



## FOSTER CARE TO COLLEGE MENTORING PROGRAM: PRELIMINARY REPORT

### INTRODUCTION

This report presents preliminary information on the implementation of the Foster Care to College (FCTC) mentoring program in Washington State. The Children’s Administration (CA) is considering incorporating the project into its operating budget, and they requested that the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) provide a preliminary report on the FCTC mentoring program. The report relies on data from the first 18 months of the program and conversations with staff from the four mentoring programs, two program managers at CA, and two staff at Treehouse designated to support the FCTC mentoring program, as well as others. This report: (1) reviews the background of the program; (2) describes the program; (3) discusses implementation issues experienced in the first 18 months of the program; and (4) suggests potential program modifications.

### BACKGROUND

Several new initiatives designed to increase the number of foster youth who enroll in postsecondary education were implemented in Washington State during the early years of this decade. The Governors’ Scholarship for Foster Youth was established by Governor Locke in 2001 to help foster youth enroll in and complete college. The first fundraiser was organized in the fall of 2001 and the first scholarships were awarded in the spring of 2002. Treehouse, a private agency in King County dedicated to helping youth in foster care, started the Coaching to College (CTC) mentoring program in 2000. CTC provides foster youth with help to pursue their postsecondary education and career plans; it grew from one volunteer serving 10 youth in 2000 to one full-time staff person and 67 volunteers serving 238 youth in 2003.

During the same period, the College Success Foundation (formerly known as the Washington Education Foundation) organized annual forums to bring together stakeholders from public and private agencies to discuss ways to support youth in foster care. A subcommittee focused on strategies to

### Summary

This report presents information on the first 18 months of the Foster Care to College (FCTC) mentoring program in Washington State. This pilot program is modeled on the mentoring program for foster youth run by Treehouse in King County. It expands the availability of education-focused mentoring to foster youth in all regions of the state. The FCTC mentoring program is funded by grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates and Stuart Foundations and funds from Department of Social and Health Services Children’s Administration.

**Findings.** The total number of youth referred, served, and matched in the program is lower than projected. Although not meeting the goal of 75 matches in year one, each DSHS Region with an established mentoring program met the goal of matching 50 new youth per year in the most recent twelve months. About 80 percent of youth in the program ever matched to a mentor were still actively matched as of March 31, 2008. Over the course of the 18-month program, the characteristics of enrolled youth and their mentors have shifted from the original contract requirements. The report suggests ways the program could be modified to facilitate referrals, increase access to the program, and improve the evaluation of program effectiveness.

improve foster youths’ educational success and college enrollment. An outgrowth of these and other activities was the formation of the Foster Care to College Partnership and a proposal in October 2004 to solicit private and public monies for programs to encourage educational attainment for these youth. The six agencies involved in the Partnership are as follows:

- Children’s Administration;
- Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction;
- Higher Education Coordinating Board;
- Casey Family Programs;
- Treehouse; and
- College Success Foundation.

The 2004 proposal developed by the FCTC Partnership included expanding the availability of education-focused mentoring to foster youth outside of King County. It is modeled on Treehouse's CTC program which serves youth in King County. Grant applications were submitted and, in December 2005, the Bill and Melinda Gates (Gates) Foundation awarded \$600,000 to support a three-year mentoring program. CA provided funds to hire staff to support the new program.

Based on the Gates Foundation grant and CA support, members of the Foster Care to College Partnership met with potential contractors in the spring of 2006. A sub-committee comprised of FCTC partner members agreed that the solicitation to establish the new mentoring program should be restricted to agencies already providing Independent or Transitional Living services for foster youth. The Independent Living (IL) program is designed to help adolescents in foster care prepare for living on their own. A companion program, called Transitional Living (TL), is available for youth who have aged out of foster care. IL and TL services are offered through classes, workshops, and one-on-one meetings. The IL/TL programs offer some educational services, including seminars and workshops on career counseling, college or vocational school applications, and financial aid. The pilot FCTC mentoring program is designed to provide additional services in support of education and career goals. The FCTC Partnership chose to site the new mentoring program at IL/TL agencies so the two programs could coordinate the educational supports they offer foster youth and because of the knowledge that IL/TL agencies have with this population.

