Youth Perspectives on the Colorado Foster Care Education Data

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"Stability is the biggest issue, because that's your main issue in life and that's the biggest that you desire. Everyone desires it, even if they don't realize that they desire it. That's the biggest desire for foster youth is stability.

And school is like the most normal it gets for stability... If you could figure out something that could work out, I think that would be like the biggest change."

Supporting Organizations

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Closing the high school graduation gap for youth in foster care is an imperative. Despite steady increases in the Colorado statewide graduation rates, students in foster care are graduating at consistently low rates[1]. What is working in Colorado for the student population, as a whole is not sufficient to meet the educational needs of students in foster care.

As part of a cross-system effort to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care, University of Northern Colorado in partnership with Mile High United Way, conducted focus groups with youth. Fifteen youth who were in foster care during middle school and/or high school reviewed information on patterns in graduation, completion (GED), dropout, and school mobility rates. The youth shared their educational experiences related to the statewide foster care education data and offered recommendations for accelerating progress. The purpose of this report is to bring youth's voices and perspectives on the foster care education data formally into the dialogue.

As one youth aptly stated:

> We really just need more awareness. We need more media coverage. We need people to know about this and to be talking about this and to actually care about it because it's not just foster kids that aren't getting an education. It's adults who can't find work because they didn't get an education.

The youth's voices and interpretations of the data presented in this report may be integrated with other Colorado foster care education work and materials to:

- Increase awareness and understanding of the complex educational issues of students in foster care
- Leverage support through pairing youth's stories and the human experience with the quantitative data on the educational outcomes of students in foster care
- Accelerate progress by informing cross-system work designed to support the success of students in foster care

It is with gratitude to the youth who so generously shared their stories that we submit this report.

Goals of Foster Care Education Research

Increase awareness of the educational issues of students in foster care.

Leverage support across the systems that serve these youth.

Accelerate progress through using data to inform actionable changes.

Context for This Work

In 2012, Colorado Department of Education and Colorado Department of Human Services entered into a data use agreement. This agreement is making it possible to conduct statewide analysis of the educational outcomes of students in foster care. The first analyses were conducted on these data in 2014. Inviting youth to review and share their perspectives on these data is part of systematically engaging stakeholders in the process of making meaning of these data.

Purpose of This Report

The purpose of this report is to include youth's voices in the Colorado foster care education research. Youth who recently exited the foster care system reviewed key findings from a 5-year trend study[2] of high school graduation, high school completion, and dropout rates conducted by University of Northern Colorado, as well as the 2012-13 school mobility data[1] reported by Colorado Department of Education. The youth's perspectives on these data and recommendations for supporting educational success are included in this report.

Research questions:

- What factors do foster care youth believe contribute to how students in foster care exit the K-12 system (i.e., graduate, complete (earn a GED), or dropout)?
- Why do foster care youth believe substantially more students in foster care are earning a GED than a high school diploma?
- What do youth recommend to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care?

A brief section on transition to college is included at the end of the report. Although transition to college was not a part of planned data collection, youth were clear that this is an essential aspect of their education that needs attention.

Students in Foster Care

Although we define the population of 'students in foster care' by their common experience of one or more foster care placements, these youth are challenged to make meaning out of their experiences and overcome barriers to school success that began before and continue after a foster care placement. For example, trauma may arise from the events that led up to a foster care placement, such as experiencing abuse, neglect, and being separated from siblings[3]. For many of these youth the trauma is complex[4], meaning that they experience multiple types of trauma[5].

The outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, dropout rates) in the foster care education data are a reflection of much more than time in care. The youth voices that are captured in this report provide insight into the complexity of closing the high school graduation achievement gap.

Youth

Fifteen youth participated in the focus groups. The average age of participants was 21.6 years old with a range of 18 to 26. The majority ($n = 10$; 66%) of the focus group participants were female. Just over half the youth identified themselves as multiracial ($n = 8$; 53%), with the remainder of the youth describing themselves as white ($n = 7$; 46%).

