educational outcomes of foster youth.

The CDE FYSCP conducted interviews as part of a research study to develop an understanding of how LEAs were able to improve outcomes so as to inform practice for all LEAs in the future.

Introduction

Research shows that the learning achievement of foster youth is much lower than their peers with who are not in foster care.^{i,ii} Foster youth face many obstacles in achieving learning success. Researchers found these major factors underlining the lack of positive educational outcomes of foster youth:

1. Changing schools hinders academic achievement.ⁱⁱⁱ Students in foster care experience school changes more than their non-foster care peers.^{iv,v} School mobility has negative effects on academic achievement,^{vi} school attendance,^{vii} and the likelihood of earning a high school diploma or equivalent.^{viii} Students who experience frequent school changes face challenges in developing and sustaining supportive relationships with teachers or with peers.^{ix}
2. Delays in school enrollment for foster youth, often due to entry into foster care, change of placement, or failure to transfer records in a timely manner, can cause adverse consequences such as lowering school attendance, having to repeat courses, failure to address special education needs, and enrollment in appropriate classes.^x
3. Behavioral problems manifested by childhood maltreatment and traumatic experiences severely interfere with learning.^{xi,xii} There is a large percentage of children and youth placed in foster care who experience physical and emotional trauma as a result of abuse, neglect, separation from family, and impermanence.^{xiii} Although youth are placed in foster care for their safety, foster youth often do not find the security and stability they need through the foster care system. Most children who enter foster care have been exposed to many conditions that have undermined their chances for healthy development.^{xiv} The

detrimental effects of environmental, social, biological, and psychological risk factors such as abuse and neglect, exposure to illicit drugs, and poverty have significantly undermined the well-being of foster youth mental health. Therefore, students in foster care face more challenges in achieving learning success than their peers not in foster care.^{xv}

California Foster Youth Outcomes

Students in foster care represent one of the most vulnerable and academically at-risk student groups in California. Unfortunately, foster youth are consistently underperforming in school when compared to all students. The 2018–19 Dashboard shows that 28 percent of foster youth were chronically absent, whereas as only 12 percent of non-foster youth were chronically absent. In addition, in 2018–19, 15 percent of foster youth were suspended from school, where only three percent of non-foster youth were suspended.

In terms of the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in both English Language Arts (ELA) and Math in 2018–19, only 24 percent of foster youth are meeting or exceeding in ELA, and only 15 percent in math. Fifty-one percent of non-foster youth are meeting or exceeding standards in ELA and 40 percent are meeting or exceeding standards in math. The four-year cohort graduation rate as reported in 2018–19 showed that 56 percent of foster youth graduated whereas 85 percent of non-foster youth graduated in the same cohort.

The majority of LEAs in California show foster youth underperforming in school as reported on the Dashboard. However, there are LEAs that are showing significant improvement in the foster youth outcomes. The CDE FYSCP has identified four LEAs to highlight as promising examples of LEAs doing exemplary work in improving foster youth outcomes. The CDE FYSCP team conducted interviews and found several themes highlighted below.

Salinas City Elementary School District

Salinas City Elementary School District (SCESD) is a transitional kindergarten (TK) through sixth grade district that is located in Monterey County. SCESD has 14 schools and over 1100 staff members. In 2018–19, SCESD had a cumulative enrollment of 37 foster youth with the majority of foster youth being enrolled in kindergarten through second grade.

Table 1: SCESD 2019 Foster Youth Cumulative Enrollment

Grade	Number of Foster Youth
Kindergarten	6
First Grade	9
Second Grade	7
Third Grade	5
Fourth Grade	5

Grade	Number of Foster Youth
Fifth Grade	3
Sixth Grade	2
Total	37

In 2018–19, Salinas City Elementary was one of only 15 LEAs in the state to receive a Green level on the Dashboard for both the suspension and chronic absenteeism indicators for their foster youth students.

