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## Examining Academic Performance and Education Stability Measures for Youth in Foster Care

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Examining Academic Performance and Education Stability Measures for Youth in Foster Care

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Spring 2023 Capstone Project

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## **1. Executive Summary**

The state of Kentucky has seen an increase in its population of youth who are involved with child welfare and in the foster care system while also seeing less cases end in reunification with families. While youth process trauma related to the removal from their homes and the potential of experiencing multiple moves through their time with child welfare, it is important that educational stability remain intact to promote normalcy and improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care. Following the signing of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Kentucky education system has seen improvement in its processes that help ensure education stability to those students experiencing foster care. This study conducts a cross-sectional analysis of standardized testing performance across multiple districts, with varying foster youth populations and mean household incomes for the county the district is in, to establish patterns of academic performance for youth in foster care. Following this study, findings suggest that in the districts observed, there are patterns of higher performance from elementary level youth in foster care and smaller gaps in performance when compared to non-foster youth when the school district has a smaller foster youth census. Past this stage you see poorer performance by foster youth across all districts but see better performance in districts with a higher percentage of the student population being in foster care.

## **2. Introduction**

Youth in foster care face many barriers to a successful education including health and behavioral needs, high mobility rates (removals and changes of placement), and traumatization. Barriers like this create a need for consistency throughout their educational journey to be successful. With high mobility as a barrier, it is common to see youth in these situations removed from their school of initial enrollment and placed in new schools. This process interrupts stability and enrollment in their next school can be a lengthy process. This time out of the classroom and the change they experience can contribute to being retained in their current grade and lead to extended time needed to complete four years of high school.

On December 10, 2015, ESSA was signed into law. The Act amended the definition of homeless youth to exclude those “awaiting foster care.” This removed resources from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (MKV) for these youth that would ensure continued school enrollment and attendance. While these funding sources were no longer accessible to youth who have recently entered the child welfare system, provisions were established to ensure the students remain in their school of origin if this was determined to be in their best interest. To do this, ESSA clarified responsibilities for both the child welfare and education systems to maintain education stability. In addition to these provisions, ESSA requires the reporting of academic performance for many disaggregated groups including students with the status of foster care (Every Student Succeeds Act 2015). With this information, State Education Authorities (SEAs) had to create state plans to address the mandated provisions of this Act including how the state would report data and how the state would ensure education continuation at a youth’s school of origin happened if is determined to be in their best interest.

This study gives further explanation to what measures are in place by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) to improve education stability and examines patterns in the academic performance for youth in foster care over the 2021-2022 school year.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **Barriers to Education Stability**

In recent years, Kentucky has seen a steady increase in the percentage of the state's youth who are in foster care while also experiencing a decrease in the number of cases that end with youth being reunified with their families. (Kentucky Youth Advocates, 2022). Both indicators present an increased chance of educational instability. Compared to the general population of students, those in foster care have been shown to be three times more likely to experience removals from their school of origin with a large portion of these moves taking place during the school year (Pears et al., 2015).

Common themes seen nationally leading to education instability for youth in foster care stem from both the on-going experiences of foster youth and systemic issues. These recurrent barriers include 1) gaps in attendance caused by disruptions during transitions, 2) issues with transportation when youth are removed from their school of origin, 3) lengthy timelines while enrolling in new schools, and 4) problems with transferring credits to their next school (Education Commission of The States, 2020). Data provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows that in 2020, 35 percent of current foster youth had more than two placements during their time in the foster care system (2022). A study of foster youth in Colorado shows that on average, each time youth experience a change in placement and in their school of enrollment, their academic growth is reduced by 3.0 percentile points in writing, 3.7 in reading, and 3.5 in math

(Clemens et al., 2018). This decline in growth in year-end assessments puts the youth behind at the beginning of the following school year and growth continues to fall without intervention.

These factors contribute to gaps in academic performance when compared to the whole student population, shown by differences in graduation rates. During the 2018-2019 school year, the national average for graduating students was 86 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). For this same year, only 56 percent of respondents surveyed by the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) reported achieving high school graduation or attainment of a GED by age 19 (NYTD, 2020). As graduation rates for foster youth are not currently reported by all states, this percentage reflects the amount of former foster youth surveyed after participating in the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program who obtained a high diploma, equivalent, or higher (NYTD, 2020). This same population reported an average of four different placements by the age of 17, increasing the chances of disruption to education (NYTD, 2020).

