



In Their Own Words: What Students in New York's Foster System Need to Succeed

MAY 9, 2024 – CHANTAL HINDS

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INTRODUCTION

Students in the foster system in New York, experience some of the lowest educational outcomes of all student subgroups in the state. In 2023, only about [half](#) of the students in the foster system graduated from high school in four years. During the same school year, only [about a quarter](#) of third through fourth grade students in the foster system earned proficient grades on their state English Language Arts and math exams.

To be clear, these outcomes are not a result of any inherent incapability of the individual students or solely because of their challenging life experiences. Instead, these grim outcomes are the result of the failure of our education and foster systems. Policies within these systems have often failed to provide the specific support and interventions these students need to thrive. This policy failure is all the more striking because these children are legally the government’s responsibility—foster youth are in the government’s care and custody.

Children’s rights activist Marian Wright Edelman once [said](#), “[e]ducation is a precondition to survival in America today.” When children are uprooted from family, community, and everything they know and love, our foster and education systems must—along with ensuring their safety—create policies that prioritize education so that these young people have every opportunity to succeed and survive. Doing anything less is unacceptable.

Unfortunately, much of the policy in the child welfare/family regulation and foster systems is created by those who have never lived the experience—that is, they or their children have never been inside the foster system, nor have they been foster parents. So, while policymakers are trying to address the challenges foster youth face in school, their policy is formed from their

vantage point outside of the system, and as a result, is void of the appropriate contextualization and urgency needed to be most effective. For example, recent policy changes through the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#), and its New York State [corollary](#), include a suite of rights to secure school stability for students in the foster system and require public sharing of graduation rate and achievement test data. While these are very important steps toward a better system, these laws do not go far enough in addressing the substantive needs that students in the foster system have.

When children are uprooted from family, community, and everything they know and love, our foster and education systems must—along with ensuring their safety—create policies that prioritize education so that these young people have every opportunity to succeed and survive.

In order to convey more clearly the unique challenges that foster youth face in life and especially in school—as well as the challenges that parents and foster/adoptive parents face—the author conducted a qualitative research study of people experiencing the foster system in New York State. The purpose of this research is to go beyond the quantitative data, and as such, interview and focus group questions were designed to understand the experiences that current and former foster youth, parents, and foster/adoptive parents had navigating both our education and foster systems. The responses that were shared shed light on the things that were

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helpful, unhelpful (or even harmful), and how we can improve these systems—based on their identified needs.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 75 individuals with lived experience and included: 52 current and former foster youth, 11 parents,¹ and 12 foster/adoptive parents² with experiences in the foster system in New York City, Western New York, the Southern Tier, Long Island, and the Hudson Valley.

The research findings and recommendations from those with lived experience presented in this report can inform policymakers about how they can better support the educational needs of students in the foster system and start a conversation about exactly how schools and foster care agencies/local departments of social services can do things differently. This report is intended to be a reference tool for state-level policymakers at both the New York State Education Department and the Office of Children and Family Services who are tasked with supporting the education needs of students in the foster system—including, but not limited to the foster care ESSA points of contact and data teams within each agency. Locally, this report can be helpful for caseworkers, social workers, principals, teachers, school psychologists, and guidance counselors. If policymakers from the state down to individual schools invest in supporting the needs of foster youth, all students—especially others with challenging life circumstances—will benefit from more mental health supports, more academic supports, and more compassionate care. A rising tide for students in the foster system lifts all boats.

Who Is Involved in the Foster System?

Current and former foster youth—a youth or young adult who was in the foster system at the time of interviews or who had been in the system at some point in time

Parent—someone with a biological parental relationship to a child in the foster system

Foster parent—someone licensed by their local department of social services to care for children in the foster system

Adoptive parent—a parent who has adopted a child they fostered through the foster system

Foster care agency—the voluntary agency that is contracted by the local department of social services to provide foster care services

Local department of social services—the local, county-based, government agency responsible for overseeing foster care across New York State (in some jurisdictions, this department also directly provides foster care services)

Key Takeaways

The interview and focus group responses by foster youth, parents, and foster/adoptive parents presented in this report not only underscore the challenges faced by these individuals, but also help identify the crucial components of education and foster systems that support students' educational achievement. The following four takeaways are essential guidelines for building such a system.

Compassionate, caring adults empower and support children

Current and former foster youth participants consistently shared the overwhelmingly positive benefits of having a compassionate and caring adult in their lives. From foster placements to schools and foster care agencies/local departments of social services staff, an adult who cared about their unique experiences and circumstances, who provided support, assisted with access to needed services, and who made them feel valued and seen made all the difference in their experience in the school and foster systems. One participant in particular shared how having supportive school staff who were aware of her foster system status and how that might impact how she showed up in school gave her a sense of “normalcy” around her foster system experience. This reality mimics long-standing [research](#)³ on the importance and power of relationship, support, and mentorship.

School and foster placement stability and support are keys to success

Stories of school and foster placement instability were fraught with frustration and difficulty. Current and former foster youth noted the challenges frequent school changes caused with having to start over in a new environment, with new classmates, and, in some cases, all new academic material. In describing their experiences in the foster system, current and former foster youth mentioned both very positive and very negative experiences depending on their foster placement—these placements either encouraged them toward their academic goals or discouraged them from moving forward academically. The negative academic outcomes associated with school and placement instability were evident in a 2022 [study](#) by the New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence, which revealed a correlation between graduation rates and foster placement instability noting, for example, a 20 percent lower graduation rate (12.9 percent) for students who moved two to three times per year versus those who moved less than once every two years (33.7 percent).⁴ The research points to the need for fidelity in implementation of school stability and targeted supports for foster youth and more attention to finding and preserving foster placements that provide safety, support, and academic encouragement.

Inter- and intra-systems coordination and collaboration matters

Many youth reported the feeling of “falling through the cracks” with their agencies/local departments of social services because their needs weren't met individually or in the foster home. As a result, there is an opportunity for foster systems to coordinate internally so that foster youth get the academic, mental health,

and social-emotional support they need. Current and former foster youth shared the importance of school staff awareness and understanding of their experience and status in the foster system highlighting an opportunity for school systems to coordinate internally to inform relevant staff and encourage them to be sensitive and flexible to meet students where they are. Both systems can collaborate to ensure that student academic goals and needs are met through sharing student information, ensuring that there is awareness on both sides of a student's goals and the path needed to get there. Collaboration, data, and information sharing across foster and school systems can contribute to improved educational outcomes and is already enshrined in laws such as the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) and the [Uninterrupted Scholars Act](#) (which amends the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act [FERPA] and allows for information sharing for students in the foster system).⁵

Respect for and partnership with parents must be prioritized

Parents consistently reported feeling excluded from critical conversations about their child's education and education planning. Parents were overlooked during foster care agency and/or school conversations about school changes and special education needs—despite the fact that parents should be consulted about [school stability decisions](#) and must, in most cases, [consent to special education services](#).⁶ When parents were involved either through a relationship with their child's foster parent or directly by the school or foster care agency, they were able to provide insight and support for their child and continue to build their relationship even though their children were away from home. Parents must be afforded every opportunity to be involved in their child's education, as it is their right.

Key Findings

Lived experience experts—that is, foster youth as well as parents and foster/adoptive parents—shared their educational experiences and experiences with their foster care agencies/local departments of social services.

Current and former foster youth reported:

- Significant foster placement instability, foster/adoptive parent maltreatment and failure to provide for their necessities, and indifference or total disregard of their educational needs. However, some reported positive foster/adoptive parent relationships that encouraged them toward their academic goals.
- School stability, positive school staff relationships, and in-school academic, mental health, and social-emotional support encouraged positive educational experiences. Conversely, school instability, negative school staff relationships, and lack of in-school supports made the school experience difficult.
- Academic, social-emotional, and mental health support provided by foster care agency/local departments of social services made foster youth feel cared for and equipped to deal with the challenges of being in the foster system. When

these supports were missing, foster youth struggled.

- Foster care agency/local departments of social services post-secondary transition support was either too late or inconsistent and focused exclusively on college instead of college and career.
- On the topic of foster care agency/local departments of social services staff relationships, there were mixed findings. Some foster youth described positive, reliable, and caring relationships that helped them feel motivated and cared for on their educational journeys. Others described negative and unreliable relationships that left foster youth feeling alone and frustrated.
- Congregate care facilities were challenging for foster youth due to negative and disruptive behaviors from peers, lack of support from school and residential staff, and an overall lack of appropriate education.

Parents reported:

- Positive experiences with school staff helped parents to feel engaged and involved in their child's education even when their children were in the foster system. Conversely, when parents were not involved, they felt disregarded and voiceless when it came to their children's education.
- Foster care agencies/local departments of social services are often inconsiderate of parents' need for information and awareness of their child's academic progress.
- Foster care agencies/local departments of social services largely exclude parents from school stability discussion and best interest determination decision-making.
- Some foster parents kept parents informed about their child's educational progress and involved them in homework time and whenever issues arose in school.

Foster/adoptive parents reported:

- Largely helpful relationships with school staff and that they were able to advocate for the children in their care. But, those relationships weren't as positive when issues arose around behavior; foster/adoptive parents reported schools were often unsupportive of student needs.
- Positive results when they engaged parents in their child's education and advocacy, helping the parent to remain connected to their child and their needs. However, some also reported that establishing or maintaining a positive relationship was difficult.
- Foster care agencies/local departments of social services were often uninvolved with the educational needs of children at their agencies, leaving the foster/adoptive parent to address any school issues on their own.
- Foster care agencies/local departments of social services often didn't help establish a good initial introduction and foster a positive relationship between foster parents and parents.

Recommendations

Foster youth as well as parents and foster/adoptive parents shared their recommendations for how schools and foster care agencies/local departments of social services can better support students in the foster system.

