

# Foster Youth and Early Implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula: Not Yet Making the Grade

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## Introduction

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown on July 1, 2013, is the first comprehensive change in the state's education funding system in 40 years. The LCFF significantly loosens the reins of state control over education, eliminating nearly all categorical funding streams and substituting a base of funding for all districts plus new dollars for low-income students, English learners, and foster youth.

The new system empowers school districts to determine how to allocate their dollars to best meet the needs of their students and holds them accountable for results. The LCFF requires that each district develop a kind of fiscal strategic blueprint, called a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which must be generated with the involvement of parents, other community members, students, and educators.

## The LCFF and Foster Youth

The LCFF calls out foster youth as a distinct sub-population of underserved students to whom added attention must be paid to improve their educational outcomes. Districts are required to

include in their LCAPs goals for foster youth, metrics for measuring progress toward these goals, and services and strategies the district intends to use to reach them. County offices of education (COEs) assume responsibility for approving, requiring changes in, or denying LCAPs. The

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California Department of Education (CDE) is tasked with providing districts with information about the number of foster youth in their jurisdiction.

## This Study

This study was commissioned by the National Center for Youth Law (NCYL). Its purpose is to provide state policymakers with information about districts' and COEs' initial implementation of the LCFF as it relates to foster youth. This research brief is one of a series of reports on the early days of the implementation of the new funding formula.

The first study, "Toward a Grand Vision: Early Implementation of California's Local Control Funding Formula," was funded by the Stuart and Heising-Simons foundations and released in October 2014. The work of 12 independent researchers who interviewed dozens of officials in 10 districts and 20 COEs, this report sketched the initial promises and challenges of the LCFF: enthusiasm for local control, seriousness of purpose about the careful expenditure of funds, and concern that education dollars are still inadequate to achieve all that the LCFF promises. Another in this series of reports, "The Local Control Accountability System: Staking Out the Ground for Early Learning," focuses on early childhood education and will be released in late winter 2015.

This report builds on what we have learned from our two previous studies and focuses on the LCFF and foster youth. The study was completed on a very tight timeline. Data were collected during January 2015 in anticipation of an early-March report release.

To collect background data, we conducted a review of recent studies of California and foster youth, including several funded by the Stuart Foundation and the recently released report from CDE to the Governor and Legislature on the state's Foster Youth Services Program. We also examined relevant state policies on foster youth with an eye toward their impact on foster youth's education prospects.

To gather on-the-ground information, we made site visits to two school districts and their county offices of education. These sites were selected in consultation with NCYL based on their reputations for maintaining exemplary programs for foster youth. At each of these sites, we interviewed key staff responsible for implementing a broad range of foster youth services that fall under the education umbrella.

Concomitant with the site visits, we conducted telephone interviews in four districts with significant numbers of foster youth. We interviewed district officials and officials in the district's COE, as well as representatives of social service agencies and legal advocacy organizations that have responsibility for foster youth. In both the in-person and telephone interviews, we asked interviewees about the supports and services available to foster youth and the LCAP processes and outcomes attendant to initial LCFF implementation.

## A Reader's Caveat

We believe readers of this report would be well served by keeping in mind the broader context for the LCFF. It is a brand new system, wholly different

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from anything that preceded it, and is in its first year of implementation. The LCFF offers districts vastly expanded authority and responsibility just as they are emerging from years of deep recession-caused fiscal cuts. Understanding the complex systems involved with foster youth—the courts, children and family services agencies, local advocacy groups, private service providers, and COEs—presents a challenge for educators. Foster youth have been something of an invisible population in many school districts. They represent a small percentage of the student population and, until very recently, many districts did not even have information about the number of foster youth they served. With the exception of a few individual educators charged with monitoring foster youth, school districts find themselves on still unfamiliar terrain.

In this study, we have attempted to gain a foothold on the LCFF and foster youth. Taking on the full spectrum of challenges with which foster youth must grapple is beyond the scope of this research. Conducting this study, however, gave us a keen appreciation for the complexity of these challenges and the multiplicity of systems that must come together to successfully confront them. Implementing the LCFF is, indeed, a work-in-progress.

The next sections of this report detail the California context for foster youth; outline the several LCFF early implementation challenges we uncovered including counts and definitions, data sharing, the evolving role of county offices of education, and LCAPs; detail the ongoing educational needs of and

supports for foster youth that emerged from this study, and offer some concluding remarks.

