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School Instability Among Foster Youth in Los Angeles County

Risk Factors and Perspectives of the County's Transportation Initiative

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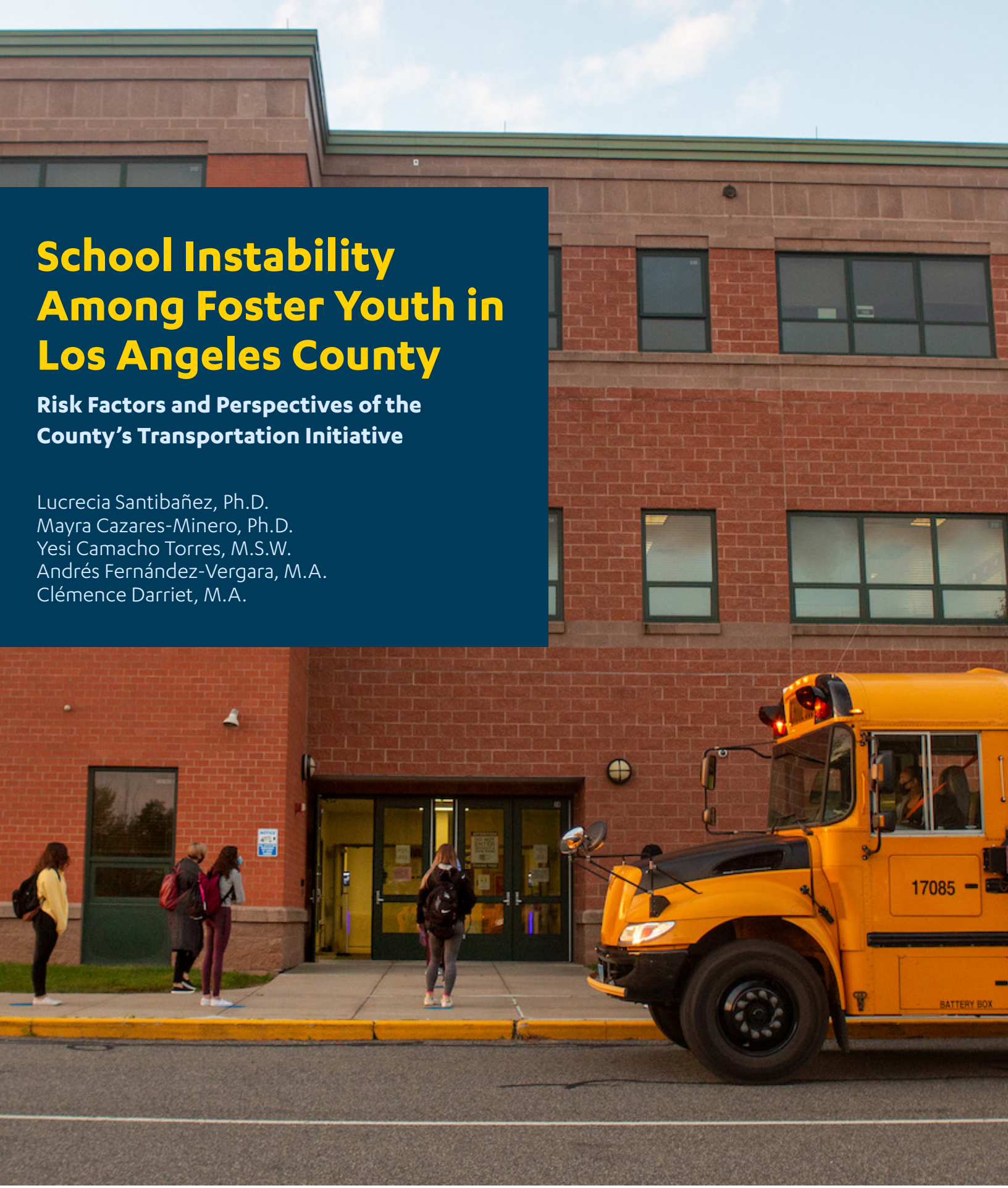

UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A significant proportion of students in foster care experience high home placement mobility, often necessitating school changes *(Simsek et al., 2021)*. **These frequent school changes negatively affect the academic and socio-emotional well-being of foster youth** *(Gasper, DeLuca & Estacion, 2012; Heck, Reid & Leckie, 2022; Zorc et al., 2013)*.

Because school instability can be disruptive to youth in foster care, school districts and child welfare organizations must find a way to support students who wish to remain in their school of origin (SOO). In fact, youth in foster care have the legal right to remain in their SOO when facing a home placement change if it is in their best interest, as determined by their educational rights holder (ERH). One key barrier to remaining in the SOO is providing transportation to take a child from a new home placement — which could be out of the school's attendance zone or even in another school district — to school. To facilitate remaining in the SOO, local and state education agencies (LEAs and SEAs) must develop guidelines for providing transportation to and from the new home placement to school. In 2017, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), in conjunction with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and the Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection (OCP) partnered together to implement a two-year pilot program to provide transportation to youth wishing to remain in their SOO through a private ride service for children. Currently, this service is available in districts serving the vast majority of foster youth in the County.

