



Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Using data to drive action



# An Evaluation of Scaling Fostering Opportunities

## Implementation Study: Year One Results

### REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- Of the three participating school districts, **one district met standards for fidelity of implementation** and **two newer districts** were **approaching fidelity**. **Fidelity improved over the year.**
- **Qualitative interviews** found that Specialists **develop relationships of trust** with the students and the adults in their lives. The program **improves coordination and collaboration** between local child welfare and education systems and influences **culture change**.
- Specialists value **trainings and supervision to enhance program delivery**, and while the **Specialist role is seen as valuable**, there is some **confusion about its scope and boundaries**.
- Students who have experienced foster care encounter **persistent systemic barriers to educational success**.

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## Executive Summary

Fostering Opportunities is the only evidence-based program in Colorado proven to improve educational outcomes for middle and high school aged students who have experienced foster care. The program’s efficacy was demonstrated through a randomized controlled trial in Jeffco Public Schools (Jeffco). During the 2023–2024 academic year (AY), the program expanded to Denver Public Schools (DPS) and 27J Schools (27J) with full implementation across all three school districts in the 2024–2025 AY.

This report presents early findings from the program’s expansion, including implementation insights and baseline data that will inform future outcome analyses. It also offers recommendations for implementing the program with fidelity and considerations for scaling the program to additional school districts.

## Key Findings

The Fostering Opportunities Fidelity of Implementation Measure consists of 21 indicators that are rated as “met,” “approaching,” or “not met” by the state intermediary, site supervisors and Specialists. These indicators are used to generate an overall rating of adherence to the evidence-based model.

1. **Overall Adherence to the Model:** Fostering Opportunities in Jeffco, the longest-running site, *met* the overall fidelity standard, adhering to the model throughout the 2024–2025 AY. The two newer districts, DPS and 27J, were *approaching* fidelity when adherence was measured in the fall and spring semesters.
2. **Improved Fidelity During 2024–2025 AY:** While the overall fidelity rating for DPS and 27J was the same in the fall and spring, item-level analysis reflects progress in building the formal (e.g., Memorandums of Understanding) and informal partnerships (e.g., communication, meetings) with county child welfare agencies necessary to deliver the program with fidelity. Child welfare agencies notifying the Fostering Opportunities program when foster care placement changes occur remained a persistent challenge in both districts.

From an implementation science perspective, we are particularly interested in the context of standing up Fostering Opportunities in new school districts.<sup>1</sup> The feasibility and acceptability of delivering this program outside of Jeffco—where it was developed—can inform future use of this proven practice in Colorado. The following key findings emerged from 34 qualitative interviews with Fostering Opportunities staff and child welfare case workers.

3. **Systems Alignment:** The Fostering Opportunities program improves coordination and collaboration between local child welfare and education systems and influences culture change to support students’ educational success.

4. **Trusted Relationships:** The Fostering Opportunities program’s success is rooted in the Specialists’ focus on developing relationships of trust with the student and the adults in their lives.
5. **Role Clarity:** While many child welfare, school, and Fostering Opportunities personnel—especially those familiar with the program—view the Specialist role as valuable and distinct, there remains some confusion about the role’s scope and boundaries.
6. **Training and Supervision:** Fostering Opportunities Specialists spoke to the value of trainings and supervision to enhance program delivery, particularly for high acuity cases and to improve their academic support function.
7. **Systemic Barriers:** Despite having legal educational rights, students who have experienced foster care encounter persistent systemic barriers to educational success.

## Recommendations

The Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab has identified two primary recommendations based on findings.

### **Recommendation 1: Support Fostering Opportunities personnel through enhanced training, information, and support.**

Five suggested strategies to engage in this recommendation include:

- 1.1 Support Fostering Opportunities Specialists with a formalized training program, supervision, and mentoring.
- 1.2 Assign Fostering Opportunities cases to Specialists based on referral and evolving case complexity to support balanced caseloads.
- 1.3 Engage in strategic hiring and training to support rapport-building.
- 1.4 Conduct peer learning(s) to uphold foster students’ rights.
- 1.5 Establish an annual review and update process of the program’s manual for continuous quality improvement.

### **Recommendation 2: Enhance system alignment, relationships, and lines of communication among serving agencies to improve program adherence.**

Five suggested strategies to engage in this recommendation include:

- 2.1 Increase education on Fostering Opportunities statewide.
- 2.2 Refine processes to notify Fostering Opportunities staff of foster care placement changes.
- 2.3 Offer opportunities for bi-directional training between child welfare and the education system.

- 2.4 With system partners, revisit how invitations to meetings are extended to personnel across the network, including to youth, as appropriate.
- 2.5 With system partners, to uphold student confidentiality and safety, review and further detail Student Data Principles to ensure that they are universally understood and applied consistently.

## Lessons Learned

The lessons learned from the first year of implementation are organized through the **Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR)** into five domains.<sup>2</sup> These lessons learned use the best available evidence to inform the use of Fostering Opportunities in the prevention services continuum.

### 1. Intervention Characteristics

*How the program's attributes influenced adoption and use.*

- An evidence-designation of a proven practice builds confidence.
- Data on educational outcomes establishes urgency to scale this proven practice.
- Operational flexibility supports program delivery without compromising fidelity.

### 2. Outer Setting

*How external factors shaped implementation.*

- Cross-system alignment improves student outcomes and reduces duplication.
- Colorado's innovative policies for transition-age youth shape implementation.

### 3. Inner Setting

*How organizational characteristics affected implementation.*

- Leadership and infrastructure enable fidelity.
- Culture change occurs when modeled consistently.

### 4. Characteristics of Individuals

*How staff knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs influenced implementation.*

- Specialist relationships are the engine of the model.
- Specialists are advocates for youth and teach self-advocacy skills.
- Supervision of Specialists can prevent burnout and improve retention.

## 5. Implementation Process

*How the program was introduced, executed, and refined.*

- Structured onboarding and peer learning accelerate uptake.
- Specialist direct observations and Case Review forms can improve service delivery and fidelity to the model.
- Caseload balancing and supervision require intentional design.

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## Data Sources

This study uses data from the following data sources:

1. Fidelity of Implementation tools, Supervisor Observations, and Case Reviews completed by Fostering Opportunities Program Coordinators, Specialists, and State Intermediary.
2. Qualitative data from interviews with partners across school districts and local child welfare agencies.

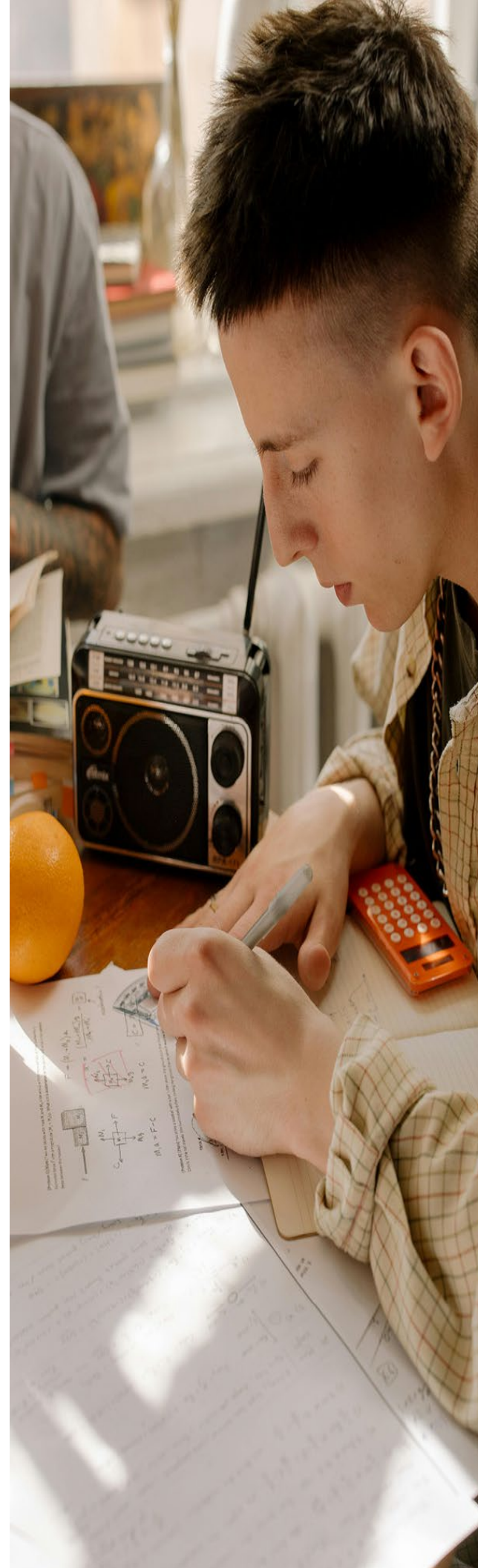
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## Introduction and Program Description



## Introduction and Program Description

Fostering Opportunities is the only proven practice in Colorado for improving educational outcomes for middle and high school aged youth who have experienced foster care. The program was initially developed in Jefferson County, Colorado, and its efficacy was tested through a randomized controlled trial. The [Foster Youth Success Act \(House Bill \[HB\] 22-1374\)](#) resourced sustaining Fostering Opportunities in Jeffco Public Schools (Jeffco) and scaling this proven practice to two additional school districts. The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) issued an open call, and Adams 27J (27J) and Denver Public Schools (DPS) were awarded funds to implement Fostering Opportunities in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2025, SFY26, and SFY27.

