INDIANA YOUTH INSTITUTE

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Family & Community

Health

Economic Well-Being

Education

SPOTLIGHT:
Supporting the Potential of Indiana Foster Students

In collaboration with:

foster success

Each year thousands of Indiana children enter foster care through no fault of their own. They are vulnerable youth who have been impacted by generational poverty, parental neglect, and the state's ongoing drug crisis.

Educating foster children equitably is a growing public policy concern in Indiana. The number of children in foster care in the state has grown nearly 60% since 2008.[1] Grouped together, the 31,000 foster children in Indiana is comparable in size to the state's largest school district. The stakes are high for these young Hoosiers and for our state. According to national research, young people who experienced foster care report challenges in educational and employment opportunities. Three in ten of 19 and 21-year-olds report experiencing homelessness and 49% are unemployed by age 21.[2]

A first-of-its kind study released by the Indiana State Board of Education finds disparity in education outcomes for foster youth and children.[3] The *Annual Report on Foster Care Youth Educational Outcomes* offers compelling evidence that Indiana foster children are struggling in school as a result of their involvement in the foster care system. As a group, foster students underperformed all other student subgroups examined across every educational measure.

Among the key findings:

- **4 in 10 pre-K and 1 in 10 Kindergarten foster students are retained each year.** Across all grades, students in foster care are retained at twice the rate of their non-foster peers.

- **1 in 5 students living in foster care are suspended annually compared to 8.9% of their non-foster peers. Expulsion rates of students living in foster care were double that of non-foster peers.** Black foster students were at greatest risk, with a combined suspension and expulsion rate of 33.5%.

- **Fewer than 1 in 10 foster student sophomores passed Math ISTEP+, including just 3% of black foster students.** ISTEP+ passing rates in English/Language Arts (ELA) and Math in grades 3 through 8 were 50% lower for students in foster care than their non-foster peers.

- **Only 6 in 10 foster students graduate from high school.** The graduation rate was 64.6% for foster students, markedly lower than the overall student graduation rate of 88.1%.

Indiana has an obligation and an opportunity. Imagine the potential of Indiana's 31,000 foster youth and the workforce and community contributions that could be realized by building supportive education systems to ensure their success. Other states have shown that foster youth can and do achieve at the same rate as their peers when provided with targeted educational supports. Together, Indiana communities, educators, child welfare leaders, and policymakers can lead the nation in developing models to support the state's most vulnerable students.

> **"Every day caring social workers and educators are changing the lives of Indiana foster youth. We owe them and the children they serve additional resources and supports to overcome the unique educational barriers associated with foster care involvement."**
> – Brent Kent, CEO, Foster Success

Who are Indiana's foster children?

In 2018, 31,042 children experienced at least one episode of foster care in Indiana.[4] The average foster care stay for a child in Indiana is 16 months.[5] In Indiana, three in ten foster children will wait three or more years for adoption.[6] For transition-age foster youth, ages 14+, one in four will experience two or more episodes of foster care during their lifetime.[7]

Increased foster care placement in Indiana is being driven by high rates of parental drug abuse and child maltreatment—Indiana ranks 2nd worst among the 50 states for child abuse.[8] Parental drug abuse is a factor in 63.8% of Indiana cases and has risen thirteen percentage points since 2013.[9] There are now more children in foster care

in Indiana as a percentage of children in the state than any other surrounding state, even those twice Indiana's population.[10]

Indiana has the highest rate of children in foster care compared to our neighboring states.
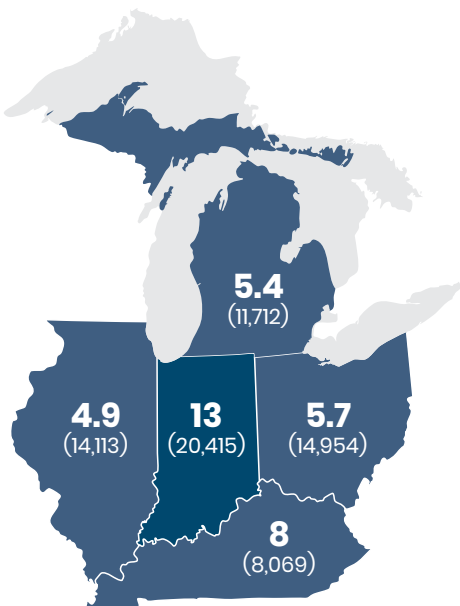
Rate of children (per thousand) 17 and younger in each state who were in foster care on the last day of FY2017

Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System and U.S. Census Bureau

In Indiana, like other U.S. states, foster children are disproportionately young and children of color. While black children make up approximately one in ten of Indiana's population, they make up 20% of children in Indiana's foster care system.[11] LGBTQ youth are also disproportionately represented among foster youth. National findings indicate that greater than 20% of children and youth in out-of-home-care self-identify as LGBTQ.[12]

How do children and youth in foster care fare educationally?

