



## *PROGRESS REPORT*

Igniting the power and potential of students  
from foster care



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*The goal of the Education Equals Partnership is to ensure that all students from foster care achieve in school at levels equal to or better than their peers and graduate with a wide range of possibilities for their future.*

Building on a decade of work at the intersection of child welfare and education, the Stuart Foundation launched the Education Equals Partnership in 2012. The Partnership is dedicated to improving educational experiences and outcomes for students from foster care, starting with preschool and extending through college. It is a collective impact effort that recognizes that education and child welfare systems must embrace a common agenda and work together in order to achieve this vision. Four California counties—Fresno, Orange, Sacramento, and Santa Cruz—are demonstration sites for the Partnership.

#### Three Primary Goals for Sharing This Report

- *Create dynamic shared learning opportunities.* The school year 2013–14 marked the first year of implementation of new practices designed to support the education of foster youth. The year was marked with significant milestones and a number of important lessons along the way that may be useful to the many other professionals in the field who share the commitment to helping foster youth to realize their full potential.
- *Seize the opportunity of new policies.* In the last few years, about two dozen new laws directly impacting foster youth have passed in California and at the federal level. These include establishment of Foster Youth Support Programs in community colleges, implementation of the Continuum of Care Reform, changes in the Family Education Rights Privacy Act, reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act, a stronger focus on school climate, a closer look at school discipline policies, and California's new Local Control Funding Formula, described in detail on the next page. As stakeholders from different systems work to implement these new policies, the lessons learned within Education Equals may be useful to those seeking to create new programs, coordinate across systems, and ensure that students reach their potential.
- *Energize collective action.* By reflecting on highlights and lessons learned, this report celebrates the progress to date and charts a path forward that will continue to energize professionals working with foster youth within and beyond the Partnership. While much has been accomplished, hard work remains to ensure that foster youth achieve at rates equal to or greater than their peers.

## *The Changing Educational Landscape for Foster Youth*

The Local Control Funding Formula, signed into law in July 2013, presents new opportunities throughout California by giving much more control to districts for determining how they spend their state funds. It also provides additional funds to school districts for low-income students, English language learners, and foster youth. Specifically, the policy allows:

- *Foster youth to become visible.* The California Department of Education, working in partnership with the California Department of Social Services, now notifies districts weekly about which of their students are in foster care.
- *Goals for foster youth to be set and tracked.* Districts are asked to establish goals for their foster youth, set metrics for measuring progress, and outline services and strategies for meeting these goals in their Local Control Accountability Plan.
- *Public awareness of the educational performance of foster youth to increase.* Schools and districts will report performance data for foster youth to the state, just as they currently do for other subgroups of students, such as English language learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

The Local Control Funding Formula presents important leverage points for Education Equals demonstration counties, given that the law's main components of increased visibility and the need to set and track educational goals for foster youth are exceptionally well aligned with the core elements of the Partnership. As the first state in the country to do so, California has an unparalleled opportunity to lead the way in supporting foster youth to thrive in school and beyond.

*“This has been a perfect storm of opportunity, with new data informing policy, promising new practices being field tested throughout the state, and local successes influencing state policy.”*

— Jesse Hahnel, Director, FosterEd,  
National Center for Youth Law



## CORE ELEMENTS & THEORY OF CHANGE

Two recent reports, *At Greater Risk* and *The Invisible Achievement Gap*, documented tragic educational statistics for students from foster care. Foster youth change schools more often, are more likely to perform below grade level, are less likely to graduate from high school, and are less likely to enroll in or graduate from college than the general population of California students and other at-risk students, such as low-income students (Wiegmann et al., 2014; Barrat and Berliner, 2013; Frerer, et al., 2013).

Education Equals is a response to the unacceptable reality that young people who grow up in foster care demonstrate extremely poor educational outcomes. This is due to life circumstances that may include trauma, often of a severe nature; frequent moves between home and school placements; and failures of our existing systems to meet students' specific educational needs.



### Core Elements of the Partnership

Education Equals' Theory of Change is based on five core elements that are integral to improving the educational outcomes for students from foster care.

- **Engaged and informed group of adults support youth.** Students have a group of adults actively engaged in supporting their education and aspirations, by identifying their strengths and growth areas, providing assistance to meet their needs, and monitoring their educational progress.
- **Inspiring and customized education plans.** Students are at the center of an action-based education plan that is informed by their strengths and growth areas, and encouraged by their education team who implements the plan by helping the youth access timely and high-quality support.
- **Robust community of practice.** County practitioners, school district staff, and foster youth advocates actively participate in a community of practice aimed at helping to lift up success stories and lessons learned as they work to ensure that all foster youth realize their potential.
- **Youth-centered systems.** The systems that support foster youth, such as school districts, child welfare agencies, county offices of education, and the courts, collaborate in meaningful ways to serve the youth. Youth voice and advice are embedded in program design and actively solicited to make course corrections.
- **Dynamic use of real-time data.** Real-time data are used by practitioners to inform quality and timely support for foster youth, both individually and for groups of foster youth.