As part of the expansion of Fostering Opportunities, an evaluation was launched to inform the scaling of this proven practice to new jurisdictions. The goals of the 3-year evaluation are to:

**Evaluate the feasibility of scaling Fostering Opportunities and producing similar outcomes to those demonstrated in the Jeffco pilot.**

**Lay the groundwork for future causal studies that could advance an evidence designation by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (Clearinghouse).**

**Use the best available evidence to inform the use of Fostering Opportunities in the prevention services continuum.**

This first report focuses on implementation of the program and fidelity to the model. Implementation is important because it helps bridge the gap between theory and practice and ensures interventions are put into action effectively. High-quality implementation of a proven practice, as it was designed, increases the likelihood that when delivered in a new context, it will achieve similar outcomes.

From an implementation science perspective, we are particularly interested in the context of standing up Fostering Opportunities in new school districts.<sup>3</sup> The feasibility and acceptability of delivering this program outside of Jeffco—where it was developed—will inform future use of this proven practice in Colorado. This report also focuses on adherence to the model and use implementation science to learn about methods, strategies, and barriers to the lifting and adoption of Fostering Opportunities.

## The Fostering Opportunities Program Model

[Fostering Opportunities](#) is a student engagement program:

- Delivered by one or more education agencies working in close partnership with local child welfare agencies.
- Designed to be responsive to changes in participating students' schools, living situations, caregivers, eligibility for services, and child welfare case statuses.
- Designed to consider the network of people and systems (within and beyond education and child welfare) that are important to students' attendance, behavior, course completion, and engagement in school.
- Designed to provide continuity in support and services for as long as students need a dedicated mentor and advocate to be successful in school.

Education agencies take the lead on service delivery because eligibility for the program continues beyond the closure of child welfare cases. Students with a history of out-of-home care often need trauma-informed educational support and mentoring throughout their entire K–12 educational experience.

Students and their caregivers are typically enrolled at the time a dependency and neglect court case opens and an out-of-home placement occurs for the student or throughout their child welfare involvement. The program then serves the student and caregiver(s) continuously:

- While the child welfare case is open and after it closes, whether reunification or alternative permanency is achieved; *and*
- Until students demonstrate sustained educational success and an established network of support for ongoing educational success, as defined by each individual student.

The program [manual](#) describes the underlying theoretical foundation, the components of program delivery, how to launch a new site, and how to monitor fidelity to the model. A previous evaluation found that Fostering Opportunities [led to improved educational outcomes](#) for middle and high school students who experienced foster care.

## Description of the Study

During SFY25, we explored the following research questions. The complete description of the sample and the methods is located in the [Methods](#) section of this report.

### Research Question 1: Was Fostering Opportunities delivered with fidelity?

This research question was answered using data from the [Fostering Opportunities Fidelity Measures](#). Adherence to the model is measured using 21 indicators that are rated as “met”,

“approaching”, or not “met”. The sample included all school districts participating in the expansion pilot. Fidelity was measured each semester beginning in fall of the 2024–2025 academic year (AY).

## **Research Question 2: Why were fidelity successes achieved, and what were the barriers to delivering the program with fidelity?**

This research question was examined via qualitative interviews with school districts and local child welfare agencies. Thirty-four participants were asked to reflect on how system alignment, relationships, and lines of communication among youth-serving agencies influenced program implementation.



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# Methods



## Methods

The methods for the study are specific to each research question and the baseline information that is the foundation the pre-post evaluation that will begin in SFY26.

### Research Question 1: Fidelity to the Model

■ Was Fostering Opportunities delivered with fidelity?

#### Data Sources

Fidelity for the purposes of this study is defined as adherence to the model. It is measured each semester by 21 indicators that are rated as *met*, *approaching*, or *not met* on the Fostering Opportunities [Fidelity Measure](#) (FOI Measure). To provide a comprehensive understanding of fidelity to the Fostering Opportunities model, three roles contribute to the adherence rating:

**State program intermediary:** a CDHS employee or contractor who facilitates selection of sites, cross-site learning, and reporting to the legislature.

**Program Coordinator(s):** School district employee(s) identified as the lead for implementation of the Fostering Opportunities program in a given school district.

**Specialists:** School district employees who provide direct services to students.

Two items on the FOI Measure rely on composite ratings or ratings from other measures: the [Specialist Observation](#) and the [Case Review](#) forms. These forms are expected to be completed twice per semester for each Specialist by the Program Coordinator at their site. Due to time limitations, the program and evaluation teams only required one completion of each in the spring semester.

#### Sample

The sample included all school districts participating in the expansion pilot. Fidelity was measured each semester, beginning in the fall semester of the 2024–2025 AY.

- 27J had one Program Coordinator and one Specialist contributing to the rating. Both individuals carry a caseload, and the Program Coordinator and Specialist did the observations and Case Reviews with each other.
- DPS had two Program Coordinators and five (fall) to six (spring) Specialists contributing to the FOI rating. However, not all the Specialist Observations and Case Reviews were completed by the Program Coordinator as intended.
- Jeffco had one Program Coordinator and five Specialists contributing to the FOI rating. The Program Coordinator or lead Specialist conducted Specialist Observations and Case Reviews.

**Table 1. Sample for Each Component of Fidelity Monitoring, Fall Semester**

School District	Number of Specialists Contributing to FOI Measure	Number of Specialist Observations	Number of Case Reviews
27J	1	4	3
DPS	5	9	12
Jeffco	5	10	10

**Table 2. Sample for Each Component of Fidelity Monitoring, Spring Semester**

School District	Number of Specialists Contributing to FOI Measure	Number of Specialist Observations	Number of Case Reviews
27J	1	2	2
DPS	4	10	6
Jeffco	5	5	5

## Analytic Approach

Data were analyzed separately for each semester to be able to track changes in fidelity ratings over time. For a given semester, sites were considered to *meet fidelity* if at least 17 of the 21 items on the FOI Measure were rated as *met*. A site was *approaching* if at least 17 of the 21 items were rated as *approaching* or *met*, which must have included items 17 and 19. Those two items are essential to the implementation of Fostering Opportunities; without them being at least somewhat present, the site is not implementing the program. A site has *not met fidelity* if it is below that count or if items 17 or 19 are rated as *not met*.

Four items on the FOI Measure rely on composite ratings or ratings from other measures:

- Items 17 and 19:** The Specialist Observation and Case Review forms each consist of 10 items. For the Case Review form, only nine items were rated this academic year. Each measure is scored by a Program Coordinator on a 1–6 scale. For each Specialist Observation and Case Review, we calculated the percentage of items scored at a 5 or 6. We then calculated the average percentage across the district. A district was considered to have *met fidelity* for each item if their average percentage was greater than or equal to 90%; *approaching* fidelity if 60–89%; and *not met* if below 60%.
- Items 20 and 21:** Specialists in each district responded to each item. The calculation is based on the percentage of Specialists who rated the item as *met*. The districtwide rating for this

item was *met* fidelity if 80% or higher, *approaching* fidelity if 60–79%, and *not met* if below 60%.

## Limitations

Due to turnover within the school district, the original DPS Program Coordinator was not able to rate Specialists on the Specialist Observation or Case Review. This meant that some of the ratings were completed as peer reviews, rather than as supervisor ratings as intended. Additionally, two individuals serving in the Program Coordinator role within DPS completed the relevant portion of the FOI Measure. While ratings largely aligned between the two completers, when there was disagreement, we deferred to the rating submitted by the individual listed by both completers as the official site Program Coordinator.

Lastly, comments were not required on the FOI Measure and were rarely used other than by the State Intermediary. As a result, there is not much additional information than what is provided in site ratings. However, qualitative data on program implementation were captured in Research Question 2.

## Research Question 2: Qualitative Learnings

Why were fidelity successes achieved, and what were the barriers to delivering the program with fidelity?

### Data Sources

In qualitative interviews, Fostering Opportunities leadership and staff, and local child welfare agency staff within implementing geographic areas were asked to reflect on how system-alignment, relationships, and lines of communication among serving agencies influenced program adherence. These interviews provided insight into why certain fidelity components were or were not being met and how to support successful delivery and scaling of Fostering Opportunities.

The research team conducted interviews in three rounds. The first-round interviews were conducted in October 2024 and included school district personnel from Jeffco and 27J. Child welfare agency personnel were interviewed in January and February 2025 in the second round. Staff from DPS were interviewed in March 2025 once the appropriate data sharing agreement was in place.

