

# School Experiences Among Young People Living in Kinship & Foster Care in Washington State



## School Experiences Among Young People Living Apart from their Parents

Young people living apart from their parents often experience unique challenges that can cause them to struggle in school.<sup>1 2</sup> They have often experienced more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than their peers who are living with their parents.<sup>3</sup> ACEs are associated with social and emotional challenges that can contribute to educational barriers linked with lower graduation rates and increased social and behavioral problems.<sup>4 5 6 7 8</sup> Students living apart from their parents also change schools more often than their peers,<sup>9 10</sup> and involvement with the foster care system often entails academic disruptions and heightened school mobility (changing schools two or more times in the past year) that can undermine school engagement.<sup>1 10</sup> Although youth living in both foster care and kinship care experience significantly more educational challenges than youth living with their parents, youth living in kinship care often have better educational outcomes than youth living in foster care.<sup>6 9</sup>

## What is Kinship Care?

Kinship care refers to the full-time care of a minor by a relative or another adult who has a close relationship with the youth and their family.<sup>11</sup> Federal law requires that when a minor is removed from their parent's care due to abuse or neglect that they are placed in the least restrictive, family-like setting.<sup>12</sup> Kinship care can be either formal or informal, depending on the level of child welfare services involvement.<sup>13</sup> Formal kinship care is organized by child welfare services (CWS), however, most kinship care arrangements are informal and arranged without CWS involvement.<sup>14 15</sup> Approximately 2.6 million (4% of US children) live in relative households apart from their parents.<sup>16</sup> In Washington State, 40,000 youth, roughly 2% of all youth in the state, live in kinship care,<sup>17</sup> and for every one youth living in a formal CWS kinship care arrangement, ten children are living in informal kinship care outside of foster care system.<sup>1 8</sup>

## Educational Benefits of Kinship Care

Among out-of-home placement options, kinship care is preferred over foster care because it helps maintain youths' key attachments.<sup>19 20 21</sup> Kinship care offers an important opportunity to keep youth with their families and in their communities. Stable positive relationships between youth and supportive adults promote school engagement<sup>22</sup> and strong community bonds are vital for educational success.<sup>9 15 23 24</sup> This is particularly important among students with learning disabilities who are disproportionately represented in the foster care system.<sup>25 26</sup>

Kinship care has also been shown to minimize the trauma of being separated from parents, and youth living in kinship care are more likely to feel connected to their families<sup>27</sup> and remain in their communities of origin.<sup>20</sup> This helps maintain school connections. Living with family members improves youths' educational outcomes, increases permanency, and supports cultural identity development.<sup>9 21 28</sup> Youth are more likely to graduate from high school and access post-secondary educational opportunities when they feel connected and secure.<sup>7 29</sup> Prioritizing school stability and community connections through kinship care placements has a positive impact on educational outcomes among youth who are not able to live with their parents and helps maintain continuity that supports educational success.

## Washington State Healthy Youth Survey

This fact sheet used data from the 2021 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) to compare school experiences between youth living in kinship care and youth living in foster care. The HYS is a biannual survey that includes 8th, 10th, and 12th grade public school students. The survey offers a representative sample of young people in Washington State and provides important details about their health and well-being.<sup>30</sup>

## COVID-19 and School Experiences Among Young People Living Apart from their Parents

While the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruptions to education across all student groups,<sup>31</sup> it intensified school disconnection among youth involved in the foster care system.<sup>4 32 33</sup> Educational success is strongly associated with health and wellness,<sup>34</sup> and the pandemic amplified preexisting health and educational disparities in ways that disproportionately impacted vulnerable young people and increased disparities and inequalities related to socioeconomic status and other factors such as race, ethnicity, disability, and living conditions.<sup>31 35 36 37</sup>

From the academic year (AY) 2018-19 to AY 2021-22, there was a 2.4% increase in enrollment among all 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in Washington State.<sup>38</sup> However, enrollment among students involved in the foster care system decreased by 31.7%,<sup>38</sup> and HYS participation among youth living in kinship care and foster care dropped dramatically with lower enrollment rates.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the findings from the 2021 HYS likely undercount health and wellness disparities among young people involved in foster care.

## Living in Kinship Care

- 2.7% (3,469 Youth)
- 35.9% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year.

## Living in Foster Care

- 0.4% (463 Youth)
- 41.7% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year.

**Note:** Sample size N=125,996.

Based upon the HYS Question: Who did you live with most of the time in the last 30 days? 95.8% (142,296 Youth) were living with their parents.

Among all students, there was a 15.2% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year to 2020-21. academic year.

### School Mobility

- Youth living in kinship care experienced more school stability. Compared to youth living in kinship care, school mobility was **1.1** times higher among youth living in foster care.

### School Attendance

- Youth living in kinship care had better school attendance. Compared to youth living in kinship care, youth living in foster care were **1.3** times more likely to say they had skipped school in the last month.

