

The pandemic's impact on youth in foster care and how schools are tackling their learning and emotional needs

This brief is aimed at providing K-12 educators and child welfare policy makers and advocates with evidence on which to base their discussions for helping this group of high-risk students and their foster parents and birth parents.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

- 1. What has educational experience been like for youth in foster care during the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- 2. What can we learn from the research on at-risk youth during other periods of school closure that can inform how we address needs and support educational and emotional well-being going forward?**

KEY INSIGHTS

<i>BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE</i>	<i>STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER</i>	<i>STRATEGIES TO AVOID</i>
<p>Foster parents and teachers agree that learning losses have occurred. Though this is true for all students, most foster youth enter school already behind in reading and math.</p> <p>Older youth are at a risk for drop out if they were unengaged in remote learning last year.</p> <p>Foster youth were found to be one of the groups most likely to be unengaged in remote learning.</p>	<p>Tutoring was a frequently mentioned, valued service by foster parents, particularly if it would be offered immediately after school and is tied to classroom content and one to one engagement.</p> <p>*Prioritize the older students who have avoided school during COVID by making additional out-reach (texting, visiting homes and places of employment), making GED classes available if not returning.</p>	<p>Current PA State strategies offered for learning loss (summer school, voluntary retention) were not acceptable to foster parents or birth parents. Birth parents felt that retention would reflect badly on them and harm reunification; foster parents and birth parents view retention and summer school as punishment.</p>
<p>Supportive school environments for teachers, and strong student-teacher and teacher foster parent relationships will help foster youths re-integrate into school.</p>	<p>Teachers are not going to back to teach "typical" students & need coaching on working with traumatized students and how to build connections with students who have experienced disruptions and crisis.</p>	<p>Schools shifting "best teachers" to address high need students can negatively impact all students in the school. Schools should be strategic about reassigning teachers & providing resources to all teachers.</p>
<p>"Education is not their first worry-- these kids have seen a lot of life". Students must feel safe and connected first.</p>	<p>Assume that all youth who are in foster care have historical trauma AND additional covid related-trauma.</p>	<p>Avoid punitive consequences for trauma-related behaviors (anger, inattention). Avoid punishing in ways that lower engagement.</p>

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BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Despite relentless efforts by foster parents and teachers to keep students on track, learning losses have occurred because of the pandemic.^{1,2,7} Youth in foster care are more likely to have educational gaps and are at greater risk of falling even further behind than their non-foster care peers in academic achievement and dropping out³.

- ◇ Educational success is linked to economic success; labor markets and future earnings are negatively impacted.^{4,5} Therefore, helping foster youth get back on track educationally is vitally important for their future.⁶
- ◇ Foster students were found to be less likely to be engaged with remote instruction⁸. In a recent study, foster parents support this finding¹. On-line learning was very challenging to keep students focused on the screen, on tasks, and as one parent commented; learning loss is greater for youth with learning disabilities, *“remote wasn’t great for special needs kids.”*¹⁷
- ◇ Dropping out of school is a risk for the un-engaged foster students ages 14-17.⁶ Older youth who were un-engaged in school were also likely to drop out of school to join work force; during the pandemic, foster family incomes were strained due to higher costs for food and utility bills.¹ Older youth may have been “educationally discouraged” because they could not navigate online and being older, did not receive oversight that foster parents give to younger children. Assumptions were made that older youth were experienced with technology but as one teacher commented, *“just because they know how to navigate TikTok, and video games doesn’t mean that they can navigate online learning platforms with ease....”*.
- ◇ Learning losses are greater for some students than for others.^{8,9} Learning loss is found to be greater for lower income youth⁹, Latinx and African American youth,⁹ and for students with disabilities¹². This is descriptive of young persons in foster care. As cognitive demands increase, children and youth in foster care are more likely to fall behind in learning compared to their peers³.
- ◇ Findings suggest that learning new math skills and math skills retention are the most negatively impacted during school closures^{15,7}. Preliminary “COVID slide” estimates suggest students will return with roughly 70% of learning gains relative to reading. But in mathematics, students are likely to show much smaller gains. It is projected that some will return with less than 50% of learning gains, and in some grades, nearly 12 months behind what we would expect under normal conditions.¹⁶

