AT GREATER RISK

California Foster Youth and the Path from High School to College

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California Foster Youth
and the Path from
High School to
College

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Stuart Foundation mission statement:

The Stuart Foundation is dedicated to the protection, education and development of children and youth. We work toward ensuring that all children grow up in caring families, learn in vibrant and effective schools, and have opportunities to become productive members of their communities. We focus our investments on projects, programs and organizations making an impact in the States of California and Washington.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Among the most vulnerable Californians, foster children and youth are highly likely to confront such factors associated with school failure as poverty and disability. In addition, these children and youth must cope with the physical or psychological trauma associated with abuse, neglect, and separation from family, friends, and teachers. The effects of this trauma can be compounded by disruptions of old and new relationships as foster youth move through a series of placements, often changing schools as well as homes. Identifying policies and practices that can support foster children and youth not only to complete high school, but also to enroll in and complete postsecondary education credentials is key to these students' future self-sufficiency and success.

To provide critical information for developing such policies and practices, this report presents groundbreaking analyses of education and child welfare data on high school-aged foster youth in California. Researchers from the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) and the University of California, Berkeley's Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) sampled data on approximately 11,300 youth who were in foster care at some point during grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 and for whom California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) data in English-Language arts were available. Their analyses of these historically separate data demonstrate that **foster youth graduate from high school, enroll in community college, and persist in community college for a second year at lower rates than not only students in the general population but also other disadvantaged students.** This report first profiles the foster youth whose data were analyzed and then presents comparisons of their education outcomes with those of a matched sample of other disadvantaged youth as well as the general population.

California Foster Youth Student Profile

Foster youth in California high schools differ from their general population peers on several demographic characteristics:

- About one-quarter of foster youth had a disability, in contrast to about one-tenth of general population youth.

- One-third of foster youth were of African-American descent, compared with one-tenth of general population students.

- More than half (56 percent) of foster youth were girls. In contrast, one-half of general population youth were girls.

In addition to their demographic differences, foster youth were more likely than general population youth to attend schools with low performance ranks on California's Academic Performance Index (API) and had lower English-Language arts achievement.

- About one-half of foster youth attended schools in the bottom 30 percent of the school performance distribution; two-fifths of general population youth attended such schools.

- On the California Standards Test (CST) in English-Language arts, one-half of foster youth scored in the lowest two out of five performance levels. Among general population youth, one-quarter of students scored in the lowest two performance levels.

California's Child Welfare System Case Management System provides information about these students' experiences in foster care. About three-quarters had spent two or more years in foster care between birth and 12th grade. While in foster care, about 70 percent of youth had three or more placements. Combining the time they spent in multiple types of placements, one-third of youth spent most of their time in foster care in the homes of relatives, and another 37 percent spent most of their time in foster homes with nonrelatives. The remainder of youth spent most of their time in group or other types of placements. When they left foster care, 27 percent did so through reunification with their families. About half (54 percent) reached adulthood while in foster care and were emancipated from care. The remainder were cared for by legal guardians, adopted, ran away, or had no exit type recorded.

High School and Community College Education Outcomes

To assess foster youth's rates of high school completion, enrollment in community college, and persistence to a second year of college, researchers selected a sample of 4,000 foster youth and compared their outcomes with 4,000 general population youth who matched foster youth on grade level, school year, gender, race/ethnicity, English language learner status, free or reduced-price lunch status, primary disability (if any), district or school performance rank, and academic achievement as measured by the CST in English-Language arts. Selecting comparison youth who matched foster youth on these characteristics allowed examination of whether foster youth status added to the risk posed by such factors as disability and poverty.

The analyses demonstrate that **foster youth are less likely than other disadvantaged youth to complete high school, enroll in community college, or remain in community college for a second year. Foster youth's low rate of high school completion clearly contributes to their lower rates of community college enrollment and persistence.**

- Less than half of foster youth (45 percent) completed high school. Among the comparison sample of disadvantaged youth, 53 percent completed high school. General population students completed high school at almost twice the rate of foster youth (79 percent).

- Furthermore, because high school completion was strongly associated with enrollment in community college, foster youth's low rate of high school completion depressed their community college enrollment rate: 43 percent of foster youth and 46 percent of comparison youth enrolled in community college, compared with 59 percent of general population youth.

- Persistence rates followed a similar pattern. About two-fifths (41 percent) of foster youth, one-half (48 percent) of comparison youth, and three-fifths (62 percent) of general population youth enrolled for a second year of community college.

- Among all three groups, those who completed high school were 11 to 20 percentage points more likely to persist in community college than were their counterparts who had not done so.

Photographs by Ana Homonnay

INTRODUCTION

For the last decade or more, education reform efforts have focused not only on increasing student achievement, but also on closing gaps among groups of children and youth. Even when the average performance of all children rises, the children who achieve at the lowest levels may not improve at all and be left even further behind. Furthermore, the children who achieve at the lowest levels—who are less likely to graduate from high school and enroll or persist in postsecondary education—tend to be concentrated in particular demographic groups. They often come from homes challenged by poverty; have parents with relatively low levels of education; are English language learners or come from homes where English is not often spoken; or have a disability. Many of these characteristics are correlated with each other, resulting in children who face multiple, compounding challenges in school.

