



EDUCATIONAL ADVOCATES FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN WASHINGTON STATE: PROGRAM BACKGROUND AND TRENDS

In 2006, the Washington State Legislature authorized the statewide implementation of an Educational Advocacy program to help foster youth succeed in school. Approximately two Educational Advocacy Coordinators (EACs) are available in each of six regions throughout the state to assist foster students, parents, teachers, and social workers with education-related issues. The EACs provide information and referral services, consultation, and direct advocacy designed to keep foster youth engaged in school and progress toward graduation. Specifically, advocates may:

- assist students with accessing education support and special education services
- work to keep students in the same school or improve transition when a move occurs
- work with school on disciplinary matters to address problems and maintain enrollment
- help with making up high school credits or finding suitable alternative programs
- train caregivers, social workers, and students on educational rights and responsibilities.

The 2011 Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to “examine the child welfare and educational characteristics for foster youth who are served by educational advocates.” This report discusses the background of student participants and presents information on program activity. The report, however, does not include a comparison group analysis, which is needed to assess the impact of the program. A final evaluation report (due October 2012) will examine program effectiveness.

Summary

Since 2006, over 3,500 students in foster care have received assistance from an Educational Advocacy Coordinator. The Educational Advocacy program was started in order to help foster youth maintain enrollment, connect to school services, and progress academically. The program was first implemented in King County in 2001. Treehouse, the non-profit agency that developed the program model, now manages the statewide program under contract with the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). This includes training advocates, screening referrals, tracking outcomes, and developing instructional material for social workers, caregivers, and educators.

The 2011 Legislature directed the Institute to “examine the child welfare and educational characteristics for foster youth who are served by educational advocates.” During the 2009–10 school year, advocates spent nearly 8,200 hours assisting youth in foster care. This report describes the background and characteristics of those students served by advocates. We also examine placement mobility and school changes as well other educational outcomes (i.e. grade point average and graduation rate). Our final evaluation report in October 2012 will address the overall effectiveness of the program.

Suggested citation: Burley, M. (2011). *Educational advocates for foster youth in Washington State: Program background and trends* (Document No. 11-12-3903). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Program Participation

Youth in grades K–12 who have been placed in out-of-home care or are receiving services from the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children’s Administration are eligible to receive services from an Educational Advocate. Typically, a caseworker, foster parent, or social worker who identifies an education-related concern will make a referral to the program. DSHS contracts with Treehouse, a private, non-profit agency, to coordinate and administer the program.¹ Treehouse first started the Educational Advocacy program throughout King County in 2001.

For the statewide program, Treehouse staff screen the referrals and track progress of the advocacy efforts. Statewide referrals started in 2006, when Treehouse received the contract to replicate the advocacy program in all six DSHS regions. Each year, between 900 and 1,450 students receive assistance from an EAC through this program (Exhibit 1).²

Exhibit 1

**Number of Student With Educational Advocate:
2006–2010 School Years**

| School Year | Students Served | Average Days in Program |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 2006–07 | 1,165 | 154 |
| 2007–08 | 1,445 | 140 |
| 2008–09 | 1,125 | 147 |
| 2009–10 | 915 | 138 |
| 2010–11 | 997 | 158 |

Students may remain engaged with an advocate for several school years. Over the course of the study period, there were 3,649 students in the program. Exhibit 2 shows the number of new entrants by school year.

¹ <http://www.treehouse4kids.org/>

² Due to different selection criteria, participation numbers reported by the program may differ slightly from totals reported here.

