



## EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF FOSTER YOUTH — UPDATED BENCHMARKS

Over the last ten years, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) completed several research studies related to education outcomes of youth in foster care. These studies document gaps in graduation rates, dropout levels, and assessment scores between foster youth and other students in Washington State. The research includes evaluations of various interventions designed to help foster youth succeed in and complete school.

This accumulation of research illustrates that foster students are one of the most at-risk groups for poor school outcomes. Prior abuse or neglect, abandonment, and death or incarceration of a parent can impact the social, behavioral, and educational trajectory of youth in foster care.

The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children’s Administration (CA) asked the Institute to develop outcome measures to establish how the educational prospects of foster students change over time.<sup>1</sup> This report presents four outcome measures related to the educational status of foster students in Washington State between 2005 and 2011. Data definitions and limitations are provided for each measure. The intent of this effort is to develop reliable metrics by which to gauge the educational status of foster youth in Washington State.

### Executive Summary

This report outlines four outcome measures for tracking the educational progress of students in foster care. Previous research conducted by the Institute has shown disparities in the educational outcomes of foster youth, including a higher dropout rate, lower scores on statewide standardized assessments, and lower high school graduation rates.

Improvements in state educational data have resulted in the ability to track student progress since 2005. We can now look at historical trends for many of these outcomes to determine how results have changed over time. This report provides detailed definitions and results on four long-term measures related to the educational status of youth in foster care. These measures include the following:

- **School retention:** Nine out of ten (90%) foster youth re-enroll in the following school year (compared to 94% of non-foster youth).
- **Behind grade level:** 6% of both foster and non-foster youth are behind their expected grade level.
- **Adjusted cohort graduation rate:** The longitudinal (four-year) graduation rate for youth in foster care was between 35 and 55% (the rate for non-foster youth was between 70 and 75%).
- **Annual graduation rate:** Measured on an annual basis, the graduation rate for foster youth was 48% compared to 72% for non-foster students.

Suggested citation: Burley, M. (2013). *Educational outcomes of foster youth—updated benchmarks* (Document Number 13-06-3901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

<sup>1</sup> The project was approved by the Institute’s Board of Directors.

## DATA SOURCES

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Two data sources were used to develop the outcome measures presented in this report: (1) the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) enrollment records, and (2) DSHS foster care placement data.

### 1. OSPI Enrollment Records

Each of the 295 school districts in Washington State regularly sends enrollment records to OSPI. The annual enrollment status (P210) data file provides an unduplicated report of all students in grades 7-12 who attend a public school at any time during the school year. We use the P210 file to track a student's enrollment status (i.e. transfer, dropout, graduate) over time. The 2010-11 school year is the latest year that statewide enrollment data are available for this analysis.

In 2005, OSPI implemented a statewide student identifier (SSID) which allows individual students to be tracked over time and across school districts. DSHS provides OSPI with foster care records, and OSPI staff match those records to the enrollment files, removing all confidential student information before releasing the research dataset. The foster care dataset is described below.

### 2. FamLink (foster care placements)

In 2009, DSHS implemented a new case management system for foster care placements called FamLink.<sup>2</sup> Data recorded in FamLink include the reason(s) the child was removed from the home, the duration and type of foster care placement, and the placement status or result. For this analysis, CA staff identified school-age youth with an out-of-home placement (foster care, group home, or with a relative) from 2004 to present.

We examine outcomes for foster youth based on the length of foster care episodes that occur during each school year.

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to FamLink, foster care records were kept in the Case and Management Information System (CAMIS) system.

The following classifications were used for this analysis:

- *Temporary placement:* 1-89 days
- *Short-term placement:* 90-182 days
- *Ongoing placement:* 183-274 days
- *Full-year placement:* 275-365 days

Foster youth with a temporary placement (less than 90 days) are excluded in cases where results for "all foster youth" are presented.

Across all five school years (2005-2011), the most accurate enrollment information was available for high school students (grades 9-12). Approximately 350,000 youth were enrolled in Washington State high schools each year during this time. Foster youth with an active placement represented less than 1% (about 0.6%) of the student population (see Exhibit 1).

