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# Students in Foster Care at Risk of School Failure: Addressing Multiple Needs

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**Students in Foster Care at Risk of School Failure:**

**Addressing Multiple Needs**

by

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the research literature on the school performance of students in foster care, and the implications for special education teachers in providing services for these vulnerable students. Students in foster care fall behind their peers on every measure of school success: academic achievement scores, behavioral referrals and disciplinary actions, identification as special education students, grade retention and graduation rates. Factors that contribute to school failure for foster students include multiple school transfers, attending low-performing schools, disrupted attendance, unmet need for mental health services, unsatisfactory communication between school and child welfare professionals, and high rates of poverty among foster care students. Special education teachers of foster care students need to work with a complex network of child welfare professionals, advocating for the needs of students and collaborating with school staff and outside agencies to serve the multiple needs of students in foster care.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

When families cannot provide safe care for their children, the child welfare system acts with the authority of the state, placing children into protective care and determining if the child may safely return to the family of origin, or if they need further protection in the foster care system (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). Children in the United States enter foster care mainly because of maltreatment by a primary caregiver (Palladino, 2003). Child maltreatment includes neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse, caused by parents or primary caregivers (Children's Bureau, 2013). In 2015, there were approximately 3.4 million maltreatment reports to child welfare agencies, resulting in 683,000 confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). Of those confirmed cases of maltreatment, 75.3 percent were neglect, 17.2 percent were physical abuse, and 8.4 percent were sexual abuse (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). In response to the growing concerns over the risks for children exposed to drug manufacturing and distribution, such as the production of methamphetamine, many states have expanded their definitions of child abuse or neglect to include such exposure, and have developed procedures for placing children into protective care (Children's Bureau, 2016a). When newborn infants present with symptoms of prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, child protection agencies begin procedures for ensuring the safety of the newborn (Children's Bureau, 2016a).

Family courts determine the next steps to ensure children are in safe care (Children's Bureau, 2013). When family courts order removal from the home, the state becomes legally responsible for determining placement, supervising the care being provided, and ultimately, determining a permanency outcome for the child. (Palladino, 2003). Foster care placements

range from an approved relative (kinship care), non-relative foster parent, therapeutic foster homes with specially trained foster parents, residential group homes, or other types of congregate care facilities (Children's Bureau, 2013).

The number of children in foster care nearly doubled between 1985 and 2005, with 276,000 children in foster care in 1985, rising to 523,000 children in 2005 (Geenen & Powers, 2006). Since then, the total number of children in foster care has declined significantly; with 415,129 children in foster care in 2014. Although the figures fluctuate, the overall trend has been a reduction in foster care placements and increased efforts to provide in-home supports and supervision (Children's Bureau, 2016b).

### **Sociodemographic Risks**

Stone (2007) suggests increased sociodemographic risks, such as poverty, larger family size, high mobility, inconsistent parenting practices, and neighborhood crime, increase the risk of maltreatment and foster care placement. The same sociodemographic risks are also associated with increased risks of school failure (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge & Courtney, 2004). A disproportionate percentage of children in foster care are poor, racial minorities from large urban areas, attending large urban school districts that are often overcrowded and underfunded (Conger & Finklestein, 2003). Given the historical prevalence of concentrated areas of poverty in urban minority communities, the overrepresentation of minority children in foster care, especially African American children, raises serious questions about racial bias and inequitable access to social supports. Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) reported that African American youth were significantly more likely to be removed from the home, and spend longer times in foster care, compared to White youth with the same type of maltreatment reports. Key factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care include: higher

rates of poverty, housing instability, difficulty accessing support services, racial bias and cultural distrust between child welfare and families (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008).

African American children stay in foster care longer due to the lack of services provided for parents to successfully reunify with their children, the difficulty of finding adoptive parents, and the greater reliance on kinship foster care providers, who may be unwilling to terminate parental rights and who often need the financial subsidy from child welfare in order to provide for the children in their care (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008). Fourteen years ago, Conger and Finkelstein (2003) reported that 48 percent of foster children were African American, and 15 percent were Hispanic. By 2014, there was a significant shift in the racial distribution of children in foster care: 24 percent of children in foster care were African American, 22 percent were Hispanic, and 10 percent were of mixed or other races (Children's Bureau, 2016b). A comparison of U.S. census demographics from 2016 reported the total percentage of African Americans was 13.3 percent, the Hispanic or Latino population was 17.8 percent, and 9.8 percent were identified as other races and multiracial persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The census comparison shows African American children are significantly overrepresented in the foster care system.

### **Kinship Care**

Growing evidence suggests that youth in kinship care fare better than youth in non-relative foster care or group homes (Stone, 2007). Kinship care provides the benefits of close ties with biological family, and a greater likelihood of continued enrollment in the same neighborhood schools (Conger & Finklestein, 2003). The financial, emotional, medical and logistic difficulty for kin caregivers has been reported in numerous studies; relative caregivers are more likely to be older, less educated, in poorer health, unemployed, and living on welfare

benefits, compared to non-relative caregivers. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012; Stone, 2007; Conger & Rebeck, 2001). Child welfare caseworkers, in accordance with the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, are required to investigate and consider kin placements whenever possible (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, 2008). Recognizing the benefits to the child in kinship care, and the additional financial hardship placed on kin caregivers, the act also provided increased funding for kinship foster care assistance programs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). Overall, the educational levels and socioeconomic status of both kinship and foster parents are lower, compared to non-foster families (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006).

### **Voluntary and PINS Placement**

Conger and Rebeck (2001) identify two additional reasons for foster care placement: voluntary placement, and Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS). A PINS placement occurs when parents feel they can no longer care for their child, usually due to delinquent behaviors or safety concerns (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). Voluntary placements occur when families request help for the significant medical or mental health needs of their children with disabilities (Hill, 2017). Children who entered foster care through voluntary placement were found to be older, more likely to remain in foster care group settings for longer periods of time, and more likely to run away from their placement settings, compared to children who entered foster care by court order for protective custody (Hill, 2017).

### **Overrepresentation in Special Education**

Students in foster care represent a vulnerable school population, at great risk of school failure, with medical and mental health problems, and a relatively high need for special education and social work services in schools (Evans, 2001; Smithgall, et al., 2004; Scherr,

2007; Allen & Vacca, 2010). The high prevalence of special education disability status among children in foster care has been consistently reported in the literature (Smithgall, et al., 2004; Geenan & Powers, 2006; Scherr, 2007; Allen & Vacca, 2010). Researchers Smucker, Kaufman and Ball (1996) reported that students in foster care were three to five times more likely to receive special education with a primary disability of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) compared to the general student population. More recent research found similar data; Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen and Powers (2012) reported 40 to 47 percent of children in foster care received special education services, with EBD as the most common disability category. Evans (2001) reported that students in foster care were at least twice as likely to receive special education for learning disabilities, compared to the general student population.

### **Educational Risks**

Along with higher rates of special education needs, several researchers found additional indicators of educational risks, including higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, significant below-grade-level academic performance, higher rates of grade retention, and significantly lower rates of graduation for students in foster care (Zima, et al., 2000; Smithgall, et al., 2004; Allen & Vacca, 2010). Scherr (2007) compared retention and disciplinary actions between students in foster care and students in the general population; findings reported the grade retention rate among foster students was 33 percent, compared to 9 percent of students in the general population. Thirty two percent of the students in foster care reported at least one suspension or expulsion, compared to 13 percent of the students in the general population (Scherr, 2007). Less than 50 percent of students who reach the age of 18 and “age out” of foster care graduate from high school or earn a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), compared to 85 percent of the general student population (Allen & Vacca, 2010).

There is a growing body of research on the characteristics of youth in foster care, the effects on measures of school performance and child well-being, and the evaluation of policies and practices that help or hinder supports for foster children. Given the probability that nearly half of all students in foster care will receive special education services, it is important for special education teachers to understand the factors that impact the child, the needs of foster parents with regard to support and communication from schools, and the complex network of persons involved in the child's supervision within the child welfare system. The high numbers of youth in foster care is a critical concern for all who are involved in the work of helping children grow, learn and transition successfully into adulthood.

### **Research Questions**

Two questions guided the research and selection of articles for this paper:

- 1) How are students in foster care performing on measures of school success?
- 2) What are the implications for special education teachers who work with students in foster care?

