Los Angeles LCAPs Reviewed

How did the 80+ Los Angeles County school districts address the needs of **foster youth** in their Year 1 Local Control and Accountability Plans?

April 2015

Foster Youth in California Public Schools

Years of research has documented that school-age children and youth in foster care have serious educational challenges. The most recent and comprehensive California study, *The Invisible Achievement Gap (IAG) Report*,[1] found that students in foster care have lower academic achievement than other students, even when compared to low-income students and other disadvantaged student groups. For example, the high school graduation rate for foster youth in 2010 was 58%, compared to 79% for other disadvantaged students and 84% for the general student population.

Students in foster care have experienced neglect and/or abuse, with associated trauma, so they are likely to need more support to achieve positive educational outcomes. Additionally, the *IAG Report* found that students in foster care are more likely to be diagnosed with a disability and to be eligible for special education services, and more likely to be over-age for their grade level. They are also less likely to be enrolled in GATE and AP courses compared to other low-income students.

One of the most salient differences between foster youth and other disadvantaged students is school mobility. Students in foster care are four times as likely to change schools at least once during the school year as other students; 32% of foster youth attended more than one school during the 2009-2010 academic year, compared to 8% of low-income students and 7% of the general student population. Students in foster care are also more likely to be attending the lowest-performing schools, and to be attending nontraditional schools (e.g. alternative schools, continuation schools, and non-public schools co-located with group homes).[2]

Multiple placement changes are strongly correlated with low academic achievement; 50% of students with three or more foster placements during the school year scored in the "below basic" or "far below basic" range in English language arts and math, and had the highest dropout rates. With each school change, students can lose up to 6 months of academic progress.[3] Therefore, a core issue for school districts and child welfare is to not only reduce school mobility, but also mitigate its impacts on students' academic progress.

The Local Control Funding Formula Legislation

In 2013, California passed the landmark Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation. For the first time in any state in the country, LCFF explicitly recognized the unique educational needs and challenges of students who are in foster care; provided supplemental funding to school districts to enable them to meet these needs (along with the educational needs of other disadvantaged student populations, including low-income students and English Learners); required each district to develop a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) including goals, actions, and funding for foster youth as well as for other disadvantaged populations and for all students; and created a framework for data collection and reporting of educational outcomes so that school districts will be held accountable for educational outcomes specific to foster youth and other disadvantaged populations.

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[1] Weigmann, W., Putman-Hornstein, E., Barrat, V.X., Magruder, J, and Needell, B. (2013 and 2014), *The Invisible Achievement Gap Part 1: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools*, and *Part 2: How the Foster Care Experiences of California Public School Students are Associated with Their Education Outcomes*, available at http://www.stuartfoundation.org.

[2] Ibid.

[3] American Bar Association and Casey Family Programs (2008). *Questions and Answers: Credit Transfer and School Completion*, available at http://www.americanbar.org.

LCFF was designed to be implemented over a seven-year period, and districts are required to revise and update their LCAPs each year. In spring 2015, districts are starting to develop their Year 2 LCAPs, using a revised state template. The purpose of this report is to synthesize and learn from the first-year efforts of Los Angeles County districts; identify and highlight innovative and promising practices; and promote more thorough and systematic attention to the educational needs of foster youth in the Year 2 LCAP planning and implementation process, and in subsequent years.

Context for Local Control and Accountability Plans in Los Angeles County

The context in which these LCAPs were developed is important. They represent school districts' first attempts to engage students, parents, and other community stakeholders in the LCAP development process, and to adapt their existing yearly planning and budgeting cycles to a new and unfamiliar format and set of guidelines. Also, the Year 1 LCAPs were developed in an atmosphere of scarcity and competing needs for funding; most school districts had experienced several years of recession-triggered budget cuts. In this context, the new LCFF funds may have been interpreted not as providing additional resources than as (partially) restoring funds lost in prior years. Pressure to compensate for past budget cuts (e.g.3 by improving school facilities, rehiring faculty and staff laid off in prior years, providing raises to faculty and staff, etc.) may have made it more challenging for many districts to implement the educational equity and access goals of the LCFF legislation. Year 1 LCAPs were also developed within a 6-month time frame, with the intent of revisiting strategies as LCFF monies increased toward full implementation over the following seven years.