Table 2: SCESD 2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Outcomes

2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Indicator	Outcome
Suspension	Green
Chronic Absenteeism	Green

SCESD had a foster youth chronic absenteeism rate of three percent and a 5.4 percent foster youth suspension rate. Compared to the state average 2018–19, that is 9.1 percent lower for chronic absenteeism and 9.7 percent lower for suspension rates.

Table 3: SCESD 2018–19 Foster Youth Suspension Rate

School vs. State	2018–19 Foster Youth Suspension Rate
Salinas City Elementary	5.4%
Statewide	15.1%

Table 4: SCESD 2018–19 Foster Youth Chronic Absence Rate

School vs. State	2018–19 Chronic Absence Rate
Salinas City Elementary	3.0%
Statewide	12.1%

Dry Creek Joint Elementary School District

Dry Creek Joint Elementary School District (DCJESD) is a TK through grade 8 school district located in the suburban areas of Roseville and Antelope in Northern California. DCJESD has ten schools including two middle schools, one TK through grade 8, six elementary, and one kindergarten through grade 8 virtual academy. In 2018–19, DCJESD had a cumulative enrollment of 20 foster youth with a fairly even distribution of foster youth through all the grades.

Table 5: DJESD 2019 Foster Youth Cumulative Enrollment

Grade	Number of Foster Youth
Kindergarten	3
First Grade	6
Second Grade	3
Third Grade	5

Grade	Number of Foster Youth
Fourth Grade	3
Fifth Grade	3
Sixth Grade	1
Seventh Grade	3
Eighth Grade	3
Total	30

In 2018–19, DCJESD was also one of only 15 LEAs in the state to receive a Blue level on the Dashboard for both the suspension and chronic absenteeism indicators for their foster youth students.

Table 6: DCJESD 2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Outcomes

Dry Creek 2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Indicator	Outcome
Suspension	Blue
Chronic Absenteeism	Blue

DCJESD had a foster youth chronic absenteeism rate of zero percent and a foster youth suspension rate of zero percent. Compared to the state average for 2018–19, that is 12.1 percent lower for chronic absenteeism and 15.1 percent lower for suspension rates.

Table 7: DCJESD 2018–19 Foster Youth Suspension Rate

School vs. State	2018–19 Foster Youth Suspension Rate
Dry Creek Joint Elementary	0.0%
Statewide	15.1%

Table 8: DCJESD 2018–19 Foster Youth Chronic Absence Rate

School vs. State	2018–19 Chronic Absence Rate
Dry Creek Joint Elementary	0.0%
Statewide	12.1%

Covina-Valley Unified School District

Covina-Valley Unified School District (C-VUSD) is a district in which schools range from preschool to adult education, and is located in Los Angeles County. In 2018–19, C-VUSD had a cumulative enrollment of 114 foster youth with the highest concentration of foster youth in kindergarten, fourth grade, and ninth grade.

Table 9: C-VUSD 2019 Foster Youth Cumulative Enrollment

Grade	Number of Foster Youth
Kindergarten	17
First Grade	7

Grade	Number of Foster Youth
Second Grade	6
Third Grade	6
Fourth Grade	14
Fifth Grade	9
Sixth Grade	6
Seventh Grade	5
Eighth Grade	9
Ninth Grade	12
Tenth Grade	7
Eleventh Grade	9
Twelve Grade	7
Total	114

In 2018–19, C-VUSD was also one of only 15 LEAs in the state to receive a Green level on the Dashboard for both the suspension and chronic absenteeism indicators for their foster youth students.

Table 10: C-VUSD 2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Outcomes

Covina-Valley 2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Indicator	Outcome
Suspension	Green
Chronic Absenteeism	Green

Foster youth in C-VUSD were absent 5.2 days fewer than the state average, and had a foster youth suspension rate of 4.4 percent. Compared to the state average for 2018–19, C-VUSD had a foster youth suspension rate that was 10.7 percent lower.