### Sample

The sample was constructed based on guidance from the Fostering Opportunities leadership team. Staff from each of the participating pilot school districts and child welfare agencies serving those school districts were invited to participate. Thirty-four individuals across school districts and local child welfare agencies were interviewed (Tables 3 and 4). The sample included more interviewees from the Jeffco and DPS school districts and Jefferson and Denver County DHS compared to 27J and Adams County DHS because DPS and Jeffco are larger school districts. To ensure a range of viewpoints were represented, both staff and leadership level positions were interviewed at school

districts and child welfare agencies. Additionally, DHS caseworkers from three other Front Range counties serving Fostering Opportunities students were interviewed as well.

**Table 3. Number of School District Interviewees by Position and District**

Fostering Opportunities Position	Jeffco	DPS	27J
Specialist	5	5	1
Coordinator	1	2	1
<b>Total Staff</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>

**Table 4. Number of Child Welfare Agency Interviewees by Position and County**

Department of Human Services Position	Jefferson	Denver	Adams	Other
Caseworker	5	5	1	3
Leadership	1	2	2	0
<b>Total Staff</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>

Interviewees had varying degrees of tenure in their current positions ranging from less than one year up to 30 years. Consistent with being a relatively new program, over half of the interviewees from the school districts had been in their role for less than three years. Nearly half of the interviewees from county DHS agencies had also been in their role for fewer than 3 years, but roughly one third of DHS interviewees had extensive (i.e., 5 or more years) experience.

### Data Collection

All interviews were conducted either in-person or virtually via Zoom by a member of the research team from the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) or a staff member from the Colorado Implementation Science Unit using the study interview protocol ([Appendix A](#)). Interview lengths differed depending on the role of the interviewee; child welfare staff interviews were 30 minutes in length, while school district staff interviews were 50 minutes. The longer format for school district staff allowed interviewees to provide more expansive responses on their experience implementing the intervention.

Interviews followed an open-ended, semi-structured approach in which questions were drafted in advance, but the conversation could unfold organically, and the interviewer could probe deeper as needed. With permission, all interviews were recorded for accuracy and professionally transcribed. Interviewers took notes to supplement where needed. All interviewees were oriented to the limits of confidentiality. Specifically, while identifying information was redacted to the extent practical, it is likely that those familiar with the project may be able to connect insights shared to individuals or sites.

## Analytic Approach

Interview narratives were analyzed by two members of the research team using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The narratives were coded using a hybrid approach that included both inductive and deductive coding. The research team first identified a list of codes that captured the purpose of the interviews (i.e., understanding how system-alignment, relationships, and lines of communication among serving agencies influence program adherence) and ones that could be valuable in contextualizing the intervention. This list formed the basis for an initial coding schema. The two researchers coding the narratives then used open coding to refine the initial codes and generate new ones.

Each interview narrative was coded by one of the two researchers. To ensure alignment between the two researchers doing the coding, the researchers met after each had coded one narrative, and periodically throughout the coding process, to discuss how each had coded specific narrative excerpts. When disagreements arose, the researchers engaged in reflective dialogue, examining the roots of their differing interpretations to deepen analysis and enhance the robustness of findings.

## Member Checking

An action research methodology was used in which Fostering Opportunities leadership were asked to play an active role in tailoring and executing actionable recommendations. Action research is an active collaboration between researchers and members of the system and includes interactive cycles of action and reflection to address practical concerns.<sup>4</sup>

The two researchers doing the coding identified an initial set of themes and recommendations that emerged from the first two rounds of interviews. These initial themes and recommendations were brought to the Fostering Opportunities Leadership Team for member checking. “Member checking” is a process where emergent findings are presented back to those with experience to explore areas of resonance and disagreement between the researchers’ interpretation and participant experience. Member checking is a prime mechanism to promote validity and accuracy in qualitative research.<sup>5</sup> The research team integrated feedback from the Leadership Team into a working set of themes and recommendations.

Following feedback from the Leadership Team, the research team conducted the third round of interviews with DPS staff. The working set of themes and recommendations was further refined based on this third round of interviews and again brought back to the Leadership Team for member checking. The research team incorporated the additional feedback. As a final step, the refined themes and recommendations were shared with Fostering Opportunities Specialists for additional reflection.

## Limitations

Not all school district staff were interviewed at the same time as originally intended. DPS staff were interviewed after initial themes were developed and reviewed by the Fostering Opportunities Leadership Team. It is possible that the pre-existence of themes influenced how the researchers coded the DPS interview narratives. Pre-existing themes were refined and new subthemes added following the processing of the DPS interviews, which suggests that the researchers did not confine themselves to the pre-existing themes and subthemes when coding the DPS interviews. However, the exact magnitude or direction of influence that the pre-existing themes and subthemes exerted on the coding of the DPS narratives is unknown.



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# Results



## Results

The implementation findings reflect the first year of the program’s expansion (AY2024-25). Over 200 students were served in this academic year. The number of students reached by the program in each school district is shown in Table 5. Note that these students are not unique (e.g., some of the 80 students reached by Jeffco in the fall are included in the 96 students in the spring).

**Table 5. Students Served by Fostering Opportunities, AY2024-25**

School District	Fall Semester	Spring Semester
27J	23	20
DPS	52	91
Jeffco	80	96

### Research Question 1: Fidelity to the Model

#### Key Finding 1

**Overall Adherence to the Model: Fostering Opportunities in Jeffco, the longest-running site, *met* the overall fidelity standard, adhering to the model throughout the 2024–2025 AY. The two newer districts, DPS and 27J, were *approaching* fidelity when adherence was measured in the fall and spring semesters.**

Figure 1 illustrates the change in the proportion of indicators rated as not *met*, *approaching*, and *met* for each school districts during the fall and spring academic terms. The dashed line annotates the cut off point for meeting fidelity.

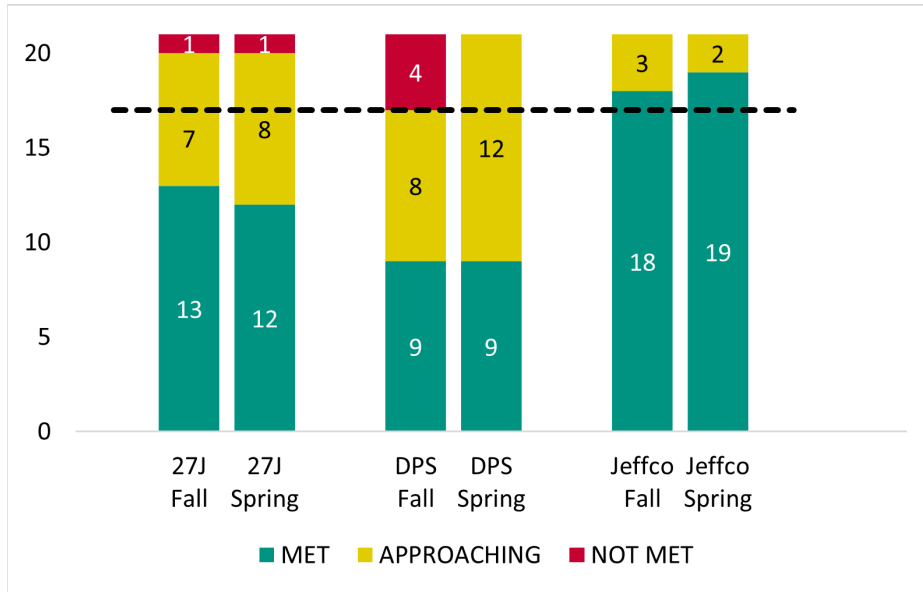
In the fall, Jeffco was the only school district rated as meeting fidelity. Both DPS and 27J were rated as *approaching* fidelity. In the spring, Jeffco maintained its fidelity rating.

DPS remained in the *approaching* fidelity category but improved notably—reducing its four *not met* items in the fall to none in the spring. Despite these improvements, the overall proportion of *met* items remained relatively unchanged across the academic year, which kept them below the threshold required to move them into the *met* fidelity category.

27J remained in the *approaching* fidelity category throughout the year. However, while they improved in two areas (legal frameworks and meetings between child welfare and education agencies), the overall number of items rated as *met* dropped from 13 to 12. Two items that were rated lower in the spring than in the fall were related coordination with child welfare (notification of placement changes and Best Interest Determination [BID] meeting processes), both of which are processes primarily owned by the coordinating county Departments of Human Services and outside

the direct control of the rater. Additionally, the item about staffing transitions was rated lower in the spring than in the fall. Given that there is anticipated Specialist turnover, it may be that gaps in the process have been identified as it is enacted for the first time.

**Figure 1. Fidelity Ratings by School District, 2024–2025 AY**



## Key Finding 2

While the overall fidelity rating for DPS and 27J was the same in the fall and the spring, item-level analysis reflected progress in building the formal (e.g., Memorandums of Understanding [MOUs]) and informal partnerships (e.g., communication, meetings) with county child welfare agencies necessary to deliver the program with fidelity. Child welfare notifying the Fostering Opportunities program when foster care placement changes occurred remained a persistent challenge in both districts.