The purpose of this study is to examine L.A. County's transportation initiative in terms of its potential impact on school instability for foster youth. To do this, we collected and analyzed stakeholder, caregiver, and parent perceptions of the initiative. In addition, we analyzed data from HopSkipDrive (the primary private ride service) to understand usage patterns. Lastly, we used de-identified district data to explore school instability for foster youth in one school district. **Our analysis yielded the following findings: (1) Scholars, policymakers, school officials,**

and advocates all agree that school stability benefits youth in foster care, provided they wish to remain in their SOO. (2) Current resource caregiver reimbursement rates may not be enough to cover the cost of transporting children whose SOO is many miles away. (3) The processes that have been established to deal with these decisions expose tensions, communication, and coordination challenges for districts and child welfare agencies. Moreover, in some cases district officials may not completely understand a foster family's situation and may engage in deficit-thinking around foster parents' responsibilities. And lastly, (4) often transportation becomes a key barrier and concerns about cost could override the youth's wishes and best-interest-determination decisions. Although the transportation initiative (and HopSkipDrive in particular) is seen as expensive by many district stakeholders, the alternative (i.e., providing bus service) could be even more costly.

To ensure that students who wish to remain in their SOO or who would benefit from staying in their SOO can do so, we recommend that the best interest determination (BID) process be examined to make sure that it is blind to the need for additional transportation. Even though SOO rights stem from unfunded legal mandates, it is imperative that more funding be allocated to school of origin transportation services. Moreover, districts should increase staff who are well trained and informed on students in foster care. School and DCFS officials should also continue to provide foster caregivers with services and support to help them navigate the complex socio-emotional needs of youth in their care. These services and supports may reduce caregiver burnout and reduce the need for youth in foster care to change placements and schools as frequently. Lastly, inter-agency collaboration between school districts and child welfare agencies should be strengthened even further, especially collaboration and communication between social workers and school administrators.

INTRODUCTION

According to the California Department of Education (CDE), in the 2022–23 school year, 34.5% of students in foster care in Los Angeles County experienced school instability, compared to only 10.4% of socioeconomically disadvantaged students and 9.5% of all students.

Although instability rates for students in foster care have been on a downward trend since 2018, the fact that more than one-third of students change schools in the middle of the year, every year, is cause for concern. Research underscores the negative academic and socio-emotional consequences of school instability for both students in foster care *(Gasper, DeLuca & Estacion, 2012; Heck, Reid & Leckie, 2022; Zorc et al., 2013)* and their low-income peers without histories in foster care *(Xu, Hannaway & D'Souza 2009: Gasper, DeLuca & Estacion, 2012; de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Kerbow, 1996)*. Although some research highlights the benefits of changing to schools that are a better fit for students academically or socially, that offer enrichment or specialized programs, or that offer better resources, changing schools is a disruptive experience for students nonetheless *(Schwartz, Steifel & Cordes, 2017; Rumberger, 2015)*.

Youth in foster care have the right to remain in their school of origin. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2016) requires state and local education agencies SEAs and LEAs to develop guidelines for providing transportation to keep youth in foster care in their current school when facing a change in home placement. In California, Assembly Bill 490 (AB 490) gives youth in foster care the right to remain in their SOO if it is in their best interest, as determined by their educational rights holder (ERH). Additional state legislation gives students the right to transfer coursework, complete graduation requirements, etc. (AB 167, AB 216, AB 1735). Still, many youth in foster care continue to change schools at an alarmingly high rate even when — in theory — many of them should have the option to remain in their school of origin. Although all student moves must be discussed in a best interests determination (BID) meeting (attended by district and school officials, foster caregivers, and social workers), the high rates of school instability among foster youth highlight risk factors and barriers to school continuity that are unique to this student population.

One key barrier to remaining in the SOO is providing transportation to take a child from a new home placement — which could be out of the school's attendance zone or even in another school district — to school. Because all federal and state mandates are not funded — i.e., they do not provide SEAs or LEAs with additional dollars to cover these transportation costs — districts must use funds provided through the Local Control Funding Formula to serve youth in foster care, funds that are to be used for all support and other services provided to this population.

To counter these challenges, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), in conjunction with the Los Angeles County Department for Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles

Unified School District (LAUSD), and the Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection (OCP) partnered together to implement a $6 million two-year pilot between 2017 and 2019 to provide and fund SOO transportation using a private vendor. In 2019, 46 additional LEAs in Los Angeles County had signed transportation agreements (through Memorandums of Understanding, or MOUs) between them and DCFS outlining cost-sharing procedures (50/50 between DCFS and districts) to cover the costs of a private ride service vendor contracted by the county, HopSkipDrive (HSD). The transportation initiative is now present in districts serving about 85% of the county's foster youth.

The purpose of this study is to examine L.A. County's transportation initiative in terms of its potential impact on school instability for foster youth. To do this, we collected and analyzed stakeholder, caregiver, and parent perceptions of the initiative. In addition, we analyzed data from HopSkipDrive (the primary private transportation vendor) to understand usage patterns. Lastly, we used de-identified district data to explore school instability for foster youth in one school district. Results from this work will help inform future initiatives and coordination efforts to fund this important mandate.

Methods

Qualitative data collection took place between March 2022 and June 2024. Data was collected through interviews with stakeholders, youth, and resource caregivers. Sixteen stakeholders, including district foster youth liaisons, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) staff, advocacy organizations, and a children's lawyer, were interviewed during 2022–2023. For the participant interviews, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for interviews. This sampling method involves deliberately choosing participants based on specific attributes relevant to the research question, allowing for the collection of rich, detailed information from a diverse population subset *(Kelly, 2010)*. DCFS provided the research team with a list of resource families, from which a researcher contacted each family via phone call and text to invite them to participate in the study. Four caregivers and five youth shared their experiences with and perceptions of the transportation initiative during late 2023 and early 2024. All interviews were conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform. The primary data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews. To ensure consistency and comprehensiveness, the researchers developed and used an interview guide containing key questions to guide the conversation. This approach allowed for flexibility in exploring topics that emerged during the interviews while maintaining focus on the research objectives. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were then analyzed using Dedoose coding software. In the initial coding phase, two research team members independently open-coded two interviews. They then met to develop a preliminary codebook. A second round of coding was conducted on one interview to refine and finalize the codebook. The final codebook was structured around three primary themes: administrative considerations, the HopSkipDrive process and its impact, and instances of absenteeism. This systematic approach ensured a comprehensive and consistent analysis of the qualitative data, allowing for the identification of key themes and patterns across participants' experiences.