Issues raised at the spring 2006 meetings with prospective contractors were summarized in a memo entitled "Potential Feasibility Barriers and Problem Solving Strategies."<sup>1</sup> Concern focused on the difficulty of meeting the number of youth-mentor matches specified in the Gates grant given the limited number of foster youth on track to graduate from high school and wanting to go to college and the amount of work necessary to establish and support each match. The goals of 75 matches in year one and 50 additional matches in years two and three were seen as challenging. The document noted that Treehouse's CTC program had about three staff supporting the approximately 40 new youth enrolled each year, whereas each FCTC contractor was expected to meet higher enrollment

goals with one full-time employee. As reported in the document, the FCTC Partnership acknowledged that it might be hard to meet the proposed number of mentor matches set out in the grant, but concluded that those expectations could not be changed.

The Children's Administration's solicitation specified that up to five contracts would be awarded, one in each Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) region not served by Treehouse's CTC program (Region 4). Bidders were asked to address how they would serve the counties in their region and if they would deviate from the CTC mentoring model. Contracts in up to three regions were to be awarded in the first solicitation round. Contractors from four DSHS regions responded to the August 2006 solicitation and contracts were awarded in October 2006 to Regions 2, 5, and 6. A fourth contract to Region 3 was awarded in May 2007. Efforts to recruit a provider to serve youth in Region 1 were ultimately successful in March 2008. The program is funded with monies from the Gates and Stuart Foundations as well as funds from CA. The cost of the program (including CA administrative costs) is \$430,000 per year. During calendar year 2007, 261 youth were served by the mentoring program at an estimated cost of \$1,648 per youth.<sup>2</sup>

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Research on the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs is limited. The key study on the effectiveness of mentoring programs remains the 1995 evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) program.<sup>3</sup> The BBBS mentoring programs use a standardized protocol for pairing volunteer adult mentors with youth from single-parent households that includes screening and training of volunteers, supervision of matches, and requirements around frequency of contact. An assessment of the cost-effectiveness of the BBBS program concluded that benefits exceeded costs by a significant amount only if no costs were associated with

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<sup>1</sup> E-mailed document received March 12, 2008 from CA program manager Marianne Ozmun.

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<sup>2</sup> During calendar year 2007, 1,601 youth were served through either the Independent or Transitional Living programs in Washington State. Ten percent of the \$2.6 million Washington State Chafee Allocation goes to Tribes, the remaining \$2.34 million supports the IL and TL programs. The average cost per youth served through IL or TL services—including costs for case management, direct payments to youth for such needs as housing and transportation, and administrative overhead—is \$1,462.

<sup>3</sup> J. Tierney & J. Grossman. (1995) *Making a difference: An impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures reissue in 2000.

the time contributed by the volunteer mentors.<sup>4</sup> Despite the popularity of mentoring programs for abused or foster youth, research on their effectiveness is lacking.<sup>5</sup>

The Children’s Administration’s Foster Care to College mentoring program is modeled on Treehouse’s CTC program. A description of the CTC program was included in the FCTC mentoring program solicitation and applicants were asked to address how their program might deviate from CTC. As presented in the solicitation, the CTC program focuses on using community volunteers who are trained to help foster youth define and realize their educational goals. Youth who enroll in the program, as described in the solicitation, are served by: (1) a one-on-one meeting with CTC staff to identify educational goals; (2) matching to a community volunteer; (3) regular meetings with the community volunteer to work toward educational goals; and (4) ongoing support from CTC staff.

The statement of work included in the October 2006 contracts laid out specific expectations regarding the number of youth to be served, eligibility requirements for youth, and expectations for mentors. Each contractor was to establish 75 youth-mentor matches in the first year followed by an additional 50 in each of the following two years for a total of 175 youth-mentor matches over the life of the contract.

In year one of the program, contract terms specified that youth eligible for the program had to be:

- between 16 and 21 and either currently in foster care or reached 18 while in foster care;
- eligible for Independent or Transitional Living services;
- enrolled in high school or a GED program at the time of application to the mentoring program;
- interested in pursuing postsecondary education; and
- approved by a social worker to participate in the program.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> S. Aos, R. Lieb, J. Mayfield, M. Miller, & A. Pennucci. (2004) *Benefits and costs of prevention and early intervention programs for youth*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. Document number 04-07-3901.

