Homeless and Foster Youth Services

Report 22-08

December 2022

OPPAGA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As directed by Chapter 2022-65, *Laws of Florida*, this report examines the effectiveness of local school districts' delivery of benefits and services required under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as well as the services provided by campus liaisons to foster youth enrolled in state colleges and universities and the academic outcomes of these students.

For K-12 education, the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires school districts to provide homeless youth with access and support to ensure that they receive the same free and appropriate public education as their peers with permanent housing. Florida statutes mirror and implement the federal requirements.[1] These statutes are largely silent on homeless student rights, and defer to federal legislation.

For postsecondary education, s. 409.1452, *Florida Statutes*, requires public postsecondary institutions to provide campus liaisons to students who are current or former foster youth. In addition, the 2022 Florida Legislature revised s. 409.1452, *Florida Statutes*, to include students experiencing homelessness as part of the group of students supported by campus liaisons.

Findings on Youth Experiencing Homelessness

- The number of Florida students in grades K – 12 identified as homeless has been close to 70,000 between school year 2013-14 and school year 2016-17, but there have been substantial increases after hurricanes followed by a substantial decrease during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Of the 48 homeless liaisons responding to OPPAGA's survey, 38 reported having at least a bachelor's degree. Forty-six reported receiving training from the Florida Department of Education on their responsibilities. However, only 14 reported receiving trauma-informed training from any source; OPPAGA's literature review found that such training is critical when interacting with families experiencing homelessness.

- Almost all (46 of 48) homeless liaisons responding to OPPAGA's survey reported providing training for other staff—most often school front office staff and teachers—on how to identify students experiencing homelessness. However, less than half reported providing similar training to other individuals who regularly interact with students (e.g., bus drivers, counselors, school cafeteria workers, and social workers); research and interviews with school district homeless liaisons suggest that such staff is key to district efforts to identify and assist homeless students.

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[1] Statutes applicable to educational services for homeless children and youth include ss. 420.622, 743.067, and 1003.21(1)(f), *F.S.*

- OPPAGA's analysis of Florida Department of Education data found that homeless students performed less well than their non-homeless counterparts on all academic measures examined. Homeless students had greater absenteeism rates, performed below peers on statewide standardized assessments, had higher rates of being retained at grade level, and had higher high school dropout rates than their peers. Furthermore, unaccompanied homeless students had even poorer performance than the general homeless student population.[2] OPPAGA's findings are consistent with national research that has determined that a lack of stable housing has negative effects on a student's academic experiences and outcomes. Poverty alone cannot explain all the performance differences between homeless and other students, as OPPAGA's analysis found that non-homeless students who also live in poverty had better outcomes compared to both homeless student groups examined.

- OPPAGA recommends that the Legislature consider requiring that school district homeless liaisons and other educational staff who work with homeless students receive training on trauma-informed care; school districts check the residency status of students at least once per school year; and school districts provide periodic training to all staff who interact with students on the school district's obligation under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to identify and provide educational services to homeless students.

Findings on Foster Youth Attending Postsecondary Institutions

- Young adults currently or previously involved in the foster care system face a variety of challenges when entering adulthood. These young adults may have unresolved trauma, a lack of family support, and educational gaps. Studies have found that foster youth enroll in college at lower rates than their peers and those that do enroll are less likely to complete their first year.

- Campus support programs provide an array of services to help foster youth acclimate to and succeed in postsecondary institutions. Campus support programs for foster youth students were first founded in the late 1990s to provide advising, skill-building, advocacy, and referral services to help foster youth navigate and succeed in college. All of Florida's postsecondary institutions have at least one staff member designated as working specifically with foster youth students; however, the services and supports available to these students vary widely across institutions.

- The 23 campus liaisons responding to OPPAGA's survey reported that they served as liaisons for an average of four years. Eighteen of the respondents reported spending less than half of their time serving students who are current or former foster youth, three reported spending approximately half their time, and two reported spending most of their time serving foster youth. Further, seven survey respondents reported not having enough time to effectively serve current students who are foster youth and do not feel that they have the information needed to serve these students.

- Thirteen of the survey respondents reported receiving training to perform their campus liaison duties from a variety of sources such as Positive Pathways and local, regional, or national

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[2] An unaccompanied homeless youth is any homeless youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Section 743.067, *F.S.*, and Ch. 2022-65, *Laws of Florida*, address the process under which an unaccompanied homeless youth may become certified to act on their own behalf and have access to certain services. A certified unaccompanied youth includes a youth who has run away from home, who has been forced to leave his or her home, or whose parents have left the area and left the youth behind.

conferences. However, only seven reported having received training in trauma-informed care and serving vulnerable populations.

- Surveyed liaisons also reported that their institutions provide an array of services to foster youth students. The most commonly provided services were assistance with Department of Children and Families (DCF) tuition waivers, food assistance, and assistance with financial aid. Although the primary need among foster youth attending postsecondary institutions identified in OPPAGA's interviews and focus groups is safe and affordable housing, most postsecondary institutions do not currently prioritize housing for foster youth students on their campuses.

- Of Florida College System students receiving DCF tuition waivers, 61% had at least a 2.0 GPA at the end of their first year; for waiver population students at institutions with campus support programs, this percentage was slightly lower, while the percentage was slightly higher for students at institutions without a campus support program. For the waiver population students in the State University System, 89% of students had at least a 2.0 GPA at the end of their first year. In contrast to Florida College System institutions, the percentage of State University System foster youth students with at least a 2.0 GPA at the end of their first year was slightly higher for students at institutions with a campus support program and slightly lower for students at institutions without a campus support program.

- OPPAGA recommends that DCF regularly generate a list of foster youth students who are newly eligible for the tuition waivers and create a system that Florida postsecondary institutions can use to verify students' tuition waiver eligibility; the Legislature consider increasing the age at which students lose eligibility for the foster care-related tuition waivers and consider modifying statute to specify the training requirements for liaisons at postsecondary institutions; and postsecondary institutions prioritize housing for foster youth students on their campuses.[3]

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[3] The vast majority of Florida College System institutions do not have on-campus housing.

INTRODUCTION

In conducting this study, OPPAGA reviewed relevant federal and state laws; reviewed academic literature and national and state reports; interviewed key stakeholders at the national, state, and local levels; surveyed school district homeless liaisons, postsecondary campus liaisons, and dependency case managers working with foster youth; conducted focus groups and a survey with current and former foster youth; and analyzed data from the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), Board of Governors of the State University System (SUS), and the Florida Department of Education (FDOE).

This report is divided into two chapters.

Chapter 1 examines the services provided by school district homeless liaisons as required by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, including

- federal and state legislation and funding that address the educational needs of homeless children and youth;

- characteristics of Florida's homeless student population;

- services provided by school district homeless liaisons, including their efforts to identify homeless children and youth and provide required academic support and other services provided to homeless students;

- academic performance of homeless students in Florida; and

- recommendations for legislative consideration.

Chapter 2 examines the services provided by postsecondary institutions to current and former foster youth students, including

- state legislation that addresses foster youth students attending a public college or university;

- services Florida's public colleges and universities provide to foster youth students, including the services provided by campus liaisons;

- academic performance of foster youth students enrolled in public colleges and universities;

- foster youth students' perceptions of the services they received while attending public colleges and universities;

- statuses of the public colleges' and universities' implementation of recent legislative changes regarding serving foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness; and

- recommendations for legislative and postsecondary institution consideration.[4]

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[4] The remainder of the report uses the term "foster youth students" when referring to young adults who are or were involved in the foster care system and who are or were enrolled in a state college or university.

CHAPTER 1: SERVICES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), on a single night in January 2020, roughly 580,000 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States, and of these, 34,000 (5.86%) were unaccompanied youth under age 25.[5] Furthermore, HUD reported that homelessness increased nationwide between 2019 and 2020, with larger increases in people staying outdoors compared to those staying in shelters. In 2020, the number of unsheltered families with children increased for the first time since the agency began collecting data.[6]

New York and Hawaii had the highest rates of homelessness, at 47 and 46 people for every 10,000 people in the state. California and Oregon also had very high rates, with 41 and 35 people per 10,000. While Florida and Texas contributed large numbers of homeless people to the national estimates, the states' homelessness rates were lower than the national average of 18 people per 10,000 (13 for every 10,000 people in Florida and 9 for every 10,000 people in Texas).

Nationally, HUD estimated that in 2020, nearly three-quarters of people experiencing homelessness were adults age 25 or older (428,859 people) and 18% were children under age 18 (106,364 children). Eight percent were young adults ages 18 to 24 (45,243 young adults). Children—individuals under the age of 18—were most often staying in sheltered locations (90%), with 10,651 children counted in unsheltered locations.

Families with children experience several challenges due to homelessness. According to one study, family housing instability or frequent relocation causes increased stress among children and may lead to a loss of identity, intense sadness, and fears concerning their safety and security.[7] Furthermore, according to another study, children experiencing homelessness tend to face numerous other challenges including poor school performance, increased need for mental health services, social engagement difficulties, and increased risk for substance abuse.[8]

Federal and State Legislation and Funding to Address the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Youth

Federal and State Legislation

To address the unique needs of homeless children and youth, the U.S. federal government enacted the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act. The act requires that state educational agencies ensure that each child of a homeless individual and unaccompanied homeless youth have equal access to the same free and appropriate public education as is provided to other children and youth. The law requires states to identify and remove barriers to the education of homeless children and youth, such

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[5] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development. *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1: Point-In-Time Estimates of Homelessness.* Henry, Meghan, Tanya de Sousa, Caroline Roddey, Swati Gayen, and Thomas Joe Bedna. January 2021. https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf.

[6] Data collection for 2021 was limited due to COVID-19 related disruptions. Many communities that normally report this data to HUD did not perform counts of unsheltered or unaccompanied homeless people that year.

[7] Windsor, Liliane C. et al. "Educating Homeless Youth in Texas: The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act of 2001." *Educ Real* 33, no. 2 (2008): 123-130. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3339440/.

[8] Mullins, Mary H. et al. "Homeless Liaisons' Perceptions of McKinney-Vento Act Implementation: Examining Geographical Trends and Differences." *Social Work in Public Health* 31, no. 5 (2016): 358-368. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27144348/.

as a school district requiring homeless students or their families to provide previous school records and proof of residency for school enrollment. These requirements also include appointing school district liaisons for homeless students and meeting numerous other obligations, such as making best interest determinations as to whether to continue a child's education in the school of origin or whether to move the child to another school and address the child's transportation needs.[9] Florida statutes on homelessness mirror and implement the federal requirements.[10] These statutes are largely silent on homeless student rights, and defer to federal legislation.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, children and youth experiencing homelessness have the right to

- receive a free and appropriate public education;
- enroll in school immediately, even if lacking documents normally required for enrollment or having missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness;
- enroll in school and attend classes while the school gathers needed documents;
- continue attending the school of origin or enroll in the local attendance area school if attending the school of origin is not in the best interest of the student or is contrary to the request of the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth;[11]
- receive transportation to and from the school of origin if requested by the parent or guardian or by the local liaison on behalf of an unaccompanied youth; and
- receive educational services comparable to those provided to other students according to each student's need.

In addition, the McKinney-Vento Act provides that unaccompanied youth specifically have the right to

- immediate enrollment without proof of guardianship; and
- assistance from the local homeless education liaison to select a school of attendance, whether the local attendance area school or the school of origin; receive transportation to and from the school of origin, if requested; and ensure the prompt and fair resolution of any disputes in accordance with the act.

Federal law also requires state education agencies to provide a state-level coordination office, develop and submit a state plan which describes the state's efforts to identify and support homeless children and youth, monitor district compliance with state and federal requirements, and collect and report information requested by the U.S. Department of Education on children and youth identified as homeless.

As part of the state's plan to the U.S. Department of Education, the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) tracks three performance indicators for each school district: (1) the district's homeless student identification rate; (2) the homeless student school attendance rate; and (3) the homeless student grade promotion rate. Florida school districts that apply for Title IX, Part A subgrants are required to set three-year goals for improvement in each of these three areas.[12] To assist school districts in identifying and assessing the needs of homeless children and youth, the state's plan includes a

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[9] Liaisons must weigh many factors as part of determining if a child or youth should stay at their school of origin, such as transportation, available academic programs, and safety of the student. The school of origin is the school that the student attended prior to becoming homeless.
[10] Statutes applicable to educational services for homeless children and youth include ss. 420.622, 743.067, and 1003.21(1)(f), *F.S.*
[11] The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines the term "school of origin" as the school that a child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled.
[12] Title IX, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended, authorizes the U.S. Department of Education to provide funding to state education agencies to ensure that all homeless children and youth have equal access to the same free and appropriate public education available to other children and youth.

provision that FDOE will coordinate and host two statewide meetings annually and conduct quarterly conference calls.

Funding

There are two primary sources of federal funding used to address the educational needs of students experiencing homelessness. First, school districts are required to set aside a portion of their federal Title I Part A funding for programs to support homeless students. For Fiscal Year 2021-22, Florida school districts set aside $8.8 million in Title I Part A funds for this purpose.[13] (See Appendix A.)

Second, school districts may apply for and receive funding under Title IX Part A of the McKinney-Vento Act. These funds flow through state education agencies as subgrants to local education agencies (primarily school districts in Florida). For Fiscal Year 2021-22, 53 Florida school districts received $5.0 million in Title IX Part A funds.[14] (See Appendix A.) Florida school districts that receive Title IX subgrants are required to set three-year goals for improvement in each of the three areas outlined in Florida's state plan. Title IX funds may be used for tutoring services, health referral services, and school supplies, but not for food or overnight field trips. All school districts are required to adhere to the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act, even if the districts do not receive Title IX funding.

As part of the state's plan for federal program funding to support homeless students, FDOE has stated that school districts with a homeless student identification of less than 5% of the district's students on Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) will receive higher risk scores and will be prioritized for monitoring and technical assistance.[15]

In addition to the use of federal funding, some school districts reported using district funds to support homeless liaisons. Twelve of the 48 homeless liaisons who responded to OPPAGA's survey reported that at least a portion of the liaison's salary was paid for with district funds.

School District Homeless Liaisons

The McKinney-Vento Act requires each school district to identify an employee as the district homeless liaison. The homeless liaison is responsible for ensuring homeless children and youth receive the services they need. The McKinney-Vento Act enumerates the specific duties of homeless liaisons, but in general, individuals serving in this role are the primary contact between homeless families, school and local education authority staff, shelter workers, and other service providers.

Experience and Educational Backgrounds

OPPAGA surveyed 73 school district liaisons in Florida and received 48 responses.[16] Of the homeless liaisons who responded to OPPAGA's survey, their tenure on the job ranged from six months to 12 years and 47 were full-time district employees. Of the 47 full-time district employees, 38 were required

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[13] Title I Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended, authorizes the U.S. Department of Education to provide funding to local education agencies (LEAs) to ensure that LEAs with a high percentage of children and youth from low-income families improve basic programs for a wide range of vulnerable children and youth. Title I, Part A requires LEAs to reserve sufficient Title I funds to provide services to students experiencing homelessness that are comparable to those provided to students in Title I schools.

[14] The 53 school districts include the Lake Wales Charter School District located in Polk County.

[15] One national study shows that, on average, homeless students make up about 11% of the FRL population for a school district. FDOE's risk assessment plan considers school districts that identify homeless students at a rate of less than 5% of the district's FRL student population as likely candidates for increased monitoring.

[16] OPPAGA surveyed 73 school district liaisons, including 6 special school districts and all 67 county-based school districts. A total of 48 liaisons responded to the survey; however, two respondents did not answer all questions. To address this issue, the report notes the number of respondents to each section of the survey.

to have at least a bachelor's degree and 11 stated that they were required to have previous social work experience. Additionally, 23 of all liaisons reported spending all or most of their time performing their duties as the district homeless liaison, while 25 reported spending half or less of their time on these duties.

Training

Although there are no federal or state requirements on the required training or job qualifications for school district homeless liaisons, 31 of the homeless liaisons reported that their school district provided some training. Of these 31 districts, most provided liaisons with information on the enrollment of students (22), mental health issues affecting homeless children and youth (19), and homeless children and youth identification (19). Forty-six liaisons also reported receiving training from FDOE. Of these 46 liaisons, the most frequent topics covered in the state-level training included the McKinney-Vento Act (40), FDOE monitoring (38), serving unaccompanied homeless youth (31), and Title IX (27).