Education outcomes for foster youth are the lowest among all peer groups examined. The report released by the Indiana State Board of Education examined 8,335 public school students in school year 2017-2018.[13] Educational disparities were found across multiple indicators among Indiana's foster youth, with outcomes significantly worse than their non-foster peers and worse when compared to other at-risk populations, including homeless students. The report finds the largest education disparities are for black students in foster care, who currently achieve at rates far lower than even their non-black foster student peers.

Educational challenges start early.

Foster students are held back in school at higher rates than their classmates. Nearly 41% of foster students in pre-K were retained, more than 10% were retained in Kindergarten and nearly 5% in 1st grade. This is significant, because foster

students tend to be young. Overall, the retention rate for foster students (3.9%) from pre-K through grade 11 was slightly higher than that of both students who experience homelessness (2.7%) and non-foster students (1.8%).

Test scores are lower in all grades examined.

Grades 3 through 8 test scores were significantly lower than for non-foster peers. For students in foster care, aggregate ISTEP+ passing rates in English/Language Arts (ELA) were 43.3% in grades 3 through 8 compared to 64.1% among their non-foster care peers. For Math, their passing rate was 38.3% versus 58.3% for their non-foster peers. Passage rates were significantly lower for black foster students (30.3% for ELA and 24% for Math) than foster students of other races.

Disparities persist throughout students' educational careers. Only 28.7% of 10th grade students in foster care pass ELA ISTEP+ compared to 58.9% among non-foster peers. In Math, only 9.1% of 10th grade students in foster care passed compared to 36.2% of non-foster peers, meaning that fewer than 1 in 10 sophomores passed the Math ISTEP+. Mirroring disparities in 3rd through 8th grade data, passage rates on both tests were lowest for black students. As sophomores, only 3.2% of black foster students passed Math ISTEP+.

Indiana foster care students are less likely to pass ISTEP+ than their peers.

Percentage of Students in Grades 3-8 Passing ELA and Math ISTEP+, Indiana: 2018
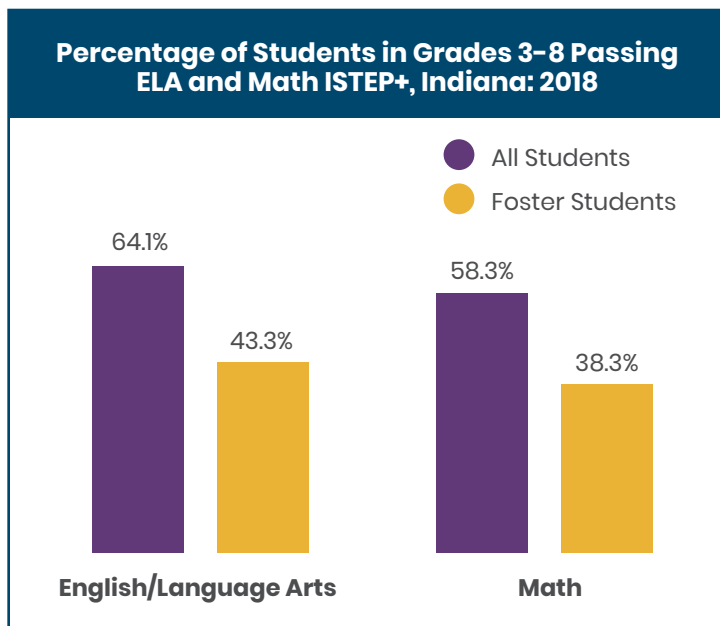
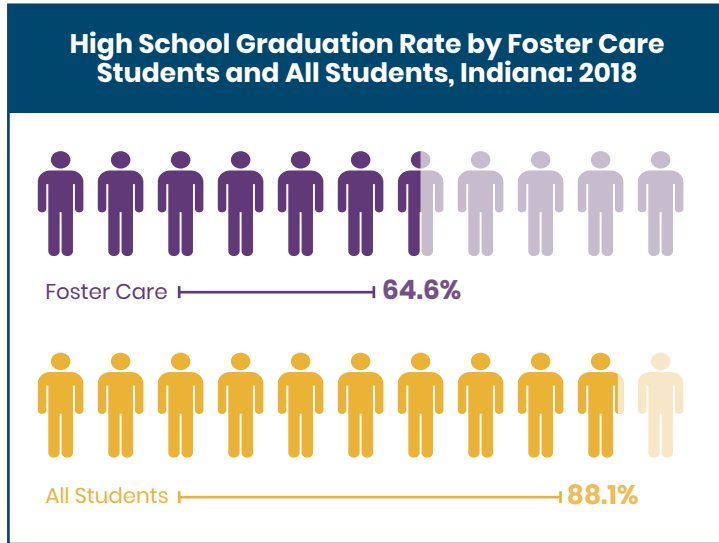*Source: Indiana Department of Education*

