Connecticut’s Invisible Opportunity Gap: Academic Challenges Facing Children and Youth in Foster Care

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I. Introduction

Children and youth who are committed to the care and custody of the State of Connecticut because they have been victims of abuse or neglect face extraordinary barriers to future success. If these children hope to lead successful adult lives, it is critical that they receive a high quality education. Academic success is an important prerequisite for employment and civic engagement. Further, for these children who are often detached from family and community in a way that other children are not, a school can be one of the few sources of stability in a child’s life. Finally, academic success can be an important source of positive affirmation for children whose experiences are often dominated by the trauma.

Once children are placed in foster care, Connecticut has a unique opportunity to help these students succeed in school. As statutory parent, the state can influence where children go to school; can help ensure needs are met and rights are protected in school; and can help provide necessary support outside of school. With this opportunity comes responsibility; having removed these children from their families, the state must fulfill educational obligations for children in foster care that might otherwise be the responsibility of a parent or guardian.

Unfortunately, preliminary evidence suggests that children who are committed to the care or custody of the State of Connecticut face substantial obstacles to academic success and many do not receive an adequate education. A recent Connecticut Voices for Children report – “Raise the Grade: Improving Educational Opportunities for Children in State Care” – documents that tenth grade students in foster care were less likely to score Proficient or better on state standardized tests than Connecticut students as a whole in the 2011-2012 School Year (hereafter SY 2012). These data are consistent with a growing body of national research that suggests that children and youth in foster care lag behind their peers in school. This literature identifies factors that may be driving this academic deficit, including:

- The detrimental academic effects of childhood trauma;
- Insufficient parental support;
- Frequent school changes and high mobility as a result of changing foster care placements;
- Limited access to high quality schools;
- Poor attendance;
- Disproportionate contact with exclusionary school disciplinary measures like suspension and expulsion;
- Insufficient individualized supports to help overcome the aforementioned barriers.

In short, an “academic opportunity gap” likely exists between children and youth in foster care and their peers; by virtue of factors related to their state involvement, state-involved children have fewer opportunities to learn and retain academic skills and knowledge than other students.

To date, there is no comprehensive study of the academic experience of children in foster care in Connecticut and important questions about their academic performance remain unanswered. This paper examines the academic experience of children involved with Connecticut's foster care system, seeking to answer the following questions:

- Is the academic performance of students in foster care uniquely poor, or are these students simply demonstrating academic performance comparable to other students from low-income families?
- If children in Connecticut’s foster care system do face unique barriers to academic success, what are these barriers, and what state interventions might alleviate them?
Key findings include:

- **Academic Performance**: In School Year (SY) 2013, DCF-involved students were less likely to receive a score of Proficient or better on state standardized tests than:
  - The average Connecticut student;
  - The average Connecticut student eligible for free and reduced price meals; and
  - The average student attending comparable school districts to those attended by children in care. This suggests that the academic struggles of youth in care cannot be explained entirely by either their socioeconomic status or where they attend school.

- **Barriers to Success**: The school district, special needs, absenteeism, and disciplinary exclusion of children in state care likely disrupt their ability to succeed in school.
  - Where children in DCF care attend school may impact their academics. In SY 2013, 56% of DCF-involved students attended an “Alliance District” (one of the 30 school districts where students receive the lowest average standardized test scores), as compared to 39% of all Connecticut public school students.
  - DCF-involved students have a high rate of special needs identification. In SY 2013, 48% of DCF-involved students had an identified special education need, as compared to 12% of all Connecticut students.
  - DCF-involved students are frequently absent. In SY 2013, 24% of DCF-involved students missed one tenth or more of the school year, as compared to 11% of all Connecticut students.
  - DCF-involved students are often excluded from class because of discipline. In SY 2012, DCF-involved students were three times more likely to experience an in-school suspension, and six times more likely to experience an out-of-school suspension, than the average Connecticut student.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the following steps could help expand educational opportunity for children in foster care:

- Enroll DCF-involved students in schools and districts with academically successful peers (when doing so would not result in school transfers that are overly disruptive to the stability of the educational experience);
- Provide adequate support for students with special needs;
- Employ interventions that reduce absenteeism; and
- Increase the use of positive behavioral interventions that reduce the unnecessary use of exclusionary discipline practices such as out-of-school suspensions.

II. **Methods**

This report uses new data generated by a recent information sharing agreement between Connecticut’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the State Department of Education (SDE) to examine the academic experiences of children in foster care. It examines data such as enrollment and demographics, test scores, attendance records, and disciplinary records of children in foster care on September 1, 2013. Because data presented here are from SY 2012 and SY 2013, both of which concluded before September 1, 2013, it may be that some of the data relate to student performance and experience prior to their DCF involvement. **For this reason, this analysis should be understood as an examination of the academic experience of children who become involved with the foster care system, not of children who are currently in foster care.** (For a detailed discussion of methods, including how students were identified, data sources used, analyses performed, assumptions made, and limitations, please read Appendix A: Methods).

There were 1,738 children in DCF care identified as being enrolled in public school grades Pre-K through 12 on September 1, 2013. Students attended every grade pre-K through 12, with the greatest number enrolled in grade 9.
One hundred and fifty-five different Connecticut school districts (out of a total of 196) enrolled at least one DCF-involved student, including local school districts, charter schools, Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), Unified School Districts (USDs), the Connecticut Technical High School system, Norwich Free Academy, the Gilbert School, and Woodstock Academy.10 Children also attended school in Maine, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. The five districts that enrolled the most DCF-involved students were Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, Bridgeport, and New Britain respectively; however, DCF-involved students made up less than 1% of each of these districts, and these districts together account for only 29% of all DCF-involved students.

