

# MORE THAN GRADES

REDEFINING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS  
FOR BC YOUTH IN GOVERNMENT CARE



McCreary  
Centre Society



YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY



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## REDEFINING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR BC YOUTH IN GOVERNMENT CARE

Youth Health • Youth Research • Youth Engagement

Founded in 1977, McCreary Centre Society is a non-governmental not-for-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, and youth engagement projects.

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- Interior Community Services, Kamloops & Merritt
- Nanaimo Youth Services, Nanaimo
- Nanaimo District Secondary School, Nanaimo
- North Island Community Services, Port Hardy & Port McNeil
- Prince George Native Friendship Centre, Prince George
- Prince George Youth Custody Centre, Prince George
- The John Howard Society of North Island, Campbell River
- Youth Justice Services, Victoria

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**Quotes from youth who participated in this project are included throughout the report.**

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REPRESENTATIVE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**McCreary Centre Society is located on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish people.**

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## MESSAGE FROM MEMBERS OF THE YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY

Youth in care face many challenges that can reduce their ability to succeed at school, including lack of support and housing instability. It's really important for youth in care to have as much support as possible with the stressful responsibilities of living, in order to do well in school. It's hard to focus on school work and absorb the information when your mind is trying to focus on survival.

Youth need to have a stable home where they can get clothed, fed, and can get enough sleep. Also, supports from adults and peers are very important for youth to feel safe and connected, and to pursue their education. Individualized support and alternative education options should be available to all youth in care. It is also important to have support from adults when planning for post-secondary education, as it is a very complicated process with a lot of steps.

It is important for foster parents and social workers to know what is going on with youth at school because it could help youth stay on track and set goals. Youth should be included in communications with school staff, foster parents, and social workers, and have a voice in educational decisions that affect them.

With this report, we hope that people understand the difficulties youth in care face with their education, and why they should not be lumped with their peers who are not facing the same challenges. We hope this report will help adults to realize how youth in care can experience educational success and how to better support them with their journey through life.

*Sierra, Sarah, Omyma, Jessica, Cheylene, & Blaise*

### YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY

McCreary's Youth Research Academy are a group of youth aged 16 to 24 with experience of the BC government care system. With guidance from McCreary staff, Academy participants conduct community based research of value to youth in and from care and the agencies that serve them. For more information about the Youth Research Academy, visit: [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca).

For this project, the Youth Research Academy took lead responsibility for analyzing the quantitative data collected through surveys, and participated in qualitative analysis of open-ended survey questions. In addition, they worked together to select the key findings. They also took the results back to youth who had participated in the survey to get their perspectives on the findings, and are continuing to share the results with young people and adults through presentations and workshops.

# KEY FINDINGS

Members of McCreary's Youth Research Academy, who have experienced the challenge of trying to succeed in school while being in government care, selected the key findings for this report:

- Youth who took part in focus groups across the province saw educational success as more than achieving good grades, graduating from high school and pursuing post-secondary education. They also described success for youth in care as attending school regularly, having positive peer relationships and feeling connected, safe, and engaged there.
- Creating a sense of safety and belonging at school was particularly important for youth who identified as Aboriginal, LGBTQ2S, and those who had special needs.
- Barriers to educational success included multiple moves to different care placements and schools. This instability made it difficult for youth to develop and maintain social connections, feel safe and engaged at school, complete course work, and graduate.
- A little under half of youth with care experience had dropped out of high school but later returned. The most common reasons for returning were a desire to get their high school diploma or equivalent, to pursue post-secondary education, and not wanting to work low-paid jobs.
- Among youth who completed an online survey, those aged 19 or older were more likely than younger youth to feel it was important to go to school regularly (90% vs. 57%) and to graduate from high school (97% vs. 65%). They were also more likely than younger youth to identify mental health challenges as a barrier to graduating (93% vs. 74%).
- Participants identified a number of supports that help youth in care to succeed at school. These included individualized and one-on-one support, and the opportunity to work at their own pace and experience different ways of learning (e.g., hands-on, outdoors, practical, online classes).
- Getting their basic needs met, including access to healthy food (e.g., through lunch programs at school) and housing stability, increased the likelihood of youth experiencing academic success.
- Supportive adults who were reliable, relatable, easily accessible, and who attempted to understand youth in care and the care system were key to youth experiencing educational success.
- Participants recommended that adults should help young people with goal setting and with concrete planning for post-secondary education, and they should help youth celebrate success along the way.
- Learning about culture at school was beneficial. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth who felt their school helped them learn about their culture were more likely than their peers who did not feel this way to feel like a part of their school (70% vs. 17%) and happy to be there (85% vs. 35%).
- Most youth felt it was important for their foster parents and social workers to know what was going on for them at school. However, they wanted to be included in communications among school staff, foster parents, and social workers, and have a voice in academic decisions that affect them.

# INTRODUCTION



As part of a larger project conducted by the BC Office of the Representative for Children and Youth, McCreary Centre Society (McCreary) was asked to capture the perspectives of youth in and from government care with respect to the barriers and supports they experience in achieving educational success.

Over 100 youth with government care experience participated in focus groups in diverse urban and rural communities across the province, and a further 57 completed an online survey. Reflective of the over-representation of Aboriginal youth and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S within the BC government care system, participants who identified as Aboriginal and/or LGBTQ2S were particularly sought out to ensure their perspectives were included in this project.

## LIMITATIONS

Within the focus groups, not all youth participated in every discussion and therefore some perspectives may not have been captured. Similarly, although the online survey aimed to capture the perspectives of youth who were unable to or not interested in attending a focus group, it did not reach all youth with government care experience.

**Government care experience** refers to having spent time in care or an alternative to care (foster care, group home, custody centre, Kith and Kin Agreement, Youth Agreement). Youth Agreements were included in this definition because youth often discussed their experiences on a Youth Agreement when talking about their care experience.





# METHODOLOGY

## ONLINE SURVEY

An online survey tapping educational experiences of BC youth aged 12 to 24 was created and widely advertised within statutory and non-governmental agencies who serve youth in and from government care. Members of McCreary's Youth Research Academy also shared the link among their networks to ensure it reached youth who were not necessarily accessing services.

The criteria for completing the survey were the age range (12 to 24 years) and having government care experience either currently or in the past (e.g., foster home, group home, Youth Agreement, custody centre, Kith & Kin Agreement). A total of 57 eligible young people completed the survey.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Between May and June 2016, 21 focus groups were completed. A total of 105 youth (38% in rural areas) took part, and were recruited through various youth programs, friendship centres, and youth custody centres. Focus groups ranged in length from 1.5 to 2 hours.

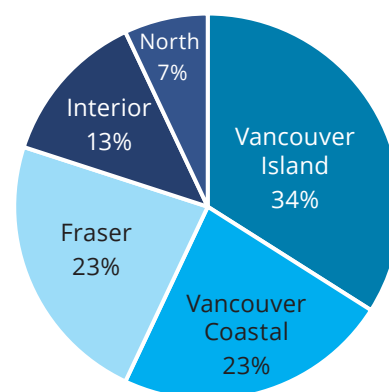


## FOCUS GROUP FORMAT

In each focus group, participants discussed the challenges experienced by youth in care in attaining school success, and supports that had or were currently helping them achieve their educational goals. They also offered suggestions for how to better support youth to succeed within the education system.

The workshop concluded with participants working individually to complete a written statement on a postcard which began, "Youth in care do well in school when...."

## WHERE YOUTH LIVED (ONLINE SURVEY)



## WHERE FOCUS GROUPS TOOK PLACE

Fraser	Interior	Northern	Vancouver Coastal	Vancouver Island
Abbotsford	Kamloops	Prince George	Gibsons	Campbell River
New Westminster	Merritt	Quesnel	Vancouver	Nanaimo
Surrey	Trail			Port McNeil
				Victoria

# PARTICIPANTS

## AGE

Participants who completed a survey ranged in age from 12 to 24, with 40% aged 18 or younger.

Focus group participants ranged in age from 13 to 24, with the majority (61%) aged 16 to 18 and around a quarter (26%) aged 19 or older.

## GENDER IDENTITY

Just under half (48%) of focus group participants identified as male, and the same percentage as female. The remainder identified as gender fluid, transgender, or another gender identity. The majority of youth who completed a survey (77%) identified as female, and most of the others were male.

## EXPERIENCE IN GOVERNMENT CARE OR ALTERNATIVE

All project participants had experienced at least one type of government care or alternative to care (such as a Youth Agreement). Twenty-eight percent of survey respondents and 59% of focus group participants were currently in government care, including foster homes, group homes, and on Youth Agreements.

GOVERNMENT CARE OR ALTERNATIVES TO CARE (LIFETIME RATES)		
	Online survey respondents	Focus group participants
Foster care	74%	78%
Group home	34%	51%
Youth Agreement	47%	45%
Custody centre	24%	41%
Kith & Kin Agreement	13%	11%
Agreement with Young Adults (AYA)	28%	13%

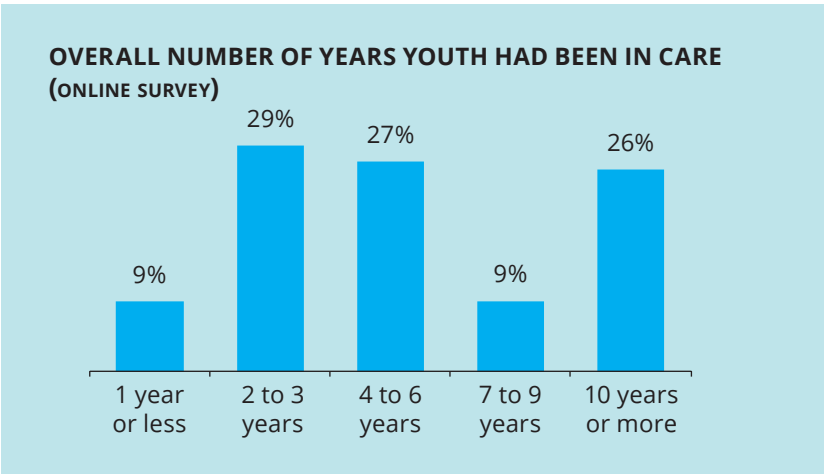
**Note:** At the time of data collection, AYA covered the living expenses of youth aged 19 to 23 who were attending school or a rehabilitation program for up to two years. The criteria for an AYA has since been expanded.