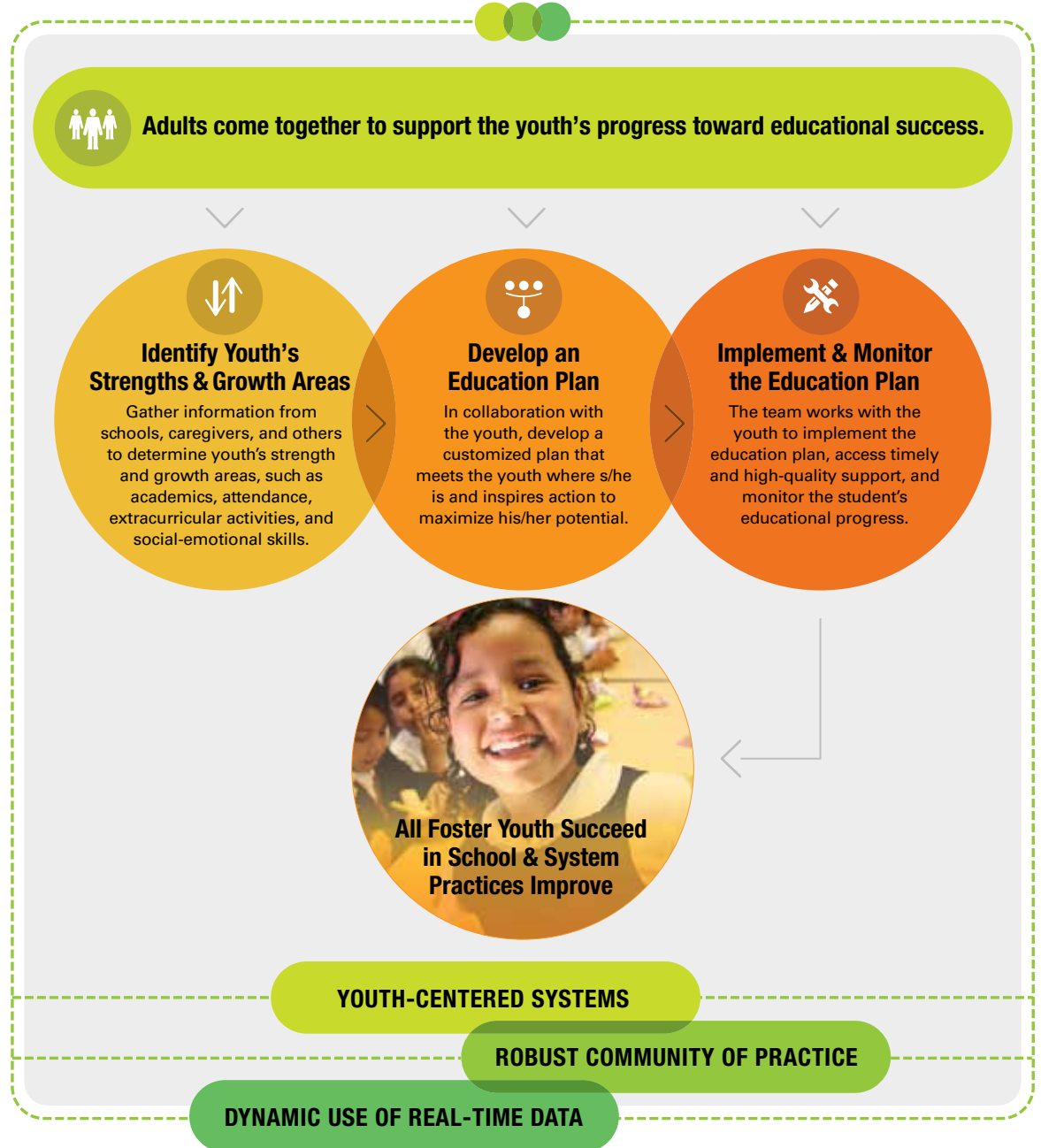
## The Theory of Change

The Partnership believes that each student from foster care should be supported by an *Engaged and Informed Group of Adults* who work in concert to meet the youth where s/he is and develop an *Inspiring and Customized Education Plan*, to support the youth in realizing his/her full potential.

In order for professionals to support youth effectively, the Partnership encourages practitioners and organizations working with foster youth to collaborate in a *Robust Community of Practice* to build professional capacity, cross-pollinate best practices, and build empathy across different systems serving youth. The Partnership encourages systems to be *Youth-Centered* and to leverage the *Dynamic Use of Real-Time Data* to design programs and proactively support youth in improving their educational experience. In essence, the synergy created by the interaction of the five core elements helps foster youth achieve at levels equal to or greater than their peers.

### Important Role of the Education Liaisons

Education Liaisons are staff members who support foster youth and may represent one or more systems, such as child welfare agencies, county offices of education, school districts, or community-based organizations. For the purposes of this theory of change, an Educational Liaison is a professional responsible for coordinating the assessment of the youth's strengths and growth areas, identifying and engaging a team of adults to support the youth educationally, and assisting those teams to develop and track each student's educational goals in his/her customized education plan.



## EVOLUTION & EVALUATION

### The Evolution of the Partnership

The timeline below presents major milestones in the evolution of Education Equals. In addition to these milestones, one aspect of this evolution is important to note:

#### Initial focus on subgroups of foster youth

The Partnership’s aspiration is that all foster youth should be supported by a connected group of caring adults who work with the youth to develop and implement a customized education plan. However, the partners recognized immediately that it would be impossible to begin serving all foster youth in each county with an education team and plan. The demonstration counties, therefore, agreed to start by implementing the core elements with subgroups of students, particularly those facing a transition, such as movement from prekindergarten to kindergarten, middle school to high school, high school to college, and foster care to reunification with parents. Santa Cruz, by far the smallest of the four demonstration counties, was able to support all of its current K–12 foster youth with an education team and plan by the end of 2014.<sup>1</sup>

*“The vision of Education Equals is for students in foster care to realize the vastness of their potential – tapping into their resilience, intellect, unique talents and inner courage – and graduate high school with the fullest array of possibilities for their future to choose from.”*

– Michelle Francois Traiman,  
Stuart Foundation

2007–12	2012	2013	2014	2015–16
<p><b>READY TO SUCCEED</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ready to Succeed, an initiative to support Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento Counties in testing new and innovative practices that would improve education outcomes for foster youth</li> </ul>	<p><b>COLLECTIVELY BUILDING THE ROAD MAP</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stuart Foundation Board approves 5-year, \$10M investment in Education Equals Partnership</li> <li>• Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento Counties join the Partnership</li> <li>• Santa Cruz County designs FosterEd program</li> </ul>	<p><b>INSTALLATION YEAR</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop tools to support effective practice</li> <li>• Invest in technology infrastructure to support data sharing across child welfare and education systems</li> <li>• Create shared evaluation metrics</li> <li>• Release At Greater Risk and Invisible Achievement Gap reports</li> <li>• Begin implementation of Santa Cruz County FosterEd program</li> </ul>	<p><b>EARLY IMPLEMENTATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training and professional development for staff</li> <li>• Launch dynamic community of practice</li> <li>• Pilot new practices and tools with students in Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento Counties</li> <li>• Expand Partnership to include Santa Cruz County FosterEd</li> </ul>	<p><b>ACCELERATE PROGRESS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand practices to reach all students</li> <li>• Deepen and widen the community of practice to reach more professionals</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> All four counties are currently focusing on serving foster youth who are dependents of their county and placed in their county. For example, Santa Cruz is not currently supporting an education team and plan for foster youth from Monterey County who are placed with relatives in Santa Cruz County. Nor is it supporting its own foster youth who are placed with relatives in Monterey County.

## The Partnership's Approach to Evaluation

A commitment to evaluation has been an important consideration from the early stages of Education Equals. Given that the effort involves multiple stakeholders, high levels of innovation, fast-paced decision making, and areas of uncertainty, a Developmental Evaluation approach was identified as a complement to the design, values, and approach of the Education Equals Partnership. Developmental Evaluation separates itself from more traditional evaluative approaches in that the evaluators actively participate in the Partnership. They support ongoing program improvement by helping program leaders use data to improve system practices and understand the value and impact of the work. The evaluation has already informed critical course corrections and will document whether and how the suggested practices lead to positive outcomes for foster youth.