Stability

- Youth reported 1 to >32 foster care placements (*median = 6*).
- Youth reported 0 to 8 school changes during high school (*median = 3*).

Educational Outcomes

The percentage of the youth who reported graduating from high school (40%) is between the 6-year and 7-year high school graduation rate found in the statewide data[2]. Given the mean age of the youth (21.6), these data align. The percentage of youth who reported earning a GED is higher than the statewide data.

- 6 youth (40%) reported graduating from high school.
- 4 youth (27%) reported earning a GED.

Ten youth reported dropping out of school one or more times. Of these youth who dropped out, only one re-engaged in school and earned a high school diploma. A table detailing stability and educational outcomes by youth can be found in Appendix B.

RESULTS

The results presented are themes that crossed multiple focus groups (see Appendix A for data analysis method). The analysis was guided by the overarching research questions:

- What factors do foster care youth believe contribute to how students in foster care exit the K-12 system (i.e., graduates, completes/earns a GED, or drops out)?
- Why do foster care youth believe substantially more students in foster care are earning a GED than a diploma?
- What do youth recommend to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care?

The first theme 'emotional consequences' is not tied explicitly to a research question. This theme provides context for understanding the population of students in foster care.

Emotional Consequences

Youth described how the emotional consequences of their experiences impacted their education.

> I feel like foster kids; they feel lost because the moment they get into foster care they're like why am I here? What did I do wrong to get me here when everybody else around you … **It slows down the learning process** because you're sitting here dealing with so much that you don't even know how to deal with your own mind.

> And that's kind of what foster kids deal with… there's a lot when you're going to school **you're not just dealing with school and learning school things you're learning how to stay calm not be angry at life**. Kind of deal with your situation, just deal with a lot of emotions. The case workers constantly needing – you're dealing with a lot of court hearings, just you're dealing with a lot more than just going to school and learning the ABC's.

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> "Oh, they're just another kid," when in all reality, it's not that way at all. We're not just another kid. We have more needs than normal kids. We have emotional needs, physical needs, mental needs. And I feel like the school part is – they're not really understanding the concept of helping people that are in foster care mentally.

RQ1: Factors Related To Exit from K-12 System

Four themes emerged from the focus group data related to how youth exited from the education system (i.e., high school diploma; GED or certificate of completion; dropout):

- Basic Needs
- Academic Self-Concept
- Educational Stability
- Resilience

Basic Needs

Youth spoke to a heightened awareness of planning for and ensuring that basic needs are met. Some youth focused on safety of others; whereas, others focused on the fear of homelessness or food instability. Responsibilities outside of school competed with their ability to be students. The importance of these competing roles related to the overarching theme of basic needs.

> **So you're seeing higher dropout rates and younger dropout rates because when we enter foster care and we have younger siblings or we have somebody that we take care of**… we're gonna want to stay home and we're gonna want to make sure that they're not gonna hit them or they're not gonna be abused. And so that's personally my experience with my little brother. I missed a lot of school just due to the fact that I was scared for him… that he was gonna fall down the stairs and those people weren't gonna do anything about it so I was like don't want to really leave because you might die.

> A lot of people are oblivious to youth homelessness and as soon as you leave foster care I feel like that's what happens.

> If it hadn't been for my foster parents letting me stay there, **I would've been homeless and I would've had to drop out.**

> I'm a dropout myself. I dropped out in 12th grade and it was because I got pregnant and I had two kids. So imagine being pregnant and going to school at the same time is kind of hard. And my last year of high school, I was actually with my grandma and working on emancipation by myself from Social Services. It's basically there's a job or a kid, job or kid … I was juggling being a mommy and a coworker or employee so… **I just never went back for it**.

