IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN/FROM CARE

FOSTERING SUCCESS

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Research Initiatives for Social Change (RISC) is the research unit for the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, Canada. The Research Initiatives for Social Change unit is committed to promoting social change through critical thinking and participatory processes.

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Another report based on findings from this project has been produced and may be accessed electronically or in paper copy:

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educational attainment is associated with almost all markers of health, well-being and social inclusion. As well, education is increasingly recognized for its role in positive connections and a sense of belonging with peers, school, adults, and community — that is, in contributing to 'social capital development' (Smith et al, 2105; Tilbury et al, 2014).

At the same time, it has been widely documented that children and youth living in foster care experience lower levels of academic achievement and have lower high school graduation rates than their peers in the general population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; 2014b; Courtney et al, 2014; Dworsky, Smithgall & Courtney, 2014; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Snow, 2009; Tilbury et al, 2014). Factors giving rise to poorer educational outcomes for youth in/from care are multi-faceted and relate to personal/individual, relational, family, social determinants of health, and systemic issues.

Despite the discouraging statistics on educational achievement, BC youth in care have aspirations of both finishing high school and going on to post-secondary, making the improvement of educational outcomes for children and youth in care a critical social issue. Yet, despite the topic's importance, a knowledge gap exists with respect to understanding the issues that affect educational outcomes for youth in/from care in BC.

To address this gap, this study aimed to address two main research questions:

- What helps and what hinders youth in/from care to complete high school?
- What strategies are being employed in BC and elsewhere that focus on youth in care's connection to and successful completion of high school?

METHODOLOGY

The study had three components:

- Literature review;
- Interviews with 20 former youth in care (12 females and 8 males); and,
- Environmental scan — interviews involving 34 informants from BC and other jurisdictions who were knowledgeable about education of young people in care.

The environmental scan informants were educators, researchers/academics, youth advocates, staff of youth-serving agencies or organizations, and government managers in education and child welfare departments. They were from BC (23), Ontario (5), Alberta (2), Manitoba (2) and the US (2).

The former youth in care (FYIC) informants ranged in age from 19 to 36. Seven (35%) were 19 years old, 60% were age 18-21, and 25% (n=5) were over 25. Eighteen lived in the Lower Mainland and two lived in Greater Victoria. In addition:

- 50% were Aboriginal or Aboriginal-mixed background
- 45% had completed high school
- 35% had completed Grade 11

PERSPECTIVES OF FORMER YOUTH IN CARE

CONNECTION TO SCHOOL

The majority of the FYIC informants — 75% — said they felt connected to their school and most of this group voiced a very strong connection to school and school staff. For some, school was "the constant" in their lives — a place that anchored them amidst traumatic and/or uncontrollable events at home or in care.

> The best home situation I had got ripped out from under me, so school became the constant in my life.

Moreover, teachers and school staff were the people in youths' lives who provided support and a sense of belonging.

> When I was kicked out at home, the first thing I did was go to the school and tell them. I had nowhere else.

For some, school also provided a purpose and focus for the day:

> It gave me something to do, something to wake up for.

As well, all but one informant reported feeling safe at school, and some emphasized that, in contrast to home, school was the place in which they felt safe.

SCHOOL AS A PRIORITY

Attending school regularly was a priority for more than half of the youth participants. 'Drivers' of their attendance included:

- Internal motivation
- Participation in sports
- Honouring others' expectations, encouragement and support

FYIC also stated that having someone track attendance made a positive difference. For many, it was a teacher, counsellor or youth worker from their alternative school; for one youth, tracking attendance involved coordinated efforts of three people: a concerned teacher, a school counsellor and the youth worker. Simply monitoring attendance for the sake of recording absences often felt punitive — instead, what FYIC appreciated was the relationship, connection and sense that someone cared.

In terms of why they kept coming to school, seven FYIC stated that they continued going so that they could graduate. One wanted to finish ahead of her younger siblings, while another stated that she knew a high school diploma would help improve her life chances.

> Reflecting on how few of my siblings had their high school diploma, nor did my mom, I knew that my life chances would be better with a high school diploma.

In addition, FYIC again spoke of their sense of safety, normalcy and internal control at school:

> School was the only place where there was normalcy. There was safety in coming to school. . . . I felt empowered. If I studied, I'd do well. It gave me a sense of control in an environment where, otherwise, there wasn't that much control.

FOSTERING SUCCESS

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL CAN MAKE A PIVOTAL, POSITIVE DIFFERENCE

The majority of FYIC informants had attended an alternative program and most found this to be a good experience; for some, their positive alternative school experience was the reason they graduated from high school. Positive aspects of alternative schools included:

- More personal attention, one-to-one support from teachers/staff; small class size
- Classes can be self-paced; more flexibility; more choice
- Comfortable atmosphere; feel welcome
- Youth worker was available to provide support
- Kitchen and lunch/food program made a difference
- Wrap-around support/support in other areas of my life

BARRIERS TO HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION FOR YOUTH IN/FROM CARE

Both groups of informants — environmental scan and FYIC — were asked about barriers to high school completion for students in/from care. Their responses were consistent with the literature and revealed two broad categories of themes:

Systemic barriers, including:

- Lack of leadership to implement systemic or inter-sectoral change;
- Lack of cross-sectoral information-sharing to identify and support CYIC;
- Frequent placement, school and/or community change, resulting in lags in enrolment;
- Lack of guidance or support from a caring adult and lack of an education navigator;
- Frequent turnover of social workers;
- Lack of stable housing and lack of transportation to get to previous/preferred school; and
- Being in programs such as Independent Living or Youth Agreement before really having the life skills and support networks to manage.

Personal/individual challenges, including:

- Family conflict/breakdown or illness;
- Unresolved mental health issues;
- Experience of abuse and trauma;
- Alcohol or drug issues (likely a coping response to other issues); and
- Poverty (as much a systematic issue as a personal/individual one).

WHAT HELPS YOUTH IN/FROM CARE COMPLETE HIGH SCHOOL

Environmental scan informants and former youth in care identified approaches, practices and policies that made a positive difference to high school completion for students in/from care. Again, their responses were highly congruent with the literature and also could be linked to many of the barriers identified as impeding high school success.

DISCUSSION

This study provided a unique contribution to the Canadian discourse on educational outcomes for youth in/from care by bringing together three strands of evidence: interviews with young adults with lived experience of the foster care system; the research literature; and interviews tapping into the knowledge of educators, policy-makers, child welfare specialists, foster caregivers, community organizations, and researchers. Young people's voices were particularly compelling, as their reflections about the role of education in their lives contribute new insights to the discussion.

YOUTH IN CARE UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Youth from care emphasized the pivotal importance of completing high school. While some acknowledged that their connection with education wasn't always evident from their behaviour at the time, as they matured, they were able to reflect upon the central role that school played in their lives. As well, some saw themselves as role models; they knew about the low rates of high school completion for youth in foster care and/or amongst Aboriginal youth, and they wanted to do better.

SCHOOL OFFERS STABILITY, CONNECTION, SAFETY

Equally important was that former youth in care valued school as a place of stability, normalcy, connection, and safety. School offered a refuge from the uncertainty that FYIC were experiencing and provided an environment over which they felt a sense of control. School also offered the platform for caring and supportive connections with teachers, counsellors or other adults: people who were paying attention to them, noticing if they skipped, suspecting when they needed academic or emotional support and offering it.

YOUTH IN CARE VALUE AND NEED CONSISTENT ADULT ALLIES

Youth also regarded social workers as important allies. Social workers' involvement in youths' education signalled to youth that they were valued, that someone believed in their abilities and could advocate on their behalf. Consequently, youth were distressed by the uncertainty and transience of these important relationships.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED AND INDIVIDUALIZED, WRAP-AROUND APPROACHES ARE CRITICAL

Environmental scan informants' identification of relationship-based and wrap-around approaches as effective models for practice was consistent with young people's reflections on the importance of connections and relationships. Moreover, as reported in the literature and echoed by this study's findings, a high percentage of youth in/from care have learning disabilities, mental health, trauma, substance use issues, and/or are survivors of (multi-generational) impacts of residential school and colonization. Hence, youth needed and wanted ready access to services such as mental health counselling/care and an educational program that was in keeping with their strengths, needs, and aspirations. Further, youth wanted a trusted adult to help guide them.

SYSTEMS WORKING TOGETHER, AND WORKING CLOSELY WITH CAREGIVERS, MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The findings from this study clearly demonstrated that educational outcomes were improved when the involved systems (education and child welfare) offered practical supports to remove barriers to attendance, such as food/meals, day care, transportation, low cost recreational activities, and tutoring (e.g., in school, by caregivers, or in the community). With respect to tutoring, findings from this study indicated that tutoring in school, by caregivers, or in the community was useful, and that training for caregivers related to tutoring should be developed and implemented.

TRANSITION SUPPORTS INCLUDING TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE, RESPONSIVE

The transition from high school to adulthood was another time of potential vulnerability for youth in care. While an increasing number of universities offer tuition waivers for former youth in care, the findings from this study indicated that such post-majority programs needed to be more flexible and ought not to penalize youth for 'false starts'.

CROSS-MINISTRY AND CROSS-SECTORAL LEADERSHIP NEEDED

There was strong evidence that cross-ministry and cross-sectoral leadership are essential in order to establish and publicly commit to education-related goals for CYIC, identify meaningful targets, and then develop and implement strategies, collaborations and partnerships to monitor and report progress.

FORMAL PROTOCOLS PROVIDE DIRECTION

Similarly, there was strong evidence that cross-ministry protocols can make a difference by helping to provide direction and a mandate for sectors and systems to work collaboratively to improve educational outcomes for youth in care. Not only can protocols give direction, they can provide clarity as to information-sharing between ministries and systems. This was crucial, as the ability to ensure that youth in care were receiving appropriate and specific resources tailored to meet their individual learning needs and goals started by knowing which students were in the child welfare/care system.

THE OPTION TO STAY IN CARE LONGER CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Finally, several jurisdictions have introduced legislation and policies that allow young people to stay in care or access care-related supports as a means to improve educational outcomes and life course trajectories. Experiences in these jurisdictions are promising and suggest that when youth have this option, they are more likely to continue their education.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In conclusion, this study offered strong evidence that improving educational outcomes for children and youth in care is a complex undertaking that requires a concerted and deliberate strategy. This is not an education problem alone nor is it a child welfare problem alone; former youth in care, caregivers and families, health and mental health practitioners, community agencies, substance use services, Aboriginal leaders, agencies and communities are all participants and potential allies in planning and implementing action toward change.

POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS

By way of closing, the report proposes 12 potential "action items" that stem from this study that individuals and groups from all sectors and locations can use to further the conversation and flesh out into detailed steps about ways to improve educational outcomes for youth in/from foster care in British Columbia.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Adult Graduation Diploma (a.k.a Adult Dogwood Certificate) In BC, an Adult Dogwood Certificate is awarded to adult learners 18 and older who can complete their education through a combination of courses and work experience. Students can gain credit for current or past work competences or completed post-secondary training courses.

Agreement with Young Adults (AYA) In BC, the AYA program provides financial assistance and support services to former CCOs or youth on a YA age 19 to 24 who want to: finish high school; earn a diploma or certificate; learn a trade; attend college or university; and/or complete a rehabilitation program. The amount of assistance depends on individual needs.

Children/Youth in Care (CYIC) A child or youth who is receiving residential services (e.g., foster care, group home care, independent living or semi-independent living); a child or youth removed from his/her caregivers and placed in residential child welfare care.

Continuing Care Order (CCO) In BC, a CCO is the term used when the Director of Child Welfare is the sole guardian of the child, under the protection and legal care of government.

Crown ward In Ontario, 'crown ward' is the term used to refer to children and youth living in foster care and under the protection and legal care of the government.

Dogwood Certificate In BC, a Dogwood Certificate is awarded to students acquiring 80 credits from a combination of required courses, elective courses, and the Graduation Transitions program.

Former Youth in Care (FYIC) Youth who have aged out of government care upon reaching age of majority; in BC, in this report, this includes youth who age out of Youth Agreements.

School Completion Certificate (a.k.a Evergreen Certificate) In BC, a School Completion Certificate is awarded to students who meet the goals of their educational program other than graduation, for example, their Individual Education Plan.

Social Capital The presence of social supports, connections, and networks that give rise to specific benefits such as trust, belonging, and reciprocity.

Youth Agreements (YA) In BC, a YA is a legal agreement involving the Ministry of Children and Family Development and a youth (age 16 to 18) who is unable to live safely at home or with a responsible family member. The agreement has provisions for financial support to enable the youth to live independently and provides access to supports and services such as mental health and substance use treatment.

Youth Education Assistance Fund (YEAF) In BC, the YEAF provides grants of up to $5,500 to 19-24 year olds attending college, university, or other post-secondary institution. The grant can be used for tuition, books, and living expenses.

1
INTRODUCTION

Educational attainment is associated with almost all markers of health, well-being and social inclusion and is an important protective factor against long term social disadvantages (Cameron, Connelly & Jackson, 2015; Tilbury et al, 2014).

At the same time, numerous studies from Canada, the US, Europe and elsewhere have documented that child and youth in care (CYIC) and former youth in care (FYIC) experience lower levels of educational attainment, including high school completion and entry into post-secondary education, than their peers in the general population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; 2014b; Courtney et al, 2014; Dworsky, Smithgall & Courtney, 2014; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Pecora et al, 2006; Reid & Dudding, 2006; Snow, 2009; Tilbury et al, 2014). Indeed, Brownell et al's (2015, 86) Manitoba-based analysis found that on every measure of school-related success — from kindergarten readiness to high school completion — children and youth in care fared more poorly than youth who received child welfare services but had not entered care, and they in turn fared worse than youth who had never been involved in the child welfare system. Both Frerer, Davis Sosenko and Henke's (2103) and Weigman et al's (2014) analyses of the educational achievement of CYIC in California resulted in comparable findings.

In examining educational outcomes of children and youth in care, it is also critical to consider educational outcomes — including barriers to and enablers of school completion — of groups that are over-represented in the child welfare system; over-representation within the child welfare system exists when there is a higher proportion of those children in the system than in the general population (Allan, Howard, & Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013, quoted in Brownell et al, 2015).

Without question, Indigenous children are disproportionately represented in Canada's child welfare system. Although they comprise approximately 4% of the general population of children and youth in Canada, Indigenous children and youth account for nearly 50% of all children within the Canadian foster care system (Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group, 2015). And while the proportion of children in care who are Aboriginal varies across Canada — in Manitoba, Indigenous children represent almost 90 per cent of children in care, and in Alberta, 69% of the children and youth in care self-identify as Aboriginal — in British Columbia, almost 61% of the children and youth in care are Aboriginal (Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group, 2015; Brownell et al, 2015; BC Ministry of Education, 2014). In terms of educational outcomes, Aboriginal children and youth experience lower completion rates than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and Aboriginal children and youth in care are a sub-population for whom 'closing the education gap' requires immediate and focused attention (BC Auditor General, 2015).

Factors giving rise to poorer educational outcomes for young people in/from care are multi-faceted and compounding, and relate to personal/individual,

relational, family, social determinants of health, and systemic issues, including impacts of colonization. As compiled by Brownell et al (2015), education-related correlates of being in care include:

- having experienced trauma and/or social, emotional or mental health difficulties (Gharabaghi, 2014; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014);

- having multiple school and community changes (Day et al, 2012; Pecora et al, 2006);

- having higher rates of school absence (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014);

- repeating a grade or being expelled (Day et al, 2012; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Pecora et al., 2006);

- completing high school with a General Educational Development (GED)[1] rather than a high school diploma (Pecora et al, 2006; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012);

- living independently or without an adult and receiving less financial support from parents and family (Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow & Brown, 2007); and

- being First Nations, Métis, or Inuit and therefore more likely to have experienced current and historical legacies of colonization, racial discrimination, systemic devaluing of culture and language, and the multi-generational impacts of residential schools (Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group, 2015; Brownell et al, 2015; BC Auditor General BC, 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Increasingly, the value of education also is being recognized for its role in social capital[2] development — that is, in forming positive connections and a sense of belonging with peers, school, adults, and community (Smith et al, 2015; Tilbury et al, 2014). Indeed, in a recent report on building social capital among young people in foster care, Smith et al (2015) showed that students who had positive connections and felt as though a teacher cared about them were more likely to report positive physical and mental health.

