Educational Experiences of Massachusetts Foster Youth

In 2015, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's (SJC) Court Improvement Program (CIP) began research on the school experiences of students involved with the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) in out-of-home placement in Massachusetts. The full report was commissioned "to address the gaps in information on the school experiences and academic outcomes of students in DCF custody," with a comprehensive purpose "to improve educational outcomes for children in state care by identifying barriers to school success in Massachusetts and developing interventions to improve outcomes." The report was completed and presented to DCF, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and the SJC in August of 2017. An Executive Summary of that report was released in March 2019. The CIP report and other supplemental research found that **students in Massachusetts foster care are performing up to 6.5 times worse than the general student population in Massachusetts public schools.** Further data sharing show that these findings are not limited to students solely in DCF out of home placement, but also apply to students involved with DCF.

While the CIP Report used data from the 2015-16 school year, the experiences that the report revealed, such as **absenteeism, discipline, and dropout rates**, have remained the same, and in some cases, have worsened due to the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the delivery of educational services and support for all K-12 students.

As we approach four years since the Massachusetts SJC acquisitioned this study, showing profound disparities in school performance for children and youth in out of home placement, the Commonwealth must show strong leadership in addressing what the data and research show.

DESE and DCF have an agreement to tag students in foster care to allow DESE to track school data on foster youth, and that collection continues. However, **these data are not publicly available and we, therefore, do not know the extent of which DCF-involved students are experiencing disparate educational outcomes in comparison to their peers**, leaving over 5,000 of the most vulnerable students in the Commonwealth without equitable educational access, support, and opportunity for achievement.

DESE should share and use these data to provide a greater understanding of how students involved with DCF are doing in school and leadership from all child serving agencies, and with the input of schools, impacted youth and families, the education and advocacy community, come together to take action to hold all of us accountable to address these disparities. Massachusetts foster youth deserve the best we can offer.
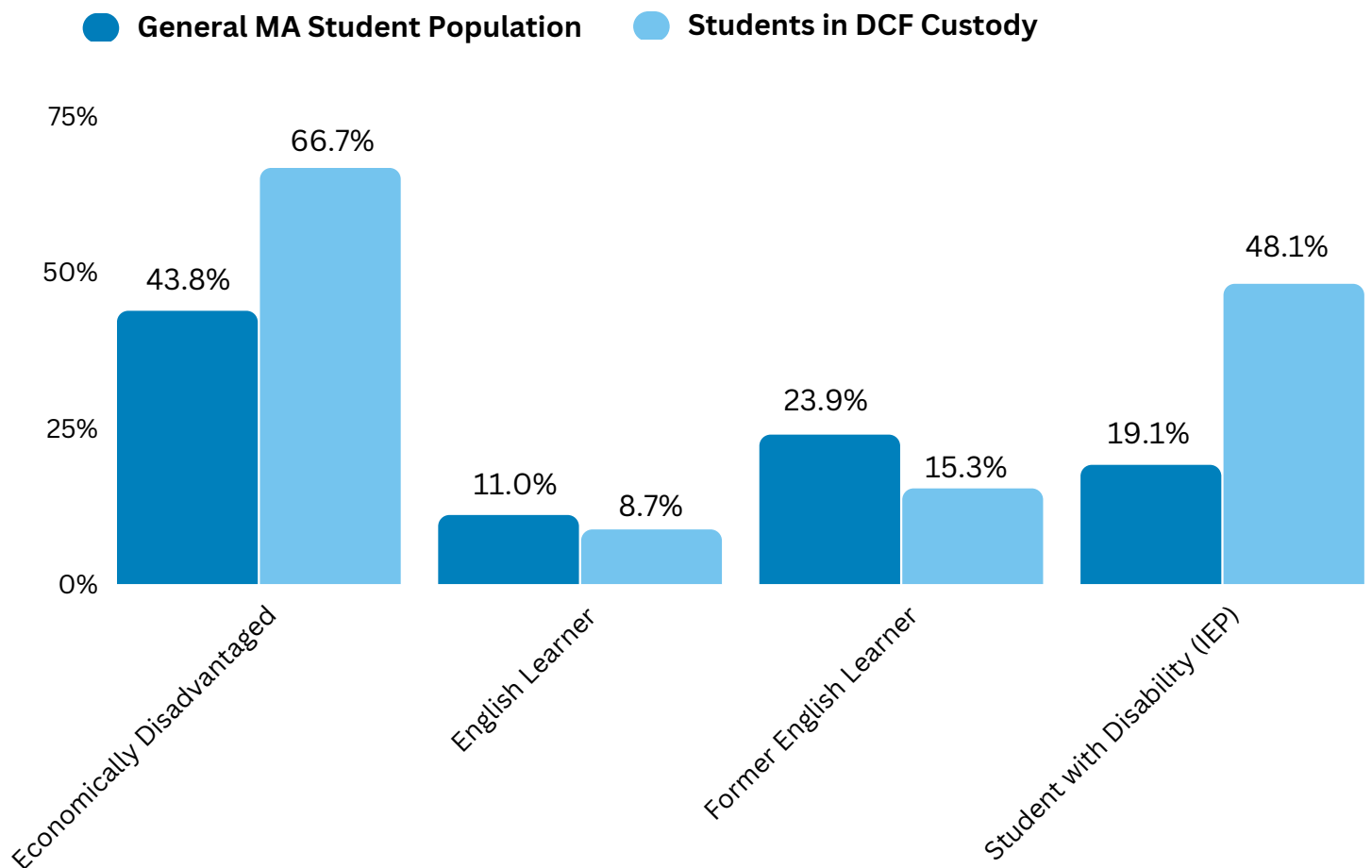
Research Findings – What We Know

In 2019, the **Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's Court Improvement Program** (CIP) released their report, "Stable Placement, Stable School: Improving Education Outcomes of Children in Foster Care in Massachusetts."

The report matched administrative datasets from DCF, the court system, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

The DCF Annual Report's measurements on factors of educational well-being and DESE reports on MCAS scores are the data publicly available. We supplement this data with the CIP Report findings and other literature.

