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EDUCATIONAL ADVOCATES FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN WASHINGTON STATE: PROGRAM IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Compared to their peers, students in foster care are more likely to change schools, repeat a grade level, receive special education services and drop out before competing high school. The problems faced by foster students may stem from a history of maltreatment or abuse, higher rates of learning disabilities, or difficulty forming connections in school. These educational problems may be exacerbated if foster students move from school to school as a result of placement changes, lack of services, or disciplinary actions.

In 2006, the Washington State Legislature established a statewide Educational Advocacy program, providing information and referral services, consultation, and direct advocacy for the purpose of keeping foster youth engaged in school and progressing toward graduation. Trained Educational Advocates usually work with foster youth for one or two school years and may be involved with:

- assisting students with accessing education support and special education services;
- working to keep students in the same school or improve school transitions;
- mediating disciplinary matters to keep students in the proper school setting;
- helping students make up high school credits or find suitable alternative programs; and
- training caregivers, social workers, and students on educational rights and responsibilities.

This report examines the effect of these advocacy efforts on academic achievement, reducing unexcused absences, and decreasing school mobility.

Summary

Educational Advocates work with schools, social workers, foster families and students to help youth in foster care succeed in school. Advocates were initially available to assist foster students in King County. In 2006, the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) started a statewide Educational Advocacy program for foster youth in need of educational assistance.

The 2011 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to "examine the child welfare and educational characteristics and outcomes for foster youth who are served by educational advocates." This report includes the results of the evaluation.

Between 2006 and 2011, over 3,500 foster students were served by Educational Advocates in Washington State. Based on a matched comparison group of similar foster students, we found that students participating in the program had fewer unexcused absences and less frequent school moves following a referral. We did not find any differences in grade point averages or graduation rates between the two groups, although a longer time period may be necessary to evaluate these outcomes.

Suggested citation: Burley, M. (2012). *Educational advocates for foster youth in Washington State: Program impacts and outcomes* (Document No. 12-11-3902). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON EDUCATION AND FOSTER CARE

Previous research conducted by the Institute found that in Washington State, 44% of foster students graduated from school on-time (within four years), compared to 73% of non-foster students.[1] The rate for meeting standards on math and reading assessments was twice as high for non-foster youth, compared to students in foster care (52% versus 21%).[2] In addition, students in foster care have higher rates of grade retention, enrollment in special education services, and school mobility.[3]

The educational gap observed for foster youth in Washington State is consistent with findings from studies in other U.S. jurisdictions.[4] One consistent challenge identified for foster youth is their frequency of school movement. In a longitudinal study of foster youth in the Midwest, 34% of foster students reported changing schools five or more times while in care.[5] A growing body of research has quantified the effects of school mobility on student outcomes. Obradović (2009) notes that, "Among socioeconomically disadvantaged children, compelling data suggest that homeless and highly mobile children fall at the high end along a continuum of risk for academic problems."[6] In a review of 16 studies (from 1990-2008), Reynolds (2009) found that student mobility was significantly associated with lower achievement and more school dropouts in 13 of these studies. Furthermore, frequent mobility (three or more moves) was associated with a lag in reading and math scores equivalent to four months when compared to non-mobile students.[7] Evidence also suggests that among older adolescents in foster care, placement changes leading to school disruptions may increase the likelihood of dropping out.[8]

FEDERAL LEGISLATION – FOSTERING CONNECTIONS

In October 2008, the federal "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act"[9] was passed. This law included a number of new child welfare reforms; for example, the law increased financial support for kinship care placements, extended services for foster youth transitioning to adulthood, increased oversight and coordination of health care services, offered adoption incentives and assistance, and placed a greater emphasis on school stability in foster care placement decision-making.[10]

The school stability guidelines of the Fostering Connections Act have three primary components. First, child welfare agencies must ensure that foster children are enrolled in school full-time. Second, states are required to take into account a child's current school setting when making foster care placements. Unless it is deemed in the best interest of the child, a foster placement should not result in a school change. Finally, the state's allowable use of

[1] Burley, M. (2010). *High school graduation and dropout trends for Washington State foster youth (2005–2009)*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 10-10-3901.
[2] Burley, M. (2010). *How are the experiences of foster youth in Washington State related to WASL assessments? 2008 results.* Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 10-04-3902.
[3] Burley, M. (2008). *Educational attainment of foster children: 2006 results.* Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 08-03-3901.
[4] National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. (2011). *Education is the lifeline for youth in foster care*. Retrieved June 21, 2012 from http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/EducationalOutcomesFactSheet.pdf
[5] Courtney, M. E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/CS_97.pdf
[6] Obradović, J. (2009). Academic achievement of homeless and highly mobile children in an urban school district: Longitudinal evidence on risk, growth, and resilience. *Development and Psychopathology*, *21*(2), 493-518.
[7] Reynolds, A. J., Chen, C., & Herbers, J. (2009). *School mobility and educational success: A research synthesis and evidence on prevention*. Paper for a workshop on mobility, National Research Council, Washington, DC. Retrieved from www.bocyf.org/children_who_move_reynolds_paper.pdf
[8] Elze, D., Auslander, W., & Stiffman, A. (2005). Educational Needs of Youth in Foster Care, p 185, in Mallon, G. P., & Hess, P. M. C. (2005). Child welfare for the twenty-first century: A handbook of practices, policies, and programs. New York: Columbia University Press.
[9] H.R. 6893–110th Congress: Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. (2008). In GovTrack.us (database of federal legislation). Retrieved from http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hr6893
[10] Ibid.

federal foster care maintenance payments was expanded to include the cost of transportation so that a child could remain in the school he or she was attending prior to a foster care placement.[11]

The broad scale federal changes implemented in 2008 led to increased attention around the issue of educational outcomes for foster youth. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, between 2009 and 2010, 35 states enacted legislation related to the provisions of the Fostering Connections Act.[12] While Washington State modified and added provisions related to the education of foster youth during this time, in many ways, similar reforms began much earlier in this state. The next section will discuss the history of state reforms in greater detail.[13]

EDUCATION RELATED CHANGES FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN WASHINGTON STATE

Over the last 10 years, the Washington State legislature has enacted a number of policies designed to improve the educational stability of youth in foster care. In 2003, policy changes were passed affirming that, when in the best interest of the child, foster youth should remain in their school of origin at the time of entering care.[14] The legislature also directed officials in each DSHS region to develop written protocols with local school districts in order to "maximize the educational continuity and achievement for foster children."[15]

[11] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2010). Program Instruction on the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, Comprehensive Guidance. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/ files/cb/pi1011.pdf

[12] National Conference of State Legislatures. (2010) Fostering Connections Act: 2010 Legislation (summary of enacted state legislation). Retrieved June 21, 2012 from www.ncsl.org/issues-research/human-services/fostering-connections-act-2010-legislation.aspx.