### **Focus of the Research**

Research articles were limited to children in the U.S. placed in out-of-home foster care. The studies included in the review of literature focus on foster students' educational experiences and barriers to school success, along with recommendations for policies and practices that help meet the multiple needs of students in foster care. Some of the research differentiates data according to the reason for placement into foster care, while other researchers sought answers to different questions, and did not separate data by reasons for placement. To locate relevant studies, I conducted searches on Academic Search Premier and Google Scholar, using keywords, *foster care*, *child welfare education*, *school interventions*

*with foster care children, special education, and foster care students.* I also found relevant articles by bibliographic branching from authors' references. In order to gather relevant available data from government databases, I examined the most recent website reports from Child Welfare Information Gateway, and the U.S. Children's Bureau, agencies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

### **Importance of the Topic**

As a licensed EBD special education teacher, I have served as a case manager for several students in foster care. All of the foster care students on my caseload had a primary disability of EBD. On several occasions, there were delays in communication about special education services, due to the process of obtaining proper documentation for persons legally authorized to make educational decisions for the child. It has been difficult to get timely notification and foster parent contact information when a student moved from one temporary placement to another. In some cases, I need to communicate with the child welfare caseworker, the current foster parent, and the biological parent, all of whom are IEP team members. Recognizing the likelihood that students in foster care have experienced trauma and family stress, I want to improve my skills in collaborating with foster families, school staff, and child welfare agencies, to reduce barriers and address the multiple needs of my students in foster care. The sheer magnitude of hundreds of thousands of vulnerable children in the child welfare system warrants serious attention from educators and social services professionals.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Child welfare* is a continuum of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their children successfully. Child welfare systems

operate in best interests of the child, securing and supervising safe placements in foster care or adoption, and determining permanency outcomes for the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

*Emotional or Behavioral Disorders* (EBD) is defined as: a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances. (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression. (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017).

*Grade retention* is the practice of holding a student back from advancing to the next grade in school, due to the school team's determination that repeating the same grade is necessary to learn essential skills before advancing to the next grade. Students retained in this manner are "Old for Grade" (Smithgall, et al., 2004).

*Transition* in foster care refers to the period when youth turn 18 and exit or "age out" from foster care and begin independent living as an adult. (Palladino, 2003). In special education, *transition* refers to the comprehensive area of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), to help the student prepare for post-high school, including education, career plans, social relationships, independent living skills, and community participation (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017).

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

This paper includes a review of nine research projects, including research focused on the qualitative data derived from experiences of children and other stakeholders in the foster care system, voices of youth transitioning into adulthood out of foster care, and research using large-scale data analysis of children in foster care in major urban cities. Table 2 summarizes the findings of these studies.

### **Educational Experiences of Youth in Foster Care**

Smithgall, et al., (2004) embarked upon a large-scale, multi-faceted research project, in collaboration with Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS), Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and other child welfare groups. The researchers reported findings from a study assessing the educational experiences of youth in out-of-home care and attending Chicago Public Schools. The study included a quantitative analysis of data from both child welfare and CPS, and qualitative interviews of caseworkers, school staff and foster caregivers.

Data from the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Integrated Database on Child and Family services in Illinois was matched to CPS students in 2003. The children identified (N=4,467) as foster students were assessed using the following indicators of school performance: scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a standardized reading test administered to all third-through-eighth grade students in CPS, rates of grade retention, high school dropout rates, and rates of special education services. The researchers used an analytical approach and statistical technique called hierarchical linear modeling, to analyze the CPS students in foster care with three other comparison groups. The comparison groups included CPS students with no reported maltreatment and not in foster care (CPS comparison group), students who were maltreated but

not removed from the home, and students who were once in foster care but then gained a permanent home placement.

The demographics of the students in foster care showed an overwhelming majority of African American students in foster care: 87.6 percent African American, 3.9 percent White, and 8.2 percent Latino. Twenty two percent of the students were in kinship care, 16.7 percent were in non-relative foster care, 22.8 percent were in a combination of kinship and non-relative care, and the remaining 37.9 percent were in multiple placements, group or institutional placements. Seventy two percent of the students had been in foster care for two or more years.

Smithgall, et al. (2004) found concentrations of foster students attending a small percentage of CPS schools. Of the elementary schools attended, 48 percent were low achieving schools, and 30 percent were extremely low achieving schools, as measured by scores on nationally normed reading tests. By comparison, 26 percent of total CPS schools were low achieving, and 17 percent were extremely low achieving. In the high schools with more than 20 students in foster care, 94 percent had 4-year dropout rates that exceeded 30 percent. By comparison, 48 percent of other CPS high schools had dropout rates exceeding 30 percent. The data suggests that the low academic performance of students in foster care may be partially attributed to attendance at a lower performing school. Accounting for the likelihood that children from similar demographics and schools would have lower achievement scores, the researchers used hierarchical linear modeling to compare the students in foster care with other students of similar demographics and school attendance.

The researchers analyzed data from the nationally normed reading scores from third-through-eighth grade CPS students, estimating that 13 points on the standard scale represents about a year's worth of learning. Compared to the CPS general population comparison group,

students in foster care scored 15.7 points lower, which represents about a full year and two months behind their peers. When controlling for demographic and school factors, the discrepancy was narrowed, with students in foster care scoring 7.5 points lower than peers, representing a gap of a little more than a half year of school learning. Under similar data controls, the comparison group of students who had maltreatment reports but were not removed from the home scored 5.8 points lower than peers, and students in permanent foster homes scored 5.6 points lower than peers (Table 1).

The study investigated whether there were significant differences in reading scores, between the types of foster placements, controlling for demographic and school factors. The findings showed that students in kinship care had the lowest discrepancy rate of 5.8 points below peers, and students in institutionalized care had the highest discrepancy rate of 25 points below peers. Table 1 shows discrepancy rates in reading for students in each placement type.

The researchers analyzed the degree to which first-through-eighth grade students were Old for Grade, indicating at least one year of grade retention. Overall, 20 to 25 percent of CPS students are Old for Grade, compared to 40 percent of students in foster care. Using a statistical model to control for demographic and school factors, a student in foster care was 1.8 times more likely to be Old for Grade, compared to peers. Students maltreated, but not removed from the home, were 1.6 times more likely to be Old for Grade, and students in permanent home placements were 1.3 times more likely to be Old for Grade. Students in institutionalized care were 2.3 times more likely to be Old for Grade (Table 1).

The authors reported that all students in CPS schools identified as special education (SPED) had increased dramatically over the ten years between 1993 and 2003, rising from 7.7 percent to 11.6 percent, respectively. Students in foster care were 3.5 times more likely to be

classified as SPED, compared to CPS students in general. Even though students in foster care made up less than 1 percent of students in CPS, nearly 40 percent of all CPS students classified as EBD were either in foster care, or identified as maltreated. Nearly three-fourths of students in foster care and classified as EBD scored in the bottom quartile on standardized reading tests. Ninety percent of the students in foster care scored below national norms for their grade. The researchers also reported a higher rate of Learning Disability (LD) classification among students in foster care, with about 20 percent of students in care classified as LD, compared to 12 percent of other CPS students. Using the same controls for demographics and school factors, students in the child welfare system were still 3.5 times more likely to be identified as SPED. Students maltreated, but not removed from the home, were 1.5 times more likely to be in SPED, and students in permanent home placements were 2 times more likely to be in SPED (Table 1).

The researchers examined data from students who were 14 years old in 1998, to determine whether they had dropped out 5 years later, in 2003, the year of the study. In an unadjusted model, students in foster care were 3 times more likely to drop out of school, but when controlling for demographic and school factors, the odds ratio reduced to about twice as likely to drop out before graduating (Table 1). For the youth who should have graduated by 2003, the graduation rate was less than 30 percent. Additional data suggested the teens in foster care were struggling with delinquency behaviors; ten percent of 15-year-old youth were incarcerated in 1998, and nearly 40 percent of youth had run away from their foster care placement at least once before dropping out of school. The data suggests that there may be critical periods when high school students may benefit from additional supports to help them stay in school and graduate. Table 1 on page 18 summarizes the research data.

**Table 1. Comparing Reading Scores of Students in Foster Care, Odds Ratio of Old for Grade, and High School Dropout Rates, Controlling for Demographic and School Factors.**

Comparison Group or placement type	Score discrepancy on 3 <sup>rd</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grade standardized reading tests	Odds ratio of being Old for Grade	Odds ratio of having a SPED disability	Odds ratio of students aged 14 yrs. in 1998, dropping out within 5 years, controlling for demographics, school factors, and being Old for Grade
Students in foster care	-7.5	1.8	3.5	1.8
Maltreated, but not removed from home	-5.8	1.6	1.5	1.9
Permanent home placement	-5.6	1.3	2.0	1.9
<b>Data analyzed according to placement type:</b>				
Placement type: kinship care	-5.8	1.8		Not reported in this study (NR)
Placement type: non-relative foster care	-9.0	1.7		NR
Placement type: both kinship & non-relative foster care	-4.6	1.7		NR
Placement type: primarily institutionalized	-25.0	2.3		NR
Placement type: multiple, with substantial institutionalized care	-7.5	1.4		NR
Placement type: Other placement history	-9.6	1.9		NR

Smithgall et al., (2004) conducted qualitative interviews with twelve Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) case workers, six school SPED case managers or counselors, six principals, nine foster parents, and two residential care staff. The twelve caseworkers reported a range of 5 to 12 different schools attended by students on their caseload. Eight of the caseworkers were in the Chicago area. Three of the four caseworkers outside of Chicago reported that children on their caseloads attended schools as far as 40 to 50 miles away from their offices. One of the caseworkers described their feeling of the lack of connection with schools, saying:

you know [kids in foster care] just sometimes kind of get lost...in the cracks because I've come out to a school and I might have been the seventh worker that the school has seen since the child has been in eighth grade...which would be a good thing if he has only had seven workers and he has been in the same school. [The teachers] don't remember my name. I'm looking in my book so I can remember theirs. I mean it's just different (p. 36).