## Evaluation Indicators

The demonstration counties are tracking a number of indicators, including:<sup>2</sup>

- **Preschool enrollment.** The percentage of foster youth ages 3–5 who are enrolled in preschool or kindergarten.
- **School stability.** The percentage of K–12 foster youth who remain in one school throughout the school year.
- **Attendance.** The percentage of K–12 foster youth with attendance rates above 90 percent.
- **Behavior.** The percentage of students who are suspended or given other disciplinary actions at school.
- **College readiness.** The percentage of high school foster youth on track to complete the 15 “a-g” course requirements of the University of California and California State University systems to be eligible for admission.
- **Graduation rates.** The percentage of foster youth who graduate from high school.

Given that three of the four counties were at the early implementation stage during the 2013–14 school year – piloting new tools and practices – it is premature to present comprehensive data on educational outcomes for foster youth in this report. In addition, each county is identifying challenges to obtaining accurate aggregate data and will be developing strategies with the Partnership to improve its data collection systems. Nonetheless, each county profile in this report includes at least one education indicator tied to a change in practice that was in place for most of the 2013–14 school year.

<sup>2</sup> This list includes the primary student outcome indicators being tracked in Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento Counties. Santa Cruz County is tracking similar K–12 indicators but is not tracking preschool enrollment.

## INFRASTRUCTURE BUILDING

Education Equals' third year was marked by many successes and new thinking. The next three sections will describe highlights across the Partnership, organized by infrastructure building, new practices, and early outcomes. Later sections describe additional features specific to each of the four implementing counties.

From the beginning, the Partnership recognized the importance of building an infrastructure, including the systems and tools needed to support the Education Equals' core elements. Early infrastructure building efforts included:

- Construction of a shared vision, values, and goals.
- Development of a set of indicators to track progress and outcomes, and agreement on data collection methods.
- Identification and refinement of a data management system that could link with child welfare and school district information systems.
- Establishment of mechanisms, such as Memorandums of Understanding and Court Orders, to enable data sharing between child welfare and education agencies and the Partnership's evaluator.
- Creation of tools to support effective practice, such as education screens and education plans.

During the 2013–14 school year, the Partnership continued to build and refine aspects of the infrastructure. While many infrastructure elements were addressed, the largest and most critical efforts are presented at the right.

*“Partnership is the heart and soul of this work. Establishing a shared vision and then jointly developing a set of tools to support the work has been critical to our collective success.”*

— Avi Khullar, Stuart Foundation

### *Established a Backbone Support Team*

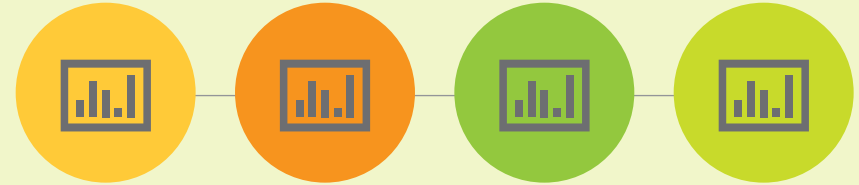
Since its inception, Education Equals has engaged a number of advisors, including experts in the areas of child welfare and education from state agencies and nonprofit organizations. At the beginning of 2014, a team of state policy experts, researchers, a technology vendor, communications experts, youth representatives, and Stuart Foundation leaders was assembled. The team comes together every six weeks to support implementation and share lessons learned to inform policy in California and beyond.





## *Strengthened Youth Engagement*

A core value of Education Equals is that it be youth centered. Youth must have a strong active voice in their education and be empowered to be the drivers of their future. To live this value, a team of 12 youth ambassadors was created to inform development of the Education Equals approach and integrate foster youth insights into the Partnership's communications and implementation.



## *Invested in Data Linking*

Having a database that combines information from education and child welfare data systems is crucial for providing professionals from those two systems with access to real-time data that can mean the difference between an issue being raised early or a student languishing for a lengthy period without support. Practitioners are committed to using these data to inform quality and timely support for students. Linked data are also critical to the evaluation of the Partnership.

Foster Focus, the database developed and maintained by Sacramento County Office of Education and used by the Partnership's demonstration counties, combines data from the state's child welfare database – Child Welfare Services Case Management System – with education data from districts that link their student information systems with Foster Focus. Establishing these linkages requires staff commitment and investment by the districts agreeing to link with Foster Focus, county partners, and the technology vendor.

During the 2013–14 school year, the Partnership also focused on building dynamic reporting tools to enable users to produce a real-time report with the linked data. For example, Education Liaisons can now request and download a list of foster youth in grades 10 through 12 in their county and those students' California High School Exit Examination scores. With this information, the Education Liaisons can develop a targeted plan to follow up with students.

## NEW PRACTICES

In the 2013–14 school year, new practices emerged in how member organizations of the Partnership collaborated, and how professionals in those organizations worked with foster youth.

### ***Established a Community of Practice: Counties Active in Continued, Dynamic, Shared Learning***

Throughout the evolution of Education Equals, a key element has been the collaborative learning among an array of professionals working at multiple levels within the child welfare and education systems. This ongoing engagement, now called the Community of Practice, serves as a valuable structure to build trust and camaraderie among practitioners.

Through the Community of Practice activities, the Partnership is able to learn about best practices, seek assistance with challenges, and co-create new solutions.

*“Our partnership with Sacramento County Office of Education is helping us recognize the unique needs and circumstances of foster youth so we can help them reach their full potential.”*

— Brent Johnson, Coordinator,  
Foster Youth and Homeless Education,  
Natomas Unified School District



The Partnership organized a series of well-curated sessions to bring together practitioners and policy makers during the 2013–14 school year.

- *Two-day education equals convening* held with more than 200 individuals from approximately 40 partner organizations and a 35-person youth delegation. Feedback on the convening was overwhelmingly positive. One hundred percent of the 66 attendees who completed an evaluation form reported that participating in the convening increased their commitment to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for foster youth, and 98 percent reported that they developed new connections and relationships.
- *Partnership advisors' meeting* with approximately 75 individuals from 20 organizations gathered for a day of thoughtful and deliberate discussions on the Partnership's first year and the mapping of future plans.
- *On-site meetings* occurred across the four counties focusing on discussions around strategies, feedback on tools, and updates on efforts.
- *Cross-county learning sessions and webinars* provided opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. Topics included early childhood population, data-informed decisions, and developing and monitoring education plans.
- *Launched EducationEquals.org* that provides a digital presence to the Education Equals Partnership and a virtual collaboration space, including password protected sections of the website.