One group in particular, foster children and youth, are highly likely to confront multiple risk factors. In addition, these children and youth must cope with the physical or psychological trauma associated with abuse, neglect, and separation from family, friends, and teachers. The effects of this trauma can be intensified by disruptions of old and new relationships as foster youth move through a series of placements, often changing schools as well as homes. It is not surprising, therefore, that foster youth struggle to complete high school and enroll and stay in college. Compared with their peers in the general population, foster youth are nearly twice as likely to drop out of high school and also less likely to earn a postsecondary degree.

Why Focus on Foster Youth?

Why focus on the outcomes for foster youth, who constitute less than 1 percent of K–12 students in California?

First, there is a clear moral imperative to support the well-being of youth for whom the state is responsible. Foster youth are among the most vulnerable young Californians: they not only face numerous challenges, but also do not have parents who can consistently provide support or gather resources from schools and other community organizations to address their needs. For many years, research in California and across the nation has demonstrated that foster children and youth achieve at lower levels than other identified

subgroups of students. These students need a unique set of education supports and services to achieve at the same level as other children.

Second, a deeper understanding of education outcomes among foster youth allows for more informed interventions and more efficient use of time and money in the short run, while preventing the need for further intervention at the cost of the state in the long run. Third, what we learn about how to address foster youth achievement gaps can inform efforts to narrow gaps that other vulnerable student populations face.

Finally—perhaps as a consequence of the reasons listed above and despite crippling budget cuts—state legislators in California have funded various programs to provide support for foster youth (e.g., the Foster Youth Services Program, piloted in 1981 and implemented statewide by 2007–08; AB12, passed in 2010).[1] The purpose of this report is to provide California educators, social service policymakers, and legislators with critical information about education outcomes of foster children and youth in California so they may continue to improve foster youth education outcomes through state and local policies.

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[1] The California Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12), effective in 2012, extends benefits to foster youth until age 21.

> "What we learn about how to address foster youth education achievement gaps can inform efforts to narrow gaps that other vulnerable student populations face."

Focus of This Report

In an unprecedented effort to break down data silos and more effectively support foster youth, the Stuart Foundation sponsored analyses that bring together administrative data from both public education databases and the state's child welfare information system to deepen our understanding of California foster youth's transitions from high school to college. (See sidebar "About the Data.") The report discusses differences in high school completion, entry into community college, and persistence to a second year of college between youth in foster care and their peers who were not in foster care but shared many background characteristics, including low academic achievement.

Before looking at outcomes, however, the report profiles California foster youth and their matched peers. To provide context for understanding the challenges foster youth face, foster youth characteristics and experiences are compared with those of students in the general population. Comparisons with the general population demonstrate the achievement gap between foster youth and youth in general and thus provide context for the analyses of foster and other disadvantaged youth.

PROFILING CALIFORNIA FOSTER YOUTH

Demographics

On various demographic characteristics, foster youth varied considerably from their general population peers. As found in previous studies, foster youth are more likely than youth in the general population to be of African-American descent: one-tenth of all California students were African-American, compared with a full one-third of foster youth. Foster youth were also less likely than the general population to have white/Asian (28 percent of foster youth compared with 46 percent of the general population) or Hispanic

> "Do foster youth graduate from high school, enroll in community college, or persist in community college at lower rates than their peers who are not in foster care but are also at risk?"
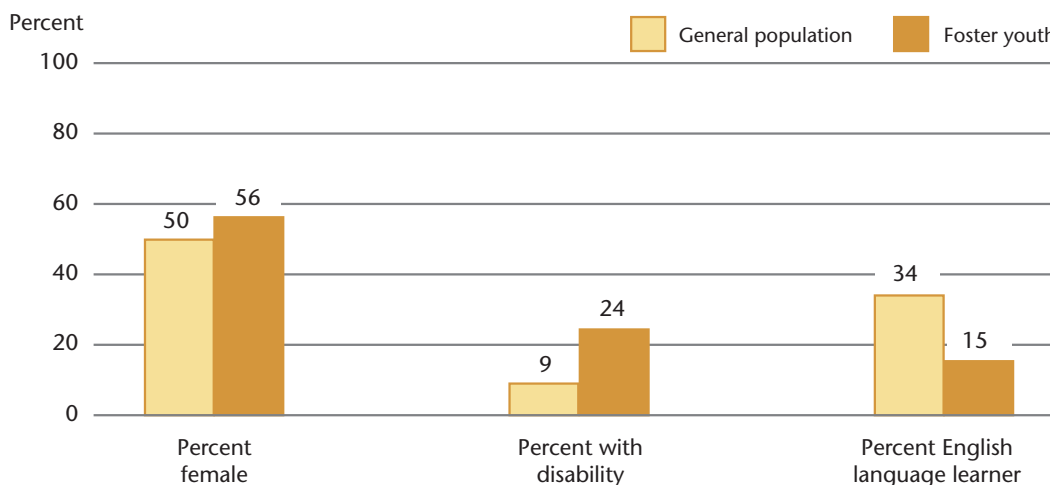
(37 percent versus 42 percent) backgrounds. In addition, foster youth were more likely than their counterparts in the general population to be girls (56 percent of foster youth compared with 50 percent of the general population) (exhibit 1), and have a disability (24 percent of foster youth versus 9 percent of general population youth).

Foster youth were less likely than their general population peers, however, to be English language learners. Fifteen percent of foster youth were not fluent in English, compared with 34 percent of the general population.

Exhibit 1: GENDER, DISABILITY, ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Percentage of students who were female, had a disability, or were English language learners

NOTES: Based on samples of 11,337 foster youth and 99,895 general population students in grades 9–11 in California public schools from 2002–03 through 2006–07.

