# California Connected by 25:
# Efforts to Address the K-12 Educational Needs of Transitioning Foster Youth

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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The California Connected by 25 Initiative is a collaborative effort of five foundations to improve the life prospects of youth transitioning out of foster care in California. Counties participating in CC25I aim to improve policies, programs and outcomes for transition-age foster youth in seven focus areas: K-12 Education; Employment/Job Training/Post-Secondary Education; Financial Competency and Asset Development; Housing; Independent Living Skills Programs; Personal/Social Asset Development; and Permanency. Four counties – Fresno, San Francisco, Santa Clara and Stanislaus Counties – are early implementers of the initiative.

This report documents the Initiative's progress made in the area of K-12 Education by each of the early implementing counties. K-12 education is a high priority because objectives and outcomes in this focus area interact with efforts in other CC25I focus areas such as permanency and post-secondary education and employment.

### The Educational Challenges Faced by Foster Youth

The educational trajectories of foster youth are far behind even those of other disadvantaged, low-income youth. The statistics are daunting; three-quarters of foster youth perform below their grade level and over half are held back in school for at least one year. Foster youth achieve lower scores on standardized achievement tests in reading and math and only 45 percent have graduated from high school at the time of emancipation from the foster care system. Although the State of California has passed legislation to begin to address these serious educational deficits – the Foster Youth Services program funds services to meet the educational needs of foster children and Assembly Bill 490 provides provisions to improve school stability and educational advocacy for foster youth – these policies are limited in scope, funded at insufficient levels, and have been inconsistently implemented across the state.

Accordingly, the CC25 Initiative has identified the K-12 educational experience of transition-age foster youth as a matter of primary importance and has dedicated the resources to improve outcomes in this area. The K-12 Education objective of CC25I is to achieve shared responsibility between the child welfare system and local school districts in order to provide foster youth with a stable, uninterrupted, needs-appropriate, high quality education that supports and encourages their academic success. To this end, the four early implementing CC25I counties are creating new collaborations among child welfare agencies, county offices of education, school districts, caregivers and other community partners.

Key strategies supported by these collaborations include: furthering educational stability for foster youth by helping them stay in the same school even if their foster placement changes and ensuring that their records are transferred rapidly and completely if they do switch schools; systematically monitoring youth's educational progress and sharing this information among all key stakeholders; ensuring that youth receive tutoring and other supportive services; and, across all these domains, ensuring that youth, caregivers, educators and social workers take full advantage of the opportunities and services already available under state or federal law.

### County Progress Towards the K-12 Education Objectives of CC25I

Currently in their third year of the Initiative, early implementing CC25I counties have already made substantial strides towards these goals, drawing on the resources, collaborations and technical assistance provided directly or indirectly by the Initiative. CC25I has sponsored several general and topic-specific convenings at which team members from each county participate in technical assistance opportunities and share the lessons learned with regard to K-12 education and other topics since joining the Initiative.

CC25I county child welfare agencies made great progress in integrating K-12 educational objectives within agency policies and practices:

- In all four counties, the child welfare agency has a staff member identified as Educational Liaison; in three of four counties, the position is full time.
- All counties train social workers and other staff on how to comply with legislation and better serve the educational needs of youth.
- Counties increasingly incorporate educational assessments and record-keeping into routine social worker tasks.
- Two counties have created resource or training guides for child welfare staff and foster caregivers, and one developed a self-advocacy binder to help youth with their own educational planning.

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The partnerships these child welfare agencies have developed with local educational agencies and other community partners have changed school procedures for foster youth facing home placement changes, have improved cross-agency communication and have opened up auxiliary tutoring and other academic supports for youth:

- Agencies offer workshops and trainings to educational agencies so that principals, counselors and teachers understand foster youth challenges and relevant legislation.
- Agencies and school districts collaborate to create standardized forms and procedures for seamless school discharge and re-enrollment procedures when there is a change in foster home placement.
- All counties have some level of data sharing in operation between the child welfare agency and schools or school districts.
- Each county has its own mix of targeted programs providing academic enrichment and support to different groups of foster youth: at-risk (below 2.0 GPA) youth; potentially college-bound youth; GED-focused youth; truant youth; special education youth; middle school students; and high school freshman.
- Counties also offer workshops to foster youth and caregivers on educational rights, graduation requirements and available local educational supports.

**Local Initiatives**

Counties have developed solutions to K-12 educational challenges that build on local strengths and resources and respond to the needs of their particular foster youth population. Some of the more innovative and effective approaches taken include:

**Fresno County**

- Fresno County made K-12 education a high priority within its child welfare agency. It placed Independent Living Program social workers directly on school campuses in three school districts attended by many foster youth. Agency staff initiated a number of school-specific initiatives to support youth.
- The County posted in one central Internet location the forms and procedures needed by multiple agencies to ensure smooth placement and enrollment changes, as well as disseminate information on relevant legislation, A-G requirements and community resources for foster youth.

**San Francisco County**

- San Francisco County made early identification of mental health needs among foster youth a priority and has developed streamlined policies and procedures to ensure compliance with AB 3632 among foster youth.
- The County prioritized putting education and health data for all foster youth into their CWS/CMS records.
- The County was the first among CC25I early implementing counties to seek a draw down of Title-IVE funding to support Foster Youth Services programs and resources.