Other organizations also provide training, and 34 district liaisons reported receiving training from organizations other than their school district or FDOE. Of these 34, the most commonly reported organizations that provided training were the SchoolHouse Connection (14) and the National Center for Homeless Education (13).[17,18]

There are aspects of training that could be improved. Only 14 of the 48 survey respondents reported receiving trauma-informed training from any source. Homeless students often experience trauma as a result of their experiences, which manifests as a variety of physical, social, and cogitative setbacks and unacceptable behaviors resulting from coping and survival strategies. National researchers recommended that such training is critical for individuals interacting with students and families experiencing homelessness. Additionally, 46 districts reported providing training for other staff to identify homeless children and youth, however the types of staff who received training varied.[19] Specifically, of the 46 that reported providing training for other staff, school front office staff (42), teachers (39), bus drivers (23), counselors (21), school cafeteria workers (20), school administrators (10) and social workers (9) received training. Research that OPPAGA reviewed found that training all individuals who regularly interact with students is key to school districts' efforts to identify and assist homeless students.

Identification of Homeless Children and Youth

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, a primary duty of homeless liaisons is to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness. According to a published study, identification of homeless children and youth can be difficult.[20] Some students fear their homeless status may not be kept secret by staff or may be embarrassed by their status. Unaccompanied homeless youth may attempt to evade authorities

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[17] SchoolHouse Connection is a non-profit that provides advocacy and practical assistance for homeless children and youth in early childhood programs, schools, and higher education institutions.
[18] The National Center for Homeless Education is the U.S. Department of Education's technical assistance and information center for homeless education.
[19] The other two districts were unsure if teachers and other staff received training to help them identify homeless children and youth.
[20] Ascher, C. Jarvis, et al. "Strategies to Improve Data Collection on New York's Homeless Students: A Report to the NTS-TEACHS and the New York State Education Department." Brown University, 2007.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280052268_Strategies_to_Improve_Data_Collection_on_New_York%27s_Homeless_Students.

and service providers out of fear of being forced to return home to what they believe is a dangerous living situation.

Forty-seven of the 48 liaisons responded to most of OPPAGA's survey questions related to the identification of homeless children and youth. Respondents reported that, in addition to the homeless liaisons themselves, other staff is involved in identifying homeless children and youth. Forty-six reported that there was other school staff with specific duties for identifying homeless children and youth in school year 2021-22. These staff included school guidance counselors (38), teachers (21), principals (16), school psychologists (11), registration staff (8), and social workers (6).

Forty-three of the surveyed liaisons reported that their school district administers a student housing/residency questionnaire to help identify school-aged children and youth who are experiencing housing instability. The FDOE's school district template for this form includes questions regarding adults with whom the student lives, the living situation of the students, and the causes of the student's current living situation. Of the 43 districts that use a questionnaire, 20 reported that the form was provided at least once per year to every student and 23 reported that a questionnaire is provided to students upon enrollment. The information collected on these questionnaires is reviewed by district staff to determine whether the student is eligible for McKinney-Vento Program services. Other methods used by school districts to identify homeless children and youth included identification by parents of homeless children and youth (47), referrals from teachers or other district staff to the liaison (44), and student self-identification (38).

Homeless liaisons also reported using a variety of other strategies to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness. The most commonly reported methods included providing information about assistance to students experiencing homelessness in languages other than English (40); providing information on homelessness to all students and their families (29); and contacting community organizations, such as homeless shelters, food pantries, and faith-based organizations (28). Twenty-eight of the liaisons reported that their districts did not have any special strategies for identifying unaccompanied homeless youth; instead, the districts rely on the same strategies used for identifying all homeless children and youth.[21]

Characteristics of Florida's Homeless Student Population

Number of Homeless Students

OPPAGA's analysis of Florida Department of Education data found that, during school year 2020-21, Florida school districts reported 62,319 students as homeless. (See Exhibit 1.) The reported number of homeless students was relatively stable from school year 2013-14 to school year 2016-17, increased substantially in school year 2017-18, and decreased in the three most recent school years. The overall reported state homeless student population has been declining in the most recent three-year period. Nine school districts—Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Orange, Osceola, Palm Beach, Pinellas, Polk—accounted for slightly more than 50% of all reported instances of student homelessness.

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[21] Two liaisons stopped the survey before reaching this question.

Exhibit 1
Reported Homeless Student Population From School Year 2013-14 to School Year 2020-21
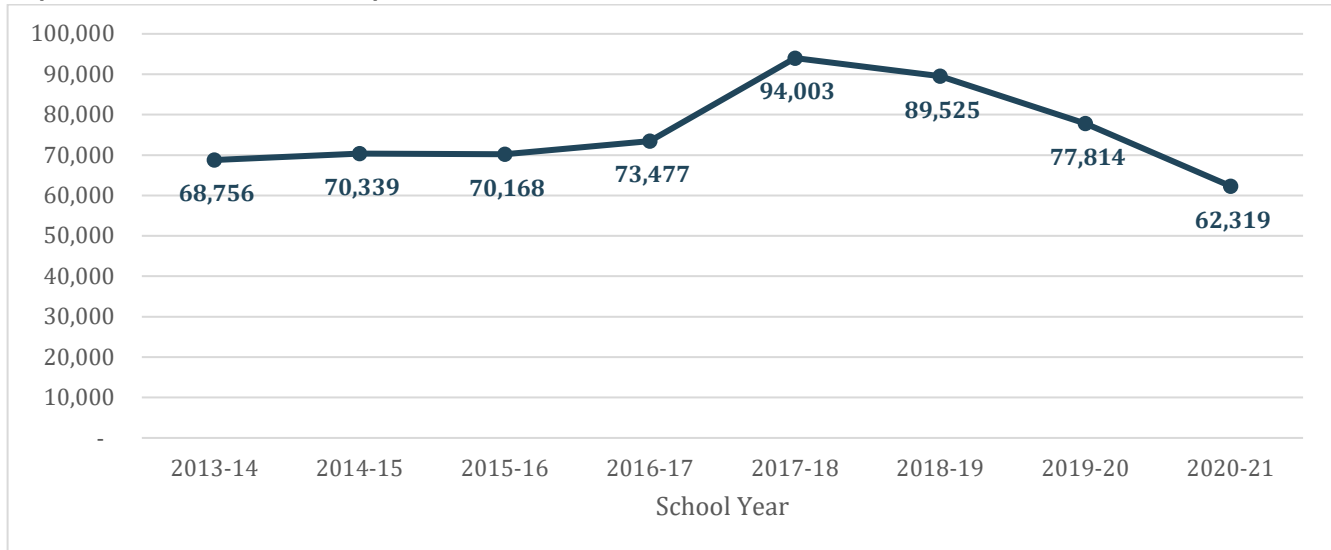
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Natural disasters and the pandemic appear to have had a substantial effect on Florida's reported student homeless population. The spike in the homeless student population in school year 2017-18 followed Hurricane Irma, which struck the state in the fall of 2017. Similarly, Bay and Jackson county school districts, which were among the counties most affected by Hurricane Michael in October 2018, experienced substantial increases in their homeless student populations in school year 2018-19, while the number of homeless students decreased statewide that year. Bay County School District's homeless children and youth population increased from 1,496 in school year 2017-18 to 5,537 in school year 2018-19, and Jackson County School District's increased from 145 to 2,693 during the same period.

The COVID-19 pandemic also appears to have had a noticeable impact on the reported number of homeless students in Florida. From school year 2019-20 to school year 2020-21, homeless student counts fell by almost 20%. OPPAGA's review of literature suggests this decline was at least partially due to undercounting of homeless students due to school closures and remote schooling. The reported homeless student population fell to 62,319 in school year 2020-21, the first full school year during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was the only homeless student population count below 68,000 during this period.

During the eight-year period from school year 2013-14 to school year 2020-21, Florida's unaccompanied homeless student population followed a similar pattern to all homeless students, ranging from a low of 5,960 in 2020-21 to a high of 7,810 in school year 2017-18, with an average of 6,771 during this period and making up about 9% of all homeless students.

Race and Ethnicity of Homeless Students

OPPAGA's analysis of instances of student homelessness reported by Florida school districts to the FDOE for the eight-year period from school year 2013-14 to school year 2020-21 revealed that 55% of the instances involved White students and 36% involved Black students. Thirty percent involved Hispanic students. The race and ethnicity percentages of unaccompanied youth were similar those reported for all homeless students. (See Exhibit 2.)

FDOE uses Free and Reduced Lunch Program enrollment as a proxy measure for poverty and a comparison group when reporting and monitoring homelessness rates. OPPAGA's analysis found that, compared to students in the FRL Program, there is a slightly higher percentage of Black students and a moderately lower percentage of Hispanic students reported as homeless. OPPAGA's analysis was somewhat consistent with national research that OPPAGA reviewed. For instance, according to the national policy organization Voice of Youth Count, Black or African American young adults are disproportionately represented among the homeless, even after accounting for differences in income and education levels. However, OPPAGA's analysis found that there is a moderately lower percentage of Hispanic students reported as homeless when compared to peers in the FRL Program.

Exhibit 2
Race and Ethnicity of Homeless Students Reported From School Year 2013-14 to School Year 2020-21

	Race			Ethnicity	
Student Type	White	Black	Other	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
All Homeless	55%	36%	8%	30%	70%
Unaccompanied Homeless	57%	34%	8%	21%	79%
Free and Reduced Lunch Program	60%	31%	9%	39%	61%

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Living Situations of Homeless Students

During the eight-year period between 2013-14 and 2020-21, OPPAGA's analysis of FDOE data found that most students reported as homeless were living in shared housing with other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. Shared housing for such reasons is commonly referred to as "doubled up." (See Exhibit 3.) Other arrangements, such as living in shelters, hotels or motels, or places not designated for human sleeping, such as cars or parks, were far less commonly reported living situations among homeless students. OPPAGA's findings are consistent with national research showing that the vast majority of homeless school age students report doubling up compared to other types of living arrangements.

OPPAGA's analysis also found slight but potentially meaningful differences between the living situations of unaccompanied homeless students, who tend to be older, and accompanied youth, who tend to be younger and in the presence of an adult family member or guardian. Notably, unaccompanied homeless students were slightly more prone than accompanied homeless students to be doubled up or in emergency or transitional shelters. In contrast, accompanied youth were more prone than unaccompanied youth to report living in hotels or motels and places not designated for human sleeping, such as cars or parks.

Exhibit 3
Living Situations of Students Reported as Homeless From School Year 2013-14 to School Year 2020-21
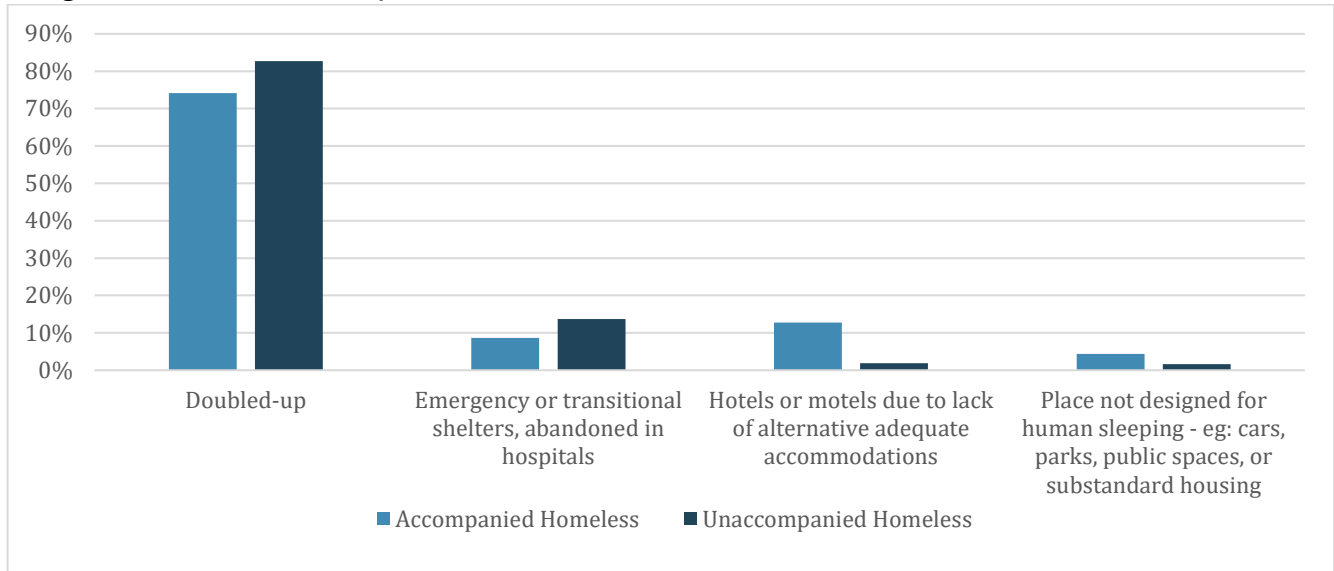
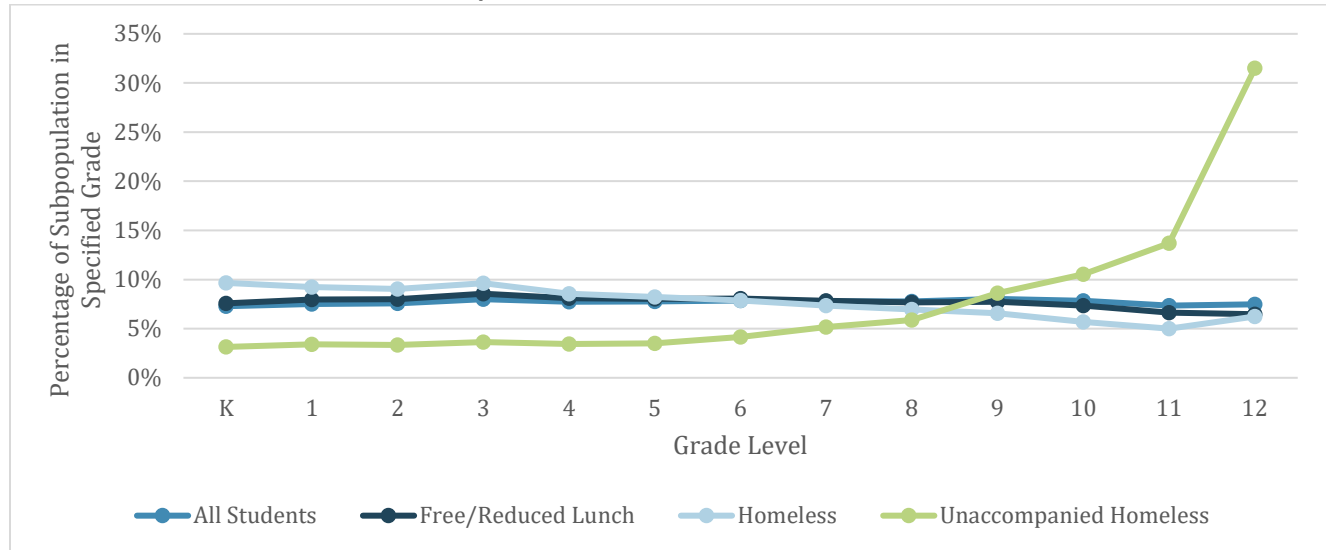Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Grade Levels of Homeless Students

OPPAGA's analysis found considerable differences in the grade distribution of homeless students overall compared to unaccompanied homeless students. The percentage of all homeless students reported by grade level during the eight-year review period was relatively evenly distributed across all grade levels from kindergarten through grade 12 (ranging from 5.0% to 9.7%) with only slight decreases beginning in grade 4 and continuing each year through grade 11. The grade level distribution of all homeless students was also similar to all students and to FRL students. (See Exhibit 4.)

In contrast, the percentage of unaccompanied youth was unevenly distributed across grade levels (ranging from 3.1% to 31.5%) with the largest percentage (64%) reported in grades 9 through 12. This could be because unaccompanied students, who are no longer in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, tend to be older than other students, including the general population of homeless students. In addition, unaccompanied homeless students are eligible for additional federal financial aid to attend postsecondary education, providing increased incentives for homeless students to identify as unaccompanied, which might help explain the spike in the percentage of unaccompanied students in grade 12.

Exhibit 4
Grade Level Distribution of Student Groups From School Year 2016-17 to School Year 2020-21

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Academic Support and Other Services Provided to Homeless Students

Among their responsibilities under the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless liaisons must ensure that the students are enrolled in school, have an equal opportunity to succeed academically, and have equal access to services for which they are eligible. To achieve these goals, homeless liaisons are responsible for handling enrollment disputes or disputes related to attending a homeless student's school of origin, addressing any transportation barriers to getting to and from school that the student might encounter, and ensuring that the student receives needed academic support services.

Prompt Enrollment

The McKinney-Vento Act requires liaisons to ensure that homeless students are immediately enrolled in school, even if the student is unable to produce the records normally required for enrollment (e.g., academic records, immunization records, other health records, or proof of residency) or if the student has missed deadlines for enrollment due to homelessness. It is the enrolling school's duty to contact the last school attended to retrieve relevant records, and schools must maintain those records.