<sup>5</sup> P. Britner, F. Balacar, E. Blechman, L. Blinn-Pike, & S. Larose. (2006) Mentoring special youth populations. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 34(6): 747-763.

<sup>6</sup> In year two the program’s starting age was lowered to 14 and youth could either be enrolled in high school or a GED

In year one of the program, volunteer mentors were expected to:

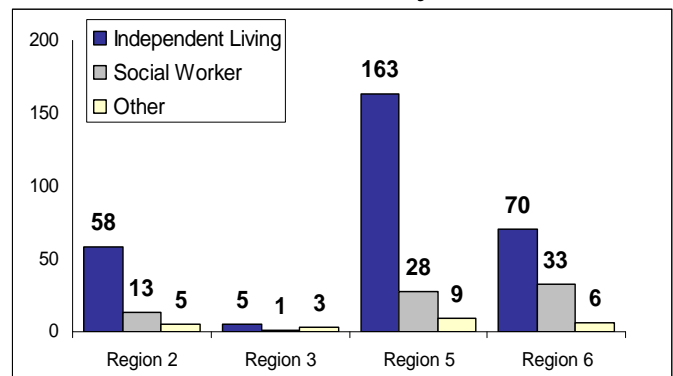
- have completed a postsecondary program similar to that desired by the youth;
- have the ability and commitment to support, listen to, motivate, and encourage youth;
- pass a criminal background check; and
- make a one-year commitment to the match.<sup>7</sup>

## PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

### *How are youth recruited into the program?*

The first step to establishing the FCTC mentoring program was to recruit interested youth. The FCTC Partnership anticipated that large numbers of youth would be interested in and qualify for the program, but the first months resulted in fewer referrals than expected. Programs varied in what they counted as a referral during the initial start-up period, with the provider in Region 5 initially getting the names of almost all youth referred for IL services. Exhibit 1 shows the number of referrals in the first ten months of the program. The program in Region 3 started in May 2007 and only had nine referrals through July 2007 due to staffing turnover.

**Exhibit 1**  
**Referral Source by Region for the First Ten Months (“Year One”)**  
**October 2006 – July 2007**



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For all regions, IL providers were the most frequent source for referrals and social workers were the next most frequent source. Approval from a social worker is required before a youth can be enrolled in the program and matched to a mentor. Direct referrals from social

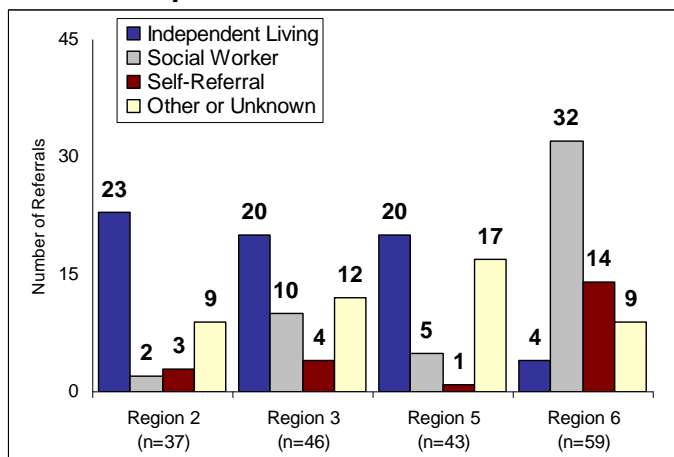
program or express a desire to pursue a postsecondary education.

<sup>7</sup> Raised to eighteen months in year 2.

workers have the advantage of not requiring an additional step before the youth can be enrolled.

New software to support the FCTC program was obtained in August 2007. The software, Efforts to Outcomes (ETO), is a web-based case management system from Social Solutions used by many non-profits. The screens developed for the new FCTC database helped standardize the referral process. Referrals entered into the new ETO database through March 2008 are displayed in Exhibit 2.

