

Supporting Pennsylvania Students in Foster Care Placement

Educators' Guide

Who are Students in Foster Care in Pennsylvania?

The [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System](#) (AFCARS) reports that more than 21,000 children and youth are served by the Pennsylvania foster care system. In an average month, there are over 13,000 children and youth in foster care placement in Pennsylvania with their average age being just over 8.

Pennsylvania children and youth in foster care placement spend an average of almost 2 years in care. Forty-four percent live in placement with a relative, also known as kinship placement. Another 41 percent reside with a non-relative foster family. Seventy percent of those students' cases indicate a goal of reunification with the primary caregiver.

Approximately 64 percent of children and youth in foster care placement in Pennsylvania are school age. [Academic achievement](#) and [graduation rates](#) are lower for students in foster care than their peers. Required state assessments demonstrate that 12 percent of high school students in foster care placement are proficient in mathematics compared to 62 percent among all high school students. In the reading and language arts, 23 percent are proficient compared to 64 percent among all students. The graduation rate for students in foster care placement is 49 percent compared to 87 percent for students not in foster care placement.

How Are Schools Able to Support Students in Foster Care Placement?

[Research](#) has demonstrated that students in foster care placement are more likely than their peers to struggle academically and to drop out of school before graduation. These outcomes are due to the high mobility of this student population, who experience much higher levels of residential and school instability than most other student populations. A positive school experience and consistent school stability can serve as powerful protective factors for students in foster care placement.

Educators can play a key role in promoting an inclusive and nurturing environment for every student in foster care placement. These tips, strategies, and additional practice-enriching resources will help you effectively support students with foster care experience, ensuring they receive the support they need to thrive academically and emotionally.

1

Recognize the Effects of Trauma on Learning

Students in foster care placement have often experienced trauma, toxic stress, and loss. Approach interactions with empathy and understanding, recognizing that trauma affects learning.

Enrich your practice: [Toxic Stress – Center on the Developing Child](#)

2

Ensure Confidentiality

Respect the privacy of students in foster care placement. Avoid stigmatizing labels, share information appropriately, and make every effort to protect their confidentiality, creating a safe and supportive environment.

Enrich your practice: [Information Sharing in Pennsylvania – Education and Child Welfare](#)

3

Recognize Strengths and Presume Competence

Celebrate the resilience and strengths of students in foster care placement. Acknowledge their talents, friendships, and supportive relationships, integrating these strengths into engagement strategies. Presume that students with foster care experience are highly capable students but may need additional support to heal and accomplish their education goals.

Enrich your practice: [Trauma-Sensitive Schools and Social Emotional Learning: An Integration](#)

4

Empower Student Voice

Involve students in decision-making processes related to their education and long-term goals. Empowering them with a sense of control over their lives can enhance their engagement and sense of agency. Involve them in Best Interest Determination (BID) meetings whenever possible and find pathways to participation in school-sponsored activities to foster a sense of belonging.

Enrich your practice: [A Tool for Youth Engagement and Empowerment](#)

5

Support During Transitions through Collaboration

Students in foster care placement may experience frequent transitions, which sometimes necessitate a school move. Offer continuity and stability by ensuring smooth school moves via expedited records transfers and collaboration with other school departments. This may include student services, enrollment and registration, student assistance programs (SAP), and Child Accounting.

Enrich your practice: [Foster Care Student School Stability Tool](#) and [Pennsylvania Statewide Foster Care Education Directories](#)

6

Establish Students in the School Community

When welcoming a new student who has enrolled due to a foster care placement, ensure they feel welcomed, equipped, and prepared to attend their new school. Take steps to integrate the student and their foster family or kin into the school. Give the student a tour, ask about their interests, introduce them to teachers and student groups, and begin planning their class schedule. Create opportunities for them to exercise their agency. Connect with families to welcome them to the school and describe the educational resources available to their child in foster care placement.

Enrich your practice: [Guide for Schools: Meeting the Needs of Students in Foster Care](#)

7

Address Educational Gaps and Accelerate Learning

Many students in foster care placement enter with educational gaps due to absenteeism, changes in schools, and other factors. Provide targeted support to help bridge these gaps and ensure academic success. Seek and request academic records and assess all credits, partial credits, and prior work completed. Be flexible when assessing prior work and provide necessary accommodations to support their academic progress.

Enrich your practice: [Foster Care for Children: Information for Educators](#)

8

Assess the Application of Act 1 of 2022

Students in foster care placement who have experienced “education instability” — meaning one or more school changes in school entity enrollment during a single school year — are eligible for assistance under Pennsylvania law. Act 1 provides students with a Point of Contact, equal access, fees elimination, graduation progress assessment, and considers alternative pathways to graduation.

Enrich your practice: [Act 1 of 2022 – Assisting Students Experiencing Education Instability](#)

9

Connect Students to Resources

Students with foster care experience may be eligible for resources including transition to adulthood programs, post-secondary tuition support, and extended health care coverage. Identify and connect these resources to students to help them achieve their academic and career goals and connect with child welfare agencies to discuss their participation.

Enrich your practice: [Know Your Rights Guide](#)

10

Understand Legal Education Protections and Guidance

Familiarize yourself and ensure compliance with federal legislation and state school codes supporting and affecting students in foster care placement. Protections include school stability and policies regarding school enrollment and attendance.

Enrich your practice: [Laws and Guidance](#)

11

Collaborate with Child Welfare Agencies

Establish partnerships with child welfare professionals to coordinate support for students in foster care placement. Collaborate on Best Interest Determinations (BID), school placements, and transportation arrangements to ensure the student’s well-being and educational success. Plan to connect with your child welfare agency contacts at a minimum of the beginning and end of the school year to review students in foster care placement enrolled in your school and update records if placement changes have occurred.

Enrich your practice: [Education Liaison Directory](#) and [What is Child Welfare? A Guide for Educators](#)

In Pennsylvania, we all share the commitment to provide equitable opportunities for all students, including those with foster care experience. By implementing the strategies outlined in this guide, educators can create a supportive educational environment where every student in foster care placement can reach their full potential.