Students with High Needs, 2021–22 (DCF Annual Report, FY2022)

Legend:
- ● General MA Student Population
- ● Students in DCF Custody

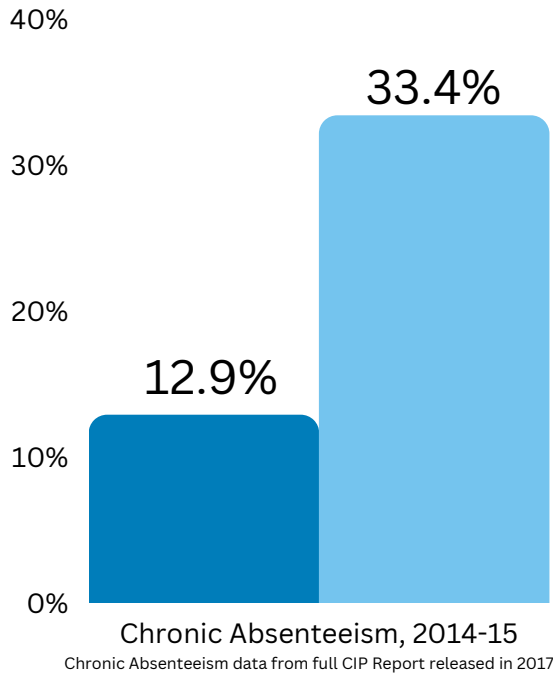| Category	General MA Student Population	Students in DCF Custody
Economically Disadvantaged	43.8%	66.7%
English Learner	11.0%	8.7%
Former English Learner	23.9%	15.3%
Student with Disability (IEP)	19.1%	48.1%

DESE defines "High Needs" as a student who is economically disadvantaged, a current or former English Learner, or a student with a disability. In the 2021-22 school year, **84.8%** of children in DCF custody were considered High Needs compared to **56.2%** of the general MA student population.

# Absenteeism & Attendance (CIP Report, 2017; DCF Annual Report, FY2022)

DESE defines chronic absenteeism as missing **10% or more** school days. Students who are chronically absent are at a higher risk of **dropping out of high school**.

(Patnode, Gibbons, & Edmunds, 2018)

● **General MA Student Population**

● **Students in DCF Out-of-Home Placement/DCF Custody**

33.4%

12.9%

Chronic Absenteeism, 2014-15

Chronic Absenteeism data from full CIP Report released in 2017

The CIP Report found that, during the 2014-15 school year, students in DCF out-of-home placement were chronically absent at **over 2.5x the rate** of the general MA student population.

91.5%

86.8%

Percent of School Days Attended, 2021-22
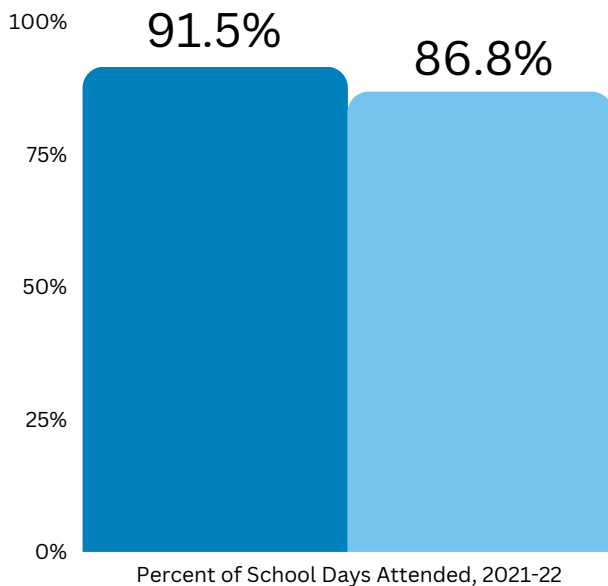
For the first time, the DCF FY2022 Annual Report shared data on school attendance rates. This graph (left) shows that students in DCF custody attended a **slightly smaller percentage of school days** in the 2021-22 school year, which is **different than chronic absenteeism.**

Addressing Attendance

Kids in School Rule! (KISR!)*, a grant-funded project in Cincinnati, Ohio, found that establishing an educational point person at each Cincinnati public school led to students in foster care **achieving attendance rates of 90% or higher** during the last school year of the pilot program.
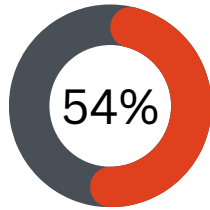
Special Education Services

Of the clients in the FaCES clinic serving foster youth at UMass Memorial Hospital in Worcester, MA, **81%** of school-aged youth in foster care had been given an IEP/504 or were in the process of obtaining one, compared to **13%** of the general MA student population.

FaCES Sample Population

General MA Student Population

54% of FaCES clients needed support with obtaining testing for an IEP/504 plan.

School Mobility & Churn Rate, 2014–15 (CIP Report, 2017)

School Mobility Rate is calculated by the statewide churn rate, which represents the sum of all students who attended more than one school divided by all students reported as enrolled at any point in time during the school year. Neither DESE nor the DCF Annual Report publishes data on school mobility for students in foster care.

(Department of Elementary and Secondary Education)

Nearly **35%** of children in Massachusetts (compared to 22% in the U.S.) foster care **experience 4+ placements***, which impacts school mobility.

Native American, Black, Multiracial, and Latinx foster children in Massachusetts have the highest rates of placement instability.

*(Kids Count, 2021; Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), 2018)

- General MA Student Population
- Students in DCF Out-of-Home Placement

27.0%

8.9%

30%

20%

10%

0%

School Mobility & Churn Rate
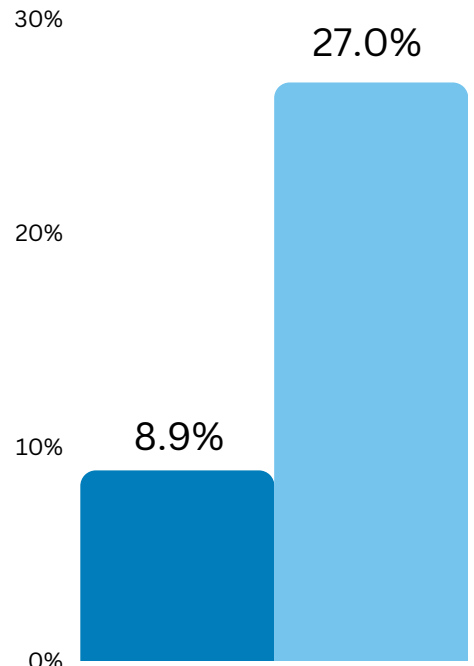
School Mobility & Churn Rate data from full CIP Report released in 2017