Following from this, amongst young people who have disconnected from school and/or aged out of care, the loss of positive social connections represents a loss of social capital. Of greater concern is that youth who age out of care often lose these important relationships and sources of support precisely at a time when they need and want help transitioning to adulthood, developing life skills, and making decisions about post-secondary education, training, or employment — and, at a time when their peers in the general population are still accessing this support from family members (BC Representative for Children and Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC, 2015; Reid & Dudding, 2006; Rutman et al, 2007; Vancouver Foundation, 2013).

Despite the discouraging statistics on educational achievement, BC youth in care have aspirations of both finishing high school and going on to post-secondary: 70% of youth who had been in care indicated that they planned to continue their education after high school (BC Representative for Children and Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC, 2015, p.58). These statistics are on par with those reported in other BC-based and US studies (Courtney et al, 2014; Smith et al, 2011).

Improving educational outcomes for children and youth in care is a critical social issue. Yet, despite the topic's importance, a knowledge gap exists in terms of "mapping" the issues that affect educational outcomes for youth in/from care in BC. Information as to promising approaches and policies that support young people to complete their secondary education is needed to inform change-makers in efforts to improve outcomes.

To address this gap, the Fostering Success: Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth from Care project was undertaken. The project has aimed to consolidate

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1 GED Tests are a set of five tests; by passing the tests, GED certificate olders demonstrate they possess academic abilities equivalent to those of high school graduates. Program was discontinued in 2014 in BC.

2 As defined by Smith et al (2015, p. 9) social capital is "the presence of social supports, connections, and networks".

and expand knowledge regarding the BC context, key issues and opportunities related to helping youth in/from foster care improve their educational outcomes. The primary research questions guiding the project were:

- What helps — and what hinders — youth in/from care to complete high school?
- What strategies are being employed in BC and elsewhere that focus on foster youths' connection to and successful completion of high school?

A key facet of the project was learning from the lived experience of former youth in care; as well, educators, child welfare practitioners, policy makers, and community service providers shared their knowledge regarding approaches that improve educational outcomes. This report shares findings from the project. Central are the voices of youth — through their reflections they offer powerful insights as to why this conversation matters.

THE BC CONTEXT

THE PROVINCIAL PICTURE: HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES

In BC as in most Canadian jurisdictions, the high school completion[1] rate of youth in care is significantly lower than is the completion rate of youth in the general population:

- In 2012/2013, 47% of all BC youth in care completed high school; by contrast, 84% of BC youth in the general population completed high school (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014).

- Of the CYIC who turned 19 in 2013/2014, only 27% earned a Dogwood Diploma, 16% earned a School Completion Certificate, and 5% earned an Adult Dogwood Certificate (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2015).

While statistical analyses indicate that the high school completion rate of BC's CYIC has risen over 15 years, (from 28% in 2001 to 47.4% in 2013), a number of reports also note that the increase in high school completion rate is primarily due to the Ministry of Education's inclusion of the School Completion Certificate as an "alternate" designation for students who met the requirements of the Individual Education Plan (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014). For example, between 2005/06 and 2013/2014, the percentage of students completing high school with a Completion Certificate increased from 2% to 16% (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2015). By contrast, the percentage of BC CYICs completing high school with a Dogwood Diploma rose from 22% in 2001 to 27% in 2013. A notable limitation of a School Completion Certificate is that it generally isn't adequate for entry into post-secondary institutions.

SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH IN/FROM CARE

In examining the school completion rate of BC's youth in/from care, it is critical to look at particular subgroups of youth:

- In 2013/14, Aboriginal children and youth comprised 63% of those in care with a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) in BC (BC Ministry of Education, 2014).

- In 2014, the six-year completion rate for all Aboriginal children in care with a CCO was 40%; for Aboriginal males in care, the rate was even lower (37%).

- By comparison, in 2013/2014, Aboriginal youth who were not in care had a six-year school completion rate of 62% — up from 51% in 2009/2010, but still substantially less than the 2013/2014 rate for non-Aboriginal children, which was 86% (BC Ministry of Education, 2014).

- The BC Auditor General (2015) recently issued a strong call to the BC government to make good on its 2005 commitment to close the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by 2015; similarly, at a federal level, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) has urged immediate action to close the education gap.

HIGH RATES OF LEARNING OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY AMONGST CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE

Students in care are also proportionately more likely to have a developmental disability and/or special needs designation (Brownell et al, 2015). In 2012/13, 46% of BC children or youth in care had a special needs designation, as compared with 8.7% of students not in care (BC Representative for Children and

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1 High school completion is defined as those students completing high school requirements within 6 years of entering Grade 8 (BC Ministry of Education, 2014).

Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC, 2015). BC's statistics are consistent with the literature, which indicates that young people in care are significantly more likely to have special education needs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; Czeck, 2015; Snow, 2009).

GRADE 11 AS A PIVOTAL POINT IN FOSTER YOUTHS' SCHOOL JOURNEY

The *Growing Up in BC* report (2015, p. 61) also found that the drop off in grade progression for youth in care with a CCO increased noticeably in Grades 11 and 12. It is unclear from statistics alone whether these youth worked at grade level or struggled in earlier years but still continued to advance to the next grade level. What the statistics do tell us is that their passage through the final two years remains stubbornly difficult to achieve. Indeed, the gap in achievement between youth in care with a CCO and other students doubles from Grade 11 to 12 and again from Grade 12 to graduation, when most CYIC in Grade 12 do not graduate.

POLICY, COMMUNITY AND INTER-SECTORAL RESPONSES TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

In recognition of the importance of education and of the benefits of coordinated planning for children and youth in care, in 2008, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) published cross ministry guidelines to assist in joint educational planning and support for children and youth in care (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2008). The guidelines are intended to improve information sharing, promote joint planning, and improve communication and collaboration amongst educators, child welfare workers, and community and family members. To date, little if any research has been published exploring the implementation, consistency of application and impacts of the Guidelines in relation to educational outcomes.

POST-SECONDARY TRANSITION

According to Woolley (2013), at any one time there are approximately 5,500 young adults in BC between the ages of 19 and 24 who were formerly in foster care. For those who want to complete high school or pursue further education or training, MCFD offers financial help via two programs: the Agreement for Young Adults (AYA) and the Youth Educational Assistance Fund (YEAF). As of January 2013, approximately 410 or 7.5% were registered on an AYA. In addition, in 2013/2014, 253 young adults received assistance via the YEAF; 34% were Aboriginal and 66% were non-Aboriginal (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2015). In addition, 2014 saw the creation of the Youth Futures Education Fund, developed by Vancouver Foundation in partnership with Coast Capital Credit Union, which provides former youth in care who attend a post-secondary institution with non-tuition related living expenses.

FOSTERING CHANGE

Vancouver Foundation, through its *Fostering Change* initiative, is spearheading the conversation on why youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood deserve the same range of supports as their peers who have not been in care. Together with an increasing number of partners, Vancouver Foundation has identified four pillars to supporting youth leaving care:

- Engaging youth in planning and decision-making
- Offering grants to develop innovative community programs and initiatives
- Supporting learning about promising policies and practices
- Increasing public awareness and will for resources and relationships to ensure successful outcomes for youth leaving care

2
METHODOLOGY

OVERVIEW AND APPROACH

The project had three inter-related components:

- A literature review re: strategies, approaches, programs and policies that assist youth in/from care to successfully complete their secondary education.
- An environmental scan involving interviews with youth-serving service providers, researchers, policy makers, and advocates to: identify issues, opportunities and promising approaches that improve educational outcomes for youth in/from care.
- Individual interviews with youth from care regarding what has helped or hindered them in relation to completing high school.

An Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from the education system, MCFD, youth-serving/youth-focused organizations, and the BC Representative for Children and Youth provided guidance to the study. The project was subject to the ethical guidelines of the University of Victoria. Additional details regarding the research process follow.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN–RESEARCH PROCESS

An environmental scan involves gathering and synthesizing information to provide a snapshot of current knowledge, policy and/or practice in relation to a given topic; the scan may also yield information regarding good or promising practices and policies in order to inform a blueprint for change.

In this project, with the assistance of our Advisory Group and informed by our literature review, we identified key informants and organizations involved in or knowledgeable about the provision of education-related supports (approaches, policies, programs) and service delivery for youth in/from foster care. Thus, our sampling technique for the environmental scan was purposeful (Morse, 1994; Sandelowski, 1986).

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN–INFORMANTS

A total of 34 people were interviewed as part of the environmental scan. While the majority of informants came from BC, we also intentionally sought out informants and conducted phone interviews with educators, researchers/academics, staff of youth-serving organizations, youth advocates, and government officials in education and child welfare departments in three other Canadian jurisdictions and two US states.

The interviews used a semi-structured format involving open-ended questions. Questions focused on informants' perspectives about:

- barriers faced by youth in care/former youth in care in graduating from high school; and
- effective or promising approaches to improve educational outcomes for youth in/from care.

Figure 1 Environmental Scan
Informants By Jurisdiction

Legend:
- BC
- Ontario
- Alberta
- Manitoba
- USA

Values: 23, 5, 2, 2, 2
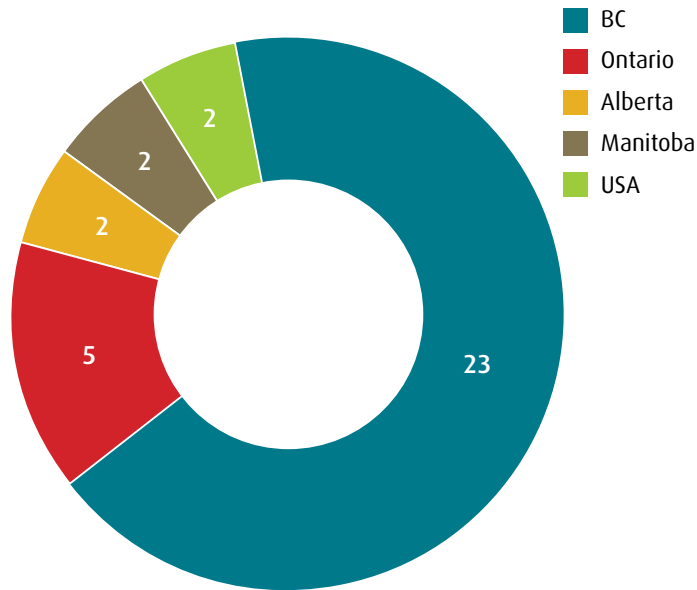
Figure 2 Affiliation of all
Environmental Scan Informants

Legend:
- Educators
- Researcher/Academic
- Government/Child Welfare Agency
- Provincial/Community Agency
- Foster Parent/FP Org
- Child/Youth Advocacy Org
- School-based Health Staff

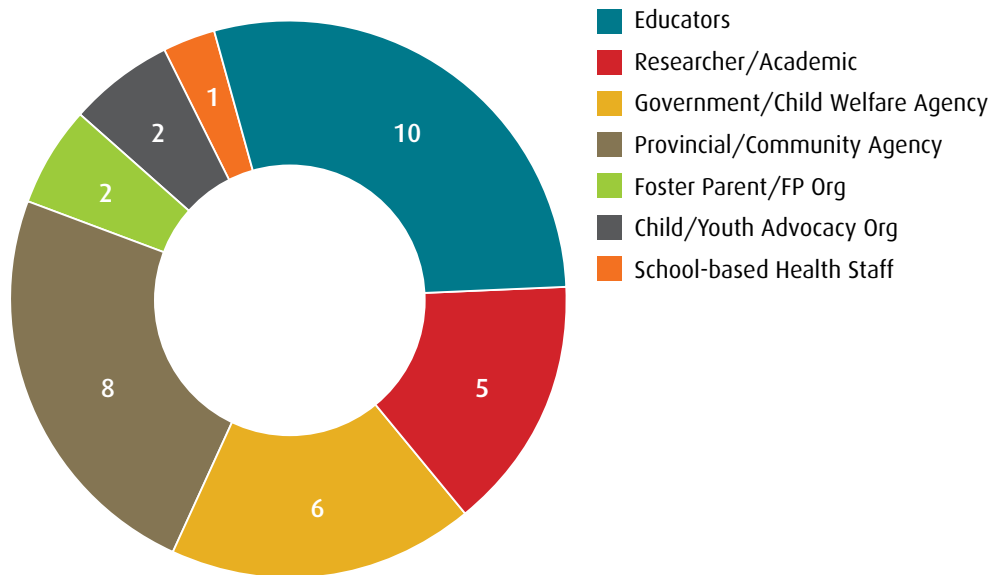Values: 10, 5, 6, 8, 2, 2, 1

Figure 1 and Figure 2 provide breakdowns of
environmental scan key informants by jurisdiction
and by organizational affiliation.

INTERVIEWS WITH FORMER YOUTH IN CARE—RESEARCH PROCESS

In keeping with research exploring people's lived experiences, this component of the project employed a qualitative research design and purposeful sampling techniques (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992; Sandelowski, 1986).

ENGAGING FORMER YOUTH FROM CARE IN THE STUDY

Eligibility criteria for a young person to participate in an interview were:

- Had experience living in foster care and/or on a Youth Agreement
- Over 19 years of age (there was no upper age limit)
- Interested in reflecting on their experience of school, particularly what helped and hindered high school completion

Our Advisory Committee provided key assistance in identifying potential interview participants. Advisors and several BC-based environmental scan informants shared information about the project to former youth in care through face-to-face communication and/or via web-based newsletters, social media, or posted on public bulletin boards. Young people who were interested in participating in an interview then contacted a member of the research team or communicated their interest to program or school staff, who, with the person's consent, shared contact information with the research team.

Potential participants were told that the interview would focus on their experiences in school and what helped and what hindered them to complete high school. In adherence with ethical protocols, informants completed an informed consent process prior to the interview. Informants were offered an honorarium for their participation in the interview.

FORMER YOUTH IN CARE INFORMANTS

A total of 20 young adults from foster care participated in in-depth interviews for the project: 18 were from the Lower Mainland and 2 were from Vancouver Island.

Twelve (60%) of these informants were female and eight (40%) were male. Additional demographic information about informants, along with their perspectives about their educational experiences, is provided in Section 4.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In terms of the environmental scan and interviews conducted with FYIC, it is important to note that this was a small-scale study, and the majority of the FYIC informants were based in the Lower Mainland (although they may have grown up elsewhere in Canada). This means that the experiences of FYIC in rural areas or other regions of the province could be substantially different than those of the FYIC who were interviewed for this study.

Similarly, the majority of the BC-based environmental scan informants were from either the Lower Mainland or Greater Victoria. That was intentional in terms of the study's design, but needs to be borne in mind by readers — that is, we know that innovative practices, policies and programs are occurring in other parts of BC, but it was beyond the project's scope to 'tap into' all of these, and thus these promising approaches are not captured in this report. Moreover, the project was intended to focus on the issues and experiences of FYIC as a whole and not on specific sub-populations such as Aboriginal youth in care or those with special educational needs.

3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following is a review of the literature focusing on the barriers to school success and promising approaches to promote improved educational outcomes for young people in/from foster care. In addition, an Annotated Bibliography was prepared through this project and is available as a separate publication, which can be accessed via www.uvic.ca/hsd/socialwork/research/home/projects/index.php or www.fosteringchange.ca/resources.

3A. BARRIERS TO HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION FOR YOUTH IN/FROM CARE

The challenges facing children and youth in care in relation to their education are well documented. In the past 10 years, numerous studies, including literature reviews and policy analyses, have been undertaken in Canada and the US focusing on the barriers and supports/enablers to high school completion and educational attainment (see Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a, for an excellent example of such a report).