The length of time overall that focus group participants had spent in government care ranged from a year or less (28%) to 10 years or more (22%). The range was the same among youth who completed a survey.

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

Youth who took part in focus groups and surveys most commonly identified as Aboriginal and/or European (they could mark more than one background). Among youth who completed a survey 61% identified as European and 40% identified as Aboriginal, while 63% of focus group participants were Aboriginal and 38% were European. Among participants who identified as Aboriginal in both focus groups and surveys, around 80% were First Nations and the rest were Métis. Project participants also identified as East Asian, African, South Asian, West Asian, Latin /South /Central American, and Australian/Pacific Islander.

The vast majority of participants were born in Canada.



## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sixty-three percent of focus group participants identified as straight/heterosexual, while 22% identified as bisexual, 5% as gay or lesbian, and the remainder were questioning their sexuality or did not have attractions. Percentages were similar among youth who completed an online survey.

## HEALTH

Youth with health challenges and disabilities are over-represented among youth in care. This was reflected among participants in this project, as 74% who took part in a focus group had at least one health condition or disability, and the rate was 81% among survey respondents.

Youth most commonly identified having a mental health challenge (69% of survey respondents and 47% of focus group participants).

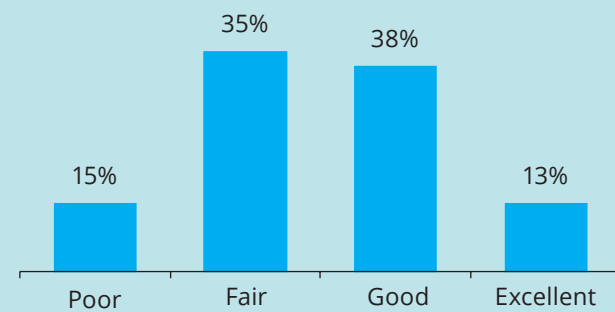
Half of youth who completed a survey rated their mental health as good or excellent, whereas the other half rated it as fair or poor. There were no significant differences in ratings based on age, gender, or on when youth had been in care (currently or previously).

### MOST COMMON HEALTH CONDITIONS OR DISABILITIES (FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS)

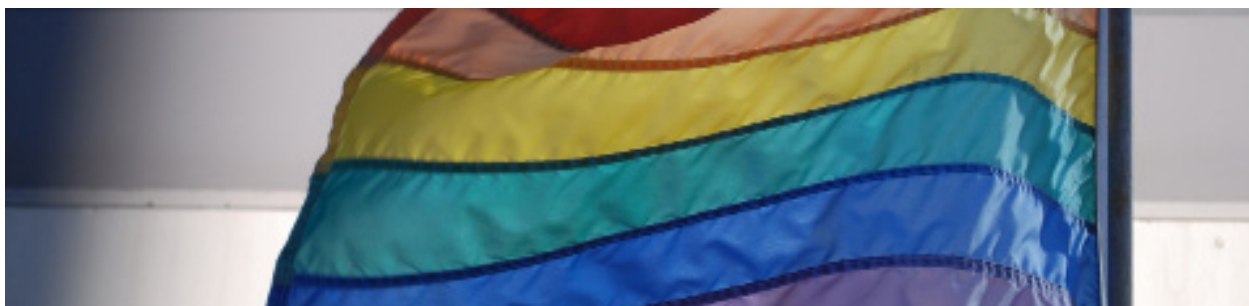
Mental health or emotional condition	47%
Alcohol or other drug addiction	32%
Behavioural condition	27%
Long term/chronic medical condition	16%
Learning disability	13%
Sensory disability	9%
Physical disability	6%
Other condition	5%

**Note:** 'Other condition' included Autism Spectrum Disorder and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

### MENTAL HEALTH RATINGS (ONLINE SURVEY)



**Note:** Percentages exceed 100% due to rounding.



## SCHOOL

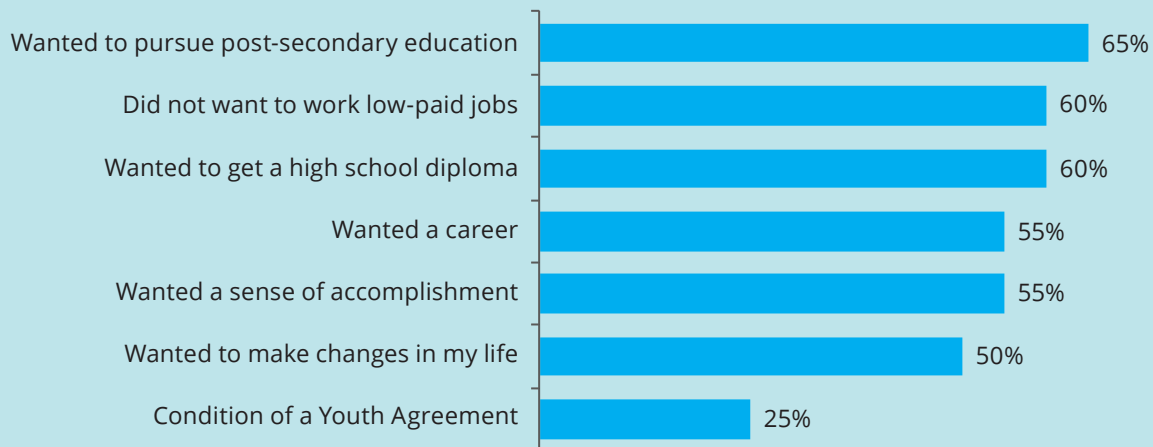
Most focus group participants (64%) were currently attending high school or middle school, and a few were attending post-secondary. Among survey respondents, 38% were currently in high school or middle school (18% in mainstream school and 20% in an alternative program), and 21% were in post-secondary education (e.g., trade school, college, university).

Among focus group participants who were not in school, over half (52%) had stopped attending before graduating high school. The rate was 37% among survey respondents not in school.

Around 1 in 5 (21%) focus group participants had dropped out of school and had not gone back, while 46% had left but later returned. Percentages were similar among youth who completed a survey.

Survey respondents who had dropped out of high school but later returned identified a number of reasons for returning to school. The most common were a desire to get their high school diploma or equivalent, to pursue post-secondary education, and not wanting to work low-paid jobs.

### **MOST COMMONLY IDENTIFIED REASONS FOR RETURNING TO HIGH SCHOOL (AMONG YOUTH WHO HAD LEFT AND LATER RETURNED; ONLINE SURVEY)**



**Note:** Youth could mark all responses that applied.



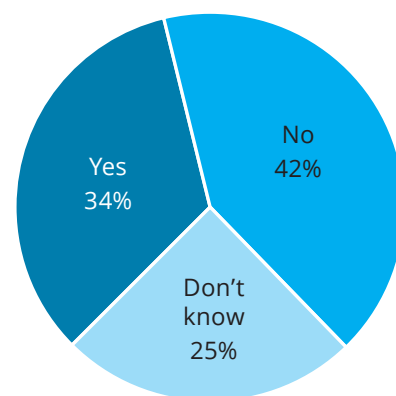
Around 1 in 3 youth who completed a survey reported having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) either currently or in the past, while a quarter of youth were unsure.

Youth who reported having Autism Spectrum Disorder or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) were more likely to indicate having an IEP than their peers without these conditions.

Most youth who completed a survey felt that adults cared how well they did at school (71%) and that adults expected them to succeed at school (80%). Around half (51%) felt they were supported to succeed at school, and 43% indicated they received extra help with their school work when they needed it.

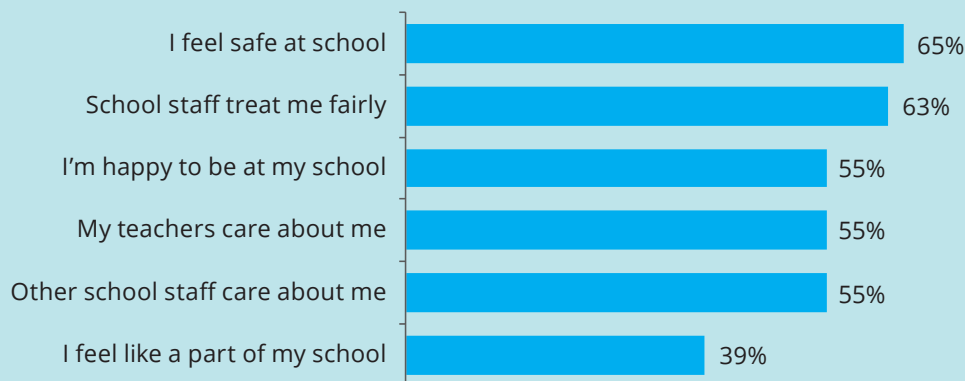
Youth were also asked about school connectedness, which includes feelings of belonging, safety, and happiness at school. Youth who were not in school responded based on their past experiences at school. Most felt safe at school, although a minority felt a sense of belonging there.

#### YOUTH WHO HAD AN IEP (ONLINE SURVEY)



Note: Percentages exceed 100% due to rounding.

#### SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS (YOUTH WHO AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED; ONLINE SURVEY)



# DEFINING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS



***"It's a big achievement [doing well in school]. Maybe there's trouble at home or you ran away. If you're in care and doing well, it's an achievement."***

Focus group participants were asked to define what educational success meant for youth in government care. Youth in each of the focus groups felt that educational success looked different for youth in care, compared to their peers not in care. The main reason was that youth in care had priorities and responsibilities beyond school which other youth did not have. These included needing to earn money, taking care of their personal needs (e.g., buying groceries, cooking, doing laundry), caring for younger siblings, and sometimes finding a safe place to sleep that night.

*"People tell you, 'you shouldn't worry' when they don't even know what your life is like. They can go home and relax, watch TV – you can't."*

*"As a teenager, they leave it up to your parents [to get you to go to school] and some kids don't have parents to do that."*

## ATTENDING REGULARLY

While achieving good grades, graduating, and going to college were how adults measured youth's success; for many youth in care attending school regularly, arriving on time, and staying for the full school day were considerable achievements.

*"You have to keep good attendance, good grades. But when you hear teachers say you need straight A's, it should be about bettering yourself."*

Among youth who completed a survey, those aged 19 or older were more likely than younger youth to feel it was important to go to school regularly (90% vs. 57%).

