



EVERY TRANSITION COUNTS

Educational Stability of Colorado's Students in Foster Care

2007-08 TO 2013-14

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DATA SOURCES

Out-of Home placement data are from the Colorado Trails Child Welfare application. Educational data are from the Colorado Department of Education's Data Services Office. Focus group data were collected in partnership with Mile High United Way.

AUDIENCE FOR REPORT

This report is designed to provide an overview of educational stability of students in foster care for Colorado policymakers and practitioners. Sections describing the youth perspective, modeling the odds of earning a high school credential, and summarizing geographical information have a corresponding research report or technical manuscript. A complete list of research reports using data from the Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care are available at unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research. The section on probability of students changing schools is only reported here, and additional information on statistical models is available upon request from the authors.

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“A school can be one of those things where it can be consistent... Stability in a sense is where you feel comfortable. You feel like yourself.”

- Former Colorado Student in Foster Care

EDUCATIONAL STABILITY

Educational stability helps to ensure that students in foster care know what to expect during the school day, have their educational needs met, and feel connected to a school community. The school also knows the student and can provide a foundation for students in foster care to achieve academic success and make progress toward a high school diploma. Educational stability is the opportunity for students in foster care to have a consistent, predictable learning environment.

When child welfare placement changes occur or a student is initially removed from the home, educational stability must be maintained or established. Federal and state policies and best practice recommendations approach educational stability from two entry points¹:

1. SCHOOL STABILITY

Students remain in their schools of origin unless it is in their best interest to change schools. Transportation is provided to the school of origin, when needed, to maintain school stability.

2. SEAMLESS TRANSITIONS

When students change schools, they are immediately enrolled in a new school with appropriate classes, educational services, and transfers of credits. Students are able to participate fully in athletics and other extracurricular activities. Both the student and the school are prepared for the transition.

School stability, or remaining in the same school in the midst of child welfare placement changes, is a way to maintain educational stability. Seamless transitions are a part of maintaining educational stability for those students in foster care who do change schools.

A recent Government Accountability Office report indicated that the implementation of policies targeting federal educational stability is a nationwide problem.² It is a complex challenge to balance safety, permanency, and educational stability.³

Barriers to educational stability include a lack of foster care placements in proximity to students' schools of origin, transportation costs, unclear responsibility for transportation or educational decision-making, and challenges accessing and transferring students' records.⁴ Both school stability and seamless transitions require communication and coordination among the multitude of systems that serve students in foster care.⁵



SCHOOL STABILITY



SEAMLESS
TRANSITIONS

EVERY TRANSITION COUNTS!

For a student, every school transition - not just those associated with child welfare placement changes - counts.

Educational stability may need to be established for students who experienced school changes prior to entering foster care or between removal episodes.

The absence of educational stability within the foster care population is often cited as barrier to academic achievement and progress toward high school graduation.⁶ The national literature consistently indicates that many elementary through high school-aged students in foster care experience school instability. However, like many educational data points for students in foster care, there is a lack of apples-to-apples comparison data regarding school changes.

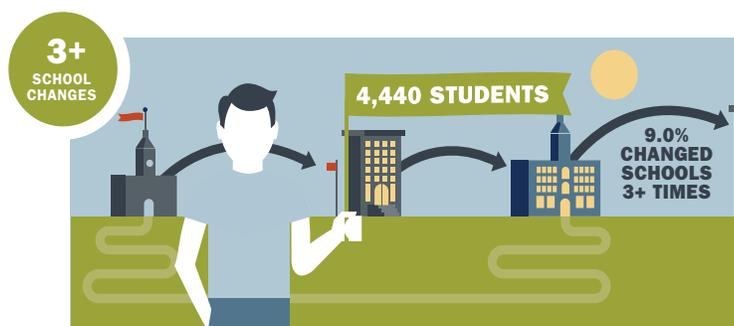
Some researchers have studied school changes over a two-year time period. Researchers following a cohort of elementary school children in foster care found that they typically attended three schools in two years, with 20% attending four or more schools in the same time period.⁷ In another study, approximately two-thirds of middle and high school youths in foster care had at least one school transfer in the previous two years.⁸

Others researchers have asked current and former foster youths how many times they changed schools while in the foster care system. In one study, the average number of school transfers reported was eight.⁹ Minority youths in foster care experienced more educational instability than their White foster care peers.¹⁰

In the current study, researchers first examined school changes throughout high school and then school changes that occurred in the same year as an out-of-home placement. Follow-up studies may consider events preceding the student's initial removal from the home and draw comparisons to time periods when the student was in out-of-home care.



IN 2013-14 | **4,440 STUDENTS** IN FOSTER CARE WERE ENROLLED IN A CO SCHOOL BY OCT 1ST. **53.3%** CHANGED SCHOOLS 1 OR MORE TIMES THAT SCHOOL YEAR.



IN 2013-14 | **4,440 STUDENTS** IN FOSTER CARE WERE ENROLLED IN A CO SCHOOL BY OCT 1ST. **9.0%** CHANGED SCHOOLS 3 OR MORE TIMES THAT SCHOOL YEAR.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

Colorado youths gave voice to the statistics when they shared their personal experiences as students in foster care¹¹:

Youths participating in focus groups spoke to both gaps in learning and repetitive learning that results from differences in curriculum across the schools attended.

You might go to one school where they're learning something this semester, transfer schools and they're learning something different, maybe something you already learned. But what they learned the first semester is something that you missed.

You can't just take somebody in the middle of chemistry and throw them in the middle of another chemistry class - they're learning two completely different things and two completely different levels. It might be the same class, but it's different.

Variations in curriculum, course offerings, and graduation requirements were described as barriers to on-time high school graduation.

My sister moved three schools in one semester and two were in the same school district. And at the end of the semester, all she had was English and math. Those were the only two that translated through all three schools. She was in German and the second school didn't have German so that didn't transfer, and it's like if the school you transfer to doesn't have that exact class that you were in... Then they can't count it.

As a consequence of challenges in maintaining educational continuity between schools, some youths in foster care reported feeling disengaged from academics.

I'm not even going to have the chance to learn. I'm going to be going to a different school, so who cares.

Many shared about experiences when transitions between schools were not seamless.

Then you're kind of lost in the dust. You're just another particle that is just there.

The examples shared by Colorado youths mirror the national literature. Researchers who study school mobility in a variety of student populations cite similar practical challenges.¹² Theorists describe the “social capital” that is lost when residential moves result in school changes.¹³ There is value in relationships with peers and adults in the school community, especially because these relationships often support academic achievement.

As Colorado continues to implement state-level educational stability solutions and local pilot programs, research on school changes can be used to refine and prioritize that work.

School changes are an indicator of educational instability that can be counted. Certainly some school changes are in students' best interests, and for some students, the transitions that occur are seamless. When patterns emerge, such as minority students or ninth to eleventh graders changing schools at disproportionately high rates, it becomes clearer where to target educational stability efforts.

This report opens with establishing the empirical connection between the number of times foster care students change schools and high school graduation rates that are well-below the state average. The lens widens to look at the prevalence of school changes within the foster care student population from kindergarten through twelfth grade. The report concludes with a brief summary of previously released research regarding where school transfers typically occur in Colorado.

SCHOOL CHANGES DURING HIGH SCHOOL

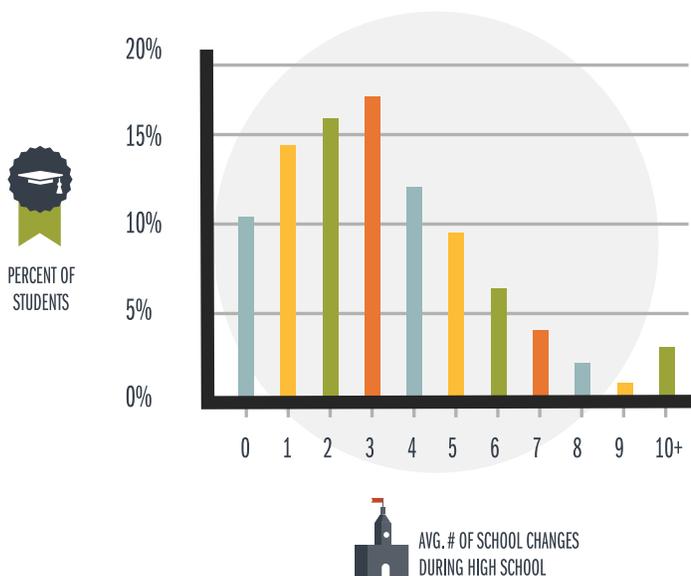
Colorado students who experience foster care during high school typically change schools three or more times after initially entering ninth grade.