The quantitative part of the study used de-identified data provided by HopSkipDrive and Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). HSD data were analyzed using standard statistical software. LBUSD data were analyzed using regression analysis to estimate the relationship between school instability and student characteristics and behaviors. In addition, we used LBUSD data to dig deeper into patterns of midyear student mobility. This analysis used data from school years 2014–15 to 2022–23 from students enrolled in LBUSD representing slightly over 150,000 unduplicated students enrolled in 88 different schools in the district. From this sample, a total of 4,700 student records were flagged as being in foster care, or between 400 and 700 students each school year.

School Instability Among Foster Youth: Causes and Consequences

School instability is disruptive for most students *(Gasper et al., 2012; Haveman et al., 2015)*. **Frequent changes can disrupt learning and social connections, especially when these moves happen in the middle of the year** *(Engec, 2006; Grigg, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2009)*. **Low-income and other vulnerable students are most susceptible to the negative impact of midyear student mobility** *(Schwartz et al., 2009)*.

While it is an unfortunate reality that many students need to change schools, sometimes unexpectedly, schools can mediate the impact of the move — in other words, depending on the school a student moves to and the support and resources it has in place, the move can be more or less disruptive. Emerging research shows, for example, that when students move to a higher-performing school than the one they left, the academic impact on student outcomes is lessened *(Santibañez et al., 2024)*.

The histories of trauma and other individual- and family-related characteristics that disproportionately affect youth in foster care are related to a higher incidence of school instability *(Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019)*. Mental health challenges, material hardship, disabilities, and negative relationships with their resource caregiver (previously referred to as "foster parents or caregivers") are all related to higher school instability *(Barnett et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2020; Hyde and Kammerer, 2009; Gottfried et al., 2019)*. There are also systems-related factors that affect the ability of youth in foster care to attend the same school consistently. These include limited cross-sector collaboration and communication between education and child welfare systems, staff turnover and inadequate training in education and child welfare systems, and the types of placements found by child protective services.

Allowing students who wish to remain in their SOO after a residential move is critical for youth in foster care because, in many cases, these youth have already experienced adverse childhood experiences that can have long-lasting consequences on educational outcomes. We know that on average, youth with histories in foster care demonstrate worse academic outcomes compared to their peers in the general population and their low-income peers *(Bruskas, 2008; Morton, 2017, Clemens et al., 2016)*. They also have higher average suspension and expulsion rates *(Morton, 2015)*, lower college enrollment rates *(Courtney et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2004)*, and lower college persistence and degree completion rates *(Okpych & Courtney, 2021)*.

One of the main barriers to staying in their SOO for youth in foster care is transportation. The literature has found that students with longer commute times from their home placement to school change schools more often than those with shorter commutes, and that students often change schools to move closer to home *(Stein et al., 2020)*. Daily stressors, including long commute times, build over time and increase the likelihood of school transfer *(Stein et al., 2020)*. Commuting to work for adults is also linked to higher physiological

and psychological stress and results in negative behaviors (absences, lateness, etc.) at work *(Liu, Ettema & Helbich, 2022)*. For this reason, parents and caregivers sometimes choose to move their children to a new school that better accommodates their work and other schedules.

Transportation is a federally reimbursable cost for resource caregivers under Title IV-E, but the basic foster family home rate is not intended to cover the extraordinary expenses of long commutes to school. In 2023, the Educational Travel Rate reimbursement per month per child was $250 for the 14-18 mile bracket (considered a "long commute"). Moreover, the reimbursement is intended to cover only the costs of daily transportation to and from the school; other education-related transportation expenses such as transportation to and from extracurricular activities, sports-related activities, school dances, after-school activities, parent-teacher conferences, and instances when the caregiver needs to travel to the school to pick up the child for appointments or illnesses are likely to surpass the payment given to resource caregivers through the Educational Travel reimbursement.

Table 1. Distance From Foster Care to School of Origin (SOO), and Travel Rate Per Child

Distance From Foster Care Placement To School Of Origin (In Miles), One-Way	Educational Travel Rate Per Month Per Child
Up to three miles	**$0**
4 to 8 miles	**$58**
9 to 13 miles	**$154**
14 to 18 miles	**$250**
19 to 23 miles	**$347**
24 or more miles	**$443**