Academic Self-Concept

Self-concept is the internalized structure of beliefs about one's self and is domain specific[6]. The youth described how they internalized the messages that they received from adults, as well as peers. The interpretation of these messages reflects a learned belief structure about who they are as students or an academic self-concept. The youth's academic self-concept is connected to how they represent themselves and behave on a continuum of being disengaged from school to driven to succeed. The research team observed that the youth who participated in this study polarized to the extreme ends of the continuum of disengaged from school to highly motivated and driven to succeed. Those youth who presented as more driven applied a resilience lens to their experiences – often reframing how they are stronger because of being a 'foster kid.'

Messages from professionals/ programs

Messages from peers

Messages from families (bio/foster)
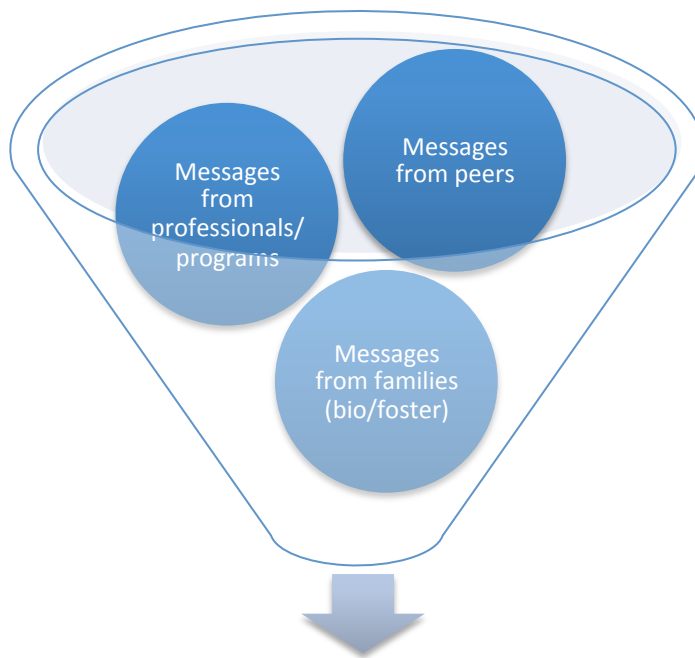
Academic Self-Concept

Disengaged

Driven

Messages from Professionals/Programs

Messages from professionals/programs include the professionals that work in the systems that serve students in foster care (e.g., case workers, teachers, guardians ad Litem), and the requirements or perceived expectations for participating in programs that serve these youth.

How youth make meaning out of these messages and internalize them is what becomes integrated into their self-concept. The example below illustrates a lens, perhaps shaped by the emotional consequences of being a 'foster kid'. The message, "we want to get you ready," is interpreted as, I'm not a ''normal student."

The following quotation is an example of implicit messages a youth described as salient to her engagement in school.

> That also reminds me of things like people, foster kids, who do exceed and excel in school are not getting the proper recognition for what they do and how they succeed because there was a point where I was excelling and exceeding and nobody noticed in a sense, just put me down whatever. **It made me go the other direction for a little while**.

An additional pattern in the data was youth interpretations of messages from professionals/programs as highlighting or confirming that they are different from other students. This data point is elaborated further under results related to earning a high school diploma versus a GED.

> The newer schools you go to it's kind of weird for us because they see it in the system. You're flagged as foster care and they know. Like they have the mentality and most of your teachers will kind of act like that towards you, too. But every time you switch a school, the new counselor is like, "oh, they're in foster care"…

Messages from Families (Biological and Foster)

Some messages from families that shaped youth's academic self-concept were implicit, such as a lack of actions or information related to supporting school success.

> Because my foster mother didn't want me to succeed as much as I wanted to, I would say to her what does it take to go here and do that? She didn't have the answers and I was wondering why…

Several years later, this youth's academic self-concept and behaviors reflect a drive to succeed and help others.

> …If I were fully knowledgeable about my options back then, I would look at everything so differently. I would take charge of my life at that age and say this is what I want to do and no one's gonna stop me. I wasn't given that. I don't want that happening to anybody else. So my conclusion: If I had my own group home, I would do all my research. I would show the kids this is what is on the table that you can do and you can do, right. I would say this is how you get there, this is how you do it. If you want it, I can help you do it.