OPPAGA asked homeless liaisons which documents, records, or other requirements were needed to enroll a student believed to be homeless. Forty-six liaisons responded to the questions in this area. Twenty-seven said they did not require any documentation or records to enroll a homeless student in school. The remaining district liaisons reported requiring documents such as health records, immunization records, birth certificates, prior school records, and residency documentation.

The homeless liaisons were also asked to identify any barriers that limit their ability to promptly enroll homeless students. Twenty-seven liaisons reported that their districts experienced no barriers to prompt enrollment of homeless students. Sixteen liaisons reported barriers to prompt enrollment. The two most commonly identified barriers were training among staff tasked with identifying homeless children and youth and obtaining required documentation for enrollment.

School of Origin Best-Interest Determination

When a student becomes homeless, they often change living situations to an area that is outside their school's service area. The school they attended prior to becoming homeless is called their school of origin. The McKinney-Vento Act requires the school district to determine if it is in the best interest of the student to remain at their school of origin or to change to their zoned school based on their new place of residence. Generally, it is considered in the best interest of the student to remain at the school of origin, as school stability is important to a student's continued school attendance and academic success. A liaison may consider many factors when making this determination, including transportation time, student safety, and any special programs, clubs, sports, or classes in which the student participates. After making a determination, a student or parent may object to it, and the student is usually allowed to remain at the school of origin despite the liaison's determination.

Forty-seven liaisons responded to OPPAGA's survey questions related to factors used to make such determinations. Forty-three reported using student-centered factors when determining if remaining in the school of origin is in the best interest of a homeless student. Of these districts, the most common factors included school attendance (36), travel time (35), parental preference (35), and academic achievement (34).Eleven liaisons also reported that they used the Florida Department of Education's *Checklist for Comparing School Selection Options for Homeless Children and Youth* during school year 2021-22 to determine if remaining in the school of origin is in the best interest of the homeless student.

Forty-six liaisons responded to OPPAGA's survey questions related to disputes over the school of best interest for a homeless student. Thirty-nine liaisons reported that, in the past three years, their school districts had not overruled the wishes of the parents, guardians, or homeless student in their determination of the homeless student's school of best interest. Only three liaisons reported that in the past three years they have participated in a dispute resolution process regarding a preference by a homeless student or the students' parent or guardian to remain at the student's school of origin. Similarly, 41 of responding liaisons said that, in the past three years, their school districts had not overruled the wishes of an unaccompanied homeless student in the determination of the school of best interest. Only one school district determined that an unaccompanied homeless student should remain at their school of origin against the wishes of the unaccompanied homeless student, and four respondents were unsure if this occurred over the past three school years.

Transportation of Homeless Students

The McKinney-Vento Act requires a homeless liaison to ensure that a homeless family or youth is fully informed of all transportation services, including transportation services to their school of origin. While the liaison must assist homeless students and their parents in accessing transportation to the school the students attend, even if it is not the school for which they are zoned, homeless students are only required to be provided with comparable transportation services. Of the 16 homeless liaisons who reported barriers to prompt enrollment, only 10 liaisons reported facing barriers to providing transportation to the school of origin for homeless students in the past three years. Five of the 10 liaisons cited a lack of bus drivers as a barrier. Some of the school district homeless liaisons interviewed by OPPAGA reported using ride hailing services, vans, or town cars to try to make up for transportation barriers and gaps.[22]

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[22] As part of this project, OPPAGA interviewed school district homeless liaisons from seven school districts: Bay, Brevard, Broward, Lee, Nassau, Polk, and Sarasota.

Academic Support Services

The 47 school district homeless liaisons responding to OPPAGA's survey questions on academic support services reported several efforts to support homeless students with the services and supplies they need to succeed at school and receive the same education as other students. Liaisons reported providing the following services to homeless students:

- **School supplies (44 districts).** District liaisons interviewed by OPPAGA described supplies as including appropriate clothing to wear to school, uniforms for choir or Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps, backpacks, computers, and tablets.

- **Coordination with other agencies providing services (40 districts).** District liaisons in survey responses and interviews said that organizations like churches, thrift stores, and other community partners provided homeless students with academic supports including covering fees related to academic programs or transportation to extended learning programs.

- **Tutoring and supplemental instruction (38 districts).** Survey responses were consistent with information OPPAGA collected in interviews in which liaisons said that their districts provided homeless students with additional instructional services such as online tutoring after school or at shelters, academic support, ACT/SAT prep, and transportation to and from tutoring.

- **Summer programs (23 districts).** District liaisons described these as including identification of homeless children and youth, year-round tutoring at shelters, and summer programs.

Survey results generally were consistent with OPPAGA's review of school year 2021-22 Title I, Part A sub-grant applications for 77 districts, which described the multiple ways that districts planned to use the federal funding to support homeless education. Among the most commonly identified planned uses of the funds were for school supplies (58 districts); tutoring services (28 districts); transportation services (23 districts); clothing items (19 districts); medical and mental health services (17 districts); and other items needed by homeless students such as college applications, birth certificates, driver's licenses, and immunization records (19 districts).

Academic Performance of Homeless Students

OPPAGA analyzed a range of academic data provided by the Florida Department of Education. For most of the following analyses, OPPAGA examined the academic performance of four student groups: (1) all students reported as homeless; (2) the subgroup of homeless students reported as unaccompanied; (3) all students who received free or reduced priced lunch; and (4) all students who did not receive FRL.[23,24] Overall, OPPAGA found that homeless students performed less well than their non-homeless counterparts on all academic measures examined. Furthermore, unaccompanied homeless students had even poorer performance than the general homeless student population. OPPAGA's findings are consistent with national research that has determined that a lack of stable housing has negative effects

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[23] In these groupings, students identified as homeless are also counted in the groups for free and reduced price meals and non-free and reduced price meals. However, the number of students identified as homeless (averaging 79,271 between school year 2016-17 and school year 2020-21) is relatively small compared to the total number of students on FRL (averaging about 1.7 million) and the total number of all students (averaging about 3.0 million) during the same period. Because homeless students represent a small percentage of these other groupings (5% of FRL students and 3% of all students), the inclusion of homeless students in these other groups does not meaningfully affect the characterizations of these groups relative to the characterizations of homeless students as their own group.

[24] The group of students who received FRL and the group of all students who did not receive FRL are provided as a point of reference and are not entirely comparable to the homeless student populations in terms of the academic challenges they face.

on a student's academic experiences and outcomes. Poverty alone cannot explain all the performance differences between homeless and other students, as OPPAGA's analysis found that non-homeless students who also live in poverty had better outcomes compared to both homeless student groups examined.

Absenteeism

Homeless students have consistently rated school as very important, yet experience attendance problems at much higher rates than non-homeless students. OPPAGA's analysis found substantial differences in the percentage of days absent among the groups of students identified as homeless compared to other groups of students. (See Exhibit 5.) Unaccompanied homeless students had the highest absenteeism, with the percentages of days absent ranging from 11% in school year 2019-20 to 17% in school year 2020-21. The general population of homeless students had the next highest absenteeism rates, followed by FRL students. Students who did not receive FRL had the lowest percentages of days absent, at about 5% each year. This pattern was consistent across the five years that OPPAGA examined.

However, the absenteeism differences were most pronounced in school year 2020-21, the first full school year during the COVID-19 pandemic, when absentee rates spiked for FRL students, homeless students, and unaccompanied homeless students. According to some national studies, lower-income students and students experiencing homelessness are more likely than other students to lack internet service necessary for remote online learning, which was common practice during the pandemic.

Exhibit 5
Percentage of Days Absent by School Year and Student Group
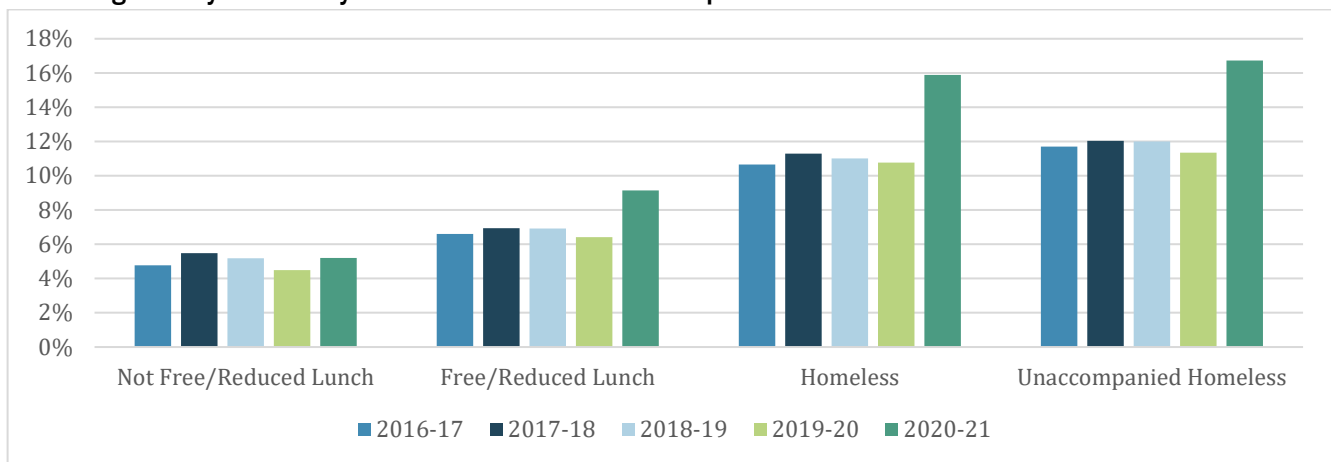
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Some of the differences among the four student groups may be partially driven by differences in the grade-level distributions of the groups, particularly unaccompanied homeless students. Absentee rates from kindergarten through grade 5 were slightly lower for unaccompanied homeless students compared to homeless students overall. However, in grades 6 through 12, absenteeism rates for unaccompanied homeless students exceeded that of the general population of homeless students. Because approximately 80% of unaccompanied homeless students were in grades 6 through 12, the absenteeism rates of unaccompanied homeless students, across all grade-levels combined, exceeded that of all other student groups.

Academic Proficiency

Unaccompanied homeless students and homeless students overall had lower proficiency rates on statewide assessments than the other two student groups examined. (See Exhibit 6.) During the four-year period from school year 2015-16 through school year 2018-19, unaccompanied homeless students had the lowest passage rates on the Florida Standards Assessments (FSA) in English Language Arts (23%) and Mathematics (30%) and on end-of-course examinations in Algebra (23%) and Biology (36%).[25] The general population of homeless students had the next lowest passage rates on statewide assessments, followed by FRL students. During the period, non-FRL students had the highest passage rates, ranging from 68% on the English Language Arts assessment to 77% on the Biology end-of-course exam. OPPAGA's findings are consistent with results in research that OPPAGA reviewed. For example, one national study found that homeless students scored approximately eight to nine percentage points lower on statewide assessments when compared to non-homeless, economically disadvantaged students.

Exhibit 6
Percentage of Students Testing Proficient (Level 3+) On Statewide Assessments From School Year 2015-16 Through School Year 2018-19 by Student Group
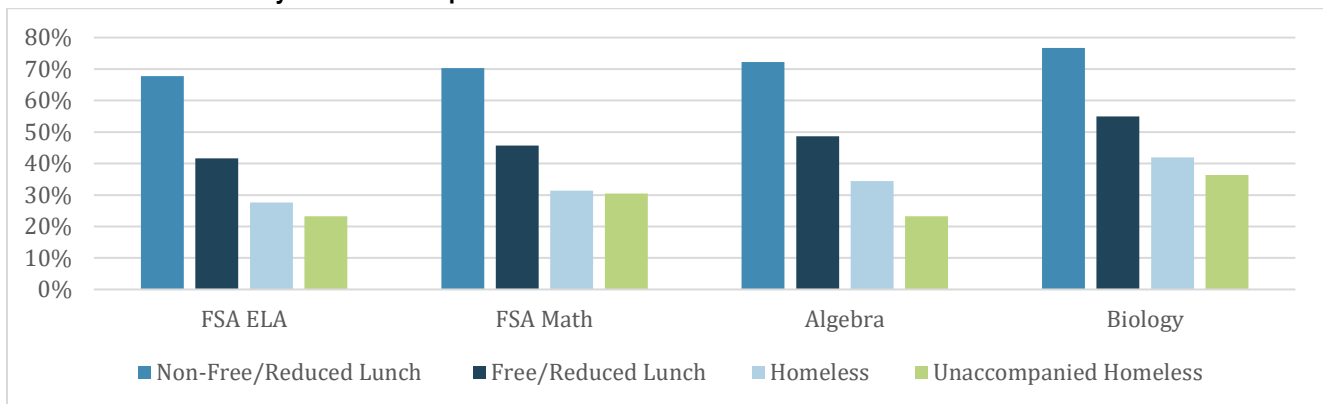
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Retention Rates

OPPAGA's analysis also found that unaccompanied homeless students and homeless students overall had higher retention rates than FRL students and non-FRL students. (See Exhibit 7.) Of the four student groups, unaccompanied homeless students had the highest retention rates, ranging from 10.8% to 7.9% from school years 2016-17 through 2020-21. The general population of homeless students had the next highest retention rates (7.0% to 4.2%), followed by FRL students (3.9% to 1.9%). Non-FRL students had the lowest retention rates, which did not exceed 2.0% during the five-year period.

The percentage of students retained declined for all four groups in school year 2019-20, the first school year to include the COVID-19 pandemic. For that school year, FDOE used emergency powers to permit school districts to promote and graduate students who did not meet all requirements for promotion or graduation. However, the relative rates of retention of the three disadvantaged groups (homeless,

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[25] Since test passage rates are generally slightly lower in higher grade levels, this comparison may be slightly affected by the grade level distribution of students taking FSA examinations. For example, 37% of all FSA ELA test takers took 8th–10th grade tests, compared to 50% of unaccompanied homeless youth. This may result in a slightly lower average test passage rate for unaccompanied homeless youth since students in grades 3–7 passed the assessment at slightly higher rates than students in grades 8–10 (52.2% versus 50.9% respectively).

unaccompanied homeless, and FRL students) compared to non-FRL students was not substantially different during school year 2019-20 compared to earlier years.

Exhibit 7
**Retention Rates by School Year and Student Group**
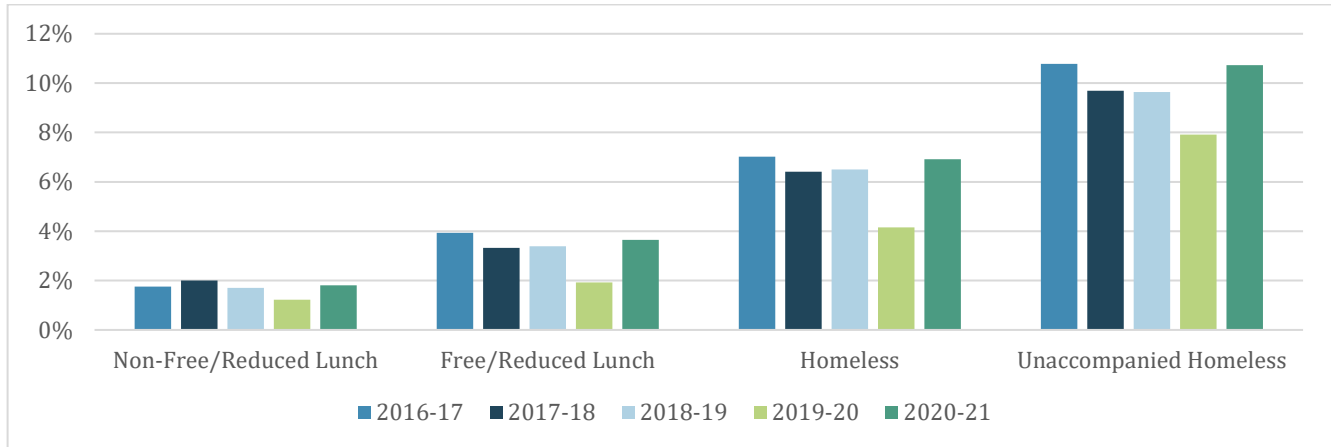
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Notably, retention rates varied substantially by grade level. For all four student groups, retention rates spiked substantially in 3rd grade (the grade in which students must pass the English Language Arts statewide assessment to be promoted to the next grade, then generally climbed in each subsequent grade level from grades 6 through 10. Across all grades, retention rates were considerably higher for homeless and unaccompanied homeless students compared to non-FRL students and FRL students. However, the relative ranking of the two homeless student groups flipped as the grade level increased. In grades 1 through 3, the general population of homeless students had the highest retention rates. Conversely, from grades 4 through 11, retention rates of the unaccompanied homeless student group exceeded that of all homeless students. The retention rate differences between unaccompanied students and all homeless students were greatest in grades 9 through 11.

