

The Aftermath of the Eaton Fire: Foster Care and Education Disrupted

Project Team: Tyrone C. Howard, PhD; Laura Liévano-Karim, PhD; Taylor I. Dudley, JD; Ivy Zucaya, PhD; Olivia Gilchrist; Nancy Olivares, MPP; Emma Chen; Gifty Ayawvi, MA; Brenda A. Tully, PhD; Audra Langley, PhD



Highlights

1. The Eaton Fire affected 225 dependent children and youth living in the impacted area, the majority (60%) of whom were Latinx. Most were receiving permanent placement or extended foster care services (44%) and in-home family maintenance services (36%), while a minority (20%) were receiving family reunification services. Three months after the fire, displaced children and youth (17%) had moved an average of 16 miles from their home or placement at the time of the fire. Findings revealed the importance of post-fire recovery support and services in preventing foster care entries and reentries.
2. The Eaton Fire compounded existing educational challenges for children and youth involved with the child welfare system across Altadena, Pasadena, and Sierra Madre, disrupting educational continuity and exacerbating instability. Findings revealed the importance of upholding the educational rights of children in foster care, the continued need for targeted mental health and academic supports, and the vital role of professionals who bridge the child welfare and education systems.
3. The Eaton Fire disrupted the postsecondary plans of high school seniors involved with the child welfare system, interfering with key milestones such as graduation and college preparation. Findings revealed the need for tailored support to assist older youth in care, including non-minor dependents, with navigating postsecondary transitions, and rebuilding progress toward educational and professional goals.

The Eaton Fire

On January 7, 2025, the Eaton Fire ignited at dusk in the hills of Eaton Canyon in the San Gabriel Mountains. The wildfire claimed 19 lives, burned more than 14,000 acres, and destroyed over 9,000 structures while damaging more than 1,000 additional properties across Altadena, Pasadena, and Sierra Madre. Nearly 23,000 residents were affected, resulting in large-scale evacuations and widespread disruptions to community life.¹ Notably, Altadena was home to a historically Black, middle-class, and culturally vibrant community. A total of 225 dependent children and

¹McChrystal Group. (September 25, 2025). After-Action Review of Alert Notification Systems and Evacuation Policies for the Eaton and Palisades Fires. <https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/207915.pdf>

youth resided in the area impacted by the Eaton Fire, with the majority (76%) being of school age, between the ages of 5 and 17 years.

Eight school campuses were severely damaged or destroyed, prompting the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) to close schools for two to three weeks,² interrupting education for approximately 14,000 students. Schools suitable for use were reopened gradually following debris removal and environmental testing, while those with extensive damage were relocated to alternate sites to resume in-person learning.³

The Research

Grounded in a commitment to public scholarship and equity, this study examines **how the Eaton Fire disrupted the educational experiences of children and youth involved with the child welfare system.**

Guided by this commitment, stakeholders working in schools and the child welfare system were consulted to shape the research and center the unique needs of system-involved children, youth and families affected by the fire. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews with 19 key professionals and caregivers representing agencies at the forefront of the response and recovery efforts, including the PUSD, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), and several community-based organizations. These interviewees provided perspectives spanning education, child welfare, caregiving, and community recovery. Quantitative analyses utilized de-identified, individual-level case management records provided by DCFS.

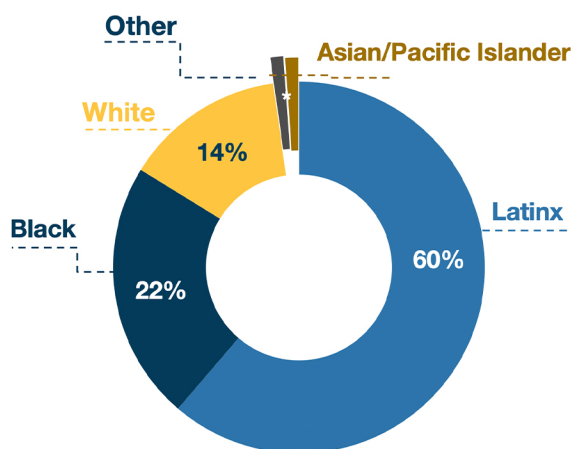
Background

The US child welfare system is entangled with a long history of structural racism and policies that have contributed to disparate outcomes, particularly among Black and Indigenous families.⁴ Children and youth involved with the child welfare system face significant challenges including frequent placement changes that lead to school transfers, delayed record sharing between schools, under-resourced educational environments, and inconsistent access to trauma-informed and special education.⁵ This creates chronic instability that disrupts learning and social-emotional development. As a result, many of these youth experience disparate educational outcomes.⁶

Key Findings

On January 7, 2025, 225 dependent children and youth lived in the area impacted by the Eaton Fire. Nearly two-thirds of these youth were identified in their case records as Latinx (60%), almost one-quarter as Black (22%), and one in seven as White (14%; Figure 1).⁷ One in six (17%) had a primary language other than English. Just over half (54%) were identified as female.