**Figure 2: School Districts with Highest DCF Enrollment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Pre-K to 12 Enrollment</th>
<th>DCF Enrollment</th>
<th>Percent DCF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hartford</td>
<td>21,487</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterbury</td>
<td>18,389</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Haven</td>
<td>21,183</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgeport</td>
<td>20,155</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Britain</td>
<td>10,217</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: State Department of Education

III. **Academic Performance**

A previous Connecticut Voices for Children report, “Raise the Grade: Improving Educational Opportunities for Children in State Care,” found that in SY 12, tenth grade students in DCF care were less likely to receive a score of Proficient or better on the CAPT exam than the average Connecticut student.11 However, the report did not address whether students in foster care underperform when compared to low-income students, who often struggle on standardized tests.12 Because children in foster care often come from low-income or poor families, it is necessary to determine whether the academic performance of students involved with DCF can be explained by their low-income status alone, or if they exhibit uniquely poor performance.

Here, the percent of all DCF-involved students who received a valid CMT or CAPT score of Proficient or better in SY 2013 (hereafter “proficiency rate”) is compared to the percent of all children in the State of Connecticut, and to the percent of all students eligible for free or reduced price meals (FRPM).13 Both the average Connecticut student and the average student eligible for FRPM are more likely to receive a score of Proficient or better than the average DCF-involved student in every tested subject.14 This suggests that children in foster care struggle more academically than both the average student and the average child from a low-income family.
The next question concerns the relative impact of where a child attends school: that is, if the weak academic performance of DCF-involved students contrasts significantly with the relative performance of other students with whom they share a school district. Here, the percentage of DCF-involved students scoring Proficient or better is compared to the estimated average rate of proficiency of students who attend the same school districts as students in DCF care. This average is weighted by the number of DCF students attending each school district, to better reflect the typical group of students with whom DCF-involved students share a school. (For a detailed discussion of this calculation and its limitations, see Appendix A: Methods.) DCF-involved students are less likely to score Proficient or better in all subjects than a group of students representative of the typical group of students with whom they share a school district. In other words, children in DCF care perform worse academically than might be predicted based upon the school district they attend.
In summary, DCF-involved students are typically outperformed on standardized tests not only by the average Connecticut student, but also by low-income students and by students attending the same school districts.

IV. Barriers to Success

This section examines four factors identified in national literature as potentially having an impact on the academic performance of DCF-involved students: that is, school district attended, special needs, absenteeism, and discipline.

School Attended
The map below shows Connecticut’s local and regional school districts. Black circles indicate the number of DCF-involved students attending each school district, with the size of the dot corresponding to size of DCF enrollment. Each district’s color indicates its third grade reading scores. Towns where 72% or more third graders scored Proficient are in green, towns where 50% to 71.9% of 3rd graders scored Proficient are yellow, and towns where fewer than 50% scored Proficient are red.

**Figure 5: Number of Children in Foster Care Enrolled vs. 3rd Grade Reading Scores**

![Map showing Connecticut's local and regional school districts with indicators for number of DCF-involved students, third grade reading scores, and percentage of students scoring Proficient.]

DCF-involved students attended a large and diverse group of school districts; however, they are concentrated in school districts with lower than average third grade reading scores, suggesting that they may attend districts where other students perform below the state average. In fact, as shown in Figure 6, 56% of all DCF-involved students attended an “Alliance District,” one of the 30 local school districts with the lowest average student standardized test scores. By contrast, only 39% of all Connecticut students attended these districts.

Even within these lower performing schools, DCF-involved students are less likely to score Proficient or better than the overall student body (see Figure 3). This does not contradict the findings shown in Figures 5 and 6; rather, it suggests that, while the school districts DCF-involved students attend may have some impact on their academic performance, the school district attended by these students cannot explain the entirety of the standardized test performance gap shown in Section III.
Special Needs
In SY 2013, 48% of DCF-involved students had identified special education needs, as compared to 12% of students statewide. This is an extraordinarily high rate of special education identification. In fact, if DCF-involved students constituted a school district, that district would enroll the second greatest percentage of special education students of any school district in the State. (The first would be USD 2, the district operated by DCF for students committed to DCF-operated detention centers and psychiatric facilities.)

Absences
In SY 2013, 24% of DCF-involved students were “chronically absent” from school, meaning that they missed 10% or more of the school year for any reason (excused or unexcused). This rate of chronic absenteeism is not only higher than for the State as a whole, it is higher than the rate for at-risk populations such as students with disabilities and students from low-income families. (Note that here students eligible for free meals are counted separately from students eligible for reduced price meals; data for free and reduced price meal eligible students together was unavailable in this case.)
In SY 2012, 28% of DCF-involved students experienced at least one exclusionary sanction from school: an in-school or out-of-school suspension or an expulsion. Apart from the question of out-of-school or in-school sanction, many DCF-involved students experienced multiple disciplinary sanctions, an average of 3.3.

While expulsion data were not available for analysis, DCF-involved students experienced in-school suspensions at more than three times the state suspension rate, and out of school suspensions at almost six times the state suspension rate.
V. Discussion and Recommendations

When the state of Connecticut removes children from their families to protect them from abuse and neglect, it does so with the implicit promise of a brighter future. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that these children are less likely to experience positive educational outcomes than other children of similar income and/or attending similar schools. In the 2012-2013 school year, DCF-involved students were less likely to demonstrate proficiency on state academic standards than the average Connecticut public school student, students living at or near poverty, and students attending a comparable group of school districts. School attended, special education needs, frequent absenteeism, and excessive discipline all appear to contribute to the academic woes of children in foster care. The challenges reflected in the state data presented here are consistent with national literature. As children age out of the foster care system, they often struggle more than most, with their educational deficits causing barriers to employment and economic well-being.