OPPAGA performed additional data analysis to determine if the retention rates corresponded with the percentage of students who were in a grade lower than expected based on their ages. This analysis examined three slightly different groupings of students: (1) unaccompanied homeless students; (2) accompanied homeless students; and (3) FRL students who were not homeless. Consistent with higher retention rates for homeless student populations, OPPAGA found that, compared to FRL students, both groups of homeless students were more frequently in a lower grade level than expected based on their ages. (See Exhibit 8.) The highest percentages of students behind expected grade level were among unaccompanied homeless students. Similarly, OPPAGA's analysis found that the percentage of students who are two or more years behind expected grade level was on average much higher for unaccompanied homeless students than the other two groups of students.

Exhibit 8

Percentage of Students in a Lower Grade Than Expected Based on Student Age by Student Group From School Year 2013-14 Through School Year 2020-21
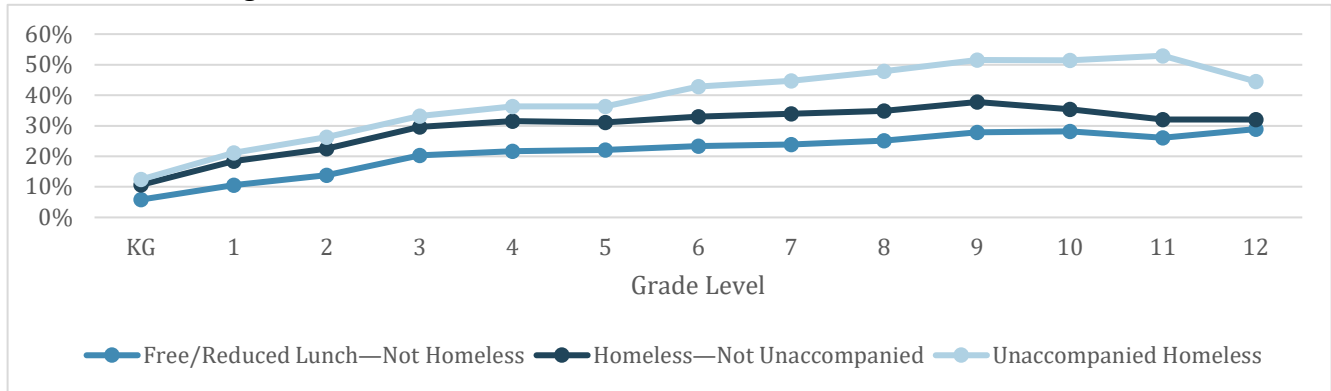
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Suspension Rates

OPPAGA's analysis of out-of-school suspensions for the four student groups revealed patterns similar to those seen with the other academic measures examined. Unaccompanied homeless students were most frequently suspended at least once, ranging from 12% to 16% for school years 2016-17 through 2020-21. (See Exhibit 9.) The general population of homeless students was the next group that was most frequently suspended at least once, followed by FRL students. Non-FRL students were least frequently suspended at least once, not exceeding 4% during the five-year period. Notably, the suspension rates for all four student groups generally trended upward from kindergarten through grade 5, peaked during middle school (grades 6 through 8), and then generally declined in high school.

Exhibit 9
Percentage of Students Suspended at Least Once, by School Year and Student Group
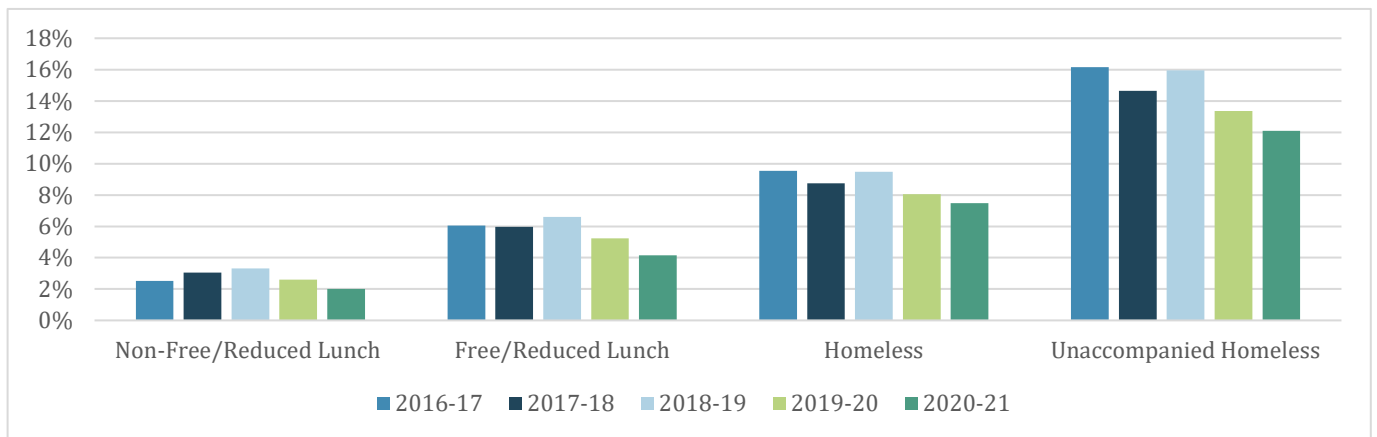
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

Dropout and Graduation Rates

OPPAGA's analysis found that dropout rates of students in grades 9 through 12 were higher for unaccompanied homeless students and homeless students overall compared to the other two groups of students. (See Exhibit 10.) Unaccompanied homeless students had the highest dropout rates, ranging from 4.1% to 5.9% during the five-year review period, followed by the general population of

homeless students. The dropout rates of FRL students and non-FRL students were both lower than the two homeless student groups and did not exceed 2.0% in any of the five years examined.

Exhibit 10
Dropout Rates by School Year and Student Group
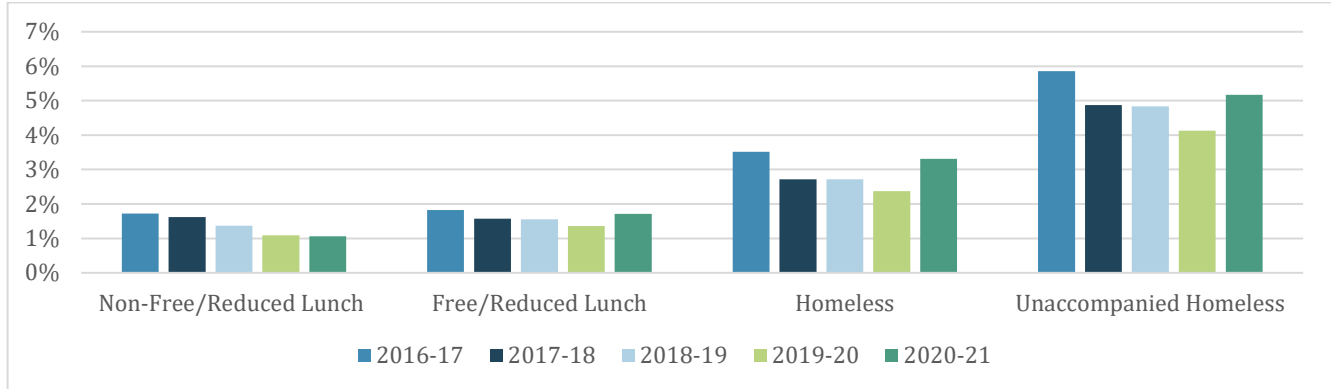
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

For all four student groups, dropout rates generally increased in each successive grade level. However, dropout rates were considerably higher for homeless students overall and unaccompanied homeless students than for FRL and non-FRL students. The largest difference (2.6 percentage points) in dropout rates between the general population of homeless and the unaccompanied homeless student group occurred in grade 11.

High school graduation rates were lowest for the two homeless student groups.[26] (See Exhibit 11.) For all years examined, unaccompanied homeless students had lower high school graduation rates than homeless students overall. However, the differences in graduation rates between the two groups across the five-year period were slight, ranging from 0.5 to 4 percentage points. For instance, in school year 2016-17, the graduation rate for the unaccompanied homeless student group (62%) was slightly lower than that of the general homeless population (65%). Non-FRL students had the highest graduation rate rates, ranging from 89% to 94% during the period examined.

Exhibit 11
High School Graduation Rates by School Year and Student Group
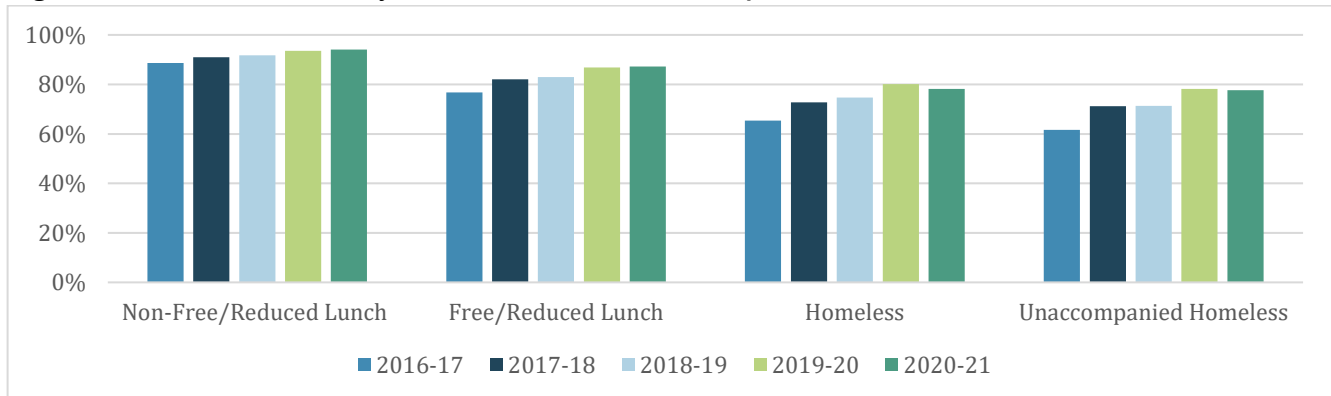
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Florida Department of Education data.

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[26] Graduation rates presented in this section reflect the percentage of 9th grade entrants who graduated in four years with some exclusions applied.

RECOMMENDATIONS

OPPAGA's review of school district homeless liaison services identified several issues that could be addressed. OPPAGA's survey results indicated that many of the liaisons and other school district staff who work with homeless students and their families have not received adequate training, including training on trauma-informed care. Research indicates the need for such training to ensure that school district instructional staff and support staff can fulfill the district's obligation to identify and support homeless students and their families. OPPAGA's survey results also indicated that not all school districts regularly inquire about the residency status of students in their district, which is a primary means to identify students experiencing homelessness. Based on these findings, OPPAGA has the following recommendations for consideration.

1. **Require school district homeless liaisons and other educational staff who work with homeless students to receive training on trauma-informed care**. In OPPAGA's survey of school district homeless liaisons, only 14 of 48 survey respondents reported receiving trauma-informed training from any source. Homeless students often experience trauma as a result of their experiences, which manifest as a variety of physical, social, and cogitative setbacks and unacceptable behaviors resulting from coping and survival strategies. National researchers recommended that such training is critical for individuals interacting with students and families experiencing homelessness. To address this issue, the Florida Department of Education could develop training on trauma-informed care and require this training for appropriate school district staff who work with homeless students.

2. **Require school districts to check the residency status of students at least once per school year**. OPPAGA survey results showed that while about half of the school district homeless liaisons reported that their district provides residency questionnaires to students at least once per year, this was not a statewide practice. Annual information about a student's residency status would help school districts increase the identification of students and families experiencing homelessness and eligible for services. To address this issue, the Florida Department of Education could implement State Board Rule requiring school districts to check the residency status of students at least annually.

3. **Require school districts to provide periodic training to all staff who interact with students on the school district's obligation under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to identify and provide educational services to homeless students.** Some national studies have shown that many public school teachers are unaware of the rights and benefits afforded to students identified as homeless. In addition, bus drivers and counselors may be in the best position to notice changes in student behavior associated with unstable housing. Half of the district homeless liaisons that responded to OPPAGA's survey reported that their district provided training to bus drivers or school counselors to identify homeless children and youth. Requiring such training could better ensure that all appropriate educational staff are aware of the requirements under the McKinney-Vento act and are in a position to assist the school district in identifying and providing educational services to these students. To address this issue, the Florida Department of Education could work with school districts and other experts to develop appropriate training and implement State Board Rule requiring school districts to periodically provide training to ensure that appropriate staff members are aware of the school district's obligations and services to homeless students and their families.

CHAPTER 2: SERVICES FOR FOSTER YOUTH STUDENTS ATTENDING POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Young adults currently or previously involved in the foster care system face a variety of challenges when entering adulthood. These young adults may have unresolved trauma, a lack of family support, and educational gaps. Studies have found that foster youth enroll in college at lower rates than their peers and those that do are less likely to complete their first year.[27] To address these gaps, federal and state programs provide financial support to current and former foster youth pursuing postsecondary education. States have the option of using federal funds to provide foster care up to age 21 for young adults who meet eligibility criteria. States may also use federal and/or state funds to provide a variety of educational supports, including Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETV), state tuition waiver programs, and targeted college scholarships.[28] In addition to these financial supports, an increasing number of colleges and universities are establishing campus support programs designed to address the unique needs that foster youth students face. These programs provide a variety of services to help increase retention and academic success among students with prior foster care involvement.

Florida provides several supports to foster youth, including Aftercare, Extended Foster Care (EFC), Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS), ETV, and the tuition exemption waivers.[29,30] Those who remain in foster care until they reach age 18 may elect to remain in foster care until age 21 through EFC or may receive services through Aftercare (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, and counseling).[31,32] To maintain eligibility for EFC, young adults must participate in a qualifying activity, including postsecondary education.[33] The state provides financial support to certain foster youth enrolled in postsecondary institutions through PESS, ETV, and tuition waivers. Eligible young adults are exempt from paying tuition and fees at eligible institutions through the waivers; some of these young adults may also receive a monthly stipend through PESS.[34] The waivers are available to foster youth students under age 28 who meet specific criteria, including aging out of foster care, being adopted, and being placed into a permanent guardianship.[35] At least 27,016 youth who had been adopted, aged out of foster care, or been placed in a permanent guardianship over age 16 were between 18 and 27 years

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[27] For the purposes of this report, foster youth includes young adults with current or former foster care involvement.

[28] The federal Education and Training Vouchers program provides eligible former foster youth with up to $5,000 per year toward postsecondary education and training. In Florida, these funds are available for youth attending a postsecondary institution or training program that is not eligible for the state tuition waivers.

[29] Sections 409.1451(2) and (3), 39.6251, and 1009.25(1)(c), *F.S.*; and 42 U.S.C. § 677(a)(6).

[30] Florida offers tuition exemption waivers to a wide array of populations. Unless otherwise noted, all references to tuition waivers in this report are specific to waivers available to current and former foster youth.

[31] Youth with a documented disability may remain in EFC until age 22.

[32] Aftercare services are available until age 23.

[33] Youth may also participate in qualifying activities such as working on their GED or working at least 80 hours per month. There are several other eligibility criteria that young adults must meet to remain in EFC, including meeting with a case manager every month and attending six-month court reviews.

[34] Those attending institutions that are not eligible for the tuition waiver may receive ETV funds until age 23. ETV funds are limited and are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

[35] Foster youth must also meet additional eligibility criteria specified in s. 1009.25, *F.S.*

old at the start of the 2020-21 academic year, and thus may have been eligible for the tuition waivers.[36,37]

State Legislation and Funding to Address the Educational Needs of Foster Youth Students

State Legislation

The 2013 Florida Legislature required the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to collaborate with the Board of Governors (BOG), Florida College System (FCS), and Florida Department of Education (FDOE) to help address the need for a comprehensive support structure in colleges and universities for youth who have been in or remain in the foster care system.[38] Select colleges and universities (as determined by DCF) were required to establish postsecondary educational campus coaching positions to provide foster youth students with dedicated, on-campus support.[39] These coaches (often referred to as liaisons) were required to be institution employees who are focused on supporting these youth.

