

Supporting Youth in Foster Care In Distance Learning

September 2020

Students in foster care are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and at greater risk of falling behind in school due to the barriers they face in distance learning. Prior to the pandemic, youth in foster care were already living with the impacts of trauma and experiencing significant education gaps compared to their peers. During spring school closures, students in foster care were less engaged in online instruction than their peers¹ because of the obstacles they faced, including a lack of access to technology and connectivity and disruptions to important educational supports that students in foster care receive through their schools. In addition, youth in foster care may be more directly impacted by the pandemic as caregivers may have lost employment, reduced work hours, or their work is considered essential and they are not in the home to supervise distance learning. In addition, caregivers often lack appropriate training to provide academic assistance to the youth in their care and could benefit from further guidance and supports.

In fact, in a recent survey by the Alliance for Children's Rights,² 42% of caregivers reported that they are not comfortable supporting youth in their care with technology needs, and 39% of caregivers reported that they are not comfortable providing academic support to the youth in their care during distance learning. Related to technology access, only half of caregivers reported that each child in their care had received their own device to participate in distance learning. The other half of caregivers faced challenges when multiple children needed to access online instruction at the same time. While most caregivers (87%) reported having high-speed internet access in their homes, nearly two-thirds (62%) reported experiencing connectivity issues once a week or more during distance learning, including one-quarter (23%) who experienced connectivity issues multiple times a day. Overall, caregivers consistently reported that the youth in their care need access to tutoring and academic supports, reliable access to connectivity, and supports for caregivers so they can support youth learning.

Below we provide recommendations for specific actions to support academic achievement and connectivity for youth in foster care and their caregivers during distance learning, including through collaborations between education and other agencies that serve foster youth.

¹ Los Angeles Unified School District, Independent Analysis Unit (July 2020). "Student Engagement Online During School Facilities Closures: An Analysis of L.A. Unified Secondary Students' Schoology Activity from March 16 to May 22, 2020." Available at <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202020%200707%20-%20Student%20Engagement%20Online%20During%20Closures.pdf>

² Alliance for Children's Rights, "Identifying the Needs of Caregivers and Children During Distance Learning," July-August 2020.

Create Partnerships Between Child Welfare and Community-Based Organizations or Other Government Agencies and Local Education Agencies and Service Providers (MOUs, Contracts or Philanthropic Support)

- Support school districts to develop and offer in-person learning opportunities at school sites and community resource centers, including parks and recreation sites, libraries and other community spaces.
- Coordinate tutoring support through California State University and other higher education institutions' teacher credentialing programs to support student learning and student teacher preparation.
- Coordinate tutoring support through community-based organizations like AmeriCorps.
- Assign Foster Youth Liaisons and other trained staff to contact and engage youth in foster care after one day's absence from distance learning.
- In association with Foster Kinship Care Education (FKCE) and/or other training providers, develop Resource Family Approval (RFA) training for caregivers to support the learning needs of youth, including monolingual Non-English, literacy, and computer literacy trainings.
- In association with the child welfare agency, local education offices and other advocates/providers, develop training for STRTP staff on how to support the learning needs of youth in their facilities.
- Provide mobile hotspots, multiple devices and noise-cancelling headphones for youth in short-term residential therapeutic programs (STRTPs).
- Provide mobile hotspots, devices and noise-cancelling headphones for youth in homes who are not able to provide or whose school or school districts have not provided these materials.
- Offer stipends to caregivers for completing additional training to support learning needs of youth in the home.
- Provide high-speed internet access for youth in STRTPs by expanding the California Public Utilities Commission Teleconnect Fund.
- Require child welfare agencies, rather than caregivers, to serve as guarantor and assume liability on contracts with school districts if technology devices are damaged, stolen or lost.