Source: All County Letter No. 11-51

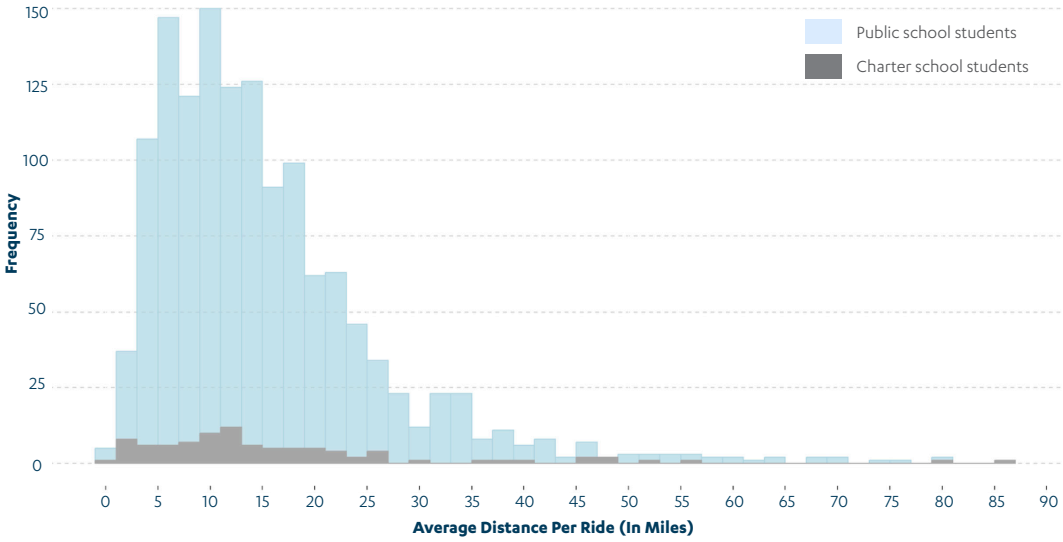
To alleviate transportation barriers to school stability, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), and Los Angeles County school districts entered into a collaborative agreement known as the "Los Angeles School of Origin Transportation Initiative." The effort sought to provide and fund transportation for foster youth to their schools of origin using alternative means to traditional school transportation options (i.e., school buses or public transit passes). The key innovation in this initiative was to provide transportation to youth wishing to remain in their SOO through a private vendor, ride-share service approved to transport minors. In 2019 the county's transportation initiative was fully implemented with HopSkipDrive (HSD) as the primary ride vendor.

KEY FINDING 1

Most students in foster care used the rideshare service for three months to cover distances around 10 miles.

An analysis of HSD data shows that in an average 10-month period, students used HopSkipDrive services for an average of 3.4 months. The shortest service duration for a single rider was one day, while the longest was 2.1 years. Most students used HopSkipDrive services for an average of 3.4 months, and the distance for most of these rides was around 10 miles. However, a non-trivial percentage of rides were longer than 20 miles (See **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Average Distance Traveled per Youth in a 10-Month Period, by Charter and Traditional Public District



Note: Average distance is for a 10-month period, calculated from the total distance traveled per youth across 10 months divided by the total number of rides in that same period. Data is grouped by youths attending charters (n = 91) and traditional public schools (n = 1,361)

The average cost to the district of a one-way HSD ride was $53. Assuming that the average student uses HSD for about three months for two rides each day (to and from school), this equates to 90 rides for a total cost of $4,800 for those three months, or about $1,600 per month. This is much higher than the current travel reimbursement for families traveling 14-18 miles one-way to their student's school of origin ($250) and explains why, in our interviews with school districts, there was a common concern that the cost of HSD was unsustainable.

KEY FINDING 2

School instability disrupts continuity for students in foster care.

Stakeholders and participants mostly shared positive perceptions about their ability to stay in their SOO. In particular, stakeholders felt that school stability creates continuity for youth in the often unpredictable environment of foster care. A foster youth liaison highlighted the importance of keeping youth in their SOO so that they can continue to receive support and services from a consistent school team:

"Well, definitely keeping kids in their school of origin and providing that stability for the children [is beneficial]. I think even for kids that are having a difficult time with their behavior and academically at their school of origin, it's still providing them that stability because we're able to follow through [and monitor their progress]. And there's not as much interruption in trying to get them the supports that they need because when they go to a new school, the process starts all over again and records aren't available and all of that stuff."

Stakeholders spoke of the positive impact HopSkipDrive has had on the academic outcomes and socio-emotional well-being of students in foster care. One foster youth liaison mentioned that HopSkipDrive transportation allowed students in foster care to graduate with their class and maintain their friendships. The guarantee of transportation has allowed students in foster care to work hard in school and to organize their time around pickup for school by waking up early and being ready in time. A child welfare staff member told us:

"They've been able to get the transportation to come to their school and graduate with their friends, and just continue to have those friendships and just [be in school with] people that they know and be able to finish in that manner. So that's definitely a huge, huge success. Sometimes they've even worked harder at doing better in school with their grades when they know that they're going to be given the transportation, the opportunity to still continue. So it's almost like, 'Okay, I'm up early,' and things like that, and, 'I'm there,' and, 'I don't want to leave. I don't want to transfer to another school.' So they're more willing to do whatever it takes because they know that [they] can be cut off [from the transportation initiative]."

Resource caregivers felt that transportation support through HSD provided a consistent routine and a sense of continuity for youth. Resource caregivers mentioned that HopSkipDrive transportation has helped them build a consistent routine with their foster child: "Now we have a routine ... every single day." Another resource caregiver elaborated: "They have [my foster child's] schedule set up for morning and afternoon when she gets out of school. They're here in the morning on time, they're picking her up on time." A resource caregiver described how HopSkipDrive made it easy for them to modify pickup times for their child and that they're very helpful. Another resource parent shared that consistent transportation allowed their foster child to build relationships with additional trusted adults, including HopSkipDrive drivers.

"One [driver] that she really liked ... she really engaged with him ... she would come home and say things [like] "oh he', dah, dah, dah, dah' [...] he gave her [$10] for her birthday."

KEY FINDING 3

The transportation initiative provides convenience and flexibility and contributes to school stability for foster youth.

One resource caregiver emphasized the importance of SOO transportation for their foster child, especially considering the multiple children living in their household. Without SOO transportation, the resource parent said, it would be challenging for them to transport all their children to their respective schools, take them to their appointments, and also fulfill their other responsibilities.