In 2022, the Legislature modified statute to require every school district Adult and Career Education program, FCS institution, and state university that has at least one student using the foster care tuition waivers to have, at a minimum, a knowledgeable, accessible, and responsive employee who acts as a liaison and provides assistance to those students who are eligible for the tuition waiver to assist in resolving any problems related to the waivers and provide on-campus support.[40,41,42] This requirement also now applies to students receiving a tuition waiver due to homelessness, many of whom may have received services through the school district homeless liaison while in primary and secondary school.[43] The Chancellors of the Division of Career and Adult Education, the FCS and the State University System (SUS) are required to annually report to DCF specific data about the students served by the campus liaisons, including academic progress, retention rates for students enrolled in the program, financial aid requested and received, and information required by the National Youth in Transition Database.[44]

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[36] Overall, this is an underestimate of eligible youth. Data limitations result in the omission of a substantial number of adopted youth (those who were adopted prior to 2003) as well as youth who entered guardianship prior to age 16 whose guardians were still receiving payment at the time the youth turned 18. Simultaneously, the number of youth aging out of DCF care may be a somewhat high estimate.

[37] While many youth who leave foster care under these circumstances are eligible for the supports available to young adults with foster care histories, there are additional eligibility criteria specific to the type of placement the youth was in at the time they exited foster care, as well as the amount of time spent in care, and thus not all youth who exit care for these reasons are eligible for these services.

[38] Section 409.1452, *F.S.*

[39] DCF had sole discretion to determine which state colleges and universities were required to offer campus coaching services, based on departmental demographic data indicating greatest need.

[40] The 2022 legislation changed the terminology in the statute from "coach" to "liaison." While the terms are often used interchangeably, some stakeholders reported that coach is often used to describe a more comprehensive role used by some liaisons (e.g., those liaisons that provide more than just assistance with the waiver). For clarity, the remainder of this report will use the term liaison regardless of the degree of involvement with the students.

[41] The name and contact information of the liaison must be: (1) provided to each student who is exempt from the payment of tuition and fees and who is attending that institution; (2) published on the website of the program, institution, or university; and (3) provided to the department and each community-based care lead agency.

[42] As the requirement for school district Adult and Career Education programs to have liaisons did not go into effect until July 1, 2022, these institutions are not included in OPPAGA's review.

[43] As the requirement to serve youth receiving the homeless tuition waiver did not go into effect July 1, 2022, this population was not a central component of OPPAGA's analysis.

[44] The National Youth in Transition Database is run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. The information is collected from youth via surveys, which include demographic information on youth in foster care as well as information on the services provided to youth who have aged out of foster care and their outcomes.

To meet these statutory requirements, DCF contracts with a nonprofit organization, Educate Tomorrow, to assist institutions in establishing campus liaisons. The Educate Tomorrow liaison contract, referred to as Positive Pathways, requires the organization to coordinate, develop, and maintain a network of postsecondary campus-based support initiatives across the college and university systems. Positive Pathways works to help liaisons understand the value of supporting the students on their campuses and to create a network of child welfare professionals, both on and off college and university campuses. This assistance is provided through technical assistance, trainings, monthly calls, and funding.

Funding

Liaisons at Florida state colleges and universities may be individual staff members providing assistance to foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness who are seeking assistance with a tuition waiver, or they may be staff of larger campus support programs geared toward working with these populations. While liaisons are required to be postsecondary institution staff and may be paid with institutional funding, some institutions use additional funding streams to pay for liaisons and/or services provided by the campus support programs, including grant funding and private donations. Additionally, Positive Pathways has funded liaison positions at two institutions on a temporary basis, as well as funded campus tours for prospective students and state-level research efforts. In addition to funding the services provided to foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness, in academic year 2021-22, Florida state colleges and universities waived $17.8 million in tuition for foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness. (See Exhibit 12.)

Exhibit 12
Florida's State Colleges and Universities Waived $17.8 Million During Academic Year 2021-22 in Tuition for Foster Youth Students and Students Experiencing Homelessness

Institution Type	Foster Care Waivers	Homelessness Waiver	Total
Florida College System	$6,192,142	$970,427	**$7,162,570**
State University System	9,001,302	1,666,951	**10,668,253**
Total	**$15,193,444**	**$2,637,378**	**$17,830,823**

Source: Board of Governors and Department of Education data.

Challenges Experienced by Foster Youth Students Attending Postsecondary Education Institutions

Youth with histories of foster care system involvement face a variety of challenges when transitioning to postsecondary education. Studies examining the supports provided to these youth have found that campus support programs vary in the types of services provided but generally aim to improve college retention by offering financial, academic, logistical, and/or psychosocial support.[45] While research on the outcomes of youth who participate in these programs is limited, studies of campus support programs show positive effects on student retention and graduation.

Foster youth have a unique set of needs that may hinder their ability to succeed in postsecondary institutions. Many foster youth have histories of child abuse or neglect, family separation, unstable

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[45] Dworsky, Amy et al. "Supporting Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care," *Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago*, issue brief no. 1. (2014). https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/43266/2000127-Supporting-Youth-Transitioning-out-of-Foster-Care.pdf.

living arrangements, multiple caregivers, and frequent school changes.[46] Existing research estimates that fewer than 1 in 10 foster youth complete two- or four-year degrees by early adulthood. Youth aging out of foster care are more likely to drop out of high school, be unemployed, and be dependent on public assistance when compared to children in the general population. The ability of foster youth to succeed in postsecondary education may be hindered by issues such as mental health problems, family conflicts, food and housing insecurity, and the stigma associated with foster care.[47]

A study of foster youth students in California colleges found that the odds of completing a college degree were lower for males, White youth (as compared to Black youth), those with sexual orientations other than heterosexual, and those who had ever repeated a grade in elementary or secondary school.[48] Further, the estimated odds of completing a college degree were approximately 4 times higher for youth who first enrolled in a four-year college than for youth who first enrolled in a two-year college. Those who received an education and training voucher had almost 2.4 times higher odds of completing a degree than youth who did not receive a voucher.

Benefits of Campus Support Programs

Campus support programs provide an array of services to help foster youth acclimate to and succeed in postsecondary institutions. Campus support programs for foster youth students were first founded in the late 1990s to provide advising, skill-building, advocacy, and referral services to help foster youth navigate and succeed in college. These programs vary in the types of support that are offered but often aim to improve college retention by offering financial, academic, logistical, and/or psychosocial support. One study found that most campus support programs offer resources, information, referrals, career development, and financial assistance; approximately half provide academic support in the form of coaching, tutoring, and counseling; and a minority offer summer programs, drop-in sessions, priority registration, and dedicated study spaces.[49]

Studies examining the needs of participants in campus support programs have found that the most common needs are access to financial aid, housing, and concrete resources (e.g., staff to assist students in securing these services); assistance with academic challenges; access to mentoring and social and emotional supports; navigating campus life and developing campus awareness; and managing connections to relatives and relationships outside campus.[50,51] The largest unmet needs identified in two studies were difficulty paying for living expenses and navigating the transition from foster care to postsecondary education.[52,53]

[46] Dworsky, Amy. "Supporting College Students Transitioning Out of Foster Care: A Formative Evaluation Report on the Seita Scholars Program," *Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. OPRE Report, no. 2020-102. (2020). https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102813/supporting-college-students-transitioning-out-of-foster-care-a-formative-evaluation-report-on-the-seita-scholars-program_2.pdf
[47] Okpych, Nathanael et al. "Memo From CalYOUTH: An Early Look at Predictors of College Degree Completion at Age 23 for Foster Youth," *Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago* (2021). https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Predictors-of-degree-completion-at-age-23.pdf.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Geiger, Jennifer et al. "A Descriptive Analysis of Programs Serving Foster Care Alumni in Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities," *Children and Youth Services Review*, no. 85 (2018): 287-294. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.01.001.
[50] Miller, J. et al. "Conceptualizing On-Campus Support Programs for Collegiate Foster Youth and Alumni: A Plan for Action," *Children and Youth Services Review*, no. 83 (2017): 57-67. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.10.028.
[51] Randolph, Karen A. et al. "A Systematic Review of Interventions to Improve Post-Secondary Educational Outcomes Among Foster Care Alumni," *Children and Youth Services Review*, no. 79 (2017): 602-611. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.07.013.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Dworsky, Amy et al. "Helping Former Foster Youth Graduate From College Through Campus Support Programs," Children and Youth Services Review, no. 32 (2010): 255-263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.09.004.

Positive Effects on Student Retention and Graduation

Limited research has been conducted on the outcomes of foster youth students who participate in campus support programs. One study of a campus support program in California found that participants had an 82% retention rate and a 70% six-year graduation rate, which were higher than the rates for the overall student body.[54] Another study of a program in Michigan found that 30% of participants earned a four-year degree in six years, which is higher than the national average of foster youth but lower than that of the institution's overall student body.[55] A third study found that engagement with a college support program soon after enrolling in college was positively correlated with participants' subsequent GPAs.[56]

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of outcomes to date is an eight-year study of 401 foster youth students enrolled in postsecondary institutions conducted by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall.[57] The study included a statistical analysis of the role of campus support programs in promoting college persistence for foster youth students.[58] Approximately 58% of those in the study with campus support programs at their institution participated in the program; youth attending a four-year institution and those who remained in foster care at age 18 were more likely to participate in a program than their counterparts.[59] The study found that participation in campus support programs improved foster youth students' odds of completing the first two semesters in both two-year and four-year institutions; the odds of persistence of youth who participated in a program were twice the odds of youth who did not participate.

Florida's Postsecondary Campus Support Programs for Foster Youth Students

Foster youth enter postsecondary institutions with a unique set of needs, and often require additional supports to succeed academically. All of Florida's postsecondary institutions have at least one staff member designated as working specifically with foster youth students; however, the services and supports available to these students vary widely across the institutions. OPPAGA surveyed liaisons of all 40 of Florida's state colleges and universities and interviewed staff of six campus support programs. Institution staff identified the unique needs and challenges faced by these students and reported providing a variety of services to meet students' basic needs to help support academic success.

Challenges Faced by Foster Youth Attending Florida Postsecondary Institutions

Campus support program staff interviewed by OPPAGA reported that foster youth students face a variety of challenges in completing their postsecondary educations. Many of the challenges pertained to basic needs, which staff said must be addressed for the student to focus on their education. The most

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[54] Lenz-Rashid, Sonja. "An Urban University Campus Support Program for Students From Foster Care: Services and Outcomes," Children and Youth Services Review, no. 94 (2018): 180-185. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.09.033.
[55] Unrau, Yvonne A. et al. "Perceived Value of a Campus-Based College Support Program by Students Who Aged Out of Foster Care," Children and Youth Services Review, no. 78 (2017): 64-73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.05.011.
[56] Huang, H. et al. "Elements of a College Support Program That Matter: A Case Study," *Research on Social Work Practice*, no. 29 (2019): 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731519832105.
[57] Okpych, Nathanael J. et al. "The Roles of Campus-Support Programs (CSPs) and Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) on College Persistence for Youth With Foster Care Histories," Children and Youth Services Review, no.111 (2020): 104891. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104891.
[58] The study defined persistence as a student remaining enrolled through their first two consecutive non-summer semesters in college, either on a part-time or full-time basis.
[59] Approximately 40% of students reported receiving an education and training voucher.

common challenges reported by these programs were housing insecurity, food, a lack of healthy relationships or issues with interpersonal skills, and mental health issues. The programs also identified needs related to a lack of family support, transportation, family obligations (e.g., concern over siblings who remain in foster care), deficiencies in life skills, financial hardship, academic struggles, and legal issues related to their immigration status.

Variation in Campus Support Programs Across Florida's Postsecondary Institutions

At the time of OPPAGA's review, all state colleges and universities had an appointed liaison. Some postsecondary institutions have liaisons that are housed within campus support programs and provide an array of services to foster youth students. Other institutions have a single staff member serving as the liaison; these staff members may serve other roles at the institution that are not specific to working with foster youth students (e.g., a registrar or academic advisor). While postsecondary institutions had liaisons assigned to work with foster youth students at the time of OPPAGA's review, the majority of institutions did not have a campus support program. According to OPPAGA's review of state college and university websites and Positive Pathways materials as of July 2022, 7 of the 28 colleges and 7 of the 12 universities were identified as having campus support programs for foster youth students.[60]

To gather information on the roles of liaisons and services provided to foster youth students at postsecondary institutions, OPPAGA surveyed liaisons of all 40 of Florida's state colleges and universities and interviewed staff of six campus support programs.[61] Of the 40 institutions, 23 responded to the survey.[62] Respondents have served as liaisons for an average of four years. Eighteen respondents reported spending less than half of their time serving students who are current or former foster youth, three reported spending approximately half of their time, and two reported spending most of their time serving foster youth. Further, seven survey respondents reported not having enough time to effectively serve current students who are foster youth.

Training

While statute specifies that liaisons be knowledgeable, there are no specific requirements for the types of training these staff members must receive. Thirteen survey respondents reported receiving training to perform their campus liaison duties. Respondents reported receiving training from a variety of sources such as Positive Pathways and local, regional, or national conferences. Of those who reported receiving training, 11 indicated receiving training from more than one source. Nearly all of the 13 respondents who received training also reported receiving training in multiple areas (12); areas of training reported by respondents included training on tuition waivers (11), training on campus resources (10), community resources (10), trauma-based care/serving vulnerable populations (7), academic advising (6), and career counseling (3). Four respondents who received training reported needing additional training in one or both of the following areas: serving vulnerable populations/trauma-informed care (3) and community resources (2).

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[60] Broward College, Daytona State College, Florida A&M University, Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University, Florida Southwestern State College, Florida State College at Jacksonville, Florida State University, Miami-Dade College, St. Petersburg College, Tallahassee Community College, the University of Central Florida, the University of Florida, and the University of South Florida.

[61] OPPAGA interviewed staff at Broward College, Daytona State College, Florida International University, Florida State University, Miami-Dade College, and the University of South Florida.

[62] Twenty-one respondents completed the full survey and two respondents partially completed the survey.

Initial Engagement With Foster Youth Students

The ways in which current and prospective students are contacted by program staff or otherwise made aware of available services vary by institution. According to survey responses, the primary ways in which these programs identify potentially eligible students is through a student's use of a tuition waiver, a completed Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or notification by a student's community-based care case manager. Other ways in which youth are identified or educated about the program include questions on the institution's admissions application, a completed program application, referrals from college/university staff, McKinney-Vento school district liaisons, information provided to high schools, information provided to youth participating in summer bridge programs, and referrals from community providers.[63] Eight respondents indicated that there are additional strategies that their institution could implement to improve the identification of current students who may be foster youth; three of these respondents suggested adding an identifying question to the admissions application or using the admissions application to identify students.

Survey respondents and program staff OPPAGA interviewed reported working with community-based care lead agency staff, including case managers, both to identify foster youth at their institutions and to assist in the provision of services.[64] While statute requires the liaisons to assist students with any issues related to the tuition waivers, liaisons OPPAGA interviewed reported that the lead agencies determine eligibility for the tuition waivers, while the liaisons may facilitate communication between the student and the lead agency if additional documentation is needed to process the waiver at the institution. To better understand the coordination between case managers and liaisons, OPPAGA surveyed 179 case managers across the state; 40 case managers responded to the survey.[65] When asked about the timing of their first communication with institution staff, 12 of the 31 respondents with youth at colleges and/or universities reported that they begin communicating with staff prior to the student's initial enrollment at the state college and/or university. The next most common response was that the case manager communicates with college and/or university staff after enrollment but prior to classes beginning (eight respondents). Eight respondents also indicated that the case manager does not initiate communication with college and/or university staff; however, all but three of these respondents reported having some communication with postsecondary institution staff in the past year.[66]

The survey also asked about the types of postsecondary institution staff with whom case managers communicated in the past year and the frequency of their communication. All but six respondents reported communicating with at least one postsecondary institution staff member. The responses varied based on the type of staff, with the most respondents communicating with financial aid personnel and the fewest respondents communicating with mental health services personnel. (See Exhibit 13.) When asked about the topics on which they speak to institution staff, all but four respondents reported speaking with postsecondary institution staff on at least one topic. Respondents reported most frequently communicating with institution staff to discuss the tuition waiver (25) and

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[63] These additional methods of identification were provided through the survey responses as well as through interviews with program staff.

[64] DCF contracts with community-based care lead agencies in all 20 of Florida's judicial circuits to manage services provided to children in foster care.

[65] OPPAGA sent surveys to 179 case managers that were identified as working with foster youth transitioning to adulthood and received 40 responses. Thirty-four respondents answered the questions pertaining to communication with a postsecondary liaison; however, only 31 reported that they have youth on their caseloads who are students at state colleges and/or universities.

[66] The remaining respondents reported that they speak to institution staff when the youth requests that they do so, when submitting the tuition waiver to the institution, and that the timing varies.

college/university registration (21). Case managers also reported speaking to institution staff about financial aid (17), and housing (13).[67]

Exhibit 13
Dependency Case Managers Reported Most Frequently Communicating With Financial Aid and Admissions Staff in the Past Year

	Type of Postsecondary Institution Staff				
Frequency of Communication	**Admissions**	**Academic Advisor**	**Campus Liaison**	**Financial Aid**	**Mental Health Services**
At least once per month	3	2	2	1	1
Less than once per month but more than once during the year	7	9	5	9	3
Once during the year	8	6	8	10	4
Rarely or Never	13	14	16	11	23

Source: OPPAGA survey of dependency case managers.