## CALIFORNIA CONTEXT FOR FOSTER YOUTH

California's foster youth have been subjected to trauma by the time they enter care. Many have experienced physical abuse and/or neglect; several have psychological scars from their experiences. These youth, many of whom move frequently and are typically forced to change schools at least once and sometimes as often as three times during a school year, are likely to suffer long-lasting consequences, including educational outcomes that place them far below their peers.

Academic achievement, as measured by scores on standardized tests, are lower for foster youth than for many other groups of students including non-foster youth living in poverty, English learners, and students with disabilities. Poor academic results become more pronounced the longer these students remain in care. Educational attainment challenges are compounded by the fact that foster youth are likely to be enrolled in the state's lowest performing schools.

Not surprisingly then, foster youth have lower rates of high school graduation and lower rates of college enrollment and persistence than do other California students.<sup>1</sup> These poor educational

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information, see these reports from the Stuart Foundation: *The invisible achievement gap: Education outcomes of students in foster care in California's public schools* (2013), Parts 1 and 2, found at <http://www.stuartfoundation.org/docs/default-document-library/the-invisible-achievement-gap-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2>; *At greater risk: California's and the path from high school to college* (2013), found at

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outcomes lead to profound consequences in adulthood. A recent report submitted by the California Department of Education to the Governor and Legislature describes the experience of foster youth two to four years after they had left care. The report indicates that only half of these young adults were employed, nearly half had been arrested, a quarter had experienced homelessness, and more than half the young women had given birth at an early age.<sup>2</sup>

## California Foster Youth Policy

Long before the LCFF, California policymakers had begun to pay attention to the plight of foster youth. The Foster Youth Services (FYS) Program began as a pilot project in 1973 and coordinates key support services for foster youth, including tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and facilitating the transfer of health and education records so that students are placed appropriately in school. There have also been several pieces of legislation that the state has adopted to focus on improving academic conditions and outcomes for students in foster care.

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<http://www.stuartfoundation.org/docs/default-document-library/at-greater-risk-california-foster-youth-and-the-path-from-high-school-to-college.pdf?sfvrsn=6>; *Ready to succeed: Changing systems to give foster children the opportunity they deserve to be ready for and succeed in school* (2008) found at

<http://www.stuartfoundation.org/Files/ready%20%to%20succeedfinalreport-full-5908.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Report to the Governor and Legislator: Foster Youth Services Program* (2014), California Department of Education, found at

[www.cde.ca.gov%2Ffls%2Fpf%2Ffy%2Fdocuments%2Ffyslegrport2014.doc&ei=Wo3SVPPgHoyWgwS8koGQBw&usg=AFQjCNG\\_f5G2qF3GPa5jDsfTqKJbYEzxiw&sig2=mB5iFkMk3m8g6pIL0fiW1w&bvm=bv.85142067,d.eXY](http://www.cde.ca.gov%2Ffls%2Fpf%2Ffy%2Fdocuments%2Ffyslegrport2014.doc&ei=Wo3SVPPgHoyWgwS8koGQBw&usg=AFQjCNG_f5G2qF3GPa5jDsfTqKJbYEzxiw&sig2=mB5iFkMk3m8g6pIL0fiW1w&bvm=bv.85142067,d.eXY)

These key state policies, such as AB 490, the Ensuring Educational Rights for All Foster Youth Act (2004) and the Public Priority for Postsecondary Education Act (2011), were intended to facilitate timely enrollment, minimize school transfers, and smooth the route for foster youth to California public colleges and universities.

California, then, has a broad array of policies meant to attend to the many challenges foster youth face. We turn now to the LCFF, its early days of implementation, and that sweeping law's emergent impact on students in foster care.

## DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS, DIFFERENT COUNTS

Knowing which students are in foster care seems like an obvious prerequisite for school districts to serve them. While serious efforts are underway to provide all districts with critical information about their students in foster care, California still has a long way to go before it can guarantee that foster youth do not fall through cracks in the system. Currently, the state has inconsistent definitions of who is a foster youth and who qualifies for services. Moreover, the data systems that track foster youth do not agree about how many foster youth there are.

This proved to be a problem for districts during the first year of LCFF implementation as many districts struggled to gather basic information. As one COE official reported: "...they had no idea how many foster youth they had..." At the school level, concerns about confidentiality sometimes meant that schools did not know which students were foster youth. By establishing foster youth as a

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target population and by making districts responsible for meeting the educational needs of these students, the LCFF has made access to information for districts a critical need.

