An Evaluation of the National Center for Youth Law's Compassionate Education Systems Program

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June 2023

Child Trends

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Acknowledgments

Suggested citation: Rosenberg, R., Ryberg, R., Martinez, M., Surani, K., Rodriguez, Y., Tansey, J., Gabriel, A., & Chandler, T.E. (2023). An evaluation of the National Center for Youth Law's Compassionate Education Systems program. Child Trends. https://doi.org/10.56417/7307p5208t

Introduction

Young people in foster care or experiencing homelessness face more hurdles than their peers on the path to high school graduation. While some youth experience both homelessness and foster care, the two groups have important differences and unique needs.

Youth in foster care experience lower high school graduation rates than their peers not in foster care and several factors may inhibit their educational attainment, including school instability, credits not transferring between schools, and a lack of access to supportive adults to help them navigate challenges.[1] Due to systemic bias, Black and Indigenous youth are disproportionately represented in the foster care system and may face additional bias within schools.[2] Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) are also overrepresented in the foster care system, often because they are not accepted within their family unit.[3] LGBTQ+ students have unique experiences in school, which can be exacerbated by their foster care involvement. For example, LGBTQ+ students receive fewer social and developmental supports from teachers and increased rates of bullying.[4] When LGBTQ+ young people enter foster care they may experience even less support from adults and increased bullying by peers because of their system involvement.[5]

Youth experiencing homelessness also face unique challenges in pursuing their educational goals, such as school and housing instability, high rates of absenteeism, and a lack of access to reliable wireless internet to complete homework.[6,7] Youth experiencing homelessness are a diverse group: Some may experience homelessness with their family unit and others may live on their own rather than with their parents. LGBTQ+ and Black and Hispanic youth are overrepresented in the youth homeless population.[8] Youth experiencing homelessness may live in a hotel/motel, car, abandoned house, homeless shelter, or on the street; alternately, they may couch surf, live "doubled up" (or sharing a space with other families), or live anywhere else not meant as a permanent dwelling.

While youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness both have unique needs as they navigate school, they are also resilient and share many similarities in which supports and services help them succeed and graduate high school. Students in both groups who have access to supportive adults, mentoring, tutoring, and school credit recovery fare better in school than students without access to these services.[9, 10] However, these services are not provided to all young people in foster care or who are experiencing homelessness. In many schools, students and caregivers are left to navigate the complex education system and child welfare system/homelessness services on their own.

To address this gap and provide needed services to communities throughout California, the National Center for Youth Law (NCYL) runs the Compassionate Education Systems Program (formerly Foster Ed), referred to as Compassionate Ed hereafter. NCYL's Compassionate Ed initiative aims to improve education outcomes for students who come into contact with public systems, including students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness. Compassionate Ed advances this vision by collaborating with students, family members, community partners, school personnel, and others to deploy four co-occurring strategies, below. This report focuses on Strategy 1.

In **California**, Compassionate Ed operates in two high school districts—Antelope Valley and Monterey—and one middle school district, Lancaster.

Antelope Valley and **Lancaster** serve young people experiencing foster care.

Monterey serves students experiencing homelessness.

1. **Youth partnership:** Engaging with students in a student-centered framework ensures that initiatives center their aspirations, goals, and strengths. Compassionate Ed builds engagement through more intensive connections with students—including weekly (and ongoing) meetings, as well as on an as-needed basis.[11]

2. **Building and supporting positive school culture**: Compassionate Ed partners with families (including parents), coaches, teachers, and other supportive adults to increase culturally relevant engagement with students.

3. **Systems-level capacity building and training:** Compassionate Ed supports more effective implementation of existing laws and policies.[11]

4. **Policy agenda flowing from on-the-ground experiences with youth and community**: Compassionate Ed leverages lessons learned with students, family, community, and partners to mobilize local and state policy agendas.[11]

By implementing Strategy 1, Compassionate Ed serves young people in foster care (Lancaster grades 6-8 and Antelope Valley grades 9-12) or experiencing homelessness (Monterey grades 9-12). At the district level, 20 percent of students in Monterey were experiencing homelessness in the 2021-22 school year and 4 percent of students in Lancaster were in foster care, as were 2 percent of students in Antelope Valley.[12,13,14]

Schools identify students as being in foster care or experiencing homelessness and Compassionate Ed Education Liaisons reach out to those students about the program. The services provided by NCYL's Education Liaisons are a targeted Tier 3 intervention, which refers to an intervention with the goal of changing outcomes for the students with the greatest need. In addition to being in foster care or experiencing homelessness, students must meet at least one of the additional criteria to be eligible for the program. These additional criteria ensure that NCYL is serving the students with the greatest need:

- Student previously identified as a potential candidate to receive intensive district supports
- Student has one or more behavior referrals in the last four months
- Student is chronically absent
- Student transferred to the district mid-school-year
- Student is school credit deficient
- Student performs below proficiency in math or language arts
- Student has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan
- Student failed one or more courses in the last school year

Monterey gives additional preference to students who are unaccompanied; to those who live in hotels/motels or shelters, or who are unsheltered (rather than being doubled up or in shared living arrangements); and to 11th and 12th graders.

Compassionate Ed allows students to enroll at different times in their educational careers, based on their needs. For example, a 6th grade student who enters foster care may enroll and remain in the program throughout their time in foster care or through graduating high school. However, another student may not enter foster care until the 10th grade and would become eligible for the program at that point. Regardless of when a student enrolls in Compassionate Ed, once they are enrolled, they are paired with an Education Liaison who works with them to identify education and life goals, build relationships with supportive adults, and ultimately graduate high school.

About this report

NCYL partnered with Child Trends to learn more about the operations and program outcomes of Compassionate Ed's first strategy during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. In this report, we share the results of a mixed methods study highlighting the program's structure and featuring data from the program

itself, the three school districts in which the program operates, and interviews with NCYL staff, caregivers, and students. This mixed-method approach allows for a better understanding of the program, the students served by the program, and the experiences of those involved with the program. We begin the report with a short literature review on the key factors that support students in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness, and/or create barriers to their educational attainment. We then provide a description of the methods used in the rest of the report, review our findings, and offer a short discussion including recommendations for improving programming.

Key findings

Our evaluation found three key findings:

1. **Strong connections between Education Liaisons and students are critical to Compassionate Ed's functioning and the success of its participating students.** While we only spoke to a small number of students (4), all addressed the importance of their relationship with their Education Liaison. Staff (9) all spoke to the positive impact of these relationships on their job satisfaction and the ways in which strong relationships allow them to provide better support to students. Students felt these relationships had provided a safe place to process life events, navigate complex relationships with other adults, and advance their education.

2. **The relationships between Education Liaisons and students are evident in students' program interactions.** Interactions ranged from light touch to more frequent check-ins, with an average of 1 to 3 interactions per month. These interactions help students meet their basic needs, set goals and monitor progress, and resolve barriers to attendance and academic achievement.

3. **Compassionate Ed is successfully reaching the program's target population**. Compassionate Ed aims to serve students in foster care and experiencing homelessness who face additional barriers to graduating high school—including chronic absenteeism—one of the largest predictors of high school dropout that became increasingly common during the COVID-19 pandemic.[15,16] Indeed, more than half of program participants at the high school level are considered chronically absent.

> **Youth in foster care** include any youth who have been removed from their family of origin and placed in a foster home, kinship care, congregate care facility, group home, or institutional setting.
>
> **Youth experiencing homelessness** refer to youth who are living in structures not designed for permanent residency, including motels/hotels, abandoned buildings, on the street, in cars, in campgrounds, or in homeless shelters; it also includes youth who are couch surfing or "doubled up." This population is further described in the [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#).

Literature Review

Youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness often face additional hurdles to graduating high school, relative to their peers. While not all youth in foster care or experiencing homelessness face these hurdles, such challenges are more prevalent among these populations than among their stably housed and non-system-involved peers. For youth in foster care, hurdles are often due to the system involvement itself, and can include frequent placement changes, school changes, delays in school paperwork being completed and credits not transferring,[1,17] and lack of appropriate services to address the trauma associated with being removed from their family of origin.[18] For youth experiencing homelessness, circumstances around housing instability can create an additional risk of school instability, high levels of absenteeism, and low school engagement.[19,20] The average four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate in California for the 2018-19 school year was 70 percent for students experiencing homelessness and 56 percent for students in foster care; by comparison, the average graduation rate was 85 percent for all students in California.[21]

Furthermore, not graduating high school can impact long-term outcomes such as mental and physical health[22] and economic hardship.[23]

While youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness face unique barriers during their high school education, they express post-secondary education goals at similar rates as their stably housed and non-child welfare-involved peers.[24,25] This indicates that, while youth in foster care or experiencing homelessness may need additional services and supports to further their education, they have similar goals to their peers. When provided with these necessary services and supports, many former foster youth or youth experiencing homelessness graduate high school and attend post-secondary training.[26,27]

The following literature review highlights the unique experiences of youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness at the student/family, school, and community levels and how these experiences are associated with high school graduation.

Student- and family-level factors contributing to educational attainment

Youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness may have unique individual- and family-level factors that contribute to or hinder their educational attainment.

Chronic absenteeism increases risk for dropping out of school.

Students may miss school for a variety of reasons, including family responsibilities, lack of transportation, bullying, lack of school engagement, or being below grade level and struggling academically.[28,29] However, consistent school attendance is associated with improved academic performance,[30] increased graduation rates,[31] and better social and emotional outcomes.[32] Chronic absenteeism across all students has steadily risen over the past several years. Students are considered chronically absent if they miss more than 10 percent of instructional days.[33] Prior to the 2020 school year, about 8 million students in the United States were considered chronically absent, which almost tripled by Spring 2022 alongside the COVID-19 pandemic.[34] Chronic absenteeism is associated with falling behind in school, scoring lower on standardized tests,[35] and dropping out.[36] In California's SY 2021-22, the rate of chronic absenteeism in the general population of K-12 students was 30 percent compared to 46 percent among youth experiencing homelessness and 47 percent of youth in foster care.[37]

Many school districts take a punitive approach to addressing chronic absenteeism, rather than incentivizing attendance and addressing root causes of absenteeism. For example, in 2018, 60,000 youth[38] were sent to juvenile court for missing too much school. Being sent to court for chronic absenteeism may put youth at risk for new or continued involvement with the juvenile justice system through probation or additional penalties if they continue to miss school.[39] Punitive approaches also do not address the root causes of absenteeism, which may include housing instability, bullying, academic struggles, and mental health challenges.[28]

However, some schools have started using more supportive programs that are associated with improved attendance. These programs include home visiting programs,[40] involving students' caregivers to a greater extent, following up directly with students when they miss class,[41] and incentivizing class attendance (e.g., tokens to spend in a school shop[42] or a certificate recognizing attendance).[43] Addressing the root causes of absenteeism might include offering free tutoring to help students get back on grade level, providing counseling and connections to services to address mental health needs, and ensuring that students have access to free breakfast and lunch.[28,44,45] Additionally, collaboration between school districts and community organizations can increase school attendance for targeted groups of students. For example, New York City's campaign against absenteeism has increased attendance among all youth and has been used by Homeless Services to increase attendance among youth currently living in homeless shelters.[46]

School engagement is important for high school graduation.

School engagement refers to a student's behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in school, and includes a student's connections with peers and staff, participation in academic courses and extra-curriculars, and their overall perception of their school environment.[47] A lack of school engagement is often cited as a reason for dropping out of high school.[47,48] While school engagement is important for all students, students experiencing homelessness face higher levels of disengagement than their housed peers for many reasons, which may include elevated family responsibilities and lack of consistent transportation.[49] Youth in foster care also experience lower levels of school engagement than their peers not in care, but similar levels as their peers in other at-risk populations (e.g., children living in single family homes and/or low-income). School engagement does vary among youth in care, with girls and younger children reporting higher levels of school engagement than boys and older youth.[50]

Increasing school engagement often involves working directly with the student to identify the factors preventing them from engaging in school and addressing those root causes. Increasing student participation in school and extracurriculars and connectedness, for example, are associated with high school graduation rates.[51] Research shows that peer acceptance, staff support, and access to resources play a critical role in student outcomes and engagement.[52, 53] A safe, supportive school environment with teacher and caregiver engagement can further increase school engagement.[52]

Housing and school stability are associated with high school graduation.

