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Memo from CalYOUTH: Predictors of High School Completion and College Entry at Ages 19/20

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Finishing high school and attaining a college degree have become increasingly important to finding stable employment and earning a living wage. By age 19, most youth in the US have earned a high school credential and many have entered college. However, the educational attainment of young people who were in foster care as adolescents lags behind their peers (Gillum, Lindsay, Murray, & Wells, 2016). In one large study involving foster youths in three Midwestern states, about four in ten participants had not earned a high school credential by age 19, compared to about one in ten young people across the nation (Courtney et al., 2005). The gap in college entry was even larger; just 24 percent of foster youth had entered college, compared to 57 percent of their peers (Courtney et al., 2005). These gaps have consequences for the employment prospects and economic well-being that foster youths experience later in adulthood (Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Salazar, 2013).

Disparities in educational attainment between foster youth and their peers have been well documented, but less research has examined factors that influence educational outcomes. Existing studies have found that several factors negatively impact high school completion and college outcomes, including high school mobility, physical or learning disabilities, substance use problems, early parenthood, placement in a congregate care setting (vs. foster care home), and a history of grade repetition (Clemens, Lalonde, & Sheesley, 2016; Courtney & Hook, 2016; Villegas, Rosenthal, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2014). Conversely, higher reading proficiency, higher educational aspirations, early work experience, and receiving a high amount of preparation before exiting care have been found to positively impact these outcomes (Courtney & Hook, 2016; Villegas et al., 2014). Additionally, remaining in care past one's 18th birthday was found to increase the chances of completing high school and finishing a year of college, even after rigorous accounting for alternative explanations (Courtney & Hook, 2016). Overall, existing studies suggest that several risk factors, such as academic difficulties and behavioral health problems, impede educational attainment for foster youth, while supportive contexts and skill development opportunities promote such attainment.

This Memo builds on past studies by examining factors that influence the likelihood of young people in foster care finishing high school and entering college. California is a state that has been at the forefront of promoting educational attainment for young people in foster care. We examine a wide range of predictors such as youths' demographic characteristics, aspects of their academic performance and background, characteristics of their maltreatment and foster care histories, and other risk and promotive factors.

Study Methods

This Memo involves participants in the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH; Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014). CalYOUTH includes a representative sample of adolescents in California foster care who were between the ages of 16.75 and 17.75 years old in late 2012 and who had been in care for at least six months (n = 732). The first wave of interviews was conducted in 2013 when most respondents were 17 years old (n = 732) and the second wave of interviews was conducted in 2015 when most respondents were 19 years old (n = 611). See Courtney et al. (2014) and Courtney et al. (2016) for more information about Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews, respectively.

In this Memo, we first investigate predictors of high school credential completion by age 19 among CalYOUTH participants who had not yet completed a high school credential at the time of their baseline interview. Of the 611 study participants interviewed at age 19, 545 had not yet earned a secondary education credential when we first interviewed them. We refer to these young people as the "high school sample" in this Memo. We examined whether or not they had earned a high school diploma, GED, or alternative certification by their second interview at age 19.

We then examine predictors of college entry among CalYOUTH participants. Information on college enrollment was obtained from administrative data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) and supplemented by self-report data from the interviews conducted at age 19.[1] This analysis includes CalYOUTH participants who provided permission to access administrative data, which were needed for the NSC college records and for the predictors derived from child welfare administrative data. Additionally, one participant died between the baseline and follow-up interview and was excluded from this analysis. We refer to the remaining 711 participants as the "college sample" in this Memo. We examined whether or not a participant had enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college by the time the NSC data was obtained in February 2016, when the average and median ages of CalYOUTH participants was 20.2 years.

Logistic regression analyses were used to examine each of the two outcomes.[2] The factors that were considered as predictors of high school completion included youth demographic characteristics, several measures of youths' academic history and achievement, social support and school encouragement, past maltreatment, characteristics of youths' foster care histories, satisfaction with foster care, and other risk and protective factors. We also included, as a predictor, the number of months youth had remained in foster care past their 18th birthday up to the time of the follow-up interview. The same sets of factors were examined as predictors of college entry.[3] Most predictors were assessed during the youths' baseline interviews. Past maltreatment, foster care history characteristics, and months in care after youths' 18th birthday were obtained from state administrative child welfare data.

