

# The Invisible Achievement Gap Report: Key Findings

## The Importance of the Invisible Achievement Gap Report, Parts 1 and 2

*The Invisible Achievement Gap is a groundbreaking study based on a data match between state agencies.*

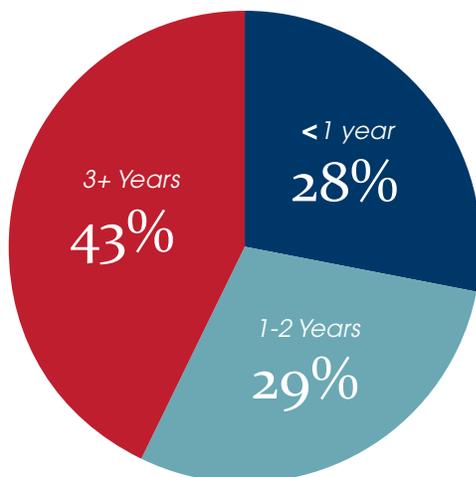
Together, these reports offer the first statewide comprehensive educational snap-shot of all K-12 students in foster care, demonstrating their unique characteristics as a distinct population of students and further illustrating the need for policies and strategies that improve their academic success. These reports, based on data from the 2009/2010 school year, are the result of a state level collaboration that began nearly three years ago, originating from a commitment to work together to link state level data sets. The study is a bold and proactive effort by the California Departments of Education and Social Services, reflecting their commitment to use data to better understand the educational outcomes for students in foster care.

## Key Characteristics and Experiences of Students in Foster Care

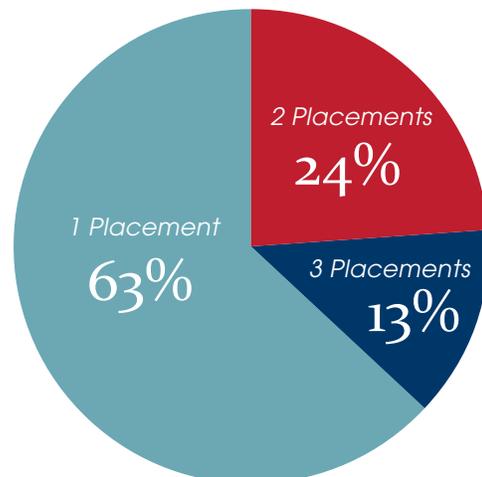
*The experiences of students in foster care - by the numbers.*

In California, 43,140 students in grades K-12 and between the ages of 5 and 17 were in foster care during all or part of the 2009/2010 school year.

- Why they entered foster care: The vast majority of these students were in foster care due to neglect (78 percent), with 11 percent due to physical abuse and 4 percent due to sexual abuse.
- Where they were placed: 32 percent were placed in foster homes certified by private foster family agencies (FFAs), 30 percent in kinship care, 15 percent with guardians, 10 percent in group homes and 8 percent in county-licensed foster homes.
- How long they were in care: 43 percent of students had been in foster care for more than 3 years.
- How many placements they had: 37 percent had experienced two or more foster care placements during the study period.
- What are their ethnic group demographics: 43 percent of these students were Hispanic, 26 percent African American, 23 percent white and 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander.



*Time in Care*



*Number of Placements*

## Key Findings from the Invisible Achievement Gap Reports

1. *Students in every type of foster care placement experienced an achievement gap compared to their peers in school.*

- Regardless of the characteristics of their foster care experience (e.g., placement type, removal reason, number of placements, time in care), students in foster care experienced an achievement gap.
- Across nearly all education outcomes examined, students in foster care performed worse than their low-SES (socio-economic status) peers. These disparities persisted regardless of the characteristics of a student's experiences in foster care.
- Even students placed with kin, who typically fared better academically than their peers in other placements, lagged behind students in the general student body and among low-SES students.
- Students in foster care were more likely to be diagnosed with a disability and to be over-age for their grade level.

2. *Students in foster care were more likely than other students to change schools during the school year.*

- Students in foster care experienced much higher rates of school mobility than other students.
- 32 percent of students in foster care attended more than one school during the academic year, compared to 8 percent of low-SES peers, and 7 percent of the general student population.
- Placements in more restrictive settings were strongly correlated with heightened school mobility. 50 percent of students placed in group homes attended more than one school during the academic year, compared with 42 percent in FFA placements, 35 percent in foster homes and 28 percent in kinship care.
- Among foster care students who attended three or more schools during the academic year, 49 percent of them had been in foster care for less than one year.
- Among students who had been in care for three or more years, 6 percent attended three or more schools during the school year.

3. *Students in foster care are more likely than the general student population to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools and more likely to be enrolled in nontraditional schools.*

- Students in foster care, along with their low-SES peers, were consistently more likely than the general student body to attend the lowest-performing schools, and less likely to attend the highest-performing schools.
- Students in foster care were also more likely to be enrolled in a nontraditional school. Overall, students in foster care are nearly four times more likely to attend a nontraditional school than both the low-SES and general student population.
- By high school, 1 in 5 students in foster care were attending a nontraditional school.

4. *Students in foster care had the lowest participation in California's statewide testing program and participation was tied to placement instability.*

- 91 percent of students in foster care who experienced only one placement during the school year participated in California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program. Participation in STAR dropped to 86 percent among students with two placements, and 73 percent among students with three or more placements.

