School Mobility for Students in Foster Care

Niu Gao, Jonathan Isler, Anastasia Semykina, Izamar Ortiz-Gonzalez, Piper Stanger, Isabelle Saillard, Kelsey Berryman, and Diana Casanova

August 2025

American Institutes for Research® | AIR.ORG

AIR®
Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

Contents

Acknowledgments

We thank Dion Burns, Emily Casillas, Katherine Elliott, Michelle Lustig, Elysia Versen and Sara Wolforth for their thoughtful review of an earlier draft of this report. All errors are our own. This research is supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through grant R305S240021 to the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®). Any errors or misinterpretations belong to the authors and do not reflect the views of the Institute, the U.S. Department of Education, or the California Department of Education.

Executive Summary

Nearly 40,000 students in California public schools were in foster care at some point during the 2023–24 school year (California Department of Education, 2024). These students encountered significant challenges to academic success, including high rates of school mobility, which disrupts student learning and connections with peers, schools, and communities (Cutuli et al., 2013) and was associated with lower academic performance, worse employment prospects, and increased involvement in the justice system (Kennedy et al., 2023). Improving educational stability is essential to closing the opportunity gaps for students in foster care, as emphasized by federal and state laws.

In this report, we analyze student-level longitudinal data from the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) covering the 2017–18 through 2023–24 school years to examine school mobility patterns among students in foster care. Key findings follow:

- **Students in foster care experienced school mobility at significantly higher rates than their peers.** Thirty-one percent of students in foster care changed schools during a school year, compared to only 6% of students statewide. Students in foster care also had higher mobility rates than other student groups, including low-income students (7%), multilingual learners (6%), students with disabilities (7%), migrant students (8%), and students experiencing homelessness (16%).
- **School mobility varied by youth age, race/ethnicity, and educational needs.** High school students in foster care had higher mobility rates (38% in high school vs. 27% in K–5). Black students in foster care had the highest mobility rates among major racial/ethnic groups at 36%. Rates were highest among students in foster care who experienced homelessness (before or after foster care) (50%).
- **School mobility has decreased over time,** dropping from 36% in 2017–18 to 30% in 2023–24. During the pandemic, mobility rates declined sharply, possibly due to the shift to distance learning in 2019–20 and 2020–21, which made it easier for students to remain in their schools virtually. Although the rates increased postpandemic, they remained below prepandemic levels, at around 30%.
- **Two thirds of school moves are associated with a residential change.** On average, students in foster care relocated to more than 20 miles away. Depending on the traffic, road condition, and public transportation infrastructure, commuting 20 miles can be challenging for students, particularly younger children and those with disabilities. As a result, more students in foster care moved to a different district (in the same county) or county instead of remaining in the same district.

- **Most students in foster care remained in traditional public schools, but subsequent moves were more likely to involve alternative educational settings.** Each year, more than 90% of students in foster care attended traditional public schools, and most school moves were between traditional public schools. However, about one in three school moves involved switching to a different type of school, like a continuation school or juvenile court school. Changing school types became more common the more often a student moved—22% changed school type on their first move, 29% on their second, and 44% on their third or later change.
- **Not all school moves are detrimental—but we need to know more.** When students move to better resourced schools, student outcomes can improve. About 30% of moves were from a high-poverty school (at least 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) to more affluent schools, and 15% were from a high-need school (at least 55% of students were low-income, multilingual learners, or in foster care) to lower need schools. These figures have remained stable over time, including during the pandemic.
- **Multiple factors at the individual, school, and community levels influenced school mobility.** Residential moves—often linked to placement changes—were major drivers. Additional risk factors included student age, disability status, housing status, and enrolling in an alternative education setting. Community factors such as being in a rural area and crime rates also are associated with higher mobility. Urban districts, housing affordability, and number of foster care facilities were linked to lower school mobility.

This study provides the first comprehensive look at school mobility for students in foster care—and variation across student groups and over time. The findings underscore the urgent need to improve educational stability—maintaining a child in their school of origin unless it is determined to not be in their best interest. This is especially true for Black students in care, and those who have disabilities or experience homelessness.

This report is the first in a three-part series examining school mobility for students in foster care. Our future work will examine how local education and child welfare agencies support educational stability, such as conducting best-interest determinations and arranging transportation. We will also provide new evidence on the relationships between school mobility and student academic and social-emotional outcomes in the postpandemic context.

Introduction

Each year, more than 300,000 children in the United States are in foster care. These children have experienced parental neglect, abuse, and abandonment and are unable to continue living safely with their families (Administration for Children and Families, 2023). Nearly 40,000 of them are enrolled in California public schools (California Department of Education, 2024). Students in foster care frequently encounter significant challenges to academic success, including high rates of school mobility; developmental delays; and trauma from abuse, neglect, and separation from families (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As a result, students in foster care are more likely to drop out and face suspension and expulsions, and they are less likely to be proficient in math or English, graduate from high school, or enroll in college (Barrat et al., 2025).

Students in foster care change schools more often than their peers (Burns et al., 2022; Clemens et al., 2017; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012; Pears et al., 2015), and in some states most of these moves are associated with placement changes (Clemens et al., 2017; Pears et al., 2015). Frequent school moves disrupt student learning and connections with peers, schools, and communities, and the interplay of school mobility and foster care experience contributes to lower academic performance, poorer employment prospects, and increased involvement in the justice system (Kennedy et al., 2023). The adverse effects on academic outcomes are cumulative, increasing with each additional move (Clemens et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2009; Welsh, 2017), and they are more pronounced for students who move during the school year (Grigg, 2012; Pears et al., 2015).

Federal and state laws emphasize the importance of educational stability for students in foster care. In 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act, which, for the first time, included specific requirements addressing the unique needs of students in foster care. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration and joint decision making between educational agencies and child welfare agencies. It also requires educational stability for students in foster care by keeping students enrolled in their schools of origin, unless it is determined to be in their best interest to change schools (U.S. Department of Education and U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

> Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, students in foster care must remain in their school of origin unless it is determined not to be in their best interest.

In California, the Continuum of Care Reform Act (2015) further requires child welfare agencies to consider educational stability when making placement decisions (California Department of Social Services, 2015). In 2021, the California Department of Education and the California Department of Social Services issued joint guidance to help local educational agencies, child welfare agencies, and probation departments conduct best-interest determinations, where the educational rights holder determines whether it is in the youth's best interest to remain in their school of origin (California Department of Education, 2021).

Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a school of origin is the public school a student is enrolled in (a) when they enter foster care or (b) when they change foster care placements.

Under the California Education Code, a school of origin is (a) the school a student attended when they first entered foster care, (b) the school a student most recently attended, or (c) any school a student attended in the last 15 months that they feel connected to.

In this report, we analyze student-level longitudinal data from the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) covering the 2017–18 through 2023–24 school years to examine school mobility patterns among students in foster care. We focus on within-year school mobility, because it tends to be more disruptive to student learning and well-being (Grigg, 2012; Pears et al., 2015). California's large and diverse student population enables us to examine the variations by student characteristics and document the trends over time.

DEFINING FOSTER CARE

Foster care definitions vary at the state and federal levels. In this report, we use California's Local Control Funding Formula definition, which includes out-of-home placements (either supervised by child welfare or probation), court-ordered family maintenance, voluntary placements, tribal foster care, and nonminor dependents. It does not include in-home probation, emergency removals, voluntary family maintenance, legal guardianship, the Kin-Guardian Assistance Program, or the adoptions assistance program (California Education Code 42238.01(b)).

DEFINING STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE

In this report, students in foster care include those in care at any point in a school year. For example, they may be in foster care continuously throughout the year or just for a few days.

This report is structured as follows: It begins with descriptive statistics on school mobility among students in foster care, addressing key questions such as the prevalence and frequency of within-year school changes. It then explores the changes over time, including the trends before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It then uses regressions to examine the relationships among individual, school, and community-level factors and school mobility.

School Mobility for Students in Foster Care

In this section, we analyze CALPADS data from the 2017–18 through 2023–24 school years to explore mobility patterns among students in foster care. We defined foster care as students who had ever been in foster care during a school year. Our sample includes 133,127 students, with the number decreasing from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,099 in 2023–24.[1] Below we briefly describe how we calculated school mobility, and more details are included in Appendix A.

DEFINING SCHOOL MOBILITY

We calculated school mobility by counting the number of schools (identified by their unique statewide school ID) in which a student had a primary enrollment record during a school year. Certain situations, such as dropping out, out-of-school suspensions, short-term enrollments, summer moves, or concurrent enrollment, were not considered to be midyear school changes. For more details about our methodology, please refer to Appendix A.

A descriptive summary of student characteristics is included in Appendix B, Exhibit B–1. Compared to the overall K–12 population, students in foster care were disproportionately Black (18% vs. 5%) and more likely to have disabilities (32% vs. 14%). All students in foster care are categorically eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals, and fewer are multilingual learners. Close to 10% of students in foster care had experienced homelessness during the school year. Because we did not have information on when students entered foster care or experienced homelessness, the overlap could have been caused by students experiencing homelessness before entering foster care or after exiting.[2] Although 93% of these students attended traditional public schools, students in foster care were disproportionately enrolled (ever in a school year) in alternative education settings, which include juvenile court schools (5%),

[1] This decline (22%) is steeper than enrollment declines among the general student population (8%). This could be attributed to the collective efforts to keep families together and prevent students from entering foster care.
[2] When students are in foster care, they may also experience homelessness when their caregivers lose their employment and are evicted from their homes.

