Meeting the Challenge:

A Preliminary Report on the Education Performance of Foster Youth in Three California Counties

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The Challenge

Success in School Leads to Success in Life

Succeeding in school has long been recognized as the pathway to becoming a productive and competent adult. Unfortunately, this is not the outcome that awaits many children and youth in the foster care system. There is a growing body of research that documents how vulnerable and academically at risk this population is and that a high percentage of them experience poor educational outcomes. For example, they are more likely than other children and youth to have:

- academic and behavioral problems in school,

- higher rates of disciplinary referrals, grade retention and placement in special education classes

- Lower performance in the class room and on standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics.

Contributing to the wide range of school problems of this population are the high levels of residential mobility and school transfers that they experience. Highly mobile foster children:

- miss large portions of the school year,

- lose academic credit due to moves made mid-semester, and

- have incomplete education records due to missing transcripts, assessments and attendance data

The long-term consequences of poor academic experiences are significant. Two to four years after leaving the foster care system:

- 51% are unemployed,

- 40% are on public assistance,

- 25% were homeless, and

- 20% had been incarcerated

The Ready to Succeed Initiative

A Call to Action

To address these dismal outcomes, there is a movement within the child welfare, education, and philanthropy communities to come together and address the systemic barriers that undermine the educational success of foster children and youth. The Ready

to Succeed Initiative is one such initiative which was launched to improve the educational outcomes of children and youth in the foster care system.

It grew out of the work of the California Education Collaborative for Children and Youth in Foster Care, which brought together over a two-year period a Design Team comprised of creative thinkers and leaders from child welfare and education in California as well as former foster youth, legislators, policymakers, and representatives from the legal system, philanthropy, and mental health. Their charge was to make recommendations that would lead to the improvement of educational outcomes for foster children and youth. The final recommendations which address three basic areas of need – school readiness, school success, and data sharing – were compiled and published in a document titled *Ready to Succeed, Changing Systems to Give California's Foster Children the Opportunities They Deserve to be Ready for and Succeed in School.*

The Collaborative felt strongly that these recommendations should not end up on a shelf collecting dust but should be put to practice. To that end Ready to Succeed, a comprehensive, multi-component initiative to continue this effort was born. In formulating a framework to support innovative practice and policy development three sites were selected to build upon the knowledge and recommendations of the Design Team. The criteria for selecting the sites included:

- A strong commitment to improving educational outcomes for foster children and youth that is supported by the **leadership** of both the child welfare and the education system,

- A history of **collaboration** between child welfare and education, and

- The capacity to **gather and analyze data** from both the child welfare and education systems.

In the end three counties – Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento – were selected. Each had demonstrated over a period of time a high degree of collaboration between child welfare services and education as well as a commitment to improving education outcomes for children and youth in foster care.

COMMON ELEMENTS

Vibrant Learning Community

From the beginning there was a recognition that these three county sites should not work in isolation, but needed to be part of a larger community facilitating change in order to reach their full potential to affect education outcomes. To further this goal the counties come together in peer learning sessions to share resources, lessons learned, and promising practices. In addition individual and cross county technical assistance is given to provide necessary supportive materials, planning tools, training and consultation.

Education Liaison Model

All three counties were chosen to enhance or expand a version of their distinct education liaison (EL) model,[1] a strategy which is designed to troubleshoot education barriers for children and youth in foster care and to bridge the gap between the various agencies and individuals – child welfare, education mental health, caregivers, and the courts – involved with these youth.