These findings are based on a unique database that combines K–12 education data from school districts and public postsecondary institutions across California with data from the state's child welfare system. The education data were assembled by the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC), a nonprofit organization that administered the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS), a voluntary consortium that includes two-thirds of California's elementary/secondary school districts, all of its community colleges, and nearly all of its public universities. Cal-PASS members contribute data about their students to the Cal-PASS data system, which integrates the data and allows members to learn about their students as they move among school districts and into the California Community College, California State University, and University of California systems. Data on foster youth's experiences in foster care were assembled by the University of California, Berkeley's Center for Social Services Research (CSSR), which partners with the California Department of Social Services to analyze data from California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System.

Researchers from IEBC and CSSR integrated data from these two sources to identify foster youth's education records and analyze their elementary, secondary, and postsecondary outcomes in relation to their experiences in foster care. They sampled approximately **11,300 foster youth** who were in foster care at some point during grades 9–11 in any of the academic years from 2002–03 through 2006–07 and for whom California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) data in English-Language arts were available.

IEBC and CSSR staff also identified two groups of contemporary California youth whose outcomes were analyzed to provide contextual information. The first group includes youth who had not been in foster care but who matched foster youth on a number of characteristics, including several that have been associated with low academic achievement in a large, long-standing body of research. The comparison group sample matched the foster youth sample on grade level, school year, gender, race/ethnicity, English language learner status, free or reduced-price lunch status,[2] primary disability (if any), district or school performance rank, and academic achievement as measured by the California Standards Test in English-Language arts. The second group that was identified to provide context for understanding foster youth outcomes included approximately 100,000 other students who were in 9th–11th grades in the same time period and represent the general population of California high school students.

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[2]By law, all foster youth are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program.

School Performance Rank and Student Achievement

Foster youth in California are more likely than general population youth to attend schools with low performance ratings according to the Academic Performance Index (API). Among foster youth, 52 percent attended schools whose API fell in the bottom 30 percent of all California schools. In contrast, 40 percent of general population youth attended such schools (exhibit 2).

Relative to students in the general population, foster youth performed poorly on the California Standards Test (CST) in English-Language arts. Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of foster youth scored in the far below basic level on the CST, the lowest of the five performance levels (exhibit 3). In contrast, about half as many (11 percent) of general population 11th graders in 2012 scored in this lowest level. Similarly, 27 percent of foster youth scored in the second lowest level, below basic, while about half as many general population 11th graders (13 percent) did so.
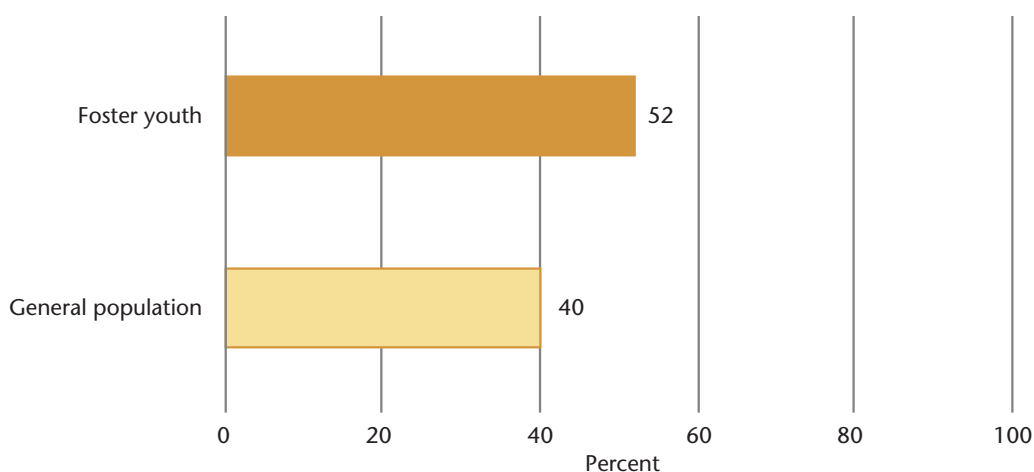
At the other end of the achievement scale, only 19 percent of foster youth scored in the proficient or advanced levels, while nearly half of general population 11th graders (48 percent) did so. General population 11th graders scored in the proficient level at nearly twice the rate of foster youth and in the advanced level at more than five times the rate of foster youth.

Experiences in the Child Welfare System

Foster children, by definition, have experienced the trauma of being removed from their families. Many of these children have been removed because of other types of trauma. Looking only at their most recent removal from their families, 6 percent of the foster youth in this study had been removed because of sexual abuse, 12 percent because of physical abuse, and another 14 percent because of emotional or other types of abuse (exhibit 4). The remaining foster youth had been removed most recently because of neglect.

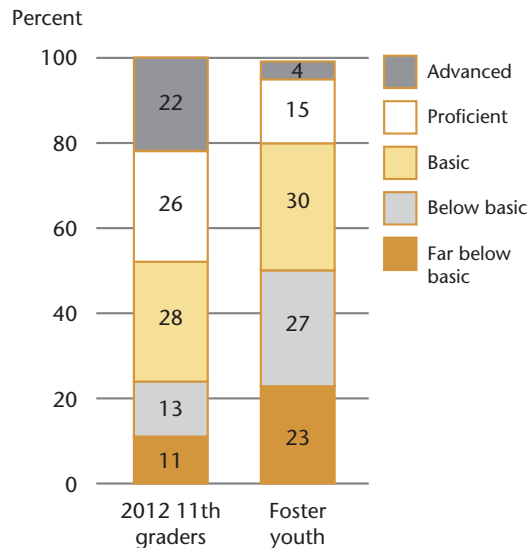---

Exhibit 2: SCHOOL RANK

Percentage of youth who attended schools whose performance ranked in the lowest 30 percent

NOTE: Based on samples of 11,337 foster youth and 99,895 general population students in grades 9–11 in California public schools from 2002–03 through 2006–07.

