The Student in Foster Care

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (2021) it is estimated that over 400,000 children and youth in the United States are in foster care. Additional, more recent statistics (national and/or state) can also be found on this website under the Focus Areas tab, then choose the "Foster Care" (current, as of August 10, 2026). Foster care is a temporary living arrangement for children in need of a safe place to live when their parents or other relatives cannot provide care. Thousands of North Carolina students are part of the foster care system and attend school each day.

For school purposes, the foster parent assumes guardianship over the child once placement has been made. School nurses should be aware of the potential special health care and psychological needs of these students. To identify students, and their needs, school nurses may need to partner with the local Department of Social Services (DSS) to develop information-sharing protocols. When children are in the foster care system, communication with the assigned caseworker is important, and practices regarding sharing of information may vary. The NC Department of Public Instruction provides guidance on ensuring education stability and success for youth in foster care under the Every Student Succeeds Act (2017).

Students in the foster care system are often at higher risk for mental and physical health issues, unplanned parenthood, untreated illness, depression and suicide. They may have had inconsistent medical care due to the challenges in their lives. Children in foster care may also require intervention for maladaptive behaviors. These children may experience a lack of self-worth or sense of belonging. To help improve health and education outcomes, extra attention and assistance will likely be required from support teams within the school. Children and youth in foster care have an array of issues that should be evaluated. A team approach facilitates assessing, planning, and implementing goals for their individual needs.

Children in foster care are eligible for Medicaid coverage which provides an enhanced health care visit schedule to address their complex needs. The American Academy of Pediatrics has published Standards of Care (2021) for children and youth in foster care.

In the North Carolina Appropriations Act of 2015, legislators amended various statutes to extend foster care for youth up to age 21, authorizing services and benefits, provided certain criteria are met. These criteria and additional information can be found in G.S. 108A-48 Fostering Success/Extend Foster Care to 21 Years of Age (Section 12C.9.(a), p. 153-154).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, students in foster care are at an increased risk of dropping out of school and are less likely to attend or graduate from college. Addressing educational barriers and identifying needed support is necessary for the success of all children, but even more so for youth in foster care. The NC Reach program is available to assist foster care alumni with college costs.