Figure 1. Primary Race/Ethnicity



²Pasadena Unified School District. (n.d.) School Reopening. <https://www.pusd.us/fire-relief/school-reopening>

³Pasadena Unified School District. (2025, January 21). Reopening Update. <https://www.pusd.us/news-details/-board/pusd-announcements-fire-updates/post/january-21-2025-reopening-update>

⁴Child Trends. (2023, March). State-level Data for Understanding Child Welfare in the United States: Companion Guide. Bethesda, MD.

<https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CW-Companion-Guide-2023.pdf>

⁵Burns, D., Espinoza, D., Adams, J., & Ondrasek, N. (2022). California's Students in Foster Care: Challenges and Promising Practices. Learning Policy Institute.

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/california-students-foster-care-report>

⁶California Department of Education. (2024). Foster youth outcomes data reports. Sacramento, CA. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/fyp.asp>

⁷To protect the confidentiality of Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American youth and adhere to the state's data deidentification policy, percentages for these racial/ethnic identities could not be reported.

A majority of the children and youth impacted by the Eaton Fire were of school-age. Nearly half (44%) were between 5 and 13 years old, and another quarter (23%) were between the ages of 14 and 17 years. Almost half (44%) of these children and youth lived in permanent placements or were in extended foster care, while roughly one in three (36%) were receiving in-home family maintenance services at the time of the fire. The remaining one-fifth (20%) were placed in foster care and received family reunification services (Figure 2). These findings underscore the need to provide post-fire supports to families with DCFS involvement, regardless of whether the child is in out-of-home care, to avoid future system involvement.

Three months after the Eaton Fire, one in six (17%) dependent youth had relocated outside of the Altadena area. On average, these children and youth moved about 16 miles from where they lived at the time of the fire (Figure 3). Displacement data, when examined for race/ethnicity, sex, age, the type of child welfare service, and case length, did not reveal disproportionality.

While these quantitative findings document the population of children impacted, the qualitative findings offer deeper insight into the six primary educational disruptions faced by students:

1. The Eaton Fire Compounded Educational Instability and Interrupted Access to Schools. Interviewees reported that the Eaton Fire introduced yet another layer of instability in the lives of children and youth in foster care. Beyond the placement changes, shifting home environments, and frequent school transitions that already characterize their experiences, the fire led to further displacement, school closures, lengthy commutes, and changing schools. As one interviewee explained, *“They were evacuated out of the area (...) that’s going to disrupt schooling, learning, and stability, which is something these children face on a regular basis.”*

► These disruptions emphasize the need for transportation assistance, specifically to support caregivers and to maintain stable placements. Targeted mental health services, academic supports, and recognizing the vital role of both caregivers and professionals who bridge the child welfare and education systems will aid in recovery by promoting long term stability.

2. The Transition to Virtual Learning Exacerbated Educational Setbacks. Interviewees reported that the provisional shift to virtual learning contributed to another disruption for students following the Eaton Fire. This further compounded educational setbacks, particularly for students who struggled to engage in virtual coursework due to acute emotional distress, lack of in-person support, disability, or technological barriers. As described by an interviewee: *“Grades took a little dive because school was online for (...) three or four weeks after the fires. So that was difficult for most.”*

Figure 2. Type of Child Welfare Service

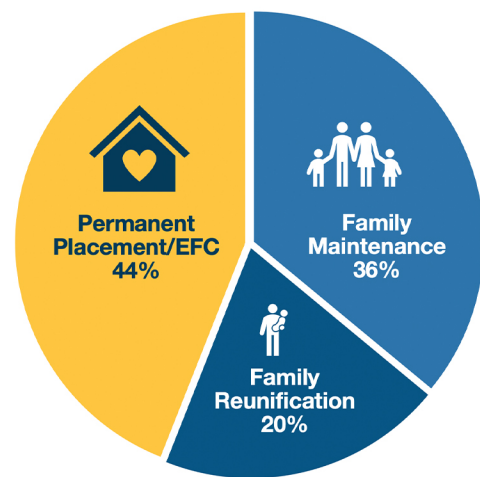


Figure 3. Housing Relocation Following the Eaton Fire



- ▶ Though in-class teaching has resumed, this short term shift and its long term consequences should not be ignored. For example, one interviewee remarked, *“Ask me how a nonverbal autistic kid does remote learning? It’s just tough.”* Moreover, even if brief in duration, virtual learning may result in gaps in education which can persist for years, especially for children and youth with disabilities.

3. Access to School-Based Services and Supports Were Disrupted Following the Eaton Fire. Interviewees reported that the Eaton Fire disrupted the delivery of school-based services, including counseling, therapy, tutoring, and supports outlined in students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEP). As one interviewee explained, *“...when a kid either doesn’t have a school to go to because that school has burnt down or is having to undergo an emergency move (...) they’re not getting those IEP services every day.”*

- ▶ Again, administrative data from DCFS show that, on average, students displaced following the fire moved approximately 16 miles from the Altadena area, which may have contributed to these disruptions in service provision. This also underscores the need for transportation assistance raised by interviewees. Additionally, identifying and engaging educational rights holders may be beneficial for addressing disruptions in special education and other school-based services.