Percentage of students who scored at each of five proficiency levels on the California Standards Test (CST) in English-Language arts
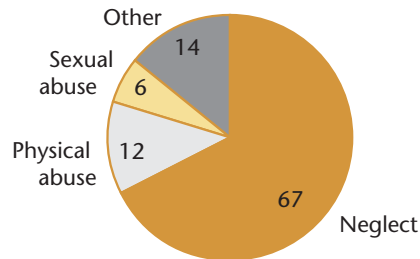
Percent

NOTES: Based on samples of 4,060 foster youth and 4,060 comparison youth in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools. General population percentages from all 11th graders tested in California in 2012 as reported by the California Department of Education. Retrieved March 2, 2013, from http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2012/ViewReport.aspxps=true&lstTestYear=2012&lstTestType=C&lstCounty=&lstDistrict=&lstSchool=&lstGroup=1&lstSubGroup=1.

Foster youth's experiences in the child welfare system provide further context for understanding their education outcomes. Analyses of high school students included four characteristics of foster youth's experiences in the child welfare system: the total length of time spent in foster care between birth and 12th grade, the number of foster care placements experienced, the type of placement in which the youth spent the most time, and how the youth exited foster care. (See sidebar "How Does California Compare?" for information on how California compares with the nation on related measures.)

The total amount of time youth spent in foster care was considerable: 73 percent had spent two or more

Percentage of sampled foster youth who were most recently removed from their homes for various reasons

NOTE: Based on sample of 11,337 foster youth in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools.
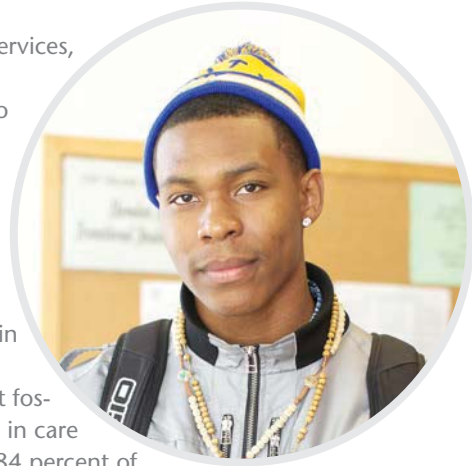
years in foster care between birth and 12th grade (exhibit 5). Furthermore, youth often experience multiple home placements during their time in foster care. Among the foster youth sampled for this study, 69 percent had three or more home placements: 38 percent had been in more than five placements, and 31 percent had been in three to four placements.

There are many types of placements, including placement with relatives, commonly referred to as "kin" foster homes; placement in the home of a nonrelated family, or "nonrelative" foster homes; group placements; and other placements (e.g., medical facilities and juvenile detention centers). If relatives are available and able to provide the care a youth requires, their homes are the first choice among placement options. Group placement types indicate that youth need physical care or emotional or behavior support beyond what a family can provide.

Among the foster youth studied, about one-third spent the largest amount of their foster care time in kin foster homes, and another 37 percent spent the largest amount of their time
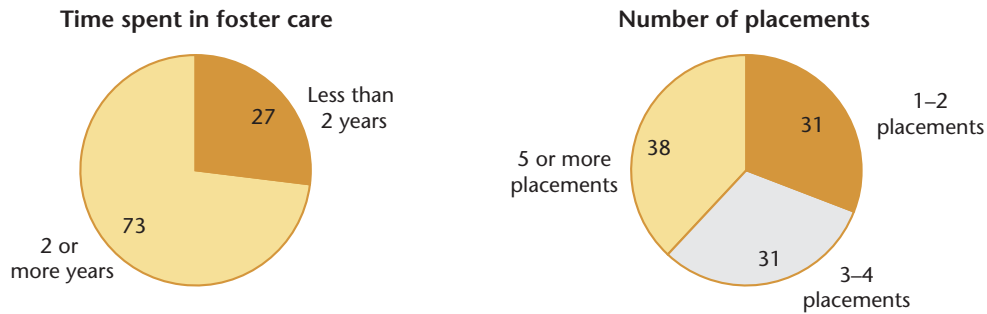
According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, California ranks near the middle among the states on measures of foster children's number of placements and time to reunification.[3] For example, in half the states, more than 69 percent of foster children who were reunified with their families in 2010 were reunified within 12 months of when they entered foster care, and in the other half of the states, less than 69 percent were reunified within a year. In California, 68 percent of foster children and youth who were reunified in 2010 were returned to their families within a year of removal, putting California just slightly below the median. Similarly, in 2010, half the states were able to limit foster placements to two for 85 percent of children who were in care for less than a year. California again ranked in the middle: 84 percent of California youth in care for less than a year in 2010 had no more than two placements.

[3]U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Administration for Children and Families; Administration on Children, Youth, and Families; Children's Bureau, *Child Welfare Outcomes 2007–2010: Report to Congress.* Retrieved February 28, 2013, from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cwo07-10/cwo07-10.pdf.

