

# Meeting the Educational Needs of Children in Foster Care: A National Perspective



A Data Project of the National Foster Care Review Coalition

July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009 - December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009

## Mission

The mission of the National Foster Care Review Coalition (NFCRC) is to serve as a national coalition of independent foster care review programs to ensure, through individual case review and advocacy for systemic change, the safety, well-being, and timely achievement of permanency for children in foster care by: informing and influencing individual state and national policy makers as well as the public, promoting the establishment of an independent review system in each state to assess the status of these children, and supporting the work of active independent review systems.

## Strategies

One of the key strategies for achieving this mission is to provide a mechanism to gather and distribute data from independent review organizations in order to impact systemic reform. While many state child welfare systems now have State Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) that can provide administrative data, the NFCRC believes there is unique value to information gathered through their review programs. While administrative data can tell you what happened, how many times it happened, and when it happened (all important aspects on their own), independent foster care review programs can provide qualitative assessments of why events occurred, as well as independent analysis of systemic and case specific efforts towards protecting children and ensuring their well-being and permanency.

To this end, the NFCRC is committed to conducting Data Projects focused on improving practice through research. Projects will cover various topics pertaining to child safety, permanency, and well-being. Data collection for each project is guided by the adoption of a standard set of questions and instructions. Member organizations opt into each project as feasible, with the goal of having as many members participate in each project as possible.



# Overview

This paper provides an analysis of the NFCRC's first Data Project: Meeting the Educational Needs of Children in Foster Care: A National Perspective. Member organizations from seven different states collected data for six-months (July 1<sup>st</sup> – December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009). The seven states (shown in the box below) represented most regions of the country, including the Northeast, Midwest, West, and Pacific Northwest. Some review systems were able to collect data on all children reviewed, while others collected data on a portion of their reviews. This project was designed to include general questions intended to capture broader issues. Areas with lower performance, or that created additional interest, could be studied further in future projects.



A total of 20,469 children were reviewed during the time period. For some questions (1,3,4, and 6), the most frequent answer was 'Not Applicable'. Questions 1 and 3 were purposefully focused on small age ranges, so most of the children reviewed fell outside of these ages. Question 4 was created to see the impact of initial placements on children's education, so it was answered only on initial reviews. Lastly, Question 6 was designed only for children requiring special education services (i.e., Individualized Education Plans and 504 plans). Most of the children reviewed did not require special education services, leading to the high number of NA's for that particular question.

Specific data for each question is presented on the following pages. Charts represent response percentages without the 'Not Applicable' responses. Tables include all responses. Written discussions will always pertain only to the children applicable for that particular question.