**Exhibit 2**  
**Referral Source by Region for Seven Months**  
**September 2007–March 2008**



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Compared with the earlier time period displayed in Exhibit 1, the number of referrals is more uniform across DSHS regions. With one exception, regions continue to receive more referrals from IL providers than from any other source. However, only in Region 2 does the contractor continue to get over half of its referrals from IL providers. Contractors in Regions 2, 3, and 5 noted difficulties in getting both referrals and approvals from social workers for youths' participation in the mentoring program despite efforts by providers to build relationships with local CA offices and social workers. The provider in Region 6, on the other hand, received over half its referrals from social workers. The provider in Region 6 also received more referrals than the providers in other regions.

Several contractors for the FCTC program expressed a belief that it would be beneficial for IL providers and social workers to refer more youth to the mentoring program. These contractors wanted the opportunity to explore with more youth whether they might be interested in the mentoring program. They expressed their opinion that some IL providers and social workers did not understand the important support the FCTC program could provide for the adolescents on their caseload.

**What are the characteristics of youth served by the program?**

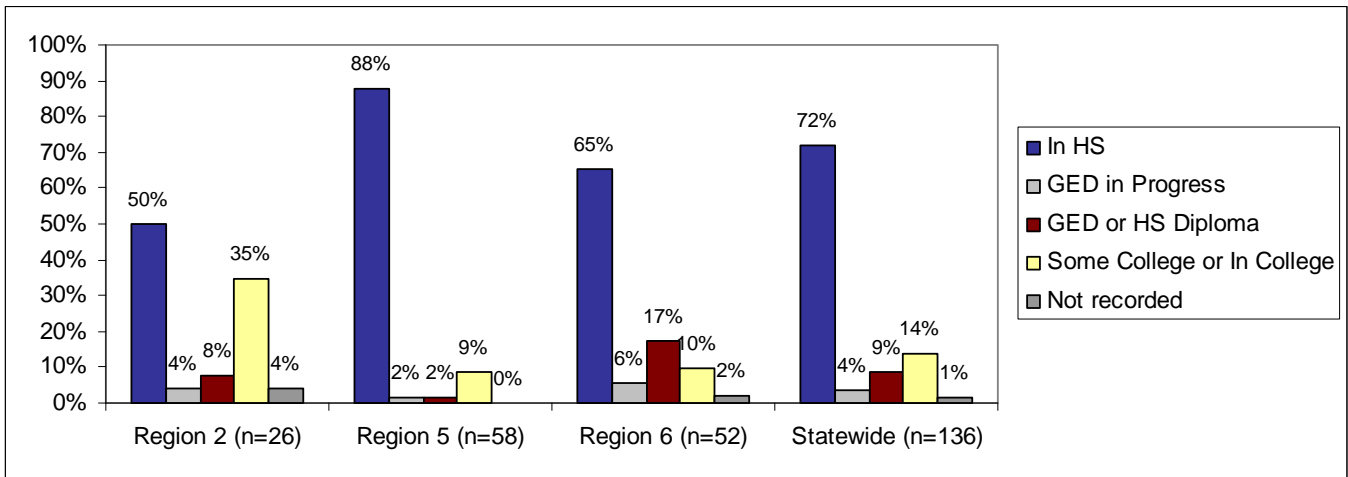
As noted earlier, the Children's Administration's FCTC contract for year one required that youth enrolled in the program be in high school or a GED program and desire to pursue a postsecondary education. Exhibit 3 displays information on the educational status of youth served in year one of the program. Since no youth were enrolled in Region 3 by July 31, 2007, that region is not presented in Exhibit 3.

Overall, 76 percent of youth served in year one met the year one eligibility requirements that youth be enrolled in a high school or GED program. Most of the enrolled youth not meeting the eligibility requirements were either in college or had some college experience. As shown in Exhibit 3, the proportion of youth meeting the program requirements varied from a low of 54 percent in Region 2 to a high of 90 percent in Region 5.

Discussions with the Gates foundation led to a broadening of the eligibility requirements for youth in year two. Youth already in college, as well as youth no longer in high school or a GED program, were eligible to enroll in the program. For youth in high school or working on their GED, an expressed desire to pursue a post-secondary education was no longer a requirement. Contractors spoke of the benefits of serving youth interested in improving their educational and career prospects. Their descriptions of successful mentor-mentee relationships include the transformation of a youth doing poorly in school or lacking in self-esteem to a youth expecting to graduate from high school and perhaps starting to think about going to college.

