



Local Educational Agency Leadership Guide

Supporting the Unique Needs of Students

in the Foster Care System, Experiencing

Homelessness, or in the Juvenile Justice System



Contributions

An [earlier version](#) of this tool was created as part of the Professional Learning Network (PLN), convened by the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence and hosted by NCYL, with a special focus on supporting youth in the foster system.

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Using This Guide

This guide offers key questions to help LEA leaders assess the use of equity-focused policies, planning, and strategies for students with unique needs. It's meant for various LEA leaders, such as school board members, superintendents, and program coordinators. As student well-being monitoring is ongoing, leaders should revisit this guide annually for reflection and planning.

- Review the key questions provided in the guide to assess the integration of equity-focused policies, planning, and strategies in your LEA.
- Engage with the tool collaboratively with other LEA leaders to ensure comprehensive evaluation and discussion.
- Consider revisiting the guide annually to track progress and address evolving needs.
- Utilize the separate columns provided in the guide to delve deeply into the impact of data, practices, and policies on each student group.
- Adapt and customize the questions as needed to align with the specific context and requirements of your local educational agency.

Note that this document does not offer legal advice; consult with a legal professional for any specific legal inquiries or concerns.

Introduction

This is a guide for local educational agency (LEA) leadership to support planning and monitoring for students who are experiencing homelessness¹, in foster care² or involved with the juvenile justice system³ (together, “students with unique needs”). Students with unique needs are entitled, under California and federal law, to certain protections and rights in the context of their education.

For example:

- All three student groups have rights related to school stability including the right to remain in their school of origin (SOO), a Best Interest Determination (BID) to determine school placement, immediate enrollment and transportation to SOO;
- All three student groups are eligible for an exemption from local graduation requirements and can enroll in a 5th year of high school;
- Students in foster care generate supplemental and concentration funding for LEAs through the Local Control Funding Formula, and accordingly LEAs’ investment of those funds should be principally directed toward and effective in serving that group.

The above and other legal protections all help improve opportunities for these students to succeed in school. However, this improvement can only happen if LEA leadership develops thoughtful, equity-focused policies, planning, and strategies.

Definitions

AB 490

Enacted in 2004. This bill focuses on increasing school stability, improving attendance, and addressing roadblocks to academic success. It requires designated LEA foster youth liaisons, immediate enrollment, the right to remain in school of origin, timely transfer of records, placement in the least restrictive educational setting, grades and credit protection, and ensures access to interscholastic sports and other extracurricular activities.

AB 490 Definition of Foster Youth

Regardless of where the youth lives; any child who is subject to a juvenile dependency (child welfare) court petition (California Welfare & Institute Code WIC § 300) and any child who is subject to a juvenile delinquency (probation) court petition (WIC § 602). A dependent child of the court of an Indian tribe, consortium of tribes, or tribal organization who is the subject of a petition filed in the tribal court pursuant to the tribal court's jurisdiction in accordance with the tribe's law. A child who is the subject of a voluntary placement agreement, as defined in subdivision (p) of Section 11400 of the WIC.

Education Rights Holder (ERH)

ERHs are individuals with the legal authority to make education decisions and access education records. Parents generally retain education rights unless they are limited by the court and a new ERH is assigned even if the child was physically removed from their care. It is possible for students to have co-ERH. All ERHs should be included in the decision-making meeting.

Home to School Transportation Reimbursement

Reimbursement funding for school districts and county offices of education based on the prior year eligible transportation expenditures and prior year LCFF transportation-related add-on funding. Education Code (EC) Sections 39800.1 and 41850.1

Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) Definition of Foster Youth

Pursuant to EC Section 42238.01(b), all students under the AB 490 foster rights definition are considered foster under the LCFF with the exception of students who are subject to a juvenile delinquency (probation) court petition (WIC § 602). Students who are subject to WIC § 602 must have been removed from their home and placed in a suitable placement to be identified under the LCFF definition.

McKinney-Vento Definition

Individuals experiencing homelessness lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This includes children and youth who share housing due to loss of housing or economic hardship often referred to as “doubled-up”, live in motels/hotels regardless of who is paying, trailer parks due to lack of alternatives, reside in emergency or transitional shelters, or are abandoned in hospitals. It also encompasses those whose primary residence is not designed for human habitation, such as cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, or substandard housing (i.e., no running water, no electricity, holes in roof, etc.).