Additionally, although a data match between the CALPADS statewide education database and the CWS/CMS statewide child welfare database was contemplated in the LCFF legislation, school districts did not yet have current, accurate data concerning the number and distribution of foster youth in their student populations at the time they developed their Year 1 LCAPs. Moreover, although the exact number of foster youth in each district was not yet determined, it was clear that foster youth are the smallest of the three student sub-populations defined by LCFF; available data suggested that foster youth represent 1-2% of most districts' student populations. Future LCAPs will benefit from the availability of higher-quality data on students who are in foster care, not only in terms of numbers, but in terms of specific areas where their academic outcomes lag behind those of other students and where they may be in need of specific, targeted supports.

Purpose and Method of the Los Angeles LCAP Review

At the request of the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council, a group of child welfare and education advocacy and policy organizations[4] reviewed 80+ Year 1 LCAPs developed by Los Angeles County school districts, focusing on how districts addressed the educational needs of foster youth. This report presents common themes noted in Los Angeles County districts' LCAPs, with special attention to goals, actions, services, and/or funding specifically targeted towards foster youth. The report also identifies opportunities to leverage broader school-wide and district-wide investments that will improve the education of students in foster care through a comprehensive system of supports and services.

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[4] LCAP-reviewing organizations were Advancement Project, Children's Law Center, National Center for Youth Law's FosterEd: Los Angeles, and Public Counsel.

Demographic and Scaling Considerations

Los Angeles County has, by far, the largest number of students who are foster youth of all California counties. As of 2009-2010, Los Angeles County had 12,648 students in foster care, almost 40% of the state's foster youth population.[5] Three of the ten school districts with the largest numbers of foster youth in California are located in this county: Los Angeles Unified School District, Long Beach Unified School District, and Antelope Valley Union High School District. Since LCFF allocates funding to school districts based on numbers of targeted students enrolled, the funding analysis for this report reflects that larger districts received more money based on their larger enrollment of foster youth than smaller districts, and therefore the report makes comparisons between districts of similar size.

For the purposes of this report, Los Angeles County school districts are divided into four categories:

- Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) — In a category by itself since it has about 8,500 foster youth,[6] over ten times as many foster youth as the next largest district in the state.

- "Large" districts — 25 districts with between 100 and 650 foster youth, with a total of about 6,000 foster youth.

- "Mid-sized" districts — 35 districts with between 15 and 100 foster youth, with a total of about 1,500 foster youth.

- "Small" districts — 20 districts with 15 or fewer foster youth, with a total of less than 300 foster youth (findings from these small districts are not included in this summary report).

Methodology Limitations

Finally, a note about data limitations: This report presents only preliminary and tentative findings. Multiple agencies were involved in the review, and while the reviewers tried to be as consistent as possible, the review was not scientific in nature. In addition, because of the challenges of the required state template, it was sometimes difficult to accurately align goals, actions, and funding in the LCAPs. Districts also used varying terminology to describe their programs and services, and the budget information in the LCAPs did not always clearly specify whether a funding amount was for one specific goal or action, or to be applied to several goals or actions. That said, this report summarizes emerging promising practices that Los Angeles County school districts are adopting to support the academic achievement of foster youth, and identifies opportunities for collaboration between school districts and community partners to develop effective programs, practices, and policies to support foster youth education.

Innovative and Promising Practices

LAUSD, in light of its large population of foster youth – and perhaps influenced by the organized efforts of a coalition including youth advocates, community-based organizations, and representatives of the county

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[5] *IAG Report Part 2*, Table D11. This report uses the 2009-2010 data on numbers of foster youth per school district because more recent data are not yet available. The statewide and Los Angeles County foster care population has increased since 2010, so these data likely underestimate the current number of students who are foster youth.