School recommendations:

1. Provide appropriate trauma-informed training and workshops for school staff and students to increase awareness, sensitivity, and understanding of the foster system experience.
2. Make in-school mental health supports accessible and available for all students in the foster system.
3. Increase academic support, life skills support, and after-school programming.
4. Expand understanding and awareness of college and career resources and supports available for students in the foster system.
5. Develop student clubs or programs that target the needs of students in the foster system.
6. Ensure that parents are invited to school meetings and informed of their child's progress and any challenges while in the foster system.

Foster care agency/local departments of social services recommendations:

1. Ensure foster youth have safe foster placements.
2. Provide consistent, reliable therapy.
3. Provide foster youth with robust holistic supports for academics, career, and transition.
4. Ensure that foster parents and parents receive support to make foster placements successful.
5. Increase communication and school record-keeping to support foster youth's academic and vocational goals.
6. Provide transportation to maintain school stability, involve foster youth in decision-making about school placement and inform them of the reasons for any changes.
7. Ensure that foster youth are aware of their rights and agency/local department of social services responsibilities.
8. Increase pay and hire more foster care agency/local department of social services staff to provide better support and care for foster youth in the foster system.

Joint education and foster system recommendations:

1. Improve communication, collaboration, and data-sharing between education and foster systems at the state and local levels.
2. Create personalized education plans for students in the foster system by working collaboratively with students, foster care

agencies/local departments of social services staff, parents, foster parents, and schools.

METHODOLOGY

The author partnered with several nonprofit organizations throughout New York to identify participants. Participants who were current and former foster youth, parents, foster parents, or adoptive parents were invited to participate in the study. The author conducted both individual interviews and focus groups in-person, virtually, and by phone. Individual interviews were approximately one hour in length and focus groups were approximately ninety minutes. Participants were asked a pre-set series of questions about their foster system and education experiences and recommendations for change. Due to the varying nature of each conversation and participant responses, the author and participant(s) did not always get to each question during the interview or focus group. Participants were compensated for their time and expertise with gift cards.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Overall Participant Demographics

There were a total of 75 participants, each of whom met one of the following criteria:

- current or former foster youth or young adult in the foster system;
- parent of a child or children currently or formerly in the foster system;
- foster parent; or
- adoptive parent.

Participants were invited to voluntarily provide anonymous demographic information; 68⁷ participants shared this information.

Of the 75 participants, 52 (69.3 percent) were current and former foster youth, 11 (14.7 percent) were parents and 12 (16 percent) were foster/adoptive parents.

Participant Race/Ethnicity and Gender⁸

Participants were allowed to describe their race/ethnicity and gender in lieu of predetermined categories. For purposes of this report, I consolidated⁹ race/ethnicity descriptions into five categories, Black/African-American, Black and Hispanic or Latino,¹⁰ Hispanic or Latino (not Black/African-American), White/Caucasian, and Other.

Current and Former Foster Youth Demographics

Current and former foster youth interview and focus group participants ranged in age from 16 to 42, with an average age of 25.¹¹ More than half of these participants were Black/African-American or Black and Hispanic or Latino. Most participants were also women.

