



Raise the Grade: Improving Educational Opportunities for Children in State Care Kenneth Feder & Tamara Kramer, J.D.

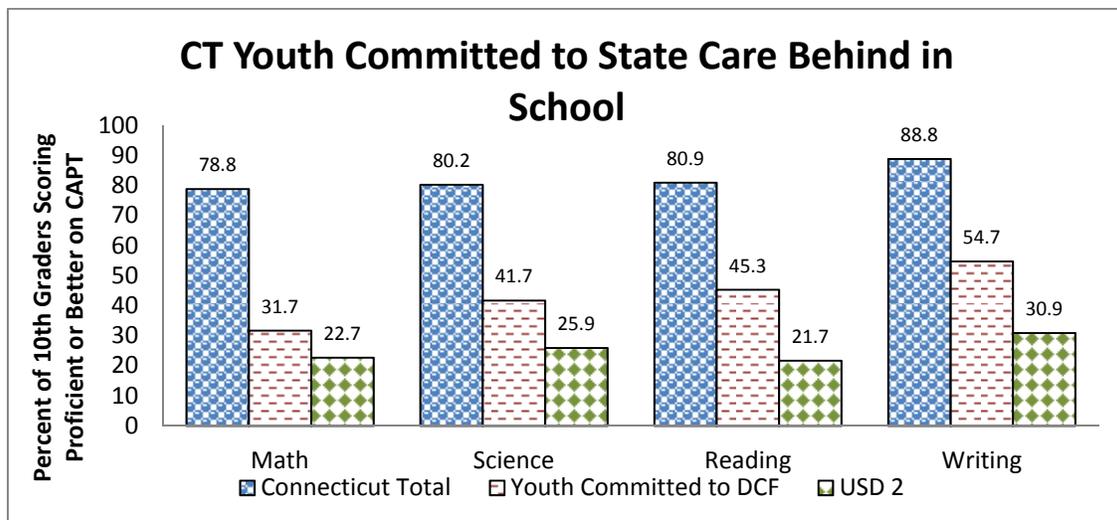
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Children and youth who are committed to the care or custody of the State of Connecticut – either as a result of being victims of abuse or neglect or through involvement in the juvenile justice system – face extraordinary barriers to future success:

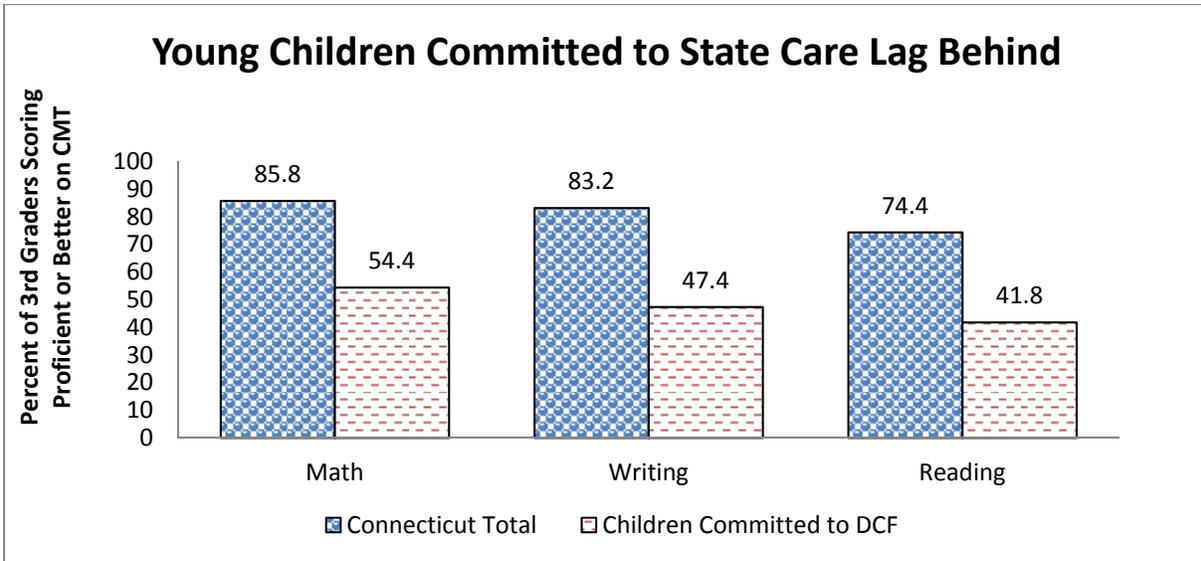
- Nearly all have experienced serious childhood trauma.
- Most struggle with physical, mental, or behavioral health challenges.
- Many will spend part of their childhood growing up in institutional or non-family settings.
- By definition, all of them will have to grow up for some time outside the care of immediate family – a child’s most natural source of the love, nurturing, and support necessary for healthy development.