[13] Schutte, C. (2010). Spurred by new federal law, CA and other states help improve outcomes for foster youth. *Youth Law News, 29*(3). Retrieved June 21, 2012, from www.youthlaw.org/ publications/yln/2010/july_sept_2010/spurred_by_a_new_federal_law_ca_and_other_states_look_at_helping_youth_by_extending_care_to_age_21/

[14] RCW 74.13.550

[15] RCW 74.13.560; see http://www.k12.wa.us/FosterCare/ LocalAgreements.aspx for example agreement.

In 2005, the Legislature adopted the statewide Educational Advocacy program to support the educational needs of foster students in Washington State schools.[16] The program was modeled after an advocacy program in King County operated by Treehouse, a non-profit organization serving foster youth.[17] When this program was implemented statewide, Treehouse received a contract to hire, train and oversee Educational Advocates.

The 2011 Legislature directed the Institute to "examine the child welfare and educational characteristics for foster youth who are served by educational advocates." This report discusses the background of all foster students in the state and highlights the characteristics of those referred to Educational Advocates. We also compare outcomes of students referred to the program with similar youth in foster care to determine how advocacy is related to student achievement, mobility and graduation.

WASHINGTON STATE EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY – PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Referrals to the statewide Educational Advocacy program began in February 2006. Any student in grade K–12 who is receiving services from DSHS Children's Administration may be referred to the program by a social worker. Intakes are reviewed and approved by Treehouse program staff. In 2008, program administrators decided to give a higher priority to youth in out-of-home (foster) care. After this change, approximately 600 students were referred to the program every year (Exhibit 1, next page). During the study period (2006-2011), a total of 3,529 foster students received direct advocacy services, and were involved with an advocate for an average of 133 days per student.

[16] Fiscal matters, 2005 Wash. Sess. Laws 2509 § 202 (7).

[17] See www.treehouse4kids.org/whatwedo/educational_advocacy for more information.

Exhibit 1
Number of Students With Educational Advocates
2006–2010 School Years

School Year	Intakes	Actively Enrolled	Average Days Enrolled
2006–07	967	967	114
2007–08	770	1,287	129
2008–09	605	1,088	137
2009–10	565	903	129
2010–11	622	973	157
Total	**3,529**		**133**

For the purposes of determining program impact, we needed to analyze information from a student's school enrollment and foster care records.[18] However, this information was not always available for all students receiving advocacy services. In addition, not all students had the same level of detail for the characteristics included in this report. A student's grade point average is not recorded in primary grades, for example. Other data, such as unexcused absences, was only recorded in the last two years of the study period. When appropriate, we note the reasons that the total number of students included in reported results may vary.

This evaluation of Washington's Educational Advocacy program includes the following sections:

I. Characteristics and educational difficulties of program participants;

II. Level and type of advocacy services provided;

III. Selection of appropriate comparison group; and

IV. Educational outcomes of program participants relative to comparison group.

Additional background information and detail about this program can be found in previous Institute reports.[19,20]

[18] Foster care records are matched to school enrollment records under a data sharing agreement between the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and DSHS Children's Administration. Personally identifiable information are removed from these records in accordance with federal and state guidelines. The de-identified research dataset was made available to the Institute under an agreement with originating agencies.

[19] Pennucci, A. (2010). *Education advocacy for foster youth in Washington State.* Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 10-04-3901.

[20] Burley, M. (2011). *Educational advocates for foster youth in Washington State: Program background and trends* (Document No. 11-12-3903). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

I. CHARACTERISTICS AND EDUCATIONAL DIFFICULTIES OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Examining the key characteristics of program participants provides important background regarding the study approach and outcomes reported in this evaluation. For example, as Exhibit 2 indicates, nearly half (47%) of program participants were elementary students. School mobility may be a more relevant issue for these students, since there are a larger number of elementary schools compared to high schools. For older students, discipline and graduation credits may be a greater focus for advocates.

Approximately 10% of the student population in Washington State has a reported behavioral, learning or health disability. For students in foster care, the percentage with a reported disability ranges between 30 and 40%.[21] Among the program participants in this study, 38% had a reported disability. The level of disability is important to consider when evaluating results related to academic achievement and graduation. It also points to the extent to which advocates must review and monitor the appropriate provision of special education services.

Exhibit 2
Characteristics of Educational Advocacy Program Participants

Category	Students	Percent
Sex		
Male	1,939	56.7%
Female	1,481	43.3%
DSHS Region*		
Region 1	431	12.6%
Region 2	493	14.4%
Region 3	578	16.9%
Region 4	816	23.9%
Region 5	683	20.0%
Region 6	419	12.3%
Reported Disability		
Yes	1,289	37.7%
No	2,131	62.3%
Age at Referral		
5-11	1,649	46.7%
12-13	603	17.1%
14-17	1,277	36.2%
Total	**3,420**	

Note: Students with missing data in one or more of these categories are excluded (n=109)
*In 2011, DSHS transitioned from six regional districts to three. This report includes a summary based on the prior (six) regional boundaries (see www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/popMap.asp)

Research both within and outside Washington State has established the educational gap between foster students and non-foster students. For the purpose of this evaluation, it is important to explore how the educational deficits of foster students served by educational advocates relate to other students in foster care. To demonstrate why educational advocacy referrals may be necessary, we compared a series of educational measures for participants to all other foster youth. Across nearly all of these measures, we found that youth referred for advocacy services had greater educational deficits than other students in care.

[21] Burley, M. (2009). *Graduation and dropout outcomes for children in state care (2005–2008)*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 09-11-3901.

EDUCATIONAL STATUS – ENROLLMENT DAYS

During the school year a foster student was referred to the Educational Advocacy program, only 61% of participants were enrolled for the entire school year (more than 179 school days).[22] Among foster students that did not have an advocacy referral, 83% had a full year of enrollment. In addition, 16% of the students participating in the Educational Advocacy program were enrolled for less than 80 school days during the year of referral (Exhibit 3, next page).

