

**Educational Experiences of Children in  
Out-Of-Home Care**

**Executive Summary**

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**2004**

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CS-108

# The Educational Experiences of Children in Out-of-home Care

## Executive Summary

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### Introduction

This report presents the findings from a study assessing the educational experiences of youth in foster care in Illinois and serves two purposes. First, the findings provide a baseline for ongoing assessment and monitoring of the educational experiences of children involved with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Second, the findings provide information for targeting and shaping policy and practice recommendations designed to improve the educational achievement of children who are involved with the child welfare system in Illinois.

### Findings

#### Concentration of children in out-of-home care in CPS schools

- Almost one-quarter of the elementary school students in out-of-home care are enrolled in 27 – or 5 percent of – CPS general elementary schools, and almost half of all high school students are enrolled in 16 – or 18 percent of – CPS general high schools.
- Of the 27 elementary schools, nearly a third is extremely low achieving, schools where less than 25% of the third- through eighth-grade students are achieving at national norms in reading, and almost half are low achieving schools, schools where between 25% and 35% of the third- through eighth-grade students are achieving at national norms in reading.
- The extent to which children in out-of-home care are concentrated in a small number of schools presents an opportunity for implementing targeted interventions that reach a large number of students; however, proportionate to the size of the student body in each of the CPS school, no general CPS school was found to have more than 6 percent of its student population in out-of-home care at any one point in time.

#### Academic Performance of Children in out-of-home care

##### *Reading Achievement*

- Almost 50 percent of third to eighth grade students in out-of-home care scored in the bottom quartile on the ITBS reading section. On the flip side, over a fifth of children in care scored at or above national norms.
- Once students' demographic characteristics are statistically controlled for and students are compared to other students within their school, the achievement gap separating students in care from other CPS students shrinks from more than a year's learning to a little more than half a year's learning. This suggests that the weaker academic performance of students in care is partially attributable to students in care attending lower achieving elementary schools and the existence in CPS of general achievement inequities along race and socio-economic lines.
- Compared to other similar CPS students, many students in out-of-home care, on average, do not lose ground while in care with respect to reading achievement; however, they are failing to close the substantial achievement gap that separates them

from other CPS students at age eight. Students, however, who spend their full elementary career in out-of-home care tend to fall slightly farther behind in reading while in care.

### ***Old for Grade***

- Even after demographic factors are controlled for and comparisons are made to other students attending the same schools, students in care are 1.8 times more likely than other CPS students to be old for grade, students experiencing abuse and neglect but not placement were 1.6 times more likely to be old for grade, and students in permanent placements were 1.3 times more likely to be old for grade.
- A disproportionate percentage of students in out of home care are falling behind early in their academic careers.
- Our findings suggest that students who are abused and neglected and placed in care around ages five and six are susceptible to enrolling in school late and may already be old-for-grade before they are in an out-of-home placement.

### ***Dropout Rates***

- The proportion of students in care who dropped out was far greater than the proportion of other CPS students who dropped out.
- The proportion of students in care who are dropping out of school between ages 13 and 16 (15 percent) is more than double the averages for other students in the CPS system. This finding indicates that a sizeable number of students in care are struggling to successfully make the transition to high school and consequently dropping out at an early age. Many of these early dropouts are associated with broader placement disruptions such as students running away, being placed in detention, or entering institutionalized care.
- Although reading achievement and retention are important factors associated with dropout rates, they are not the sole factors driving the differences. Students in out-of-home care, students in permanent placements, and those who were abused or neglected but not placed were nearly two times more likely to drop out of high school than were other CPS students with no record of maltreatment, even after controlling for their educational performance in elementary school, students' demographic characteristics, and the high schools in which the students first enrolled.

### **Academic Performance of School Age Students at the time of Entering Care**

- During the 2002-2003 school year, around 400 kindergarten through twelfth graders in CPS entered out-of-home care during the school year.
- Combining the ITBS reading test scores from the previous year with students' old-for-grade status when they entered care revealed that slightly under two-thirds of students enter care either old for grade or scoring in the bottom quartile in reading. Moreover, almost a quarter of students in care were both old for grade and scoring in the bottom quartile in reading.
- Students entering care were also at heightened risk of being retained in the same grade the year after they entered care.