FIG. 1

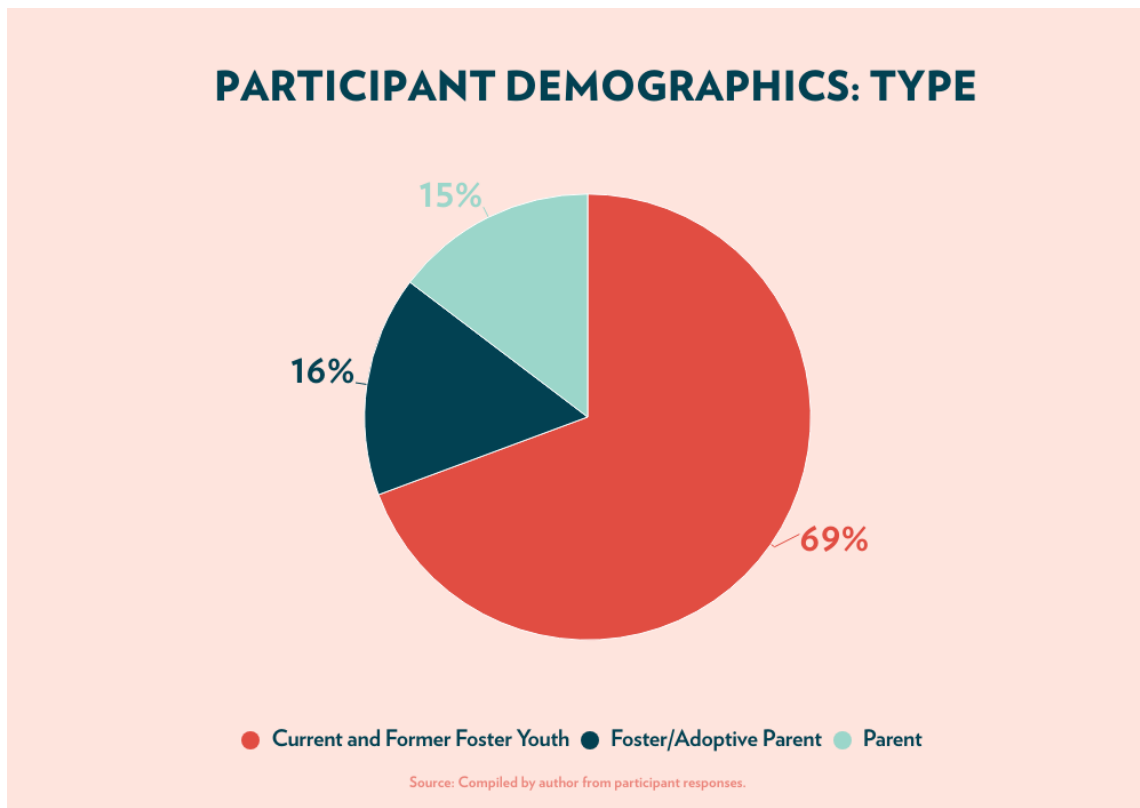


FIG. 2

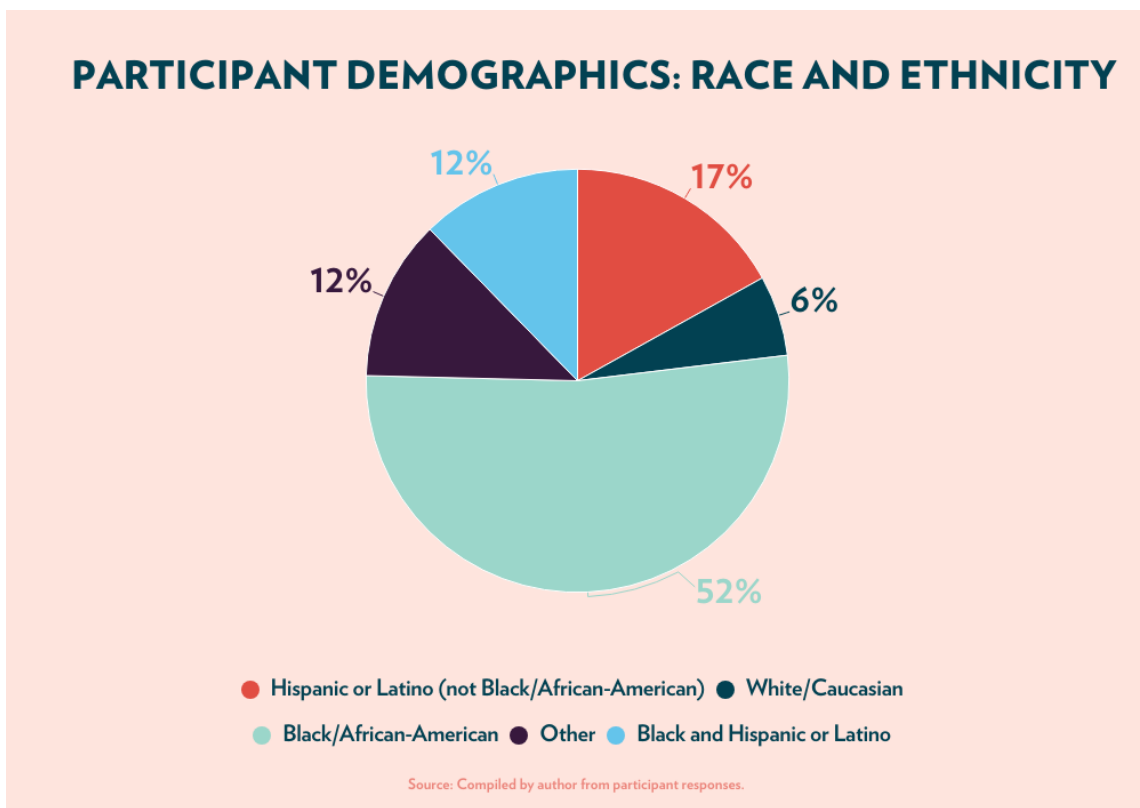
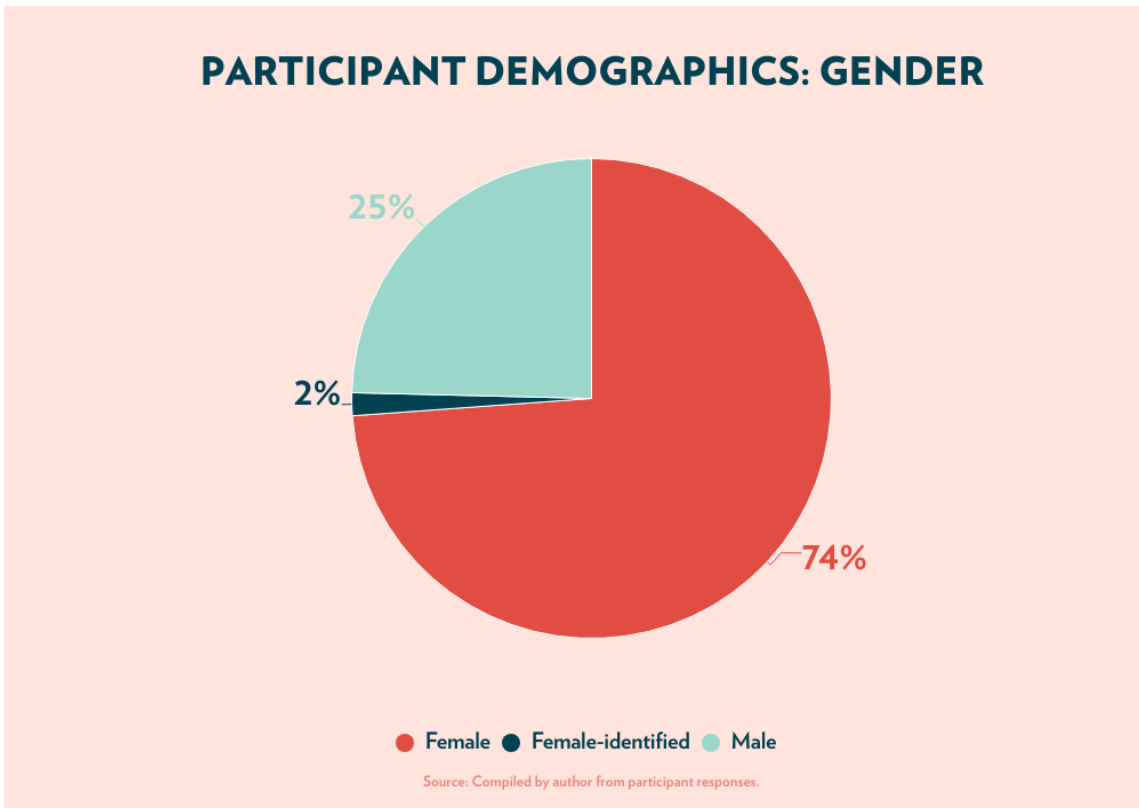
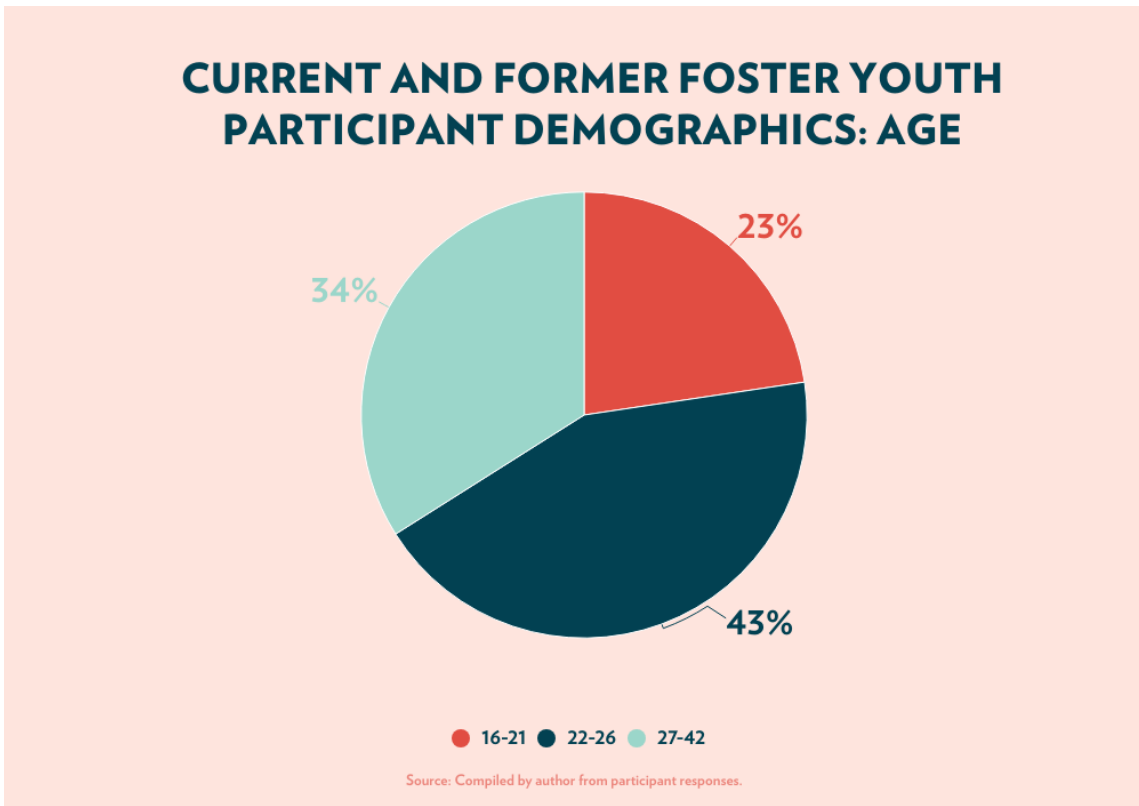


FIG. 3



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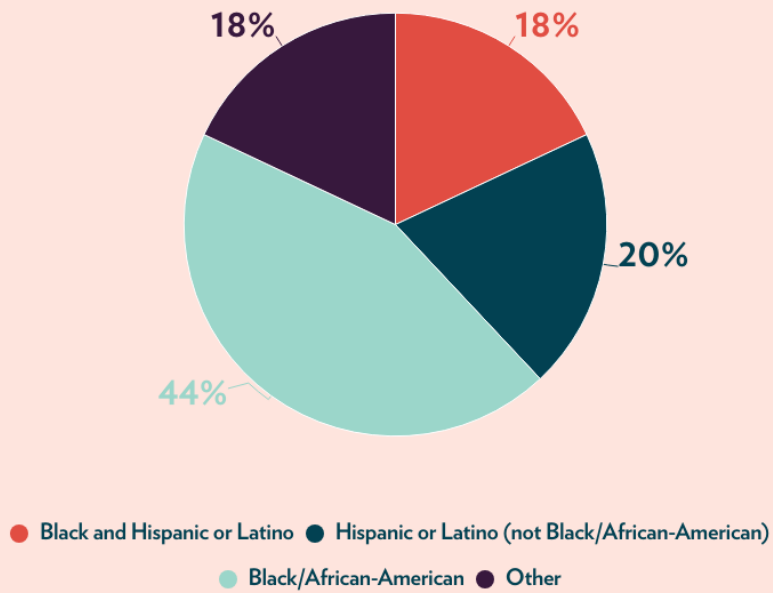
FIG. 4



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FIG. 5

CURRENT AND FORMER FOSTER YOUTH PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS: RACE AND ETHNICITY

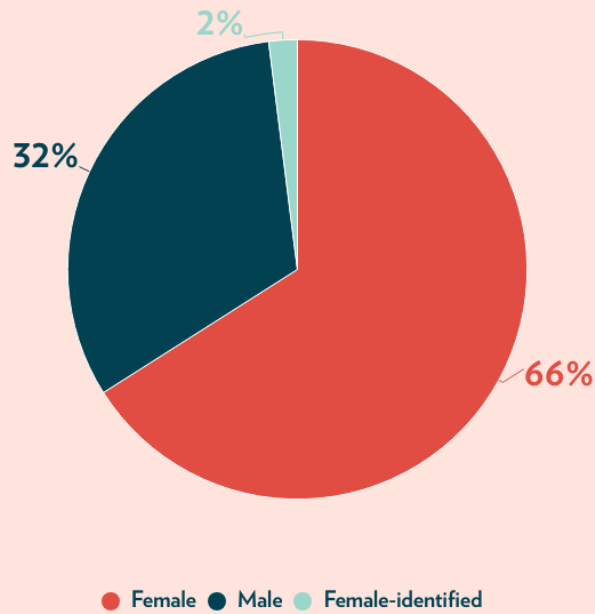


Source: Compiled by author from participant responses.



FIG. 6

CURRENT AND FORMER FOSTER YOUTH PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS: GENDER



Source: Compiled by author from participant responses.



Participants averaged about 9 3/4 years in the foster system, ranging from six months to 25 years.¹² They also experienced various types of foster placements. Thirty-seven current and former foster youth shared information about their placements: 20 spent their time only in foster homes, and 17 spent time in either congregate¹³ care settings or both foster homes and congregate care settings. Participants also had a variety of educational experiences: 27 of the current and former foster youth were in general education, 10 in special education, and 15 in both general and special education settings during their school-age years.

Current and former foster youth participants had many types of placements. Of the participants who shared their placement history, 20 were only in foster homes, while 17 were in congregate care facilities or had spent time in both foster homes and congregate care facilities. They were also in foster placements in various parts of New York State, including New York City, Westchester County, and Buffalo.¹⁴ About 82 percent of participants spent all or part of their time in the foster system in New York City. As a result, the experiences and recommendations here do not, and cannot, represent all experiences across the state. However, the commonalities across all experiences—both in New York City and outside of New York City—represent useful information about experiences that are common to many children in the foster system, and provide a critical starting point for further research in specific communities across the state.

Parent Demographics

There were 11 parent participants, of whom six provided demographic information. All six parents identified as female. Of the 6, 3 identified as Black or African-American, 1 identified as Black and Hispanic or Latino, 1 identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 1 identified as White/Caucasian. The parents collectively had children in the foster system from 2000 through 2022.

Their children were in the foster system during both their pre-school and school-age years, spanning from 1 year old to 11 years old. Their children were in both general and special education settings and primarily in New York City.

Foster/Adoptive Parent Demographics

There were 12 foster/adoptive parent participants, with 9 providing demographic information. All 9 foster/adoptive parents identified as female. Of the 9, 7 were both foster and adoptive parents and two were foster parents only. Six foster/adoptive parents identified as Black/African-American, and 3 identified as White/Caucasian. Of the 9 participants who provided demographic information, 6 were foster parents in New York City, 2 were foster parents in Buffalo, and 1 was a foster parent in Chemung County, New York.

Collectively, the foster/adoptive parents had over 180 years of experience as foster parents. They were foster parents to children ranging from birth to 21 years old. The group had fostered over 350 children collectively and had adopted 23 children. These foster/adoptive parents had cared for children in both general and special education.