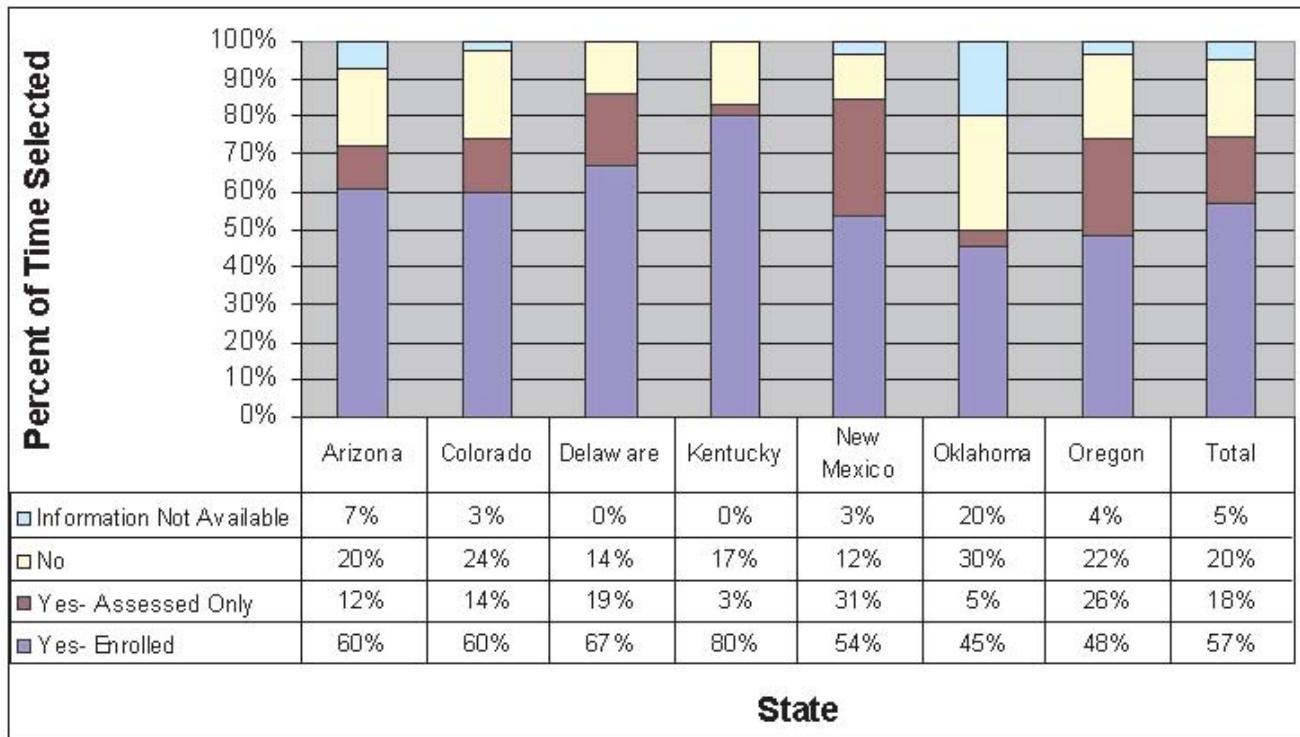
## Participating Review Systems

- **Arizona:** Foster Care Review Board
- **Colorado:** Administrative Review Division
- **Delaware:** Child Placement Review Board
- **Kentucky:** Citizen Foster Care Review Board
- **New Mexico:** Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board
- **Oklahoma:** Foster Care Review Board
- **Oregon:** Foster Care Review Board

# Results

## Early Education

**Question 1: For children aged 3-5: Is the child enrolled in Early Head Start or another early childhood education program?**



Overall, 57% of children aged 3-5 were enrolled in an early education program. Scores ranged from a low of 45% (Oklahoma) to a high of 80% (Kentucky). Another 18% had been assessed for a program, but were not currently enrolled. Scores on this dimension also showed variability, from a low of 3% in Kentucky, to a high of 31% in New Mexico. A possible interpretation of this wide variability that deserves further study is whether that large difference between 'Assessed Only' and 'Enrolled' across states is reflective of early education capacity in those states. For example, both New Mexico (31%) and Oregon (26%) had a high percentage of children who had been assessed for, but were not receiving, services. Most other states had a higher percentage in the 'Enrolled' category. Is this representative of greater capacity in those states?

Overall, 20% of the children ages 3-5 had not been assessed or were not enrolled in an early childhood education program at the time of the review.

Perhaps most notable is the fact that 20% of the children between the ages of 3-5 had neither been assessed for, nor were enrolled in, an early education program. Large variability can be seen again, ranging from a low of 12% in New Mexico to a high of 30% in Oklahoma.