Addressing School Mobility

From 2012 to 2017, KISR! has maintained **an average of 74% of students experiencing no school moves.**
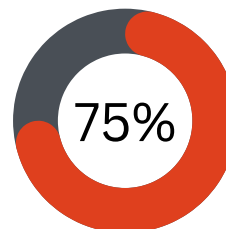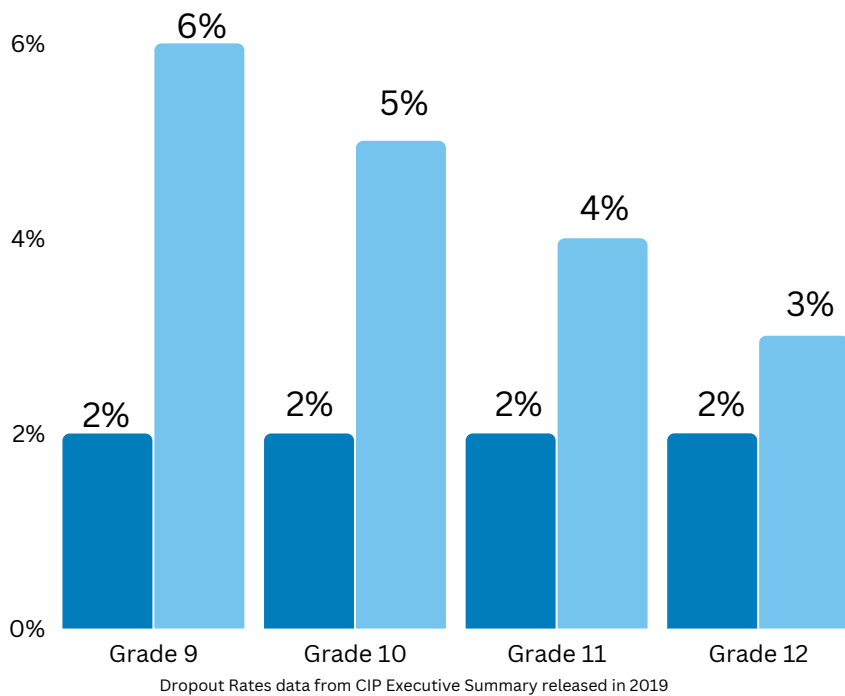
75% change schools when first entering foster care, nationally.

*Data from Fostering Success in Education. National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care, 2018; 2022

Dropout Rates, 2014–15 (CIP Report, 2017)

- 🔵 **General MA Student Population**
- 🔵 **Students in DCF Out-of-Home Placement**

Grade 9: 2% / 6%
Grade 10: 2% / 5%
Grade 11: 2% / 4%
Grade 12: 2% / 3%

Dropout Rates data from CIP Executive Summary released in 2019

> Neither DESE nor the DCF Annual Report publishes data on dropout rates for DCF-involved students.

> In Grade 9, students in foster care dropped out of high school at **3x the rate** of students in the general MA student population.
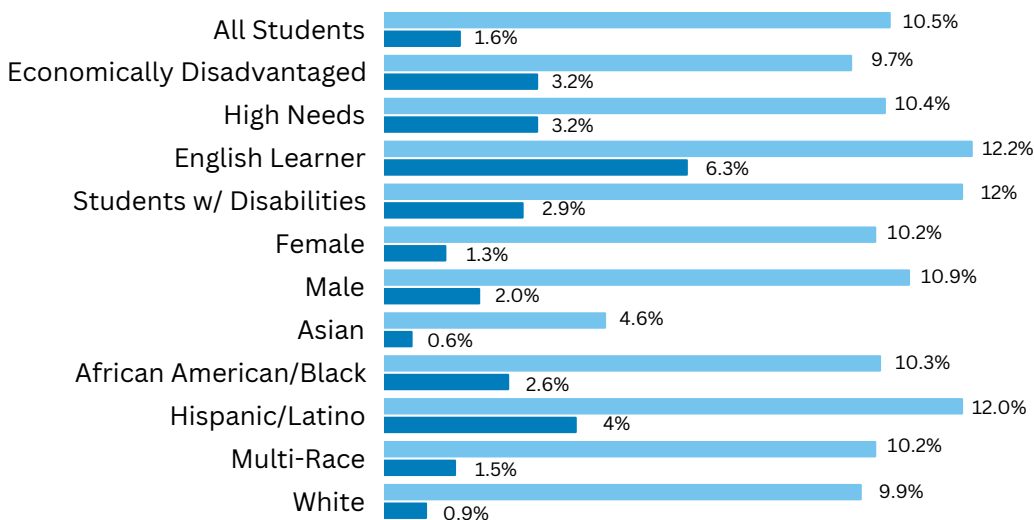>
> Meanwhile, nationally, students in foster care are **2x** as likely to drop out school between 7th and 12th grade.*
>
> *Fostering Success in Education. National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care, 2018; 2022

Dropout Rates (DESE, 2018; DCF, 2018)

Public School Students in DCF Custody at Any Time Between 2013-2018 vs. Students Never in DCF Custody

- 🔵 **Students in DCF Custody**
- 🔵 **Students Never in DCF Custody**

Category	Students Never in DCF Custody	Students in DCF Custody
All Students	1.6%	10.5%
Economically Disadvantaged	3.2%	9.7%
High Needs	3.2%	10.4%
English Learner	6.3%	12.2%
Students w/ Disabilities	2.9%	12%
Female	1.3%	10.2%
Male	2.0%	10.9%
Asian	0.6%	4.6%
African American/Black	2.6%	10.3%
Hispanic/Latino	4%	12.0%
Multi-Race	1.5%	10.2%
White	0.9%	9.9%