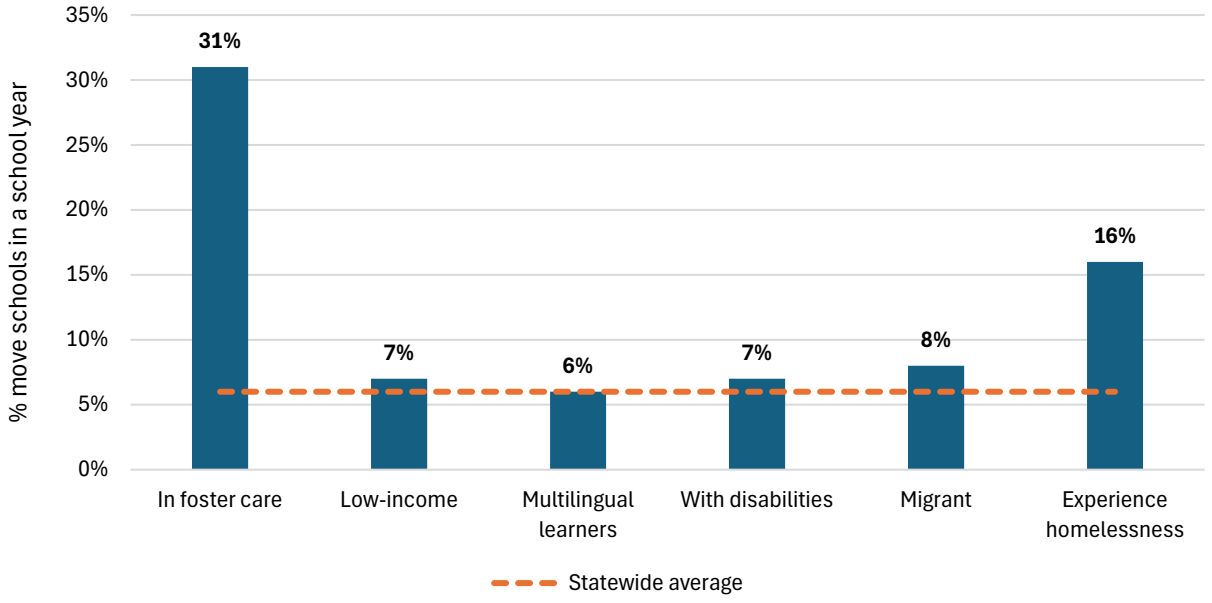
continuation schools (4%), and county community schools (2%). Juvenile court schools and county community schools serve students who are involved in the justice system (e.g., dually involved youth), whereas others may offer more flexibility and pathways to high school completion than traditional schools.

In spring 2025, we conducted site visits and interviews at seven counties across the state (Calaveras, Los Angeles, Kern, San Diego, Santa Clara, Shasta, and Tulare) to understand how education and child welfare agencies collaborate to improve educational stability and outcomes for students in foster care. These counties are selected based on the number of students in foster care, student outcomes (such as test scores), and geographic location. We conducted more than 100 interviews with educators, child welfare staff, care givers, former students in foster care, and members from community-based organizations, and these insights helped us contextualize the school mobility findings. Our future report will examine these data to spotlight promising local programs.

Students in Foster Care Were More Likely to Change Schools During a School Year Than Other Groups

Thirty-one percent of students in foster care changed schools during the school year, a rate significantly higher than other student groups, such as low-income students (7%), multilingual learners (6%), students with disabilities (7%), migrant students (8%), and students experiencing homelessness (16%). Over a 3-year period, 52% of students in foster care had changed schools midyear (Appendix B, Exhibit B–3).

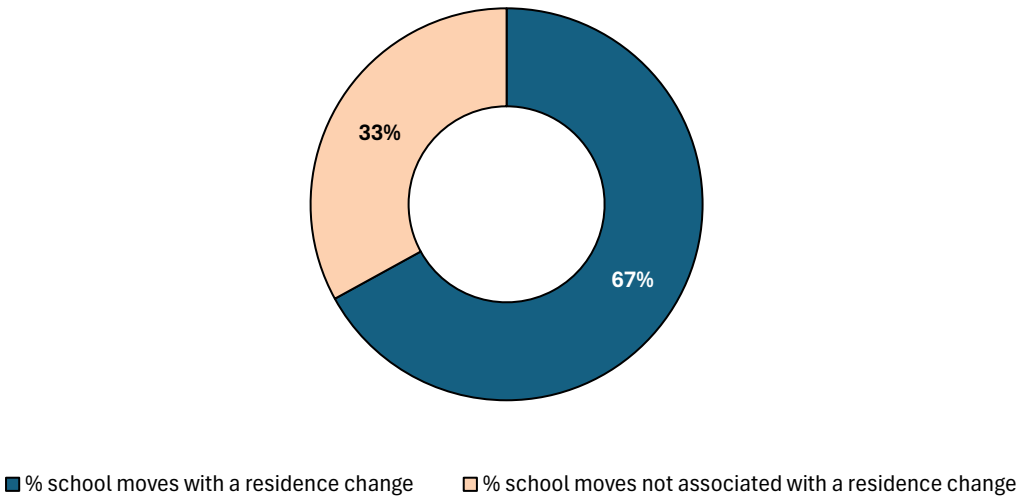
Figure 1. Percentage of Students Changing Schools During the School Year, by Student Group



Note. Sample included 43,223,355 students enrolled in California public schools from the 2017–18 through 2023–24 school years. All student groups were based on annual indicators, e.g., in foster care, low-income, multilingual learners, with disabilities, migrant, or experiencing homelessness at any point in the school year.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Students in foster care may change schools for many reasons, including academic needs, behavioral issues, and mental health needs. However, research from other states shows a strong link to placement changes; in one Mountain state, 31% of initial home removals resulted in a school move, and more than 40% of subsequent placement changes had led to a school move (Clemens et al., 2017). We do not have placement information; therefore, we examine the relationship between changes in where students live (as indicated by ZIP code) and changes in schools within the same school year. The results are summarized in Figure 2. Two-thirds of school moves were associated with a change in student residence in the same year. We do not have information on the timing of the residence moves; hence, we cannot determine whether the school move occurred before or after the residence move. However, the prevalence of this pattern indicates a significant connection between school mobility and residential mobility.

Figure 2. Percentage of School Moves With or Without a Residence Change in the Same Year

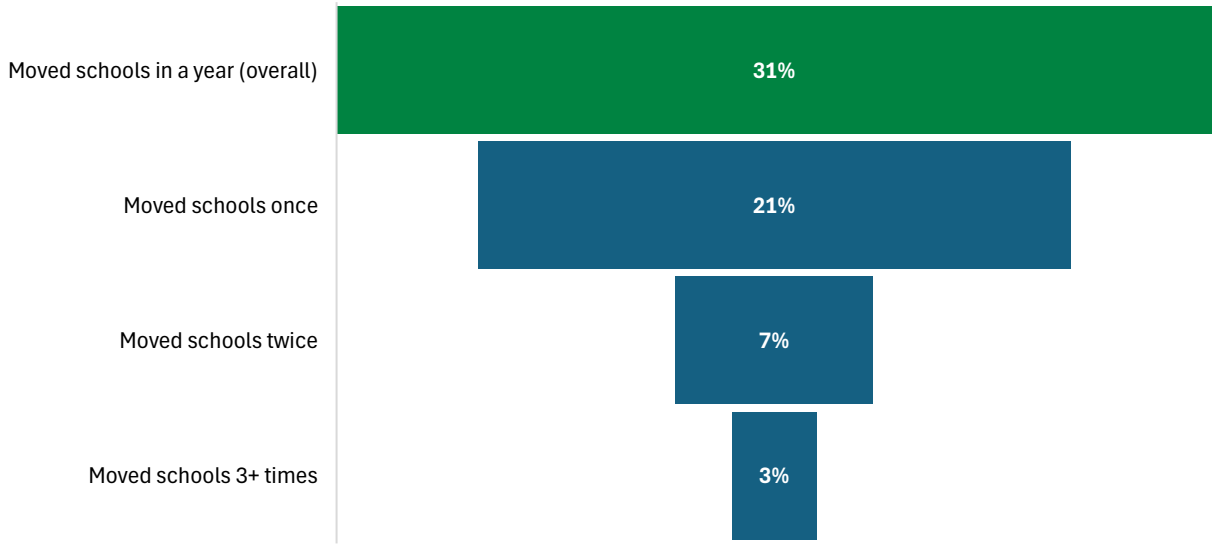


Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point in each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details. Because we did not have data on the specific timing of residence changes, we could not confirm all school moves happened after a placement change. Consequently, some school moves may have preceded placement changes, which could lead to an overestimation of the impact of placement changes on school mobility.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

In California, 27% of students in foster care changed residences at least once and 6% moved multiple times within a year (Appendix B, Exhibit B–2).[3] This suggests that students in foster care may change schools multiple times in a year. To examine this, we calculated the number of school moves within a year; the results are summarized in Figure 3. Ten percent of students in foster care changed schools more than once. Because the adverse effects of school mobility are cumulative (Clemens et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2009), frequent school moves raise concerns about the educational experiences of these students.

Residential mobility could be attributed to placement stability, which is a challenge for most child protection agencies. Nationwide, 35% of children in foster care had had more than two placements (Kids Count Data Center, 2021). In California, about 12% of children in foster care for less than 12 months had had three or more placements, and nearly 60% of those in care for longer than 24 months had had three or more placements (Children's Bureau, 2023).

Figure 3. Percentage of Students in Foster Care Changing Schools Within Year, by Number of School Changes



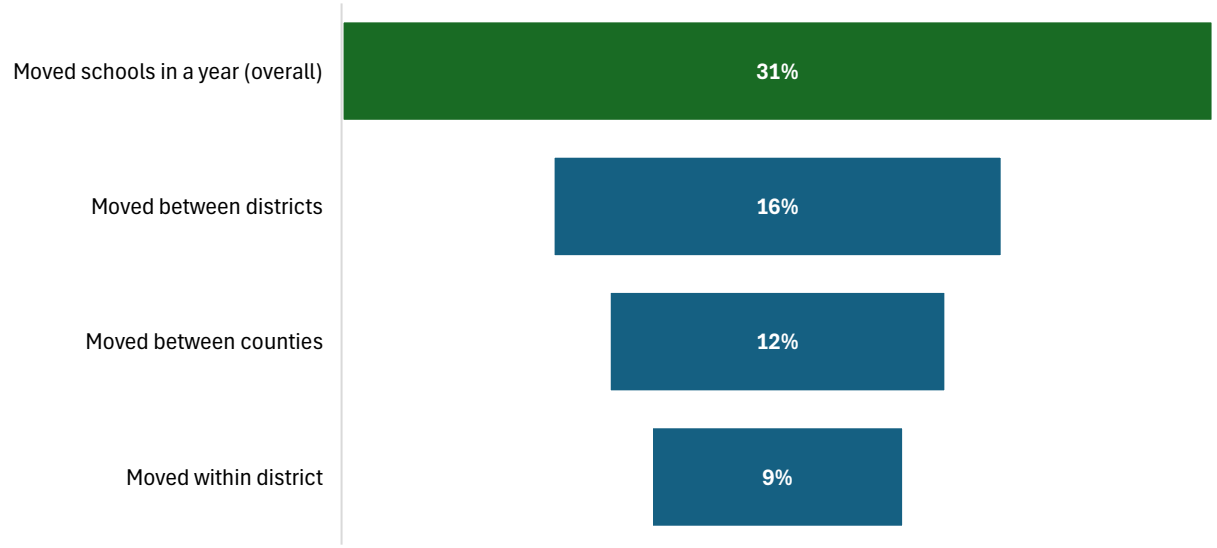
Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point in each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

[3] Some residential changes are not captured by CALPADS, so this may undercount residential mobility.