Exhibit 2

**Enrollment Status of Students at Program Entry:
2006–2010 School Years**

| School Year | Program Intakes | Intakes With School Records |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 2006–07* | 983 | 794 |
| 2007–08* | 809 | 695 |
| 2008–09 | 619 | 546 |
| 2009–10 | 586 | 505 |
| 2010–11 | 652 | n/a |
| Total | 3,649 | 2,540 |

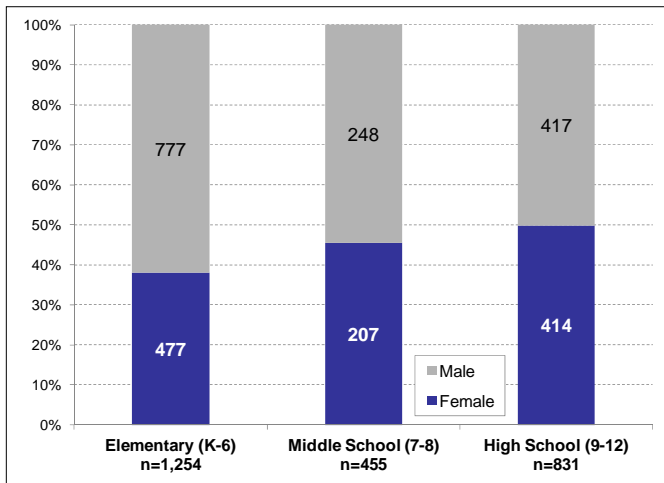
* Program eligibility rules changed at the end of the 2007–08 school year to give greater priority to youth in out-of-home (foster) care.

Under a data sharing agreement with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the DSHS Children’s Administration, we were able to obtain information on the foster care and school background of students in the educational advocacy program.³ School data for students enrolled during the 2010–11 school year were unavailable for this analysis. We were able to obtain information for 85 percent (n=2,540) of the students who were served before this school year (see Exhibit 2).

We did utilize program information to examine characteristics of youth in the study and those who could not be included. There were no (statistically) significant differences in gender, age, placement status (foster/group/relative), or educational status (general/special education) between study and non-study youth. Exhibit 3 (next page) shows the total students in the study (n=2,540) by grade level, and indicates that male students represent a higher percentage of the program population for younger students (elementary and middle school). Males and females are represented equally among high school-age participants.

³ All study procedures were approved by the DSHS Human Research Review Board. Program records were matched to school enrollment data by OSPI staff, who removed personally identifiable information from the research dataset.

Exhibit 3
Program Participants by Grade and Gender



WSIPP, 2011

Students served by Educational Advocates are also more likely to be a racial or ethnic minority (Exhibit 4). About 38 percent of K–12 students in Washington State have a racial/ethnic background other than Caucasian. Approximately half of all participants in the Educational Advocacy program, in contrast, are non-Caucasian. The racial distribution of program participants is also similar to the broader population of foster youth in Washington State.⁴

Exhibit 4
Race/Ethnicity of Program Participants

| Race Ethnicity | Program Participants | All Students |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| African American | 409 (16%) | 59,270 (6%) |
| American Indian/ Alaska Native | 228 (9%) | 26,506 (2%) |
| Asian | 38 (1%) | 82,007 (8%) |
| Caucasian | 1,315 (52%) | 670,651 (62%) |
| Hispanic/Latino | 343 (14%) | 166,822 (16%) |
| Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander | 14 (1%) | 9,452 (1%) |
| Multiracial | 135 (5%) | 30,504 (3%) |
| Not Provided | 58 (2%) | 30,040 (3%) |
| Total | 2,540 | 1,075,252 |

⁴ Miller, M.. (2008). *Racial disproportionality in Washington State's child welfare system* (Document No. 08-06-3901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Among the entire K–12 student population in Washington State, approximately 13 percent have an identified disability that may require supportive services that are established through an Individual Education Program (IEP). For foster youth working with an Educational Advocate, 45 percent have a disability that may require an IEP (see Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5
Primary Disabilities of Program Participants

| Disability Status | Total (Percentage) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| No Disability | 1,394 (55%) |
| Disability | 1,146 (45%) |
| Health Impairment | 315 (12%) |
| Specific Learning Disability | 315 (12%) |
| Serious Behavioral Disability | 235 (9%) |
| Developmentally Delayed | 102 (4%) |
| Other | 179 (7%) |
| Total | 2,540 |

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities have access to educational opportunities in the least restrictive environment possible.⁵ As these figures indicate, foster youth needing an educational advocate have a range of disabilities that may require special education services and accommodations.