### **Connections between Workers and Schools**

- In June 2003, Illinois DCFS caseworkers had an average of 14 children on their caseloads, and across the 2003 academic year they worked with an average of 18.6 children.
- Forty-five percent of children in out-of-home care for the full 2002-2003 academic year had two or more caseworkers assigned to their case during that time.
- Among schools with more than 10 students in out-of-home care during the 2002-2003 school year, school staff interacted with an average of slightly more than 11 caseworkers.
- Among caseworkers who worked with 10 or more children (at least 5 of whom were CPS students) over the 2002-2003 school year, workers interacted with approximately 8 schools for every 10 students on their caseload.
- Qualitative interviews confirmed the extent to which workers both inside and outside the Chicago area interact with multiple schools and vice versa.
- The potential for repeated interactions and thus the development of professional, collaborative relationships is likely constrained by the relatively high numbers of workers with whom school staff must coordinate or school staff with whom workers must coordinate.

### **School and Placement Mobility among Children in Out-of-home Care**

- Initial placements in out-of-home care and placement changes are driving the higher rates of school mobility among children in DCFS care.
- In interviews with foster parents, DCFS caseworkers, and school case managers, respondents told of significant problems with transferring information and documentation between the education and child welfare systems, particularly around enrollment and special education services. The impact of these school transfers on the children's education performance ranged from minor disruptions such as missing a couple days of school to serious problems with long-term consequences such as broken peer relations, weeks of school absences, and misplaced special education services.

### **Special Education Classification and Children in Out-of-home Care**

- Nearly half of 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in out-of-home care have been classified as disabled, a proportion much higher than other CPS students (13 percent to 16 percent, depending on grade) but also higher than students in permanent placements or those who were abused or neglected but not placed (20 percent to 30 percent).
- Students in out-of-home care are significantly more likely than other CPS students to be classified as having an emotional behavioral disorder (EBD). In September of 2003, 10 percent of first through eighth graders classified as having an EBD were in out-of-home care
- By 8<sup>th</sup> grade, students in care are also more likely than other CPS students to be classified as learning disabled (LD). Nearly three-fourths of third through eighth graders in out-of-home care who are classified as learning disabled are scoring in the bottom quartile on reading and 95 percent are scoring below national norms on reading.

- Interviews with caseworkers, school staff and caregivers, suggested that there are many parties involved in the IEP process under the presumption of representing their respective institution and/or the interest of the child. These participants' understanding of the special education process and their own role in that process varied considerably.

### **Communication and Information Flow among Schools, Caseworkers, and Foster Parents**

- A major source for miscommunication was that everybody involved with a child in care had a different perspective about who is responsible for communicating what to whom.
- The foster parents who reported feeling most satisfied with the communication they have with the school described that, in working with the child welfare caseworker, they feel like the “part of a team.”
- Effective communication about educational issues may ideally require a team approach, with explicit expectations for not only the frequency but also the nature of involvement by foster parents and caseworkers.

### **Conclusions**

Significant proportions of students in out-of-home care have low achievement test scores, are being retained, or are dropping out of school before the end of their 12<sup>th</sup> year. The weaker academic performance of school-age students at the time they enter out-of-home care and the poor performance of students who have been abused and neglected suggest that a portion of the academic problems of students in out-of-home care may stem from experiences prior to their entry into care.

Other findings from this study indicate that children in care are often changing schools multiple times over their academic career. Furthermore, opportunities for the development of strong working relationships with consistent repeated interactions between school staff, caseworkers, and foster parents may be constrained by such factors as the current approach to case assignment, placement instability, and worker turnover. Communication among all of the parties involved in these children's education is often complex and ineffective, and sometimes lacking altogether. For many children, factors such as poor communication and school mobility are further impeding their educational progress while in out-of-home care.

Together the results of this study highlight the importance of addressing the educational needs and supporting the educational successes of students as they enter and remain in out-of-home care. Efforts to improve the educational performance of students in care will require ongoing collaborative efforts between the child welfare and education systems.