Academic Outcomes for Wisconsin High School Students in Out-of-Home Care

Wisconsin’s public schools serve approximately 7,000 children in out-of-home care (OHC) each year, about half of whom will not graduate from high school. OHC encompasses the placement and services provided to children and families when children are removed from the home due to abuse, neglect, or other safety concerns. Due to the adverse conditions they experience, these children face greater barriers to their academic success than their non-OHC peers.

To support academic success for these at-risk students, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) have formed a partnership to analyze the academic outcomes of students in OHC across the state. For this project, and as an extension of prior research, the two agencies collaborated with a team of students at the University Wisconsin–Madison’s La Follette School of Public Affairs. This work focuses on academic outcomes for high school students in OHC, namely attendance rates, disciplinary actions, and math and reading scores on state standardized tests.

In this report, the La Follette team analyzed a data set linking OHC placements by type, region, number, and duration with student academic outcomes. As expected, given the adverse conditions these individuals experience, the analysis found that OHC students in high school experience worse academic outcomes than a comparison group selected based on similar characteristics. The analysis also shows differential outcomes based on grade level, demographic characteristics, and type of OHC placement.

The authors offer three recommendations for DCF and DPI based on their analysis of administrative data provided by DCF and DPI as well as a review of prior literature and investigation of best practices and successful innovations in other states to support academic achievement for these vulnerable children. The recommendations are the following:

1. Facilitate ongoing data sharing between DCF and DPI.
2. Emphasize the use of existing tools and the development of new interventions to streamline communication between the state-level agencies, local caseworkers, and school district personnel.
3. Ensure school stability and continuity of services to reduce mobility when possible and support academic improvement.