The four challenges discussed above – attending schools where other students are struggling, special education needs, frequent absenteeism, and frequent contact with exclusionary discipline – are not an exhaustive list of the academic hurdles facing children in foster care. For example, national research shows that children in foster care change schools frequently, and that these transfers are disruptive to student learning. (In fact, in 2010, in an attempt to minimize this barrier to success, Connecticut passed legislation requiring that children in foster care be allowed to remain in their current school after entering care or changing foster care placements, provided it is not against their best interests.) Furthermore, these school-related challenges may be manifestations of deeper problems common to children in the child welfare system; for example, developmental delay associated with abuse may increase rates of special education needs, or trauma at home may cause children to externalize their negative behaviors in school and face discipline. Nonetheless, they represent an important starting point for state and local interventions to improve academic outcomes for children in foster care. For that reason, each of these four barriers is discussed below, with attention given to potential interventions.

School Attended

The data presented here present a complex picture of the “typical” school attended by children involved with DCF.

DCF-involved students disproportionately attended school districts where other students were likely to be struggling academically, suggesting that children in care are less likely than the average Connecticut student to have academically successful peers to engage with and learn from in school. This disproportionate enrollment in schools with a struggling peer group likely occurs because most children who are in foster care tend to be born into very poor families, and because state law protects the right of children in foster care to remain in their school of origin. As a result, children in foster care are likely to attend high poverty school districts before and after entering care. Students attending high poverty schools in Connecticut typically score below their peers academically.

There are good reasons for allowing children in foster care to remain in their school of origin, such as providing continuity of relationships and protecting children from frequent disruptive school transfers, and keeping children in foster care in their school of origin should remain a social worker’s default option. Connecticut’s school stability statute also provides for exceptions when remaining in the same school is not in the best interests of the child.

Given the data presented here, it is important that social workers and caregivers consider as part of the “best interests” determination whether the school each child in foster care attends provides him or her with an academic environment conducive to learning.

Children in foster care by no means attended exclusively struggling school districts; 153 school districts enrolled at least one DCF-involved student. However, importantly, these students did not make up more than 2% of enrollment in any district. These enrollment patterns suggest that the need for educational support for children in foster care is widespread, but dedicating resources to such support may not always be a priority or possibility for low-resourced districts. National literature suggests the unique needs of children in foster care are often unrecognized or neglected by school districts.
Homeless children face a similar situation: they have unique and urgent academic needs, but there are a relatively small number of homeless students attending a diverse set of schools across many states. Recognizing that the needs of homeless children were consistently unmet, Congress passed the federal McKinney-Vento act, which mandated that all school districts designate a “homeless liaison” that is responsible for ensuring the district provides each homeless student with the protections and services to which he or she is entitled by law. Following this model, California has mandated that each school district designate a foster care liaison, to ensure districts meet the educational needs of children in foster care. This promising practice has been endorsed by the Legal Center on Foster Care and Education, and would be appropriate in Connecticut as well. Connecticut public school districts, like California public school districts, should each have a foster care liaison to help address the unique needs of children in foster care who enroll.

Special Needs

The data suggest special education needs are widespread in Connecticut’s foster care population. This is likely at least in part because of developmental delay or trauma associated with child maltreatment. However, special education needs are not necessarily detrimental to academic opportunity; federal and state law protect the right of students with special education needs to receive a free and appropriate education that meets these needs. Furthermore, it is important to note that the low standardized test scores presented here are not necessarily evidence that special education needs are going unmet; students with special education needs sometimes take alternative assessments, and their academic performance is therefore not captured by the CMT and CAPT data used in this report. Nevertheless, national research suggests that the special education needs of children in foster care frequently go unmet because of the demanding participation typically required of parents and because social workers struggle to navigate educational bureaucracy.

Pilot programs, such as New York’s Advocates for Children’s “Project Achieve,” that provide both legal representation to children in foster care in special education proceedings and technical assistance to empower caregivers to support the children under their supervision in special education proceedings have demonstrated success in improving the educational supports and placements provided by schools. The Connecticut Child Justice Foundation (CCJF), an organization that provides pro bono legal representation to children in care in educational proceedings, has provided some support to DCF-involved children in Connecticut. While this program has shown some success, with no state funding and volunteer membership, it may not be a sustainable model, given the frequency of special education needs in the foster care population. Connecticut could benefit from investing in additional legal partnerships to represent children in foster care in special educational proceedings.

While DCF does provide foster parents with an overview of the educational process during foster parent training, the involvement of DCF’s educational specialists and the emphasis placed on education during training varies from office to office; a recent report also finds evidence that DCF may not have sufficient educational consultants to meet current levels of demand. Research indicates that youth in foster care believe that having an adult (such as a foster parent) familiar with their personal and academic history consistently taking responsibility for supporting them in school is the most important factor contributing to their academic success. DCF should develop a robust and standard educational training for all foster parents, and the State should provide DCF funding for more educational support staff to ensure that foster and adoptive parents are prepared to support children in their care in the special education process.

Finally, early intervention can prevent future special education needs. While beyond the scope of this report, other research has suggested that too few infants in DCF care are referred to Connecticut’s Birth-to-3 program, which provides screening and treatment to young children with developmental delays. In addition, too few children in care may be enrolled in pre-school programs. Recent legislation requiring that DCF screen every child age birth-to-three for developmental delay twice per year, and refer every potentially eligible child to Birth-to-3, may help increase rates of early intervention and decrease reliance on special education services in the foster care population. Data on how regularly these newly required screenings and referrals actually occur should be made available.
publicly available so that the legislature can assess both whether the practice of bi-annual screenings has taken hold at DCF, and whether more children are being referred to Birth-to-3. Given the exceptionally high rates of developmental delay in the foster care population and the challenges non-professionals face identifying these delays, if referral rates remain low, it may be more appropriate for every child age birth to three involved with DCF to be referred to Birth-to-3 for screening. Furthermore, recent legislation also requires that DCF, in collaboration with Connecticut’s Office of Early Childhood (OEC), develop a plan to maximize preschool enrollment of children in DCF care. This plan and its implementation must be monitored to ensure that all young children in foster care have access to high quality preschool, and that any and all resources required to ensure this outcome (such as the cost of transportation) are made available. It is critical that young children in foster care have access to high quality early learning experiences and interventions that can help prevent future special education needs.