EDUCATIONAL STATUS – UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

Examining unexcused absences is another way to measure a student's connection to school. Among non-participating foster students age 12 and older, 70% had no unexcused absences during a school year, compared to 56% of Educational Advocacy participants (Exhibit 4, next page). On average, the foster students served by the program had 5.5 days with an unexcused absence during the year. It is worth noting that under state law, students with 10 or more unexcused absences in a year may have a truancy petition filed in juvenile court.

EDUCATIONAL STATUS – GRADE POINT AVERAGE

In the year of referral, Educational Advocacy participants had a mean cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 1.85, while other foster students had a GPA of 2.11. Given the GPA scale of 0.0 to 4.0, we would expect a normal distribution, or 'bell curve', showing the highest percentage around the mean GPA and fewer numbers of students receiving high or low grades. Exhibit 5 (page 8) shows this distribution for both program participants and other foster students. Approximately 27% of the non-participating foster students had a GPA of 3.0 or higher, compared to 17% of Educational Advocacy participants.

EDUCATIONAL STATUS – CREDITS

Finally, for students in high school, we examined the ratio of total class credits earned to class credits attempted. As Exhibit 6 (page 8) shows, 27% of students receiving Educational Advocacy services had earned all available credits from the classes in which they were enrolled at the time they started the program. Over a third (36%) of non-participating students earned the maximum number of credits. On average, the percentage of credits earned was 10 percentage points higher for the overall population of foster students compared to program participants.

[22] WAC 180-16-215: Each school district shall conduct a school year of no less than 180 school days in such grades as are conducted by the school district.