### **Providing Stability, Equity, and Performance Improvement**

Signed into law on December 10, 2015, ESSA calls for the reporting of “information on student achievement on the academic assessments” for all students, providing disaggregated data for groups including those with a “status as a child in foster care” (ESSA, 2015). In addition to this added level of performance transparency, the Act called for State Education Agencies (SEAs) Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to collaborate with state and local child welfare agencies to create plans to “*ensure that all children receive a high-quality education, and to close the achievement gap between children meeting the challenging State academic standards*” (ESSA, 2015). In regard to the removal of youth from homes or during a change of placement, this includes assuring transportation is set-up and funding in order to keep the youth in their school of origin unless it is determined to not be in their best interest (ESSA, 2015). This leaves

autonomy with the SEAs to be creative in the production of these plans as there are no defined methods in ESSA of establishing transportation with you along with no standards for determining best-interest of youth in determining if students should be kept in their school of origin.

### **ESSA Implementation Progress**

Following the signing into law in 2015, the U.S. Department of Education did not approve all ESSA state implementation plans until September 2018 (US Department of Education, 2021). During this time, Congress asked the Government Accountability Office to review implementation of the provisions set forth by ESSA in ensuring stability of education for foster youth (2019).

The results from a 2017 GAO survey of State Educational Agencies (SEAs) reported five frequent challenges: “turnover among local child welfare and educational agency staff, obtaining school district input during the process for determining whether it is in a youth’s best interest to remain in their school of origin (referred to as best interest determinations), providing and funding transportation, ensuring accurate identification of youth in foster care, and monitoring how school districts implement these provisions” (2019). When asked about areas where SEAs would like further federal assistance in implementing ESSA standards regarding providing stability for youth in foster care, transportation issues and determining best interest for youth were amongst those where the most respondents reported additional aide being helpful (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019).

In Kentucky, House Bill 312, signed into law March 27, 2020, requires that “the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) to develop processes to promote more expeditious enrollment of students in foster care who are transferring to a new school or district, and the



sharing of information among schools” (Kentucky Legislative Research Commission). The process created and monitored by the KDE consists of the new school the youth will be attending immediately request records from the previous school when enrollment begins. The previous school of attendance is then expected to provide the requested information by the end of the day that the request was received. Data presented by the KDE shows that during the school year prior to this bill only 26% of new schools requested information for students within the first two days following enrollment (2020). Following the implementation, there was an increase in timely requests up to 62 percent for the whole student population and 94 percent for the 1,000-request seen for youth in foster care (*Foster Care*, 2020). Similarly, an increase in timely responses was seen for requests from 68 to 75 percent and 94 percent for foster care youth (*Foster Care*, 2020).

#### **4. Research Design**

With the implementation of ESSA, there was a call for transparency of disaggregated data across underperforming groups, including youth in foster care and provisions set forth to insure the stability of education for these individuals. For this study, a cross-sectional design was applied using data mandated by ESSA and provided by the Kentucky Department of Education to examine the performance levels of youth in foster care compared to the whole student population across selected Kentucky school districts. This method allows for the analysis of multiple variables at the same time from one period of data collection in order to establish potential patterns. As this data is from one point in time, this model does not present evidence for any long-term effects or relationships but could be used as evidence to support the need for further investigation or studies. To get a better understanding of how barriers to stable education impact performance, the districts chosen have varying percentages of foster youth population compared to the whole student body. District selection was impacted by the availability of

assessment data across multiple grade levels. This resulted in including districts with larger numbers of foster care youth, but still provided variation in the percentage of the districts' population made up by this demographic.

Data for this research was gathered through the Kentucky Department of Education's Report Card. Information was retrieved from four 2021-2022 school year data sets: "Accountable Assessment Performance", "Total Student Count\_Primary Enrollment", "Assessment Performance by Grade," and "Graduation Rate." (Kentucky Department of Education). From the populations available within these data sets, this analysis uses the "All Students," "Foster Care," and "Non-Foster Care" demographic categories.

## **5. Findings**

### **Kentucky Summative Assessment Reading**

When viewing standardized assessment score data for reading, different patterns were seen for elementary grade students and middle/high school students. From the districts observed, seen in Figure 1, elementary aged students didn't appear to show a relationship between the population percentage of the district's students but did show a correlation with better performance when the foster care student census is lower compared to districts with larger censuses.