The LCFF definition of foster youth includes all foster youth, regardless of where they are placed. However, California's Foster Youth Services (FYS) program, which provides services through County Offices of Education and six Core Programs, counts only foster youth in traditional foster care settings.<sup>3</sup> As a result, foster youth placed with relatives, for example, are counted as part of districts' support for foster youth under the LCFF, but not for services from the FYS program. As one COE official reported:

*We have to pull services when kids are lucky enough to have a relative stand up and have them come live with them. We have to say, "Okay, great, I hope you don't need those tutoring services anymore." It's absurdity. Their need has not changed.*

The research on outcomes of foster youth placed with relatives is somewhat mixed, but there is no question that this group of foster youth still need support services.<sup>4</sup> Notably, California recently

<sup>3</sup> Core programs refer to FYS programs in six local school districts (Sacramento, Elk Grove, San Juan, Mount Diablo, Paramount, and Placer /Nevada County Consortium).

<sup>4</sup> See Barrat, V. X., & Berliner, B. (2013). *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools*. San Francisco: WestEd. Koh, E. "Permanency Outcomes of Children in Kinship and Non-kinship Foster Care: Minimizing the Effects of Selection Bias with Propensity Score Matching." [https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/32041/20\\_4koh\\_paper.pdf;jsessionid=A3C385441F615163D219427E01B58D2F?sequence=2](https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/32041/20_4koh_paper.pdf;jsessionid=A3C385441F615163D219427E01B58D2F?sequence=2). Also see Berrick, J. D., (Spring 1998). "When Children Cannot Remain Home: Foster Family Care and Kinship Care," *The*

invested \$30 million to increase the financial support provided to relative caregivers to ensure that there was fiscal parity in foster care rates provided to family caregivers and traditional non-relative placements.

In addition to the problem of different definitions of foster youth, California lacks a uniform database containing up-to-date health and education records on foster youth. The Sacramento County Office of Education's Foster Focus database is designed to gather and share information within and across COEs, but currently only 27 of 58 COEs participate (at various levels of sharing). Los Angeles County, for example, maintains its own data system. COEs generally hold the license for Foster Focus and coordinate information sharing with districts through memoranda of understanding. The Foster Focus database contains comprehensive information on foster youth including such individual student information as name, birthdate, ethnicity, principal language, date in care and type of care, school name, grade, entry and exit dates, GPA history, transcripts, attendance pattern, courses taken and credits earned, test scores, detention, suspension/expulsion, IEP, and case worker/social worker notes. The database also contains countywide information by school (numbers of foster youth, graduation rates). But with fewer than half of California's counties participating, sharing this kind of comprehensive data across the state is problematic. In a few counties, County Child Welfare does not even share its data on foster youth with the COE.

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The California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) is matching its data with that of the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System. CALPADS released data on foster youth to all districts in fall 2014, but matching and other problems resulted in an undercount of foster youth. In its initial release of data, CALPADS identified only about 30,000 foster youth. By contrast, the California Child Welfare Indicators Project reported roughly 37,000 foster youth ages 5 through 17 as of October 1, 2014. As one COE official reported:

*So a district calls me and says 10 kids are not on the CALPADS list, but we need to service those kids. That's a big problem for districts who are trying to service foster youth and CALPADS is underreporting.*

While CALPADS is working hard to improve its counts and revised numbers are expected, the CALPADS system has other limits. CALPADS does not collect student attendance, course enrollment data, and other key data needed to inform foster youth needs. In addition, county social service agencies reported that they do not have access to CALPADS data.

CALPADS data on foster youth remains a work-in-progress. Moreover, districts may find they need to improve their own student information systems to better track and disaggregate foster youth outcomes. When districts disaggregate their data by foster youth, problems are more visible. One of our case study districts recently moved to have its research office include foster youth as a separate student group in all of its data analysis. As a result, the district was able to document that although

they had made progress in lowering the expulsion and suspension rates of foster youth, those rates remained unacceptably high. As districts move toward the kind of needs-based budgeting and accountability envisioned by the LCFF, they will need accurate information about who their foster youth are, where they are, what their needs are, and what services they are already receiving. Without a comprehensive and accurate statewide data system, gathering this information will remain challenging for districts.

## DATA SHARING DILEMMAS

Among the many issues districts must address regarding foster youth is what their policies and procedures are for sharing information with school staff about the foster youth at their school. Districts need to balance the confidentiality rights of foster youth with educators' need to know which of their students are foster youth.<sup>5</sup> As the staff of one district's well-developed program for foster youth told us, teachers need to be sensitive to the effects of the trauma on foster youth of being removed from their families and develop strategies to help them succeed in the school setting. One COE official emphasized the importance of ensuring school administrators and administrative assistants are aware of the rights of foster youth for immediate enrollment and appropriate placement even when their educational records are not available.