Exhibit 3

Enrollment Days of Students Referred to an Educational Advocate

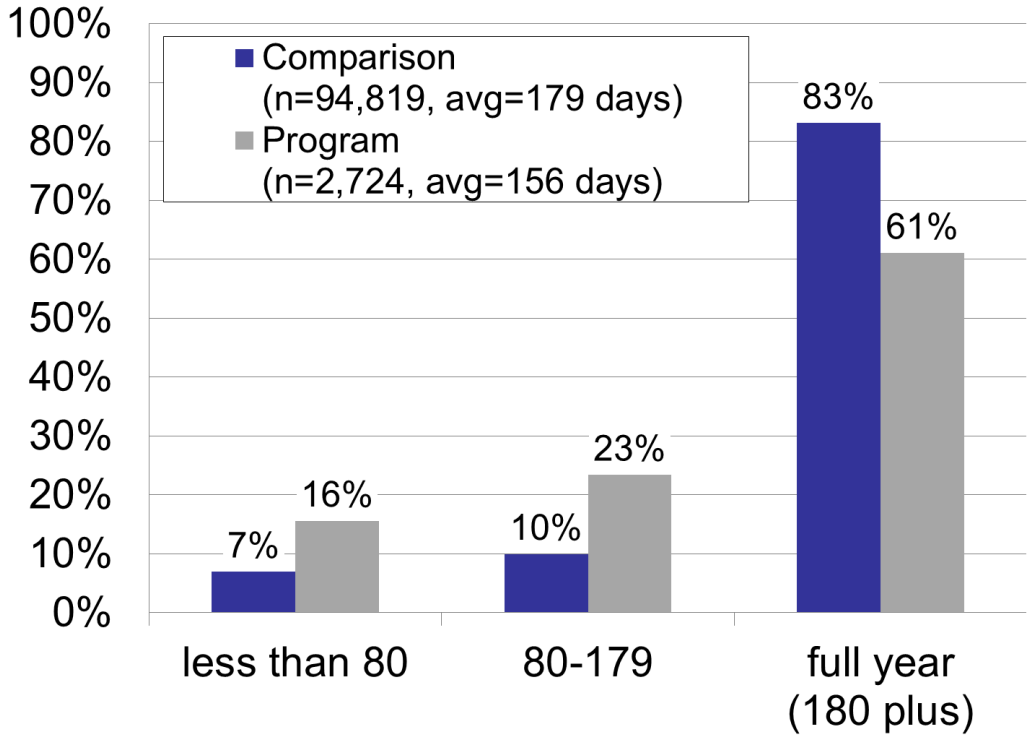


Exhibit 4

Unexcused Absences of Students Referred to an Educational Advocate

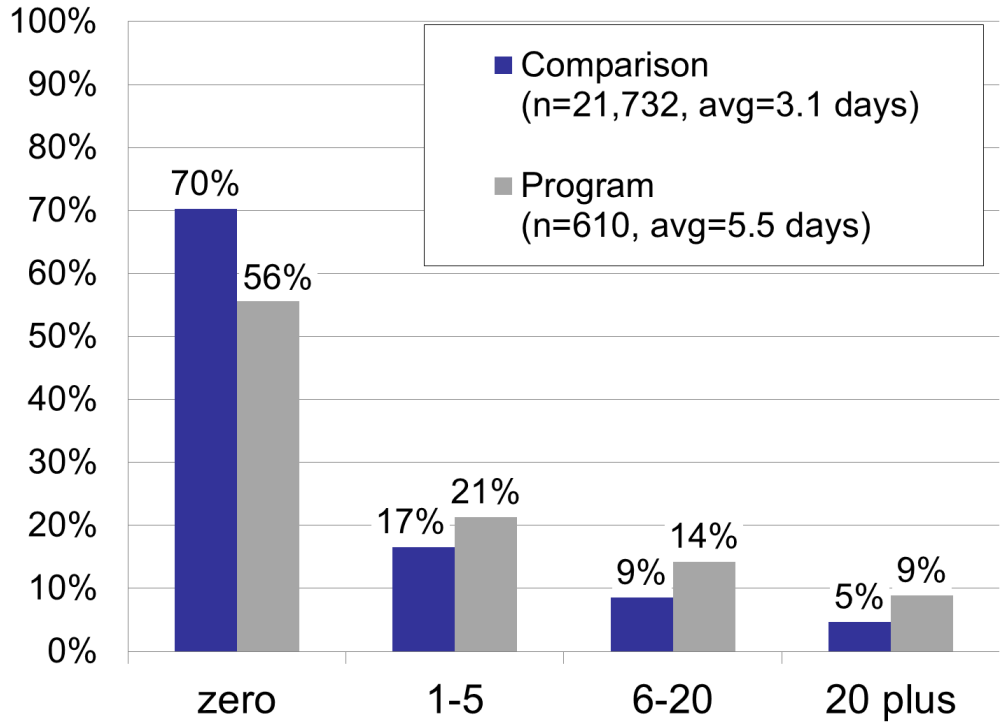


Exhibit 5

Grade Point Average of Students Referred to an Educational Advocate

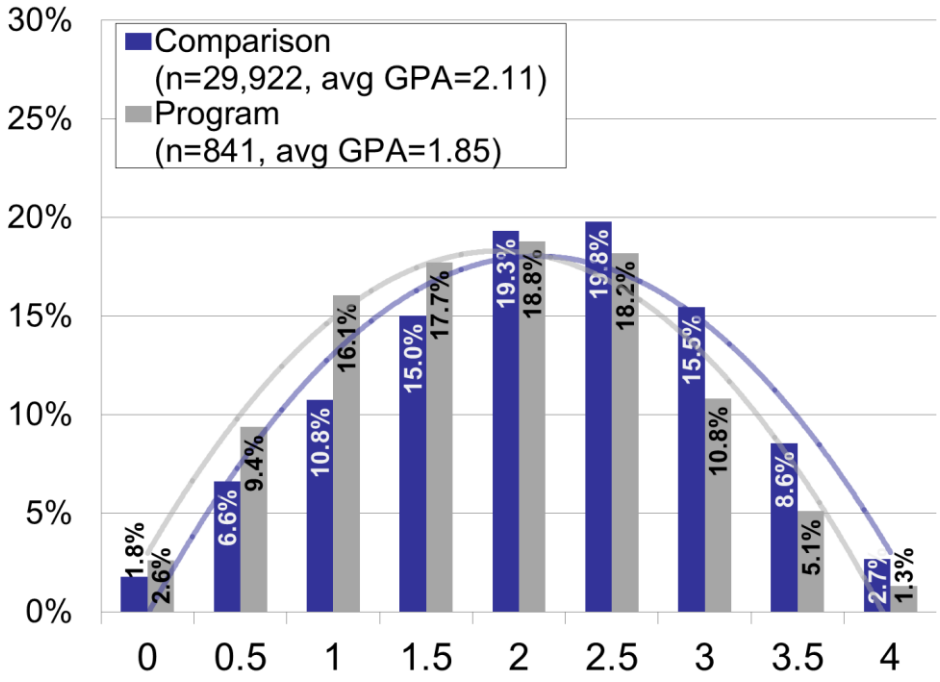
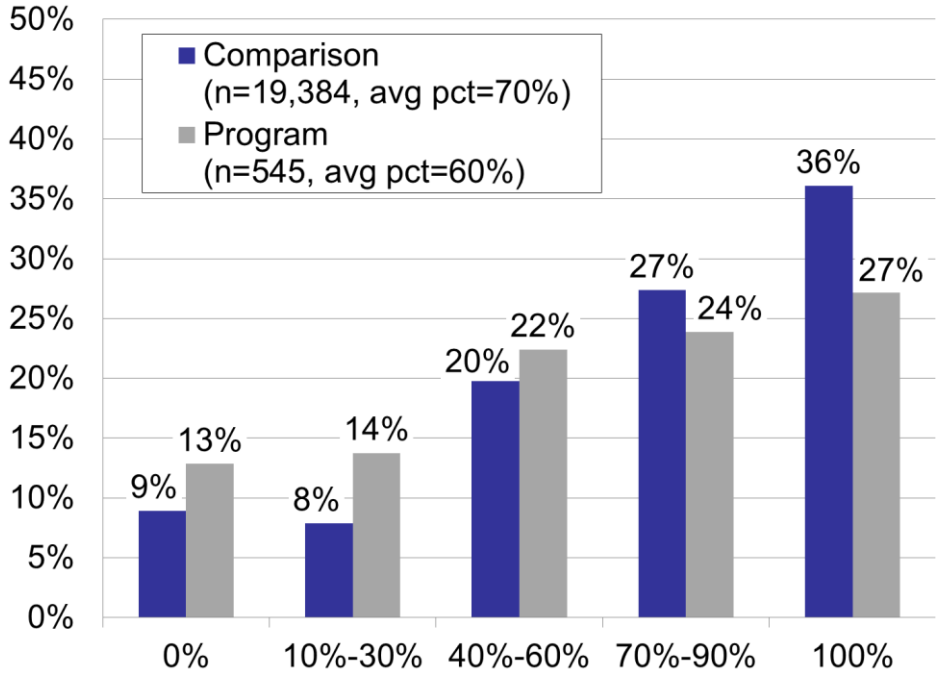


Exhibit 6

Credits Earned by Students Referred to an Educational Advocate

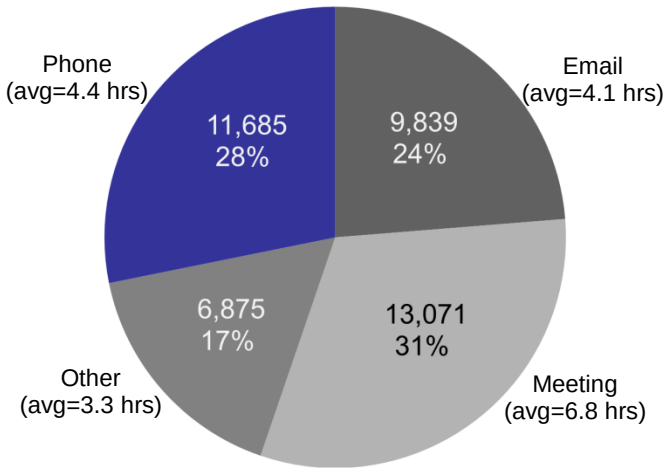


II. LEVEL AND TYPE OF ADVOCACY SERVICES PROVIDED

Students are referred to the Educational Advocacy program because they have a greater risk of falling behind in school compared with other foster youth. Advocates are available to help these students re-engage in school, recover needed credits, or resolve disciplinary matters. Advocates also provide information about support options and legal requirements for services like special education.

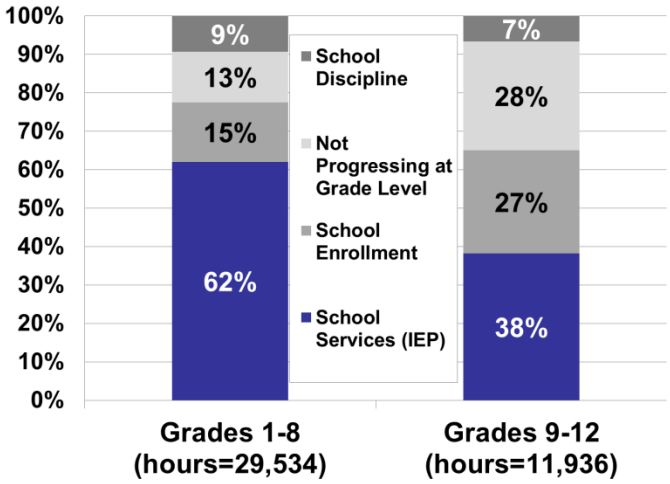
During the study period (2006-2011), advocates spent over 42,000 hours assisting foster youth who may be struggling in school. As Exhibit 7 shows, while some of this time may involve consultations over phone or email, about one-third of the total advocacy hours involved direct meetings with school personnel, case managers, youth or caretakers.