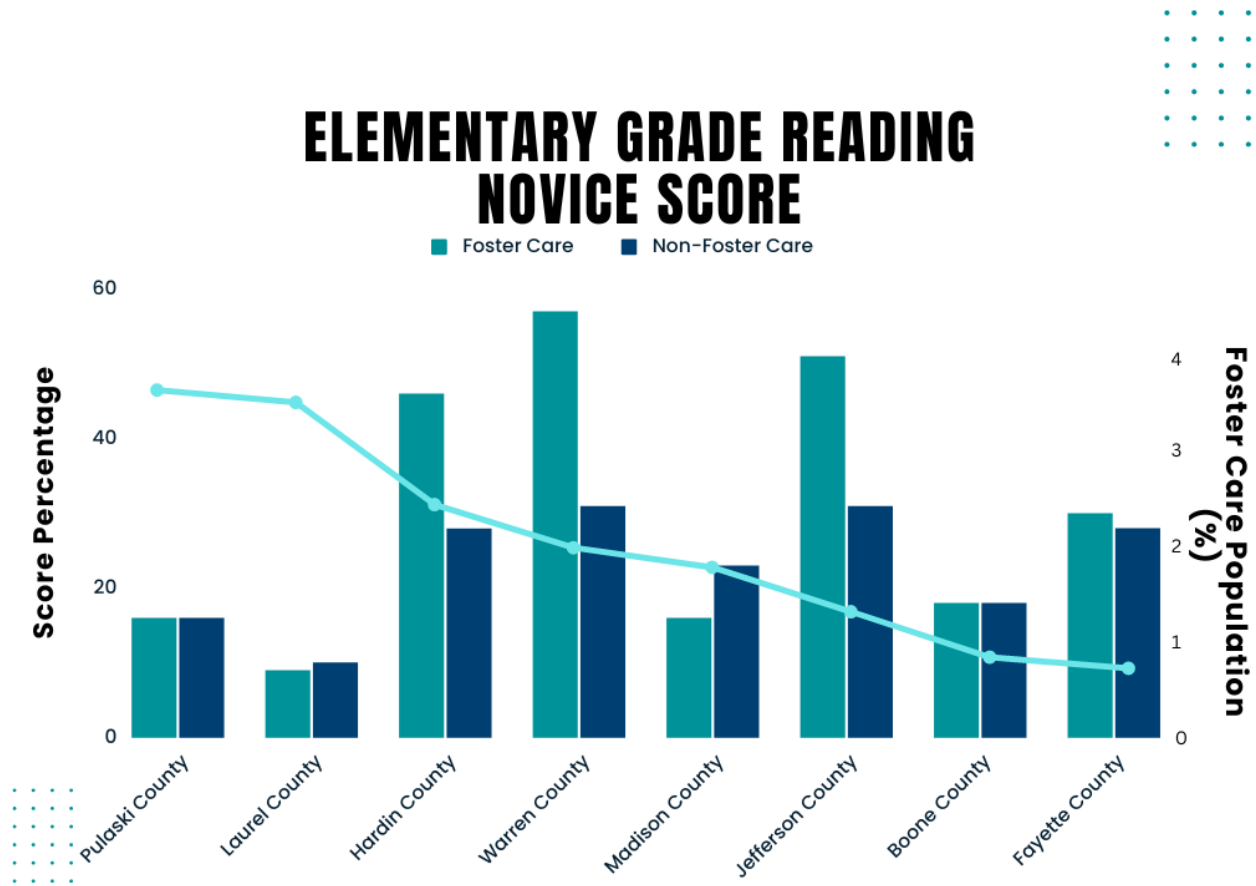


Figure 1: Percentage of elementary populations scoring "novice" on the Kentucky Summative Assessments

Figure 1 shows foster youth performing, on average, 7.25 percentage points worse than the non-foster population across the observed districts. But when comparing the districts with the four highest and lowest censuses, we see that the districts with lower censuses have an average of 2 percent less students scoring “novice” while seeing an average of 21 percent more foster youth scoring “novice” from the larger census districts.

The same pattern can be seen when looking at the percentage of the population who scored a “proficient” or “distinguished” on their assessment. Seen in Figure 2, only the Laurel County and Madison County school districts had foster care populations that performed comparably or better than the non-foster participants with all the districts observed seeing an average of 14.5 percent less scores of “proficient” or “distinguished” from the foster youth

students. We see a smaller gap in performance, 3 percent compared to 13.75 percent, when conducting a comparison of the highest and lowest foster youth censuses.