*"Looking back I wish I'd gone [to school] regularly. I did until the middle of grade 8 and then I went downhill and I wish I didn't. It's made it hard for me to do work now—I'm trying to finish grade 12."*



## FEELING CONNECTED AND ENGAGED

Participants said it was difficult to be successful at school unless they felt safe and happy there.

The majority defined doing well in school as feeling emotionally connected to school, feeling mentally and physically able to participate in school activities, and having good relationships with staff and their classmates.

*"You can only succeed if you can go to school without hating everybody."*

*"Feeling like you fit in with every other child."*

## KEEPING UP WITH COURSEWORK

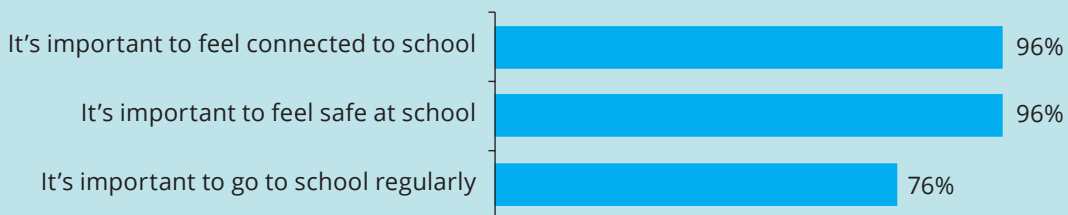
Although most youth said getting good grades was not necessarily as important to them as attending and feeling like a part of their school, many did note that passing classes and courses was an accomplishment for youth in care.

Youth reported feeling successful when they were able to understand and retain the information being taught, submitted homework and assignments on time, and were able to keep up with the workload.



***"For me, success is passing in classes I'm interested in and care about."***

### YOUTH WHO AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED... (ONLINE SURVEY)





***"I understand that [graduating] is important. It is your gateway. You need that for everything now."***

## GRADUATING

The vast majority of youth believed they needed to graduate to gain even entry level employment and be successful in life. However, they felt that graduation should not be the primary goal of school for youth in care. They wanted to learn at their own pace without their graduation date looming over them.

*"I graduated before I was ready."*

*"There's too much pressure to graduate the year you are 'supposed to.'"*

Some youth felt it was more important for them to graduate than their peers not in care. They did not have a family to rely on for support, so would need to graduate to support themselves in the future.

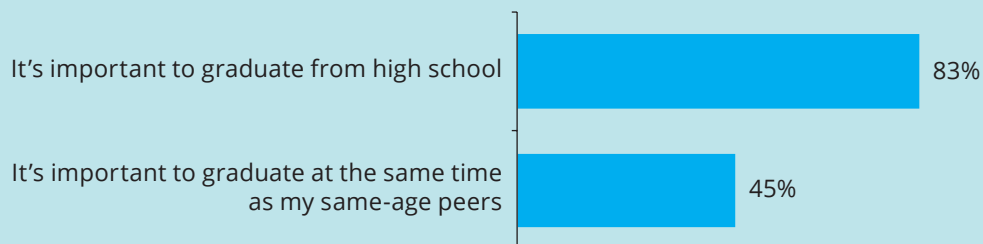
A number of older participants noted they had not felt graduating was important when they had been in school, but later came to realize it was.

*"I don't want to be on welfare for the rest of my life."*

Consistent with what youth said in the focus groups, most youth who completed a survey felt it was important to graduate from high school, and youth aged 19 or older were more likely than younger youth to feel this way (97% vs. 65%). Also, among youth of the same age, those who had been in care for four or more years were more likely than those who had been in care for fewer years to feel it was important to graduate from high school (91% vs. 67%).

Less than half of youth felt it was important to graduate at the same time as their same-age peers, with similar percentages across age and length of time in care.

### YOUTH WHO AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED... (ONLINE SURVEY)





# BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

***“The hardest thing about going to school is that people don’t understand anything you’ve gone through and people tell you to toughen up, but they’ve never walked in our shoes.”***

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS

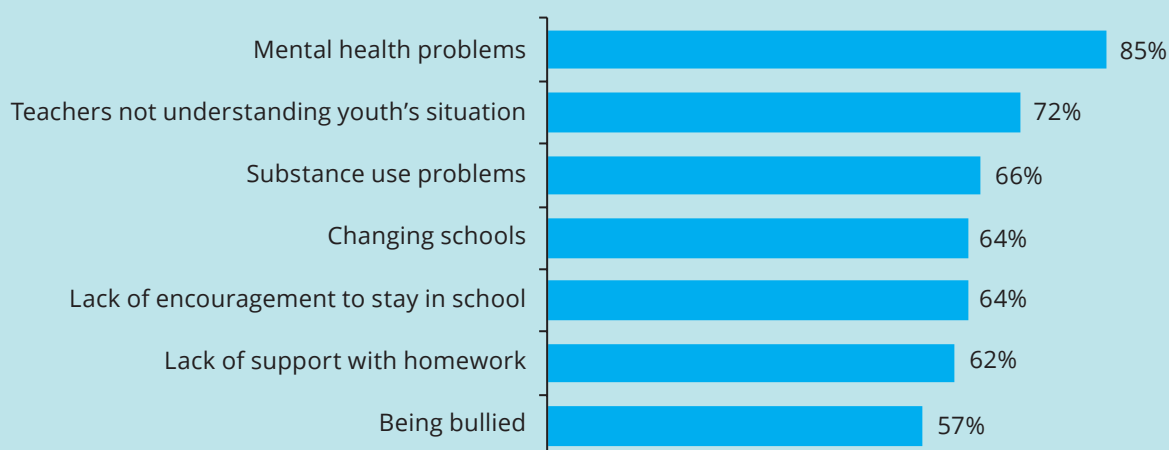
Youth who completed a survey identified various situations that created challenges for youth in care to graduate from high school. The most common was having mental health issues, with youth aged 19 or older more likely than younger youth to identify this as a barrier to graduating (93% vs. 74%).

*“Why not look at WHY the youth isn’t going to school, or is having problems at school or whatever. They’re doing it for a reason and it’s because there is something they are missing and finding through whatever behaviour they’re exhibiting.”*

Older youth were also more likely to identify not getting enough support with homework (80% vs. 39% aged 18 or younger), not getting enough encouragement to stay in school (87% vs. 35%), and teachers not understanding youth’s situation (90% vs. 48%) as challenges to graduating from high school.

Regardless of age, youth who had been in care for four or more years were more likely than their peers who had been in care for fewer years to identify changing schools as a barrier to graduating from high school (77% vs. 44%).

## CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH IN CARE TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL (ONLINE SURVEY)



**Note:** Youth could mark all responses that applied.



***"I had my social worker pull me out from school and just tell me I wasn't going home—to my home of 9 years on my 12th birthday. I grew up with all of these kids, then I had to move and I didn't have a home. I cried so hard."***

## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

### ENTERING GOVERNMENT CARE AND CHANGING PLACEMENTS

Youth in focus groups spoke about the emotional instability they felt when they moved into government care or changed placements. For some, school became less of a priority as they dealt with the turmoil and change of having to get to know new foster parents, a new neighbourhood, or new roommates.

*"Being moved from place to place is like 'great, another broken home.' It takes a lot to open up to someone, then it gets taken away so fast. It will crush kids."*

Dealing with the challenges of entering care or living independently on a Youth Agreement had negatively impacted some youth's mental health. This could make it hard to attend or concentrate at school and to build relationships with teachers and classmates who either did not know about their situation or did not understand it.

For youth with a disability, changing placements could be particularly challenging if the new foster home did not accept them for who they were, or seek to understand why they behaved in certain ways.

*"Being aware that people have disabilities [is important for foster parents]. I want them to acknowledge and try to understand my disability, and different people's disabilities."*

Some youth reported that foster families often took more interest in their biological children's schooling than in their foster children's. In contrast, other youth felt that their foster parents pushed them too hard to do well in school and this caused them increased stress, which led them to disengage.

*"I got pushed a lot by my foster family. I got pushed too hard and I took offence to it."*

*"Don't push them, because school is pushing them just as bad."*

Aboriginal youth placed in a non-Aboriginal foster family felt these families took more interest in the education of their foster children who were not Aboriginal than they did in the Aboriginal children in their care.

*"Most of the time, the people you live with don't care about you or how you do in school."*

*"I didn't really have anyone to talk to about school."*

When youth first entered care or changed placement, they reported having difficulties getting an adult to sign permission slips. This often persisted throughout their time in care and meant that if they were unable to get a social worker to sign permission forms in time, they missed out on attending school events and trips.

## LIVING IN A GROUP HOME

Around half (51%) of participants in the focus groups had lived in a group home. The majority felt the environment was not conducive to supporting youth to do well in school. Not only did youth have to navigate their own challenges, they were also surrounded by other youth experiencing challenges, and were often negatively influenced by them. They also felt they had to be more independent because group home staff were not readily available to provide them with the support they needed to succeed at school.

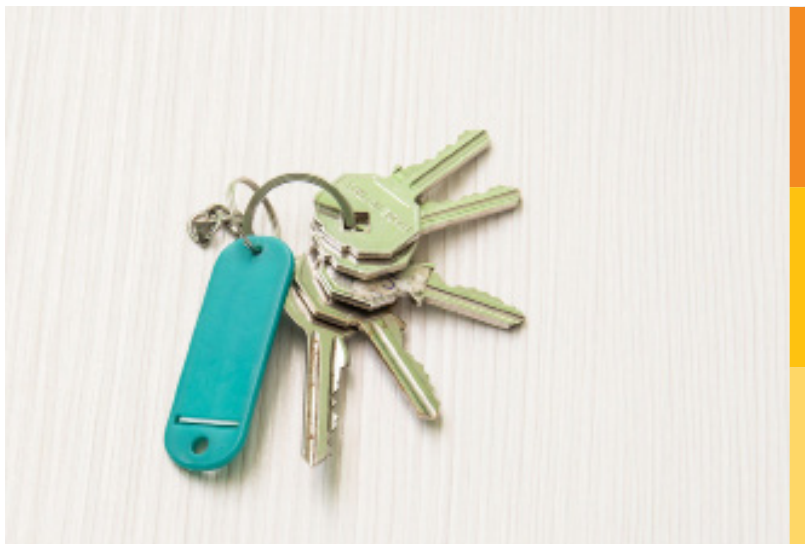
*"When I was at home, my dad kept me in check but when I got to the care home, it all fell apart. I kind of stopped caring."*

*"If anything, the group home talked to the cops more than the school."*

However, for some youth, being in a group home created stability and gave them the support and motivation they needed to go to school, especially when there were younger youth in the home to whom they felt they should be good role models.