> In 2018, **10.5%** of students in DCF custody dropped out of high school compared to **1.6%** of students never in DCF custody.
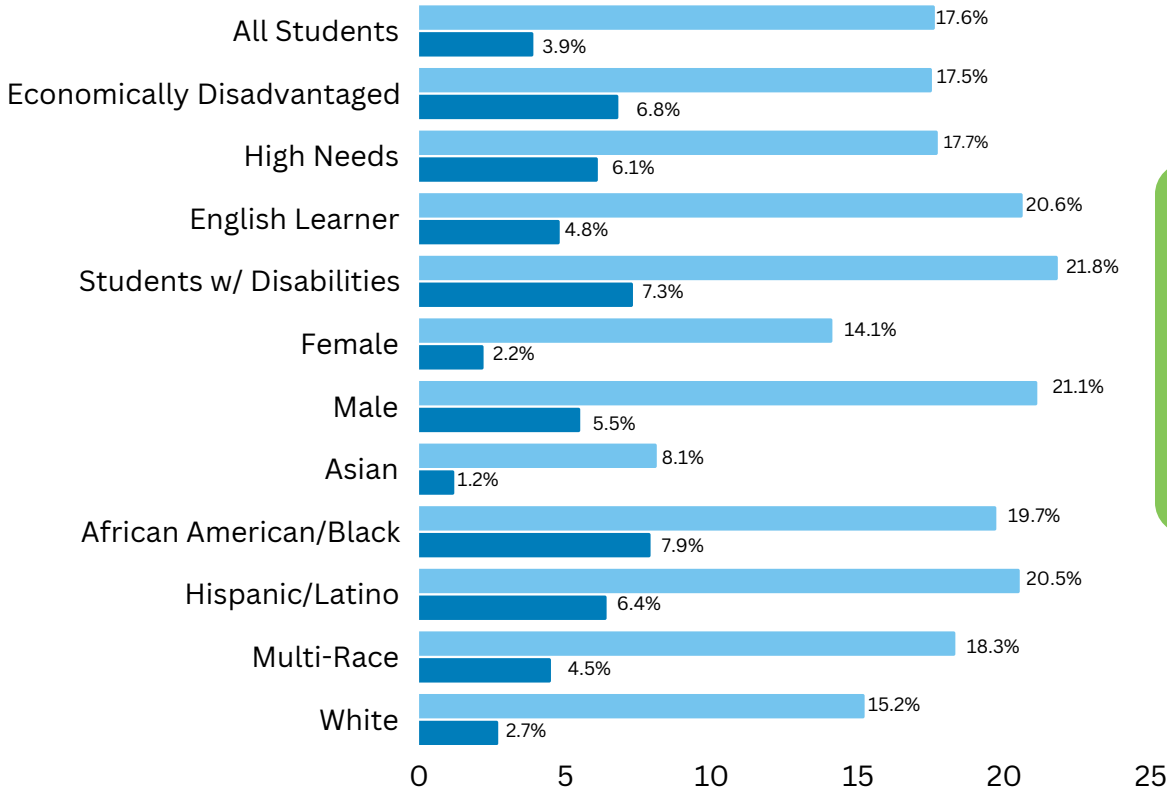
Addressing Dropout Rates

From 2012 to 2017, between **87%** and **100%** of all KISR! high school students graduated from high school. In Massachusetts, an average of **55%** of students in out-of-home DCF placement graduated from high school in four years during the same time period.

(Department of Children and Families, 2017)

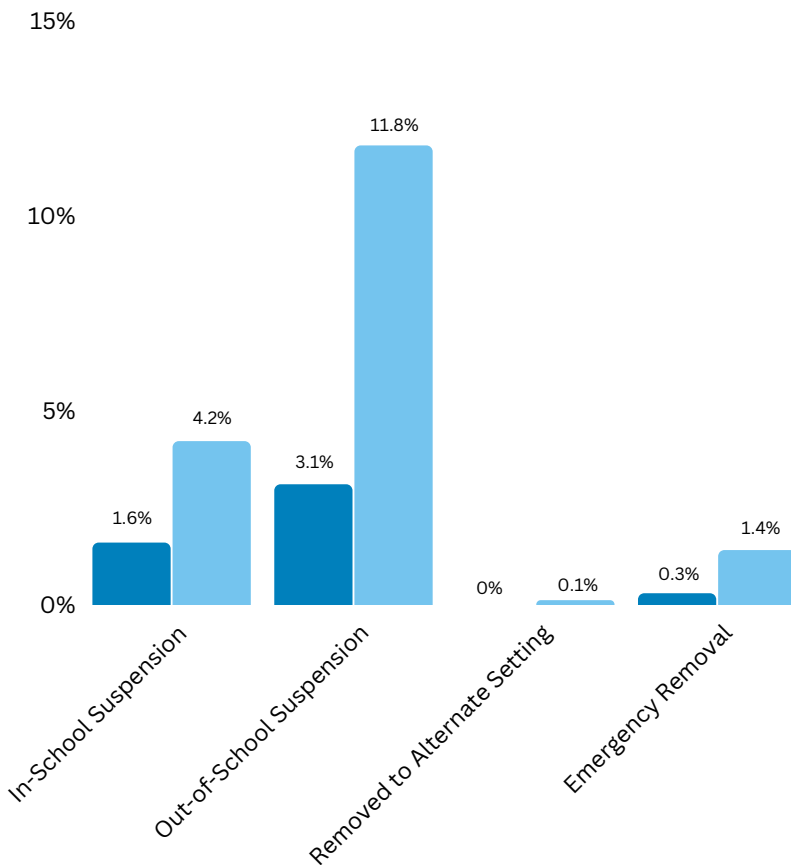# Student Discipline Rates (DESE, 2018; DCF, 2018; DCF, 2022)

2017-18 Public School Students in DCF Custody at Any Time Between 2013-2018 vs. Students Never in DCF Custody

● Students in DCF Custody   ● Students Never in DCF Custody

Category	Students in DCF Custody	Students Never in DCF Custody
All Students	17.6%	3.9%
Economically Disadvantaged	17.5%	6.8%
High Needs	17.7%	6.1%
English Learner	20.6%	4.8%
Students w/ Disabilities	21.8%	7.3%
Female	14.1%	2.2%
Male	21.1%	5.5%
Asian	8.1%	1.2%
African American/Black	19.7%	7.9%
Hispanic/Latino	20.5%	6.4%
Multi-Race	18.3%	4.5%
White	15.2%	2.7%

(x-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25)

> Students in DCF custody are disciplined at **over 4.5x the rate** of students who have never been in DCF custody.