**Exhibit 1**  
**High School Students Included in Educational Benchmarks: 2005–2010 School Years**

| School Year | Non-Foster Students | Foster Students |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 2005–06     | 350,772             | 1,939 (0.55%)   |
| 2006–07     | 350,125             | 2,128 (0.61%)   |
| 2007–08     | 336,030             | 1,978 (0.59%)   |
| 2008–09     | 347,495             | 2,141 (0.62%)   |
| 2009–10     | 347,071             | 1,917 (0.55%)   |
| 2010-11     | 348,713             | 1,784 (0.51%)   |

Exhibit 2 (next page) outlines the number of foster youth included in the analysis by length of time in placement.

**Exhibit 2**

**Foster Students by Length of Time in Placement (2005-06 to 2010-11 School Years)**

| <b>Time in Foster Care</b>                      | <b>2005-06</b>         | <b>2006-07</b>         | <b>2007-08</b>         | <b>2008-09</b>         | <b>2009-10</b>         | <b>2010-11</b>         |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Temporary placement (less than 3 months)</b> | 442 (23%)              | 508 (24%)              | 400 (20%)              | 476 (22%)              | 536 (28%)              | 488 (27%)              |
| <b>Short-term placement (3 to 6 months)</b>     | 252 (13%)              | 290 (14%)              | 315 (16%)              | 389 (18%)              | 296 (15%)              | 298 (17%)              |
| <b>Ongoing placement (6 to 9 months)</b>        | 234 (12%)              | 260 (12%)              | 228 (12%)              | 356 (17%)              | 231 (12%)              | 215 (12%)              |
| <b>Full year placement (9 to 12 months)</b>     | 1,011 (52%)            | 1,070 (50%)            | 1,035 (52%)            | 920 (43%)              | 854 (45%)              | 783 (44%)              |
| <b>Total</b>                                    | <b>1,939</b><br>(100%) | <b>2,128</b><br>(100%) | <b>1,978</b><br>(100%) | <b>2,141</b><br>(100%) | <b>1,917</b><br>(100%) | <b>1,784</b><br>(100%) |

As shown in Exhibit 2, roughly one out of four students with an out-of-home placement remain in care for less than three months. Since these youth are in state care for a short period of time, we do not track educational results for these students in the reported outcome measures.

Among the remaining foster youth, between 800 and 1,100 students were in an out-of-home placement for the entire school year (9-12 months) during the study period. These students are of particular interest since programs and interventions are primarily designed to assist foster youth with continuing and stable connections. Between 500 and 800 foster youth had placements lasting between three and nine months during the school year. These two groups (short-term and ongoing) are combined and referred to as “school-year placements” for the remainder of this report.