More Students in Foster Care Moved to A Different District or County Than Remained in the Same District

Where are students in foster care moving to? Figure 4 shows that more students in foster care moved to different districts (16%) or counties (12%) than remained in the same district (9%). This pattern was the same regardless of the number of moves in a school year (Appendix B, Exhibit B–4). In our interviews with seven counties, we learned that there was a shortage of placement options in many counties (Hurd, 2023; Kelly et al., 2017; Simon, 2023). As a result, it is a challenge to find a foster care placement in the local area and/or to arrange transportation, which makes it challenging to remain in the same school. In addition, the Continuum of Care Reform limits the use of congregate care, and most group homes have transitioned into short-term residential therapeutic programs (STRTPs; California Department of Social Services, 2015). In counties without STRTPs, students in need of specialized and intensive care are often placed in STRTPs in other counties.

Figure 4. Percentage of Students in Foster Care Moving Within Districts, Across Districts, and Across Counties



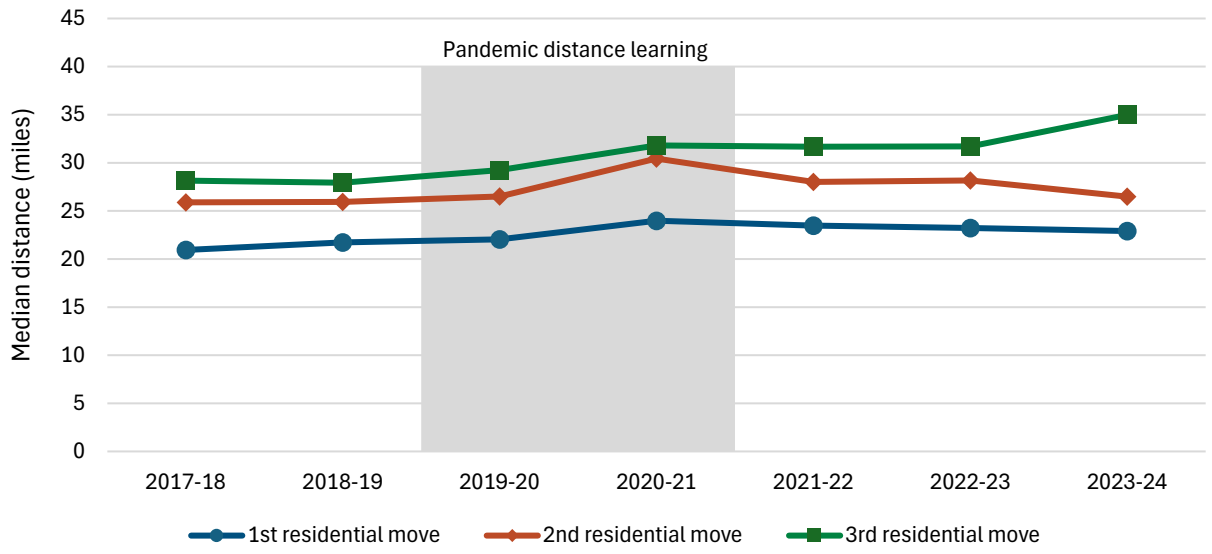
Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point during each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Students in foster care are entitled to remain in their schools of origin. During our interviews, we learned that travel distance and time play a key role in best-interest determinations. In Figure 5, we measured the distance between students' current and previous residential ZIP codes in a year; additional details about the calculations are described in Appendix A.

On average, students relocated 22 miles away in their first residential move, 27 miles in their second move, and 30 miles in their third move.

Depending on time of day and traffic and road conditions, a 22-mile commute could take from 30 minutes to more than an hour. In remote areas without a robust public transportation infrastructure, it may be cost prohibitive to arrange transportation for 22 miles. Notably, the median distance has risen over time, particularly for third moves, which reached a record 35 miles in 2023–24. These substantial distances contribute to challenges to students' remaining in their schools of origin and partially account for the increase in students transferring across districts or counties rather than staying within the same district.

Figure 5. Average Travel Distance Between Student Residences, 2017–18 Through 2023–24



Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point in each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details. We calculated the travel distance between a student's current and previous residential ZIP codes after each move. More than 99% of students in foster care had changed residential addresses three or fewer times in a year. Black, White, high school students, and students with disabilities tended to move farther away (Appendix B, Exhibit B–3).
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 to 2023–24.

Most School Moves Did Not Involve Changes in School Type

Only 31% of midyear school moves involved changes in school type, such as transitioning from a traditional public school to an alternative educational setting like a continuation school or a county community school. Subsequent moves, such as the second and third school changes within the same year, saw slightly higher rates of change in school type—29% and 44%, respectively (Appendix B, Exhibit B–6).

DEFINING CHANGES IN SCHOOL TYPES

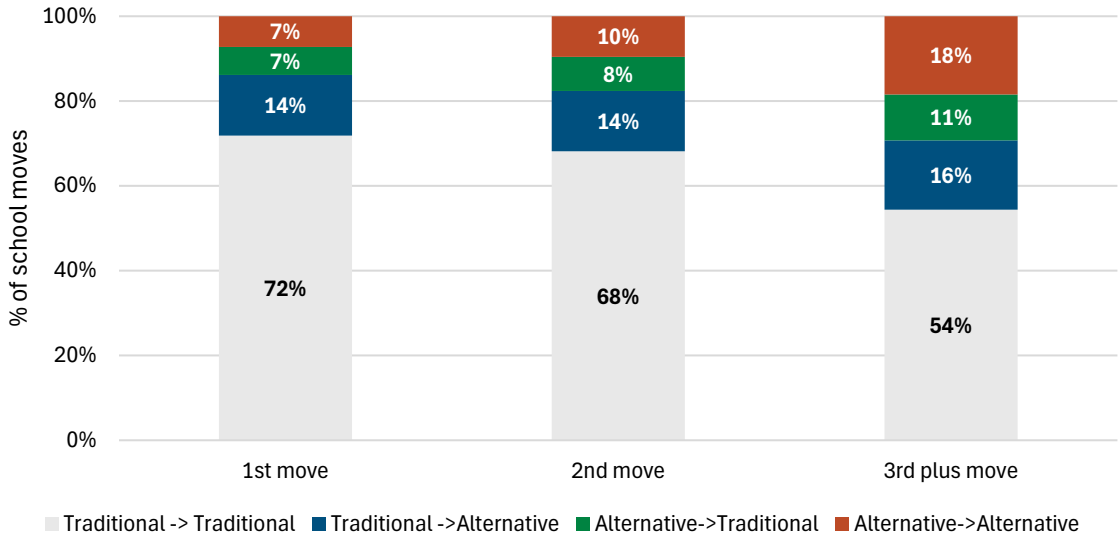
There are more than 10 types of schools in CALPADS, meaning that there are more than 100 possible mobility patterns in each move. For simplicity, we group all nontraditional schools together and categorize school moves as follows:

- Moving from a traditional public school to a traditional public school (traditional to traditional)
- Moving from a traditional public school to an alternative education setting (traditional to alternative)
- Moving from an alternative education setting to a traditional public school (alternative to traditional)
- Moving from an alternative education setting to an alternative education setting (alternative to alternative)

Figure 6 presents the frequency of each type of move. Students tended to move between alternative education settings more frequently in subsequent moves. During the first move, 72% of students remained in traditional public schools; however, this rate decreased to 54% by the third or subsequent move in the same year. Approximately 20% of students transitioned from one alternative education setting to another in their third or later move.

Alternative educational settings are designed to support students with unique academic, behavioral, or mental health needs. However, research indicates that these settings often yield no substantial improvement—and even declines—in academic outcomes, such as standardized test scores, attendance, or credit accumulation (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Wilkerson et al., 2016). Based on our analysis of CALPADS data, only 38% of students in foster care who enrolled in alternative education settings graduated from high school in 2018–19, whereas 60% of those in traditional schools graduated. Given that students in foster care are disproportionately represented in alternative education schools, concerns arise about the quality of education and instruction being provided in such environments.