Table 11: C-VUSD 2018–19 Foster Youth Suspension Rate

School vs. State	2018–19 Foster Youth Suspension Rate
Covina-Valley Unified	4.4%
Statewide	15.1%

Table 12: C-VUSD 2018–19 Foster Youth Chronic Absence Rate

School vs. State	2018–19 Foster Youth Average Days Absent
Covina-Valley Unified	10.1
Statewide	15.3

Torrance Unified School District

Torrance Unified School District (TUSD) is a TK through grade 12 district located in the south-western part of Los Angeles County. TUSD consists of 17 elementary, eight middle, four high schools, and one continuation and one alternative high school. The district also has three adult school campuses. In 2018–19, TUSD had a cumulative

enrollment of 128 foster youth with the highest concentration of foster youth in high school.

Table 13: TUSD 2019 Foster Youth Cumulative Enrollment

Grade	Number of Foster Youth
Kindergarten	6
First Grade	2
Second Grade	3
Third Grade	4
Fourth Grade	4
Fifth Grade	5
Sixth Grade	7
Seventh Grade	4
Eighth Grade	12
Ninth Grade	9
Tenth Grade	21
Eleventh Grade	25
Twelve Grade	26
Total	128

In 2018–19, TUSD was one of only two LEAs in the state to receive a Green level on the Dashboard for both the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP)-ELA and CAASPP-Math indicators.

Table 14: TUSD 2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Outcomes

Torrance Unified 2019 Dashboard Foster Youth Indicator	Outcome
CAASPP-ELA	Green
CAASPP-Math	Green

52.2 percent of foster youth in TUSD met or exceeded standards on the 2018–19 CAASPP ELA assessment and 48 percent of foster youth met or exceeded standards on the 2018–19 CAASPP Math assessment. Compared to the state average for 2018–19, TUSD foster youth scored 28 percent higher for ELA and 33 percent higher than other foster youth in the state for math.

Table 15: TUSD CAASPP ELA Met & Exceeded Scores

School vs. State	2018–19 Foster Youth CAASPP ELA Met & Exceeded
Torrance Unified	52.2%
Statewide	24%

Table 16: TUSD CAASPP Math Met & Exceeded Scores

School vs. State	2018–19 Foster Youth CAASPP Math Met & Exceeded
Torrance Unified	48%
Statewide	15%

Recommended Practices

The following recommended practices were identified through interviews with the highlighted LEAs.

Continuous Improvement Process and Continual Review of Data

All four LEAs have a continuous improvement process implemented whether it is a formal improvement science training, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), or collaborating with an outside contractor to conduct a continuous improvement process.

DCJESD holds monthly foster youth meetings that include the Director of Student Services and Community Engagement, the Director's secretary, and the district California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) staff member. During this meeting, they review data on their foster youth at an individual level from various sources such as Foster Focus, CALPADS, and their student information system. They look at placement changes, attendance rates, behavior rates, Individual Education Plans/504 plan supports, counseling needs, and food/clothing needs. The Director keeps a log on all the foster youth in the district and logs the data, supports, and notes on each youth.

Foster youth identified during the monthly meetings as needing attendance supports are routed to an Attendance Success Plan (ASP). DCJESD holds monthly meetings with attendance clerks and discusses specific students who need support to attend school. During these meetings, school nurses may be involved for students having health issues that are causing barriers to attendance. If a foster youth, or any student, continues to have attendance issues, DCJESD begins the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) process with two “nudge” letters and then sends SARB truancy letters. An ASP meeting is then held. During the meeting, parents, students, and staff discuss ideas to help get the student to school, create a plan, and decide incentives that can be implemented.