As one interviewee explained, deciding who needs to know the identity of foster youth can be

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<sup>5</sup>By law, only social workers, attorneys, the court, educational rights holders, and the foster youth can have access to a foster youth's court records.

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complicated. For example, food service administrators need to know as all foster youth are eligible for free and reduced meals. Someone at the school needs to know the name of a foster youth's attorney, as the attorney may come to the school to interview the youth. Who needs to know the identity of foster youth and what information they need to have is an as yet unresolved challenge for many school districts.

Of course, sharing information within a school requires that the school have up-to-date information about the student. Interviewees told us that county placing agencies and school districts are still struggling with the timely transfer of school records when foster youth change schools. As research has shown, foster youth are significantly more likely to transfer schools than are other groups of students. While more than 90 percent of the general population of students attends the same school for the full school year, only about two-thirds of foster youth do so. One in 10 foster youth will attend three or more schools during a school year.<sup>6</sup>

AB 490 was supposed to remedy this issue. Since January 1, 2004, as soon as a youth's case worker or probation officer becomes aware of the need for a transfer to a new school, the school must be notified of the last day of attendance and must transfer the student's records within two days. However, county welfare officials reported that social workers' huge caseloads prevent them from

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<sup>6</sup>Barrat, V. X., & Berliner, B. (2013). *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools*. San Francisco: WestEd.

informing the schools in a timely manner. As one COE official explained:

*Typically when DCFS [Department of Children and Family Services] has a placement change, the communication isn't happening at the school liaison level. They aren't alerting us. We find out because we follow up.*

A county child welfare official in one county estimated that notification to the school only occurs about 30 percent of the time. In another county, officials reported that the system of notifying the school of a transfer "...works more often than not." Yet at this district one interviewee told of ongoing problems:

*We just had a student change schools. She didn't have her schoolbooks because she was removed from her house. The school tried to withhold registration until the books were returned, and that's not okay.*

Reportedly, schools also are not being informed in a timely manner when a student is placed in temporary care. Technically this is the social worker's responsibility, but estimates are that schools are not receiving this information for 30 to 60 days. One county is tackling this problem by having the attorneys, who attend every court hearing and know when a child is placed in temporary care, complete a form and fax it to the school so the school is informed immediately.

Overall, our interviews suggest that the promise of AB 490 is not yet realized, at least when it comes to timely transfer of records and immediate school enrollment. While the law has provided school district foster care liaisons across the state, the

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entire foster care system continues to struggle with capacity and communications issues. LCFF makes these existing problems all the more pressing for school districts as they work to develop plans to meet the educational needs of foster youth.

## A COMPLICATED AND EVOLVING ROLE FOR COUNTY OFFICES OF EDUCATION

Under the LCFF, COEs must take on significant new responsibilities. Chief among these is to review and approve a district's LCAP and develop their own LCAPs that focus on education-related programs for which they are responsible. These issues, with which we deal in the LCAPs section of this report, are now added to COEs' historical responsibility for managing a number of services for foster youth.

Most of COEs' traditional foster youth services are funded by the Foster Youth Services (FYS) Program. With money from the state and administered by CDE, FYS offers a range of services for foster youth including education assessment, academic counseling, mentoring, tutoring, college and career readiness training as well as linking schools, social services agencies, and juvenile courts to provide a comprehensive range of needed supports and services to youth in foster care. In 2014-15, 51 of California's 58 counties received FYS grants ranging in size from \$24,400 to more than \$2 million, with the lion's share of the dollars being awarded to the five counties—Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino—in which foster youth are concentrated.

The LCFF and FYS share the same basic goal, that is, improving educational outcomes for foster youth. But they operate in two different organizations,

albeit two different *education* organizations. Complicating matters further, as we noted in a previous section of this report, the LCFF defines foster youth more broadly than does FYS. Thus, COEs work from a different definition of who is eligible for services than do districts. CDE acknowledged in its recent FYS report to the Governor and Legislature that the program's narrower definition results in significant numbers of foster youth being denied access to services offered by COEs. CDE has recommended expanding the definition to encompass more foster youth and increasing available funding for services. That recommendation awaits legislative action.

## LOCAL CONTROL ACCOUNTABILITY PLANS

The first round of LCAPs typically did not result in large numbers of districts specifying comprehensive or coherent plans to address the unique needs of foster youth. More often, strategies or services that are likely to benefit foster youth were simply embedded in programs for the general target populations, particularly low-income students. Said one interviewee, "I think our superintendent felt that all our kids—we have 80% poverty and free and reduced price lunch—[needed help] so he wanted to make changes that would help all youth and not just foster youth."

