



Addressing High School Graduation Challenges for Michigan's Foster Care Population

For the first time, we can look at high school graduation rates for young people experiencing foster care in Michigan. Because of federal mandates for data collection, Michigan must now pull out young people in foster care as a subgroup in our education data system. For the cohort of young people experiencing foster care, a total of 626 young people who began high school in the 2014-15 school year and would have graduated “on-time” with their cohort of peers in 2018:

- Only four in ten graduated from high school within four years, while nearly three in ten dropped out of high school during that time.
- Another 30 percent reported hanging on to continue to work on their high school completion for at least another year, and 3 percent received a high school credential in another way.
- Their graduation rate is fully 15 percent below the next lowest, students experiencing homelessness, and is just half of the average graduation rate across the state. The dropout rate is three times as high as the average, as is the share of young people still continuing past their 4th year of high school. Michigan law allows state payments for time beyond a traditional four years, through age 21 in some cases.

Graduation Outcomes for Michigan High School Cohort

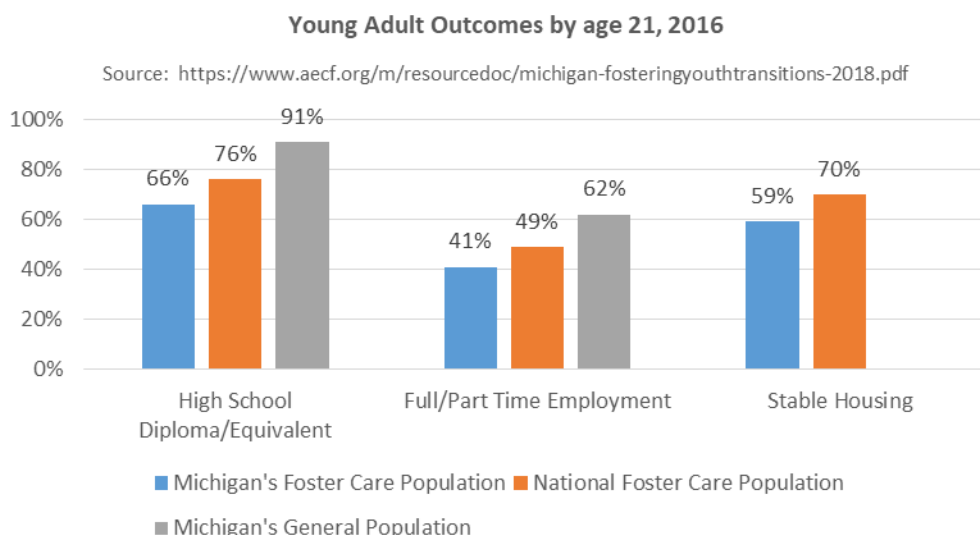
2017-2018 School Year

	On-Track		Off-Track	Other
	Graduated	Dropout	Continuing	Completers
All Students	80%	9%	10%	1%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	77%	10%	11%	3%
Asian	91%	4%	4%	1%
Black or African American	69%	14%	16%	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	85%	n/a	9%	n/a
White	84%	7%	8%	1%
Hispanic or Latino	73%	13%	13%	1%
Multiracial	75%	11%	13%	1%
Economically Disadvantaged	68%	14%	16%	2%
Limited English Proficient	69%	15%	14%	2%
Migrant Education	66%	18%	n/a	n/a
Students with Disabilities	57%	14%	23%	6%
Students Experiencing Homelessness	55%	20%	24%	2%
Students Experiencing Foster Care	40%	27%	30%	3%

Source: Four-year Cohort Graduation and Dropout Reports, 2019 CEPI <https://www.mischooldata.org/>

Definitions: *On-Track Graduated:* Students who completed high school with a regular diploma in four years or less. *Dropout:* Students who left high school permanently at any time during the four-year cohort period, or whose whereabouts are unknown; *Off-Track Continuing:* Students who did not complete high school in four years and are still continuing in school; *Other Completers:* Students who completed a high school equivalency like GED or an alternative diploma within four years.

