

The Education of Children in DCFS Care: Findings from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

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Children placed in out-of-home care because of abuse or neglect often have cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and health problems that can make it difficult to succeed at school.¹ A research review by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education found that 35.6% to 47.3% of youth in out-of-home care receive special education services.² Studies have shown that youth in foster care are twice as likely to be absent from school.³ Seventeen to eighteen year olds in foster care read at the 7th grade level on average, and are about twice as likely to have an out-of-school suspension than other students and three times as likely to be expelled.⁴ Just 65% of youth in foster care complete high school by age 21, a minority of those who graduate from high school enroll in college, and somewhere between 3% and 10.8% of former foster youth attain a bachelor's degree.⁵

Given the educational risks for students in out-of-home care, it is important to understand the educational progress and outcomes of Illinois youth in care, to identify what extra assistance they might need. This research brief reports on the educational well-being of Illinois children in out-of-home care who are being served by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and its private agency partners. The brief is one in a series that presents capsule summaries of results from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study in different domains of well-being.

2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study provides a snapshot of the well-being of children and youth in out-of-home care in Illinois in 2017. The Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) drew a stratified random sample of 700 children and youth from the population of children and youth in DCFS care in October 2017. Older youth and youth in care for more than two

¹ See, e.g., .S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families (2001). *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: One Year in Foster Care Report*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/oyfc_report.pdf

² National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018). *Fostering success in education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care*. Chicago, IL: The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education. Retrieved from <http://fosteringchamps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/NationalEducationDatasheet2018-2.pdf>

³ National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018), *ibid.*

⁴ National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018), *ibid.*

⁵ National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018), *ibid.*

years were oversampled to provide large enough subsamples of these groups to analyze, and statistical weights were used to compensate for the effects of oversampling. The Survey Research Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Chicago conducted the interviews with caseworkers, foster care providers, and children age seven and older between December 2017 and July 2018. The final report of the study, from which this brief was adapted, is available on the CFRC website.⁶

Education Findings from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

Almost all children (99.4%) were currently in school and the vast majority (97.1%) were expected to advance to the next grade. Just over 1 in 10 had previously been retained in a grade at least once. Over half of children (54.7%) had not missed school in the past 30 days.

The caregiver and child interviews suggest that most children were performing adequately in school. The majority of children reportedly had no grades lower than C and were at grade level or higher in reading and math.

Most children reported having positive experiences at school. On a multi-question school engagement score, students scored 3.23 on average (se=.05) which is between “often” engaged and “almost always” engaged on a 4- point scale. Over half of children reported “often or almost always” enjoying being in school, getting along with teachers, doing their best work at school and other positive experiences.

Most children (62.2%) had attended two or more schools in the past two years, and 18.1% had attended three or more schools. These percentages were still high (53.8% and 16.8% respectively) when we eliminated promotions between schools (e.g., from middle school to high school) and counted only non-promotional transfers. By far the most common reason for changing schools was the geographic location of a new foster care placement. Youth aged 12 to 17 were particularly likely to change schools: 72.4% of them had changed schools one or more times in the past two years.

Attendance was a problem for many children. 41.4% of children had missed between 1 to 9 days in the past 30 days and 3.9% missed more than 10 days. Among students aged 12 to 17, 7.4% had missed 10 or more days of school in the last 30. This may not be a result of truancy, as caseworkers in these cases reported that most absences from school were excused absences.

15.9% of students had detentions in the previous year, 11.5% had in-school suspensions, 8.5% had out-of-school suspensions, and 11.3% had other disciplinary actions. Students age

⁶ Cross, T.P., Tran, S., Hernandez, A., & Rhodes, E. (2019). *The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study: Final Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

12 to 17 were more likely than any other age group to receive in-school and out-of-school suspensions (each 13.2%) and detentions (29.8%).

A substantial proportion of children and youth reported that they sometimes hated going to school (42.7%) and 17.0% that they often or always hated going to school. 81.8% of children and youth sometimes to always found schoolwork too hard. 72.5% of children and youth sometimes to always did not complete their assignments.

Results varied by race-ethnicity. White students were significantly more likely to get a grade below C (39.5%) than African-American students (17.0%) or students of other races (13.2%). African-American students were significantly more likely to have been held back a grade (30.0%) than White students (9.5%) or students of other racial groups (10.8%). White students were significantly more engaged in school (mean=3.38) than African-American students (mean=3.02).

LGBTQ+ students had a more difficult school experience. LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to change schools: 10 out of 12 (83.3% had attended two or more schools in two years. Out of 13 LGBTQ+ youth, 6 reported often or always hating to go to school (46.2%), a significantly higher percentage than heterosexual youth (13.2%).

Discussion

Most of the sample was performing adequately or better in school, according to caregivers and youth themselves. A majority of youth reported enjoying school often or almost always. These results help us appreciate the strengths and resilience of children and youth in out-of-home care.

On the other hand, the results also showed that many children faced obstacles to school success. Having to change schools because of foster care placements remains a problem—most children were in two or more schools in two years. Attendance and school disciplinary issues are also problems for a significant minority of students. Almost a fifth of students reported often or always hating school. The negative feelings of LGBTQ+ youth about school raises questions about whether they were treated badly there because of their sexual orientation.

Time and resource limitations have prevented us from collecting data directly from school records, which was a significant limitation. It is important to be cautious about interpreting education data in the current report, since caseworkers', caregivers' and students' reports on education are likely to be less reliable than school records and may be subject to biases in their recall and judgment.

These findings suggest that more needs to be done to help children in out-of-home care with their education. Increased efforts are needed to reduce frequent school changes due to foster care placements, to increase school attendance, to deal with behavior problems at school, and

to improve academic performance. The difficulties of African-American and LGBTQ+ students at school need special attention.

One positive step is DCFS' new opportunity to access school record data from the Illinois State Board of Education, thanks to a 2015 data sharing agreement. The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education has described 25 promising programs from around the country to help improve educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care. The following are among the methods used by these programs:

- Targeted early intervention and screening to help children in foster care enter school ready to learn;
- Required data collection and information sharing between child welfare and education agencies;
- Better collaboration between child welfare and education agencies;
- Increased supports and services for students in foster care, including related to maintaining school stability;
- Educational advocacy for students in foster care to get the extra supports they need and ensure systems are working together;
- Targeted services for students in foster care to help them prepare for, and complete, postsecondary education.
- Support groups for youth transitioning from out-of-home care to college campuses.

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