Graduation rates are lowest for students in foster care. In 2018, Indiana's federally reported graduation rate was 87%.[14] However, of the foster care students examined, only 64.6% graduated in 2018. This rate not only was lower than non-foster students (88.1%), but it was significantly lower than the graduation rate of 82.3% for youth who experience homelessness.[15]

Just as concerning, 20.9% of graduating foster students received a waiver from graduation requirements,

compared to 8.3% of all students. This indicates that these vulnerable youth, if they even graduate at all, are leaving high school unprepared for college or work. In addition, few foster students pursue and gain Academic or Technical Honors diplomas. Only 9% of foster students graduated with either distinction. By comparison, 39.5% of non-foster students graduated with one or both of these distinctions.
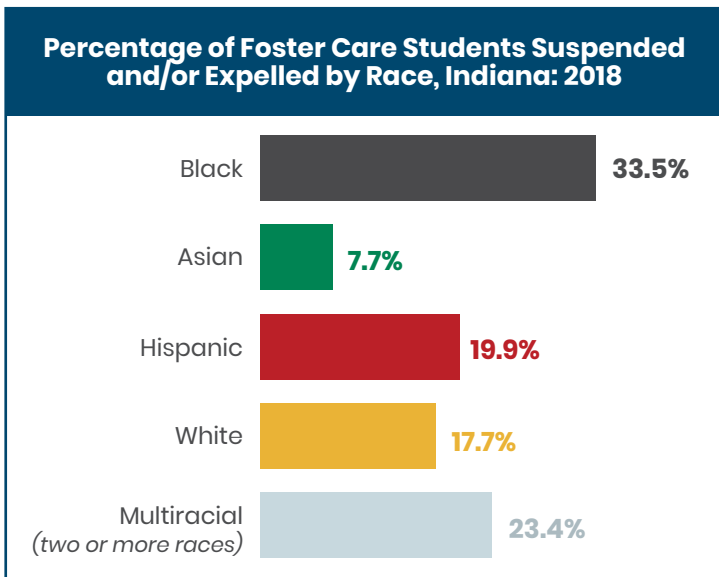
Foster care students are less likely to graduate than their peers.

High School Graduation Rate by Foster Care Students and All Students, Indiana: 2018

Foster Care |———————| **64.6%**

All Students |————————————| **88.1%**

Source: Indiana Department of Education

High percentages of suspensions and expulsions exist.

Foster youth are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their non-foster peers. Greater than one in five students in foster care (21%) were suspended in the year examined compared to 8.9% of their non-foster peers. Their expulsion rate was also nearly double that of the non-foster population. Black foster students, again, were at greatest risk for negative outcomes. Roughly half of reported suspensions and expulsions were students of color, including 33.5% of black foster children.[16]

Percentage of Foster Care Students Suspended and/or Expelled by Race, Indiana: 2018

Black — **33.5%**
Asian — **7.7%**
Hispanic — **19.9%**
White — **17.7%**
Multiracial *(two or more races)* — **23.4%**

Source: Indiana Department of Education

> **"… with the right resources, 5,290 more young people [foster youth nationally] would graduate from high school each year, leading to $2.17 billion in economic gains through increased lifetime income."** [17]

How can Indiana improve outcomes for foster youth?

Childhood trauma and family dislocation are barriers to the educational success of foster youth, but there are also systemic issues which can be addressed in the near term. By supporting collaboration between Indiana's dedicated social workers and educators, foster children can access educational opportunities that allow them to reach their full potential. However, doing so requires enabling coordination and providing additional resources for educators and case managers. Among changes that would help foster students succeed include:

- **Help navigating multiple school placements.** A Colorado analysis of foster students in high school found they changed public schools an average of 3.46 times.[18] The same analysis found that as the average number of school changes increased, the odds of earning a high school diploma decreased and the odds of earning an equivalency diploma (e.g., GED) or exiting without a credential increased. While high rates of school mobility can be reduced by following federal "school of origin" guidance, some school transitions are inevitable. Transitions can be better supported by ensuring transcripts and credits are transferred on time, course replication is minimized, and transportation issues are addressed.