According to national surveys reported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation earlier this year, by age 21 young people in foster care experience graduation and employment gaps not only with their Michigan peers, but also with young people with similar foster care experiences elsewhere in the nation.



What we found this first year in our educational data, and was reiterated in other data sets, is troubling at best, and damning at worst. It is a wake-up call for both our foster care and education systems to change current practice and make better investments in the educational success of this vulnerable population of young people for whom we hold so much responsibility.

We must work to prevent child abuse and neglect by supporting parents during times of need, through concrete supports like child care, mental health care, and income support, and through social supports like mentoring programs and parent education classes to stabilize families. And we must address what research and lived experience show to be the drivers of gaps in educational outcomes for youth who are involved with foster care.

EARLY AND LATER TRAUMA: Family destabilization and its causes are traumatic for children and youth. Our brains are always changing, rewiring themselves in response to our experiences. The science is clear that adverse experiences in childhood, like abuse or neglect, actually alter brain development and reactions, even delaying cognitive development. We know that without supportive adults and services, children and youth in care are at higher risk than others to experience physical, behavioral, emotional, and academic problems.

1. **Develop Systems Well Versed in Behaviors and Reactions Borne of Trauma.** A brain that is rewired through sustained early trauma may exhibit:
 - reduced ability to respond, learn, or figure things out, and can even increase problems with learning and memory, resulting in problems in school;
 - lower tolerance for stress, resulting in behaviors such as fighting, checking out or defiance;
 - increased difficulty in making friends and maintaining relationships; and
 - increased stress hormones which affects the body's ability to fight infection and may cause lasting health problems. Source: [ACE Connection, 2019](#)

All adults surrounding children and youth in care need some assistance in dealing with these behaviors and reactions, including guidance, support and tools for caregivers of all kinds and professionals who serve children in child care, schools, and afterschool providers, among others.

2. **Commit to Early Assessment and Intervention:** At entry to foster care, infants and toddlers are referred to the state's *Early On* program to assess for delays and to access intervention and treatment. Despite the fact that *Early On* services prevent the need for special education and other supportive services later on, [Michigan's system](#) is heavily dependent on local funding, creating uneven access

depending on where you are born or where you live. Children and youth entering care are also required to receive timely assessments, access to physical and mental health and other developmental services, but these assessments and services are not always readily available and aren't consistent from community to community. This lack of access creates lasting challenges for young people themselves and difficulties for caregivers, destabilizing placements and hampering family reunification efforts.

3. **Continue Assessment and Intervention Beyond Early Childhood:** Young people in care require assessments and intervention through K-12 and upon leaving the system to ensure adequate developmental, emotional and behavioral supports. Appropriate behavioral or physical health assessments, and timely, supportive services at school are often delayed. This can be due to unstable family circumstances that create barriers to facilitating IEPs or changing placements that make consistent assessment and service provision difficult. When children and youth move, often the process to find qualified professionals and quality services begins all over again, creating barriers to timely, consistent services.

INSTABILITY IN LIVING ARRANGEMENTS: Children and youth often experience multiple moves during their time in care, including moving back and forth from their birth homes, relative placements, foster homes, institutional placements and even independent living arrangements. Inconsistency of case workers or other professionals responsible for their well-being, and limited communication between children and youth and their caregivers often inhibits youth from sharing personal information and investing in relationships, at times leading to feelings of abandonment later on. Despite the efforts made to ensure educational stability through intentional school placement decisions and assistance with transportation when needed, instability still occurs, often resulting in disruptions in youth's education and other supportive services.