FINDINGS

Jump to the findings about a particular group of study participants using the following links:

1. [Current and Former Foster Youth](#)
2. [Parents](#)
3. [Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)

The quotations woven throughout the rest of the report all come from research participants.

Current and former foster youth experiences

We will begin with a discussion of findings about *the relationship between foster children and foster and adoptive parents*.

When current and former foster youth were asked about their relationships with their foster parents generally and as it related to school, they reported a variety of experiences, ranging from very negative to very positive, and, depending on the foster home they were placed in during their time in the foster system.¹⁵

The following findings pertain to *maltreatment*.

Ten (10) current and former foster youth reported maltreatment by their foster or adoptive parents in various ways, including:

1. **A failure to provide basic necessities like clothing and food.** Several respondents reported that the lack of appropriate clothing (e.g., inappropriate clothing in wintertime, having to wear the same clothes repeatedly, or clothes that were in poor condition) affected their ability to feel comfortable attending school or feeling focused while in school.

“You’re taking us to thrift stores to buy clothes, you’re forcing us to wear clothes multiple days in a row, which is something that’s very noticeable to other children. So you got me wearing the same outfit multiple days in a row. And then that’s ostracizing me at school.”

“I have to go to school with either the same clothes or I have to figure out how to mix and match. That was always my biggest problem with school, like not wanting to go to school because I didn’t have the proper attire. I can excel in the classroom, but I don’t know if I’m going to be picked on because I had the same shirt on that I had on yesterday.”

2. **Physical, sexual, emotional and mental abuse by foster parents and/or foster families.** While the author has refrained from sharing specific quotations from participants about their experiences of abuse while in the foster system, [recent research](#) sheds light on this serious issue.¹⁶ Additionally, the Children’s Bureau requires states to report on maltreatment experienced in the foster system. [Data](#) from 2021 revealed that about 300 children—1.38 percent of children—in the foster system in New York experienced maltreatment.¹⁷

3. An overall disregard for their well-being, including their education.

"I had foster parents that didn't even care if I went to school as long as I was out of the house by seven o'clock, they didn't care, they literally expressed that to me . . . she literally was like, um, you have to leave my house seven o'clock. I don't care where you go, just leave my house at seven o'clock."

The following findings pertain to *foster and adoptive parent academic support*.

Thirteen (13) current and former foster youth reported feeling unsupported academically by their foster or adoptive parents, especially in the areas of help with homework, college, and general interest in their educational well-being.

"My foster homes honestly I didn't really get that much support when it came to academics."

"I think foster parents is kind of hands-off in terms of like, even like, helping you with your homework, honestly, it's kind of like either you get it or you don't."

Twelve (12) current and former foster youth reported a supportive academic relationship with their foster or adoptive parents in the following ways:

1. Overall encouragement about the importance of education.

"[S]he would always tell me go to school, get your education. No one can take your education. And so she told me that almost every day. Even now when we talk, she's like you got your education . . . my [foster parent] always supported me."

2. Support during homework time, including the space to ask questions about their homework, and the provision of a quiet space or after-school routine to encourage homework completion.

"Grandma was big on education . . . we used to have a routine . . . we had a strict routine, we used to come home, we used to sit at the dining room table, we used to do our homework. She taught us how to use a dictionary, how to do work in general. . . . I feel like that structure helped me a lot."

3. Support with school transitions, including helping foster youth navigate a new school placement and any challenges that might arise in a new school.

"My foster parent helped [with my school transition] . . . she gave me a little speech on everything . . . start new, start fresh, nobody knows me so nobody knows everything that happened in the past."

4. Use of rewards or incentives for good grades.

Participants reported that these incentives were helpful in motivating them academically.

Next we will discuss findings about **experiences at school and in academic settings**.

Current and former foster youth were asked a variety of questions about their school experiences, including school stability, relationships with schools and school staff, academic experiences and support, social-emotional support, and school discipline experiences. Participants shared a range of experiences in each area. Some participants had challenging relationships with schools overall, but there were bright spots of positive and helpful relationships with individual school staff members.

The following findings pertain to *school stability*.

Nine (9) current and former foster youth reported stable school placements when they entered and while they were in the foster system. Two (2) participants reported starting new schools due to returning to school after a prior absence or because they started a new grade at a natural transition point (e.g., beginning high school).

Twenty-two (22) current and former foster youth reported more than one school change while in the foster system. Fifteen (15) current and former foster youth reported one school change while in the foster system. Of those who reported experiencing school changes, the following were reported:

- **Three (3) current and former foster youth reported that it was easy changing schools.**

"I'm starting new in a school where I don't know nobody here . . . that's the difficult part. But the easy part is that you could start over. Say you have a bad experience at your old school, you move to a new school, nobody knows you, you get to start over. You get to be something different."

- **Twelve (12) current and former foster youth reported difficulty changing schools.**

"[It was] very awkward [to start over in a new school], very, it was overwhelming because you get used to one school for so long and then you switch and you have to do it all over again. I think that what people don't understand is that there's so much anxiety built up around like, okay, I have to put on this sort of persona, or I have to do something to like, fit into this new school. I don't know anybody. I don't have any friends at this school. You're starting over as the new kid, the outcast. It's very overwhelming starting new schools. And it's not like even with the guidance counselors and teachers there to give you support. You don't really know any of them yet to be so open and be like okay, I can come to them if I have any problems."

Eight (8) current and former foster youth noted problems transitioning between schools. Participants reported issues with credits transferring, having to repeat work or grades when they transitioned schools, and challenges being placed in appropriate classes. Others reported difficulties socially adjusting to their new schools.

"And they tell you the whole time you there [in the group home]. Do your work because it counts towards your actual credits and stuff. I got out of there and when I got put into a foster home, my school basically told me I had to redo high school, mind you by the time I left that program and got put into that program . . . I was in 10th, 11th

grade basically. They told me, my guidance counselor looked me in my eye and said you're gonna have to complete all four years."

Four (4) current and former foster youth reported that their schools changed due to the distance from their foster placement to their previous school. Participants mentioned transferring due to inter-district school changes (e.g., from New York City to Westchester County or Long Island). One participant noted that she requested to remain in her original school, but was told by her foster care agency that she could not remain in her school because it was too far from her foster placement.¹⁸

Two (2) current and former foster youth noted that they did not have any input into the decision to change their schools. Participants noted that their schools were changed due to convenience of their foster parents and general disregard for their preferences to remain in their original schools.

Current and former foster youth were asked about **various aspects of their relationship to their schools**, including their experiences with schools when they were aware of their placement in the foster system and their experiences finding trusting relationships with school staff.

The following findings pertain to *school awareness of foster system placement*.

Twelve (12) current and former foster youth reported positive experiences when their schools were aware of their placement in the foster system. They were treated with compassion, offered support, and treated with an understanding of how the foster system experience might impact how they presented in school on any given day.

"Some [teachers/school staff knew I was in the foster system,] yes, some knew and some didn't . . . it was helpful, at least they know that I'm in the foster care system so things are a little hard for me so they actually helped me out a little bit with it. . . . I was struggling a lot in school because of my placements and foster care and stuff."

"So with them [school staff] knowing . . . it's like, okay, like she moved her placement like let's chill out like let's not kind of be like, oh you missed first period . . . and kind of understanding like yeah I'm not just coming to school late because I just want to be late this Monday, like it's some stuff going on. . . . And then it got to the point that I didn't even have to explain that because everyone kind of knew what that was. They would just be like an email being sent or a quick radio call. And that was it. . . . It kind of created some normalcy, like around like my foster care experience."

Five (5) current and former foster youth reported negative experiences when their schools were aware of their placement in the foster system. Most of the negative experiences centered on school staff unnecessarily sharing their status with others in the school. Three participants reported that they felt like teachers either actively disregarded them once they found out they were in the foster system, pitied them because of their placement in the foster system, or, in one private school instance, kicked them out of school altogether because of their status.

Five (5) current and former foster youth reported that it was neither helpful nor harmful to their school experience when the school was aware of their placement in the foster system.

Although these participants noted a neutral experience in terms of the school's awareness of their placement in the foster system, two participants indicated that it was clear something was going on because they were of a different race than their foster parents. One participant noted that the school staff tried working with the foster care agency staff to support him, but the support wasn't effective.

The following findings pertain to *relationships with school staff*.

Positive relationships with trusting adults at school were important in helping current and former foster youth feel welcomed, cared for, and supported.

Twenty-seven (27) current and former foster youth reported helpful relationships with at least one school staff member during their time in school. They reported helpful relationships with teachers, teacher's assistants/aides, guidance counselors, college and career guidance staff, principals, and staff from community-based organizations within the school. Current and former foster youth reported that these relationships were most helpful when school staff were caring, supportive, and understanding of their placement in the foster system and how that might affect their performance in school. Staff were also helpful when they provided academic support, assisted with the college application process, provided emotional support during challenging times, and when they helped to provide tangible support for unmet needs (e.g., clothing, fees for school trips, etc.).

"[M]y principal at my high school knew and like my guidance counselors. . . . I feel like it was like it was supportive . . . literally senior dues, were free for me. Literally, I did not have to pay for any trips or anything in this school so it was like, it was very, very supportive."

"So nobody really knew, but my own guidance counselor, so she knew like if I came in with attitude, that something was going on at home and stuff like that."

"I had this teacher in high school . . . and besides the work she would honestly check up on me to make sure I was okay, my well-being that she could see that like I came into school with such anxiety. . . . She made sure to check up on me and everything. She even decided to tutor me and helped me study more. . . . I'm glad I met her because without her I felt like I wouldn't have been in school. She really made me like school. . . . She actually took the time to get to know me, besides the work."

Fourteen (14) current and former foster youth reported unhelpful relationships with at least one school staff member during their school experience. Foster youth found the lack of understanding, awareness, or interest in their home lives challenging: staff did not always ask questions or intervene in situations in the ways foster youth wished they would have.