In the literature review that follows, we use broad headings to categorize the barriers to high school completion for youth in/from foster care. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the barriers are complex and interconnected; understanding these interconnections is essential not only to fully appreciate foster youths' experiences but also to help identify and plan effective, multi-sectoral pathways to action.

FACTORS PRECEDING COMING INTO CARE, INCLUDING POVERTY, HOUSING INSTABILITY, MALTREATMENT AND LEARNING DISABILITIES

Many young people enter foster care with complex histories that impact their emotional, cognitive, and social development, including being raised in poverty, having home and community instability, and living in an environment in which education wasn't a priority (Day et al, 2012; Reid & Dudding, 2006; Snow, 2009; Tilbury et al, 2014). Indeed, Brownell et al (2015) and Snow (2009) reported that many of the factors associated with poor educational outcomes are the same types of variables that likely contributed to children and youth coming into care, including: living in poverty; parental substance use and/or having a neuro-developmental disability associated with maternal substance use; experiencing maltreatment and attachment difficulties; and having a mental disorder or emotional difficulties (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH BEING INDIGENOUS

Non-Indigenous children in care have been found to have better educational outcomes than Indigenous children in care (Brownell et al, 2015). The differences stem from a number of factors, including deep and systemic poverty, lack of adequate housing, disparities in government funding for education, fewer educational and social services and supports, family conflict, intergenerational trauma, and mental health and parental substance use problems associated with residential school legacies (Aboriginal

Children in Care Working Group, 2015; Brownell et al, 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). As well, educational outcomes for Aboriginal children are compounded by their experiences of individual and systemic racial discrimination and lack of culturally appropriate curriculum (Brownell et al, 2015; BC Auditor General, 2015).

INTERPLAY BETWEEN PRE-CARE AND CARE-RELATED EXPERIENCES

In addition to circumstances existing prior to coming into care, the literature documents a variety of systemic and care-related factors that create additional barriers and/or augment the negative impact of existing barriers to school success.

As reported by a host of Canadian, US and UK researchers and policy advocates (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; 2014b; Brownell, 2014; Courtney et al, 2014; Cox, 2013; Day et al, 2012; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Geenen et al, 2014; Gharabaghi, 2014; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Reid & Dudding, 2006; Snow, 2009; Tilbury et al, 2014), these factors include:

- Frequent placement changes or moves "in and out" of care, leading to school and community changes;

- Frequent school changes, leading to disruptions in learning and curricula;

- Multiple appointments, leading to missed days/ classes;

- Delays in enrolment to a new school after a placement change, leading to school absence;

- Delays in transferring student records from one school to another, leading to loss of course credits and/or need to repeat courses;

- Limited or lack of access to appropriate homework/tutoring assistance or specialized supports;

- (Untreated) mental health issues, resulting in missed days/classes, difficulties concentrating;

- Separation from siblings;

- Loss/lack of natural advocates or of a single advocate who monitors progress;

- Having multiple/no continuity in social workers;

- Lack of transportation to continue attending former/preferred school; and

- Ineffective collaboration between organizations and poor monitoring of foster children's educational progress.

Elaborating on the first several of these bulleted points, BC-based researcher Julie Czeck (2015) emphasized that a very significant issue noted in the literature was the negative impacts of placement changes and changes in school. The US-based National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2014) also stated that with each school change, young people in foster care fall further behind, even when controlling for socio-demographic variables. Brownell et al (2105) also reported findings from a meta-analysis that showed that students who changed schools more frequently had lower achievement in reading and math, as well as a higher likelihood of dropping out of school.

Czeck (2015) further reported that a conservative estimate was that many youth in/from care lose at least 16 months of academic learning, given that 4-7 placement changes are common for youth in care and 4-6 months of school are lost with each school change. Youth who disengage from school or are asked by the school not to return clearly will lose even more months of academic learning. Many youth in care report feeling further stigmatized because of being held back a grade.

Expanding on these points, Ferguson and Wolkow's (2012) literature review on barriers to school success for youth in/from care included qualitative research that voiced foster youths' perspectives on the emotional and psychological issues that negatively affected educational outcomes. These included the stress of being placed in care, the disruption and social isolation of frequent moves, the pain and experience of trauma associated with being separated from siblings and family, and the stigma of being in care and/or of having mental health issues, all of which made it difficult to focus on school. These findings were echoed in Annie E. Casey Foundation's

(2014b) report based on interviews with youth in/from care.

Further to this, Brownell et al's (2015, p.7) review of the literature on educational outcomes for children and youth in care reported that "frequent school changes also make it challenging for children to develop long-lasting, supportive relationships with teachers and peers" (also see Gharabaghi, 2014; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Similarly, in British Columbia, Smith et al (2015) found that the more moves experienced by youth in care, the lower their sense of connection to school.

Gharabaghi's (2014) overview of the literature on barriers to educational success for youth in/from care emphasized many of these factors, including the stigma associated with living in care that was felt by young people and the fragmented communication that exists between social workers, caregivers, and school personnel.

In addition, Gharabaghi (2014) emphasized that low expectations of educational success — held if not overtly expressed by caregivers, school staff, and child welfare workers — along with the low prioritization of school-related outcomes by child protection workers and caregivers/guardians (relative to acute safety concerns) created and/or compounded other barriers to education success. Among other impacts, low expectations may be linked to poor monitoring of the young person's attendance and/or progress. Gharabaghi (2014) also identified caregivers' limited knowledge about the learning styles of the youth in their care and about the academic requirements of the youth's courses as additional barriers.

Lastly, with regard to the lack of inter-sectoral collaboration and its negative impacts for youth in/from care, Ferguson & Wolkow (2012, p. 1146) were clear in their criticism of both the education and child welfare systems. They stated:

> By far, the most frequently expressed barrier is interagency antagonism with education and child welfare systems blaming each other for

the poor outcomes. School placement instability and poor information management were also identified as key impediments to school progress.

FACTORS RELATED TO LIVING INDEPENDENTLY OR WITHOUT AN ADULT IN THE HOME

Another barrier to completing high school for older youth in/from care who are living on their own is the need to develop and exercise independent living skills including: securing and maintaining safe housing (including finding someone to co-sign a lease); grocery shopping, meal preparation (i.e., addressing food security needs); budgeting and paying bills; managing transportation; and, if need be, finding employment to make ends meet (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014b; Czeck, 2015). Another issue that often is a barrier to high school completion (and enrolling in post-secondary programs) is having parenting responsibilities (Czeck, 2015; Vancouver Foundation, 2013).

Similarly, based on their large scale survey on the health of BC youth, including over 1,000 who had been in care, Smith et al (2015) found that living alone or with no adult was a barrier to social capital. In other words, youth in these circumstances felt less connected to their community and to school, and they were more likely to miss school than youth in other living arrangements (p. 16). Moreover, Smith et al (2011) reported that there was a relationship between income/food insecurity and living without an adult: 61% of youth not living with an adult reported often/always going to bed hungry, which posed a barrier to school attendance and engagement. In keeping with these findings, Day et al's (2012) report gave voice to Michigan-based youth in/from foster care, who emphasized that young people cannot succeed academically if they have unmet basic and school-related needs, especially needs related to transportation, food, housing and clothing.

3B. APPROACHES/PRACTICES, PROGRAMS, POLICIES, LEGISLATION THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

OVERVIEW

Just as there have been several comprehensive literature reviews on the barriers to youth in/from foster care completing high school, recently there have been several significant North American reviews of the research literature focusing on interventions to improve educational outcomes for youth in/from care (Dworsky, Smithgall & Courtney, 2014; Forsman and Vinnerljung's, (2012); Goodman & Burnett, 2014; Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy 2013). In addition, Brownell et al (2015) provide an excellent summary of this literature.

While each of these reviews has cautioned that weak study designs hamper conclusions about the actual effectiveness of the programs or interventions, the reviews also found that most of the programs included in their study showed promise for improving foster youths' educational attainment, and most seemed to have made some positive difference. Moreover, Forsman & Vinnerljung's (2012) review concluded that while more rigorous evaluation of interventions is required, there is evidence that educational outcomes of youth in/from care can be improved with adequate support and tailored interventions. Importantly, the study also concluded that if provided with adequate support such as tutoring and structured individualized support, children and youth in foster care could make important gains in literacy and math proficiency. Inadequate services were to blame for low achievements rather than the limitations of the children and youth. As well, to make a difference, strategies need to be introduced at an early age.

Forsman and Vinnerljung's review study also found that no one type of intervention clearly stood out in terms of efficacy; that said, they noted that different types of tutoring programs for youth in care yielded the strongest empirical evidence of efficacy (Flynn et al, 2012; Harper & Schmidt, 2012). Other programs/interventions included within Forsman

and Vinnerljung's (2012) review that resulted in demonstrable educational gains for children and youth in care were the provision of tailored support to youth and the use of an educational liaison within the school.

In the discussion that follows, we summarize and synthesize the literature on approaches, programs, policies and legislation that make a positive difference to educational outcomes for youth in/from care. As with our discussion of the barriers to high school completion, we have organized our literature review using broad-stroke categories; that said, we emphasize that these categories are highly inter-connected.

CORNERSTONE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES: SETTING HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

The importance of having the expectation that children and youth in care would achieve educational success was noted by Ferguson and Wolkow (2012) as a key factor in attaining positive educational outcomes. Similarly, Leone and Weinberg (2010) discussed the value of setting goals and working across systems — that is, creating jurisdiction-wide blueprints for improved educational outcomes.

From the perspective of youth in/from care, having expectations of school-related success and wanting to graduate was critical (Smith et al, 2007); along these lines, Tilbury et al, (2014, p. 463) also stated:

> Young people's personal motivation and tenacity also affected their level of school engagement. Going beyond the low expectations of parents provided a motivation for some participants, who spoke about their drive to create a different future and life for themselves from that of their own parents.

SCHOOL-BASED: INDIVIDUALIZED SCHOOL/EDUCATION PLANS AND EDUCATIONAL LIAISONS

As noted above, Forsman and Vinnerljung's (2012) review reported that providing tailored supports to youth in care yielded promising results in terms of educational outcomes.

Similarly, the US-based National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2014) reported several examples of programs and practices that were making a positive difference for foster youths' school success. These included: having Individualized Education Plans for all children in care (as is implemented through the Graduation Success program at Treehouse in Seattle) and having designated staff to help children and youth in care transition into a new school. The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2014) further noted that encouraging trauma-sensitive practices and supports in schools was key to improving educational outcomes for children in care.

The value of having individualized educational plans and support for youth in/from care has been echoed by numerous other researchers, policy advocates and foster youth themselves (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014b; BC Representative for Children and Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC, 2009; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning & Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc., 2008, p. 24); Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Goodman & Burnett, 2014).

For example, drawing on research with and feedback from young people in care, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014b) urged that youth in care should automatically be eligible for and have an Individual Education Plan to ensure that their educational needs are met. Similarly, BC-based youth in care have voiced the need for flexible and tailored learning plans for all youth and also stated that it was important to offer a mentor who understood the experience of youth in care and who could support them to graduate (Representative for Children and Youth & Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC, 2015, p. 64).

In a similar vein and also based on the perspectives of youth in/from care, the Ontario Office for the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (2012, p. 15) recommended providing an educational support liaison in schools to help children and youth in care stay in school. The recommendation of providing all foster children and youth with a designated individual at their school who

supported them similarly was voiced by both the BC Representative for Children and Youth/ Office of the Provincial Health Officer (2009) and the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care initiative as a concrete action step to improve educational outcomes (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning & Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc. (2008, p. 24). Most recently, the US made improving the educational outcomes of foster youth a legislative requirement; designating a specific person to be a liaison or point person for foster youth is now required by all state education centres, and all US states must now track achievement test and graduation data for CYIC as a separate subgroup (Frey, 2015).

SCHOOL-BASED: VALIDATING THE VALUE OF CARING RELATIONSHIPS

There is considerable, long-standing evidence and practice wisdom attesting to the value of engaging in a relational approach when working with vulnerable youth and other at-risk populations. As discussed in Brownell et al (2015)'s literature review, research has demonstrated that supportive relationships and a positive educational experience help youth to develop resilience and improve overall well-being, which can lead to higher rates of high school graduation. UK-based researchers Cameron, Connelly and Jackson (2015, p. 136) put it very clearly:

> **Looked after children are more likely to thrive in schools where they are able to develop supportive relationships with teachers.**

Similarly, from the perspective of youth in/from care, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014b), the BC-based McCreary Centre Society (Smith et al, 2007; Smith et al, 2011) and Day et al (2012) have emphasized the importance of youth having connections with caring and competent teachers who understood their personal situations, abilities and challenges as young people in/from care. Amongst BC-based youth in foster care, the presence of caring teachers in students' lives increased the chances that students planned to complete high school and had post-secondary aspirations; as well, the rate of skipping school decreased when youth felt cared about by their teachers (Smith et al, 2011).

Along the same lines, young people in Day et al's (2012) study stressed the need for teachers who are flexible and sensitive to the individual learning needs of youth in care.

HOME- AND COMMUNITY-BASED: CAREGIVERS' ROLE AND TUTORING

A number of studies and reports have highlighted caregivers' role in improving educational outcomes for children and youth in care. While the literature in this area in relatively scant, research has demonstrated that caregivers' attitudes toward education, including their involvement with the school, academic expectations and whether they promoted reading, play a role in influencing youths' academic outcomes and achievements (Cheung et al, 2012; Gharabaghi, 2014).

Flynn and colleagues (2012) and Dill, Flynn, Hollingshead and Fernandes (2012) similarly emphasized that caregivers' role is crucial: caregivers' provision of educational support along with having high educational expectations were associated with better outcomes for children and youth in care. In a Special Issue of *Children and Youth Services Review* on promoting educational outcomes for young people in care, they wrote:

> **Believing that our youth in care can achieve extraordinary things seems to be an essential ingredient when encouraging them to succeed in school and beyond (Dill, Flynn, Hollingshead & Fernandes, 2012, p. 1082).**

Related to this point, a number of Canadian and US researchers and policy analysts/advocates have recommended providing training for caregivers in tutoring methods as well as, for caregivers/parents of preschool children, in self-regulation skills (Brownell et al, 2015; Goodman & Burnett, 2014; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). One US-based initiative has taken action in this area and produced a "road map" for caregivers to help define their education-related advocacy role and also spell out roles and responsibilities of caregiver advocates as well as students and child welfare workers (Children's Administration, 2010).

COMMUNITY-BASED: MENTORING AND COACHING

Mentoring of children or youth in care by peers, "near-peers" or adult volunteers consistently has been identified in research reports and literature reviews as a key, evidence-based approach for improving educational outcomes of foster care children and youth (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014b; BC Representative for Children and Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC, 2015; Brownell et al, 2015; Dewar & Goodman, 2014; Geenen et al, 2014; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Snow, 2013; Snow et al, 2013).

For example, the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2014) reported findings that foster youth in Washington State who accessed mentoring services were more likely to go on to college than those who did not. Similarly, Leone and Weinberg (2010) and the BC Representative for Children and Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC (2015, p. 87) supported implementation of evidence-based mentoring programs (e.g., Big Brothers, Big Sisters), which has been shown to result in significant decreases in violence, bullying, and risky behaviour, as well as increases in high school completion and enrolment in post-secondary education.

Similarly, Dewar and Goodman (2014) and Snow (2013; also see Snow et al, 2013) reported that pairing youth in/from care with former foster care youth as mentors had positive results. In Snow et al's (2013) Toronto-based Voyager Project, university students who were former youth in care were paired with incoming university students who were also former foster youth; the group provided peer support, mentoring and problem solving in relation to attaining educational goals. Lessons learned from this project include the value of peer support as a means to promote belonging, and the inter-connections between belonging and school achievement. Geenen et al's (2014) implementation and evaluation of the Better Futures project in Oregon demonstrated similar findings in terms of gains for former foster youth paired with a "near-peer" mentor. In describing lessons learned in the implementation of this

approach, Geenen and her colleagues also emphasized the importance of regular supervision of the "near-peer" mentors.