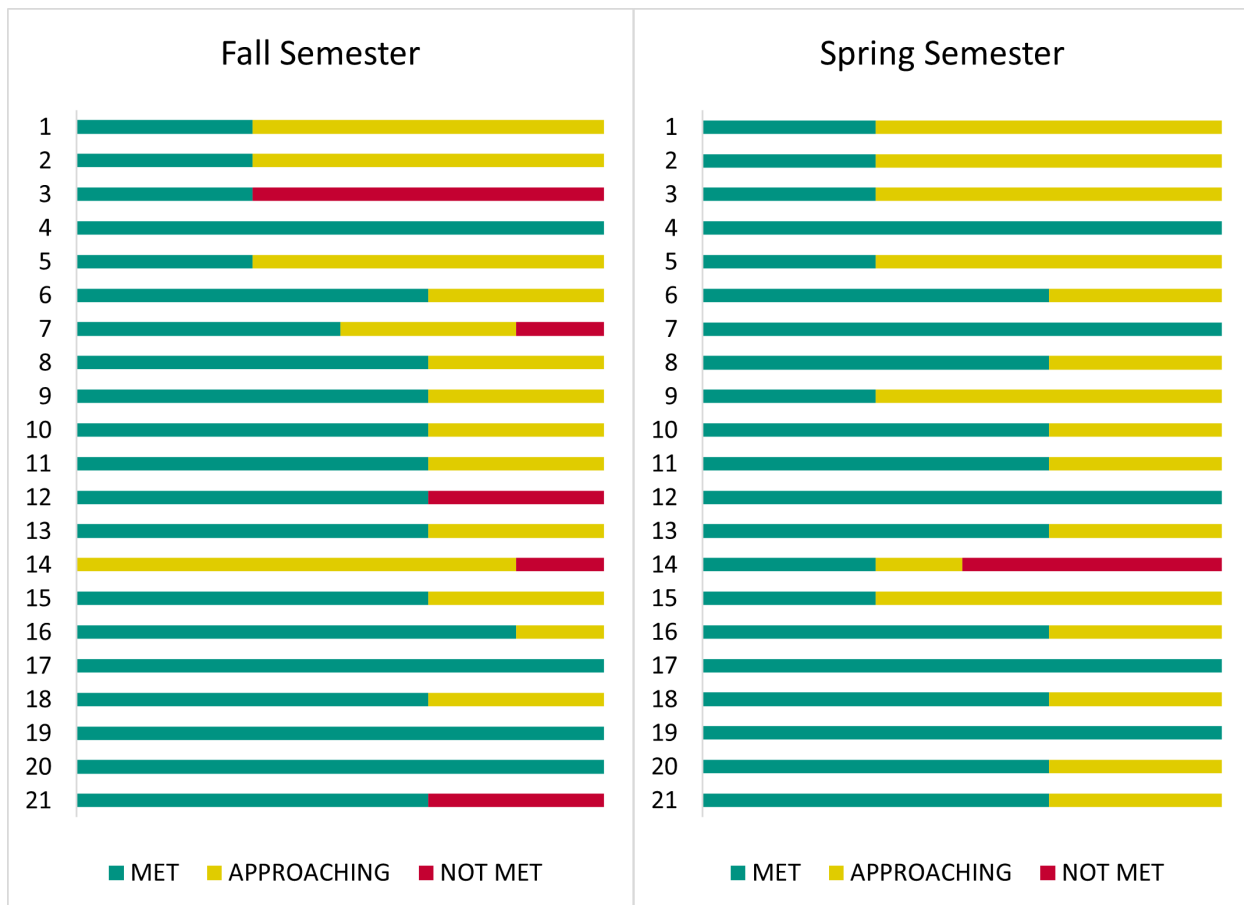
[Item-level](#) ratings across all three districts at each timepoint are shown in Figure 2.<sup>i</sup> Shared areas of strength and challenge include:

- **Strengths:**
  - Across both timepoints, relationships were an area of strength. All sites had representatives in the Leadership Team, and by spring, all had established consistent meeting schedules between school districts and child welfare agencies.
  - All three districts were able to provide reasonably consistent support for Specialists through Specialist Observations, Case Reviews, and regular supervision.

<sup>i</sup> DPS had two raters. To avoid over-weighting their responses on items where ratings differed, we treated each rater's selection as half of DPS' rating. Consequently, the graphs in Figure 2 appear to be in sixths, rather than in thirds.

- **Challenges:**
  - Newer districts 27J and DPS needed more time than Jeffco to develop program infrastructure. In the fall, both newer districts were building formal (e.g., MOUs) and informal partnerships (e.g., communication, meetings) with county child welfare agencies. This was also reflected in interviews (see associated [Findings](#)). By spring, both sites indicated improvement in developing this basic infrastructure.
  - However, notification of foster care placement changes remained a persistent challenge. 27J and one of two DPS raters identified this area as *not met* the only item with this rating.
  - DPS experienced leadership turnover that was reflected in its fall ratings. By spring, however, DPS had a Program Coordinator who was trained in the Fostering Opportunities model.

**Figure 2. Item-Level Fidelity Ratings, 2024–2025 AY**



Overall, all three sites had most of the building blocks needed to operate Fostering Opportunities at full fidelity.

## Research Question 2: Qualitative Learnings

### Key Finding 3

**Systems Alignment:** The Fostering Opportunities program improved coordination and collaboration between local child welfare and education systems and influenced culture change to support students' educational success.

Fostering Opportunities supported goal alignment among the adults in a student's life. Specialists increased the culture of collaboration through increased information-sharing and by bridging support where needed. **Both Fostering Opportunities Specialists and child welfare caseworkers reported working together to address barriers to student participation and educational success.** Child welfare and education systems alignment was one of the key components of the Fostering Opportunities program, and many interviewees found that the program improved alignment between these two systems. In the words of one caseworker, "I love how the Specialists and the caseworkers can work together to make sure that needs are being met, whether that's inside or outside school."

**Fostering Opportunities Specialists helped child welfare caseworkers navigate schools and school districts.** Specialists acted as a go-to point of contact at the school, connecting caseworkers with their clients' teachers or other school staff quickly, saving time and reducing caseworker frustration. Monthly reports from Specialists gave caseworkers more detailed information on the students' strengths and challenges than can be gleaned from the students' grades alone. When students change schools, Specialists were instrumental in securing student records and establishing contacts at new schools. This increased culture of collaboration extended beyond typical boundaries to provide individualized support for students. For example, one caseworker reported working with a Fostering Opportunities Specialist to secure a hot spot for a student lacking internet connection in her home.

*"I don't care how many hours a day a caseworker could work, there is no way that you could be that in tune with what's going on at school as what I see the Fostering Opportunities folks are ... they're like eyes on a fly. I mean, like, man, it just makes my job so much easier."*

- Child welfare caseworker

While Fostering Opportunities improved information sharing between the school districts and child welfare agencies, it is not yet systematic, and both Specialists and caseworkers must be proactive to get needed information. Some Specialists felt that they often did not have the "full picture" to be able to best advocate for their students. There was a lack of clarity about what can be shared with whom (i.e., confidentiality gray areas) along with no clear guidance on who needs what information to be successful.

The Fostering Opportunities program supported broader culture change within schools. **In meetings and in their work in schools more generally, Specialists modeled trauma-informed care and student support practices that have influenced school practices broadly, both for students in and outside of the program.** One Specialist said, “I think we have been able to, on a systems level, have better understanding from school staff and social workers and psychologists of, like, the really specific and unique trauma that students that experience child welfare come to school with every day. So even if they're not involved in the Fostering Opportunities program, having some exposure to students that are involved in the program, and then open and communication with our team, has really allowed us to educate those school staff on what unique needs children that have experienced child welfare have in their lives.” Fostering Opportunities also influenced how school leaders supported other populations facing challenges outside of school. One Specialist commented on how the program modeled practices that are now being applied to the newcomer program, “They have an established newcomer program ... and we've had several meetings with them together to just kind of inform what our role looks like. ... I think they're realizing, even though not all of their newcomers are in foster care, that some of these are helpful practices for how to address, certain needs and things like that.”

Through exposure to the program, school staff unaffiliated with Fostering Opportunities began to reframe their language around child welfare involved students. One Specialist, reflecting on broader culture change, said, “The best examples of seeing those impacts ... is, like, hearing school staff reframing. How they are talking about students involved with child welfare is so huge and, like, hearing the school staff change their language.” Another Specialist said that due to Fostering Opportunities, more school staff now talk about how it is the school’s responsibility to uphold foster students’ rights. Specialists noted that the Fostering Opportunities model has influenced how schools think about support based on students’ unique experience and needs, for example in how they considered truancy and speeding up the IEP process to meet the needs of a more mobile population.

#### Key Finding 4

**Trusted Relationships: The Fostering Opportunities program’s success was rooted in the Specialists' focus on developing relationships of trust with the student and the adults in their lives.**

Relationships of trust were foundational for the Specialist to execute the four pillars of their role: advocacy, mentoring, social-emotional support, and academic support. The model supported trust-building with students through the regular, individualized one-on-one check-ins between students and their Specialist. **Since the check-ins were consistent and were not time or geographically bound, the Specialist became a reliable, present adult in the student’s life.** One caseworker, in speaking to the value of the Specialist-student relationship, said, “Honestly, I feel like if I didn't have Fostering

*“The trust piece is so important to be able to get them to move through some of this stuff. And that can take some time. ... You got to focus on the relationship before you can get into business.”*

- Fostering Opportunities Specialist

Opportunities, it would be very difficult for me to do my job. And they've also helped a lot of my youth on my caseload because I feel like they've had that other trusted adult in the education side of things.”