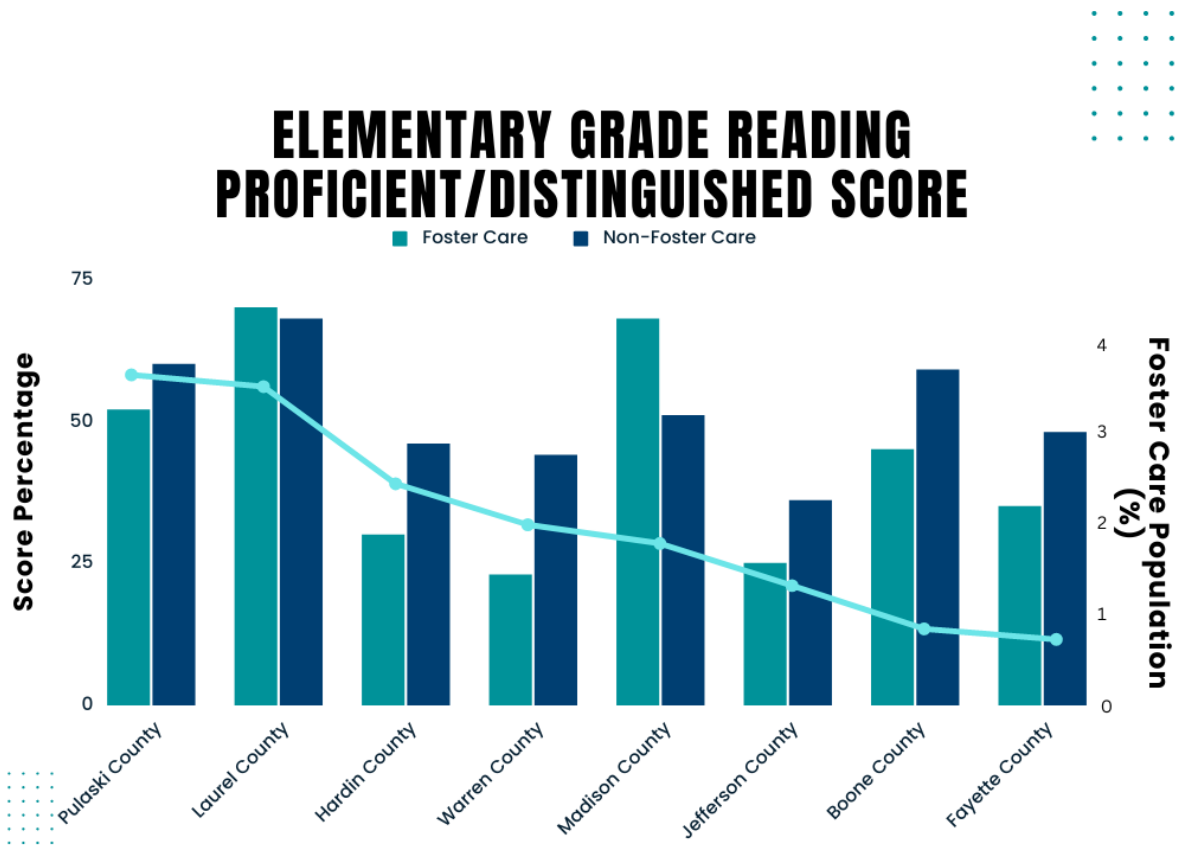


Figure 2: Percentage of elementary populations scoring "proficient" or "distinguished" on the Kentucky Summative Assessments

When reviewing the middle and high school assessment results shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, it is seen that overall, the performance from the foster care youth population is better when they make up a larger percentage of the student population. However, it is also shown that this demographic is performing lower than the non-foster comparison population. Of the middle school participants shown in figures 3 and 4, the percentage of foster care youth who scored “novice” in reading was 17.29 percent higher and 20.86 percent lower when scoring a

“proficient” or “distinguished.”