Supportive school environments for teachers, and strong student-teacher and teacher-foster parent relationships will help support the foster youth who are returning to in-person instruction.⁹

- ◇ Teachers have also experienced stress¹. Many were trying to educate their own children at home while delivering content to their students and managing crises and losses. Teachers had to rapidly learn how to deliver content remotely, make substantial changes in their curriculums, as well as learn how to connect to students and parents who may not have had good internet access.

- ◇ Teachers are not uniformly educated on working with children who have adverse experiences and may know little about the behaviors that are common following abuse and maltreatment.^{10 13}
- ◇ Foster parents were "education warriors"¹: they created lesson plans, learned new math, bought materials, asked for support from extended family to help teach, gave up other activities, and even their jobs, to be full-time teachers at home. Formal education is not the role of a foster parent, yet they tried to teach their children. Foster parents are not always portrayed in a positive light or thought to be highly educated. The foster parents in this study, even if they were not highly educated themselves, were fierce advocates for their foster children's educational needs during the pandemic.

Youth in Foster Care lost access to mental health and counseling when schools shut down in March 2020

- ◇ Mental health services were difficult to access in the community,¹ there were waiting lists and few therapists were available. When they could, foster parents arranged for telehealth visits with school psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors.
- ◇ Some foster parents did identify that spending more time at home with the foster child resulted in a more comprehensive picture of the child's learning problems¹. One foster parent identified her young foster child's attention problems because she was helping her with her classes. She was able to arrange for a telehealth visit with a psychiatrist and psychologist who verified her observations. She may not have noticed this as quickly were she not so engaged in teaching activities.
- ◇ Anxiety and social isolation were identified as mental health problems for all youth during the pandemic¹⁴. The research is not clear as to how much more foster youth were impacted, as the study was not specific to this subgroup, but taking a universal approach is prudent since adolescents experienced higher rates of anxiety, stress and depression during the pandemic¹⁴.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Reasonable Accommodations¹⁸

Reasonable accommodations are modifications or adjustments to the tasks, environment, or the way that things are usually done that enable individuals with disabilities to have equal opportunities to participate in an academic program or job. Providing accommodations does not compromise the essential elements of a course or curriculum, nor does it weaken academic standards. It is simply an alternative way to accomplish the course requirements.

- ◇ 504 plans are used to address reasonable accommodations. Birth and Foster parents need to know that accommodations are possible and that it is not stigmatizing or "marking" their child, rather it helping to address the learning gaps.

Messaging to Birth and Foster Parents

In communicating, it may help to make learning loss “real” and “concrete” to foster parents and birth parents ¹. Foster parents and birth parents (who did not have good experiences in education) may not fully understand the long-term consequences of learning loss for future earnings ⁴⁵. Unfortunately, many African American and Latinx parents, both birth and foster, view education as a negative system and may not want extended school time for their children. Accommodations may feel like punishment or stigmatizing the child ¹.

- ◇ In communicating to foster parents and birth parents, educators and foster care professionals suggested making the learning loss real and concrete: your child lost 180 hours of school which is equivalent to xx days of school. It was also suggested to help parents visualize where they want the child to be in 5 years; can they get there with this math or reading gap? How can we help them? ¹ Even highly involved foster parents may not fully realize that this is far more than the summer slide knowledge loss and will require additional instruction time.
- ◇ The typical “message” about grade retention was not positively received by birth or foster parents ¹. “Give your child the gift of time” did not resonate with those for whom extra time in school is viewed as a punishment. *“It wasn’t their fault—this is punishment”* was a common response to the question of voluntarily repeating a year. How retention is discussed with birth parents (who typically have educational rights) is very important as they believe that a retention year will reflect badly on their efforts to get their children back. Working with CYF and judges to ensure that this is not perceived as a “black mark” against the parent (birth or foster) will be critical if foster youth would be best helped by repeating a grade.

