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CA Multi-Tiered System of Support Implementation Pilot Program

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Supporting the Academic Success of Students with Foster Care Experience: Lessons from Sweetwater Union High School District

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Supporting the Academic Success of Students with Foster Care Experience

Lessons from Sweetwater Union High School District

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SUMMARY

The Multi-Tiered System of Support has brought considerable attention to the academic needs of students with foster care experience (FCE). To help identify effective strategies that address these needs, this brief details the findings of a case study of Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD), based in Chula Vista, California, and its practices, programs, and policies that promote the academic well-being of students with FCE. Conjointly, drawing from interviews with California high school graduates with FCE, we will also report students' recommendations for schools serving such students, as well as best practices identified in focus groups conducted with educators and service providers.

INTRODUCTION

Of the 52,265 children and youth in California's foster care system on January 1, 2023, approximately two-thirds are school-aged (*Webster et al., 2023*). Compared to their peers without FCE, children in foster care are more likely to experience family disruptions, trauma, out-of-home placements, and school changes (*Clemens et al., 2017; Engler et al., 2022; Fawley-King, 2017; Font et al., 2020*). These experiences have been linked to deleterious academic outcomes, including disciplinary problems, lower academic achievement (e.g., grades, test scores), grade repetition, being placed in special education, dropping out of high school, and increased barriers to postsecondary education (*Clemens et al., 2018; Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017*).

Despite these challenges, empirical studies have identified various factors that improve educational outcomes among adolescents in foster care, such as school stability, positive relationships with peers, positive school experiences, and strong connections with adult mentors (*Dworsky, 2018; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016*). Accordingly, schools, child welfare agencies, and other service providers have developed practices that promote these protective factors within educational settings.

In the spirit of promoting the dissemination of such practices, the following brief reports the results of a case study examining the practices, programs, and policies tailored to the unique academic needs of students in foster care at Sweetwater Union High School District. Rooting our case study in the experiences of young people with FCE, we begin by presenting findings from a series of interviews with California high school graduates with FCE. Then, we describe our use of administrative data to inform a mixed-method exploration of Sweetwater's programs targeting students with FCE. We finish by providing recommendations to inform the development of similar programs at other districts serving students in foster care.

A special thank you to Dr. Elvia Estrella, Brian Murphy, and staff from Sweetwater High and Castle Park High for hosting the focus groups, as well as staff from the SUHSD district office, Alta Vista Academy, Sweetwater High, Castle Park High and Middle, Mar Vista High, National City Middle, Granger Junior High, Chula Vista Middle, and Hilltop High who participated in groups.

SALIENT CONCERNS OF STUDENTS WITH FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE

We conducted three exploratory interviews with California high school graduates with FCE to ground our case study in their experiences. Interviews explored students' high school experiences, unaddressed needs, and recommendations for schools supporting high school students with FCE.

Participants noted that teachers were an essential source of academic and emotional support. Teachers often knew about students' foster care status, which made them more accommodating. Teachers' willingness to tailor academic experiences to the scholastic and emotional needs of students fostered a sense of belonging and had a positive impact on the students' overall mood while in school. Similarly, connection to counselors and mental health clinicians provided necessary emotional supports that helped to mitigate the impact of unstable home situations on the students' academic well-being.

Positive experiences notwithstanding, some students noted that teachers' awareness of their foster care status led to diminished expectations, which did not prepare them for postsecondary education. Participants also reported that some school personnel had little regard for the emotional stressors related to changing schools and unstable home environments. Finally, participants emphasized the need for peer or near-peer mentorship, stating it would have been helpful to have someone slightly older with similar foster care experiences to guide them through the process of applying for college and navigating the transition to postsecondary education.



SWEETWATER UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Background

Equipped with these insights, we aimed to identify school districts that showed notable improvement in the academic outcomes of students in foster care. Using publicly available administrative data published by the California Department of Education, we examined indicators of foster youth academic success from 2017 to 2021. We found that students with FCE in Sweetwater Union High School District not only improved but in many instances surpassed state and county averages across several academic indicators.

Located in the southwestern region of San Diego County, SUHSD serves more than 38,000 students in grades seven through 12 across 32 campuses. More than 70% of Sweetwater students are Latinx, and half are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. One in five students are English Language Learners, and almost half of students speak a language other than English at home (SUHSD.org, nd). Over the last five years, SUHSD high school graduation



rates have hovered around 85%, with a little over half of graduating students meeting A-G requirements for CSU and UC admission. Between 4% and 7% of SUHSD students drop out in any given year. Suspension rates range between 4% and 5%, and expulsions are generally low, with fewer than 10 students being expelled per year. Since 2015, Sweetwater has served approximately 1,165 students in foster care.