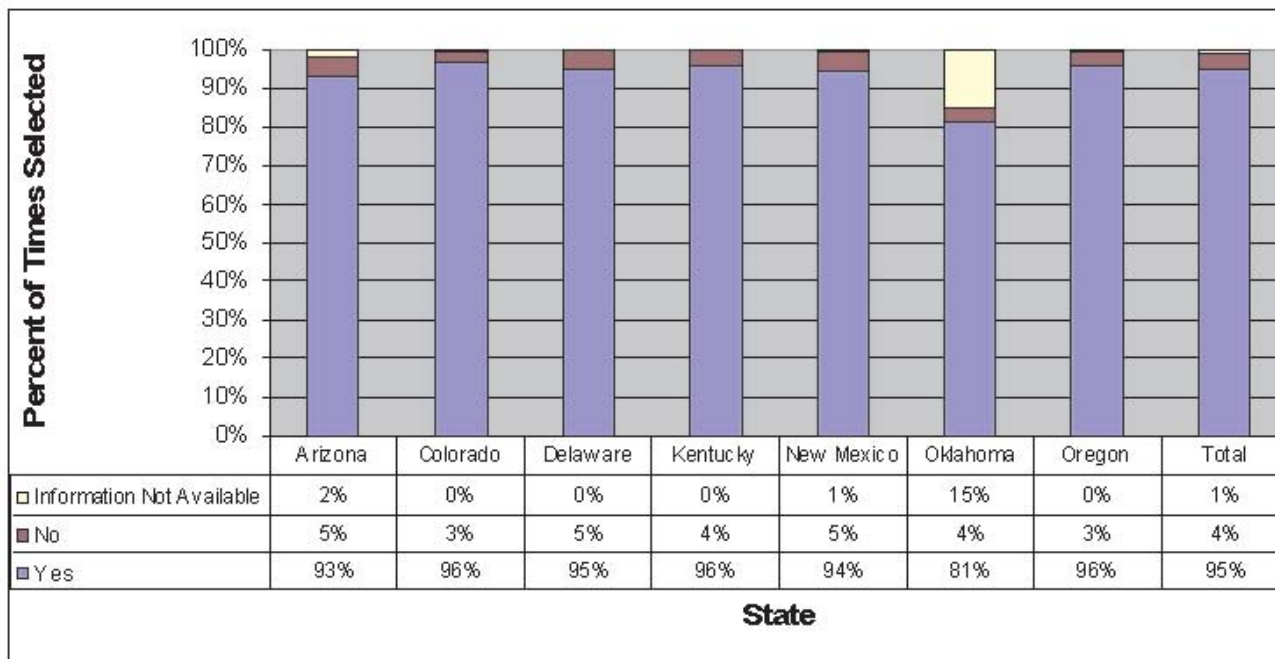


Question 1: For children aged 3-5: Is the child enrolled in Early Head Start or another early childhood education program?						
State	Yes-Enrolled	Yes-Assessed Only	No	Information Not Available	NA	Percent NA
Arizona	761	155	255	93	9210	87.9%
Colorado	262	62	103	11	3839	89.8%
Delaware	42	12	9	0	296	82.5%
Kentucky	80	3	17	0	401	80.0%
New Mexico	132	76	29	8	910	78.8%
Oklahoma	9	1	6	4	59	74.7%
Oregon	360	196	169	27	2871	79.2%
Total	1646	505	588	143	17586	85.9%

Overall then, 20% of the children had either not been assessed, or were not enrolled at the time of the review. In addition, in 5% of the reviews there was not information available to the reviewer to even determine an appropriate response for the child. While not always true, lack of documentation of testing or services might likely indicate that they are truly missing; thereby bringing the estimate up to 25% of applicable children not having been assessed or enrolled at the time of the review.

## Enrollment

**Question 2: For children of school age: Is the child currently enrolled in school?**



The majority of school-aged children reviewed were enrolled in school. Specifically, responses ranged from a low of 81% in Oklahoma to a high of 96% for Colorado, Kentucky, and Oregon. Overall, only 4% of all of the applicable children reviewed were not enrolled in a school at the time of review.

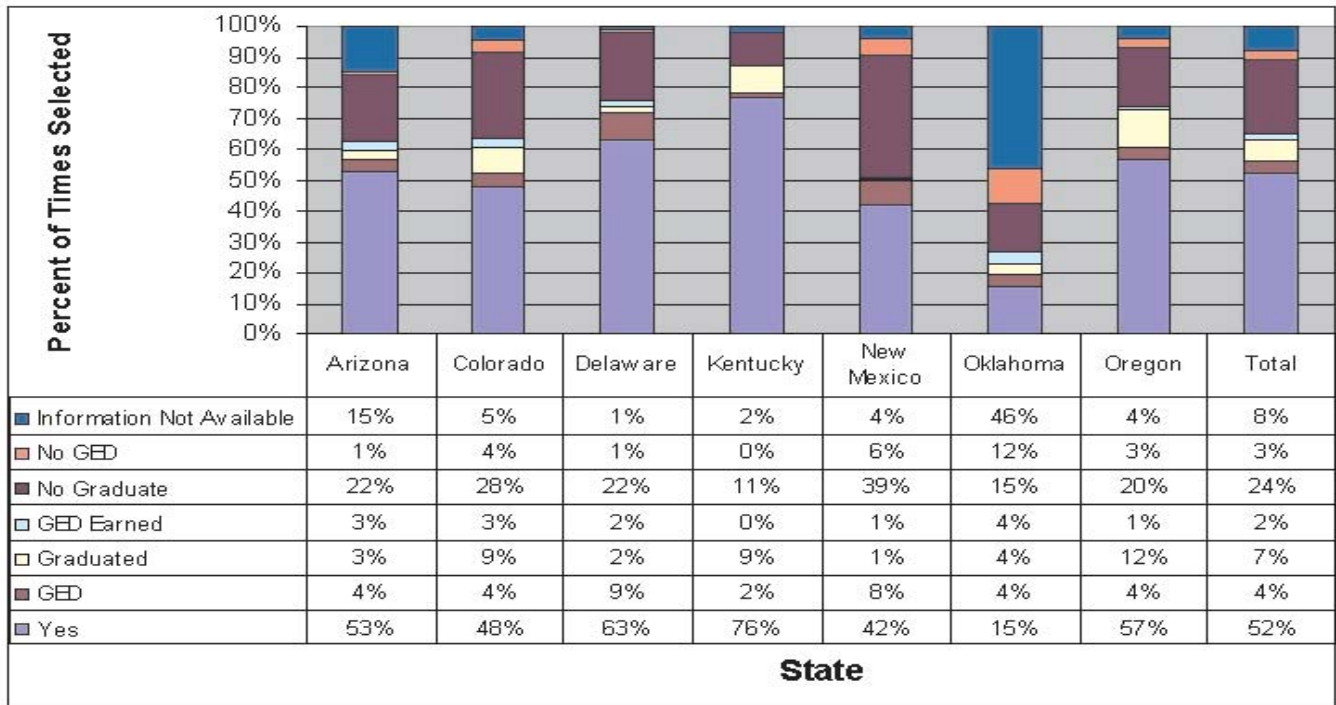
95% of school age children were enrolled in school at the time of the review.