Educational Advocates help ensure that foster youth receive the proper services and supports as identified in the student's IEP. Advocates also work to establish an IEP for eligible students who may not be receiving services. Detailed information on special education services (such as integration of special education students in general education classes, disciplinary actions, and improvements in functioning) will be included in the final program evaluation report (due October 2012).

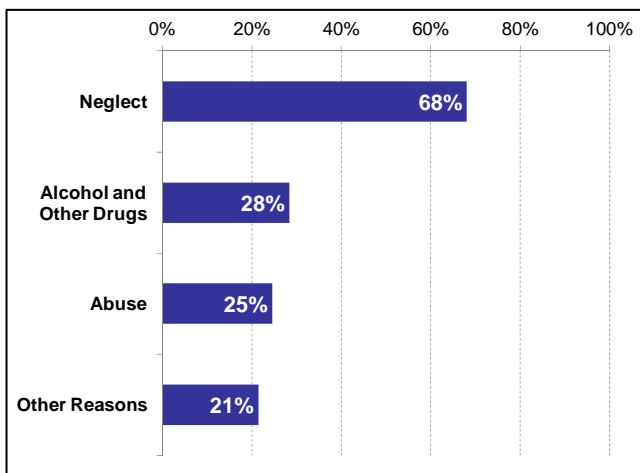
⁵ RCW 28A.155 sets the statutory guidelines for the implementation of IDEA in Washington State.

Foster Care Background

Children in foster care represent one of the most academically at-risk populations in the education system. Past histories of abuse or neglect, multiple placements, and school instability can all negatively impact the educational progress of these students.

Most youth had multiple reasons for an out-of-home placement, as shown in Exhibit 6. Prior neglect was listed as a removal reason for 68 percent of youth in this study. Parental alcohol and substance abuse was also common (28 percent), as well as physical or sexual abuse (25 percent) and other issues (such as abandonment and parental incarceration or death).

Exhibit 6
Reasons for Removal From Home:
Foster Youth With Educational Advocates



WSIPP, 2011

For one-third of program participants, the first placement in foster care occurred prior to starting school. Almost half of these youth first entered foster care between ages 6 and 12, during their elementary school years (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7

Age at First Entry and Average Time in Care:
Foster Youth With Educational Advocates

| Age at First Placement | Total (Percentage) | Average Number of Years in Care |
|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| 0 to 5 | 1,056 (32%) | 4.8 |
| 6 to 12 | 1,521 (46%) | 3.3 |
| 13 to 17 | 729 (22%) | 1.9 |
| Total | 3,306 | 3.0 |

Note: Totals also include program participants not identified in school records.

On average, students with educational advocates had been in a foster care placement for three years. For students who entered care prior to starting school, the average time in placement was nearly five years. During this time in care, the foster student may have experienced a number of changes in placements.⁶ Placement instability may have increased the likelihood that foster youth changed schools, which may have interrupted continuity in instruction and interfered with social relationships.

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008⁷ requires states to develop “a plan for ensuring the education stability of the child while in foster care” and help reduce the number of placements that may cause disruptions in school. In Washington State, the Legislature has directed DSHS to develop protocols with each school district in the state that promote educational continuity and achievement.⁸

In the years following the assignment of an Educational Advocate, the percentage of youth who did not experience changes in caregivers increased. During the first year of the program,

⁶ During the first two years in care, 17 percent of foster youth in Washington experience more than two placement moves. See: www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ca/BraamInforeportFeb11.pdf

⁷ P.L. 110-351

⁸ RCW 74.13.560

one-third of foster youth in the program had no placement changes. In later years, the percentage without a caregiver change increased by 7 to 8 percentage points (Exhibit 8).