Exhibit 5: TIME SPENT IN FOSTER CARE AND NUMBER OF PLACEMENTS

Percentage distribution of foster youth by time spent in care and number of placements

Time spent in foster care

- Less than 2 years: 27
- 2 or more years: 73

Number of placements

- 1–2 placements: 31
- 3–4 placements: 31
- 5 or more placements: 38

NOTE: Based on sample of 11,337 foster youth in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools.
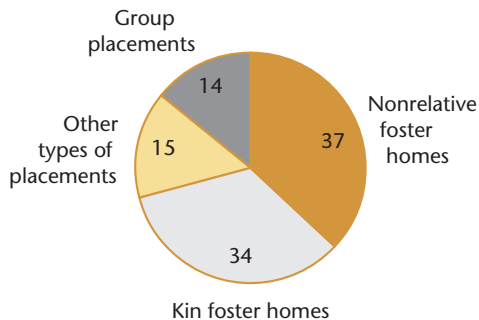
in nonrelative foster homes (exhibit 6). Fourteen percent spent the largest amount of their time in group placements, and another 15 percent did so in other types of placements.

Youth leave foster care for a variety of permanent placements. The first choice of permanency for every youth is reunification with the family from whose care he was removed, and 27 percent of the foster youth sampled were reunified with their families when they left foster care (exhibit 7). When reunification is not possible, however, the youth may be emancipated, adopted, or cared for by a legal guardian until he reaches majority. Among the sampled foster youth, about one-half (54 percent) were emancipated. Emancipated youth

Exhibit 6: MAJOR PLACEMENT TYPE

Percentage of foster youth who spent most of their time in foster care in various types of home placements

Group placements: 14
Other types of placements: 15
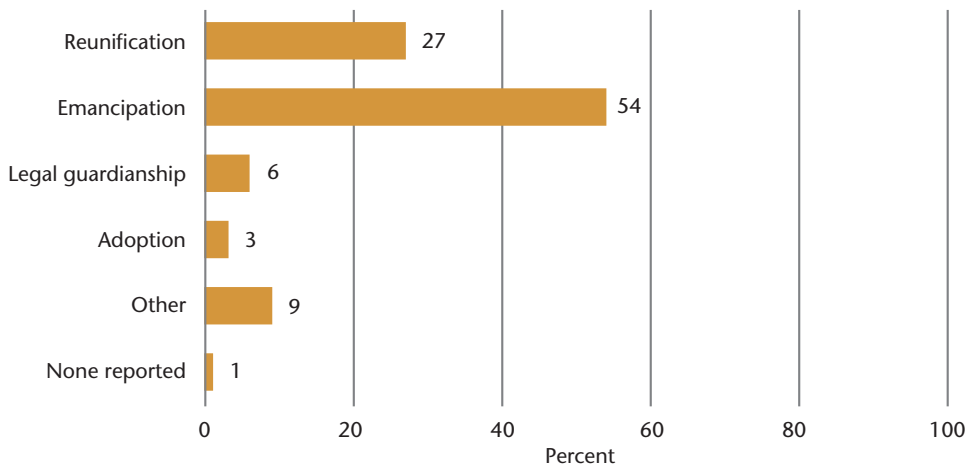Nonrelative foster homes: 37
Kin foster homes: 34

NOTES: Based on sample of 11,337 foster youth in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools.

receive some services from the state, and because of the tremendous challenges these youth face and the poor outcomes observed among them historically, state, county, and private organizations are providing increasing amounts and types of support for these young people.

In addition, about 10 percent of foster youth were placed with legal guardians (6 percent) or adoptive parents (3 percent), some of whom were extended family members. Another 9 percent exited in some other fashion (e.g., running away from a foster placement), and for 1 percent of youth, no exit type was recorded.

Exhibit 7: EXIT TYPE

Percentage of foster youth who most recently exited foster care to various permanent placements

Exit Type	Percent
Reunification	27
Emancipation	54
Legal guardianship	6
Adoption	3
Other	9
None reported	1

NOTE: Based on sample of 11,337 foster youth in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools.

HIGH SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE EDUCATION OUTCOMES

California foster youth generally achieve academically at lower levels than their general population peers do. Given the many characteristics that foster youth share with students at risk of low achievement and dropping out of school, this is not surprising. Analyses of education and child welfare data from younger Californians demonstrate that foster children are less likely than other children at risk of school failure to reach higher academic achievement levels in English-Language arts. (See sidebar "California Foster Youth's Low Academic Achievement.")

For the first time, this report presents data establishing that California foster youth *also* complete high school, enroll in community college, and persist in college at lower rates than do nonfoster youth who also face such challenges as poverty or disability. Being removed from their homes because of neglect or trauma makes it even more difficult for foster youth, who are already challenged by demographic risk factors, to succeed in high school or community college.
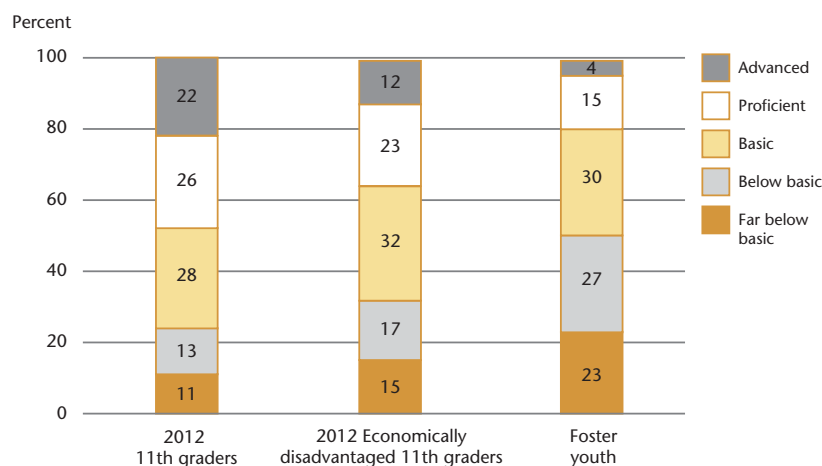