Exhibit 7
Total Hours of Educational Advocacy by Activity Type (2006-2011)



The type of educational issues addressed by advocates also differs according to a student's age and grade level. Younger students in elementary and middle school, for example, most often need assistance obtaining or revising necessary support services (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8
Total Hours of Educational Advocacy by Educational Issue (2006-2011)



A student's Individualized Educational Program (IEP) is a legally binding document that delineates what special education services will be provided to students with delayed skills or other disabilities. For students in grades 1–8, advocates spent 62% of total hours helping direct necessary school services and develop an appropriate IEP for participating foster youth. For high school students, advocates address a range of concerns. Connecting students to school services accounted for 38% of total hours, while helping students maintain school enrollment (i.e. records transfer) made up 27% of total hours for high school students.

In most cases, advocates work with each youth over a period of one or two school years. For students referred to an advocate when the program started (2006-07):

- 47% had one year of services
- 39% had two years of services
- 9% had three years of service
- 5% were involved with an advocate for four or more years

We examined program activity for all students referred to an Educational Advocate based on the number of years a student had participated in the program. In the first year of participation, a student received 4.5 hours of advocacy support, on average. It appears that advocates also made frequent contacts and inquiries regarding each advocacy case. During the first year following a referral, case activity was reported for an average of 106 days. For all students participating in the program, advocates spent an average of 11.7 hours per case over the course of 197 days.[23]

Exhibit 9
Educational Advocacy Activity by Student Time in Program (2006-2011)

Number of Advocacy Years	Students	Average Total Advocacy Days	Average Advocacy Hours per Student
One	2,242	106	4.5
Two	993	279	14.6
Three	205	516	42.8
Four or more	89	834	90.3
Total	**3,529**	**197**	**11.7**

The goal of this evaluation is to determine if this program participation was associated with a significant improvement in educational outcomes for program participants. To address this question, we need to estimate what may have happened to these students *without* the assistance of an Educational Advocate—we cannot simply compare outcomes for participants to other foster students. As previously discussed, program participants are at greater risk for poor educational outcomes. A more suitable comparison would include foster students with a similar risk level that did not receive advocacy services. The process of identifying this comparison group is described in the next section.

III. SELECTION OF APPROPRIATE COMPARISON GROUP

The identification of a suitable comparison group for this analysis included three steps.

First, program participants were matched to comparison youth based on their characteristics for the year in which they were referred to the Educational Advocacy program. For each year of referrals, there were an equal number of program and comparison youth selected. We also attempted to match the profile of program group members when selecting comparison students. Potential comparison group members were matched to program participants based on age, sex, region, and special education status. In addition, we determined that the comparison group members should also have a similar number of foster care placements during the school year of interest. After we excluded participants with missing information for one or more of these key variables, there were **3,244 program students** left in the analysis group.

Second, we calculated each student's distance above or below the average (called a 'z-score') for a range of educational measures, including:

- Grade point average;
- High school credits achieved;
- Unexcused absences; and
- Enrollment days.

For each program participant, we identified the educational measure where they were having the most difficulty (furthest below the average). After pinpointing this gap, we matched program participants to other foster youth who were experiencing a similar level of academic difficulty, but *did not* receive services from an Educational Advocate. Based on available data, we were able to complete this process for **2,605 program students**.

[23] Educational Advocates log advocacy time spent for each student case including the purpose, method, and duration (in minutes) of the contact.

Third, we conducted seven different 'passes' to match program participants to similar foster students based on variations of the criteria described above. To find the best possible match, for example, we tried different matching rules in each pass (e.g. create two-year age grouping rather than exact age match). The final match included **2,437 program students**, or between 400 and 600 students per year in both the program and comparison groups (see Exhibit 10).

Exhibit 10
Program and Comparison Group Members by School Year

School Year	Program Participants	Comparison Group
2006-07	594	594
2007-08	520	520
2008-09	430	430
2009-10	425	425
2010-11	468	468
Total	**2,437**	**2,437**

Exhibit 11 (next page) shows the demographic characteristics of the selected comparison group are very similar to program participants. Although we did not match potential comparison group members based on race or ethnicity, the two groups have a similar racial/ethnic distribution. Similarly, we selected comparison group members based on the number of recent foster care placements. For other measures of placement history (such as age at first placement), there were no significant differences between program participants and comparison youth.

Selection Bias

Comparison (or control) groups are used in evaluations in order to estimate the impact of a program or intervention. To measure the 'true' impact of a program, it is necessary to remove all other possible explanations about why there may be differences between the program and comparison groups. In an ideal evaluation design, individuals are *randomly assigned* to a program or control group. This randomization ensures that the program and control groups are statistically equivalent in both observed and unobserved characteristics. Any differences in outcomes between the two groups, therefore, could be attributed to the intervention.

In most cases, random assignment to a program may be either unethical or impractical. For these non-random ('quasi-experimental') program evaluations, the problem of *selection bias* should be considered. Selection bias refers to the presence of unmeasured differences between the two groups. For example, program participants may have higher levels of ability or motivation that could explain observed outcomes.

This evaluation included extensive efforts to identify an equivalent comparison group based on observable (measurable) student characteristics. We accounted for student-level differences and variations among school districts as well. However, it should be noted that we could not account for other unmeasured factors which may determine why students are referred to an educational advocate or influence program outcomes.