**Absenteeism**

DCF-involved students are often chronically absent from school. National research suggests that delays in school and record transfer can keep children in foster care out of class. Additionally, children may miss class because of medical problems, doctor’s appointments, or court dates. Finally, children in foster care may miss school because of excessive use of exclusionary discipline (as discussed in the next section).

Recent legislation establishes a pilot program that provides coordinators in the Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven DCF regions to help expedite school and record transfers, which may help reduce absenteeism. If this program proves successful, it should be expanded to the rest of the state. Additionally, as discussed previously, requiring each school district to have a “foster care liaison” similar to the McKinney-Vento homeless youth liaison might help coordinate school transfers, and also ensure that there is a school official responsible for investigating and intervening in instances of chronic absenteeism amongst children in foster care. Finally, DCF sometimes schedules Administrative Case Reviews (ACR) for youth in foster care during school hours, forcing youth to make the choice between being involved in their case planning and pursuing their education. DCF should never schedule an ACR for youth over age 12 during school hours.

**Exclusionary Discipline**

Research has shown that distracted or disruptive behavior, in school and elsewhere, is a natural adaptation to adverse childhood experiences. Since children in foster care almost by definition have had adverse childhood experiences, it is unsurprising that they would at times engage in disruptive behavior in school. The data presented here suggest that schools often respond to this behavior with exclusionary discipline such as suspension and expulsion. This response is inappropriate, as it does not address the underlying cause of the behavior, causes students to miss valuable class time, and may even send students back to the traumatic environment responsible for their disruptive behavior.

That schools often fail to provide students in foster care with a trauma-informed response to disruptive behavior was precisely the finding of a powerful 2002 interview study by Vera Institute of Justice. Students in the New York City foster care system spoke about how trauma and distractions at home spilled over into school. Some externalized their negative experiences by acting out, disrupting class, or fighting. This led to suspensions that kept children out of class. These findings are also consistent with those described by students currently in Connecticut’s foster care system at a January 2014 conference hosted by Connecticut Voices for Children. At that conference, four young people from Bridgeport, New Haven, and Manchester spoke about their experiences in school. Students described how their academic performance fell around the time they came into foster care, as the trauma in their home lives detracted from their ability to focus in school. Several described constantly being disciplined in school, but never being referred to a guidance counselor or another in-school support system.

Connecticut programs that connect children in school to existing behavioral health resources have been shown to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. Connecticut’s schools should use existing evidence based models to ensure schools are appropriately prepared to address children’s mental health issues that present themselves in the classroom.
Existing Supports and Programs
It is important to note that Connecticut already provides many valuable educational supports to children and youth in foster care, some of which have already been mentioned. These include:

- Staffing DCF with educational consultants and specialists who can support social workers in educational decision making;67
- Providing children with surrogate parents to represent them in the special education decision making process;68
- Mandating that children in foster care be allowed to remain in their school of origin when they enter care or change placements;69
- Expediting record transfers and educational placements with the new “Raise the Grade” pilot program in Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven;70
- Providing post-secondary educational guidance and career planning to youth transitioning from high school;71 and
- Providing tuition assistance to young adults in foster care and pursuing post-secondary education. 72

All of these programs and regulations are best practices which should be continued. In the realm of post-secondary education support, Connecticut is particularly strong, and this support likely plays a role in the high rates of young adults in DCF care who are still enrolled in or graduated from a post-secondary education program when their time in care ends.73

Directions for Future Research
This report provides the first systematic and data driven examination of the educational experiences of Connecticut children involved with the foster care system. However, it has several important limitations, which should be addressed in future research:

First, this paper examines a snapshot of the academic experience of children in foster care in September of 2013. It looks back at these children’s most recent test scores, enrollment, attendance, and disciplinary histories; however, it does not track how these various measures of academic experience change over time. This makes it impossible to determine if entering foster care changed the academic experience of these children. Future research should examine the impact of entering foster care on children’s academic experience. Such a project would track measures of academic performance and experience (such as grades, test scores, and attendance) over time, to see if there are noticeable changes immediately following a child’s entry into the foster care system, as well as whether the academic experience improves or worsens over the period of an extended foster care stay. Examining the academic performance of children in foster care over an extended period of time also allows for analysis of other important measures of academic experience that can only be examined by following a cohort over years, such as the dropout rate of children in care.74 To date, there are no studies that have followed a cohort of students in foster care over an extended period in time. DCF should take advantage of its new data sharing agreement with SDE to conduct such a study.75

Second, this paper does not examine how different foster care experiences and placements affect educational outcomes. The foster care population is diverse in a myriad of ways; children enter and leave foster care for many reasons, can have any number of complex clinical diagnoses, and their placement types can also vary dramatically based on clinical need, current policy, and availability of beds. 76 California's study on the academic experience of children in foster care “The Invisible Achievement Gap” – the most extensive study of this topic to date – found that children in older grades are further behind in school than students in younger grades; that students who experience frequent changes in placement or reside in group homes had both the lowest rates of participation in standardized testing and the lowest test scores; and that students in stable placements were most likely to graduate from high school. Future Connecticut research should examine how reason for entry into care, age of entry into
care, placement types and changes, and clinical interventions affect the academic experience of children in foster care, as these findings have important implications for the state’s child welfare practice.