● General MA Student Population   ● Students in DCF Custody

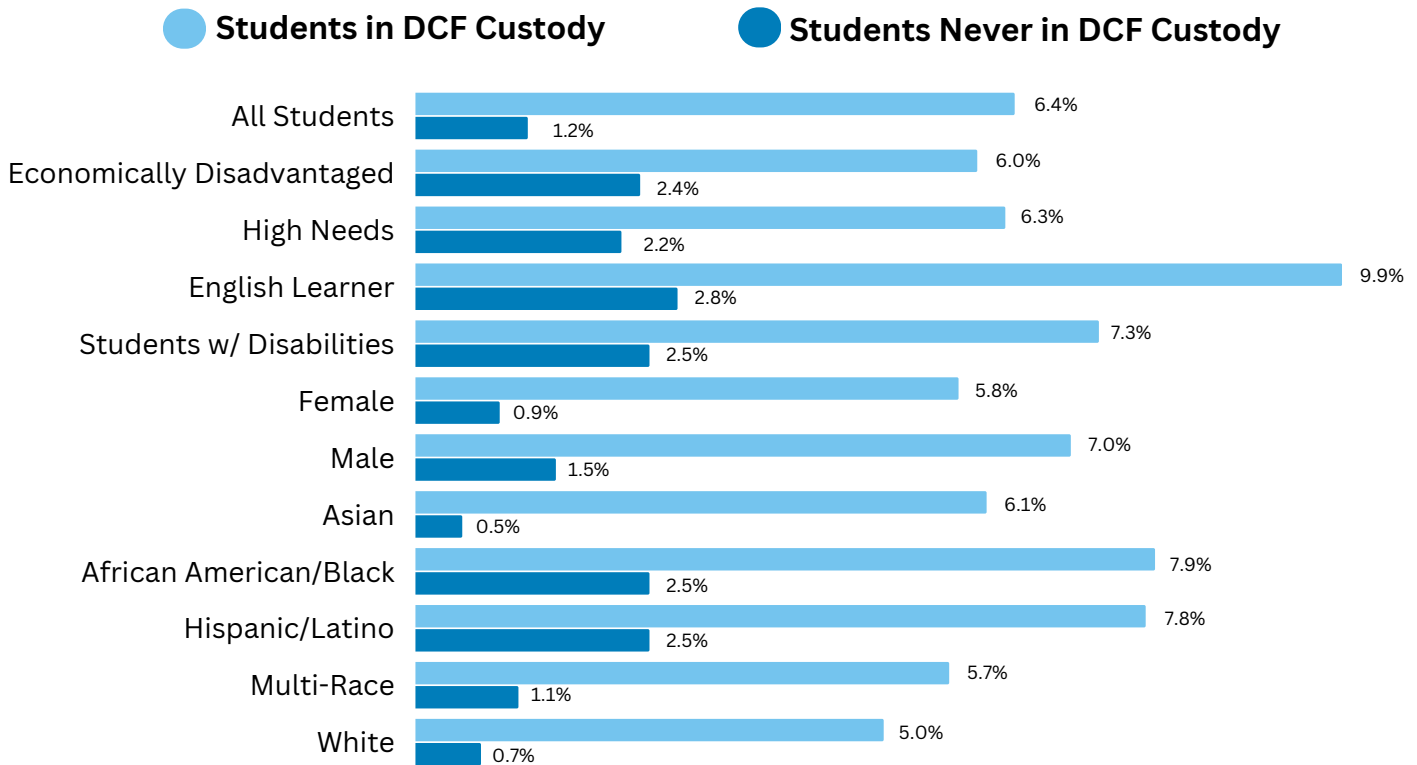| Discipline Type	General MA Student Population	Students in DCF Custody
In-School Suspension	1.6%	4.2%
Out-of-School Suspension	3.1%	11.8%
Removed to Alternate Setting	0%	0.1%
Emergency Removal	0.3%	1.4%

(y-axis: 0%, 5%, 10%, 15%)

> The DCF FY2022 Annual Report shows the discipline rates for all students by discipline type. The Report shows that <0.1% of all students (DCF and general) experienced a school-based arrest or a non-arrest law enforcement referral.

> Students in DCF out-of-home placement experienced **in-school suspension at nearly 3x the rate** of the general student population, and **out-of-school suspension at nearly 4x the rate**.
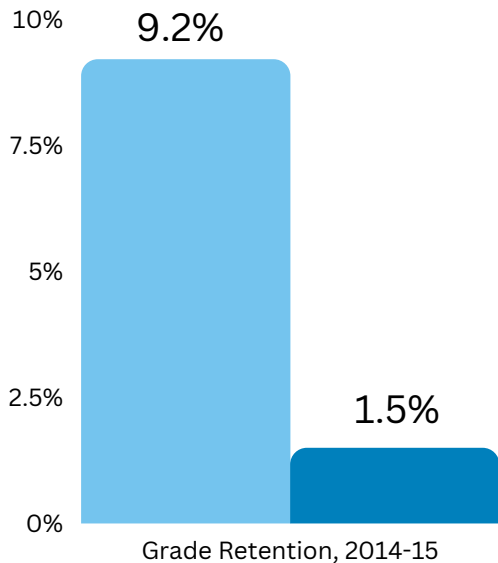
Addressing Discipline

In the 2012-13 school year, **32%** of KISR! foster students had **no disciplinary referrals**. Over the next four years of the model that percentage increased, on average, to **61%.**

Grade Retention Rates (DESE, 2018; DCF, 2018; CIP, 2017)

Public School Students in DCF Custody at Any Time Between 2013-2018
vs. Students Never in DCF Custody

● Students in DCF Custody   ● Students Never in DCF Custody

Category	Students in DCF Custody	Students Never in DCF Custody
All Students	6.4%	1.2%
Economically Disadvantaged	6.0%	2.4%
High Needs	6.3%	2.2%
English Learner	9.9%	2.8%
Students w/ Disabilities	7.3%	2.5%
Female	5.8%	0.9%
Male	7.0%	1.5%
Asian	6.1%	0.5%
African American/Black	7.9%	2.5%
Hispanic/Latino	7.8%	2.5%
Multi-Race	5.7%	1.1%
White	5.0%	0.7%

● Students in DCF Out-of-Home Placement   ● General MA Student Population

9.2%

1.5%

Grade Retention, 2014-15

Grade Retention data from full CIP Report released in 2017

In 2014-15, students in DCF out-of-home placements experienced grade retention at over **6x** the rate of the general student population.

