

UGrad Works:

An Evaluation Study of an Educational Advocacy Program for Youth in Foster Care

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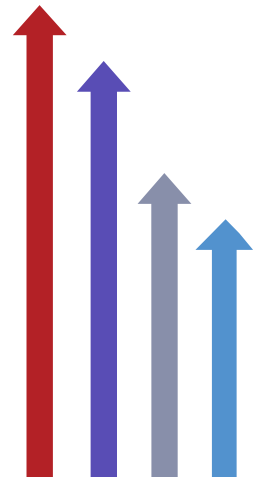
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

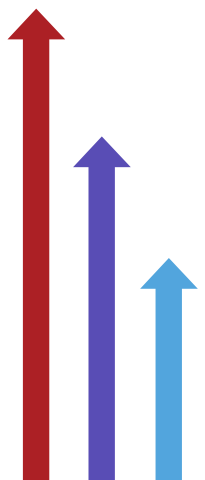
UGrad Academy (UGrad) aims to reduce disparities in educational and life outcomes for children and youth in foster care. Based in the state of Delaware, UGrad is a case management program that helps foster care-involved children and youth from kindergarten through college succeed in school, college, and career. This work is accomplished by connecting participants with an Education Advocate who supports and advocates for them as they navigate school, prepare for the future, and handle life challenges.

A team from ACT for Youth at Cornell University conducted a mixed-methods evaluation to assess and better understand the impact of participation in the UGrad program on high school students. We conducted a quasi-experimental (natural experiment) outcome study utilizing secondary data from the Delaware Department of Education regarding academic outcomes for all Delaware youth involved in foster care. In addition, we carried out qualitative interviews with program participants and UGrad staff to identify and illustrate aspects of the program they perceive as pivotal to student success.

This study found that participation in UGrad is associated with positive, statistically significant effects on participants' academic outcomes. Specifically, a greater proportion of UGrad participants advance to the next grade level (98%), graduate from high school (97%), and graduate within four years compared to non-participant peers involved in foster care. UGrad participants have less than half the number of absences from school compared to non-participants. Participants also achieve higher year-end average grades across their core subjects (+9.65 points) as well as for each individual course. Though we did not find significant differences regarding disciplinary incidents (i.e., detentions, in- and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions), on average, UGrad participants have fewer in- and out-of-school suspensions than nonparticipants. (With additional years of data, this trend may become statistically significant.)

Findings from the qualitative study with participants and Advocates illuminate aspects of the program that fuel this impact: The program staff and structure create a consistent and caring environment for participants that promotes warm and trusting relationships. Through frequent contact, Advocates can assess a young person's needs in real time, relieving immediate burdens and preventing small problems from growing into large issues. With a targeted focus on education, strategies are developed to address issues. By developing a stronger, more coordinated network of support around participants, UGrad staff give youth a sense of connection that helps them address challenges and move toward their goals.

This evaluation provides a foundation of evidence for the effectiveness of the UGrad program. Results indicate that the program has strong, positive effects on UGrad participants' educational outcomes. UGrad's strategies of providing consistent, caring relationships, effective interventions, and a network of support are the foundation of its success. We recommend that this evidenced based program be further developed using prospective study designs and additional measures. The results of this evaluation suggest that continuation and even expansion of the UGrad program are warranted.



INTRODUCTION - The UGrad Program

Children
and youth in
foster care are
much less
likely to
graduate from
high school
than students
not in foster
care

Nationally, nearly 400,000 children and youth are in foster care, with 20,000 of them transitioning out of care without a permanent family each year (Students in foster care, 2023). The unique challenges that children and youth in foster care face are extensive and well-documented. They have often experienced multiple traumas, including the abuse or neglect by parents that led to their placement in foster care (Mitchell, 2018). Youth in foster care often experience higher rates of mental health issues than the general population, with common diagnoses including major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and reactive attachment disorder (Engler, Sarpong, Van Horne, Greeley, & Keefe, 2022). Once in care, children and youth experience frequent changes in foster home placements and schools. (Sandh, Donalldson, & Katz, 2020).