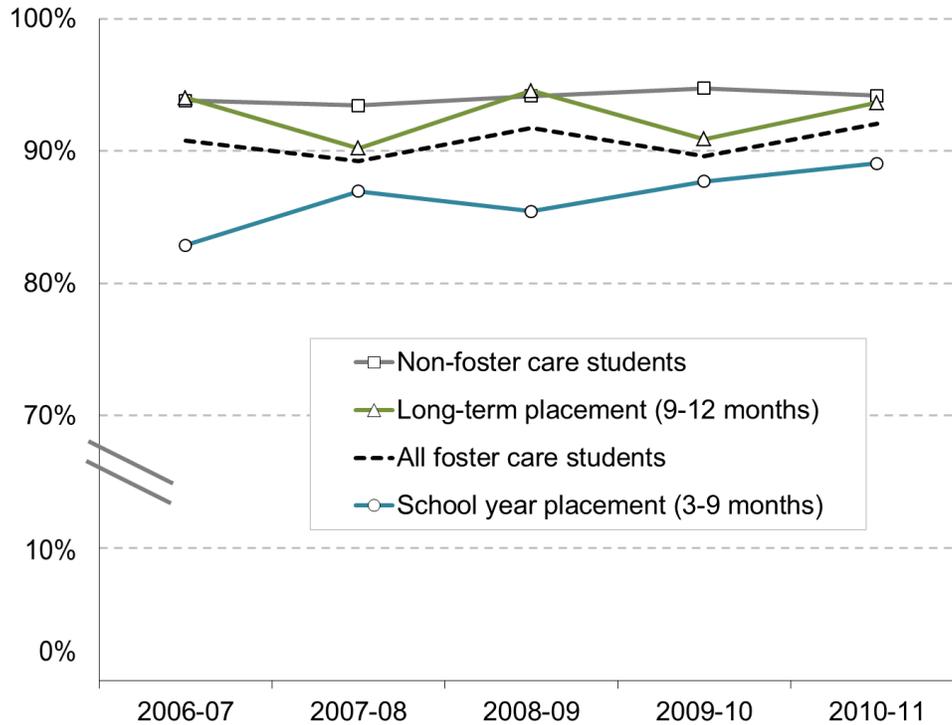
**MEASURE ONE: PERCENT OF STUDENTS CONTINUING IN SCHOOL FROM PREVIOUS YEAR**

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The number of youth that remain enrolled in school from year to year is an initial indicator of a student’s ability to complete high school. The first outcome measure reported here (percent retained) includes all students who were enrolled in a Washington State public high school on October 1<sup>st</sup> of each school year. We matched these students (in grades 9-11) to enrollment records from the next school year (grades 10-12) to determine the percentage of students retained. Students that were not enrolled in a Washington State public school, but had a confirmed transfer, are excluded from the analysis.

About 94% of non-foster students starting school in a given year were enrolled in any Washington State public high school during the subsequent school year (Measure 1). For all foster students, on the other hand, about 90% remained enrolled in subsequent school years. This rate held constant over the course of the study period. Foster youth with a school-year placement (3-9 months) had a lower retention rate (83-89%), but this rate has improved in recent years.

**Measure 1**  
**Annual Retention (from Previous School Year) by Foster Care Placement Length**



| Time in Foster Care                            | 2006-07              |            | 2007-08              |            | 2008-09              |            | 2009-10              |            | 2010-11            |            |
|--|----------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|--------------------|------------|
|  | N                    | %          | N                    | %          | N                    | %          | N                    | %          | N                  | %          |
| <b>Non-foster care students retained/total</b> | 233,423 / 248,812    | 94%        | 232,092 / 248,386    | 93%        | 228,785 / 243,026    | 94%        | 233,555 / 246,539    | 95%        | 235,332 / 249,907  | 94%        |
| <b>School year placement (3-9 months)</b>      | 276/333              | 83%        | 327/376              | 87%        | 323/378              | 85%        | 435/496              | 88%        | 334/375            | 89%        |
| <b>Long-term placement (9-12 months)</b>       | 769/818              | 94%        | 783/868              | 90%        | 814/861              | 95%        | 689/758              | 91%        | 649/693            | 94%        |
| <b>All foster care students</b>                | <b>1,045 / 1,151</b> | <b>91%</b> | <b>1,110 / 1,244</b> | <b>89%</b> | <b>1,137 / 1,239</b> | <b>92%</b> | <b>1,124 / 1,254</b> | <b>90%</b> | <b>983 / 1,068</b> | <b>92%</b> |

**Data Notes:** Includes enrollment records from OSPI P210 report for grades 9-12. Only schools that are listed as having 'primary responsibility' for the student are included. Student must be listed as enrolled on October 1<sup>st</sup> in order to be included in the analysis. If an enrolled student does not appear in the subsequent year (and has no record of a confirmed transfer), then they are considered to be not retained. Results exclude youth in foster care less than 90 days and students without subsequent re-enrollments that had a confirmed transfer.

**MEASURE TWO: PERCENT OF STUDENTS BEHIND A GRADE LEVEL**

Students that fall behind in school are at an increased risk of dropping out and are less likely to graduate.<sup>3,4</sup> Unfortunately, there is no standard definition for categorizing students that fall behind in school. Previous research conducted by the Institute identified students behind grade level based on their expected date of graduation.<sup>5</sup> Using this definition, about 10% of students had an expected graduation that was behind their grade level cohort. A later report used only a student’s age and found that about 5% of students were older than other students in their grade level cohort (i.e. age 16 or older at start of 9<sup>th</sup> grade).<sup>6</sup>

We examine both a student’s age at the beginning of the school year *and* their expected year of graduation for this analysis. Youth that were older than other students in their grade or had repeated a grade (expected graduation year differed from peers) were considered “behind grade level.” Using this approach, we found that approximately 9% of all students (and 13% of foster students) could be considered “behind grade level” (Exhibit 3).