Figure 1. Five-year high school graduation rates among students in foster care

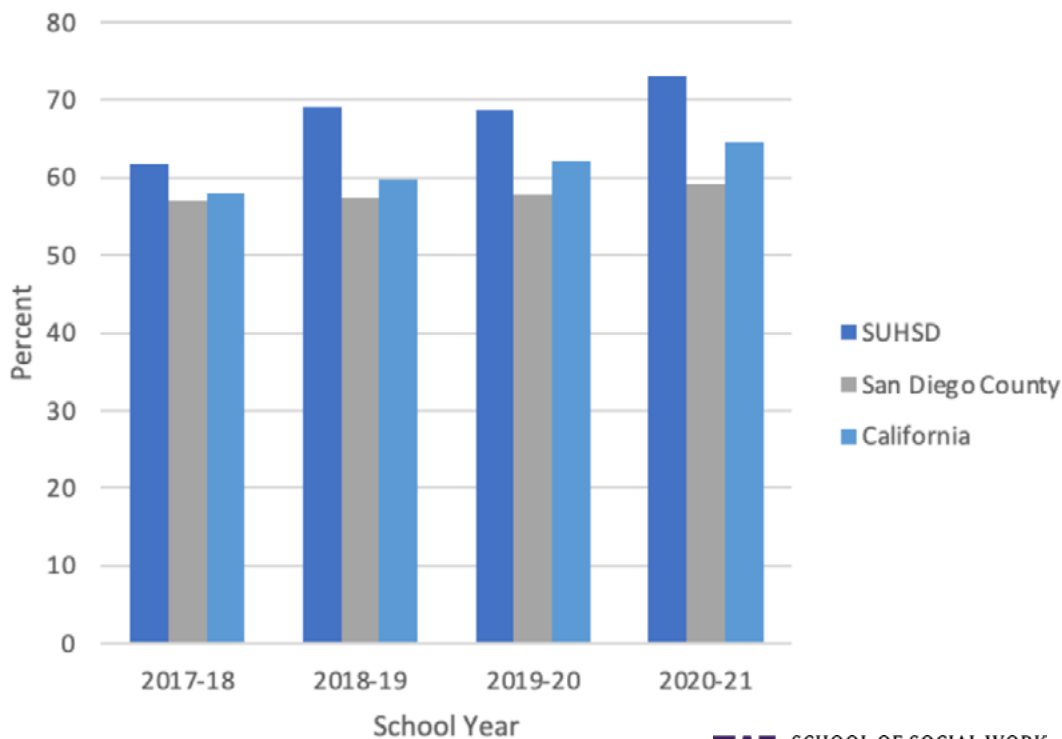


Figure 2. Percent of students in foster care who meet A-G requirements

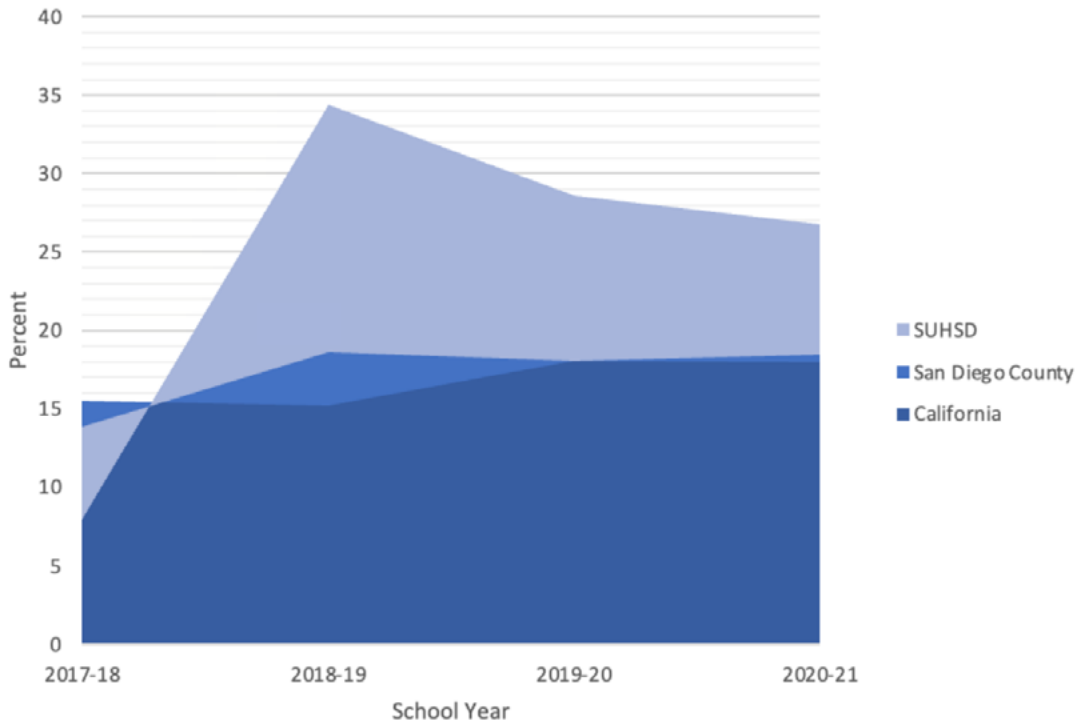
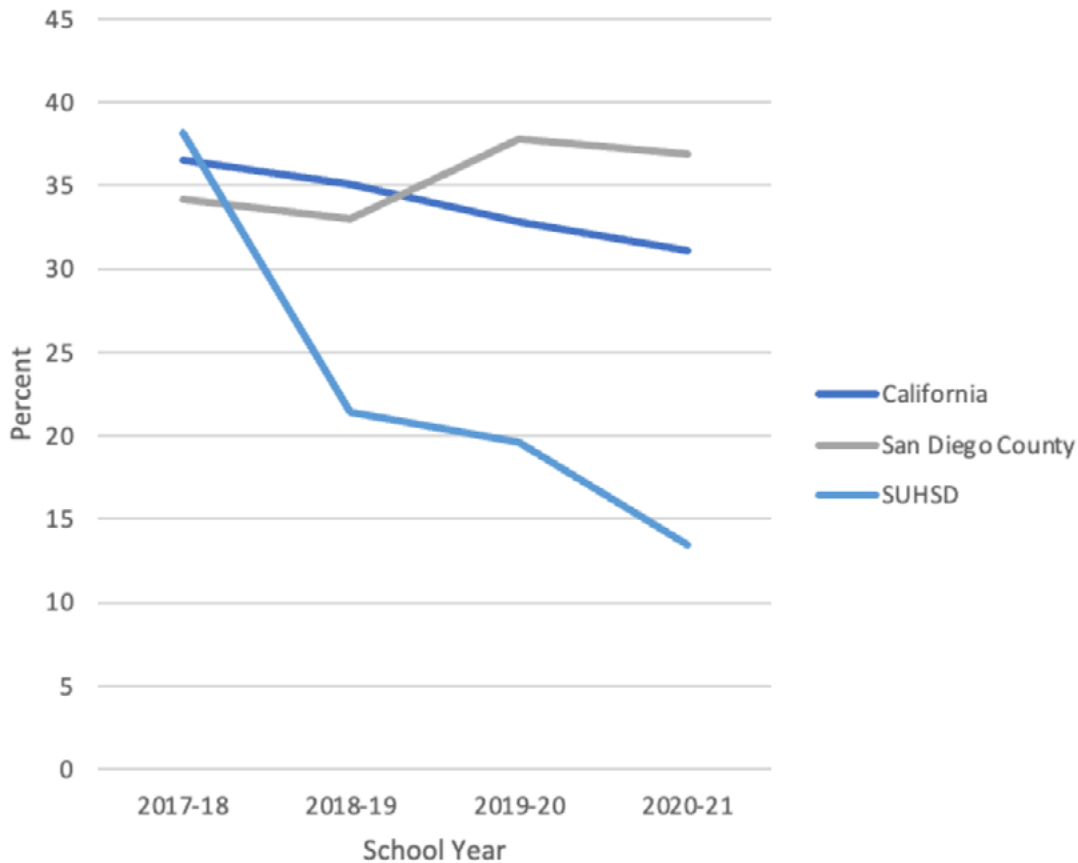


Figure 3. High school dropout rates among students in foster care



Promising Trends: Initial Administrative Data Findings

While space limits preclude us from presenting all [administrative data findings](#), analyses showed a greater proportion of SUHSD students with FCE graduate high school within five years, meet A-G requirements for CSU and UC admission, and enroll in postsecondary education when compared to county and statewide averages for students with FCE. Moreover, SUHSD has made progress in diminishing the over-representation of foster youth among students who experience negative academic outcomes. Between 2015 and 2019, high school dropout and suspension rates among students in foster care decreased by 25% and 6%, respectively. These promising academic outcomes were paralleled by evidence illustrating the experience of SUHSD teachers and personnel. The average teacher at Sweetwater had 15.3 years of experience, and approximately 90% of teachers and pupil services personnel have served at SUHSD for three or more years.