SYSTEMS-BASED: SCHOOL AND HOME/PLACEMENT STABILITY

Nearly all reviews of the literature and research/policy reports indicate that one of the most important factors for improving educational outcomes for children and youth in care is decreasing the number of placement changes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; 2014b; Brownell et al, 2015; Goodman & Burnett, 2014; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

Embedded within 'school and home stability' are a number of "sub-interventions", including ensuring that "education stability" is a focus/component of the child/youth's care plan, ensuring that there is a school-based liaison working with children/youth in care, and ensuring that children/youth in care have transportation-related support to enable them to attend their preferred school (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a).

SYSTEMS-BASED: INTER-SECTORAL COLLABORATION

On par with the importance of school and placement stability, collaboration across sectors — in particular education and child welfare systems - has been identified as one of the most universally-expressed, evidence-based factors to improve educational outcomes for children and youth in care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Goodman & Burnett, 2014; Leone & Weinberg, 2010). Inter-sectoral collaboration is needed to resolve complex social issues that are often beyond the scope and ability of a single institution or authority. Hence, multi-sector or inter-disciplinary coordination contribute to improved educational outcomes for at risk children and youth.

Moreover, having a clear mandate for interagency collaboration at an executive level (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a) and having strong leadership/champions and the willingness to devote resources and staff time to the process (Leone & Weinberg, 2010) have been noted as critical first steps toward achieving broad systemic change. Similarly, as

discussed by Ferguson and Wolkow (2012, p. 1147), strategies for facilitating and supporting interagency collaboration include:

- establishing clear guidelines of roles and responsibilities across agencies;
- resolving conflicting policies across systems;
- improving school records and information sharing protocols and procedures; and
- providing cross-training to develop trust and awareness of each other's systems.

Another suggestion identified in the literature is to ensure that students who are living in care are identified and tracked as a special population within the education system so that educators, child welfare practitioners and policy makers can work together to monitor foster youths' school attendance/achievement and learning needs and demonstrate collective responsibility for students' progress and outcomes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a). Rubin et al (2013) similarly promote the idea of data sharing and communication across systems to support collaborative, child-level case management, and have reported positive results of a community in which this is happening (e.g., Allegheny County, Pennsylvania).

Stemming from inter-sectoral collaboration, the approach of integrating delivery of education, child welfare and health services — e.g., co-locating education-related and other professionals who work with children and youth in care, including social workers — has been noted as promising (Creighton et al, 2014; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Rubin et al, 2013). Along these lines, Creighton et al (2014) have reported positive impacts of a wrap-around/hub model wherein educators, social service supports and specialized health care providers work together within an alternative high school as means to improve educational outcomes for youth in care; in addition, the school that was the focus of Creighton et al's (2014) study was co-located with a local child welfare office, alcohol and drug counselling, and other providers to improve youths' access to services and to strengthen inter-disciplinary collaboration.

SYSTEMS-BASED: REMOVING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

While the research literature has not focused extensively on the role of extra-curricular activities as a means to improve educational outcomes for youth in/from care, two reports spoke of the value of extra-curricular activities and the importance of removing barriers to participation for young people in foster care (Klitisch, 2010; Smith et al, 2007).

For example, Klitisch (2010) summarized literature demonstrating positive impacts of extracurricular activities for youth in foster care (e.g., in relation to reduced dropout rate; development of positive relationships with teachers and peers; feelings of positive connection with school) and identified US states that have taken notable steps toward removing these barriers. California and Colorado in particular waive fees for foster youth to participate in activities. In addition, based on their BC-wide survey of young people enrolled in alternative schools, Smith et al (2007) found that access to non-academic activities such as Food Safe, First Aid, as well as volunteer activities, life skills, and outdoor recreational programs were important to youth. These authors thus suggested that the creation of partnerships between school districts and community agencies in order to develop extra-curricular, volunteer and work experiences would be a useful approach to promoting school success for children and youth in care.

SYSTEMS-BASED: EXTENDING AGE AT WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE AGE OUT OF CARE

Discussion of evidence-based approaches to improving educational outcomes for youth in/from care would be incomplete if it did not include a most fundamental 'intervention': extending the age until which young people are in care or receive care-related supports. Grounded in research as well as policy analysis, this recommendation has been made by Canadian, US and UK-based scholars and advocates (Brownell et al, 2015, Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Munro et al, 2012; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

For example, Courtney and Dworsky's Midwest study found that educational outcomes of those who remained in foster care past age 18 were much better than those who had left care (Courtney et al., 2007, p. 12, as cited in Leone & Weinberg, 2010). In addition, while it is early days in terms of the implementation and evaluation of the Staying Put 18+ initiative in Scotland, Munro et al's (2012) research on the Staying Put 18+ Family Placement Pilot Programme examined ways in which the program offered a cohort of young people the opportunity to remain with their foster caregivers beyond the age of 18 and up to the age of 21. They reported that:

> Those 'staying put' were significantly more likely to be in full time education at 19 than their counterparts who did not stay put. Young people who stayed put were more than twice as likely to be in full time education at 19 compared to their counterparts who did not stay put (55% and 22% respectively) (Munro et al, 2012, p. 106).

SYSTEMS-BASED: CREATING A PLAN FOR ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE; GENERATING EVIDENCE; MONITORING OUTCOMES

The literature regarding improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal children in care is consistent with all of the above in terms of identification of the issues along with approaches that make a difference (Brownell et al 2015; BC Office of the Auditor General, 2015; Friesen & Krauth, 2012; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). However, according to Friesen and Krauth (2012), gaps exist in research/evaluation evidence to inform policy/program directions. To address this, Friesen and Krauth have emphasized that improvements to data collection are needed and that new programs and policies need to be consistently evaluated.

Along these lines, in BC the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) made numerous recommendations in its Draft Education Accountability Framework aimed at beginning this

process of building evidence and strengthening educational achievement (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2014). Of note are FNESC's recommendations that: Aboriginal children and youth in care in the education system be identified so that targeted resources can be directed toward supporting their educational progress and overall well-being; that funding be allocated to support release time for teachers in each BC school district to provide leadership and support for children in care by monitoring and supporting their learning plans; and that partnerships be developed between educators and Aboriginal communities to ensure that they are integrally involved in the design and delivery of Aboriginal programs. Additionally, steps toward improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students involve ensuring that Aboriginal history, language, and culture are valued and taught within the school system, and developing a system-wide strategy for closing the gaps in education (BC Auditor General, 2015).

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH: YOUTH HAVE SECURE HOUSING, INCOME AND FOOD SECURITY

Lastly, in identifying approaches to improve educational outcomes for youth in/from care, it is imperative to address issues not only systemically, but also from a social determinants of health lens. In this vein, a study on academic resilience amongst homeless youth in Ottawa showed that youth who were housed for longer periods of time were more likely to go to school (Liljedahl et al, 2013). The researchers stated:

> **Considering the important role that housing has been shown to play in promoting participation in school, educational programs and policies meant to engage homeless youth in school cannot ignore the fact that youth need to become stably housed if they are to be expected to attend school (Liljedahl et al, 2013, p. 279).**

In a similar vein, Albert, Penna-Cooper and Downing (2015) found that school engagement was identified as being a key protective factor, as was teaching life skills in high school, in terms of pathways out of homelessness amongst vulnerable youth.

PERSPECTIVES OF FORMER YOUTH IN CARE:
SCHOOL EXPERIENCE AND CONNECTION

This section begins with a description of informants' demographic information and in-care experiences. Following this, youths' perspectives on their school experience and their views regarding what helps youth in/from care to complete school are provided.

AGE

Informants ranged in age from 19 to 36. As shown in Table 1, 35% of informants were 19 years old, 60% were 21 or under, and 25% of informants were over 25.

Table 1 Age of Informants

	#	%
Age 19	7	35%
Age 20-21	5	25%
Age 22-24	3	15%
Age 25-29	3	15%
Age 30-36	2	10%

ETHNICITY/CULTURAL BACKGROUND

There was considerable diversity in informants' ethnic/cultural background, with 35% being of European/Caucasian descent, 50% being Aboriginal or Aboriginal-mixed background, 5% being of Asian descent, and 10% being either "not sure" or providing no answer to this question. The percentage of youth informants in this project who self-identified as Aboriginal is roughly comparable to the overall

percentage of BC CYIC with a Continuing Care Order who are Aboriginal (BC Ministry of Education, 2014).

PARENTING STATUS

Three informants had a child or children. All these informants were female, and all were over 25, though one had had a child while she was still in foster care herself.

HIGHEST GRADE COMPLETED

Nine of the 20 youth informants (45%) had graduated/completed Grade 12. Despite the very small size of our sample, this mirrors the provincial high school completion rate of youth in care. As well, seven informants (35%) reported that Grade 11 was the highest grade completed, which parallels provincial findings indicating that the drop-out rate of youth in care with a CCO after Grade 11 or during Grade 12 is noteworthy (BC Representative for Children and Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer of BC, 2015).

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT CONNECTION TO SCHOOL?

As an initial interview question school experience, former youth in care informants were asked about their current connection to school.

Seven informants were currently enrolled in school. Of these, five were 18-19 years old and four of the

Figure 3 Informants' Self-identified
Ethnicity/Cultural Background

- European/Caucasian
- Aboriginal
- Mixed: Aboriginal/Caucasian
- Mixed: Aboriginal/Caribbean
- Asian
- Not Sure
- No Answer

35% / 35% / 10% / 5% / 5% / 5% / 5%
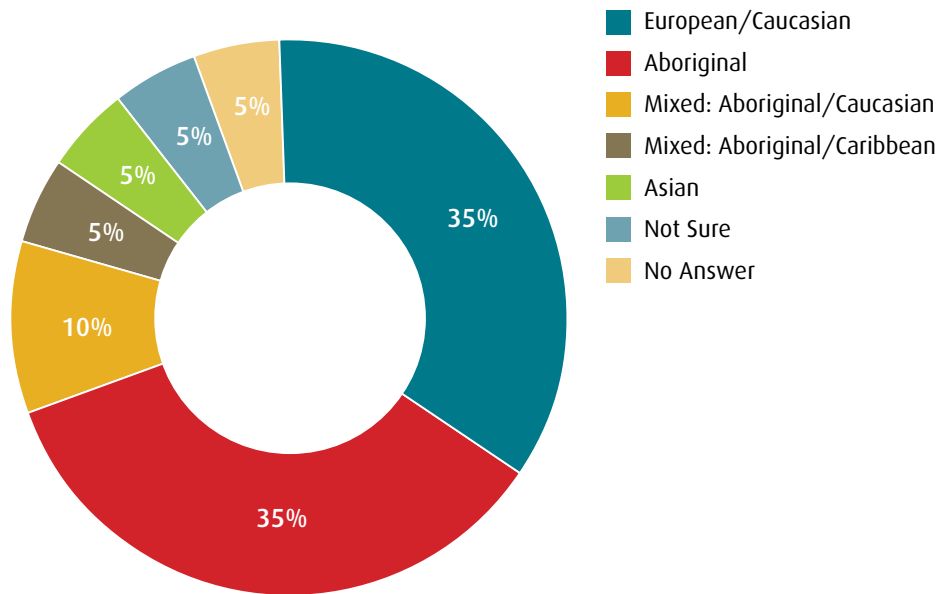
Figure 4 Informants' Level of Education
Highest Grade Completed

- Grade 9
- Grade 10
- Grade 11
- Grade 12 (Leaving school certificate)
- Grade 12 (Dogwood)
- Some post-secondary
- Graduated post-secondary

5% / 15% / 35% / 5% / 20% / 10% / 10%
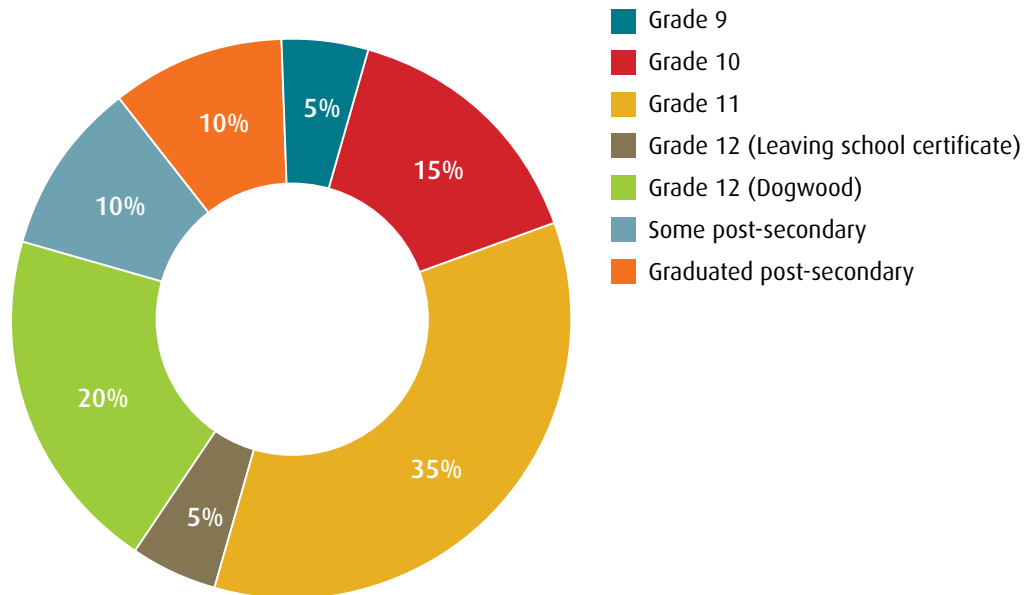
five were in the process of completing high school. One of these youth also had already registered for courses at a local college and spoke of her plans to transfer to university after her first year at college. The other two informants who were currently attending school were enrolled in post-secondary programs: one was doing a six-month hair-dressing program and the other was doing a college-based diploma program.

IN-CARE EXPERIENCE

AGE FIRST IN CARE

Forty per cent of our sample of youth informants (n=8) had gone into foster care at age 16 or older.

YEARS IN CARE X # PLACEMENTS

The data suggested a relationship between the number of years in care and the number of placements in which informants had lived. Seven had been in only 1-2 placements; all of these informants had been in care five years or less. One informant who had been in care for more than 11 years reported living in 46 placements, while another reported living in "too many to count".

OF COMMUNITIES IN WHICH INFORMANTS HAD LIVED

Roughly one third of informants (n=7) had lived in 1-2 communities growing up; 30% had lived in 3-4; and 35% had lived in more than five. One youth said: "I can't even count — around 12".

OF ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOLS THAT INFORMANTS ATTENDED

While the majority of informants (65%) went to only 1-2 elementary schools, there was less stability in informants' high school experience: 65% attended at least three high schools, and 25% attended more than five high schools.

EVER ON (SEMI-) INDEPENDENT LIVING OR YOUTH AGREEMENT

The majority of informants had been on the Independent Living program or on a Youth Agreement.

Age Entering Foster Care

Birth – 5 years	n=6
6 – 15 years	n=6
16+	n=8

Table 2 Number of Years in Care x Number of Placements

	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	11+ years
# Placements				
1-2	n=5	n=2		
3-5	n=2	n=2	n=1	n=1
6-8	n=1	n=2		
9+	n=1			n=3

Table 3 Number of Elementary and High Schools attended by Informants

	Elementary school	High school
1-2 schools	65%	35%
3-4 schools	20%	40%
5+ schools	15%	25%

Table 4 Enrollment in Independent Living or Youth Agreement

	Independent Living	Youth Agreement
Yes	65%	75%
No	30%	25%
Not sure	5%	0%

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY INSTABILITY FOR CYIC AND RELATIONSHIP WITH COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL

"MOVING AROUND" – NUMBER OF COMMUNITIES THAT INFORMANTS HAD LIVED IN

Since stability in community — or lack thereof — typically is related to the number of schools that youth attend, and frequency of school moves is a risk factor for lack of high school completion, informants were asked about the number of communities in which they had lived growing up.