### LCAP Development

Nearly all district LCAP development teams in our study districts included at least one member of the foster youth staff. Sometimes this was the AB 490 educational liaison, sometimes it was another staff member. Thus, foster youth interests generally were represented at the LCAP development table.



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Nevertheless, targeted foster youth programs and services were not reflected in most of the final LCAPs.

Several interviewees described this first year of LCAPs as a baseline year or, as one county official said, “a year of awareness.” Commented another interviewee, “Everyone is just trying to figure out who their foster youth are. Districts are working through the process as best they can.”

Some districts made different strategic choices this first year of LCFF implementation. Just emerging from several years of deep budget cuts brought about by the recession, many districts used the newly flexible LCFF funds to restore what they considered essential programs and services that had been eliminated.

To be sure, some districts’ LCAPs revealed particular attention to foster youth. Two of our study districts added new counselors designated to work with foster youth. One of these districts tasked the new counselors specifically with focusing on the students’ social and emotional needs. Some districts indicated their intent to provide professional development to teachers around the needs of foster students; others plan to ramp up tutoring to enhance the prospects of foster students’ academic progress. Still others indicated plans to develop systems to track data on foster students and map their academic achievement.

A key evolving LCAP task falls to COEs; that is, acquainting their districts with the range of services available to foster youth and helping to

coordinate these services. This will be a heavier lift for some COEs than for others. Said one COE foster youth official:

*All of our services are outward facing to stakeholders, the courts, child welfare, etc. None [or] very little is actually directed toward the school district. That’s just going to have to change.*

Other COEs have been more proactive about ensuring county and district cooperation around developing foster youth supports and services. Several COEs in our sample host monthly meetings that bring together school districts, social service and social welfare agencies, juvenile court representatives, and legal advocates to share information, update data, and work to resolve service delivery problems. One of our study COEs hosted a training attended by assistant superintendents and AB 490 education liaisons representing two-thirds of the county’s districts. The training focused on accessing resources the districts will need to implement their LCAPs.

Where districts and COEs have a history of working together on foster youth issues, that relationship bore fruit. For example, in one COE that helped to host meetings that brought foster youth stakeholders together, a COE official told us:

*...As I am reading the LCAPs, I am seeing what the stakeholders [social service agencies] told them they needed in the LCAP. They really listened and they incorporated it. So, for instance, I have about a half dozen districts that have hired*

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*school social workers or school counselors that are dedicated to identifying and ensuring services to the [foster] kids on their campuses.*

More district-COE cooperation may be on the horizon. Several COEs and social welfare agencies report they are receiving increased number of calls from districts about foster youth. As one interviewee from a child welfare office told us:

*I have seen ... recently that the light bulb is going off in the districts that serve a lot of our kids because now they are reaching out to us and wanting to talk to us.*

In some instances, the information request was quite general: Who are our foster kids? In others, request for assistance was more specific. Reported one COE interviewee, “I have four new emails from districts asking for training in trauma.”

Complicating LCAP matters, COE foster youth staff report they often were not engaged in developing or reviewing their own COE’s LCAP. As one interviewee told us:

*When it comes to foster youth in our county, ... no one [in the foster youth division] was asked for input when they were writing. My boss took me over to see the county plan and I was like, ‘What? They already wrote it?’ Their [COE’s] idea of inclusion was to bring us to stakeholder meetings.*

However, some COE interviewees saw reason for optimism:

*I’m hopeful because ... one of the county people who was part of writing the LCAP, he took me aside and we talked about our county LCAP and how next time there needs to be an additional piece involved.... What we need is for foster youth services people to be aware, strategically to be the voice.*

## Engagement

The LCFF requires that parents, educators, community members, students, and other stakeholders be involved in developing a district’s LCAP. As we noted in our first LCFF report in October 2014, many districts lack the skills requisite to successful community engagement. Thus, we found, engagement of parents of low-income and EL students often lagged. This study showed that this finding generally holds for foster parents and guardians as well.

Nearly all districts held one or more community meetings to secure parent ideas, advice, and input regarding the district’s spending priorities. In some study districts, outreach efforts were limited to general invitations to parents or the community at large. While no attendance records were kept, most district officials we interviewed acknowledged that few foster parents or guardians came to these meetings.