**Question 2: For children of school age: Is the child currently enrolled in school?**

State	Yes	No	Information Not Available	NA	Percent NA
Arizona	4236	212	93	6210	57.8%
Colorado	2901	96	10	1270	29.7%
Delaware	265	13	0	81	22.6%
Kentucky	331	14	0	156	31.1%
New Mexico	902	46	7	200	17.3%
Oklahoma	43	2	8	26	32.9%
Oregon	2227	78	8	1310	36.2%
Total	10905	461	126	9253	44.6%

## Educational Progress

**Question 3: For youth age 16 or older: Is the youth on track to graduate and/or complete high school?**



While the majority of children reviewed were enrolled in school, for children aged 16 or older, only 65% were on target to graduate from and/or complete high school. This included 52% who were on track to graduate, 4% on track to earn a GED, 7% who had already graduated, and an additional 2% who had already earned a GED.

To better understand these numbers, it is helpful to compare them to rates from the general population. The National Center for Education Statistics recently released rates from 2007. Overall, 8.7% of youth aged 16 to 24 were not enrolled in high school and did not have a high school credential (i.e., diploma or equivalency degree)<sup>1</sup>. The study indicates that this is a good measure of educational attainment of young adults in the United States. This compares to the 27% of the youth age 16 and over in this review that were not on track to graduate or attain an equivalency degree. The study also found that 89% of individuals age 18 through 24 that were not enrolled in high school had attained a diploma or equivalency degree<sup>1</sup>. Again, only 65% of the children 16 or older reviewed in this study were on track to attain a similar status. Compared to the general population, children in foster care appear likely to have significantly lower levels of educational attainment.

Compared to the general population, children in foster care appear to have significantly lower levels of graduation from high school.

Several other points are noteworthy. First, in 8% of the applicable cases, there was not enough information available to the reviewer for them to make a determination of the child's educational progress. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of these appeared in two states: Oklahoma (46%) and Arizona (15%). Due to the small number of youth reviewed in Oklahoma, their percent only represents 12 youth. This leaves Arizona as the state with the highest number of children where information was not available to answer this question. Case practice might benefit from a continued focus on educational progress by review boards, particularly in Arizona.



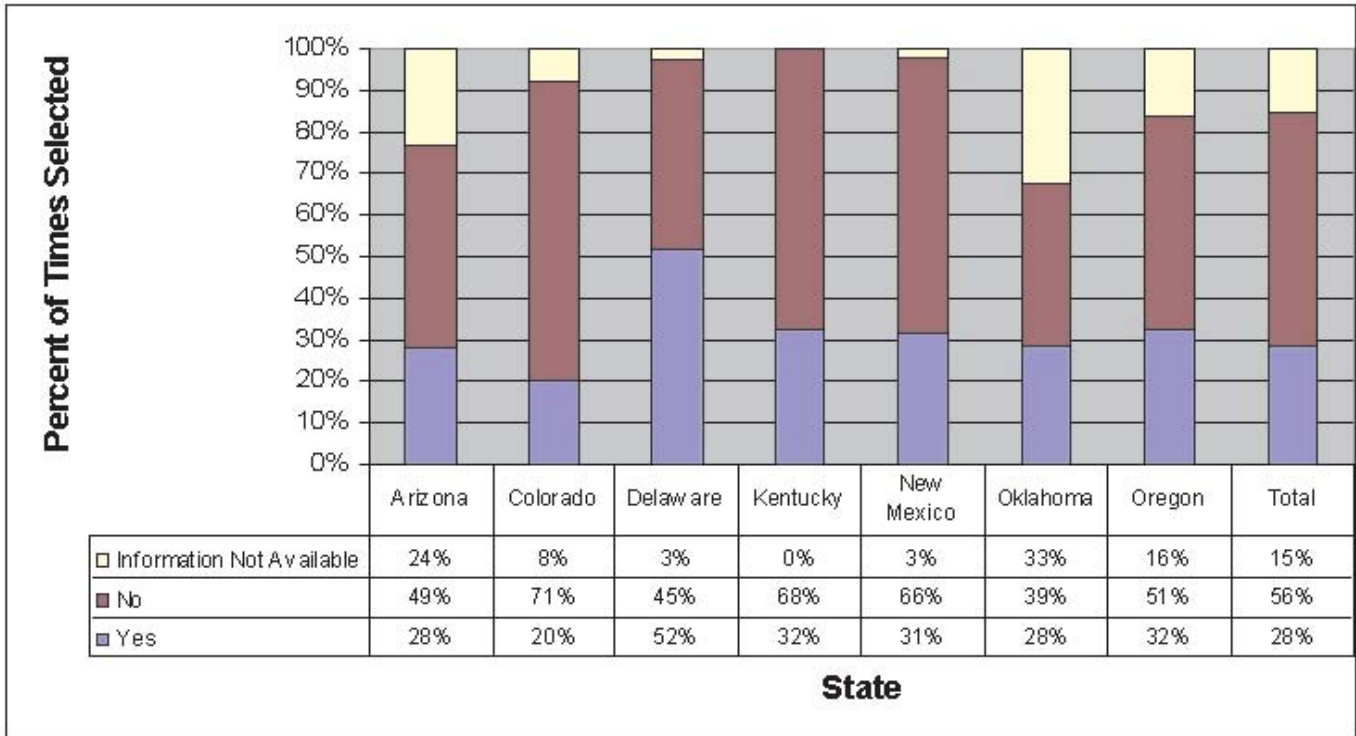
Secondly, there was a wide range across the percentage of children on track to graduate/complete high school: going from a low 15% in Oklahoma to a high of 76% in Kentucky. However, it should be noted that the number of children on whom data was collected in Oklahoma was small. Due to this, if Oklahoma is removed from the comparison, the range is much more consistently around 50% or higher (42% to 76%).