<sup>3</sup> Jimerson, S. R., Anderson, G. E., & Whipple, A. D. (2002). Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychology in the Schools*, 39(4), 441-57.  
<sup>4</sup> Blackledge, A., Blodgett, C., Wagner, B., & Building Bridges. (2009). *Building Bridges dropout initiative, 2009-10 annual evaluation: Report to the Legislature*. Olympia, WA: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.  
<sup>5</sup> Burley, M. (2008). *Educational attainment of foster children: 2006 results* (Document No. 08-03-3901). Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.  
<sup>6</sup> Burley, M (2009). *Graduation and dropout outcomes for children in state care (2005–2008)* (Document No. 09-11-3901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

**Exhibit 3**  
**Percent of Students Behind Grade Level (2010-11 School Year)**

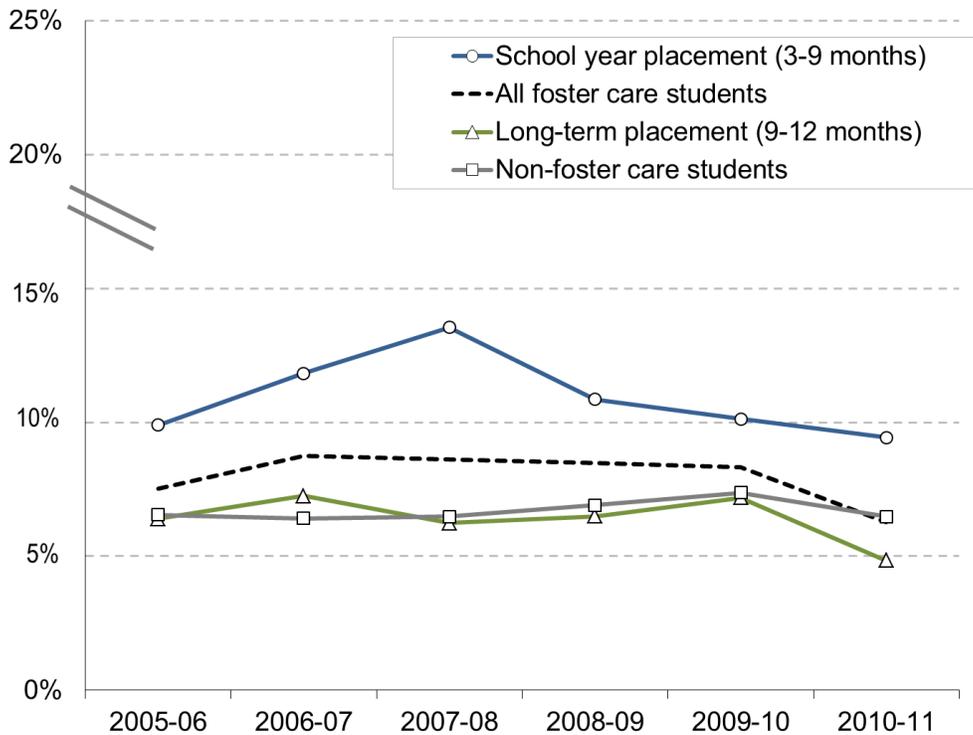
| Foster Status               | Behind Grade Level | Total   |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|---------|
| Non-foster care youth       | 31,493 (9.2%)      | 341,066 |
| School year (3 to 9 months) | 55 (16.2%)         | 339     |
| Full year (9 to 12 months)  | 88 (11.8%)         | 743     |
| All foster care youth       | 143 (13.2%)        | 1,082   |

This definition, however, does not account for the fact that students without a high school diploma are eligible to remain in public schools through age 21.<sup>7</sup> This most commonly occurs among students in migrant education, transitional bilingual instruction (English language learner), and special education programs.<sup>8</sup> This extension is important for the purpose of this benchmark since special education students are disproportionately represented among the foster care population. According to OSPI enrollment records, 40% of the foster student population received special education services, compared to about 11% of non-foster students.

