

## Educational Outcomes for Court-Dependent Youth in San Mateo County

by Sebastian Castrechini

### Background

Dependent youth—those placed under custody of the court due to parental abuse or neglect—face many educational challenges. First, changes in placements may cause disruptions in schooling that can hurt educational attainment (Wolanin, 2005). Additionally, evidence suggests that a variety of factors, such as the stress of court appearances, separation from siblings and parents, the stigma associated with being in foster care, and trauma from the abuse or neglect that led to removal from the parents' custody detract from students' ability to concentrate on school work and can lead to behavioral problems (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, July 2002; Hill, Yeung, & Duncan, 2001). Although there is limited research on school experiences for dependent youth, the existing research shows that outcomes are expectedly poor given the difficulties dependent youth face (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008).

The lack of research on educational outcomes for dependent youth stems from the fact that tracking these educational outcomes is complicated. For example, changes in home placements may require a foster youth to change schools, and educational records do not always follow students (Foster Youth Services Program, 2008). Also, few communities have the ability to integrate child welfare and school district records (Wilson, 2006). For this reason, some state legislatures have taken action aimed at improving educational experiences for dependent youth. For example, in the last ten years California has passed SB 543, which requires social workers to store educational information in a portable Health and Education Passport; AB 636, which mandates data reporting on and accountability for educational outcomes for foster youth; and AB 490, which gives foster youth rights and services aimed at reducing breaks in school attendance caused by placement changes (see the JGC policy fact sheet *Fostering Educational Success: Legislation and Policies to Promote Positive Educational Experiences for California's Foster Youth* for more information). Unfortunately, these measures have been largely difficult to implement and enforce (Berrick & Ayasse, 2005; Foster Youth Services Program, 2008).

Given this backdrop, representatives from several San Mateo County youth-serving agencies, including Advocates for Children, the San Mateo County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program; Human Services Agency; delinquency and dependency court; philanthropic foundations; and community college district formed a committee to identify strategies for improving the educational success of the court-dependent youth that they collectively serve. This group asked the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University to analyze educational outcomes for the dependent youth in the County. In partnership with the SPHERE Institute, the JGC operates the Youth Data Archive (YDA), an initiative that links data across youth-serving agencies to answer questions that those agencies could not answer working independently. For this analysis, we used the YDA to link dependency records from the Child Welfare Services (CWS) to educational data from several school districts to examine the relationship between dependency and school outcomes.

## Data Sources and Methods

JGC and SPHERE researchers linked CWS records on types, durations, and numbers of placements for dependent youth to school achievement, attendance, and discipline data from four participating educational systems in San Mateo County. Using this matched data set, we produced cross-sectional statistics that, although not suitable for drawing causal conclusions, do provide a picture of educational outcomes for San Mateo County dependent youth that were not previously available.

The analysis examines all dependent youth in four county school districts—including those removed from their homes and put in an out-of-home foster placement as well as those remaining in or returned to their home while under court custody—who ever enrolled in elementary through high school at a partnering district between the 2003-04 and 2007-08 academic years. A total of 1,015 individual youth appeared in the data at some point during this period. Because some students were enrolled in multiple school years in one of our partnering educational systems, we have a total of 2,302 observations of student outcomes. In addition to comparing outcomes of dependent youth to other youth enrolled in these districts, this analysis examines differences in outcomes among dependent youth by their dependency characteristics, listed below:<sup>1</sup>

- Kin care – placements where the caregiver is identified as a relative or extended family member.
- Foster home – placements in homes where the caregiver is not a relative, including guardian, Foster Family Agency approved, and court-specified homes.
- Group home – placements in group homes.
- Shelter or receiving home – placements in the county receiving home or another temporary location while awaiting a more permanent placement.
- Involuntary family maintenance – periods in which the child is a dependent of the court but living in his/her parents' home and receiving court-mandated Family Maintenance services.
- Previously in Dependency – students who have been either reunified with their birth parents or permanently adopted after having spent time as a dependent.

Finally, we examined differences based on the overall amount of time that youth spent in dependency.