Other messages from family were explicit.

> My own father who says he's supposed to be there loving me and tell me all this stuff. But I get texts from him that say, "you're a worthless piece of shit." … The [foster family] care about me more than you [father] do… **I started slacking and I started not caring** - I really don't care about myself anymore.

> I had an incredible foster home and my foster parents cared that I was going to school… And I had a school counselor tell me that I could only go to community college, ***and my foster parent went down there and got in her face and was like you can't tell people that.***

How the youth made meaning out of the messages they received is reflected in their academic self-concept and school/education related behaviors. The quote below is an example of the connection to polarizing to the driven end of the continuum of education behaviors. This youth graduated from high school.

> Because I see myself as a human being who can make a damn difference and me wanting to prove my family wrong because you know what they told me I'm gonna do all this negative stuff. Yeah I've done negative stuff but look at the positive I've done. I've done a damn lot for how old I am and for who I am as a person.

Messages from Peers

The fear of and experiences of social stigma were connected to disengagement from school.

> I left at 11th grade I didn't really want to go back, and then I tried online school because of the fear of students and how they're gonna treat me, how they're gonna look at me. Online school didn't really work…. I just decided hey I might as well just go get my GED. It was a quick process; took me like two weeks because I know I'm smart.

> I also felt like in school it was really, really hard because as soon as I told one person, "hey I'm in foster care." Kids over here they made judgment automatically; Oh, she's in foster care because she's a bad kid. I don't want to hang out with her. I don't want to be friends with her. I don't even want to get to know her. **Then there's this social barrier that's like I don't really want to be at school**. All they're going to do is judge me. All they're going to do is stereotype me. All they're going to do is say, "hey you're going to do horrible because you're a foster kid."

> … and I took a GED, mainly because everybody there [at school] either ignored me, or thought I was weird, or just was bullying me. I was like, "you know what? I can just go ahead and go take the GED and not have to deal with all this."

Youth shared numerous stories similar to the quotations above. There were minimal references to positive peer relationships that contributed to school engagement. Many youth referenced stigma related to being in foster care as a reason for disengaging from school. Changing schools during the academic year was referenced as contributing to the social stigma.

> And everyone knew that I was in foster care. A black kid coming in the middle of the school year being dropped off by a white lady.

Educational Stability

Educational stability is a broad term defined by Federal and State policy on foster youth (e.g., 2008 Fostering Connections Act[7]; Colorado HB O8-1019[8]). Some of the provisions for foster youth that support educational stability are:

- Staying in their school of origin if that is in their best interest
- Requiring immediate enrollment and transfer of records if a school change is necessary

The youth's desire for school stability was palpable. School has the potential to be a stabilizing force in these youth's lives. Some youth spoke about a willingness to contribute to the logistical challenges of remaining in the same school despite placement changes.

There was also recognition among the youth that at times staying in the same school is not practical. However, this awareness was often followed with statements of the negative impact of school changes on their ability to graduate from high school.

Desire for School Stability

A school can be one of those things where it can be consistent… Stability in a sense is where you feel comfortable. You feel like yourself.

Stability is the biggest issue, because that's your main issue in life and that's the biggest that you desire. Everyone desires it, even if they don't realize that they desire it. That's the biggest desire for foster youth is stability. And school is like the most normal it gets for stability. You know what I mean? And for that, I think that's the biggest – if you could figure out something that could work out, I think that would be like the biggest change.

And we should have the right to choose which school we go to and the state should have to accommodate us. Like in my situation, I did not go to the school in my district because I was already enrolled because my bio family moved around so much and I didn't want to have to switch schools every time so I open enrolled. And then when was put in foster care because I was open enrolled, I was allowed to stay there. I had to take a long bus ride, but they should give us that choice to make our own decisions. If you want to make that long bus ride, yeah, you could stay at your own school, but you're responsible for getting yourself there.