Key Characteristics of Each Model

Three Counties Three Models – A Comparison

	Fresno	Orange	Sacramento
Primary Leadership	Child welfare	Child welfare/education	Education
Philosophy of Change	Combination cohort and referral model that includes a strong outreach component which will be enhanced as education is integrated into the permanency teaming process No cap on number of foster youth served Focusing on the Birth – 5 population is an integral part of the philosophy of change History of using education data from Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) to identify education issues Strong advocacy component as well as a focus on training and transferring knowledge	Combination cohort/referral and data gathering model Education Progress Reports (EPRs) prepared on all 10-19 year olds for court hearings; increased court scrutiny will lead to more accountability and better practice Certain populations (6th-7th graders; high risk girls) require more intensive intervention or intervention at key transition times Strong problem-solving component as well as a focus on training and transferring knowledge	Relationship model Closely following a cohort of 6th/ 7th graders through high school will increase academic performance Focus on interaction with youth, collaboration with school site, consultation with social workers and caregivers Ongoing analysis of youth's school data to identify successful strategies Strong problem-solving component as well as a focus on training and transferring knowledge
EL Background and Role	4 former case-carrying social workers employed by child welfare. All have Masters degrees 3 ELs are co-located with Foster Youth Services which is	4 ELs and 1 program specialist are employed by Orange County Department of Education Foster Youth Services and are collaboratively funded by child welfare and OCDE and managed by	4 ELs are employees of Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) and have backgrounds in youth development programs; all but one has a BA degree; one has almost completed an MA

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[1] In Sacramento the ELs are referred to as Instructional Case Managers (ICMs).

	located in child welfare building; the 4th EL who serves children Birth – 5 is co-located with the social workers who serve this population Work is divided by ages and grades (Birth – K; 1 – 6 grade; 7 – 8 grade) except for lead liaison who because of her experience, provides support and training for the other ELs and handles more complicated cases ELs regularly review GPAs as well as psychotropic medication authorization from the court to identify those students who may need educational intervention.	OCDE ELs have Master's degrees with Pupil Personnel Services credentials and are co-located in the child welfare offices Former foster youth are employed to collect school records and enter data into Foster Focus database EL role is to gather information, assess that information and ensure that it is shared with social workers, educators, youth, caregivers, mental health, and the court; as academic, behavioral, or attendance problems are identified from review of school records or from referrals, ELs work to resolve problems by contacting the social worker and school.	degree and Pupil Personnel Services credential in school counseling ELs see the youth weekly or every other week and continue with them until the youth graduate, move out of the county, or are reunited with family or move in with a guardian and are stable in that setting for 6 months. School data are either entered in Foster Focus database by ELs or uploaded directly. School data are analyzed on a regular basis by ELs and program specialists.
Targeted Youth	All children and youth ages 0 – 19 years in foster care in Fresno County	10 – 19 year old receive an Education Progress Report 6th – 7th graders Girls Court (high-risk girls)	7th – 10th graders in 11 school districts in Sacramento County
Level of intervention with youth	Light	Light to heavy	Heavy
Number of school districts, including County Office of Education, served by the ELs	34 school districts including the County Office of Education	28 school districts including the County Office of Education	12 – including County Office of Education – of the total 14 school districts

Level of collaboration between child welfare and education[2]	Coordination – Agencies regularly communicate and share information and resources, the role of each agency is well defined, and some decision-making is shared.	Coalition – Ideas and resources are shared across agencies, there is frequent and prioritized communication, and all participants have a vote in decision-making	Cooperation – There is some formal communication and agencies provide information to each other, each agency's role is somewhat defined, but all decisions are still made independently.

> *"They [education liaison] took the time to get to know me and not everyone does. It was a relief when I didn't have to go through it[school experiences] by myself."*
>
> Interview with former foster youth

Data Informed Decision Making and Practice Change

Each county is committed to collecting and analyzing data from child welfare and education as a way to test its assumptions about the work each one does and make course corrections. Utilizing data to inform practice has pushed the counties to be more effective in addressing the educational needs of foster children and youth.

> *"We've become data nerds. We need to look at data and use that data to guide our policy. There are benchmarks we can look at and determine what we can do if the youth are not making the benchmark."*
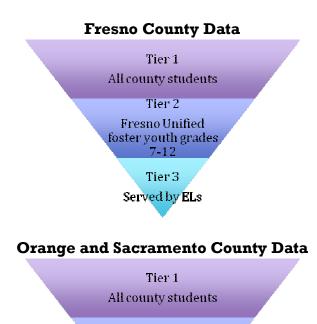>
> Interview with child welfare administrator

WHAT THE DATA REVEALS SO FAR

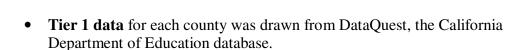### Different Levels of Data to Better Understand School Functioning

To understand how foster children and youth served by the ELs (Tier 3) are functioning in school, data on school stability, academic performance, and school engagement indicators of those foster children and youth are compared with how other foster children and youth in their county's perform (Tier 2) as well as how all students in their county's perform (Tier 1) on these measures. The charts below show the levels (Tier 1, 2 or 3) of data that were available from each county that and were used in different sections of the analysis

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[2] As adapted from Frey et al. (2006) and Hogue (1993), agencies may find themselves on a continuum of collaboration at or between one of six levels: coexistence, communication, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration.