Partial Credits

If a student changes schools during the school year, they have a right to partial credits in all classes that they are passing when they leave their school, even if they do not complete the entire class. Credits are based on each LEA’s partial credit policy. Determining partial credit based on enrollment time versus attendance is suggested. Students cannot be forced to retake a class or part of a class that they have already completed with a passing grade.

Unaccompanied Youth

For a youth to qualify as an “unaccompanied youth” under the McKinney-Vento Act, they must both: (i) meet the definition of homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act based on the youth’s living arrangement, and (ii) not be in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

Data Systems Guiding Questions

The questions below can be utilized to identify and assess the use and effectiveness of data systems that identify and track educational data for students with unique needs.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Which databases are used to identify and monitor the needs of students with unique needs? • California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS)⁴ • California School Dashboard⁵ • DataQuest⁶ • Child Welfare System/Case Management System (CWS/CMS)⁷ • Student Information System (SIS) (e.g. Powerschool, Infinite Campus, Aeries) • Los Angeles County Education Passport System (EPS)⁸ • Foster Focus⁹			
Are LEA staff utilizing the databases available to them to address their needs?			
Who is authorized (district level and/or site level) staff) to use and monitor the systems that provide information on these populations?			
How often are data systems used or monitored to address student needs?			
Is access to other data systems needed to support these students?			
Who should be given access to the data systems?			
Once students are identified, what process is in place to flag their information in the student information system?			
How do we consider who should be able to see students identified within these student groups?			
How often does my LEA report enrollment to the CALPADS?			
Are staff trained on these data systems?			
Does your LEA utilize a questionnaire to identify students at enrollment who may not appear on these data systems?			

Demographic Data Guiding Questions

Use this list of questions to study enrollment and other characteristics of students with unique needs.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Does our student information system have identifiers for these students?			
If so, are there measures to protect student group status from inappropriate dissemination?			
How many students in each group are enrolled in our LEA?			
How many students in each group are enrolled in comprehensive vs. alternative education settings (e.g., continuation, community day, independent study, credit recovery, COE community, court or opportunity schools) in our LEA?			
Do we have disaggregated data by age/grade/school site/race/ethnicity for these student groups?			
Can we disaggregate data by living arrangement for these students? (e.g., home of legal guardian, short term residential therapeutic program, placement with relative, foster parent, shelter, motel/hotel, shared housing)			
How many youth experiencing homelessness are unaccompanied minors? ¹⁰			
Do we have a housing questionnaire to identify McKinney-Vento students at enrollment or mid-year?			
Are we able to query attendance data for each group?			
Who can query attendance data for each group?			
How frequently are we reviewing chronic absenteeism data for these students?			
Are we able to query data on suspension and expulsion rates for these populations?			
Who can query internal data on suspension and expulsion rates?			
How frequently are we reviewing suspension and expulsion data?			
Who reviews data on statewide academic metrics, including ELA, Mathematic and other standardized assessments?			
How are the metrics used for these groups?			

Demographic Data for State-Required Accountability Metrics

California's new accountability and continuous improvement system provides information about how local educational agencies and schools are meeting the needs of California's diverse student population based on a concise set of measures.¹¹ Performance on these measures is reported through the [California School Dashboard \(Dashboard\)](#).¹² Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, state law allows the 2022 Dashboard to only display the most current year of data (also known as Status).¹³

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
<u>Has a review of the annual and change-over-time data for the previous 3+ academic years been disaggregated for students on state-required indicators in the following areas?</u> • Academic Performance • Chronic Absenteeism • College/Career • English Learner Progress • Graduation Rate • Suspension Rate • Science			
Has analysis of the general student population outcomes been compared to these student groups?			

Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) Review For Goals, Actions Steps, and Finding

The LCAP development process and document itself are important avenues for considering the needs of and planning for students with unique needs (students in the foster care system, the juvenile justice system, and experiencing homelessness). The following questions are based upon the most recently revised annual update 2026-2027 LCAP template. LEAs are encouraged to highlight specific services and support to address the identified needs of student groups, and/or schools within the LCAP as part of this response. As part of this response, the LEA must identify the following, which will remain unchanged during the three-year LCAP cycle:

- Any school within the LEA that received the lowest performance level on one or more state indicators on the 2025 Dashboard;
- Any student group (FY, JJ, HY) within the LEA that received the lowest performance level on one or more state indicators on the 2025 Dashboard; and/or,
- Any student group (FY, JJ, HY) within a school within the LEA that received the lowest performance level on one or more state indicators on the 2025 Dashboard.