<sup>1</sup> In cases where placement types switch during the course of an academic year, we categorize students according to their placement type at the end of the school year.

## Characteristics of Dependent Youth in San Mateo County

There are a variety of reasons why children are placed under court jurisdiction; the most common are abuse and neglect (Bitler, Gelbach, and Hoyes 2003), which are often related to substance abuse, at one time including the epidemic of crack cocaine use (Minkler and Roe 1993; Hirshorn, Van Meter, and Brown 2000). Other reasons for court dependency include parental death, HIV/AIDS (Joslin 2000) and incarceration (Dressel and Barnhill 1994). Considering these reasons and their relationship to demographic characteristics, it is not surprising that dependent youth have different characteristics than other youth. Table 1, which shows the characteristics of dependent youth in the four partnering districts compared to other youth in the same districts, confirms that youth involved in the child welfare system had different gender, racial, and socio-economic profiles compared to non-dependent youth. The dependent population consisted of higher percentages of female and African American youth as well as youth receiving Free- and Reduced-Price Lunch and special education services. However, English learners were underrepresented among dependent youth in these districts.

**Table 1: Background Characteristics of Dependent and Other Students Enrolled from 2003-04 to 2007-08**

	Dependent Youth	Non-Dependent Youth
Female	53.6%	48.5%
Male	46.4%	51.5%
African American	23.4%	4.0%
Asian	5.8%	7.9%
Latino	46.9%	49.5%
White	20.4%	36.3%
Special Education	29.6%	12.1%
English Learner	29.1%	33.9%
Free/Reduced Lunch	63.5%	40.6%
Number of Youth	1,015	34,724

## Educational Outcomes for Dependent Youth

Overall, dependent youth had substantially worse educational outcomes when compared with non-dependent youth. As Table 2 shows, dependent youth had lower California Standards Test (CST) proficiency rates; higher absence, mobility, and grade retention rates; lower high school exit exam passing rates and credits accumulated; and higher discipline referral rates.

**Table 2: Educational Outcomes for Dependent Youth Compared to Non-Dependent Youth in YDA-Partnering Districts, 2003-04 to 2007-08**

	Dependent Youth	Non-Dependent Youth
<b><u>Academic Test Scores</u></b>		
ELA CST Proficiency Rate	22%	46%
Math CST Proficiency Rate	20%	42%
<b><u>Attendance, Mobility and Retention</u></b>		
Average Absence Rate	12%	6%
Percent Left School Mid-Year	17%	2%
Percent Retained in Grade	4%	2%
<b><u>Progress Towards Graduation</u></b>		
ELA CAHSEE (Exit Exam) Pass Rate	48%	74%
Math CAHSEE (Exit Exam) Pass Rate	50%	75%
Average Annual Credits Earned	40	54
Average Annual UC/SU Credits Earned	18	33
<b><u>Discipline</u></b>		
Percent of Students Suspended	25%	10%
Percent of Students Expelled	10%	1%

Even though the overall picture for dependent youth shows much worse outcomes compared with other youth, there are differences among dependent youth that suggest potential points of intervention. The subsequent tables disaggregate outcomes for dependent youth by two dependency characteristics—type of placement and duration of dependency.

**Table 3: Attendance and Mobility Among Dependent Youth, 2003-04 to 2007-08**

	% Days Missed	% Transferred Schools	% Retained
<b>Combined Annual Results for All Dependent Youth</b>	12.5%	17.4%	4.5%
<i>Unduplicated number of individual students across years</i>	818	1,015	580
<b>Combined Annual Results for All Non-Dependent Youth</b>	6.1%	2.0%	2.0%
<i>Unduplicated number of individual students across years</i>	26,547	41,799	25,221
<b>By Placement Type</b>			
Kin Care	12.9%	18.8%	2.7%
Foster Home	10.0%	23.1%	2.6%
Group Home	20.7%	35.1%	16.7%
Shelter or Receiving Home	16.2%	8.9%	5.9%
Involuntary Family Maintenance	9.7%	11.6%	4.3%
Previously in Dependency	12.0%	16.1%	4.2%
<i>Statistically significant difference across placement types</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>By Overall Duration of Dependency</b>			
Less than 6 months	17.0%	22.1%	7.5%
6 months to 2 years	13.0%	18.8%	5.4%
More than 2 years	12.1%	20.1%	3.3%
<i>Statistically significant difference across durations</i>	No	No	No