[6] Numbers of foster youth per district referenced in this report are based on the *IAG Report*'s 2009-2010 data, except in the case of LAUSD, for which there is more recent local data obtained through a data match between LAUSD's student information system and the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services' data system.

child welfare agency[7] – made a major effort to address the educational needs of foster youth in its Year 1 LCAP. LAUSD set LCAP goals aimed at closing the achievement gap between foster youth and other students and providing comprehensive educational needs assessment and support to each student in foster care. LAUSD allocated approximately $9M to create a Foster Youth Achievement Program, including the hiring and training of over 60 new Pupil Services counselors to work directly with foster youth, and to provide district-level oversight and support including administrative supervision, development of policies, procedures, Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), management of data collection, etc.

Aside from LAUSD, several other large districts had clearly articulated LCAP goals specific to foster youth, supported by action steps and substantial funding.

For example, Compton USD (466)[8] set an overall goal of closing the achievement gap for foster youth on all metrics of student achievement, and included detailed action steps to implement this goal, including establishing district-level policy and data infrastructure, taking steps to reduce rates of school transfers for foster youth, and hiring additional staff at the district- and school-site levels. Compton USD funded these action steps with a total of $710K in Year 1, with planned increases to $891K in Year 2 and $1.178M in Year 3.

As summarized in Table 1, other large districts with foster-youth specific goals, action steps, and substantial funding included: Inglewood USD (189), Downey USD (171), Pomona USD (495), Bonita USD (146), Whittier Union HSD (100), and William Hart USD (132).

Table 1. Innovative and Promising Practices Targeted for Foster Youth from LA County's Large Districts

District	Example
Inglewood	Develop an Individual Learning Plan for each foster youth; provide educational resources (e.g. curriculum and software) and staffing (e.g. college counselors and parent liaison) for foster youth.
Downey	Hire four case workers to support foster youth.
Pomona	Provide Foster Care Liaison Consultants at all school sites; track attendance, dropout, and suspension/expulsion metrics specifically for foster youth.
Bonita	Hire and retain two foster youth/homeless liaisons.
Whittier Union	Provide part-time Targeted Counselor at each school site to meet the needs of foster youth.
William Hart	Provide two Child Welfare and Attendance staff to ensure foster youths' educational rights are met and inform counselors about services that benefit foster youth.

[7] The Coalition for Educational Equity for Foster Youth (CEEFY) was organized in fall 2013 and engaged in meetings throughout 2014 with LAUSD Board members, Superintendent, and high-level administrators; provided testimony at Board hearings; and disseminated position statements. Active participants in CEEFY include: the LA County Department of Children and Family Services, Advancement Project, Public Counsel, Alliance for Children's Rights, California Youth Connection, Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, National Center for Youth Law's FosterEd, United Friends of the Children, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, and other community-based advocacy groups and service providers working with foster youth.

[8] Numbers in parentheses represent the number of foster youth in the district; see footnote 3 for data sources.

Most of these districts concentrated their foster youth-specific actions and expenditures on socio-emotional supports and links to community resources, rather than on academic support specific to foster youth. These districts' foster youth-specific LCAP goals, actions, and funding generally focused on additional counselors, school social workers, school-based mental health services, foster youth liaisons, etc. These types of school-based support may be important and beneficial, especially when coordinated with the socio-emotional supports provided to foster youth through the child welfare system, such as social workers, attorneys, case plans, individual therapy, Wraparound programs, and other emotional and behavioral supports. Districts should coordinate carefully to ensure that the new supports for foster youth provided through their LCAPs are complementary to and coordinated with foster youths' existing case plans, mental health services, etc., and that the unique role of schools in supporting foster youths' academic progress and success is not overlooked.