Fresno County Data

Tier 1
All county students

Tier 2
Fresno Unified
foster youth grades
7-12

Tier 3
Served by ELs

Orange and Sacramento County Data

Tier 1
All county students

Tier 2
Not available

Tier 3
Served by ELs

- **Tier 1 data** for each county was drawn from DataQuest, the California Department of Education database.

- Fresno provided **Tier 2 data** for all foster youth in grades 7th – 12th from Fresno Unified School District (FUSD). These data were available because of a data-sharing agreement between FUSD and Fresno Department of Social Services. Neither Orange nor Sacramento has a way, at this time, to provide Tier 2 data.

- **Tier 3 data** consists in Fresno of foster children and youth in grades 7th – 12th referred to the ELs; in Orange of 6th and 7th grade foster children and of youth served by the Girls' Court; and in Sacramento of 7th-10th graders served by the ELs from 11 school districts.

Sources of Data

Sacramento uses a database, called **Foster Focus**, which was developed by SCOE, and in which school data are input by hand by the ELs. With technical assistance from SCOE, Orange this year has expanded its use of Foster Focus to assist with writing the Education Performance Reports (EPRs) and to track students' education progress.

Foster Focus is not yet operational in Fresno. As a result DSS relied on **data from the FUSD database** which eliminate those students attending other school districts from

the quantitative report; however approximately 70% of the foster youth in Fresno do attend FUSD, so it was determined that this would provide the best available data for now.

In addition to the above databases this report also uses **self-reporting data** from the counties.

Common Indicators of Stability, Academic Performance, and Engagement Collected

The Stuart Foundation Ready to Succeed Leadership Team determined that data from the counties would be collected on school stability, academic performance, and school engagement. The three counties worked hard to provide consistent data on the common indicators. However, problems remain with some of the indicators, in particular: CST Math, attendance, and suspension. The effort to provide consistent data on common indicators has in itself been a fruitful effort that will improve future data collection on this project as well as other endeavors to collect data on important school outcomes for foster children and youth.

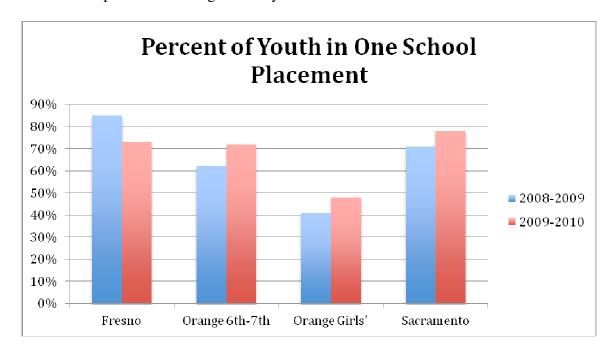| Indicator	Definition
School Stability	
Number of school placements	Number of school placements each student had during the school year
Type of school settings	Schools were identified as either comprehensive (e.g., district elementary, middle, or high school) or alternative/restrictive (e.g., continuation, independent study, nonpublic).
Special education status	Number of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
Academic Performance	
GPA	Cumulative GPA for the year
California Standards Test (CST) English Language Arts scores	Student yearly proficiency levels (i.e., Advanced, Proficient, Basic, Below Basic, Far Below Basic) including alternative assessments
California Standards Test (CST) Math scores	Student yearly proficiency levels (i.e., Advanced, Proficient, Basic, Below Basic, Far Below Basic) including alternative assessments
California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) results	Whether or not student passed the English-Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics parts of the CAHSEE each year.
Graduation	12th graders who receive a diploma in the school year indicated.
Engagement	
Attendance	Percentage of days (one period constitutes a day) a student attends school in relation to the total number of possible days
Suspensions	Number of students temporarily removed from school for a suspendable offense and the number of periods or days suspended.
Expulsions	The number of students who are prohibited from attending any school within the district for any part of the school year for an expellable offense.