This section reports comparisons between **a subsample of approximately 4,000 of the foster youth studied above and a sample of 4,000 nonfoster youth who were also disadvantaged.** The nonfoster youth were selected for comparison because their demographic characteristics, school or district, school performance ranking, and performance levels on the CST in English-Language arts matched those of the sampled foster youth—i.e., **as a group, the comparison youth faced the same challenges as foster youth with the exception of having been removed from their families as a result of abuse or neglect.** The section presents a comparison of foster youth rates of high school completion, entrance into community college, and one-year persistence in community college with those of both the comparison group and the general population. It illustrates that, despite equally low levels of achievement, foster youth lag behind other at-risk youth in high school completion, community college enrollment, and college persistence.

Foster youth achieve at lower levels than not only the general population (exhibit 3), but also other disadvantaged students. In 2012, for example, 12 percent of economically disadvantaged 11th graders throughout California scored at the advanced level on the CST in English-Language arts. In contrast, only 4 percent among the foster youth sample scored at the advanced level. At the other end of the achievement distribution, 15 percent of economically disadvantaged 11th graders scored at the lowest proficiency level, far below basic, compared with 23 percent of the sampled foster youth.

Exhibit A: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS PERFORMANCE

Percentage of students who scored at each of five proficiency levels on the California Standards Test in English-Language arts

NOTES: Based on a sample of 4,060 foster youth in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools. General population and economically disadvantaged population percentages from 11th graders tested in California in 2012. Retrieved March 2, 2013, from http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2012/ViewReport.aspxps=true&lstTestYear=2012&lstTestType=C&lstCounty=&lstDistrict=&lstSchool=&lstGroup=1&lstSubGroup=1 and http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2012/ViewReport.aspx-?ps=true&lstTestYear=2012&lstTestType=C&lstCounty=&lstDistrict=&lstSchool=&lstGroup=3&lstSubGroup=31.

To explore whether students placed in foster care achieve at lower levels than they would if they had not been placed in care, CSSR and IEBC compared foster youths' achievement with that of a group of comparison students as both groups advanced through the elementary and middle grades. From the longitudinal data on California children's education and child welfare experiences, the researchers selected all California children who were in foster care for the first time while they were in any of grades 3–8 during the academic years 2003–04 through 2006–07. They also selected a sample of children who had not been in foster care but who matched the foster youth on grade level, school year, gender, race/ethnicity, English language learner status, eligibility for participation in the National School Lunch Program, primary disability, district or school, and proficiency on the CST in English-Language arts. These comparison students were matched to foster youth at the time foster youth entered foster care.

Compared with similarly challenged nonfoster youth, foster youth were less likely to gain and more likely to lose achievement levels in the three years after they entered foster care. For example, among students in the second lowest achievement level, below basic, 31 percent of foster children reached a higher achievement level in three years, compared with 43 percent of comparison children. Among students who began in the proficient or advanced achievement levels, 40 percent of foster children lost ground—scored at a lower level three years later—compared with 27 percent of comparison children.

High School Completion

Foster youth completed high school at slightly more than half the rate of students in the general population: 45 percent of foster youth completed high school, compared with 79 percent of general population students (exhibit 8). Despite their identical demographic characteristics, school performance ranking, and English language achievement, foster youth also underperformed the comparison students by 8 percentage points (45 percent compared with 53 percent). The vast majority of those who completed high school in all three groups earned diplomas, with 5–7 percent receiving some other completion award (e.g., graduating from an independent study program).
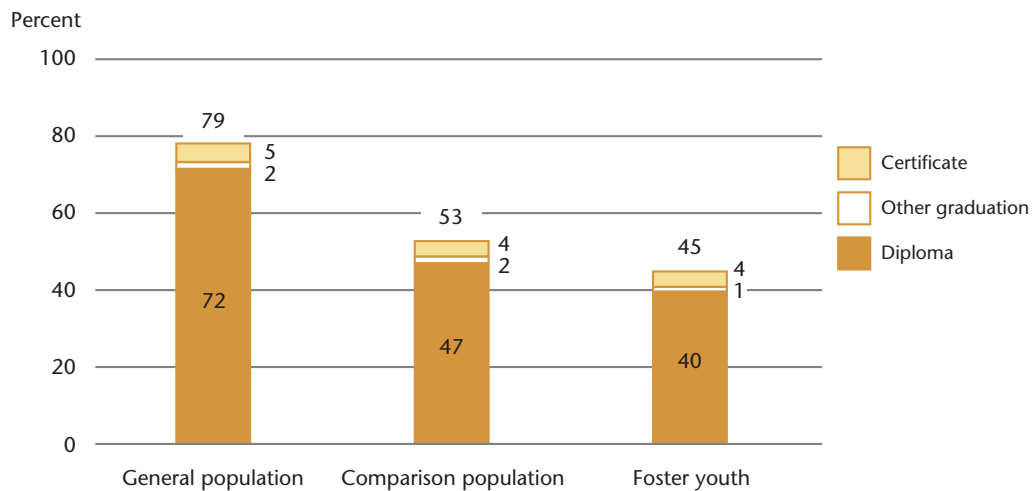
"For the first time, this report presents data establishing that California foster youth *also* complete high school, enroll in community college, and persist in college at lower rates than do nonfoster youth who also face such challenges as disability."