Smithgall, et al. (2004) analyzed qualitative data examining patterns of school mobility, enrollment and special education, and the effects of each on the communication patterns between schools, foster parents and caseworkers. Many of the DCFS caseworkers and school staff suggested that the flow of information for students in foster care should occur as it would normally for other families, with school staff communicating directly with foster parents. Three of the principals interviewed stated that foster parents had the same role as birth parents regarding the school affairs of their wards, and several of the caseworkers indicated that they see the foster parent as the primary source of information and the central party for all school communications. The DCFS caseworkers described their communication with the schools as being primarily administrative, with some reporting that they do not actually talk to the teachers; they just request that the teachers fill out the forms and send them back.

Some foster parents said that they felt abandoned, with no one to help them with their responsibilities as caregivers. Five of the foster parents interviewed had four or more children in the home, and in all but two homes, the children attended multiple schools. The foster parents were also employed, and found it difficult to manage all of the various school communications, appointments and other service arrangements. Interviews with two residential group home staff showed somewhat more clear communication pathways between the staff and schools. Group homes have designated persons who are knowledgeable of school procedures, and are responsible for school communications.

The qualitative interviews also suggested that communication between DCFS caseworkers and schools improved when an education liaison was involved. Education Liaisons are appointed persons in the child welfare system, assigned to work with specific students, to facilitate communication, educational services and due process in special education, record transfers, and parent involvement. Nine of the twelve caseworkers interviewed in the study reported working with an education liaison, most often for assistance with the special education process. They reported that the education liaisons helped with facilitating communication, retrieving information, and saving the caseworker time. Three of the foster parents indicated they had a helpful experience with an education liaison, especially in facilitating communication with schools.

The study examined data on school mobility among students in foster care, and found that 67 percent of students changed schools when entering foster care in 2003. As foster placements were longer and more stable, the school mobility rate decreased, with 28 percent of students in foster care for longer than two years changing schools in 2003. The change of schools resulted in some students missing school days, due to the delay in sending or receiving necessary

paperwork, ranging from 1 day to 2 weeks. The special education process was the most time consuming, to get all of the necessary paperwork transferred from one school to another, a process delayed by the need for authorizations and signatures required for release of information. Several foster parents shared concerns about the social-emotional impact on the child when moving to a new school. One foster parent advocated for more transition-related school support for the child, such as assigning a counselor to work with them, starting the transition with school tours, and introductions to tutors and school staff.

Qualitative interviews with caseworkers, school staff, and caregivers suggest that the IEP process requires involvement of many parties. Interview respondents were asked to characterize the role of DCFS caseworkers in the IEP process as either an active “advocate” or a more passive “administrator”. Seven of the caseworkers described their role as being more akin to an administrator, whose purpose was to collect records, attend some meetings, provide some history of the child, and conduct mandated follow-up with the school. Five of the caseworkers said their role in the IEP process was that of an advocate, in which they initiate, promote, support and help design the IEP for the student. One caseworker explained that she was actively involved in planning academic courses a student would take; another caseworker described being closely involved when a school was proposing removing the student from speech services. Some of the caregivers said they perceived the caseworkers’ involvement in the IEP process as interceding only when there was a problem. School staff viewed DCFS caseworkers’ roles in the IEP process as more administrative than advocative. A viewpoint echoed by all of the school SPED case managers was that the DCFS caseworkers’ involvement was sporadic, and that most do not participate in the process at all.

Of the nine foster parents interviewed, seven had foster children in SPED. Five of those said they were involved in the IEP process, had attended meetings and could provide information about recommendations that came out of the meetings. Several of the foster parents said they did not understand the IEP process, and two of the parents who had actively participated in the process admitted they did not understand much of what was discussed. One parent described her feeling that she was not actually involved in any of the decision-making, by saying:

I was lost...I think they had already done it before I got there and they just kind[of] were in a hurry. It seemed to me like they were in a hurry and they just kind of said here's the papers. This is what's what and basically we go straight for the goal and to the plan (p. 67).

Smithgall, et al. (2004) concluded that the relatively consistent findings across all academic achievement measures were a cause for concern. Students in foster care are entering CPS schools already old for grade, and by 8 years old, they are an average of a full year's learning behind their peers. This finding suggests that early interventions and intensive academic supports may help to reduce the pervasive achievement discrepancies for students in foster care. Students in foster care are more likely to change schools, further disrupting their educational progress, and causing more social-emotional distress. The lower academic performance at the time of entry into foster care suggests that part of the academic problems may stem from experiences prior to the child's referral into the child welfare system. The academic challenges are further compounded by the students' likely attendance in one of the lowest achieving schools in CPS, and the higher rate of school mobility.

Students in foster care are significantly more likely to have a special education classification, particularly an emotional or behavioral disorder or learning disability. Academic and behavioral challenges follow students throughout their school careers, and among high school students, those in foster care are at least twice as likely to drop out of school.

The connections between DCFS caseworkers, school staff, and foster parents are constrained by the current approach to case assignment, placement instability for foster students, and caseworker turnover. Communication between all parties involved in the students' school affairs, especially the IEP process, is often complex and sometimes ineffective. The authors of this study highlight the importance of addressing the educational needs of all students in the child welfare system, with different placement types and reasons for placement indicating somewhat different needs among the children. The qualitative interviews provide some insights into the need for strong advocates to act on behalf of the students in foster care, and to facilitate better communication among the many different people who play a role in helping the students succeed in school.

### **Relationship Between Foster Care Experience and School Performance**

Conger and Rebeck (2001) conducted a large-scale research project, at the request of the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and in collaboration with the NYC Board of Education. The researchers examined the relationship between children's foster care experiences and their school performance. The authors suggest that decisions about the placement of children in foster care, including the types of placements, decisions to move to a new placement, and when or whether to reunify the child with the family influence children's educational outcomes.

The researchers hypothesized that foster children in more restrictive settings (congregate homes) would have worse educational outcomes than children in less restrictive settings (kinship and foster homes). They also expected to find that children who had multiple placements or who ran away from foster homes would have poorer school achievement. Another hypothesis was

that children who entered into foster care more recently would show better school performance than those who entered care earlier, due to improved ACS policies beginning in 1996. The researchers were uncertain about the relationship between several other foster care variables, such as length of time in foster care and the reason for placement into foster care. The reasons for entry into foster care were maltreatment and removal from home, voluntary placement, and Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS). The researchers did not investigate the differences between maltreatment types because they were unable to distinguish between neglected children and abused children. The researchers expected to find a relationship between placement type and attendance and school transfers, and they further expected that attendance and school transfers would affect both one another and academic achievement.

Data collection procedures included matching the records of NYC foster children in the New York State Child Care Review Service database to student records in the NYC school system. This match located the combined educational and foster care records of 17,422 school-age children who entered foster care between 1995 and 1999. The database identified attendance rates, exam scores, and other educational indicators for all five cohorts (children who entered care in each year, between 1995 and 1999). Several variables were created from foster care records: 1) time in care, as restricted to the particular timeframe in the different data analyses, 2) placement type, identified as kinship, foster, or congregate homes, 3) youth who had run away from their foster homes, 4) year of foster placement, and 5) reason for placement, identified as maltreatment, voluntary, or PINS. Demographic variables include age, ethnicity and gender. Educational variables include performance prior to placement, school enrollment, time enrolled in school after placement, and whether the semester after placement is in fall or spring. The researchers used the term educational outcomes to identify common measures of school

performance, including attendance, school transfers, reading and math scores. School transfers that were identified as educationally related were not included, such as placements into special education programs or alternative high schools.

Conger and Rebeck (2001) used multivariate analysis to examine the influence of variables on the measures of educational performance indicators. This technique enabled the researchers to isolate the influence of each variable on the indicator being measured, controlling for the others. In all of the analyses, the educational scores were modeled after entry into foster care, controlling for scores prior to foster care entry. The continuous outcomes of attendance, reading and math scores were analyzed using a Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression model. In all models, the conventional cutoff of  $p < 0.05$  is used to indicate statistical significance.

More than half of the study group children were placed in foster homes, and 65 percent entered care due to maltreatment. Half the children were still in foster care one year after placement. Thirteen percent of the children were identified as AWOLS at least once in the year after foster care placement, and 37 percent were transferred to a new foster home at least once after initial placement. Demographic characteristics show 55.8 percent of children were African American, 34.2 percent were Latino, 7 percent were White, 2.3 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 0.6 percent were American Indian or Alaskan Native.

The students in the study group were performing lower than other NYC district students at the time of entry into foster care, and made very little improvement after placement into care. Students' attendance rates before placement averaged 76.2 percent—lower than the district average of over 80 percent. After foster care placement, attendance rates improved slightly, to 77.7 percent. Twenty-seven percent of the students in foster care had experienced a school

transfer during the year before placement; after placement, 57 percent of students experienced at least one school transfer. Third through eighth grade reading scores were almost one-half of a standard deviation (-0.47) lower than average, before foster care placement. Math scores were even lower; with students in foster care scoring -0.54 below the district mean. A change of one-quarter of a standard deviation (0.25) is considered a statistically significant change in cognitive achievement. Overall, the scores improved slightly after placement; reading scores improved 0.02 and math scores improved 0.01.