[1] College entry data was missing in NSC records for CalYOUTH participants with blocked records. It is not possible to identify these individuals. See Okpych & Courtney (in press) for a detailed discussion of how Wave 2 data were used to supplement unreported enrollment records in NSC data.
[2] Multiple imputation was used to provide information that was missing for the predictor variables.
[3] One exception is that when examining predictors of college entry, youths' age at the date of the NSC data draw was used instead of youths' age at the date of their second interview. Similarly, the number of months in care past the 18th birthday was calculated up to the date of the NSC data draw instead of up to the date of the second interview.

Findings

Figure 1 displays the proportions of youths who attained a high school credential by age 19. Overall, about 71 percent of participants had finished a secondary credential. Among the youths who had not completed a high school credential by the time of their baseline interview at age 17, two-thirds had completed a credential by age 19. Nearly all of the credentials that were earned were high school diplomas (93%) rather than GEDs or alternative credentials (7%). The proportion of credential earners was slightly higher for females than for males, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .66$).

Figure 2 shows the proportions of youths who had entered college by the time NSC data were obtained. More than half of youths had enrolled in college. The proportion of college entrants was higher for females

Figure 1.
Proportion of Youths Completing a High School Credential by Age 19, Overall and by Gender.

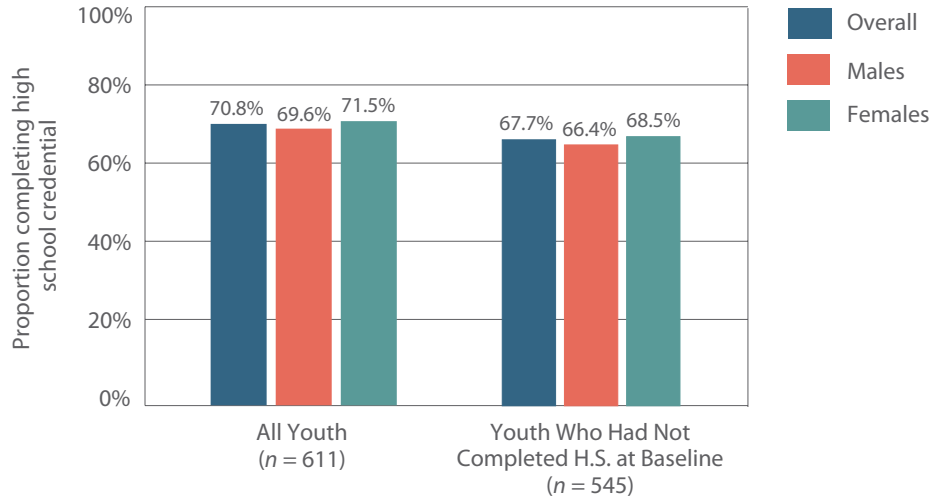


Figure 2.
Proportion of Youths Entering College by NSC Data Draw, Overall and by Gender

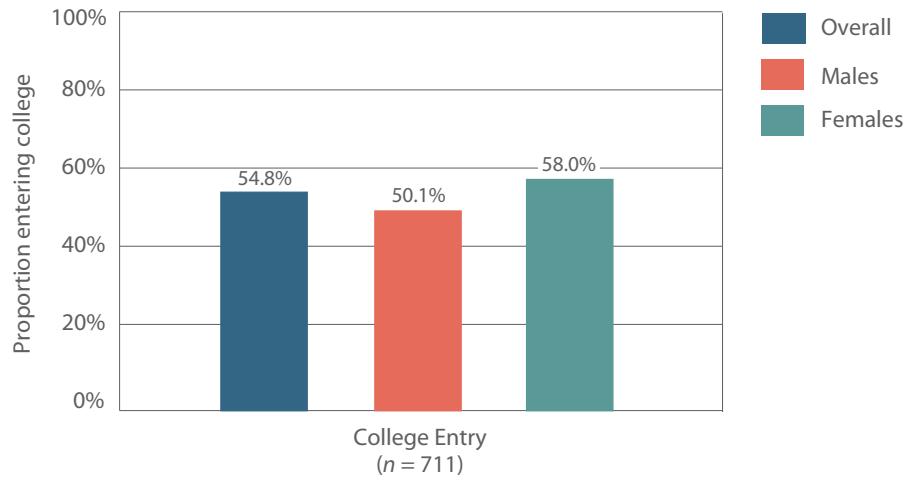
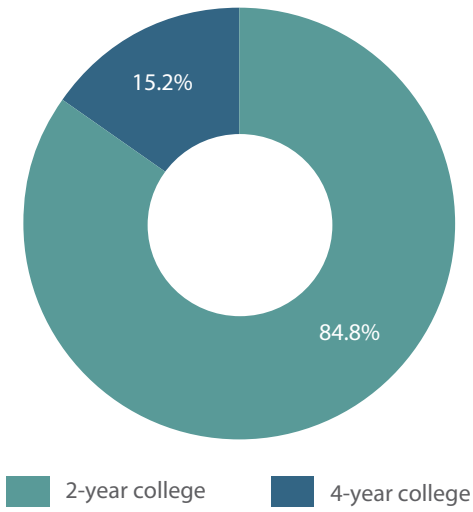