"I had a set schedule at work, and it was difficult to change time and days to be available to drive [my foster child].... I have my [two] biological kids to worry about, and I would have doctor's appointment[s], this and that. And if I had to take them to school back and forth, I [would] have time for absolutely nothing."

A county staff member echoed this sentiment:

"There is a [state] program that allows for caregiver reimbursement, but we ... actually looked at data very early on in the process and we figured out that students are often placed pretty far away from their school of origin communities ... [and] sometimes the caregiver has multiple youth in their homes. So, if they have to go to school[s] of origin that are in different places, it's just not possible."

A foster unit supervisor at a school district shared that placements farther from a youth's SOO present logistical challenges for resource families. Although resource caregivers are reimbursed for transportation, not all resource caregivers are willing or have the capacity to transport their foster children to school themselves.

"I remember when I was in this 12, 13 years ago, 'Oh, we're going to start paying parents for mileage 62 cents' or I don't know, whatever. That didn't change one bit my foster parents' attitudes. They did not care at all. It's about convenience. I don't care what anyone says. So if the foster kid cannot go where their [biological] kids go, they didn't want to deal with it.... So I mean, if you want to know what a social worker of 21 years thinks, the solution is, DCFS should be investing money in recruitment of [more foster] families. That way transportation isn't such a big issue because there's a lot of families everywhere. We have very [few] families, so that's why kids have to move or that's why we have to pay for a very expensive cap."

KEY FINDING 4

The transportation initiative helps foster youth to have a sense of agency, self-efficacy, and control over their choices.

Resource caregivers also mentioned that consistent transportation has allowed their foster children to advocate for themselves. One shared:

"[The opportunity to stay in her school of origin] kept her motivated and incentivized to remain in a familiar environment. She changed her ways and remained focused. She continues to thrive in every aspect of her life. It provided a sense of control to make some decisions in her life."

Some district officials felt the initiative communicated to students that they were valued. A district foster youth liaison highlighted that HopSkipDrive transportation communicates to students in foster care that they matter and are seen as important members of their school's community. A positive effect of that external validation is an increase in the self-efficacy of these students in their schoolwork and in their self-advocacy skills. The district official shared:

"It shows students that they're valued, that they matter, that we want them to stay at their school. So I feel like there has been, for some students, an improvement with that self-efficacy and just being able to do their work and just participate.... So that has been something positive where they're advocating for themselves and they're aware of their rights to stay at their school."

KEY FINDING 5

Stakeholders have real concerns with the fiscal sustainability of the transportation initiative.

This sentiment was echoed by almost everyone we talked to. Given the high cost of each ride relative to travel reimbursements for resource caregivers, HSD seemed extraordinarily expensive to most district staff. One foster youth liaison remarked:

"HopSkipDrive, oh my god, it's just very expensive and I'm very tight with my money.... And then if a kid continues the next year, we're talking about ten, fifteen thousand [dollars] a year to take a kid to school. It is just not right."

A DCFS administrator shared that the initiative was challenging to fund and that it was taking away funds for other programs that could have been provided by their department. A district foster liaison said that sometimes there were tensions between districts around who would pay for school of origin transportation, particularly in cases where a youth is the resident of one district but was attending their school of origin in a different district:

"And I do know that sometimes districts will fight with each other over the funding for it. Because there's a possible way to work it out where you can have districts split the responsibility and sometimes they'll really go to bat to be like, 'Well, [your district is responsible for this much money] and it's that far, so you should [pay this].' They really will haggle over it.... Because they don't want to pay for the transportation."

A foster youth liaison shared that their district was planning to include transportation funding as an eligible expenditure in their school transportation plans, as allowed by the California 2022 Budget Act.

"The one thing is that I know that there was recent legislation passed that will help to fund transportation costs, and we're looking at getting that into our LCAP [Local Control Accountability Plan-] so that we can receive those funds from the state to help reimburse. I think it's like 60% of the transportation costs. That'll be a significant help, so we're really happy that that's coming down."

A director said that both child welfare agencies and school districts have raised the issue of cost and staffing to support transportation efforts for students in foster care,also noting the need for sustainable state funding for this effort:

"But I've heard people say before [that] more funding and staffing support [are needed] for the extra work around this... Both DCFS and the districts have raised this, but I think it's more so on the district side, is the need for sustainable state funding for this effort.... A lot of the districts are using their Local Control and Accountability Plans, LCFF [Local Control Funding Formula] funds to fund this."

Directors noted that cost-sharing practices between districts and child welfare agencies vary across districts, with some districts funding all of transportation and others not paying for any transportation. Funding and cost-sharing for transportation are locally determined:

"There are districts paying all of it, or they're paying none of it. You have all kinds of different local things happening because ... every jurisdiction gets to make their own choices."

Stakeholders also mentioned that not every district has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with DCFS — a document specifying what services need to be provided and how the district and DCFS will handle all financial and logistical aspects of providing transportation — despite federal mandates to provide transportation to SOO for students in foster care. One foster youth liaison shared that students enrolled in schools without an MOU will often be moved to a school with an MOU so that they can receive transportation.

"Because I've heard that some [districts] aren't enrolled in the MOU, so they don't have funding to transport their student to their school of origin. And so often ... these kids are funneled or moved to a different school just so that they could get money to be transported to their school of origin."

KEY FINDING 6

Better collaboration, communication, and information-sharing is needed between schools and child welfare systems about foster care placement changes.

A district staff member shared the importance for public child welfare workers to inform a school when there is a home placement change so that the school (and district) can take measures to keep the youth in their school of origin.