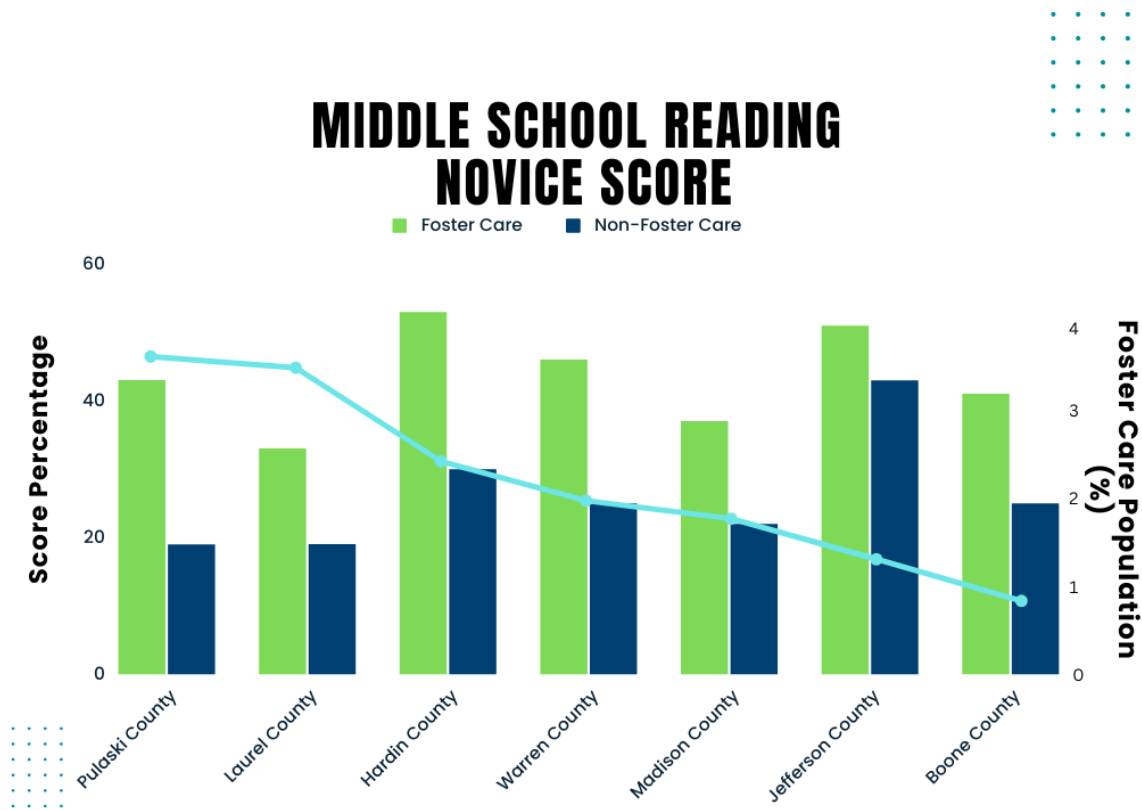


Figure 3: Percentage of middle school populations scoring "novice" on the Kentucky Summative Assessments

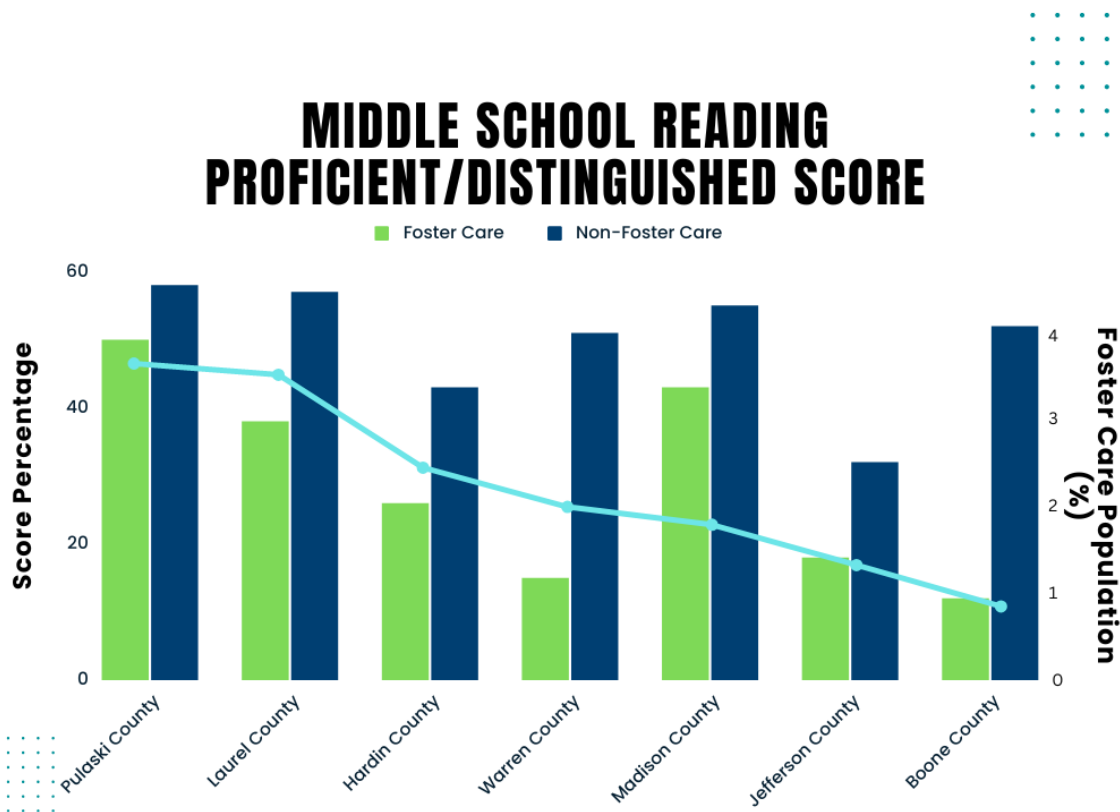


Figure 4: Percentage of middle school populations scoring "proficient" or "distinguished" on the Kentucky Summative Assessments