Figure 3.
Type of College in which Students First Enrolled (*n* = 398)



than males, but this difference was not quite statistically significant ($p = .07$).

Figure 3 includes only the 398 youths who had enrolled in college. Among college entrants, the overwhelming majority first enrolled in 2-year colleges. For every one youth who entered a 4-year college, about 6.5 youths entered 2-year colleges.

Turning to the results of the regression analyses, Table 1 displays the findings of predictors of high school completion by age 19 among the high school sample. The table only displays youth demographic characteristics and factors that were significantly associated with the expected odds of finishing a high school credential. Factors that were also included in the model but were not significant predictors of credential attainment are listed at the bottom of the table.

There were no differences in the predicted odds of earning a high school credential by gender or race/ethnicity, but youths in rural and suburban counties were significantly more likely than youths in large urban counties to have earned a high school credential. A few characteristics of youths' academic background were associated with their expected likelihood of finishing a credential. Having completed 11th grade by the time of the baseline interview (vs. completing 9th grade or lower at baseline) increased the odds of finishing a credential, as did youths' reading proficiency. A standard deviation higher in reading proficiency was associated with a 42 percent increase in the predicted odds of finishing high school, net of the other factors in the model. Conversely, youths who had ever repeated a grade were less likely to have completed a high school credential than youths who had not been held back. Youths with an alcohol or substance use problem were also less likely to have completed a credential, as were youths who had confirmed cases of sexual abuse (compared to youths who experienced neglect, emotional abuse, or types of maltreatment other than physical abuse). Finally, the number of months youths spent in care after age 18 was significantly associated with the odds of finishing high school. Each month in care past age 18 increased the expected odds of completing high school by about 8 percent.

Table 2 displays the findings of predictors of college entry among the college sample. As in Table 1, only youth demographic characteristics and statistically significant predictors appear in the table. Similar to the predictors of high school credential completion, higher reading proficiency increased the expected odds of entering college, while a history of grade repetition decreased the odds of entry. Aspiring to earn a college degree or more than a college degree (versus aspiring to earn a high school credential or less) also significantly predicted the odds of going to college, after controlling for the other factors in the model. The odds of going to college were about 66 percent lower for participants who were already parents at age 17 compared to participants who were not parents. Foster youth who changed placements more often during their time in foster care were less likely to enter college compared to youths who changed placements less often. Finally, the odds of enrolling in college increased with greater time spent in care past the 18th birthday, net of the other predictors. Each month in care past age 18 increased the expected odds of entering by about 6 percent.