### *Piloted New Tools: Education Screens and Plans*

During the 2013–14 school year, the three original Education Equals counties—Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento—piloted two new tools to support youth as they enter the foster care system and equip professionals and supportive adults with deeper information from which to understand how best to support each student.<sup>3</sup>

The *education screen* is a tool that Education Liaisons and social workers use to systematically gather information about each student's academic performance, social and emotional strengths, and areas for needed growth. This tool includes the analysis of transcript information and interviews with each student as well as key adults in his/her life. The *education plan* is a tool that helps to incorporate information gathered and organize action items to ensure a student receives appropriate support, and to establish connections among adults in the student's life.

The tools are available on [EducationEquals.org](http://EducationEquals.org) and [EqualFutures.org](http://EqualFutures.org), a resource created to support school districts, county offices of education, community-based organizations and other agencies in improving educational outcomes for students from foster care.



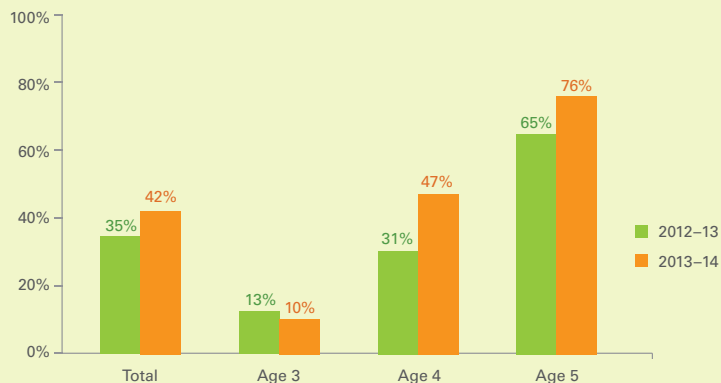
<sup>3</sup> Santa Cruz began implementing its screen and education plan process during the 2012–13 school year, refining it during 2013–14. Santa Cruz's screening process is similar to the other three counties but differs in a few notable ways. Santa Cruz uses an initial team meeting to identify educational strengths and needs, and also reviews the student's educational records. The results of the team meeting and educational records review are not documented on a screening tool. Rather, the team discussion and records review leads immediately to the team setting goals for the youth in the youth's education plan.

## EARLY OUTCOMES

### Increased Preschool Enrollment

During the 2013–14 school year, Orange and Sacramento Counties initiated new practices designed to support foster youth ages 3 to 5, including checking whether the children are enrolled in preschool or kindergarten and offering to help them enroll if they are not. Fresno County continued with the supports they developed in 2009 for this population. As shown in Figure 1, early indicators of preschool enrollment across these three counties are encouraging. County-specific preschool enrollment rates are discussed in greater detail in the upcoming county sections of the report.

**Figure 1: Preschool Enrollment Among Foster Youth Ages 3–5**



**Data Note:** Data are combined for Fresno, Orange, and Sacramento Counties, and are for a point in time. Children ages 3 to 5 who were in foster care on the day the data were extracted and placed in a foster home within the county were included in the analysis. The sample size was 558 children in 2012–13 and 711 children in 2013–14. Data were extracted from California’s Child Welfare Services Case Management System and Foster Focus in May of 2013 and 2014. Five-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten were included in the enrollment counts.

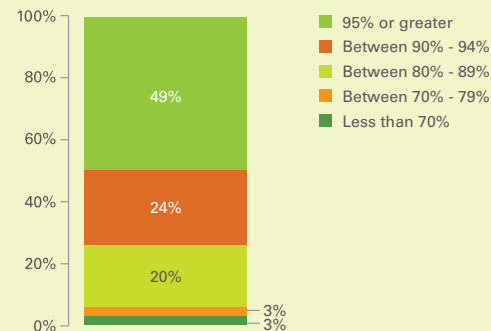
### Early Results for K–12 Students

During the 2013–14 school year, the three original Education Equals counties began early implementation of the Partnership’s core elements, including pilot testing the education screen, education plan, and education team processes. Santa Cruz County had been implementing and refining practices consistent with Education Equals’ core elements for a year and a half. While it is premature to examine K–12 results in the three counties that just started piloting the new practices, it is appropriate to examine K–12 findings for FosterEd Santa Cruz County. Figures 2–5 present education data for foster youth in Santa Cruz County who had been involved in FosterEd for two months.

### Attendance increased among students who entered with low attendance rates and stayed high among those who entered with high attendance

As seen in Figure 2, almost half of foster youth had a high attendance rate (at least 95%) before they joined FosterEd. Among those who did not enter FosterEd with a 95% or above attendance rate, about three-quarters of youth

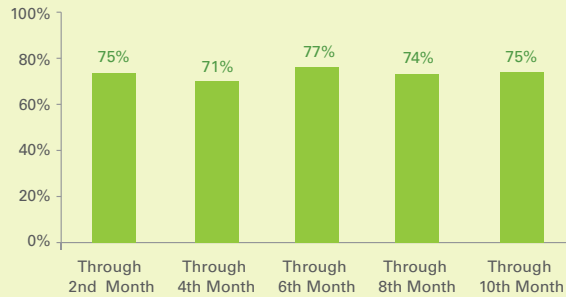
**Figure 2: Attendance Rates for Foster Youth Prior to Joining FosterEd Santa Cruz County**



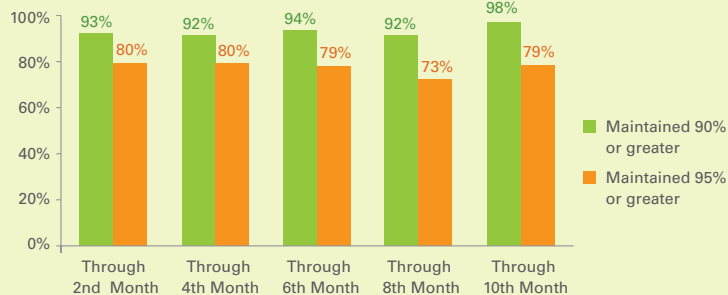
**Data Notes for Figures 2–4:** Included in these charts are 147 foster youth whose cases were active in FosterEd Santa Cruz County for at least two months, and who had attendance data available prior to joining FosterEd and after joining FosterEd. Figures 3 and 4 compare youths’ attendance rates prior to joining FosterEd with various lengths after they joined FosterEd. For example, in Figure 3, the bar for “Through 4th month” reports that, among youth who entered FosterEd with less than a 95% attendance rate, 71% increased their attendance over that four-month period. The rate “Through 4th month” is based on the average of their attendance across those four months. Data were extracted from Foster Focus in February of 2015.