One cautionary note: this question does not necessarily imply that these children are not on target to graduate/complete high school because of their placement into foster care. It is very possible that they came into foster care lagging in educational progress. Future data projects may want to more closely examine this issue to determine both positive and negative influences of foster care on educational attainment of the children served.

Question 3: For youth age 16 or older: Is the youth on track to graduate and/or complete high school?									
State	Yes	GED	Graduated	GED Earned	No Graduate	No GED	Information Not Available	NA	Percent NA
Arizona	620	43	36	33	256	16	173	6297	84.3%
Colorado	594	51	107	36	347	49	60	3033	70.9%
Delaware	62	9	2	2	22	1	1	260	72.4%
Kentucky	71	2	8	0	10	0	2	408	81.4%
New Mexico	72	14	1	1	68	10	7	982	85.0%
Oklahoma	4	1	1	1	4	3	12	53	67.1%
Oregon	416	26	88	10	143	19	30	2891	79.8%
Total	1839	146	243	83	850	98	285	13924	79.7%

# Educational Stability

**Question 4: When the child entered foster care, did the child remain in his/her school at the time of their initial placement into foster care?**



Although question 4 was only answered if it was a child's initial review, it was still applicable for approximately 27% of all children reviewed. Of the 4,792 children for whom this question applied, only 28% were able to remain in their same school at the time of removal from their home. Fifty-six percent of the children were not able to remain in the same school. For an additional 15% of the children, there simply wasn't enough information available at the review to make a determination of whether or not the child was in the same school. Again, there was high variability, with children in Arizona having the most stability at the time of placement (52%), and those in Colorado the lowest (20%).

In even the best performing state, only 1/2 of the children were able to remain in their same school when placed into foster care.