Prior to the referral of an Educational Advocate, foster youth in the program had an increasing number of caregivers each year. We examined placement changes for program participants who were in care during the period before and after an educational advocacy referral. Exhibit 9 shows the average number of caregivers per year for these students.

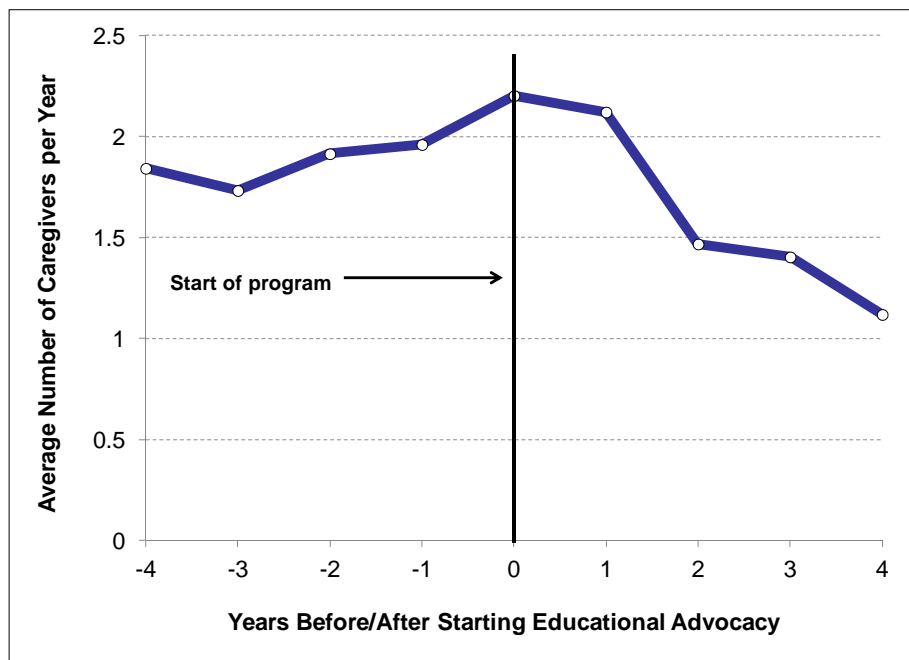
The average number of annual placements ranged between 1.8 and 2.2 in the years leading up to program entry. In the years following a program referral, the average dropped to 1.1 caregiver changes per year (by the fourth year following program referral).

Exhibit 8
Number of Placement Changes per Year:
Years Following Educational Advocacy

| Number of Placement Changes | First Year | Second Year | Third Year |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| None | 790 (33%) | 458 (40%) | 246 (41%) |
| One | 816 (35%) | 360 (32%) | 167 (28%) |
| Two or more | 759 (32%) | 313 (28%) | 185 (31%) |
| Total | 2,365 | 1,131 | 598 |

While improved placement stability is one of the goals of the Educational Advocacy program, advocates work primarily to ensure that placement changes cause minimal educational disruptions. Changes in school placements are examined in the final section of this report.

Exhibit 9
Average Number of Placements per Year
Before/After Educational Advocacy Services



WSIPP, 2011

Note: Includes program students with placements in at least two of prior four years and at least two of subsequent four years.

Program Activity

Under this program, an Educational Advocacy Coordinator (EAC) may assist foster youth in a number of different ways. First, the EAC provides *information and referral services* to caregivers, social workers, or others who would like to support and assist the foster youth. In this case, the advocate serves as a resource who can educate others about alternative education programs, tutoring, or mentoring options, and special education laws.