Conclusion
Connecticut’s constitution mandates that the State provide all children with equal educational opportunity. Unfortunately, the data examined in this report suggest that those children to whom the State bears the greatest responsibility – those for whom it serves as statutory parent – are the children least likely to experience academic success. If Connecticut cannot provide these children with a suitable education that accommodates their unique needs, they will struggle to access gainful employment opportunities as adults. In addition, if who grow up in foster care do not receive an adequate education, they will be ill-prepared to participate in democratic institutions such as voting or political activism, leaving those best-equipped to represent the interests of future children in foster care underrepresented in the political process.

Precisely because Connecticut has a unique responsibility for children in foster care, it also has a unique opportunity to help them re-engage with school and learning. Intervention by DCF can and should be an educational lifeline for maltreated children. As the statutory parent, Connecticut, and its public schools, can connect children, who often have grown up in environments of extreme deprivation or abuse, to previously inaccessible health, safety, and education resources necessary for learning. The State should take proactive steps to support the educational needs of students in foster care, including adopting the recommendations presented in this report, to ensure that these vulnerable children care have the same opportunities to learn and grow in school as any other child in the state.
Appendix A: Detailed Methods

Each month, DCF provides the State Department of Education (SDE) with a set of State Assigned Student Identification Numbers (SASID) for all youth who are in DCF care on 96-hour-hold, committed to the State on an Order of Temporary Custody, or committed to State care for abuse and neglect. This does not include youth who are committed delinquent or who are utilizing DCF voluntary services. SDE uses these SASIDs to provide DCF with corresponding educational records for each youth in its care. The students examined in this report are the cohort of children and youth age 3 to 18 who were both committed to DCF and enrolled in a Connecticut public school on September 1 of 2013. The report looks back at SY 2012 and SY 2013 to understand the academic experience of this cohort of children and youth in those school years. However, because data presented here are from SY 2012 and SY 2013, both of which concluded before September 1, 2013, it may be that some of the students included in this analysis were not in foster care at the time their actions generated the data used in this report. For this reason, this analysis should be understood as an examination of the academic experience of children who become involved with the foster care system, not of children who are currently in foster care.

The following data were provided:

- A summary of enrollment data for SY 2013, which included:
  - A count of the number of DCF-involved students attending each school district;
  - A count of the number of DCF-involved students attending each school;
  - A count of the number of DCF-involved students enrolled in each grade pre-K through 12;
  - A count of the number of DCF-involved students enrolled in any school disaggregated by race;
  - A count of the number of DCF-involved students enrolled in any school disaggregated by gender;
  - A count of the number of DCF-involved students enrolled in any school disaggregated by English Language Learner status;
  - A count of the number of DCF-involved youth enrolled in any school disaggregated by special education status;

- A summary of standardized score data for SY 2013, for Reading, Writing, Math, and Science. Data were not disaggregated by type of test (CMT or CAPT), or by grade. Rather, for each tested subject, the following was provided:
  - The number of DCF-involved students who received a score of Advanced;
  - The number of DCF-involved students who received a score of Goal;
  - The number of DCF-involved students who received a score of Proficient;
  - The number of DCF-involved students who received a score of Basic;
  - The number of DCF-involved students who received a score of Below Basic;
  - The number of DCF-involved students who received a score of Invalid;
  - The number of DCF-involved students who were not in a tested grade;
  - The number of DCF-involved students who did not take a standardized test for some other reason;
  - The total number of DCF-involved students (which was in all cases the sum of all other categories);

- The number of DCF-involved students who received at least one in-school-suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), or expulsion in SY 2012 (data for SY 2013 were unavailable), disaggregated by school district, and for the State as a whole;

- The number of OSS, ISS, and expulsion incidents experienced by DCF-involved children in SY 2012, disaggregated by school district, and for the State as a whole.

- The number and percent of DCF-involved students who were chronically absent (absent for 10% or more of the school year) in SY 2013.

For each of the aforementioned data sets, SDE removed all enrollment or incident counts greater than zero but less than five. This redaction algorithm protects the privacy of students under the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), by ensuring that it is not possible to identify individual students from aggregate
data. However, this redaction presented methodological challenges when aggregating or averaging over the data set, because 194 students in DCF care attend one of the 85 school districts that enrolls between 0 and 5 students in DCF care. For all analyses where not knowing the DCF enrollment of these 85 schools was an obstacle, we assumed that each school enrolled 2.28 DCF-involved students (the average number of DCF students enrolled in each school). Each time this assumption is made, data presented in the paper are labeled as “approximations.” This methodological choice is discussed in more detail when relevant below.

In addition to data on the academic performance of DCF-involved students, we also used publicly available and previously requested data on other groups of Connecticut public school students, to compare with DCF-involved students. These data sets included:

- The SY 2013 enrollment of each Connecticut public school and school district;78
- The SY 2013 CMT and CAPT scores of all Connecticut public school students, and all students eligible for FRPM, for every tested student.79
- The SY 2013 rates of chronic absenteeism for Connecticut public schools.80
- The number of students receiving ISS and OSS in the SY 2012 school year.81

**Data Summary**

District and school enrollment totals were sorted by enrollment, to determine the districts and schools enrolling the greatest number of DCF-involved students. To calculate the percent of each school district's enrollment that was composed of DCF-involved students, we used SY 2013 district and school enrollment data provided by the State Department of Education.

**Academic Performance**

To compare the standardized test performance of students in DCF care to a) all Connecticut students and b) to students eligible for free or reduced price meals (FRPM), we used test score data publicly available through 4<sup>th</sup> Generation data interaction website for the CMT,82 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation data interaction website for the CAPT.83 These data are provided in user designed reports, where student test scores are disaggregated by grade. Since the test scores we received for DCF students were not disaggregated by grade, we aggregated these scores by compiling the percent of students scoring Proficient or better on each test and the number of students tested in each grade, and taking a weighted average across grades to calculate the exact percent of students that scored Proficient or better in all grades combined.