Table 1. Abbreviated Results from Logistic Regression Analysis of Predictors of High School Completion (n = 545)[a b]	
Demographic Characteristics	**Odds Ratio**
Male (reference: female)	0.93
Race/ethnicity (reference: white)	
African American	1.29
Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian/AK Native	5.04
More than one race	1.17
Hispanic	0.87
County urbanicity group (reference: large urban)	
Rural/suburban	2.61*
Urban	1.40
Los Angeles County	1.20
Age at baseline interview	0.10**
Age at follow-up interview	3.79^
Academic History and Achievement	
Highest grade completed at Wave 1 (reference: 9th grade or lower)	
10th grade	1.74
11th grade	3.35*
Reading score	1.42**
Ever repeated a grade	0.52*
Maltreatment and Foster Care History Characteristics	
Most severe substantiated maltreatment (reference: neglect, emotional abuse, or other maltreatment)	
Physical abuse	0.83
Sexual abuse	0.37**
Months in care past age 18	1.08***
Risk Factors	
Alcohol/substance use disorder	0.53*

Notes: ^$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. Odds ratios without an asterisk had a p-value greater than .10.

[a] Additional variables included in this model that did not significantly predict high school completion: high school grades, educational aspirations, encouragement from foster care personnel to pursue postsecondary education, number of individuals nominated as social supports, placement type youth spent most time in while in foster care, placement change rate while in foster care, youths' desire to remain in care beyond age 18, positive screen for an externalizing behavioral disorder, and number of school changes due to a family move or foster care placement change .

[b] Additional variables not included in this model that were explored in preliminary analyses and found to not significantly predict high school completion: ever placed in special education classroom, youths' perception of preparedness to achieve education goals, youths' report of amount of education-related services received, encouragement from school personnel to pursue postsecondary education, encouragement from relatives to pursue postsecondary education, total number of years in foster care before age 18, total number of foster care episodes before age 18, total number of foster care placements before age 18, youth's satisfaction with foster care, youth ever worked for pay, youth was a parent at Wave 1, youth had ever been incarcerated by Wave 1, and positive screen for an internalizing psychological disorder.

Table 2. Abbreviated Results from Logistic Regression Analysis of Predictors of College Entry (n = 711)[a b c d]	
Demographic Characteristics	**Odds Ratio**
Male (reference: female)	0.77
Race/ethnicity (reference: white)	
African American	1.27
Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian/AK Native	1.61
More than one race	1.23
Hispanic	0.71
County urbanicity group (reference: large urban)	
Rural/suburban	1.21
Urban	0.81
Los Angeles County	0.88
Age at baseline interview	0.39
Age at NSC data draw	2.62
Academic History and Achievement	
Highest grade completed at Wave 1 (reference: 9th grade or lower)	
10th grade	1.22
11th grade	1.74
12th grade	2.65^
Reading score	1.43**
Ever repeated a grade	0.52**
Educational aspirations (reference: high school credential or less)	
Some college	1.14
Earn a college degree	2.21*
More than a college degree	2.70**
Maltreatment and Foster Care History Characteristics	
Foster care placement change rate	0.83*
Months in care past age 18	1.06***
Risk Factors	
Parent at age 17	0.34*

Notes: ^$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. Odds ratios without an asterisk had a p-value greater than .10.

[a] Additional variables included in the model that did not significantly predict college entry: high school grades, ever placed in special education classroom, number of individuals nominated as social supports, placement type youth spent most time in while in foster care, youths' desire to remain in care beyond age 18, and positive screen for an alcohol or substance use disorder.

[b] Additional variables not included in this model that were explored in preliminary analyses and found to not significantly predict college entry: youths' perception of preparedness to achieve education goals, youths' report of amount of education-related services received, number of school changes due to foster care or family moves, encouragement from foster care personnel to pursue postsecondary education, encouragement from school personnel to pursue postsecondary education, encouragement from relatives to pursue postsecondary education, total number of years in foster care before age 18, total number of foster care episodes before age 18, most severe substantiated type of maltreatment, youth's satisfaction with foster care, youth ever worked for pay, positive screen for an internalizing psychological disorder, and positive screen for an externalizing behavioral disorder.

[c] The total number of placements youths resided in while in foster care significantly predicted the likelihood of entering college. However, this variable was strongly associated with placement change rate and was thus excluded from the regression model. When placement change rate and number of placements were swapped in the regression model, the results for number of placements are as follows: (reference group = 5 or fewer placements, $OR = 0.54$, $p = .013$ for 6–10 placements; $OR = 0.43$, $p = .001$ for 11 or more placements).