Second, an EAC may provide *consultation or direct advocacy* to intervene on behalf of a foster student requiring educational assistance. The time commitment and involvement for these advocacy efforts vary by case. If necessary, the EAC can help convene meetings and work directly with the schools and other parties to address disciplinary concerns, student enrollment or credit issues, or changes to special education services. An EAC keeps a record of the time, duration, type of contact and service goal for every advocacy effort undertaken. Based on this information, we analyzed the length of service for foster youth in the program each school year. During the 2009–10 school year, the number of days spent on each case ranged from:

- 1 to 30 days for 8 percent of cases
- 31 to 90 days for 29 percent of cases
- 91 to 180 days for 36 percent of cases
- 181 to 365 days for 27 percent of cases

As part of the final evaluation for this program, we will analyze how the length and types of services received are related to student outcomes. The types of services provided by an advocate focus primarily on one of four different education-related goals:

- 1) access to school-based services
- 2) enrollment stability and continuity
- 3) decrease in suspensions/expulsions
- 4) academic achievement (progress toward graduation)

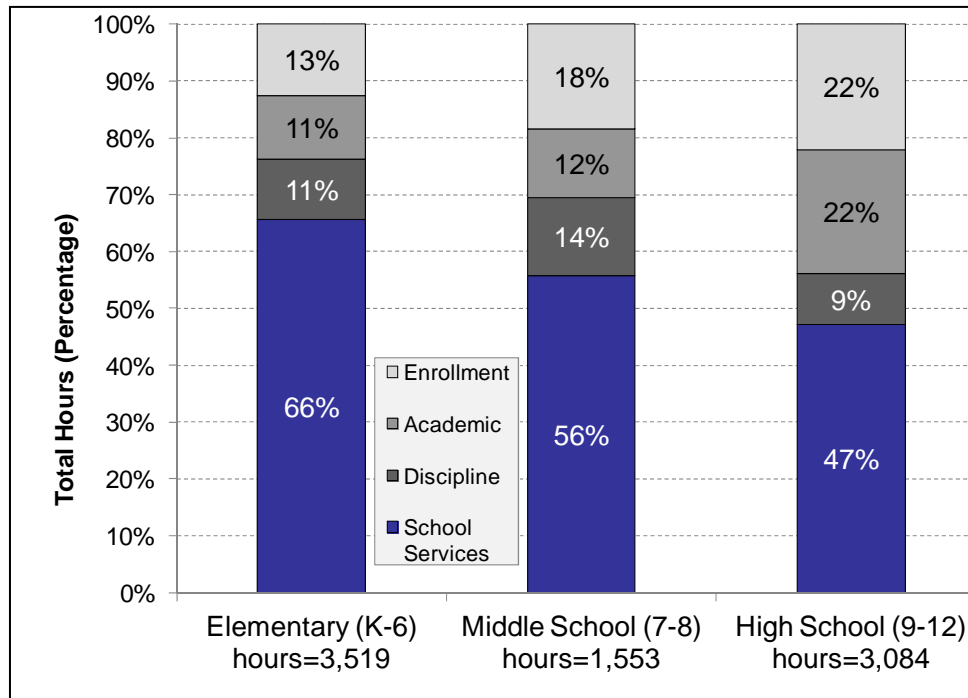
On average, advocates spend about 11 hours per case for these types of advocacy services. The time required for each case is similar for students in elementary, middle, and high school. The type of educational goal, however, does vary by grade level.

Exhibit 10 (next page) shows the number of hours spent during the 2009–10 school year in each of the identified educational goals. Overall, there were 8,156 advocacy hours reported for the school year. Most of the time focused on increasing and improving access to school-based services. This primarily involved helping initiate an evaluation for special education or working to improve or refine a student's Individual Education Program (IEP).

For the time spent by advocates, the educational focus differed by grade level:

- Among elementary (K–6) students, two-thirds (66 percent) of total hours addressed school services/special education issues.
- Compared with younger students, high school-age youth received higher levels of services focused on academics/credit retrieval (22 percent) and maintaining enrollment (22 percent).

Exhibit 10
Total Advocacy Efforts by Educational Goal and Grade Level:
2009–10 School Year



WSIPP, 2011

Educational Outcomes

Educational Advocacy Coordinators work with students across all grades and may have a different set of goals for each student, depending on each student's educational needs. Therefore, it is necessary to examine a range of outcomes to determine whether the program is effectively meeting the needs of these students. The outcomes covered in this report include changes in grade point average, number of schools attended, and graduation rates.

