



The relationship between school mobility and students in foster care earning a high school credential



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between school mobility for Colorado students in foster care and educational attainment outcomes, specifically earning high school diploma, a high school equivalency diploma (e.g., through examination such as a GED), or exiting the K-12 system without a credential. Multinomial logistic regression was utilized to analyze the predictive role of school mobility related to high school educational attainment within a statewide sample of four cohorts of students who experienced out-of-home placements during high school. Results indicated that students in the foster care cohorts changed public schools an average of 3.46 times during their first four years of high school. As the average number of school changes increased, the odds of earning a high school diploma decreased and the odds of earning an equivalency diploma (e.g., GED) or exiting without a credential increased. Grade level analysis suggests that educational stability in ninth and twelfth grades may be particularly important to closing the high school graduation gap for students in foster care. A more comprehensive child welfare profile that includes frequency of residential moves, types of placements, and mental or behavioral health indicators was not included in analyses, and this limitation must be considered when using the results of this study to inform policy or practice.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have consistently found that the educational attainment of students who experience foster care is well below their non-foster care peers (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Students who exit the K-12 education system without a high school credential in the United States (U.S.) face significant economic and social challenges throughout the lifespan, including higher rates of teen pregnancy and delinquency (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Harlow, 2003; Manlove, 1998; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Individuals who drop out of high school are also less likely to secure employment than those with a high school diploma or equivalency degree (e.g., GED, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015a).

For those students in foster care who do earn a high school credential, the type of high school credential earned, either regular high school diploma or high school equivalency diploma, may also have a differential effect on employment and earnings (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). A regular high school diploma is earned through accruing the course credits to meet district graduation requirements; whereas, a high school equivalency diploma is earned through an examination, such as the General Education Development (GED) test. Students who earn regular

high school diplomas are more likely to earn higher salaries and more likely to enroll in post-secondary education than students who earn GEDs or otherwise demonstrate high school equivalency (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2010; Patterson, Song, & Zhang, 2009).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 2013–14 school year, 82.3% of students in the U.S. graduated from high school “on-time” (i.e., within four years after initially entering ninth grade) with a regular diploma. However, students in foster care typically graduate from high school at rates far below their non-foster care peers (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Burley, 2013; Clemens, 2014; Colorado Department of Education, 2016). For example, in Colorado, the on-time rates ranged from 27.5% to 30.0% between 2012–13 and 2014–15 (Colorado Department of Education, 2016). During the 2010–11 school year in the state of Washington, Burley (2013) found that the graduation rates for foster care youth who were in care for >90 days was 50%, as compared to 75% for non-foster care youth. Washington state students in foster care for shorter period of times (i.e., one to two years) graduated at a lower rate (44%) than those in out-of-home care for three to four years (65%).

Although there is less information available on the rates of students in foster care earning a high school equivalency diploma versus a regular high school diploma, there is some evidence that students in foster care do so at disproportionately high rates compared to their non-foster care peers. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported

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that in a nationally representative sample of all students who entered during the 2008–09 school year, 3% had earned a GED by the end of the 2012–13 school year. Colorado's state average was just below the national statistic with 2.7% of students in the Class of 2013 earning a GED. In comparison, 13.8% of Colorado students in foster care earned a GED or other certificate of completion in that same year (Colorado Department of Education, 2015). By age 20, 7% of Washington state students in the Class of 2009 had earned a GED, while 24% of students who were in foster care had earned a GED (Burley, 2013). Researchers nearly a decade earlier who tracked foster care youth in the Casey National Alumni Study to age 25 also reported rates of earning a GED that well exceeded the national non-foster care comparison data (Pecora et al., 2006). These findings suggest there may be systemic issues or barriers facing students in foster care relative to earning a regular diploma that differ from the general student population.

1.1. Definition of students in foster care

The federal definition of foster care states that it is “24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the child welfare agency has placement and care responsibility” (45 C.F.R. § 1355.20(a) as cited in U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). This definition does not distinguish among placement types such as family-like foster homes, kinship care, group homes, and residential facilities and has applied to education law (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). Furthermore, it is inclusive of both short-term foster care and long-term foster care.