Figure 6. Percentage of School Changes Involving Different Types of Schools

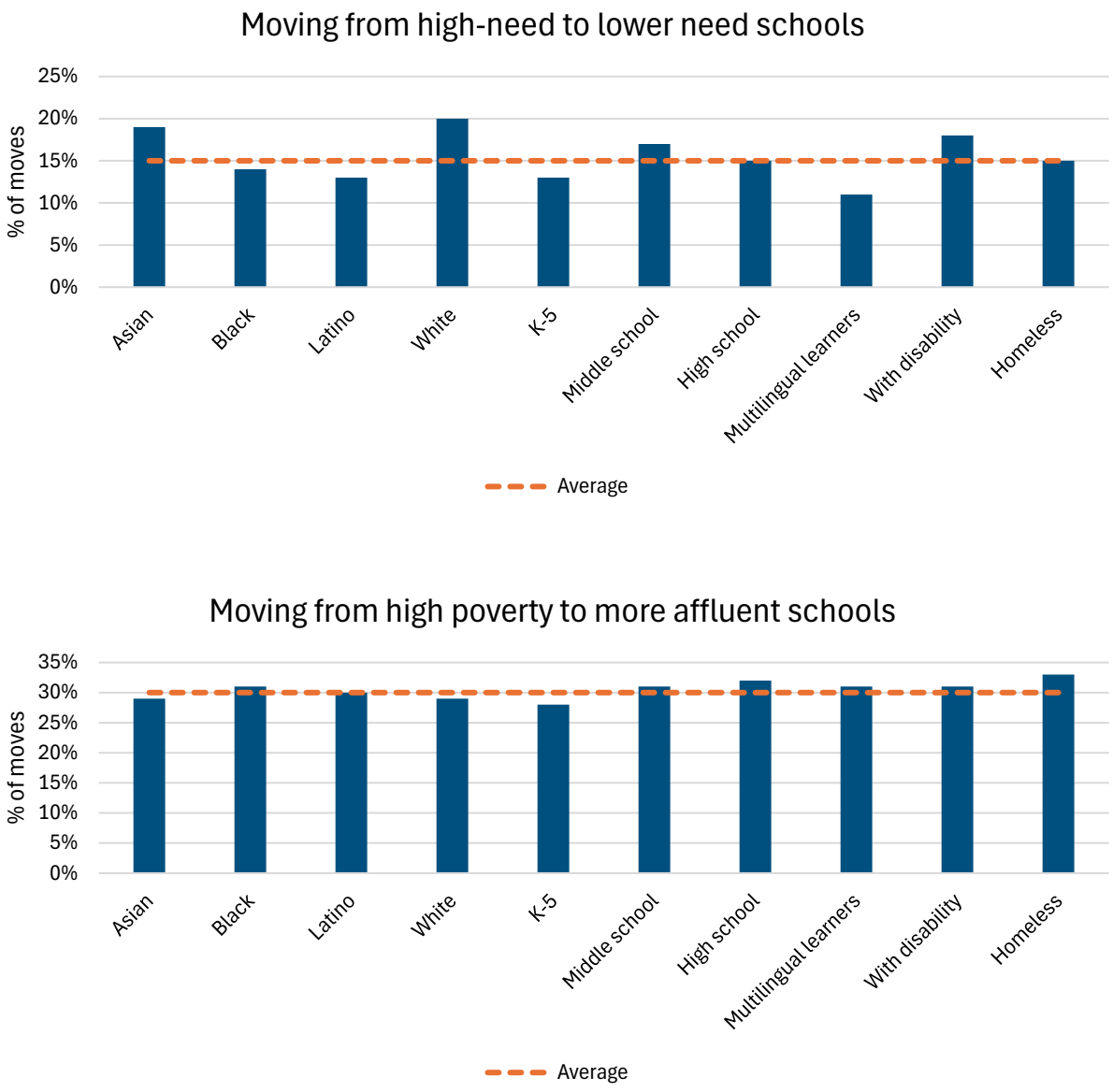


Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point within each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details. Alternative education options include juvenile court schools, continuation schools, county community schools, opportunity education, alternative schools/programs of choice, special education school, home and hospital instruction, youth authority school, and state special school.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Some School Changes May Provide More Resources for Students

Most students in foster care attended high-poverty schools in which at least 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Sometimes they moved to a better resourced school. For example, about 30% of school transfers were from a high-poverty school to a more affluent school. In addition, 15% moved from a high-need school (where at least 55% of student were low-income, multilingual learners or in foster care) to a lower need one (Figure 7). Because better resourced schools may provide more academic support, mental health counseling, and wraparound services, such moves can improve student learning and well-being (Irwin et al., 2024). Black, Latino, and multilingual learners are less likely to move from high-need schools to lower need ones. Our future study will test this hypothesis by examining the relationship between school mobility and student outcomes, such as attendance, test scores, and dropout rate.

Figure 7. Percentage of School Changes Leading to a Better Resourced School

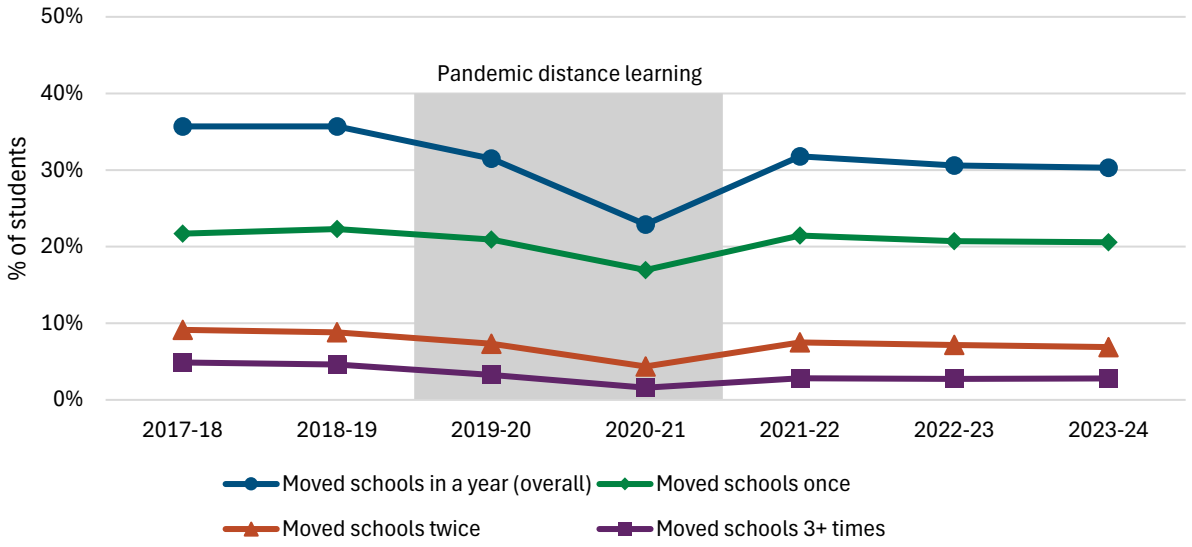


Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point during each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details. High-need schools: at least 55% of students were low-income, multilingual learners, or in foster care. High-poverty schools: at least 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Trends in School Mobility Over Time

School mobility declined over time, primarily because fewer students were moving multiple times in a year (Figure 8). Average mobility was stable at 36% before the pandemic, then dropped significantly during the pandemic. Most public schools in California were in distance learning from spring 2020 to spring 2021 (Herrera et al., 2022), and the shift to online learning made it easier for students in foster care to remain in their schools virtually despite residence moves. Following the reopening of schools in spring 2021, mobility rates partially rebounded but stayed below prepandemic figures, with the downward trend continuing in recent years. The reduction is mainly attributed to a decline in students who moved more than once; for example, 14% of students changed schools more than once in 2017–18 compared to 10% in 2023–24.

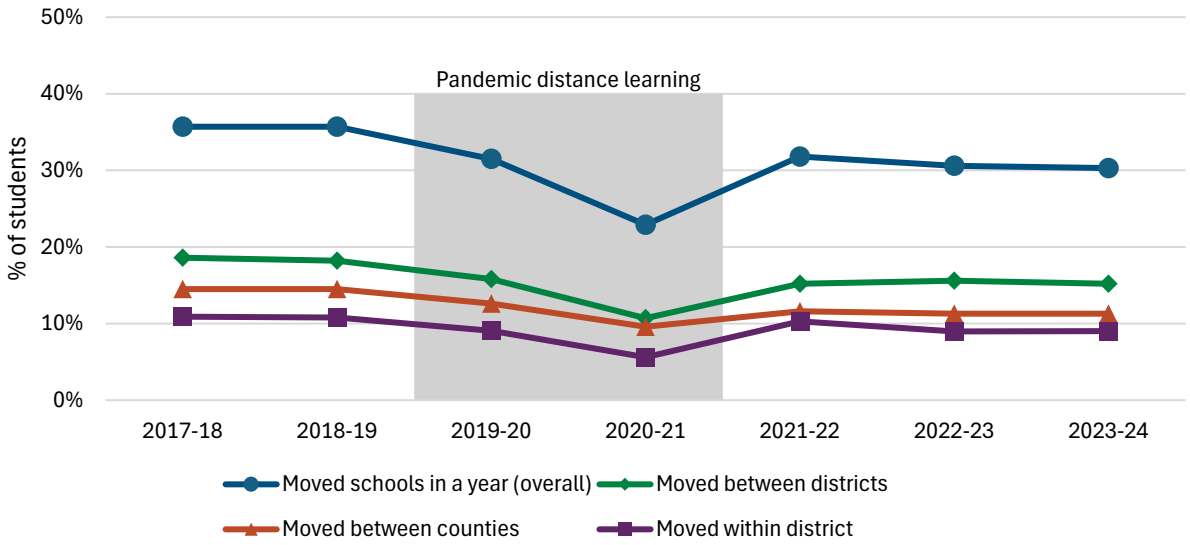
Figure 8. Percentage of Students in Foster Care Changing Schools Midyear, by Frequency, 2017–18 Through 2023–24



Note. Sample include students who were in foster care at any point in each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Figure 9 shows the trend for within-district, between-district, and between-county moves. Over time, all three types of moves have been declining, and the decrease is more pronounced for between-district and between-county moves.

Figure 9. Percentage of Students in Foster Care Changing Schools Midyear, by Mobility Patterns, 2017–18 Through 2023–24



Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point during each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Students who move multiple times may move within districts, between districts, and/or between counties within the same year. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

What might explain the decrease in school mobility over time? We interviewed staff members from education, child welfare, and community-based organizations in seven counties—Calaveras, Kern, Los Angeles, Shasta, San Diego, Santa Clara, and Tulare—and the interviews highlighted several contributing factors.

First, recognizing that children thrive in a safe, stable, and permanent family environment, major policies in recent decades have prioritized keeping families together. In 1997, California established the Wraparound Services program to return children in group homes to their homes and communities, and in 2010, the program became an optional statewide program (California Department of Social Services [CDSS], 2010). Later efforts, such as Differential Response and Structured Decision Making, aim to provide early services and programs to prevent the increase in severity of problems (California Department of Social Services, 2008). In 2018, the federal Family First Prevention Services Act provided additional investments through Title IV-E Prevention Program to focus on early interventions and preventing children from entering foster care. In 2023, California enacted Assembly Bill 2085 to address the overreporting of "general neglect," which disproportionately affects low-income families and families of color. In the same year, the California Child Welfare Council Prevention and Early Intervention Committee issued recommendations to shift toward statewide implementation of

Community Pathways that connect families with existing services and supports (California Child Welfare Council, 2023).

Second, there is an increasing understanding of the importance of educational stability for students in foster care. For example, the Continuum of Care Reform (2015) requires child welfare agencies to consider educational stability in placement decisions. In our interviews, we learned that most county offices of education have also expanded efforts to inform caregivers, biological parents, and/or educational rights holders about schools of origin.

Last, placement stability is improving over time, with the number of placement changes decreasing from 3.9 per 1,000 days in 2015 to 3.6 in 2024 (California Child Welfare Indicators Project [CCWIP], 2025). The Continuum of Care (2015) reforms placement options to stabilize children and youth in family homes, and a series of efforts since then, such as establishing the Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children to provide affordable child care and the Family Urgent Response System to provide trauma-informed support, have helped caregivers maintain stable family homes for children in care (Children Now, 2022).