Recognition that 'Best Interest' isn't Always Practical

I wanted to go to the best school, but I wasn't necessarily given that opportunity because I wasn't in that location. So I would say being in foster care, being in a group home, you're not able to thrive as much.

Other parents will move during the summer so that their kids' schools don't get interrupted. Other parents will move somewhere else and then drive their kids to school so that they can finish out their last couple weeks after they move.

And we understand that there's not a lot of foster homes, but there should be more foster homes that have openings so that when you're going to [An Urban City] High School and you have to move foster homes, the closest foster home isn't in 40 miles away. There should be one close enough that you could still be in the same school if you chose to get yourself there. They should give especially high school students. It's kind of hard for elementary school students to be responsible for their own transportation. But they should do something to keep us in our schools so that we can graduate.

Alignment of Curriculum & Graduation Requirement

Youth spoke to gaps in learning and repetitive learning that resulted from differences in curriculum across the schools attended.

I don't know division or subtraction or addition because I've never had the chance to learn it, because each school I've moved to has taught me just multiplication.

You can't just take somebody in the middle of chemistry and then throw them in the middle of another chemistry class, and they're learning two completely different things at two completely different levels. It might be the same class, but it's different where their learning and where their skills are at.

Well and then, see, like with the school mobility and stuff like that, especially like I found it was more like in middle school when I moved around and stuff like that, but at semester it always seemed to be if I went to one school, that school, the new school that I went to already taught that semester. And so when I went to the new school, I was already re-learning what I had already learned the first semester so it was always just like repeat. So I went through the American Revolution probably like 13 times. It was just over and over and over again.

Variations in course offerings and graduation requirements were described as barriers to on-time high school graduation.

> My sister moved three schools in one semester and two were in the same school district. And at the end of the semester, all she had was English and math. Those were the only two that translated through all three schools. She was in German and the second school didn't have German so that didn't transfer, and it's like if the school you transfer to doesn't have that exact class that you were in… Then they can't count it.

> Yeah, it's crazy. I started out at West High School [in District A] and then I moved down to [District B], and then I moved back to [District A] my senior year of high school. When I came back, they changed it… and you needed like 22 credits to graduate, but then you needed like some 200-odd hours of class time. I had the credits, but since I didn't have the class time, I couldn't graduate on time.

Consequence is Disengagement

> You're going from school to school, you're finding new social people. It causes you to not care about school. I might care about school. I ain't here to learn, I'm here to make new friends. I mean I'm not going to be here long enough to see what I can do, so I have fun as opposed to learn. I don't care to learn. **I'm not even going to have the chance to learn. I'm going to be going to a different school, so who cares.**

> So you're in foster care, you're constantly going from home to home to home. You're like, "Oh, well, who cares anyway. I don't know how long I'm going to be with this family. I'm going to go to another school next year anyway." They just – they don't care. **Why should I care to graduate when you're not caring to keep me on a stable level so that I can get that education I need.**

Coordination of School Transitions

Youth described two aspects of school transitions: preparing the youth and the school.

> I feel like a lot of kids don't really like change and it is really, really, really hard going from one school to another to another and especially if nobody's preparing you for it.

> Yeah and then you're kind of lost in the dust. You're just another particle that is just there. Nobody really knows what to do with you but it's just there.

Resilience

Some youth engaged in a pattern of describing negative messages or challenging experiences, followed by a positive reframe. These youth present descriptions of challenges in a way that shows an aptitude for resilience and successful adaptation.

> I firmly believe you can take any situation and make it positive. So even though you faced that, you can say to the next generation that's where I came from. Look where I am now.