Diving Deeper: A Mixed-Method Examination of Promotive School Practices

Although administrative data indicated that Sweetwater moved the needle on several metrics related to academic well-being of students with FCE, these data did not reveal how Sweetwater fostered these outcomes. Therefore, we directly engaged with SUHSD to conduct a mixed-method case study of the practices, programs, and policies targeting students in foster care. SUHSD enthusiastically agreed and facilitated access to teachers, pupil service personnel, residential school staff, and program administrators across eight comprehensive school sites, one alternative school, and the district office.

Using our administrative findings as a starting point, we developed a focus group protocol to elicit more information on the strategies, programs, and policies that promote positive academic outcomes among students with FCE. Over the course of one week, researchers

Figure 4. Focus group participants' roles

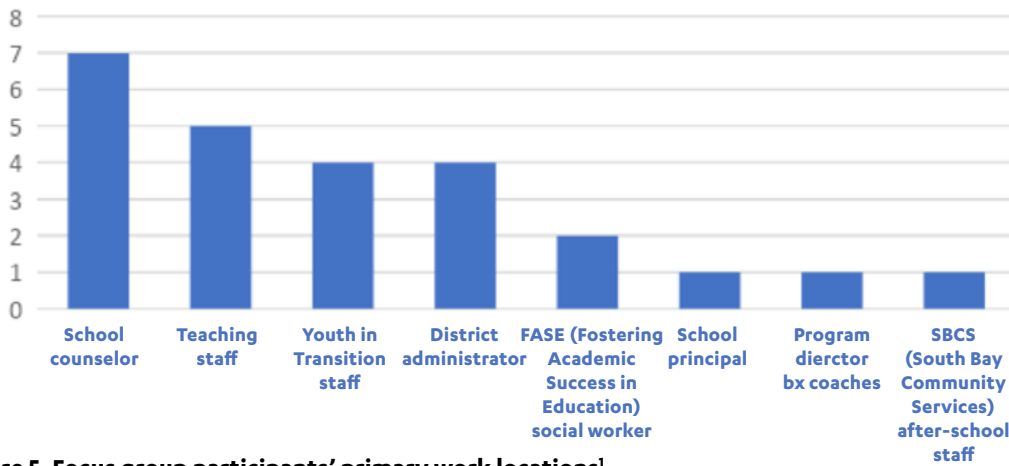
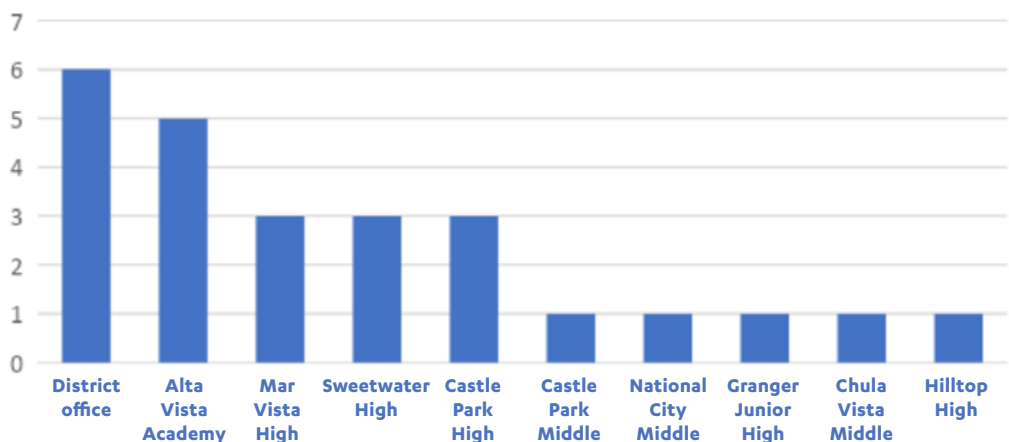


Figure 5. Focus group participants' primary work locations¹



¹ Some personnel worked at multiple sites, so the number of locations exceeds the number of respondents

conducted in-person and virtual focus groups with personnel who work directly with or provide administrative support to students with FCE. We complemented our focus groups with a survey consisting of respondent demographics, teaching experience, training, perceptions of school climate, and attitudes related to punishment. To better understand regional child welfare practices related to the educational outcomes of students in foster care, we also administered a separate survey to 41 child welfare caseworkers working in Southern California.

Focus Group Participant Demographics

A total of 25 personnel participated in focus groups and interviews, including school counselors, teachers, programmatic staff, and others. Participants were located at the district office or at particular middle and high schools.