In a sample of students (n = 3,547) who were part of the class of 2011, 2012, 2013, or 2014, three school changes after initially entering ninth grade was most typical. The mean was 3.47, median 3, and mode 3.

Only 10% of students did not change high schools at all. 59% of students changed high schools three or more times. The range of number of school changes was up to 18 times in four years.

Students are part of the foster care cohort or a "Class Of..." for tracking graduation and completion outcomes if they experienced an out-of-home placement during high school.

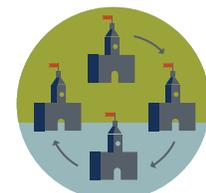
NUMBER OF SCHOOL CHANGES DURING HIGH SCHOOL



OBSERVED IN SAMPLE



28.5% ON TIME GRADUATION



3 SCHOOL CHANGES

Over the past few years, the on-time graduation rates for Colorado students in foster care have ranged from 27.5 to 30%,¹⁴ which is well below the graduation rates for the state as a whole. An additional 7.1 to 13.8% of students in foster care earn an equivalency diploma (e.g., GED).¹⁵

THE ODDS OF EARNING A HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL

The number of times students change schools during high school is a strong indicator of the educational attainment of Colorado students in foster care. As the number of school changes increases, the odds of students graduating with their class decreases *and* the odds of earning a GED (i.e., high school equivalency diploma) increases. This pattern is consistent when the outcomes are measured at four years and at six years after initially entering ninth grade.

Improving educational stability is likely to:

- Increase the total number of students in foster care earning a high school credential (diploma or GED).
- Change the proportions of students earning a diploma versus a GED, so that more students in foster care graduate with their class and fewer students earn a GED.

METHOD FOR MODELING THE PROBABILITY OF EARNING A HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL

Multinomial logistic regression was used to model the probability of students in foster care earning a high school credential based on the number of times they changed schools within four years of initially entering ninth.¹⁶

DEFINITION OF SCHOOL CHANGES

Number of times students enter a new high school or re-enter a previously attended school after initially entering ninth grade. School changes that occur over the summer months were counted. Students who were only enrolled in 1 Colorado public high school between when they initially entered ninth grade and when they were anticipated to graduate with their class (i.e., 4 years later) have 0 school changes.

This approach provides insight into expected outcomes or rates for the population of students in foster care based on the average number of school changes. Application of findings to policy and practice include both reducing the number of school changes that are not in a student's best interest and facilitating more seamless school transitions.

High School Equivalency Diploma's are awarded by Colorado Department of Education. In Dec of 2015, the State Board of Education approved three exams to demonstrate high school equivalency: GED, HiSET, and TASC exams.

GED is used throughout this report because it was the only approved high school equivalency examination during the study period.

Four dependent variables, or outcomes, were used in analyses.



HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA
(ON-TIME GRAD RATE)

The observed “on-time,” four year high school graduation rate in this sample of four cohorts of foster care students was 28.5%. The state graduation rate during this same time period ranged from 73.9% to 77.3%. State Legislative Reports indicate that some unique populations of students may need more time reach meet graduation requirements, therefore this outcome is measured at four years and six years after initially entering ninth grade.¹⁷



HIGH SCHOOL
EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA

A high school equivalency diploma is earned through examination, such as the GED. Colorado students in foster care earn an equivalency diploma at disproportionately high rates.¹⁸ Findings from the Midwest Study of Former Foster Youth suggest that the labor outcomes for students in foster care differ between earning a GED and a diploma.¹⁹ For these reasons, comparisons are drawn between the odds of earning a high school diploma versus a high school equivalency diploma.



STILL ENROLLED
(OR RE-ENROLLED)

Some students stay enrolled or re-enroll in high school after their original high school class graduates. The expected rate of students in foster care continuing their high school education beyond four years time may inform efforts to support youths ages 18 to 21. The average age of students in foster care at the end of their anticipated year of graduation was 18.6.

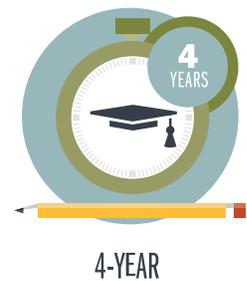
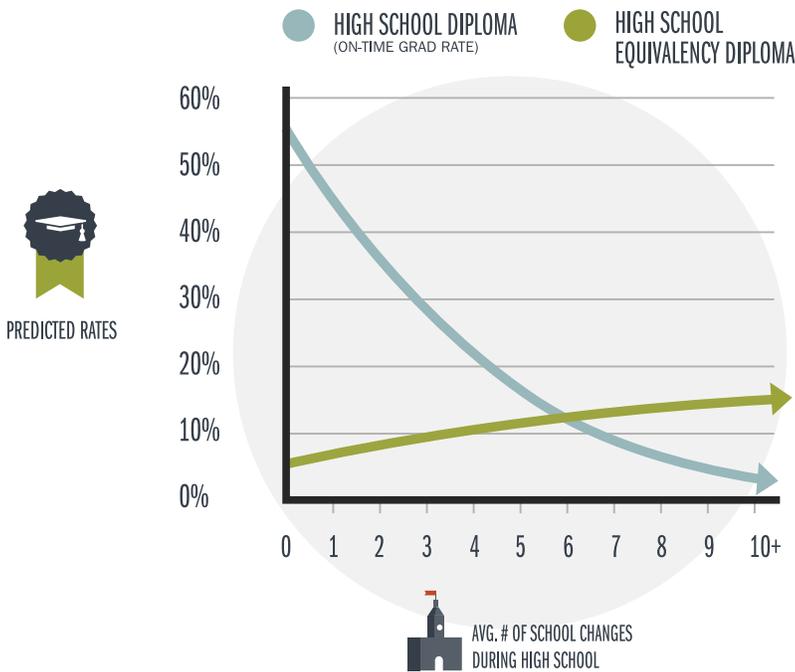


EXITED WITHOUT
A CREDENTIAL

Students who dropout of high school and stay out are those that exit the K-12 system without a high school credential. Students that transferred to school outside of the Colorado public system are not included in this study.

MODEL AT FOUR YEARS AFTER STUDENTS INITIALLY ENTERED NINTH GRADE

The odds of each outcome²⁰ – high school diploma, high school equivalency diploma (GED), still enrolled, and exiting without a credential – were analyzed together. The results are presented separately for clarity. The full model is provided at the end of this section.



Earning a High School Credential

The first few school changes are likely to have a greatest effect on whether or not students earn a high school credential and what type of credential they earn – diploma or GED.

As the average number of school moves increases, the expected on-time graduation rate decreases while the percentage of students earning a GED increases. The percentage point change in predicted rates of graduation is particularly pronounced with the first few school changes.

Improving educational stability is likely to increase the percentage of students in foster care earning a high school credential, which is also referred to as the “completion rate.”

Three or more school changes were most typical. Looking to the left of “3 school changes” on the X-axis illustrates a substantial increase in the expected graduation rate of students in foster care, if educational stability is improved.

The slope of the expected graduation rate (blue line) is steeper than the slope of the expected percentage of students demonstrating high school equivalency (green line). Adding the percent of students who earn a diploma to the percent of students who earn a high school equivalency (e.g., GED) is the “completion rate.”

Improving educational stability is also likely to change the proportions of students earning a high school diploma versus a GED, so that more students in foster care graduate with their class and fewer earn a GED (i.e., demonstrate equivalency).