## School Attendance, Mobility, and Grade Retention

Table 3 shows absence, mobility, and retention rates by placement types and overall dependency duration. Across all three indicators, youth placed in group homes had the worst outcomes. Youth in involuntary family maintenance tended to have more positive results, particularly in terms of attendance and mobility; it is important to note that the home circumstances of youth assigned to family maintenance are typically less severe compared to youth placed outside their home. Youth in kin care or foster home placements had the lowest retention rates. The high retention and mobility rates among youth in group homes especially stands out. Because youth in group homes were mostly high school age, the high retention rate could be related to well-documented problems with course transcripts not transferring promptly when students transfer, leading to students not being placed in the correct grade, or resistance to giving partial course credit for students who transfer mid-term (Choice et al., 2001; Foster Youth Services Program, 2008). Although the differences were not statistically significant, youth with the shortest dependency histories had the poorest outcomes across all three measures. This could be explained by the fact that the youth newest to dependency would have gone through a recent transition or trauma and, as a result, struggled more.

## Academic Proficiency and High School Credit Accumulation

Academic achievement similarly differed for youth by their dependency experiences. Looking at CST proficiency rates in Table 4, there were again substantial differences by placements types and durations. Previously dependent youth—those who had been permanently adopted or reunified with their families—and those in involuntary family maintenance had the highest proficiency rates in both ELA and math. However, youth in kin care and foster homes earned the highest average annual number of credits whereas youth in group homes and temporary shelters had the lowest average annual credits earned, which, again, may be related to issues with credit transfer as these two placement types tended to have the shortest durations. CST Proficiency rates were worst for youth who had spent more than two years in dependency and best for youth in the mid-range of six months to two years of duration. This finding points to two possible areas of concern: long-term cumulative effects of multiple disruptions to home and educational settings as well as short-term effects of a more recent trauma or transition. However, annual credits earned were highest for youth with the longest time spent in dependency.

**Table 4: CST Proficiency and High School Credits Earned Among Dependent Youth, 2003-04 to 2007-08**

	% Proficient in English Language Arts	% Proficient in Math	Avg Annual Credits Earned
<b>Combined Annual Results for All Dependent Youth</b> <i>Unduplicated number of individual students across years</i>	21.7%	19.6%	39.7
<b>Combined Annual Results for All Non-Dependent Youth</b> <i>Unduplicated number of individual students across years</i>	46.4%	41.7%	54.3
	26,190	25,150	17,958
<b>By Placement Type</b>			
Kin Care	14.8%	20.5%	43.6
Foster Home	14.2%	8.9%	45.9
Group Home	8.3%	12.5%	27.0
Shelter or Receiving Home	12.5%	5.9%	24.5
Involuntary Family Maintenance	16.2%	19.8%	40.4
Previously in Dependency	25.1%	21.1%	40.9
<i>Statistically significant difference across placement types</i>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>By Overall Duration of Dependency</b>			
Less than 6 months	14.6%	19.1%	29.5
6 months to 2 years	17.2%	23.7%	36.9
More than 2 years	12.4%	7.6%	40.4
<i>Statistically significant difference across durations</i>	Yes	Yes	No

**Table 5: Suspensions and Expulsions Among Dependent Youth, 2005-06 to 2007-08**

	<b>% Suspended</b>	<b>% Expelled</b>
<b>Combined Annual Results for All Dependent Youth</b> <i>Unduplicated number of individual students across years</i>	24.7% 711	4.1% 531
<b>Combined Annual Results for All Non-Dependent Youth</b> <i>Unduplicated number of individual students across years</i>	9.7% 41,799	0.7% 36,564
<b>By Placement Type</b>		
Kin Care	38.2%	1.9%
Foster Home	28.8%	0.0%
Group Home	31.8%	8.4%
Shelter or Receiving Home	21.7%	0.0%
Involuntary Family Maintenance	15.2%	0.0%
Previously in Dependency	24.1%	4.9%
<i>Statistically significant difference across placement types</i>	Yes	No
<b>By Overall Duration of Dependency</b>		
Less than 6 months	23.5%	1.8%
6 months to 2 years	20.6%	1.0%
More than 2 years	31.6%	4.1%
<i>Statistically significant difference across durations</i>	Yes	No