"My guidance counselor . . . tried to support me in little ways, but . . . never really did the work. . . . If I was a social worker in school and I see one of my kids didn't have a coat, where's your social worker? Why

am I not going to talk to your social worker? There was never enough energy for me”

Foster youth also noted that it would have been more helpful if teachers had a nuanced approach to working with students in the foster system given their different life circumstances. This nuance would have included things like being more flexible with assignments and expectations and increased sensitivity with inquiries about their placement in the system generally.

Current and former foster youth also noted general discouragement, lowered expectations, or lack of confidentiality of foster system status that made relationships with school staff challenging. Some of the things foster youth experienced included discouragement from attending college, discouragement in continuing in high school after becoming pregnant, or an expectation that children in the foster system would be “problem children.”

“I had one teacher who used to feel like I was a problem child . . . she told me like you have to be a problem child you don’t have this normal background like most other kids. So I have to deal with you differently. That was like literally one of the reasons why she gave me for what I felt like was constant[] antagonizing.”

Two (2) current and former foster youth noted that they kept their status mostly confidential, preferring to only tell trusted adults. These participants noted that overall they felt very protective of their personal lives. **One (1) participant believed it was very important to share her status with school staff and peers.** She believed that sharing her status would help educate others about different life experiences.

The following findings pertain to *academic experiences and support, social-emotional support, and school discipline.*

Eight (8) current and former foster youth reported that their schools provided academic support. Participants reported that schools offered tutoring, support from individual teachers or teachers’ aides during and outside of classroom time, support from a mentor within the school, or overall support towards reaching their academic goals (e.g., guidance counselor support in meeting graduation requirements).

“They had a teacher’s aide in the class. And sometimes I would go to my counselor if I feel like that I wasn’t getting the help that I felt like I needed from the teachers. . . . I had a mentor back then so I would go to my mentor and he would help me with my work . . . he was actually the gym teacher.”

Two (2) current and former foster youth reported that they had access to therapists or counselors at their schools. In one case the relationship was helpful; in the other case, the participant did not feel adequately supported.

“They also had a therapist in the school, that was really, really helpful. She was the first therapist that I actually went to and was committed to going to for more than a year. So I’m really happy, she was a very good therapist. She’s also the reason that I probably stayed in school and was motivated to finish doing what I had to do.”

Four (4) current and former foster youth discussed their positive and negative special education experiences while in the foster system. Three participants noted negative experiences with special education, including not understanding why they were receiving services or disagreeing with having special education services altogether. Participants also reported being treated differently, like they couldn’t succeed because of their status in special education. One participant noted that he understood the need for his special education services, but noted difficulty with service delivery when they transferred schools, leading to a delay in appropriate services.

Three (3) current and former foster youth noted that certain types of targeted school programs or smaller settings helped them flourish in school. These programs and settings included vocational programming, transfer schools, and smaller class sizes.

Five (5) current and former foster youth reported challenges completing school. These challenges included leaving school because of a lack of support and difficult experiences within the foster system. Some of the participants ultimately returned to school or went on to get their high school equivalency diploma.

“I dropped out in high school when I was in care. Just because . . . it, like, it was just a lot like having different like homes and always having like a different parent like coming up to your school and then like kids kind of like caught on like that I was in foster care. But when I went back to school and ended up staying in my last high school and graduating.”

Three (3) current and former foster youth discussed school discipline and behavioral challenges, reporting difficulties with behavior due to issues in their foster home and challenges getting along with peers.

“. . . I’m getting whipped with switches. I’m getting real beatings. They did nothing, the teachers did nothing. [They] see that I’m angry. I’m getting suspended. I mean, multiple suspensions. . . . I come right off the suspension. I’m back on a suspension. Y’all didn’t pick up on any sign of that.”

Next we shall discuss findings related to **youth’s foster care agency or local department of social services experiences.**

Current and former foster youth were asked a variety of questions about their education and mental health experiences with their foster care agencies or local departments of social services. Participants shared how they were impacted by unstable foster placements; the provision, or lack thereof, of mental health and academic supports; and overall experiences with their agencies or local department of social services and staff.

The following findings pertain to *foster placements.*

Thirty-nine (39) current and former foster youth reported that they had more than one foster placement during their time in the foster system. This represents two-thirds of the total current and former foster youth participants indicating at least some level of placement instability for most youth.

Twenty (20) current and former foster youth reported that they had two to sixty-three placements during their time in the foster system. The average number of foster placement changes was 11. However, there were four outliers, where two participants reported 20 placements, one reported 50, and another 63. When those outliers are removed, the average number of placement changes was four.

The following findings pertain to *academic, mental health, and social-emotional supports*.

Fifteen (15) current and former foster youth reported that their agencies provided them with academic support. This support was usually in the form of tutoring and was provided in both foster home and congregate care settings.

- Of the fifteen, **four (4) reported that in addition to academic supports, the agency also provided mentorship opportunities and encouraged them as they pursued their academic goals.**

“I remember receiving tutoring support when I was in foster care while being in high school. I think that was very crucial.”

“I had gotten my GED from [the group home], they provided an on-site GED program . . . they provided mentoring, [my mentor] actually went with me to my first college and did everything for me.”

Three (3) current and former foster youth reported that the agency did not provide any academic support while they were in their residential or foster placements.

“[Question:] In terms of the foster care agency like your caseworker or anyone on that side of things. Did they give you any help when it came to school? [Answer:] No, they was barely there.”

Four (4) current and former foster youth reported that their agency provided mental health or emotional support. One participant noted that there were people there for him, but he wished they had more concrete mental health supports. Another participant noted that while they did receive therapy, it was still difficult going through the foster system, irrespective of the therapy provided. **Two (2) participants reported that either the agency failed to follow through on their requests for therapy or failed to have the appropriate staff available for mental health supports at a congregate care site.**

The following finding pertains to *post-secondary transition support*.

Three (3) current and former foster youth reported that agencies provided post-secondary transition support. All three participants noted that the focus was mainly on transition to college and did not center vocational training as an option. One participant noted that the support with education came too late: she only felt the agency cared for her after she turned 16 years old. Another participant noted that although there was a college specialist available, they were often very busy.

The following findings pertain to *relationships with agency or local department of social services staff*.

Twelve (12) current and former foster youth reported helpful relationships with their agency or local department of social services staff. Current and former foster youth reported that these relationships were helpful when agency staff were supportive, motivating, and caring about issues related to school and placement in the foster system.

Participants named education counselors, college specialists, social workers, and caseworkers specifically as supportive staff in their educational journey. Participants also noted that there was inconsistency in the availability of supportive and helpful staff, so that throughout their journey in the foster system, they had helpful relationships with staff at times and less so at other times. Some participants noted the long-lasting and continued impact of positive staff relationships to date—well beyond their time working with a specific agency staff person.

“And I had this one caseworker. I had two caseworkers actually. And one was African-American, and the other one was Caucasian. And at that time, I was so young. So I was so ignorant and. . . I used to be like, I don’t want to talk to you . . . like, leave me alone . . . I’m not going to school. As soon as I moved into my own apartment, I didn’t have that same push to go to school and go to my GED classes and I miss her [the Caucasian caseworker]. And when I tell you she’s the only person that has been there for me since, she is a reason why I do a lot of things I do.”

“So [residential] staff honestly. . . I had like a decent amount of people that like I was able to, to like go to, [I] actually have a mentor that used to work there . . . she’s like one of the big bosses, she’s my mentor now, I talk to her a lot.”

“[My] education counselor was great, she helped me out . . . she cared so much, she was always fighting for us . . . she was the only person that I really had a connection to at the agency.”

Seven (7) current and former foster youth reported unhelpful relationships with agency or local social services staff. Participants found staff unhelpful when they didn’t feel like agency staff were keeping up with their whereabouts or needs, which resulted in them feeling like they were lost in the system. Others reported feeling unseen when agency staff failed to address abuse in foster homes. Some current and former foster youth reported difficulty getting in touch with relevant education support staff at agencies.

When discussing how staff was unhelpful, two participants noted a staff’s overall lack of care or interest in the unique needs or interests of foster youth, or a tendency toward juvenile behavior in the congregate care setting with foster youth, for instance by encouraging fighting instead of acting to prevent or de-escalate.

The following findings pertain to *overall agency or local department of social services support*.

Seventeen (17) current and former foster youth reported that their agency or local department of social services was unhelpful. The most notable way youth felt unsupported was due to a lack of reliability or dependability from agency staff. For example, several current and former foster youth mentioned that staff would promise to do something for them, but then fail to follow through. Others mentioned that staff didn't support post-secondary transitions including transitions to college, only checking in with foster youth after they had already started college.

Two (2) current and former foster youth mentioned that they did not feel supported by their agencies when it came to more practical education-related needs. These practical needs included help with school supplies or having proper attire and grooming to attend school.

Five (5) current and former foster youth reported that they didn't feel like their agencies or local department of social services were responsive to their needs or goals. For example, two participants noted that they didn't feel seen and didn't feel like their academic or career goals were championed by staff. Another participant noted that she wished agencies provided more support with school supplies and finding good schools for students. And, yet another participant noted that she didn't feel like the agency prepared her for life by ensuring she was well-versed in skills needed for independent living.

The following findings pertain to *congregate care experiences*.

Current and former foster youth experiences at their congregate care placements (including residential facilities and group homes) and with their education while in these settings were largely negative. Many of the responses mirrored the experiences of youth who participated in the Children's Rights January 2023 [report](#), "Are You Listening? Youth Accounts of Congregate Placements in New York State."¹⁹

Ten (10) current and former foster youth reported negative experiences in congregate care settings, including difficulties learning because of student behavioral disruptions²⁰ in and outside the classroom, overall feelings that they didn't receive an appropriate education, and a lack of teacher support.

"The kids were like turning up every day, and by that I mean like throwing chairs, pulling the fire alarm, it was insane, like every single day."

Five (5) current and former foster youth reported positive experiences in congregate care settings, including having helpful teachers, classroom paraprofessionals, and counselors. Some participants noted that their residential facility had a good credit recovery program and that smaller classes were helpful.