Table 1 provides information about respondent demographics. More than half of respondents reported having worked with youth with foster care and/or trauma

Table 1. Survey and focus group respondent demographics (N=22)

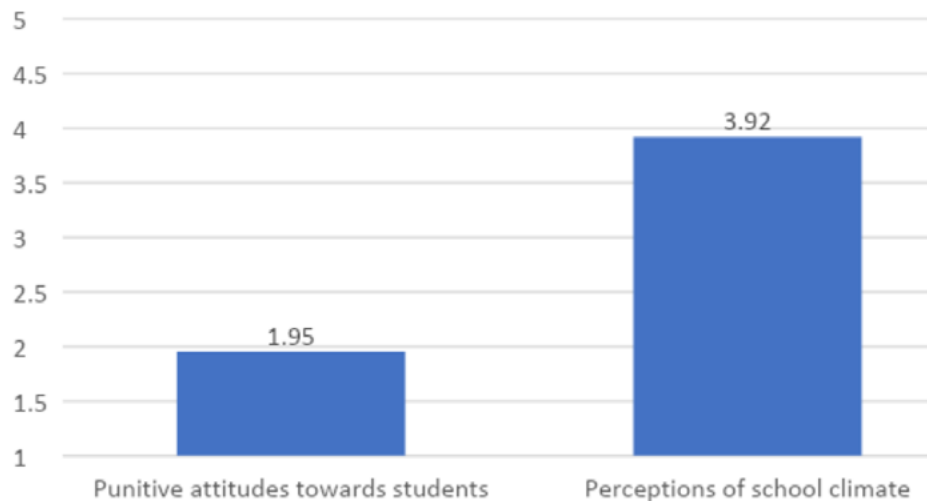
| Variable | n | % |
|---|----|------|
| Gender | | |
| Woman | 16 | 72.7 |
| Man | 6 | 27.3 |
| Race¹ | | |
| White | 13 | 59.1 |
| Other | 7 | 31.8 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous American | 1 | 4.6 |
| Asian/Asian American | 1 | 4.6 |
| Black/African American | 1 | 4.6 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Latinx | 13 | 59.1 |
| Has been in current role 3 or more years | 20 | 90.9 |
| Previous experience working with youth with FCE ² | 13 | 59.1 |
| Received preservice training related to students with FCE | 9 | 40.9 |
| Receives ongoing training related to students with FCE | 18 | 81.8 |
| Can identify students with FCE in their classroom/caseload ³ | 18 | 81.8 |

1 Respondents could select more than one racial group, so totals exceed the number of survey respondents

2 FCE=foster care experience

3 Of teaching staff, three of five could readily identify foster youth.

Figure 6. SUHSD staff attitudes



4 Both scales ranged from 1 (low punitive attitudes/negative ratings of school climate) to 5 (high punitive attitudes/positive rating of school climate)

experience before assuming their current role. More than 80% reported that they received ongoing training related to students with foster care experience or trauma-informed care. All but four respondents could identify students with FCE, most commonly through the Student Information System (SIS), communicating with a student's child welfare (CW) caseworker or school liaisons, or hearing from the student directly.

On average, respondents reported low punitive attitudes toward students (1.95 out of 5) and a positive school climate (3.92 out of 5), both of which have been associated with greater student motivation and educational success (Bear et al., 2017; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

In the caseworker survey, just over half of respondents identified as women, and most were Latinx (41.4%), Black

(24.4%), and white (17.1%). About 63% were child welfare caseworkers, while the remaining respondents were administrators or specialized social workers. Across all school districts they worked with, caseworkers reported that they most often contacted counselors, school social workers, and teachers. Caseworkers most frequently engaged school staff for reasons related to Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, new school enrollments, and student disciplinary proceedings. More than half of caseworkers invited school personnel to Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings or other collaborative meetings hosted by the child welfare or other county agencies. Caseworkers reported several school-based services improved the educational experiences of youth in foster care, with school counseling (58.8%), individualized education programming (41.2%), and credit recovery (35.3%) being the most helpful in the eyes of caseworkers.



FOCUS GROUP INSIGHTS

SUHSD’s success in supporting students with FCE is in large part due to their interdisciplinary team structure, strong community, integration of restorative practices, and adoption of policies that support student autonomy.

Interdisciplinary Teams

SUHSD developed a continuum of services that are collaboratively administered by personnel from the school district and the local child welfare agency. This approach facilitates cross-system collaboration and allows personnel to leverage the resources and expertise of both service sectors. This collaboration also minimizes role confusion and redundancies, which ultimately benefits students.