Stable housing arrangements and a consistent school setting are associated with increased odds of graduating high school, but stability is not a reality for many youth in foster care and/or experiencing homelessness.[54] When a young person is removed from their home of origin due to abuse or neglect, they are placed in a new home with kin, in a foster family, or in a congregate care setting. On average, youth in foster care experience several placements and 27 percent of youth in foster care experience four or more placements,[55] with each new placement consisting of a new home and a new set of rules.[1] These placement shifts may also require youth to move communities and schools and lose connections with supportive adults, including teachers.[56] When youth move placements, they are often forced to move schools.[57] Youth in foster care experience an average of 3.5 school moves[58] during their first four years of high school, with each school move associated with a decrease in the odds of earning a high school diploma or GED. With each placement, youth can lose up to half a year of academic progress as a result of delays in school credit transfers and school enrollment.[59]

By definition, youth experiencing homelessness experience a lack of housing stability and may be couch surfing, staying in motels/hotels, or sleeping in their cars in their need to find shelter. These unstable housing situations put them at an increased risk of missing school or needing to change schools as they move around. For example, 22 percent of students experiencing homelessness[60] have changed schools at least once during the academic year. As students move schools, they may experience delays in school enrollment, credit transfers, and connection to needed supports such as tutoring.[61] This increases their chances of dropping out of school and not graduating.

When provided necessary services, youth experiencing homelessness graduate high school at similar rates to their stably housed peers. Foster youth who experience fewer school changes are more likely to complete high school than foster youth who experience more school moves.[58,62] One approach to reducing barriers associated with housing and school instability is to appoint a transition coordinator to facilitate services for students (e.g., school credit transfers), help them navigate their concerns, and provide them with additional support.[63]

School- and community-level factors contributing to educational attainment

Many youth need access to special education services and supports.

Special education services are provided to students who may need additional supports to address delays or other disabilities and should be provided in the least restrictive environment possible. Students with access to needed special education support have higher rates of high school graduation than students who need these supports and do not have access to them.[64,65]

Youth with disabilities are overrepresented in foster care and the foster care system creates additional hurdles to accessing special education services.[66] Youth in foster care are 2.5 to 3.5 times more likely to receive special education services than their peers who are not in foster care.[67] Once referred, these youth face additional hurdles to receiving supportive services: They are less likely to be provided the accommodations in their IEPs, they experience gaps in services due to lack of clarity on which adult (e.g., caseworker, foster parent, family of origin) is responsible for advocating for services and which adult has the authority to apply for services, and they are more likely to be placed in a more restrictive placement (e.g., alternative school).[66] Furthermore, caseworkers may not know about or read a young person's IEP and may miss additional supports that the young person needs.[68]

Youth with disabilities are also overrepresented in the homeless population. For example, youth experiencing homelessness are twice as likely to have a diagnosed learning disability than their stably housed peers.[69] While youth experiencing homelessness have higher rates of special education referrals, they are less likely to receive the services they need.[70] For example, these students may be denied services for missing school too often or their IEP and other documents may not be transferred between schools in a timely manner (or at all) due to school mobility.[71,72] However, when necessary special education services are provided in the least restrictive placement, youth in foster care and experiencing homelessness who have disabilities may be more likely to be successful in their educational pursuits.

Connections to supportive adults protect against school drop out.

Young people who have connections to supportive adults throughout their life fare better in young adulthood and have higher levels of educational attainment.[73] Supportive adults can include parents, teachers, mentors, neighbors, and other community members. Youth in foster care may find it difficult to maintain existing connections with supportive adults when they are removed from their family and community of origin.[74] On the other hand, youth may also experience opportunities to connect and make new connections as they move through placements. Youth experiencing homelessness also face an increased risk of losing connections as they move around to find shelter.

Many communities have created programs to increase educational attainment among youth. Many of these programs use a positive youth development (PYD) approach. PYD centers the youth and their needs and aims to build authentic relationships between students and supportive adults. PYD may be especially salient for youth in foster care or experiencing homelessness because it provides a model for meeting youth's unique needs and connecting them with supports and supporters that align with their goals.

When students in foster care or experiencing homelessness are connected to supportive adults through formal or natural (i.e., relationships they already have or that form naturally in the community) mentoring programs, activities that encourage connections to teachers and coaches, or community-based programs that offer connections to elders in the community, they are more likely to graduate high school and fare better in young adulthood.[75,76,77,78]

Societal-level factors contributing to educational attainment

Equity and community-specific barriers make educational attainment difficult.

Systemic racism has often excluded families of color from building generational wealth, owning a home (i.e., through redlining), and attending adequately funded public school systems.[79,80,81] These policies and practices have created disparities in wealth and access to resources. Furthermore, implicit and explicit biases among case workers, teachers, and other direct service providers put families of color at increased risk for being reported to, investigated by, and ultimately entering the foster care system.[82]

Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionally represented in the foster care system nationally, and Hispanic youth are overrepresented in the California foster care system.[83] This disproportionality creates additional barriers for these youth as they navigate middle and high school. For example, in Antelope Valley, California, the foster care population is heavily Hispanic and Spanish-speaking, but the community lacks available Spanish-speaking foster homes.[84] While many communities are experiencing a lack of placement options, the problem can be magnified for Hispanic youth if they are placed with families of a different culture and who speak a different language.[85,86] Keeping youth connected to their communities of origin can help maintain important ties to supportive adults and connections to their culture, both of which help with high school completion rates.[87]

Black, Hispanic, and LGTBQ+ youth are overrepresented among homeless youth and may experience discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation/gender identity. This may prevent youth experiencing homelessness from accessing resources to further their education.

COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness.

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the foster care system and services supporting youth experiencing homelessness, thereby reducing youth's abilities to meet their basic needs, thrive in school, and focus on future goals. During the pandemic, available foster care placements decreased due to fears of children bringing COVID-19 into the home, a lack of foster parent recruitment events, and many states' inability to train new foster parents virtually.[88,89,90] Furthermore, many youth experienced a pause in parent and sibling visitation or were forced into virtual-only family and friend visits and a lack of extra-curricular activities being available.[91,92] During a time in which youth needed access to all the supportive adults in their lives, many youth were unable to access the internet and the devices needed to maintain these connections. Youth experiencing homelessness faced a decrease in access to public places with reliable internet connections and to gathering spaces such as public libraries and schools.[93] They also experienced a decrease in available resources as schools closed, shelters restricted placements and residents' ability to come and go as needed (due to fear of bringing COVID-19 into the shelter), and food banks experienced increased pressure without an increase in resources.[94,95]

Methodology and Data

The current report utilized a mixed-method approach, relying on quantitative program and educational data; qualitative data from interviews with staff, caregivers, and students; and a stakeholder engagement process. Each method is further described below. This study was reviewed, approved, and conducted under the supervision of Child Trends' Institutional Review Board.

All data in this report represent a snapshot or point in time, which provides an understanding of how young people are faring during a particular school year. However, the data do not provide a longitudinal

examination of how young people are faring over time or Compassionate Ed's potential impact on student outcomes. None of the data discussed in this report are causal, which limits our ability to attribute any changes seen in the data or shared by students to their participation in the program.

A note on COVID-19

Communities in the United States started responding to COVID-19 in March 2020 with school closures, transitions to online learning, and countywide lockdowns; school districts made difficult decisions on how to prioritize student and staff safety while ensuring student learning. This report focuses on the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, which were an extremely tumultuous time for the education system. School districts transitioned to remote learning in Spring 2020 and many remained remote until the 2021-22 school year. In compliance with the participating school districts and NCYL policy, Compassionate Ed's Education Liaisons worked remotely, returning to in-person services with students in Fall 2021. California changed requirements for data collection during COVID-19 and did not require districts to report on standard metrics such as school attendance and school disciplinary actions. Therefore, the data we have to compare at the district level are limited for these time periods, and comparability between the districts is limited.

Methods

Stakeholder engagement

We utilized a two-stage stakeholder engagement process to ensure that student, caregiver, and staff voice were represented throughout the project and in the interpretation of the findings. For stage one of this process, staff were randomly selected from a list of all eligible staff. Education Liaisons provided a list of students and caregivers active in the program and the research team randomly selected one caregiver and one student from the list. For stage two, the Education Liaison coordinated participation for one student.

> **Stage 1:** To refine the interview protocols, we conducted two one-hour calls, the first with a staff member and the second with a student and a caregiver. During these calls, the staff member, student, and caregiver provided feedback on language used in the interview protocols (to ensure the language resonated with our population), the types of questions being asked, and the best way to get details about certain life experiences.

> **Stage 2:** After analyzing data, we conducted a one-hour focus group with a student and a staff member focused on checking the results from our quantitative and qualitative analysis. Specifically, we used this time to 1) ensure our understanding and interpretation of the data, 2) provide additional context for the data, and 3) solicit input on how we framed results and recommendations.

Quantitative

We analyzed four student-level data sources for each school district for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years: (1) program rosters[a]; (2) program interaction data; (3) program goal data; and (4) student-level educational data. We also included district-level data provided by the districts and state-level data from the California School Dashboard for comparison, as applicable. NCYL provided all data to Child Trends. Many of the educational data elements are not directly comparable across the three districts, as each district collects their data independently (see Table 1 for comparability considerations). The schools and school districts experienced additional burden in pulling and cleaning the data in already understaffed data units. This was apparent in one of the school districts from which we received incomplete data.

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[a] Program rosters are a list of all students in the program.

We merged all data sources for each school district, linking all individual-level data using the student's unique identifier. After merging the sources, we created our final sample of students using the program roster as a guide. We dropped 81 respondents who were not on the program roster, who had no completed interactions from September 1 to May 31 of the given school year, or who appeared out of the program scope. For example, in Monterey, which only serves high school students in grades 9-12, we dropped eighth graders from our sample. The September to May timeframe was chosen because it eliminated students who had single interactions with the program at the beginning or end of the SY. These interactions typically included initial outreach to prospective program participants that did not result in program participation and onetime meetings to help students transition from middle school into high school or from high school into the workforce or higher ed. The analyses focused on program data—including most student characteristics, program interactions, and program goals—use this full sample. The analyses focused on education data including a subset of respondents for whom educational data were provided by the school districts. Table 1 shows the breakdown by school district.

Table 1. Final sample size, by district, year, and analysis type

Sample	Program analysis	Education analysis
Monterey 2020-21 SY	26	25
Monterey 2021-22 SY	35	30
Antelope Valley 2020-21 SY	37	N/A (no educational data provided)
Antelope Valley 2021-22 SY	54	52
Lancaster 2020-21 SY	44	34
Lancaster 2021-22 SY	46	44
Total 2020-21 SY	107	59
Total students 2021-22 SY	135	126

Source: Child Trends' analysis of Compassionate Ed program rosters and educational data
Note: Students who continue in the program from one school year to the next are included in each school year, so each entry in the table does not necessarily represent a unique student.

Details on the quantitative indicators presented below and in the accompanying district snapshots are available in Appendix Table 1. These details include the data source for each indicator, details on data cleaning, and considerations for comparability across each school district. All results presented are descriptive in nature, including comparisons between groups. No significance testing was performed because the data are for all student participants (i.e., not a sample).

When conducting analyses, we disaggregated data by student subgroups, year, and school districts. Due to small sample sizes, we cannot disaggregate across school district, school year, and by student characteristics at the same time. In this report, we have prioritized presenting change over time at the district level. In the district snapshots in the appendix, we disaggregated by school district and student characteristics within districts. To do so, we aggregated data across the two school years. Across all analyses, cells representing

less than five students are suppressed from tables and figures. Many data elements in the current study were either combined or suppressed due to small sample sizes.

Qualitative

All staff were eligible to participate. Students and caregivers were eligible if the student was active in Compassionate Ed during the 2021-22 SY or graduated the previous semester. We first selected a random sample of all eligible students and caregivers. We then called caregivers and students over age 18; for students under age 18, we called their caregivers first to get consent. This yielded one student and zero caregivers. In the next recruitment phase, we texted potential participants from the random sample identified above, yielding one additional student and one caregiver. To increase sample sizes, we then worked with Education Liaisons to schedule interviews with students on behalf of the research team. This yielded another two students and two caregivers. In total, we conducted 16 one-hour semi-structured individual interviews with program staff (9), students experiencing homelessness or in foster care (4), and caregivers who were foster parents, step-parents, or biological parents (3). Staff included national program administrators, program managers who work at the school district level, and Education Liaisons working in specific schools. Students represented the Antelope Valley and Monterey school districts and ranged from participating in the program for just a few months to several years. Middle school students were not eligible to participate in interviews and their voices are not represented in the qualitative findings. While their experiences are captured in the quantitative data, more work may be needed to better understand their unique experiences with the program. Interviews were conducted and transcribed via Microsoft Teams in English or Spanish based on the participant's preference. Staff and caregivers provided consent and students provided assent for participating. All participants received a $75 gift card as compensation for their time.