**Santa Clara County**

- Santa Clara County demonstrated an energetic commitment to multi-partner strategies: The Juvenile Education Task Force leads ongoing efforts to find collaborative and cross-agency solutions to issues related to foster youths' educational needs and the legislative mandates to meet them.
- The County is home to several fruitful collaborations between the child welfare agency and various community partners aimed at improving the GPAs of 9th and 10th graders; creating educational plans and ensuring auxiliary supports for all middle school foster youth; and supporting foster youth enrollment in the college-preparation program AVID ("Advancement Via Individual Determination").

**Stanislaus County**

- Stanislaus County developed a strong partnership between the child welfare agency and the county Office of Education to expand tutoring services available to youth and also assist youth in preparing for and taking exams such as the GED.
- The County created a self-advocacy binder to help youth engage in strength-based goal setting, secure needed supports and prepare for post-secondary opportunities.
- An Educational Liaison has worked closely with foster youth, caregivers and social workers to properly assess needs and plan educational supports; reviewing hundreds of school transcripts to ensure appropriate credit accrual, and advocating at 125 IEP meetings and expulsion hearings.

**Outcomes: Educational Results for Transition-Age Foster Youth**

Counties are still implementing new data tracking strategies that will allow ongoing assessment of the K-12 educational outcomes identified by CC25I : the percentage of foster youth passing the California High School Exit Examinations in Math and English Language Arts and the percentage of foster youth graduating from high school (with a high school diploma, GED or

equivalent certificate). However, in some counties, measures of intermediate youth outcomes are available:

- Among foster youth attending Fresno Unified School District in Fresno County, the average GPA of middle and high school youth increased from 1.69 in the 2004-2005 school year to 1.90 in the 2006-2007 school year, and from 1.33 to 1.72 among group home youth in particular during the same period. There were also improvements in school change, attendance, yearly credits earned and suspensions.
- Also in Fresno County, foster care youth with GPAs below 2.0 who participated in the Youth Law Center pilot study saw their average GPA increase from 1.15 to 1.55 within a one year period.
- In an effort to encourage foster youth to set college attendance as a goal and complete college prerequisites while in high school, CC25I counties are trying to link students with college-directed programs like AVID. Early results show that Santa Clara County enrolled nine foster youth in AVID or similar programs and Fresno County enrolled 25 youth. These are significant achievements; local AVID programs often have no foster youth among their participants.

**Key Lessons Learned**

**1. Focus and Leadership on K-12 Education Objectives are Essential.** Counties that prioritized K-12 education over other CC25I target areas showed more progress in program and service innovation in this focus area. Fresno and Santa Clara Counties, for example, made K-12 Education a high-priority area, and implemented a number of initiatives on school campuses and in collaboration with individual school districts to expand academic supports for foster youth. Strong leadership is very important; anticipating the possibility of changes in senior county leadership or having a key point person (or two) in each focus area can minimize the impact of high-level changes.

**2. The CC25I Emphasis on Agency Collaboration and Community Partnerships is Valuable.** CC25I has generated a number of valuable partnerships in all counties to address educational challenges and expand the available continuum of academic supports. In Santa Clara County, for example, the abundance of local educational initiatives resulted in a large collaborative effort to integrate and streamline each of the separate projects, taking community partnership to a new level. Going forward, it will be essential for counties to develop strategies to sustain these partnerships and collaborative undertakings over the long term.

**3. Small-scale or Targeted Program Interventions are an Effective First Step.** Innovative strategies to better assess and respond to the academic needs of youth were initially implemented not county-wide, but with single school districts within a county or with certain subgroups of foster youth. Fresno and Santa Clara Counties worked closely with one to three school districts to implement services and to improve the educational outcomes of foster youth with GPAs of 2.0 or below. San Francisco County targeted truant and special education foster youth for review and service referrals. Counties also made concerted efforts to enroll youth in targeted, high priority programs such as AVID and similar programs. Going forward, the challenge in this area will be finding ways to take these efforts to scale – to serve more schools, districts and youth – and to sustain larger-scale efforts over time.

**4. The Challenges of Supporting Out-of-County Youth Remains Largely Unaddressed.** The fact that two of the four CC25I counties, San Francisco and Stanislaus respectively, either place half their foster youth with caregivers in other counties or find that nearly half of the foster youth in their local schools are under the jurisdiction of another county, suggests that out-of-county placement is a widespread issue statewide. Data sharing agreements among counties that frequently find themselves in a sending/receiving relationship for foster youth may be a good jumping-off point for progress here. In general, counties will probably need to develop targeted approaches to this particular challenge, working with the counties where most of their youth are placed, or from where most of their youth originate.

**5. Data Sharing and Outcomes Tracking**. Counties need a variety of strategies to overcome the barriers that appear when agencies with different missions, confidentiality rules and multiple stakeholders try to share administrative data. A Memorandum of Understanding is often the first step in opening up an avenue for data sharing between agencies and is sometimes supported by a standing court order, as is the case in Fresno and Santa Clara Counties (and is being developed in San Francisco County). Establishing data-sharing between the child welfare agency and a limited number of school districts (rather than attempting a county-wide effort involving multiple districts) may also be helpful. Sharing of effective strategies among counties, efforts facilitated by CC25I-sponsored convenings and technical assistance, can contribute greatly to improvement in data tracking and sharing.