Additionally, school stability in 12th grade increases the odds of a student earning a diploma compared to a GED.²¹

Still Enrolled Rate: Students Who Stayed Enrolled in High School for More Than Four Years

Students who change high schools frequently may need more than four years time to meet graduation requirements.

The still enrolled/re-enrolled rate describes the percentage of students remaining enrolled in high school for more than four years after initially entering ninth grade or re-enrolling in high school after their anticipated year of graduation. Students that have transferred to a high school equivalency preparation program are not included in this rate.

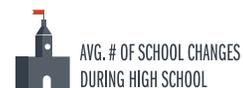
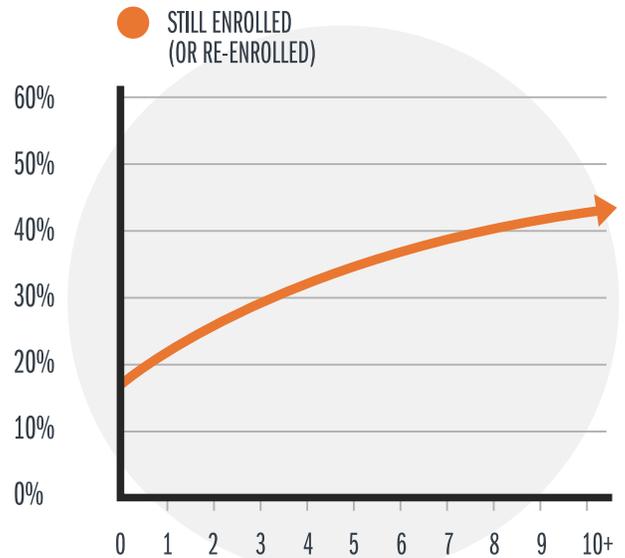
As the average number of school changes increases, the odds of staying enrolled in high school for more than four years also increases. This is particularly true for students who change schools in ninth grade.

Students who change schools in ninth grade are more likely to continue their high school education for five or six years than to earn a diploma or GED within four years of initially entering ninth grade.²²

PREDICTED OUTCOMES AT 4-YEARS AFTER INITIALLY ENTERING NINTH GRADE

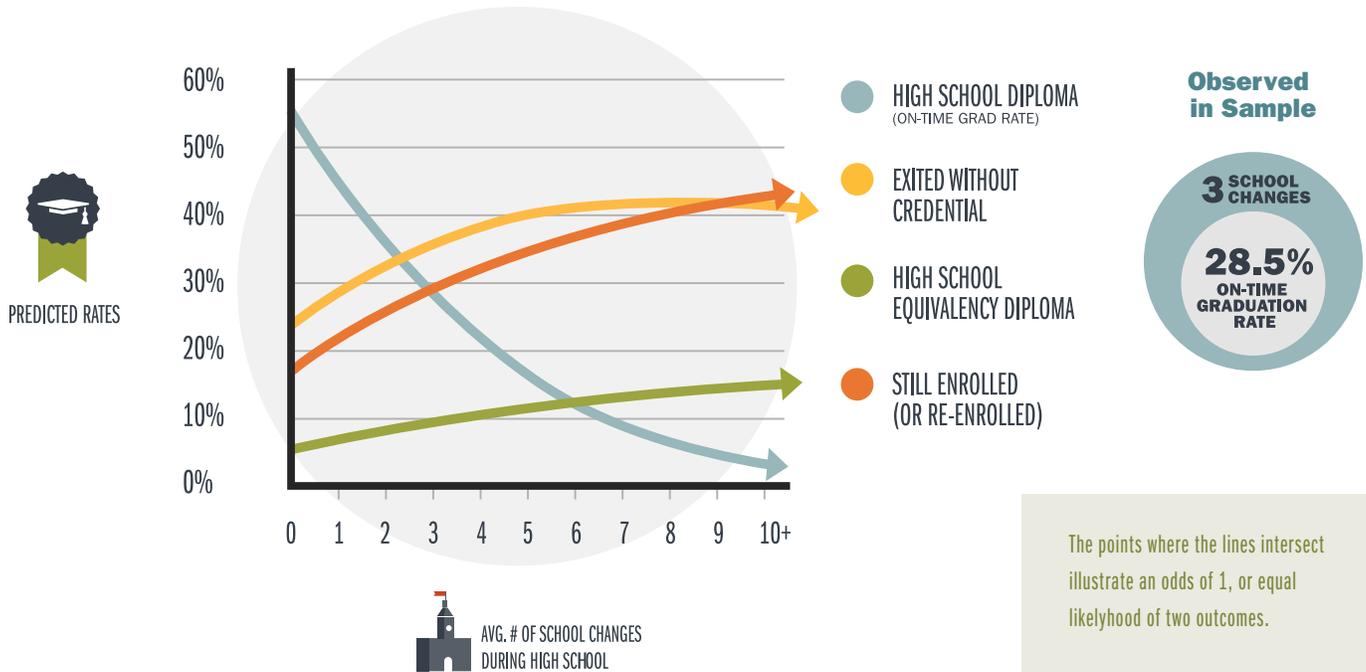
# OF SCHOOL CHANGES	HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA (ON-TIME GRAD RATE)	HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA	COMPLETION RATE
0	54.1%	5.5%	59.9%
1	44.9%	6.7%	51.6%
2	36.0%	8.0%	44.0%
3	27.9%	9.2%	37.1%
4	21.1%	10.3%	31.4%
5	15.6%	11.3%	26.9%
6	11.3%	12.2%	23.5%
7	8.1%	12.9%	21%
8	5.7%	13.6%	19.3%
9	4.0%	14.1%	18.1%
10+	2.8%	14.6%	17.4%

COMPLETION RATE IS ALL STUDENTS THAT EARNED A HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL: DIPLOMA OR GED/CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION.



Full Model Four Years After Initially Entering Ninth Grade

The full model illustrates that educational stability is likely to increase the rate of students in foster care graduating on time and decrease the rate of students earning a high school equivalency diploma, remaining enrolled for more than four years, or exiting the K-12 system without a high school credential.



The points where the lines intersect illustrate an odds of 1, or equal likelihood of two outcomes.

At an average of 3 school changes, the odds of graduating or staying enrolled in high school for more than four years are similar.

At an average of 2.5 school changes in the population of students in foster care, the odds of graduating or dropping out and staying out (i.e., exiting without a credential) are similar.

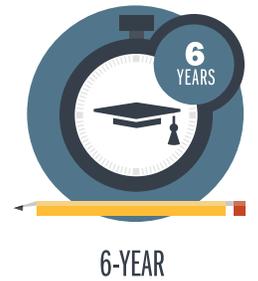
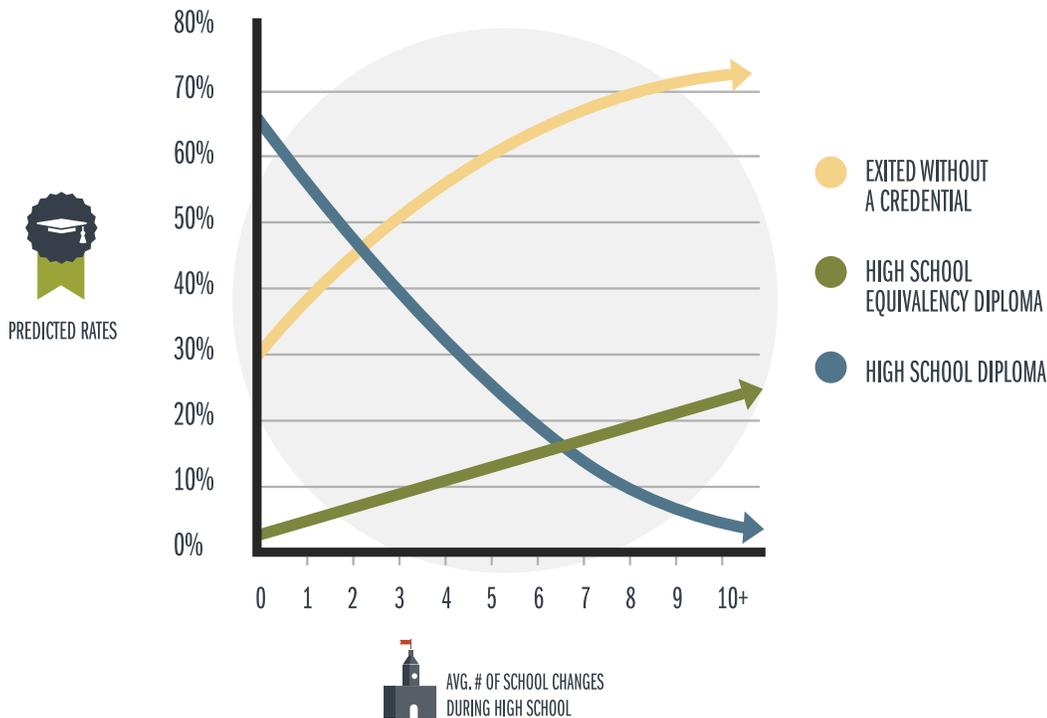
PREDICTED OUTCOMES AT 4-YEARS AFTER INITIALLY ENTERING NINTH GRADE