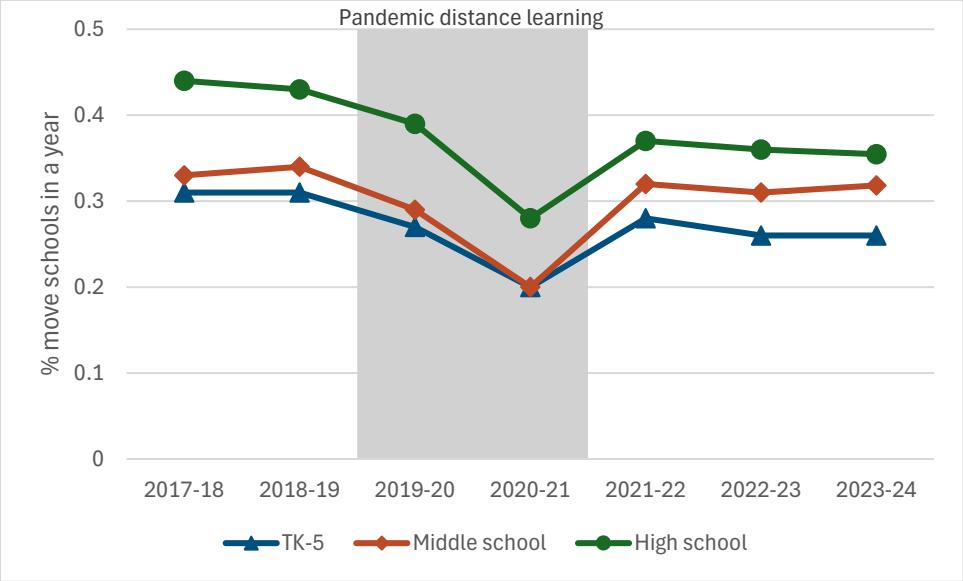
School Mobility Varied Among Students in Foster Care

This section examines variations in school mobility by student characteristics such as age/grade level, race/ethnicity, and educational needs. The analysis indicates that Black students in foster care, high school students, students with disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness have higher rates of school mobility. Female students in foster care have slightly lower mobility rates, whereas multilingual learners in care experience mobility rates comparable to their nonmultilingual peers.

Older Students Switch Schools More Often

School mobility is closely related to age (Figure 10). Close to 40% of high school students changed schools in a year, compared to 30% among middle school students and 27% of students in K–5. The disparities could be attributed to the placement challenges experienced by older children (Kemp & Bodonyi, 2000; Oosterman et al., 2007). For instance, children aged 16–17 moved placements 4.4 times per 1,000 days, whereas those aged 6–10 moved 3.9 times (CCWIP, 2025). Younger children are also more likely to leave foster care, with more than 40% of 6- to 10-year-olds achieving permanency in a year, as opposed to fewer than 20% of 16- to 17-year-olds (CCWIP, 2025). All grade levels experienced a significant decrease in mobility during the pandemic, followed by an initial rebound after schools reopened. In the most recent years, mobility rates have continued to decline across age groups, except among middle school students, whose mobility has remained relatively stable.

Figure 10. School Mobility, by Grade Level, 2017–18 Through 2023–24

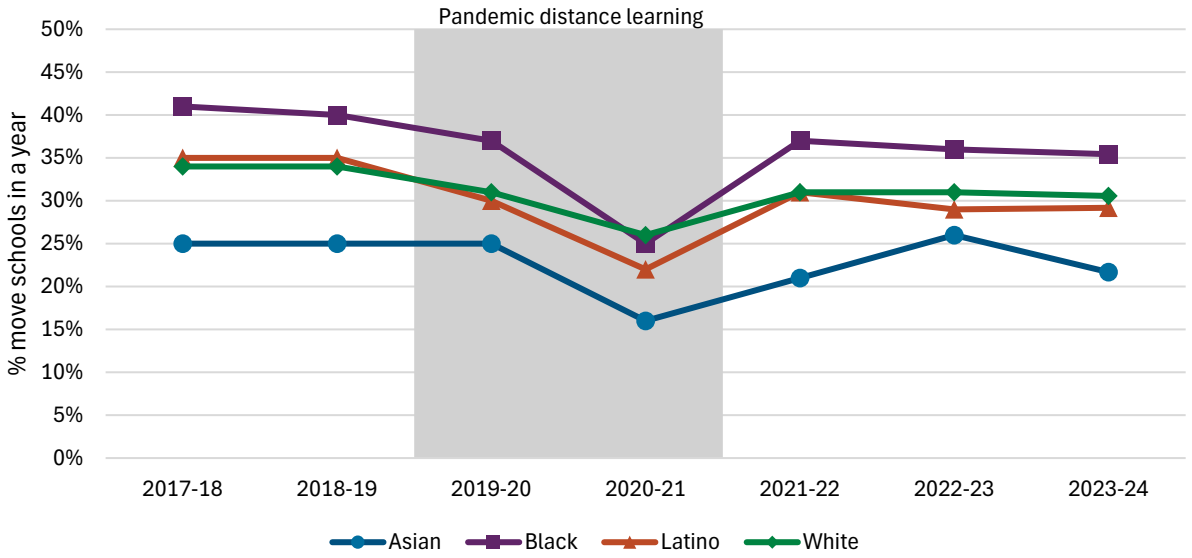


Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point in each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 to 2023–24.

Black Students Were More Likely to Change Schools

Among all major racial and ethnic groups, Black students experienced the highest rate of school mobility (Figure 11). Thirty-six percent of Black students in foster care changed schools within the year—much higher than White (31%), Latino (30%), and Asian students in foster care (23%). All groups experienced a notable drop in mobility during the pandemic (2019–20 and 2020–21). After an initial increase in this rate after the pandemic, mobility rates have continued to decrease in recent years. The disparity between Black and White students has narrowed from 7 percentage points in 2017–18 to 4 percentage points in 2023–24.

Figure 11. School Mobility, by Race/Ethnicity, 2017–18 Through 2023–24

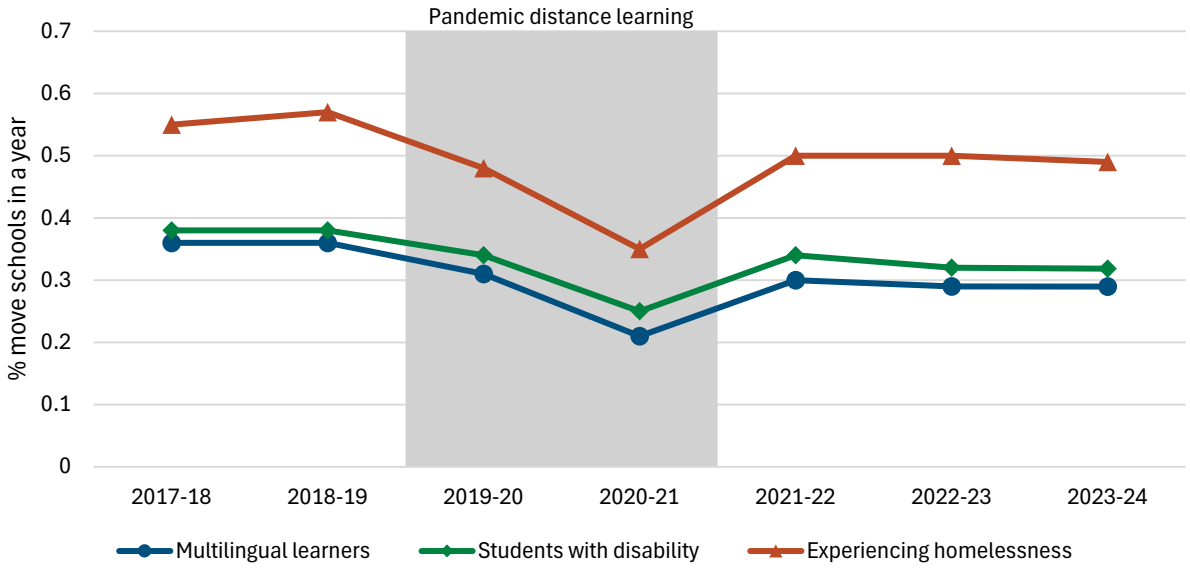


Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point in each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Students Experiencing Homelessness Had the Highest Mobility Rate

Students in foster care who were also identified as multilingual learners had mobility rates similar to their nonmultilingual peers. Most differences stemmed from disability and homelessness status (Figure 12). Before the pandemic, nearly 60% of students in foster care who had experienced homelessness at some point (including prior to entry into foster care) changed schools within a year, while close to 40% of students with disabilities did the same. Although mobility has decreased over time, about half of students in foster care experiencing homelessness changed schools in the most recent school year (2023–24), as did nearly a third of youth with disabilities. These statistics illustrate the complex needs of students in foster care, and how multiple forms of disadvantage can push students further away from opportunities.

Figure 12. School Mobility, by Educational Needs, 2017–18 Through 2023–24



Note. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point in each school year. This ranged from 49,983 in 2017–18 to 39,088 in 2023–24. Please refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 to 2023–24.

Factors Associated With School Mobility

In this section, we modeled the relationships between individual characteristics (such as demographics, educational needs, residential changes), school environments (such as school demographics), and community factors (such as poverty and crime rates) and school mobility using a probit regression. We used whether a student changed schools midyear as the dependent variable. Additional details about the model specification and full results are in Appendix C, Exhibit C–1.

Figure 13 presents an overview of individual, school, and community factors linked to higher school mobility. One primary driver was a change in student residences, which often signals a placement transition; such moves increased the probability of switching schools by 45%. Because students typically relocated by more than 20 miles (Figure 5), it can be difficult for students to remain in the same school. Our finding echoes an earlier study highlighting the positive correlation between placement instability and school mobility (Clemens et al., 2017). Additional individual factors included race (Black), age/grade level, disability status, migrant background, and housing status, which were associated with an increase in the likelihood of school mobility.

Enrollment in an alternative education setting as the primary school (defined as the school where the student is enrolled the longest) was associated with a 13% increase in school mobility. Some alternative education settings such as juvenile court schools and county community schools serve youth who are involved in the justice system. A recent study from Los Angeles County shows the crossover of youth involved in both the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system (i.e., dually involved youth): Half of the youth in the juvenile system had past or concurrent engagement with child welfare or would become engaged with child welfare after a first contact with juvenile justice (Herz et al., 2021). These schools are typically located in juvenile halls, ranches, or secure youth treatment facilities; students released from juvenile facilities are required to continue attending school, most often at a district- or county-run school (California Department of Education, 2025). Other alternative education settings, such as continuation schools, may provide more flexibility to meet the academic, behavioral, and mental health needs of students in foster care.