Community College Enrollment and Persistence

Among all three groups—foster youth, comparison youth, and general population youth—high school completion was strongly associated with enrollment in community college; in each population, the majority of students who completed high school entered community college (exhibit 9). Among youth who did not complete high school, however, far fewer went on to study at a community college, and both foster and comparison youth entered community college at a lower rate than did students in the general population. Only about 30 percent of foster and comparison youth who had not

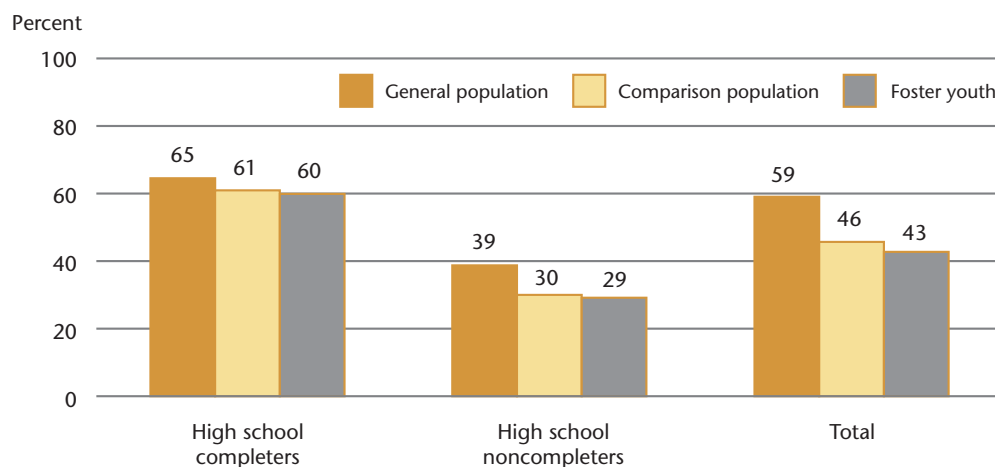### Exhibit 8: HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

Percentage of students who completed high school by 2010

NOTE: Based on samples of 4,060 foster youth, 4,060 comparison youth, and 99,895 general population students in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools.

Percentage of youth who entered community college by 2010

Percent

Legend
General population
Comparison population
Foster youth

High school completers: 65, 61, 60
High school noncompleters: 39, 30, 29
Total: 59, 46, 43

NOTE: Based on samples of 4,060 foster youth, 4,060 comparison youth, and 99,895 general population students in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools.

completed high school entered community college, compared with about 40 percent of high school noncompleters in the general population.

Because foster and comparison youth are so much less likely than general population youth to complete high school, the difference in college-going rates between high school completers and noncompleters seriously reduces the overall likelihood that foster youth will enter postsecondary education. Among general population students, 59 percent entered a community college, but among foster and comparison youth, 43 and 46 percent did so, respectively.

Foster youth tended to earn fewer credits during their first year of community college than other

"Sixty-two percent of general population students enrolled for a second year, compared with 48 percent of comparison youth and 41 percent of foster youth."

students did, which did not bode well for their persistence into a second year. Among general population students, 37 percent earned 15 credits during their first year of college, about one semester's worth of credit for a full-time student. In contrast, 27 percent of comparison youth and 21 percent of foster youth did so.

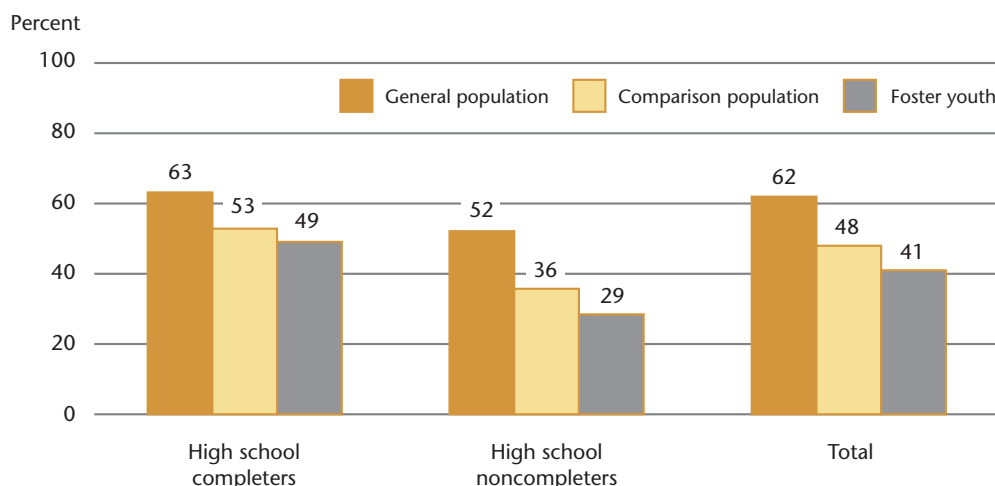Consistent with the credit accrual results, persistence to a second year of postsecondary study also varied among the three groups. Sixty-two percent of general population students enrolled for a second year, compared with 48 percent of comparison youth and 41 percent of foster youth (exhibit 10). Furthermore, persistence was strongly related to whether students had completed high school. Among all three groups, those who com-

