

November 2009

JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER for Youth and Their Communities

Educational Outcomes for Court-Dependent Youth in San Mateo County

Background

Ample anecdotal evidence points to the challenges that foster youth face in school, but most communities cannot look across educational and child welfare agencies to track these challenges. For this reason, a collaborative of agencies that serve foster youth asked researchers from the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (JGC) and The SPHERE Institute to use the Youth Data Archive (YDA) to examine school outcomes for court-dependent youth by matching Child Welfare Services records to school data from four partnering districts.¹ Although it does not explain the relationships between school experiences and dependency, this analysis does provide a detailed picture of school-related outcomes for dependent youth.

Findings and Interpretation

Between the 2003-04 and 2007-08 school years, there were 1,015 students in elementary through high school enrolled in the four districts who spent time as a dependent in the child welfare system. The YDA analysis of their educational outcomes revealed these findings:

- **Dependent youth had worse educational outcomes than non-dependent youth** (Table 1). Dependent youth had lower California Standards Test (CST) proficiency rates and higher absence, mobility, discipline, and retention rates compared with non-dependent youth. Dependent youth in high school had lower high school exit exam passing rates compared to non-dependent youth and earned, on average, 15 fewer credits each year.
- **Longer time in dependency was not necessarily associated with worse outcomes.** Although one might expect outcomes to decline with longer dependency lengths, youth with six months to two years in dependency generally had the highest educational outcomes compared to youth with less than six months in dependency and to those with more than two years.
- **There were large differences in educational outcomes across placement types.** Dependent youth in in-home care generally had better outcomes than youth in out-of-home placements. Youth placed in group homes often had the poorest outcomes compared to youth in other types of placement.

¹ Dependent youth include both those removed from the parents' home and placed in foster care as well as those in in-home care while under court custody.

Table 1: Educational Outcomes for Dependent and Non-Dependent Youth, 2003-04 to 2007-08

	Dependent Youth	Non-Dependent Youth
<u>Academic Test Scores</u>		
ELA CST Proficiency Rate	22%	46%
Math CST Proficiency Rate	20%	42%
<u>Attendance, Mobility, and Retention</u>		
Average Absence Rate	12%	6%
Percent Left School Mid-Year	17%	2%
Percent Retained in Grade	4%	2%
<u>Progress Toward Graduation</u>		
ELA CAHSEE (Exit Exam) Pass Rate	48%	74%
Math CAHSEE (Exit Exam) Pass Rate	50%	75%
Average Annual Credits Earned	40	54
Average Annual UC/CSU Credits Earned	18	33
<u>Discipline</u>		
Percent of Students Suspended	25%	10%
Percent of Students Expelled	10%	1%

From Findings to Action

The findings of this study confirm that dependent youth, especially those with particular dependency experiences, face serious educational challenges. Because educational success for dependent youth is based on both home and school factors, our findings underscore the need for inter-agency collaboration among entities that serve dependent youth. Sharing information on the common youth that agencies serve is a key strategy and can inform collaborative work on:

- ***System-level policy:*** Several communities have linked data between the child welfare and school systems to regularly report on educational outcomes for dependent youth. These data inform policy decisions such as allocation of supportive services to areas of highest need and planning professional learning opportunities for people who interact with dependent youth.
- ***Individual-level case management:*** Some communities have developed integrated data systems that case workers, educators, and juvenile justice officials can access to inform decisions about individual youth. They use this centralized information to support students and advocate for the educational services that they need. Safeguarding the privacy of dependent youth is a major consideration, but systems do exist to share data in a way that is safe, legal, and helpful in improving services.
- ***Implementing existing mandates:*** Recent state and federal laws require reporting of and accountability for educational outcomes for dependent youth, but implementation of these mandates has been difficult without the integrated data systems needed to gather the required information. Cross-agency data sharing can help communities fulfill these existing mandates.

The JGC and its partners are working to expand this analysis to include more agencies to get a broader picture of the educational experiences of dependent youth and, ultimately, to help partners use findings to better support dependent youth toward educational success.