Emerging Successes

Each county shows important areas of emerging successes with their specific cohorts of foster youth (Tier 3). Third year data, which will be available in Fall 2011, will help confirm the results that are reported here.

School Stability
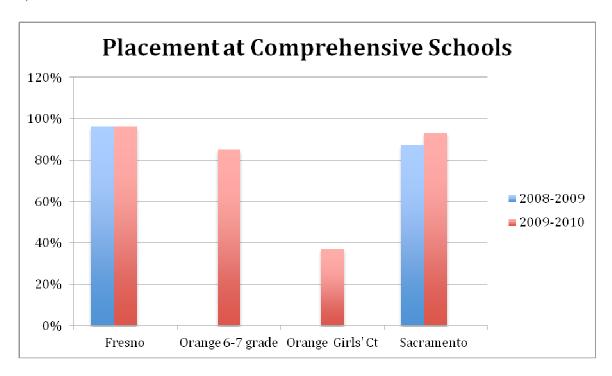
Youth in One School Placement

It is well-established that one predictor of success in school is remaining in the same school placement throughout the year.

- Each county had a high percentage of foster children and youth served by the ELs that remained in one school placement for each entire school year.

- In each county (except for the Girls' Court in Orange), at least 70% of the youth and as high as 85% in Fresno in 2008-2009 remained in one school placement throughout the year.

- The 6th - 7th grade cohort served by the ELs in Orange showed a 10% increase of those in one school placement for youth served in 2008-2009 and those served in 2009-2010.

- The Girls' Court cohort in Orange and foster youth served by the ELs in Sacramento showed a gain of 7% of those in one school placement from one year to the next.

Type of School Setting

There is often concern expressed that foster youth are segregated from the general student population that attend comprehensive schools and are instead placed in overly restrictive school settings, such as non-public schools or continuation schools. The data, however, do not bear that out.

*2008-2009 data from Orange was not available.

- In 2009-10 over 80% of foster youth in each county (and as high as 96% in Fresno and 93% in Sacramento) that were served by ELs were in comprehensive schools rather than in more restrictive alternative schools.

- While the Girls Court cohort in Orange shows a lower percentage attending a comprehensive school, many of these foster youth lack credits to graduate, and so attending an alternative placement can be a strategy to help them make up credits quickly. In the case of high risk populations, enrollment in a large comprehensive school is not always the placement of choice and smaller, more intimate alternative placements may be preferable to make up credits quickly and for the rapport with school personnel.

- Over the two-year period, 2008-09 and 2009-10, 96% of youth in Fresno served by the ELs remained at comprehensive schools, which was higher than the over 80% from Tier 2 data of all FUSD foster youth at comprehensive schools.

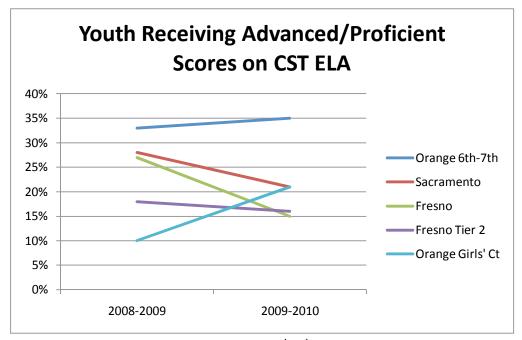- Sacramento increased the percentage of youth at comprehensive schools by 6% from 2008-09 and 2009-10.

Academic Performance

Grade Point Average(GPA)

- An increase was seen in GPAs from 2008-09 to 2009-10 for both the 6th-7th grade cohort (2.3 to 2.5) and Girls' Court cohort (2.0 to 2.3) in Orange.

California Standards Test (CST) English Language Arts (ELA)

- For both 2008-09, 96% of Orange County's 6th -7th grade cohort took the CST in ELA.

- In the Girls' Court in Orange and in the Sacramento cohort there was an increase of 15% and 24% respectively of youth taking the CST ELA

- For youth who were followed over a two-year period, the Girls Court in Orange saw 50% of youth with improved scores, the 6th-7th grade cohort a 30% gain and in Sacramento a 10% gain.