We revise the definition of “behind grade level” to account for different graduation guidelines that apply to these students. If a student was classified as special education or an English language learner (ELL), we added three years to the acceptable limits for both expected graduation date and age-appropriate grade definition (see Measure 2, next page). When we account for these additional factors, the overall “behind grade level” rate falls to approximately 7% of all students, with foster youth at a nearly identical rate compared to non-foster students.

<sup>7</sup> WAC 180-51-115  
<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.k12.wa.us/GraduationRequirements/pubdocs/GraduationToolkit.pdf>.

**Measure 2**  
**Percent of Students Behind Grade Level by Foster Care Placement Length**  
**(adjusted for special education and ELL status)**



| Time in Foster Care                       | 2005-06     | 2006-07     | 2007-08     | 2008-09     | 2009-10     | 2010-11     |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Non-foster care students</b>           | 22,279 (7%) | 21,859 (6%) | 21,578 (6%) | 23,415 (7%) | 25,081 (7%) | 22,126 (6%) |
| <b>School year placement (3-9 months)</b> | 52 (10%)    | 66 (12%)    | 73 (14%)    | 85 (11%)    | 57 (10%)    | 32 (9%)     |
| <b>Long-term placement (9-12 months)</b>  | 71 (6%)     | 83 (7%)     | 70 (6%)     | 61 (6%)     | 64 (7%)     | 36 (5%)     |
| <b>All foster care students</b>           | 123 (8%)    | 149 (9%)    | 143 (9%)    | 146 (8%)    | 121 (8%)    | 68 (6%)     |

**Data Notes:** See notes for Measure 1 for more information about inclusion criteria. Students are counted as “behind grade level” if the age at which they enter school in the fall is older than other students in the cohort (grade 9-16, grade 10-17, grade 11-18, and grade 12-19), *and* the student’s expected year of graduation is one year (or more) before other students in their current grade (i.e. student in grade 12 was expected to graduate in prior school year). For more information about the assignment of expected graduation years, see <http://www.k12.wa.us/CEDARS/pubdocs/2011-12/2011-12CEDARManual.pdf> (page 7). This definition also provides for an additional three years to expected graduation for special education and ELL students). Results exclude youth in foster care less than 90 days.

**MEASURE THREE: ADJUSTED COHORT  
(LONGITUDINAL) GRADUATION RATE**

Starting in the 2010-11 school year, the United States Department of Education (DOE) began requiring state education agencies to report an “adjusted cohort graduation rate.” This rate is defined as the “number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the class.”<sup>9</sup> The adjusted cohort class includes all students entering ninth grade for the first time in a given year, plus students (from the same age group) who transferred into the cohort. Students who exit from state public schools with a confirmed transfer are excluded from the calculations.

This new adjusted cohort graduation rate provides a standardized definition so that graduation rates can be compared across states and between different student populations. In March 2012, OSPI issued a report that describes the calculations and criteria for the new adjusted cohort methodology.<sup>10</sup>

The “Class of 2011” include 9<sup>th</sup> grade students entering in the fall of 2007. For this most recent cohort, we tracked the adjusted graduation rate for students in a foster care placement for 1-2 years during high school and foster students in placement for 3-4 years during this period. Students in foster care for most or all of their high school career (3-4 years) had a higher adjusted graduation rate than students in care for a shorter period (65% versus 44%). Half of all foster youth in care for at least one year graduated “on time” with the class of 2011 (Exhibit 4). While this rate was lower than the graduation rate for non-foster youth (75%), graduation levels for foster youth have improved in recent years (Measure 3).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Education, High School Graduation Rate, Non-regulatory Guidance (2008): <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/hsgrguidance.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Graduation Rate Calculations in Washington State (2012): <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/pubdocs/GradDropout/GradRateCalculationsinWAStateSchYrsMarch2012.pdf>

