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Students in Foster Care Are Not Achieving the Same Level of Educational Success Compared to Other Students

DENVER— The Colorado Office of the State Auditor (OSA) has released a performance audit of the Colorado Department of Education’s (CDE) Foster Care Education Initiative (Initiative). In 2012, as part of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, CDE launched the Foster Care Education Program, which it later rebranded to be an “initiative,” to help students in foster care excel academically. However, auditors’ analyses of educational data show that students in foster care are still not achieving the same level of educational success when compared to other students in the state.

Auditors analyzed CDE’s educational data for the 2013-2014 through 2018-2019 schools years to identify demographic and other characteristics about students in foster care, as well as trends in how those students performed on standardized tests and how many different schools they attended compared to other students. Auditors found that for the 2018-2019 school year, on average, foster care students scored about 100 points lower than other students on the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) Science test, and 20 to 30 points lower on both the CMAS Math and English Language Arts tests. Foster care students also scored an average of 822 on the SAT, while their non-foster care peers averaged 1001. The score range for the SAT is 400 to 1600.

Auditors also found that CDE could do more to improve data tracking for students in foster care in support of the Foster Care Education Initiative’s goals. For example, CDE only reports data points about students in foster care that are specifically required by state and federal law, such as graduation rates. However, CDE does not track other metrics, such as the number of schools that students in foster care attend each year, that could provide additional insight about how foster care students are performing academically. Auditors found that a significantly higher proportion of students in foster care have more school transitions during the year than other students. During the

2018-2019 school year, about 51 percent of foster care students attended two or more schools, compared to only 10 percent of non-foster care students who attended two or more schools. The data showed that there were 140 foster care students who attended four or more different schools during the year. “School transitions are important to track and report on since multiple transitions in a single school year can create gaps in a student’s knowledge and create barriers to educational attainment,” said Jenny Atchley, Audit Manager.

Finally, auditors found that CDE and the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) could improve their data sharing process to ensure that all children in foster care are identified in CDE’s educational data. Since 2013, CDE and CDHS have had a data-sharing agreement in place to share relevant information on children in foster care at the state level. However, auditors found that data CDHS provided to CDE did not include about 2,400 children who, according to CDHS’s Trails system, were in foster care during Fiscal Year 2019. In addition, CDE did not flag in its own system at least 273 children who were included in the CDHS data as being in foster care even though they were between 6 to 16 years old, which are the ages that children are required by law to be in school. Also, auditors identified 149 children between the ages of 4 to 5 years, and 104 children between 17 to 21 years, who CDHS data indicated were in foster care but who CDE had not flagged in its system as being in foster care, but who could also be attending school or receiving services through the public school system.

Auditors made recommendations to help the State more effectively use available data to track educational performance of students in foster care. The audit report also includes an appendix with detailed data comparisons between students in foster care and their non-foster care counterparts. The full report is available @ www.colorado.gov/auditor.

About the Office of the State Auditor (OSA)

Under the direction of the State Auditor, the OSA’s nonpartisan, professional staff promote government accountability by conducting independent performance, financial, and IT audits and evaluations of state agencies, departments, and institutions of higher education; conducting independent evaluations of the State’s tax expenditures (e.g., credits, exemptions, deductions); tracking about 4,000 Colorado local governments for compliance with the Local Government Audit Law; and operating a statewide fraud reporting hotline.

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