# OF SCHOOL CHANGES	HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA (ON-TIME GRAD RATE)	HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA	STILL ENROLLED (OR RE-ENROLLED)	EXITED WITHOUT CREDENTIAL
0	54.1%	5.5%	17.2%	23.2%
1	44.9%	6.7%	20.9%	27.5%
2	36.0%	8.0%	24.6%	31.4%
3	27.9%	9.2%	28.1%	34.7%
4	21.1%	10.3%	31.2%	37.4%
5	15.6%	11.3%	33.8%	39.3%
6	11.3%	12.2%	36.0%	40.5%
7	8.1%	12.9%	37.8%	41.3%
8	5.7%	13.6%	39.2%	41.6%
9	4.0%	14.1%	40.4%	41.5%
10+	2.8%	14.6%	41.4%	41.3%

MODEL AT SIX YEARS AFTER STUDENTS INITIALLY ENTERED NINTH GRADE - APPROXIMATELY AGE 21

Tracking outcomes for cohorts of students beyond when they are anticipated to graduate with their class provides insight into the relationship between school stability and outcomes at approximately age 21. The odds of earning a high school credential are modeled at six years after initially entering ninth grade when the average age of students was 20.6.

At two school changes, the odds of graduating or exiting without a high school credential are almost the same.



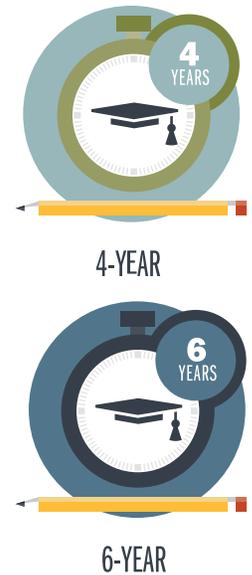
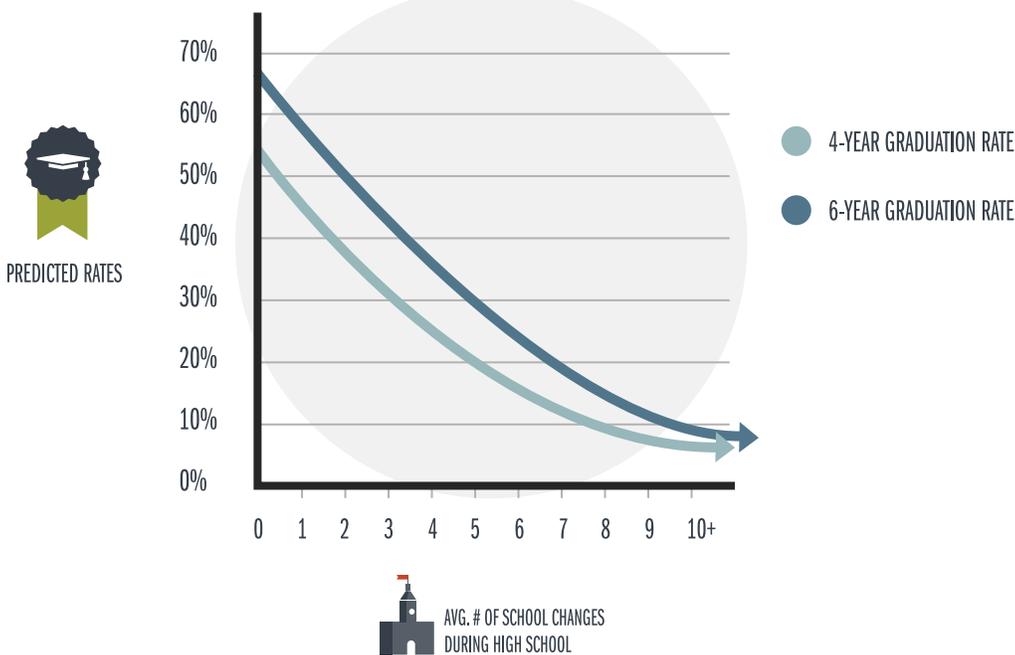
PREDICTED OUTCOMES AT 6-YEARS AFTER INITIALLY ENTERING NINTH GRADE

# OF SCHOOL CHANGES	NO HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA	HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA	HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA
0	30.8%	5.9%	63.4%
1	37.7%	7.6%	54.7%
2	44.8%	9.5%	45.8%
3	51.5%	11.4%	37.1%
4	57.4%	13.4%	29.2%
5	62.3%	15.4%	22.3%
6	66.2%	17.2%	16.7%
7	68.9%	18.8%	12.2%
8	70.8%	20.3%	8.9%
9	71.9%	21.7%	6.3%
10+	72.4%	23.1%	4.5%

A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON: FOUR YEAR AND SIX YEAR EXPECTED GRADUATION RATES

The odds of graduating were better when students have more time to complete graduation requirements and fewer school changes.

The percentage point gap between the four year and six year rate is widest on the left hand side of the graph. Outcomes are measured for the same students first at four years after initially entering ninth grade and again at six years after initially entering ninth grade.



COMPARISON OF EXPECTED 4-YEAR 'ON-TIME' GRADUATION RATES AND 6-YEAR 'EXTENDED TIME' GRADUATION RATES

Expected outcomes at six years after initially entering high school were based on following students in the foster care Class of 2011 and 2012 cohorts (n= 1826). Only school changes during the first four years of high school were included in analyses to facilitate comparisons across models.

# OF SCHOOL CHANGES	4-YEAR GRADUATION RATE	6-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
0	54.1%	63.4%
1	44.9%	54.7%
2	36.0%	45.8%
3	27.9%	37.1%
4	21.1%	29.2%
5	15.6%	22.3%
6	11.3%	16.7%
7	8.1%	12.2%
8	5.7%	8.9%
9	4.0%	6.3%
10+	2.8%	4.5%

SCHOOL CHANGES DURING THE SAME YEAR AS AN OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT

The previous set of analyses were based on the number of times students changed schools during high school. It was a cohort approach and counted school changes at any point during high school. This section focuses on school changes that occurred during the same year as an out-of-home placement.

As Colorado continues to implement state-level solutions and local pilot programs, data on school changes can be used to refine and prioritize that work.

Interactive charts are available online for policymakers and practitioners to disaggregate the data in ways that best inform their work.

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Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care
unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research

TREND IN NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE AND FREQUENCY OF SCHOOL CHANGES

The number of students in foster care declined substantially from 2007-08 to 2011-12. The size of the population stabilized from 2011-12 to the most current year of available data, 2013-14.

Given that the number of students in foster care declined substantially between 2007-08 and 2010-11, it is possible that the characteristics of youth in out-of-home care have changed. It is possible that those youths who are removed from the home in recent years have characteristics that make them more at-risk for school changes than students in prior years.

Over the last seven years there was a slight increase in the percentage of students in foster care who changed schools one or more times.