1. **Stabilize Families to Prevent Removal.** There is growing recognition around the country that families deserve more support to cope with parenting responsibilities and allow children and youth to remain at home or return home quickly after short-term alternatives. Michigan needs to take full advantage of new resource opportunities to support mental health, substance abuse and skill needs of parents to stabilize families prior to removal, and innovative programs that support reunification options, like specialty Baby Courts and peer-led Parent-to-Parent programs need to be available to families statewide.
2. **Better Utilization and Support for [Relative Care Placements](#).** When children and youth are placed with families, those placements tend to be more stable and help to mitigate the trauma of experienced abuse or neglect and removal from parents. These placements, which include grandparents, aunts and uncles, and often older siblings, have not traditionally been supported in the same way that foster parents have been supported, financially or otherwise. Recent shifts have allowed some financial payment to relatives, and significant attention needs to be paid to supporting the stability that these caregivers can bring.
3. **Support for Other Caregivers and Independent Living Situations.** Foster and adoptive families, group homes and independent living placements all need better training and support to prevent "failed" placements and encourage relationship stability. Foster and adoptive families often cite inability to access appropriate mental health or other services as reasons why placements in their care were not successful, and older youth in congregate settings or living independently need even more supportive relationships to maintain their stability.

INSTABILITY IN EDUCATION PROGRESS: As mentioned, instability in placements often results in instability in schools. Trauma can hamper educational progress and eventual success, and time spent out of school creates

lost educational opportunity that can result in repeating grades and gaps in knowledge and skills. In addition, the current high school credit system is ineffective for mobile populations.

1. **Better Enrollment, Truancy and Discipline Policies that Minimize Lost Educational Time.** Frequent school changes negatively impact all educational outcomes and disrupt the growth of supportive relationships with adults and peers. Delays in school enrollment at foster care entry or when living arrangements change impact attendance, contribute to grade repetition or enrollment in inappropriate classes or grade-levels and create challenges to addressing special education needs. Young people in care are twice as likely to be absent from school, twice as likely to have experienced out-of-school suspensions, and three times as likely to be expelled from school. (Source: [National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018](#))
2. **Access to Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs.** Because of this lost educational time, young people in care need expanded learning opportunities to catch up, and build interests and confidence. Quality afterschool and summer learning programs can even serve to rewire the brain to be able to digest more and different information, and to make the connections necessary to connect learning to life.
3. **Progress Through Grade Levels and Credit Accumulation That Accommodates Multiple Moves.** Studies have shown that children and youth in foster care lose approximately four to six months of academic progress with each change in school placement. (Source: [Legal Center for Foster Care and Education](#)) When youth in care change schools, they often experience inappropriate grade-level placements, lack of educational support services, and difficulties in transferring course credits. Districts have different methods of calculating course credit and grade placement, creating barriers to progressing with peers and accumulating enough full credits to graduate on time.
4. **Dedicated Staff to Assist With Educational Issues.** All of these barriers require dedicated staff to work across education and child welfare to ensure educational service continuity, stability and success starting when children and youth enter foster care until they leave. Unfortunately, there have not been enough Education Planners through child welfare to adequately serve all young people in care and there is evidence that the school system points of contact have not served to effectively connect kids in care with services.
5. **Access to Multiple Paths to Success.** It is too easy to leave high school, and too hard to find a ramp back on to graduation. Access to credit recovery and additional years of high school beyond the traditional four can help students feel confident that they can stay in school until completion. While we don't have data yet for young people in care, we do know that the 5th and 6th years of high school increase the graduation rate for homeless youth by over 20 percent. (Source: [CEPI, MDE, 2019](#)) Access to GED and high school completion through adult ed is not available consistently across the state.

Young people experiencing foster care don't finish a high school credential not because of a specific event or factor, but because circumstances that often begin early in their lives have left them at risk of falling through the many gaps in our school and child welfare systems. We need to take the opportunity to intervene early and often to ensure that youth in care experience as level a playing field as possible through their educational careers and that they are able to easily find a path back to completion and success when their education is interrupted.

Data Note: Students Experiencing Foster Care are identified through a data sharing agreement between the Department of Health and Human Services and the Michigan Department of Education. A student identified as in foster care at any time during a school year is flagged as a foster care child for reporting purposes. Different grade placement practices between school systems results in some skewing of the cohort information for this group – the same student could have been placed in 9th grade in one school and then moved to another school that year and placed in the 8th grade or the 10th grade.