Treehouse's Coaching to College program, the model upon which the FCTC program is based, has undergone a similar change. Treehouse will now serve youth with high levels of high school credit deficiencies whose educational goal may be high school graduation followed by a remedial or vocational program rather than college. They see the Coaching to College program as helping students be more successful in their educational and career pursuits, whatever they might be.

**Exhibit 3**  
**Educational Status at Time of Enrollment by Region for the First Ten Months (“Year One”),**  
**October 2006–July 2007**



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**How are youth matched to mentors?**

After youth are referred to the mentoring program, FCTC staff contact the youth to discuss his or her educational plans, interest in having a mentor, and desire to enroll in the program. The number of contacts between the staff and youth and the method of contact (phone or in-person) varies, but all contractors spend time interviewing referred youth before matching them to a mentor. Included in the interview with the youth is an exploration of whether the youth already has supportive adults (so-called “natural mentors”) who might be willing to take on educational mentoring tasks. As described by the contractors, some youth already have several natural mentors and some are interested in establishing a relationship with someone new. For all contractors, the youth’s needs and interests shape the youth-to-mentor match process.

Volunteer mentors are expected to have completed a postsecondary program comparable to one desired by the youth. In some areas of the state, particularly in remote locations, that criterion is difficult to meet. Contractors spoke of accepting any postsecondary experience as sufficient to qualify an individual to be a mentor. One contractor noted a situation where she matched a youth to a person lacking postsecondary experience because of the importance of other factors. The use of mentors without postsecondary experience is in-line with the practice at Treehouse. While Treehouse has an abundance of potential mentors with postsecondary degrees, they do not require postsecondary experience for their volunteer mentors. Instead, they include it along with other criteria—such as occupation, ethnicity, sex, and physical location—in matching mentors to mentees.

The contractor in Region 2 noted more difficulty in recruiting mentors than did contractors in other regions, particularly mentors with postsecondary experience. As a result, this contractor developed relationships with staff at the local community college. Some community college staff have signed on as FCTC mentors for individual youth. Many foster youth receive one-on-one services from community college staff regarding educational issues. The mentoring program has developed the term “go-to” mentors to refer to individuals available to provide one-on-one educational counseling to foster youth.

The time commitment expectation for mentors has been handled slightly differently in various regions. When the program started, it was expected that mentors would make a one-year commitment to the program. That requirement led one contractor in year one to not consider community college students as potential mentors because they could not make the necessary time commitment. Another contractor used community college students successfully for youth for whom it was believed a one-year commitment was not necessary. Contractors noted that school counselors and teachers have expressed concern that they may not meet the time qualification for being a mentor because they are unwilling to maintain the mentoring relationship in the summer.

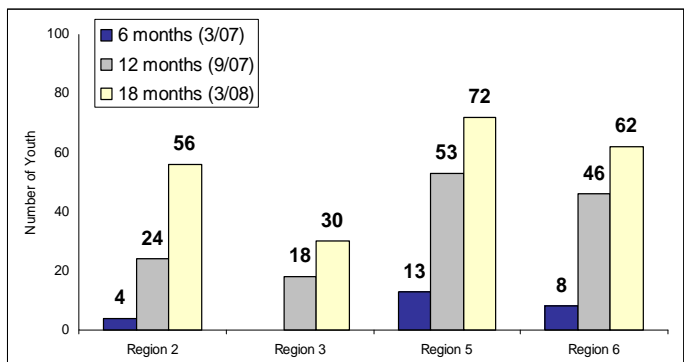
Currently, mentors’ demographic and educational backgrounds are not collected in the ETO database. Also unknown is the relationship of mentors to the youth they help, and the proportion who mentor foster youth as part of their job.