For example, suppose that on reading exams, 10% of students score Proficient or better in third grade, 20% in fourth grade, 30% in fifth grade, 40% in sixth grade, 50% in seventh grade, 60% in eighth grade, and 70% in tenth grade. Suppose also that there were 10 third-graders tested, 10 fourth-graders tested, and 20 students in every other grade. To determine the total percent of students scoring Proficient or better on Reading, we would calculate:

\[
\frac{10 \times 0.1 + 10 \times 0.2 + 20 \times 0.3 + 20 \times 0.4 + 20 \times 0.5 + 20 \times 0.6 + 20 \times 0.7}{10 + 10 + 20 + 20 + 20 + 20 + 20 + 20 + 20 + 20}
\]

This method was used for all four tested subjects.

A similar method was used to calculate the percent of DCF-involved students expected to score Proficient or better, if there is no difference between these students’ performance and that of non-DCF-involved students in the same districts. Here, we compiled the number of students tested and the percent of students scoring Proficient or better by grade for each school district, and then used the method above to calculate the percent of students scoring Proficient or better in each school district for all grades in that district. We then used these district totals to calculate the average percent of students scoring Proficient or better, weighted by the number of DCF-involved students enrolled in each school district. Districts redacted because between 1 and 5 DCF-involved students were enrolled were weighted as enrolling 2.28 students.
For example, suppose there are 3 school districts: Avon, Branford, and Cheshire. Suppose 70% of all Avon students, 60% of all Branford students, and 50% of all Cheshire students score Proficient or better on reading exams. Further, suppose 10 DCF-involved students attend Avon, 20 attend Branford, and between 1 and 5 attend Cheshire. In order to determine the percent of DCF students we would expect to score Proficient or better on standardized tests, (again, assuming DCF-involved students are on average performing as well on standardized tests as the other students attending the same school districts), we would calculate:

\[
\frac{10 \times 0.7 + 20 \times 0.6 + 2.28 \times 0.5}{10 + 20 + 2.28}
\]

This method was again used for all four tested subjects.

Finally, comparison tests for differences of proportion at the p<.05 level were used determine if the proficiency rate of DCF-involved students was significantly different from that of students eligible for FRPM, and that of students attending the same school districts; e.g. if the differences in the rates could not be attributed simply by chance.

**Limitations**

The group of DCF-involved students who take standardized tests does not constitute a random sample of DCF-involved students. In Connecticut, students take the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) in grades 3 through 8, and the Connecticut Academic Progress Test (CAPT) in grade 10. Students who complete either test are assigned a score, but students’ scores can be invalidated if they sit for a test but fail to complete an entire section, or their answers are incomprehensible and cannot be graded (for example, because of handwriting). Finally, even students in tested grades may not take standardized tests because their special education plan calls for them to take an alternative assessment, or because they are absent on the day of testing and do not make up the exam.84 Since national literature shows that children in foster care are frequently absent and often have special education needs,85 it is likely many students in foster care are systematically not participating in standardized testing, and that these students who are regularly absent or have severe special needs are the students who struggle the most academically.

To examine the hypothesis that many DCF-involved students are not taking standardized tests because they were absent or their scores were invalidated, we summed the number of DCF-involved students who received any score other than Invalid on the CMT or CAPT in each subject to determine how many and what percent (of students in tested grades) successfully completed the test. We compared this percent to the percent of students in a tested grade who did not take the test or received a score of invalid (Figure 10). Between 23% of children in tested grades (in writing) and 35% of children in tested grades (in reading) were not tested or received an invalid score.86 Therefore, it may be that the average tests scores for DCF-involved students presented here actually overstate students’ academic performance; regardless, the test score data presented here should be interpreted with caution.
In comparing DCF-involved students with students living in poverty, we were unable to distinguish between levels of poverty. Free and reduced price meal eligibility covers a broad range of income, from no income, to 120% of the Federal Poverty Level ($28,620 for a family of four in 2014) for children eligible for free meals, to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level ($44,123 for a family of four in 2014) for children eligible for reduced price meals. Children are also categorically eligible for free meals if they are in foster care, are homeless, are enrolled in a Head Start program, or are migrants. There is evidence that, as income falls, measures of academic performance fall, even within the population of students eligible for FRPM – in fact, Figure 7 of this report shows that students eligible for free meals are more likely to be chronically absent than students eligible for reduced price meals. Therefore, even if FRPM eligible students outperform students in foster care on standardized tests (as is demonstrated in this report), this does not eliminate the possibility that the academic woes of children in foster care are entirely attributable to growing up in extreme poverty. It may simply be that the average child in foster care is from a poorer family than the average student eligible for FRPM.

Finally, because only district-level enrollment data had levels of enrollment high enough to regularly exceed SDE’s standard for data privacy (more than 5 children enrolled), DCF-involved students were compared to students who attend similar school districts, rather than similar schools. However, the student body composition of each school can vary greatly within a district, and it may be that DCF-involved students are concentrated in the schools with the most disadvantaged students within their school districts. If this is the case, then the analysis presented here may underestimate the extent to which attending schools with academically-struggling peers impacts the education of DCF-involved students, because students in DCF care may actually have a peer group that is substantially less academically successful than the one modeled in Figure 4.

**Barriers to Success: School District Attended**

We used GIS mapping to provide a visual representation of where DCF-involved students attend school. Circles representing the number of DCF-involved students attending each school district were superimposed on to a map of Connecticut’s school districts – larger circles correspond to more DCF-involved students being enrolled. Districts were also color-coded on the map, with color indicating the percent of 3rd grade students who scored Proficient or better in SY 2013 on the CMT reading exam. (Third grade reading scores for each school district are
publicly available, and were downloaded from the 4th Generation data interaction website for the CMT. This map allows one to examine whether DCF-involved students appear to be concentrated in school districts where students are less likely to reading proficiently by 3rd grade – a common measure of academic performance in a district. School districts that are operated neither by towns nor by regional districts (e.g. charter schools, RESCs, endowed and incorporated academies) are not shown.