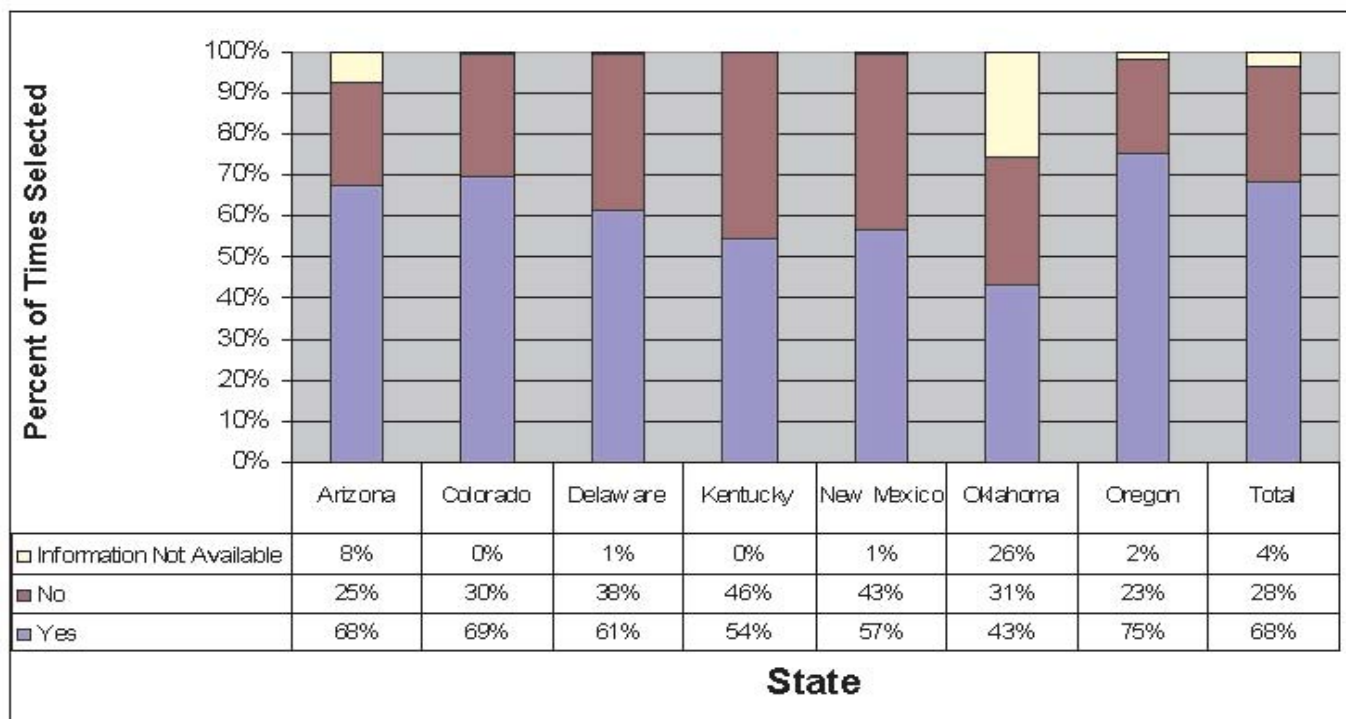
In most participating states, only 1/3 of the children remained in their original school.

Question 4: When the child entered foster care, did the child remain in his/her school at the time of their initial placement into foster care?				
State	Yes	No	Information Not Available	NA
Arizona	574	998	485	5417
Colorado	190	668	77	3342
Delaware	67	59	4	229
Kentucky	65	137	0	299
New Mexico	185	389	15	566
Oklahoma	13	18	15	33
Oregon	269	427	137	2790
Total	1363	2696	733	12676



## Educational Stability (continued)

**Question 5: During the review period, has the child been able to remain in the same school?**



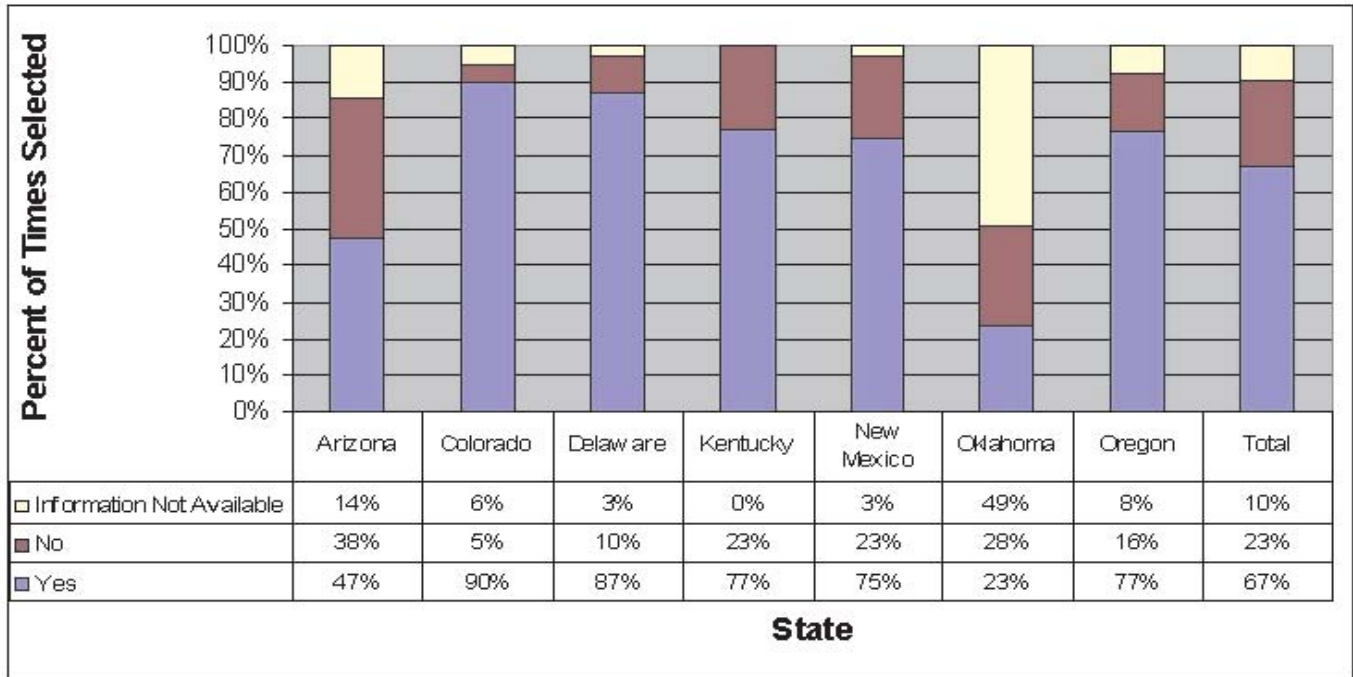
For the 11,530 children for whom this question applied, only 68% of them were able to remain in the same school during the period under review. There was a wide range in performance on this question, as Oregon was able to maintain 75% of their children in the same school, while this occurred for only 43% of the children reviewed in Oklahoma.