### How many youth are matched to mentors?

The focus in the first 18 months of the mentoring program has been on establishing mentor-mentee matches, and each region has used different strategies to try to reach the targets set out in the original contracts. Contractors were expected to match 75 youth in the first year of the contract. As shown in Exhibit 4, none of the contractors reached that goal in the first 18 months of the program. The contract also called for 50 additional matches in each of the subsequent two years. The three programs that received contracts in October 2006 (Regions 2, 5, and 6) added between 52 and 59 matches during the 12 months—April 2007 to March 2008.

**Exhibit 4**

### Cumulative Number of Youth Matched to Mentors

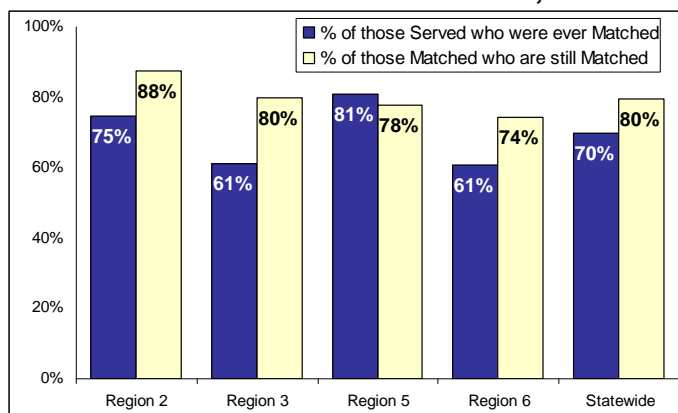


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Although the number of matches programs made in the first 18 months was lower than projected, the matches that were made appear to last. As shown in Exhibit 5, 80 percent of youth ever matched to a mentor were still actively matched as of March 31, 2008. The proportions of youth whose matches persist are similar in all regions. Exhibit 5 also displays the proportion of youth served in the mentoring program who were matched to a mentor. A lower percentage of youth enrolled in the program were matched in Regions 3 and 6 than in Regions 2 and 5.

**Exhibit 5**

### Percentage of Youth Served Who Were Matched and the Percentage of Those Ever Matched With an Active Match on March 31, 2008



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### How are youth not matched to a mentor being served?

The Foster Care to College program is focused on providing services through one-on-one mentoring relationships. Not every youth is matched with a mentor, and some youths may want educational or career services beyond those provided by the IL or TL program but not be interested in a one-on-one mentoring relationship, or a mentor may not be available. Before youths are matched to mentors, they are offered services and support. They are placed in the category of “served” but not “matched.” All youth, whether matched to a mentor or not, may receive one-on-one support from program staff or attend various meetings and workshops. The program does not capture information on services that youth receive outside the mentoring relationship, but all contractors serve youth who are not matched to a mentor.

Treehouse’s Coaching to College program also serves youth who are not matched to a mentor. Recent figures from CTC indicate that about half the youth they serve are not matched to a mentor. Treehouse has found that some youth may be interested in receiving help in specific areas but not want a mentor. All youth in CTC can get direct support from program staff and referrals to other individuals with specific knowledge or strengths regardless of their interest in being matched to a volunteer mentor.

**How does the program operate in rural areas and locations distant from Foster Care to College staff?**

The challenge in remote areas of the state is that all three components of the system—youth, mentors, and FCTC staff—are distant from one another. This distance makes it difficult to recruit youth and mentors, train mentors, match youth to mentors, and support the mentor relationship. Typically, much of the initial contact between FCTC program staff and both mentors and youth is conducted in person. Face-to-face meetings are difficult when the mentors, youth, and FCTC staff are dispersed over a large geographical area. In some cases, contractors meet several times with the youth and perhaps with the youth and the school counselor before attempting to match the youth to a mentor. Much of the mentor training, particularly in more remote areas, is conducted one-on-one. This training includes an orientation to the program, a formal interview, and training specific to the program ranging from a minimum of one hour for someone such as a school counselor to two or three hours for most mentors. Region 6 has developed strategies for supporting the program in remote locations through volunteers, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and Americorp volunteers. Other contractors have a part-time employee in a second location in order to have a local presence in another area of the region.