We were not able to reach the originally intended sample size due to barriers in recruitment. These barriers included scheduling logistics, participants not attending scheduled meetings, and the need to receive parental consent for minors. Additionally, we found that students and caregivers did not recognize Compassionate Ed, the name of the program, or NCYL. Therefore, when Child Trends reached out to share who we were and discuss our partnership with Compassionate Ed, potential participants were unsure what we were referring to and about participating. Education Liaisons eventually shared information about the project with students and caregivers, but caregivers were still unsure of who the research team was when we reached out directly.

Once all interviews were complete, we uploaded and coded the transcripts in Dedoose using a coding guide with themes identified *a priori* (i.e., before coding began), based on program characteristics and relevant literature. We double-coded 75 percent of interviews and a third team member reviewed discrepancies between coders. Themes and codes were adjusted as needed throughout the process. Qualitative data are not meant to be generalizable beyond the context in which they are presented and, due to small sample sizes, should not be taken to mean that all students and caregivers in Compassionate Ed feel a certain way or would report the same things. Instead, we present quotes to highlight important findings and provide context to some experiences reported among Compassionate Ed participants.

Presentation of Findings

Student program participant characteristics

Program reach grew from SY 2020-21 to SY 2021-22 as the number of students served increased from 107 students to 135 students (see Table 1). In SY 2020-21, Compassionate Ed served 26 students in Monterey, 37 students in Antelope Valley, and 44 students in Lancaster. The following school year, the program served 35 students in Monterey, 54 in Antelope Valley, and 46 in Lancaster. Altogether, the number of students

served grew by 26 percent between the two school years. Of the 60 students with education data served during SY 2020-21 and SY 2021-22 in Monterey, 18 percent attended more than one school. From SY 2020-21 to SY 2021-22, 37 percent (13/35) of Monterey students returned to the program, 28 percent (13/46) returned in Lancaster, and 39 percent (21/54) returned in Antelope Valley.

The program served a fairly even mix of male and female students at the high school level. Across school years, 54 percent of participants were female and 43 percent were male in Antelope Valley; in Monterey, 49 percent of participants were female and 51 percent were male.[b] However, at the middle school level, in Lancaster, a larger proportion of participants were male, at 67 percent.[c]

The program primarily served students who self-identified as Black or Latino (see Figure 1). In Antelope Valley and Lancaster, about 40 percent of students identified as Black, 40 percent identified as Latino, and about 10 percent each identified as White and as being of other races or ethnicities (including Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, multiracial, or any other race).[13,14] In Monterey, more than half (61%) of participating students self-identified as Latino, 21 percent identified as another race/ethnicity, 13 percent identified as White, and 5 percent identified as Black—which aligns closely with the district's demographic composition.[12]

Figure 1. Racial/ethnic distribution of students served by Compassionate Ed, by district
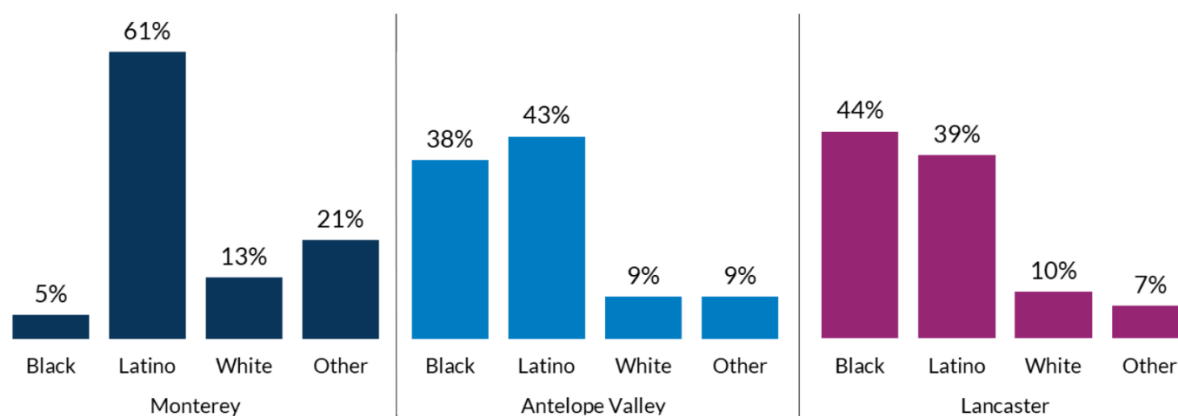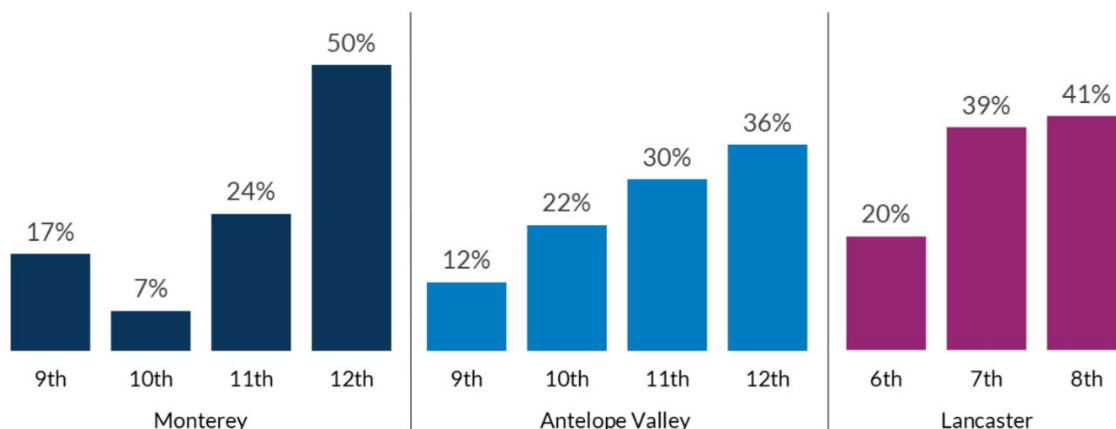

Source: Child Trends' analysis of Compassionate Ed program rosters

In the two districts serving high schoolers, the majority of youth served were 11th or 12th graders (see Figure 2). In particular, 50 percent of students served in Monterey and 36 percent of students served in Antelope Valley were seniors. In Lancaster, the students served were distributed fairly evenly across 7th and 8th grades, with only 20 percent of students in 6th grade.

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[b] When combining data across school years, as in Figure 1, students were counted twice if they were in the program for both years.
[c] A small number of students listed a gender other than male or female (e.g., non-binary). They are not included in the gender disaggregation to protect their identities due to small sample size.

Figure 2. Grade level distribution of students served by Compassionate Ed, by district

Students identified with special education needs were disproportionately represented in the program, particularly in Antelope Valley. In Antelope Valley, 38 percent of participants had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), compared with 22 percent in Lancaster and 9 percent in Monterey. It was much less common for students to have 504 plans (another form of support for students with disabilities); 10 percent of students served in Lancaster had 504 plans, compared to fewer than five students total served in Antelope Valley or Monterey. In comparison, in both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 SYs, 12 percent of *all* Monterey students had an IEP and 2 percent had 504 plans; in Antelope Valley, 17 percent of *all* students had an IEP and less than 1 percent had 504 plans.[d]

Participants' educational characteristics

In this section, we present the following educational indicators for participants: chronic absenteeism, grade point average (GPA), formal exclusionary discipline (including suspensions and expulsions), school mobility, and graduation. While students and families identify many other areas of importance for which data were not systematically collected (feelings of safety in school, school discipline practices, teacher/student relationships, quality and availability of arts and other elective courses, and school experiences), there is value in understanding the education outcomes that we can measure. These indicators provide a snapshot of the educational experiences of Compassionate Ed participants. Compassionate Ed is designed for students who are chronically absent, are failing or at risk of failing at least one class, have been written up for behavioral problems, and/or experience a high level of school mobility. The data below indicate that the program is reaching the intended students.

Chronic absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism (missing at least 10% of instructional days) was very common among program participants and increased from SY 2020-21 to SY 2021-22 as schools returned to in-person instruction (see Figure 3).[e] In SY 2021-22, over 70 percent of Monterey participants were chronically absent, compared to 44 percent in Antelope Valley. The rates of chronic absenteeism among program participants in SY 2021-22 were much higher than among all relevant comparison groups, including high school students in Monterey (27%), students of all grade levels who experienced homelessness in Monterey (32%), and students of all grade levels who experienced homelessness across California (46%).[96] In Antelope Valley, the percentage of program participants who were chronically absent in SY 2021-22 (44%) was also higher than among *all* high

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[d] Lancaster did not provide IEP or 504 information at the district level.
[e] Attendance policies and procedures varied across districts during COVID.

schoolers in Antelope Valley (34%), but lower than among foster youth across grade levels in Antelope Valley (45%) and across California (47%).[f]

Chronic absenteeism rates were lower in the middle school district. This aligns with data showing that chronic absenteeism is higher nationally in high school than in middle school.[97,98] In Lancaster, 21 percent of program participants were chronically absent in SY 2020-21, rising to 48 percent the following year. These most recent rates were similar to those of 7th and 8th graders in Lancaster (43% in SY 2021-22) and students of all grade levels in foster care in Lancaster (42% in SY 2021-22) and across California (47% in SY 2021-22). During the combined 2020-21 and 2021-22 SYs, more female (46%) than male students (30%) were chronically absent. White students (56%) and students who identified as belonging to another race/ethnicity (67%) were much more likely to be chronically absent than Black (21%) or Hispanic (40%) students. See the district snapshots in the appendix for an examination of how chronic absenteeism rates vary by student demographics, including gender and race/ethnicity, by district.

Figure 3. Chronic absenteeism rates among Compassionate Ed participants, by district and year
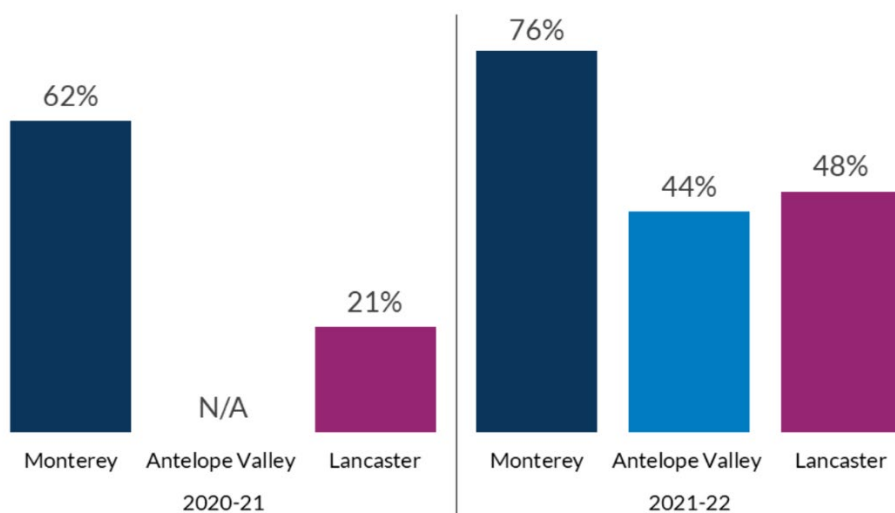
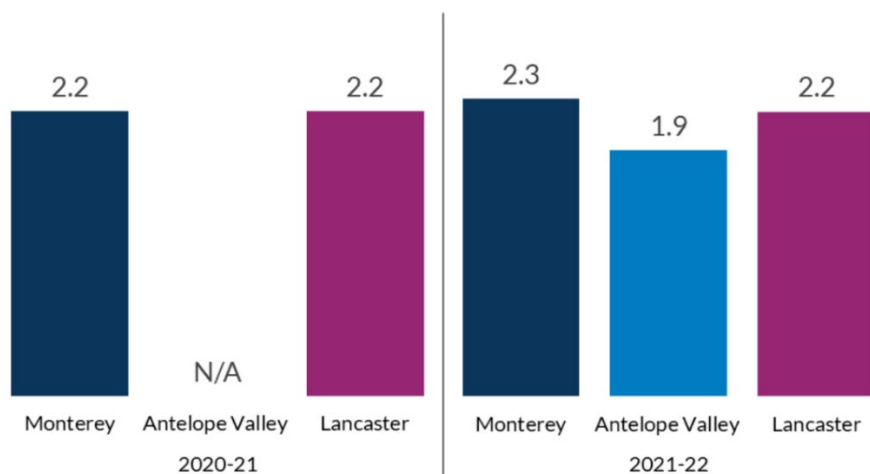**Source:** Child Trends' analysis of Compassionate Ed program rosters and educational data
Note: Educational data are only available for SY 2020-21 for Antelope Valley. Attendance policies and procedures varied across districts during COVID.