"And then the bigger issue is, at least in LA County, the onus is on the child welfare department to let the school know that there's [been a] change.... I [would] say the biggest issue is the lack of communication ... because we find out when a kid leaves [their SOO] way after."

In addition, some stakeholders noted a lack of coordination between schools and child welfare agencies to respond to changes in placements or other that may affect the ability of the foster child to stay in their SOO or to continue their schooling uninterrupted:

"When kids move placements, it doesn't seem as if keeping the child in the school of origin is the automatic response. Usually, the kids are disenrolled from school, and then there's a couple of days when everyone's trying to figure out what to do with them before we get set up with HopSkipDrive and get them back in school. Or they just enroll in their other school and we never even knew they left. There's gaps in the system with the schools and the DCFS working together to try to keep the kids in school with consistent attendance. And that's the other thing, is that they move homes, and oftentimes it's a little bit of a distance away and it'll take a couple days to set up HopSkipDrive, but the resource caregivers won't transport them so there's no other way for them to get to school. We work as quickly as we can to get that referral in, and it's just of [a] couple days, but they won't drive them to school, so they miss those days."

One stakeholder felt that the issue was school districts not wanting to go through the process of setting up an MOU with DCFS that would provide funding for transportation by HSD, but would also come with increased monitoring. One education specialist who provides technical assistance in the foster care system in one of our districts mentioned:

"I know to this day, they're still trying to get more districts signed on [to HopSkipDrive], because if I'm not mistaken, we're still at like 50% of districts in LA County have actually signed on. So the districts that haven't, they basically are just assuming the financial responsibility, but I would also bet they're not transporting kids as frequently as they should, because there's at least a little more oversight in the MOU process. Because there's these notifications, folks know what's going on. And I have had a situation recently with one of my districts. They asked me, they said, 'Oh, we have a child that moved wherever, and we want to let them stay here, but it's really far. Do you think DCFS will help us share the [transportation] costs? I know they can share the costs.' And then we look it up, and we're like, 'You don't have an MOU with them. They're not going to just write you a check for this one student. They've been trying to get an MOU with you for the past five years.' So then we brought up the conversation again. 'Do you want to get the MOU? And then [DCFS can share in the transportation costs] for this child and future children, they can.' And they said, no. They were like, 'No thanks.' "

MIDYEAR STUDENT MOBILITY IN LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (LBUSD)*

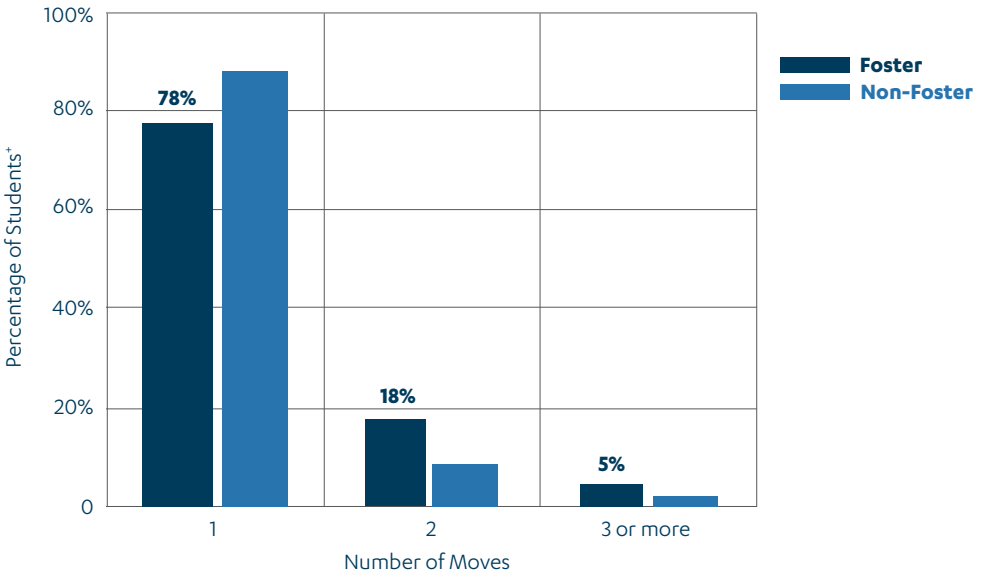
The research team also analyzed data from the ridesharing service and LBUSD to explore how school instability relates to student characteristics and behaviors.

01 More than one-quarter of students in foster care in LBUSD made a midyear move and, of those, most made only one midyear move. Most midyear moves among foster youth occur in the early elementary grades or in high school and happen between October and January.

Research has shown that midyear moves are particularly disruptive to students' academic trajectories *(Guarino et al., 2024)*. Using data from LBUSD, we analyzed the frequency of midyear moves among youth in foster care, the average distance traveled from home to school, and whether these distances change after a school move. These analyses use data from 2014–15 to 2022–23 school years, during which LBUSD had 4,700 observations representing 2,868 unique students designated as foster youth at some point (some exited the designation and some entered it during the time period under study). This is equivalent to about 520 unique students every year.