Please [click here](#) to access the 2026 sample LCAP for youth in the foster care system, which outlines recommended goals, outcomes, and actions, along with additional activities and services, for LEAs to incorporate into their LCAPs to work towards improved educational outcomes for youth in foster care.¹⁴

Education Partner Engagement

	Yes	No	Unsure
Does my LEA/county office drafting committee identify parents, students, advocates, child welfare, probation or other educational partners to provide support, resources or to be involved in the decision-making process?			
Are the identified educational partners engaged and participating in the drafting/approval committee/process?			
Are there LEA-level policies, data collection/analysis, and MOUs with child welfare, probation, and community-based organizations?			
Are staff aware who is identified as students in the foster care system (<i>experiencing homelessness, if appropriate</i>)?			
Are they aware of goals and/or actions in the LCAP that support these students and families?			
Are students and families aware of the supports available to them? How so?			

Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) Review For Goals, Actions Steps, and Finding (Continued)

Goals & Actions

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Was a root cause analysis completed to identify needs to create goals and actions for these populations?			
Were student and family voices or those close to the students such as therapists, counselors, teachers, support staff included in the root cause analysis?			
Do we include explanations for why goals were included and targeted towards these students groups?			
Do the goals and actions listed adequately address the identified needs for these students?			
Is there a clear timeline to implement the identified actions?			
Are there strategies differentiated by grade span? (e.g., primary, middle, and high school)?			

Staff

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Are there sufficient staff to fully implement the identified actions?			
Is there hiring and/or assignment, training, and supervision of staff who work at each school site?			
Do professional development opportunities provided to all staff include topics specific to addressing the academic and social and emotional needs of these student groups?			

Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) Review For Goals, Actions Steps, and Finding (Continued)

Increased or Improved Services for Youth in the Foster System

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Does the LEA plan effectively and specifically describe the areas of improvement needed for youth in the foster care system?			
Does the LEA Plan describe how principally directed and effective actions are planned to improve these conditions?			
Do the principally directed and effective actions include expected measurable outcomes for the goals and actions related to youth in the foster care system?			

LCAP Budget and Actual Expenditures for Actions & Service for Youth in the Foster System

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Is our district able to revise/increase new year budgeted expenditures as necessary to support all actions/services for youth in the foster care system?			
Are funds being intentionally allocated to address the needs of youth in the foster care system?			
With budgetary limits, have innovative ways to use funds to meet the underlying needs of youth in the foster care system been considered?			
Have other funding streams, besides LCFF, been identified that can be used for programs, supports, services, and resources specific to youth in the foster care system?			

School Stability Guiding Questions

Education Code sections [48853](#), [48853.5](#) and [48852.7](#) grants students in the foster care system, certain students in the juvenile justice system, and students experiencing homelessness who experience a placement change, the right to continue to attend their school of origin. This also allows students to matriculate to the same school as their peers.

A school can be considered a student's school of origin if it meets one of the following:

1. The school that the youth attended when permanently housed;
2. The school in which the youth was last enrolled; or
3. The school the child has a connection to AND attended within the immediately preceding 15 months AND education rights holder (for students who meet the foster youth definition) in consultation with the foster/homeless youth liaison, and student agree it is in the student's best interests to deem it the school of origin.

The liaison, in consultation with the education rights holder(s) and students, can recommend the student waive their right to school of origin. If the recommendation is to waive their right to school of origin, it should be provided in writing. However, the education rights holder(s) make the final decision. A Best Interest Determination process (BID) should be initiated. The [Ensuring Education Stability and Success for Students in Foster Care- Non-Regulatory Guidance](#) can be accessed for additional information.