Of the seven informants who had lived in only 1-2 communities growing up, five had completed high school. By contrast, of the seven informants who had lived in more than 5 communities, only two completed high school.

"SWITCHING SCHOOLS" – NUMBER OF HIGH SCHOOLS THAT INFORMANTS ATTENDED

Of the five informants who had attended more than five high schools, only one had completed high school. By contrast, 57% (4 out of 7) of the informants who had gone to 1-2 high schools completed high school. Speaking of the frequency of school moves, these informants stated:

New school every year, except this past year.

I went to four high schools before getting expelled.

Of the 13 young adult informants who were not currently attending school:

- 7 had completed/graduated high school
- 5 had not graduated high school, although 1 was registered to go back to school in September 2015 to complete high school through Adult Education), and
- 1 was not sure whether he had completed high school.

Several youth who were not currently connected to school recognized the value of furthering their education but spoke of significant challenges to pursuing post-secondary education, such as having to secure housing and/or funding for their courses or living expenses; navigating this on their own was stressful. In informants' words:

I still have a connection to Douglas College but I'm not attending. I'm not planning to go back anytime soon; I can't afford to go and don't want to go right now. It was a lot

of stress on me to go to school and to get my school paid for. I have to attend full-time but then I have to work full-time to pay for living expenses.

No. I'm trying to get back into school. I'm trying to get my life together. I want to use an AYA to get ahead. I want to get financially stable.

DID YOU FEEL CONNECTED TO SCHOOL?

Three quarters of the youth informants (n=16) reported feeling connected to their school, and of these, most (11/16) voiced a very strong connection to school and school staff. For some, school was "the constant" and a place that anchored them amidst unpredictable and seemingly uncontrollable events at home or in care.

Yes. I was furious when my school told me I had to leave. When I got here, I realized how supported I had been. After I moved from my

foster home — because my foster parent got fired — I was very upset and angry. The best home situation I had got ripped out from under me, so school became the constant in my life.

I just liked being at school. I liked it more than being at home.

Youth stated that school personnel (teachers, counsellors) were the people in their lives who provided support and conveyed a sense of belonging, and they were the ones with whom informants shared their experience of family conflict ("getting kicked out at home"), placement changes, and intense feelings of upset and anger arising from highly stressful and often traumatic life circumstances.

When I was kicked out at home, the first thing I did was go to the school and tell them. I had nowhere else. . . . At [my school] there was a personal touch again, similar to [my former community].

Some teachers made me feel like I belonged.

Moreover, one informant reported appreciating that teachers and other key adults in her life, including her social worker and foster parent, focused on her needs during a time when she felt alone, on her own, and yet still in need of a caring adult's watchful eye.

In Vancouver, I had structure again. I had a social worker, probation officer, foster parent, teachers, and the [specialized foster] home. Everyone was focused on me and on making sure that I was in school.

School also provided a purpose and focus for the day. In reflecting on their school connection, some informants spoke of their achievements and/or academic pursuits, such as writing, and the support they received from teachers related to these interests.

I did [feel connected to school] — It gave me something to do, something to wake up for. I regret skipping school now.

Yes, I really felt like my writing was encouraged there.

In [my former small community school], I was connected. I had 'A's. I had known everyone at the school.

In addition, some youth reported being very connected to sports, music and/or extracurricular activities at school.

I felt connected to my school counsellor, Band and Rotary Club. These were all important to me.

As well, school was where friends were and provided opportunities for supportive peer relationships.

Everyone is at school, my friends.

In contrast with these comments, two informants expressed mixed feelings about whether they felt connected to school. While they experienced and appreciated support from some teachers, they also spoke of not being very involved in school activities. As one youth stated:

I did and I didn't [feel connected to school] at the same time. I wasn't part of any extra-curricular activities.

Lastly, two informants reported "not really" feeling connected to (high) school. One student stated that she was "picked on" by other students, and teachers did not intervene.

WAS BEING AT SCHOOL EVERY DAY A PRIORITY FOR YOU? DID ANYONE TRACK YOUR ATTENDANCE OR TALK WITH YOU OR YOUR GUARDIAN WHEN/IF YOU MISSED SCHOOL?

More than half of informants (n=12) stated that regular attendance was a priority for them and that they went to school most days if not every day. Some informants said that they were internally motivated to go to school and that they were committed to graduating.

> Education was important to me. I wanted to say that I graduated. I knew the statistics about Aboriginal kids and those in foster care, and I didn't want to be a statistic. . . . Everyone wanted me to graduate, but it was up to me to be motivated.

> No one really noticed if I attended, but education was important to me so I always attended. Being in foster care was better than living at home, so I saw it as an opportunity and I wanted to do well to say thank you.

Another informant stated that his regular attendance was motivated by the desire to participate in sports teams, as well as his desire to adhere to family expectations.

> Yes, in order to keep up my sports, I needed to have perfect attendance. In order to keep my parents happy, I needed perfect attendance.

A number of informants also noted that regular attendance hadn't been as much of a priority to them at earlier points in their school career, but as they got older and/or with the help of someone who tracked their attendance and encouraged/supported them to get to school, attendance had improved.

> Recently it has been a priority. I'm hoping to finish the GED this week.

> Attendance wasn't a priority until I moved in with [the teacher at my current school]. I saw it as an opportunity. Attending school was all that [the teacher] asked of me – to graduate. Attending school wasn't a priority for my family.

Along these lines, one informant told us that the tracking of and support for her to maintain regular attendance came about as the combined and coordinated efforts of three people: a concerned teacher, a school counsellor and her youth worker, who each monitored her school attendance and communicated with each other and with her if attendance was lagging, in keeping with a condition of her Youth Agreement.

> Yes, regular attendance was a priority for me,

and yes, there was someone who was tracking my attendance. There were three people: my teacher for my Marketing class, plus my youth worker and my school counsellor. They knew I was on a Youth Agreement. My teacher and I had had a conversation about being on a Youth Agreement and being motivated. And part of my Youth Agreement was that my youth workers and my counsellor had to talk to each other (and make sure I was attending school). It was both good and bad, but it got me there enough to graduate.

This example is similar to the situation of another youth informant (cited above) who spoke of the value of having her social worker, probation officer, teachers, and specialized caregivers all be actively working together to ensure that she went to school regularly.

At the same time, about one third of informants stated that regular school attendance was variable and wasn't always a priority for them. For at least two of these youth, mental health issues, such as feeling depressed, "fed up" or conflicted at times got in the way of attending school. Nevertheless, even amongst the informants for whom regular school attendance was not a high priority, having someone who tracked and encouraged their attendance made a positive difference in terms of going to school.

> My foster parents did keep track for the most part. They told me, "You have to go to school". But they didn't teach the value of school. Going every day wasn't necessarily a priority, but I did go to school most days. I didn't go if I was feeling depressed.

> Looking back, yes, attendance was important, but at certain times it wasn't important to me. During the last couple of years of high school, I was skipping a lot. The counsellors tracked my attendance and brought my parents in for meetings about my performance in school. They talked to me about my attendance too.

In response to the question focusing on whether there was someone who monitored regular school attendance, the majority of informants stated that

someone did track their attendance at one or more of the schools they attended. Moreover, most of these informants noted that it was a teacher, counsellor or youth worker from their alternative school who checked in with them about attendance. Several informants voiced their belief that teachers and staff at mainstream schools were too busy with the demands of large classes to track their attendance.

> I was going on time, every day. The youth worker at [the] alternative school tracked my attendance. At the mainstream school, no one tracked my attendance. At the mainstream school, there was a counsellor who I could go to when I had struggles with the curriculum, but she juggled lots of kids in a large school. She was sweet, but it wasn't the same as at [the alternative school].

> In alternative school, they did track it; at my regular high school, no.

In addition to teachers, counsellors and school-based youth workers, two informants reported that their support worker from a community-based agency checked in with them on a regular basis regarding their school attendance.

> My counsellor checked in with me daily. Another counsellor at the school would call everyone who didn't come that day. Also, the support worker at Aunt Leah's would check in on me; it was supportive.

As well, two informants noted that their foster parents tracked their school attendance. At the same time, both of these young people indicated that their foster parents' expressions of concern about their attendance did not have much impact, which may have been a reflection of some strain in their relationships.

> I'd always go to school, but my class attendance was a problem sometimes. My foster parents would express concern (about attendance), but I didn't always care about them.

Finally, several informants stated that no one really tracked their attendance. Two of these youth commented that teachers would take attendance, mark absences, and penalize students for lateness; however, this was experienced as being inflexible and punitive rather than as teachers having concern about students' whereabouts or well-being.

> Most days I tried to get to school, but they'd lock the door if you were late. You'd be made to wait till the first break, and it counted as if you weren't there in terms of attendance. Even at the alternative school, it was like this.

WAS (HIGH) SCHOOL DIFFICULT? WHEN DID THIS START FOR YOU?

Approximately half of the youth informants stated that they found school to be difficult, while the other half said that it was not. At the same time, two informants commented that they found school to be frustrating — as opposed to difficult — because they viewed many of the subjects to be irrelevant to their lives. As well, two of the informants who said that school was not difficult went on to say that their poor performance was due to their lack of interest in school or their involvement in alcohol or drugs. One informant again noted that, rather than being difficult, school was a very positive place because of its structure and predictability. A sample of informants' comments follows.

> High school was hard, yes; it's horrible. Studies often are frustrating. I sometimes had panic attacks.

> When I went, it wasn't easy. If I had help from someone for tutoring, I may have stayed around. The only person who helped me with homework was the Aboriginal Support Worker. The teachers ignored me; they didn't like me. They just cared whether I handed in the work or not.

> School wasn't really difficult. School was the place where I had structure and accountability, and where I knew what was expected of me. It wasn't like there was a fear of things being pulled out from under me.

HOW ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL DIFFERS FROM MAINSTREAM SCHOOL

There was considerable consistency in informants' comments about the ways in which alternative schools differed from mainstream schools. Positive aspects included:

- More personal attention, one-to-one support from teachers/staff; small class size
- Classes can be self-paced; more flexibility; more choice
- Comfortable atmosphere; feel welcome
- Youth worker was available to provide support
- Kitchen and lunch/food program made a difference
- Wrap-around support/support in other areas of my life

Several informants noted that teachers or staff seemed highly attuned to students' strengths and circumstances and offered personalized support to help ensure they had what they needed to succeed in school. In fact, one informant who had aged out and was homeless shared that her teacher had provided her with a place to live for the duration of the school year.

> The last few months, I wasn't attending school much. The teacher called and asked me what was up. I didn't have a place to live. I was 19 and out of care with nowhere to go. The teacher offered me a place to live 'til I finished school.

> They're more attentive, helpful; they have more time for you. . . . [The teacher] texts me all the time and says, "Are you coming in?". At the mainstream school it was hit or miss whether they'd look out for you. There were so many students.

> The counsellor at the mainstream school had been dismissive of my taking First Nation Studies — she said that course wasn't important. Between the counsellor and the unsupportive teachers, I didn't want to go back. I told them at the alternative school what my poor subjects were — English and Socials. They suggested I take First Nations studies. I completed that course with a 98%.

As well, informants valued the welcoming atmosphere that they experienced, and one informant noted that he felt a sense of connection with other students at the alternative school, given some common experiences. In terms of alternative schools' flexible approach, informants stated:

> Alternative schools are self-paced, flexible; I can strive for my own goals. That's created more responsibility for me; I get to choose what I want to learn.

Other informants spoke of having access to resources at alternative schools that helped them address needs in different areas of their lives:

> Also, they had a big kitchen, with food — lunches and/or breakfasts. Basic nutrition is really important, especially when you're on semi-independent living.

By contrast, relatively few informants identified any negative aspects of alternative schools. One theme that emerged, raised by several informants, pertained to the relatively slow pace. In addition, one informant was critical of the other students ("lots of drugs; kids were gangsters") attending her alternative school, and reported that although she didn't have problems, she found these students to be intimidating.

DID YOU ATTEND AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL? IF SO, HOW WAS THIS EXPERIENCE?

Fifteen of the 20 youth informants attended alternative school(s). Of the 15, two thirds described their alternative school experience very positively. Indeed, five noted that it was their most positive school experience; some went on to say that they would not have graduated if it weren't for alternative school. Along similar lines, one informant believed that he would have successfully completed school had he stayed at his alternative school.

> I never felt like I really meshed with a regular high school. I used to have really bad social anxiety. I really didn't care about anything. I had a crummy relationship at home that affected everything. . . . Moving to an alternative school was good. I liked the small class size and the extra attention from teachers. School became a happy place where I could get away from home and bad relationships.

> There were lots of days when I didn't go to school in the regular school. I couldn't get out of bed. I was willing to do the work but I wasn't always able to get in the building. I could go to the alternative school and just work at my own pace, and that's what works best for me. . . . I would not have graduated high school if I had not gone to an alternative school.

At the same time, five informants spoke of having mixed or negative experiences. For example, while one youth was positive about having augmented one-to-one support and flexibility, and an option of taking "normal" and/or self-paced classes, he also said that being at an alternative school made him feel "dumber" than attending a mainstream school. Another said she felt "babied — like daycare for teenagers", while a third stated felt she was forced to go to the alternative school because she was reputed to be "a bad kid".

No one spoke of having attended an Aboriginal school, learning centre or program.

DO YOU FEEL SAFE AT SCHOOL?

Feeling safe at school has been linked to broader educational outcomes and to other dimensions of health and well-being. For example, BC-based researchers have demonstrated that youth who felt safe at school and had good relationships with staff and peers reported better health and a greater likelihood of planning to go on to post-secondary education (Smith et al, 2015, p. 7; Tsuruda et al, 2012). Feeling safe at school also was linked to lower levels of substance use amongst youth (Smith et al, 2011).

In the current study, all but one informant reported feeling safe at school, with 15 of 20 young people saying unequivocally that they felt safe, and four reporting that they felt safe "for the most part".

Moreover, in keeping with themes reported previously, a couple of young people reiterated that, in contrast to home, school was the place in which they did feel safe. Interestingly, one of the informants who were less certain in their response noted that her potential concerns about safety had to do with worries that a parent would come to the school rather than because of bullying, peer conflict or an unsafe school environment.

A sample of informants' comments regarding their sense of safety follows.

> Yes, at all of them. School was a place to go to for help. It was the only real structure in my life — for example, when I was kicked out of my home, I went to school to talk.

> I felt safe at [my alternative school] and at my regular school. I didn't like my experience at high school overall, but I felt safe.

> For the most part I felt safe, but in high school I was always wary — unsure if my mom was going to show up unexpectedly. If I didn't feel safe, it was because of that.

In contrast to all other informants, one youth stated that he "sometimes" felt safe, but that he was "jumped" by a number of classmates, which was traumatic. Following that experience, he reported feeling "babied" by school staff until he ultimately left the school.

PEER SUPPORT: DID YOU HAVE FRIENDS WHO WOULD BE UPSET IF YOU DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL?

More than half of informants (n=11) said they had a friend or friends who would be upset if they dropped out of school. Several noted that their friends were happy about their accomplishments and provided support to one another to graduate from school.

> I think they would be disappointed. My friends are really happy with my accomplishments.

> Yes. A lot! All of us graduated together.

As well, one informant commented that in addition to encouragement, one friend provided her with transportation that enabled them to remain at the same school together:

> One friend would go out of her way to pick me up and we'd go to school together. Not finishing school wasn't an option for these friends.

At the same time, nearly half of informants indicated that either they did not have any friends who would have been upset by their not completing school, or their friends had already graduated, so they grew out of step with their peers. Similarly, one informant noted that because he had changed foster homes, schools and communities so much, he no longer stayed connected with his friends and thus did not have friends who would have been upset by his leaving school without graduating.

