

November 2001

Educational Attainment of Foster Youth: *Achievement and Graduation Outcomes for Children in State Care*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over 12,000 school-age children in Washington State lived in out-of-home care sometime during the past 12 months because of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or family conflict. Nearly half of these children leave state care within 60 days. A significant number, however, spend an extended period of time in foster care or group homes. These long-term foster youth remain state dependents until they move to a permanent placement or until they turn age 18. Until that time, state caseworkers, foster parents, court officials, and others assume responsibility for the health, safety, and education of foster youth. While their physical well-being is followed, little is known about the overall educational status of foster youth.

The 2000 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to:

... review and summarize existing research that identifies problems and barriers to improved educational attainment of children in long-term foster care and suggest ways to improve the availability of information about the educational experiences of these children. EHB 2487 (§ 607(5)).

This report summarizes findings from a statewide analysis of the educational attainment of foster youth in Washington's public school system. The study results demonstrate:

- Foster youth score, on average, 15 to 20 percentile points below non-foster youth in statewide achievement tests.
- Only 59 percent of foster youth enrolled in 11th grade complete high school by the end of grade 12. The completion rate for non-foster youth is 86 percent.
- Even after statistically controlling for a variety of factors, a youth that enters foster care is likely to have lower test scores and graduation rates.
- At both the elementary and secondary levels, twice as many foster youth had repeated a grade, changed schools during the year, or enrolled in special education programs compared with non-foster youth.
- Surprisingly, a youth's length of stay in foster care and other placement characteristics do not appear to be related to educational attainment. Foster youth in short-term care, for example, have on average the same educational deficits as children in long-term foster care.

While this study does not evaluate any particular interventions or programs to assist foster youth with education issues, it does quantify the gap between foster youth and other students in Washington State. This research also identifies the important individual, family, and school issues that are related to a student's success in school.

Currently, very little information about a student's educational background is shared among foster parents, educators, and social workers. This report draws attention to the important factors associated with academic achievement and suggests improvements in maintaining and updating educational records for youth in foster care.