Youth Receiving Advanced/Proficient Scores on CST ELA

- Orange County's two cohorts, the 6th-7th graders and those served by the Girls' Court, improved the percentage of youth scoring at the advanced or proficient levels on the CST ELA. The 6th-7th cohort improved slightly while the Girls' Court improved by 11%.

- The Fresno cohort served by the ELs in 2008-09 had 29% more youth performing at the advanced or proficient levels than foster youth as a whole in FUSD.

- Although Sacramento's cohort lost 7% from 2008-09 to 2009-10, of youth performing at the advanced or proficient levels, the decrease in percentage is likely related to of the increase of youth receiving special education services that the ELs served in 2009-10.

California Standards Test (CST) Math

- Youth served by ELs in Orange and Sacramento increased the percentage of those taking the CST Math from 2008-09 to 2009-10.

- Although 14% fewer youth served by Fresno's ELs in 2009-10 took the CST Math than in 2008-09, the percentage of those taking this test was higher than that of all foster youth in FUSD.

- Orange's 6th-7th grade cohort showed a minimal gain of those receiving advanced or proficient scores on the CST Math from 2008-09 to 2009-10 and the Girls' Court showed a gain of 17% across the two years.

Importance of Tier II Data

Tier II data helps us understand the context in which the the ELs are working. For example, although fewer youth served by Fresno's ELs took the CST Math in 2009-10 than in 2008-09, the percentage of those taking the test was actually higher than that of all foster youth in FUSD.

California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)

- During 2009-10 81% of the foster youth participating in the Girls Court who took the exam passed the English Language Arts portion of the CAHSEE and 56% passed the Math portion.

- From the EPRs, 58% of 166 foster youth in high school for whom Orange had CAHSEE scores, passed both sections. 63% passed the math section only and 67% passed the English section only.

- In Fresno all 10th-12th graders who have not passed the CAHSEE are linked by the ELs to state-mandated programs that are designed to assist students to pass this exam.

High School Graduation

- Of the two youth eligible to graduate in the Girls' Court, both received high school diplomas, which can be seen as a significant accomplishment for girls who are as high risk as those served by the Girls' Court.

- 98 out of 114 open cases in Orange, completed high school (86%). 80 graduated with a diploma, 3 passed the GED and 15 completed a Certificate of Completion.

- 73% of foster youth in Fresno County who attend the 3 largest school districts (Fresno Unified, Clovis Unified and Central Unified) graduated from high school in 2010.

School Engagement

Attendance

- It appears that high percentage of foster youth in each county attend school. Attendance was close to or at 90% or above for 2008-09 and 2009-10 in both cohorts in Orange and in Sacramento. Youth served by the ELs in Fresno had a 90% attendance rate in 2008-09, which was significantly higher than the 84% attendance rate for all foster youth in FUSD.

- These data should be viewed with caution, however. Additional efforts are needed by the schools and child welfare agency to track attendance or truancy of foster youth when they leave the county or district or are disenrolled from a school.

Suspension

- Oranges' Girls' Court cohort reduced the percentage of girls suspended from 30% to 22% over the two-year period.

- The percentage of Fresno youth served by the ELs who were suspended at least once was minimally higher than all 7th-12th grade foster youth in FUSD for 2008-09 and 2009-10. Since the ELs in Fresno serve a particularly high-risk group of foster youth, the fact that these foster youth only had a slightly higher percentage of youth suspended can be considered a positive finding.

- Only 1 percent increase in suspension rates occurred from 2008-09 to 2009-10 for youth served by the ELs in Sacramento, even though there was a much higher percentage in the 2009-10 cohort of youth who receive special education services. On average, students who receive special education services have a much higher rate of suspension than the general student population.[3]

Expulsion

- No foster youth served by ELs were expelled from Orange or Sacramento in either 2008-09 or 2009-10, or from Fresno cohort in 2008-09.

Zhang, D., Katsiyannis, A., & Herbst, M. (2004). Disciplinary exclusions in special education: A 4-year analysis. *Behavioral Disorders, 29,* 337–347.