Given the high percentage of children changing schools at the time of placement, and during their time in care, educational stability is lacking for children placed into foster care.

Question 5: During the review period, has the child been able to remain in the same school?					
State	Yes	No	Information Not Available	NA	Percent NA
Arizona	3076	1123	341	2934	39.3%
Colorado	2161	937	12	1167	27.3%
Delaware	177	110	2	70	19.5%
Kentucky	171	144	0	186	37.1%
New Mexico	527	399	6	223	19.3%
Oklahoma	25	18	15	21	26.6%
Oregon	1718	523	45	1337	36.9%
Total	7855	3254	421	5938	34.0%

## Special Education

**Question 6: If appropriate, is the child receiving federally required 504 or IEP Special Education services?**



While this question was not applicable for approximately 61% of the children reviewed (as seen in the table below), only 67% of those who required special education services were receiving them at the time of the review. As with other areas reviewed, there was a wide variance in performance across states, with Colorado performing the best at 90% and Oklahoma faring the worst at 23%. It is also interesting to note that for 10% of the children reviewed, there was not enough information available to the reviewer for them to make a determination if the child was receiving services.

**Only 67% of the children needing special education services (e.g., IEP or 504 plans) were receiving them at the time of the review.**

Question 6: If appropriate, is the child receiving Federally required 504 or IEP special education services?					
State	Yes	No	Information Not Available	NA	Percent NA
Arizona	1385	1119	420	4550	60.9%
Colorado	1436	74	89	2678	62.6%
Delaware	137	16	4	202	56.3%
Kentucky	144	43	0	314	62.7%
New Mexico	329	99	12	715	61.9%
Oklahoma	11	13	23	32	40.5%
Oregon	1075	220	108	2220	61.3%
Total	4517	1584	656	10711	61.3%

# Recommendations

One of the key strategies for achieving the mission of the NFCRC is to provide a mechanism to gather and distribute data from independent review systems in order to impact systemic reform. In order to achieve the goal of systemic reform, it is important to interpret collected information and make recommendations.

While the data displayed above is only from seven states over a six month period, it still provides insight into areas where the national foster care system can improve in meeting the needs of our children. The following recommendations are evident from the information discussed previously.

## **1. Increase documentation around children’s educational assessments, needs, services, and progress in case files.**

Across many of the questions asked during this project, reviewers often indicated that there was not enough information available to answer the question. Specifically, the percentage of times information was lacking ranged from a low of 1% (Question 2) to a high of 15% (Question 4). In addition, two other questions received 10% and 8% response rates for ‘Information Not Available.’ This indicates a lack of documentation on the education status and progress of children in care. This also raises concern regarding the overall emphasis on education for children in out-of-home care. For older youth, this is even more concerning, as it may mean aging out of the system without records of their own educational history. Children and families may be better served by increasing efforts to include more complete documentation of educational needs, services, and progress in a portfolio or passport model designed to remain with the child throughout, and after, their time in care.

## **2. Ensure that age appropriate children are enrolled in an early childhood education program.**

In this pilot project, only 57% of eligible children reviewed were enrolled in an early education program. For the remaining 43%, a valuable resource is not being fully utilized. For example, the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the Administration for Children and Families) has shown that Early Head Start children achieved better scores on some measures of cognitive, language, and social-emotional development than did children not enrolled<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps equally important, parents of children enrolled in Early Head Start reported having a greater range of discipline strategies (which included less punitive strategies) and also more positive interaction with their children (e.g., increase in daily reading time with their children). Parents also reported that children enrolled in Early Head Start programs had greater access to health care and better overall health. Focusing on early education services such as Early Head Start and Head Start, then, would appear to be a way to help children and families achieve positive outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency, and well being.