Some districts took specific steps to engage foster parents and guardians as well as representatives of foster advocacy groups in their LCAP discussions. One study district reported it held an LCAP meeting specifically around the needs of foster youth. This meeting, said district officials, brought together district staff responsible for foster youth, social service agency representatives, attorneys, parents,

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court appointed special advocates (CASA), school board members and the district's associate superintendents. The meeting focused on, 'What do foster youth need?' According to one district official, despite the meeting's good intent, it proved to be less fruitful than it might. Productivity, this interviewee said, was hampered because achievement results and other data relevant to foster youth were not available at the meeting to frame the discussion.

Another study district plans to conduct two focus groups of foster students to assess their LCFF interests and needs in time for the upcoming LCAP revisions. The focus groups were organized after a foster youth spoke up at one of the district's general LCAP meetings.

On balance, initial LCAPs did not recognize the needs of foster youth. Moreover, engaging foster parents and students will take more work and perhaps different strategies. Districts will have another chance as they modify their LCAPs in time for the July 2015 deadline.

## EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF AND SUPPORTS FOR FOSTER YOUTH

The LCFF has begun to shine a bright light on the needs of foster youth. By including foster youth as a targeted group, districts are working to identify these students and learn how to best serve them. In this section, we explore the key support strategies our study sites are using to meet the needs of their foster youth.

Many of our interviewees had been working on foster youth issues for a number of years and were

encouraged by the attention foster youth were beginning to receive as a result of the LCFF. One COE official, for example, described recent workshops she led on foster youth and trauma:

*The rooms were packed. And now we are having all this follow up... can you train our staff? When can you train our staff? What can you do for us? Those are brand new conversations with people who have never talked to me before... They're coming to the trainings. They're showing up at our meetings. They call to say can we attend this? That's stuff that just didn't happen before. I think it's a seismic shift.*

At the same time, this enthusiasm for the LCFF was tempered by awareness of how much work remains to be done to turn around foster youth's dismal educational outcomes.

The LCFF provides districts with an opportunity to provide targeted supports for these students. Among our case study districts, we found six somewhat overlapping and complimentary strategies: school stability, counseling, tutoring, advocacy, changing the school climate, and professional development.

### School Stability

Promoting school stability is an important component in smoothing the way for foster youth. Prior to the LCFF, most districts' involvement with foster youth was limited to the logistics of enrollment, records transfer, and transportation, as required by AB 490. As we indicated earlier, districts are still struggling with foster youth's enrollment and records transfer rights. AB 490 recognized that foster youth may have frequent changes of school, which adds to the instability of

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their lives. Thus, all involved agencies are expected to work together to provide transportation to help foster youth remain in their school.

One COE official emphasized the importance of school stability for foster youth and tried to encourage districts to invest in transportation plans specifically for them:

*School stability is very important, but sometimes there aren't any foster homes open in the same area as where the child goes to school and then you've got a transportation issue. I'm trying to see if school districts will come up with a specific method for supporting foster youth solely. I would like to see money for that, not just bus tokens.*

Another COE official reported that districts in his county were forced to cut transportation services during the recent round of budget cuts, requiring the COE and the district to improvise on a case-by-case basis. In yet another county, the COE provided transportation services for foster youth using cabs and shuttle buses when necessary. But as an official from that COE explained, caregivers, social workers, the court, and others assigned to a foster youth collectively make placement and transportation decisions. He argued his most important responsibility is bringing school stability into the conversation. He gave this example:

*Okay so it's December 3<sup>rd</sup> and you are talking about moving Johnny on Monday. Well we're three weeks until the end of the semester. What is our plan so he at least finishes the semester? Or what are the opportunities for him to stay in the school of origin?*

Our interviewees also acknowledged that maintaining school stability is not always feasible. They mentioned numerous examples of foster parents objecting to long travel times for their foster child. Given that foster youth are overrepresented in the state's lowest performing schools, a school change may not always be a bad idea. Regardless, while districts are not required by AB 490 to provide transportation, LCFF provides districts an opportunity to keep one part of a foster youth's life stable when other parts are not.

## Counseling

For foster youth, the trauma they experience is often manifested in behavioral problems at school. Overall, expulsion and suspension rates are higher for this group than for any other group of students. Their attendance is often spotty.

Our interviewees also reported that poor quality foster placements can result in foster youth arriving at school upset and angry. One interviewee argued there is an over reliance on congregate care: "...it's actually been used more as a place to warehouse teenagers. ...We isolate them and they are not prepared to integrate into the community upon graduation."