[d] A binary variable measuring whether youths had ever been incarcerated by Wave 1 was negatively and significantly associated with college entry. However, this variable was omitted from the regression model because it was strongly associated with the presence of an alcohol/substance use disorder. When these two variables are swapped in the regression model, past incarceration did not significantly predict college entry ($OR = 0.83$, $p = .487$).

Conclusion

This Memo explored factors related to the likelihood that foster youths earn a high school credential and enter college. Among young people who had not earned a high school credential by the baseline interviews at age 17, which was about 90 percent of CalYOUTH participants, two in three completed a credential by Wave 2 when they were 19 years old. Not surprisingly, youths who showed signs of being behind academically at baseline (i.e., had repeated a grade, had not yet completed 10th grade, had lower reading proficiency scores) were expected to have lower chances of completing a high school credential two years later. The academic setbacks faced by some youths are considerable. At age 17, about half of the respondents were reading below a high school level, more than half said they were earning mostly Cs or lower in school, and about one-third had repeated a grade.

Some of the predictors shed light on other factors that negatively affected the chances that CalYOUTH participants completed a high school credential by age 19. The findings suggest that foster youths with alcohol or substance use problems and foster youths who experienced sexual abuse prior to entering care may be at heightened risk of not completing a credential. About 26 percent of the sample had a positive screen for an alcohol or substance use disorder at age 17, and the findings underscore the importance of identifying and addressing these problems. Sexual abuse can be particularly psychologically damaging, leading to problems with emotional regulation and attention that interfere with learning. About 17 percent of the sample had substantiated cases of sexual abuse, and child welfare departments can use administrative data to identify these young people to ensure they are receiving the psychological and educational support needed to help them finish high school. Finally, youths in rural/suburban counties were more likely to finish high school than were youth in large urban counties. There appears to be something favorable about rural/suburban counties, but these findings are difficult to explain and warrant further research.

In terms of the analysis of college enrollment, results indicate that over half of foster youth had enrolled in college by ages 19–20. If we consider 100 foster youths, 45 youths would have not enrolled in college, 47 would have enrolled in 2-year colleges, and only 8 would have enrolled in 4-year colleges. Thus, and consistent with past studies (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005), 2-year colleges are an important access point to higher education for foster youth. The high percentage of foster youth in 2-year colleges means that resources will need to be directed to these institutions to help foster youths meet the demands of college and to navigate a course to a degree or certificate. Child welfare departments can play an important role by using administrative data to identify the colleges that foster youth most commonly attend so that they know where to concentrate resources.[4] This will aid local child welfare departments in establishing sustained partnerships with colleges with critical masses of foster youth. Furthermore, it is important to determine the extent to which foster youth are being directed into or opting to attend 2-year colleges instead of 4-year colleges. A wide body of research suggests that characteristics of the colleges that students attend, such as campus culture and resources, affect their chances of succeeding, independent of their incoming skills and characteristics (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011). While some foster youth may be appropriately matched to 2-year colleges given their skills, preparedness, and goals, some foster youth may be undermatched when they enroll in colleges that are below their credentials. This could hurt their prospects of continuing and completing college in the long run (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013).

Findings from the regression analyses point to several factors that significantly predicted the likelihood of attending college, net of other factors. Similar to the analyses of high school credential completion, aspects of foster youths' educational history and achievement

[4] For example, states can use child welfare administrative data of older youths in foster care and purchase NSC records for a nominal fee.

were related to their expected chances of entering college. Foster youths who had not repeated a grade, who had higher reading proficiency[5], and who aspired to go to college were more likely to enroll. Still, many of the foster youths who made it to college will likely face difficulties in adjusting to college-level work. For example, among those who made it to college, only one-quarter (25%) had been reading at or above their grade level at age 17. Thus, it will be critical that foster youths are linked with adequate academic support as they begin college.

Early parenthood decreased the chances that foster youth entered college, which is consistent with past research that suggests that caregiving responsibilities can delay or hinder college enrollment. About 10 percent of females and 2 percent of males had a living child by age 17. Young people who had changed placements more often while in care were less likely to enter college compared to youth who changed placements less frequently. It may be that youth who move around more may experience other issues (e.g., behavioral health problems) that impede their ability to enter college, and it may be that frequent placement changes themselves have a disruptive impact on foster youths' learning and subsequent likelihood of going to college. Efforts are underway to reduce placement mobility for foster youth and to reduce negative repercussions on foster youths' educational continuity when placement changes do occur, and the findings of this brief underscore the importance of these initiatives.