4. Relocation due to the Eaton Fire Disrupted Students’ Social Connections and Undermined Belonging. Interviewees described how relocation and emotional distress disrupted students’ relationships with caregivers, peers, and teachers, intensifying feelings of isolation and weakening academic engagement for children and youth in care. One interviewee recalled working with a child in foster care *“...she was having a lot of anxiety—she said, ‘I don’t want to be here [at school]. None of my friends are here.’”*

- ▶ Even when children and youth in care appeared unaffected by the aftermath of the fire, professionals recognized this as a learned adaptation rather than a lack of impact. This normalization of instability reflected both resilience and emotional numbing, a survival response to chronic disruption. As another interviewee observed, *“As important as we know mental health is, it’s further down on that basic-necessity list.”*

5. The Eaton Fire Strained the Capacity of Educators and Service Providers to Support Students. Interviewees reported that school personnel and service providers, many of whom were personally affected by the fire, faced reduced capacity to support students, further straining educational continuity and mental health care for children and youth in foster care. One interviewee reflected, *“It was difficult because people (...) supporting them were also affected. So it was a challenge in making sure that the students had the support they needed when there was already a lack of support to begin with.”*

- ▶ Yet, despite reduced capacity and personal losses among school and service personnel, interviewees highlighted that the educational community demonstrated exceptional resilience and dedication. Educators, social workers, and service providers adapted quickly, relocating classrooms, modifying schedules, and finding creative ways to sustain learning and connection amid uncertainty. As described by one caregiver: *“I feel the teachers did everything they could (...) they were very hands-on, very willing to talk every day before and after school (...) they did also try as best they could to keep education immediately back on track and do everything they could to get their kids back up to speed. It was one of those very intense efforts.”* Their collective efforts stand as a powerful testament to the commitment of professionals working to ensure stability and care for children and youth in foster care during an extraordinarily challenging time.

6. The Eaton Fire Disrupted Postsecondary Planning for High School Seniors. Interviewees reported that the Eaton Fire disrupted the postsecondary planning of high school seniors involved with the child welfare system by limiting their access to academic and career resources, such as internships, completion of classes, and college

application support. One interviewee described how *“... it was an emotional toll on all of the students, especially the seniors—what’s going to happen? Am I going to be able to graduate? Is my GPA going to be affected? What about my financial aid?”*

- ▶ These challenges highlight the importance of support strategies, such as credit recovery, tutoring, and college and career counseling, to help seniors in care regain academic progress and access tailored postsecondary supports, equipping them to plan for their futures.

Together, the foregoing findings illustrate how the Eaton Fire compounded preexisting barriers to academic success for children and youth involved with the child welfare system by further disrupting their stability, educational continuity, and access to school-based supports.

State and Local Agencies Mobilized to Support Student Recovery

In the face of these disruptions, several interviewees reported positive efforts by the State of California, PUSD, DCFS, LACOE, and other agencies to support students and families following the fire. For example, Governor Newsom’s executive order⁸ allowed displaced students to attend school outside of their district and made temporary facilities accessible for school use to ensure educational continuity. As one interviewee described, *“...it was also no questions asked. It’s like, if the family has been displaced, just enroll.”*

At the local level, PUSD acted swiftly to reopen schools. DCFS provided flexible funding, transportation coordination, and temporary placement waivers. One interviewee noted that the additional funds *“...helped a lot because there were a lot of emergency needs for the youth,”* while another interviewee mentioned that transportation services were *“able to [be] activate[d] (...) during those difficult times.”* LACOE mobilized mental health and student support staff. As one interviewee reflected, *“What helped us a lot was LACOE stepped in and then other partners stepped in, like different social workers to come for the first days back to school.”* Community organizations and philanthropy also provided vital educational, emotional, and financial assistance, with one interviewee emphasizing *“what was really helpful was the community support from foundations and other supporters that really stepped up.”* Together, these efforts demonstrate a shared commitment to recovery and student well-being.

These positive observations are notable and must be commended, especially in the face of significant loss and devastation. Nevertheless, with the educational rights of children in foster care in mind, sustained investments by PUSD, LACOE, DCFS and other relevant agencies towards educational stability, trauma-informed services, and cross-system coordination will be essential to achieve equitable recovery in the short and long term. Monitoring and evaluating the needs of these children will be essential to providing them with relevant support for years to come. Doing so will ensure that children and youth impacted by the Eaton Fire and involved with the child welfare system have ongoing opportunities to learn, heal, and thrive in accordance with their innate ability and potential.

This project was generously supported by the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, Wasserman Dean Christina Christie, the Anthony Pritzker Family Foundation, and The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation.

⁸Executive Department State of California, Office of the Governor of California. (January 14, 2025). Executive Order N-6-25: LA Fires K-12 and Child Care Emergency. https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2025-1-14-LA-Fires-K-12-and-Child-Care-EO.FINAL_.pdf