> I've been to like 12 different middle schools and two high schools. Lost count of elementary because I've been in foster care practically my whole life. Definitely think like as far as curriculum goes it's harder because you might go to one school where they're learning something this semester, transfer schools and they're learning something different, maybe something you already learned. But what they learned the first semester is something that you missed out depending on the school. **But I think going to different schools helps you to become more personable like you work on your people skills. It's like an advantage at the same time.**

The lens of resilience that was applied to how the youth made meaning out of their stories seemed to be a mediating or protective factor. The resilience lens appeared to function as a filter between the messages received and youth's academic self-concept. This is consistent with the literature. Resilience is defined as either a personality characteristic or a skill set that allows individuals to respond to trauma, adversity, or disruptive life events in healthy and adaptive ways.[9] These youth exhibit resilience by translating negative messages into a strong drive to succeed.

RQ2: High School Completion Over Diploma

There are substantially more Colorado students in foster care earning a GED or other certificate of completion than a high school diploma.[2] Researchers analyzing the Midwest Study longitudinal dataset found the difference in employment outcomes based on earning a GED versus a high school diploma may be even more pronounced for students in foster care than the general population[10]. The employment rate for former foster youth during their mid-twenties who earned a high school diploma was greater than 10% more than those who earned a GED. [10]

The Colorado data paired with the Midwest study findings suggest that it is important to learn why so many more students in foster care are exiting with a GED rather than a diploma. The themes that resulted from this study are:

- Consequences of School Mobility
- Fastest or Easiest Positive Exit from the K-12 System
- Encouraged to Take the GED

Consequences of School Mobility

The consequences of school mobility (e.g., low credit accrual, moving to a district with substantively different graduation requirements) made it impossible to graduate on time.

> My credits are way too low nowadays, because I moved so much, because I moved constantly all the time; I always moved. **You can lose one semester within one move.**

Fastest or Easiest Positive Exit from the K-12 System

Youth described a GED as the fastest or easiest exit from the K-12 system.

> But at the same time I'm sitting there thinking I still have seven months left of high school. I just took the GED and aced it. I could be done if I want to be. I didn't do that, but I think that's fed to us as an easy way out.

> It's easier. You'll be done quicker. Get your GED. Some they actually pressure you a lot being a foster kid. They actually even in middle school, they honestly tell you like, "you know, you could get a GED," but that's how I think about it pretty much.

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Encouraged to Take the GED

The majority of the youth described specific times when they were encouraged to take the GED by professionals or programs. The context for the encouragement was not always clear in the data. Thus, it was not possible to discern from these data if the encouragement is practical guidance for individuals toward the best possible exit from the K-12 system. Some youth suggested there are systemic messages and encouragement for students in foster care to pursue a GED over a high school diploma. This may be an area for further exploration.

> I wanted to finish high school. It was my senior year**. I had a 3.4 throughout all high school.** I got accepted to all the colleges I wanted to. And then it was because I couldn't get along with the foster family I ran away like two weeks before I turned 18 and my caseworkers was like, "no, you're not going back to school. You're getting a GED." So I had no choice… **It wasn't because I chose to get my GED**. It's because my caseworker was like, "No, you're getting your GED and we're gonna get you out."

> It was the programs that help foster kids are like, well, with that one in particular because everybody except for me that was signing up for it was getting their GED and you had to get the GED to get the money for college. They were like well, **everyone has to take the GED test just to be in our program. And I wanted the money for college, but I didn't want the GED but they made me take it anyways**. And then I could've just been like submit that and I'll just take my GED and be done, which is the easy way out... and **I was like this isn't gonna count, right, because I don't want to get a GED. I want to graduate with a diploma.**

> I was never really encouraged to take the GED because everybody just seeing that I was in high school and that's my passion, just education in general. But I did see a lot of my fellow foster sisters and brothers, they were pushed to do that. They were pushed pretty damn hard to do that, too, now that I think about it. And **it's kind of sad now that I sit back and realize we were told to do this [GED] versus you can do high school diploma**. You can do it. Just let's set you up right. No, they were just like you're in your situation. Let's see what you can do with that and get a GED. Yeah, that's exactly right.

