# Supporting Students in Foster Care:
## Cultivating Connections to Promote Student Success – From Early Childhood to Postsecondary Education and Beyond

Students in foster care need support from early childhood to postsecondary education and beyond. Youth of all ages in the child welfare system often endure trauma from separation from their family and tumultuous circumstances associated with their removal from home. Educational stability is critical to help address this trauma and to support academic achievement, holistic well-being, and student success. Thus, youth need support and services to remain stable in appropriate child care, early education, and K-12 school placements.

Unfortunately, far too many students in foster care do not receive these supports and services, negatively impacting their academic outcomes, including not graduating from high school or college despite a strong desire to do so. By understanding key challenges and barriers, we strive to identify concrete solutions and collaborative approaches to help students in foster care achieve academic success and thrive. Much work has already started, but more is needed.

*"How could I know any better life if all I knew was chaos? … How could I think I would make it to college when I missed so much school? It is so easy to tell a foster youth to go to school, get good grades, smile, listen, don't fight, etc. But how could one do that when they have heavier thoughts? Will I eat today? Will I be relocated? Will my parents ever get custody back? Will someone hurt me again? Education can be a big stepping stone into the protective factors for youth but we can't expect someone to just jump to D if they haven't gone through A, B, C."*

—YOUTH WITH FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE

## FOSTER CARE FUNDAMENTALS
## Who Are Children in Foster Care? (2022)[1]

| Total Number in Foster Care and Ages | 368,530 children in foster care | 35% are under 5 years old | 4% are 18–20 years old | 59% of all youth in foster care are ages 5 through 17 (typical K-12 school age) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Length of Time in Foster Care | 34% less than 1 year | 29% 1-2 years | 18% 2-3 years | 13% 3-4 years | 5% 5 years or more |

The race and ethnicity of children and youth in foster care reflects disproportionality of involvement in the foster care system of children and families of color (e.g., Black or African American children represented 23% of children in foster care in 2020, compared to 12.4% in the general population according to 2020 census data).[2]

1   Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2022 data: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-30.pdf (published as of March 2024).

2   For more information on demographic data of youth in foster care, see Fast Facts: Foster Care & Education Data at a Glance, pages 2-3, available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63dcf65b8d0c56709027332e/t/6454f88fa66ab34124a03df4/1683290255678/Foster+Care+and+Education+Fast+Facts+final.pdf.

# Data Suggests That Many Students in Foster Care Encounter Academic Obstacles

For more detailed information, see Fast Facts (2022) Foster Care and Education Data.

| EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OR OUTCOME | | FINDINGS (National/Multistate) |
|---|---|---|
| **School Stability** | % of youth in foster care who change schools when first entering care | **31%–75%**[1] |
| | % of 17-to-18 year-olds who experienced 5 or more school changes | **25%–34.2%**[2] |
| **School Engagement** | % chronically absent from school | About **twice** the rate of non-foster students[3] |
| | % of 17-to-18 year-old youth in foster care having out-of-school suspensions | **12–23%** (compared to **5–7%** of all students)[4] |
| | % of 17-to-18 year old youth in foster care being expelled | **3–4 times** that of non-foster students[5] |
| **Reading Attainment** | Reading level of 17-to-18 year old youth in foster care | **29–33%** (meet state standards)[6] |
| **Special Education** | % of youth in foster care receiving special education services | **30–50%** (compared to 14% for all students)[8] |
| **High School Graduation** | % of youth in foster care who complete high school by age 18 (via a diploma or GED) | **64%** of foster youth compared to **87.3%** for non-foster youth[9] |
| **Post-secondary Education** | % of 17-to-18 year-old youth in foster care who want to go to college | **70–84%**[11] |
| | % of youth in foster care who graduated high school who enrolled in postsecondary education at some level | **13%–38%**[12] |
| | % of foster care alumni who attain a bachelor's degree | **2%–10.8%**[14] |

# Challenges & Barriers to Educational Progress

1. School instability (i.e., changing schools multiple times)
2. Delayed enrollment
3. Missing in-school class time (e.g., court hearings, required meetings)
4. Difficulties with credit transfers and shifting graduation requirements
5. Inadequate special education services and supports
6. Disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion
7. Overrepresentation in alternative education programs
8. Inappropriate on-site education programs
9. Truancy and disproportionate referrals to law enforcement

## Top 10 Actions to Help Students in Foster Care Improve Academically and Thrive Holistically

1. Engage youth in their education
2. Enlist supportive adult advocates
3. Provide the foundation for a strong start for young children in care
4. Ensure school stability and timely enrollment
5. Promote regular school attendance and access to the full school experience, including extracurricular activities
6. Address trauma, behavioral and mental health (i.e., provide trauma-responsive relationships, restorative interactions, and behavioral and mental health services and supports)
7. Provide timely and adequate special education assessments, services, and supports
8. Ensure appropriate educational placements for students in congregate care settings
9. Help students meet credit requirements (including via credit waivers) and graduate high school (including extended high school)
10. Support transition, persistence, and successful completion of postsecondary education

For more information on each of these points and relevant research, see the linked source.