*"When I was younger and going through Ministry it was hard, but now I'm in a group home it's more routine and it's easier to go to school."*

Youth from group homes commonly felt they did not 'fit in' with their peers at school, and were treated differently by peers and teachers because of their unique living situation. This led them to put up barriers around themselves which led to a sense of further isolation.



## LIVING ON A YOUTH AGREEMENT

Participants who were currently on a Youth Agreement, or who had previously been on one, spoke of having little adult support with their schooling, including no one monitoring their attendance or attending parent-teacher interviews. They also commonly had to work while completing school, which meant they fell behind academically and did not graduate at the same time as their peers.

*"People were flabbergasted to know I am living on my own and I'm still attending school."*

*"For most kids they still have their parents supporting and encouraging them but I have to be the adult."*

***"I feel awkward around kids. I don't have interest in what they say. I skipped that part of my life."***

***"I still have not graduated because I have been bouncing around from house to house and my school is too far away now. I don't know which school to transfer to (or if I even want to!). I've made a great connection with my counsellor and two of the teachers at an alternative school and I am sad to leave them."***

## CHANGING SCHOOLS

*"The easiest solution would have just been to have stayed at the same school—it should have been easy."*

The disruption of having to change schools which often accompanied a move into government care or to a new placement was seen as one of the biggest barriers to educational success. Changing schools made it hard for youth to develop and maintain social connections. They spoke about their sadness at losing touch with old school friends and how daunting it felt to have to try and make a new group of friends. For rural based youth, there was also often the added challenge of having a long commute to their new school.

*"You don't get to connect, so you just don't try. [You're] going to move again anyway. You forget how to make friends and small talk."*

*"I don't have friends at my new school—I don't even try to make friends because I change schools so often. [I would love] to be able to go to school and have a friend in class instead of having to just talk to teachers all the time."*

Participants spoke of having to negotiate admittance to a new school without the support of an adult to help them to register or transfer courses. The stress was often compounded when their academic records were lost or misplaced during the transfer. Participants recommended the process of transferring records between schools be reviewed and improved.

*"There's no one there to back you."*

Changing schools often resulted in youth having to repeat work or a grade they had already completed, while also having missed a large part of the curriculum at their new school. Some had not been able to continue with a subject they had done well in at a previous school because it was not offered at the new school. These experiences led some participants to become so overwhelmed and disillusioned that they stopped going to school altogether.

*"It sucked because I was always the new student."*

*"I had to do Grade 7 three times because I kept having to take off."*

Participants who had experienced more positive transitions between schools talked about receiving individualized support to help them catch up. They felt it was important for teachers and peers to reach out to new students, and make them feel welcome.

Some youth also mentioned that having an orientation done by a fellow student was comforting and gave them a point person to approach. They felt that such friendships, although manufactured, helped ease the tension of starting at a new school.

## LACK OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

A lack of school connectedness was identified as a barrier to succeeding at school. The experience of living in government care was in itself a barrier to feeling connected to school, as youth felt they were 'different' from the majority of their peers who lived with their parents. They felt their peers worried about trivial issues such as getting a new phone or a new car, while they were dealing with much bigger challenges. Having different priorities to their peers made connecting to school harder.

*"I felt like the only people I could talk to were my counsellors at lunch, and that my peers did not understand or empathize with me, rather, believing I was too different to be friends with, or not trying to understand my situation."*

*"I had to grow up a lot faster [than my classmates] and feel that I missed out on a childhood."*

Youth also felt that the mainstream public school environment encouraged students to compete with one another, which deterred them from supporting each other to succeed at school, and reduced feelings of school connectedness and motivation to graduate.

*"No one really helps each other out."*

*"Half the reason people don't graduate is it feels like a competition."*

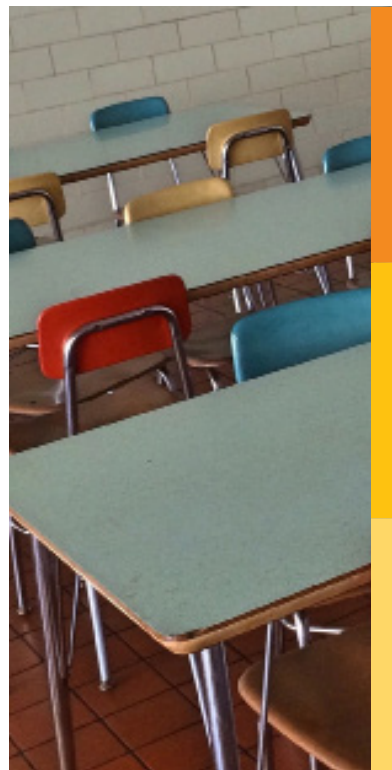
Participants felt that youth in care had to contend with adults in the school system who were often unaware or unsupportive of the additional challenges they were facing to their education, and did not make efforts to include them in school life. Some youth spoke about feeling angry and distrustful of adults as a result of their life experiences, and having so many adult responsibilities outside of school (e.g., budgeting, shopping, and cooking), that it impacted their relationships with school staff.

*"I've left school because people have told me to toughen up. It's not fair."*

*"[School staff] don't know how much of a challenge it is, going through care."*

Getting to and from school, as well as to extracurricular activities was an issue for some youth, especially those in rural areas, and this also impacted their feelings of connectedness to school. Many youth said having an adult (e.g., a social worker or Aboriginal Education Worker) who had supported them with rides to school had been helpful for ensuring they could attend and feel more connected.

Transportation issues, particularly in smaller more rural communities, and the cost of participation also prevented youth in care from taking part in extracurricular activities. Several felt they were missing out on opportunities to engage in healthy activities such as organized sports where they could make friends, and feel connected to a school team as well as improve their well-being and skills.



***"You should feel safe [at school] and trust the people around you."***





***"Youth in care get picked on more than anyone else."***

## VICTIMIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION

*"I dropped out of high school at the first opportunity due to bullying and other stresses in my life."*

Many participants shared stories of being physically or emotionally victimized at school and some also acknowledged being the perpetrators of such bullying. Youth said they often would not attend school if they feared being bullied. Also, if they did not feel safe at school, they did not feel connected.

*"Being in care, when I was in 4th grade this kid was like 'no wonder your mom doesn't want you'."*

*"[Feeling safe at school is] pretty important because if you are stressed and you feel bad, it's hard to concentrate."*

Some male participants spoke about the link between engaging in violence and reduced feelings of connection to school. They felt that the threat of violence was a constant distraction from their school work and from engaging in positive activities at school.

*"They should be safe, but I get into fights at school."*

*"If you're connected to school, you don't need to worry about that safety stuff."*

Aboriginal youth who experienced racism by teachers and peers said this experience had made school difficult for them. They also felt that racism outside of school led to increased contact with the police and criminal justice system, and this in turn impacted school attendance and engagement.

*"If you're going to stereotype me, I might as well make the stereotypes true."*

Feeling unsafe and unsupported in school because of their sexuality or gender identity was a barrier for some participants. Several youth who identified as transgender spoke of being rebuked or suspended for wearing clothes that did not match what the school considered to be appropriate for their biological sex. A small number stated that homophobia or transphobia was the reason they had disengaged from school.

*"You can't come out in high school as Trans. You get jumped, called horrible names."*

*"You can't go to the females or males washrooms because it's not safe. You have to pretend you have a disability to use the disabled washroom."*

## HEALTH CHALLENGES

Several youth noted being suspended or expelled as a result of behavioural problems, mental health challenges and substance use addiction. Missing school had further exacerbated these health conditions, especially when they did not have a supportive adult in their life who could advocate for their return to school.

*"Instead of punishing [youth], ask, 'why are you using drugs or alcohol? What's going on with you?'"*

*"If a kid comes in angry then don't send them away straight away, try to figure out why they're angry. Don't assume, and give them time."*

Some youth with ADHD noted that their condition made maintaining the routine of attending school and doing school work difficult.

## LACK OF SLEEP

Almost all youth who completed a survey felt that the amount of sleep they got affected how well they did at school (94%), and that getting enough sleep was a factor that helped youth in care succeed at school (92%).

Focus group participants said that lack of sleep was a major barrier to getting up for school. It also affected their mood and behaviour, as well as their ability to concentrate, understand school work, and stay engaged throughout the day.

*"I'm miserable and skip school if I don't sleep."*

*"There were nights when I didn't get any sleep and I didn't want to be at school. I didn't want to be around people."*

Although there was consensus that cell phone usage contributed to poor sleep, participants were generally unsure how they might reduce their use. Some youth did note that having a routine—often one supported by an adult—was helpful for them in going to bed and getting up at appropriate times.

***"More of a routine, a schedule, a bedtime [is helpful]. Lots of kids don't have a routine."***

YOUTH IN  
CARE DO WELL  
IN SCHOOL  
WHEN...

*"They have a good night's sleep."*



***“Getting myself AND a child ready is a big effort, to travel every morning with a child to day care and then to school especially. When he’s having a bad day it’s even harder.”***

## PREGNANCY INVOLVEMENT

The financial burden of having a child, along with the exhaustion of caring for a baby had made it difficult for the young mothers in the focus groups to stay in school. They suggested that providing daycares in schools would improve the chances of young parents being able to stay in school.

*“I wanna graduate because I want to feel the accomplishment. I’ve always wanted to finish even though I keep missing out. It’s hard for me to focus though with my son near me.”*

Some youth had wanted to use their time in custody to complete their Dogwood but felt that they often ended up taking courses which did not count toward graduation. Others had made a conscious decision not to graduate while serving a custodial sentence as they wanted to graduate in the community with their families present.

*“I’d rather graduate where my family could come and it be like ‘we finally made it.’”*

## POVERTY

Being unable to afford groceries and transit, and having to pay rent and bills, were all cited as barriers to staying in school by youth who felt they had to prioritize food and shelter over education. This was a particular concern for participants currently on a Youth Agreement.