Relationship development was supported by the innovation and flexibility designed into the Fostering Opportunities model. **Specialists could tailor their outreach to and relationships with both the student and adults in the student’s network to meet individual needs.** For example, one Specialist reported seeing a student twice a week rather than the intervention’s standard three times a month to provide the student with additional support *and* to support other school staff in their work with this student. Similarly, one coordinator spoke about providing a caseworker with weekly communication (rather than a monthly report) about a student to help support the caseworker in their work with that individual.

**Trust across the network of adults developed over time as the systems solve problems together.** More long-standing program personnel from Jeffco reflected on the value of relationships that developed over time, and both Specialists and caseworkers across districts, regardless of time in the program, expressed a desire for additional facetime with one another to facilitate relationship building.

## Key Finding 5

**Role Clarity: While many child welfare, school, and Fostering Opportunities personnel—especially those familiar with the program—viewed the Specialist role as valuable and distinct, there remained some confusion about the role’s scope and boundaries.**

While Fostering Opportunities Specialists and child welfare personnel, particularly those with the greatest familiarity with Fostering Opportunities, viewed the program as beneficial and spoke to a synergy between roles, there was a mixed understanding of the contributions of the Specialist role. Despite some uncertainty around the role of the Specialist, interviewees did not view the Specialist position as redundant. **Even in the crowded network, Specialists played a unique and additive student engagement role.** For example, one caseworker referred to Specialists as their person on the inside, “I have somebody there on the school side talking to the teachers, figuring out what assignments need to be completed or what haven’t been completed.” The Specialist provided the caseworker with context around what the student was telling the caseworker, putting the caseworker in a better position to support the student. Together the caseworker and Specialist were able to work on removing barriers to the student’s success. Another caseworker appreciated having another adult with a trauma-informed background working with the student who wasn’t the caseworker because, frankly, sometimes “youth get mad at us [caseworkers] for being involved and all that.”

Specialists themselves occasionally expressed uncertainty about their role. **While the flexibility of the Specialist’s role enabled them to tailor it to the students’ needs, Specialists were, at times, unclear about role boundaries, and may have ended up trying to do everything.** One Specialist said, “I have had to learn this ... be super consistent, be super reliable, and also know that, we cannot fix it all. We are not the therapist.” With respect to the academic support component of their work, several Specialists spoke about the difference between helping a student organize their work and find a tutor versus serving as the student’s tutor. One Specialist noted that by referring students to other adults in their network, they modeled how a student should use the various strengths of people in their own network.

In general, role clarity and program understanding were not uniform across program counties: Districts and child welfare agencies with less experience implementing Fostering Opportunities were generally less clear on the Specialist’s role. Caseworkers and Specialists both viewed themselves as “the connector” across the student’s network. Some Specialists pointed to the relatively crowded network of adults supporting a student involved in the child welfare system as one potential reason for the lack of clarity on the Specialist’s role. Others suggested that it was due to a general lack of understanding of the program. School districts and child welfare agencies in the early stages of program implementation leaned on the state intermediary and leaders in districts with more experience in program implementation for guidance on the Specialist’s role. In the program’s districts, liaisons that bridge the two systems (e.g., Child Welfare Education Liaison or DHS Education Liaison) played a key role in holding information about Fostering Opportunities and the Specialist role, which was particularly valuable as counties experience caseworker staffing turnover.

*“I feel like a lot of times, even though it’s somebody ... I’ve talked to or emailed with multiple times, like, they still don’t really understand who I am or why I’m contacting them.”*

- Fostering Opportunities Specialist

Both child welfare and Fostering Opportunities personnel indicated that they would benefit from greater understanding of the other. Interviewees also shared that there would be value in educating youth serving organizations on Fostering Opportunities broadly to increase program understanding in child welfare agencies and school districts not included in the expansion.

## Key Finding 6

**Training and Supervision: Fostering Opportunities Specialists spoke about the value of trainings and supervision to enhance program delivery, particularly for high acuity cases and to improve their academic support function.**

**Specialists desired more support, particularly for higher need cases related to both meet social-emotional needs and set appropriate boundaries.** For example, one Specialist, who lacked a background in special education, stated that her current caseload was predominantly (50–60%) composed of students with either an IEP or a 504 plan. Other Fostering Opportunities staff noted that the number of students entering the program from residential treatment centers was higher

than in previous years. Increased case acuity is one factor driving the need for more training and supervision.

In addition to more support around high acuity cases, **Specialists expressed that they could improve program delivery with more training and support related to the academic support function of their role.** Interviewees shared that students involved with child welfare face various system barriers including difficulty transferring credits across schools and a lack of appropriate academic assessment. For example, one Specialist said, “The other issue is, you know, kids just not having the academic support that they need. You know, I know that a lot of kids get tested for IEPs and 504 plans and that sort of thing. But I do think a lot of kids are not getting assessed on what their academic needs are, so therefore they're feeling left behind.” Despite the program’s long-term focus on improving student academic performance and graduation rates, throughout the interviews, Specialists often shared less about providing academic support and some Specialists expressed difficulties with prioritizing this component in the interest of addressing more foundational needs for youth who are or have been in out-of-home care. This aligns with [prior research](#) that found that stable mentorship must be in place before a focus on academic/career goals can be achieved.<sup>6</sup>

Monthly academic progress reports were one way Specialists center academic support for their students. These reports not only support information sharing with child welfare but are a tool for Specialists to track and act on academic standing. However, this was made more challenging due to difficulties accessing academic information, including information from schools/teachers and across districts.

### Key Finding 7

**Systemic Barriers: Despite having legal educational rights, students who experienced foster care encountered persistent systemic barriers to educational success.**

Students associated with foster care have [educational rights](#) to support educational success. Despite these rights, in participating districts, foster youth continue to face barriers to full participation. **Interviewees spoke at length about transportation challenges. While some form of transportation is generally in place to abide by the requirements, the options provided do not always meet individualized needs.** Interviewees often spoke of how transportation shortcomings impacted their students: Rules like “walk zones” don’t always provide a safe or accessible option for students to get to school, RTD routes are not always safe or convenient, and strict bus route drop off/pick up times and locations prevent students from participating in extracurriculars. Several interviewees mentioned that third party contracted transportation, like HopSkipDrive, acts as a “band aid” solution and was expensive and unreliable.

*“The cost of school is a barrier to many families ... they have to pay money to participate in art class or wood shop.”*

- Fostering Opportunities  
Program Coordinator



In addition to transportation challenges, interviewees raised several other instances of systemic barriers to academic success, including students not being appropriately assessed to determine their academic level, students having difficulty getting into desired classes when they move into a new school, students facing financial obstacles to participation in extracurricular activities, and students lacking the necessary prerequisites to attend vocational/technical school classes. For example, one Specialist lamented that some vocational training programs required students to take courses in a particular order. This can be challenging for students in foster care who are commonly very mobile, attending multiple schools over a given year, and often face disruptions to the continuity of their schooling. When the barrier was financial, some interviewees mentioned that Fostering Opportunities helped find funding.



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## Implications



## Implications

Based on implementation findings, this section provides actionable recommendations to support successful delivery and scaling of the evidence-based program.

### Recommendation 1: Support Fostering Opportunities personnel through enhanced training, information, and support.

#### 1.1 *Support Fostering Opportunities Specialists with a formalized training program, supervision, and mentoring.*

*Training calendar:* As the program scales, consider structured training for onboarding and continued learning opportunities. An appropriate training calendar should be tailored by role, tenure, and background. Upload onboarding or other training modules online for easy access and revisiting.

*Supervision:* Continued use of supervision supports Specialists in setting boundaries, especially for high acuity cases, making appropriate case decisions to support students' needs.

*Mentoring:* Fostering Opportunities leadership, including the state intermediary and Program Coordinators, provide valuable mentorship and "go-to" support.

#### 1.2 *Assign Fostering Opportunities cases to Specialists based on referral and evolving case complexity to support balanced caseloads.*

Develop formal or informal criteria to assess case acuity at the point of referral and ongoing methods to evaluate caseload "weight" to inform balanced staffing. Since complexity may not be fully understood at intake, systems should allow for reassessment over time. Examples of case complexity may include frequency of Specialist check-ins, the amount of outreach needed to connect with a student, travel time to meet with students on their caseload, type of caregiver engagement (e.g., biological parents and foster parents), the students' baseline attendance and behavior at school, and the overall acuity of the child welfare case (e.g., frequency of court events, therapeutic foster home placement, and Qualified Residential Treatment Placement).

#### 1.3 *Engage in strategic hiring and training to support rapport-building.*

Since relationships are critical to program success, consider and reinforce components of the Specialist hiring and training that support successful relationship development, both with students and the network of adults. For example, it is beneficial to hire Specialists with a diversity of lived and professional experience.