## Suspension and Expulsion Incidences

Although discipline referral rates overall for dependent youth were very high, suspensions and expulsions varied widely within the dependent population, as shown in Table 5. Suspensions were highest for youth in kin care and group homes and lowest for youth in involuntary family maintenance. Youth in the dependency mid-range again had the lowest discipline rates, and youth with more than two years in dependency had the highest. Although the number of students who were expelled was small, making it difficult to show statistically significant findings, there were relatively large differences in expulsion rates; youth in group homes, those previously in dependency, and those with the longest dependency durations had the highest discipline referral rates.

## Conclusions and Implications

This analysis provides a descriptive profile of the educational outcomes of dependent youth in four partnering educational systems. The analysis is intended to highlight the existence of associations between and among educational and child welfare-related experiences, but the findings cannot be used to infer that students' dependency experiences cause differences in educational outcomes. It is also important to note that the classification of students based on their dependency status at a given point in time does not take into account the dynamic nature of youths' dependency experiences. Even with these limitations

in mind, there are several important patterns that we can draw from the analysis:

- Dependent youth were more likely to receive special education services, more likely to qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, more likely to be African Americans, and less likely to be English learners compared to other youth in the same districts.
- Compared with other youth, dependent youth had lower CST scores and credits earned; had much higher rates of absence, mobility, and grade retention; and were much more likely to be suspended or expelled.
- Educational outcomes were generally better among youth in involuntary family maintenance, compared to youth in out-of-home placements.
- Longer time in dependency was not necessarily associated with poorer educational outcomes. Educational outcomes were generally better for youth who have been in dependency for 6 months to 2 years compared with those who were newer to dependency and those who had spent longer periods of time in dependency.

These findings suggest several points of intervention for schools, social workers, and others concerned with the well-being of court-dependent youth. First, the overall poor educational outcomes for dependent youth, including previously dependent youth, point to an urgency for schools and child welfare agencies to focus on academic support for dependent youth.

Also, the differences in outcomes by dependency characteristics identify some specific groups that seem to be at highest risk. For example, the relatively poor outcomes for youth new to dependency highlight a need for special support for students who have recently been placed into court custody. Worse outcomes for youth in out-of-home placements, particularly group homes, indicate a potential area for targeting outreach and intervention.

Because these findings are connected to both placement settings and educational settings, they indicate a need for collaboration across agencies that work with dependent youth. One primary piece of collaborative work involves sharing system-level information between districts and agencies that serve dependent youth to inform policy and programmatic decisions. While there are currently few localities that have an established, systematic way of sharing this kind of information or data among agencies, a few successful examples exist. In Los Angeles County, several school districts have joined with the Department of Child and Family Services and the Probation Department to form the Education Coordinating Council. This entity uses an annual match of data from schools and the child welfare agency to conduct system-level analyses that inform the groups' policy development and advocacy (Los Angeles Education Coordinating Council, n.d.). The Kentucky Department of Education formed an interagency group, the Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children, that produces an annual report card on foster youth which tracks their educational outcomes in the same way that disaggregated outcomes are typically reported for other subgroups and uses this data to inform service integration, technical support, and professional development to support those who work with foster youth (Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children, 2009; Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008).