- **Target recruitment, enrollment and support of foster youth in afterschool and out-of-school activities.** Foster care is often an isolating experience that can separate youth from their friends, teachers, and familiar adults. A coordinated, cross-sector effort to support foster youth participation in structured afterschool activities, out-of-school youth organizations, and faith communities would support academic achievement and overall well-being. These networks of supportive adults have the potential to be force multipliers for Indiana's case managers and teachers.

- **Improve coordination between schools and child welfare providers.** Consistent communication and collaboration between school district points of contact (as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act), school leaders, and child welfare case managers is essential to realize a new vision for foster student success. With additional resources and clear, jointly established goals for foster student performance, more foster students will graduate prepared for college and the workforce.

- **Expand tutoring and supplemental educational services targeted to foster students.** Tutoring and supplemental educational services can positively impact specific educational needs of foster students and provide critical time-on-task support. Ideally, schools would assess the academic needs of every student in foster care and provide focused remediation.

- **Implement foster student success plans with explicit goals to close the foster student achievement and opportunity gaps.** With support from the state, districts and schools with high numbers of students in foster care would develop plans focused on improving outcomes in known challenge areas such as early grade retention, suspension and expulsion, standardized test scores, graduation rates and school stability.

- **Develop deployable school and district-level models to support foster student success.** Indiana child welfare and education stakeholders could survey existing in-school and community-based educational programs across the country that are successfully supporting foster youth academic achievement. A model program and technical assistance could be employed in schools or districts serving the highest number of foster youth.

- **Provide schools with additional resources to meet the unique educational needs of foster children.** State lawmakers could consider an increase in per pupil funding for students in foster care to support schools in meeting the exceptional challenges of foster care involvement. Alternatively, the state could create a state-level fund specifically to support the development of school and district-level programs.

Foster Children Can Succeed

Responding to a statewide on-time graduation rate of 43%, Treehouse, a Seattle-based nonprofit, introduced new academic supports and behavioral interventions, including Education Specialists that met weekly with middle and high school students. Treehouse recently reported an extended graduation rate of 82% and an on-time graduation rate of 69%, which exceeded the overall state average.[19]

Learning from LA County

Los Angeles County is piloting two promising innovations to support foster students. First, they provide dedicated funding for a school transportation initiative for foster care students. Second, they created an "education passport" to facilitate data-sharing among schools, child welfare agencies, and probation departments, with a focus on foster students in high school transitioning into adulthood.[20]
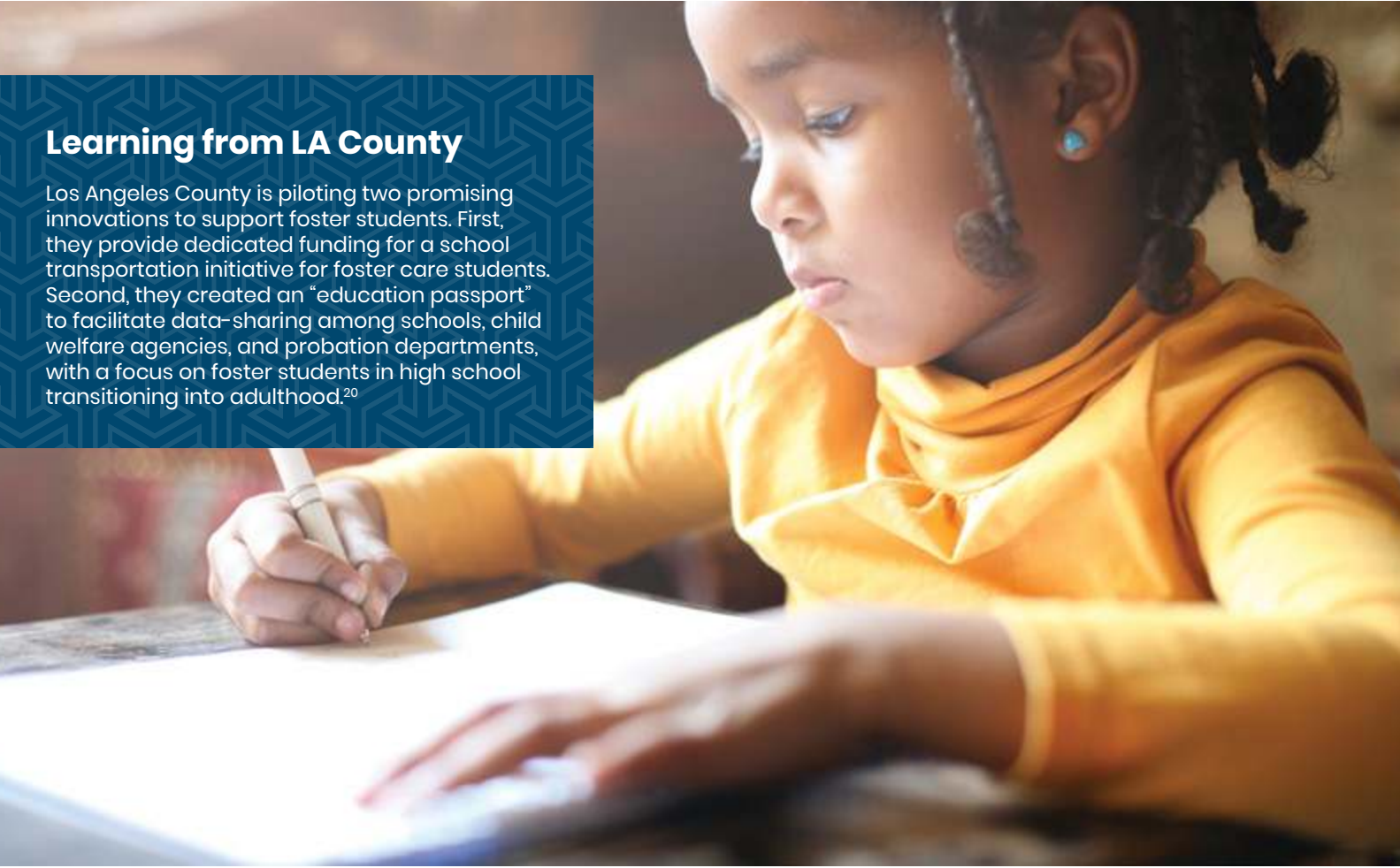
- **Aid the early success of foster students by prioritizing foster child enrollment in pre-K programs.** Prioritizing enrollment of foster children at four years of age in Indiana's pre-K programs would help to ensure they enter Kindergarten with a strong social and emotional foundation, along with the basic skills necessary to succeed. It also would assist with early identification and remediation of learning disabilities. As of 2015, foster children were a priority population for 16 state pre-K programs and Head Start.[21]