#### 1.4 *Conduct peer learning(s) to uphold foster students' rights.*

Peer learning provides a venue for informal knowledge sharing and consultation. For example, transportation is a persistent barrier to full academic participation. A peer learning session can move beyond the "what is the legal right" to how to uphold best practices to address transportation challenges. Peer learning sessions might include structured topics such as a discussion of how to effectively partner with child welfare to implement federal legislation in

Colorado (e.g., rules on what fees can/cannot be waived, creative solutions to spending dollars set aside most effectively, and additional resources or approaches). The unstructured, informal knowledge sharing is equally important that allows Specialist to consult on specific challenges and learn from other implementing districts.

1.5 *Establish an annual review and update process of the program’s manual for continuous quality improvement.*

Each Fostering Opportunities team member and district brings new ideas for strengthening the program. The manual should empower practitioner decisions while providing the necessary guidance to implement the program’s key components to fidelity. Establish a mechanism to gather feedback from program staff and to track necessary changes and learnings to be incorporated throughout the year. An annual review and update process allows time to gather new strategies and ideas for improvement of the manual while ensuring that adjustments are aligned with the program’s essential elements and not diverging into an adaptation of the evidence-based program.

## **Recommendation 2: Enhance system alignment, relationships, and lines of communication among serving agencies to improve program adherence.**

2.1 *Increase education on Fostering Opportunities statewide.*

Improve understanding of Fostering Opportunities statewide by: holding informational meetings, integrating program information into the child welfare training module, providing a role overview at BID meetings, and establishing a continued dissemination plan for existing Fostering Opportunities educational resources, including an updated [Fostering Opportunities Fact Sheet](#) (ideally, tailored by audience and for each district) and program language and branding for outreach emails. The state intermediary plays a key role in coordinating and conducting trainings, as well as developing and disseminating program outreach materials.

Program personnel can raise awareness and advocate for the program by sharing program success broadly, including outcomes such as graduation rates and student “success stories” to support communal fluency of the program and its benefits.

2.2 *Refine processes to notify Fostering Opportunities staff of foster care placement changes.*

By spring 2025, notification of foster care placement changes was the only item rated as *not met* within DPS and 27J. Systematic communication is important for Specialists to be able to consistently deliver the program and remain informed about major changes in a student’s life. Sites can build on the relationships developed within the Fostering Opportunities Leadership Team to move toward more systematized approaches to communication. Additionally, the state intermediary can continue to support school districts and county child welfare agencies in developing a process that works, which may be further reinforced through the awareness-building and training opportunities identified throughout this recommendation.

2.3 *Offer opportunities for bi-directional training between child welfare and the education system.*

Cross-training between child welfare and education systems will help to strengthen trust and increase understanding of each system; key implementation activities include the participation of leadership committee members and the provision of a Fostering Opportunities orientation to caseworkers and school building leaders. These activities, ideally in-person, develop the relationships needed to improve communication and systems alignment before direct student work begins. As feasible, the training calendar (see [Recommendation 1.1](#)) could include in-person convenings to provide facetime between the two systems.

- It may be beneficial to conduct outreach and an orientation to online and facility schools to better track students over periods in which they engage with these schools.
- When scaling Fostering Opportunities to other school districts, allocate time and financial resources to ensure that key program leads in school districts with established Fostering Opportunities programs can train and support school districts initiating the program. These existing leaders are important resources for cross-site learning.

2.4 *With system partners, revisit how invitations to meetings are extended to personnel across the network, including to youth as appropriate.*

Caseworkers and Specialists agreed that attendance at various meetings such as Family Engagement Meetings, BID meetings, and IEP meetings was helpful in ensuring that the student's network had timely information. Comprehensive participation in meetings also increased systems alignment. Even though this is attempted or intentioned, it does not consistently happen in practice, and processes should be intentionally revisited.

2.5 *With system partners, to uphold student confidentiality and safety, review and further detail Student Data Principles to ensure that they are universally understood and applied consistently.*

While the program manual details the infrastructure for what student information is shared, with whom, and how, in practice, information sharing varies. Consider what examples or problems of practice may help illustrate the Student Data Principles, revise, and house them in a central location for use by both Fostering Opportunities and DHS personnel.

## Lessons Learned and Changes for the Future

The lessons learned from the first year of implementation are organized through the **Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR)**. CFIR is a widely used, evidence-based framework that identifies five domains that influence whether and how an intervention is successfully adopted and implemented: (1) *Intervention Characteristics*—the features of the program itself; (2) *Outer Setting*—external factors such as community needs and interagency relationships; (3) *Inner Setting*—organizational culture, resources, and leadership within implementing districts; (4) *Characteristics of Individuals*—the knowledge, beliefs, and roles of those delivering the program; and (5) *Implementation Process*—the steps taken to introduce, adapt, and sustain the program. Organizing findings through this lens supports thoughtful scale-up by identifying which elements were essential to successful implementation and how they may be replicated or adapted in new districts.<sup>7, 8</sup>

### Lessons Learned

These lessons learned **use the best available evidence to inform the use of Fostering Opportunities in the prevention services continuum**. The lessons learned draw heavily from the qualitative findings from the first year of expansion and highlight the critical conditions for successful implementation of Fostering Opportunities in new school districts. They also draw upon prior research and the experience of the Colorado Lab in partnering with Jeffco to develop this evidence-based practice.

#### 1. Intervention Characteristics

*How the program's attributes influenced adoption and use.*

- **An evidence-designation of a proven practice builds confidence.**

Colorado legislation ([HB 24-1428](#)) substantially changes the statutory requirements for the use of evidence in the budgeting process. Per the best-available research evidence, Fostering Opportunities is the only proven practice in Colorado that improves educational outcomes for youth in foster care. The program's established evidence-base builds confidence in its use.

A request has been submitted to the Clearinghouse to conduct a review of this program. An evidence designation by the Clearinghouse is needed before Colorado can consider including Fostering Opportunities in its prevention plan and request federal reimbursement under the Family First Prevention Services Act.

- **Data on educational outcomes establishes urgency to scale this proven practice.**

While Colorado's statewide graduation rate has increased to over 84%, students in foster care consistently graduated at a rate of 40% or lower. This discrepancy is larger than with any other vulnerable group, including youth who are homeless, youth who are economically disadvantaged, and youth with disabilities. The dropout rate for students in out-of-home placement decreased slightly compared to the 2022–2023 AY but remained high (4.1%) relative to other vulnerable groups in 2023–2024 AY.<sup>9</sup> Over the last decade,

there have been innovative policy change to promote educational stability, resource transportation, and open doors to postsecondary participation for youth who have experienced foster care. These policy advancements are essential but not enough to close the educational attainment gap. The persistent data on low educational attainment conveys the urgency to scale this proven practice to ensure that young people are set on a path for success in school and life.

- **Operational flexibility supports program delivery without compromising fidelity.**

Implementing districts benefitted from the program's built-in flexibility, such as the ability to tailor check-in frequency or caseload composition to student needs. This operational flexibility can be crucial for uptake in school districts and preserving essential elements of the program.

## 2. Outer Setting

*How external factors shaped implementation.*

- **Cross-system alignment improves student outcomes and reduces duplication.**

While the program catalyzed better communication and shared responsibility between education and child welfare systems, partnerships that were in place prior to the program launch remain important to improving student outcomes. For example, local Collaborative Management Programs (HB 04-1451) promote coordination among youth serving entities. These partnerships, leaders, and referral and information sharing practices can be leveraged to launch and deliver Fostering Opportunities. Aligning implementation with cross-system alignment work that is already happening locally reduces duplication of efforts.

- **Colorado's innovative policies for transition-age youth shape implementation.**

Colorado has a suite of innovative policies aimed at helping youth transition successfully into adulthood that can shape the implementation of this program for middle and high school students. When youth know that there is a pathway to pursue postsecondary education and that their total cost of attendance in Colorado can be waived ([Senate Bill 22-008](#)), that policy information can be leveraged to increase student engagement in K–12 school. When youth are connected to Chaffee Services and oriented to the Youth in Transition Program ([HB 21-1094](#)), which offers housing supports, then some of their unmet needs can be addressed.

## 3. Inner Setting

*How organizational characteristics affected implementation.*

- **Leadership and infrastructure enable fidelity.**

Sites that invested in early infrastructure-building—such as creating MOUs, establishing regular cross-system meetings, and supporting Program Coordinators—demonstrated stronger adherence to the model. Jeffco's established systems served as a blueprint for newer districts.

- **Culture change occurs when modeled consistently.**

Specialists' trauma-informed approaches influenced how school staff approached not only Fostering Opportunities students but other high-need groups. This diffusion effect suggests that the program can serve as a lever for broader culture change within schools. When the schools that Fostering Opportunities students attend operate with a trauma-informed lens, the implementation of the program is more seamless.

#### 4. Characteristics of Individuals

*How staff knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs influenced implementation.*

- **Specialist relationships are the engine of the model.**

Success hinges on Specialists developing trusted relationships with the students and adults in their lives. Staff emphasized that trust-building must precede academic gains and that the program structure supports consistent, personalized engagement to build that trust. In the [recommendation](#) section, the importance of strategic hiring is emphasized.