SCESD also holds a monthly foster youth meeting that includes county office of education foster youth personnel and the district CALPADS staff. SCESD holds monthly meetings with school site administrators. Monthly meetings are also held with Foster Youth Guardians. During the meeting, staff review data and new regulations, collaborate with the county FYSCP coordinator, discuss supports for students, and discuss what is working and barriers that need to be overcome. SCESD continually reviews multiple sources of data for foster youth such as Dashboard data, referral data, counseling data, local assessment data, participation data, engagement data, etc. The improvement process is done at site levels on a monthly basis and focuses on Positive

Behavioral Intervention Strategies (PBIS) tiers of support. In addition, SCESD administrators keep a log on foster youth where they keep data around absences, suspensions, assessments, attendance, interventions, teacher feedback, extracurricular activities, and a log of monthly phone calls to communicate with foster youth guardians about the needs of foster youth. When an issue arises, they are immediately identified and there are calls to check in with parents/caregivers.

C-VUSD holds monthly data analysis and has ongoing meetings with administrators around data. The data analysis and planning process goes down to an individual site level, where each site has a data team that includes administrators, department chairs, and teachers who continually review data and plan site-level professional development based on identified needs. C-VUSD also works with an outside consulting agency to help improve academic outcomes through training and development around using data to inform practice.

TUSD also has a strong emphasis on reviewing data to inform practice. They have worked hard to ensure that their foster youth population was a priority. TUSD holds "15 Minute Meetings" with each school site administrator to specifically discuss progress and status of each individual foster youth at each school site. Administrators are responsible for keeping a spreadsheet of data on each foster youth at their site, and they must know the specifics around academic achievement, attendance, behavior, and supports provided for each youth. TUSD believes this has directly led to an improvement in the achievement of the foster youth in their district. In addition, TUSD has a strong PLC and Response to Intervention process in place. During the weekly PLC meetings, teachers and administrators review data from formative assessments and create interventions for individual students.

Implementation of PBIS and Restorative Practices

PBIS, Restorative Practices, or a combination of both were implemented at all the highlighted LEAs. All the LEAs believed that these practices were a pivotal component to improving school climate and culture leading to an improvement in chronic absenteeism rates, suspension rates, and an improvement in test scores.

DCJESD has been implementing restorative practices for the past two school years, and it has been a key to lower suspension rates. Teachers are using daily or weekly Restorative Circles to build relationships and a strong classroom community. In addition to Restorative Practices, DCJESD implemented calming corners and sensory rooms at school. DCJESD reviewed data that has shown that implementation of non-punitive measures such as other means of correction, and restoring and repairing relationships has led to an improvement in school climate and culture. This in turn has led to a decrease in chronic absenteeism and suspension rates.

SCESD trained all staff and implemented PBIS for over six school years. In addition to having a strong tiered system in place, they used *Harmony at Home* to implement PBIS supports at their students' homes. In addition, SCESD has proactive strategies in place to attempt to mitigate suspensions. It begins by looking at data and identifying needs of

foster youth. When issues are identified that could lead to suspensions in the future, supports are put in place. For example, they may put social emotional learning or counseling supports in place. SCESD also provided PBIS in the home, mindfulness, social emotional support workshop opportunities for all parents in the district.

C-VUSD has done a lot of work to decrease their suspension rates, including implementing restorative practices. Work was done to define what it meant to fight, what to suspend students for and other means of correction district-wide. Based on discipline data, the district was able to identify that the majority of fights were happening outside at break time. In turn, the district put more supervision in place at recess and breaks. The other means of correction they identified can include restorative circles, reflection time out of class, and natural consequences.

TUSD has had PBIS in place for their K–8 campuses for over five school years. In addition, they have worked on alternatives to suspensions for over five school years. TUSD believes that this has led to an improvement in their campus climate and culture that in turn has helped to improve educational outcomes.