While coping with the upheaval in their lives, foster children often lack the social support and networks that could help them overcome challenges. (Johnson, 2021, Sieta, Day, Carrellas, & Pugh, 2016). Children and youth in foster care are much less likely to graduate from high school than students not in foster care, are less likely to graduate within four years, and have much lower participation in college preparatory instruction. They experience high levels of housing and educational instability. (Sandh et al., 2020). Those who do go on to post-secondary education face a number of challenges compared to their non-foster care involved peers. (Johnson, 2021).

The UGrad
program aims
to help
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successfully
navigate
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early career
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adulthood.

Once leaving foster care, youth often struggle in various life domains, including education, employment, housing, health, and mental health (Lindner & Hanlon, 2024), with a greater number of care placements and lower educational attainment linked with worse outcomes (Reilly, 2003). Training, services, interconnected support networks, educational interventions, and mentoring relationships with positive adults are associated with more positive outcomes for youth in foster care (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Cox, 2013; Leone & Weinberg, 2010).

Based in the state of Delaware, UGrad is a case management program for foster care-involved children and youth in kindergarten through college. UGrad was developed in 2018 by Caroline Jones, President and Founder, and the Kind to Kids Foundation, (<https://kindtokids.org/>). Kind to Kids provides educational advocacy and support to children and youth in foster care, nurturing emotional stability and well-being through skill building, tutoring, technology, and resources. Nested within the larger Kind to Kids organization, the UGrad program aims to help participants successfully navigate school, college, and early career for a positive transition to adulthood.

At the heart
of the
program are
the staff
who work
with young
people:
Education
Advocates.

UGrad
responds to
the varied
needs of
program
participants,
recognizing
that
many big
challenges
start small.

With financial support from federal and state governments as well as foundations and private donors, UGrad began serving children and youth in January of 2019. Taking a holistic approach to educational achievement, the program addresses well-being, mental health, physical environment and household circumstances, and other situations that may prevent a young person from focusing academically.

At the heart of the program are the staff who work with young people: Education Advocates. Advocates are strategically recruited based on their education and training, personal characteristics, and experience working with children in foster care or other youth coping with systemic social inequities. All Advocates are certified in trauma-informed care. The ability of Advocates to understand and employ best practices in the field, such as age-appropriate and trauma-informed interviewing, a solution-focused approach, and positive reinforcement, is crucial to their work.

To build and strengthen each child's support network, UGrad also engages all available stakeholders. Not all foster care-involved children or youth have the same services or supports assigned or accessible to them; UGrad helps make these connections. When an Advocate meets with a "Team of Support" it includes but is not limited to a young person's foster caregivers, parents, social worker, teachers, school counselor, therapists, special education coordinator, and child advocate attorney. Regular contact and established relationships with these stakeholders provide Advocates with information about the young person from different environments and perspectives. Prioritizing these relationships also allows the Advocate to coordinate within a complex system, keeping all parties up to date and engaged in strategizing how to best support the child or youth.

As a case management program, UGrad responds to the varied needs of program participants, recognizing that many big challenges start small. UGrad has created a structured and consistent process that emphasizes attention to detail, premised on the fact that all children and youth in foster care need attention and support, even if they are "doing well" on paper. By providing consistent support through in-person meetings and regular communication, Advocates can notice and seize opportunities for early intervention, preventing small problems from becoming intractable issues.

EVALUATION STUDY

Kind to Kids Foundation contracted with a team from Cornell University to serve as external evaluators of the UGrad Academy program. Our evaluation focused on school-related outcomes of UGrad participants compared to non-participant Delaware youth who were in foster care at any point during the study period (Outcome Evaluation) and identified case management strategies that connect to participant outcomes (Qualitative Study). While impact can often be demonstrated anecdotally, we sought to determine the program's effects through rigorous evaluation. The results of this evaluation can be used to strengthen and expand current UGrad programming. Strategies that are associated with student success can also be replicated to expand services for youth in foster care beyond UGrad.

Key evaluation questions included:

1. How do UGrad participants compare to other children and youth involved in foster care (who are not enrolled in UGrad) on important academic outcomes?
2. What components of UGrad are connected to positive outcomes for children and youth?
3. What are the greatest barriers to school, employment, and career success for foster care-involved children and youth? How does UGrad address these barriers?