In 2018, **6%** of students in foster care repeated a grade compared to **1%** of the general MA student population.

Being held back in school can have significant impact on mental and behavioral health and drop out rates.

Addressing Grade Retention
The percentage of KISR! Students promoted to the next grade level increased over the course of four years, with the 2016-2017 school year (the last year with available data) showing **91%** of students moved on **to the next grade.**

Massachusetts Department of Education Achievement Data

For the last three years (Massachusetts did not administer the MCAS in 2020), students in out-of-home DCF placements performed up to **4x worse** on Math MCAS up to over **3x worse** on ELA MCAS compared to students in the general population.

Percent of Students "Meeting Expectations" or above on MCAS Exams (DESE, 2019-2022)

Statewide assessment (MCAS) data are the only data that DESE disaggregates by foster care status. The publicly accessible database does not provide four- and five-year graduation rates for students in out-of-home DCF placement as required by federal regulations.
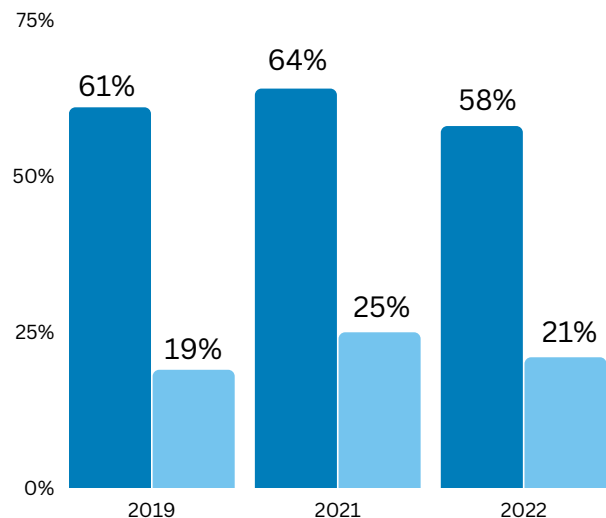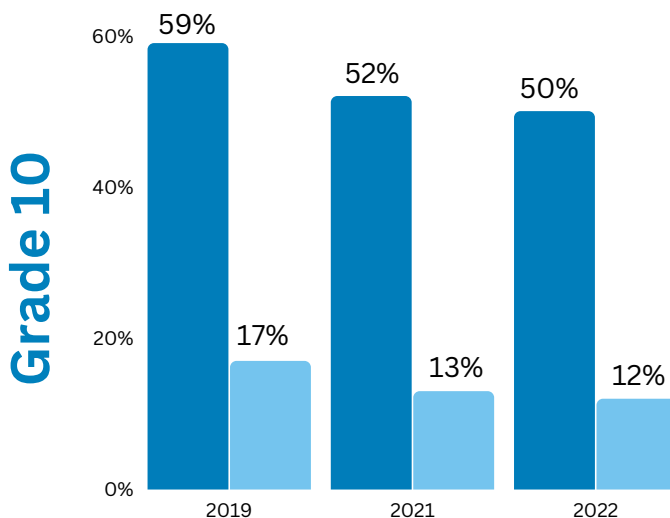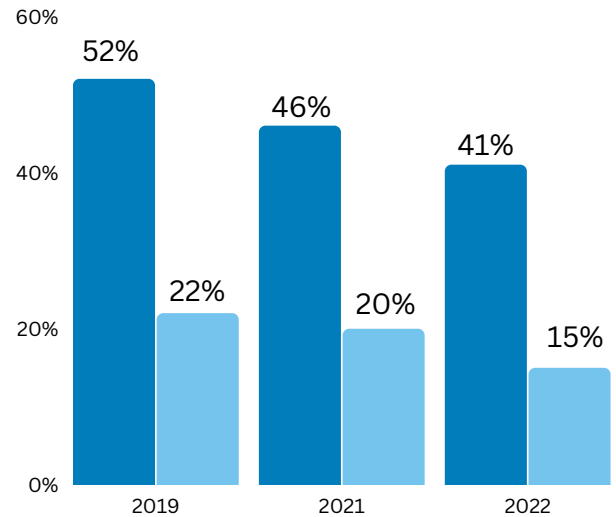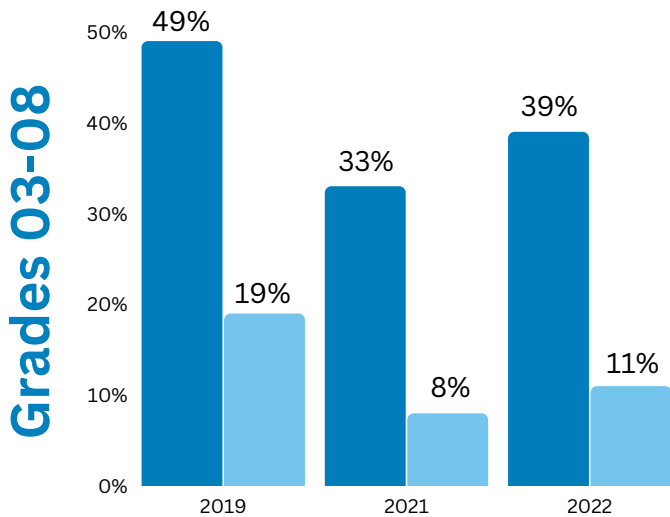
*MCAS Data from DESE's Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results.

Math MCAS

ELA MCAS

General MA Student Population | **Students in DCF Out-of-Home Placement**

Grades 03-08

Math MCAS — Grades 03-08:
- 2019: 49% / 19%
- 2021: 33% / 8%
- 2022: 39% / 11%

ELA MCAS — Grades 03-08:
- 2019: 52% / 22%
- 2021: 46% / 20%
- 2022: 41% / 15%

Grade 10

Math MCAS — Grade 10:
- 2019: 59% / 17%
- 2021: 52% / 13%
- 2022: 50% / 12%

ELA MCAS — Grade 10:
- 2019: 61% / 19%
- 2021: 64% / 25%
- 2022: 58% / 21%

The above graphs show the percentage of students who have scored in the "Exceeding Expectations" or "Meeting Expectations" range on their respective MCAS examinations.