Birth to Five in Fresno

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Data Driven Practice

Education is often viewed as beginning at kindergarten or 1st grade, however, from the beginning of their Ready to Succeed project Fresno made the decision to include the Birth to 5 population as an integral part of their education liaison model. This was based on the earlier work they had done which led them to the conclusion that to have a real impact on educational outcomes overall, it was critical to start as early as possible. By dedicating one EL to this population and bringing in an outside consultant, they were able to get a baseline and then to show significant improvements.

They have **increased the percentage of foster children enrolled in preschool programs from 42% to 59%.** Further, all children ages Birth – 5 entering the foster care system have been given assessments to screen for developmental issues and subsequent referral for services.

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Areas of Concern and Need for More Examination

A disparity between students in the general population and students in foster care

There has long been anecdotal evidence that there is a difference in the school experience between students in foster care and students in the general population. In several areas the data collected over the past two years confirms this perspective.

Special Education Status

Thirty percent of foster children nationwide have been identified through testing as potentially eligible for special education services based either on cognitive or emotional/behavioral disabilities.[4] It is not surprising, therefore, that the foster youth served by the ELs in each county receive special education services at a higher percentage rate than all students in each county.

	Fresno-FY Served by ELs	FUSD 7-12 grade FY	Fresno all students	Sacramento FY served by ELs	Sacramento All students	Orange 6th-7th grade FY	Orange Girls' Court FY	Orange all students
2008-2009	**44%**	**32%**	8%	**25%**	11 %	**NA**	**NA**	7.6%
2009-2010	**40%**	**35%**	11.5%	**38%**	11%	**45%**	**59%**	7.6%

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[4] Webb, M.B., Frome, P., Harden, B.J., Baxter, R., Dowd, K. & Shin, S.H.(2007). Addressing the educational needs of children in child welfare services. In R. Haskins, F. Wulczyn & M.B. Webb (Eds.) *Child protection: Using research to improve policy and practice,* (pp. 243-258). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
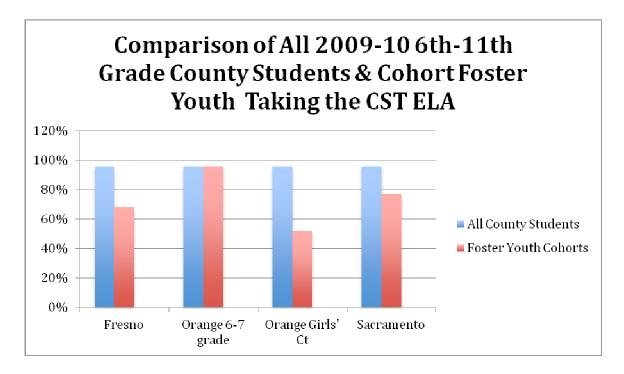
- In Fresno, a higher percentage of foster youth served by the ELs receive special education services than all 7th-12th grade foster youth in Fresno Unified School District.

- The fact that 40% or higher of foster youth served by the ELs in Fresno and Orange receive special education services indicates that these may be particularly high-risk foster youth populations.

- The ELs in Sacramento served a higher percentage of foster youth in 2009-10 that received special education services than they served in 2008-09. This occurred because of a group of new foster youth the ELs were serving for the first time in 2009-10 that had IEPs when they started serving them rather than the students who they had been serving becoming newly eligible for special education services.

Future Directions

More research is needed to understand why so many children in foster care are identified as needing special education services, what their eligibility criteria are, and whether or not special education is the most appropriate placement. Were they in special education when they entered the foster care system, or was it only after they entered foster care that they were found eligible for special education? Once placed in out-of-home care are foster youth who experience learning or behavior difficulties linked to intensive interventions such as Response to Intervention (RTI) or Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) in their schools as an alternative to special education? Do the schools they attend have these resources available?