> My friends from my past foster home would have been upset. But I bounced around so much, I didn't have time to make or have friends who'd be upset. I was a leaf in the wind.

OVERALL, WHAT KEPT YOU COMING TO SCHOOL?

Finally, as a way of wrapping up this part of the interview, informants were asked what kept them coming to school. Themes emerging in response to this question included:

- Internal motivation to graduate
- School was a safe alternative to home, in which I felt a sense of control
- School staff / foster parent encouraged/ supported me
- Friends
- Parents'/family's wishes or expectations
- MCFD program/placement required school attendance

Understandably, some informants' responses reflected two or more of these themes.

Interestingly, the theme that was voiced most frequently by youth was their internal motivation to finish school. Seven informants said that they kept coming to school so that they could graduate. One wanted to graduate ahead of her younger siblings, while another stated that she knew she would improve her "life chances" with a high school diploma. Moreover, one informant was motivated to complete high school by her early 20s so she could access funding opportunities for FYIC that she would "age out of" and be denied by age 24. In informants' words:

> Reflecting on how few of my siblings had their high school diploma, nor did my mom, I knew that my life chances would be better with high school diploma.

> At age 23, knowing that I have grants and bursaries I can apply for, but that these opportunities end by 24. That's the driving force for me now.

A second strong theme was that school was a safe, "normal" and predictable alternative to being at home:

> School was the only place where there was normalcy. There was safety in coming to school. You don't realize it at the time. There was a sense of control. I felt empowered. If I studied, I'd do well. It gave me a sense of control in an environment where, otherwise, there wasn't much control.

> The school is the only constant in my life.

Similarly, five informants said they kept coming to school because their teacher(s), caregiver and other supportive adults in their life continued to encourage them to attend.

In addition, five informants stated that friends kept them coming to school:

> My friends at school. When I'm not there, they rag on me.

As well, several informants said that they kept coming to school to honour family values or in keeping with a parent's wishes:

> My mom wanted me to graduate. She passed away. She wanted me to be a good influence/example for my younger brothers.

> My aunt had said education was the key to freedom. That stuck with me.

Lastly, several informants stated that their Ministry of Children and Family Development program (e.g., Independent Living or Youth Agreement) or their foster placement required them to attend school.

PARTING WORDS

By way of concluding the interviews, youth informants were invited to share any parting words of final comments they might have. A brief discussion of these themes follows.

DESIRE FOR CONTINUITY, RELATIONSHIP ("BONDING TIME)" WITH SOCIAL WORKER, TEACHER; NO AGE LIMITS FOR INVOLVEMENT WITH PROGRAMS/SUPPORT PEOPLE

By far the strongest theme in informants' 'parting words' pertained to their desire for continuity and having more time with their social worker, teachers

in mainstream school, and having no age cut-offs for program involvement or relationship-based support. Notably, some youth expressed a desire for a relationship with their social worker, who was in a position to be a powerful ally. In youths' words:

> I really wish that social workers wouldn't change hands so much. They passed me along a lot. Right after introductions, they passed me along.

> Social workers are very busy people. It should be mandatory for social workers to have bonding time with their kids.

> I aged out of [the housing program], so I feel I'm experiencing what people who do age out of care feel. It's stressful. It can put your whole world upside down. Aunt Leah's doesn't have age limits. I feel so stable and grateful for Aunt Leah's.

PROMOTING THE IMPORTANCE OF POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS

Another theme that emerged related to applying and accessing funding for, and attending, post-secondary education. Three informants spoke of their strong internal motivation to attend a post-secondary program. At the same time, these informants also emphasized the importance of having supportive adults in youths' lives to "instil the importance of education", inform them about post-secondary opportunities (including financial support), and to provide assistance, if needed, to ensure post-secondary success.

> I want to get an AYA before I turn 24. I want to complete high school so I can get into the Dental Assistant program. I want to be able to say I did it on my own terms. It's about motivation, plus having a few good people around you.

> If kids know that they have a future it might be an incentive for them to graduate. Everyone needs to be thinking about our future. Should be their responsibility to make sure we get the information and the support we need to be successful.

VALUE OF CO-LOCATING SCHOOL AND SOCIAL WORKER TO SUPPORT EDUCATION

One informant spoke of the value of having her social worker and her school co-located in the same building. This helped her to initially get connected to the school and then promoted her regular access to her social worker in a setting in which she felt "welcome, not unwanted or a burden".

NEED FOR READY ACCESS TO COUNSELLOR/MENTAL HEALTH WORKER

Another informant spoke of the importance of ensuring that all youth in/from care have barrier-free access to a counsellor or mental health professional, to assist in addressing issues related to abuse, neglect or maltreatment. This would include access to culturally relevant mental health and counselling services.

> I went through multiple forms of abuse growing up. That caused self-hatred. . . . I think it should be mandatory for youth in care to have access to and see a counsellor.

APPRECIATION FOR WORK BEING DONE TO HELP YOUTH IN CARE IMPROVE THEIR EDUCATION

Lastly, one informant expressed appreciation that work — such as the current project — was being undertaken to help youth in/from care improve their education.

5

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN FINDINGS

5A. BARRIERS TO COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL FOR YOUTH IN/FROM CARE

Environmental scan informants were asked about barriers to high school completion for students in care. Their responses were highly consistent with the literature in that they revealed two broad categories of themes: 1) **systemic barriers**, such as lack of leadership to implement systemic or inter-sectoral change, lack of cross-sectoral information-sharing to identify and support CYIC, frequent placement, school and/or community changes, turnover of social workers, lack of an education navigator/guide and/or a consistent advocate, being in programs such as Independent Living or Youth Agreement before really having the life skills and support networks to manage, and lack of transition-related supports; and 2) **personal challenges/barriers**, in particular unresolved mental health issues, trauma, and poverty (which may be viewed as is a systemic barrier as much as it is a personal challenge). Discussion of these themes follows.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

LACK OF LEADERSHIP TO IMPLEMENT SYSTEMIC OR INTER-SECTORAL CHANGE

BC environmental scan informants agreed that leadership was required in order to substantially address and improve educational outcomes for CYIC. While informants believed that leadership existed at the school board level, despite the Cross-Ministry Guidelines for cooperation between the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Ministry for Education, some informants suggested that provincial leadership was inconsistent or that there wasn't a strong overall mandate for prioritizing inter-sectoral collaboration to improve educational outcomes for youth in/from care.

> *There is no one with responsibility to say what should be happening — too many loopholes. We're already working with kids with lots of problems so it isn't helpful that the system doesn't show interest. We need a coordinated effort with a mandate to behave in that way. We need leadership from the top.*

For example, despite Cross-Ministry Guidelines that every school in BC is mandated to have a designated advocate for CYIC, two environmental scan informants stated that it was up to individual schools and school districts to decide how to implement the Guidelines. In other words, there was no oversight provincially and no one leading the way to make this a priority. Consequently, when environmental scan informants were asked about the Cross-Ministry Guidelines in Joint Educational Planning and Support for Children and Youth in Care (2008), awareness was uneven; most BC informants didn't know about the Guidelines, or if they did, weren't able to readily identify the 'point person' in their area.

Moreover, informants expressed concern that without overall leadership at a provincial level,

implementation of the Guidelines would vary by community or region, based on the presence — or absence — of committed champions. As well, unless codified through formal agreements, once a champion or leader departed, the commitment to working collaboratively to make educational progress for CYIC a priority was not as secure.

Further, from a community perspective, the lack of leadership at a systems/government level put community agencies in the position of trying to fill the gaps to support CYIC, despite not having reliable funding or a formal role within the education or child welfare systems to do so. This can also leave agencies negotiating on a class by class or school by school basis to be recognized as having a credible role to play. In the words of one informant:

The problem in BC is the silo approach. There isn't a lot of movement outside of each ministry's mandate, and the school boards have their own mandates. So it falls to the non-profits or community to fill the gap. There is no leader in the conversation.

LACK OF CROSS-SECTORAL INFORMATION SHARING TO IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT CYIC

According to key informants in BC and Ontario, a first step toward improving educational outcomes is to know which students are involved in the child welfare system. That said, environmental scan informants in BC noted that this information wasn't always readily available. As well, as one person noted, gauging what to do with the information was challenging when there wasn't an explicit framework for its use.

It's not easy to say what percentage of our students is in care. There is no flag on the education record or database to indicate that they are there and can access added supports. We also can't track whether a child has left the school to go to another community or has dropped out.

EDUCATION ISN'T A FOREMOST PRIORITY FOR CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM, GIVEN ITS PROTECTION FOCUS

A related systemic challenge, expressed by several environmental scan informants, was that education did not seem to be a top priority for the child welfare ministry, given its primary focus on child/youth safety. Informants' views were grounded in their experience of social workers' infrequent participation in education planning meetings or having school attendance for CYIC be a priority. According to one informant, this left the education system owning the 'problem'.

Education is often not on the child's care plan — education often is at the bottom of the list, even though connection to community and school is a huge issue. School is not seen as a child protection issue — there is no flag to say that the kid isn't going to school.

Similarly, other key informants said that not having social workers at school-based meetings was not only discouraging, it sent the wrong message to youth.

We don't see the social workers much in the school-based meetings. This is discouraging because attendance is a big barrier, so if the social worker doesn't care, the youth won't.

Further, for one informant, this spoke to a larger problem of social workers — along with other people in foster youths' lives, as well as society more broadly — not having expectations of CYIC to do well in school.

(There are) no expectations from the social worker that [youth] will do well; that's a real barrier.

Two people commented that part of the issue, from their perspective and experience, was the reality that child welfare workers were overwhelmed with crises and meeting day to day demands on their time.

[Child welfare] social workers are so busy with crises, dealing with life and death stuff, that education falls off the table. They are dealing daily with chaos.

FREQUENT CHANGES IN PLACEMENTS, SCHOOLS, COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL WORKERS; LACK OF CONTINUITY RESULTS IN EDUCATION LAGS AND LOSS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS/CAPITAL

Multiple changes in CYICs' lives — related to their placement, school or social worker — were seen as a major barrier when it came to forming stable and lasting connections with schools, teachers, foster parents, friends, and so forth. Without these relationships, children and youth potentially were without a supportive and healthy social network and thus were more vulnerable. Reflecting this theme, one informant stated:

> *A barrier is instability — lots of placement changes. And related to this, with lots of school changes there are difficulties following the curriculum, and then youth in care have to build new relationships with peers and teachers.*

Related to this point, youth informants stated:

> The lack of stable, good placements. Not being more supported — encouraged — the way you'd support your children.

> Because of family problems and going back and forth to foster homes, I've never really had a chance.

Similarly, another environmental scan informant noted that frequent placements had a ripple effect that was difficult for CYIC to overcome.

> *The moment we make school unstable, we create challenges for students that are ultimately difficult to overcome.*

Similarly, one youth said:

> After Grade 10, I moved to another town, and by Grade 11, going to school wasn't a priority.

Tied to this theme, several informants reflected that students who moved frequently were not only left behind academically, they also missed out on the opportunity to develop a sense of competence, accomplishment, and to create and strengthen their support networks. In the words of two informants:

> *One thing that impacts youth in care so much is moving around — transience — moving from community to community. It has a huge impact on school continuity; youth lose support and their social networks.*

> *Some kids have been in so many schools, they just aren't interested anymore and they've lost their sense of competence.*

LACKING ADEQUATE EDUCATIONAL SUPPORTS

Several informants noted that a high number of children and youth in care have learning disabilities and thus required extra help such as tutoring or assistance with homework in order to progress. One informant in Ontario summed it up in this way:

> *About 80% of CIC have a special needs designation. Knowing that a large percentage have learning disabilities, the key is to have learning assessments and then interventions that are tailored to meet their needs.*

Nine of the 20 youth informants in this study reported that they had a learning disability.

Another informant reflected that the combination of cognitive difficulties and environments that weren't equipped to assist with homework made it challenging for CYIC to do well at school.

> *Foster parents aren't equipped to support children and youth in care with homework, and having someone available to help with homework, especially in a group home environment with 6-8 youth and two staff doesn't happen. There just isn't enough support for youth with educational needs.*

LACK OF AN EDUCATION-RELATED 'CHAMPION' (NAVIGATOR/GUIDE) FOR CYIC

Similar to the preceding theme, two informants noted that, in contrast to a typical family environment, children and youth in care didn't have a strong champion or guide to advocate for their educational needs or to encourage their educational accomplishments.

> *Those who struggle are the ones who are without champions to help them with what they want to do.*

BECOMING INDEPENDENT TOO EARLY

The practice of putting youth into Ministry programs such as, in BC, Independent Living or a Youth Agreement was viewed as another impediment to creating healthy and positive social networks and community/school attachment. In the view of some environmental scan informants, youth were encouraged and/or pushed toward independence without having adequate and consistent supports from an adult such as a social worker or foster parent and this left them vulnerable to negative influences. It also meant that youth were responsible for all of the day-to-day aspects of living including getting to school every day, with or without adequate life skills and supports.

> *Being placed on Independent Living too early and when not attached to a caregiver or strong advocate, youth can easily get into poor peer group and substance use. Everything day to day takes precedence over school completion.*

> *Almost 100% of those on Youth Agreements have no support; a once a year meeting with a social worker is often the norm unless something special comes up such as moving.*

This view was also shared by Ontario-based informants, who cited research showing a link between poor school performance and becoming independent too early.

> *At age 16, YIC start thinking about aging out; they move to semi-independent living or group homes and those moves are disastrous. When*

we reviewed Grade 10, 11, 12 students, we could see that those youth who stayed in the foster home did okay in school, but those with unstable housing did very poorly.

Similarly, youth stated:

> Having support and having housing — the main things that everyone has.

Finally, as voiced by a BC-based educator, the confluence of school transience and living circumstances may compound a history of poor school performance and ultimately contribute to further school avoidance.

> *The biggest barriers are living circumstance, for example being on a Youth Agreement and having to manage one's own life, rental, work and roommates, plus lots of school changes that contribute to a lack of self-confidence and history of not feeling good at school. Youth start to avoid going to school because they don't feel competent.*

INSUFFICIENT TRANSITION SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH RELATED TO AGING OUT OF CARE

Informants noted that youth also struggled with the transition out of care. In their view, youth lacked life skills to prepare them for being on their own and also lacked support to access information, guidance and resources related to post-secondary opportunities.

> *We had a youth who aged out at 19. She fell apart at age 19. She didn't know how to apply for [post-secondary funding] or do on-line course selection, how to navigate that. I think it is a crime that youth have no supports post age of majority.*

> *Most former foster youth crash and burn at transition. The supports aren't available for them anymore. That really impacts their ability to apply for post secondary right away and that is why they wait until they are in their mid 20s.*

PERSONAL CHALLENGES/BARRIERS

Almost all environmental scan informants agreed that mental health, trauma, and intergenerational trauma were significant barriers for youth in care, affecting all aspects of their lives, including school, relationships, transitions, and housing stability. As well, their comments reflected their appreciation that these issues were related to other barriers to education success, such as poverty, poor family connections, and multiple moves. Nevertheless, the experience of mental health issues and trauma for children and youth in care was a predominant theme that ran throughout the interviews.

> *Barriers to completing school are anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, poor connections with family members, and poor connections with community resources. For youth in care, trauma is a constant throughout; they are more likely to have more PTSD and therefore more anxiety and depression.*

Youth spoke powerfully about how mental health challenges created significant barriers to school attendance and completion:

It's like a huge hill that's impossible to get over. It's very foreboding.

Environmental scan informants also noted that, for former youth in care, the experience of unresolved trauma was a key barrier to accessing and/or successfully engaging with post-secondary programs:

> *We heard from a group of former youth in care (enrolled in post-secondary programs). They are still focused on their experience of being in care and not on their experience of being a student. Many are still dealing with trauma.*

Lastly, transportation and poverty were also cited as significant barriers for CYIC when it came to completing high school.