High School Graduation Rates (DCF, 2022)

Before FY2022, four- and five-year graduation rates were the only education data included in DCF's Annual Report. The FY2022 Annual Report included data on graduation rates, and added data on attendance and disciplinary rates, and a categorical breakdown of High Needs students.
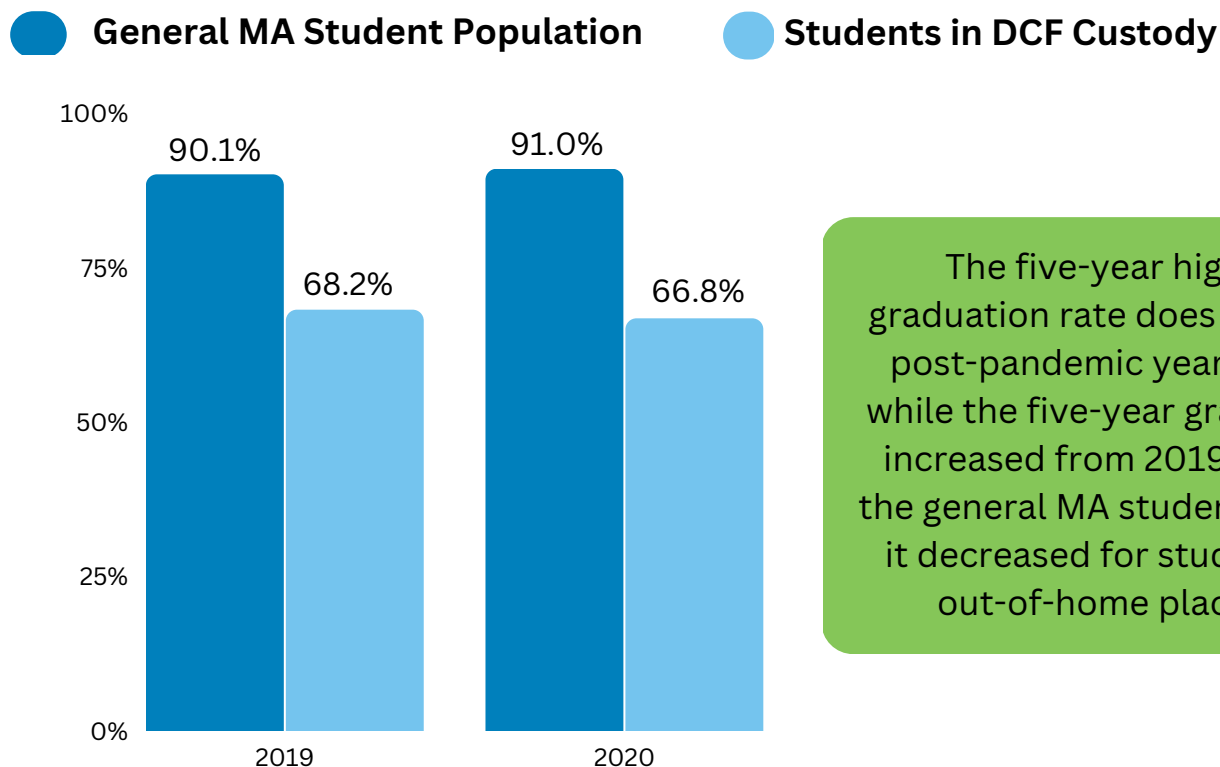
Four Year Graduation Rate*

● General MA Student Population ● Students in DCF Custody

Year	General MA Student Population	Students in DCF Custody
2019	88.0%	56.8%
2020	89.0%	50.6%
2021	89.8%	56.7%
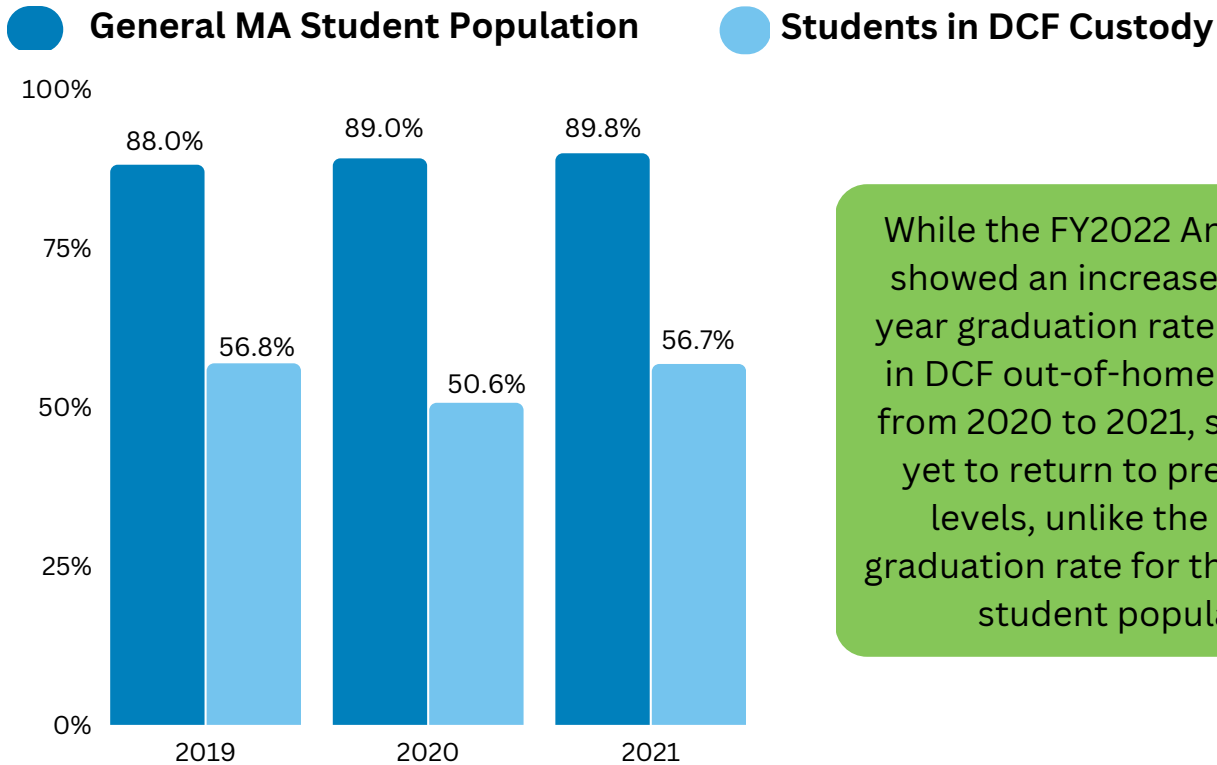
While the FY2022 Annual Report showed an increase in the four-year graduation rate for students in DCF out-of-home Placements from 2020 to 2021, such rate has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, unlike the four-year graduation rate for the general MA student population.