Emphasis on Relationships

Relationships are a thread throughout all of the identified school districts. Strong relationships were identified between foster youth parents/caregivers and school staff, foster youth and staff, as well as with staff and staff. At SCESD, the parent coordinators are a keystone in ensuring that foster youth parents/caregivers are engaged and supported. Parent coordinators have strong relationships with parents and they are able to offer resources, translate when needed, and provide training to other parents. There are also strong relationships at SCESD between county office of education foster youth personnel and the CALPADS staff member that allows for an effective use of data to inform practice. The same can be said in C-VUSD, in that having a close relationship between parents and CALPADS staff members allows for an effective use of data to inform practice.

At DCJESD, there are robust relationships among the staff members working with foster youth. The Director of Student Services and Community Engagement has a close working relationship with the district leadership, site leaders, human resources, fiscal staff, maintenance staff, and special education staff. Leadership team meetings are held often with all of the staff members, and foster youth are discussed often at these meetings. This combats isolation among district staff, and allows for involvement in all aspects of the district's goals and happenings.

There is a Parent Community Engagement Coordinator in TUSD. The Coordinator oversees the Family Welcome Enrollment Center which allows for parents to come in person to experience a streamlined, centralized process for enrollment, and ensures that a youth enrolling is correctly identified as a foster youth and is given the proper supports needed to be successful. This process allows a relationship to be built with a foster youth's caregivers early on that opens the door for a continual collaborative relationship to thrive.

Strong Communication at Various Levels

Communication is a cornerstone in the identified LEAs. All of the LEAs have a plan in place for communication with caregivers if or when an issue arises. SCESD has multiple staff members who contact caregivers before and when an issue arises. The caregivers of foster youth who are chronically absent, suspended, or doing poorly in class are contacted by either the FYSCP coordinator, administrator, or parent coordinator. The same can be said for DCJESD. Communication happens immediately with a caregiver when a foster youth is found to be having any behavioral or academic issues.

Communication among staff was also identified as an important factor by all the LEAs. For example, C-VUSD identified that their frequent meetings held at the district level to review foster youth data were an important part of planning for necessary actions to help foster youth. TUSD believes that the communication in the frequently held meetings with administrators specifically on foster youth have led to improved outcomes for foster youth in TUSD. In DCJESD, communication around foster youth in the district happens monthly and involves school clerks, who are considered frontline staff, to identify and communicate with foster youth or their caregivers.

Professional Development Based on Identified Needs

Frequent professional development was identified by all of the LEAs as a key part in improving outcomes for their foster youth population. Specifically, the LEAs all identified that professional development is determined locally by data. Because data is reviewed often at all the highlighted LEAs, staff have a deep understanding of needs and plan for professional development based on those needs. When needs are identified around foster youth in the LEAs, professional development is held to address the issues. A good example is in C-VUSD, where teachers are involved in reviewing site-level data. They use this analysis to plan school-specific professional developments. Not having district-wide professional development, but rather school-site professional development, allows for more targeted professional development to occur.

Targeted Behavioral and Academic Interventions

The LEAs discussed have all worked to make foster youth a priority. In TUSD, they have a philosophy of “Every Student, by the Standard.” This philosophy means that all students can achieve at high levels, and to have high expectations for all students. This philosophy drives what happens in TUSD for foster youth. For example, the 15-minute meetings that are held quarterly to discuss the progress and status of a foster youth at each school site have allowed administrators to use current data to create interventions with the expectation that the foster youth in TUSD will achieve at high levels. In addition, TUSD offers extensive interventions for foster youth who struggle academically or behaviorally. Counseling for behavioral or emotional needs or extended school days for academic struggles are some examples of interventions given.

In C-VUSD, administrators monitor foster youth attendance data and give targeted interventions quickly when youth are chronically absent. At the secondary level, deans

were hired to address chronic absenteeism and behavioral issues. In addition, students in C-VUSD high schools have a seven period day that allows all students to have more changes to earn credits and to re-take classes, if necessary. This allows students more opportunities to ensure they are able to graduate.

