

Foster Care & Education

Q&A

CREDIT TRANSFER AND SCHOOL COMPLETION

Q: Why are youth in out-of-home care more than twice as likely to drop out of high school as their peers?

A: Youth in out-of-home care face a number of obstacles to graduation. One major challenge is the high rate of school mobility for youth in care, both when they are initially removed from home, and when they change living placements while in care. On average, youth in care move one or two times each year.

When youth in care move schools, they often experience delays in enrollment, inappropriate school placements, lack of educational support services, and difficulties in transferring course credits. Youth in care often lack a strong advocate to help navigate the obstacles associated with changing schools.

Moreover, studies have shown youth in out-of-home care lose approximately 4 to 6 months of academic progress with each change in school placement.

Q: Why do youth in out-of-home care experience difficulties obtaining full or partial credits for coursework previously completed at a different school?

A: Even within the same state, schools in different districts can offer different classes, employ different methods of calculating full and partial course credits, and require students to take different types of core classes to graduate. Thus, when youth in care switch schools, they often cannot obtain full or partial credit for the coursework they completed at previous schools. Even

when youth in care obtain credit for courses they took at previous schools, these credits may not count toward core graduation requirements, but instead may count only as electives.

Q: Why do difficulties with transferring credits or coursework lead to higher drop out rates for youth in care?

A: Like most students, youth in care aspire to graduate from high school and attend college or other post secondary education programs. Unfortunately, school mobility often causes them to lag behind their peers. When foster youth are not able to obtain credit for classes or coursework they have already completed, they fall behind on graduation requirements and may be held back one or more grades. As a result of such frustrating experiences, foster youth often lose the motivation to continue with school.

Q: Are there any examples around the country of how credit calculation and graduation requirements for highly mobile students have been addressed?

A: In recent years, a few states, such as California and Maine, have enacted laws designed to resolve the challenges that prevent youth in care from graduating, including difficulties in transferring credits.

California Assembly Bill 490 (AB 490), a comprehensive state law addressing numerous issues related to



education needs of children in out of home care, requires public school districts to accept “full or partial coursework” completed by a student while attending a public school, juvenile court school, or nonpublic, nonsectarian school or agency. AB 490 is silent on a specific method for calculating partial credits, but some school districts in California have developed their own. For example, Fresno Unified School District calculates credits based on “seat time,” which is defined as the number of hours a student successfully completes in a particular course. However, because school districts across California employ different methods for calculating credits, California youth continue to experience difficulties in transferring credits when they move between districts.

Maine Public Law Chapter 451 provides special protections for particular groups of highly mobile students, including foster youth and homeless students. When such a student is placed temporarily in a new school, the law requires that the student, the student’s guardian, and staff at the student’s previous and new schools collaborate on the development of a “school work recognition plan.” The plan outlines how the student will complete coursework and earn credit to meet the state’s educational standards, as well as any diploma requirements applicable to secondary students. By requiring communication between staff at the student’s previous and new schools regarding the student’s path to graduation, Chapter 451 promotes the resolution of credit transfer problems and other school completion challenges that might arise as a result of different course requirements and credit systems at the student’s previous and new schools.

Q: What can states do to address the challenges that prevent youth in care from losing credit or graduating?

A: State policy makers and advocates need to focus on the issues of credit transfers and graduation requirements and their impact on school completion. Several strategies include:

- Develop policies and procedures to address partial credit calculation and graduation requirements for highly mobile students, including children in out-of-home care;
- Identify specific methods for calculating credits and graduation requirements, preferably in statewide policies;

- Require state boards of education to create detailed guidelines for determining partial credits and graduation requirements for highly mobile students;
- Create simple methods for calculations, to ensure successful implementation at the school level;
- Involve multiple stakeholders in the development and implementation of new policies and procedures. In Maine, advocates built support for legislation among multiple stakeholders—including educators, labor representatives, parents, youth, judges, and parole officers—by involving them in the development of Chapter 451;
- Involve youth in policy creation and advocacy. Youth have first hand knowledge of barriers to school completion, including difficulties in transferring credits. Youth can also be powerful advocates to assist with the passage of important policies. In California, advocates collaborated with approximately 500 current and former foster youth in support of AB 490. Advocates and youth reached out to reporters across the state, and conducted several press conferences to inform the public and raise awareness about the educational needs of foster youth; and
- Partner with advocates for other highly mobile students to maximize attention to the issue and increase the interest and attention from schools to the issue. In Maine, because Chapter 451 applies to foster youth, homeless youth, juvenile offenders, and other groups of highly mobile students, advocates from each of these groups partnered to advance the bill.

Q: Whom do I contact for further information about strategies to promote credit transfer and school completion or to share information with other advocates?

A: Please send all comments and questions to ccleducation@abanet.org.