Conger and Rebeck (2001) examined the educational performance indicator of attendance, controlling for attendance in the semester before placement, and comparing rates between placement types. Multivariate analysis isolated each variable in the group categories, controlling for variables such as age and the amount by which being in a particular group increased or decreased attendance, relative to the other group types. Multivariate analysis showed that students in congregate homes decreased attendance rates by -2.68 percentage points, while students in foster and kinship homes had no significant variance from each other, so no multivariate analysis coefficient was calculated. However, bivariate analysis using attendance data from before and after placement, showed the students increased attendance by 4.4 percent in foster homes, and 7 percent in kinship homes.

Students who spent the entire semester in care during the study sampling increased attendance by 4.5 percent after placement. Those who spent only a portion of the semester in care had a decline in attendance, with a coefficient of -4.58 percent, and those who were not in care during any school semester, such as a shorter placement in summer months, had a -2.75 percent decline in attendance. AWOLS showed the most significant decrease in attendance, with the multivariate analysis coefficient score of -11.26 percentage points. PINS decreased

attendance by a coefficient of -3.88, but the voluntary placement group did not show statistically significant decline in attendance after placement, and the maltreated group showed an increase coefficient of 1.12 after placement. As the researchers expected, the attendance rates improved with the most recent years of placement, indicating that the ACS changes had a positive effect on attendance. In 1995, foster students' attendance after placement declined by a coefficient of -2.46; in 1998 the decline was -0.78, and by 1999, attendance had improved by 1.5 percent.

The results of the analysis of school mobility yielded unexpected results. Students who transferred schools after placement had a slightly better attendance coefficient (0.67) than students who did not transfer. The longer children remained in care, the more likely a school transfer would occur. Students in care for under 3 months had an adjusted probability of 50.9 percent for a school transfer, compared to 62.3 percent for students in care for the whole school year. Students in foster homes had an adjusted probability of 68.5 percent that they would transfer schools, compared to kinship and congregate homes, with an adjusted probability of 48.5 percent each. Other groups that showed significantly increased probability of school transfers were AWOLS (64.4%), PINS (66%), and students who had foster care placement transfers (67.4%). The high probability for PINS school transfers is due to the older age of children entering care on PINS petitions, and the higher degree of care and treatment options that may need to be coordinated along with school services. The overall probability of school transfers did not change significantly over the 5 years included in the study data. In 1995, the adjusted probability of a transfer was 58.2 percent, and in each subsequent four years, the adjusted probability was between 58.4 and 59.8 percent.

There were only three foster care variables found to influence the reading and math exam scores of students in care. There was no relationship between exam scores and placement type,

AWOLS, or students who transferred foster homes. There were modest associations of the other variables: reason for placement, year of placement, and time in care. Children placed for maltreatment showed a slight increase in math scores, with a coefficient score of 0.13 ( $p < .05$  considered statistically significant). The attendance rate positively influenced both the reading and math scores, with coefficients of 0.004 and 0.005, respectively. If students transferred schools between the two math exam times, the scores were negatively affected. Coefficient scores for math exams were -0.053, a statistically significant decline for students who transferred schools between exams. The attendance rates were the most important positive influence on exam scores. The various foster home placement types influenced attendance, which in turn influenced exams scores, but there were no direct relationships between placement types and exam scores. The researchers also noted that there was considerable attrition between the administration of the first and second exams, one in each semester. Accounting for the attrition, they nonetheless found no significant relationships between placement types and exam scores.

The researchers found that attendance and school transfers had the greatest relationship to educational performance indicators, and placement types had negligible associations with exam scores. Some foster care experiences influenced attendance and school transfers more than others, but the influences were inconsistent. For example, students in congregate care had declines in attendance rates after placement, but were less likely to experience a school transfer, compared to students in kinship and foster home settings. Attendance had a stronger influence on both reading and math exam scores, compared to school transfers. Contrary to expectations, school transfers had a slightly positive influence on attendance rates.

Conger and Rebeck (2001) reported that the Adoption and Child Welfare Act of 1980 urged child welfare agencies to place children in kinship and foster homes, rather than

congregate care homes (Adoption and Child Welfare Act of 1980, as cited in Conger & Rebeck, 2001). Their research project supports the preference for kinship and foster homes instead of congregate care settings. Many child welfare agencies, including ACS, are increasing placement into therapeutic homes, which are family-like homes with highly structured environments and well-trained foster parents. The research suggests these types of placements can help children improve school attendance, which in turn is likely to increase performance on other indicators. The researchers suggested that kinship placements provide children with more stable connections to family, neighborhood and schools, increasing the likelihood of better attendance. Conger and Rebeck (2001) noted that, although their research did not show significant negative effects from school transfers, the majority of research and intuition suggests that school transfers have some negative effects.

The researchers reported that national average time in foster care ranges from less than eight months to more than two years. During the 1980s, the concept of permanency became a major concern, leading to increased efforts to find permanent homes for foster children. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 requires child welfare agencies to expedite the process for determining either reunification or permanency in foster homes (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, as cited in Conger & Rebeck, 2001). This research project does not challenge the benefits of permanency, but offers insights into the importance of stable placement for the school year, which was shown to positively impact attendance. The researchers suggest that consistent school attendance should be an important factor when determining when and whether to change foster homes, or to reunify the child with the family.

The group that appears to be most at risk for lower performance on all variables are the children who enter care under PINS petitions. In NYC, more than half of the children with PINS

referrals leave foster care within two months. Many child welfare advocates have challenged this practice, suggesting that parents may be using the foster care system as a cooling-off time after disruptive behaviors, and that such practices are harmful to the children and costly to the child welfare system. The researchers suggest that juvenile justice and child welfare agencies need to develop alternatives to foster care for PINS youth, and emphasize targeted family supports for this vulnerable group of children.

### **Population at High Risk for Long Term Foster Care**

Akin, Bryson, McDonald and Walker (2012) reported the initial activities of a large, statewide project of the national Children's Bureau Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII). The PII commenced in 2010, as a Presidential initiative, to develop innovative strategies and evidence for reducing long term foster care (LTFC). Cooperative agreements were made, with six grantees in the U.S., requiring a 10-month planning period to establish a target population, identify the population's barriers to permanency, and select an intervention for the local project. The researchers in this study report on the findings from this phase of the initiative, which involved the collaborated efforts of a Midwest state university, a public child welfare agency, and four private foster care providers. The team reached a rapid consensus on the population of children they believed to be most at risk for LTFC: children with serious emotional disturbance (SED). They agreed that the greatest obstacle for helping children with SED was the difficulty of delivering meaningful, intensive home-based services and concrete supports to birth parents. The child welfare and mental health systems are structured to provide services for the child, but not the parent. Parents of children with SED placed into care often have a long list of mandated tasks to complete, which seldom involve interactions with the child, and they get very little support in those endeavors. Prior research indicates that families of children with mental health

problems have higher than average rates of mental health problems. The authors of this research cite earlier research by Tuma (1989), suggesting that children with SED who are from especially vulnerable families are least likely to remain in treatment for their mental health problems (Tuma, 1989, as cited in Akin, et al., 2012).

The researchers used a mixed methods approach, with quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews. Three research questions were developed at the onset of the study: 1) Is a child's mental health status an important risk factor of LTFC? 2) If so, what barriers to permanency are encountered by parents of children with SED? 3) What systems issues are barriers to permanency for this subpopulation of children and families?

Longitudinal research design included statewide data for 7,099 children in foster care for at least eight days during 2006 and 2007. The authors defined long term foster care (LTFC) as being in care for three years or longer. Several variables were identified, including the presence of SED, age, race, whether there were prior removals, if there were siblings in foster care, and other variables that could be separated from the data. Children who did not have SED were in LTFC at a rate of 7.2 percent, compared to children with SED, who were in LTFC at a rate of 19.6 percent. The researchers sought to control for the wide range of variables, to determine if there were any changes to the association of mental health problems and LTFC. Using multivariate logistic regression analysis, the independent variable with the strongest association with LTFC was mental health problems. Among all the variables analyzed, children with an SED were 3.6 times more likely to experience LTFC, compared to children without SED.

Data from 30 case record reviews and caseworker interviews were coded, to measure risk factors and the most difficult obstacles to reunification or other permanency placements. The prevalence rate of risk factors identified in the caseworker records were:

1. Poverty related issues were prevalent in 90 percent of case records.
2. Parental mental health problems were prevalent in 90 percent of case records.
3. Alcohol and other drug issues were prevalent in 83 percent of case records.
4. Parenting problems with competency or attitude were prevalent in 97 percent of case records.
5. Prior involvement with child welfare was prevalent in 90 percent of case records.
6. A parental history of trauma was prevalent in 80 percent of case records.

Qualitative interviews with caseworkers identified major obstacles to permanency. Five major obstacles were identified: poverty related issues, parent mental health problems, history of trauma, alcohol and other drug issues, and parenting problems with competency or attitude.