Exhibit 11
Characteristics of Educational Advocacy Program Participants and Comparison Group

Category	Program Participants (at referral year)	Comparison Group
Sex		
Male	1,387 (57%)	1,308 (54%)
Female	1,050 (43%)	1,129 (46%)
Age Group		
5-8	738 (30%)	743 (30%)
9-13	880 (36%)	818 (34%)
14-17	819 (34%)	876 (36%)
Mean	11.1	11.2
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	220 (9%)	238 (10%)
Asian	43 (2%)	25 (1%)
Black/African American	397 (16%)	275 (11%)
Hispanic/Latino of any race(s)	343 (14%)	282 (12%)
White	1231 (51%)	1266 (52%)
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	12 (0%)	14 (1%)
Two or More Races	143 (6%)	281 (12%)
Not Provided	48 (2%)	56 (2%)
Reported Disability	888 (36%)	773 (32%)
Entered Foster Care in Current Year	658 (27%)	515 (21%)
Age at First Foster Placement		
Birth to three	464 (19%)	480 (20%)
four to eight	919 (38%)	966 (40%)
nine to twelve	538 (22%)	552 (23%)
thirteen to seventeen	516 (21%)	439 (18%)
Mean	8.0	7.7
Number of Foster Care Placements (during school year)		
Not in foster placement*	151 (6%)	283 (12%)
None	902 (37%)	919 (38%)
One	594 (24%)	637 (26%)
Two-Four	572 (23%)	516 (21%)
Five or more	218 (9%)	82 (3%)
Total	**2,437**	**2,437**

* Foster placement may have occurred in the period following an Educational Advocacy referral, or youth may have experienced other temporary placement through DSHS Children's Administration.

IV. EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS RELATIVE TO COMPARISON GROUP

Once we have identified the best possible comparison group for the analysis, we can report outcomes for each cohort of students. This section presents the evaluation results with the following findings:

- **No difference** in academic performance (grade point average)
- **Decrease** in unexcused absences for program participants
- **Decrease** in school mobility for students receiving advocacy services
- **No difference** in graduation rate between program and comparison students

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES – GRADE POINT AVERAGE (GPA)

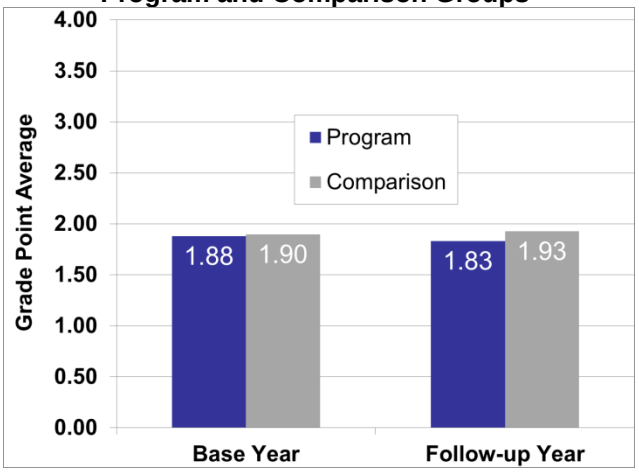
For this analysis, we examined a student's cumulative GPA in the starting year, and then examined any changes in the GPA that occurred one year later. In the base year (year of program referral), there were no significant differences in GPA between program participants and the matched comparison group (Exhibit 12).

Exhibit 12
Program and Comparison Group Base GPA

Cumulative GPA	Program Participants	Comparison Group
A (3.5-4.0)	20 (3%)	24 (3%)
B (2.5-3.4)	159 (22%)	168 (21%)
C (1.5-2.4)	286 (40%)	331 (42%)
D (1.0-1.4)	117 (16%)	110 (14%)
F (0.1-0.9)	135 (19%)	155 (20%)
mean	1.87	1.87
Total	**717**	**788**

In the year following a program referral, there were no differences in cumulative GPA between program and comparison group students (Exhibit 13). For students with a recorded GPA in both periods, the average GPA for program participants was 1.83 in the year following a referral. Comparison group students had a cumulative GPA of 1.93 in this subsequent year, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Exhibit 13
Change in Cumulative GPA between Program and Comparison Groups



The data available for this analysis did not include a student's high school GPA for each semester. The most recent grades for a student may have been a better means to measure change over time (rather than cumulative GPA). Advocates usually work with a student for one or two years, but the cumulative GPA may include grades from before this period as well. In addition, advocates help connect youth to services, but are not involved with tutoring or working directly with the student on academics.

The next section discusses unexcused absences and school mobility—two outcomes that can be tracked for students in all grades over time.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES – UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

Beginning in 2009, school districts reported the total number of unexcused absences for each student during the school year. These statewide records do not include the date on which these absences occurred, so we cannot determine how often the student was absent in the days before or after an advocacy referral. To address this limitation, we examined the change in total unexcused absences for the first and second year following an advocacy referral.

Among students that entered the program during the 2008-09 school year, we found that students with an advocacy referral initially had a higher number of unexcused absences in the first year (2009-10). Among program participants, 36% had one or more unexcused absences this year, while 24% of comparison group students had an unexcused absence (Exhibit 14).

Exhibit 14
Program and Comparison Group
Unexcused Absences in First Year (2009-10)

Unexcused Absences	Program Participants	Comparison Group
Zero	199 (64%)	228 (76%)
One	31 (10%)	20 (7%)
Two-Three	22 (7%)	19 (6%)
Four-Nine	25 (8%)	17 (6%)
Ten or more	33 (11%)	15 (5%)
Total	**310**	**299**

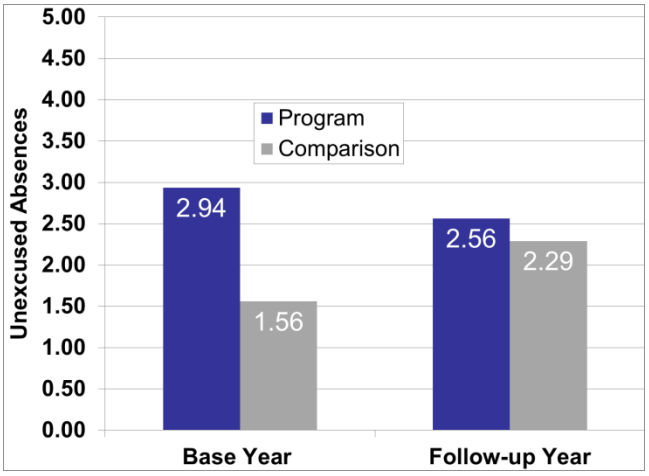
By the second year following a referral (2010-11), the percentage of students in the program group with unexcused absences had decreased. During this second year, about 25% of students in the program and comparison group had unexcused absences.