In our final report (due October 2012), we will examine how student characteristics and level of program participation relate to observed outcomes. In this initial report, we look at annual changes in each outcome among students served by Educational Advocates. These changes highlight the experiences of participants, but do not necessarily speak to the effectiveness of the program, since the results could be related to a number of factors.

Grade Point Average

For the purpose of this analysis, we received data on a student's cumulative grade point average (GPA) in each school year since grade nine. At the point at which youth were referred to an Educational Advocate, 48 percent had a cumulative GPA below 2.0 (C average), and 23 percent had a cumulative GPA at or above 3.0 (B average). The mean GPA among program participants during this first year was 1.94. In the years following an educational advocacy referral, the average cumulative GPA stayed relatively constant for program participants (Exhibit 11).

Exhibit 11
Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA)
for Students With Educational Advocates

| Years Following Advocacy Referral | Mean Cumulative GPA | Total Students (High School) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| First Year | 1.94 | 670 |
| Second Year | 2.08 | 277 |
| Third Year | 1.96 | 322 |
| Fourth Year | 2.02 | 232 |

There are several reasons why the cumulative grade point average may not be the best measure to follow academic outcomes for this study. First, the cumulative GPA represents grades earned over the entire high school career. Ideally, we would like to determine student progress with grades from each academic term. Second, high school graduation is based on credits achieved. It may be more informative to follow a student’s ability to stay “on-track” each year with the number of credits needed to progress toward graduation.

Neither of these more detailed factors related to academic achievement were available for this analysis. For the final evaluation report, we plan to request additional information related to the student’s academic records to better track outcomes.

Changes in Schools

As mentioned earlier, one of the primary goals of the Educational Advocacy program is to reduce school mobility among foster youth. Frequent school moves among foster youth are related to both academic delays⁹ and increased disciplinary problems.¹⁰ Therefore, enrollment stability represents an outcome that may also impact other goals defined by the Educational Advocacy program.

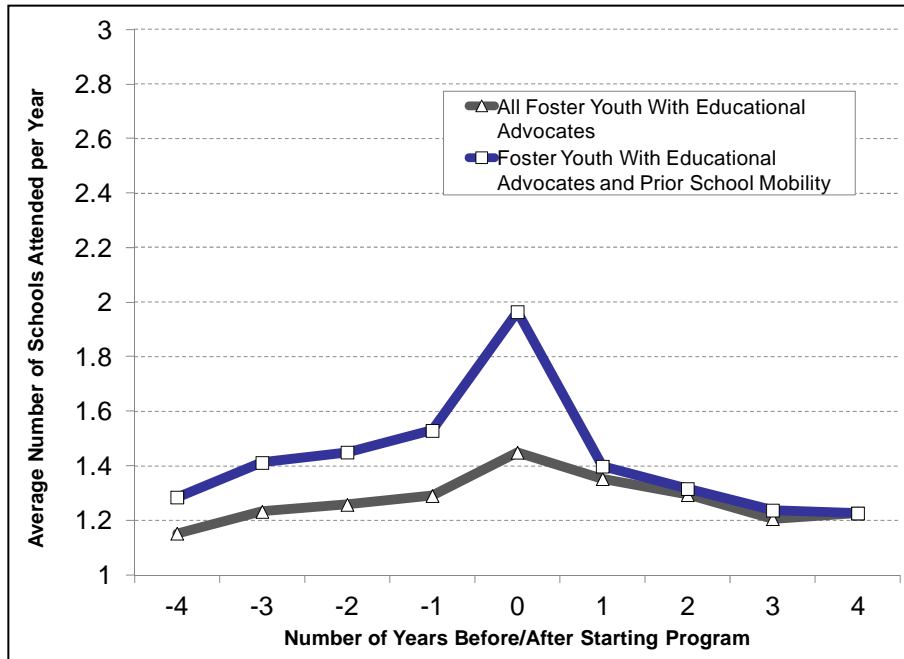
Foster youth experienced decreased school mobility in the years following a referral to an Educational Advocacy program. At the time of referral, students in the program (grades K–12) attended 1.45 schools per year on average. By the fourth year after starting the program, enrolled students attended 1.23 schools per year on average (Exhibit 12).