Grade point average (GPA)

Program participants tended to have GPAs hovering around a 2.0 or C average (see Figure 4). These rates have been fairly consistent over time, as one would expect for cumulative data. They have also been fairly consistent between districts, ranging from 1.9 in Antelope Valley in the 2021-22 SY to 2.3 in Monterey in the 2021-22 SY. The district snapshots in the appendix provide additional information on variation in GPA by student demographics, including gender and race/ethnicity, by district.

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[f] Note that the comparison chronic absenteeism rates were obtained directly from the California Department of Education's (CDE) chronic absenteeism data rather than the California School Dashboard, because the dashboard captures only grades K-8 in its chronic absenteeism data. CDE recommends using caution when comparing chronic absenteeism data across years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and reporting requirements.

Figure 4. Average grade point averages (GPAs) among Compassionate Ed participants, by district and year

Source: Child Trends' analysis of Compassionate Ed program rosters and educational data
Note: GPA is reported as cumulative GPA for Monterey and Lancaster. Antelope Valley reported GPA for the 2021-22 SY only.

A few students reported that participating in the program also improved grades and attendance. These are two critical components of navigating high school and setting oneself up for post-secondary education. One student reported, of working with their Education Liaison: "I'm not gonna lie, I did have pretty bad grades and working with her helped me get my grades up and it helped me focus more on education and going to college."

Another student reported changes in their grades and how they think about post-secondary education:

> *"Now my goals are to just focus more on my work, my homework. Getting into college and universities. I'm gonna go to college, and I'm gonna get good grades to get to college. And I was never really thinking about that. And she helped me."*

Exclusionary discipline

Exclusionary discipline is, unfortunately, a common experience for youth involved with the foster care system or experiencing homelessness. While we report on suspension and expulsion, we are not able to report on more informal types of exclusion such as school push-out, which are not formally tracked. In California in SY 2021-22, 5.5 percent of youth experiencing homelessness were suspended at least once, as were 12 percent of youth in foster care and 8 percent of Black students. Nationally, Black students were suspended at a rate over twice as high as White and Hispanic students.[99] Being suspended increases the likelihood that a student will be incarcerated as an adult, placing Black boys at a disproportionate risk.[100,101] Furthermore, the presence of law enforcement in California schools creates scenarios where students receive a suspension and a referral to law enforcement simultaneously.[101] Suspensions were relatively rare for Compassionate Ed students in Monterey: No Compassionate Ed students were suspended in SY 2020-21 and less than five students were suspended in SY 2021-22.[g] Experiences with formal exclusionary discipline were more common in Antelope Valley and Lancaster: In Antelope Valley, 12 percent of students were suspended in SY 2021-22—on par with the national and state averages for youth in foster care but actually below the district-average for youth in foster care (19%). And, in Lancaster, 22 percent of students

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[g] Monterey reported cumulative suspension rates, which are not directly comparable to the school year-specific rates reported by Lancaster and Antelope Valley.

were suspended across the two years—a rate higher than the state average for youth in foster care (12%) and the district average of 8 percent. Across all sites, no students were expelled.

School mobility

In Lancaster, 11 percent of Compassionate Ed students attended more than one school during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 SYs. In comparison, 2 percent of participants changed schools during the 2020-21 SY and 20 percent changed schools during the 2021-22 SY.[h] In Monterey, 18 percent of Compassionate Ed students attended more than one high school during a school year, including 15 percent of students during the 2020-21 SY and 20 percent during the 2021-22 SY. This indicator was not available for Antelope Valley, which does not track this information.

Graduation

In the 2020-21 SY, 13 of 14 Monterey Compassionate Ed seniors graduated, with 29 percent of graduates meeting state requirements and 71 percent meeting district requirements. In the 2021-22 SY, 11 of 13 Compassionate Ed seniors graduated, with 8 percent meeting state requirements and 92 percent meeting district requirements. In Antelope Valley, at least 16 of 24 participating seniors graduated during SY 2021-22. Additional students may have graduated over the summer, after the data were collected or at an unaccounted-for school after transferring before the end of the SY.

Program staff experiences

Program staff reported on several different characteristics and experiences in their roles as Education Liaisons, program managers, and Compassionate Ed leadership.

1. **Job satisfaction**. Compassionate Ed staff reported enjoying their jobs and having relevant past work experience, including counseling, working with adults experiencing homelessness, and working within the foster care system. Education Liaisons reported their main job responsibility as supporting students and helping them navigate education and life in general. As one Education Liaison shared, "My only job is to put together the puzzle, help connect youth to the people and make sure that they're really like in charge of their future and making progress towards what they want to do." Staff are matched one-on-one with students to facilitate a close working relationship and build trust. A national Compassionate Ed staff member explained, "Our Education Liaisons are matched one-to-one with youth. And really there's an emphasis on building a relationship between our staff and the young person … we work with the education team because a lot of systems-involved youth have many adults in their lives. We help coordinate between those adults."

2. **Direct connections with caregivers and students.** Staff described this role as important because it provides context to behaviors they may see from students, or about other circumstances happening in the student's life. One Education Liaison shared, "So I would give [caregiver] an update on the student if I needed more support and I would also ask them like 'Hey, how is your student doing at home? I notice his grades are low. Why didn't he come to school? Was he sick?'"

3. **Navigating systems**. Staff reported on the importance of helping families navigate complex services that they may otherwise not be able to access. One staff member summarized the importance of this role: "Honestly, it's a little easier to work with [caregivers] because they're more open and if there's something they need right away they mention it. So, if it was housing, then I would provide them the information for a low-income apartment."

4. **Building authentic relationships**. Staff reported that building authentic relationships and establishing trust with students underlies all their roles and responsibilities. One staff member shared their approach to building trust and rapport with students: "If he's very quiet, like just learning a little bit

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[h] Remote learning options during COVID allowed for more flexibility.

more about the student and about their current living situation and then I would go to the student and build rapport." Another Education Liaison talked about the importance of authenticity when working with students: "So being authentic, you know I'm a firm believer that kids can see right through you. And so, if you're trying to be fake or, you know, not genuine with what you're sharing with them, they're not gonna open up."

Student participants' interactions with the program

The Compassionate Ed program was not designed to serve students for a pre-determined amount of time. Students join the program at different points during the school year, so some students receive support for an entire school year while others receive support for part of the year. The duration of students' participation varied by site. During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 SYs, the majority of Compassionate Ed students in Monterey (51%) received support from the program for 5 to 9 months. One third of students received support for 10 to 12 months and 16 percent received 1 to 3 months of support. In Antelope Valley and Lancaster, in contrast, a large majority of students received support for at least 10 months. In Antelope Valley, 73 percent of Compassionate Ed students received support for 10 to 12 months, with 17 percent receiving 5 to 10 months of support and 10 percent receiving 1 to 3 months. In Lancaster, 82 percent of Compassionate Ed students received support for 10 to 11 months, with 11 percent receiving support for 5 to 9 months and 7 percent receiving 2 to 3 months. Lancaster did not consider enrollment until August of each SY, so 12 months of support was not possible.

The length of service was calculated based on a student's entry and exit from the program and does not consider the intensity or frequency of their interactions with the program during that time. Some students may have had many interactions in a short time, while others may have stayed in the program longer but received fewer interactions.

Program interactions

Education Liaisons provide a range of services and support to youth: They may check in with youth, help them navigate life changes, and help them set and achieve their goals. One key component of their work is to build relationships with youth through different program interactions. The four students interviewed shared more about the importance of building relationships with the Education Liaison. Students reported that Education Liaisons helped them go after life goals and reminded them not to give up.

One student described the value of their relationship with their Education Liaisons:

> *"Mostly because [Educational Liaisons] don't let me give up like they just chase after my dreams."*

Program interactions ranged from a light touch (e.g., checking in monthly) to more frequent check-ins; however, frequency of interactions varied by district and year from about 1 to 3 interactions per month (see Figure 5). In Monterey, the average number of monthly interactions decreased from 3.0 in SY 2020-21 to 2.3 in SY 2021-22. In both Antelope Valley and Lancaster, the average number of interactions per month increased from SY 2020-21 to SY 2021-22—from 1.0 to 1.4 in Antelope Valley and from 1.3 to 2.2 in Lancaster.

Across entire years, students averaged from 10 to 18 interactions with Compassionate Ed per year, depending on the site, school year, and length of time in the program. The total number of interactions grew from the 2020-21 to 2021-22 SYs, as students and program staff returned to in-person instruction—from 1,229 in SY 2020-21 to 1,945 in SY 2021-22, for an increase of 60 percent.

Figure 5. Average number of program interactions per month, by district and year
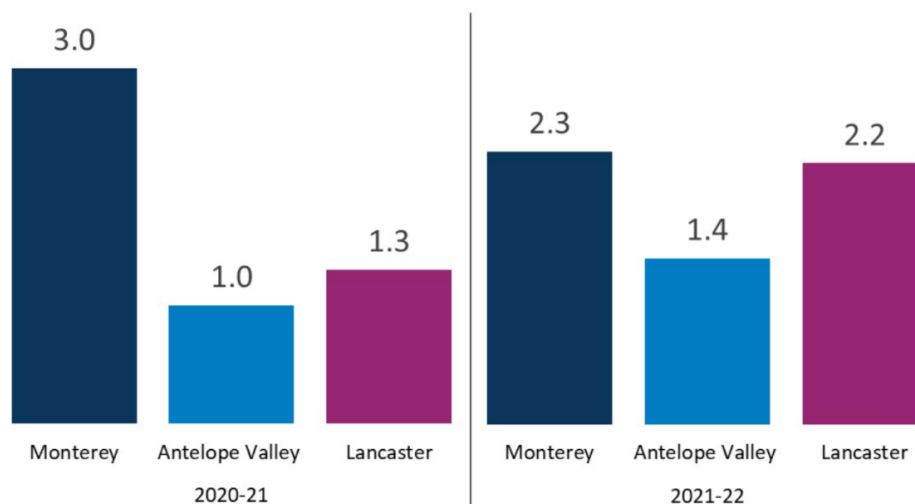
Source: Child Trends' analysis of Compassionate Ed program rosters and interaction data.

Across sites and school years, the most common type of interaction between students and the program was student meetings: Student meetings made up 75 percent of all interactions in Monterey, 81 percent in Antelope Valley, and 69 percent in Lancaster. The second most common type of interaction was team meetings, which made up 22 percent of interactions in Monterey, 11 percent in Antelope Valley, and 28 percent in Lancaster. Follow-ups, student surveys, team meetings, and other types of interactions made up a minority of all interactions at each site.

In a 2022 survey of Compassionate Ed participants conducted by RTI, [i] students indicated that one-on-one interactions were particularly helpful. This response was shared by 91 percent of students in Monterey; however, only 50 percent of students in Monterey and 55 percent of students in Antelope Valley reported that group meetings with the whole team had been very helpful.

Students reported strong relationships with their Education Liaisons in the 2022 RTI survey; 93 percent of students in Monterey reported they agreed or strongly agreed that their Education Liaison is there for them, 92 percent reported their Education Liaison believes in them, and 88 percent reported their Education Liaison takes their thoughts into consideration when they are talking. These estimates were also high in Antelope Valley, with 93 percent reporting they agreed or strongly agreed that their Education Liaison is there for them, 92 percent reporting that their Education Liaison believes in them, and 89 percent reporting that their Educational Liaison takes their thoughts into consideration when they are talking.

Caregivers and students provided more information about these interactions in their interviews. Regardless of the frequency or type of interaction, the students and caregivers both reported many different benefits of interactions, ranging from increased problem-solving and conflict-resolution to better educational outcomes. One caregiver stated, "We talk now instead of screaming at each other. We now talk, you know, we discussed the importance of doing well in school, not having to be perfect. "Another caregiver shared "Yeah, like I said, academically, they've improved."

Students also reported Education Liaisons helped them build skills such as self-expression, conflict resolution, relationship building, and goal development—all critical skills for young people to develop as they

[i] Report available upon request from NCYL.

transition into adulthood. As one student shared, "Our relationship is actually pretty close. Yes, sometimes if we don't have anything to talk about with school, she'll ask me, how is it at home? "

Education Liaisons also provide an important connection between students and others within their school. Students and caregivers both remarked on the importance of their Education Liaison helping them navigate the complex structures and systems within the school setting. One caregiver discussed the importance of having the Education Liaison join important meetings with administrators: "I think it's helpful because it supports the student. I know my two boys. They feel they get support from [Education Liaison]. She, you know, when they get frustrated, can't find the word they're looking for because it's very intimidating to a child to sit in front of the VP, the counselor, the teacher, and then there's just the kid there."

Program challenges

The small sample of students and caregivers remarked on the importance of having frequent communication with their Education Liaisons. Caregivers wanted more frequent contact while students wanted more opportunities to just stop by the Education Liaison's office; relatedly, students spoke to the importance of having Education Liaisons on campus.