*“I’m always stressed out about if I’m going to have a bed tonight, dinner tonight....”*

*“I need regular healthy food because I’m diabetic, but I don’t eat properly sometimes for weeks. I have to spend my money on 5 cent candies to last me three days of low blood-sugar levels.”*

Being unable to afford to take part in school events, field trips, and graduation events reduced the incentive to stay in school and graduate. Youth who had benefited from programs that helped pay for prom dresses and suits for students felt that these should be more widely available.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

Youth who had experience of the criminal justice system felt that it was often difficult to get back into mainstream school due to their previous behaviour or because of lost or misplaced administrative records. They also felt teachers were often not knowledgeable about the justice system.

*“I’m not here to teach them. They’re here to teach me. They should go do some research about youth in care.”*



## EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

Some youth felt that adults put too much pressure on them to succeed academically because they knew that the youth would soon have to support themselves financially, and would need good grades to qualify for scholarships to fund post-secondary.

*"You are supposed to be the best of the best."*

*"You doing good is the only thing that will pay for college. You need a scholarship."*

Others felt adults often had lower expectations of them. For example, teachers might not expect them to attend school or submit assignments because they knew they were in care.

*"The teachers helped me as much as they could, but they didn't expect me to do anything. They were just happy if I was well behaved. It was all they could expect."*

## AGING OUT OF CARE

Among older youth who had not graduated, aging out of the care system before they had finished high school had been a major barrier. They felt that after they turned 19, there was no support to complete high school and it became much harder to keep attending.



*"It would have been nice to be encouraged to stay in school."*

*"I feel like [leaving] school was a big catalyst for me not to do anything."*

Some younger youth who were settled in their school spoke about not wanting to graduate 'on time' because they were scared about losing the structure of school at the same time that they aged out of care. They suggested providing transition planning for youth in school to help them bridge into post-secondary education in a timely manner, and have a plan for when supports cease at 19.

*"You drop off the cliff and you are in the abyss."*

*"Every foster kid gets dropped, it's ridiculous. It makes life hard in general."*

***"Youth in care do not get told by their foster parent 'when you graduate,' it's not talked about like we were their own child. They say 'if,' there's a big difference in treatment there. There's no talk about college."***

# SUPPORTING YOUTH IN CARE TO SUCCEED AT SCHOOL

***"Being able to go at my own pace [has been helpful] as I get overwhelmed quite easily and it takes a lot to get my focus back on track when something sets me off."***

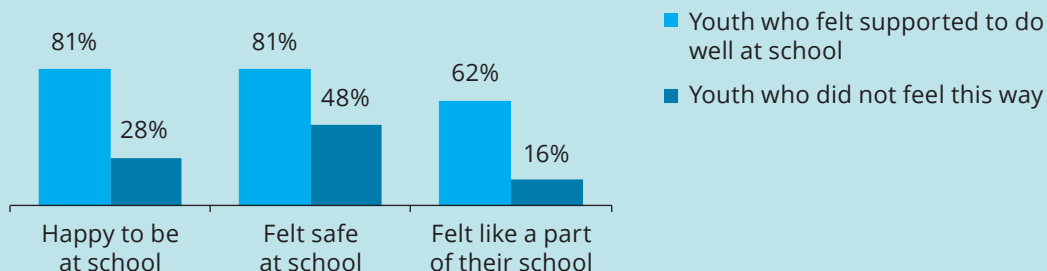
*"I had a lot of supports within the education system who were persistent in the completion of my high school education. They encouraged me, and understood my situation and potential."*

Among youth who completed a survey, those who felt they were supported to do well at school, and received extra help with their school work when needed, were more likely than their peers who

did not feel supported to report feeling like a part of their school, happy to be there, and safe at school.

On the survey, youth most commonly (94%) identified learning at their own pace as a factor that helps youth in care do well at school. Also, 78% felt that learning good study habits contributed to school success.

**FEELING SUPPORTED AT SCHOOL IN RELATION TO SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS (ONLINE SURVEY)**



**YOUTH IN CARE DO WELL IN SCHOOL WHEN...**

*"You have the right support from the right people."*

*"You get support and help for assignments."*

*"They have that one trustworthy super helpful person that they can count on for the support they need."*

*"There is someone there supporting them....it's always good to have someone that you can talk to and trust."*

## OFFERING INDIVIDUALIZED OPTIONS

*“Adults need to be fully aware of where the youth is academically and to adjust supports in order to help the youth excel and meet expectations with less struggling.”*

Focus group participants felt it was critical for youth in care to have a range of school options available to them to reflect the different ways people learn. Some noted performing better within the structure of a mainstream school, whereas others responded better to the flexible and independent nature of alternative programs where they were able to get more individualized support.

Youth generally felt that adults should make the effort to figure out what each youth needs and responds to, in order to maximize youth's likelihood of succeeding at school.

*“When you are working with youth in care, try to find out how their brain learns.”*

## ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

Many youth said the main factor that would help them do well in school was having one-on-one support from a teacher (offered in a non-stigmatizing way). Receiving this type of support was particularly important if youth were new to a school or had missed a lot of classes. Similarly, most participants who completed a survey (84%) identified one-on-one support as important to their academic success.

Youth in rural areas or in alternative schools with smaller class sizes were more likely to report receiving this help than youth in large urban schools. As a result, these youth expressed feeling better able to succeed at school.

## HANDS-ON LEARNING

Many youth identified experiential and hands-on learning as an approach that worked well for them because it helped them to stay interested and engaged in school.

*“Less time in books, more time being active.”*



*“In alt school, there's smaller classes and it's easier to connect with your teachers.”*

YOUTH IN  
CARE DO WELL  
IN SCHOOL  
WHEN...

*“We have many learning tools, and teachers understand how we work.”*



***"I don't find adults very helpful anymore. I like learning online."***

## ONLINE COURSES

Youth who had experienced challenges in a school setting—most notably as a result of an anxiety disorder, certain learning disabilities, or a disciplinary problem—felt that online courses gave them the opportunity to study at their own pace and achieve success.

## ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Many participants felt alternative schools were well set up to support youth in care as they usually provided meals, offered more experiential learning, and were less demanding than mainstream schools. They also had teachers who were skilled at working with youth who were dealing with challenges.

*"Alternative schools often know a bit more about your situation. It helps when they know, for example, that I skip a lot and why."*

*"I had a lot of support from teachers, counsellors etc. I went to an alternative school, it was such a small school which meant there were tight communications, we were like family."*

Participants did note some disadvantages with alternative schools, including not feeling they had been pushed enough to perform at a high level, and not learning important life skills such as arriving on time. Some also felt that youth in care and particularly Aboriginal youth were automatically assigned a support worker whether or not they needed one, and that the support worker tended to do things for them, rather than with them, which meant they did not learn as much as they could.

*"They expect you to do well but then they set their standards so low. It makes you feel bad about yourself."*

*"You get babied at school. I had to re-learn everything. People aren't being pushed to their full potential."*

## SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

*"I focused on my role models—my foster grandparents who were immigrants and my [foster] dad who worked all the way up from the bottom. I don't want to have to say I got carried to the finish line. I want to say I ran the whole race, and I finished!"*

Youth particularly appreciated being able to talk with adults who had shared similar experiences to themselves or who made an effort to understand youth's experiences and needs.

*"Anyone with that experience would be helpful and supportive. It makes such a difference to talk to someone who knows. It's so hard to find because they don't want to relive those experiences sometimes either."*

**YOUTH IN  
CARE DO WELL  
IN SCHOOL  
WHEN...**

***"They're supported by adults, when adults show them that they care."***

***"They have adults that can offer advice and understanding."***

## TEACHERS

*"A teacher can be there for you, can clap you on the back when you do something right, not just when you do bad. Everyone needs that in a teacher because we don't have anyone at home. We don't have anyone to bring the report card to, for example."*

*"The amount of encouragement I received in school was life changing. School staff seemed to see in me a potential I was almost scared to believe existed. They connected me with opportunity after opportunity."*

Youth in every focus group spoke about the important role that teachers could play in supporting them to succeed at school. They felt it was important for teachers to be friendly, relatable, and approachable.

However, several felt that teachers often did not have time to work with youth one-on-one or to undertake specific training, and without this it was hard for them to support youth in care in the way they would want to.

*"Teachers are sometimes overworked and underpaid, they're burned out."*

Participants gave examples of experiencing a mental health issue (such as a panic attack or an incident of self-harm) at school and the adults not understanding what was going on or how to deal with it. As a result, Mental Health First Aid training was recommended by many groups as a particularly beneficial training for teachers to complete, as was additional training about working with youth in care and the challenges they face.

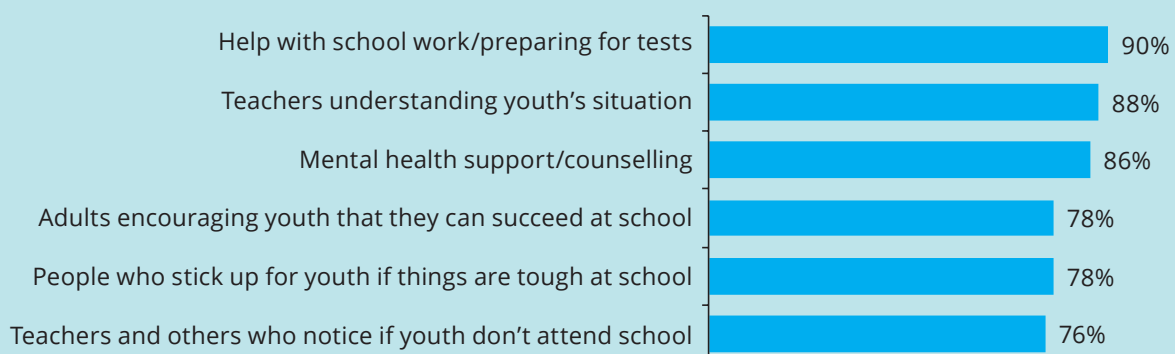
*"Teachers should have a mental health first aid certificate."*

*"The school were more likely to call the cops or the 'psych ward' than try to deal with the bigger issues behind [self-harm]."*

Having a teacher who was understanding of their parenting needs was helpful to young mothers, and a couple credited their teacher with making the difference between them attending and dropping out.