In response, some districts are increasing the counseling services targeted to foster youth. Our interviewees agreed that foster youth typically need more counseling services than are available at their schools. As one COE official reported:

*Counselors have like 500 students in their caseload at the high school. They [foster youth] need, whether you call them an intervention specialist or a foster youth counselor, someone*

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*who has a smaller number... and oversees a process for them.*

Recognizing this need even before the LCFF, one of our case study districts implemented a particularly well-developed foster youth support program. District foster youth counselors and social workers provide crisis intervention counseling, transition and emancipation services, and case management specifically for foster youth.

Yet even this strategy to address specific needs can be fraught with challenges. One case study district dramatically increased counseling services for foster youth. This district planned for a new set of counselors and began hiring counselors, lead counselors, and a coordinator. But as of January 2015, the district was still trying to hire a full staff. While the district had intended the counselor to foster youth ration to be 50 to 1, the current ratio is about 115 to 1. In addition, the district is still struggling to provide the newly hired counselors with information about their assigned foster youth and to secure an agreement through the court for blanket data sharing with the county's Child and Family Services Department. Finally, the district has not yet hired an administrative data analyst so that the counselors will have an accessible computerized case management system instead of the current paper records system.

## Tutoring

By any academic measure, foster youth have the lowest academic performance of any other group of students. In response, both districts and COEs provide tutoring services, often through federal Title I funds, to improve foster youth's academic

outcomes. These programs usually include afterschool tutoring and credit recovery support.

COEs typically look to district programs first to provide tutoring for foster youth; the COEs maintain programs designed to fill gaps. As one COE official reported:

*We prefer kids to get what they need from their own school. We want them to get what every other kid can get. That's what they are entitled to. And if that can't work for them, that's when their sibling visit is, that's when their therapy appointment is, or their foster parent has to pick them up after school because she has three other kids to pick up, then we go to their house.*

Another COE official reported that some junior and senior high schools do not provide tutoring or that the schools only provide tutoring for students who are failing. In other cases, a foster youth may want to go to college and needs help to meet A-G requirements. In these instances, COEs provide tutoring as part of their FYS program. LCFF provides an opportunity for districts to expand their tutoring support for foster youth and pay particular attention to those who might not be able to take advantage of traditional afterschool tutoring programs.

## Advocacy

Foster youth have many adults in their lives—caregivers, social workers, lawyers, educators, counselors, judges. Yet they often feel isolated and alone. As one of our interviewees told us:

*...the youth commonly face a lack of personal connection with a family unit, true friends, and safe adults that they can turn to on a daily basis... This*

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*becomes apparent by simply asking a foster youth who in their lives they consider as ‘someone that they know they can trust and can turn to when in need.’ More often than not these youth answer this simple question with “no-one.”*

The state began to address the broader need for foster youth advocacy with AB 490. The law required every school district to appoint a foster youth liaison. From our interviews with individuals in these positions, it was clear that liaisons also play advocacy roles for both individual foster youth and for all foster youth collectively in their district. As previously noted, in most, but not all of our case study districts, the foster youth liaison participated in the development of their district’s LCAP.

While liaisons serve the entire population of foster youth in their districts, the key advocate for an individual foster youth’s educational needs is the educational rights holder. If the court determines that a child’s parent is not capable of making educational decisions for the youth, it can appoint a qualified individual to serve that function. An educational rights holder is charged with meeting with the foster youth as well as the educational liaison or regional service coordinator to determine if educational and developmental services needs are being met and ensure the youth’s rights are being protected. Before each scheduled review hearing, the educational rights holder must provide information and recommendations to the social worker, probation officer, or the court.

The state currently has a shortage of qualified educational rights holders. A district can play this role only if the foster youth is or may be eligible for

special education. If the court cannot identify a qualified education rights holder, the court holds the rights. CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children), a statewide organization that recruits and trains volunteers to be educational rights holders, represents one effort to remedy this situation. One of our interviewees argued that districts should consider including as part of their LCAPs ways to help end the shortage of educational rights holders.

## School Climate

Foster youth often do not find school to be a comfortable, welcoming, or supportive place. A support strategy related to advocacy is to transform a school’s climate to make it foster youth-friendly. This strategy was pioneered at one high school with large numbers of foster youth. In 2007, county Child Protective Services made the school aware of its high foster youth suspension and expulsion rates. That prompted the school to take a hard look their foster youth data. As the district reported:

*By analyzing foster youth student data at [the school] it was determined that the foster youth were experiencing a disproportionate number of discipline, academic, and social issues when compared to their non-foster youth peers. The discipline issues were reflected in an abnormally high number of suspensions and expulsions; the academic issues were reflected in poor school attendance, low grade point averages, and low graduation rates; and the social issues were reflected in a lack of connectedness or buy-in while at school, low participation in school and extra-curricular activities and a lack of normalizing experiences at school.*