Staff raised several challenges to implementing the program, including system involvement (e.g., student mobility, changes in routine due to system involvement, lack of access to supportive adults) and school mobility. One staff member stated, "I think the biggest challenge of the work is, the system itself, when you see a young person who is finally in a place where they are thriving academically and socially in their confidence. And then their case changes … and they get relocated."

School mobility was often discussed as a barrier. One Education Liaison highlighted, "The biggest challenge of working with youth, I think, is their mobility. Students move so much and that has been the challenge, right? You're working so hard to build the relationship and then all of a sudden, they get reunified with their parent, who's an hour away."

Lastly, the differences between implementing the program in middle schools vs. high schools is another challenge. As one staff member summarized, "We don't have a program manager, so not having consistent leadership … it's not really understood that the work we do at the high school level is 100% different than what they do at the middle school level."

Goal setting

While Education Liaisons engage with students in the Compassionate Ed program in many ways, goal setting is a key component of the program and a focal point for the relationship between Education Liaisons and students. The emphasis placed on goal setting varied across sites, though, based on student needs and competing priorities. In Monterey, for example, much of the program's work helps students meet their basic needs, which may be beyond the student's control. Furthermore, approaches to goal setting vary across sites and Education Liaisons may use different approaches; for example, some may set one large goal while another may set several smaller goals that work toward a larger goal. One Education Liaison provided an example: "[Speaking to a student] Give me one thing you want to accomplish this year … and let's work on that. Otherwise, they get overwhelmed, and nothing gets accomplished."

This section begins with a discussion of the number of goals that students set and accomplish through Compassionate Ed, followed by a look into the substance of those goals. We then review Education Liaisons' perspectives on goal setting in the program.

Quantity of goals. Examining the quantity of goals that students set and accomplish through Compassionate Ed provides information about how many goals students are successfully accomplishing through their work

with Education Liaisons. In this section, we report on a subset of goals completed by students: goals that were set and completed within the same school year (July 1-June 30). While this approach allows us to compare the quantity of goals achieved between school years, it limits the discussion to a subset of goals. Goals that were set in a previous school year, goals that were still in progress at the end of a school year, and goals that were set but became no longer relevant based on a student's changing needs are not captured here, although they may very much be in line with how the program is intended to operate. These numbers also do not account for how long a student was served in the program. Additional data entry limitations also limit the number of goals included in this section (See Appendix Table 1 for details).

Altogether, participants completed a total of 66 goals in SY 2020-21 and 280 goals in SY 2021-22, or 0.6 goals per student in SY 2020-21 and 2.1 goals per student in SY 2021-22—an increase in total goals of about 330 percent. The quantity of goals completed increased considerably at each site, but also varied considerably by site. In SY 2021-22, Monterey students completed the most goals, on average, at 4.3 goals per student, compared with 2.3 goals per student in Lancaster and 0.4 goals completed per student in Antelope Valley. Goals were not distributed evenly across students, however, and many students did not complete any goals created within the school year. Across both years, 82 percent of students at Antelope Valley, 48 percent of students at Lancaster, and 31 percent of students at Monterey did not complete any goals made within the same school year.

Figure 6. Average number of goals completed within the school year, by district and year
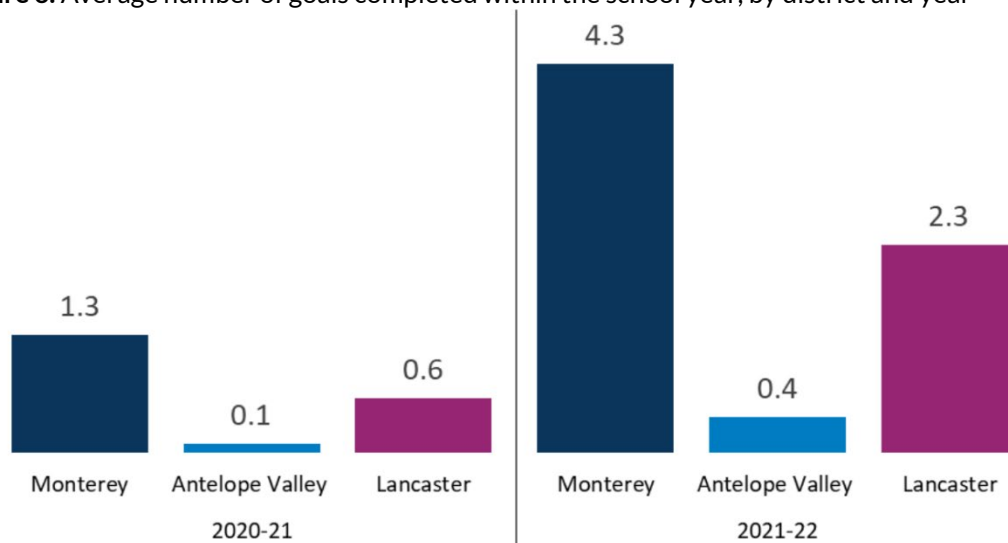
Source: Child Trends' analysis of Compassionate Ed program rosters and interaction data.
Note: Goals that were created and completed within the same school year are included. Additional goals (not captured here) took multiple school years to complete.

Substance of goals. NCYL groups student goals into four categories: academic goals, social capital goals, social development goals, and other types of goals. The vast majority of goals completed across sites were academic goals: 82 percent of completed goals were academic goals in Antelope Valley, compared to 69 percent in Lancaster, and 71 percent in Monterey. When describing their work with Education Liaisons, students also discussed both educational goals and broader life goals.

Academic goals. Educational goals may include goals such as improving grades, applying to college, or navigating financial aid. One student stated, "[Education Liaison asks] What would you wanna do after school? And I'd say I don't know, and [Education Liaison would] be like, would you wanna get a job? Or would you wanna go to college? So, we figure out the goals like that, like she questioned me and I'd give her answers. Then in the end we always just came up with the goals from her, asking me questions."

Many of the students aspired to post-secondary education and Education Liaisons reported providing resources to support this goal, including information on financial aid. One Education Liaison summarized this process: "If they're seniors and they're interested in post-secondary and attending either university or community college, I would provide them with basically the requirements … to apply to a community college … then also provide them information about financial aid, so letting them know like hey, it is possible to go to university, the first two years are free if you qualify through FAFSA." Another student shared, "So my goal is to attend college and then graduate from college … Get a degree in the medical field and then, become a registered nurse."

Students reported that Education Liaisons help them with general life goals in addition to educational goals. These included helping them get their driver's permit, talking to them about career options, and working on their self-esteem. One student shared the importance of this general life advice: "Like I had to practice for my drivers permit and she gave me resources that I could study."

Other life goals. Students also reported working with Education Liaisons on their future career goals. For example, one student had been working with their Education Liaison to identify what they wanted to do after high school based on their career goals, sharing: "I feel like taking care of seniors and being able to help seniors, in general, is something that I really want to do. So, I guess going to college will help me."

In a 2022 survey of Compassionate Ed students conducted by RTI,[j] students reported growth in other life domains, including self-efficacy, outlook on future goals, and relationships with other adults:

- 85 percent of students in Antelope Valley and 92 percent of students in Monterey reported feeling that they can succeed at almost anything. 93 percent of students in Antelope Valley and 92 percent in Monterey reported being able to achieve the goals they set for themselves.

- Students reported a growth in future-success orientation since working with their Education Liaisons. For example, 92 percent and 88 percent of students in Antelope Valley and Monterey, respectively, reported trying harder to make good choices that increase their chances for a good future. 85 percent and 84 percent reported feeling more positive about their future.

- In Antelope Valley and Monterey, more than half of students reported having more frequent positive interactions with other adults in their life since working with an Education Liaison.

Education Liaison perspective. Education Liaisons also saw their goal-setting work in efforts to improve the overall lives of the students with whom they work. One Education Liaison summarized: "And so I feel like proud to be part of a program that is able to like provide this one-on-one support for students and help them work towards their educational goals." When setting goals, Education Liaisons also discussed the importance of recognizing students' struggles and barriers to achieving those goals: "I saw in my goal setting with young people because it was a really high stress time [speaking about the pandemic] and there was a lot of loss, a lot of grief … And so my goal setting looked different. I prioritized attendance and academics when I could, but really, sometimes their goals were really focused on asking for help."

Another Education Liaison shared:

> *"We address the obvious barriers first if they don't have clothing, if they don't have access to food, if they don't have access to a washer and dryer, transportation is another huge one that obviously impacts their ability to be in class. Let's address that first and kind of get some immediate gratification for them so that they're like, OK, I see what participating in this can do for me. And then we start working towards those longer-term goals."*

Education Liaisons reported that helping students with their life goals is rewarding. One Liaison summarized it: "Seeing young people's growth and seeing them grow in their self-esteem and autonomy, and seeing them

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[j] Report available upon request from NCYL.

exercise that agency, I think for young people in [foster] care particularly having a sense of control is not something that is common or allowed in many of those spaces, and so seeing a young person make their statement and say it with, with meaning and with power, and understand their right to say it and know that that they can say no … has been the most rewarding … it's truly a privilege and an honor to work with youth."

Discussion of Findings

The findings above highlight how certain aspects of the Compassionate Ed program are important to achieving programmatic goals, including program reach, differences in program focus between middle and high school, and the importance of relationships between Education Liaisons and students/caregivers.

Program reach is a critical component of ensuring that students and caregivers who are eligible for the program receive services; reach varied considerably during COVID when students may have needed extra support. Once a school identifies a student as eligible for the program, an Education Liaison reaches out. However, not all eligible students participate in Compassionate Ed and, while others may be eligible, the school may not know they are eligible. Corresponding to the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer students were served by Compassionate Ed in the 2020-2021 SY than during the 2021-2022 SY. This may represent a rebound to program enrollments pre-COVID, but it is difficult to say with certainty because previous years' reports used a more inclusive criteria for program participation that renders a direct comparison impossible.[102,103,104] Program intensity also increased from the 2020-21 SY to the 2021-22 SY, captured by the number of interactions and goals reported by students. For example, the number of goals set and completed in SY 2021-2022 was more than triple that of the previous school year.

Compassionate Ed is reaching its target populations with a high percentage of students being considered chronically absent or having an average grade point average of about a 2.0, a high rate of suspension, and high levels of school mobility. Compassionate Ed focuses on serving those students most in need and is reaching the intended audience.

Differences in program focus between middle and high school highlight the need for coordination across school levels. These differences are particularly important for students who may only participate in the program in middle or high school rather than both. The middle school serves predominantly male participants while the high school serves an even split of male and female students. Furthermore, staff highlighted differences in the content provided. The high school Education Liaisons reported focusing more on navigating the unique challenges of high school, working with other school staff on behalf of students, and helping students plan for their future; the middle school Education Liaisons reported focusing on behavior and academic achievement. The high school Liaisons also reported feeling that middle school students could have been better prepared for their transition to high school. The differences between the two programs highlight the need to ensure that middle and high school Liaisons are communicating and aligning services, which would allow for smoother transitions to high school for middle school participants.

The connections and relationships between Education Liaisons and students are key to Compassionate Ed. The four high school students we interviewed and the Education Liaisons each talked about how impactful these relationships are and how much they value the opportunity to work together. These remarks are reflected in the 2022 RTI survey of Compassionate Ed participants.[k] Students described their relationship with the Education Liaisons in close and trusted terms: "more of a friend" and "sharing with them feels like a weight off my shoulders." The RTI evaluation additionally found that approximately 9 in 10 students agreed that their Education Liaison is there for them and believes in them.

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[k] Report available upon request from NCYL.

Recommendations for Compassionate Ed

Practice

Several practice-based recommendations arose through our interviews and findings from our quantitative data analysis.

First, increasing brand recognition might help reach more eligible students and caregivers. While students and caregivers sometimes knew the Education Liaison by name, they did not recognize the terms Education Liaison, NCYL, Compassionate Ed, or Foster Ed. This indicates that students may not connect their work with the Education Liaison to a specific program. Those who participated in the stakeholder engagement interviews and focus groups shared that students often don't want everyone to know they are in foster care or experiencing homelessness. Therefore, Compassionate Ed tries to keep the Education Liaison role vague and not call the program something that indicates foster care or homelessness. This mirrors past evaluation findings: One student who participated in the 2022 RTI survey stated, "Well I think it's already super good to begin with but I also didn't know it existed until the school therapist told me about it. So maybe advertise more? I don't know."

Ensuring that students and caregivers have full information about the program may increase participation and recruitment among other students. While there is no single way to increasing awareness about the program, approaches may include placing flyers about the program in the counselor's office, partnering with caseworkers in foster care to share information with students about the program, and working with teachers to refer students.