Next we will discuss findings about *overall experiences in the foster and school systems*.

In addition to their specific education experiences, many

participants shared about their overall experiences in the foster system and, in some cases, how those experiences impacted their education.

The following findings pertain to *mental and emotional health*.

Eighteen (18) current and former foster youth noted overall emotional challenges and/or challenges with their mental health or mental state while in the foster system. Participants shared that they experienced challenges due to:

- issues in their foster homes;
- not feeling supported by their agencies or local department of social services;
- social difficulties in school;
- difficulties trusting others;
- lack of mental health supports;
- feeling like they were in survival mode;
- medications for diagnoses impacting how they showed up for school;
- feeling alone or isolated; and
- feelings of being on auto-pilot or becoming desensitized.

Nine (9) current and former foster youth discussed balancing being in the foster system and school. All but one participant indicated some difficulty with being in the foster system and school.

The following findings pertain to *support and guidance* and to *relating with others*.

Ten (10) current and former foster youth shared that they did not feel like they had appropriate support or guidance while in the foster system. Participants noted needing support and guidance with:

- remaining motivated to stay in and complete school;
- skill-building around appropriate relationships with others; and
- correction around negative behaviors and being held personally accountable.

Two (2) current and former foster youth shared that they struggled to relate to others at school because of their foster system experience. They also noted how school instability made it difficult to establish a community of people who knew them and who they could turn to.

The following findings pertain to *self-advocacy*.

Seven (7) current and former foster youth mentioned the need for self-advocacy within the foster system. Participants noted a reliance on themselves, their connections, and resources (within and outside of their foster care agencies) to get the things they

needed. This included help with getting into college, persisting in college, and simply ensuring they received their allowance as teenagers.

“I don’t like being a mean person when it came to asking for support. But it’s like I had to show my fangs in order to get the support I needed and I hated that. Because I was like I’m not a mean person. . . . [I]t was certain times where staff or social workers were just not in it for the support. And I was like I’m angry that I have so I have to sit here and yell and scream. Rather than you just hear me.”

The following findings pertain to *coping mechanisms* and *race and culture*.

Twelve (12) current and former foster youth mentioned having helpful coping mechanisms and supportive relationships to help them through their foster system experience. Participants noted positive and helpful relationships with family, their attorneys, social workers from their attorney’s offices, and faith communities. In terms of coping mechanisms, participants noted that they made friends at the library, utilized mental health supports that were available, escaped through school, distracted themselves from the reality of the foster system, or simply pretended like things were okay or made light of the situation.

Four (4) current and former foster youth mentioned how differences in race and culture impacted their foster and school system experiences. Participants mentioned how being of a different race, religion, or culture than one’s foster parents and/or their new neighborhood or community required an adjustment at home and at school. Some participants also noted how varying cultural dynamics and attitudes around education in certain foster homes were a positive influence on their academic progress.

Parent Experiences

Parent participants shared their experiences with schools and foster care agencies or local departments of social services.

First we shall discuss findings about **school experiences**.

Parents were asked a variety of questions about their experiences with the schools that their children attended while they were placed in the foster system, including school stability, relationships with school staff, foster parent involvement, and parental school involvement. Parents were also asked about their experiences with their foster care agencies or local departments of social services.

The following findings pertain to *school stability*.

- **Nine (9) parents reported the challenges they had with their children maintaining school stability while in the foster system.**
- **Three (3) parents reported that their children had changed schools once while in the foster system.**
- **Three (3) parents reported that their children had changed schools more than once while they were in the foster system—one parent noted distance as the reason for their child’s school change.**

- **One (1) parent reported that they were unsure of how many daycares and schools her child had been in because the agency did not share that information with her.**
- **Six (6) parents reported that they had no input in determining if their child changed schools or which schools they went to if they changed schools.** Parents reported that they weren’t notified of school changes and that the agency or local department of social services didn’t discuss any possible school transfers or the reason for such transfers.

“I’m not even sure how many daycares and schools my daughter has been in because they shielded me from knowing anything I recently found a slip in her backpack. . . . That was from a daycare I’d never even heard from just this past August. . . . And there was this whole fight about I didn’t want to go into a Catholic school and they enrolled her anyway.”

“[Question: Did anyone talk to you about why your child was changing schools?][Answer:] No . . . the educational coordinator did not reach out to me to explain anything about why they wanted to change [my child’s] school. They just kind of took it upon themselves to discuss it with the team without even consulting me or dad.”

The following findings pertain to *school relationships*.

Two (2) parents reported that the schools were aware that their children were in the foster system and both parents reported negative experiences. Parents noted that schools would exclude them from the “school picture” once they found out their child was in the foster system. One parent reported that the school tried to circumvent her rights under the special education process to have the kinship foster parent sign consents for evaluations even though the parent was actively involved in her child’s education and asserted her right to participate in the special education process.

“Yeah, I think a big problem is that once the school finds out that you have a child welfare case, they start actually treating you differently as a parent. Especially when the caseworkers like don’t call the parent call the foster parent, or the school starts getting that kind of dialogue from the caseworker. And again, a lot of situations they use parent’s mental health, or substance abuse against them.”

Three (3) parents noted that for children who had experienced trauma, schools focused on giving them a mental health diagnosis instead of addressing the trauma and difficulties that they have experienced. Parents noted a need for more emotional supports instead of mental health diagnoses—and in some cases referrals for special education services—for their children.

“I also feel like that children of color, get the ABC diagnosis when they in the system, they go and put a lot of diagnosis on the child and go and try to go on and blame on other things but there’s a lot of trauma that goes on in the foster care system as well, vicarious trauma, they can get PTSD. And that’s what’s not talked about either.”

The following findings pertain to *foster parent school and parent involvement* and *parent school and educational involvement*.

Three (3) parents reported that foster parents kept them informed about their child's school progress and that it was helpful. Foster parents provided updates to parents about any challenges their children were having in school, involved them during homework time (usually by phone), and shared information about their children's overall school progress.

"Yeah, my foster mother and I had a bond but they put an order of protection on so when I go to the visit[s] [she] tells me that [my child's] having problems in school and stuff, but they put order of protections this year so she we can't really talk unless the workers leave and [she] stays so yes, we had a bond but it's gone."

Three (3) parents shared that they had positive experiences being involved in their child's school and that the school prioritized their involvement even though their children were in the foster system. These positive experiences included the school reaching out to the parent when their child was having a difficult time behaviorally, inviting the parent to school meetings to address social-emotional concerns, and reaching out to the parent generally to ensure they remained involved and up to date about what was happening with their children's education.

"Well for me, I actually got called . . . because they felt like my son was depressed. He's not the same kid they met. And I'm like I think that's when he got to the second school so they . . . really was like well, maybe we really need mom. So I guess they probably was bringing this issue up to the foster family and they wasn't never mentioning anything. So . . . they was like, 'No, it's a must, that [I] attend this meeting and see what's really going on.'"

Five (5) parents reported that they had negative experiences when attempting to remain involved in their child's education. These experiences centered mainly on the schools failing to keep parents updated about their child's academic progress and any needs they may have had. In some cases, parents were either initially left out of important conversations about their child's needs and then included later, or included initially, only for communication to stop at a later point.

"But they had not included me in parent teacher conferences. They had said that there was no way that they could include me. And because of ACS things that were put in place. But yes, there was no kind of effort to include me in any kind of educational activities for [my child]. They really didn't respect anything when it came to me."

Four (4) parents reported that they were engaged in their child's education by completing homework during visits, reading to their children, playing educational games, and keeping up to date with their school progress through reports from their children during visits.

"Yea, my [child] doesn't have homework [yet], but I just play games and a card that shows the ABCs and stuff like that so I teach her."

"The first thing when I would go to the agency was automatically the same thing they was doing when [my child] was home . . . When I

would come to the visits, first thing is get that homework out and then I would ask them you know how's everything going in school? How do you like your teachers? Are you getting help from the foster family? . . . Just keeping up with [their] progress through them because I wasn't getting a lot from the foster family so I would ask my child is very mature."

Next we shall discuss findings related to ***foster care agency/local departments of social services experiences***.

Parents were asked a variety of questions about their experiences with their foster care agencies or local departments of social services and staff when it came to education and their children. Participants reported almost exclusively negative experiences.

Seven (7) parents reported feeling like their foster care agency was inconsiderate of their thoughts, need for information and, in some cases, even restricted their access to information about their children's education. Parents shared that their foster care agencies failed to:

- share where their children were attending school;
- provide updates about how their children were doing in school; or
- help with explaining any concerns or interventions that were recommended by the school (e.g., evaluations and services to address unmet academic needs).

Overall, parents expressed feeling excluded from their child's education by the agency and like the agency staff did whatever they wanted to do—even, at times, over parent objection. Parents also reported being outright excluded from important events like graduation, being threatened with educational neglect when they attempted to advocate for their children, and a failure on the agency's part to provide academic supports even when the agency was aware that the child was struggling in school.

"The agency sometimes does whatever they want, whatever they choose, you don't have [a] say so."

Foster/Adoptive Parent Experiences

Foster and adoptive parents shared their experiences in the following categories: schools, foster care agencies or local departments of social services, and overall experiences in school systems.

First we shall discuss findings related to ***school experiences***.

Foster/adoptive parents were asked a variety of questions about their experiences with the schools that the foster youth in their homes attended, including school stability, relationships with school staff, and general school involvement. Foster parents were also asked about their efforts, if any, to involve parents in their child's education.

The following findings pertain to school *stability and dynamics*.

Six (6) foster/adoptive parents reported school changes when children entered their homes. They reported that children changed homes due to:

- distance because their homes were outside of the child's original school district (or borough in New York City);
- issues with the child's prior school (due to the child's behavioral challenges); and
- the child's original school not meeting their academic needs appropriately.

Two (2) foster/adoptive parents reported concerns about how schools treat foster youth when they are aware of their status in the foster system. Foster/adoptive parents raised concerns about social promotion, unfair treatment, and lack of support to help children learn.