**Figure 3: Percentage Who Increased Their Attendance, Among Those Who Joined FosterEd With Less Than a 95% Rate**



**Figure 4: Percentage Who Maintained a High Attendance Rate, Among Those Who Joined FosterEd With at Least a 95% Rate**



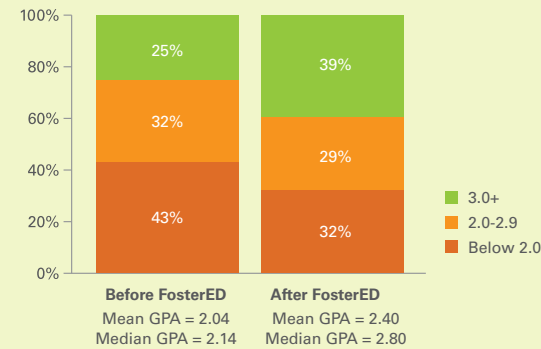
increased their attendance after joining FosterEd (Figure 3). These increases were observed at various points of the youth's involvement in the program.

Among students who joined FosterEd with a very high attendance of 95% or above, the vast majority maintained these rates (Figure 4).

### Preliminary grade point average (GPA) results are promising

Figure 5 reports that after joining FosterEd, the mean GPA for foster youth increased, as did the percentage with at least a 3.0 GPA. While these results are encouraging, it is important to note they are based on a relatively small sample of 28 youth and thus should be interpreted with caution.

**Figure 5: Grade Point Averages for High School Foster Youth Served by FosterEd Santa Cruz County**



**Data Notes:** Included in these GPA charts are 28 high school foster youth who had GPA data available both prior to joining FosterEd and after joining FosterEd, and who were active in FosterEd for at least two months. The analysis incorporates multiple terms (e.g., quarters or semesters) of "prior to" and "after" joining FosterEd for cases in which those data were available. Analyses examining only the most adjacent "prior to" and "after" terms yielded a similar pattern of results.

### Education Equals Strengthened Relationships

All counties reported stronger collaboration for supporting the education of foster youth within their counties. In some counties, agencies have made deliberate efforts to share office space and encourage collaboration between staff. As one staff reported, "With co-location it gives greater access to and connection between case-managers and social workers; it has strengthened [the collaboration], but we need to continue to expand." Stronger collaboration also resulted from regular multi-agency meetings where individuals develop strategies for resolving issues that arise and discuss emerging issues related to practice, policy, and data collection.

### Increased Focus on Foster Youth Education by Multiple Systems

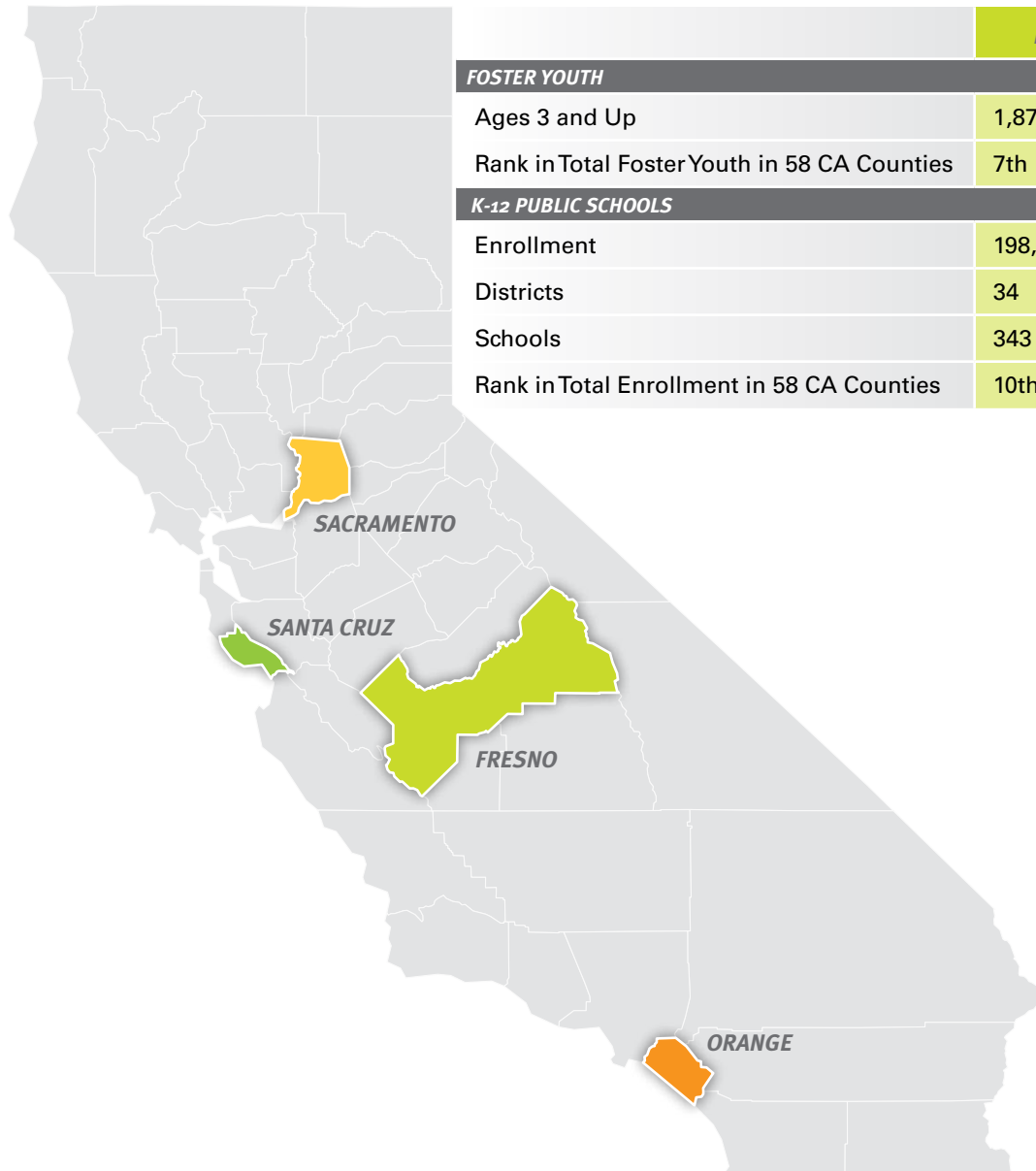
The education of foster youth has come into sharper focus in each county, since the launch of Education Equals. One county staff remarked that they are "talking more to the social workers about education, using educational language, and they are recognizing it... It's more on their radar for day-to-day practice, so it's not only about asking about psychological, physical, and mental well-being, but about their education." A representative from another county explained, "Education is now on the table more than ever before. When I started, education was a one-line item in the court report. Now everyone is focused on education."