Similar outcomes are seen when looking at the four districts that had available information on high school participants. In this group, we see that performance outcomes are similar across districts with an average of a 25 percent gap in scoring “novice” between foster and non-foster groups with youth in foster care having more participants score “novice.” The gap is closer for “proficient” or “distinguished,” with foster care youth showing an average gap of 18.5 percentage points. There does appear to be an outlier in this group with foster care youth performing better in Pulaski County school district, but the district does also show better

performance overall at the high school level.

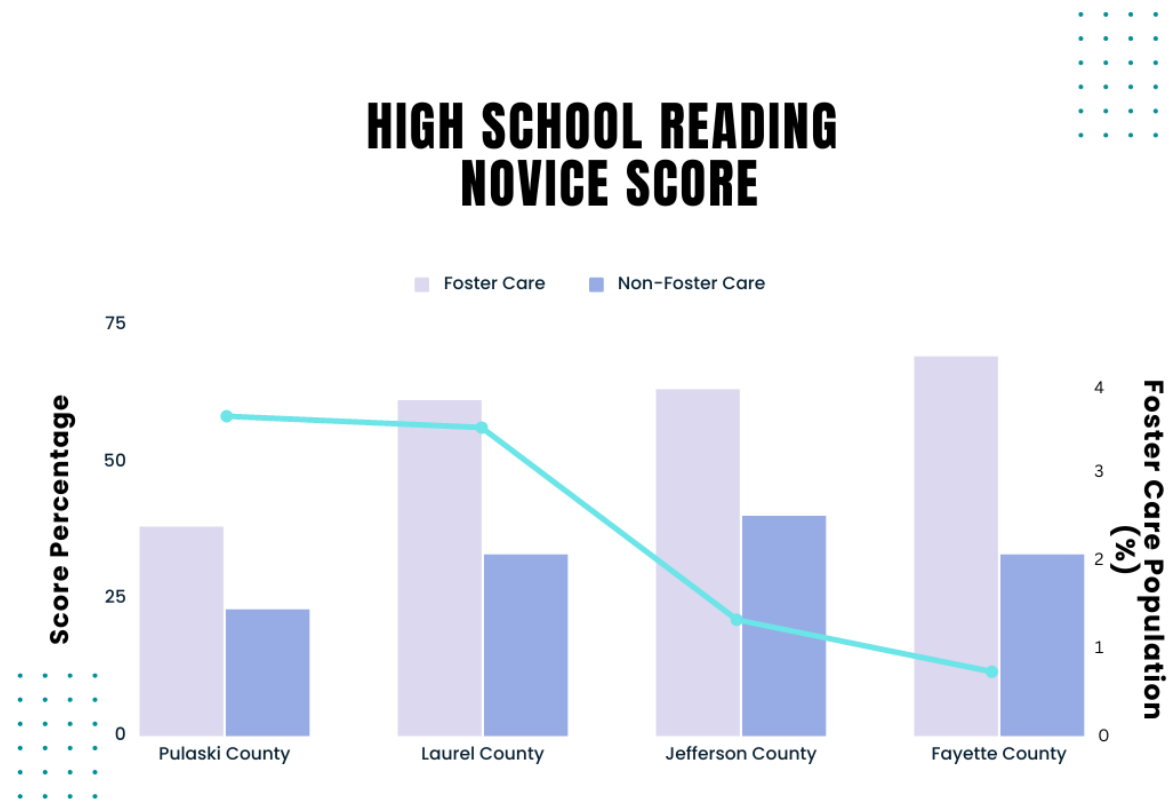


Figure 5: Percentage of high school populations scoring "novice" on the Kentucky Summative Assessments