At the community level, higher crime rates, which make neighborhoods less safe for students and families, are associated with greater mobility; specifically, for every 1,000 additional city crimes (violent and nonviolent), the probability of school mobility increases by 0.01%. School mobility is also higher in rural districts. Interviews with counties indicate two contributing factors: first, rural areas have a more severe shortage of placement options, so students are more likely to be placed farther away. Second, it is more challenging and cost prohibitive to arrange transportation in rural areas, even if the distance is not very far.

Figure 14 highlights factors associated with lower school mobility. Asian students and female students were less likely to change schools, consistent with descriptive results. Urban districts, which typically have more placement and transportation options, were linked to lower school mobility. Schools with a higher proportion of students with disabilities and those serving more highly mobile populations (e.g., students in foster care, students experiencing homeless, migrant students) tended to experience lower mobility, likely suggesting that these schools have a better capacity to meet the needs of these students. For example, our fieldwork in select counties revealed that these schools were more likely to have transportation options for students in foster care. We also learned that students in foster care with disabilities often transferred to better meet their Individualized Education Program needs. Therefore, schools with a greater number of students with disabilities may be better equipped to deliver special education programs and services.

Housing affordability is also linked to school mobility. From our interviews, we learned that cost of living—in particular, housing—often limits the number of placement homes. It also increases the likelihood of school mobility because families may relocate to more affordable areas.

We used the number of foster care facilities to measure county child welfare infrastructure and capacity. We also included the percentage of facilities that were STRTPs /group homes, because

students may be placed out of county if their county of jurisdiction does not have STRTPs/group homes. These measures were associated with lower mobility because they indicated more local placement options.

Figure 13. Marginal Effects of Factors Associated With Higher School Mobility

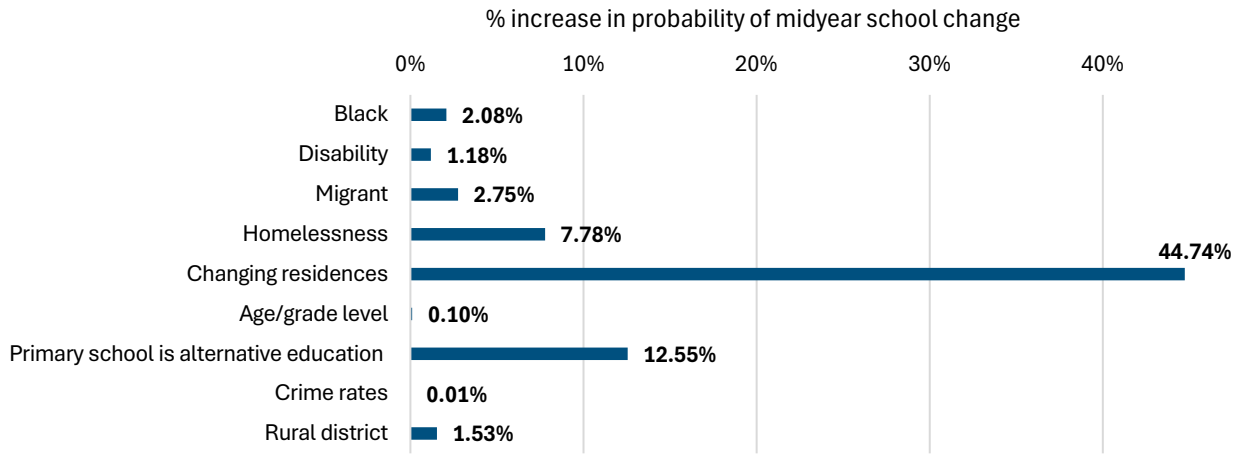
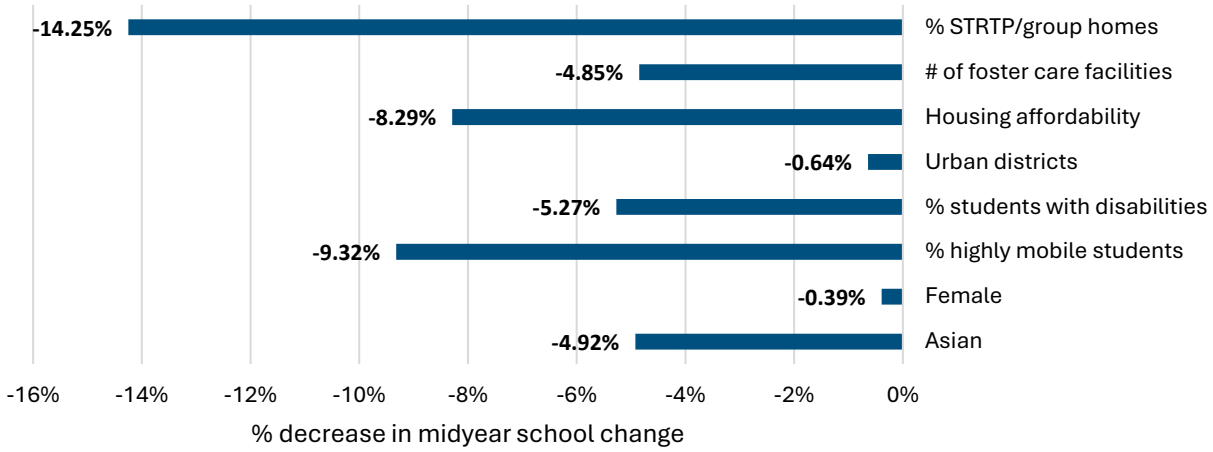


Figure 14. Marginal Effects of Factors Associated With Lower School Mobility



Note. Marginal effects are shown. Sample included students who were in foster care at any point in each school year, from 49,983 in 2017–18 through 39,088 in 2023–24. Refer to Appendix B, Exhibit B–1 for more details. We ran a probit regression using whether a student changed schools within a school year (0 or 1) as the dependent variable. Independent variables included student characteristics (e.g., demographics, educational needs, residential changes), school characteristics (e.g., demographics, school type) based on the school attended the longest period in a year, community characteristics (e.g., district size, geographic location, district poverty, crime rates in the city/area, housing affordability, number of STRTPs/group homes), and time fixed effects. Standard errors are in brackets and clustered at the school level (i.e., the school attended for the longest period in the year). All estimates are significant at least at the 10% level.

Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data (2017–18 through 2023–24), NCES School Geocodes (2023–24), Census Small Area Poverty Estimates (2017–18 through 2023–24), California Department of Justice Crime Data

(2017–18 through 2023–24), National Association of Realtor Housing Affordability Index (2017–18 through 2023–24), and California Department of Social Services Foster Care Facility data (2017–18 through 2023–24).

Conclusions

In this report, we used longitudinal data from CALPADS to examine school mobility for students in foster care from 2017–18 through 2023–24. Students in foster care were five times more likely to experience school mobility compared to the statewide average. One in 10 of these students changed schools more than once, compounding the disruptions associated with school mobility. Most students were transferring to a different district or county rather than remaining in the same district, which is correlated with residence changes: Median travel distance was more 20 miles between residential moves. Although most students in foster care attended traditional public schools, they were more likely to change to alternative education settings, particularly those who moved frequently.

School mobility varied across student groups. Black students in foster care, older youth, students with disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness had much higher mobility rates. Over time, school mobility has decreased, mostly driven by the decrease in students who had moved three or more times. However, median travel distance is on the rise, meaning that students are placed farther away and may be less likely to remain in their schools of origin.

This study highlights the urgent need to improve educational stability for students in foster care—reducing the number of school changes to those that are in a child's best interest and creating the most seamless transitions possible when a change of school is necessary. Persistent disparities by student race/ethnicity, age, disability, and housing status further underscore the importance of targeted investment to address the complex challenges these children face. This report is the first in a three-part series examining school mobility for students in foster care. Our future work will explore how local agencies implement best-interest determinations and highlight promising practices at the local level.

References

Administration for Children and Families. (2023). *The AFCARS dashboard.* Children in foster care on September 30, FFY [table]. https://tableau-public.acf.gov/views/afcars_dashboard_main_page/mainpage?%3Aembed=y&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y

Barrat, V. X., Diercks, C., Berliner, B., Derby, K., Chen Gaddini, M., & Pivnick, L. (2025). *Revisiting California's invisible achievement gap: Trends in education outcomes of students in foster care in the context of the local control funding formula.* WestEd.

Burns, D., Espinoza, D., Adams, J., & Ondrasek N. (2022). *California's students in foster care: Challenges and promising practices.* Learning Policy Institute.

California Child Welfare Council. (2023). *Community pathway recommendations.* https://www.chhs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PEI_Comunity-Pathway-Recommendations.pdf

California Child Welfare Indicators Project. (2025). *4-P5 placement stability.* https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/P5/MTSG/cws/cwsCw/l

California Department of Education. (2021). *Educational stability and best interest determination*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/fy/documents/bidjointletter.pdf

California Department of Education. (2024). *DataQuest*. https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/

California Department of Education. (2025). *Juvenile court schools.*

California Department of Social Services. (2015). *Continuum of care reform.* https://www.cdss.ca.gov/resource-families/continuum-of-care-reform

California Department of Social Services. (2010). *Wraparound services.* https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/cdss-programs/foster-care/wraparound/background-history

California Department of Social Services. (2008). *Differentiated response.* https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/child-welfare-protection/differential-response#:~:text=Differential%20Response%20(DR)%20is%20a,of%20child%20abuse%20or%20neglect

Children's Bureau. (2023). *Child welfare outcomes report data—Outcomes data: Placement stability.* https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/sixOneLessThan12/index/

Children Now. (2022). *Stability for children and youth in foster care.* https://www.childrennow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/4.-stability-2023-final.pdf

Clemens, E. V., Klopfenstein, K., Tis, M., & Lalonde, T. L. (2017). Educational stability policy and the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves. *Children and Youth Services Review, 83,* 209–217. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.10.031

Clemens, E. V., Lalonde, T. L., & Sheesley, A. P. (2018). The effects of school mobility on students in foster care: A longitudinal analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review, 87,* 86–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.015

Cutuli, J. J., Desjardins, C. D., Herbers, J. E., Long, J. D., Heistad, D., Chan, C. K., ... Masten, A. S. (2013). Academic achievement trajectories of homeless and highly mobile students: Resilience in the context of chronic and acute risk. *Child Development, 84(3),* 841–857.

