

What we're just starting to understand about the long-term impacts of the pandemic on the education of children in foster care

EDUCATION IMPACTS

By Jeremy Loudenback

As successive waves of COVID-19 continue to disrupt learning in many parts of the country, students of all ages face uncertainty, fear and stress. None are more vulnerable than youth in foster care.

Educational advocates underscore the ongoing challenges faced by young people in care, including growing behavioral issues in the classroom, difficulty accessing technology and a lack of school transportation.

However, despite school closures and the disruption of regular routines over the past two years, little data is available to reflect how this subset of students has fared academically. Over the next year, more information will likely be available to answer this question,

but other questions — like the long-term effects of an interrupted education — may take years to resolve.

But experts say that for young people whose educational experience is already marked by academic and social challenges caused by frequent school changes, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing educational gaps between young people in foster care and their non-dependent peers.

FirstStar CEO Lyndsey Wilson, whose nationwide organization runs college-prep pipeline programs for foster youth on college campuses, said measures taken by school districts to adapt to the spread of the coronavirus have done little to tackle the challenges and barriers of students in care.





“Our youth were behind even before the pandemic,” Wilson said, “and the past two years have illuminated for many people that not only were they behind just academically, but they were behind in terms of access to technology. But at the end of the day, the pandemic did little to disrupt or alter the continued challenges of just being in the foster care system.”

First Wave

In the early months of the pandemic, nearly half of America’s kids were enrolled in remote learning, according to the analytics firm McKinsey & Company. Some students participating in distance learning struggled with a lack of technology, while others were absent and unaccounted for. Other schools remained open, but faced closures

due to COVID-19-induced staffing shortages. As a result, elementary school students completed the 2020-2021 school year an average of five months behind in math and four months behind in reading, researchers from McKinsey found.

Shutting down schools — which provide breakfast and lunch along with medical care to many students — has also adversely impacted the health of many young people. A November 2020 study published by the American Medical Association found that the decision to close the country’s public primary schools in the spring of 2020 could likely result in a lowered life expectancy for children because of the correlation between lower educational attainment and shorter lifespans.

Los Angeles Unified, the nation’s second largest school district, released limited data on the participation rates of students in foster care for the early part of 2020, when all instruction was delivered remotely. The district reported that from March to May, youth in foster care and homeless students were less likely than their peers to participate in distance learning, and when they did, were less engaged. For example, during the first three months of the pandemic, just 24% of Los Angeles Unified’s middle school students who identified as homeless or in foster care participated “frequently” in online learning — defined as three days or more a week — compared to 47% of their peers.

Lesson Learned: Tech Troubles

Whether schools closed either for

a few weeks or for a few months, teachers relied on Wi-Fi capable devices to deliver lessons and review homework. For young people in foster care that presented a problem, because some homes lack computers or even a basic internet connection. Andi Ervin, regional manager of the Educational Advocacy Program for the Seattle-based Treehouse, said there was a scramble to find solutions for young people with limited options for technology. Sometimes, she said, four or five youth living in

advocates found ways to make remote learning work, a need that will present again as COVID variants continue to prompt school closures. Some schools have also begun using remote learning options outside of the pandemic, to avoid canceling school for inclement weather or for some special education students who learn better in a virtual environment.

Ervin and other advocates believe there is a silver lining to the pandemic: a growing awareness that youth in

Disciplinary Issues on the Rise

In addition to technology challenges students and caregivers face, one area of great concern for educational advocates is the growing number of suspensions, expulsions and disciplinary incidents experienced by students in foster care during the past year.

And, while it is too early to have data on these trends, researchers, policymakers and advocates expressed concern about the toll the pandemic has taken on the mental health of children nationwide. According to a 2021 Pediatrics study, nearly 140,000 children have lost a caregiver since the pandemic emerged. Other recent studies document increased depression and anxiety rates among children and adolescents as well as a rising number of children in emergency rooms because of concerns of self-harm. Those trends led the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to issue a warning in December 2021 about a growing mental health crisis among youth in America, particularly among young people in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Yasmina Sefiane, director of the Center for Child Welfare and Education at Northern Illinois University, said disciplinary actions taken in response to the behavioral issues of youth in foster care have spiked in the past six months in a way she says she's never seen before. Developing social-emotional skills remains a key need, she said.