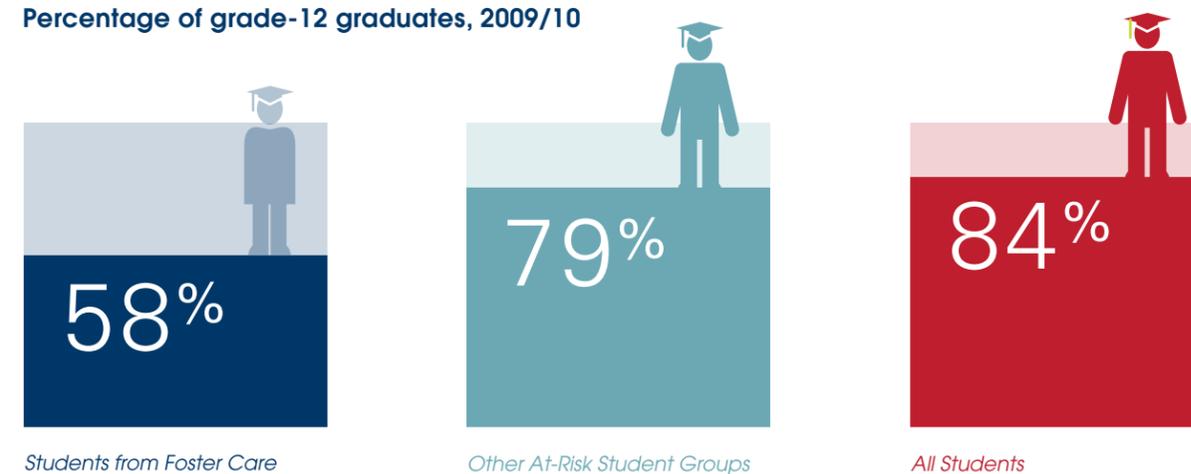
5. *Statewide testing documented that the achievement gap for students in foster care was greatest in upper grade levels and for students who experienced three or more foster care placements.*

- Students in foster care consistently fell short of achieving proficiency in English language arts and mathematics.
- Achievement gaps in English language arts and mathematics were particularly apparent for students placed in group homes in comparison to other students in foster care, with roughly 2 out of every 3 students in a group home placement failing to attain proficiency in either English language arts or mathematics.
- The number of placements students experienced during the school year was correlated with low performance in English language arts and mathematics, particularly among students who experienced three or more placements. Among students who experienced three or more placements, 50 percent scored below or far below basic in English language arts and 44 percent scored in the lowest two levels in mathematics.

6. *Among all high school students, those in foster care had the highest dropout and lowest graduation rates; students in more stable placements showed better performance for both of these education outcomes.*

- Students in foster care were less likely to pass the California high school exit exam (CAHSEE), more likely to drop out, and less likely to graduate than the statewide student population and low-SES students.
- Students with three or more placements (13 percent) were more than twice as likely to drop out as students with one placement (6 percent).
- Placement type was also correlated with student dropout and graduation rates. Among students in grades 9–12 who were placed in group homes, 14 percent dropped out. Alternately, students placed in guardian placements (4 percent) were among the least likely to drop out.

Percentage of grade-12 graduates, 2009/10



The **Invisible Achievement Gap** is a report created with support from the Stuart Foundation and developed by West Ed in partnership with the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at the University of California at Berkeley. Linking data from the California Department of Education and the California Department of Social Services, the report provides new insights on an achievement gap that had not previously been identified.

## Key Characteristics

*Students in foster care are a unique student population with distinct challenges.*

- Students in foster care are uniquely situated because the State is responsible for their safety, health, well-being and educational outcomes.
- Students in foster care have experienced neglect and abuse, with associated trauma, which may require more community-based support and services to ensure improved educational outcomes.
- Students in foster care are twice as likely to be eligible for special education services.
- Students in foster care are 4 times more likely to change schools at least one time during one academic school year.

*When students in foster care do receive the appropriate level of support by a committed group of caring educators and adults, they are able to achieve academically.*

While the achievement gap seems daunting, there are partnerships, policies and programs that collectively have the potential to ensure that students in foster care receive the educational opportunities they need to succeed in school and thrive in life.

*California is demonstrating its commitment to improving educational outcomes for students in foster care.*

- In 2013, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) restructured the way California funds education. Provisions regarding students in foster care included:
  - Students in foster care are now included as a distinct subgroup for which school districts will be accountable.
  - Local education agencies will develop and implement local control and accountability plans specifying how they will improve the educational outcomes of students in foster care.
  - The California Department of Education (CDE) will inform school districts which of their students are in foster care on a weekly basis.
- The California Department of Education's Foster Youth Services (FYS) Program provides funding to county offices of education to monitor and support the educational success of students in foster care.
- California has a number of statutes targeting common challenges faced by students in foster care, including provisions that:
  - Allow students in foster care to attend their school of origin even if they don't reside in the district.
  - Allow students in foster care to immediately enroll in school even if they don't possess medical or academic records.
  - Require agencies to transfer academic records in a timely manner.
  - Require school districts to calculate and accept partial credit for coursework completed.
  - Allow students in foster care to graduate if their school mobility has prevented them from meeting local graduation requirements.