A few large and mid-size districts – Compton USD, Centinela Valley USD, Eastside Union SD, and Walnut Valley USD – specifically included academic outcome goals and/or specific academic supports for foster youth (e.g. tutoring, priority access to summer programs, etc.). One mid-size district, Eastside Union HSD (65), included a notably concrete and specific academic support for foster youth: its LCAP provides funding for a laptop or desktop computer for every student in foster care.

Table 2. Foster Youth-Specific Academic and School Stability Goals from LA County's Large and Mid-Size Districts

District	Example
Compton	Track metrics specifically for foster youth around closing the achievement gap and decreasing transfers to alternative education placements; develop policy and data infrastructure to better support foster youth.
Centinela Valley	Track metrics specifically for foster youth around graduation rate, dropout rate, A-G completion rate, AP exam participation rate, CAHSEE passage rate, and school transfer rate; develop policies, infrastructure, and MOUs around data-sharing for foster youth.
Eastside Union	Provide funds to school sites to develop an acceleration program for foster youth; purchase desktop and laptop computers for use by foster youth.
Walnut Valley	Track metrics specifically for foster youth around closing the achievement gap and decreasing school mobility; develop policy and data infrastructure necessary to support and monitor the education of foster youth.

As noted in Table 2, a few districts' LCAPs – Compton USD, Centinela Valley USD, and Walnut Valley USD – include goals and/or action steps specifically focused on increasing school stability for foster youth by, whenever possible, protecting foster youths' right to remain in their school of origin despite placement changes, and/or by reducing transfers of foster youth from comprehensive schools to alternative and continuation schools. In light of the data indicating that school instability is a key challenge for foster youth, and one of the major ways in which foster youth are distinct from other low-income and at-risk student populations, targeted efforts to improve school stability in LCAPs for Years 2 and beyond may play a crucial role in improving academic outcomes for foster youth.

More Progress Needed

Due to the small size of the foster care population in comparison to other at-risk student populations, it is understandable that most districts' LCAPs do not allocate large percentages of their LCFF supplemental and concentration funds to foster youth-specific actions and services. As the LCFF process continues and more data become available, districts will have a better basis for assessing how much targeted funding is necessary in order to close the achievement gap between foster youth and other students.

While some districts' Year 1 LCAPs did set specific goals and action steps for foster youth, it was unclear if there was sufficient funding dedicated to support these goals and actions. Specifically, 12 large school districts and 10 mid-sized districts developed LCAP goals for foster youth such as closing the achievement gap, providing individualized support for foster youth students, reducing delays in enrollment, providing credit recovery and supplemental instruction, etc. – but appeared to allocate little or no funding for actions, services, and staffing to achieve these goals specific to the foster youth population. Recognizing the presence and needs of students who are foster youth by including specific LCAP goals is an essential first step, but without specifying funding to carry out these goals, these districts may have difficulty achieving them, and may want to consider adding actions, services, and designated funding in Year 2 and future years.

Moreover, Year 1 LCAPs for an additional 6 large districts and 11 mid-sized districts did not include any goals, actions, or funding specific to foster youth. Although this omission may be understandable in Year 1 due to the unfamiliar parameters of LCFF and the complexity and competing needs and priorities involved in the LCAP development process, in Years 2 and beyond, these districts should consider setting specific goals that are supported by actions and funding proportionate to the size, needs, and unique educational challenges of their foster youth populations.

Some mid-sized districts, perhaps in light of their relatively small numbers of foster youth, took the approach of combining goals, actions, and/or funding allocations for foster youth together with other at-risk groups perceived to have similar needs, such as homeless students or English Learners. Duarte USD (33), for example, included funding of $100K for a designated counselor to work with its foster youth and English Learner students, who would focus on improving rates of A-G course completion for these two student subgroups, and also an additional liaison funded at $85K who would work with foster youth, homeless, and English Learner students. This may be a promising approach for districts with smaller foster youth populations to achieve specificity and scale.