As shown in Figure 7, each staff member plays a unique role in supporting students with FCE, though their level of specialization varies. For example, teachers in SUHSD use trauma-informed and restorative teaching approaches with all students, such as allowing students to take breaks during class, resolving disputes in the classroom by holding

restorative circles, and offering Saturday School for students who fall behind on schoolwork. Similarly, school counselors engage in practices that benefit all students, including expedited transcript review, partial credit provision, credit path coaching, and wellness rooms where students can decompress during the school day. Although these supports benefit all students, school personnel noted that these protocols effectively prevented students in foster care from “falling through the cracks,” especially since child welfare caseworkers generally have little time to address their clients’ academic needs. Limited time notwithstanding, the incorporation of restorative and collaborative practices within the district made it easier for caseworkers to become involved in their clients’ academic affairs if the school needed access to out-of-district school records or students needed an advocate in a disciplinary meeting.

Staff further down the continuum, including staff at Alta Vista, a residential treatment school, are trained to work with youth with acute material and/or social-emotional needs. Staff at Alta Vista receive specialized training in relationship building, crisis de-escalation, and prosocial skill development. Finally, the Youth in Transition (YIT) and Fostering Academic Success in Education (FASE) programs specialized in providing educational case management services for students with FCE. See Table 2 for more details about the YIT and FASE programs.



The student wellness room developed and maintained by counseling staff at Sweetwater Union High School is equipped with coloring books, mindfulness activities, motivational quotes, and soft surfaces.

Figure 7. Continuum of staff focused on supporting students with FCE attending SUHSD

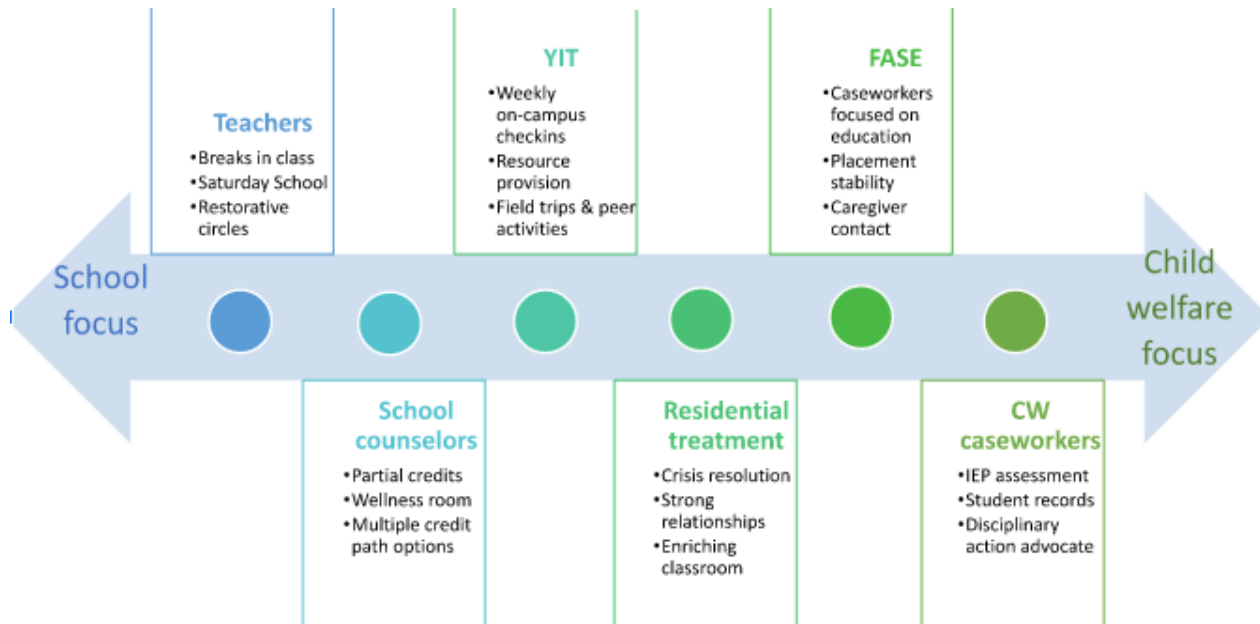


Table 2. Replicable SUHSD programs targeting the needs of students with FCE

| Program | Description |
|--|---|
| <p>Youth In Transition (YIT) Program</p> <p>Dr. Elvia Estrella Program Manager elvia.estrella@sweetwaterschools.org</p> | <p>Staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One program manager, two program facilitators, two clinical staff, and secretary Program manager is the foster/homeless education liaison for the district ~300 Students per facilitator, 40-45 are students with FCE Making the ask for two more program facilitators and one counselor <p>Scope:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Located in the district office within the Foster & Homeless Youth Education Services Program Staff travel to students throughout the district Youth served include unhoused youth, youth in shelters, foster youth, unaccompanied youth, and incarcerated youth <p>Services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular on-campus check-ins with students with FCE across the district to address barriers to academic success Can provide snacks, hygiene, backpacks, school supplies Coordinate with caregivers, school staff, and CW agency Tutoring referral or other academic supports on demand Assist with extracurricular involvement Therapy referrals on campus Postsecondary supports, including college field trips and FAFSA |