About 28% of foster students made a midyear move at some point. Midyear school instability rates for foster youth are high compared to the 15% midyear school mobility for students not in foster care. Most foster students (78%, n=983) making a midyear move made only one such move (18% made two, and 5% made three or more moves. See second and third dark blue bars in **Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Number of Moves Made by LBUSD Students Who Made a Midyear Move, 2015–16 to 2022–23

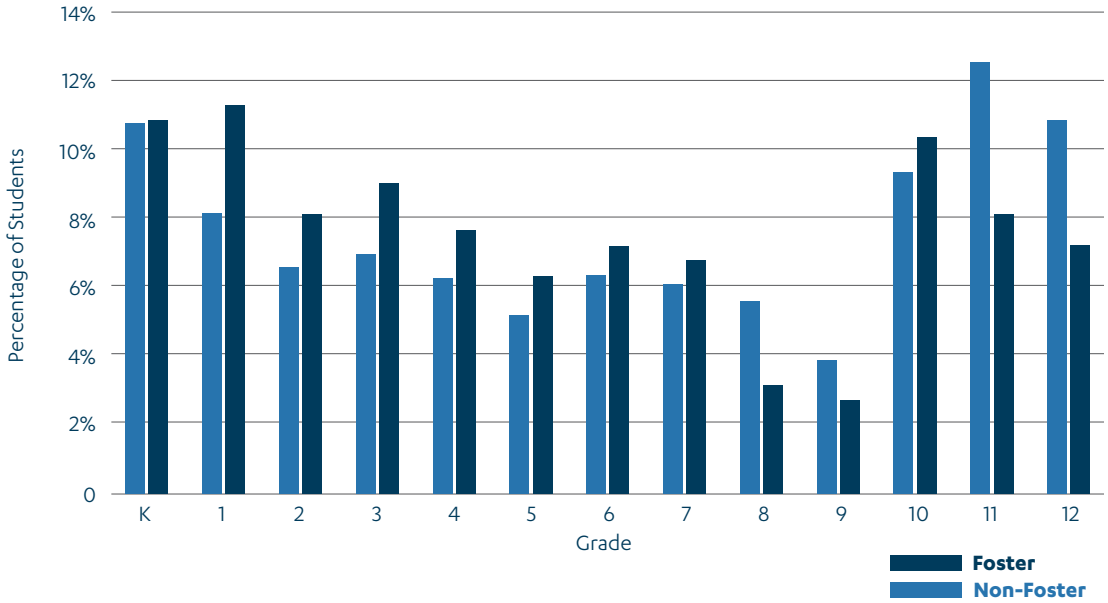


*This analysis is only for LBUSD because it was the only district in Los Angeles County that participated in the transportation initiative and agreed to share data for this study. LBUSD had 455 students in foster status in 2023-24 (this is the latest year for which there is public data on the CDE website). These students represent 0.007 of the districts' total enrollment. This proportion is comparable to the county (0.007) and slightly larger than the state's proportion of students in foster care out of total enrollment (0.005). LBUSD is representative of the County and State in terms of race/ethnicity of students in foster care. Out of its population of students in foster care, 0.019 are African-American and 0.006 are Latino. This is comparable to the County (0.020 and 0.006) and State (0.018 and 0.005).

+The proportion of students making 0, 1, 2 or more school moves.

The most common midyear moves among foster youth children occurred during kindergarten, grades 1-3 and grades 10-11 (See Figure 3). Compared to non-foster children, foster students were more likely to change schools in every grade except grades 8-9 and grades 11-12.

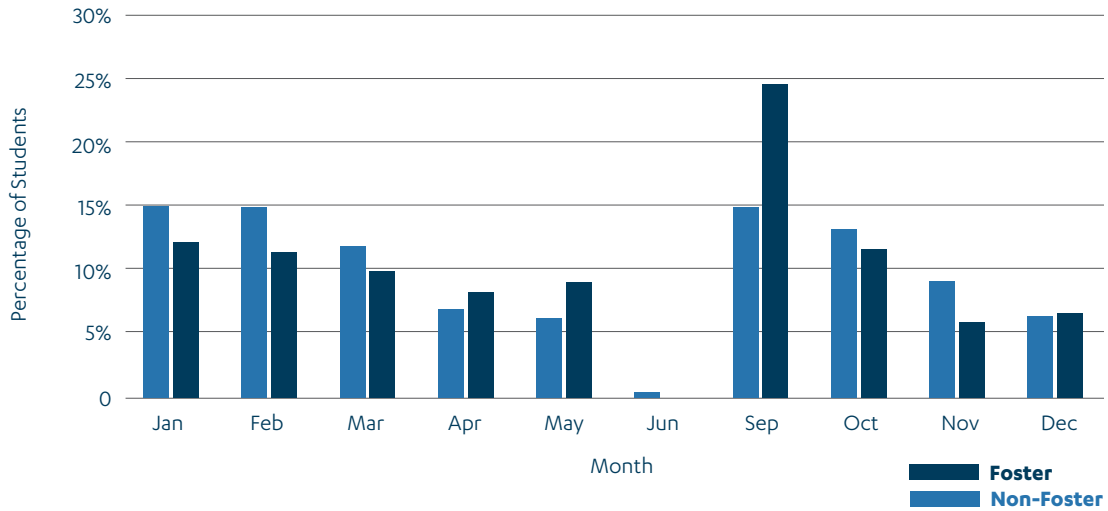
Figure 3. Proportion of LBUSD Students Making a Midyear Move by Grade and Foster Care Status, 2015–16 to 2022–23



Timing of Midyear Moves by Month

Figure 4 charts the proportion of students making a midyear school move by month. It shows that a high proportion of midyear moves among students in foster care happens in the period between October and January — this pattern differs from non-foster youth. Students who change schools in the middle of the year and are not in foster care move a great deal in September and October, but after that they tend to move at similar rates every month.

Figure 4. Proportion of LBUSD Students Making a Midyear Move by Month and Foster Care Status, 2015–16 to 2022–23



02 Students in foster care who change schools midyear move closer to their new schools than students not in foster care who move midyear.