Ensure that an adequate number of well-trained and supported staff are available to meet students' needs. Staff discussed staffing shortages and the need to ensure the presence of an Education Liaison in each school rather than have one Education Liaison cover multiple schools. Given the student-centered focus of the program, it is important to ensure that Education Liaisons have the time needed to spend with each student. Students and caregivers both reported wanting more one-on-one meetings with the Liaisons. Meanwhile, in the 2022 RTI survey, 96 percent of students in Antelope Valley and Monterey reported being satisfied with the amount of contact they had with their Education Liaison, but several students reported wanting more meetings. Compassionate Ed may consider further investigation to better understand students' perspectives on their ideal frequency and types of interactions with their Education Liaisons.

Address unique and specific factors to allow each Education Liaison to better serve participants. Interviews indicated that, while staff feel supported overall, Compassionate Ed needs a better understanding of Education Liaisons' specific situations and needs when working with students and caregivers. This is particularly important because the program is student-centered and the exact services provided will vary across Liaisons and students, based on student needs. Staff mentioned a few specific resources, including better translation services or bilingual liaisons, in-person meetings, and resources/connections in different professions. For example, if the student is interested in architecture, the Education Liaison could connect them with an architect. Translation services and/or bilingual liaisons may be particularly important to serving the students in Monterey and Antelope Valley, given the large populations of students in those districts identifying as Latino.

Continue to provide detailed onboarding and adequate paid time off to staff. The staff we interviewed reported the onboarding process and paid time off as two of the most helpful resources the Compassionate Ed program provides. One staff member shared, "When I was doing my onboarding, you know, I learned all the information I needed, you know our onboarding is actually about a month. So ... they really try to support us in that way, as well as we do check-ins with our supervisor once a week. And I know that if I have an issue, I can call my supervisor." Another staff member spoke to the importance of paid time off (PTO): "I think

NCYL does like a very, very good job of, you know, giving us that time and space to not only talk through that, but also have plenty of PTO to like almost disengage and like become a human again."

Increase the presence of Education Liaisons in middle schools to provide additional opportunities to help middle school students successfully transition to high school. The middle school programs have a unique ability to help prepare and support students in their transition from eighth grade to ninth grade and, ultimately, to graduate high school. The transition to high school is a critical time period for a young person's educational trajectory. The majority of students who drop out of school do so around ninth grade, which indicates that earlier starts to programs like Compassionate Ed may be an effective approach to prevent students from dropping out. [105,106]

Lastly, focus on reducing chronic absenteeism, a frequently reported barrier to educational success. The Compassionate Ed program aims to support students who are at risk of being, or already are, chronically absent—and is successfully meeting the goal of serving that population. Compassionate Ed should continue to make and track goals around reducing chronic absenteeism for students with whom they are currently working and track attendance among participants, to the degree possible, to tailor supports when attendance patterns change.

Continuous Quality Improvement

In addition to practice recommendations, we have several recommendations for continuous quality improvement that can advance future evaluation efforts.

First, develop a logic model that includes a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process. A logic model that details program inputs, activities, and outcomes can allow a better understanding of its potential impact. Additionally, the model can provide a helpful structure for identifying changes in programming in response to evaluations and other CQI processes.

Invest in developing a set list of data elements (both program and district-level data) and reporting mechanisms. For example, the district could provide data twice a year, once after the first half of the school year in December/early January and again at the end of the school year in June.

Explore longitudinal analysis of students in the program. This is particularly important for tracking changes in educational outcomes among participants. For example, tracking a cohort of students who start the program in middle school or early high school through their high school graduation may provide important insight into the different services and resources they needed as they moved through the program. Longitudinal analyses would also allow Compassionate Ed and their evaluation partners to capture students' experiences with goal setting and completion in a way that is more aligned with how the Compassionate Ed program functions, capturing goals that span multiple years. A longitudinal analysis could also provide evidence on changes in education metrics such as GPA and chronic absenteeism as students progress through the program.

Encourage program staff and Education Liaisons to enter data in real time as they are collected. Entering data into the Compassionate Ed data system in real time provides a better understanding of how students are doing and of the program's busier and slower periods. However, currently data entry is clustered around a few times of year. For example, goal data entry is clustered in March/April, indicating that these goals may have been set earlier in the school year. Clustered data entry limits longitudinal analysis and the timely tracking of goal setting and goal completion. This is compounded by a limitation in the software used by the Compassionate Ed program that does not allow users to edit goal creation dates. Program staff and Education Liaisons may need additional training or time to enter data on a more regular basis.

Document district-level policies and practices that may impact data. During the pandemic, districts changed their practices on virtual instruction and counting attendance, which impacted the data presented

in this report. Formally documenting the differences between districts, in times of crisis and overall, can facilitate a more thorough understanding of the data and changes over time—changes that may be due to the Compassionate Ed program or to external factors.

Finally, collect and analyze data that allow for more information on program dosage. In order to analyze data by school year, participants are considered part of the program if they were active in the program between July 1 and June 30 of that school year (e.g., from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021 for the 2020-21 SY). However, this method may capture young people who were eligible and served briefly over the summer but who moved before the school year—and who were thus not served in the program for an entire school year.

Conclusions

The Compassionate Ed program aims to support students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness in their educational careers, both up to and through high school graduation. The first strategy of the program, the focus of this report, relies on relationships between Education Liaisons and students with the greatest needs, as identified by a number of educational criteria including chronic absenteeism—a population that Compassionate Ed is successfully reaching. This evaluation found evidence of strong connections between Education Liaisons and students that are critical for the functioning of Compassionate Ed and its students' success. Through these relationships, Education Liaisons help students reach their educational goals—as reported by students, staff, and caregivers.

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Appendix

Table 1. Quantitative indicator descriptions

Indicator	Operationalization	Data source(s)	Data cleaning notes and comparability considerations
Participant characteristics			
Participant gender	Male/female	Program roster	A small number of students listed a gender listed other than male or female (e.g., non-binary). They are not presented separately to protect their identities, but are included in all analyses.
Participant race/ethnicity	Black, Hispanic, Other, White	Program roster	Due to small sample sizes, we combined Other, Multiracial, Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, into an "Other" category.
Participant grade levels	Grade level. Ranges from 5th-12th grade, with another category for graduates	Program data	In Monterey, one eighth grader was dropped.
IEP status	Dichotomous yes/no	Student-level educational data	Available for participants with educational data only
504 status	Dichotomous yes/no	Student-level educational data	Available for participants with educational data only
Program data			
Total number of interactions	Sum across all interaction types	Program interactions data	Approximately 10.5 percent of all interactions in the program data for the 2021-22 SY were attempted but not completed. We excluded those interactions, as well as a small handful of attempted interactions in the 2020-21 SY.

We included all interactions that took place between July 1 and June 30 of the following year. |
| **Average number of interactions per student per year** | Total number of interactions divided by number of students served in a year | Program interactions data | If a student was not listed in the program interaction data, we assumed they had 0 interactions during that SY.

Approximately 10.5 percent of all interactions in the program data for the 2021-22 SY were attempted but not completed. We excluded those interactions, as well as a small handful of attempted interactions in the 2020-21 SY. |
| **Average number of interactions per student per month** | Total number of interactions per student divided by total number of months in the program | Program interaction data | Two students in Lancaster had enrollment end dates before their enrollment dates so it was impossible to calculate their number of months in the program. They were excluded from this indicator. |

Indicator	Operationalization	Data source(s)	Data cleaning notes and comparability considerations
Type of interactions	Education champion, student, student survey, team, follow-up, other	Program interactions data	Approximately 10.5 percent of all interactions in the program data for the 2021-22 SY were attempted but not completed. We excluded those interactions, as well as a small handful of attempted interactions in the 2020-21 SY.
Total number of goals completed	Sum of all goals completed	Program goals data	If a student was not listed in the program goals data, we assumed they had 0 goals completed during that SY. We included goals that were created and completed during the same school year (between July 1 and June 30 of the following year). Goal creation dates were auto-captured as the date that a goal was entered into the data system and may not reflect the date a student began working in it if, for example, a goal was set at the beginning of the semester, but it was not entered into the system until the end of the semester. Goal completion dates were also auto-captured when a goal is entered as "complete" in the system. This date can be updated by the data enterer, but this is not automatic. Prior to October 2020, the data system did not auto-capture goal completion dates, so some goals were missing completion dates and could not be included. We included goals that had dates for both creation and completion only.
Average number of goals completed	Total number of goals divided by number of students served in a year	Program goals data	If a student was not listed in the program goals data, we assumed they had 0 goals completed during that SY.
Types of goals completed	Count of goals by type (academic, social capital, social development, other)	Program goals data	N/A
		Academic characteristics	
Average GPA	Average GPA	Student-level educational data	GPA was reported as cumulative GPA for Monterey and Lancaster. Antelope Valley reported GPA for the 2021-22 SY only. In Lancaster, sixth graders only had school year data, while other grades had school year and cumulative data. Since the school year data for sixth graders represented the entire time they had been at the school, we treated the data as cumulative as well. This applies to all academic characteristics for sixth graders at Lancaster.

Indicator	Operationalization	Data source(s)	Data cleaning notes and comparability considerations
Chronic absenteeism rate	% of students who attended who were present 90% of the school year or less	Student-level educational data	Chronic absenteeism was calculated separately by school year. Absenteeism rates were provided in Antelope Valley, as were attendance rate in Lancaster. In Monterey, we calculated chronic absenteeism rates using days of school attended, assuming a school year of 180 days.
Suspension rate	Number of students with at least one suspension during the SY divided by number of students	Student-level educational data	Monterey reported cumulative suspension rates, which are not directly comparable to the school year-specific rates reported by Lancaster and Antelope Valley.
Expulsion Rate	Number of students with at least one expulsion during the SY divided by number of students	Student-level educational data	N/A
School mobility	Number of schools attended	Student-level educational data	Monterey and Lancaster reported the number of schools each student attended during that school year. This indicator is not available for Antelope Valley.

NCYL Compassionate Education Systems: Antelope Valley

This brief describes the NCYL Compassionate Education Systems program in Antelope Valley (referred to as Compassionate Ed hereafter) for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (SYs). It was prepared by Renee Ryberg, Tyler Chandler, and Alex Gabriel.

Compassionate Ed Program Overview

NCYL's Compassionate Ed program aims to improve education outcomes for students who come into contact with public systems, including students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness. In Antelope Valley, Compassionate Ed serves young people in foster care in grades 9-12.

Students are identified by the school as in foster care, and Compassionate Ed Education Liaisons then reach out to those students about the program. Once a student is enrolled in Compassionate Ed, they are paired with an Education Liaison who works with them to identify education and life goals, build relationships with supportive adults, and ultimately graduate high school. In addition to being in foster care, to be eligible for the program students must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Previously identified as a potential candidate to receive intensive district supports,
- One or more behavior referrals in the last 4 months,
- Chronically absent,
- Transferred to the district mid-school-year,
- School credit deficient,
- Performing below proficiency in math or language arts,
- Has an IEP or 504 plan,
- Failed one or more courses in the last school year.

## Program Participant Characteristics

In the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (SYs), a total of 91 students were served by Compassionate Ed in Antelope Valley. In both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 SYs, slightly more female than male students were served (see Figure 1). The program serves primarily Black and Latino students, who each make up about 40 percent of students served. The remaining students are White and of other races and ethnicities. Looking by grade level, students served by the program tend to be seniors in high school with 9th, 10th, and 11th graders making up a smaller proportion of students served (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Number of students served by gender, by year
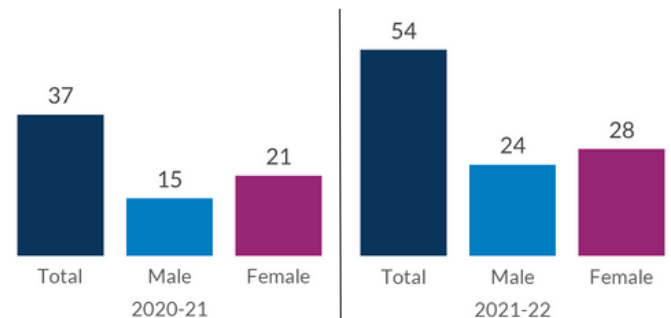
Note: 3 students are missing gender information.

Figure 2. Number of students served by grade level, SY 2021-2022
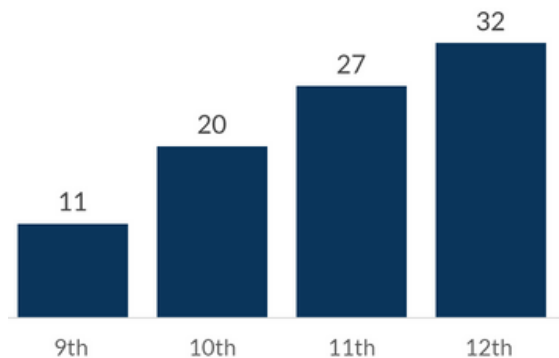
Note: 1 student is missing grade level information.