Services Provided to Foster Youth Students at Postsecondary Institutions

Twenty-one liaisons responded to OPPAGA's survey questions related to services. Liaisons who responded to OPPAGA's survey reported that their institutions provide an array of services to foster youth students. The most commonly provided services were assistance with the tuition waivers (16), food assistance (16), and assistance with financial aid (13); two programs that OPPAGA interviewed reported that all of their campus support program staff had mental health backgrounds. (See Exhibit 14.) While it was the most commonly provided service, only 14 respondents reported that they assist students specifically with obtaining tuition waivers. Of those who do, respondents identified several ways in which they assist students in this capacity: informing eligible current students about the waiver once they arrive on campus (10); helping current students determine whether they are eligible for the waiver (9); referring eligible current students to the office that processes the waiver (9); and contacting the local lead agency to determine if there is anything the liaison should know to assist the student (8).

Exhibit 14
Institutions Responding to OPPAGA's Survey Offer a Wide Array of Services to Foster Youth Students

Service Type	Number of Institutions Providing Service
Food assistance	16
Tuition waiver assistance	16
Assistance with financial aid	13
Assistance applying for public assistance	12
Personal care/hygiene supplies	12
School supplies or equipment	12
Academic advising specific to foster youth students	11
Career readiness services	11
Enrichment activities (e.g., cultural field trips, academic clubs)	10
Mentoring	10

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[67] Smaller numbers of respondents reported communicating with institution staff about: school supplies/equipment (9), medical and/or mental health services (8), transportation (7), food and/or clothing (4), and non-academic enrichment activities (3).

Service Type	Number of Institutions Providing Service
Clothing	9
Health supports (e.g., medical services, assistance applying for health insurance)	8
Mental health services specific to foster youth students	8
Life skills training	7
Transportation assistance	7
Child care assistance	3
Substance use services	3

Source: OPPAGA survey of state college and university liaisons.

The programs identified similar services as being most frequently requested by foster youth students. The most commonly requested services included assistance with financial aid (15), assistance with the tuition waivers (13), and academic advising (9). While the most requested services were provided by the majority of survey respondents, four respondents reported that other offices at their institutions provide support services specifically designed for foster youth students. These services include assistance with the tuition waivers (10); assistance with financial aid (10); academic advising specifically tailored to foster youth students (8); mental health services specifically tailored to foster youth students (8); career readiness services (7); and food assistance (7).[68] Twenty respondents reported referring students to other campus offices for support when needed; 18 liaisons reported also referring students to community partners, primarily for assistance with clothing, food, and applying for public assistance. Seven respondents indicated that they received requests for services that neither their institution nor community partners provided. Of these, nearly all indicated receiving requests for services related to housing.

One commonality across the programs is the goal to provide support to students and address their needs and overall wellbeing so that they are able to succeed academically. The program staff OPPAGA interviewed reported working to build students' sense of community, coping skills, and meeting immediate needs so that they are able to focus on school. Six survey respondents reported using a specific set of outcomes to monitor students' academic progress, including program completion/graduation (6), retention (6), course grades (5), GPA (5), course passage (4), and attendance (2).

Department of Children and Families Tuition Waivers

While the number of supports available to foster youth students has grown in the past decade, there is still a large proportion of youth who do not attend a postsecondary institution and, of those that do, many do not consistently use the available supports. Estimates show that only 20% of foster youth attend postsecondary institutions, compared to 66% of the general population.[69] As noted above, one study found that approximately 40% of the foster youth in the study received education and training vouchers and approximately 58% took advantage of campus support programs. Similarly, Positive Pathways conducted a study of campus support program usage at Miami-Dade College and found that approximately half of foster youth students using a tuition waiver participated in the program. Due to the complicated nature of eligibility for the tuition waivers, it is difficult to determine the number of

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[68] Five or fewer respondents identified the following services as being provided by other offices on campus: clothing (5); enrichment activities (5); personal care/hygiene supplies (5); school supplies or equipment (5); life skills training (5); mentoring (5); assistance applying for public assistance (4); transportation assistance (4); health supports (3); child care (1); and substance use services (1).

[69] U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau. "Current Population Survey (CPS)," 2017. https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html.

youth eligible for the waivers during a given period and thus determine the rate of waiver usage. Data are available for students who used a DCF waiver in at least one term of their enrollment at a postsecondary institution. Although this data contains increasing numbers of students with at least one term of waiver coverage, it should be noted that the number of institutions with campus support programs has also increased over time. Additionally, there is no statewide data on the use of liaisons or campus support programs by foster youth at postsecondary institutions.

Eligibility Determination

Foster youth may be eligible for a tuition waiver in three primary ways: leaving foster care due to adoption, leaving foster care due to permanent guardianship, and remaining in foster care until turning age 18.[70] In addition to these criteria, there are also requirements regarding the amount of time youth spent in foster care, the type of placement in which they resided, and the age at which they left foster care. DCF does not maintain a list of young adults who are eligible for the waivers, and determining this through DCF data requires combining multiple data sources, including placement data, payment data, and information from the child's legal file. DCF reported that eligibility is determined by the lead agencies on a case-by-case basis through a review of the youth's case file.

OPPAGA requested data from DCF to estimate the number of currently eligible youth, but the ability to precisely determine the number of youth eligible for a waiver or those enrolled in a postsecondary institution and not using a waiver is limited. Further, there is no statewide source for data on the use of liaisons or campus support programs. Despite the data limitations, OPPAGA was able to identify a minimum of 46,718 youth ages 18 to 27 who were eligible for the waiver from academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2020-21; this includes 23,279 eligible through adoption, 19,922 through aging out, and 3,517 through guardianship. Eighteen percent of identified eligible youth had a postsecondary enrollment at an FCS or SUS institution during the review period.[71]

Over the review period, the number of eligible youth who were age 18 at the start of the academic year grew from 2,233 in academic year 2013-14 to 4,050 in academic year 2021-22.[72] Among all youth eligible for the DCF waiver in each academic year of the review period, approximately 8% had a postsecondary enrollment in the FCS or SUS system. Of those enrolled in a college or university each academic year, between 84% and 87% received a DCF waiver during the academic year. For youth enrolled in FCS, the percentage with a DCF waiver was consistent across all years of the review period; however, youth enrolled in the SUS had higher percentages of DCF waiver coverage in more recent years (an increase from 81% in 2013-14 to 92% in 2020-21).

To determine the number of foster youth who have used the state's tuition waiver at an FCS or SUS institution, OPPAGA requested data from FDOE for academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2020-21. Both the FCS and SUS data sets include any student who used a DCF tuition waiver in at least

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[70] The 2022 Legislature expanded waiver eligibility to include youth who were reunified with their parents (who meet other criteria). Because OPPAGA's review period was prior to the expansion of eligibility, this eligibility type is not included in the data presented in this report.

[71] Overall, this is an underestimate of eligible youth. Data limitations result in the omission of a substantial number of adopted youth (those who were adopted prior to 2003) as well as youth who entered guardianship prior to age 16 whose guardians were still receiving payment at the time the youth turned 18. Simultaneously, the number of youth aging out of DCF care may be a somewhat high estimate. Additionally, matching data across systems means that some DCF youth may not have been identified in the education records who may have educational records. Ninety-four percent of DCF youth had matches in FDOE's data system, and of those who did not match, the majority were youth who had been adopted.

[72] Although youth are eligible for the DCF waiver prior to turning 18, OPPAGA limited the population to youth 18 and older to best reflect ages most youth begin postsecondary education.

one term during their enrollment at an FCS and/or SUS institution during this time.[73] In OPPAGA's analyses, these students are referred to as the DCF waiver population students.

Waiver Usage

The number of foster youth students using tuition waivers has increased in both SUS and FCS; students in both systems experience gaps in waiver usage during their enrollments. From academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2020-21, 14,775 students used a tuition waiver for at least one semester at a Florida state college and/or university and 1,808 of those students used a tuition waiver in both a state college and state university. During each year of OPPAGA's review, more students used a tuition waiver in FCS than SUS.[74] In both systems, not all students receive a waiver for every semester in which they were enrolled, which may include their first semester of enrollment or a lapse in waiver coverage during their enrollment. Additionally, not all students received a waiver in the semester after transferring schools after having previously received a waiver.

In both FCS and SUS, most students who were newly enrolled in each system and were waiver recipients were Non-White and most were female. In FCS, 39% of waiver recipients were White Non-Hispanic, 34% were Black Non-Hispanic, 17% were Hispanic, and 10% were Other.[75] In SUS, 44% of waiver recipients were White Non-Hispanic, 27% were Black Non-Hispanic, 20% were Hispanic, and 9% were Other. In both systems, more than 60% of the newly enrolled waiver recipients in each system were female (61% in FCS, 64% in SUS). Additionally, 40% of newly enrolled waiver recipients in SUS and 61% in FCS also received a Pell Grant in their first academic year. (See Exhibit 15.)

Exhibit 15
In Both FCS and SUS, Most Waiver Recipients Were Non-White and Female

Institution Type	Race/Ethnicity				Gender[1]		Pell Grant Recipients
	White Non-Hispanic	Black Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Other	Female	Male	
State University System	44%	27%	20%	9%	64%	33%	40%
Florida College System	39%	34%	17%	10%	61%	38%	61%

[1] Approximately 1.5% of FCS waiver recipients and 3.5% of SUS waiver recipients were missing gender information or indicated Other/None for gender.
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

The number of institutions with campus support programs has increased since academic year 2013-14, as has the number of student enrollments. In academic year 2013-14, 905 students were enrolled at 5 institutions with campus support programs (3 state colleges and 2 universities). In academic year 2020-21, 3,042 students were enrolled at 13 institutions with campus support programs (7 universities and 6 colleges).

Florida College System

During the review period, 13,385 foster youth received a tuition waiver in FCS and 9,204 of those had their first college-level enrollment at an FCS institution.[76] The total number of students receiving the tuition waivers in FCS varied from 3,701 in academic year 2016-17 to 3,966 in academic year 2020-

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[73] Students who transferred from an FCS institution to an SUS institution (or vice versa) may appear in both data sets.
[74] A small number of students in the data had a non-DCF tuition waiver; these students were not included in the counts of DCF waiver users.
[75] The Other category includes multiracial students as well as student whose race/ethnicity were unknown or missing in addition to Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.
[76] Ninety-one percent of these students were seeking an associate in arts (AA), associate in science (AS), or associate in applied science (AAS); however, a small percentage had vocational program enrollments, and a very small number were seeking a bachelor's degree in their first year.

21, peaking at 4,375 in academic year 2019-20.[77] (See Exhibit 16.) The number of students receiving a waiver for the first time varied only slightly throughout the period, from a high of 1,602 in academic year 2017-18 to a low of 1,220 in academic year 2020-21. Of the students first enrolled at the college level in FCS during the review period, 76% received a waiver during all enrolled semesters; 93% received a waiver for their first semester. However, 11% of transfer students did not receive a waiver in the first term after their transfer. Of those who did not use a waiver for every semester and first enrolled prior to academic year 2017-18, a waiver was not used for an average of two semesters.[78] On average, students using the waivers began college at age 19, while approximately 12% began college at age 21 or older.

Exhibit 16
Number of Students Using a DCF Tuition Waiver in FCS Was Highest in Academic Year 2019-20
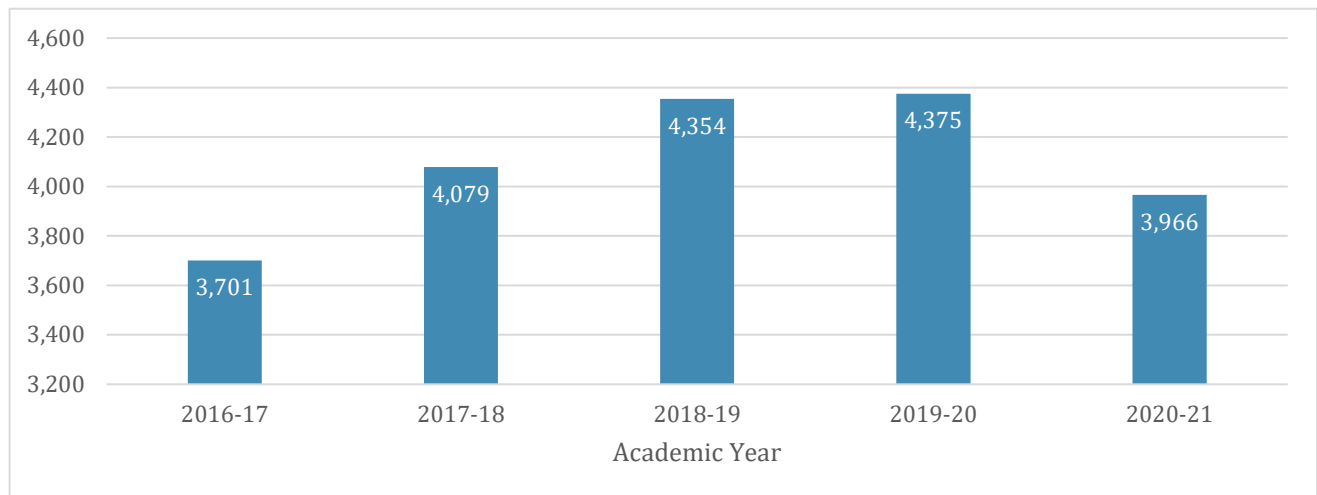
Note: The figures in this exhibit differ slightly from Florida Department of Education reports, which is likely the result of data processing methods that OPPAGA used, including those used to de-duplicate students who received more than one type of DCF exemption in an academic year. Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

OPPAGA examined data for students who attended an FCS institution and received a waiver at any point during their enrollment and found that in academic year 2020-21, 42% of students attended an institution with a campus support program, an increase from 24% in academic year 2013-14. The addition of three programs as well as more students in existing programs contributed to this increase. OPPAGA also examined wavier coverage for students attending FCS institutions with and without a campus support program. Among students who first enrolled in college from academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2016-17, 23% of waiver users attending an institution with a campus support program experienced at least one term without DCF waiver coverage, compared with 14% at institutions with no campus support program.[79]

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[77] For comparability between the FCS and SUS data, for all analyses, the SUS academic year has been adjusted to match the FCS academic year conventions, wherein the academic year begins in summer. Therefore, SUS counts reported throughout may not match other SUS reports by academic year.

[78] OPPAGA limited this analysis to those who first enrolled prior to academic year 2017-18 for comparability purposes. The counts of terms with no waivers presented above are associated with the student's first enrollment institution; students may have additional terms of enrollment and terms without waiver coverage at other institutions.

[79] OPPAGA used a pooled four-year cohort of students who began from academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2016-17 to reflect the average length of time spent at an institution to ensure consistency in the potential amount of time a student may be enrolled. Students enrolled in earlier years have a greater possibility for a lapse in waiver coverage to occur, thus OPPAGA excluded those who entered more recently from the analysis.

State University System

During the review period, 3,198 foster youth received a tuition waiver in SUS and 2,842 of those had their first college-level enrollment at an SUS institution.[80] Transfer students accounted for 1,223 of first time SUS enrollees. The total number of students receiving the tuition waivers in SUS increased by over 50% from academic year 2016-17 through academic year 2020-21. (See Exhibit 17.) In academic year 2016-17, universities saw 360 new waiver recipients, while in academic year 2020-21, 429 new waiver recipients joined the university system. For the population first enrolled in the SUS system during the review period, 79% had a waiver for all semesters enrolled; 88% used it for their first semester. However, 9% of transfer students did not receive a waiver in the first term after their transfer. Of those who did not use a waiver for every semester and first enrolled prior to academic year 2017-18, a waiver was not used for an average of three semesters.[81] On average, students who used the DCF waiver in their first term began college at age 18, while only 0.8% began college at age 21 or older.[82]

Exhibit 17
Number of Students Using the Tuition Waivers in SUS Increased by Over 50% From Academic Year 2016-17 Through Academic Year 2020-21
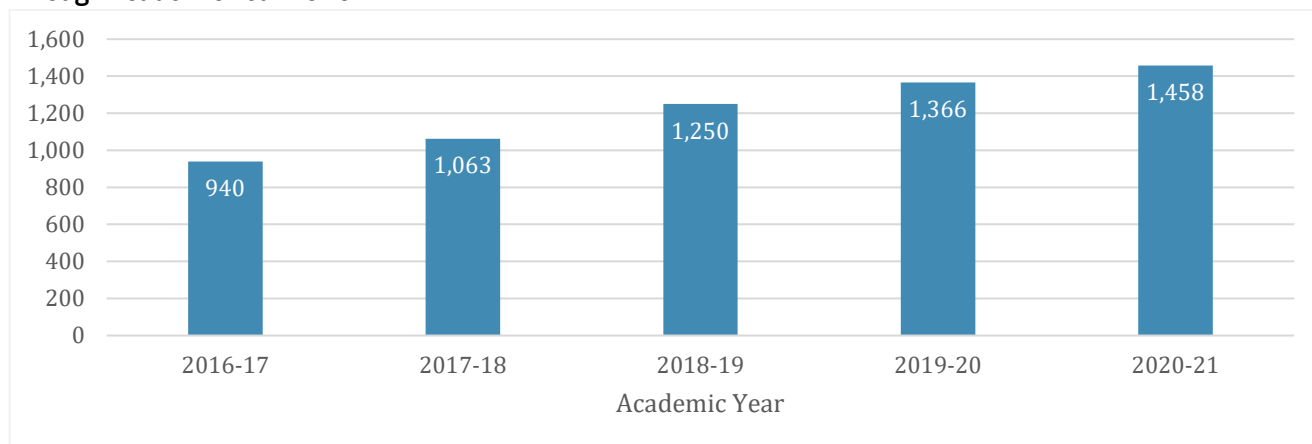
Note: The figures in this exhibit may differ slightly from Florida Board of Governors counts, which is likely the result of data processing methods that OPPAGA used, including those used to de-duplicate students who received more than one type of DCF exemption in an academic year. Source: OPPAGA analysis of data provided by the Department of Education.