# HIGH SCHOOL READING PROFICIENT/DISTINGUISHED SCORE

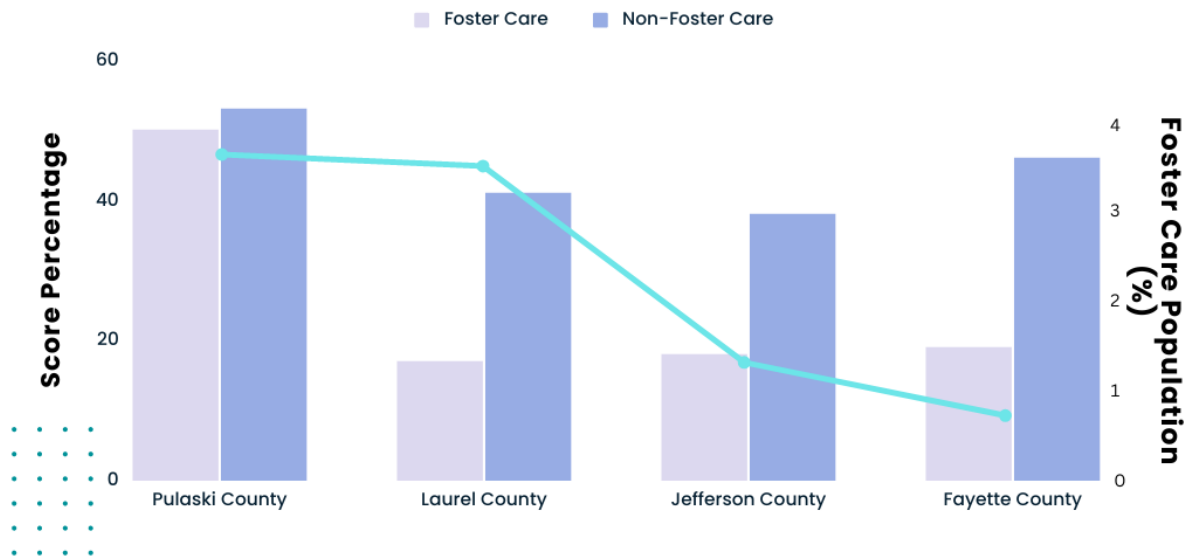


Figure 6: Percentage of high school populations scoring "proficient" or "distinguished" on the Kentucky Summative Assessments

## Graduation Rates

All the districts from this study, except for Laurel County, had graduation rate data available. Here we can see that this is a positive correlation of foster care population percentage and the percent of students in that demographic graduating within four years. Figure 4 shows this along with the gap seen in foster care youth graduation rates compared to the population of non-foster youth. For these districts, we see a 17.53 percent average gap between the graduation rates of foster and non-foster youth.