Transition to College

The focus of the data collection and this report is on exits from the K-12 system. Although we did not explicitly ask about the transition to college, some youth made it clear that this is an important area where they wanted their voices heard. Below are a few quotes that reflect some of the challenges and experiences of those youth who are truly driven to succeed in school and in life.

> We don't have parents that have millions of dollars and like oh here you go here's happy graduation. Like no you have to start from the very, very bottom. Whether that's saving yourself, applying for loans, applying for financial aid, etcetera. You start from the very bottom and it sucks.

> I have not a single penny to my name. I'm struggling to get into college. I'm struggling to – I have a job because you know what? I was extremely lucky that I even got a job... Because that was me and my moral compass leading me north.

> They [university] make you prove you were in foster care. And if you can't prove you were in foster care you are an out-of-state student. And in my case my file was sealed when I emancipated. Sealed. I can hire a lawyer and have it opened up so that I can get the court documents they want.

> Every school wants a different piece of paperwork. There's no universal document.

> If it's hard for someone who just left foster care and still knows their social worker, their social worker still works at the county to get that kind of information, imagine if you were 30 and you decided that you're finally going to go back and get your associate's or something like that.

> I've asked [University] to give me the name of their foster care liaison because every school is supposed to have one, and I know that there's gonna be a problem because there was a problem at [Another University] that took forever to get taken care of. So I know already that there's gonna be a problem and I want to fight it off. Nobody will tell me who this person is.

> I have student loans now because I couldn't get what I was entitled to as a foster kid.

RQ3: Recommendations From the Youth

Youth offered recommendations for closing the high school graduation achievement gap, promoting school success, and increasing educational stability. With the exception of an opening quote for each section, these recommendations are paraphrased for clarity and synthesis across participants. The core content; however, is unfiltered. The purpose of this section of the report is to communicate the youth's recommendations.

Closing the High School Graduation Achievement Gap

Something that's missing in the system is that the foster care system and the education system don't really work in collaboration... They need to do something to keep us in our schools so that we can graduate.

- School stability
- Flexible graduation requirements (e.g., more class options, opportunities to learn practical things - what you need for life)
- Accessible non-traditional academic programs (e.g., online, home, vocational)
- Consistent, state-wide graduation requirements
- Adults who express an interest in foster youth finishing high school
- Information about the available resources for schools, families, and youth

Promoting Success in School

The teachers and staff need to be trained, and a lot of young people experience a lot of trauma, and so I think it's important to have like trauma-informed care training so that they understand when kids are behaving in a negative way or they're acting out instead of trying to discipline them.

- School personnel and teachers with an understanding of the foster care system
- Not requiring assignments (or sharing of assignments) that are about family (e.g., genograms, autobiographies)
- Trauma informed educational practices – teacher training specifically
- More attention to mental health issues
- Awareness of different paths and options for education and learning
- More coordination between involvement of school and foster-care system and home
- More frequent progress reports
- Study groups at school

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- Choices about getting and receiving help with academic issues
- Opportunities to choose what you'd like to learn, rather than being forced
- Incentives for taking tests and getting good grades
- Emotional support and encouragement from school staff
- Encouragement of positivity and hope
- Individual academic evaluation
- Increased social awareness of needs and barriers foster youth experience
- Mentoring programs

Increasing Educational Stability

Wouldn't it be cool if there were a couple teachers that were certified foster families like to do emergency placement… it would be anonymous and no one would know but them. But that kid would still be able to go to the same school and then the teacher would work closely with the family to kind of support the family. Or even if it wasn't a teacher or it was like your PTO came together and decided to identify five respite families…

- Identify respite families in each school
- Include youth in determining if remaining in the school of origin is in their best interest
- When switching foster homes, being allowed to stay in school of origin or make choice about which school to attend
- Practical/ realistic solutions to school transportation barriers
- Consideration of youth's ability (maturity) and willingness to contribute to transportation solutions (e.g., length of travel time; complexity of travel)
- More options for foster homes that allow for placement within existing school
- More responsibility and accountability of caseworker to ease transitional burden of relocating
- Placement testing when foster youth are placed in new school settings

APPENDIX A: Method

The purpose of this appendix is to describe the methods used in the study. This information may be used to contextualize the results and make determinations regarding transferability. The University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this research.