***"It is nice to have someone support us in school when we have kids, like if we needed to breast feed or had an appointment. We had to let [the teachers] know in advance, but they took it really good. They were understanding."***

### SUPPORTS FROM ADULTS THAT HELP YOUTH WITH CARE EXPERIENCE TO SUCCEED AT SCHOOL (ONLINE SURVEY)







***“Every school should have an Ab Ed worker that’s easily accessible and open for anyone that wants it.”***

## ABORIGINAL EDUCATION WORKERS

Aboriginal Education Workers were identified by most Aboriginal youth, as well as some non-Aboriginal youth, as a reliable source of support for youth in care, regardless of whether youth were regularly attending school.

*“Aboriginal workers are amazing—even welcoming white people!”*

Many noted that their Aboriginal Education Worker played an important role facilitating cultural connectedness within the school setting. They were also an excellent resource, helping youth to tackle challenges within the school system, including helping them to find suitable courses.

*“I felt I could talk to [my Aboriginal Education Worker] and she listened. She would also help me go to classes when I was there.”*

## SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

Youth spoke about the valuable support provided by school counsellors and how much they appreciated this support. They recommended increasing the number of counsellors available because these staff were often unable to spend the needed time supporting youth in care.

*“There’s only four counsellors for hundreds of students.”*

*“My counsellor in high school, who always believed in me helped me the most to succeed with my education.”*

## FOSTER PARENTS

*“It’s kind of cool to have a foster parent to talk to about school.”*

Many youth felt that a supportive foster parent could play an invaluable role in helping youth through their school years, and felt it was important that their foster parents were engaged in their schooling. They also acknowledged that if the foster child did not share information with their foster parent, there would be no other way for that foster parent to know what was going on at school for the youth.

*“My foster parent helped me with my work and took me to school. I was cool with him.”*

*“I had a foster family I was able to count on—besides them though there wouldn’t be anyone else.”*

## SOCIAL WORKERS

For some youth, social workers had played an important role in their education. Examples included ensuring youth attended classes, supporting them with post-secondary education planning, and connecting them to needed resources. However, almost all youth said they would like more time with their social worker so that they could develop a relationship and talk to them about school.

*"I wouldn't have graduated without my social worker."*

*"I liked my social worker because she was good with money and paper work, but was never there for support. They should take us out for coffee and talk to us or something but that never happens."*

## FINDING ADULTS' SUPPORT HELPFUL

Youth who completed a survey had asked various adults for help with their education in the past year, and most found this assistance helpful. Those who found the assistance helpful were more likely than those who did not find it helpful to feel safe at school, happy to be there, like a part of their school, and supported to do well academically.

***"I had an Aboriginal support worker that balanced culture and work with school. It helped me survive as a student and as a person. Helped me graduate."***

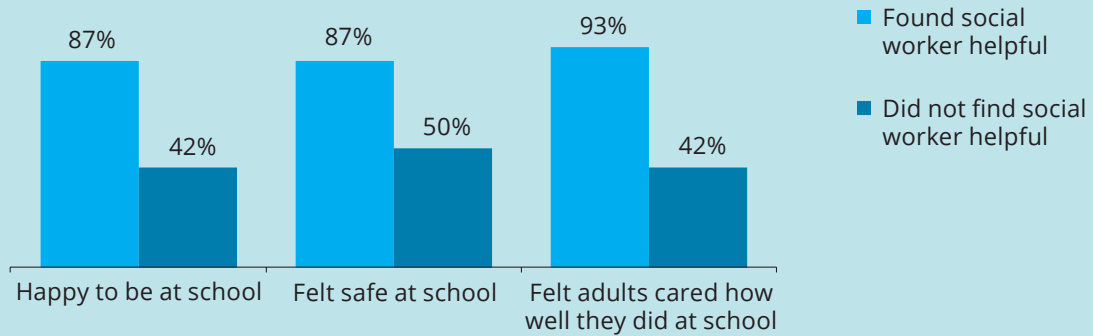
### MOST COMMON ADULTS WHOM YOUTH ASKED FOR HELP WITH THEIR EDUCATION IN THE PAST YEAR (ONLINE SURVEY)

	Asked for help	Found it helpful (among those who asked)
Family member	72%	64%
Teacher	71%	88%
School counsellor	63%	72%
Social worker	60%	56%
Other school staff	55%	79%
One-on-one worker	51%	62%
Aboriginal support worker *	50%	89%
Aboriginal Education Worker *	50%	78%
Aboriginal Elder *	44%	100%
Mental health or substance use counsellor	43%	79%
Foster parent	42%	72%

\* Among Aboriginal youth.

## FINDING SOCIAL WORKERS HELPFUL IN RELATION TO SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

(AMONG YOUTH WHO ASKED SOCIAL WORKERS FOR SCHOOL-RELATED HELP IN THE PAST YEAR; ONLINE SURVEY)





## POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Having friends and a positive social network was listed by youth in every focus group as contributing to their school success, particularly attending regularly and feeling safe and happy at school. For some youth, school was where they felt safe, supported, and experienced respite from a difficult home life.

*"Friends were my protection at school. That's the only reason I went to school."*

*"Encouragement from my best friend, it really helped me. Every morning when I felt like giving up my friend was always there to talk to me."*

Consistent with comments in the focus groups, most youth who completed a survey (80%) felt that peer support helped youth with care experience succeed at school. Most (72%) had asked a friend for help with their education in the past year, and 81% of these youth found the assistance helpful.

Most youth who found their friend's assistance helpful reported feeling safe at school (80%) and happy to be there (76%), compared to almost no youth who did not find their friend helpful (among those who had approached a friend for help with their education).

## STABLE ENVIRONMENT

Having a stable home life was considered necessary for youth to succeed in school. Elements that participants felt constituted a stable home included a supportive, understanding, and reliable adult who was available to talk, who set goals and healthy boundaries, and also gave youth space to make decisions and mistakes. Stability also included not moving from one placement to another.

*"Stable living space at home is needed. Not moving around so much."*

To fully participate in school, participants on Youth Agreements felt it was important for them to have stable housing, and assistance and advocacy if they experienced challenges maintaining their housing.

A stable and safe school environment also contributed to youth doing well at school. Not changing schools was identified by most survey respondents (63%) as a factor that helped youth in care to succeed at school.

*"Having a safe environment both at home and school is important."*



***"A safe home, stability [would help youth in care succeed at school]. It's like I'm asking for the moon or something... That youth have a safe space to stay and they like their school."***

YOUTH IN  
CARE DO WELL  
IN SCHOOL  
WHEN...

*"They have a good friend group, they have a solid support group."*

*"They have a stable home, not moving from place to place."*

*"They are in a stable living environment."*

## INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MOTIVATION

When focus group participants completed postcards prompting them to identify the factors needed for youth in care to do well in school, one of their most common responses was having the internal and external motivation to succeed.

Some participants spoke about how difficult it was to maintain motivation to keep attending school and get good grades. Older youth focused on the need to motivate themselves to do well and finish school, and felt that no one else could do this for them. Younger youth were more likely to point to external factors including having an adult help them to develop goals and future plans, and having positive mentors or role models.

*"You get what you put into school. What you put in is what you get back."*

*"The motivation is the knowledge that you'll have something to look forward to when you're finished."*

Having a supportive family member, such as an older sibling or cousin, was identified as particularly motivating for younger youth and Aboriginal youth. Seeing older siblings succeed inspired them to try to succeed at school as well. Similarly, older youth spoke of wanting to be role models for their younger siblings by regularly attending school and completing their school work.

*"Seeing your siblings graduate makes you want to do it too."*

## GOAL SETTING

Setting educational goals and short-term schedules to achieve those goals allowed youth to have a clear future plan which they could measure their progress against, and which gave them something positive to focus on. This was particularly helpful for youth on Youth Agreements and those who had experienced homelessness and/or substance use and mental health challenges.

Several youth spoke about finding it helpful when adults asked concrete questions about their future plans which assisted them to set school goals, such as "Where do you want to be in six months? A year?"

Similarly, most survey respondents (76%) felt that support with setting and achieving goals helped youth in care to succeed at school. Females were more likely than males to feel this way.

In every focus group, participants felt that adults could encourage youth to achieve their goals by celebrating successes along the way.

***"[I want] enthusiasm from people—not just saying 'it will be difficult, let's see how you do.' I needed a positive environment."***

YOUTH IN  
CARE DO WELL  
IN SCHOOL  
WHEN...

*"They're thinking about the finish line. And how their life will be then. And how they can change it for the better."*

*"They take responsibility for their own actions and put in the time and effort it takes to succeed."*

*"They are motivated by the people who surround them."*

*"You stay focused, keep an eye on the big picture. GOALS, set them!"*

## CAREER PREPARATION

Participants appreciated when their school work directly related to a career path, as it motivated them to see a course or assignment through to the end, even when it was difficult.

They felt that more exposure to post-secondary and career options from elementary school onwards was essential for youth to be able to set goals, dream of the future, and work toward their education.

The majority of youth who had completed high school or dropped out of school felt they received very little information about future careers and post-secondary programs. If they did, it was almost always when they were in their final year at school which many thought was too late because it was after they had selected courses. If this information was provided earlier (e.g., in grades 9 and 10), it could ensure that youth took the prerequisite courses or they could set realistic goals based on the subjects they were good at.

*"In high school they wait 'til the year you graduate to ask what you want to do. We need info. We don't know about this stuff."*

Older youth often commented they felt lost when they were aging out of care, and wished they had had more help developing long-term career and academic goals. They did not know where to start searching for post-secondary schools or employment opportunities or how to apply to return to education after a period away from school.

Exposure to adults in professions they might want to enter was suggested by participants in every focus group as being helpful for youth in care. Participants felt they often did not have the positive role models other youth had, and this exposure would help them to learn more about different careers.

*"When you're all alone, I don't have parents to introduce me to things... What else is there?"*

## OFFERING SAFE SPACES WITHIN SCHOOLS

Youth felt it was important to have places within a school that felt safe and which they could access when they were struggling or needed a break. Many were able to identify safe spaces within their school such as a counselor's office, the art room, or the Aboriginal Education room that felt physically and emotionally welcoming and non-judgmental, and were a place where youth could connect with a supportive adult.

*"You aren't questioned about why you're there and the teacher is understanding."*

*"A place with 'good energy' is positive, while a hostile environment makes it a lot harder to learn."*

Youth suggested that after-school clubs (e.g., homework clubs) could offer a safe space to bring youth together to support one another. LGBTQ2S youth spoke of the need for Gay Straight Alliances in every school and more safe spaces where sexual and gender minority youth could feel accepted and supported.