SCESD and DCJESD both hold regular meetings with district staff to review data and ensure that the foster youth in their districts are receiving necessary supports. These supports range from counseling, tutoring, home visits, transportation, or incentives/non-punitive strategies. In SCESD, foster youth have priority enrollment for before school, after school and Saturday programs as well as extracurricular activities.

Summary

Substantial barriers exist in the path of foster youths' academic success. Some schools have worked to put systems in place to help foster youth overcome these barriers. Although the identified schools are vastly different in size, location, and demographics, the CDE FYSCP team identified similarities in their core practices that have led to improved outcomes for foster youth. All of the LEAs have made foster youth a priority in their practices that we have identified in this document.

ⁱ Barrat Vanessa X., & BethAnn Berliner. 2013. *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part I: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools*. San Francisco: WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/the-invisible-achievement-gap-education-outcomes-of-students-in-foster-care-in-californias-public-schools-part-1/> (accessed February 21, 2020).

ⁱⁱ Clemens, E. V. & M. Tis. 2016. *Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care: Needs Assessment Data 2008 to 2014*. Greeley, CO: University of Northern Colorado. Retrieved from: <http://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/> (accessed February 21, 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Education Is the Lifeline for Youth in Foster Care*. 2011. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education.

http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/portals/0/dmx/2012/08/file_20120829_140902_sAMYaA_0.pdf (access February 21, 2020)

^{iv} Zorc, C.S., O'Reilly, A.L.R., Matone, M., Long, J., Watts, C.L., Rubin, D. 2013. The relationship of placement experience to school absenteeism and changing schools in young, school aged children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35 (5), 826-833.

^v Clemens, E.V. & Sheesley, A.P. 2016. Educational stability of Colorado's students in foster care: 2007-2008 to 20132014. Retrieved from http://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/pdf/reports/Every_Transition_Counts_V.1_Interactive.pdf (access February 21, 2020)

^{vi} Cutuli, J.J., Dejardins, C.D., Herbers, J.E., Long, J.D., Heistad, D., Chan, C.K., & Masten, A.S. 2013. Academic achievement trajectories of homeless and highly mobile students: resilience in the context of chronic and acute risk. *Child Development*, 84 (3), 841-857.

^{vii} Zorc, Catherine S. Amanda LR O'Reilly, Mereditch Matone, Long, J., Caroline L Watts, & David Rubin. 2014. The relationship of placement experience to school absenteeism and changing schools in young, school-aged children in foster care, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(5), 826–833.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.02.006>

^{viii} Clemens, E.V., Lalonde, T.L., & Sheesley, A.P. 2016. The relationship between school mobility and students in foster care earning a high school credential. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 68, 193-201.

^{ix} Sullivan, M., L. Jones, & S. Mathiesen, "School Change, Academic Progress, and Behavior Problems in a Sample of Foster Youth." *Children and Youth Services Review* 32 (2010): 164–170.

^x National Workgroup on Foster Care and Education. 2018. Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care. <http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/OurWork/NationalWorkingGroup.aspx> (accessed February 21, 2020).

^{xi} Romano, E.L., Babschishin, L., Marquis, R. & Frechette, S. 2015. Childhood maltreatment and educational outcomes. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 16 (4), 418-437.

^{xii} Pecora, Peter J. 2012. Maximizing Educational Achievement of Youth in Foster Care and Alumni: Factors Associated with Success. *Children and Youth Services Review* 34(2012): 1121–1129.

^{xiii} Romano, Elisa, Lyzon Babchishin, Robyn Marquis, and Sabrina Frechette. 2015. Childhood Maltreatment and Educational Outcomes. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 16(4) 418–437. doi: 10.1177/1524838014537908

^{xiv} Reibschleger, Joanne, Angelique Day & Amy Damashek. 2015. Foster Care Youth Share Stories of Trauma Before, During, and After Placement: Youth Voices for Building Trauma-Informed Systems of Care. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 24(4). doi: 10.1080/10926771.2015.1009603

^{xv} See Note 28

^{xv} See Note 28