There are a number of potential explanations for why students in foster care do not fair as well as their non-foster care peers. It is important to recognize that regardless of school mobility, youth in foster care are at a heightened risk for many behavioral and psychological concerns that may impact high school dropout rates (Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson, & Ortiz, 2009; Petrenko, Culhane, Garrido, & Taussig, 2011). Foster care youth are more likely to suffer from mental health disorders in comparison to youth the general population (Havlicek, Garcia, & Smith, 2013). There are also likely differences within the foster care population related to educational attainment that may also be correlated with school mobility. Students who experience more school changes may also have behavioral challenges and, as such, school mobility may function as an instrument of behavioral risk factors (Rumberger, 2003; Swanson & Schneider, 1999).

1.2. School stability

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education have recently highlighted school stability and the importance of creating seamless transitions among schools (King & Burwell, 2016a; King & Burwell, 2016b; Lopez, 2016; Stapleton, 2016). Students in foster care change schools more frequently than their non-foster care peers. For example, approximately 10% of California students in foster care attended three or more schools during one academic year compared to approximately 1% of the general student population who attended the same number of schools (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). The school mobility rate for students in foster care in Colorado was nearly three times the state average in both the 2012–13 and 2013–14 academic years (Parra & Martinez, 2015).

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) mirrors and expands upon the educational stability provisions in the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* of 2008. These Acts provide protections, such as the right to remain in the school of origin (with transportation provided as needed), if that course of action is in the student's best interest. As child welfare and education agencies consider how to implement mandates with or without adequate funding, exploring the empirical connection between school changes and metrics by

which state and local education agencies are accountable may better inform the foster care educational stability action plan.

1.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between school mobility for students in foster care and educational attainment. Researchers tested the hypothesis that frequent school changes are among the factors associated with low graduation rates and disproportionately high rates of earning an equivalency diploma (e.g., GED). In addition, researchers explored the possibility that the effects of school mobility might differ depending on the grade level when school changes occurred. Multinomial logistic regression was utilized to analyze the predictive role of school mobility within a statewide sample of four cohorts of students who experienced out-of-home placements during high school. Educational attainment outcomes of interest were: (a) earning a regular high school diploma; (b) earning a high school equivalency diploma; and, (c) exiting the K-12 system without a high school credential. In addition, staying enrolled for more than four years after initially entering ninth grade was considered in some models. Results demonstrate the importance of implementing child welfare and educational policies that reduce disadvantageous school changes for students in foster care and the value of focusing on facilitating seamless transitions when a school change is in a child's best interest. If the results of this study are to be practically applied (as in informing the creation and implementation of public policies), additional factors beyond the scope of this study should be considered, such as the propensity for trauma and residential changes among this population of students.

2. Background on school mobility and earning a high school credential

Frequent school moves are negatively correlated with educational success for both students inside and outside of the foster care system. A longitudinal K-12 analysis of school mobility within a population of 1410 low-income minority children in Chicago revealed that the log-odds of graduating from high school on-time are reduced by 12–19% with each school change (Herbers, Reynolds, & Chen, 2013). Using a sample of 11,671 nationally-representative youth from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, Rumberger and Larson (1998) found that <60% of students who changed schools two or more times between grades 8–12 for non-promotional reasons received a high school diploma at six years after initially entering ninth grade, and 16% earned a GED. In comparison, 86% of students who did not change schools received a high school diploma, while 4% earned a GED. Researchers studying predictors of educational attainment within nationally-representative samples of American high school students (and more specifically, in Chicago; Herbers et al., 2013; Ou & Reynolds, 2008) have found that school mobility predicts educational attainment when controlling for the significant effects other risk factors such as low socioeconomic status, homelessness, ethnic minority status, less parental involvement, and residential instability (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012; Herbers et al., 2013; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007). Frequent school changes are more likely to predict educational outcomes than a single school change (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Herbers et al., 2013; Ou & Reynolds, 2008).

Researchers have suggested possible reasons that school mobility is related to poor educational outcomes. One proposed explanation is that highly mobile students experience disparities in curricula and instructional methods among teachers and adjusting to these differences distracts from the learning process (Herbers et al., 2013; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004). Other authors surmised that students who move during an academic year may miss the opportunity to learn key concepts, leading to gaps of knowledge in their academic foundations (especially in math); this may contribute to a process of dissatisfaction and disengagement that eventually results in

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