The researchers sought input from stakeholders in the child welfare system, to identify systems barriers to permanency. A survey of child welfare stakeholders yielded 232 respondents. Half were case managers or clinicians, 17 percent were supervisors, 8 percent were administrators, and 26 percent did not disclose their position. There were five issues identified by 70 percent or more of the respondents as major barriers to permanency for families of children with SED:

1. 84 percent reported lack of dedicated parent services
2. 79 percent reported high foster care caseloads
3. 77 percent reported high caseworker turnover
4. 76 percent reported parents' lack of transportation
5. 70 percent reported court system issues

Akin, et al. (2012) contributed to the growing body of literature that shows a strong relationship between children's mental health and permanency outcomes. The study confirmed children's SED as a high risk factor, along with parental and systems barriers that contribute to the risk of LTFC for children with SED. The research suggests that interventions targeting children with SED must adequately address parental needs such as trauma treatment, substance abuse treatment, services to help with issues of poverty, and directed counseling and education on effective parenting practices. The systems issues identified by stakeholders as major barriers

suggest that increased family services and collaboration between agencies and other public services would help increase permanency outcomes.

### **Effects of Placement Characteristics**

Zima, Bussing, Freeman, Yang, Belin and Forness (2000) examined how behavior problems, academic skill delays and school failure interact with one another and how they may be associated with foster care placement characteristics. A study sample of 302 children in foster care included home interviews and teacher telephone interviews.

The children were identified by searching data from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. The data included children ages six through 12 years, in three of the eight county service areas and living in foster care between July 1996 and March 1998. A trained interviewer administered structured surveys to inquire about child and foster parent sociodemographic characteristics, level of child behavior problems, and school history. A child protocol included standardized measures of reading and math skills.

Behavior problems over the past six months were assessed using Achenbach and Edelbrock's Child Behavior Checklist, a standardized protocol commonly used to determine parents' perspectives on child behaviors. Classroom behavior problems and social competency were assessed using the Teacher-Child-Rating Scale developed by Hightower, Spinell, and Lotyczewski, a form commonly used in school evaluations for determining behavior discrepancies. Reading skills were assessed using the reading subtest of the Woodcock-Johnson Language Proficiency Battery, and total reading score was normed for age. Math skills were assessed using the revised Wide Range Achievement Test developed by Jastak and Wilkinson.

Bivariate analyses were conducted using the chi-square test of proportions for discrete variables and analysis of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables. Correlation between

foster parent and teacher report of behavior problems was assessed using a Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Eighty percent of the children were from minority backgrounds, and 63 percent of the foster parents had completed high school. Slightly more than one-quarter of the youth had lived in more than five foster homes during their lifetime. Sixty-two percent of the children lived in a kinship care setting. Overall, 69 percent of the children screened positive for a behavior problem, academic skill delay or school failure. Placement characteristics only sometimes were related to these outcomes. Children living in therapeutic foster care or group home settings were three times more likely to be identified by their foster parent as having a behavior disorder or repeating a grade. Children who were in foster care for longer periods of time were more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school. Also, the number of changes in foster homes was associated with having at least one severe academic skill delay.

There was poor agreement between foster parent and teacher ratings on behavior problems. The children who were rated by foster parents as having clinically significant behavior problems did not have a similar rating by the teachers, and the children who were rated by teachers as having clinically significant behavior problems were not rated by foster parents as having similar behaviors. The poor agreement between teacher and foster parent reports may be related to a variety of factors besides true differences in child behavior across settings. The authors suggest low rates of cross-informant agreement are a common methodological challenge in child mental health research, and caution that the findings on the level of behavior problems in the classroom should be viewed as preliminary.

Severe academic skill delay was not influenced by behavior problems in this study. Ethnicity was found to have a significant relationship to academic skill delays, with African

American children being three times more likely to have a skill delay in math or reading.

Placement instability was significantly related to academic skill delays, with a single additional placement change corresponding to an odds ratio of 1.18 more likely for academic skill delay.

The authors cite earlier work by Kavale and Forness (1998), showing that the relationship between behavior problems and learning problems may not be as strong as what is commonly perceived (Kavale & Forness, 1998, as cited in Zima, et al., 2000). The indicators of school failure included repeating a grade and suspensions or expulsions from school. Children living in group homes were more likely to have repeated a grade. Among the children in this study, there was no relationship between behavior problems and repeating a grade in school. Behavior problems were, however, found to be a significant predictor of school suspensions or expulsions. Age and years in foster care were significantly related to a history of suspension or expulsion from school; each year corresponded to an odds ratio of 1.52 more likely to have a suspension or an expulsion. Boys had almost seven times the odds of being suspended or expelled, compared to girls. The authors caution that the findings in this study may not represent prevalence rates in the general population, but the overall percentage of children found to have behavior problems, academic skill delays or school failure is alarmingly high and warrants attention for child welfare, mental health providers, and schools.

### **Perceived Differences in Behaviors, Between Kinship and Non-Kinship Care**

Shore, Sim, Prohn and Keller (2002) studied teacher ratings of problem behaviors exhibited in school by youth in kinship and non-kinship foster care. They examined differences between parent and teacher ratings of problem behaviors across home and school settings, in kinship and non-kinship foster homes. The study sample (N=185) was ethnically diverse, with

significantly more children of color in kinship placements. The Achenbach Teacher's Report Form (TRF) was used to measure teacher perceptions of behaviors. The TRF data on behavior did not differ significantly according to kinship or non-kinship care placement. A sub-sample (N =122) collected behavioral data across home and school settings, from foster parents and kinship foster parents, using Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL).

Shore, et al., (2002) identified one of the goals of the study was to advance the earlier work of Keller, et al., (2001) which compared the behavioral assessments by teachers, of youth in foster care and kinship foster care (Keller, et al., 2001, as cited in Shore, et al., 2002). This study was designed to find out demographic differences between kinship and non-kinship foster settings, whether behavior problems differ significantly, between kinship and non-kinship groups, and whether the differences present even after controlling for demographic variables. The researchers also analyzed data to determine the degree to which behavior ratings from teachers, foster parents and kinship foster parents agreed or disagreed.

The study sample was collected from youth served by Casey Family Programs, a private non-profit child welfare agency providing planned, long-term foster care to children and youth. As part of Casey's standard practice, the TRF and CBCL are routinely completed at intake into the program. A youth was included in the study if a 12-month assessment was completed between January 1, 1994 and June 30, 1997. The Teacher's Report Form (TRF) and Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) are standardized child assessment measures with established validity and reliability. The TRF is used to assess students' behavioral/emotional problems, adaptive functioning, and academic performance. The CBCL is a self-administered assessment completed by the adult caring for children between the ages of four and eighteen years (Achenbach, 1991, as cited in Shore, et al., 2002).

The first study sample, completed by the teachers of 185 youth, was ethnically diverse: 40 percent Caucasian, 27 percent Native American/Alaskan Native, 13.5 percent African-American, 9.7 percent Hispanic, 8.1 percent Polynesian/Pacific Islander, and 1.6 percent Asian. This ethnic distribution was similar to Casey's overall population. Due to the small numbers of Asian, Polynesian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic children in the sample, the association between kinship status and race was examined only for the three largest ethnic groups. Associations between kinship status and age and gender were not statistically significant.

After analyzing the demographic and age data, the researchers limited the remaining analysis to only those youth who had both the TRF and CBCL completed (N=122). There were 37 (30.33%) youth in a kinship placement and 85 (69.67%) in a non-kinship placement. African American youth were more likely to be placed in kinship care; of the sample group, 5.9 percent were in non-kinship care, and 24.3 percent were in kinship care. The opposite distribution was shown for White youth; 51.8 percent were in non-kinship care, and 18.9 percent were in kinship care.

Analyses compared youths in each type of foster care placement to Achenbach's normative scale. Achenbach's scale measures the following behaviors: withdrawn, somatic complaints, anxiety/depression, social problems, thought problems, attention problems, delinquent behavior, aggressive behavior, internalizing behaviors, and externalizing behaviors. The mean T-scores, standard deviations, and the percentages of youth scoring above the borderline clinical and clinical cutoffs were analyzed for comparison. Cutoff levels indicate the presence of a behavior that is significantly greater than the normative sample. Youth in kinship care scored significantly higher on just one of the ranked behaviors, the Delinquent Behavior scale. Kinship youth scored 19.64 percent, and non-kinship youth scored 7.75 percent above the

borderline clinical cutoff for delinquent behaviors. Delinquent behaviors above the clinical cutoff indicate a greater degree of severity. Kinship youth scored 16.07 percent above the clinical cutoff, and non-kinship youth scored just 2.33 percent above the clinical cutoff, indicating a significant discrepancy of delinquent behaviors between the two placement types.

The researchers found that, with the one exception of reports on delinquent behaviors, teacher-reported behavior problems were not significantly different from a normative sample of children, regardless of kinship or non-kinship status. Non-kinship foster parents, however, reported more extreme behavior problems than kinship foster parents, and, when compared to the teachers' ratings, similar levels of behavior problems were not reported. The researchers suggest further investigation to understand how non-kinship foster parents may need different types of support services than kinship foster parents. The results also highlight the importance of multiple perspectives in the assessment of behavior problems among foster youth.