The average distance between home and school was around 2.2 miles for youth in foster care (a similar distance than youth not in foster care). After a midyear move, foster youth students were, on average, 0.06 miles closer to their school, while non-foster youth were, on average, 0.06 miles further away. In other words, midyear moves (which may or may not have been prompted by changes in placements) resulted in foster youth living closer to their new schools than non-foster youth.* There is significant variation in where students end up after a midyear move, but Table 2 shows the home-to-school distance after a midyear move. On average, non-foster youth end up slightly farther away from their school after a midyear move (about half a mile farther) than youth in foster care–youth in foster care actually end up closer to school after a midyear move. However, foster youth tend to have a wider dispersion (range) of distances after a move (as seen by the larger standard deviation and narrower quartile ranges).

Table 2. Difference in Home-School Distance for Midyear Movers

	Non-foster	Foster
Mean Difference	**0.06**	**-0.07**
Standard deviation	**2.25**	**2.85**
25th percentile	**-0.21**	**-0.17**
50th percentile (median)	**0**	**0**
75th percentile	**0.46**	**0**

Discussion

What these data suggest is that (1) foster youth do move significantly more midyear than students not in foster care, (2) most foster children who move are in the early grades; only about 15% move in the last two years of high school and slightly less than half of these are in their senior year; (3) when foster students move, they end up closer to school/home, (4) most are moving early in the school year; (5) only about one-quarter (27%) of the midyear moves happen during March-May (the final months of the school year), when the service makes most sense. In other words, significant differences exist in who is moving, at what grade, and in which month. This suggests that the transportation initiative could be better targeted to serve these populations only so that costs can be more manageable. One issue to consider is that foster youth are consistently ending up closer to their new school, which suggests that school moves may be prompted by placement changes — which would mean that BID meetings are disproportionately resulting in school moves. While this is not necessarily a bad thing — it could indeed be the case that it is in the best interest of the child to move schools — the fact that it's so consistent may suggest that, at least in some cases, schools, districts and child welfare agencies are not finding ways for youth in foster care to stay in their SOO — should they wish to remain there. The relationship between school moves and placement changes should be investigated further with data that allows this analysis.

*Because we do not have accurate data on residential changes, we do not know whether the "new" distances (after a school move) result from students moving schools and placements or just from changing schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS AND SCHOOL STAFF TO REDUCE SCHOOL INSTABILITY

Scholars, policymakers, school officials, and advocates all agree that school stability benefits youth in foster care, provided they wish to remain in their SOO. When placement changes and schools are farther away, resource caregivers find it difficult to transport foster children — especially if they have several of them.

Even though they receive compensation, in some cases, this may not be enough to cover the cost of transporting children whose SOO is many miles away. In addition, the established processes that deal with these decisions expose tensions, communication, and coordination challenges for districts and child welfare agencies. In these cases, it becomes difficult to gauge whether the costs outweigh the benefits of staying at the current school — particularly when the costs are high and have to be borne immediately — but the benefits may not be immediately apparent. Transportation becomes a key barrier and concerns about cost can override the youth's wishes and best interest determination decisions.

L.A. County's transportation initiative is seen as a positive way to keep students in their SOO when logistical and other challenges prevent resource families from transporting these children. Overall, stakeholders and caregivers have positive opinions about the service, its quality, flexibility, and the autonomy it provides students. In addition, although the transportation initiative (and HSD in particular) is seen as expensive by many district stakeholders, the alternative (i.e. providing bus service) could be even more costly. Moreover, in some cases district officials may not completely understand a foster family's situation and may engage in deficit-thinking around foster parents' responsibilities.

Adequate funding, resources, and accessibility are crucial factors in supporting the educational continuity of youth in foster care. Collaboration across educational and child welfare entities is needed to ensure that these young people and their families are supported optimally. Many district stakeholders see cost as a significant barrier to districts providing transportation services through HSD. The fact that transportation costs are so high for districts could be a reason children who change placements are counseled to switch schools. This should be further investigated.

School instability is seen as disruptive for most students. Research shows that midyear mobility is particularly disruptive for students. To ensure that students who wish to remain in their SOO or who would benefit from staying in their SOO can do so, we recommend the following:

01 The BID process should be examined to make sure that it is blind to the need for additional transportation.

A renewed push should be made to understand whether it is in the best interest of these children to remain in their SOO. One such examination should look into the BID process to ensure that everyone's voices are heard and that schools don't default to a change in schools because the BID process or figuring out how to pay for transporting youth — should they choose to remain in their SOO — is too costly.

02 More funding should be allocated to school of origin transportation services.

Because a subset of foster youth could greatly benefit from services like HSD, districts could think about targeting funds more strategically to benefit students who are most at risk for disruptive midyear moves: students in the last two years of high school, those moving after March, students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), or those who have a history of trauma that could be compounded by switching schools.

03 Increase staff who are well trained and informed on students in foster care.

District and DCFS administrators should continue to provide additional personnel in schools that are well trained and informed on the educational rights and socio-emotional needs of students in foster care. These staff should fully dedicate their time and expertise to engaging students in foster care and their families. These personnel should include school social workers, foster youth liaisons, and counselors.

04 Provide foster caregivers with resources and adequate support.

School and DCFS officials should continue to provide foster caregivers with services and support to help them navigate the complex socio-emotional needs of youth in their care. These services and supports may reduce caregiver burnout and reduce the need for youth in foster care to change placements and schools as frequently.

05 Strengthen district and DCFS collaboration.

Collaboration between school districts and child welfare agencies should continue to be strengthened, especially between social workers and school administrators. Social workers should strive to keep school administrators informed of when a school change is pending for a student in foster care and involve the educational rights holder of a youth in the decision-making process.

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