Over half of the foster students in this study attended just one school per year prior to entering the program. If these students are excluded from the average figures, we find that students with a history of school mobility attended nearly two schools per year at the time they were referred to an advocate. These students also experienced subsequent declines in school mobility, averaging 1.2 schools per year in the time after an advocacy referral.

⁹ Zima, B. T., Bussing, R., Freeman, S., Yang, X., Belin, T. R., & Forness, S. R. (2000). Behavior problems, academic skill delays and school failure among school-aged children in foster care: Their relationship to placement characteristics. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 9(1), 87–103.

¹⁰ Sullivan, M. J., Jones, L., & Mathiesen, S. (2010). School change, academic progress, and behavior problems in a sample of foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(2), 164–170.

Exhibit 12
Average Number of Schools Attended per Year
Before and After Educational Advocacy



WSIPP, 2011

The percentage of students attending multiple schools also changed in the years before and after receiving assistance from an Educational Advocate. Prior to the program, an increasing percentage of these students had attended multiple schools during the year. At the time of program entry, 36 percent of the students referred to an advocate had attended two or more schools that year. In the years following advocacy assistance, however, this percentage declined to the point where eight out of ten students were enrolled in the same school for the entire year.

Graduation Rates

Over the five years since the Educational Advocacy program started, the number of overall participants has grown each year. Consequently, more students have become eligible to graduate from high school each year. Exhibit 13 shows the graduation rate among students who reached their expected year of high school completion. In the three years following the start of the program, the graduation rate among participants increased from 26 percent to 44 percent.

A recent analysis by the Institute found the graduation rate among all foster youth in Washington State was also 44 percent.¹¹ Given that students with Educational Advocates required extra assistance in school, it is worth noting that this latest data shows a graduation rate that is comparable to other students in care.

¹¹ Burley, M. (2010). *High school graduation and dropout trends for Washington State foster youth (2005–2009)* (Document No. 10-10-3901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Exhibit 13

**High School Graduation by School Year:
Foster Students with Educational Advocates**

| School Year | Graduates (Percentage) | Graduation Eligible Students [†] |
|-------------|------------------------|---|
| 2007–08 | 9 (26%) | 35 |
| 2008–09 | 28 (34%) | 83 |
| 2009–10 | 57 (44%) | 131 |

[†] Includes students with expected year of graduation in current school year (first column).

Next Steps

This report outlines the characteristics and outcomes for Washington State foster youth who have been served by the Educational Advocacy program. Since 2006, over 3,600 foster students have received educational support and assistance as part of this program. Advocacy efforts for these students focused on issues involving student enrollment, academic achievement, disciplinary problems, and support services.

An analysis of foster care and enrollment records found that both school and placement changes among program participants declined in the years after entering the program. We also found that the graduation rate steadily increased in each successive year since the program started. While these are positive trends, the outcomes discussed here do not directly address questions about program effectiveness.

During the course of this study (2006–10), there were a number of new programs and changes in state and federal laws that may have had an impact on the educational progress of foster students.¹² For the evaluation of the Educational Advocacy program, we will analyze how various factors—such as student characteristics, foster care involvement, and advocacy efforts—are related to the outcomes discussed here. In addition, we will compare educational outcomes of participants to a similar group of students who were eligible, but did not receive advocacy services. This more detailed statistical analysis will provide a clearer picture regarding the impact of the Educational Advocacy program. The final evaluation report will be completed by October 2012.

¹² Whiteman, S., Lieb, R., & Burley, M. (2010). *Foster youth transitions to independence: Options to improve program efficiencies* (Document No. 10-01-3901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy,

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Washington State
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