ChildTrends

Program Interactions

More than 850 interactions took place between students and the program over the two school years, with 357 interactions in SY 2020-21 and 514 in SY 2021-22 (see Table 1). In SY 2020-21, students had an average of 1.0 interactions per month with Compassionate Ed. This increased slightly to 1.4 interactions per month in SY 2021-22. On average, students interacted with Compassionate Ed 9.6 times in SY 2020-21 and 9.5 times in SY 2021-22. Student meetings and team meetings were the most common types of interactions.

Table 1. Number of interactions, by interaction type and year

School Year	Interaction Type					Total
	Follow Up	Student	Student (Survey)	Team	Other Engagement	
2020-21	26 (7%)	271 (76%)	9 (3%)	37 (10%)	14 (4%)	357
2021-22	11 (2%)	432 (84%)	4 (1%)	57 (11%)	10 (2%)	514

Note: Education Champion and team meetings were combined into a single group.

Goals

In this section, only a subset of goals completed by students is reported: goals that were set and completed within the same school year (July 1-June 30). Compassionate Ed students completed very few goals over the two years (5 goals in SY 2020-21 and 23 in SY 2021-22; see Table 2). In SY 2020-21, only 5 percent of students completed at least one goal. In SY 2021-22, 26 percent of students (14/54) completed at least one goal. Academic goals were the most common type of goal completed, making up all goals completed in SY 2020-21 and about 80 percent of goals completed in SY 2021-22.

Table 2. Number of completed goals, by goal type and year

School Year	Goal Type			Total
	Academic	Social Capital	Social Development	
2020-21	5 (100%)	0	0	5
2021-22	18 (78%)	2 (9%)	3 (13%)	23

Note: We include goals that were set and completed in the same school year only, in order to provide a snapshot of each school year.

The following indicators provide a snapshot of how Compassionate Ed students are faring educationally. They reflect the students served by Compassionate Ed and do not indicate the program's impact on students' educational outcomes.

Education Metrics

Educational data were not provided for the 2020-21 SY, so we report educational data (grade level, chronic absenteeism, GPA, etc.) for the 2021-22 SY only. School mobility data were also not provided.

GPA. For the 2021-22 SY, Compassionate Ed students had an average GPA of 1.9 for the SY, below the district average of 2.4 for the same year (see Figure 3 below, and Table 3 on the next page). Female students had higher GPAs, on average, than male students, and Hispanic and White students had higher GPAs than Black and other students.
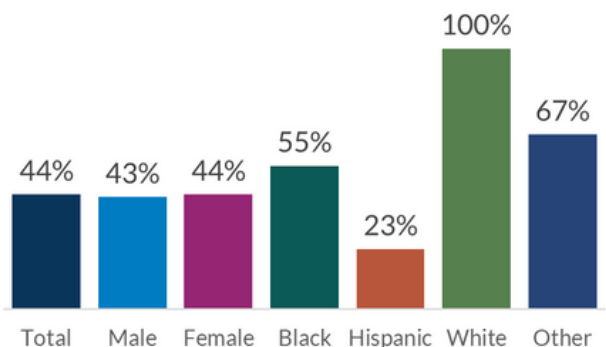
Figure 3. Compassionate Ed participant GPA, by gender and race/ethnicity, SY 2021-22
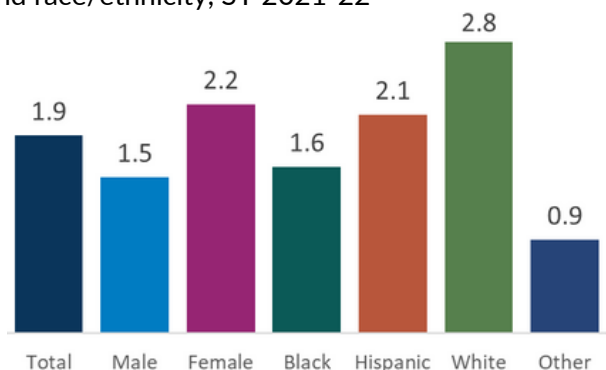
Note: GPA is for the 2021-22 SY only (e.g., is not cumulative).

Chronic Absenteeism. Less than half of Compassionate Ed students (44%) were chronically absent during the 2021-22 SY (see Figure 4 bellow). This rate is higher than the school district's average of 34 percent for high schoolers, and about the same as the chronic absenteeism rate for students in foster care in the district (45%) and state (47%). White students had the highest average absenteeism rate (100%) followed by students of other races/ethnicities (67%) and Black students (55%). Hispanic students had a much lower rate of chronic absenteeism (23%) than the other demographic groups.

Figure 4. Chronic absenteeism rate, by gender and race/ethnicity, SY 2021-22

Education Metrics Cont.

Table 3. Educational metrics for Compassionate Ed participants by student characteristics, SY 2021-22

	NCYL Participants	HS District Average	AV Foster Students	CA Foster students
GPA	1.9	2.4	N/A	N/A
Chronic Absenteeism	44%	34%	45%	47%
Suspensions	12%	7%	19%	12%

Note: Data on chronic absenteeism and suspensions for the district, AV foster students, and CA foster student averages come from the California Department of Education and represent 2022. Data for NCYL participants represent the 2021-22 SY. Data for GPA come directly from the school district.

Sources: California Department of Education. (n.d.). Antelope Valley Union High summary. California School Dashboard. https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/19642460000000/2022: California Department of Education. (2022). Chronic Absenteeism Data. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesabd.asp

Exclusionary School Discipline. Formal exclusionary school discipline was a relatively rare experience for Compassionate Ed students. No students were expelled in SY 2021-22. Six students, or 12 percent of students served were suspended in SY 2021-22—on par with the national average for youth in foster care, and below the district average for foster students of about 19 percent.

Graduation. In AV, at least 16 of the 24 served seniors graduated during SY 2021-22. Additional students may have graduated over the summer, after the data were collected, or at an unaccounted-for school after transferring before the end of the SY. This support mainly consists of responsive work and monthly check-ins.

Methods

All data were provided to Child Trends by NCYL. Educational data are from the Antelope Valley Unified High School District and are a subset of participants, as we were not able to link educational data for all students and no data were provided for the 2020-21 SY. Please see the full report, available at [INSERT HYPERLINK], for details on the methods.

NCYL Compassionate Education Systems: Lancaster

This brief describes the NCYL Compassionate Education Systems program in Lancaster (referred to as Compassionate Ed hereafter) for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (SYs). It was prepared by Renee Ryberg, Tyler Chandler, and Alex Gabriel.

Compassionate Ed Program Overview

NCYL's Compassionate Ed program aims to improve education outcomes for students who come into contact with public systems, including students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness. In Lancaster, Compassionate Ed serves young people in foster care in grades 6-8.

Students are identified by the school as in foster care, and Compassionate Ed Education Liaisons then reach out to those students about the program. Once a student is enrolled in Compassionate Ed, they are paired with an Education Liaison who works with them to identify education and life goals, build relationships with supportive adults, and ultimately graduate high school. In addition to being in foster care, to be eligible for the program students must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Previously identified as a potential candidate to receive intensive district supports,
- One or more behavior referrals in the last 4 months,
- Chronically absent,
- Transferred to the district mid-school-year,
- School credit deficient,
- Performing below proficiency in math or language arts,
- Has an IEP or 504 plan,
- Failed one or more courses in the last school year.

Program Participant Characteristics

In the 2020-21 and 2021-22 SYs, a total of 90 students were served by Compassionate Ed in Lancaster. More male than female students were served in both years (see Figure 1). The program served primarily Black and Latino students, with Black students making up 44 percent of students served and Latino students making up 39 percent. The program served predominately 7th and 8th graders (see Figure 2). Following the 2020-21 school year, 13 students remained in the program during the 2021-22 SY.

Figure 1. Number of students served by gender, by year
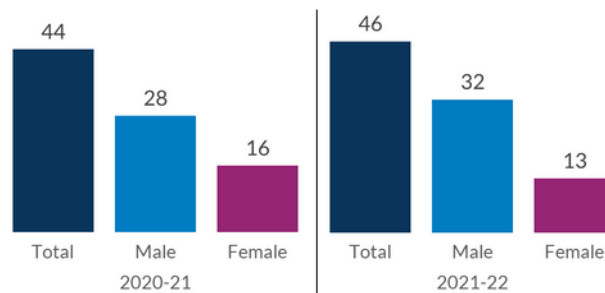
Note: 1 student is missing gender information.

Figure 2. Number of students served by grade level, SY 2020-2021 & 2021-2022

Child Trends.
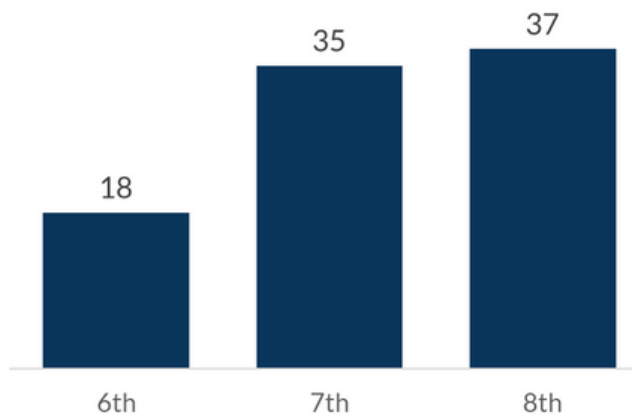
Program Interactions

More than 1,200 interactions took place between students and the program over the two school years, with 446 interactions in SY 2020-21 and 805 in SY 2021-22 (see Table 1). In SY 2020-21, students had an average of 1.3 interactions per month with Compassionate Ed. This increased slightly to 2.2 interactions per month in SY 2021-22. On average, students interacted with the program 10.1 times in SY 2020-21 and 17.5 times in SY 2021-22. Student meetings and team meetings were the most common types of interactions.

Table 1. Number of interactions, by interaction type and year

School Year	Interaction Type			
	Student	Student (Survey)	Team	Total
2020-21	312 (70%)	15 (3%)	114 (26%)	446
2021-22	552 (69%)	16 (2%)	237 (29%)	805

Note: Follow up and other meeting types represented less than 1% of all interactions and were excluded from the table. Education Champion and team meetings were combined into a single group.

Goals

In this section, only a subset of goals completed by students is reported: goals that were set and completed within the same school year (July 1-June 30). Compassionate Ed students completed 133 goals over the two SYs (28 goals in SY 2020-21 and 105 in SY 2021-22; see Table 2). Students completed an average of 0.6 goals in SY 2020-21 and 2.3 goals in SY 2021-22. In 2020-21, 43 percent of students (19/44) completed at least one goal. In 2021-22, 61 percent of students (28/46) completed at least one goal. Academic goals were the most common type of goals completed, making up more than half of all goals completed in each year.

Table 2. Number of completed goals, by goal type and year

| School Year	Goal Type				
	Academic	Social Capital	Social Development	Other	Total
2020-21	23 (82%)	2 (7%)	3 (11%)	0	28
2021-22	69 (66%)	23 (22%)	11 (10%)	2 (2%)	105

Note: We include goals that were set and completed in the same school year only, in order to provide a snapshot of each school year.

The following indicators provide a snapshot of how Compassionate Ed students are faring educationally. They reflect the students served by Compassionate Ed and do not indicate the program's impact on students' educational outcomes.
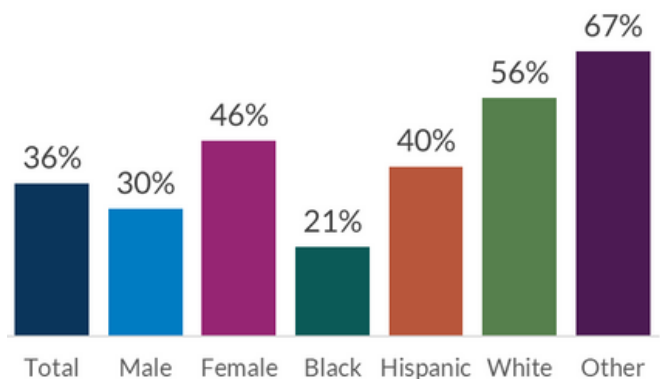
Education Metrics

GPA. Across the two school years, Compassionate Ed students had an average Ed students had an average cumulative GPA of 2.2, compared to a district average GPA of 2.7 (see Figure 3 below, and Table 3 on the next page). Female students and male students had about the same GPA, and other races/ethnicities and White students had slightly higher GPAs than Black or Hispanic students.