Standardized Tests (CST and CAHSEE) -- Missing on Test Day or Poor Outcomes

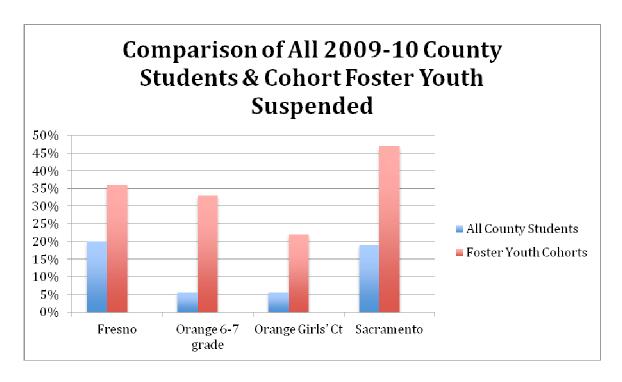## Comparison of All 2009-10 6th-11th Grade County Students & Cohort Foster Youth Taking the CST ELA

- Except for the 6th-7th grade cohort in Orange, a high percentage of foster youth are not taking either the ELA or Math CST.

- Those taking the CST scored lower than their non-foster youth peers state-wide and within their respective counties on both the ELA and Math measures.

- Large numbers of foster youth enrolled in grades in which they were eligible to take the CAHSEE in Orange and Fresno did not take the exam. With the exception of the Girls Court in Orange of those who took the exam, there were generally low passage rates on both the ELA and Math portions.

Future Directions

Additional research is needed to identify strategies that would increase the number of foster youth taking the CST and CAHSEE as well as interventions that would improve CST scores and CAHSEE passage rates.

Suspensions and Expulsions – A Troubling Picture

Both suspensions and expulsions result in school disruption, and, therefore, it is important to understand why this occurs at such a high rate for foster youth and what interventions will reverse this trend.

Comparison of All 2009-10 County Students & Cohort Foster Youth Suspended

- Foster youth are suspended from school at a significantly higher rate than students in the general population both within the county and across the state (12% in 2009)

- In Fresno foster youth attending FUSD were expelled at a higher rate (4.5%) than students in the general population both within the county (0.5%) and across the state (0.3%).

Future Directions

Some questions that need answers: Do educators need to be more aware of the traumatic issues that foster youth have endured that can lead to exhibiting negative behaviors and ultimately suspensions and expulsions? Are options such as positive behavior supports not available in schools that foster youth attend? What interventions are necessary to redirect the negative trajectory that these foster youth are on?

Other Challenges

Attendance – Inconsistencies with the Data

These data must be interpreted with caution since Sacramento calculates attendance in terms of periods, as did Orange in 2010; Fresno uses days, which Orange also used in 2010. This problem will be resolved in the upcoming year, since each county has agreed to report the number of full school days each youth attended, regardless of the number of periods that constitute a school day in the various school districts.

In addition the data do not reflect actual attendance rates within the counties or FUSD, but only attendance rates within possible days the student was enrolled in school

(or possible periods in Sacramento) during the particular time period.[5] For example, a student who attended 152 of a possible 160 days is present 95% of the time, but a student who attended 10 out of a possible 10 days enrolled (with no knowledge of school attendance for the other 150 days) is considered to be present 100% of the time. Further refinement of the data collection process is needed.

Data for foster youth who are AWOL or youth who move out of county or, in Fresno's case, out of FUSD, are not available and thus not included in the calculation of attendance rate.

Stability – A Critical Determination for Success

While the data revealed a high percentage of the foster youth served by the ELs were remaining in one school placement during the school year, there are still a significant number that continue to move throughout the year. Even one move per year means disruption in the youth's studies which research has shown has a negative impact on achievement[6]. Students fall behind academically because curricula are not aligned from school to school and they miss important concepts as well as have to adjust to new teachers and other students.

> ### Future Directions
> It is important to understand what the characteristics are of the foster youth who change school placements during the year as well as what interventions are needed to prevent school instability. Are these same students having a high number of home placement changes? When should a school placement change be considered a positive move?

GPA – A Puzzle to Be Solved

Only in Orange did the GPA increase. Understanding why this is such a difficult indicator to show improvement will be important in moving forward.

> ### Future Directions
> Have the teachers in Orange County received more training to better understand the challenges that foster youth face in school? Are more interventions and referral resources available in Orange schools? Are some teachers more or less tolerant of the academic and behavioral inconsistencies of foster youth? Were the backgrounds of the ELs, the structure of the Girls' Court, or other interventions better able to address the mental health and special education needs of these vulnerable youth?