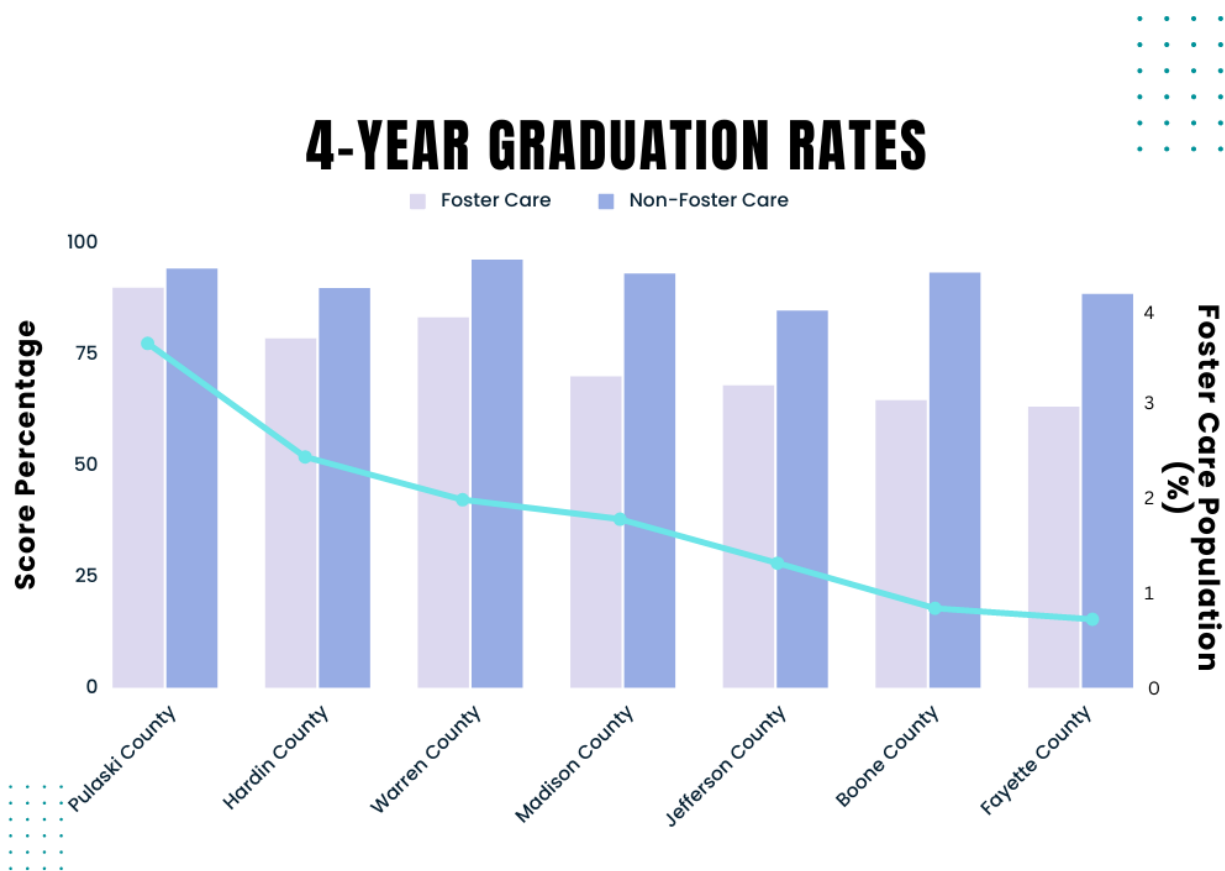


Figure 7: Percentage of current eligible "foster care" and "non-foster care" students who graduated within four

## 6. Limitations

The first limitation of this study was the suppression of data at the district level due to having an insufficient sample size. "Kentucky requires each reported subpopulation to be based on at least 10 students at each grade/content area tested within a school or district" (Lewis 2019). This measure is taken as a precaution to prevent students in smaller subpopulations from being able to be identified. Suppressed data heavily influenced which testing subjects, grade levels, and school districts could be used in this analysis. Similarly, this study was only able to present data on reading scores as there was insufficient data for all other subjects. For future studies, diving into why all subjects are not presented for the participants could add more data to this study.

Time was another limitation faced in this study. The 2021-2022 school year was the first year that had data presented in this way available. Previous years have had varying amounts of data available from different districts, creating a barrier to establishing trends.

Due to the process of moving and enrolling students into new school involving more than just the education system, another limitation to showing any causal relationship was created. In this process, the schools involved make up half of those involved in enrollments, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services makes up the other half and data around this was not gathered.

## **7. Conclusion**

### **Discussion**

Overall, the study shows there are more comparable performance outcomes between the foster and non-foster populations when viewing elementary level data compared to the middle and high school aged population. This creates a need for further study to determine why there is such a large difference between these age groups. Some characteristics that could have an impact on decreasing education performance of older populations are and increased time spent in foster care, number of school movements, and behaviors that are not as manageable for school staff as they were at a younger age.

Although the Department of Education reports high rates of timeliness in requesting in completing transfer record requests, I would be cautious in stating that it has made an impact on education stability of foster care youth so far. The school year under review in this study is only the second year that these updated practices and procedures for documentation sharing have been in place. This in addition to not having data available from the CHFS and limited reported academic performance data, makes it unclear as to if a difference has been made.

All districts reference the same policy for transferring records for foster youth set by the Kentucky Department of Education but there is not a way to measure successful implementation of these procedures when assessing the impact of disruptions in education to the performance of students. Currently, the Department of Education uses the “Student Transfer Record” report that allows districts to monitor timeliness of transfer record requests and responses (*Foster Care*, 2020). This tool is only available for use by approved district administrators. I recommend making this data available at aggregate district and state levels as it would increase accountability of districts.

### **Recommendations**

With large performance differences between the elementary and middle/high school populations, it is important to dig deeper into why there’s these large gaps to better inform intervention measures to support youth in foster care. It is recommended that the Education Committee of the state Senate introduce a resolution calling for a study of these variances. This study would be conducted jointly by the CHFS and the KDE. This will allow for access to information on academic performance, timeliness of student transfers, time spent out of school, and procedures in place for evaluating academic support and use of Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Additionally, information on exhibited behaviors, data on a student’s time in foster care, and reasons for entry to care would be accessible for this study. Information from this study could establish patterns of when academic performance begins to decline and guide earlier intervention. The findings of this study would then be presented to the Interim Joint Committee on Education.

While gathering data for this study, Kentucky showed a higher level of transparency and accessibility to information when compared with other states that were initially going to be used

for this study. Making this data available will continue to push Kentucky ahead in transparency. Another recommendation that would add to this is including the “Foster Care” demographic in the crosstab accountability tables. This would allow for assessing the performance of the foster care youth population across races and gender. Although this data would be likely suppressed at school and district levels, it would be important data to have at the state level. With this information, studies can be completed to evaluate the potential role implicit bias can play in the performance of foster care youth from different races.

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