Figure 3. Compassionate Ed participant cumulative GPA, by gender and race/ethnicity, SY 2020-21 & 2021-22
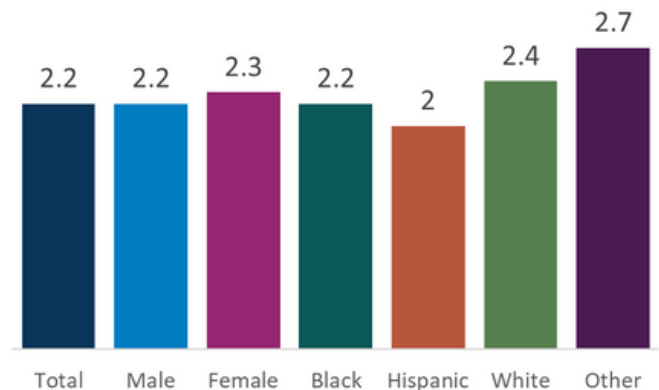
Chronic Absenteeism. In SY 2020-21, 21 percent of Compassionate Ed students were chronically absent compared to to 48 percent in SY 2021-22, for an average of 36 percent across the two years (see Figure 4 bellow). This most recent rate is similar to the school district's average of 48 percent in SY 2021-22, and the chronic absenteeism rate for all students in foster care in the district (regardless of grade level; 42%) and state (47%). There were large differences in chronic absenteeism rates by gender and race/ethnicity (see Figure 4), with male students and Black students having the lowest chronic absenteeism rates.

Figure 4. Chronic absenteeism rate, by gender and race/ethnicity, SY 2020-21 & 2021-22

Education Metrics Cont.

Table 3. Educational metrics for Compassionate Ed participants by student characteristics, SY 2020-21 & SY 2021-22

	NCYL Participants	District Average	Lancaster Foster Students	CA Foster Students
GPA	2.2	2.7	N/A	N/A
Chronic Absenteeism	34%	43%	42%	47%
Suspensions	22%	5%	8%	12%

Note: Data on chronic absenteeism and suspensions for the district, Lancaster foster students, and CA foster student averages come from the California Department of Education and represent 2022 data. Data for NCYL participants represent a combined 2020-21 SY & 2021-22 SY average. Data for GPA come directly from the school district.
Sources: California Department of Education. (n.d.). Lancaster Elementary summary. California School Dashboard. https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/19646670000000/2022; California Department of Education. (2022). Chronic Absenteeism Data. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesabd.asp

Exclusionary School Discipline. Formal exclusionary discipline was not uncommon for program participants in SY 2020-21 and SY 2021-22. Of the 78 students with suspension data across both SYs, 17 students were suspended—a rate higher than the district's 8 percent average for youth in foster care and the state's 12 percent average for students in foster care.

School Mobility. Of the students with education data, about 2 percent attended more than one school in SY 2020-21 and about 20 percent attended more than one school in SY 2021-22.

Methods

All data were provided to Child Trends by NCYL. Educational data are from the Lancaster School District and are a subset of participants, as we were not able to link educational data for all students. Please see the full report, available at [INSERT HYPERLINK], for details on the methods.

NCYL Compassionate Education Systems: Monterey

This brief describes the NCYL Compassionate Education Systems program in Monterey (referred to as Compassionate Ed hereafter) for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (SYs). It was prepared by Renee Ryberg, Tyler Chandler, and Alex Gabriel.

Compassionate Ed Program Overview

NCYL's Compassionate Ed program aims to improve education outcomes for students who come into contact with public systems, including students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness. In Monterey, Compassionate Ed serves students experiencing homelessness in grades 9-12.

Students are identified by the school as experiencing homelessness, and Compassionate Ed Education Liaisons then reach out to those students about the program. Once a student is enrolled in Compassionate Ed, they are paired with an Education Liaison who works with them to identify education and life goals, build relationships with supportive adults, and ultimately graduate high school. In addition to experiencing homelessness, to be eligible for the program students must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Previously identified as a potential candidate to receive intensive district supports,
- One or more behavior referrals in the last 4 months,
- Chronically absent,
- Transferred to the district mid-school-year,
- School credit deficient,
- Performing below proficiency in math or language arts,
- Has an IEP or 504 plan,
- Failed one or more courses in the last school year.

Monterey gives additional preference to students who are unaccompanied; to those who live in hotels/motels or shelters, or who are unsheltered (rather than being doubled up or shared living arrangements); and to 11th and 12th graders.

Program Participant Characteristics

In the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (SYs), a total of 61 students were served by Compassionate Ed in Monterey. In the 2020-21 SY, more male than female students were served (see Figure 1). The next year, slightly more female than male students were served. The majority of students served are Latino (61%). The program served predominately 11th and 12th graders (see Figure 2). Following the 2020-21 SY, 13 out of the 14 seniors graduated out of the program. In the 2021-22 SY, 13 students returned to the program.

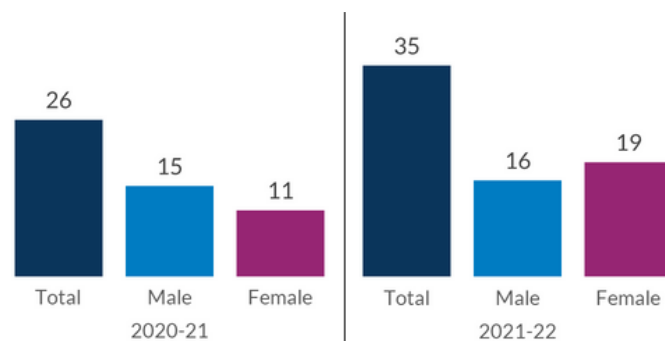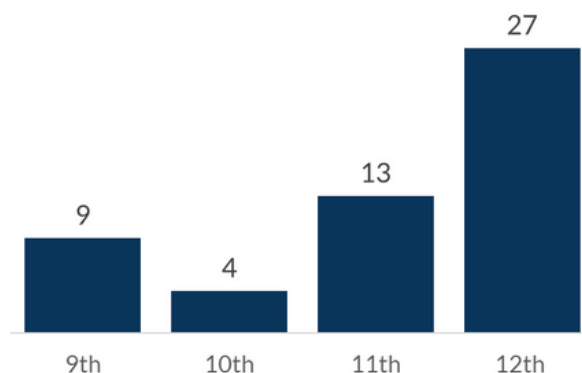**Figure 1.** Number of students served by gender, by year

Figure 2. Number of students served by grade level, SY 2020-2021 & 2021-2022

Note: 7 students are missing grade level information. 1 student was flagged as a post-secondary student who still received services.

Child Trends

Program Interactions

More than 1,000 interactions took place between students and the program over the two school years, with 426 interactions in SY 2020-21 and 626 in SY 2021-22 (see Table 1). In SY 2020-21, students had an average of 3.0 interactions per month with Compassionate Ed. This decreased slightly to 2.3 interactions per month in SY 2021-22. On average, students interacted with Compassionate Ed 16.4 times in SY 2020-21 and 17.9 times in SY 2021-22. Student meetings and team meetings were the most common types of interactions.

Table 1. Number of interactions, by interaction type and year

School Year	Interaction Type		Total
	Student Meeting	Team Meetings	
2020-21	343 (80%)	80 (19%)	426
2021-22	447 (71%)	154 (25%)	626

Note: Follow up, student surveys, and other meeting types represented less than 1 percent of all interactions and were excluded from the table. Education Champion and team meetings were combined into a single group.

Goals

In this section, only a subset of goals completed by students is reported: goals that were set and completed within the same school year (July 1-June 30). Compassionate Ed students set and completed more than 150 goals over the two years (33 goals in SY 2020-21 and 152 in SY 2021-22; see Table 2). Students completed an average of 1.3 goals in SY 2020-21 and 4.3 goals in SY 2021-22. In 2020-21, 58 percent of students (15/26) completed a goal. In SY 2021-22, 77 percent of students (27/35) completed at least one goal, a 19 percentage point increase from SY 2020-21. Academic goals were the most common type of goals completed by far, making up more than half of all goals completed in each year.

Table 2: Number and percent of completed goals, by type and year

| School Year	Goal Type				Total
	Academic	Social Capital	Social Development	Other	
2020-21	19 (58%)	2 (6%)	8 (24%)	4 (12%)	33
2021-22	113 (74%)	7 (5%)	1 (<1%)	31 (20%)	152

Note: We include goals that were set and completed in the same school year only, in order to provide a snapshot of each school year.

The following indicators provide a snapshot of how Compassionate Ed students are faring educationally. They reflect the students served by Compassionate Ed and do not indicate the program's impact on students' educational outcomes.

Education Metrics

GPA. Across the two school years, Compassionate Ed students had an average GPA of 2.2 (see Figure 3 below and Table 3 on the next page). Female students had higher GPAs, on average, than male students, and Black and White students had higher GPAs than Hispanic students or students of other races/ethnicities.
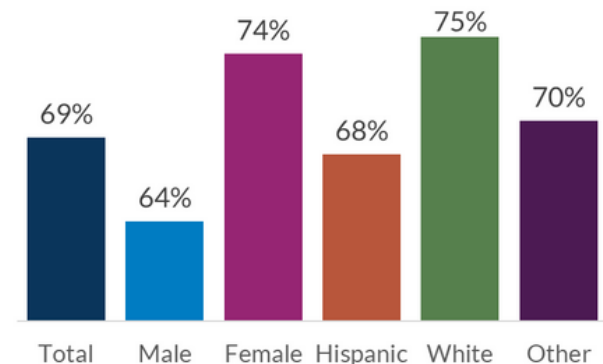
Figure 3. Compassionate Ed participant cumulative GPA, by demographics, SY 2020-2021 & 2021-2022
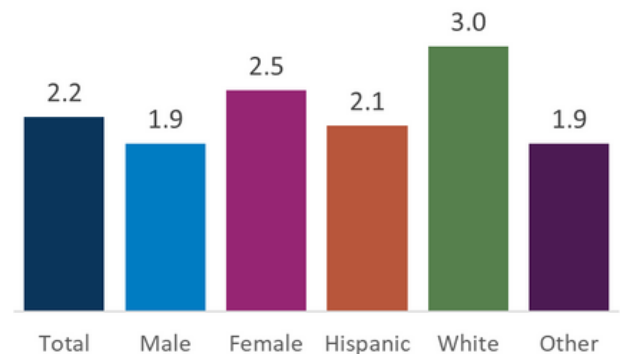
Note: Data on Black students were suppressed (<5).

Chronic Absenteeism. More than half of Compassionate Ed students (69%) were chronically absent across the two years, though chronic absenteeism rates increased dramatically from 62 percent in SY 2020-21 to 76 percent in SY 2021-22 (see Figure 4 bellow). This rate is much higher than the school district's average rate across grades of 27 percent in SY 2021-22 and the average rate for homeless students in the district (32%) and state (46%) in the same school year. All demographic groups of Compassionate Ed students had chronic absenteeism rates above 60 percent.

Figure 4. Compassionate Ed chronic absenteeism rate, by demographics, SY 2020-2021 & 2021-2022

Note: Data on Black students were suppressed (<5).

Education Metrics Cont.

Table 3. Educational metrics for Compassionate Ed participants, SY 2020-21 & SY 2021-22

	NCYL Participants	District Average	Monterey Homeless	CA Homeless Students
GPA	2.2	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chronic Absenteeism	69%	27%	32%	46%
Suspensions	4%	<1%	<1%	6%

Note: Data for the district, Monterey homeless students, and CA homeless student averages come from the California Department of Education and represent 2022. Data for NCYL participants represent a combined 2020-21 SY & 2021-22 SY average.
Sources: California Department of Education. (n.d.). Monterey Peninsula Unified summary. California School Dashboard. https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/27660920000000/2022; California Department of Education. (2022). Chronic Absenteeism Data. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesabd.asp

Exclusionary School Discipline. Formal school discipline was a very rare experience for Compassionate Ed students. No students were expelled in SY 2020-21 or SY 2021-22. Less than five students were suspended in SY 2021-22. This is in line with the district average for homeless youth (<1%).

Graduation. In the 2020-21 SY, 13 of 14 Monterey Compassionate Ed seniors graduated, with 29 percent graduating by state requirements and 71 percent by district requirements. In the 2021-22 SY, 11 of the 13 Compassionate Ed seniors graduated, with 8 percent meeting state requirements and 92 percent meeting district requirements.

School Mobility. Of the students with education data, 15 percent attended more than one school in SY 2020-21 and 20 percent attended more than one school in SY 2021-22.

Methods
All data were provided to Child Trends by NCYL. Educational data are from the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District and are a subset of participants, as we were not able to link educational data for all students. Please see the full report, available at [INSERT HYPERLINK], for details on the methods.