Grigg, J. (2012). School enrollment changes and student achievement growth: A case study in educational disruption and continuity. *Sociology of Education, 85*(4), 388–404.

Gustavsson, N., & MacEachron, A. E. (2012). Educational policy and foster youth: The risks of change. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(12), 2266–2272.

Herrera, J., Starr, D., Prunty, E., & Gao, N. (2022). *Addressing inequities in reopening schools during COVID.* Public Policy Institute of California. https://www.ppic.org/blog/addressing-inequities-in-reopening-schools-during-covid/

Herz, D. C., Eastman, A. L., Putnam-Hornstein, E., & McCroskey, J. (2021). Dual system youth and their pathways in Los Angeles County: A replication of the OJJDP Dual System Youth Study. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 118,* Article 105160. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34175505/

Hurd, K. (2023, May 28). How California's big effort to help abused children left some nowhere to go. *Los Angeles Times.* https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-05-28/california-law-foster-children-shortage-group-homes

Irwin, V., Wang, K., Jung., J., Kessler, E. Tezil, T., Alhassani, S., Filbey, A., Dilig., R, & Bullock Mann, F. (2024). *Condition of education.* National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/use-work/resource-library/report/compendium/condition-education-2024

Kelly, J., Heimpel, D., Loudenback, J., Renick, C., Phagan-Hansel, K., Green, K., ... & Zarate, M. (2017). The foster care housing crisis. *Chronicle of Social Change.* https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/child-welfare-2/chronicle-report-least-25-states-lost-fostercare-capacity-since-2012/28575

Kemp, S., & Bodonyi, J. (2000). op. cit. Wulczyn, F., Hislop, K., & George, R. (2000). *Foster care dynamics 1983–1998: A report from the multistate foster care archive.* Chapin Hall Center for Children.

Kennedy, R. S., Potter, M. H., & Font, S. A. (2023). A meta-regression of racial disparities in wellbeing outcomes during and after foster care. *Trauma Violence Abuse, 24*(4), 2711–2725.

Kids Count Data Center. (2021). *Children in foster care with more than two placements in United States.* The Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/8822-children-in-foster-care-with-more-than-twoplacements#detailed/1/any/false/2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868/any/17680,17681

Lange, C. M., & Sletten, S. J. (2002). *Alternative education: A brief history and research synthesis.* ERIC. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED462809

Oosterman, M., Schuengel, C., Slot, N. W., Bullens, R. A. R., & Doreleijers, T. A. H. (2007). Disruptions in foster care: A review and meta-analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(1), 53–76. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2006.07.003

Pears, K. C., Kim, H. K., & Buchanan, R. (2015). Adverse consequences of school mobility for children in foster care: A prospective longitudinal study. *Child Development, 86*(4), 1210–1226. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12374

Reynolds, A. J., Chen, C. C., & Herbers, J. E. (2009). School mobility and educational success: A research synthesis and evidence on prevention. In R. E. Slavin (Ed.), *Educational interventions for disadvantaged students* (pp. 135–160). Routledge.

Simon, Scott. (Host). (2023, July 15). Weekend Edition Saturday. [Audio podcast]. NPR. *There is a nationwide shortage of foster care families.* https://www.npr.org/2023/07/15/1187929875/theres-a-nationwide-shortage-of-foster-care-families

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *Students in foster care*. https://www.ed.gov/teaching-and-administration/supporting-students/special-populations/students-foster-care/students-in-foster-care

U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2024). *Non-regulatory guidance: Ensuring educational stability and success for students in foster care.* https://www.ed.gov/media/document/non-regulatory-guidance-ensuring-educational-stability-and-success-students-foster-care-november-15-2024-108448.pdf

Welsh, R. O. (2017). School mobility and student outcomes: A research synthesis and implications for practice. *Review of Educational Research, 87*(1), 72–102.

Wilkerson, K., Afacan, K., Perzigian, A., Justin, W., & Lequia, J. (2016). Behavior-focused alternative schools: Impact on student outcomes. *Behavioral Disorders*, *41*(2), 81–94. https://doi.org/10.17988/0198-7429-41.2.81 (Original work published 2016)

Appendix A. Methodology

Calculating School Mobility

We determine whether a student changed schools by counting how many schools (identified by their unique County-District-School codes) a student was primarily enrolled in during a school year. Certain situations, like dropping out, out-of-school suspension, short-term enrollments, summer moves, or dual enrollment, are not considered school changes. Here are some examples:

- Example 1: If a student was enrolled in School A in October but dropped out in March, it is not counted as changing schools. Drop-out rates are calculated separately.
- Example 2: If a student attended School A in September, switched to School B in December, and then returned to School A in May, this counts as two moves: first from School A to B, then from B back to A.
- Example 3: If a student briefly attended a juvenile court school (short-term enrollment) for 10 days while enrolled in School A as primary enrollment, this would not count as changing schools.
- Example 4: If a student attended School A during one school year, moved during the summer, and enrolled in School B the following school year, this summer move would not be counted as a school change during the school year.

Students who enrolled and left the same school within 5 days were excluded from the analysis because, in effect, they did not receive services from the school. This applied to about 175 students in foster care (73 with the same enrollment start and end dates and 102 with an enrollment period of between 1 and 4 days) over the entire period under study (less than 0.1% of students).

Our sample included students who had ever been in foster care in a school year. We dropped students with inconsistent birthdays and incomplete enrollment records, so the number of students in each year may be different from a publicly available data source such as DataQuest.

Our data did not capture school mobility involving private schools or out-of-state and out-of-country moves. We also do not have school of origin information.

We do not have the county of jurisdiction for students in foster care. A student enrolled in County A may be under the jurisdiction of County B.

Calculating Residence Change

We determined whether students had changed residence by comparing the ZIP codes associated with their residential addresses. We then computed the travel distance (in miles) between two ZIP codes using Google Maps API. Because students may have been placed out of county or out of state, we report the median values of travel distances for each move.

For students who changed residences multiple times in a year, we computed the travel distance between each move (i.e., between current and previous ZIP). For example, if a student moved from A to B and then to C, we calculated the distance between A and B and then between B and C.

We did not have information on when students had entered foster care; therefore, we could not determine their original home addresses.

If students moved to a different location within the same ZIP code, such residence moves were not captured by our data.

We did not have information on when residence moves had occurred; therefore, we could not determine whether a school change had occurred before or after the residence move (in the same year).

We did not have placement information, so we could not distinguish initial placement from subsequent placement changes.

Appendix B. Additional Tables and Figures

Appendix B–1. Summary Statistics of Student Characteristics, 2017–18 Through 2023–24

Demographic categories	All students, all years	In foster care, all years	No. of students in foster care, by school year						
			2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Demographics									
Asian	12%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Black	5%	18%	19%	19%	18%	18%	18%	18%	17%
Latino	55%	56%	55%	56%	56%	57%	57%	57%	57%
White	22%	18%	19%	18%	18%	18%	17%	17%	17%
Mixed race	4%	4%	3%	3%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%
Female	47%	49%	48%	49%	49%	49%	50%	50%	50%
Educational needs									
Special education	14%	32%	31%	31%	31%	32%	33%	34%	35%
Migrant	1.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%
Homeless	4%	9%	10%	11%	9%	7%	9%	10%	11%
Multilingual learners	20%	15%	16%	16%	15%	15%	16%	16%	15%
School mobility (% of students…)									
Changed schools during school year	6%	31%	36%	36%	32%	23%	32%	31%	30%
Changed schools 1 time	5%	21%	22%	22%	21%	17%	21%	21%	21%
Changed schools 2 times	1%	7%	9%	9%	7%	4%	8%	7%	7%
Changed schools 3-plus times	0%	3%	5%	5%	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%

Demographic categories	All students, all years	In foster care, all years	No. of students in foster care, by school year						
			2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Changed schools within the same district	3%	9%	11%	11%	9%	6%	10%	9%	9%
Moved to a different district (in the county)	2%	16%	19%	18%	16%	11%	15%	16%	15%
Moved to a different county	1%	12%	15%	15%	13%	10%	12%	11%	11%
No. of schools attended (within a year)	1.06	1.43	1.52	1.52	1.43	1.29	1.43	1.41	1.41
No. of school changes (within a year)	0.07	0.47	0.57	0.56	0.47	0.31	0.46	0.44	0.44
Enrolled (ever during the school year) in…									
Traditional public schools	97%	93%	92%	92%	93%	93%	94%	94%	94%
Juvenile court schools	0%	5%	6%	6%	6%	4%	4%	3%	3%
Continuation schools	1%	4%	5%	5%	5%	4%	4%	4%	4%
County community schools	0%	2%	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Opportunity education	0%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Alternative school/program of choice	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	4%	3%	3%
Special education school	0%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%
No. of students	43,223,355	133,127	49,983	46,515	45,087	43,479	42,965	41,723	39,088

Appendix B–2. Changes in Residential Addresses, 2017–18 Through 2023–24

Type of address change	All years	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
No. of residential ZIP codes [a]	1.35	1.4	1.41	1.35	1.28	1.33	1.33	1.34
Changed residential home	27%	30%	31%	28%	23%	26%	26%	27%
Changed home 1 time	21%	23%	23%	22%	18%	21%	20%	21%
Changed home 2 times	5%	6%	6%	5%	4%	4%	5%	5%
Changed home 3-plus times	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%

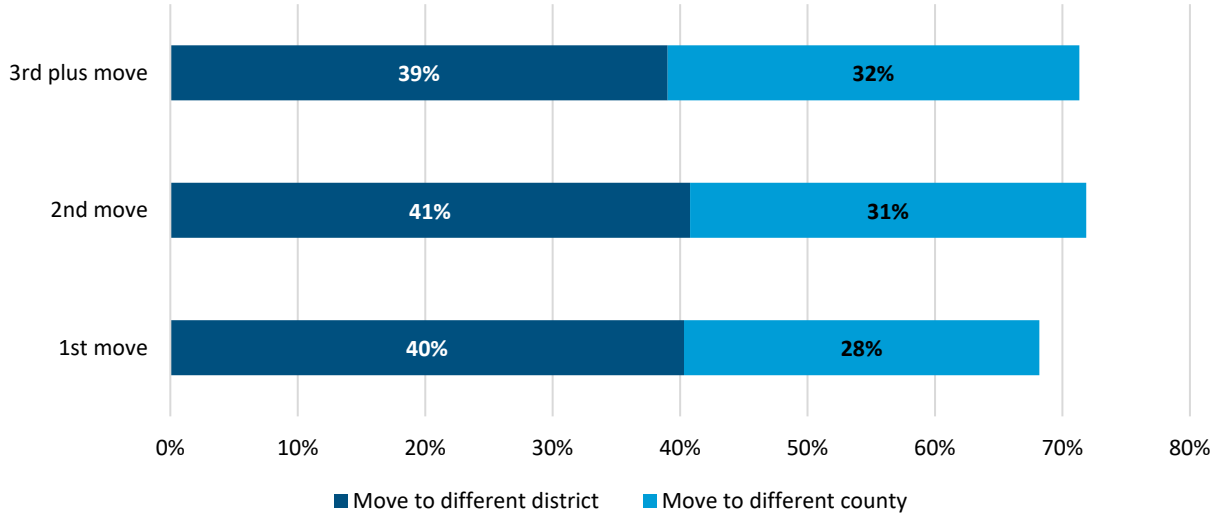
Note. Sample included 133,127 students who were in foster care in each year.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.
[a] The median is about 1 for all years.