## **3. Make educational stability a priority in case planning and service delivery.**

During the project, 56% of the school-aged children reviewed experienced a change in schools at the time of their placement into out-of-home care. Additionally, 28% of the children reviewed had to change schools during the period under review. Given the additional stress and trauma changing schools can place on a child

who has already experienced a separation from their family, and that school based relationships can form a significant social support for them, children would benefit from increased educational stability. Changes in school can also have a significant, negative, impact on the chances of educational success. There may be delays in enrollment in the new school, loss of credits for classes taken at prior schools, etc. One study found that the likelihood of graduating for those that experienced a change in schools was cut in half as compared to those who did not change schools.<sup>3</sup>

The McKinney-Vento Act was designed specifically to increase educational success for homeless youth. Equally important is that it also includes children and youth who are "awaiting foster care placement". Unfortunately, it does not define what this means, leaving child welfare agencies to define it themselves. The most significant aspect of the legislation is that it allows children/youth to remain in their school until the end of the year in which they find permanent housing. The act also encourages resource development, waiting until natural breaks in the school year prior to moving children/youth to a new school, and providing transportation assistance. However, funding for the act is limited, with only 6% of school districts nationwide receiving McKinney-Vento funds.<sup>4</sup>

The Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) also addresses these issues. For example, it requires that case plans for children in foster care address the appropriateness of the child's school setting. It also requires the child welfare agency to partner with the local education agency and attempt to keep the child in the same school at the time of placement into care, unless it is not in the child's best interest. P.L. 110-351 also allows children to be immediately enrolled in a new school if they do have to be moved. Lastly, the legislation opened the potential to pay for reasonable transportation costs that might be necessary to keep a child in their school at the time of placement. Even with this change, transportation continues to pose a significant hurdle in many regions of the country, where children may have to be placed long distances from their school. While these are all important improvements, given the findings in this project, much work remains.

Given this discussion, several changes could be made to improve educational stability for children in out-of-home care. First, McKinney-Vento should be fully funded. It should also be amended to include all children in out-of-home care. This would remove confusion as to which children are eligible and provide needed protection to all children being served in foster care. If it is not amended, states should create legislation making it applicable to all children in foster care. For example, Delaware passed legislation at the state level applying these concepts to all children in foster care and focused on its application in child welfare practice. In this study, they were found to have the highest stability for children in care, with 52% of their children remaining in the same school at the time of placement (a full 20% better than the next best state). However, their performance was below the overall average for keeping children in their schools during the review period. Part of this could be due to positive moves for children (i.e., placed for adoption outside of the school district), but it does underscore the need for continued focus beyond the initial placement of children into foster care.



Child welfare systems should continue to research and identify geographic areas with high placement rates and then ensure a sufficient provider base so that children can be kept within school districts. Additionally, when children need to be moved outside a district, other services (e.g., transportation) should be explored (or potentially developed if they are lacking) to support the child remaining in the same school. This

includes increasing the use of the P.L. 110-351 option of claiming transportation costs for educational stability as part of the foster care maintenance rate.

#### **4. Improve educational attainment for children in foster care.**

This project found that only 65% of the applicable children reviewed were on track to earn a high school diploma or earn an equivalency degree, as compared to 89% of the general population<sup>1</sup>. Given the significant difference in attainment rates, it is clear that additional efforts should be made to support educational attainment for children in care. While these children may have entered care already behind, given the disparate outcomes between those who have a degree (or GED) and those who do not, improving their educational success seems critical to improving their future outcomes. For example, the median income for individuals aged 18 to 65 without a diploma/GED is \$24,000, those with a diploma/GED have a median income of \$40,000<sup>1</sup>. Individuals 25 and older without a diploma/GED reported having worse health than those with a diploma/GED<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, individuals without a diploma/GED account for a higher percentage of the prison population, with almost 34% of federal and state inmates not having a high school credential<sup>1</sup>. Even more importantly, families headed by an individual with a high school degree have ten times the wealth (i.e., including assets, etc. in addition to income) than those who are headed by someone without a high school degree<sup>6</sup>. Related to this, it's been reported that it takes approximately five (5) generations for the advantages/disadvantages of family background to change in the United States<sup>7</sup>. Ensuring the educational success of children in foster care could not only improve outcomes for the children served, but also future generations of children that may not have to be served. To ensure their long term success, it is critical to find ways of increasing the educational attainment of children in foster care.



#### **5. Improve efforts to meet the needs of children requiring special education services.**

Data from the project indicate that only 67% of the children reviewed who required special education services were receiving them. At this time, it is difficult to say why so many children were not receiving the required services. A future project may want to explore barriers to educational services more fully.



## Citations

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