

Foster kids get help to graduate

Bethania Palma Markus

A team led by Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina has been rolling out a program to plug the cracks for foster children in high school.

The pilot Foster Youth Education Program has already dramatically increased graduation rates.

Since 2008, the program has been put in place in several school systems in Molina's 1st District, including Pomona Unified.

So far, officials say the results are encouraging.

While foster children nationally only graduate high school 30 percent to 50 percent of the time, children in Molina's pilot program graduated 75 percent of the time and 80 percent of those graduates went on to four-year colleges, Department of Children and Family Services officials said.

The key to the program is partnering with school districts and agreeing to share data, program manager Angel Rodriguez said.

"A lot of (foster) kids are saying this is the first time anyone has asked them about school," Rodriguez said.

Foster children are often moved from one home to another and suddenly change schools in the process. As a result, credits are often lost in the shuffle, Rodriguez said.

Part of the program is learning where children were enrolled and recovering their school credits to help them graduate. Social workers so far have recovered more than 1,000 lost credits, which is more than 200 semesters' worth of class time.

Social workers who participate in the program work with a school team to develop educational plans for the foster children.

The program has some hurdles - schools, for example, don't currently keep track of foster children. And when foster children go to juvenile hall after running afoul of the law, their case with DCFS closes and the probation department takes over.

Social workers are currently assigned cases based on proximity to the children's biological mother, but the program will change that, said Martha Molina-Avilas, children's deputy for DCFS. Social workers will instead be assigned cases based on the children's school district.

Officials hope to expand the program to the rest of the county.