Education is a lifeline for children who are in the care or custody of the State of Connecticut. For all children academic success is increasingly necessary to develop the skills, knowledge, and critical thinking ability that make one employable as an adult.¹ However, for youth in the care or custody of the state, youth who are often detached from family and community in a way that other children are not, school attendance and school achievement take on additional importance. For youth in care, schools provide an opportunity to experience “normalcy,” when most other facets of their lives are in disarray. For youth who have aged out of care, youth who often lack the safety net of family to fall back on in adulthood, a high quality education and workforce preparation is essential.

Any time the State removes children from their homes and takes them into its care, it assumes a *unique responsibility* that extends beyond physical safety. Connecticut should commit itself to ensuring that all youth in foster care receive the education they need to lead healthy, fulfilling, and productive adult lives; unfortunately, **preliminary evidence suggests that the State is not meeting this obligation.**



As shown above, 10th grade children committed to the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) care are far less likely to receive a score of proficient or above on state standardized tests in all four tested subjects. Students attending Unified School District 2 (USD 2), the school district operated by DCF for children confined to the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS), Solnit Center South (Riverview Hospital), and Solnit Center North (Connecticut Children's Place) are even further behind.²



This test-score difference is evident as early as 3rd grade, the first grade in which students are tested.³ These data document a troubling academic “opportunity gap” between youth in State care and other Connecticut students.

While additional research is needed to quantify and analyze the causes, extent, and impact of the opportunity gap for children committed to State care in Connecticut, **national literature provides insight into the multitude of factors that may contribute to their depressed academic performance:**

Trauma

Nearly every child in State care has experienced some form of trauma.⁴ One national study found that a quarter of youth in foster care suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a rate nearly double that of U.S. war veterans.⁵ Another study, from Illinois, found that 93% of youth committed to a juvenile detention center had experienced one or more traumatic incident, and at least 11% suffered from PTSD.⁶ Childhood trauma negatively impacts brain development, increasing biological risk factors that cause children to become distracted and defensive, and to engage in risky behavior.⁷ Children who are exposed to trauma are more likely to experience academic failure, more likely to be chronically absent from school, and more likely to have behavior problems in schools.⁸

Insufficient Parental Support

Many children in State care lack parental support and engagement: the kind of involvement correlated with student academic success.⁹ In addition to living apart from their parents while in placement, they often want for any stable or supportive figure in their lives: someone to motivate them to try hard in school, to ensure that they are enrolled in appropriate classes, to read to them, to help them with homework, or advocate for them in special education hearings. Without parental involvement, youth in foster care may not have the academic motivation and support necessary to learn or excel in school.