*Four year graduation rates are from DCF's FY2021 Annual Report and DESE. As of November 18, 2022, 2020 is the latest year with data available.

Five Year Graduation Rate**

● General MA Student Population ● Students in DCF Custody

Year	General MA Student Population	Students in DCF Custody
2019	90.1%	68.2%
2020	91.0%	66.8%

The five-year high school graduation rate does not yet show post-pandemic years. However, while the five-year graduation rate increased from 2019 to 2020 for the general MA student population, it decreased for students in DCF out-of-home placements.

**Five year graduation rates are from DCF's FY2021 Annual Report and DESE. As of November 18, 2022, 2019 is the latest year with data available.

Pathway to Meaningful Change

Improve Data Collection & Transparency

In accordance with federal regulations, Massachusetts DESE only reports standardized test scores (MCAS scores). **All other students in Massachusetts are evaluated based on 12 other independent metrics**, including **chronic absenteeism**, **annual dropout rate**, **college-going rate**, and **access to the arts**. Public Records Requests from Northeastern University's School of Law students **show that DESE collects - but does not publish - those additional metrics for students in out-of-home DCF placement.**

While DCF reports once a year on graduation rates, students with high needs, attendance rates, and disciplinary action, **DESE only disaggregates data based on foster care status for the "Student Achievement" data ,** which shows the percentage of students scoring at each achievement level on the English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science MCAS Tests, and High School Graduation Rate.

We recommend that **"Students Involved with DCF"** be added as a special population, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation/gender identity, on all DESE measurements and metrics and allowing for intersectional analysis.

Until we know the scope of the problem, we cannot solve it.

School-Based Accountability

Grant funded programs like KISR! and DREAMS show the success of having a school-based staff person whose sole purpose is to assist the school in providing stability and success for DCF-involved students.

We recommend the implementation of a **state-funded pilot program** that **designates a fully accountable, school-based staff member** who coordinates the efforts of other DCF point of contacts in holding the system accountable for the stability and success of DCF-involved students.

Massachusetts should commit to **regular transparent reporting on the data** that are currently shared between DCF and DESE that show absenteeism, discipline, grade retention, churn/mobility, and other DESE metrics, intersectionally presented and disaggregated by DCF-involved students.

True change will occur when Massachusetts commits to **becoming accountable** for the support and success by the general student standards of all DCF-involved students.

Models that have had success in improving the educational outcomes of students in foster care, such as KISR! and DREAMS**, have shown that having **a designated and accountable school based person** who is responsible for the educational support of child welfare-involved students **increases stability and educational success.**

*Kids in School Rule! (KISR!) –Cincinnati, Ohio

- Beginning in 2012, the KISR! program in Cincinnati, Ohio, was a collaboration between a county child welfare agency, an urban school district, a court, and a nonprofit legal services organization.
- The project aimed to increase school stability, improve systems coordination, improve educational outcomes, create a a structure for data collection, exchange, and evaluation, and develop a practice model that can be shared and replicated.
- KISR! utilizes a multi-agency model of collaboration in its approach, identifying a KISR! liaison at each school who then coordinates with other agency liaisons to ensure students are receiving proper educational services, as well as maintaining accurate data collection, enrollments, and progress monitoring.
- KISR! has served over 1600 youth and continues to expand. KISR! has grown from 22 pilot schools in 2008 to serving students in all 64 Cincinnati Public Schools in 2018.

**Developing Resources and Educational Advocacy for Motivated Students (DREAMS) – Florida

- DREAMS' multi-faceted approach addressed cross-system collaboration, implementation of an automated, web-based data extraction and reporting system to facilitate information sharing, collocation of educational liaisons in targeted school districts, designation of a point person in each school to advocate for students in foster care, provide training to educational stakeholders, improve coordination of educational support services, enhance educational engagement of parents and caregivers.
- DREAMS served foster youth in Marion and Citrus counties. 40 schools in Marion County and 9 schools in Citrus County participated in the DREAMS project. Over the course of the program's 15 month tenure, DREAMS served over 1,765 youth.
- Students who participated in the grant saw an increase of 0.07 in their grade point average, compared to students who were not in the grant who saw a decrease of 0.10 in their grade point average. Grant participants saw improvements in English Language Arts, and an improvement in attitude toward school and homework completion.

Connecticut Raise the Grade Pilot Program

- In 2013, the Connecticut State Legislature established the Raise the Grade Pilot Program in the state, designed to "to increase the academic achievement of children and youth who live in the custody of the Department of Children and Families or who are being served by the Court Support Services Division."
- The pilot was designed to measure academic achievement, absenteeism, and disciplinary measures for students performing below grade level and are either in state custody or under juvenile justice supervision.
- The Department of Children and Families contracted independent educational coordinators to work **in partnership with designated school-based contacts.**
- The pilot lasted two years, including the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. Because the participating districts (New Haven, Hartford, and Bridgeport) did not have standardized methods of assessment, no data is available on how academic achievement changed over the course of the pilot's duration.
- Anecdotal evidence from student participants highlight how the pilot improved communication between students, teachers, DCF, and school officials. **Improved communication and awareness of students' circumstances led to the provision of transportation, special education supports, and tutoring services for students.**

Methodology for CIP Report on DCF–Involved Student Outcomes

- Researchers identified the factors associated with school stability and success.
- Through this analysis, researchers analyzed the educational outcomes of 6,269 students in foster care during the 2014-2015 school year (pre-ESSA). NOTE: the report defines students in foster care as "students in court-ordered DCF custody on July 1, 2015."
- The above data is also from Public Records Requests, national data on foster youth, and analyses of client interactions with the THREdS team in the UMass Chan FaCES Clinic.