### **Learning Disabilities in Relation to Foster Care Environment**

Evans (2001) conducted research to examine the relationship between learning problems and environmental factors. The research examined achievement and intelligence scores obtained within 30 to 60 days of foster care placement, in a large database of 3,483 school-aged children entering Arkansas foster care over four years, between 1995 and 1999. Subjects were divided according to two reasons for placement, neglect (N=1140) or other reasons (N=2343). Medical and mental health examinations were administered as part of the foster care placement process, including review of medical records and history, interview of child and caregiver, and physical examination. Psychological evaluation included review of records from school, social services, psychiatric records, cognitive, academic and behavioral/emotional assessments, and interviews

of child and caregivers. All standard scores were converted to a common metric, with a mean of 100 and standard deviation of 15. Discrepancies between IQ and achievement were calculated using the state regression model, with a mean IQ-achievement correlation coefficient of .60 used to determine discrepancy. Academic underachievement was identified as a score in the lower quartile compared to national achievement test scores. Scores could not be obtained for all subjects, due to some interfering factors such as oppositional behaviors, acute illness or fatigue.

IQ scores were obtained for 90 percent of the subjects, with a mean IQ score in the low-average range. Mean achievement scores were in the low average to average range, with greater variability than IQ scores. Slightly more than 25 percent of students showed a severe discrepancy in one or more areas. In the reading skills area, there was a higher discrepancy in basic reading skills than in reading comprehension skills. In the math area, there was a higher discrepancy in math calculation than in math reasoning. In the overall underachievement measures, 76.6 percent of the children showed underachievement in one or more areas.

The subjects in the group of neglected children (N=1140) showed a significantly higher rate of underachievement, compared to the group of children placed in foster care for other reasons (N=2343). The neglect and other reasons groups did not differ significantly on discrepancy scores. The author found that the larger IQ-achievement discrepancies were associated with subjects who had low IQs, were male, and had low height for their age.

The author sought to determine if these results could help provide new information on the nature of learning problems. The sample population showed that both IQ and achievement scores were below national means. The findings that low IQ and low height are significant predictors of a severe discrepancy suggest that home environments that include maltreatment contribute to a range of cognitive, academic and physical development problems. The author

suggests that suppression of IQ and achievement can add to emotional and behavioral deficits, but higher IQs and achievement scores can function as protective factors.

Another important finding is that the children showed achievement deficits in basic skill areas such as phonemic awareness and basic math operations. The author suggests that it is very difficult for children to compensate for basic skill deficits, but a higher level of intelligence may be correlated with higher scores in other areas of achievement where skills like context clues and deductive reasoning are used. The results of this study indicate that school-age children entering foster care should be considered at-risk for poor school performance, and that enhanced understanding of the variables that influence diagnosis can help remediate learning disabilities.

### **Transition from Foster Care into Adulthood**

Geenen and Powers (2007) used focus group methodology to gather qualitative data about the experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care into adulthood. Ten focus groups were conducted, with 88 participants, including youth currently in foster care (N=19), foster care alumni (N=8), foster parents (N=21), child welfare workers (N=20), education professionals (N=9), Independent Living Program staff (N=9) and other key professionals (N=2).

The researchers report that approximately 20,000 youth exit foster care each year, generally at the age of 18. These youths often struggle in young adulthood, with few or no supports from family or the foster care system. Geenen and Powers (2007) report that within four years of transitioning out of foster care, 50 percent of youth had used illegal drugs, 25 percent were involved in the legal system, and only 17 percent were completely self-supporting. The authors identify well-documented problems for youth transitioning out of foster care: underemployment, unemployment, lack of work history, low wages, low high school graduation rates, homelessness, and single parenthood. Legislation introduced in 1999, the Foster Care

Independence Act (FICA), attempted to address this complex problem of youth exiting foster care with such poor outcomes. FICA doubled the funding for states to implement independent living programs for youth transitioning into adulthood out of foster care. Additionally, federal law requires that youth in foster care 16 years or older must have a written Independent Living Plan, which describes the programs and services the youth will access to prepare for successful independent living (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

The transition of youth with disabilities is an area of research that has not received as much attention as foster youth in general. Some of the only information about outcomes of foster youth with disabilities comes from the National Evaluation of Title IV-E Independent Living Programs. The program comparison of youth with disabilities and youth without disabilities yielded important findings to support a need for increased attention and services for this population. Youth with disabilities were less likely to be employed, less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to have social supports or be self-sufficient than foster youth without disabilities. Citing research study results by Smithgall, Gladden, Yang and Goerge (2005), only 16 percent of foster care youth with disabilities graduated from high school, and 18 percent had dropped out of high school due to incarceration (Smithgall, et al., 2005, as cited in Geenen & Powers, 2007). Given the overwhelming challenges facing youth who transition into adulthood out of the foster care system, the researchers designed this study to ask stakeholders about what needs to change or improve, identify barriers to transition success, and to describe what the transition process is like for youth, including those with disabilities.

Separate focus groups were held for each constituent group. Focus groups lasted for 60 to 90 minutes and involved five to nine participants. Each focus group session was recorded and transcribed verbatim using a court reporter. The protocol for the focus groups centered on broad

questions that were intentionally open-ended, to allow the participants to share their perspectives. After the open-ended questions were discussed, the researchers asked specific follow-up questions to prompt more in-depth answers. Transcripts were coded and entered into a computerized program, according to constant-comparative procedures. Emerging themes were identified, and both a primary and secondary coder reviewed approximately one-third of the transcripts, to control for any possible coding biases.

Among the qualitative themes that emerged, self-determination was identified as a frustrating paradox, where youth are given little or no opportunity to practice self-determination skills, but then are expected to do so independently once they reach age 18. Youth reported that they often felt like caseworkers and foster parents were making decisions for them, without their input. Child welfare professionals and foster parents agreed that youth need more opportunities for self-determination, but foster parents expressed fears that if their foster youth makes a mistake while learning how to develop independent skills, the foster parents are held accountable by the courts.

Themes that emphasized the importance of relationships received significant attention. Stable, caring relationships with caseworkers made a difference for both the youth and the foster parents, providing continuity and helping youth develop a foundation of trust with one person, which in turn helps them to build trust with others. When this stability and caring relationship was not present, youth suffered from the unpredictability and insecurity of constant changes, resulting in problems with self-worth and feelings of isolation. The importance of the relationship with foster parents was reported as a critical factor in the overall well-being of youth. Many participants lamented that the foster parents could be providing more of the foundational skills for independent living, but the system is currently designed to reduce

payments to foster parents as the youth develop more skills. The practice of paying a special rate for foster youth who have more severe behavior problems and less independent skills is a disincentive for foster parents to focus on training and preparing youth for adulthood. The study also reported a significant concern for youth as they struggle with the complexity of attempting to resume a relationship with birth parents after they emancipate from the foster care system. Some caseworkers recommended that youth receive professional counseling to explore the potential benefits and risks of a family relationship, before the youth are ready to leave the foster care system.

The study reported mixed experiences with Independent Living Programs (ILP); many respondents reported there was a waiting list for ILP case managers, and even with case managers, the services provided were insufficient to develop independent living skills. The issues related to youth with disabilities in the foster care system highlight the need for more comprehensive special education transition services. Participants cited numerous examples of poor communication between school IEP case managers and foster parents; in many cases, foster parents do not have the training to help youth develop transition skills, and school case managers are often unaware of who is acting as a surrogate parent on behalf of the youth for the purposes of IEP planning. Caseworkers also reported frustration with school systems that fail to address the academic needs of bright foster youth who have behavior problems; they describe the youth as being “stuck in behavior classroom” and “bored out of their skulls because everything is geared toward the lowest common denominator” (p. 1097).

Geenen and Powers (2007) suggest that a flexible, individualized and creative approach to transition is needed, in order to help youth successfully move toward adulthood. While the passage of federal laws and related funding is helpful, there is substantial concern that the

funding is simply perpetuating a provider-driven system that is inadequately delivering the appropriate services for youth in transition. Youth with disabilities face even greater obstacles as they prepare to transition out of the foster care system. The researchers noted that the same practices identified as goals of special education transition services were also mentioned by the focus group participants as necessary for successful transition—student involvement in relevant transition planning, student engagement in general education and extracurricular activities, support for participation in postsecondary options, instruction in self-determination skills, mentorship experiences, family involvement and interagency collaboration. The researchers suggest that a consolidated program that provides each individual youth with access to funds, along with an agent whose primary allegiance is to the youth instead of serving a system, would provide more opportunities for self-determination and more streamlined access to funds that support such efforts. This approach would be a significant departure from the current system; a bold change that the researchers assert is necessary to prepare a vulnerable youth population for the challenges of adult living.