Exhibit 15
Program and Comparison Group
Unexcused Absences in Second Year (2010-11)

Unexcused Absences	Program Participants	Comparison Group
Zero	229 (74%)	228 (76%)
One	19 (6%)	19 (6%)
Two-Three	17 (5%)	16 (5%)
Four-Nine	20 (6%)	18 (6%)
Ten or more	25 (8%)	18 (6%)
Total	**310**	**299**

In the first year for which data were available, students with an advocacy referral had an average of 2.94 unexcused absences, which was significantly higher than students in the comparison group (1.56 unexcused absences, $p<0.01$). In the second year, however, unexcused absences for comparison students increased to 2.29, while the number of unexcused absences for program participants decreased to 2.56 (see Exhibit 16). There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in year two ($p=0.41$).

Exhibit 16
Change in Average Unexcused Absences for Program and Comparison Group



EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES – SCHOOL MOBILITY

As discussed earlier in this report, students experiencing frequent school changes are significantly more likely to have ongoing academic difficulty as well. In most cases, students are referred to an Educational Advocate to ensure that the proper services and supports are in place to avoid school disruptions. To gauge the extent to which advocates help a student stay in their current school, we looked at the number and timing of school moves that occurred in the year following a referral.[24] For students in our comparison group, we determined if a foster care placement occurred during the initial school year. We examined school changes following this placement date for these comparison students.[25]

Over the course of one school year, we found that students with advocacy services had a lower rate of school changes relative to comparison students. As Exhibit 17 shows, 11% of program participants changed schools two or more times, while 15% of comparison youth had multiple school changes.

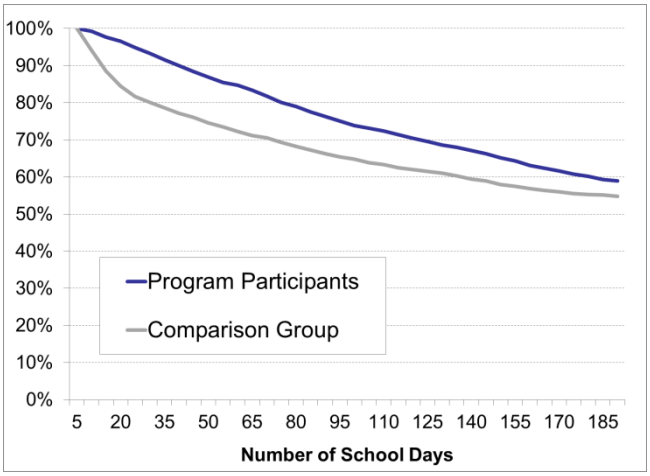
Exhibit 17
Program and Comparison Group
Number of School Changes in One Year

School Changes	Program Participants	Comparison Group
None	1,085 (57%)	967 (54%)
One	600 (32%)	559 (31%)
Two or more	207 (11%)	275 (15%)
Total	**1,892**	**1,801**

In addition to the number of school changes, the *timing* of school transfers was much different for program participants. Youth in the comparison group moved to a new school much sooner (52 days). For Educational Advocacy participants, these changes occurred an average of 81 days following referral (for those with a school change. The timing of school changes is important because it shows when a foster student may be at the highest risk of moving schools as the result of an adverse event (such as new foster placement).

Exhibit 18 shows a student's likelihood of remaining in the same school over the course of the entire school year (180 school days). As the exhibit indicates, program participants have a higher likelihood of remaining in the same school after referral to an Educational Advocate. In the 60 school days after a referral,[26] the probability of remaining in the same school was 82% for program students and 70% for comparison youth (see Appendix A for calculations).

Exhibit 18
Conditional Probability of Remaining in Same School after One School Year



[24] We measured time in terms of school days, meaning that school holidays (i.e. summer vacation) and weekends are excluded.

[25] Approximately 65% of comparison group students had a foster care placement during this base year. For students that had placements in prior years, we used the referral date (from the matched program student) for the starting date.

[26] Or foster placement change for comparison youth.

A number of factors could be associated with the likelihood that a student will move schools. For example, a student's age, grade level, disability status, and foster care placement history may contribute to the probability of a school move. To test how educational advocacy services are related to school mobility, we developed a multivariate model to estimate how each of these factors related to a student's risk of changing schools.

Appendix B includes the details for this statistical model. The results show that participation in the Educational Advocacy program was associated with a **20 percent reduction** in the likelihood of moving schools, after considering other student characteristics that were also associated with mobility. Other factors examined included grade level (elementary students more likely to change schools), foster care entry (youth that recently entered care were more likely to change schools), and number of prior foster care placements (increased chances of changing schools). By accounting for these other variables, we can obtain a more reliable estimate of the overall program effect.

If similar students were randomly assigned to the advocacy program or a control group, we could more precisely estimate the overall impact of this effort. Since all foster youth students across the state were eligible for an Educational Advocate, we cannot be certain that other unobservable factors did not influence these outcomes. However, these findings do indicate a positive direction in the program's stated goals of keeping at risk students connected to school.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES – GRADUATION

High school graduation represents the final outcome included in this evaluation. Only a subset of the study group could be included in this analysis since a large percentage of students were not expected to graduate during the study period. The potential number of graduates increased each successive year during the five-year study period (Exhibit 19).

Exhibit 19
Program and Comparison Group
Number of Graduation Eligible Students

Expected Graduation Year	Program Participants	Comparison Group
2007	5	5
2008	25	42
2009	82	71
2010	94	92
2011	137	148
Total	**343**	**358**

We looked at the final enrollment status for foster youth in this study and found that 37% of Educational Advocacy participants graduated on-time (four years). For graduation-eligible students, there were no significant differences in enrollment status between the two groups (Exhibit 20, next page). Approximately 40% of foster students graduated on-time, while an additional 10% had an extended (five-year) graduation date.

Exhibit 20
Final Enrollment Status for Graduation-Eligible Students

Enrollment Status	Program	Comparison
Dropout	28 (8%)	27 (8%)
Continued Enrollment	43 (13%)	36 (10%)
Transfer	54 (16%)	57 (16%)
Unknown	50 (15%)	45 (13%)
GED Completer	9 (3%)	9 (3%)
Graduate	126 (37%)	147 (41%)
Extended (five year) Graduate	34 (10%)	37 (10%)
Total	**343**	**358**

While we did not observe any significant differences in the percentage of graduates between the program and comparison groups, we did conduct additional analyses to look at the predictors of graduation among the study group. In this multivariate statistical analysis (Appendix C), participation in the Educational Advocacy program was not associated with an increased likelihood of graduation. The variables that were related to graduation included days of enrollment (increased likelihood), special education status (decreased likelihood), and number of previous foster care placements (decreased likelihood).