In part, students have struggled to get back into a routine they haven't followed for a while. For some younger pupils, there's no experience with an in-person school schedule that doesn't allow the same breaks as virtual learning. But, for young people in care who may be struggling with profound expe-



at home with limited internet bandwidth, could not attend online classes at the same time.

Throughout this time, caregivers — fearing they'd have to become teachers themselves — also struggled to keep up with the evolving demands of emerging educational technology platforms. “There was a high level of panic, quite frankly,” Ervin said.

But by working with teachers, administrators and caregivers, Treehouse

foster care not only need continued academic support to graduate, but also access to technology to succeed in school and later as they enter the workforce.

“What COVID did is it shined a huge light — something that could no longer be ignored — that these young people might not have access to a computer at home and internet service,” she said. “That’s not new, but it just wasn’t noticed before, and I think it’s going to change.”

periences of trauma, they are ending up in trouble with school staff at a high clip, according to many advocates.

"In the last year of the pandemic, I think there was a lot of empathy and sympathy and love and compassion," Sefiane said. "That's gone out the window. We're back at school and it's back to zero tolerance in a lot of cases."

Staff Shortages

As the pandemic crosses into its third year, scores of Americans have quit their jobs and schools, like other industries, have been hit hard.

Students in foster care have been particularly affected. Across the country, school districts struggle to fill staffing vacancies, from bus drivers to behavioral therapists, advocates report. It's a problem complicated by the inability of many youth to remain in their school of origin after being removed from their parents, particularly when it comes to transportation. Willing resource parents have stepped in to help get some kids to school. Still, other foster youth have been left scrambling to find their own way to school.

"We haven't come up with the magic sauce to solve that because we just have a body shortage," Ervin said.

While some states like Arizona offered hiring bonuses and waived licensing requirements for medical professionals, many therapists and paraprofessionals have stayed away from the classroom, limiting the accessibility of behavioral and therapeutic services for youth in foster care already grappling with behavioral issues or special education needs.

Making up the Achievement Gap

Wilson of FirstStar said the educational

challenges faced by students in the group's program have been exacerbated by COVID. During the pandemic, these young people have struggled to remain engaged with school, and this year, a slightly lower number are choosing to go to college. After the destabilizing first year of the pandemic, many older youth were unable to find their footing again, she said.

"Instead of going to college, they chose to go to the military or they chose to go directly into the workforce," Wilson said. "Another reason why they chose to go into the workforce is they started seeing that people in their household lose their jobs during COVID."

When these youth aren't engaged with school, the likelihood of dropping out of high school and lower academic outcomes increases, she said.

Tips for Caregivers

Many school districts have tried to help youth in foster care make up lost ground by providing additional learning opportunities. Some used one-time funds from the American Rescue Plan of 2021 to provide tutoring services. California is using a mix of federal money and state investments over the next five years to provide summer and after-school programs to all students, with a special focus on schools with large numbers of foster students.

Other educational agencies, like Texas' Ector County Independent School District, lengthened its school year and offers a summer program to give students an extended learning experience.

But educational advocates for youth in foster care also stress that caregivers can help young people get back on track with their learning.

Illinois-based Sefiane urges caregivers to seek out free community services. For example, tutoring and other educational services can often be found at public libraries. Caregivers can also help youth by supporting their involvement in school-related extracurricular activities, an important place to develop relationships.

"Kids need a sense of belonging, and that's not just the academics, but also their peers and teachers and extracurricular activities that provide that belonging," Wilson said.

She urges caregivers to show interest in what's going on with their youth at school. Be curious and ask questions, she said, and incentivize young people to share their feelings openly.

"They know that it matters to you as much as it matters to them," Wilson said. "It doesn't have to happen every day. Even if it's once a week, where you sit and talk about how things are going — just being intentional around being curious about their academic experience is so important." •

Jeremy Loudanback is a Los Angeles-based senior reporter who writes about foster care, youth justice and child trauma for The Imprint. Loudanback tracks data, follows legislation in the state capital and reports from confidential courtrooms to cover the most vulnerable and resilient children and families. Loudanback previously worked as a reporter at the North County Times and has blogged about politics and governance and worked with homeless youth. Over the last five years, he has examined the impact of California's congregate care reforms and reported on juvenile diversion programs, among other topics.