- **Expand and improve state agency data sharing to improve knowledge about foster students.** Improved data sharing between state agencies is necessary to get an accurate count of the number of foster care children in pre-K through 12th grade educational programs and to effectively assess their outcomes over time. Reporting could also be strengthened by using a 4-year cohort or on-time graduation rate, as well as disaggregating data by race, ethnicity, and foster care placement type.

- **Give foster students the best odds of success by ensuring access to high-performing schools.** According to the Indiana State Board of Education report, 40.2% of foster students examined were being educated in C, D or F schools compared to 29.8% of their non-foster peers. Only 18.5% went to A-rated schools compared to 30.8% among non-foster peers.

- **Better support and equip school district foster care points of contact.** By developing and requiring professional development and training opportunities, district foster care points of contact would be equipped to better meet the needs of foster youth with resource navigation, trauma-informed support, and cross-agency information sharing.

- **Support targeted dropout recovery programs for foster youth.** Dedicated efforts must be made to enroll the countless foster students who already have dropped out of school into drop-out recovery high schools. At a small cost, helping recently transitioned youth get back on track educationally will pay off in greater employability which in turn will support the success of the Indiana economy.

What resources are available?

Foster Success provides support to foster care youth at their most critical time – when they are transitioning out of the foster care system. Foster Success helps Indiana's 22,000 transitional age foster youth through education, financial support, and advocacy. *www.fostersuccess.org*

Child Advocates engages community volunteers to support children who are victims of child abuse by providing them a voice in court. The new Educational Liaison program is improving foster youth education outcomes by working with caregivers and school staff to build individualized educational plans. *www.childadvocates.net*

Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® is a national and state-based initiative that unites the people, public systems, and resources necessary to help young people transition from foster care to adulthood. *www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/*

Child Trends is the nation's leading research organization focused exclusively on improving the lies of children and youth, especially those that are most vulnerable. *www.childtrends.org*

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago focuses on child welfare, community capacity, and youth homelessness. Chapin Hall combines rigorous research methods to generate evidence, while providing implementation support to apply the evidence in the field. *www.chapinhall.org*

INDIANA YOUTH INSTITUTE RESOURCES

www.iyi.org

The **Indiana KIDS COUNT® Data Book** is the premier data resource on Hoosier youth. Developed with you in mind, it provides an in-depth profile on child well-being across the four key areas of Family and Community, Health, Economic Well-Being and Education.

Submit a **Custom Data Request.** Curious about a youth issue? Do you need data for a grant application, report or presentation? We are here to help! We work with you to get the data and research you need.

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