OPPAGA also examined data for students who attended an SUS institution and received a waiver at any point during their enrollment and found that in academic year 2020-21, 77% of students attended an institution with a campus support program; this is an increase from 16% in academic year 2013-14. The addition of five programs as well as more students in existing programs contributed to this increase. OPPAGA examined waiver coverage for students attending SUS institutions with and without a campus support program.[83]

A smaller portion of waiver users experienced at least one term without DCF waiver coverage in SUS than in FCS. Among students who first enrolled in a university in academic year 2013-14, 8% of waiver users attending an institution with a campus support program experienced at least one term without

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[80] Of first-time SUS enrollees, 1,223 students were transfer students.
[81] The counts of terms with no waivers presented above are associated with the student's first enrollment institution; students may have had additional terms of enrollment and terms without waiver coverage at other institutions.
[82] Four percent of records were missing date of birth and therefore are excluded from summary information about student age.
[83] As with the FCS cohort noted in footnote 80, OPPAGA used a four-year cohort for this analysis.

DCF waiver coverage, compared with 13% at institutions with no campus support program. (See Exhibit 18.)

Exhibit 18
A Smaller Portion of Waiver Users Who First Enrolled From Academic Year 2013-14 Through Academic Year 2016-17 Experienced at Least One Term Without DCF Waiver Coverage in SUS Than in FCS
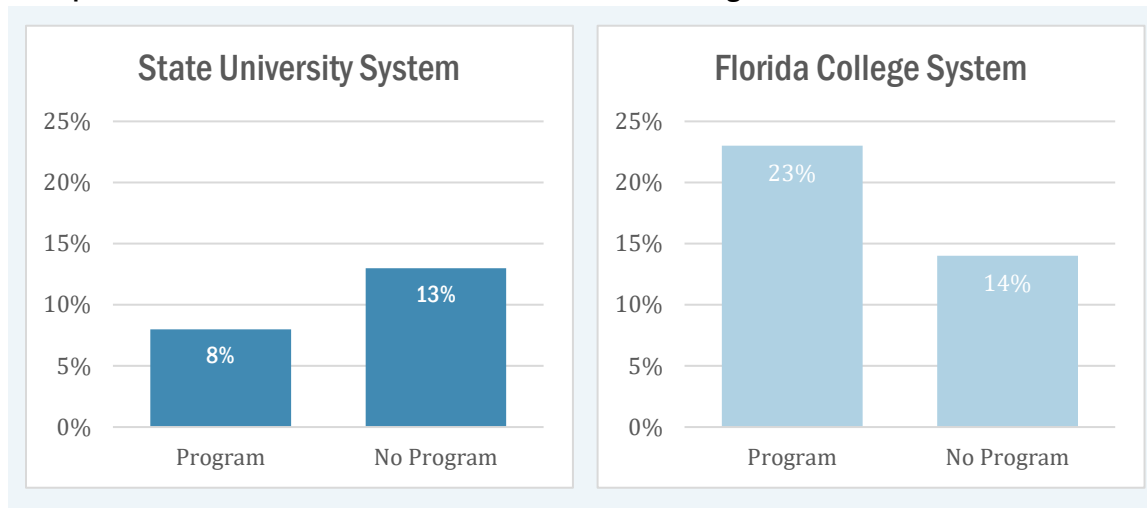
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Academic Outcomes of Foster Youth Students Using the Department of Children and Families Tuition Waiver

To determine the academic outcomes of the 10,681 foster youth who began college from academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2020-21 and received tuition waivers at an FCS or SUS institution, OPPAGA analyzed students' outcomes in two areas: (1) grade point average (GPA) and academic progress and (2) completion rates. OPPAGA summarized these outcomes using Florida Department of Education data on students at Florida College System and State University System institutions who received a waiver in at least one term of their enrollment at an FCS or SUS institution.[84]

Grade Point Averages and Academic Progress

GPA and academic progress are two primary methods to measure students' success in their postsecondary education. To evaluate the GPAs of waiver population students, OPPAGA examined GPAs at the end of the first year of enrollment for students whose first term was either summer or fall. The Florida Board of Governors defines the academic progress rate as the percentage of first-time-in-college (FTIC) students who started in the fall (or summer continuing to fall) term, were enrolled full-time in their first semester and still enrolled at the same institution during the next fall term, and had a GPA of at least 2.0 at the end of their first year (fall, spring, summer). OPPAGA used this definition to evaluate the academic progress of students who had a DFC tuition waiver in at least one term of their enrollment at an FCS or SUS institution. Additionally, OPPAGA examined the percentage of FTIC students who were enrolled full-time in their first semester and were enrolled at the same institution the next fall term but did not have at least a 2.0 GPA.

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[84] Students who transferred from an FCS institution to an SUS institution (or vice versa) may appear in both data sets.

Florida College System

For the waiver population students in FCS, 61% of students had at least a 2.0 GPA at the end of their first year; for waiver population students at institutions with campus support programs, this percentage was slightly lower (58%), while the percentage was slightly higher (62%) for students at institutions without a campus support program.[85] Using the BOG definition of academic progress, OPPAGA found that the rate of academic progress of the waiver population students attending FCS institutions varied slightly across the review period, ranging from 35% to 40%.[86] The rate of academic progress also varied (23% to 56%) during the period for students at institutions with campus support programs and was lower than the academic progress rates at institutions without campus support programs (36% and 38%, respectively). Additionally, some students did not achieve the required GPA to be counted as progressing but remained at the same institution. Of the FTIC waiver population students with lower than a 2.0 GPA, 55% enrolled at the same institution the following fall semester.

Students who did not use a waiver in their first semester at an FCS institution generally had better rates of academic progress than those who used a waiver in their first semester of college. Over the review period, 30% of students without a waiver in their first semester progressed, while only 21% of students with a waiver progressed.[87,88]

Many foster youth stop and restart their enrollments at postsecondary institutions; these situations are referred to as stop-outs. For this analysis, a stop-out is when any student has a period of non-enrollment followed by re-enrollment at the same institution within four years of a student's initial college-level enrollment at an FCS institution. OPPAGA examined the waiver population students who paused their enrollment at an FCS institution and resumed their enrollment within four years of college entry.[89] Students may have a variety of reasons for temporarily suspending their education, such as emotional stress or balancing coursework with external commitments. Students suspend their educational work for varying lengths of time, but all stop-outs increase the amount of time it takes a student to complete their credential. Overall, 56% of FCS students using a waiver experienced a stop-out during the review period.

State University System

For the waiver population students in the SUS, 89% of students had at least a 2.0 GPA at the end of their first year; this percentage was slightly higher (92%) for students at institutions with a campus support program and slightly lower (86%) for students at institutions without a campus support program.[90] Using the BOG definition of academic progress, OPPAGA found that the rate of academic progress of the waiver population students attending SUS institutions varied across the review period, ranging from 60% to 75% in academic year 2019-20.[91] Across the review period, the rate of academic progress was higher for students at institutions with a campus support program than for students at institutions without a campus support program (64% and 78%, respectively). A relatively small number of students did not achieve the required GPA to be counted as progressing but remained at the

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[85] This includes any FCS student with a valid, non-zero GPA in the data.
[86] Academic year 2020-21 was excluded from this analysis.
[87] The number of institutions with campus support programs increased over the review period.
[88] Students who first enrolled in academic year 2020-21 were excluded from this analysis.
[89] OPPAGA limited this analysis to within four years to ensure consistency in the measure across cohorts of students. Additionally, students who began college after academic year 2017-18 could not be tracked longer than four years.
[90] This includes any SUS student with a valid, non-zero GPA in the data.
[91] Academic year 2020-21 was excluded from this analysis as a result of data constraints.

same institution; overall, 77% of FTIC students at SUS institutions enrolled at the same institution the following semester, while 71% were enrolled and had a 2.0 GPA or greater.

Students who did not use a waiver in their first semester at an SUS institution had better rates of academic progress than those who used a waiver in their first semester of college. Over the review period, 80% of students without a waiver in their first semester progressed, while only 70% of students with a waiver progressed.[92]

As previously noted, many foster youth stop and restart their enrollments at postsecondary institutions, including state universities. For this analysis, a stop-out is any period of non-enrollment followed by re-enrollment at the same institution within four years of a student's initial college-level enrollment at an SUS institution. OPPAGA examined the waiver population students who paused their enrollment at an SUS institution and resumed their enrollment within four years of entry.[93] Overall, 31% of SUS students using a waiver experienced a stop-out during the review period.

Completion Rates

Completion rates within the FCS and SUS did not vary substantially between institutions with campus support programs and those without campus support programs. During the review period, the overall completion rate for bachelor's degrees at SUS institutions was higher than the overall completion rate for associate's degrees at FCS institutions. There was little variation in the completion rate for bachelor's degrees at SUS institutions with campus support programs compared to SUS institutions without campus support programs. Likewise, there was little variation in the completion rate for associate's degrees at FCS institutions with campus support programs compared to FCS institutions without campus support programs.

Florida College System

To evaluate associate's degree completion rates in the FCS, OPPAGA analyzed FCS data for waiver population students who first enrolled in an FCS institution in a fall semester from academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2017-18; this population included 4,056 students.[94] Of these students, 18% completed an associate's degree at some point during the review period (5% finished within two years, and 11% finished within three years).

Students in the DCF waiver population also completed other types of credentials in the FCS system. For all waiver population students enrolled in an FCS institution during the review period, 3% earned an adult high school diploma or equivalent in the FCS system, 6% completed a certificate program (either clock or credit hour certificate), and 1% earned a bachelor's degree.

State University System

To evaluate bachelor's degree completion rates in the SUS, OPPAGA analyzed SUS data for waiver population students who had their first SUS enrollment from academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2014-15.[95] For the 489 students who had their first SUS enrollment in academic year

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92 These percentages represent relatively small populations of students without a waiver in their first term: over the full review period only 105 FTIC students had no wavier in their first term, 84 of whom progressed.

93 OPPAGA limited this analysis to within four years to ensure consistency in the measure across cohorts of students. Additionally, students who began college after academic year 2017-18 could not be tracked longer than four years.

18 OPPAGA used this period to allow a minimum of three years for members of each cohort to achieve an associate's degree.

95 OPPAGA used this period because academic year 2014-15 allows for multiple measures of time to degree for each cohort, including four-year, six-year, and more than six years. This is done to maximize the possibility that these students would have completed the degree during the period reviewed.

2013-14 or academic year 2014-15, 50% finished a bachelor's degree at some point during the review period. Of those with a fall FTIC, 25% completed the degree in four years and 40% completed the degree in six years.

Of the 489 students who had their first SUS enrollment in academic year 2013-14 or academic year 2014-15, 210 were transfer students. More than half of these transfer students completed a bachelor's degree, 57% at any SUS institution and 53% at the same institution to which they initially transferred. Because transfer students may have already completed credit hours at the time of their first enrollment at an SUS institution, OPPAGA also analyzed SUS data for waiver population students who transferred to and first enrolled in an SUS institution from academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2016-17; this population included 504 transfer students. Of these transfer students, 58% completed a bachelor's degree at an SUS institution during the review period and 55% completed a bachelor's degree at the SUS institution to which they transferred during the review period.

Foster Youth Student Perceptions of Educational Services Received

As part of this review, OPPAGA sought feedback from youth who have experience with Florida's foster care system. OPPAGA conducted focus groups and surveyed youth across the state. Approximately half of the youth who spoke with OPPAGA or responded to OPPAGA's survey reported working with liaisons on their campuses; most reported having good experiences.[96] The youth received a variety of services from their liaisons but primarily received assistance with tuition waivers. Conversely, several youth reported experiencing issues with their liaisons, including difficulty contacting their liaisons and not receiving referrals to other on- or off-campus resources.

To gather information from foster youth on their experiences entering adulthood and accessing the available supports, OPPAGA conducted several focus groups and surveyed youth across the state. Of the 34 youth who participated in the focus groups, 23 shared information about their experiences with a tuition waiver and/or campus supports for foster youth students. Of those, 15 reporting interacting with the liaisons on their campuses, 6 reported that they did not interact with their liaisons, and 2 did not discuss the liaisons on their campuses.[97] Of the 15 youth who reported interacting with their liaisons, 10 described positive experiences and described liaisons and other services for foster youth students as helpful supports while in school.[98] These youth reported receiving services such as help with public assistance, career planning, connecting to peers, food, help with classes, and help purchasing textbooks.

While many youth reported positive experiences, several reported experiencing issues accessing on-campus supports. Six youth reported that staff at their postsecondary institutions lacked knowledge regarding foster youth students, liaisons, and/or the tuition waivers. These youth reported several issues with accessing their waivers, including a lengthy and confusing eligibility process, being asked to resubmit documentation each semester, and being asked for additional documentation beyond the required form. One youth reported feeling rushed to finish school before losing waiver eligibility at age

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[96] Some youth who responded to the survey reported not knowing whether the staff member was the appointed liaison; however, the information they provided about this staff member and the supports they received are included with the responses of those who knew they had met with the actual liaison.
[97] Four of the six youth who did not interact with their liaisons reported that they did not know that their institution had such a staff member. One youth reported trying to find their liaison but other campus staff were unaware of the position.
[98] Two youth who reported working with liaisons noted that their case manager facilitated their communication with the liaison.

28. Three youth described difficulties contacting their liaisons for needed supports. Supports needed or requested but not received included a letter of recommendation, assistance with the tuition waivers, and mental health support. Two youth noted having a positive experience at one school and a negative experience at another.

A common issue reported by youth participating in OPPAGA's focus groups is a lack of safe, affordable housing. Fourteen youth described difficulties with finding housing after leaving foster care. The youth discussed the high cost of housing (one reporting that room and board on their campus was twice the amount of their Postsecondary Education Services and Support stipend), that foster youth often do not have an adult to cosign, and a lack of established credit as being impediments to securing housing. One youth reported experiencing homelessness while in college and another discussed the need for supportive housing for foster youth students at postsecondary institutions.

OPPAGA delivered a survey to 677 youth, of whom 52 reported having attended a Florida college, university, or technical college and responded to questions about their experience attending these institutions.[99],[100],[101] When asked how prepared they felt to attend a postsecondary institution when turning age 18, 36 respondents reported feeling either very well or somewhat well prepared, though 16 reported that they were not very well prepared. The youth who reported feeling not very well prepared also reported that they did not feel prepared to work full-time while attending school or in accessing their tuition waiver.

Of the 52 youth who attended a postsecondary institution, 48 reported that they have used a tuition waiver, with 34 using their waiver at a state college and 17 using their waiver at an institution with a campus support program.[102] Despite the large percentage of students using a tuition waiver, only 10 reported that they met with a liaison (an additional 14 respondents reported meeting with someone at the institution but were unsure if it was a liaison). Ten of these 24 respondents were satisfied with the services they received, while four were dissatisfied.[103] Respondents who met with a liaison or other staff member most frequently reported receiving assistance with their tuition waiver. Respondents also reported receiving support with counseling, mentoring, tutoring, connecting with peers, career planning, selecting classes and creating a schedule, receiving referrals to other campus supports, and being connected to school supplies and personal hygiene items. Five respondents reported that they requested a service the liaison was unable to provide; one of these students was referred to and received the services they requested from other on-campus resources, while four reported not being referred to anyone or not receiving the service. The services requested but not received were assistance applying for public benefits, assistance with financial aid, mental health services, mentoring, and parenting classes; two of the respondents noted a general lack of services for foster youth on their campuses.