### **Voices of Youth in Foster Care**

Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, and Powers (2012) conducted a qualitative study that followed seven youth in foster care who received special education services; the youth were ages 15 to 18 and were followed for six to nine months. They were interviewed an average of seven times, and were encouraged to document their lives in journals, photographs, etc. The purpose of the study was to examine the youth's experiences, perceptions, goals and actions within the context of their lives in the foster care and special education systems, and to identify factors that influence youth's decisions and actions. Data was collected by assigning one interviewer for each youth, and conducting interviews that each lasted for 60 to 90 minutes, meeting in public

spaces that allowed for confidential discussion. Transcripts were analyzed using a three-pronged iterative approach to capture a detailed understanding of experiences, perspectives, and goals. Constant-comparative procedures were used to identify themes emerging from the interviews.

Excerpts from narrative descriptions provide insights into the seven youths' perspectives, perceptions and goals, which cannot be generalized to all youth, but nonetheless give detailed accounts to help frame the challenges faced by these youth. One youth described school as a waste of time, with little learning going on and too many interactions with administrators who do not care about the youth they serve. The youth also described conflicted feelings about the loss of connection with his biological family, including fears for his mother's safety and conflicts with his biological siblings. Another youth described a relatively good relationship with her foster parents and aspirations for her future, but she felt like transition decisions were made without her input, and reported that her caseworker was very difficult to work with. Another youth described his feelings of isolation and insecurity, never knowing when or if he was going to be moved to another home, having lived in 14 different homes in 13 years. Fortunately, he also reported feeling grateful for the support of his most recent foster parents, especially his foster dad. This youth expressed a desire to attend college, and said that the stability and support of his current family made it possible for him to imagine a better life for himself, and stay motivated to do well in school. Another youth expressed his dismay at all the negative labels he heard when various professionals discussed his background. He was sick and tired of attending meetings and not seeing any tangible results that helped him prepare for emancipation and adult life. This young man experienced a troubling transition into adult life, with no supports from caring adults, and a deeply painful process of trying to take control of his own life. A female youth who was in foster care due to earlier sexual abuse in her family described her continued

involvement in gang activity, and her struggle to disavow the gang because it was her only sense of connection to a family-like group. This youth also described a five-year-long positive relationship with a mentor that helped her to navigate through life's difficulties. Another female youth described conflicts with her foster family and the constant threat of being kicked out of the home if she misbehaved. She had aspirations to attend college, but was frustrated by the lack of academic rigor and support she was receiving in her special education program at school. By the end of the interview sessions, this youth was no longer in her foster home and had moved back home with her biological mother. Sadly, she appeared isolated and spiraling toward an uncertain future.

Several crosscutting themes were identified as part of this research study. Youth discussed the connection between school success in high school and the improved potential for future goals, but the participants had overwhelmingly negative experiences in school settings, including a sense that the education coursework was not preparing them adequately for either college or careers. The more restrictive special education placements were described as being of particularly poor quality, with few advocates who would consistently help students with transition goals. The themes of disempowerment, lack of self-determination, lack of caseworker support, and restrictive placements were described by many of the youth as significant barriers to their ability to prepare for adulthood and to maintain progress toward goals. Some of the youth identified themes of positive influences such as mentorships and positive relationships with foster parents, caseworkers, school staff and other adults. The authors of this study emphasize the importance of positive adult relationships and involvement over time, as youth progress through their high school years and navigate the complexities of the social systems they interact with. Another benefit of consistent adult relationships is that, when there is trust between youth

and the adults, they are more receptive to understanding the consequences of their decisions and behaviors, and can begin to make more informed and better decisions with the help of a trusted adult.

### **Caregivers, School Liaisons and Agency Advocates**

Zetlin, Weinberg and Shea (2010) conducted a study using focus group methodology, to gather input from each sector of the child welfare system, including schools, child welfare caseworkers, and foster caregivers. The researchers cited evidence from Needell et al., (2007) that approximately 40 percent of children entering foster care for the first time reunify with their parents within 12 months, while the rest of the children are at risk of being trapped in the foster care system and remaining in care until they “age out” at 18 years old (Needell et al., as cited in Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2010). Given the breadth of research that identifies the significant school difficulties these youth experience, along with the poor outcomes described in numerous research studies, the authors of this study assert that no one agency has the resources or expertise to provide for the needs of this high-risk population. The researchers sought to gain an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of three distinct groups who serve students in foster care. Participants included 13 foster caregivers who cared for a total of 33 children, three social workers who worked closely with school staff, seven school counselors, and six education liaisons placed in schools as advocates for the foster youth. Focus group meetings were held, with each session lasting 60 to 90 minutes. Meeting transcripts were coded and analyzed to reveal themes that emerged from each of the three sets of focus groups.

The caregiver focus group identified difficulties in finding and accessing help to address children’s multiple needs. They reported mostly struggling on their own to find and obtain services such as early special education, early intervention services, and help for children with

medical and behavioral problems. Some caregivers reported that they received help from local non-profit centers to enroll their foster children in programs and services. The caregivers expressed intense and continuing struggles with schools, with frustrations over the lack of school attention to the children's mental health needs and their harsh treatment of the children when they had behavioral problems in school. Several foster parents described situations where school officials had either refused to consider special education services for the child, or had suspended services due to a child's absence. They also expressed dismay over school counselors who provided little oversight and guidance for youth who were severely credit deficient. The caregivers felt that they would benefit from additional training so that they could better advocate for their foster children. For foster parents who made the decision to adopt their foster children, there were major concerns about the fewer services and supports made available to them, compared to when their children were in the foster care system.

The education liaison group identified the serious problem for foster children of instability due to the many changes in home placements and caseworkers. They felt that a strong connection between home and school was critical for the success of youth, but reported that such connections are missing for most foster care youth. Several school liaisons reported that caregivers often do not show up at school meetings, and they singled out kinship providers as being especially unsupportive of the school teams. Another concern was that of foster parents who are caring for multiple high-needs children in the home; they are often not able to meet the demands of the children and may be reluctant to enroll children in additional programs due to the logistical problems of such arrangements. The liaisons also reported poor communication from the child welfare agencies and schools, often resulting in a lack of continuity of services. Liaisons reported that social workers were often misguided about the types of services schools

can provide, and requested services that were not available from schools, but would be available from other local agencies, such as mental health counseling and assessments. Another concern was that schools often lacked the follow through to ensure a child was consistently attending school when they moved from one school to another. Chronic truancy appears to go unchecked, even when schools and liaisons report it to the child welfare agencies. For youth in foster care, the liaisons reported a multitude of problems with learning gaps that occurred during placement changes, and the need for additional tutoring and credit recovery services that are too often not being provided, leaving the youth to languish further behind.

The child welfare agency advocates group reported concerns that the education liaisons were not well integrated into their agency's operating systems, and they felt that often their own colleagues had little knowledge about how to integrate with school staff and liaisons. They expressed concerns that foster children often do not have appropriate assessments administered upon entry into the foster care system, so their needs are not known and therefore not addressed. Child welfare advocates also described serious problems dealing with schools, with complaints ranging from violation of laws to the unfair practices of refusing to award partial credit for courses when a student has moved schools due to foster home placement changes.

All three of the focus groups recognized the serious problems encountered by foster care students in their school settings, and all agreed for the need to address the challenges for youth in foster care. The three different groups each point to the other groups as needing to play a bigger role in addressing students' needs, indicating a need for more open communication and clarification of roles between the groups. The researchers suggest that model programs need to be developed, to improve information sharing systems and strategically address educational

barriers. These models must include all sectors of the child welfare systems, and organizational decisions need to identify and address the problems hindering students from school success.

**Table 2. Summary of Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Procedure</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, and Courtney (2004)	4,467 children attending Chicago Public Schools, and placed in out of home care	Mixed methods approach, quantitative analysis of data, and qualitative interviews	Children in foster care have lower scores on standardized academic tests, higher dropout rates, overrepresentation in special education EBD, are more likely to attend underperforming schools, and more likely to drop out of high school.
Conger and Rebeck (2001)	17,422 NYC school children in foster care between 1995-1999	Multivariate analysis used, to examine influence of foster care variables on educational performance.	Attendance rates decreased 4.8% for students in group homes, increased 4.4% for students in foster care homes, and increased 7% for students in kinship homes. Attendance had the strongest effect on educational performance. Students in foster homes more likely to transfer schools than those in group or kinship homes. Modest relationship between reason for placement and reading and math scores: students in FC due to abuse/neglect showed slight improvement, other reasons for placement did not show improvement.
Akin, Bryson, McDonald and Walker (2012)	7,099 children included in longitudinal research design, 30 case record reviews, 232 respondents in electronic survey	Mixed methods approach, including longitudinal research design, case record reviews, and electronic surveys.	Children with Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED) were 3.6 times more likely to be in long term foster care (LTFC). Major parental barriers to permanency included high prevalence of poverty, mental health & alcohol/drug problems, history of trauma, and parental competency problems.
Zima, Bussing, Freeman, Yang, Belin, and Forness, (2000)	302 children selected from Los Angeles County Dept. of Children and Family Services records, ages 6-12, living in out-of-home placements	Data collected from foster parents and teachers using structured interview protocols. WJ and WRAT-R academic skills tests were administered.	Children in therapeutic foster homes have 3 times the odds of having a clinical behavior problem vs. children in a kinship foster home. Placement instability was significantly related to academic skill delays. Children in group homes had 3 times the odds of repeating a grade, vs. children living with a relative in family foster care.