Three (3) foster/adoptive parents reported mainly helpful relationships with school staff. Almost all three reported that they had helpful relationships where school staff supported students with behavioral needs or flagged concerns or issues for foster/adoptive parents to address at home.

However, foster/adoptive parents also reported negative experiences, including being called to go to the school to address behavioral challenges or having to respond to classroom exercises that unintentionally ostracized children in the foster system (e.g., in one instance, a foster/adoptive parent noted assignments that require children to draw their family and teachers noting that children in the foster system should draw their "real" family as opposed to who they identified as their family).

"Now in high school, [my adopted child] has a good school counselor who is kind of like the mediator. . . . So like if there's an issue or something going on, [the counselor will] call."

"I was called from my work on numerous occasions, to either go over to school or to have the assistant principal put [him] on the phone so I could talk him down. . . . The school said he seemed to be a threat to the school safety and I had said no, you seem to be a threat to his safety."

The following findings pertain to *behavioral challenges and foster/adoptive parent school and parent involvement*.

Five (5) foster/adoptive parents shared their challenges with schools providing the appropriate support to address children's behavioral challenges and needs. Overall foster/adoptive parents reported that schools were unsupportive of behavioral needs. Foster/adoptive parents noted that some schools overreacted to behaviors, failed to understand the role that trauma plays for children in the foster system, and were unable to provide the behavioral supports and de-escalation needed for foster youth in the foster system.

"I don't think that they felt that [collaborating with the child to figure out de-escalation strategies] was within their realm of responsibility."

"I remember one day [my adopted child] was getting detention or almost suspended because they [went through] double doors and like karate kicks the door open. . . . I definitely think she was seen as like the older poor, troubled foster youth and kind of just had a target on her back. So some of those behavioral things while yeah, they're stupid things that maybe you shouldn't do in class. I think some of the consequences were blown out of proportion. In that setting [suburban school], specifically."

Five (5) foster/adoptive parents reported involvement with their foster children's school including advocating for school stability, participating in school meetings or conferences, advocating for special education services, and sharing insights about a child's behavioral support needs. Two foster parents also reported that they have had negative experiences with the school. Negative interactions included school staff failing to communicate with the current foster/adoptive parent, and a situation where the school continuously called the foster parent for behavioral issues even though they declined to provide special education services or behavioral supports.

"And I will also say to them [the school] you know, I'm giving you this information so you know a few months down the road, don't call me with an incident. You know, I mean, I'm giving you this information proactively. So you're not going to call me in a few months and say, Guess what [happened]? No, we're not doing that, you're not suspending [my foster child] because I'm telling you."

Four (4) foster/adoptive parents reported engaging the child's parents in their child's education and overall establishing a relationship with the parents. These foster parents spoke positively, overall, about their efforts to work collaboratively with parents to keep them informed about their child's academic progress and needs. Foster parents discussed partnering with parents to ensure homework was completed during visits or working collaboratively to ensure that a child received special education services. Foster parents also discussed working with parents generally to provide overall support in a co-parenting model to promote a continued parent-child relationship. However, one foster parent noted that establishing a positive relationship can be difficult due to negative perceptions or frustrations parents have toward the foster parent.

"And what I learned in that process is that you have to become not just the child's foster parent, but the birth parent's foster parent. . . . I want her to know that. These are your kids. Tell me what you think, try to get her involved with everything."

"Mom and I have always, always . . . communicated. . . . So obviously in foster care the birth parents don't have to lose their rights because kids are in foster care. I would call her first outside of the agency and stuff like that. So here's the deal. This is what I'm looking at. This is why I'm doing it. What do you think? Do you think it's a good idea? You don't think it's a good idea? Let me know like what else can we do? But we got to address this situation."

Next we shall discuss findings related to *foster care agency or local department of social services experiences*.

Foster/adoptive parents were asked a variety of questions about their experiences with their foster care agencies or local departments of social services and staff when it came to education and their foster home generally.

Seven (7) foster/adoptive parents reported that their foster care agency or social services departments were unhelpful when it came to issues related to their foster home and education for the children in their homes. Foster/adoptive parents reported taking education advocacy upon themselves due to a lack of support from their agencies or social services departments. Foster/adoptive parents also reported that agency or social services staff:

- failed to ensure a proper introduction and meeting between foster parents and parents to help facilitate a positive relationship;
- weren't proactive in addressing education issues or offering referrals to needed resources (e.g., therapy); and
- had high rates of turnover making it difficult to maintain consistent support around academics.

Two (2) foster/adoptive parents reported that their foster care agency or social services departments were helpful. Agencies were helpful when they shared needed education information when a child entered their home and assisted with school registration or other needed school supports.

Next we shall discuss findings related to *overall experiences in the foster and school systems*.

In addition to their education experiences, many foster/adoptive parents shared about their overall experiences working with foster youth in the foster system, and in some cases how that impacted children's education.

Two (2) foster/adoptive parents reported challenges with appropriate education for foster youth in the foster system—and children overall—based on race and geographic location. Foster/adoptive parents wondered if school staff who were of a different race than the children in the foster system (in this case, the foster/adoptive parent specifically highlighted Black children) were invested in the children's success. Another foster parent noted that there were big differences in the approaches schools took to their students depending on the geographic location of the school—where schools in “better” neighborhoods provided more support and resources to their students.

“We have teachers and psychologists and social workers and speech pathologists that do not look like our children. So are they really vested into the work? . . . They breadcrumb us, they breadcrumb our neighborhoods, they breadcrumb our babies.”

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are based on input from all interview participants, and include recommendations for schools, foster care agencies, and local departments of social services, as well as recommendations for how education and foster systems should work together to improve educational outcomes and experiences for foster youth in the foster system.

School Recommendations

Recommendations²¹ from participants centered on schools being centers of support for students and families involved in the foster system. Participants wanted schools to be places where they could connect with needed supports and resources and where they felt seen, cared for, and supported in school and during their journey through the foster system. Effective examples of the implementation of the recommended policies are highlighted in call-out boxes.

Provide appropriate trauma-informed training and workshops for school staff and students to increase awareness, sensitivity, and understanding of the foster system experience. Schools must provide trainings for teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrative staff, about the foster system, the impact of trauma on mental health, and the experiences of foster youth and families navigating the system.²² Schools should also ensure that staff are trained on their educational rights to remain informed and involved in their child's educational journey while in the foster system.

Make in-school mental health supports accessible and available for all students in the foster system. Schools must provide trauma-informed in-school therapy, social-emotional skill-building, mindfulness training, and support groups for students in the foster system. In order to ensure all student needs are met, school districts and the New York State Education Department must increase the number of psychologists, counselors, and social workers available to work with students. Mott Haven Academy Charter School provides a [proven, unique model of support](#), leveraging a 1:24 ratio of students to social-emotional support staff who provide support in and outside of the classroom.

Increase academic support, life skills support, and after-school programming. Schools should provide a robust suite of supports for students including in-school tutors and test prep; support with developing independent living skills in areas like cooking, financial literacy and planning, healthy relationships, and self-care; and ensure a breadth of after-school and extracurricular programming is available for students including arts, academic, and vocational programs. The [All-Stars Foster Youth Program](#) in the Corona-Norco Unified School District in Riverside County, California, is an example of school-based programming which focuses on providing students in the foster system with both academic and life-skills support during the school day.

Expand understanding and awareness of college and career resources and supports available for students in the foster system. Relevant school staff (e.g., college advisors, guidance

counselors, etc.) should be aware of resources for college-bound students in the foster system including scholarships, financial aid, and specific college programs (e.g., [various programs at The City University of New York \(CUNY\)](#), [Foster Youth College Success Initiative \(FYCSI\)](#), and more). Staff should also be aware of vocational and career resources to provide support to students seeking a career after high school.

Develop student clubs or programs that target the needs of students in the foster system. Schools should develop in-school or after-school programs or clubs specifically to support foster youth in the foster system. However, it's important that programs do not ostracize students and that they are discrete and confidential to protect student privacy.²³ Schools should strive to have programs led by those with lived experience in the foster system including considering contracting with nonprofit agencies. Programs like [Youth Empowering Success \(YES!\)](#) in Kern County, California, provides a model for a student-led organization for mentorship and empowerment of students in the foster system.

Ensure that parents are invited to school meetings and informed of their child's progress and any challenges while in the foster system. Schools must prioritize parental involvement by inviting parents to attend school meetings; contacting parents directly about their child's school progress or any academic or behavioral concerns; and involving parents in any school stability and special education decision making processes.

Foster Care Agency/Local Department of Social Services Recommendations

Recommendations from participants for foster care agencies/local departments of social services centered around providing more oversight and support for foster youth, foster parents, and parents to ensure that foster youth are safe and supported in their academic, vocational, and overall life goals.

Ensure foster youth have safe foster placements. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services must guarantee safe foster placements, free from abuse and mistreatment. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services must ensure that foster youth's basic needs are met within their foster placements (e.g., make sure that foster youth have access to their clothing allowance for appropriate clothing).

Provide consistent, reliable therapy. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services must prioritize supporting foster youth's mental health and providing them with needed therapy to support them throughout their time in the foster system.

Provide foster youth with robust holistic support for academics, career, and transition. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services should ensure that foster youth have tutoring support; college access and persistence support; and independent living skills development and ongoing support including help with career, housing, financial literacy, and financial planning. [Fair Futures](#), a [promising model](#) of support, that centers the goals and needs of foster youth and provides tutoring and coaching in areas including academics, career, housing, and life

skills.

Ensure that foster parents and parents receive support to make foster placements successful. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services must work with foster parents to ensure they are both aware of the educational needs and progress of children in their homes and providing them with needed support (e.g., a quiet space to do homework, etc.). Agencies/local departments of social services should encourage healthy relationships between parents and foster parents by facilitating parent and foster parent introductions and meetings as soon as possible and highlighting the importance of education and the parent's involvement in their child's educational journey. An example of how foster care agencies/local departments of social services can support these relationships is Rising Ground's [co-parenting pilot program](#), which helps develop positive relationships between parents and foster parents around many aspects of parenting, including school.