> *Transportation is a huge barrier as is stable housing. We give out bus tickets even though we are not supposed to.*

> *Poverty and finances — having enough money to pay for basic needs.*

5B. HELPING YOUTH IN/FROM CARE TO COMPLETE HIGH SCHOOL

Environmental scan informants were asked to identify approaches, practices, programs or policies that made a positive difference to high school completion for youth in/from care. Their responses were highly congruent with the literature and also may be linked to — i.e., as means to address — many of the barriers identified as impeding high school success. For example, providing food/meals in schools helps to address the barrier of poverty, while at the same time fostering positive relationships amongst CYIC and school staff.

Key themes identified by environmental scan informants included: using research and evidence to help guide development of programs and use of resources; using protocols to provide a clear mandate for multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral practice; valuing a relationship-based approach as well as an individualized, wrap around model; and the importance of mentoring and tutoring. Discussion of these and other themes follows.

GUIDING PHILOSOPHY, PROMISING APPROACHES, POLICIES AND PRACTICES

CORNERSTONE BELIEF: IMPORTANCE OF USING EVIDENCE TO INFORM PRACTICE AND POLICY

A number of informants described ways in which they had used evidence to inform decision-making, in view of their appreciation that research and statistical information helped them to identify strategies to improve rates of high school completion for CYIC.

> *The School District took 10 years of data and looked at the Social Service Index and then looked at five school indicators and found a high correlation between the SSI and: special*

needs; attendance/chronic absenteeism; and Aboriginal students. This information helps us to flag the schools and programs to which we need to provide more support.

The Aboriginal education worker took a leave and did research on why students aren't staying connected. This was the impetus for the Transition Worker positions in the Aboriginal Education Department. Their main focus is to re-connect youth to school.

Moreover, in keeping with research demonstrating a correlation between attendance and school success, several informants reported that they now consistently monitored attendance as a marker of whether a child or youth is potentially at risk:

Five years ago we did a study in the district of 660 kids who didn't graduate within six years. We asked ourselves, what did they have in common? Significant family dysfunction; poor attendance from a young age; struggles with literacy but not with learning disabilities. That is why we decided to monitor attendance — it is a good indication of how the kid is doing.

CORNERSTONE BELIEF: IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH, FOSTERING BELONGING

Many informants emphasized the fundamental importance of a relationship-based approach: CYIC did best and were more likely to feel attached and therefore to attend school when they had a strong, positive relationship with an adult whom they could trust.

Our school is very relationship-based. Students feel safe, respected; they feel good about coming to school. They have a positive relationship, maybe the only place where they have this. Positive peer relationships are the norm and are expected. When we have these relationships, we see students coming to school.

We believe that youth will commit to finishing school when they have a positive relationship with an adult, much like a parent. We spend time with them and function like a parent.

As noted by two informants, a relationship-based approach encompasses a deliberate strategy of breaking down barriers between staff and students. In the view of one educator, this approach lays the foundation for both academic and life-skills learning, including how to have respectful relationships and make healthy decisions. One informant stated:

We have a lunch program and there is no staff room or separate bathrooms. Everyone sits down to a meal together. Having lunch together and developing great relationships is really important. There is no swearing, no graffiti, and healthy food. The students tell us they feel safe; it's a flexible and calm environment. These factors bode well for graduation.

Similarly, as one youth stated:

The personal connection is crucial. I could talk with [my workers]. They were the only people in my life. They wanted to see me be successful. I'm still connected with those people two years later.

As well, in keeping with a relationship-based approach, one informant stressed the connection between youths' sense of belonging and their commitment to their education:

Belonging is key — to a club, to a school. Any kind of connection increases the youth's chance of completing Grade 12. Those kids who had no connection to community or school were quite likely to drop out.

SYSTEMS-BASED: FORMAL SIGNED AGREEMENT OR JOINT PROTOCOL

Improving educational outcomes for youth in/from care requires a multi-sectoral approach, involving the education and child welfare systems working together, along with others who have a role in young people's lives. Along these lines, several informants spoke of the value of formal

RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH: YOUTHS' EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL STAFF CARING ABOUT THEM...

The youth informants in our study were asked whether there was a teacher or other school staff whose caring made a difference to them in terms of continuing with school.

90% reported that there was a teacher or school-based staff who cared. Teachers were named most frequently, but informants spoke of others whose caring mattered, including school counsellors, a school-based youth worker, and a nurse who worked at the school.

. . . and what difference that makes

Some informants focused on the assistance that teachers provided with schoolwork, while others emphasized the support provided outside of class. Themes emerging included:

- School was my safe place (place to go to escape troubles);
- School was the place where I felt in control/had normalcy;
- Teacher became "like a parent"; teacher noticed when I'm stressed;
- Teacher/counsellor tracked attendance, encouraged school connection; and
- Teacher/school staff was trustworthy/someone to talk to.

Former youth in care said:

> I had a teacher who changed my life. He was the most supportive person I met. . . . He was very compassionate and caring. . . . I grew as a person. . . . The school was a second home.

> Your teachers almost became like a parent. If I slept in, it'd be the teacher I'd have to answer to.

> My Marketing teacher — she would call me in the morning to make sure I was up. She put a mini-fridge in the classroom with energy drinks to make sure I'd come to morning class. She noticed when I stopped coming to class. She realized things had changed in my life.

As well, in response to the question: "Has there been a person or people who were/are especially helpful in terms of staying in school or graduating?", nearly all affirmed that there was someone who was especially supportive, such as teachers, youth workers, friends, extended family, social workers, foster parents, and an adult volunteer mentor:

> The social worker really went to bat for me. She went to court two months before I turned 19 to apply to have me brought into care so that I could go access the YEAF program; she saw something in me.

> The youth worker — she is still very involved in my life. She's the person I talk to five years later. She encourages me to complete my education.

agreements between the government's education and child welfare departments. For example, one informant in Ontario noted that the province's Protocol offers a useful framework for the two systems to work together by helping to make explicit each sector's roles and responsibilities:

The Protocol amplifies the rights of the CAS to be very involved in the schools and in the child's education. It has improved our overall working relationship with the schools and means that the micro problems are more readily managed. Having the Protocol in place has taken away from it being an 'us versus them' kind of conversation.

Having a Joint Protocol gives you a rule book — it tells you what to do when you hit a road block. It is a starting point, not an endpoint.

The province of Alberta similarly has a provincial protocol framework aimed at improving the educational success of children and youth in care. Alberta-based environmental scan informants shared key observations about what the protocol means in terms of practice:

With the Protocol in place and plans done, there is more consistency, and when this happens, the child does better. We are seeing a lot more cost sharing between school and child welfare, for example, transportation costs if the child wants to stay in a school and not move if there is a placement change. The Protocol allows us to build in a more proactive response, not just when a child is suspended or expelled. The focus on strengths has helped social workers shift their own practice to look at what is going well and how they can enhance that.

SYSTEMS-BASED: INTER-SECTORAL INFORMATION-SHARING PROTOCOLS AND PROCEDURES

Related to the preceding theme, several environmental scan informants spoke of the importance of information-sharing protocols between the child welfare and education ministries, and between schools and child welfare

offices. Information-sharing protocols are of particular importance due to the countervailing presence of privacy rules.

Informants also spoke of ways that data-sharing enabled inter-sectoral monitoring of foster youths' school-related progress as well as becoming a basis for designing interventions and determining best practice. For example, one Ontario-based informant stated:

We have a data-sharing protocol with the local school board that allows us to look at how many children and youth in care are late, missing school, have individualized education plans, have withdrawn, and so forth. We use this information to then base our next steps and interventions.

Similarly an informant from Washington State reported:

We worked on legislation to help information exchange between education and social services. Now all youth have a flag indicating that this is a child or youth in care. The individual districts now know who is in foster care and that allows them to focus support interventions.

SYSTEMS-BASED: CONSISTENCY AND CONTINUITY

Several environmental scan informants spoke of the importance of consistency and continuity for CYIC. Promising approaches stemming from this included: keeping youth in the same school despite changes in living arrangements; ensuring that youth remain in school until they are finished, regardless of age; or providing programs without age limits that help CYIC transition to adulthood.

MCFD can and does ask that the foster parents keep the child in the same school if they are receiving a child who has been moved. So the foster parents will drive them long distances so they can stay at the same school.

We don't worry if the students are over age 18. We can get adult funding now, so they can stay here until they graduate. We can provide continuity, which is an added bonus.

As well, one informant linked continuity in schools with foster youths' sense of belonging, which in turn was vital to attendance and high school completion:

School stability is a key factor in terms of belonging. When kids have stability and have involvement in school and community, their grades are higher and they are likely to graduate.

SYSTEMS-BASED: EXPANDED OPTIONS FOR GRADUATION

In BC, students have three options for graduating: a Dogwood Certificate, an Adult Dogwood, and a School Completion Certificate. The latter two options acknowledge that some students need more time or a different approach to their education. According to some informants, the Adult Dogwood in particular has helped CYIC considerably, as it means that students can take a bit longer to complete their requirements and can graduate with credits for work experience.

The introduction of the Adult Dogwood allows students to work at their own pace and if they aren't done by the time they are 18, they don't have to continue to make up courses missed pre-18. There are fewer courses required for Adult Dogwood, and students can add on courses that are specifically required for a given program. This reduces a lot of stress for students; they don't have to do a lot of the electives that had been required. It tells students that the government understands they've experienced gaps in their education and that government doesn't want to punish them.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED: WRAP-AROUND APPROACH

A wrap-around approach encompasses a philosophy based on values of respectful relationships, paying attention to the individual needs of youth, and proactively bringing together a range of community and cultural supports to effectively problem-solve.

The Ministry for Children and Family Development has a Memorandum of Understanding with Vancouver School Board to deliver the alternate programs using a wrap-around approach.

The overall intent of a wrap-around approach is to make education attentive to students' wholistic needs, be strengths-based, and easy to access:

Youth feel safe and feel welcome and respected. There is a low barrier to entry in terms of substance use; we are reluctant to dismiss; we're strengths based; have a health focus; and we provide food and bus passes to reduce transportation barriers. Individualized programs/school plans are developed.

The characteristics of a wrap-around model can vary. Several informants described education programs that were co-located with community agencies or child welfare offices, while others described place-based programs or independent schools that worked collaboratively with community resources to support students. Co-location of agencies gives CYIC access to multi-disciplinary services (e.g., health, mental health, substance use, child welfare) within one site. It also enables professionals from different sectors to develop working relationships, ensuring that responsibility for supporting CYIC is shared:

We have good relationships with social workers, probation, district youth and family workers, etc. The relationships help youth get re-connected. It is not just for the school to solve the problems.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED: EMBEDDING LIFE SKILLS INTO CURRICULA

Related to a wrap-around approach, informants emphasized that acquiring life skills was a strategic necessity as well as a protective factor in helping CYIC prepare for adulthood, and thus that embedding life skills into school curricula was a good approach:

If a youth is involved in community programming we ask: 'What are they doing? Can we give them credit for what they are doing?' We embed life skills into everything they are doing. We also make sure that we are doing everything so they have information and tools for post age 19, like ID, birth certificate, budgeting, bank account, meal planning, and shopping.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED: DESIGNATED NAVIGATOR/ADVOCATE/MENTOR

Several environmental scan informants from BC, Ontario, and the US stated that having a navigator or advocate, possibly though not necessarily within the education system, was a valuable resource. Navigators, whether they were foster parents, teachers, youth workers, or someone else, were an ally and someone who could speak up for youth in helping them to traverse the education system and obtain the supports and services they required. Without an advocate or navigator, youth in care were more vulnerable and easily lost.

The most important approach is having a supportive, constant mentor or caregiver. The person can be an advocate for the youth — we need to make sure there is an advocate or caregiver or mentor present at all meetings.

Another informant noted that her region's Children's Aid Society had partnered with the Ministry of Education to have school-based social workers placed in schools that were most in need of this kind of support. The social workers did child protection work, but were involved with all children experiencing conflict and challenges, not just CYIC.

In addition, informants from a few jurisdictions offered examples of purposeful and structured mentoring programs. For example, Ontario recently introduced a program with the intent that all crown wards will have a mentor. Some Children's Aid Societies also have mentoring or tutoring programs.

Another new piece is mentorship — an initiative out of the Ministry of Education that will result in matching crown wards with Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentors. The hope is to find mentors for every kid.

Similarly, Washington State has an in-school mentor program based in part on the Check and Connect program (developed at the University of Minnesota), which is a comprehensive intervention designed to promote school completion through student engagement. The mentor is an extra resource in each school and is assigned to work with CYIC, caregivers, and teachers, to help build relationships and reduce crises:

We started the Check and Connect mentor program in 2013 and this has really closed the gap on kids' behaviour. It is an extra set of eyes on the kid daily. Without a mentor, students might have an issue or fight and the education specialists wouldn't get to the school for 2-3 days. With a mentor, they can communicate with the educational specialists immediately and also advocate with school personnel.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The youth informants in our study were asked whether there was a program that was especially helpful to them in terms of their school attendance and completion.

75% identified one or more programs that were helpful, such as:

- Sports programs at school
- Community-based programs
- Homework Club at school
- Youth-directed recreation/life skills/food-based program at (alternative) school
- MCFD Independent Living (IL) program

. . . and how these programs made a difference to youths' educational success, e.g.:

- Program led to supportive relationships: Caring adult checked in with youth

  [My alternative school] — they had a program on food bags, and I'd go when I had to see my youth worker. And she'd be checking in on me and ask me "Where's your homework?" I felt obligated to go to school.

- Program enabled youth-directed recreation/food security/life skills development

  I had help from the IL worker (MCFD) until age 20. She helped me with life skills; I didn't have a clue about stuff like cooking, cleaning, budgeting. With the support of the IL worker, I was able to create a stable living situation and could then focus on going to school.

- Program promoted "balance", "grounding" and stress reduction

  "Why Wait for Wellness" — the program doesn't run anymore. We did yoga and workouts and tennis. . . . It was a very grounding program. It gave me balance in my life, made my life more meaningful.

- Program promoted sense of belonging, community

  I played rugby and that really helped. You get to see your team play.

- Program promoted self-esteem, doing something youth liked and were good at

  The idea of being part of a team and being good at something. At school, I was failing at stuff.

- Program involvement required school attendance

  I used to play sports; I played almost every sport. In order to play sports, I had to have perfect attendance.

One youth informant talked about the two mentors in her life:

> The first person was a Big Sister, when I was 6 years old. She asked me, "Do you like reading?" I said no. She said, "You probably haven't found the right book yet". She gave me a brand new book. The second mentor I had was with a church group. She brought me to [post-secondary institute]. This was at a time when I was thinking of dropping out of school. I decided I'd be the first one to finish high school in my family.

HOME- AND COMMUNITY-BASED: TUTORING

Several informants reflected on tutoring in helping CYIC keep up with their schoolwork. Indeed, according to one informant, tutoring was one of the two most important strategies for helping CYIC achieve academic success:

> *The two approaches that have an impact and are most important are having a tutor outside of school to help youth keep up with schoolwork and having the Transition Worker.*

Community agencies involved with children and youth in care were also cognizant that many CYIC needed help with schoolwork. One informant described the various ways that her community-based agency worked with youth in/from care in relation to education:

> *Once a week [someone from the college] comes in to provide tutoring support for youth in care. Also, tutors go to the youths' homes to work with moms and babies. We also hold a Reading Circle for kids of moms, and there's a Thursday night Homework Club with up to three tutors per session, if possible.*

Another noted that an Aboriginal agency that operated group homes ran a tutoring program in the group homes aimed at supporting youth with their schoolwork.

> *[The agency] has a program called Eagle Education — tutoring for youth in their group homes. It's great and means that even if youth can't be at school for some reason they can keep up with their work.*

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH-BASED: REMOVING BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION IN EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Lastly, as noted elsewhere in this report, poverty and transportation were often cited as barriers to school attendance and engagement, particularly for CYIC who lived on their own. As a promising approach to address this, numerous informants spoke of the importance of offering food within schools, and, as noted above, coming together for a meal strengthened positive relationships as well as addressed food security issues.