**Source:** Exploring Education Outcomes: What Research Tells Us.
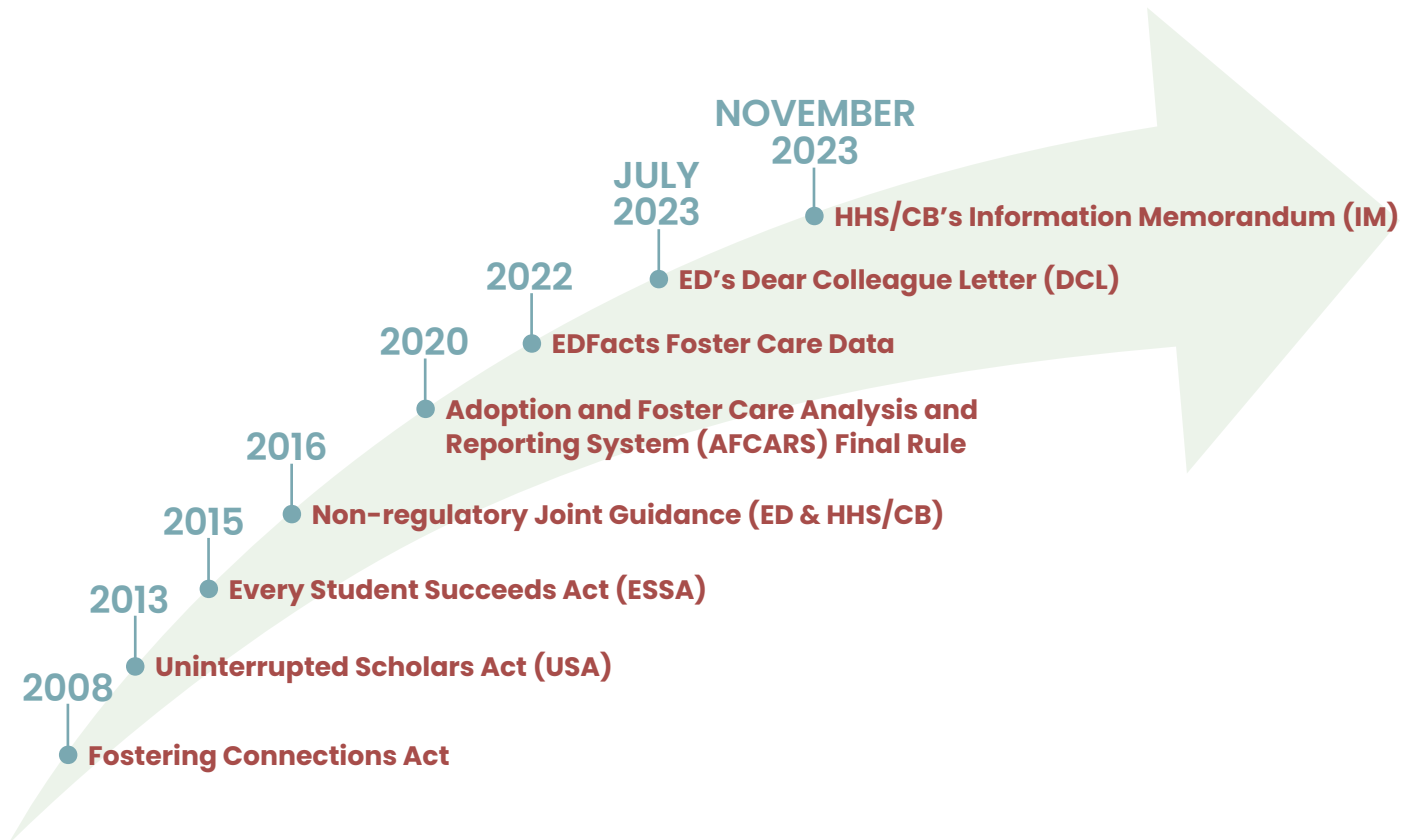
KEY NATIONWIDE IMPROVEMENTS