Youth who participated in the focus groups and survey offered several recommendations for how to improve services at state colleges and universities. Focus group participants and some survey respondents suggested that there should be more campus support programs across secondary institutions in Florida; and that liaisons should provide more supports and services than just processing the waiver. One focus group participant suggested that liaisons should have training in

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[99] The ages of respondents answering the questions related to postsecondary institutions ranged from 18 to 28.
[100] Respondents were only asked questions about their engagement in postsecondary education if they are or may have been a participant in Florida's Independent Living services.
[101] Twenty-eight respondents had attended a postsecondary institution for three or fewer semesters at the time of the survey; 12 had attended for six semesters or more.
[102] Five of the 52 did not indicate where they used the waiver.
[103] Four respondents were neutral about the services they received from their liaisons, three were unsure, and three did not answer the question.

DCF's Independent Living programs to know what students are receiving and how the liaison can best support them; a couple of survey respondents noted a lack of knowledge of foster care-related issues among campus staff. Additionally, one survey respondent suggested that foster youth students should receive priority for on-campus housing; this is supported by OPPAGA's focus groups and interviews with campus support programs, wherein housing was one of the largest challenges faced by foster youth.

Implementation Status of Recent Legislative Changes

The 2022 Legislature made several changes regarding the services and supports available to foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness at postsecondary institutions in Florida.[104] Twenty-one liaisons responded to questions about these changes. OPPAGA's survey of state colleges and universities found that the changes have largely been implemented at the respondent institutions. According to the 21 liaisons who responded to OPPAGA's survey, many services were provided to students experiencing homelessness attending their institutions prior to July 1, 2022. All respondents reported serving students experiencing homelessness in some capacity and most reported that students experiencing homelessness already had access to the same services provided to foster youth students at their postsecondary institution. Additionally, most respondents indicated providing services such as tuition waivers (20) and financial aid (18). (See Exhibit 19.)

Exhibit 19
All Liaisons Reported Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness in Some Capacity Prior to July 2022

Service	Number of Institutions
Homeless tuition waiver	20
Access to the same services as foster youth students	18
Financial aid	18
On-campus academic supports	18
Academic supplies (e.g., textbooks, laptops)	14
Basic supplies (e.g., food, clothing)	14
Housing options	12
Personal and professional development (e.g., career counseling)	12
Personal supports (e.g., child care, transportation)	10

Source: OPPAGA survey of state college and university liaisons.

At the time of OPPAGA's survey of liaisons, nearly all respondents reported having implemented changes needed to comply with the 2022 legislation. Of those who indicated that they had already implemented the requirements, all respondents indicated that they had designated a staff member as a campus liaison who provides assistance to foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness with tuition waivers. Fourteen respondents also indicated they already began providing the campus liaison's name and contact information to foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness who are receiving tuition waivers. Eleven respondents reported that there are additional components to serving foster youth students and students experiencing homelessness that their institution plans to implement. (See Exhibit 20.)

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[104] As with foster youth, students experiencing homelessness may be eligible for a tuition waiver at Florida postsecondary institutions (s. 1009.25(1)(e), *F.S.*).

Exhibit 20
Liaisons Reported That Their Institutions Planned to Implement a Variety of Changes to Comply With the 2022 Legislation

Planned Changes	Number of Institutions
Establish a comprehensive support structure that assists students' transition from a structured care system to independent living setting	6
Publish liaison's contact information on the institution's program page and/or main website	6
Establish campus coaching positions and other supports to assist students receiving the tuition waivers	5
Provide campus liaison's name and contact information to current students who are receiving foster care and homeless tuition waivers	5
Provide campus liaison's contact information to DCF and each community-based care lead agency	4
Establish protocols for collecting and maintaining original tuition waiver eligibility documentation submitted by students to avoid additional requests	3
Designate a staff member as a campus liaison to assist current students with access to the foster care and homeless tuition waivers	1

Source: OPPAGA survey of state college and university liaisons.

The use of the tuition waiver for students experiencing homelessness has increased in recent years. From academic year 2013-14 through academic year 2020-21, the number of students using a homeless waiver has fluctuated in the FCS system and increased in the SUS system, with both systems seeing a decrease in academic year 2020-21.[105] While homeless waiver usage in the FCS system has fluctuated throughout the review period, with the exception of academic year 2020-21, it has been increasing over the past five years. (See Exhibit 21.)

Exhibit 21
From Academic Year 2013-14 Through Academic Year 2020-21, the Number of Students Using a Homeless Waiver Has Fluctuated
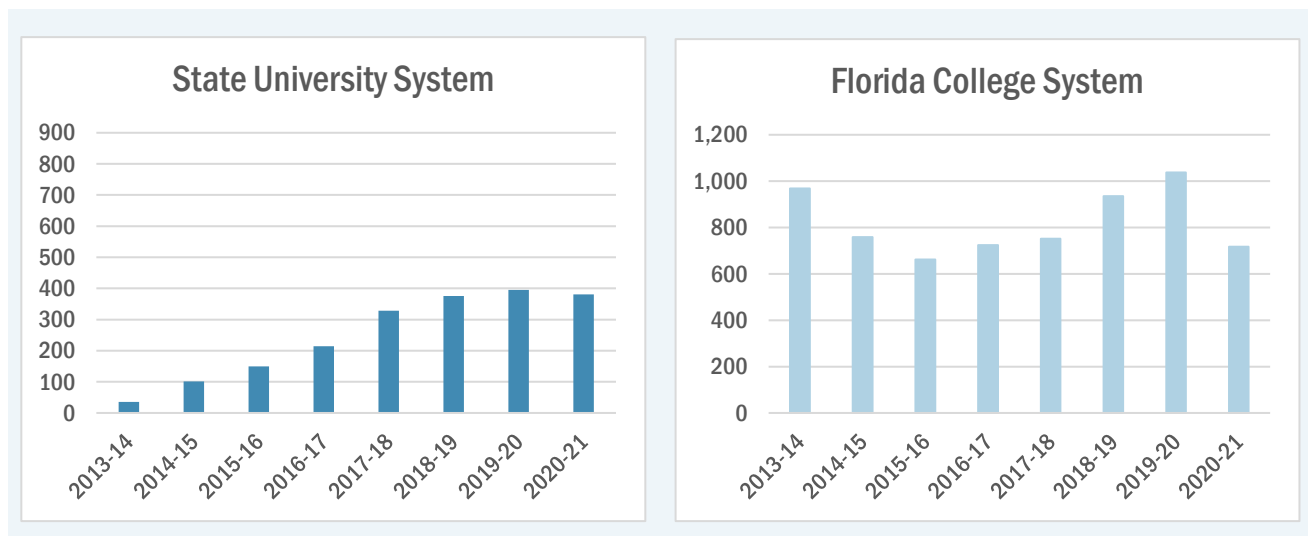
[1] Students are unduplicated within systems and year but may be duplicated across educational systems.
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

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[105] The decrease in the use of tuition waivers in academic year 2020-21 may be due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

OPPAGA's review of postsecondary supports provided to current and former foster youth identified several issues that could be addressed. Youth reported issues with waiver eligibility determinations, often resulting in delays in receiving waivers or gaps in waiver usage; eligibility for the waiver is complicated and based on several factors of youth's foster care history. Additionally, waiver eligibility for foster youth ends when the youth turns 28; OPPAGA's analysis of waiver data and focus groups found that this may be an issue for some youth enrolled in state colleges and universities. While statute specifies that liaisons be knowledgeable, there are no specific requirements for the types of training these staff members must receive. OPPAGA's survey of liaisons and focus groups with foster youth found gaps in training and knowledge among liaisons and other campus staff with regard to the needs of and supports available to foster youth on their campuses. Finally, OPPAGA's interviews with campus support program staff and focus groups with foster youth found that housing among these students is a significant concern and often an unaddressed need at postsecondary institutions. Based on these findings, OPPAGA recommends several changes.

1. **Regularly generate a list of foster youth who are newly eligible for the tuition waivers.** OPPAGA's review of the foster care-related tuition waivers' eligibility criteria, including review of statute, discussions with DCF staff, and analysis of DCF and FDOE data, found that it is difficult to determine which youth are eligible for the waiver. DCF staff reported that eligibility is determined by the lead agencies on a case-by-case basis. Further, several youth in OPPAGA's focus groups reported difficulty in applying for and receiving a waiver. To address this confusion, OPPAGA recommends that the Department of Children and Families provide a list of youth who are newly eligible for the waivers to the lead agencies each semester. The list could be generated through a report in the department's Florida Safe Families Network data system and remove any ambiguity regarding who is eligible for the waivers.

2. **Create a system Florida postsecondary institutions can use to verify students' tuition waiver eligibility.** Campus support program staff OPPAGA interviewed explained that they are reliant on the lead agencies to submit paperwork documenting the student's eligibility for a tuition waiver. A few youth who participated in OPPAGA's focus groups reported having to submit waiver paperwork to their institution on multiple occasions or provide additional documentation, and one discussed having to reapply when transferring between institutions. Further, OPPAGA's analysis of FDOE data found that approximately 1 in 10 students transferring to a new institution did not use a waiver in their first semester at the school to which they transferred (10% in SUS and 11% in FCS). To address the challenges associated with postsecondary institutions' confirmation of waiver eligibility, OPPAGA recommends that the Department of Children and Families create a query-based system that postsecondary institutions can access to check a student's eligibility. This could be particularly helpful for students who transfer schools or for those who were adopted and may no longer be in touch with their lead agency. Further, the system could make eligibility determinations more efficient, resulting in fewer semesters of missed waiver usage and lower workloads for case managers, students, and institution staff.

3. **Increase the age at which students lose eligibility for the foster care-related tuition waivers.** Youth who are eligible for a Florida tuition waiver based on their experience in the foster care system lose this eligibility at age 28. OPPAGA's review of FDOE data found that some students began college at older ages, took multiple semesters off school, and took longer than

three years to achieve an associate's degree and longer than six years to complete a bachelor's degree. Additionally, an OPPAGA focus group participant reported feeling rushed to complete their postsecondary education by age 28. To address this issue and encourage foster youth to continue their postsecondary educations, OPPAGA recommends that the Legislature consider increasing the age at which foster youth lose eligibility for tuition waivers.

4. **Modify statute to specify the training requirements for liaisons at postsecondary institutions.** Only 13 of liaisons who responded to OPPAGA's survey reported receiving training to perform their liaison duties, and only seven reported having received training in trauma-informed care and working with vulnerable populations. Additionally, youth who participated in OPPAGA's focus groups and survey reported a lack of knowledge of foster youth and needed supports among staff at their postsecondary institutions. To address this issue, the Legislature could consider modifying s. 409.1452, *Florida Statutes*, to require that liaisons and other campus support staff receive training in the needs of and challenges experienced by foster youth, as well as training in working with vulnerable populations (i.e., trauma-informed care). Further, postsecondary faculty and staff should be required to be trained on what supports are available to foster youth students on their campuses so that they can appropriately direct youth in need of such services.

5. **Prioritize housing for foster youth students on their campuses.** The primary need among foster youth attending postsecondary institutions identified in OPPAGA's interviews and focus groups is safe and affordable housing. These students often do not have the resources (financial and otherwise) of other students and frequently experience difficulty securing housing. To address this need, OPPAGA recommends that postsecondary institutions prioritize foster youth students attending their institution when assigning on- and off-campus housing to help ensure these students are able to meet their basic needs and succeed academically.[106]

AGENCY RESPONSE

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(2), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of OPPAGA's report was submitted to the Department of Education, Department of Children and Families, and Florida Board of Governors. The Department of Education's written response has been reproduced in Appendix B.

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[106] The vast majority of Florida College System institutions do not have on-campus housing.

APPENDIX A

Fiscal Year 2021-22 District Allotment of Title I Part A and Title IX Part A Funding to Support Education of Homeless Students

District Name	Title I Part A Funding ($)	Title IX Part A Funding ($)
Alachua	$91,201.20	$120,000.00
Baker	$4,000.00	-
Bay	$241,954.00	$145,000.00
Bradford	$1,500.00	-
Brevard	$281,276.00	$120,000.00
Broward	$400,000.00	$170,000.00
Calhoun	$3,000.00	-
Charlotte	$109,426.00	$55,000.00
Citrus	$6,250.00	$80,000.00
Clay	$7,444.00	$95,000.00
Collier	$112,239.59	$120,000.00
Columbia	$10,000.00	$65,000.00
DeSoto	$500.00	$45,000.00
Dixie	$4,672.49	-
Duval	$180,000.00	$145,000.00
Escambia	$583,867.23	$120,000.00
Flagler	$181,798.25	$65,000.00
Franklin	$2,500.00	$45,000.00
Gadsden	$215,417.80	-
Gilchrist	$6,049.18	-
Glades	$500.00	-
Gulf	$1,000.00	-
Hamilton	$18,000.00	$55,000.00
Hardee	$11,402.50	$55,000.00
Hendry	-	$80,000.00
Hernando	$225,009.62	$80,000.00
Highlands	$2,000.00	$65,000.00
Hillsborough	$635,000.00	$145,000.00
Holmes	$2,590.27	-
Indian River	$244,550.49	$80,000.00
Jackson	$55,000.00	$55,000.00
Jefferson	$22,250.00	-
Lafayette	$33,583.78	$55,000.00
Lake Wales Charter Schools[1]	$5,000.00	$55,000.00
Lake	$216,663.93	$120,000.00
Lee	$180,000.00	$120,000.00
Leon	$44,166.00	$95,000.00
Levy	$500.00	$55,000.00
Liberty	$500.00	-
Madison	$55,270.66	$45,000.00
Manatee	$108,145.00	$120,000.00
Marion	$48,954.00	$120,000.00
Martin	$45,121.40	$80,000.00
Miami-Dade	$750,000.00	$170,000.00

District Name	Title I Part A Funding ($)	Title IX Part A Funding ($)
Monroe	$71,428.00	$55,000.00
Nassau	$12,400.00	$80,000.00
Okaloosa	$12,000.00	$80,000.00
Okeechobee	$14,568.32	-
Orange	$495,974.37	$145,000.00
Osceola	$333,524.27	$135,000.00
Palm Beach	$907,571.00	$145,000.00
Pasco	$238,550.00	$120,000.00
Pinellas	$296,730.00	$145,000.00
Polk	$280,914.96	$145,000.00
Putnam	$92,683.12	$80,000.00
Santa Rosa	$323,698.19	$95,000.00
Sarasota	$86,527.35	$80,000.00
Seminole	$125,000.00	$120,000.00
South Tech Charter Academy[1]	$13,500.56	-
St. Johns	$83,821.00	$80,000.00
St. Lucie	$115,629.00	$120,000.00
Sumter	$1,000.00	-
Suwannee	$2,000.00	$55,000.00
Taylor	$5,260.80	$45,000.00
UCP Charter District[1]	$1,000.00	-
Union	$11,156.59	-
Volusia	$58,612.00	$135,000.00
Wakulla	$500.00	
Walton	$35,000.00	$55,000.00
Washington	$1,000.00	-
School for Deaf/Blind	$7,475.00	-
Florida Virtual School	$4,000.00	$55,000.00
FAU - Lab School	$5,000.00	-
FSU - Lab School	$500.00	-
FAMU - Lab School	$2,010.36	-
UF - Lab School	$1,316.55	-
Total	**$8,788,654.83**	**$5,010,000.00**

[1] For the purpose of federal funding, charter school groups may form their own local education agency (LEA). These charter school groups applied for and received an individual subgrant.

Source: Florida Department of Education Data.

APPENDIX B
Agency Responses

November 29, 2022

Ms. PK Jameson
Coordinator
Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
111 W. Madison St., Pepper Building

Dear Coordinator Jameson:

We thank you and your staff for the opportunity to participate in the review process and provide contextual feedback. Pursuant to section 11.51(2), Florida Statutes, this letter serves as the Department of Education's (DOE) response to the preliminary report titled: Homeless and Foster Youth Services. We do not have any feedback at this time.

Sincerely,

Manny Diaz, Jr.

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OPPAGA provides performance and accountability information about Florida government in several ways.

- [Reports](#) deliver program evaluation and policy analysis to assist the Legislature in overseeing government operations, developing policy choices, and making Florida government more efficient and effective.

- [Government Program Summaries](#) (GPS), an online encyclopedia, provides descriptive, evaluative, and performance information on more than 200 Florida state government programs.

- [PolicyNotes](#), an electronic newsletter, delivers brief announcements of research reports, conferences, and other resources of interest for Florida's policy research and program evaluation community.

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