Shore, Sim, Prohn and Keller, (2002)	185 youth in kinship and non-kinship foster care	Teacher ratings of behavior problems evaluated using TRF, sub-sample of 122 compared foster parent assessments using CBCL.	Teacher Reporting Form (TRF) yielded no significant difference in teacher assessment of behavior problems between kinship and non-kinship foster care students, with one exception where kinship care had significantly higher score on delinquency measure. Sub-sample comparing ratings of teachers and foster caregivers showed slightly higher levels of behavior problems reported by non-kinship foster caregivers, compared to teacher reported scores.
Evans (2001)	3,483 school age children entering foster care in Arkansas from 1995-1999	Records review and data analysis, compared IQ and achievement scores from assessments completed at intake into foster care	Students in foster care were at least twice as likely to meet discrepancy criteria for Learning Disability. Largest IQ-Achievement discrepancy found for males with low IQ scores and low height for age.
Geenen and Powers (2007)	10 focus groups with a total of 88 participants— transition-age foster youth, caseworkers, and foster parents.	Focus groups met for 60-90 minutes, transcripts of all focus groups were coded, emerging themes were identified.	Interventions and supports that improved experiences and outcomes for foster care youth as they transition into adulthood: coordination of care on a continuum of services, maintained family relationships, and independent living programs.
DelQuest, Fullerton, Geenen, Powers and Laurie (2012)	Seven youth in foster care receiving special education services, ages 15 to 18, followed for six to nine months.	Subjects interviewed an average of seven times, responses documented, coded and emerging themes were identified.	Transition challenges identified: educational struggles, lack of opportunity for self-determination, family relationship problems, and inadequate services. Better outcomes with consistent adult support, knowledge of post-high school options, services, and opportunities.
Zetlin, Weinberg and Shea (2010)	Focus groups comprised of 13 caregivers, 10 school liaisons, 6 agency educational liaisons	Focus group methodology used to conduct 3 group sessions. Sessions were audiotaped and coded to identify themes	Themes of poor communication between agencies, frustration with schools not providing appropriate services. Foster parents struggle to find services, and felt intense frustrations with schools failing to address mental health needs and using harsh disciplinary actions.

### **Chapter 3: Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Conclusions**

The research consulted in this paper provides a multifaceted view of the challenges faced by students who are living in foster care. On every measure of school performance, students in foster care are lagging behind their peers. Students in foster care are three to five times more likely to be identified for special education, compared to the general student population (Del Quest, et al., 2012). Children who have moved to several different foster homes have experienced serious disruptions to their schooling, along with a lack of opportunity to develop trusting relationships with adults. Positive, stable, mentoring relationships with adults is especially critical for students in foster care. Students in foster care have transition planning needs that exceed the needs of special education students not in foster care (Del Quest, et al., 2012). Yet too often, the youth in foster care are left out of decision-making processes and have few supports to begin independent living (Geenen & Powers, 2007). As a result, less than half of the youth in foster care graduate from high school, and nearly one fourth of youth who emancipate from foster care end up homeless within the first two years of independent adult living (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

The child welfare system prioritizes the child's safety, but other needs of the child and family are inadequately addressed. The overwhelming majority of children in foster care are minorities from poor families (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2010). Poverty wreaks havoc on families; the research suggests that birth parents of foster children have multiple needs for services to address low incomes, mental health needs, drug abuse, and parenting skills (Akin, et al., 2012). Children with serious emotional disturbance were 3.6 times more likely to be in long term foster care, and their birth parents struggled with poverty and significant mental and

chemical health needs (Akin, et al., 2012). While the number of children in foster care declined significantly over the recent decade due to increased efforts to provide in-home supports, the high number of children in foster care remains a cause for concern.

Foster families and kinship care families provide a safe haven for children who have experienced the distress of maltreatment and removal from the home. Kinship foster care is the priority placement choice of child welfare, if there is a family member who can care for the child. Children in kinship foster care appear to fare better on several measures of school performance and child well-being. Both kinship and non-relative foster parents have generally lower levels of education and income, suggesting a need for coordinated school and community resources. It should also be noted that there are many relative caregivers who are providing care for a child, without going through the child protection system at all; one in eleven children spends time in relative care before the age of 18. For African American youth, one in five spends time in relative care before age 18 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). These informal arrangements should be acknowledged and respected by school staff. Relative caregivers do not receive any of the financial stipends or child welfare services provided to foster care providers; school social workers should be consulted for all available school and community resources.

The research found several relationships of variables on school performance measures. Conger and Rebeck (2001) found that attendance was the strongest predictor of higher academic achievement scores, and suggest that school transfers in the middle of the school year should be avoided whenever possible. Variables that impact attendance would therefore impact achievement. Students living in kinship homes had the lowest academic achievement gap. Students in group homes had the largest achievement gap, which may be partially explained by the fact that children who qualify for group home settings generally have higher levels of

medical or mental health needs (Smithgall, et al., 2004). Zima, et al. (2000) found that placement instability was a significant predictor of academic skill delays.

### **Limitations**

The large-scale data analyses projects consulted in this paper provide reliable prevalence rates for a variety of relevant factors, but it is difficult to make generalized assumptions about the relationships between variables using only data analysis. The qualitative interviews consulted in this paper provide valuable insights from the perspectives of stakeholders in the child welfare system, but it is uncertain if the emerging themes would be found consistently in larger sample sizes with different geographic and demographic characteristics.

### **Implications for Practice**

The problem of poor communication between schools and child welfare workers is a serious injustice for youth in foster care, and warrants an urgent call for more comprehensive services and caring educators who will advocate for each of the foster students in their care. For special educators, it will be of critical importance to establish good communication between the foster parents, the caseworkers, and other agencies that serve the student. Foster parents often need help understanding the IEP process; this responsibility should be carried out with great integrity by the special education staff. As Smithgall, et al. (2004) reported, foster parents often do not have much support or guidance about the special education process, and caseworker involvement in the process is inconsistent.

The overrepresentation of students in special education may be regarded as both a problem and an opportunity. While it is unfair to label a student with a disability when their academic failures are more the result of their environment as opposed to an actual learning or behavioral disability, in the current education system, it may be the only way for those children

to receive special assistance and services (Zetlin, 2006). Special education services should include assessments to determine the child's academic and mental health needs, and SPED case managers should work closely with child welfare and school social workers, to ensure the child is receiving the full array of services and supports they are eligible for. Given the financial limitations faced by foster families, school social workers should be consulted on referrals for school and community resources.

High school students in foster care may have education gaps and credit deficiencies. For students in foster care and SPED, case managers need to explore all available options for tutoring services, online and blended learning, and credit recovery opportunities. I have worked with extremely credit deficient homeless teens, and know how dismayed and disengaged the students become when they realize the mathematical impossibility of earning enough credits to graduate. High school youth in both special education and foster care need additional opportunities for self-determination; students should be connected with mentors, and guided as they research postsecondary options and career training programs. Special education classrooms should be places of rigorous learning and relevant preparation for independent living; it is profoundly unjust to students who are most in need of accelerated learning to be subjected to low level remedial work in "behavior classrooms".

In the last five years of my own teaching and professional development, I have participated in staff workshops to learn more about how to support students who have suffered from trauma and the impact that adverse childhood experiences have on the brain. The goal of our continued professional development in these areas is to understand how traumatic experiences can affect school performance, behaviors, and mental health. While we often do not know the extent and nature of the trauma experienced by students in foster care, we can create

school environments that nurture students and provide supports for social, emotional and academic learning. Students in special education and foster care need stable, supportive relationships and strong advocates. When students' behaviors are disruptive, the SPED case manager need to advocate for the use of positive behavior interventions and restorative practices, instead of over reliance on punitive suspensions and expulsions. As a member of the child's IEP team, I would emphasize the importance of school teams and shared understanding of the needs of students in foster care.

### **Summary**

This research paper focused on two questions; the first being an investigation of school performance measures of students in foster care. While different placement characteristics yielded different results, the findings confirm significant academic achievement gaps, more disciplinary actions, higher rates of grade retention and significantly lower rates of graduation for students in foster care. The second research question focused on the implications for special education teachers who serve students in both SPED and foster care. The special education teacher needs to facilitate prompt and effective communication between child welfare caseworkers, foster parents, birth parents in some cases, school staff, and other service providers. Students in foster care often have multiple academic and mental health needs; SPED teachers need to advocate for an array of services and supports, along with more restorative and positive behavior interventions. Finally, the special education teacher can provide stable, caring, mentoring relationships for students in foster care, greatly improving their outcomes.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Recommendations for further research in the field include investigations of effective family support programs that help foster children successfully reunify with parents, and the

effectiveness of school programs designed to address the mental health needs of children in foster care. In addition to research design, there is a critical need for funding of pilot projects, to deliver innovative services, and to develop more streamlined methods of sharing data between agencies. Additional longitudinal studies, to measure the success of young adults who aged out of foster care, would provide valuable information for improving transition programming.

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