“This isn’t going to be like any other school year”

Many foster parents felt that their teachers assuming their foster child is on “grade” would be a mistake as most of their foster children already come into their care often a full grade year behind due to truancy and multiple school changes; and they were not sure how much their child(ren) learned in remote education due to inattention because keeping children focused was very challenging ¹.

- ◇ Foster parents can be fierce advocates for foster children which can be perceived as adversarial by teachers. Seeing this for what it is--a drive to make sure that their foster child receives all the help they need--and not a challenge, is the first step to collaboration ¹⁹. It is critical that teachers communicate with foster parents about what is happening in the classroom, and foster parents talk to teachers about what is happening in the home and with the different systems that foster children are involved with. Developing positive relationships with foster parents can help teachers to find out what is happening in "distal" (non-classroom settings such as home) that may be affecting classroom behavior. ¹¹¹

- ◇ Older youth who disengaged with remote school last year need to be re-engaged ⁸. These youth will require a different set of strategies to engage, particularly if they have entered the job market. For example, making GED preparation more accessible may be a better strategy for youth who have left school and started working during COVID than having them back in the classroom.
- ◇ Individualized and ongoing assessments and intensive tutoring and communicating with foster parents will be needed to prevent children from falling even farther behind.
- ◇ It is possible to close the learning loss gap between where they are and where they should be in math and reading. Evidence from summer programs offered in 2020 were effective in improving one outcome ²⁵. Another promising academic example is Acceleration Academies which helped students gain up to three months of learning through 25 hours of targeted instruction in a single subject ^{26 27}. Another evidence-informed method is one-on-one support for students, providing “high-dosage” tutoring and coaching, tying tutoring content to class content ²⁸. The evidence suggests that these kinds of intensive programs to close the gap on learning loss are more effective than low-dose volunteer programs on a weekly or on an ad hoc basis. However, how summer school and extended time in instruction is explained to birth and foster parents will be critical to getting them to agree and support this for their student.¹

“They lost more than a normal person in the last year”

Youth in foster care have had additional losses during the pandemic –they lost visits with siblings in other homes, visitation with birth parents, adoptions were postponed due to court closures. Time frames for judicial hearings were delayed. Young persons in foster care have little control over their lives. Teachers may not always know if a child is in foster care, but given the extraordinary circumstances of this past year, teachers should use a universal trauma-informed approach with all children.

- ◇ Teachers talked about the importance of assessing and responding to a child’s social emotional skills ¹. For youth who have enjoyed isolation and thrived in remote learning, being back in school halls and classrooms will be stressful. For other youth, social skills after a year of isolation may be out of practice and will need help with engaging with peers and adults in appropriate ways.
- ◇ Teachers should try to communicate clearly and engage with all students, but particularly with foster youth who have a history of trauma and fractured relationships during this COVID pandemic period ¹⁷.
- ◇ Resuming mental health services in the school for all students (this reduces stigma) as soon as possible

Use universal school evidence-based responses to emotionally intense symptoms and behaviors when youth are having problems regulating emotions

- ◇ Although primarily descriptive, the research on co-regulation for older youth in foster care is emerging and promising and could be practiced in educational settings²¹
- ◇ Collaborating with foster parents to gather data on distal events so that teachers and counselors can create effective strategies and behavior plans for changing antecedents and consequences and reducing episodes. ¹¹
- ◇ School-wide intervention alternatives to zero tolerance disciplinary actions which have some evidence for success include restorative school interventions ²³. Additionally, school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) has been implemented and evaluated since the early 2000's as a school-wide approach to supporting positive behaviors and as promoting a positive school culture. Recently SWPBS have been adapted for schools with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds ²⁴.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Zero tolerance disciplinary policies

- ◇ Black students and those with disabilities receive disproportionate school suspensions ²². Suspensions and expulsions have lasting negative impacts on children, increasing rates of academic failure, dropout, and incarceration ²². Suspending and expelling students will only exacerbate learning losses and poor engagement that occurred due to the COVID pandemic.

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