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After identifying the problems, the school took a variety of steps to improve the school experience for its foster youth. First, they invited all foster youth in the school to monthly lunch meetings. The meetings helped build a community of foster youth as they began articulating their group needs. Next, with the support of community partners, they provided all foster youth with the resources to more fully engage them in the schools extra-curricular activities (e.g., passes to school sporting and other events, clothes for school dances, etc.). The school then established a foster youth specific student advisory class (a homeroom class). The youth were given the opportunity to stay in their then-current homeroom classes or join the all foster youth class, and all but two decided to join the new class. As the program has developed, community building for foster youth has come to include weekend events featuring presentations by successful former foster youth and improved data systems to closely monitor their academic and behavioral progress.

This program gave rise to the non-profit organization, Courageous Connection, specifically designed to change how foster youth experience the school. To help change the school climate, the program replaces the traditional reactive discipline model with a more proactive approach focused on meeting the needs of foster youth rather than just responding to their behaviors. The program also makes the school a single-point-of-service. By utilizing the school site as a meeting place for the multiple people involved in the lives of foster youth, the program can help realize a more cohesive system of support.

Courageous Connection's leadership reports impressive results. In the two years of the student advisory class, students improved their overall grade point average, increased daily attendance, and experienced no expulsions and minimal suspensions. In addition a significant number of seniors graduated on time and moved on to post-secondary institutions.

As districts revisit their LCAPs and explore strategies for supporting foster youth, the Courageous Connection model seems promising. In keeping with the spirit of the LCFF, it empowers local actors at the school level. Perhaps most importantly, it empowers foster youth to articulate their needs and build their own communities of support.

## Professional Development

Our interviewees repeatedly emphasized school staffs' general lack of awareness of foster youth educational outcomes and their needs. However, in our earlier analysis of district LCAPs, we found few districts with plans to provide professional development around foster youth. Typically, district officials pointed to the many professional development needs, their limited resources, and the need to triage those resources.

Even without much evidence of an emerging professional development strategy to improve foster youth outcomes, many of our interviewees were optimistic about the future. One interviewee argued that because foster youth are one of the targeted LCFF groups, there should be growing awareness of their needs:

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*They are invisible and that's not okay. Hopefully, with these dollars tied to them, we will at the very least open up the curtains and have people recognize that these kids are standing right next to you.*

COE officials reported that COEs have been providing trainings to districts on foster youth issues. These appear to be largely around AB 490, with training targeted to foster youth liaisons. Similarly, at least one of our case study districts reported providing extensive professional development on AB 490 requirements to front office staff, school counselors, and school administrators.

While we found few examples of district-wide plans for professional development for all educators on the needs of foster youth, training on trauma-informed practices was in the works in two of our case study districts and in some schools across the state. Trauma-informed teaching, designed to equip teachers and other educators with the skills to best manage traumatized students in the classroom, focuses on all students who experience trauma. This strategy can help teachers meet the needs of a broad array of students (including, for example, homeless students), thus blunting the criticism that foster youth-focused professional development only addresses a small percentage of students. Our interviews with district staff suggest that trauma-informed professional development is increasingly likely to be part of future district LCAPs.

## CONCLUSION

In our October 2014 report on the early implementation of the LCFF, we described a good

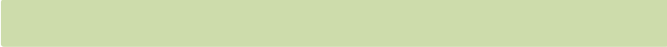
deal of enthusiasm among educators for the basic tenets of the new funding system and cautious optimism about its potential to improve student outcomes. Our interviews for this report with a wide range of individuals directly involved with foster youth and education echoed this enthusiasm tempered by cautious optimism. Enthusiasm seems warranted given the state's policy commitment to foster youth as an LCFF target group. Caution seems prudent given the recognition that so much needs to be accomplished to change the current dismal education trajectory of these students.

As we reported here, the first round of LCAPs generally offered slim evidence of districts' attention to foster youth. However, if the districts in our sample are any indication, the next round of LCAPs and budget development is likely to bring more attention to foster youth supports and services. As LCFF implementation moves forward, districts, COEs, social service agencies, and the state will need to attend to a complex set of challenges: lack of a comprehensive data system, absence of a consistent definition of foster youth, strategies to strike the appropriate balance between data sharing and confidentiality, clarification of new and different roles for COEs, and the multidimensional ongoing needs of foster youth even after they leave the foster care system.

With the LCFF's attention to foster youth, California has, in the words of one of our interviewees, "pulled back the curtain" on this often invisible population of students. The task now remains to turn commitment to results.



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