> *Food is important. So many schools have breakfast/lunch/snacks depending on the school and level of need.*

In addition, informants identified other supports that made a difference to school attendance and connection, such as bus passes, day care, and opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities at a reduced price.

5C. APPROACHES TO HELP YOUTH IN/FROM CARE RE-CONNECT WITH HIGH SCHOOL

Several environmental scan informants described programs that were designed specifically to reach out to CYIC and FYIC to try to encourage them back to high school, night school, or training programs. These programs were based in school districts as well as community agencies.

For example, one environmental scan informant spoke about a program running through her community agency that is based on the Treehouse Program in Washington State; the program provides support to CYIC still in school, as well as for former youth in care. According to this informant, former youth in care have sought out the program for: information on schools/training programs; help

THE TREEHOUSE PROGRAM

Located in Seattle, Washington, the **Treehouse Program** has worked with youth in/from care for over 25 years.

The program and its partners have set a goal to have the graduation rate for youth in/from care to be on par with that of young people in the general population for the region.

The program offers **Education Advocates** who are co-located in schools and child welfare offices; their role is to work with schools, social workers, foster youth to:

- Advocate for education-related support services
- Prevent school changes or ensure seamless transitions when this cannot be avoided
- Minimize the effects of disciplinary actions that keep students out of school
- Assist youth in/from care to stay engaged and on-track to finish their education
- Train caregivers, social workers, and CYIC to advocate for CYIC's educational rights
- Make sure that all CYIC have a mentor via the Check and Connect program. The mentor does goal setting with youth and weekly check-ins to talk about progress.

applying for academic bursaries; and help with setting educational goals.

Along similar lines, a school-based program in the Lower Mainland calls youth who haven't graduated to ask what they require to complete their education or to access other relevant programs. According to an educator affiliated with this school:

> *We have the School to Work program: two teachers call all kids who haven't graduated. While it doesn't improve the graduation rate for the District, the program does bridge the youth to another system like night school. Out of the 150 who did not graduate in 2013, 115 responded and 43 went on to complete high school.*

At the same time, the youth informants in this study identified additional factors that helped them to re-connect with school, including:

- Being internally motivated
- Having school co-located with MCFD office
- Enrolling in an alternative school and working at own pace
- Having stable housing

In informants' words:

I didn't want to be working minimum wage. My friends were getting a car, good credit rating. I wanted to finish.

I got reconnected via the Ministry office here, and I got a mental health worker here. I got connected to [the alternative school].

Having my own place. Having a stable place. In my foster home, I didn't have a good time. Having my own place was good for me.

6

DISCUSSION AND POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS

This study makes a unique contribution to the Canadian discourse on educational outcomes for youth in/from care by bringing together three strands of evidence: interviews with young adults with lived experience of the foster care system; the research literature; and interviews tapping into the knowledge of educators, policy-makers, child welfare specialists, foster caregivers, community organizations, and researchers. It is the youth voice that is particularly compelling, as their reflections about the role of education in their lives both complements and contributes new insights to the discussion.

Thus, in this section's discussion of the findings of our study, we interweave **12** potential "action items" that stem from the research, which individuals and groups from all sectors and locations — that is, every one of us — can use to further the conversation and flesh out into detailed steps about ways to improve educational outcomes for youth in/from foster care in British Columbia.

YOUTH IN CARE UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Perhaps most noteworthy is that youth from care emphasized the pivotal importance of attending, engaging with and completing high school. While some acknowledged that this connection with and commitment to education wasn't always evident from their behaviour at the time, as they matured, they were able to reflect upon the central role that school played in their lives. Moreover, they were well aware of the importance of completing Grade 12 in terms of future employment, training, and post-secondary education.

Some young people saw themselves as role models; they knew about the low rates of high school completion for youth in foster care and/or in their family and community and/or amongst Aboriginal youth, and they wanted to do better. Others wanted to finish high school in order to show family members or their community that they could and as a way of thanking those who had helped them along the way.

ACTION ITEM 1

SET AN EXPECTATION OF SUCCESS WITHIN THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND THE MINISTRY FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE

Establish and commit to the goal that BC will close the education gap and that youth in/from care will achieve the same rate of high school completion as young people in the general population. This needs to be accompanied by an action plan with specific, measurable targets.

YOUTH IN CARE VALUE SCHOOL AS A PLACE OF STABILITY, CONNECTION, SAFETY

Equally as important is that the former youth in care in our study valued school as a place of stability, connection, and safety. School offered a refuge from the uncertainty and chaos that they were experiencing in their lives at the time.

School also provided the platform for strong, caring and supportive connections with teachers, counsellors, or other adults. At school, there was someone who was paying attention to them, noticing if they skipped, suspecting that they may need academic or emotional support and then offering it, and being present as a trusted advisor and problem solver.

ACTION ITEM 2
VALIDATE THE VALUE OF CARING RELATIONSHIPS
Relationship-based practice is pivotal to positive educational outcomes. Relationship-based approaches that appreciate young people's individual life circumstances and are sensitive to the likelihood of foster youths' experience of (multi-generational) trauma need to be integral at the school, agency, and systemic level.

YOUTH IN CARE VALUE AND NEED CONSISTENT ADULT ALLIES

Youth also regarded social workers as important allies. Not only did these adults fulfil an important role in youths' lives, social workers' involvement in youths' education signalled to youth that they were valued, that someone believed in their abilities, would not let them slip away unnoticed, and could advocate on their behalf.

Consequently, youth were distressed by the uncertainty and transience of these important relationships. Along these lines, ensuring that

youth in care are attached to a mentor, advocate, or educational navigator was a highly beneficial approach that was already in place in some jurisdictions.

ACTION ITEM 3
PROMOTE AND SUPPORT THE WORK OF PEER AND COMMUNITY MENTORS
Mentors and advocates foster belonging, school connections, academic success and supportive networks — they are a critical piece of the 'education conversation'.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED AND INDIVIDUALIZED, WRAP-AROUND APPROACHES ARE CRITICAL

Environmental scan informants' identification of relationship-based and wrap-around approaches as effective/promising models for practice was consistent with young people's reflections on the importance of connections and relationships. Moreover, as reported in the literature and reflected in this study's findings, a high percentage of youth living in care have learning disabilities, trauma, mental health or substance use issues, and/or are survivors of (multi-generational) impacts of residential school and colonization. Hence, youth needed and wanted ready access to services such as mental health counselling/care and an individualized educational program that was in keeping with their strengths, needs, and aspirations. Further, youth wanted a trusted adult to help guide them.

Without a wrap-around, relational approach that took into consideration the impacts of trauma, young people in/from care were potentially too easily lost. Along these lines, findings from all three strands of evidence in this study suggested that a promising approach was for education programs to be co-located within or highly coordinated with child welfare workers and/or community agencies, so that youth in care could access a range of service providers such as health, mental health,

substance use counselling, tutoring, and/or life skills development.

> ## ACTION ITEM 4
> ### EXPAND IMPLEMENTATION OF HUB/WRAP-AROUND APPROACHES
>
> Continue and look toward expanding implementation of schools using wrap-around/hub approach; focus on coordinated tracking of and support for CYIC's engagement in school and learning. Keep in mind the example of the successful, coordinated efforts of a teacher, school counselor and youth worker to track and support a student's school attendance (see **page 23**). Celebrate successes.
>
> ## ACTION ITEM 5
> ### STRENGTHEN KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE RELATING TO CULTURAL COMPETENCY
>
> Ensure that school personnel, child welfare workers, caregivers, and community agencies have access to and are supported to engage in learning opportunities and professional development related to Indigenous Cultural Competency training. Further, foster opportunities for school personnel and community-based service providers to reflect on their role as allies and supports to Aboriginal students and explore linkages with organizations and opportunities to strengthen the cultural identity of Indigenous students.

SYSTEMS WORKING TOGETHER, AND WORKING CLOSELY WITH CAREGIVERS, MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

In addition, the findings from the literature, environmental scan, and interviews with youth from care were clear: educational outcomes are improved when the involved systems offer practical supports to remove barriers to attendance (e.g., food/meals, daycare, transportation) and offer key opportunities to enrich the school experience (e.g., low cost recreational activities and tutoring). In terms of tutoring, findings from this study indicated that tutoring in school, by caregivers, or in the community was highly valuable, and that training for caregivers related to tutoring should be developed and implemented. As well, including life skills as part of the curriculum was another strategy that was favoured by some. In one jurisdiction, introduction of life skills started early in high school and included taking youth in care on tours of college campuses, covering the costs of various pre-trades tickets, linking them with trades programs, and developing programs aimed at helping them learn to acquire, manage, and keep a job during the summer break.

> ## ACTION ITEM 6
> ### SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
>
> Identify ways to translate protocols into ongoing practice and develop and/or augment communities of practice and learning amongst educators, school staff/health care providers, child welfare workers, caregivers, community agencies; identify ways to translate inter-ministerial protocols and guidelines into on-the-ground, achievable collaborative practice. Share successes.

TRANSITION SUPPORTS, INCLUDING TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION, NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE

The transition from high school to adulthood was another time of potential vulnerability for youth in care; many have limited material, financial, emotional, or social support networks and continued to experience mental health issues. For youth who have aged out of care without finishing school, it is essential that there are flexible, accessible opportunities to re-engage — regardless of age — to complete secondary education. At the same time, young adults who have completed high school need opportunities to formulate their next steps, including opportunities for post-secondary education or training.

While an increasing number of universities in BC as well as elsewhere offer tuition waivers for former youth in care, the findings from this study indicated that such post-majority programs needed to be more flexible and ought not to penalize youth for 'false starts'. In other words, finding their path could take time, and young adults did not want to be penalized for discovering that their initial decisions and chosen pathways sometimes had to be revisited and revised. As well, tuition waiver programs need to be responsive to FYIC's economic realities and recognize that former youth in care don't typically have family to fall back on for financial and practical help. Thus, programs that provide assistance only during the academic terms leave youth vulnerable to housing instability/homelessness, food insecurity and potentially high-risk or unsafe means of garnering income.

Fortunately, positive developments are emerging in relation to helping youth from care enrolled in post-secondary programs to access non-tuition related financial supports: for example, the Youth Futures Education Fund, developed by Vancouver Foundation in partnership with Coast Capital Credit Union, which provides FYIC students attending post secondary education with non-tuition living expenses.

CREATE LONG-TERM GOALS AND ACTION PLANS

Creating provincial goals for educational achievements and committing to a plan of action can be a starting point for what is inevitably a long-term undertaking. Along these lines, the province of Ontario in 2014 released its renewed vision for education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Included in this vision is a statement regarding commitment to ensuring equity and increasing educational achievements for children and youth in care, as well as a plan of action.

CROSS-MINISTRY AND CROSS-SECTORAL LEADERSHIP NEEDED

There is strong evidence as well that cross-ministry and cross-sectoral leadership is essential in order to establish and publicly commit to education-related goals for CYIC, identify meaningful targets, and then develop and implement strategies, collaborations and partnerships to monitor and report progress.

In keeping with the findings from this project, the need for strengthened cross-sectoral leadership, partnerships and collaboration, respectful partnerships with Aboriginal peoples and organizations, elimination of funding gaps, and accountability mechanisms was a key recommendation in the BC Auditor's report (2015) on improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, and in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Calls to Action.

ACTION ITEM 8

CONVENE EDUCATION PARTNERS WHO WILL CHAMPION SUCCESS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE.

Building on existing networks, strengthen coalitions and collaborations across sectors by organizing and convening champions committed to education-related goal-setting and action. Re-convene the group regularly to review progress and re-tool strategies as required.

ACTION ITEM 9

EXPLORE FUNDING MODELS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL SUCCESS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE

Ultimately, improvements in CYIC's educational outcomes require a comprehensive and long-term provincial strategy. Funding models that reflect this reality are required in order to ensure continuation of this work within government ministries as well as at the community level.

FORMAL PROTOCOLS PROVIDE DIRECTION

Formal protocols (e.g., as exists in Alberta and Ontario) or legislation (e.g., as enacted in December 2015 in the US) increasingly are being implemented in order to emphasize the importance of improving graduation rates for youth in care. Along these lines, cross-ministry protocols can make a difference by helping to provide direction and a mandate for sectors and systems to work collaboratively to improve educational outcomes for youth in care. Not only can protocols give direction, they can provide clarity as to information-sharing between ministries and systems.

At the same time, there needs to be inter-sectoral commitment to translating the protocol and guidelines into on the ground practice. This is crucial, as to some extent the ability to ensure that youth in

care are receiving appropriate and specific resources tailored to meet their individual learning needs and goals, starts by knowing which students are in the child welfare/care system. The same can be said about of attendance/absenteeism, which research shows is an indicator of school success. Schools track attendance, but having youth in care flagged within the data base could help educators know when to bring together social workers, caregivers, and others to strategize how to make school attendance a priority. Further, collaborative and coordinated efforts (e.g., by teachers, school personnel, social workers, youth support workers and caregivers) to communicate with youth that their school attendance is important can make all the difference in terms of providing motivation for school completion and success.

ACTION ITEM 10

STRENGTHEN THE CROSS-MINISTRY JOINT PROTOCOL ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN CARE

Strengthen the cross-ministry (education and child welfare) protocol that addresses information sharing, reporting, collaboration, and joint areas of responsibility. Appointment of an Executive Director or Officer of Children and Youth in Care could be tasked with monitoring the protocol and with ensuring improvements to educational outcomes as well as other outcomes for CYIC.

ACTION ITEM 11

ENSURE INFORMATION SYSTEMS IDENTIFY AND TRACK CYIC PATHWAYS THROUGH SCHOOL

Develop and/or augment information systems to flag all CYIC in the school system in order to better identify and support them. Further, implement information systems that track their educational outcomes (at a regional or jurisdictional level.)

THE OPTION TO STAY IN CARE LONGER CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Finally, several jurisdictions have introduced legislation and policy that allow young people to stay in care or access care-related supports as a means to improve educational outcomes and life course trajectories. For example, Scotland has enacted the "Staying Put" legislation that enables youth to remain with their caregiver beyond the age of majority (e.g., age 18), to age 21, in order to have stability and continuity, to maximize opportunities for education, employment, training, and the development of independent living skills, as well as to reduce the likelihood of homelessness and/or social exclusion (The Children's Partnership, 2014). The experiences in these jurisdictions are promising and suggest that when youth have this option and take advantage of it, they are more likely to continue with their education.

This has to be a better option than ending up homeless or on income assistance, which has too often been the trajectory for youth aging out of the care system. Hence, any discussion of improving educational outcomes for youth in care in BC ought to include consideration for extending the age at which their relationship with the care system must end.

ACTION ITEM 12

GIVE SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS OF YIC ON INDEPENDENT LIVING AND YOUTH AGREEMENTS

For youth living on their own, school attendance and progress must be monitored, prioritized as essential and supported, and all barriers to attendance must be removed. This means, for example, ensuring that each and every youth in this category has an assigned advocate, mentor, or navigator whose role is to monitor and support his/her progress.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In conclusion, this study offers strong evidence that improving educational outcomes for children and youth in care is a complex undertaking that will require a concerted and deliberate strategy. This is not an education problem alone nor is it a child welfare problem alone; former youth in care, caregivers and families, health and mental health practitioners, community agencies, substance use services, Aboriginal leaders, agencies and communities are all participants and potential allies in planning and implementing action toward change. Fortunately, there are champions to provide guidance and communities where effective approaches are being implemented and collaboration is occurring. Nonetheless, provincial leadership and a mandate to work across Ministries and sectors will make clear to everyone that improving educational outcomes for youth in/from care is both a necessity and a priority.

7
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FOSTERING SUCCESS

IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN/FROM CARE

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