Participant Recruitment

Mile High United Way (MHUW) recruited participants through a network of programs that serve youth in foster care. The criteria for participation were (1) one or more foster care placement(s) in middle school or high school and (2) age 18+ at time of data collection. A gift card and lunch were provided as incentives. Two dates were set for focus group participation and potential participants were invited to attend on either date. The resulting participant pool was broader than youth who are served directly by MHUW.

Data Collection

University of Northern Colorado faculty and doctoral students conducted the focus groups. All focus groups began with an informed consent process. Foster care education data were presented in an illustrated format. Participants were invited to brainstorm their thoughts and reactions to the data verbally and/or by drawing or writing on the illustrations. A semi-structured focus group protocol guided the discussion through four key areas: (1) widening of high school graduation achievement gap, (2) GED versus high school diploma, (3) patterns in dropout events, and (4) school mobility. Interview questions were designed to elicit information about each focus group's participants' experiences related to the foster care education data, as well as their recommendations for improving educational outcomes for students in foster care.

Data Analysis

Consensual Qualitative Research[11] methods were used to analyze the data. This is an iterative process of coming to consensus on the themes and coding of the data. The consensus process occurs first at the individual case level (i.e., each participant's responses) and second through cross-case analysis. The themes that are presented in this report are the core ideas that cross-cases or reflect multiple participants' voices. To fully express the core ideas that emerged across cases, salient participant quotes were chosen. Quotes illuminate the meaning of each core idea through the participants' voices. Every effort was made by the research team to avoid inferring meaning to participant statements, but instead to stay true to the intended meaning of the participant. Research team members again considered core ideas until consensus was reached.

Trustworthiness and Transferability

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the data can be trusted and deemed credible. The process of reaching consensus[11] at every stage of the data analysis process decreases the chances that the biases or preconceived ideas of a single research team member will influence or skew the results from the data. Additionally, the members of the research team who were leading the focus groups and analyzing the data met as a research team to discuss (reveal) assumptions, biases, and experiences that may influence their perspectives on the data being collected and subsequent reporting of the data. This provided an opportunity for the research team to hold each other accountable to representing the data as "purely" as possible.

Transferability. Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings from the data have applicability to other contexts. Lincoln and Guba[12] suggested to maximize the degree to which qualitative data is considered transferable is to provide thick descriptions of the research process and representation of the data. The findings in this research were supported by providing sufficient detail so that readers can make informed decisions about the degree to which the findings are transferable to other times, settings, and students in foster care.

APPENDIX B: Stability & Exit from K-12 System

Age Entered Foster Care	# of Foster Care Placements	# of School Changes in High School	# of Dropout Events (7-12)	Highest Grade Attended	Exit From K-12 System
15	1	2	0	12th	Graduated From HS
3	3	0	0	12th	Graduated from HS
8	>32	3	1	12th	Dropped Out
3	5 or 6	5	0	12th	Graduated from HS
14	5	N/A *	7	8th	Completed (GED)
15	7	3	1	11th	Completed (GED)
7	5	3	1	12th	Dropped Out
7	6	3	0	12th	Graduated From High School
6	11	7	2	12th	Graduated From High School

7	No Response	6	1	No Response	Completed (GED)
5	10 to 12	2	1	12th	Dropped Out
13	22	7 or 8	1	11th	Dropped Out
14 or 15	2	3	0	12th	Graduated from HS
9	Many	Not Sure	1	11th	Dropped Out
11	Moved every 8 months from age 11 to 18	Every 8 months	2	12th	Completed (GED)

Youth indicated changing schools 19 times prior to high school

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