Mobility

Children removed from their homes by the State often relocate rapidly from placement to placement. As a result of these moves, children often change schools several times during a single year. Each such school change involves a new class, new material, and adjustments to the curriculum. When school records and credits become

lost or delayed in the transfer as too often occurs, students risk enrollment in inappropriate classes and problems meeting shifting graduation criteria. This problem is particularly well documented in the foster care population, where frequent changes in school negatively impact academic performance.¹⁰ A 2010 State law designed to reduce these frequent changes allows children in or entering foster care to remain in their school of origin when their residence changes if it is in their best interest.¹¹ However, it is difficult to assess the impact of this legislation because it has no reporting requirements.¹²

Limited Access to High Quality Schools

Apart from frequent school changes, students in State care often lack adequate opportunity to attend quality public schools. Children confined to institutions or detention centers must attend the schools operated within those facilities. Further, a California study found that children in foster care are disproportionately likely to be enrolled in the State's worst schools.¹³ There is reason to believe this is the case in Connecticut as well. Because most children who are in foster care are born into very poor families,¹⁴ and because state law protects the right of children in foster care to remain in their school of origin,¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Connecticut charter and magnet schools can offer an alternative to these local schools for some students in low-income communities. However, without engaged parents, it may be difficult for children in foster care to enroll in charter and magnet schools, because these schools are usually not the default enrollment option, and because they may require parental involvement to enroll.

Absence from School

Research from California suggests that children in foster care are far more likely to be absent from school than their peers.¹⁷ Disruptions in home life or absentee parents may cause children to miss school. Further, the high rate of chronic medical conditions among this population poses a barrier to attendance. Finally, children may have to miss school because they are in jail or have to go to court. This absenteeism is harmful: a recent report by the State Department of Education (SDE) shows that in Connecticut, chronically absent students (who are absent more than 10% of the school year) have lower average test scores and are less likely to graduate from high school.¹⁸

Exclusionary Discipline

Many children who have been exposed to serious trauma adapt negatively to their traumatic environment by acting out or engaging in distracting or disruptive behavior.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Connecticut's schools often respond to these behaviors with exclusionary discipline such as suspension, expulsion, or arrest, even when these are behaviors that could be managed by the school while keeping children in the classroom.²⁰ When applied to children in State care, these disciplinary tactics not only cost students valuable time in class; they may also often force children to stay at home in the traumatic environment that is causing the disruptive behavior in schools.

Insufficient Individualized Educational Supports

Nearly all children who come into State care will require some set of individualized supports or programs to help them catch up to their peers academically. For some, this will include traditional special education services and the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Other students may request fewer resources, such as tutoring or periodic check-ins with a school counselor. Failure to identify and provide such supports contributes to lack of educational attainment.

Each of the barriers listed above concern multiple players and factors both in and outside of school. Many of these barriers can predate a child's entry into State care. Successful efforts to close the educational opportunity gap for children in State care must encompass reforms across both education *and* child welfare policy. Conversely, any set of reforms that focuses only on the role of DCF, or only on the role of local public schools, will likely be insufficient. *Raising the Grade* for youth in State care requires collaborative action by DCF, SDE, and local public schools so that all children and youth in State care receive a high quality education.