***"[Youth's] interests might change, so talking about it might help you decide what you want to do."***

## BREAKFAST AND LUNCH PROGRAMS

Access to healthy food was raised in every focus group as contributing to youth doing well at school. Participants felt that getting fed through school food programs helped them to concentrate, feel more awake, and improved their mood. They felt that healthy foods and variety within meals were also important to help them learn. Similarly, most survey respondents (84%) indicated that not feeling hungry at school helped youth with care experience to succeed academically.

Youth in focus groups said that when schools provided food, it reduced their worries about food security, and for some it was the motivation to go to school on days when they did not feel like going.

Youth in rural areas noted that food was very expensive where they lived, and they were reliant on the school breakfast and lunch program to get their nutritional needs met.

## CULTURAL CONNECTEDNESS AND SUPPORTS

*“Aboriginal youth need to be connected to their culture. Their mind will feel more complete and their bodies will feel more natural when connected to their ancestors. And once you feel like you belong somewhere, you’ll succeed.”*

Aboriginal youth spoke of the value of learning about their culture, traditions, and history as part of the regular curriculum, and how this helped them to succeed academically. For youth who had not been able to learn about their own culture from their family, incorporating cultural knowledge and curriculum in school was particularly important.

Many Aboriginal youth in care said they would like to learn their native language and more about their specific nation (rather than learning only general Aboriginal history). They also felt that non-Aboriginal youth should be exposed to Indigenous culture at school.

*“We should learn our language. It’s dying and only a few Elders know it.”*

*“The Indigenous perspective needs to be incorporated in every aspect of the school, both in and outside of classrooms, not just in a few specialized classes.”*

The opportunity to participate in cultural activities, and having knowledgeable members of the community available in schools—such as Elders, cultural support workers, and Aboriginal Education Workers—was also helpful in connecting youth with members of their community.



YOUTH IN  
CARE DO WELL  
IN SCHOOL  
WHEN...

*“They’re not hungry all the time.”*

*“When they have good food and stability.”*

*"Cultural support workers, one male one female and preferably Elders should be available at school."*

*"In my high school we had Aboriginal workers from our community help us."*

Among Aboriginal youth who completed a survey, 91% felt that cultural supports are important at school, and 62% felt their school helped them learn about their culture.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth who indicated that their school helped them learn about their culture were more likely to report greater connectedness to school.

## SUPPORTING YOUTH WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

When asked on the survey what youth in care with special needs require to succeed at school, youth identified many similar supports to those which other youth in care needed, such as adults' understanding, one-on-one support, and feeling safe at school.

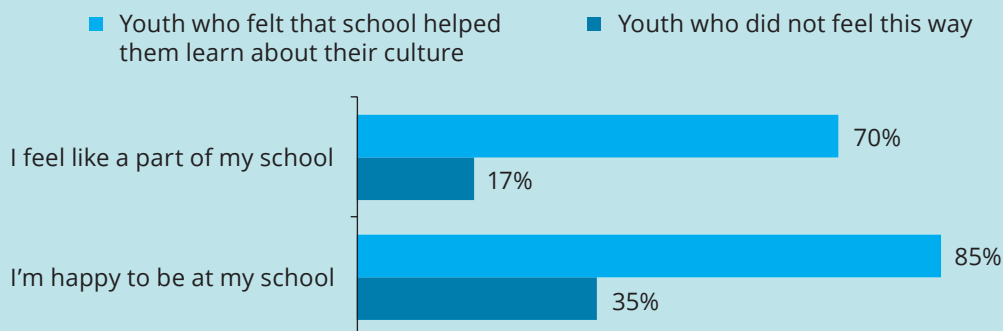
Youth in the focus groups felt these students also needed teachers to adapt to each youth's individual learning style (e.g., by conducting short sessions and providing extra breaks). They also stressed the importance of patience, and of providing support in a way that was not segregating or apparent to their peers.

*"Don't give up on us. If someone has a learning disability, keep on trying with them."*



***"Taking a 5 minute break to clear your head when you get frustrated [is helpful]. Also, music helps with me because I am diagnosed with FASD, and being able to work at my own pace."***

### LEARNING ABOUT CULTURE AT SCHOOL IN RELATION TO SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS (ONLINE SURVEY)





# COMMUNICATION ACROSS SETTINGS



***“Youth in care can be best supported by having a great support team—teachers, foster parent, other family members, etc. Also having a meeting with the support group every couple months to see where the youth is at with school and life. It helped me graduate!”***

Youth had varying experiences and opinions about communication among their school, foster parents, and professionals such as social workers.

*“Should there be more communication between school and home? No! There should be more communication between school and you.”*

## TEACHERS KNOWING ABOUT YOUTH'S CARE EXPERIENCE

Some youth did not want their teachers to know they were in care as they did not want to be treated differently, and were worried their peers might find out (particularly if they lived in a small community). Many of these youth saw school as a respite from their problems outside of school and felt that if teachers knew about their situation, the feeling of safety at school would be lost.

*“School is the only place youth can get away from your world of social workers and other workers.”*

Youth who had experienced their teacher knowing they were in care generally found the situation unsatisfactory, including feeling they had been judged and stereotyped as “troubled.”

*“They play the pity card for you. You don’t want a parent out of a teacher.”*

Youth who thought it would be helpful if their teachers knew they were in care felt this would assist the teacher to better understand them and their behaviours. A number of participants who had been on a Youth Agreement felt that teachers knowing about their situation would have helped them to succeed at school.

Youth felt that teachers should know only what was relevant to supporting them in the classroom. This included having a broad understanding of the care system, knowing if a youth was homeless, and why they might be coming to school tired.

*“They need to know a little [about youth in care]. Some don’t and they don’t understand your circumstances. It makes it hard for them to relate to or understand us.”*

*“I don’t think [teachers] really knew I was even in foster care. Of course they should know because you never know what [the foster kid is] going through. Foster kids have a lot of trauma.”*

## OUTSIDE PROFESSIONALS COMMUNICATING WITH SCHOOL

Focus group participants with custody experience usually did not want their probation officer to communicate with their school. They felt they could not make a fresh start because they would be judged and monitored. However, one youth reported successfully graduating because the principal had worked with the Probation Officer to support his transition back to school.

Whether they wanted it to happen or not, many participants felt that the adults in their lives communicated with each other, although it was often only when something negative had happened. Older youth, especially young mothers, felt that too much communication occurred between professionals such as social workers and their school. They felt that they were old enough and independent enough to sort out their own problems and make their own decisions.

*"Social workers shouldn't be involved in our school unless we want them to be."*

A few youth described feeling that their foster parents were overly involved in their schooling and this put additional pressure on them to do well. They were

also concerned that their foster parents had shared confidential information with their teacher and that this would affect how they were treated in class.

*"If I don't do well, I don't know how [my foster parents] will react, how I would be treated."*

Other youth found the involvement of their foster parents and social workers in their school life to be motivating and felt that more positive involvement would support them in school.

*"I feel like more communication would help a lot. Sometimes you have a problem building up and you need someone to talk to."*

While a handful of youth who had aged out of care said they had not wanted to engage in conversations that took place between school and their foster parents or social workers, most felt strongly that they should be involved in any such conversations.

Among youth who had been included in meetings between teachers and social workers and/or foster parents, the majority felt they did not have a voice in those conversations. They felt they were not meaningfully included in decisions that were made at those meetings, including what classes they took or what grade level they went into.

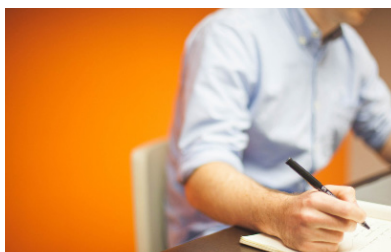
*"In those meetings, teachers and social workers talk first. They don't ask me."*

*"People ask your opinions but make decisions for you. It makes me angry and then I need to leave the room before I freak."*

Youth felt disempowered when teachers contacted their foster parents if they had a problem at school. They felt the student should be approached first and given a chance to explain what had happened, and then only if it still felt necessary, the teacher could connect with the foster parent.

*"Instead of asking my parents, sit with me and ask what's going on and if I'm OK, instead of going straight to my parents because then I just get into trouble and it's unsafe at home. Go to the student first!"*

Participants, particularly those on a Youth Agreement, felt there were very few occasions where teachers and foster parents or social workers met to say anything positive or encouraging to the youth. They felt it would be motivating to know that these important adults might get together to celebrate a youth's success at school or to acknowledge that they were doing their best in challenging circumstances.



YOUTH IN  
CARE DO WELL  
IN SCHOOL  
WHEN...

*"Foster parents meet with principals/ teachers with the foster child present and let him/her have a voice."*



## SURVEY RESPONSES

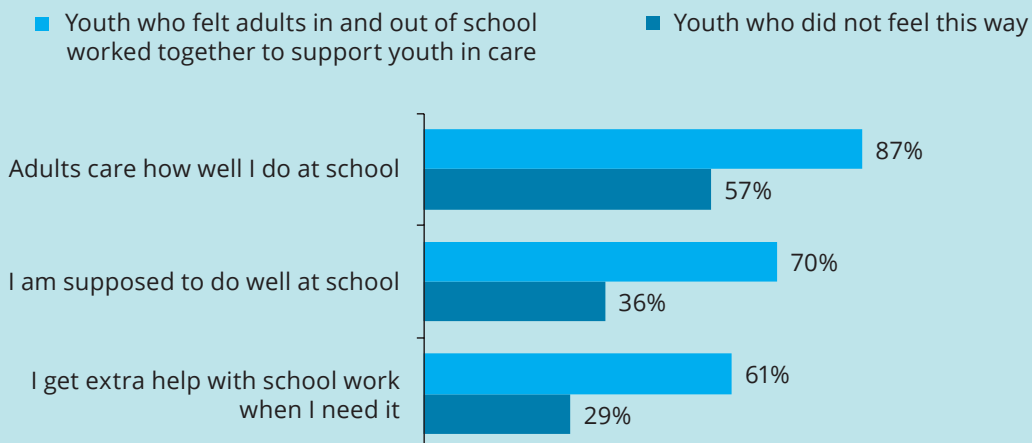
Among youth who completed a survey, 44% felt that adults outside of school worked with teachers and other school staff to ensure that youth in care were supported at school, and 23% felt the opposite (33% were neutral).