7 YEAR OVERVIEW

	# OF STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE	% OF STUDENTS 1+ SCHOOL CHANGE	% OF STUDENTS 3+ SCHOOL CHANGES
2013-14	4440	53.3%	9.0%
2012-13	4398	52.9%	8.0%
2011-12	4593	51.6%	8.2%
2010-11	5093	51.0%	7.4%
2009-10	5523	50.6%	6.9%
2008-09	5816	49.4%	6.4%
2007-08	5865	50.8%	6.0%

NOTE. # OF STUDENTS IS A COUNT OF THOSE ENROLLED BY OCTOBER 1ST, DIFFERS FROM A TOTAL STUDENT COUNT, WHICH INCLUDES STUDENTS WHO ENROLLED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

Perhaps more notable was the rising trend in the percentage of students who experienced three or more school changes in the same year as an out-of-home placement.²³ A closer look that adjusts for some youth remaining in out-of-home care or re-entering out-of-home care in multiple years provides insight into the demographic characteristics of frequent movers.

Frequent School Changers: 3+ More Moves Per School Year

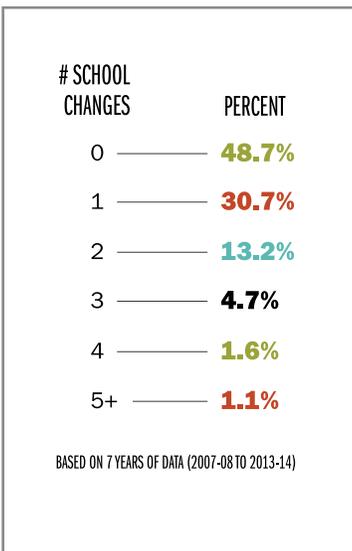
Over the last seven years, the rising trend in frequent school changes is primarily among ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade students,²⁴ with some additional evidence of an increase in frequent school moves among seventh and eight grade students.

Frequent school moves are typically defined as three or more school changes in a year. In 2014, 9% of the foster care student population changed schools three or more times. This finding is similar to the prevalence of frequent school changes reported in other states. For example, approximately 10% of California students in foster care changed schools three or more times in a school year.²⁵ In California, students tended to experience more frequent school changes in the first year of out-of-home placement compared to subsequent years in care.²⁶

A small segment of the foster care student population (1.5% in 2013-14) changed schools five or more times. These students were typically older youths who were also placed in a juvenile detention center that same school year. The count of these school changes includes entering a juvenile detention center and re-entering a traditional public school when those changes occurred in the same year as a child welfare out-of-home placement.

Two distributions of the number of school changes are presented for comparison purposes. On the left the data are averaged for all seven years. On the right is the most recent year of data, 2013-14.

SCHOOL CHANGES 2007-08 TO 2013-14



SCHOOL CHANGES 2013-14



PROBABILITY OF STUDENTS CHANGING SCHOOLS

Some groups of students in foster care are more likely to change schools or do so more frequently than others. Identifying inequities in school mobility within the foster care population might prompt additional exploration into the underlying causes of frequent school changes and necessitate direct services to address the consequences of school transitions. A framework for developing and evaluating the effectiveness of student-level interventions to build students' capacities to transition schools successfully is included in the final section of this report, *Application to Policy and Practice*.

Even when school changes are in *a child's best interest*, a student needs support and skills to transition successfully. Both the student and the school need to be prepared.

METHOD

Hurdle regression was used to simultaneously predict:

- The probability of groups of students changing schools at all, **and**
- The number of school changes among those students who changed schools at least once

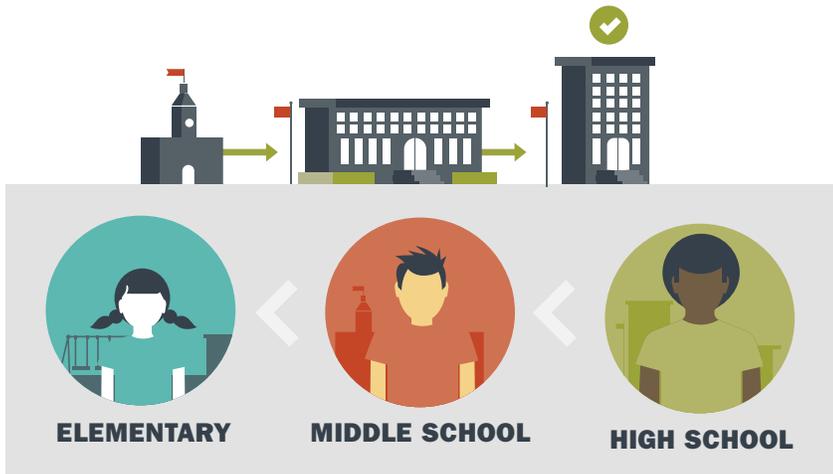
This type of analysis was used because almost half of students had zero school changes (i.e., school stability in year of out-of-home placement). The model tested how likely students were to “clear the hurdle” and change schools. Then, it assessed if there were differences in the number of school changes among those students who did change schools.

Sample students (n = 9,544) were enrolled in a Colorado public school by October 1st of the 2012, 2013, or 2014 school years and also experienced an out-of-home placement that same state fiscal year. These school years align with the time period when the number of foster care students enrolled in a Colorado public school stabilized.

Some students met the criteria for inclusion in the sample during multiple years. The total number of observations included in analyses was 13,431. Statistical adjustments were applied to the hurdle model to account for students appearing in the dataset more than once.

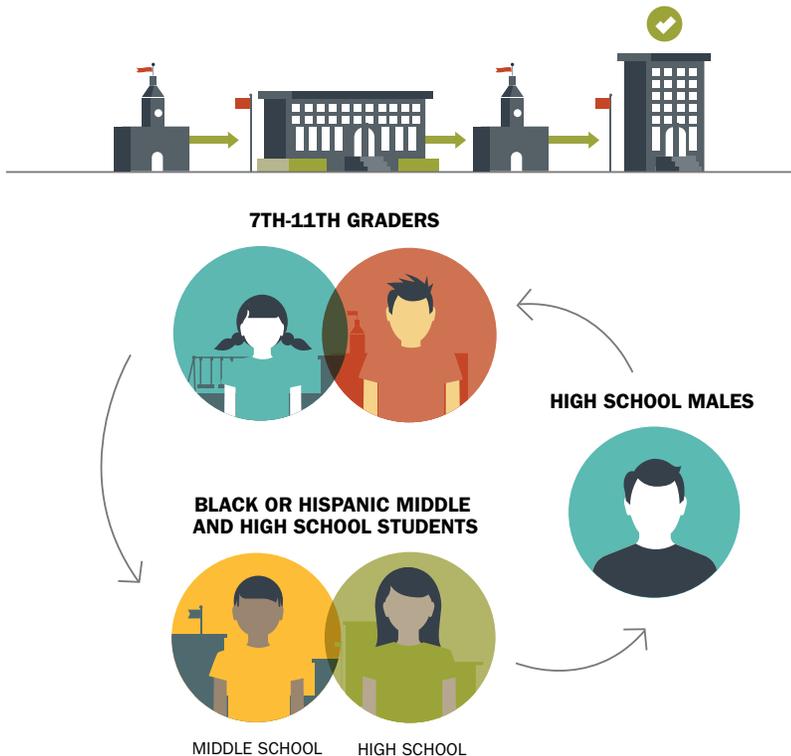
OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

AS STUDENTS MOVE UP THROUGH SCHOOL LEVELS, THEY CHANGE SCHOOLS MORE OFTEN.



As students in foster care move from elementary school, to middle school, to high school, they are more likely to experience frequent school changes.

STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE AT-RISK FOR FREQUENT SCHOOL CHANGES



Race begins to emerge as a significant factor in the middle school model. By high school, there are clear disparities. Minority students of both genders, and especially Black students, were more likely to experience frequent school changes than White students in foster care.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Among elementary school students in foster care, kindergartners experienced the most school stability, followed by third and fifth graders. The odds of first graders changing schools were 65% greater than those of kindergartners. The odds of second and fourth graders changing schools were approximately 90% greater than those of kindergartners. For elementary students who changed schools, there was no evidence of significant grade level, gender or race effects on the frequency of school changes.