As Exhibit 8 (page 9) showed, the number of hours spent assisting high school students represents less than 30% of the total advocacy hours in the program. Given the time frame for this study, we could not follow graduation outcomes for younger students receiving advocacy services in elementary grades. An extended follow-up period may be necessary to gauge the long-term impact of advocacy services on high school graduation.

CONCLUSION

This evaluation adds to previous work conducted by the Institute that illustrates the educational gap for students in foster care. Seeking to address this gap, the legislature passed a statewide program designed to assist foster students in danger of falling behind or dropping out of school. Based on an analysis of five years of program data, it appears that the Educational Advocacy program has effectively targeted high-risk foster students. Compared to other foster students, program participants have lower grades, fewer days of enrollment, and higher absence levels.

Advocates assisted over 3,500 at-risk foster students between 2006 and 2011, spending an average of 12 hours on each case. Over half (53%) of students were involved with an advocate for two or more school years.

When measured against a similar group of foster students, we found that program participants were more likely to stay connected to school. Involvement with an advocate was associated with lower levels of unexcused absences and fewer school changes. While we did not find any differences in cumulative grade point average or graduation rates, it may be more appropriate to observe these types of outcomes over a longer time period.

APPENDIX A:
CALCULATIONS FOR CONDITIONAL PROBABILITY OF REMAINING IN SAME SCHOOL

Program Participants		A	B	C	D=1-(C/A)	E=A-B-C	F=D*previous year percent
Days Since Start of Period	**Days Until End of Period**	Students at Start	Ended Period (no data in subsequent intervals)	Left School	Percent Remaining	Students Remaining	Conditional Probability
0	**5**	2,313	5	16	99%	2,292	99%
5	**10**	2,292	3	39	98%	2,250	98%
10	**15**	2,250	5	24	99%	2,221	97%
15	**20**	2,221	19	40	98%	2,162	95%
20	**25**	2,162	10	35	98%	2,117	93%
25	**30**	2,117	8	40	98%	2,069	92%
30	**35**	2,069	9	34	98%	2,026	90%
35	**40**	2,026	4	37	98%	1,985	88%
40	**45**	1,985	16	32	98%	1,937	87%
45	**50**	1,937	5	32	98%	1,900	86%
50	**55**	1,900	20	19	99%	1,861	85%
55	**60**	1,861	5	27	99%	1,829	83%
60	**65**	1,829	17	37	98%	1,775	**82%**

Comparison Students		A	B	C	D=1-(C/A)	E=A-B-C	F=D*previous year percent
Days Since Start of Period	**Days Until End of Period**	Students at Start	Ended Period (no data in subsequent intervals)	Left School	Percent Remaining	Students Remaining	Conditional Probability
0	**5**	2,196	24	128	94%	2,044	94%
5	**10**	2,044	13	124	94%	1,907	88%
10	**15**	1,907	14	87	95%	1,806	84%
15	**20**	1,806	20	59	97%	1,727	82%
20	**25**	1,727	8	35	98%	1,684	80%
25	**30**	1,684	13	30	98%	1,641	79%
30	**35**	1,641	9	32	98%	1,600	77%
35	**40**	1,600	5	21	99%	1,574	76%
40	**45**	1,574	12	31	98%	1,531	75%
45	**50**	1,531	9	24	98%	1,498	73%
50	**55**	1,498	11	23	98%	1,464	72%
55	**60**	1,464	5	23	98%	1,436	71%
60	**65**	1,436	11	14	99%	1,411	**70%**

APPENDIX B: COX PROPORTIONAL HAZARD MODEL FOR FIRST SCHOOL MOVE

Parameter	Increased (decreased) probability of School Move	95% Confidence Interval	
Educational Advocacy Participation* **	(0.20)	(0.26)	(0.13)
Female	(0.06)	(0.13)	0.02
Native American	(0.00)	(0.14)	0.15
African American	(0.02)	(0.14)	0.11
Hispanic	(0.01)	(0.13)	0.14
Other Race	0.12	(0.04)	0.30
School - Elementary* **	0.47	0.32	0.65
School - High School* **	(0.44)	(0.51)	(0.37)
Special Education Status* **	(0.25)	(0.35)	(0.14)
DSHS Region 1* **	(0.31)	(0.48)	(0.09)
DSHS Region 2	(0.15)	(0.36)	0.13
DSHS Region 3	0.02	(0.16)	0.23
DSHS Region 5*	(0.14)	(0.29)	0.03
DSHS Region 6	(0.17)	(0.35)	0.05
First Foster Care event during this school year* **	0.25	0.12	0.39
Age at first foster/relative placement* **	0.07	0.06	0.09
Total Foster Care Events (to date) * **	0.05	0.04	0.06

*** p < 0.01
** p< 0.05
* p < 0.10

n=4,520
-2 Log-Likelihood (null): 16520.951
-2 Log-Likelihood (model): 16078.759

APPENDIX C: LOGISTIC REGRESSION FOR LIKELIHOOD OF SCHOOL GRADUATION

Parameter	Increased (decreased) odds of Graduation	95% Confidence Interval	
Educational Advocacy Participation	(0.16)	(0.40)	0.18
Female	0.29	(0.08)	0.80
Native American	(0.47)	(0.71)	(0.02)
African American	0.40	(0.15)	1.30
Hispanic	0.14	(0.34)	0.95
Other Race	(0.03)	(0.50)	0.91
Special Education Status	(0.58)	(0.81)	(0.08)
Graduation Year (2008)	1.30	(0.48)	9.09
Graduation Year (2009)	1.17	(0.48)	8.00
Graduation Year (2010)**	1.53	(0.38)	9.42
Graduation Year (2011)**	0.08	(0.73)	3.34
School Days Enrolled***	0.01	0.00	0.01
DSHS Region 1	0.56	(0.20)	2.05
DSHS Region 2	0.37	(0.25)	1.49
DSHS Region 3	(0.09)	(0.47)	0.59
DSHS Region 5*	0.64	(0.05)	1.81
DSHS Region 6	(0.30)	(0.61)	0.26
First Foster Care event during this school year	0.41	(0.11)	1.23
Total Foster Care Events (to date)***	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.04)
Total Years in Foster Care*	0.07	(0.00)	0.15

Reference variables: Race (Caucasian), Graduation Year (2007), DSHS Region (Region 4)

*** $p < 0.01$
** $p < 0.05$
* $p < 0.10$

n=676
rescaled r^2=0.209
c = 0.726

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Washington State Institute for Public Policy

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