In addition to using shared data at a system level, cross-agency information sharing can also provide useful information for those who work with dependent youth at an individual level. At a minimum, districts need to be able to identify dependent youth who enroll in their schools because those youth have particular educational rights afforded them by law. To this end, some school districts ask about dependency status on enrollment forms (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008). Beyond this initial step, there is a need for ongoing information sharing because the status of youth in dependency frequently changes, and transitions into or out of dependency or

between placements can be especially difficult times for students during which they need extra support. Collaboration between foster care agencies, schools, and foster parents can also help to ensure proper interventions to behavioral problems that stem from the trauma dependent youth often experience (Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & Goerge, 2005). San Diego County has created a secure online data system through which authorized users may access integrated education, health, and welfare data on individual youth (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008) and uses this data to facilitate educational case management, tutoring, and mentoring programs for dependent youth (San Diego County Office of Education, 2009). Another example of such a collaboration is the FYS Core District program, which created an integrated system of instruction, counseling, and related services in six pilot school districts in California. Foster youth in the core districts performed much better in academic achievement, attendance, and discipline measures than foster youth in the rest of the state (Foster Youth Services Program, 2008).

Beyond school districts using shared child welfare data to target educational support services, there are also several ways in which child welfare agencies can utilize shared educational data to support dependent youths' educational success. First, child welfare agencies can use educational data shared by school districts to allocate resources to the areas of highest need. Fresno County, for example, has used the results from a data sharing collaborative to place specialized case workers who work with independently living foster youth in the schools with the most dependent youth enrollment (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008). Also, knowing about the educational needs of dependent youth can help child welfare workers advise foster parents on how to advocate for services – including, as appropriate, special education—for children in their care. Research has shown that foster youth experience delays in receiving special education services and that foster parents often lack knowledge on how to advocate for these services (Choice et al., 2001). This example is particularly relevant given our finding that special education rates were disproportionately high among dependent youth. Social workers also can play a critical role in expediting service delivery by advocating in court for foster parents, other family members, or a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to receive educational rights in cases where the birth parents are not involved in special education meetings (España & Fried, 2004). Finally, when dependent youth transfer schools, having past educational records can help

child welfare workers to facilitate prompt enrollment if they can pass on immunization or academic histories to the new school (Berrick & Ayasse, 2005).

Although laws at the state and federal level have either mandated or encouraged such data sharing and improved data collection, implementation has been a challenge in most places. Because foster youth often move through multiple placements in multiple communities, their educational and foster care records are frequently incomplete or do not transfer in a timely fashion among agencies. For example, reviews of child welfare data in California have shown that the Health and Education Passports created by state law in 1999 still go frequently unused (Berrick & Ayasse, 2005). Another issue is that the technical infrastructure does not exist in most current data management systems to link data from the separate educational and child welfare systems. The Pennsylvania and Florida departments of education have attempted to resolve both of these problems by including information on foster youth into their educational data management systems (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008).

A major challenge to cross-agency collaboration has been resistance to share information between agencies when foster youth change placements or schools despite laws that require or encourage agencies (Foster Youth Services Program, 2008). Federal laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which are often cited as reasons for not sharing information, do allow for data sharing in these cases. Examples exist of successful collaborations between educational agencies and child welfare service providers that have worked through these confidentiality concerns. In San Luis Obispo, CA, agencies have created an Interagency and Community Agreement that outlines security and confidentiality protocols to which all partners agree (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008). However, school and child welfare personnel must balance students' right to privacy with the utility of having school personnel informed of students' dependency status. Research has documented inappropriate responses of teachers toward youth whom they know to be dependents, either by holding them to lower expectations (Altschuler, 2003) or inappropriately referring them for special education services (Courtney, Roderick, Smithgall, Gladden, & Nagaoka, 2004). Thus, it is important for educators to receive training on strategies for working with dependent youth if they will be identified.

The policy implications discussed in this section give examples of how stakeholders who work with or on behalf of dependent youth can utilize inter-agency collaborations to work toward improved educational outcomes. Although the findings of this study only provide basic descriptive data and cannot explain the reasons for lower outcomes for dependent youth, they do help to focus attention on the goal of educational success for dependent youth. Also, the types of cross-agency data-sharing collaborations that made this report possible present an opportunity to conduct more detailed analyses that can explain the processes behind educational outcomes for dependent youth. Such use of data can help to inform those who work with dependent youth and identify interventions to overcome the challenges that these youth face.

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