The implications of changing schools in the elementary grades can include gaps in academic knowledge, underdeveloped academic behaviors and skills, and poor academic self-concepts.

The academic standards for each grade level are consistent in Colorado public schools, which means that there is a consistent set of knowledge and skills (e.g., add and subtract within 20) that are expected to be taught in all classrooms.²⁷ However, schools and districts adopt different curriculum. At a given point in the school year, School A might be focusing on adding and subtracting using word problems and School B might be emphasizing demonstrating multiple approaches to solving the addition and subtraction problems. When students change schools, they may not be exposed to all grade-relevant academic standards.

In addition to addressing gaps in academic knowledge that may occur through differences in curriculum and sequence of instruction, it may be important to also consider that elementary school students are learning the academic behaviors and developing the cognitive and social emotional skills associated with *how to* be students.

Cognitive and social-emotional skills development may be particularly important for students who have experienced trauma.²⁸ A comprehensive report, “Helping Traumatized Children Learn,” provides an understanding of why this may be the case:

Traumatic experiences have the power to undermine the development of linguistic and communicative skills, thwart the establishment of a coherent sense of self, and compromise the ability to attend to classroom tasks and instructions, organize and remember new information, and grasp cause-and-effect relationships—all of which are necessary to process information effectively (p. 22).

Differences in curriculum and underdeveloped cognitive or social-emotional skills may in turn influence elementary students’ beliefs about their academic abilities. Children’s academic self-concept is shaped by their successes, failures, and through comparisons to peers.²⁹ A student who changed schools might attribute his/her failure to a lack of ability rather than recognizing gaps in academic foundation. Similarly, it is possible that the appraisal of peers’ skills is inflated by peers’ familiarity with the curriculum. When students do not believe they are good at school, their motivation and persistence often mirrors that belief.³⁰

I don't know division... because I've never had the chance to learn it, because each school I've moved to has taught me just multiplication.

-Former Colorado Student in Foster Care

The brain's executive function and self-regulation skills are essential to the learning process. They allow students to remain focused, set goals, multitask, and control impulses. Although they are born with the capacity, children must develop executive function and self-regulation with support and nurturance from caregivers.³¹

When caregivers cannot provide for a child's basic physical and emotional needs, the parts of the brain involved in the development of executive function and self-regulation are disrupted.³²

For some students in foster care, schools may be the most viable place to develop these important skills.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

In middle school, grade level and demographic factors did not predict if students changed schools. A closer look at the students who did change schools revealed that seventh and eighth graders as well as Black and Hispanic students were more likely to change schools frequently.

Among those students that do change schools, the odds were approximately 45% greater that seventh or eighth graders would have more school changes than sixth graders. Black students and Hispanic students also had a greater chance of frequent school changes than White students. The effects of race in middle school were smaller than the effects of grade level. Gender did not have an effect on the probability of multiple school moves.

As curriculum complexity advances throughout middle school, school changes may be more difficult to navigate successfully.³³ During early adolescence, peer relationships also become increasingly important, especially within the context of friendship groups.³⁴ School changes disrupt peer relationships, and middle schoolers may struggle to make new friends when peer groups are already well established, which could lead to disengagement from school and a decline in academic motivation.³⁵ For these reasons, school changes in middle school may begin a process of educational disengagement that can lead to dropping out.

Colorado students in foster care dropout earlier in their education than what is typical for other groups of students.³⁶ Black and Hispanic Colorado students in foster care in this study dropped out at higher rates than White students.

HIGH SCHOOL

For high school students, the majority of school mobility was likely to occur in ninth and tenth grades, with a slight reduction in the probability of school changes in eleventh grade. The odds of a twelfth grader changing schools in the same year that he or she experienced foster care were 63% less than the odds for all other high school grades. Of those relatively few twelfth graders who did change schools, the count of school changes was typically lower than their foster care peers in other high school grades.

The low probability of twelfth graders changing schools could be explained by a number of practical considerations such as proximity to reaching the milestone of earning a diploma or being old enough to make the decision to not change schools. Most students in this sample turned 18 either before or during the school year they were enrolled in twelfth grade. Some twelfth graders who could not remain in their schools of origin may have chosen to exit to a high school equivalency preparation program or dropout of high school.

DISPROPORTIONAL HIGH SCHOOL MOVES: MINORITY STUDENTS AND MALES

Black and Hispanic students in foster care were more likely to change schools than their White peers. Of those high school students that did change schools, Black students were most likely to experience multiple school changes in the same year.

Male high school students in foster care were more likely to change schools than females. Perhaps more practically significant was the increased probability of multiple school changes in a single year.

There was not evidence of an interaction effect between race and gender. The race effects were consistent across genders.

Hurdle regression simultaneously models the probability of changing schools at all and for those students who do change schools, the number of school changes.

The odds of changing high schools:

- The odds of Black students in foster care changing schools were 72% greater than those of White students.
- The odds of Hispanic students changing schools were 60% greater than those of White students.
- The odds of male students changing schools were 17% greater than those of females.

A closer look at those students who did change schools:

- Black students changed schools more often than White students. Black students experienced 37% more school changes than White students.
- There was no significant difference in the number of school moves between White and Hispanic students who changed schools at least once.
- Male students changed schools more often than female students. Males experienced 31% more school changes than female students in foster care.

The findings of this study illustrate that young men and students of color in the foster care system may be particularly at-risk for educational instability. Disproportionality in school changes mirrors the graduation gaps within the foster care student population. For students in foster care cohorts, females tend to graduate at a higher rate than males.³⁷ White students in foster care cohorts had higher graduation rates than Black or Hispanic students.³⁸

As Colorado works to address the probability of students earning a high school credential, a combination of universal approaches that remove barriers to educational stability for all students in foster care and intensive efforts to support the academic progress of minority students and males are needed. This is consistent with broader education literature and initiatives such as *My Brother's Keeper*.³⁹

Similarly to students in middle school, the importance of social relationships and the complexity of curriculum may lead high school students to disengage following school changes.⁴⁰ In addition, differences in course offerings and graduation requirements can make it difficult for even those students who are engaged to accrue the credits necessary to graduate with their class.

GEOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Colorado has 64 counties and 178 school districts. The 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) require that local child welfare and education agencies collaborate to address the educational instability of students in foster care.

Educational stability begins with the presumption that remaining in the school of origin is in a child's best interest.⁴¹

If a school change is proposed, a formal process called a "[Best Interest Determination](#)" brings together relevant parties to decide in consultation with the child what is in his/her best interest.⁴² Although distance from child welfare placement to school may be a factor considered in the best interest process, the cost of transportation may not be a factor.⁴³

- By December 10, 2016, *transportation plans* must be developed and implemented at the local level so students in foster care may remain in their schools of origin (ESSA, 2015).

While these requirements apply to serving all students in foster care, geographical data on where school transfers have occurred over the last few years may help counties and school districts entities prioritize their collaborative efforts.

Over the last three years, approximately four out of ten school transfers were within school district boundaries (i.e., "within-district transfers").

Within-district transfers were concentrated in the Denver metro area school districts, Colorado Springs 11, Pueblo City 60, Mesa County Valley 50, and Greeley District 6.

The majority of the incidents of students in foster care transferring across school district boundaries were to adjacent school districts (i.e., "between-district transfers").⁴⁴

Specifically, the majority of between-district foster care student transfers occurred in the Denver metro area, El Paso County, and Pueblo Counties.

In the Denver metro area, the between-district foster care student transfers cross multiple counties. Transfers were typically between Denver Public Schools and Aurora, Jefferson County, or Cherry Creek school districts.

El Paso County has seventeen school districts located within its boundaries. Students in foster care typically transferred among three of those districts: Colorado Springs 11 and Falcon 49 or Harrison 2.