Youth who had experienced adults outside and inside of school working together were more likely to feel that adults cared how well they did at school, that they were supported to do well academically, and received extra help with their school work when they need it.

When asked specifically whether foster parents and social workers knew what was going on for youth at school, a minority of youth felt they did. Youth who felt that social workers knew were more likely to feel supported at school (58% vs. 20% of those who did not feel social workers were aware of what was going on at school). A similar pattern was found for foster parents (50% vs. 21% of those who did not feel foster parents knew).

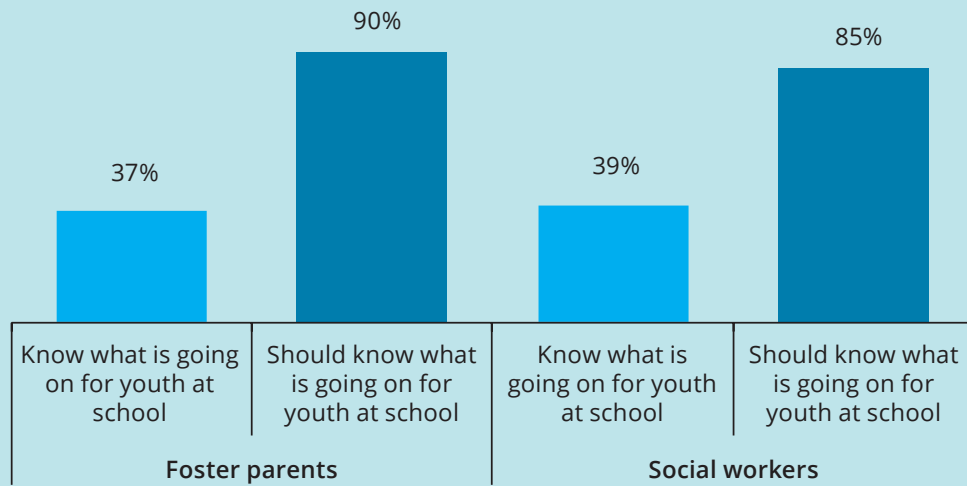
While a minority of youth felt that foster parents and social workers were aware of what was going on at school, the majority felt these adults should know. Youth aged 19 or older were more likely than younger youth to feel that social workers should know what was going on for youth at school (93% vs. 73%).

### COLLABORATION AMONG ADULTS IN RELATION TO YOUTH'S FEELINGS ABOUT BEING SUPPORTED TO SUCCEED AT SCHOOL (ONLINE SURVEY)





**YOUTH WHO FELT THAT FOSTER PARENTS AND SOCIAL WORKERS KNOW, OR SHOULD KNOW, ABOUT YOUTH'S SCHOOL SITUATION (ONLINE SURVEY)**



# SUPPORTING YOUTH TO ACHIEVE THEIR POST-SECONDARY GOALS



***“Access to post-secondary has been difficult... I feel lost about how to move forward with my education. Having aged out, having completed high school, these next steps depend completely on myself. It is intimidating and exciting all at once.”***

## FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many youth had aspirations to continue their education through post-secondary but faced a number of challenges in doing so, most commonly the financial cost. Over half felt it was not an option to continue their education when they would lose all financial and emotional support at age 19.

*“If [university] was cheaper I’d totally go.”*

Aboriginal youth spoke about the helpful support they received from their bands when they were applying to post-secondary. They felt that financial support from their band offered them a safety net if they decided to not attend post-secondary education directly after high school, as they would still get support if they later wanted to go.

*“I would get a lot of support from the band if I go.”*

However, some Aboriginal youth discussed challenges they had encountered in obtaining a status card, and felt they did not have the support they needed to navigate the system to get one. These youth were aware of Aboriginal funding opportunities but could not access them without first getting a status card.

## CONCRETE PLANNING

In every focus group, youth said it was helpful to get support with making concrete plans about where to apply to post-secondary. Those who had toured post-secondary institutions with their high school found these trips valuable because it supported them in making such plans, and gave them information about the steps they needed to take in order to apply. They felt these tours should be extended to all youth in care. Looking at specific courses and planning out a budget to complete those courses had also been helpful for those who had this experience.

*“Trips to universities open your mind, you feel less anxious about going.”*

*“We need to be better prepared [to go to post-secondary], not to be surprised.”*

## SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

Without a constant and supportive adult figure in their lives who could help them fill in scholarships and entrance applications, many youth felt too overwhelmed to begin the process of applying to post-secondary institutions.

*“Youth on Youth Agreements need supportive adults who are highly knowledgeable about post-secondary requirements, and who can help them prepare and apply for the necessary funding to transition and get through post-secondary.”*

A couple of youth mentioned that their social worker had done a good job of translating information about the care system into language they understood, and they would appreciate the same for information about post-secondary.

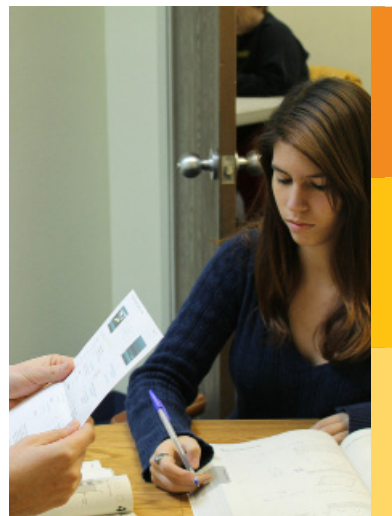
*“When you’re little you’re already thinking about what you’re doing, your responsibilities and you don’t even go to school with lunch so you need support—you need someone because you didn’t have that at home.”*

A few youth who completed a survey noted that although they felt that having adult support and guidance was helpful, they did not want adults to make decisions about their education on their behalf.

*“My social worker honestly paid no attention to my schooling until I graduated and then they **SHOVED** me into [a post-secondary institution] right after high school which was not helpful as it came along with student loans, no government funding and I didn’t even complete the course because no one helped me sign up for school so I ended up with courses I didn’t know anything about. For a lack of words, they set me up for failure and years of debt.”*

Aboriginal youth identified Aboriginal Education Workers as helpful sources of support in helping them access post-secondary education. Some felt that Aboriginal counsellors and academic advisors should also be available at post-secondary institutions on a more regular basis.

*“Specialized Indigenous counsellors and academic advisers need to be on campus all day every day, not just for a few hours every couple weeks; there needs to be greater permanency for Indigenous counsellors and staff, not the current alternating program.”*



***“My social worker changed every three months. Lots of teenagers have time to fall back on their parents for help but we don’t have a safety net.”***

# SUMMARY OF YOUTH'S SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AMONG YOUTH IN CARE

***"If I have one thing to say about the success of students, it is that they need an in-school support system for when times are tough. I do not think there are enough resources for students, and the ones that do exist are not commonly known about."***

- Measuring academic success should be individualized and not necessarily set against the same benchmark which is used for youth not in care. One-on-one support and experiential learning opportunities can help keep youth engaged and motivated to be successful at school.
- Teachers, social workers, foster parents, Aboriginal Education Workers, and other adults can all play a key role in supporting youth to succeed at school.
- Teachers and foster parents should be educated about the care system and what youth in care might be going through. Also, teachers should be provided with Mental Health First Aid training to better support youth in the classroom.
- Learning life-skills, such as good study habits, time-management, and prioritizing, help youth in care to succeed at school.
- To learn and engage in school life, youth must have their basic needs met, including a safe place to live, nutritious food, and adequate sleep.
- A stable home environment is important to school success. This stability includes structure and healthy boundaries in foster homes, and minimizing change of placement, as well as support for youth on Youth Agreements to maintain housing stability so they can focus more on school.



- A safe, non-judgmental space should be available to youth in care at school, with a supportive adult present to monitor the space. Extra efforts should be made to support youth who identify as Aboriginal, LGBTQ2S, or have special needs.
- Youth want to be meaningfully involved in school decisions that affect them, including having a say in their course and school selection.
- Supporting Aboriginal youth to learn about their culture, language, traditions, and history can foster cultural connectedness and school success.
- Indigenous perspectives should be incorporated in all aspects of school, and non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal youth should learn about Aboriginal history.
- Youth should be supported with setting academic goals and with career planning, and successes should be celebrated along the way.
- Offer youth opportunities to learn about careers and post-secondary options from an earlier age, before youth have selected their senior course options.
- Extend financial and other supports to youth with care experience who are accessing post-secondary education.

***“The best thing adults can do to support [youth in care] is listen, try to understand and be engaged, and help youth advocate for themselves.”***





# SHARING THE FINDINGS



Findings from this report are now being shared with other young people with government care experience, as well as with organizations and service providers tasked with improving outcomes for youth aging out of care.

## PRESENTATIONS

Members of the Youth Research Academy (YRA) presented key findings from the report to TRRUST: Collective Impact, a group of 44 statutory and non-statutory agencies working to improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of care in Vancouver.

In response to youth's recommendations, organizations involved in TRRUST are now working on a number of new initiatives, including seeking financial support for youth to attend graduation events. Also, Douglas College has implemented a free campus tour for youth in and from care.

The YRA also presented findings from the project to school counsellors and others working in mainstream and alternative education in the Vancouver School District during a District-wide professional development day.

## BY-YOUTH, FOR-YOUTH WORKSHOPS

Members of the YRA also developed an interactive, youth-led workshop to share data from this report with other youth with government care experience.

In the workshops to date, participants have given examples of supportive adults within the school system, including talking about the role that school librarians can play in providing a safe and relaxed space to study.

Participants have also talked in more detail about communication between foster parents, social workers, and school, and made the following recommendations:

- Youth in high school should have a choice about how much information they share about their lives.
- Youth should always be informed about any meetings among teachers, foster parents, and social workers/probation officers pertaining to the youth.
- Youth should have the choice to be involved in these meetings.
- Youth should have access to email exchanges about them which take place among teachers, foster parents, and social workers/probation officers.

BOOK A  
PRESENTATION  
OR WORKSHOP

If you would like to schedule a presentation or a by-youth, for-youth workshop, contact McCreary and the YRA at: [yra@mcs.bc.ca](mailto:yra@mcs.bc.ca), or 604-291-1996.