- **Specialists are advocates for youth and teach self-advocacy skills.**

To effectively implement both advocacy on behalf of students and the development of students' self-advocacy skills, Specialists must hold a deep belief in students' potential and right to be heard. This includes a strengths-based mindset that views each student as capable and deserving of support, even when they face significant barriers. Specialists must also see themselves as facilitators who both champion student needs within complex systems and intentionally build students' confidence and agency to advocate for themselves.

- **Supervision of Specialists can prevent burnout and improve retention.**

Regular, high-quality supervision has been shown to reduce burnout and increase retention among helping professionals by providing emotional support, skill development, and a space for reflective practice.<sup>10</sup> Supervision can help Specialists better understand the bounds on their role and how to activate community resources to address unmet youth needs. Supervision is also a forum for processing the emotionally challenging aspects of the role. Thus, supervision is a way to retain staff and maintain continuity of relationships with students and caregivers.

#### 5. Implementation Process

*How the program was introduced, executed, and refined.*

- **Structured onboarding and peer learning accelerate uptake.**

Utilizing state intermediary leadership to onboard new school districts paired with peer support from experienced districts like Jeffco accelerated uptake of this proven practice. The state intermediary sets the vision and expectation for building the infrastructure necessary to deliver the program with fidelity. Experienced implementing sites can share strategies and provide peer support. Budgets for this program should reflect the

cost of having a state intermediary and tapping experienced sites to provide consultation and support.

- **Specialist direct observations and Case Review forms can improve service delivery and fidelity to the model.**

Each Specialist brings to the program a unique set of skills and experiences that can help them build trust with students and deliver the essential elements of the Fostering Opportunities program. Direct observation of Specialists by supervisors can grow those skills such as motivational interviewing techniques. Case review forms help ensure that all essential elements of program delivery are routinely used with each student.

- **Caseload balancing and supervision require intentional design.**

Staff reported varying levels of student acuity and logistical complexity. Implementation should include early and ongoing processes to assess and adjust caseloads and provide supervision that reinforces boundaries and supports high-quality service delivery. Caseload balancing is an example of how implementation data is being used to refine the program.

## Steps for the 2025–2026 Academic Year

The 2025–2026 AY will mark the second year of the 3-year evaluation period. In the coming year, the evaluation team will collect baseline data on students' social capital, resilience, and self-efficacy; examine how students' full participation in school is influenced by Fostering Opportunities; examine early outcomes for students participating in Fostering Opportunities for at least 1 year; refine data sharing processes; and make updates to the FOI Measure.

### Student Success Tool

Students' social capital, resilience, and self-efficacy will be measured using a "Student Success Tool" that was developed specifically for use by the Fostering Opportunities program. This tool is grounded in the literature, draws from a variety of standardized measures, and is adapted to align with the population of young people involved in child welfare and program delivery setting of schools.

#### Tool Pilot 2025-2026 AY

During the 2025-2026 AY, we will pilot the Student Success Tool and, when enough data are available, perform confirmatory factor analysis to refine the tool. This will allow us to understand how well the items are measuring the intended constructs. Based on results, we will refine the tool and drop or reword items that are a less good fit.

During pilot of the Student Success Tool, Specialists will receive results associated with specific items that might be early warning indicators that a young person needs additional support.

### Administration of Finalized Tool

The reduced, final version of the Student Success Tool will be used in the 2026-2027 AY. Individualized Student Success Tool links will be shared with students during a regularly scheduled touchpoint or via text. Construct-level data (e.g., the average score for resilience items) will be automatically shared back with Specialists to inform their work with students. Results will also be used in the evaluation to track progress on development of social capital, resilience, and self-efficacy over time.

### Exploration of Student Participation in School

A next step for exploring implementation of the Fostering Opportunities program is examining how students' full participation in school is influenced by the Fostering Opportunities program, including implementation of modifications and accommodations on IEPs and 504 Plans. These topics will be the focus of fall 2025 interviews with Specialists. As with this year's interviews, transcripts will be analyzed with an action research methodology, and themes and recommendations will undergo member checking with the Leadership Team.

### Early Outcomes

This year's report focused on describing students' baseline on these college- and career-readiness activities. Future reports will examine students' progress on these outcomes. Due to data access limitations, only DPS students were able to be included in the current draft of this year's report; future iterations of this report will incorporate baseline and outcomes data for students in 27J and Jeffco. Fall semester data collection will allow districts to "catch up" on outcomes data that has been collected but has not yet been provided.

### Refine Data-Sharing Processes

This draft report is limited by the lack of available data from 27J and Jeffco. Across all three school districts, we experienced substantial delays in executing data sharing agreements. Additionally, as anticipated, data that were provided needed further updates or clarity (e.g., articulating course passing for non-traditional grading structures). Currently, data sharing agreements are executed or near executed with all three sites. In 2025–2026 AY, the Colorado Lab will work with sites to ensure all data elements are clearly articulated (e.g., IC field names identified) and to make transfers smooth and compliant with evolving district policies.

### Changes to Fidelity Measures

Through the implementation of the fidelity measures this year, three changes were identified for the measures themselves or processes:

1. Modify the PDF and online versions of the FOI Measure to reflect the change in scoring on items 17 and 19. In addition to clarifying the percentage needed to be rated as *met* these items can be removed from the program coordinator's online tool, as they are separately calculated based on Case Review and Specialist Observation scoring.

2. Document the decision to complete the Case Review and Specialist Observation only once in the spring semester due to time constraints.
3. Add an item on motivational interviewing to the Specialist Observation. As noted above, this fidelity monitoring process can help Specialists grow in their skills. Because motivational interviewing is an important skill for Specialists, we will increase the measurement emphasis on it and provide further resources.

## Conclusion

The focus of evaluation work in 2024–2025 AY was on implementation of the Fostering Opportunity. As sites are either approaching or meeting fidelity standards, the evaluation efforts will shift to measuring outcomes.

Specifically, the next goals of the evaluation are to:

- Evaluate the feasibility of scaling Fostering Opportunities and producing similar outcomes to those demonstrated in the Jeffco pilot, and
- Lay the groundwork for future causal studies that could advance an evidence designation by the Clearinghouse.

The 2025–2026 AY will bring the first opportunity to examine early student outcomes for those with at least 1 year of program participation such as, attendance, behavior, and course pass rates. The evaluation team will pilot and refine a student-facing tool measuring social capital, resilience, and self-efficacy, so that in 2026–2027 AY, those additional outcomes can be measured. Qualitative inquiry will focus on how the Fostering Opportunities program supports students' full participation in school, including modifications through IEPs and 504 Plans. Together, these efforts aim to generate actionable insights to guide ongoing implementation and program improvement, while further informing recommendations to scale the program to new geographic areas.

## Appendix A: Implementation Interview Protocols

### Key Informant Interview - Specialist

#### Introduction

- My name is *[insert name]*.
- The Colorado Lab is beginning work to evaluate and report on the implementation of the Fostering Opportunities expansion over the course of the previous state fiscal year, which served as a “building year.”
- With your permission, we would like to record the session to capture larger themes and quotes while staying engaged in the dialogue with you. Your name will not be linked to your responses; however, it is possible that illustrative examples you share might be recognizable by your colleagues. The goal is to combine insights that you share with insights from others to develop a more comprehensive picture of the successes and challenges facing the implementation of the Fostering Opportunities expansion. **Is recording okay?**
- We will take today's feedback to share out larger themes to be used to recommend best practices for expansion to future school districts and youth serving agencies.

To set the overview for today's conversation, I will ask about your experiences and perspectives on each of the components of the Fostering Opportunities program.

We have about 50 minutes. I'll pay attention to the time and pacing of discussion, and if we need to move on from a topic, we can always circle back with additional thoughts over email or in a later discussion. We will have about 10 minutes at the end to talk about anything related to understanding implementation that you feel is important that didn't come up during our structured discussion.

Any questions before we get started?

1. Role(s) in Fostering Opportunities
  - a. Position title(s): Tell me a little bit about your role in Denver Public Schools and with Fostering Opportunities.
  - b. How long have you been in this position? Do you serve youth who are in the care of multiple county human services departments or primarily one?
  - c. How would you explain what you do to friends/family?
  - d. How do you introduce or explain the program to a student, caregiver, or school employee (maybe just pick one)?