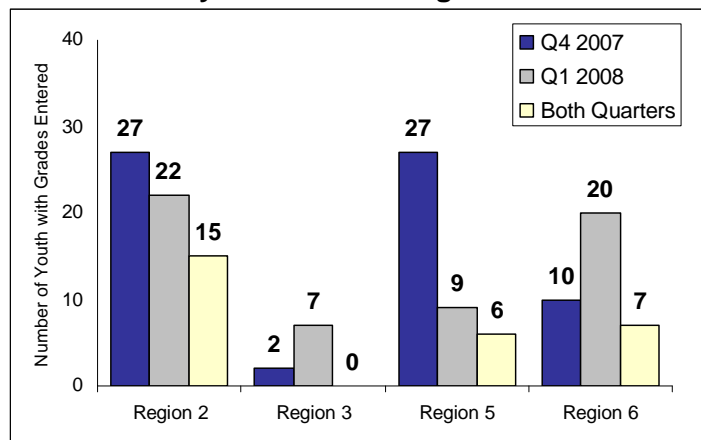
**Has the program been successful to date?**

The contract lists performance measures expected to be impacted by the mentoring program, including high school grade point averages, enrollment in college preparatory courses, high school graduation, and enrollment and persistence in college. It is early to report on longer-term outcomes such as persistence in college. After 18 months, data on shorter-term outcomes such as changes in grades or enrollment in college preparatory courses should be available. However, data collection on these performance measures did not start until the adoption of the new ETO software in the fall of 2007.

Mentors were expected to record information on key performance measures on a quarterly basis starting in December 2007. Exhibit 6 displays how often mentors reported their mentee’s course grades in the fourth quarter of 2007 and the first quarter of 2008. To track changes in a youth’s grades, data must be entered in both quarters. Exhibit 6 shows that these data were not consistently entered in the first two quarters of data collection. More complete data are needed so that the impact of the program on outcomes such as grades can be assessed.

While performance measures are not available, all the contractors described the mentoring program as making a significant impact on the educational trajectory of youth involved in the program. The contractor in Region 2 described a program established at Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC) to support foster youth enrolled in the community college. Several staff at YVCC provide individual mentoring through the FCTC program, and they have also developed a monthly program to support youth enrolled at the college. The contractor in Region 2 reported that, although four or five foster youth typically enroll in the local community college each year, in years past only one continued to the second year. Five of the six youths enrolled in the fall of 2007 were still enrolled in the spring of 2008, and five students who dropped out in previous years had re-enrolled by the spring of 2008.

**Exhibit 6**  
**Number of Youth With Course Grades Entered by Quarter and Region**



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## SUGGESTIONS FOR PROGRAM MODIFICATION

This report was requested by the Foster Care to College Partnership and funded by the Children's Administration to help in discussions of whether CA should incorporate the mentoring program into its operational budget and, if so, how the program might be altered. From talking with the contractors, it is clear there were significant start-up issues. The first 18 months have involved program modifications and experimentation on how to recruit youths and mentors, ways to support youth outside the mentor relationship, and how to serve youth in remote locations. While data are not available to assess the impact of the program on key performance outcomes, contractors report the program has had a significant impact on many of the youth they have served.

Based on experiences from the first 18 months of the program, the following modifications could be considered to facilitate referrals, expand access, and improve the ability to assess the effectiveness of the mentoring program:

To facilitate referrals to the mentoring program:

- The relationship between IL and FCTC could be re-evaluated with an eye toward better coordination of the two programs' activities to meet the educational needs of foster youth.

- Strategies could be explored to improve the partnership between the FCTC program and both CA offices and individual social workers.

To increase access to the mentoring program:

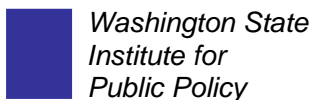
- Eligibility rules for both youth and mentors could be reviewed to ensure uniformity of practice and flexibility in determining eligibility for both youth and mentors.
- Program description and outreach materials could be revised to reflect any changes in the goals of the program, eligibility requirements for youth or mentors, and range of services offered.

To improve the evaluation of program effectiveness:

- A limited set of key outcome measures that mentors can reliably report could be collected on all matched youth.
- Mentor characteristics such as mentor's educational background, relationship to mentee, and whether they are mentoring as part of their job could be collected by program staff at the time that the mentor-mentee match is established.

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