Percentage of community college enrollees who persisted at least one year, by high school completion status

Percent

NOTE: Based on samples of 4,060 foster youth, 4,060 comparison youth, and 99,895 general population students in grades 9–11 from 2002–03 through 2006–07 in California public schools.

pleted high school were 11 to 20 percentage points more likely to persist than their counterparts who had not completed high school. Thus, again, the lower rate of high school completion among foster youth compounds their lower rates of enrollment and persistence.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates clearly that, independent of such risk factors as having a disability, California youth in foster care are less likely to complete high school, enroll in a community college, or persist in community college once enrolled. That is, even when compared with youth who shared characteristics associated with school failure, including lower academic achievement in English-Language arts, foster youth were less likely to complete high school or enroll or persist at least one year in community college. In addition, because high school completion was strongly associated with enrollment and per-

sistence in community colleges, foster youth's particularly low high school completion rate compounds the challenges they already face in enrolling and persisting in community college.

These results point to the overarching importance of providing foster youth with the support they need to complete high school as well as enroll and succeed in college at the same rates as other students. To develop policies and procedures that can provide such support, it is useful to identify factors that are associated with the success or failure of foster youth. Once these factors have been identified, policies can be crafted to support characteristics associated with success and diminish those associated with failure. The appendix presents findings concerning foster youth's experiences in the child welfare system and the relationships between those experiences and high school completion and enrollment and persistence in community college.

APPENDIX: Factors Associated with Transition Outcomes

Identifying which of their experiences in school and in foster care encourage or inhibit school success among foster youth is complicated because many of these experiences are related to each other. For example, youth with more time in foster care also tend to have more foster care placements. If youth with more foster care placements were to complete high school less often than did their peers with fewer placements, we would wonder whether this effect on completion resulted from more placements, more time in foster care, or both factors.

Multivariate analysis allows us to account for such overlap among factors and estimate the effects of individual factors *independent* of their relationships with the other factors studied. This analysis allows us to estimate, for example, the effect of spending more time in foster care *independent* of the effect of also having multiple placements while in foster care and the effects of other school and child welfare experiences.

Each of the three outcomes of interest—completing high school, enrolling in community college, or continuing in college for a second year—is a binary, or yes/no, variable: students did or did not achieve each outcome. Therefore, IEBC and CSSR researchers estimated how much each factor reduced or enhanced the average student's chance of having the better alternative—i.e., completing high school, enrolling in community college, or persisting to a second year—independent of the effects of the other factors included in the study.

As an example, consider the effect of disability on whether a student enrolled in community college: students who had a disability were 14 percent less likely than students who did not have a disability to enroll in community college. One way to think of this is to imagine two groups of foster youth who have average characteristics and experiences *except* that the students in one group have at least one disability and students in the other group do not have disabilities. Being "14 percent less likely to enroll in community college" means that if 100 percent of the foster youth without disabilities enrolled in community college, we would expect 86 percent of the foster youth with disabilities to do so.

Whether a student has a disability, however, cannot be affected directly by policy: policies cannot eliminate students' disabilities. Fortunately, some of the factors studied are amenable to changes in policies or procedures. Understanding whether these factors are associated with differences in students' likelihood of completing high school or enrolling or persisting in

community college will allow policymakers and practitioners to explore whether policy or practice in these areas could be changed to enhance foster youth's education success.

- *Attending a low-performing school reduced* foster youths' probability of completing high school by 19 percent: that is, if 100 percent of youth in higher performing schools completed high school, we would expect only 81 percent of youth in the low-performing schools to do so (exhibit 11). Although not associated with community college enrollment, attending a low-performing school also reduced foster youth's chances of persisting to a second year of community college once they had enrolled, but the effect was smaller (7 percent).

- Foster youth who *earned at least a C- in a college-prep English course* were 243 percent more likely than other foster youth to complete high school. Foster youth who earned a C- in a college-prep English course were also 20 percent more likely than other foster youth to enroll in community college, although they were no more likely to persist in community college once enrolled.

- Foster youth who *completed at least 15 credits in their first year of college*—one full-time semester's worth of credits—were twice as likely as those who completed fewer credits the first year to persist to a second year.

- Foster youth who *took a basic skills course*—a course designed for students who do not have the skills needed to enroll in a college-level course—were 46 percent more likely than students who did not take such a course to persist to a second year in college.

- *Receiving financial aid* in community college was associated with a 9 percent greater chance of persisting to a second year.

- Compared with their peers who enrolled in community college within a year of leaving high school, foster youth who *delayed entering community college one year or more* after leaving high school were about half as likely to persist to a second year of community college. On the other hand, fostr youth who took at least one community college course before completing high school were 22 percent more likely to persist than were their peers who enrolled with a year of leaving high school.

- Compared with foster youth who spent the largest amount of their time in foster care in kin foster homes, foster youth who *spent the largest amount of time in group placements* were 21 percent less likely to complete high school.[4] Youth who spent most of their time in nonrelative foster homes, however, did not complete high school, enroll in community college, or persist in community college at rates different from those of their peers in kin homes.

- Foster youth who had *three or more different placements* while in foster care were 13 percent less likely than their peers with fewer placements to complete high school. Foster youth with five or more placements were less likely than those with two or fewer placements to achieve any of the three education outcomes studied: they were 31 percent less likely to complete high school, 9 percent less likely to enroll in community college, and 16 percent less likely to persist to a second year of college.

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[4]As noted above, group placements are usually reserved for youth who need physical care or emotional or behavior support beyond that a family can provide.