To provide an additional measure of whether DCF-involved students attended schools where other students were not likely to experience academic success, we identified the state’s 30 Alliance districts – the 30 school districts that have the lowest student standardized test scores. We then calculated the percent of all Connecticut students enrolled in public schools who are enrolled in an Alliance District using the SY 2013 enrollment data provided by SDE. We compared this to the approximate percent of DCF students enrolled in Alliance Districts. Two Alliance districts – East Haven and East Windsor – enroll between 1 and 5 DCF-involved students, and therefore the precise number of students attending Alliance districts was impossible to calculate. We assumed, as we did in our test-score analysis, that these districts enrolled 2.28 DCF-involved students (the average number of DCF-involved students enrolled in each district with between one and five students. Had we assumed that East Haven and East Windsor each enroll either one or five DCF-involved students, our estimate would have changed less than 1 percentage point.

Barriers to Success: Special Needs
The percent of DCF-involved students with an identified special education need was compared to the rate for the entire state, using SY 2013 enrollment data provided by SDE.

Barriers to Success: Chronic Absenteeism
The percent of DCF-involved students who were chronically absent was compared to the percent of all students in the state who were chronically absent, the percent of those students who are eligible for reduced price meals who were chronically absent, and the percent of those students who have an identified special education needs who were chronically absent, all in SY 2013. Chronic absenteeism data for the state and each of these subpopulations are publicly available for download through the SDE website. These data on chronic absenteeism are disaggregated by free and reduced price meal eligibility separately, rather than together; therefore it was impossible to compare DCF-involved students to the full population of FRPM eligible students, as is done elsewhere in the report.

To calculate the suspension rate per 100 students for DCF-involved students in SY 2012, we divided the total number of ISS and OSS incidents respectively by the number of DCF-involved students, and multiplied this number by 100. For example, suppose there are 70 DCF-involved students, and collectively they experience 25 incidents of ISS. Then the rate of ISS per 100 students is equal to 100 times 25 divided by 70. We compared this rate to the rate of ISS and OSS for all Connecticut students, using SY 2012 data provided by SDE.

All analyses are subject to limitations common to secondary analysis of previously aggregated data, such as errors in data entry or calculation.
The important point is that schools, child welfare agencies, and community organizations likely share responsibility for alleviating the academic hurdles faced by children in foster care; this point is discussed at greater length in the recommendations section. Efforts by schools to keep students engaged and in school can reduce absenteeism. The excessive use of exclusionary discipline clearly falls within the purview of school, and it is educators who bear at least some of the responsibility for the consequences of these practices. This distinction is not black and white. Trauma at home can cause behaviors in children that result in exclusionary discipline, and it is educators who bear at least some of the responsibility for the consequences of these practices. This distinction is not black and white. Trauma at home can cause behaviors in school that result in exclusionary discipline, and efforts by schools to keep students engaged and in school can reduce absenteeism. The important point is that schools, child welfare agencies, and community organizations likely share responsibility for alleviating the academic hurdles faced by children in foster care; this point is discussed at greater length in the recommendations section.

It is worth noting that these barriers to success vary in the extent to which they may be alleviated by a school, as opposed to by a child welfare agency or other support structures operating at the level of family and community. Schools cannot, for example, control frequent student transfers, cannot prevent absenteeism that results from medical or legal causes, and typically have limited ability to engage insufficiently supportive families or foster families; these obstacles are principally the responsibility of the child welfare agency. By contrast, excessive use of exclusionary discipline clearly falls within the purview of school, and it is educators who bear at least some of the responsibility for the consequences of these practices. This distinction is not black and white. Trauma at home can cause behaviors in school that result in exclusionary discipline, and efforts by schools to keep students engaged and in school can reduce absenteeism. The important point is that schools, child welfare agencies, and community organizations likely share responsibility for alleviating the academic hurdles faced by children in foster care; this point is discussed at greater length in the recommendations section.

A major focus of prior efforts to increase academic opportunity for children and youth in foster care has been school stability – ensuring that children in foster care do experience frequent disruptive school transfers as a result of changing foster care placements. While academic and academically successful peer group is likely of benefit to children in foster care, this should not come at the expense of important progress toward school stability that has been achieved in the last five years. See, Tamara Kramer and Alexandra Dufresne “School Stability Promotes Educational Opportunity for Connecticut’s Children in Foster Care,” Connecticut Voices for Children, November 2009. Available at http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/school-stability-promotes-educational-opportunity-connecticuts-children-foster-care.

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See, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request.