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- ¹ In Connecticut, young people with higher levels of educational attainment are less likely to be unemployed and earn higher average wages. These gaps are widening. See, Edie Joseph and Orlando Rodriguez, “The State of Working Connecticut 2013: Young People in the Workforce,” *Connecticut Voices for Children*. August 2013. Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/econ13sowctfull.pdf>.
- ² Student CAPT score data for the State of Connecticut and each of its school districts, including USD 2, are publicly available online at <http://solutions1.emetric.net/CAPTPublic/Index.aspx>. Data on youth committed to DCF are from an untitled report by the Agency to the Appropriations committee in February of 2013. Available upon request.
- ³ USD 2 does not serve any students in 3rd grade. Student CMT score data for the State of Connecticut are publicly available online at <http://solutions1.emetric.net/CMTPublic/Index.aspx>. Data on youth committed to DCF are from an untitled report by the Agency to the Appropriations committee in February of 2013. Available upon request.
- ⁴ See, Portland Research Training Center on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health, “Traumatic Stress/ Child Welfare,” *Focal Point: Research, Policy, and Practice in Children’s Mental Health*. Winter, 2007, Volume 21, No. 1. Available at <http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/PDF/fpW07.pdf>, or through Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/trauma.cfm>.
- ⁵ See, Peter Pecora et al., “Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study.” April 2005. PDF available at <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ImprovingFamilyFosterCare.htm>.
- ⁶ See, Karen Abraham et al., “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma in Youth in Juvenile Detention,” *Arch General Psychiatry*. April 2004; 61(4): 403 – 410. Available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2861915/>.
- ⁷ See, Vincent Felitti et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. May, 1998. Available at <http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797%2898%2900017-8/fulltext#section19>.
- ⁸ See, Christopher Blodget, “Adopting ACEs Screening and Assessment in Child Serving Systems,” *Washington State University*. July, 2012. Available at <http://extension.wsu.edu/ahc/trauma/Documents/ACE%20Screening%20and%20Assessment%20in%20Child%20Serving%20Systems%207-12%20final.pdf>.
- ⁹ See, Andrew Houtenville and Karen Smith Conway, “Parental Involvement, School Resources, and Student Achievement,” *The Journal of Human Resources*. May, 2008. Available at http://www.unh.edu/news/docs/Conway_May08.pdf.
- ¹⁰ 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/sites/default/files/edu09school_stability_nov.pdf.
- ¹¹ See, PA 10-160. Available at http://cga.ct.gov/asp/cgabillstatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Public+Act&bill_num=160&which_year=2010&SUBMIT1.x=0&SUBMIT1.y=0.
- ¹² See, PA 10-160. Available at http://cga.ct.gov/asp/cgabillstatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Public+Act&bill_num=160&which_year=2010&SUBMIT1.x=0&SUBMIT1.y=0.
- ¹³ See, Vanessa Barrat and BethAnn Berliner, “The Invisible Achievement Gap: Educational Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California’s Public Schools,” *The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestED*. 2013. Available at <http://www.stuartfoundation.org/docs/default-document-library/the-invisible-achievement-gap-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2>.
- ¹⁴ See, Maria Cancian et al., “The Effect of Family Income on Risk of Child Maltreatment.” August 2010. Pdf available at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp138510.pdf>. Available through Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/can/factors/environmental/poverty.cfm>.
- ¹⁵ See, PA 10-160. Available at http://cga.ct.gov/asp/cgabillstatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Public+Act&bill_num=160&which_year=2010&SUBMIT1.x=0&SUBMIT1.y=0.
- ¹⁶ 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 commonly used measure of student poverty. For CT school classifications, see, “Connecticut 2012-13 School Classifications,” *Connecticut State Department of Education*. November 2013. Available at http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/evalresearch/accountability/2012-13_school_classification_summary.pdf/. Data on CT student eligibility for free and reduced price lunch are publicly available through the SDE website CEDaR portal at http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct_report/StudentNeedDT.aspx.
- ¹⁷ See, footnote 26, “Education is a Lifeline for Youth in Foster Care,” *The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education*. October 2011. Available at <http://www.firstfocus.net/library/fact-sheets/education-is-the-lifeline-for-youth-in-foster-care>.
- ¹⁸ See, Ajit Gopalkrishnan, Marquelle Middleton, and Francis Apaloo, “Chronic Absenteeism: A Closer Look at Connecticut Data,” *Connecticut State Department of Education*. May, 2013. Available at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/deps/chronicabsenteeism/learningfromthedata.statepresentation.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ See, Kari Jacobsen, “Educators’ Experience with Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom,” *St. Catherine University*. May, 2013. Available at http://sophia.stkate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1201&context=msw_papers.
- ²⁰ See, Jeana Bracey et al. “Improving Outcomes for Children in Schools: Expanded School Mental Health. August 2013. Available at <http://www.chdi.org/admin/uploads/682667905526837de13ac9.pdf>.