### Involvement in Class Activities & Decision-making

- Youth living in kinship care were more likely to say that they felt they had chances for involvement in deciding class rules and activities. Feeling as though they had fewer chances to participate in class decision-making was **1.2** times higher among youth living in foster care.

### School Bullying

- Youth living in kinship care were more likely than youth living in foster care to say they experienced bullying at school. Experiencing school bullying was **1.2** times higher among youth living in foster care.

### Carrying Weapons at School

- Youth living in kinship care were significantly less likely than youth living in foster care to say they carried weapons at school. Carrying weapons at school was **1.8** times higher among youth living in foster care.

### School Safety & Access

- Youth living in kinship care were significantly more likely than youth living in foster care to say that they felt safe going to and from school. Not feeling safe going to and from school was **1.7** times higher among youth living in foster care.

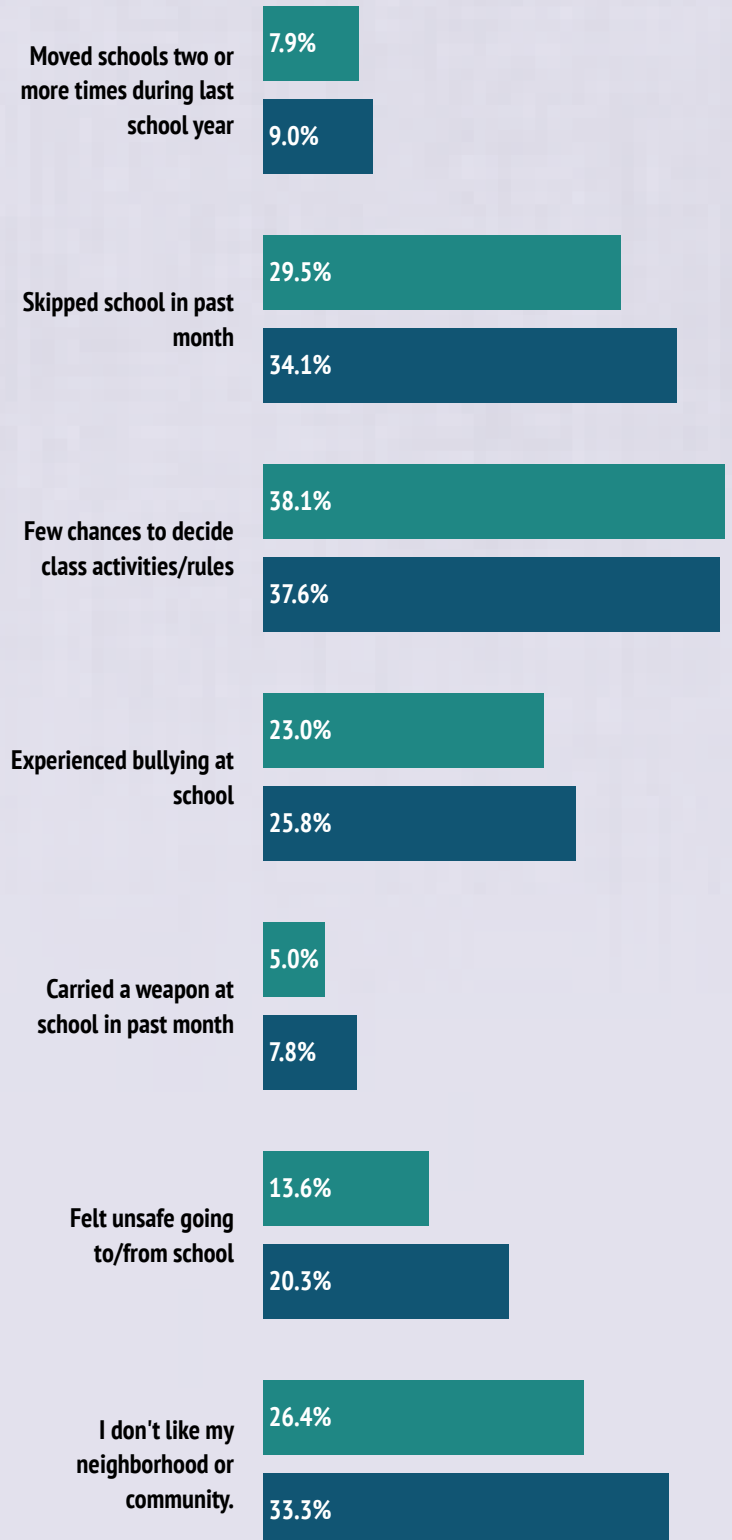
### Positive Perception of Community and Neighborhood

- Youth living in kinship care were more likely than youth living in foster care to say that they liked their community or neighborhood. Reporting they did not like their community or neighborhood was **1.4** times higher among youth living in foster care.

## Key Takeaways from the Washington Healthy Youth Survey

- Youth living in kinship care typically have better school experiences than youth living in foster care.
- Kinship care can be an important support for youth who might otherwise enter foster care and face educational instability.

● Living in Kinship Care ● Living in Foster Care



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