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[5] Sacramento only included youth in their cohorts who they were serving at the end of the school year and who had been on the caseload of an EL for at least 90 days.
[6] Emerson, J. & Lovitt, T. (2003). The educational plight of foster children in schools and what can be done about it. *Remedial and Special Education, 24,* 199-203.

PRACTICE CHANGE AND LESSONS LEARNED

Program Modification

- When a review of data revealed a high number of expulsions of foster youth from FUSD, Fresno developed a new protocol which requires that the ELs be notified anytime a foster youth is referred for expulsion, so that they can be present to advocate for the student.

- Following a review of the education issues that the ELs were addressing, Fresno made the decision to focus proactively on those critical periods when students must transition from one level of school to the next – kindergarten to elementary school, elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school – and make sure that these transitions are made smoothly.

- In Sacramento, cases initially were assigned to the ELs geographically by school but as youth changed schools the ELs would follow them to the new schools, which meant they frequently were driving back and forth across the county in a single day. To utilize the ELs time more efficiently assignments now are made on the basis of which EL has the most youth at a particular school and if youth move the EL serving the new school then provides services to the youth..

- In response to data revealing many 6th and 7th graders were not taking the California Standards Test, the Orange ELs will include as part of their practice to call the caregivers in advance to encourage them to prepare the students for the test in Spring 2011.

- One strategy the Sacramento ELs began using to help improve outcomes of the foster youth on their caseloads was to write obtainable goals with the youth for each to achieve and review the goals on each visit and update them as appropriate.

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- All three counties have identified the need to continue developing awareness and knowledge through training among school and child welfare staff regarding the educational needs of foster youth, education law, special education, etc.

- Progress monitoring in Orange to assess if case workers were getting the Education Performance Reports (EPRs) and including data in the court reports led to the development of a new procedure to ensure case workers receive the EPRs in time to include in the court report.

Program Expansion

- Sacramento and Orange realized that in order to have a greater effect on improving educational outcomes they needed to start working with children at an earlier age. Sacramento redesigned its Title I program after its secondary EL

model and assigned Title 1 ELs to work with elementary age students; Orange added a case manager to prepare EPRs and address the problems of 5 to 10 year olds.

- Orange is using what they learned from teamwork and networking at the School Planning Conferences (SPCs) that are held three times over a two year span for each 6th and 7th grader to bring the youth's support system together to identify pressing needs and link the youth with available resources. ELs are now involved in the Transition Planning Conferences that are done (a) when the foster youth turns 17 years and (b) 90 days prior to termination of permanency

- Orange organized foster youth support groups led by an EL and social work intern in two local high schools to strengthen the bridge between school and the foster youth and promote engagement.

- All three counties recognize the importance of having school data available and are developing electronic links from the school districts directly to the Foster Focus database housed in the county offices of education.

- An important expansion of the Foster Focus database, called School Connect, is in place in Sacramento, which enables the Placement Unit social workers to increase school stability. If a social worker has to change a youth's home placement, School Connect enables the Placement Unit workers to search for a new home placement in the same school catchment area where the youth had been attending school. School Connect not only lists the homes and their particular characteristics but also the number of open slots in each home for youth. Thus, School Connect helps maintain youth in the same schools even though their home placements change.

- As other counties began using the Foster Focus database Sacramento has put together a manual on Foster Focus to help other counties in using the database.

- Impressed by the effectiveness of the Girls' Court to increase school attendance, and test scores and to decrease suspensions, Orange created a Boys' Court.

IN CONCLUSION – GOING FORWARD

In June 2008, when the Ready to Succeed recommendations were published, there was a general consensus that it was important that this work – improving educational outcomes for children and youth – not stop, but move to the next step. The past three years have been a time to test different theories of change by utilizing a version of the education liaison model in three California Counties – Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento – and to examine the impact that this focus on education has had. It has been a time of trial and error and experimentation, but ultimately the work has paid off. This report identifies a series of emerging successes as well as areas of challenges that need to be addressed as the counties move forward in transforming the lives of children and youth in

foster care. It is now time to take what has been learned during the last 3 years, identify those practices that work, clearly describe their components, and thereby begin to operationalize this effort.