Students are eligible for reduced price meals if their family income is less than 185% for the federal poverty line, and free lunch if their income is less than 130% of the federal poverty line. Children are also categorically eligible for free meals if they are in foster care, are homeless, are enrolled in a Head Start program, or are migrants. For more detailed eligibility criteria, and a discussion of the limits of FRPM eligibility as a measure of socioeconomic status, see, Robert Cotto, “The Limits of Data on Free and Reduced Price Meal Eligibility in Connecticut,” Connecticut Voices for Children, March 2012, available at http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/edu12limitsFRPM.pdf. For 2014 income eligibility guidelines, see, Federal Register/ Vol. 79, No. 43, Wednesday, March 5th/ 2014/ Notices, pp. 12467-12469. Available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2014-04788.pdf.
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14 See, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request. CMT and CAPT data on all and FRPM eligible students used for this calculation were publicly available respectively at
15 Differences in all for subjects significant at the p<.001 level.
16 CMT and CAPT data used for this calculation were publicly available respectively at
17 Differences in all for subjects significant at the p<.001 level.
18 72% is the reading proficiency rate for all Connecticut third graders.
19 3rd grade reading scores are publicly available through “Data Interaction for Connecticut Mastery Test,” at
21 Public school enrollment data provided via e-mail to Edie Joseph, “Following Up on Enrollment Data Request” by SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation, January 13, 2013. Available upon request.
22 Significantly different at the p<.001 level.
23 See, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request.
24 School discipline and truancy data provided via e-mail to Edie Joseph, “Following Up on Enrollment Data Request” by SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation, January 13, 2013. Available upon request.
25 See, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request. Chronic absenteeism records from SDE matched only 1569 unique student identifiers provided by DCF. Therefore, to calculate the percent of students chronically absent, the number of chronically absent DCF-involved students (375) was divided by 1569, not by 1,738.
26 See, “2012-2013 Chronic Absenteeism” spreadsheet, downloadable from the SDE webpage “Portals and Publications.” Available at http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2758&q=334898. These publicly available data provided by the state are disaggregated by free lunch and reduced lunch status, but not both together; therefore, a comparison with all students eligible for free or reduced price meals, as is made elsewhere in the paper, is impossible. It is also interesting to note that students eligible for free meals (who must have families with income under 120% of the federal poverty line, be in foster care, or be homeless) are notably more likely to be chronically absent that students eligible for reduced price meals (who must have families with income between 120% and 185% of the federal poverty line), and are more similar to students in foster care. This offers evidence that the academic experience of students in foster care is more similar to students who are extremely poor than to those who are merely lower income.
27 Comparison testing not possible with data publicly available through SDE.
28 SY 2013 discipline data were unavailable at the time of writing, so SY 2012 discipline data are examined instead.
29 See, data provided via e-mail from SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation to Tamara Kramer, “RE: Request for School Discipline and Truancy Data.” December 9, 2013. Available upon request.
31 Differences in all for subjects significant at the p<.001 level.
32 See, data provided via e-mail to Edie Joseph, “Following Up on Enrollment Data Request” by SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation, January 13, 2013. Available upon request.
33 See, data provided via e-mail to Edie Joseph, “Following Up on Enrollment Data Request” by SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation, January 13, 2013. Available upon request.
34 See, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request. Chronic absenteeism records from SDE matched only 1569 unique student identifiers provided by DCF. Therefore, to calculate the percent of students chronically absent, the number of chronically absent DCF-involved students (375) was divided by 1569, not by 1,738.
36 In the most recent report on school classification released by SDE, all of the Connecticut schools where student performance is weakest were in the school districts of Ansonia, Bloomfield, Bridgeport, Danbury, Derby, East Hartford, East Haven, Hamden, Hartford, Manchester, Meriden, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Norwich, Stratford, Waterbury, West Haven, and Windham. All of these districts except Hamden are among the 30 local school districts with the most students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, a


48 Ibid.


54 See, Edie Joseph, Kenneth Feder, and Cyd Oppenheimer, “Testimony in Support of S.B. 24: AAC Access to Preschool Programs for Children in the Care and Custody of the Department of Children and Families,” Connecticut Voices for Children. March 2014. Available at [http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/031214_edu_sb424_hb5522_preschooeldcf_schoolreadiness.pdf](http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/031214_edu_sb424_hb5522_preschooeldcf_schoolreadiness.pdf). Note that the number of children estimated to be enrolled in preschool in this testimony reflects the number of children DCF has record of being enrolled in Head Start programs; this is a larger data set than that available in the PSIS, and should not be compared with the preschool enrollment data presented in this report. Neither number likely captures the total number of children in DCF care enrolled in preschool programs, as the agency does not keep a record of children enrolled in private childcare programs, even if children attend with a public subsidy.
Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,


It is increasingly well understood that such distracted and disruptive behavior arises from biological arousal mechanisms that kick in to defend against highly stressful situations. In short bursts, these mechanisms are adaptive, because they allow for heightened defensiveness in an emergency. However, when this natural response is activated over long periods of time in response to chronic stress such as child maltreatment, it can become toxic, and beget destructive behaviors.

Since, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request.

Public school enrollment data provided via e-mail to Edie Joseph, “Following Up on Enrollment Data Request” by SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation, January 13, 2013. Available upon request.
79 CMT and CAPT data used for this calculation were publicly available respectively at http://solutions1.emetric.net/CMTPublic/Index.aspx and http://solutions1.emetric.net/CAPTPublic/Index.aspx.

80 See, “2012-2013 Chronic Absenteeism” spreadsheet, downloadable from the SDE webpage “Portals and Publications.” Available at http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2758&q=334898. Note that here data provided by the state were disaggregated by free lunch and reduced lunch, but not both together; therefore, a comparison with all students eligible for free or reduced price meals is impossible.

81 See, data provided via e-mail from SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation to Tamara Kramer, “RE: Request for School Discipline and Truancy Data.” December 9, 2013. Available upon request.

82 See, data provided via e-mail from SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation to Tamara Kramer, “RE: Request for School Discipline and Truancy Data.” December 9, 2013. Available upon request.


86 See, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request. Note that around half of all students were not tested in reading, writing, and math and more than two thirds were not tested in science only because they were not in a grade that took the relevant standardized test. Only grades 3-8 and grade 10 take reading, writing, and math tests, and only grades 4, 8, and 10 take science tests.


88 See, data provided via e-mail “DCF-SDE Data” from Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, DCF, January 11th, 2014. Available upon request.


90 Public school enrollment data provided via e-mail, “Following Up on Enrollment Data Request” by SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation, January 13th, 2013. Available upon request.


92 See, data provided via e-mail from SDE Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation to Tamara Kramer, “RE: Request for School Discipline and Truancy Data.” December 9, 2013. Available upon request.