Students who are no longer under the jurisdiction of the court or are no longer experiencing homelessness have the right to remain in their school of origin through the end of the school year for students in grades kindergarten through eight, and through high school graduation for grades nine through twelve.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
How many students transferred in and out of our LEA last year who are identified in these student groups?			
Is there a process to ensure the education rights holders and students have been informed of the students' right to remain at their school of origin? (<i>ERH N/A for students who are unaccompanied</i>)			
How many best interest determinations (BIDs) are facilitated in our LEA annually for each student group?			
How many students remain enrolled in our school (or return) vs. disenrolling?			
Is there a process to immediately transport a student to their school of origin?			

School Stability Guiding Questions (Continued)

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
How many students in each group requested and were provided transportation to their school of origin?			
Is there a clear dispute resolution process regarding school of origin placement for these groups?			
Are school changes coordinated with the school calendar if a school transfer must occur?			
Are we receiving placement change notifications in advance, prior to the student moving?			
Are we utilizing Home to School Transportation Reimbursement? <i>(Reimbursement funding for school districts and county offices of education based on the prior year eligible transportation expenditures and prior year LCFF transportation-related add-on funding. Education Code (EC) Sections 39800.1 and 41850.1)</i>			

Guiding Questions Regarding Eligibility for Exemption from Local Graduation Requirements

Education Code section [51225.1](#) provides additional opportunities to graduate for youth in the foster care system, former juvenile court school students, and students experiencing homelessness, among other students identified in the statute. If these students change schools after completing two years of high school and cannot reasonably complete the local graduation requirements, the law allows them to opt into an exemption to graduate by meeting only the state coursework requirements. They are eligible to remain for a fifth year of high school to complete the local or state coursework requirements for a diploma. Additionally, Education Code [51225.3](#) clarifies that the governing board of a school district may, at its discretion, adopt a policy to exempt pupils from any coursework requirements regardless of status or placement change.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
How many students transferred into our school/ LEA/county after their 2nd year of high school?			
Of the students who transferred after their 2nd year of high school, how many were notified of their right and consulted about their potential exemption to local graduation requirements?			
How many students were found eligible to graduate based on the graduation exemption?			
How many students graduated under the state minimum requirements? • Within their 4 year cohort? • Opted into 5th year?			
How many students opted into a 5th year of high school to complete the local requirements?			
How many students did not initially qualify for the graduation exemption, were later reevaluated and qualified?			

School Discipline Guiding Questions

Education Code section 48853.5(d) states a foster child's education rights holder, attorney, and county social worker and an Indian child's, as defined in Section 224.1 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, tribal social worker and, if applicable, county social worker shall have the same rights a parent or guardian of a child has to receive a suspension notice, expulsion notice, manifestation determination notice, involuntary transfer notice, and other documents and related information.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Do we have clear written policies regarding disciplinary consequences for specific on-campus behaviors?			
How many students have been suspended (including on and off campus suspensions)?			
How many students have been expelled?			
How many manifestation determinations are held each year?			
How many students have had an involuntary transfer to an alternative education setting?			
How many students are transferring to Independent Study in lieu of involuntary transfers?			
Do we have written policies and information for parents on procedures for voluntary or involuntary transfer to alternative education settings?			
Are all disciplinary actions being documented in the student information system, including on-campus suspensions?			
Do we have a policy or practice of notifying education rights holders, social workers, and attorneys of school discipline?			
How many notifications are sent each year?			

Guiding Questions Regarding Students With Disabilities

Students with unique needs who also have disabilities may be eligible for services and accommodations through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
How many students requested a special education assessment last year?			
How many students were assessed for special education eligibility?			
How many students who were assessed did not meet eligibility requirements?			
How many students were found eligible for special education services? • How many students were eligible under the category: Other Health Impairment (OHI)? • How many students were eligible under the category: Emotional Disability?			
Of students who qualified for special education services, how many students were placed in the following academic setting? • Special Day Class (SDC) • Resource Support Program (RSP) • Non-Public School (NPS)			
How many students spent 80% or more of their day in a general education setting last year?			
How many assessment requests were denied last year?			
How many students requested a Section 504 plan last year?			
Of those requested, how many students were placed on a section 504 plan last year?			
How many total students were on a Section 504 plan last year?			