Four California counties—Fresno, Orange, Sacramento, and Santa Cruz—are demonstration sites for the Partnership. Each is incorporating the five core elements and theory of change within their existing contexts. This has resulted in practice models that are customized to each county. As the timeline on page 6 illustrates, Santa Cruz officially joined the Partnership in mid-year 2014. Through the FosterEd: Santa Cruz program, the county had been implementing practices very similar to the Education Equals Partnership approach since the 2012–13 school year and had been developing its FosterEd program since 2011.

*“Each of the Education Equals counties provides a ‘learning laboratory’ for innovation with a commitment to meet and share in cross-county activities, refine tools and processes, bring an unprecedented focus on data, and push the boundaries to put youth at the center of activities.”*

— Jennifer Laird, RTI International





	FRESNO	ORANGE	SACRAMENTO	SANTA CRUZ
<b>FOSTER YOUTH</b>				
Ages 3 and Up	1,870	2,390	2,570	280
Rank in Total Foster Youth in 58 CA Counties	7th	6th	5th	31st
<b>K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS</b>				
Enrollment	198,460	500,490	240,220	40,300
Districts	34	28	14	11
Schools	343	597	383	78
Rank in Total Enrollment in 58 CA Counties	10th	4th	8th	24th



**Data Sources:** Education data are from the California Department of Education’s DataQuest tool (<http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>). Foster youth counts are for children in care in July 2013, as cited on kidsdata.org, Needell, B., et al. (May 2014). Child Welfare Services Reports for California, U.C. Berkeley Center for Social Services Research; Data come from ChildTrends analysis of Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data available through the National Data Archive on Welfare Services Reports for California, U.C. Berkeley Center for Social Services Research; Data come from ChildTrends analysis of Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data available through the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, as cited on KIDS COUNT (May 2014). Child Abuse and Neglect, as cited on KIDS COUNT (May 2014).

## FRESNO COUNTY

The county's Department of Social Services is the lead agency in Fresno for the Education Equals Partnership. In the first year of early implementation, Fresno experienced a number of notable implementation highlights, and it also took advantage of opportunities to improve or refine existing practices. This section profiles one implementation and one data highlight.

### Implementation Highlight

#### Child focus teams expanded

Fresno's Child Focus Teams are a hallmark of Fresno practice in working with youth ages 0–5. A Child Focus Team is a multidisciplinary team that previously reviewed the cases of all children under the age of 6 in the dependency court system for early identification of needs in the areas of health, development, mental health, education, placement, and visitation. During the 2013–14 school year, Fresno expanded the scope of its Child Focus Teams to support all youth ages 0–18. The expansion of Child Focus Teams to school-age foster youth has enabled Education Liaisons at the county child welfare office to better collaborate with foster youth liaisons in the school districts.

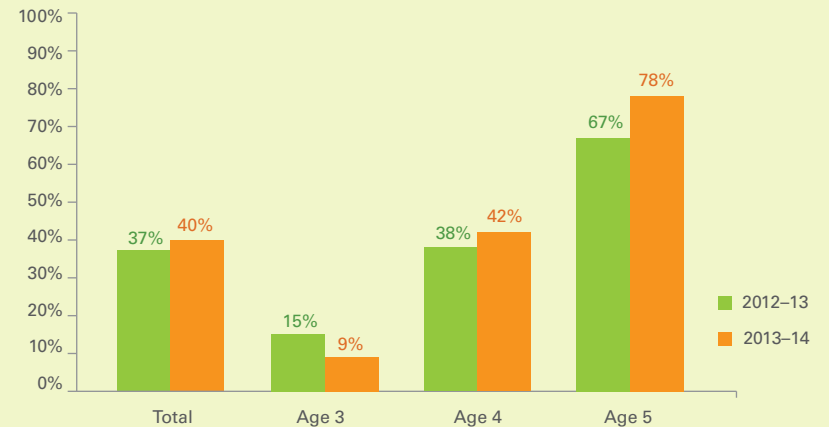


### Data Highlight

#### Preschool enrollment increased for 4- and 5-year-olds in Fresno County

Preschool and kindergarten enrollment increased substantially for 5-year-old foster youth between the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years and increased to a somewhat lesser extent for 4-year-old foster youth. However, preschool enrollment for 3-year-old foster youth dropped over the same time period. Enrolling 3-year-olds in preschool can be particularly challenging because public preschools give priority to 4- and 5-year-olds, and most programs require students to be potty trained, which is less likely among 3-year-olds.

Figure 6: Preschool Enrollment for Foster Youth Ages 3–5, Fresno County



**Fresno County Data Notes:** The sample sizes were 173 children in 2012–13 and 252 children in 2013–14. Five-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten were included in the enrollment counts. Data are from California's Child Welfare Services Case Management System. Information was extracted in May of 2013 and 2014.



## ORANGE COUNTY

The County Department of Education is the lead agency in Orange County for the Education Equals Partnership. In the first year of early implementation, the county experienced a number of notable highlights and also took advantage of opportunities to improve or refine existing practices. This section profiles one implementation and one data highlight.

### Implementation Highlight

#### Goals met for completion of Educational Progress Reports

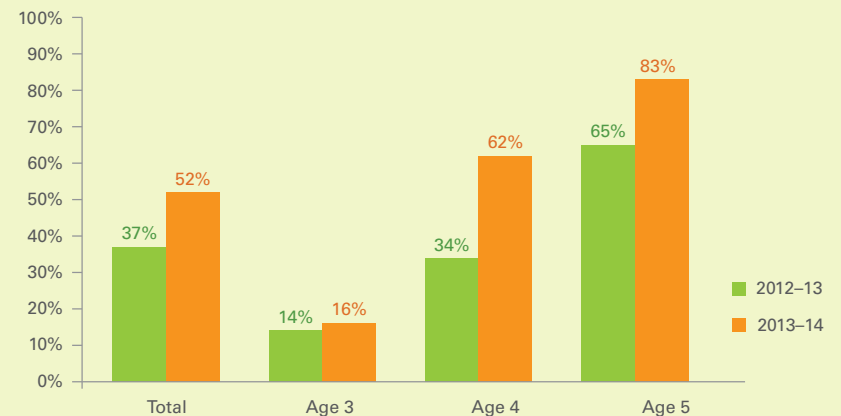
Orange County ramped up production of its Educational Progress Reports. These reports provide information, such as the youth's school enrollment, educational rights holder information, test scores, special education information, grade point averages, credit summaries for high school students, recent grades, and a summary of interventions/ supports and graduation status if youth are in high school. Educational Progress Reports are shared with the foster youth school district liaison, social worker (who includes them in his/her reports to the Court), Court Appointed Special Advocates, and caregivers—all of whom are encouraged to share the reports with the youth. Orange County staff continues to improve the process of ensuring that foster youth entering the dependency system have an Educational Progress Report completed within 60 days and for every status review court hearing. Orange County completed a total of 1,650 Educational Progress Reports from July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014, for *1,296 unduplicated youth*. This was an increase from 929 reports with 806 unduplicated youth in 2012–13.