Watch the video introducing "Best Interest Determinations"

Transportation plans include "clear written procedures governing how transportation to maintain children in foster care in their school of origin when in their best interest will be provided, arranged, and funded for the duration of the time in foster care." - ESSA, 2015

Child welfare cases close mid-school year. Colorado's extensive public-private partnership network might consider ways that school stability can be maintained beyond case closure.

APPLICATION TO COLORADO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Educational stability is integral to assisting students in foster care achieve academic success and progress towards a high school diploma. Earning a high school diploma is an important predictor of future income earnings.⁴⁵ In addition, the costs of low educational attainment and its associated challenges negatively affect not only the individual, but society. It is estimated that the lifetime cost to the nation is \$292,000 per high school dropout.⁴⁶ Identifying factors related to low educational attainment for students in foster care, an especially vulnerable subset of Colorado students, is essential to reducing the negative consequences of dropping out.

Correlational studies serve to establish an empirical relationship between an indicator that can be counted, in this case number of school changes, and earning a high school credential. These findings do not imply that changing schools causes low graduation rates. Instead, this research suggests that the consequences of school mobility, like those described by former foster youth, are relevant to addressing the high school graduation gap.

Focusing on the three T's: Transcripts, Transitions, and Transportation, is one of the ways that Colorado is working to improve educational stability for all students in foster care. There are opportunities for policy implementation and practice changes to ensure that students in foster care are able to stay in their schools of origin as well as to facilitate more seamless transitions for students who do change schools.

"It's not just foster kids that aren't getting an education. It's adults who can't find work because they didn't get an education."

-Former Colorado Student in Foster Care

► To learn more about the state level work, please visit the [Colorado Department of Education's Foster Care Education Program](#) and [Colorado Department of Human Services' Educational Outcome's Steering Committee](#) webpages.

THE 3 T'S



TRANSCRIPTS

STUDENTS ARE PLACED IN THE RIGHT CLASSES AND RECEIVE CREDIT AND PARTIAL CREDIT AS APPROPRIATE



TRANSITIONS

SCHOOL CHANGES OCCUR WHEN IT IS IN A CHILD'S BEST INTEREST, SCHOOLS ARE NOTIFIED BY CHILD WELFARE THAT THE STUDENT IS COMING. STUDENTS ARE IMMEDIATELY ENROLLED, STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS ARE PREPARED FOR THE TRANSITION



TRANSPORTATION

SOLUTIONS IN PLACE SO IT IS PRACTICAL FOR STUDENTS TO STAY IN SCHOOL OF ORIGIN IF THAT IS IN THEIR BEST INTEREST

TRANSCRIPTS

Transcripts are students' complete educational record or their cumulative file. It is the comprehensive set of information that schools and adults with a legitimate educational interest in a child need in order to place the student in appropriate classes, implement needed modifications or accommodations, and connect the student to support services.

Transcripts also help schools contextualize current academic achievement, attendance, or classroom behaviors in a student's history. Such information may also inform services or treatment of youth by other professionals with appropriate releases of information.

ALL STUDENTS

Transcript reviews are needed on a regular basis for all students in foster care. At a basic level, it is important to ensure that transcripts are complete and following students to new school so their educational history is not left behind.

Transcript reviews are also an opportunity to teach students how to self-advocate and negotiate school and family transitions.

Students at all grade levels, kindergarten through twelfth grade, can be actively engaged in this process of reviewing their transcripts and conveying their educational histories and goals to new schools or foster-families.

These conversations can be framed in but not confined to the Colorado Academic Standards. The skills that students are expected to master at each grade level are the same under the Colorado Academic Standards at every school.⁴⁷ How and when in the school year each standard is taught varies.

Reviewing year-to-date assessments of progress toward meeting grade level standards might help teachers at the new school anticipate gaps or when a student might disengage because instruction is repetitive.

Transcript review conversations with students might shed light on ways to create a softer landing at the new school. For a student in kindergarten, the conversation might be as simple discussing what they are good at and what is hard for them at school, including likes, dislikes, and making friends. Early elementary school students can comment on their relative strengths, what helps them learn and/or follow school rules, and identify actions they can take that might make school day go well.



Teacher and parent version of year-to-date assessments may help guide conversations about academic progress relative to grade level standards.

The parent version of year-to-date assessments includes information on how to interpret the reports. If the new school uses a different assessment tool (e.g., MAP; iReady), the explanations can be helpful.

This information is not always included in a transcript or cumulative folder request, but can be especially helpful if a student changed schools and missed the window when report cards were generated.

Some upper elementary and most middle school students can typically identify patterns in academic achievement, school behaviors, and relationships with peers. High school students who have taken ownership of their educational histories and current academic progress can substantively inform placement in classes, development of academic plans, and advocate for the services and experiences they need to be successful in high school and beyond.

Schools are better able to place children and youth in appropriate classes and tailor interventions to their academic, social, and emotional needs when they have complete information on students' educational histories and current academic progress.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

For students in foster care to graduate with their class, they need to consistently earn a year's worth of credits in a year's time. Per Colorado Statute,⁴⁸ when students transfer schools related to an out-of-home placement, the sending school "shall certify course work completed or partially completed." The receiving school "shall accept that coursework and apply it toward grade level progression or high school graduation requirements."

For this to occur, schools must be notified that a child welfare placement change is resulting in a school change. A request must be made so that transcripts are sent to the new school.

Child Welfare Education Liaisons (CWELS) are the point-persons in each school district for notification of all placement changes that result in a school change.

Even when coursework is certified and accepted, close monitoring of credit accrual and differences in course offerings and graduation requirements across school districts is needed. This can begin with students talking to school staff about their academic plans. Adults need to verify that students are on-track or understand what is necessary to get-on-track to graduate in a manner that is consistent with the student's maturity and level of school engagement.

Whether the adult is professional, volunteer, or family, all child welfare-involved youth need an adult who is consistently attending to their educational progress toward meeting grade level standards or high school graduation requirements.

Approaches to Getting and Staying On-Track to Graduate

The approach to helping a student who is not on-track to graduate needs to match the reason(s) why the student is not accruing a year's credit in a year's time.

Credit recovery programs can help students who mastered much of the content for a course but were unable to complete the course because when they changed schools, the course was not offered or there was a scheduling conflict.⁴⁹

Remediation approaches such as tutoring might help close foundational gaps. Student re-engagement or other social/emotional interventions may also be necessary for some students.

A Directory of Child Welfare Education Liaisons may be found on Colorado Department of Education's Foster Care Education Program Website

► [cde.state.co.us dropoutprevention/fostercare_index](https://cde.state.co.us/dropoutprevention/fostercare_index)

TRANSITIONS

SYSTEMS-LEVEL APPROACHES

Students in foster care have the right to remain in their schools of origin, if that is in their best interest.⁵⁰ The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) places the responsibility with child welfare agencies to engage in a formal process for making such determinations. ESSA also requires that education agencies collaborate with child welfare in making such determinations.

Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center developed a [Model Process](#) for engaging in the Best Interest Determination.⁵¹ Counties may adapt this form to reflect local priorities.

Even when school changes are in a child's best interest, schools also need to be prepared to receive new students and students need support and skills to transition successfully.

The law requires that when a school change occurs as a result of child welfare placement change that educational records are transferred immediately. Educational records including Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and 504 Plans that are necessary for the receiving school to place students in appropriate classes and provide needed accommodations and modifications. Colorado Statute indicates that records can and should be transferred immediately for students in foster care even if there are holds on records such as owed fees.⁵²

Schools need to be notified when a child welfare placement change necessitates a school change. Colorado's Educational Outcomes Steering Committee developed a [template](#) that counties may use to notify Child Welfare Education Liaisons of school changes.⁵³

STUDENT-LEVEL INTERVENTIONS

Interventions that build the capacity of child welfare-involved youth to make successful education transitions and provide continuity when youth do change schools can complement the systems-level approaches. Although there are resources to guide the development and implementation of such interventions, there does not appear to be a packaged and tested approach available to fully meet this goal.