Increase communication and school record-keeping to support foster youth's academic and vocational goals. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services must maintain up-to-date copies of school records including report cards and transcripts. Agencies/local departments of social services staff must build authentic relationships with foster youth to understand their academic and career aspirations, provide incentives, and supportive check-ins to learn more about their needs and progress towards their goals.

Provide transportation to maintain school stability, involve foster youth in decision-making about school placement, and inform them of the reasons for any changes. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services must help ensure school stability when in a young person's best interest by providing transportation to/from school. Ensure that foster youth understand why they are transitioning from one school to another when they enter the foster system or change foster placements. Support smooth transitions from residential schools into district programs by ensuring that credits transfer appropriately and foster youth receive any social-emotional support needed to transition well.

Ensure that foster youth are aware of their rights and agency/local department of social services responsibilities. While a bill of rights already exists for foster youth in [New York State](#), it is imperative that foster care agencies/local departments of social services inform foster youth of their rights in terms of care, treatment, and support in their foster placements including how to escalate and address issues should they arise. Foster youth should also be told exactly how the agency/department of social services can support their life goals (e.g., paying for certain programs to learn new skills or for participation in extracurricular activities).

Increase pay and hire more foster care agency/local department of social services staff to provide better support and care for foster youth in the foster system. Foster care agencies/local departments of social services should increase pay and the number of staff to decrease caseloads and address high staff turnover can help to decrease the number of foster youth who fall through the cracks and have their needs unmet.

Joint Education and Foster System Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on how education and foster systems can collaborate to improve educational outcomes for foster youth in the foster system.

Improve communication, collaboration, and data-sharing between education and foster systems at the state and local levels. Education and foster systems at the state and local levels must create open lines of communication to ensure that foster youth's academic and social-emotional needs are being met and that they are able to pursue their academic and vocational goals. A statewide or local centralized education records system or data-sharing system where both staff from the school and foster systems have access to student records can help support student academic achievement by keeping track of classes, credits, and any needed services. Both New York State and New York City have existing data-sharing agreements whereby key education information is exchanged between relevant social service and education agencies; however, there is room for improvement of the quality of the data shared and of the usage of data shared to directly support students in the foster system.

Create personalized education plans for students in the foster system. Using a collaborative team approach including students, foster care agencies/local departments of social services staff, parents, foster parents and schools, foster care agencies/local departments of social services should create a curated educational experience that centers a young person's academic, vocational, behavioral, mental health, and social-emotional needs and goals.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of current and former foster youth, parents, and foster/adoptive parents demonstrate the need for accountability from our state education and child welfare agencies; local schools; and local foster care agencies/local departments of social services for the challenging experiences expressed in this report. While many individual experiences with our education and child welfare systems were negative, there were many bright spots where schools, agencies, and foster parents went above and beyond to provide much needed support to students and parents. The recommendations from research participants highlight a way forward to help students in the foster system achieve better education outcomes through increased supports and services.

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NOTES

1 *Parent* by itself in this report always refers to someone with a biological parental relationship to a child in the foster system. The author does not use the term biological parent or bio parent so as to recognize the typical parent–child relationship that exists, and often, endures despite child welfare/family regulation or foster system involvement.

2 In this report, foster and adoptive parents are referred to as *foster/adoptive parent*, as all of the adoptive parents had been, or were currently, foster parents.

3 Brenda M. Morton, “The Power of Community: How Foster Parents, Teachers, and Community Members Support Academic Achievement for Foster Youth,” *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 30, no. 1 (2016): 99–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2015.1105334>; see also Austen McGuire et al., “Academic Functioning of Youth in Foster Care: The Influence of Unique Sources of Social Support,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 121 (2021): 105867, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105867>.

4 New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI), *Educational Outcomes of Youth in Foster Care*, May 19, 2022, accessed April 8, 2024, https://www.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/Education_Outcomes_May19_2022.pdf. The difference in graduation rates from this study and the graduation rates published by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) are due to different definitions of foster students. CIDI reported on students who had spent seven or more days in the foster system during high school while NYSED reports on graduation rates by cohort, measuring graduation rates four years after students entered ninth grade. See also Bonnie T. Zima et al., *Behavior Problems, Academic Skill Delays and School Failure Among School-Aged Children in Foster Care: Their Relationship to Placement Characteristics*, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 9 (2000): 87–103, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009415800475> and Melissa J. Sullivan, Loring Jones, and Sally G. Mathiesen, “School Change, Academic Progress, and Behavior Problems in a Sample of Foster Youth,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 32, no. 2 (2010): 164–70, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2009.08.009>.

5 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, [20 U.S. Code § 6311\(h\)\(1\)\(C\)\(iii\)](#) and [20 U.S. Code § 6311\(g\)\(1\)\(E\)\(i-iii\)](#); Uninterrupted Scholars Act (USA) of 2013, [20 U.S. Code § 1232g\(b\)\(1\)\(L\)](#).

6 U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Non-Regulatory Guidance: Ensuring Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care*, June 23, 2016, accessed April 5, 2024, https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/09/Non-Regulatory-Guidance_06-23-2016.pdf; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, [20 U.S. Code § 1414\(a\)\(1\)\(D\)\(iii\)](#); See also Office of Children and Family Services and New York State Education Department, *Students in Foster Care Tool Kit for Local Education Agencies and Local Departments of Social Services*, February 7, 2022, Pub. 5221, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://ocfs.ny.gov/publications/OCFS-Pub5221.pdf>; [8 NYCRR § 200.1](#).

7 Among the responses in the current/former foster youth category, there was one more response than the number

of people interviewed or those who participated in focus groups. While this additional data could represent a duplicate response, the author does not believe that it contributes to a substantial difference in the demographic information provided. However, the demographic data should be interpreted with this caveat in mind.

8 A participant used the term “female-identified” to describe their transgender gender identity.

9 All Black or African-American or Afro-Caribbean designations were changed to Black/African-American; Latino, Hispanic, or Puerto Rican were changed to Hispanic or Latino; Caucasian or White were changed to White/Caucasian; Black and Latino or Black and Puerto Rican were changed to Black and Latino or Hispanic; and Black and White, Indigenous, Caribbean, Guyanese, Asian, and South Asian were grouped together in the Other category.

10 Participants used the term Latino to self-identify. While the term is used in the report to remain true to the participant’s chosen language, it is not meant to be exclusionary of other terms or identities.

11 There were three participants over 30 years old.

12 Young people in New York State can remain in the foster system until 21 years old ([N.Y. Fam. Ct. Act § 1055\(e\)](#)). In certain circumstances, young people may remain in the foster system beyond age 21. For example, in New York City, a foster care agency may apply for an [exception to policy](#) for a young person over the age of 21 who is awaiting permanent housing.

13 Congregate care settings include facilities like residential treatment centers or facilities and group homes.

14 One participant had also been placed in the foster system in Connecticut.

15 Several former foster youth who had been adopted mentioned concerns about maltreatment by their adoptive parents. They expressed concerns that with the foster care agency or county out of the picture, there was no longer anyone around who could monitor whether or not they were being appropriately cared for in their adoptive homes. This presents an opportunity for continued research to better understand the experiences of adopted children and the need for continued support balanced with the need to protect families from ongoing surveillance by the child welfare/family regulation system.

16 Amanda Yoshioka-Maxwell, “Experiences of Abuse: Homeless Former Foster Youth and Their Experiences of Abuse in Out-of-Home Care,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 40, (2023): 787–796, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00810-8> and Judy Havlicek and Mark E. Courtney, “Maltreatment histories of aging out foster youth: A comparison of official investigated reports and self-reports of maltreatment prior to and during out-of-home care,” *Child Abuse and Neglect* 52, (2016): 110–122, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.12.006>.

17 “Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data,” Children’s Bureau, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/byState> (select New York to view data). It is important to note that these data only reflect cases where there was a substantiated or indicated report and only counts victims once, no matter the number of times they were victimized. As reported by participants in this research study, caseworkers did not

always act on allegations of abuse by foster parents, so these data likely represent an undercount of actual instances of maltreatment in foster homes.

18 Under the 2016 [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), students in the foster system are entitled to remain in their school of origin when in their best interests. U.S. Department of Education [guidance](#) notes that the best interest determination should consider appropriateness of the school, proximity of the school, and the child's desires, among other factors. School districts and child welfare agencies should work collaboratively to ensure transportation is provided for a student to attend their school.

19 Children's Rights, "Are You Listening? Youth Accounts of Congregate Placements in New York State," accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.childrensrights.org/news-voices/are-you-listening>.

20 The overall theme of classroom disruptions by peers was the most prevalent comment made by current and former foster youth who had been in congregate care settings. Because of the challenges with behavior, some participants noted that they did not believe it was helpful to place young people with similar challenges all together on a residential campus.

21 The recommendations included in this report are recommendations most relevant to addressing the challenges raised by participants in interviews and focus groups. However, there were broader education-related recommendations—applicable to all students—that are worth noting including: having smaller class sizes to optimize learning; developing robust arts and sports programming in schools; hiring more teachers, particularly teachers of color; including students with disabilities in the general student body population; ensuring equity and quality education across school districts; increasing access to vocational programming for students seeking a post-secondary path other than college; providing alternatives to testing to demonstrate subject-matter proficiency; including Black history in the curriculum; developing a more varied curriculum to target different types of learners and interests; and exploring alternative learning options including online learning.

22 Advocates for Children of New York 2023 report, [Building on Potential: Next Steps to Improve Educational Outcomes for Students in Foster Care](#), highlights the importance of both trauma-informed training for school staff and the elimination of harmful school practices that perpetuate trauma.

23 It is important to note that in providing specific programming to students in the foster system, students shouldn't be ostracized from the general student population and should always be afforded the same experiences and opportunities as other students.