**Exhibit 4  
Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate  
Class of 2011**

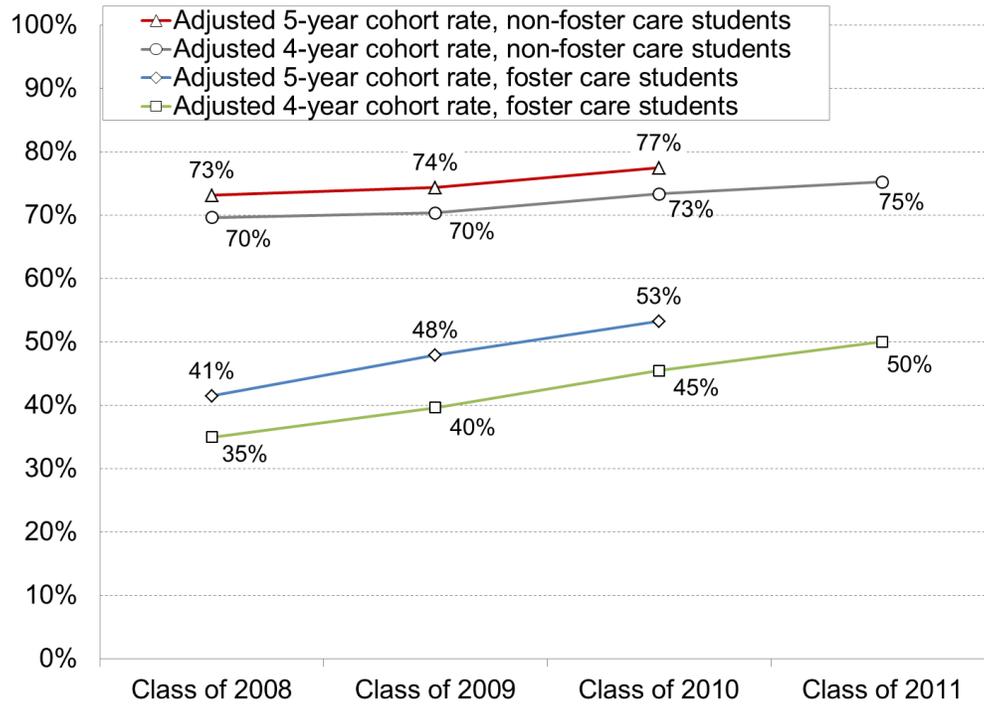
| Foster Status            | Graduated (4 years) | Adjusted Cohort |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Non-foster care youth    | 60,258 (75%)        | 80,159          |
| In foster care 1-2 years | 106 (44%)           | 240             |
| In foster care 3-4 years | 61 (65%)            | 94              |
| All foster care youth    | 167 (50%)           | 334             |

For non-foster students, the adjusted cohort graduation ranged between 70-75% in previous years. An additional 3-4% of the cohort graduated from high school within a five year period.<sup>11</sup> For foster youth, the adjusted cohort graduation rate increased from 35% (class of 2008) to 50% (class of 2011). An additional 8% of the foster youth cohort graduated in five years – for the class of 2008, the graduation rate increased from 45% to 53% after considering these extended graduates.

We also obtained information on completion of General Educational Development (GED) certificates from the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) for the purpose of this analysis. Data on GED completions were available through June 2012. For the class of 2009 cohort, 83 foster youth from the cohort earned a GED by age 20. The overall completion rate for foster youth increases to 72% if GED certificates are considered (compared to 81% for non-foster youth).

<sup>11</sup> We report the most recent year of data available (2010-11) on this measure. Consequently, we cannot report a five-year (extended) graduation rate for the most recent cohort (class of 2011) of students.

**Measure 3**  
**Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate by Foster Care Status**  
**On-Time (4-Year) and Extended (5-Year) Rates**



|                                 | Foster Care Status          | Class of 2008 | Class of 2009 | Class of 2010 | Class of 2011 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>Non-foster care students</b> | 4-year cohort grad. rate    | 57,008 (70%)  | 57,812 (70%)  | 59,860 (73%)  | 60,258 (75%)  |
|                                 | 5-year cohort grad. rate    | 59,876 (73%)  | 61,090 (74%)  | 63,187 (77%)  | *             |
|                                 | GED completions (by age 20) | 65,792 (80%)  | 66,996 (81%)  | *             | *             |
|                                 | <b>Adjusted cohort</b>      | <b>81,924</b> | <b>82,214</b> | <b>81,636</b> | <b>80,159</b> |
| <b>Foster care students</b>     | 4-year cohort grad. rate    | 124 (35%)     | 139 (40%)     | 163 (45%)     | 167 (50%)     |
|                                 | 5-year cohort grad. rate    | 147 (41%)     | 168 (48%)     | 191 (53%)     | *             |
|                                 | GED completions (by age 20) | 216 (61%)     | 251 (72%)     | *             | *             |
|                                 | <b>Adjusted cohort</b>      | <b>355</b>    | <b>351</b>    | <b>359</b>    | <b>334</b>    |

\* Data are not available to calculated extended rates for this cohort.