The geographic information on foster care school transitions suggests that in some areas, such as Denver metro area, a regional approach may be needed to maintain continuity for students. In other areas, such as El Paso county, the majority of between-district school transitions are located within the county boundaries.



STEP 1:

Define in a measurable way what a successful school transition associated with an initial removal from the home might look like at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. A successful school transition associated with an initial removal might look different than school transition behaviors of youth who have been in out-of-home care for six months or more.

STEP 2:

Identify the skills and supports that students need to transition successfully at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. This report touches on some skills and supports relevant to designing interventions that build the capacity of students to transition successfully. Skill development might include executive functioning, self-regulation, and self-advocacy. Supports might include student engagement and trauma-informed strategies. A more thorough approach to this step is warranted.

STEP 3:

Reviewing evidence-based interventions can identify components relevant to building the capacity of students in foster care to transition schools successfully. The What Works Clearing House⁵⁴ and the CASEL Guide⁵⁵ provide rigorous reviews of student-level interventions by topic, student population, and grade level. For example:

- **Check and Connect** is a comprehensive student engagement intervention. Trained mentors work with students and families for at least two years and regularly check and use school data to inform timely intervention⁵⁶.
- **Student Success Skills** is a small-group intervention typically led by school counselors. The focus is on building skills that promote academic success such as setting goals, monitoring personal progress, organizing personal materials, planning tasks, etc. Substantial outcome research indicates that this program is effective in improving academic achievement and other educational outcomes, in addition to addressing behavioral issues in school⁵⁷.
- **Second Step** is typically a classroom intervention that is grounded in Cognitive Behavioral techniques and social learning theory. Students learn to recognize and manage their emotions through making positive choices. The evidence supporting this intervention is primarily tied to the universal approach – or delivering it to all students in a school, grade, or classroom⁵⁸.

STEP 1: Define what successful school transitions look like for youth in foster care and how that might differ based age or on length of time in out-of-home care.

STEP 2: Identify the specific skills and supports students in foster care need to transition schools successfully at the elementary school, middle school, and high school levels.

STEP 3: Review evidence-based interventions and promising practices that have demonstrated success in identified areas.

STEP 4: Consider delivery methods that show promise for mobile student populations and opportunities to link student-level supports to systemic approaches.

STEP 5: Engage child welfare and education practitioners in the process of synthesizing this information into pilot approaches.

STEP 6: Take a continuous improvement approach to refining interventions and apply causal evaluation techniques to learn what works.

STEP 4:

Identify ways to deliver interventions so they follow the student and are connected to, but not bound to, a school. For example:

- The *Treehouse* program in Seattle is a model for implementing the *Check and Connect* intervention through a non-profit⁵⁹. Allegheny County Human Services (Pittsburgh, PA) employs former foster youth to serve as mentors called “youth support partners” in addition to educational liaisons at the county-level⁶⁰. *Kids in School Rule!* is a Hamilton County (Cincinnati, OH) partnership approach to monitoring and supporting educational progress⁶¹. These delivery approaches allow for consistency of support when students change schools within a defined geographical area.
- *Student Success Skills* also contains a parent component so that the academic behaviors and self-regulation skills learned at school can be reinforced at home⁶². Including a companion approach to student-level interventions would provide adults who support foster care students’ educational successes with a common language and strategies for school work.
- *Second Step* authors suggest that curriculum designed as universal delivery for all students can be pre-taught to students who might benefit from more individualized approach or additional skill building⁶³.
- Software platforms might be used to appropriately and securely share information when communication is needed across systems that serve youth (e.g., among education, child welfare, intervention staff). *Care4* is one example that has been used to support delivery and evaluation of foster care placement stability interventions⁶⁴. Accenture offers a suite of products that might be customized to meet data-sharing and data collection goals of an intervention⁶⁵.

STEP 5:

Engage child welfare and education practitioners in the process of translating Steps 3 and 4 into activities and delivery methods that reflect knowledge of the Colorado population of students in foster care and local practices. At this stage, the goal is to develop a logic model and intervention design(s) that reflect the relevant research, promising practices, and local expertise.

STEP 6:

Utilize continuous improvement evaluation strategies to learn from pilot programs. Consider how student-level interventions intersect with systems-level approaches to improving educational stability and how feasible it is to implement the new interventions. Then, use causal evaluations - such as when students are randomly assigned to different types or levels of services - to learn if the intervention improved student outcomes.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation solutions may be necessary to implement “Best Interest Determinations” (described in the “Geographic Information” section of this publication). The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act requires local educational agencies to collaborate with child welfare agencies to guarantee that students in foster care receive the transportation necessary to remain in their schools of origin. The Act also requires local educational agencies to collaborate with child welfare agencies and “by not later than 1 year after the date of enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act, develop and implement clear written procedures governing how transportation to maintain children in foster care in their schools of origin when in their best interest will be provided, arranged, and funded for the duration of the time in foster care...”

School stability is relevant to foster care students’ educational success both while they are in foster care and after their child welfare cases close. Because child welfare cases close throughout the school year, considering ways for students who experience foster care to maintain school stability after case closure is an opportunity for public-private collaboration.



“Other parents will move during the summer so that their kids’ schools don’t get interrupted. Other parents will move somewhere else and then drive their kids to school so that they can finish out their last couple of weeks after they move.”

–Former Colorado Student
in Foster Care

CONCLUSION

Research on the school mobility of students in foster care establishes a relationship between changing schools and low on-time graduation rates. Addressing the educational stability of students in foster care requires a multi-level approach: systems-level change and student-level interventions. Implementing the educational stability provisions in the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act and relevant state statutes is part of this process.⁶⁶ Designing and testing the effectiveness of student-level interventions that build capacity of students to transition successfully is also important.

The Transcripts, Transitions, and Transportation sections include policy implementation resources. These systems-level approaches can reduce the number of school changes that are not in a child’s best interest and create more seamless transitions for students who do change schools.

Student-level interventions can address the consequences of school changes and build the capacity of students to transition schools successfully. Considering delivery models that are tied to the student and follow the student, rather than being implemented by and at a given school, reflects the reality that some students in foster care will experience frequent school changes. Even when these school changes are in the child’s best interest, students need supports and skills to transition successfully.

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16. Multinomial logistic regression. The models reported here do not include control variables for simplicity in presentation of results. More complex models that include controls for special education status, placement in juvenile detention centers, and consider the grade level at which school changes occur yield interpretations that are consistent with findings reported here. Please contact the author for more complex models and a technical document. The total number of school changes had a significant effect on the odds of earning a GED [$\chi^2(1)=179.18, p<.01$] continuing education beyond four years [$\chi^2(1)=267.49, p<.01$], and exiting without a high school credential [$\chi^2(1)=240.14, p<.01$]. As the average number of school moves increases for the population of students in foster care, the odds of earning a diploma compared to other outcomes decrease. More specifically, as the total number of school changes increases by one, the odds of earning a GED is expected to increase by a factor of 1.48.
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18. Clemens, E. V. (2014). *Dropping out and into sight: Graduation and dropout rates for Colorado students in foster care: 5-year trend analysis (2007-08 to 2011-12)*. Greeley, CO: University of Northern Colorado. Note the disproportional rates contained within. Also note that there is evidence of this pattern in other states (e.g., Washington) and in the Midwest Study of Former Foster Youth.
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20. An odd can be thought of as a proportion of likelihoods or ratios of the number of individuals who end up in a group (Agresti, 2012). The odds can be different for every value of school changes, but the odds ratio represents the constant change in the odds as the number of school changes increases. The predicted frequencies found in line graphs illustrate the multiplicative effect on the odds.
- 21 & 22. This finding is from a more complex model using the same sample. Full technical report is available upon request from author.
23. The rising trend in three or more school changes is statistically significant ($p <.01$). The slope was .07. Regression model did not account for students appearing in the dataset in multiple years. Practically, it is important to consider if there is a group of students who are "frequent school changes" and who are remaining in care for relatively long periods of time.
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