Leveraging Opportunities to Benefit Foster Youth

As previously mentioned, many districts focused on school-wide and district-wide investments in their Year 1 LCAPs, which may benefit foster youth if leveraged strategically. Districts included many LCAP goals, actions, and funding allocations that address educational needs and issues commonly faced by foster youth due to frequent school changes, poor attendance, a history of trauma, and the lack of consistent adult support for their education.

These leveraging opportunities include, for example, LCAP goals, actions, and funding for attendance support and intervention for students with chronic absenteeism; improvements in school climate through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative justice programs, Multi-Tier System of Supports frameworks, and other alternatives to exclusionary discipline; increased availability of afterschool and summer enrichment programs, credit recovery programs, and other avenues for students to catch up academically; and increased access to college and career readiness programs.

One mid-size district with a unique leveraging opportunity was Keppel Union ESD (47). Its LCAP allocates $450K to provide free transportation to all students to address attendance issues – a use of LCFF funds

that might especially benefit foster youth if it includes transporting foster youth to their school of origin so they can maintain school stability despite changes in placement. Table 3 provides examples of leveraging opportunities at several large districts that may benefit foster youth.

Table 3. Leveraging Opportunities from LA County's Large Districts to Benefit Foster Youth

District	Example
Lancaster	Attendance counselors; support for students with attendance and behavior problems; tutoring and afterschool programs; PBIS and conflict resolution.
Pasadena	Counselors and health/mental health staff to address issues causing chronic absenteeism; credit recovery programs; community liaisons and parent outreach; positive interventions to reduce suspension and expulsion rates.
Palmdale	Intersession program for at-risk students.
Baldwin Park	Counseling for students at risk of not graduating; tutoring; credit recovery programs.
Norwalk-La Mirada	Summer school and Saturday school for at-risk students; additional counselors, social workers, and mental health staff for at-risk students.

For these broader investments to be leveraged to benefit foster youth, districts must ensure that foster youth gain access to them on at least an equal basis compared with the general student population. Districts with designated staffing, funding, policies, and/or programs for foster youth may find it easier to help foster youth access these district- and school-site level resources.

A Complex Picture

Some districts' LCAPs were difficult to categorize, in terms of their responsiveness to the needs of foster youth, because the districts took a highly localized approach of passing on substantial amounts of LCFF supplemental/concentration funds to the school-site level. These districts included Long Beach USD (617), whose Year 1 LCAP passes on a total of $7.5M in LCFF supplemental/concentration funds directly to individual schools to support low-income, English Learner, and foster youth students. Similarly, Palmdale ESD (425) provides $67K to each school site to support foster youth, along with English Learner and low-income students. Local child welfare and education agencies, as well as advocates and community-based organizations focused on improving the educational outcomes for foster youth, can help to ensure that a localized funding approach reaches foster youth by assisting school sites in designing and implementing programs and supports that will benefit foster youth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, our review of Los Angeles County's LCAPs has shown that there is large variance among Year 1 LCAPs in relation to specific supports for students in foster care. As LCFF moves towards its eight-year mark of becoming fully funded and implemented, we may see increased investments made that are tailored for students in foster care. Strong partnerships between school districts, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and community partners can be critical in supporting school districts in building capacity to better serve foster youth students through the following activities:

- Establishing the data infrastructure necessary to identify and track foster youth, as well as share data and information with the courts, child welfare, probation, and education agencies as necessary to support the educational success of students in foster care;

- Disaggregating and tracking foster youth education data, including setting baseline data and specific targets for improvement thereafter. Together with key partners, districts can utilize these data to make strategic investments tailored for students in foster care, particularly around school stability;

- Working together with key partners to develop and provide comprehensive training and resources for foster youth-specific staff, as well as professional development opportunities and trainings on child welfare and foster care for educators and administrators. Districts may also be able to provide professional development opportunities on education issues for child welfare, probation, and the courts;

- Coordinating with the Los Angeles County Office of Education's Foster Youth Services program, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Mental Health, etc. to ensure that programs and services for foster youth are complementary.