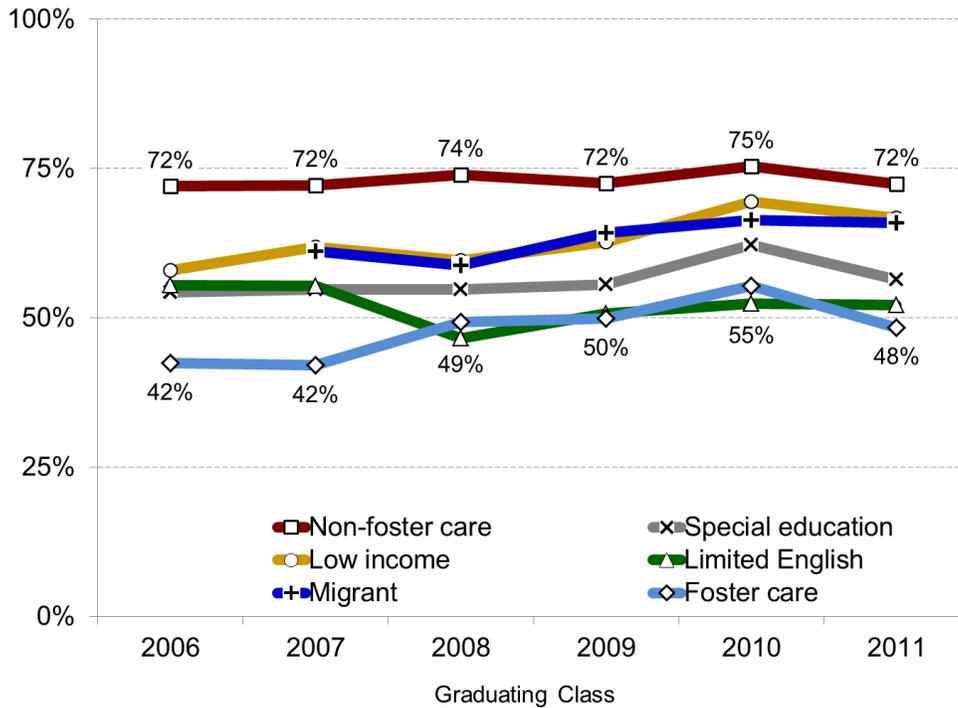
**MEASURE FOUR: ON-TIME GRADUATION RATE**

Each year, OSPI publishes graduation and dropout statistics for Washington State counties, districts, and schools. The traditional method of determining graduation rates is also referred to as the “estimated annual calculation.”<sup>12</sup> This formula estimates an “on-time” graduation rate by subtracting the successive dropout rate (in each grade level) from the total cohort of students expected to graduate in a given year.<sup>13</sup> OSPI also reports various sub-populations of students at risk of not graduating, including low-income, special education, ELL, and migrant students.

Using the matched enrollment data described earlier, we use these OSPI definitions to calculate a graduation rate for non-foster and foster students. Exhibit 5 illustrates those calculated rates and the rates reported in previous OSPI publications.

Using this traditional method, the estimated graduation rate for non-foster youth range is between 72% and 75%. The rate for foster youth rose from 42% (2005-06) to 55% (2009-10) before falling in 2010-11. Foster students had the lowest graduation rate of all at-risk students. As shown in Measure 4 (next page), graduation rates for foster youth in long-term care are higher than foster students in care for 3-9 months.