In this analysis, we did not find that social support was related to college entry. However, in a separate analysis that examined many of the same predictors, it was found that the types of individuals that youths nominated and the types of support that these individuals offered were related to college entry, rather than just the overall number of nominated individuals (Okpych & Courtney, in press). In particular, adults who had gone to college and whom foster youths turned to for advice and tangible support were particularly influential in increasing the chances that youths entered college. The finding of this related analysis that took a more detailed look at social support suggests that connecting foster youths with adults who possess the knowledge and skills to help them get into college can increase their chances of actually going. This is important because, during the follow-up interviews at age 19, about half of the respondents interested in going to college said that they had not received enough help with the concrete steps needed to enroll in college.

In addition to social support, there were other factors that may have been expected to predict high school completion and college entry but were not found to be related to these outcomes, such as high school mobility, most common foster care placement type, and externalizing behavior problems. For example, in a large study of foster youth in Colorado, high school mobility was found to decrease the likelihood of finishing high school (Clemens et al., 2016). However, most of the previous studies did not take into account factors that could explain these relationships, such as indicators of youth behavior problems and academic history. The current study controlled for a relatively broad range of factors. Further research is needed to understand the interplay and tease apart the unique contributions of different risk factors to educational outcomes for foster youth.

Finally, the amount of time youths remained in care past age 18 was significantly associated with both the likelihood of completing a high school credential and the likelihood of entering college. This is consistent with previous research, which found that participation in extended care positively impacted secondary and postsecondary outcomes (Courtney & Hook, 2016).

[5] The measure of reading proficiency was a significant predictor of both outcomes, but the measure of overall high school grades was not. Although youth reported their grades, information was not available on the type of classes they were in (e.g., basic, regular, honors/Advanced Placement), characteristics of the high school they attended (e.g., level of academic rigor), and other factors that could influence the grades they earned. Not accounting for this information could weaken the association between grades and the two educational outcomes. Additionally, grades were self-reported, which may be less precise than grades from academic records. In contrast, the measure of reading proficiency is a brief standardized assessment that scores youth based on reading proficiency norms for their age. Even though this measure is limited to just reading, it is does not have the problems just described about high school grades.

Separate analyses of CalYOUTH participants found that extended care was related to other outcomes, such as increasing economic well-being and reducing the chances of experiencing negative outcomes like homelessness and incarceration (Courtney & Okpych, 2017). In terms of educational outcomes, extended care may provide young people with the needed material support (e.g., housing) and connect them to guidance and resources that remove some of the barriers to finishing high school and going to college. These findings about the association between months in care past the 18th birthday and the two educational outcomes should be interpreted with a degree of caution. It may be that youths' characteristics that were not measured or inadequately measured lead youths to both remain in extended care and to attain these outcomes. This point must be underscored especially because satisfactory progress toward education goals fulfills eligibility requirements to remain in extended foster care in California. More rigorous research is needed to determine whether the findings reported in this Memo are replicated. Future analyses of CalYOUTH data will examine college entry and college persistence using administrative child welfare data that includes young people in foster care before and after the California Fostering Connections Act (AB12) was enacted.

Limitations

Several limitations are important to note when interpreting the findings in this Memo. First, as stated above, findings about the impact of extended care must be interpreted cautiously. Second, the analysis of predictors of high school completion excludes about 70 youths who had completed high school by Wave 1. While removing these youths was a necessary step for this analysis, it may have created a sample of young people who were less likely to finish high school, and regression estimates may be different among the subsample considered in the Memo. Third, few participants enrolled in 4-year colleges, which limited our ability to separately examine predictors of 2-year college entry and predictors of 4-year college entry. Small sample sizes in some of the predictor categories (e.g., county urbanicity groups) may have also limited our ability to detect significant associations. Finally, the findings reported here apply to the population of foster youth within California. Findings may differ for foster youth in other states where the demographic composition of the foster youth population, aspects of the child welfare system, and aspects of the educational systems differ.

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