## Multi-strategy approaches are needed at the federal, state, and local levels
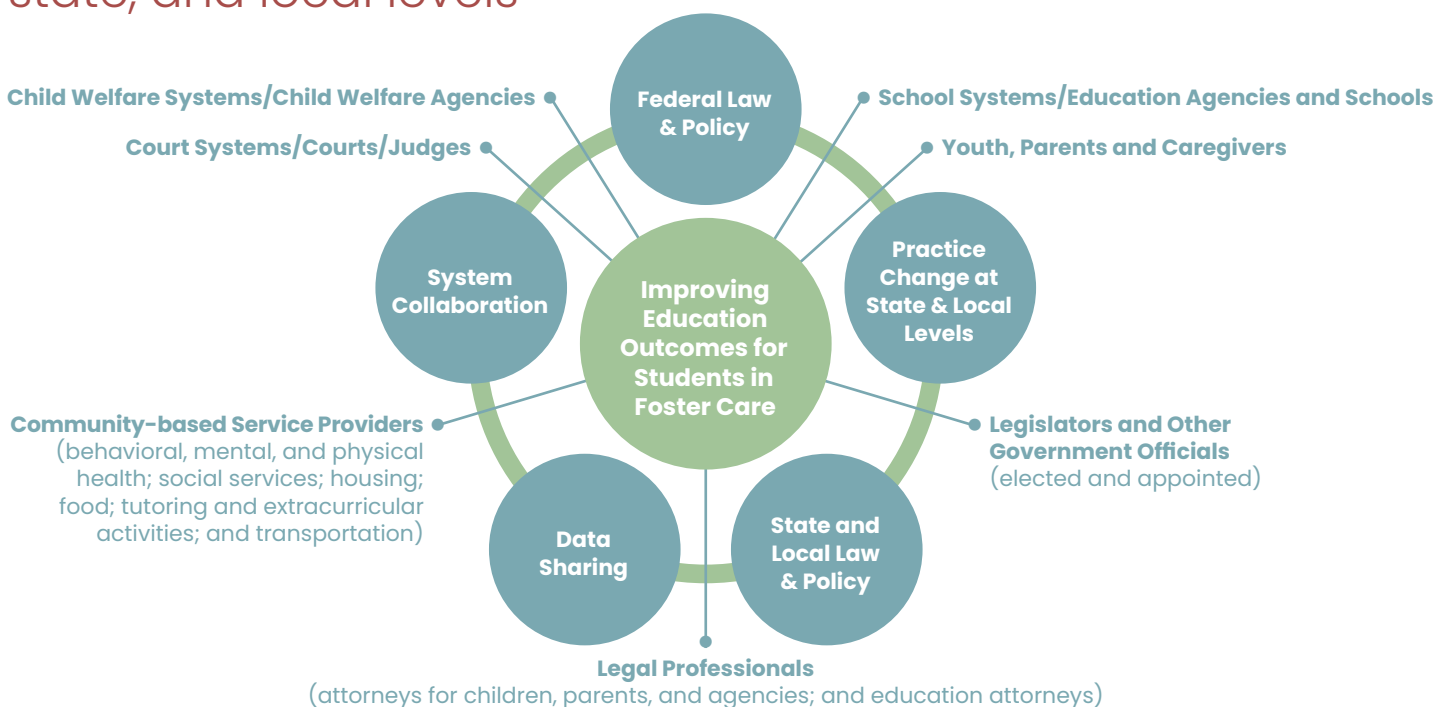
MAJOR FEDERAL LAW & POLICY MILESTONES

# We Have Made Strides in the Past Two Decades, But More Work is Needed

For more information on federal law and policy, visit fostercareandeducation.org.

**NOVEMBER 2023** — HHS/CB's Information Memorandum (IM)

**JULY 2023** — ED's Dear Colleague Letter (DCL)

**2022** — EDFacts Foster Care Data

**2020** — Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Final Rule

**2016** — Non-regulatory Joint Guidance (ED & HHS/CB)

**2015** — Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

**2013** — Uninterrupted Scholars Act (USA)

**2008** — Fostering Connections Act

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The **National Working Group on Foster Care and Education** encourages its members and the broader community to take action in solidarity with students in foster care to help them connect with supportive networks and achieve success in school and beyond.

The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education strives to harness our collective power to co-create healthy conditions in which children and youth in foster care experience holistic well-being and thrive academically as joyful, engaged, and supported students.

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