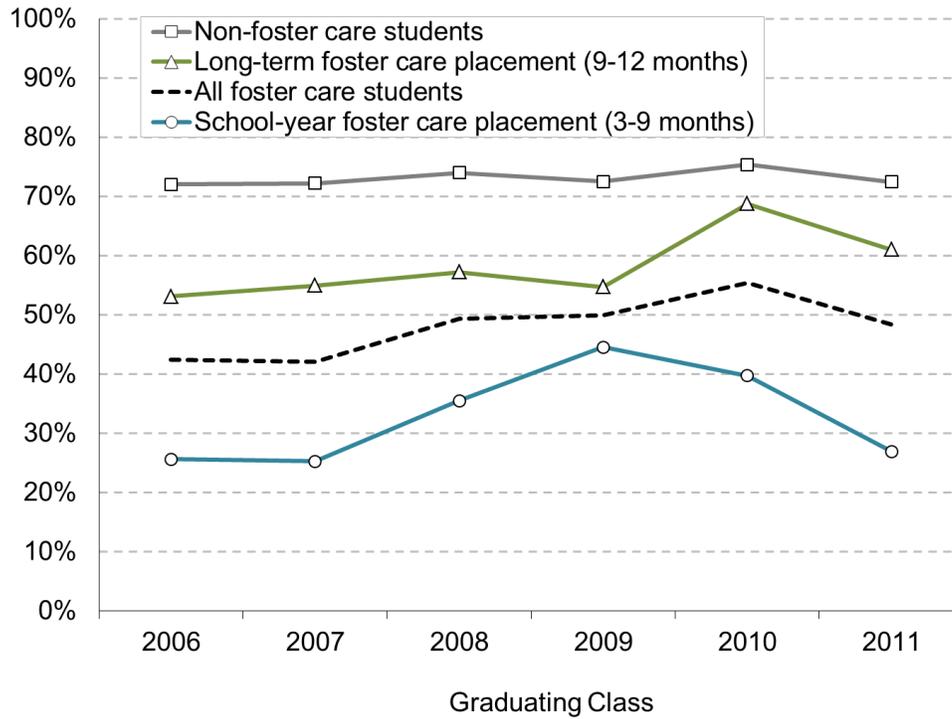
**Exhibit 5  
On-Time Graduation Rate by Student Sub-Population**



<sup>12</sup> The traditional method for calculating a graduation rate (estimated cohort method) will no longer be reported by OSPI after the 2011-12 school year.

<sup>13</sup> On time graduation rate = 100\*(1-grade 9 dropout rate)\*(1-grade 10 dropout rate)\*(1-grade 11 dropout rate)\*(1-grade 12 dropout rate-grade 12 continuing rate).

**Measure 4**  
**On-Time Graduation Rate by Foster Care Placement Length**

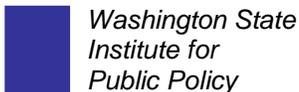


| Time in Foster Care                                   | 2006            | 2007            | 2008            | 2009            | 2010            | 2011            |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| <b>Non-foster care students</b>                       | 57,039<br>(72%) | 58,971<br>(72%) | 56,734<br>(74%) | 59,684<br>(72%) | 61,981<br>(75%) | 62,502<br>(72%) |
| <b>School year foster care placement (3-9 months)</b> | 28 (26%)        | 29 (25%)        | 36 (35%)        | 96 (45%)        | 47 (40%)        | 37 (27%)        |
| <b>Long-term foster care placement (9-12 months)</b>  | 78 (53%)        | 74 (55%)        | 76 (57%)        | 34 (55%)        | 83 (69%)        | 69 (61%)        |
| <b>All foster care students</b>                       | 106 (42%)       | 103 (42%)       | 112 (49%)       | 130 (50%)       | 130 (55%)       | 106 (48%)       |

**Data Notes:** Graduates include the number of students served, minus confirmed dropouts and continuing students. The on-time graduation rate is calculated as:  $100 \times (1 - \text{grade 9 dropout rate}) \times (1 - \text{grade 10 dropout rate}) \times (1 - \text{grade 11 dropout rate}) \times (1 - \text{grade 12 dropout rate} - \text{grade 12 continuing rate})$ . See <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/default.aspx#dropoutgrad> for additional detail. Results exclude youth in foster care less than 90 days.

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