### Data Highlight

#### Preschool enrollment increased for 4- and 5-year-olds in Orange County

Preschool enrollment increased substantially for Orange County's foster youth ages 3 through 5 between the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years. Increases occurred at each of the three ages and were particularly large among 4- and 5-year-olds. As noted in the discussion of Fresno's preschool enrollment, enrolling 3-year-olds in preschool can be particularly challenging because public preschools give priority to 4- and 5-year-olds.

Figure 7: Preschool Enrollment for Foster Youth Ages 3–5, Orange County



**Orange County Data Notes:** The sample sizes were 244 in 2012–13 and 208 in 2013–14. Five-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten were included in the enrollment counts. Data were extracted from California's Child Welfare Services Case Management System in May of 2013 and 2014.

## SACRAMENTO COUNTY

The County Office of Education is the lead agency in Sacramento County for the Education Equals Partnership. In the first year of early implementation, the county experienced a number of notable implementation highlights, as well as opportunities to turn lessons learned into improved practices for the county and the broader Partnership. This section profiles one implementation and one data highlight.

### Implementation Highlight

#### New supports for 3- to 5-year-olds

For the first time, the County Office of Education developed specific systematic practices to better support the educational needs of foster children ages 3 through 5. In the fall of 2013, an Education Liaison began designing these practices, including researching the programs and services available to these children and establishing partnerships with some of the providers. The Education Liaison then assessed the enrollment status of all children ages 3–5 by checking Foster Focus for a current enrollment record and then calling the caregiver of any child who was not noted in Foster Focus as enrolled. The Education Liaison offered the caregiver assistance in enrolling the child in preschool. She also incorporated what she learned through these calls with caregivers in the development of “how to enroll” resources, which the county now provides to agency partners and foster parents.

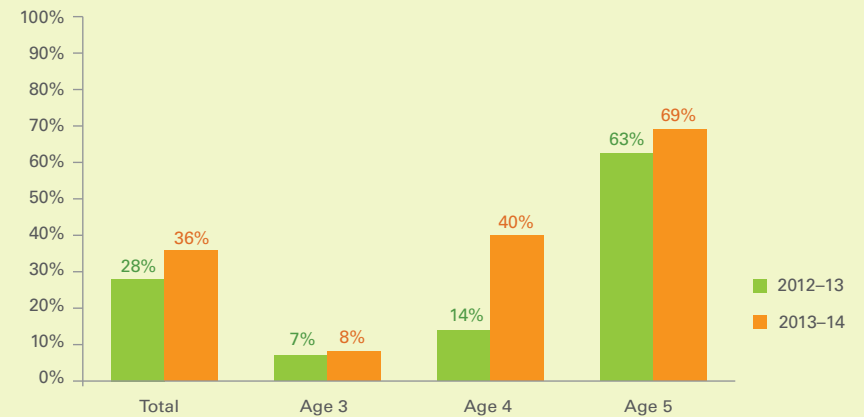


### Data Highlight

#### Large increase in preschool enrollment among Sacramento County’s 4-year-old foster youth

Preschool enrollment increased for Sacramento County’s foster youth, with a very large jump among 4-year-olds. An Education Liaison focused on supporting foster youth ages 3 through 5 whom she had identified as not yet being enrolled in school. Furthermore, additional children were added to waitlists for preschool (data not shown in figure).

**Figure 8: Preschool Enrollment for Foster Youth Ages 3–5, Sacramento County**



**Sacramento County Data Notes:** The sample sizes were 141 in 2012–13 and 251 in 2013–14. Five-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten were included in the enrollment counts. Data were extracted from Foster Focus in May of 2013 and 2014.

## SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

The overall objectives of FosterEd—Santa Cruz’s approach to supporting foster youth—are similar to the core elements of Education Equals. As noted earlier in this report, Santa Cruz County joined the Education Equals Partnership towards the end of the 2013–14 school year, but in many ways they were ahead of the other counties in terms of implementation, as they began their program in the 2012–13 school year.

A unique feature of the Santa Cruz program is that it is led by a nonprofit organization, the National Center for Youth Law, rather than a public agency. This section profiles one implementation and one data highlight.

### Implementation Highlight

#### Use of technology links the adults who support foster youth

FosterEd: Santa Cruz uses Goalbook, an online educational case management tool, to set educational goals for each foster youth in the program, track progress on those goals, and generally communicate about the education of the student, including celebrating successes. The FosterEd staff (or Education Liaisons) create a Goalbook team for each FosterEd student and invite key stakeholders (such as the youth’s social worker, teacher, Court Appointed Special Advocate, and caregiver) to join

the student’s education team in Goalbook. Students are welcome to attend and participate in the team meeting as developmentally appropriate. Based on an assessment of the youth’s educational strengths and needs, the team identifies goals for the youth to list within Goalbook.

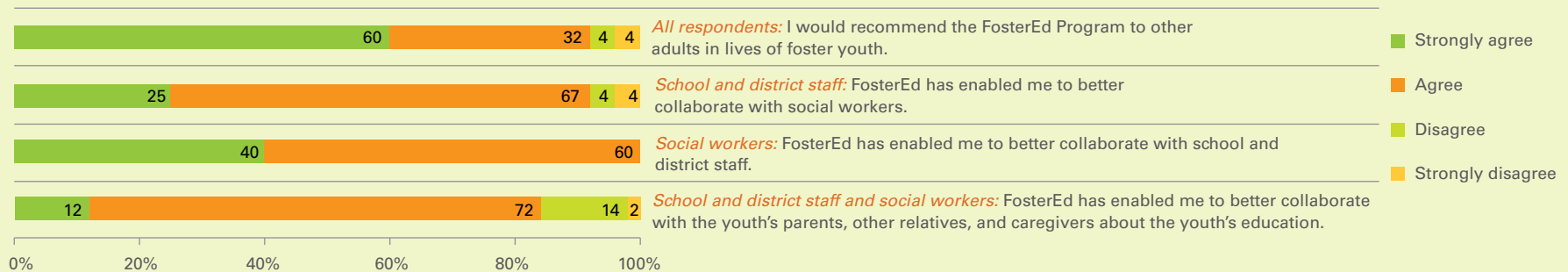
During 2014, 183 youth had an education team assembled in Goalbook, with 693 goals set for these youth. The education teams involved 910 adult team members. Some adults served on multiple teams. There were 316 unique adults who served across the 183 teams. Seventy-three percent of the teams had at least four adult team members, while 24 percent had three and 4 percent had two adult team members.