Program**Fostering Academic Success in Education (FASE) program**

Sarah Glass

Child Welfare Services
Program Managersarah.glass@sdcounty.ca.gov**Description****Staff:**

- One program manager, four FASE educational social workers
- ~20 students with open child welfare cases per social worker

Scope:

- Three-year pilot partnership of the County of San Diego HHSA, CWS, the San Diego County Office of Education, and SUHSD
- Located in San Diego CWS
- SUHSD FASE model was based on the Gloria Molina Foster Youth Education Program (Los Angeles)
- Serves students from 17 schools across San Diego County, including five schools in SUHSD and 12 in Escondido School District

Services:

- Staff meet with students weekly for 5-10 minutes between classes
- Address barriers to academic success
- Collaborate with school staff, YIT staff, CW caseworkers, CASAs, and caregivers
- Access to CW records eases collaboration between school and CWS
- Focus on educational and placement stability and troubleshooting barriers with caregivers; able to visit caregivers' homes

Restorative and trauma-informed practices

Although California state law (EC § 48900) mandates that schools offer students alternatives to suspension and expulsion, SUHSD goes beyond the minimum standard by prioritizing practices that reduce the likelihood of escalation. These include training staff to consider the reasons behind students' behaviors, allowing students to take breaks during the school day, offering a wellness room where students can decompress, and resolving disputes in the classroom with restorative circles. SUHSD strives to provide on-campus mental health services to students as a part of their broader Educationally-Related Mental Health Services, though they have struggled with provider availability, resulting in long wait lists and referrals to external agencies. If disciplinary hearings occur, the YIT program also prioritizes having a team member present at the meeting to advocate for the student.

"We have access to their profiles....We're able to get their story that's written on court reports, the trauma that they went through.... And of course we're not going to disclose, but we have that and utilize it as part of the bridge, bridging the gap with the communication and all that. Let's just not be so harsh, let's look back. And we come from a trauma-informed perspective rather than reacting, oh, they're misbehaving."

FASE EDUCATIONAL SOCIAL WORKER

"When they're going to be in an expulsion hearing or something, somebody from our program is there, either the counselor or the program manager, to support."

YIT PROGRAM FACILITATOR



Supporting student autonomy

Staff work collaboratively with students to ensure that their academic journeys are reflective of their needs and interests. Students take the lead in conversations around graduation paths (i.e., pursuing the general curriculum [44 credits] or the California grad plan [22 credits]), foster care status disclosure, and plans to address barriers to academic success (e.g., credit recovery). Moreover, staff regularly connect students to school/after school programs that facilitate students' exploration of extracurricular interests.

Community

SUHSD regularly hires from the local community. In fact, many of the staff we spoke with were Sweetwater graduates themselves. Consequently, staff naturally relate to students, and are deeply committed to their success. The YIT program aims to foster a sense of community among students with FCE by coordinating award ceremonies and field trips to local college campus support programs for students with FCE. In the past, the YIT program had a specialized counselor who helped connect students with college campus support programs for youth with FCE, which was particularly helpful in ensuring that students still had access to needed supports once they entered postsecondary education.

"When we present the program... I explain, your education is important, this is something you have control of and we're here just to provide the additional support. We're not here to judge you, we're not here to reprimand you. It's like, how can we help you? And once we present it that way, they're like, 'Yes, please help me.'"

FASE EDUCATIONAL SOCIAL WORKER

"We did have a counselor last year, I believe it was due to funding that we don't have her anymore this year.... They focused primarily with 11th and 12th graders, ensuring that they completed their financial aid. A lot of universities have homeless liaisons or foster programs on campus. So just connecting them, the student, to the school site."