Supports and Resources Checklist

Leveraging community resources and local partnerships supports high-quality academic and enrichment opportunities by broadening the experiences that may be typically offered to students and by expanding access to local expertise. Better aligning and utilizing these resources can also help school systems identify and access low-cost services or facilities to support learning opportunities on and off school sites.¹⁵

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS APPLY TO EACH STUDENT GROUP	YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM	YOUTH IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM	YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Which site and/or LEA-level academic supports and resources are available specifically for these students?			
Which site and/or LEA-level socio-emotional counseling, supports, and resources are available specifically for these groups?			
What plans are in motion to develop new site and/or LEA-level supports and resources specifically for these populations?			
Are resources centrally located and easily accessible?			

Policies and Practices Guiding Questions

LEAs should assess whether they have the following policies and practices in place, which relate to the topic-specific guiding questions below. This is a non-exhaustive list of policies and practices that are either required by law or encouraged based on promising practices to support students with unique needs.

	Yes	No	Unsure
Are LEA and school site staff trained in trauma-informed practices in schools?			
Are LEA and site-specific staff trained in culturally responsive and inclusive practices in schools?			
Do we have policies on restorative justice practices that are implemented at every level (<i>i.e., student, school site, district</i>)?			
Do we have a standard policy or protocol to identify students' needs for mental health services and how to make referrals for students, either within or outside of the LEA? (<i>This should be separate from the special education assessment process</i>).			
Do we have a policy on the responsibilities of the AB 490 Foster Youth and McKinney Vento Liaisons?			
Do we have a process in place to locate education rights holder, attorney, and social worker (Tribal Worker if applicable) information?			
Does the above process include doing so at enrollment?			
Do we have protocols for immediate enrollment and identification of students with unique needs?			
Do we have a plan for how to assess and apply partial credits for students that transfer in/out of our LEA?			
Do we have practices to minimize mobility for students with unique needs at the primary, middle, and high school levels?			
Do we have an Education for Foster Youth policy that reflects the latest state and federal legislation? (<i>CSBA AR6173.1</i>)			

Policies and Practices Guiding Questions (Continued)

	Yes	No	Unsure
Do we have a written notification of foster youth education rights?			
Does our county office of education have a joint transition planning policy to support students leaving court schools? (AB 2276/1354)			
Do we have an MOU or other agreements in place to support students returning from court schools? (AB 2276/1354)			
Do we have designated personnel to ensure adequate transition supports for students returning from court schools? (AB 1354)			
Do we have a policy detailing when and how to communicate and share confidential information with probation officers and other law enforcement about students involved in the juvenile justice system?			
Do we have a policy to ensure eligibility of students with unique needs in extracurricular activities?			
Is there an LEA education surrogate program, which provides surrogates for students with special needs, or suspected needs, when an Education Rights Holder is not available?			
Do we explain Uniform Complaint Procedures on our website?			
Do we have written policies regarding our independent study option and information for parents on enrollment procedures?			
Are our policies reviewed annually (or at LCAP approval) to assess needed updates?			
Do we have robust practices to support families before making referrals to Student Attendance Review Board (SARB)?			

Endnotes

¹A child who meets the definition of “homeless children and youths” in Section 11434a(2) of Title 42 of the United States Code.

²A child who is the subject of a juvenile dependency court petition (Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 300).

³A child who is the subject of a juvenile delinquency court petition (Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 602).
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/>

⁴<https://www.caschooldashboard.org>

⁵<https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>

⁶<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/child-welfare-services-case-management-system>

⁷<https://www.lacoe.edu/services/technology/eps>

⁸www.courts.ca.gov/documents/BTB25-3D-01.pdf

⁹<https://studentinfotracking.dcfs.lacounty.gov/> or
<https://www.counties.org/video/best-practices-los-angeles-countys-dcfs-student-information-tracking-system>

¹⁰The federal McKinney-Vento Act defines unaccompanied youth as “a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian”, and whose living arrangement meets the definition of homeless. [42 USC § 11434a(6)].

¹¹Accountability. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/>

¹²California School Dashboard and System of Support. Retrieved from
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm>

¹³California School Dashboard and System of Support.
<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2022>

¹⁴Sample LCAP 2026 for Youth in Foster Care
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/149bSIF79mOy3D8hfwlQpzUJakHx4Qp4e>

¹⁵U.S. Department of Education, Better Use of Community Resources.
Retrieved from: <https://oese.ed.gov/archived/oii/better-use-of-community-resources/>



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