**Figure A1. Roles in Fostering Opportunities**



\*\*If focusing on Role of the Specialist questions, continue on to Q2

**Role of the Specialist**

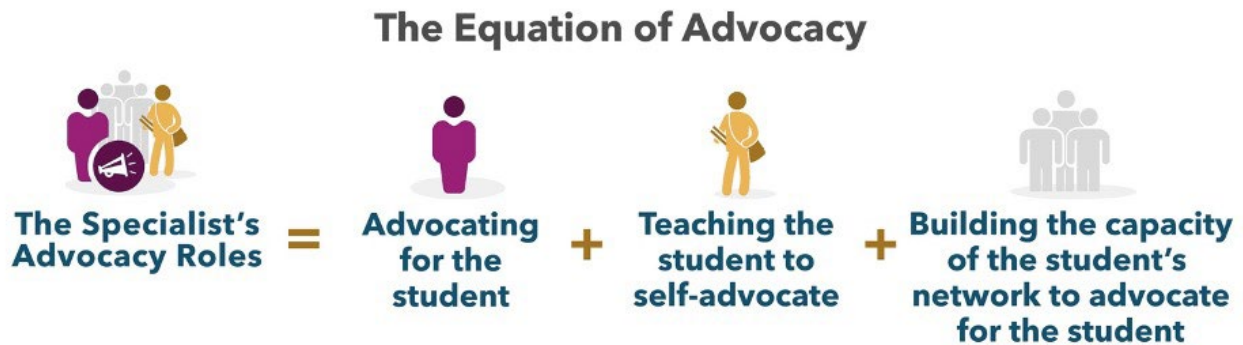
- 2. Specialists are the “face” of Fostering Opportunities, and from the student and family perspective, they deliver the program. [Here are a couple of graphics to prompt thinking across aspects of the Role.]
  - a. What aspects of the program and your role do you enjoy most?
  - b. What do you find most challenging?

**Figure A2. The Role of the Specialist**

**Laying the Groundwork for Success:  
The Role of the Specialist**



Figure A3. The Equation of Advocacy



3. An important aspect of the program is **building students' network of support** to help them be more successful in school. Youth involved with child welfare often have a lot of adults in their lives (share Figure 4).
  - a. What are the roles of people you typically coordinate with to support students' success in school?
  - b. How do you begin to develop relationships with students' network?
    - i. Prioritization, strategies
    - ii. What tends to go well, what tends to be challenging?
  - c. What does communication with members of a student's network look like?
    - i. What's routine communication, what's ad hoc, what would you like to be more routine or systematic and ideas for how to do that?
  - d. In an ideal world, what does it look like for a students' network to have the right information to advocate for and support students' educational success?
    - i. [For ones they mention]: What has worked well to ensure timely and reliable information sharing about how the student is doing, what they need, and how to collectively support them?
    - ii. [For others]: What are the challenges that you have experienced building relationships with [insert role, e.g., Guardian ad Litem and Court Appointed Special Advocate]?

*[Share Figure to Prompt Expanded Discussion]*

- *Mark on figure the ones mentioned as typical (check)*
- *For the others, what might prompt engaging them, what are reasons why they aren't routinely engaged, what value do you see in intentionally building those relationships and network of support?*

Figure A4. Social Capital of Students in Foster Care: The Student's Network

## Social Capital of Students in Foster Care: The Student's Network



### A System to Track Students Across Placements and Schools

4. What system(s) do you use to identify eligible students? (Site Coordinators only)
5. What system(s) do you use to track student information across placements and schools?  
What works well, what doesn't?
  - a. *Prompt Based on What Wasn't Covered:* Where do you go for information on [academic progress, academic history, IEP/504, child welfare case, releases of information, placement, and caregivers]?

### Systems Alignment (Primarily for Site Coordinators)

6. **Systems alignment is the behind the scenes aspect of the program:** We are interested in learning more about how the child welfare and education systems work together (or don't) in support of students' educational success.
  - a. For students not in Fostering Opportunities, what are policies or practices that you find to be most helpful for students to be successful in school? [Explain if needed: that this is gathering information about how having Fostering Opportunities in your district has advanced systems alignment for ALL child welfare youth, even those not being served directly by the program.]
  - b. Where are there pain points for your students—specifically, pain points associated with being currently in foster care, child welfare involved, or formerly child welfare involved?
  - c. What ideas do you have for systematically addressing [summarize above] these challenges?

- d. What is an example of an out-of-the box or above and beyond solution that child welfare and the education system came together on for a youth? What made this possible?
- e. What barriers have you experienced in working toward systems alignment?
7. What recommendations do you have for programs launching Fostering Opportunities to tee up systems alignment? What needs to be in place before you get started, and what evolves during implementation of Fostering Opportunities?

## Wrap Up

8. Knowing what you know now, what recommendations do you have for programs launching Fostering Opportunities to support Specialists in delivering the program?
9. **Overall:** What are one to two **recommendations** or specific pieces of guidance you have for improving the implementation of Fostering Opportunities with respect to aligning systems, building relationships, and improving communication across a youth's network?

## Key Informant Interview - Caseworker

### Introduction

- My name is *[insert name]*.
- The Colorado Lab is beginning work to evaluate and report on the implementation of the Fostering Opportunities expansion over the course of the previous state fiscal year, which served as a “building year.”
- With your permission, we would like to record the session in order to capture larger themes and quotes, while staying engaged in the dialogue with you. Your name will not be linked to your responses; however, it is possible that illustrative examples you share might be recognizable by your colleagues. The goal is to combine insights that you share with insights from others to develop a more comprehensive picture of the successes and challenges facing the implementation of the Fostering Opportunities expansion. **Is recording okay?**
- We will take today's feedback to share out larger themes to be used to recommend best practices for expansion to future school districts and youth serving agencies.

To set the overview for today's conversation, I will ask about your experiences and perspectives on each of the components of the Fostering Opportunities program.

We have about 30 minutes. I'll pay attention to the time and pacing of discussion, and if we need to move on from a topic, we can always circle back with additional thoughts over email or in a later discussion. We will have about 10 minutes at the end to talk about anything related to understanding implementation that you feel is important that didn't come up during our structured discussion.

Any questions before we get started?

1. Role(s) in Human Services Agency
  - a. What human services agency do you work for and what is your title?
  - b. How long have you been in this position?
  - c. How many youth that you have worked with participated in Fostering Opportunities?
  - d. What information did you receive about the FO program before one of your youth was enrolled?
    - i. Follow-up: orientation, materials, and phone call.
  - e. How would you explain Fostering Opportunities to a youth and their caregiver?
    - i. Follow-up: what is not clear to them, where they would like more information about Fostering Opportunities.

## Systems Alignment

2. **Systems alignment is the behind the scenes aspect of the program:** We are interested in learning more about how the child welfare and education systems work together (or don't) in support of students' educational success.
  - a. For students not in Fostering Opportunities, what are policies or practices that you find to be most helpful for youth to be successful in school? [Explain if needed: that this is gathering information about how having Fostering Opportunities in your district has advanced systems alignment for ALL child welfare youth, even those not being served directly by the program.]
  - b. Where are there education or participation in school related challenges for youth on your caseload—specifically, challenges associated with being currently in foster care, child welfare involved, or formerly child welfare involved?
  - c. What ideas do you have for systematically addressing [summarize above] these challenges?
  - d. What is an example of an out-of-the box or above and beyond solution that child welfare and the education system came together on for a youth? What made this possible?
3. **What recommendations do you have for programs launching Fostering Opportunities to tee up systems alignment?** What needs to be in place before it gets started, and what evolves during implementation of Fostering Opportunities?

## Role of the Specialist

4. Child welfare involved youth have a lot of professionals in their lives. What do you see as the unique or redundant aspect of the Fostering Opportunities Specialists' role in supporting child welfare-involved youth?
  - a. Please describe what communication looks like with the Fostering Opportunities program:
    - ii. What communication are routine and you know you will get from the program and what are ad hoc?
    - iii. Do you know who your youth's Specialists are and how to contact them?
    - iv. What types of communication do you find most helpful and what are some of the communication challenges?
5. An important aspect of the Fostering Opportunities program is **building students' network of support** to help them be more successful in school. That network can include (roles in Figure 5):
  - a. In an ideal world, what does it look like for a students' network to have the right information to advocate for and support students' educational success?

- i. [Option for Rephrasing] What has worked well to ensure timely and reliable information sharing about how the student is doing, what they need, and how to collectively support them?

**Figure A5. Social Capital of Students in Foster Care: The Student's Network**

## Social Capital of Students in Foster Care: The Student's Network



### A System to Track Students Across Placements and Schools

6. How are youth in your county referred to Fostering Opportunities?
  - a. [possible follow-up] How have you made referrals, and how would you go about making a referral?
7. What types of information do you share with a Fostering Opportunities Specialist about their child welfare case? How is this information shared (e.g., email when a placement change occurs)?
8. What role does Fostering Opportunities play when:
  - a. Students change schools?
  - b. Students change placements or return home?

### Wrap-Up

9. **Overall:** What are one to two **recommendations** or specific pieces of guidance you have for improving the implementation of Fostering Opportunities with respect to aligning systems, building relationships, and improving communication across a youth's network?

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Brownson, R. C., Shelton, R. C., Geng, E.H., & Glasgow, R. E. (2022). Revisiting concepts of evidence in implementation science. *Implementation Science*, 17, Article 26.  
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- <sup>8</sup> Damschroder, L. J., & Lowery, J. C. (2013). Evaluation of a large-scale weight management program using the consolidated framework for implementation research (CFIR). *Implementation Science*, 8(1), 51. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-8-51>
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- <sup>10</sup> Kadushin, A., & Harkness, D. (2014). *Supervision in social work* (5th ed.). Columbia University Press.