YIT SECRETARY

PROGRAM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff and student recommendations for programs supporting students with FCE fell across four major categories:

Recommendation 1: Interdisciplinary Teams

*Fund and maintain an **interdisciplinary, well-resourced, and specialized team** that can meet the needs of students with FCE across the district.*

- *EC § 48850(a)(1)* mandates that those supporting foster youth work together to address the educational needs of youth with FCE. However, there is little guidance surrounding who should be recruited to support students in foster care. We suggest **support staff should fall along a continuum from school-focused to child welfare-focused staff**, with each staff understanding their role in supporting students with FCE (see Figure 7). One way to ensure meaningful cross-disciplinary collaboration would be to require districts to submit a report detailing their efforts to comply with *EC § 48850(a)(1)* to CDE.
- Having a single foster youth liaison in a school district is insufficient to meet the range of needs of all foster youth in the district. **YIT and FASE offer teaming models to support educational success for students with FCE** in both school and child welfare settings (see Table 2). Policymakers should increase the funding allocated to YIT and similar programs. Funding increases should also include provisions for evaluation to facilitate the assessment of YIT on student outcomes and the development of replicable program infrastructure materials. FASE is currently being evaluated and, pending evaluation results, should be rolled out statewide as an evidence-based practice so that every school may have access to a child welfare worker.
- Provide adequate funding and infrastructure for **on-campus mental health providers** to (1) be in alignment with [ERMHS standards](#), and (2) increase students' timely access to mental health services that do not require transportation access.
- Whether through YIT/FASE or similar program models, **facilitate direct access to resources that meet student needs**, ranging from the basic (e.g., hygiene, school supplies) to complex (e.g., tutoring).
- Maintain **adequate staffing** (e.g., reasonable staff to student ratios) to promote program sustainability and prevent staff burnout.



Recommendation 2: Restorative Practices

Implement **trauma-informed, restorative approaches to discipline.**

- Codify **trauma-informed care, restorative practices, and respite opportunities** in school policies and procedures. Current policy supports alternatives to discipline but does not mandate preventative restorative practices to be in place. Any staff who are interacting with students should be required to receive training in trauma-informed care and restorative practices, and districts should choose one or more specific program interventions for teachers and counselors to practice their skills when concerns arise (e.g., [restorative circles](#)). Districts could be required to report how they are implementing restorative practices in their school to the state education authority. *EC § 48900.5(b), 48900(v).*
- Offer students in-class breaks and opportunities to use **wellness or cool-down rooms, which can prevent misbehavior from occurring in the first place.**
- Require that a **well-trained advocate** from the team focused on students with FCE is present during informal and formal [disciplinary meetings](#). Current policy only requires the student to attend informal disciplinary conferences to advocate for themselves. *EC§ 48911(b)-(c).*

Recommendation 3: Support Autonomy

Provide students with **FCE exposure to postsecondary options and offer multiple paths to graduation.**

- Ask for and respect **student input and decisions** regarding their post-graduation plans.
- Rather than lowering expectations for students with FCE, **provide options** and troubleshoot barriers to students' goals.
- Provide **specialized guidance counseling for students with FCE.** Guidance counselors need additional training about programs serving youth with FCE to facilitate warm hand-offs upon graduation. YIT programs can also include a specialized guidance counselor position for youth with FCE. Counselors should coach students on the implications of different credit plans and how they align with their postsecondary plan and ensure that schools make reasonable efforts to help students graduate on the local credit plan, should that be the student's choice.

- Coordinate regular **field trips to visit campus support programs** for students with FCE at community and four-year colleges. Require that counselors are offering site visits to campus support programs at least once per year.
- Provide internships and **postsecondary supports on-campus** so that students without transportation can participate. *EC§ 48850(a).*
- The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides federal funds for postsecondary preparation and support for youth with FCE. [Policy guidance](#) could be added requiring a certain percentage of youth served by the program to have FCE and could require that service providers are trained in trauma-informed care, given that experiencing trauma and experience in foster care are both eligibility criteria for the program (see Recommendation 2).

Recommendation 4: Build Community

Foster a positive school climate by **hiring staff from the community and providing opportunities for students with FCE to connect with each other.**

- Hire **staff from the local community and staff with foster care experience**, who tend to be more invested in the work and relationships with students. Hiring from the community sets a precedent that positions students as future leaders and educators.
- Structured events (award ceremonies, college field trips) provide an opportunity for students with FCE to **build community with peers and near-peers.**

CONCLUSION

Students with FCE face unique challenges that can impact their educational success in the absence of specialized supports. Through conversations with recent graduates with FCE, school and district personnel in Sweetwater Union High School, and child welfare professionals, we identified four categories of supports that would positively benefit students with FCE: invest in interdisciplinary teams focused on students with FCE across the education and child welfare sector, integrate restorative practices at school, support student autonomy while planning for postsecondary education and employment, and foster a positive school climate by hiring former students and offering opportunities for students with FCE to build community with one another.

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