Appendix B–3. Percentage of Students in Foster Care Who Changed Schools in a 3-Year Window

Demographic categories	All years	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
All students in foster care	52%	58%	57%	53%	48%	49%	51%	44%
Asian	39%	43%	43%	40%	35%	35%	43%	35%
Black	58%	64%	63%	59%	54%	55%	59%	51%
Latino	50%	58%	56%	51%	46%	47%	49%	43%
White	52%	56%	55%	53%	49%	49%	51%	46%
K-5	46%	53%	51%	48%	42%	43%	45%	38%
Middle school	52%	58%	56%	51%	47%	50%	53%	46%
High school	60%	67%	65%	61%	55%	55%	59%	52%
Multilingual learners	50%	59%	57%	52%	45%	47%	49%	42%
With disability	55%	63%	60%	57%	52%	52%	55%	47%
Experiencing homelessness	64%	71%	71%	63%	56%	62%	64%	58%
Female	50%	57%	55%	51%	46%	47%	50%	44%

Note. We identified students who had ever been in foster care for each year and examined whether they had changed schools in the previous, current, and next school years.

Appendix B–4. Percentage of Students in Foster Care Who Moved to Different Districts or Counties, by Number of Moves, 2017–18 Through 2023–24



Note. Sample included 133,127 students who were in foster care in each year.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Appendix B–5. Median Distance Between Residential ZIP Codes, by Student Group, 2017–18 Through 2023–24

Demographic categories	% who changed residential ZIP code midyear	Median distance (miles), 1st move	Median distance (miles), 2nd move	Median distance (miles), 3rd+ move
Asian	23%	18	24	19
Black	30%	25	30	34
Latino	26%	21	25	28
White	28%	25	30	34
K-5	25%	21	23	25
Middle school	31%	22	27	29
High school	31%	26	32	39
Multilingual learners	27%	21	24	30
Students with disability	28%	24	30	36
Students expr homelessness	45%	20	23	26

Appendix B–6. Changes in School Type Associated With School Changes, 2017–18 Through 2023–24

Demographic categories	All years	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
% change school types	31%	30%	30%	31%	33%	35%	32%	31%
during 1st move	22%	25%	19%	16%	21%	27%	21%	20%
during 2nd move	29%	36%	29%	25%	26%	31%	28%	26%
during 3 plus move	44%	51%	46%	46%	45%	43%	41%	39%

Note. Sample included 133,127 students who were in foster care in each year. The numbers do not add up to 100% because we did not display less common moves.
Source. Authors' calculations using CALPADS data, 2017–18 through 2023–24.

Appendix C. Regression methods

In this section, we formally model school mobility in a probit regression and estimate the following equation:

$$P(M_{it} = 1) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 I_{it} + \beta_2 S_{it} + \beta_3 D_{it} + d_t)$$

Where $M_{it} = 1$ indicates student i changed schools during school year t; I_{it} includes individual student characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, gender, age/grade, multilingual learner, migrant, homelessness, and disability status; S_{it} measures the characteristics of the school in which the student stays the longest during the school year, such as student demographics, school type, and student needs; D_{it} includes community characteristics such as district urbanicity, district enrollment size, % children living in poverty within the district, crime rates in the city, housing affordability index in the county, and number of foster care facilities in the county; d_t school year fixed effects and Φ the cumulative standard normal distribution function. Because child welfare is administered by 58 counties, in some specifications, we also include county fixed effects. Standard errors are in brackets and clustered at the school level (i.e., the school in which the student stays the longest in a year).

Most of the marginal effects are consistent across model specifications. Our preferred model is model (5) that includes county fixed effects, because California's child welfare system is county administered, and county fixed effects can be used to control for time-constant unobservable factors such as placement practices, social worker capacity (e.g., number of social workers, case load), agency leadership, relationships between education and child welfare agencies, foster care infrastructure, and county culture (e.g., whether the judges are pro-family). The single strongest predictor is whether a student changes residential addresses (measured by changes in residential ZIP codes). Changing residential address is associated with a 45% increase in midyear school changes. This is not surprising because our analysis shows that, on average, students relocate to a distance of more than 20 miles away, making it difficult to remain in the same school.

Appendix C–1. Marginal Effects of Student, School, and Community Factors on School Mobility

Demographic categories	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Student characteristics					
Asian	-0.0665***	-0.0460***	-0.0438***	-0.0427***	-0.0492***
	[0.0082]	[0.0068]	[0.0071]	[0.0077]	[0.0077]
Black	0.0441***	0.0281***	0.0321***	0.0280***	0.0208***
	[0.0039]	[0.0031]	[0.0031]	[0.0031]	[0.0032]
Latino	-0.0003	0.0049**	0.0100***	0.0069***	0.0010
	[0.0031]	[0.0023]	[0.0024]	[0.0026]	[0.0026]
Pacific Islander	0.0038	0.0138	0.0205	0.0143	0.0086
	[0.0166]	[0.0127]	[0.0133]	[0.0147]	[0.0146]
Mixed race	0.0098*	0.0033	0.0053	0.0077	0.0040
	[0.0055]	[0.0045]	[0.0046]	[0.0051]	[0.0050]
Female	-0.0034	-0.0074***	-0.0066***	-0.0040**	-0.0039**
	[0.0022]	[0.0016]	[0.0016]	[0.0017]	[0.0017]
Having disabilities	0.0161***	0.0134***	0.0120***	0.0117***	0.0118***
	[0.0027]	[0.0021]	[0.0017]	[0.0019]	[0.0019]
Migrant student	0.0278*	-0.0015	0.0081	0.0177	0.0275*
	[0.0160]	[0.0132]	[0.0130]	[0.0158]	[0.0157]
Experiencing homelessness	0.1783***	0.0674***	0.0734***	0.0765***	0.0778***
	[0.0042]	[0.0030]	[0.0031]	[0.0031]	[0.0031]

Demographic categories	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Multilingual learners	0.0016	-0.0004	0.0040*	0.0035	0.0037
	[0.0029]	[0.0023]	[0.0024]	[0.0026]	[0.0026]
Changed residential address		0.4434***	0.4399***	0.4483***	0.4474***
		[0.0017]	[0.0015]	[0.0013]	[0.0012]
Grade level	0.0037***	0.0038***	0.0002	0.0012***	0.0010***
	[0.0004]	[0.0003]	[0.0003]	[0.0003]	[0.0003]
School characteristics (based on primary school of enrollment)					
% multilingual learners			-0.0506***	0.0025	-0.0106
			[0.0108]	[0.0106]	[0.0106]
% highly mobile students			-0.1613***	-0.0902***	-0.0932***
			[0.0351]	[0.0174]	[0.0185]
% low-income students			0.0370***	0.0040	0.0042
			[0.0077]	[0.0066]	[0.0066]
% students with disabilities			-0.1032***	-0.0409**	-0.0527***
			[0.0147]	[0.0177]	[0.0175]
Primary school is an alternative education setting			0.1310***	0.1239***	0.1255***
District characteristics			[0.0067]	[0.0067]	[0.0065]
District enrollment size				0.0001***	0.0001***
				[0.0000]	[0.0000]
Urban district				-0.0131***	-0.0064**
				[0.0029]	[0.0029]

Demographic categories	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Town district				-0.0130**	0.0073
				[0.0054]	[0.0052]
Rural district				0.0038	0.0153*
				[0.0087]	[0.0091]
Community characteristics					
% children aged 5–17 in poverty in the district				-0.0069	0.0195
				[0.0226]	[0.0239]
Number of crimes (in 1,000) in the city				0.0001**	0.0001*
				[0.0000]	[0.0000]
Housing affordability index in the county				0.1896***	-0.0829*
				[0.0169]	[0.0457]
Total no. of foster care facilities				0.0082***	-0.0485***
				[0.0013]	[0.0059]
% STRTPs/group homes facilities				-0.0459***	-0.1425***
				[0.0089]	[0.0273]
Time trends					
Year 2019	0.0010	-0.0009	0.0029	-0.0035	0.0065*
	[0.0032]	[0.0028]	[0.0028]	[0.0032]	[0.0034]
Year 2020	-0.0339***	-0.0155***	-0.0137***	-0.0241***	0.0003
	[0.0034]	[0.0029]	[0.0029]	[0.0034]	[0.0045]

Demographic categories	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Year 2021	-0.1141***	-0.0754***	-0.0672***	-0.0732***	-0.0553***
	[0.0037]	[0.0031]	[0.0032]	[0.0037]	[0.0044]
Year 2022	-0.0210***	-0.0042	0.0042	0.0123***	0.0155***
	[0.0038]	[0.0032]	[0.0030]	[0.0035]	[0.0045]
Year 2023	-0.0342***	-0.0107***	-0.0040	0.0124***	-0.0014
	[0.0037]	[0.0030]	[0.0031]	[0.0039]	[0.0061]
Year 2024	-0.0386***	-0.0314***	-0.0241***	-0.0061	-0.0218***
	[0.0038]	[0.0030]	[0.0030]	[0.0042]	[0.0072]
Observations	304,466	279,154	250,272	202,399	202,399

Note. Each column represents a separate probit regression using whether a student had changed schools midyear as the dependent variable. Standard errors are in brackets and clustered at the school level (based on the school in which the student stayed the longest).
* $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

About the American Institutes for Research®

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. AIR's work is driven by its mission to generate and use rigorous evidence that contributes to a better, more equitable world. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit AIR.ORG.

AIR® Headquarters
1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | **AIR.ORG**

28509_08/25