### Data Highlight

#### Adults in the lives of foster youth report improved collaboration


Adults who served on a foster youth’s education team were asked for their feedback on the FosterEd program via a survey. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 92 percent “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” that they would recommend FosterEd to other adults in the lives of foster youth. Almost all social workers and school and district staff reported that FosterEd enabled them to better collaborate with each other, and 84 percent felt it helped them to collaborate with foster youths’ parents and caregivers.

**Figure 9: Feedback from Adult Team Members About the FosterEd: Santa Cruz Program**



**Santa Cruz County Data Notes:** There were 220 adult team members who were asked to complete a survey soliciting feedback on the FosterEd: Santa Cruz Program. Of those, 118 (54 percent) completed the survey, including 48 school and district staff, 23 parents and caregivers, 21 Court Appointed Special Advocates, 10 social workers, and 16 other adults (such as mental health workers).

It should not be surprising that the Education Equals Partnership has evolved over time, and implementation efforts have yielded a number of lessons learned. These lessons learned are shared with the hope of helping others working to better support the educational experience and outcomes of foster youth.



*Our goal is to be as transparent as possible so that others who are embracing the challenge of making formerly invisible youth visible can accelerate their efforts.*

**1** *Practices must be customized for each county.* At its inception, the Partnership planned to develop highly-specified new practices to be uniformly implemented in all counties. However, early in the process, the partners quickly discovered the need for greater flexibility to allow each county to tailor proposed new practices to best fit its region's unique assets and conditions. This led to an overall shift from uniformity to the development of a set of core elements that are shared across all of the sites, with each county then developing its own individual practices within these core elements. This shift was intentional and based on the acknowledgment that a one-size-fits-all approach does not translate easily into system-level impact.

**2** *Collaboration requires resources, including investments of staff time.* In each of the demonstration counties, effective cross-agency collaborations have been built. These collaborations required a significant investment of staff time as well as, in some cases, dedicated shared office space to enable real-time collaboration. In Sacramento, following several months of frequent meetings and agreed-upon action items, a strong partnership with school district has resulted in better coordinated services for foster youth. The Santa Cruz Community Leadership Team, comprised of members representing county agencies and community-based organizations, was formed approximately one year before the launch of the FosterEd program. This leadership team met monthly in the first year and then quarterly during the first and second year of implementation to design the program and clarify the role each agency would play.



**3** *Early involvement and buy-in from front-line practitioners is key.* The process of developing the education screen to identify the students' educational strengths and needs was led by researchers with review by other members of the Partnership, including the county leads. When the screen was introduced to the Education Liaisons, the front-line practitioners who would be implementing the tool, it became clear that they should have been involved in earlier stages of its development. The Education Liaisons had important insights that could have been incorporated earlier and likely would have resulted in stronger initial support for the screen.

**4** *Assigning an Education Liaison specifically for the preschool population yields results.* For the first time, Orange and Sacramento Counties focused efforts on 3- through 5-year-olds, modeling what Fresno County has been doing for these young children since 2009. While each county has developed its own tailored approach, all three counties have assigned an Education Liaison to focus on this population. Having a dedicated staff person to attend to the education needs of these young children provided focus and allowed for the development of an expertise to best meet the needs of preschool-aged children.

**5** *Linking child welfare and education data is critical to supporting foster youth.* And it is currently quite challenging. Similar to most large projects, data sharing and uniformity is a challenge. Linking districts with Foster Focus, the data system used by the Partnership to combine child welfare and education data, is progressing more slowly than initially expected. The effort has been challenged by the variety of district data management systems used across the state, including within counties. Furthermore, there are some differences in the content and format of district data, even among those using the same type of data management system. Some districts changed data management systems during the course of the Partnership, requiring repeated efforts to link the new system with Foster Focus.




## Education Equals Partnership: A Look Ahead

The Partnership plans to undertake a variety of important steps over the next two years, including:

- 1** *Dynamic youth partnerships.* Youth leaders will be engaged in a meaningful way at multiple levels within Education Equals. Youth leaders and other adults in the Partnership will continue to co-create effective collaboration strategies and practices, so that the lived experiences, insights, and individual talents of the young leaders become infused throughout the Partnership.
- 2** *Integrated common agenda and county-led tailoring of practice.* Counties will continue to translate Education Equals' vision and common agenda into tailored implementation practices that integrate with and enhance existing county efforts. Counties will assume additional leadership roles to guide the Partnership and lead county partnerships.
- 3** *Deepening engagement with school districts.* School districts have multiple demands and priorities. It is important to understand their structures and challenges in order to collaborate effectively with school districts to realize the promise of the Local Control Funding Formula. The relationships between county leads and school districts will deepen as they develop concrete collaborations to support their foster youth and the implementation of their Local Control Accountability Plans.
- 4** *Enhanced portfolio tools.* The Partnership will continue to expand and enhance tools, such as electronic alerts and reporting mechanisms, to provide real-time data to practitioners to proactively support youth and improve their educational experiences. To strengthen efforts to link child welfare and education data, the Partnership is actively developing strategies to leverage the new Local Control Funding Formula requirement that districts report performance data for their foster youth to the state.
- 5** *Expanded community of practice.* The Partnership will focus on growing and enriching the Community of Practice by expanding beyond the four demonstration counties and targeting a wider set of stakeholders. This will be accomplished with new tools, focused learning sessions, and ongoing outreach to connect and cross-pollinate best practices. The Community of Practice will also provide more tools and resources on the EqualFutures.org website, designed to support school districts, county offices of education, community-based organizations, and other agencies committed to improving educational outcomes for students from foster care. An expanded community will allow the Partnership to broaden its reach, refine its approach, and test multiple strategies to ultimately support the educational experience of foster youth.
- 6** *A cohesive and reinforcing policy-to-practice cycle.* The Partnership will bolster its efforts to surface effective practices at the policy level and translate policies to effective practices at the local level. To ensure that students from foster care are able to leverage landmark education reform in California, it is critical that policies are developed with a youth-centered focus, and that youth voice becomes a key driver of decisions made at the state and local level.





*“This work can seem daunting and can feel like the needle is never moving in the direction of progress. The Partnership has the ability to create opportunities for foster youth where we haven’t seen them before. It has created a venue for change to be a possibility. Small victories are important. Every meeting is a small victory. I am excited to continue this work.”*

— Kenyon Whitman, Foster Youth Ambassador,  
Ph.D. Student - University of San Diego

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Igniting the power and potential of students from foster care

Education Equals Partnership is a program of the Stuart Foundation in collaboration with Fresno County Department of Social Services, Orange County Department of Education, Sacramento County Office of Education, and Santa Cruz County Office of Education. Connect to the power and potential of a student in foster care today. Learn more at [EducationEquals.org](http://EducationEquals.org).



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