To address these questions, we undertook a **TWO-PART STUDY**:

PART 1 - a quasi-experimental (natural experiment) outcome evaluation was conducted using secondary data from the Delaware Department of Education (DE DOE). The study compared the educational outcomes of UGrad participants to those of foster care-involved non-participants.

PART 2 - An exploratory quantitative study was carried out to clarify which components of the UGrad program are associated with positive outcomes for its participants.

PART 1 - Outcome Evaluation

Outcome Evaluation: Objectives

The main objective of the outcome evaluation was to determine the effect of participation in the UGrad program on academic outcomes. We expected that, compared to students in foster care who were not involved in the program, UGrad participants would be more likely to:

- ➡ Graduate from high school at the end of twelfth grade
- ➡ Advance from one grade level to the next the following academic year (grade promotion)
- ➡ Have fewer absences from school than their peers
- ➡ Have higher average grades for core subjects (English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, and World Language combined), as well as for each of these core subjects independently
- ➡ Have fewer disciplinary incidents (as measured by in-school and out-of-school suspensions, detentions, and expulsions)

Since this evaluation was based on secondary data, it was not possible to randomly assign students to program participant/non-participant groups. Therefore, we used a quasi-experimental design (natural experiment) in which program participants' outcomes were compared to those of non-participant peers who had been or were currently in foster care during the study period (academic years ending 2019-2023) and attended Delaware public schools. Participants and non-participants were found to be comparable in demographics such as gender and race. Though there are far fewer UGrad participants than non-participants in the data they were approximately evenly distributed across school districts, strengthening our confidence that any differences found through these analyses can be attributed to the program's effects.

Outcome Evaluation: Method

To evaluate the differences in outcomes between UGrad participants and non-participants, we obtained existing academic outcome data from the DE DOE. This information is regularly collected and includes attendance, grade promotion, graduation rate, final grades for core courses, and disciplinary incidents of students enrolled in Delaware schools. UGrad participants and non-participants came from the same communities and schools in Delaware. For this study, we only included high school students (grades 9-12) from the five academic years ending in 2019 to 2023. This period was selected because the UGrad program began working with students in early 2019. Student data were included if the student was recorded in the DE DOE system as ever having been in foster care during this period. For the purposes of this study, each student's data were considered within the context of each academic year: we defined a "case" as each student's data for a given academic year. Our final data consisted of 105 UGrad cases (for 52 UGrad participants) and 1,679 non-participant cases (for 695 non-participants).

Demographic data between the two groups were similar. For the 52 unique UGrad participants, 59.6% (31) were female and 40.5% (21) male. Of the 646 unique non-UGrad participants, 52.2% (337) female and 47.8% (309) male. Racial breakdown for UGrad participants were 59.6% (31) Black, 25% (13) White, 11.5% (6) Hispanic, 1.9% (1) Multiracial, and 1.9% other. The non-UGrad participants were 55% (355) Black, 28.6% (185) White, 9.4% Hispanic, 6% Multiracial, and 0.9% (6) Other.

Outcome Evaluation: Data Cleaning

The data cleaning process included several steps, as summarized below. Greater detail is available from authors.

Identification of UGrad Participants

We used a list provided by Kind to Kids Foundation to identify UGrad participants. Note that this could vary from year to year for each student. A student was considered a UGrad participant if they participated in the program within that school year for at least half a year.

Grade Promotion

For students in grades 9-11, grade promotion was determined by examining whether a student was reported as being in the next grade level in the following school year or having graduated at the end of 12th grade.

Demographics

Due to very small numbers of students indicated as Native American, Asian, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, race and ethnicity data were converted to the following categories: White, Black, Hispanic (regardless of race), multi-racial and other.

Core Course Grades

The dataset included students' yearlong final English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Science, Social Studies, and World language numeric grades. Non-numeric grades were removed from this analysis. Averages were calculated for each case. For the analysis of grades, 712 cases (60 UGrad and 652 nonparticipants) were used. Although this approach removed many cases from the grade analyses, it resulted in the most consistent data and allowed for the strictest test of program effects on grades.

OUTCOME EVALUATION: RESULTS

Many of the expected academic outcomes regarding the impact of the UGrad program were supported through this analysis. UGrad participants were compared to their foster care involved peers who are not UGrad participants:

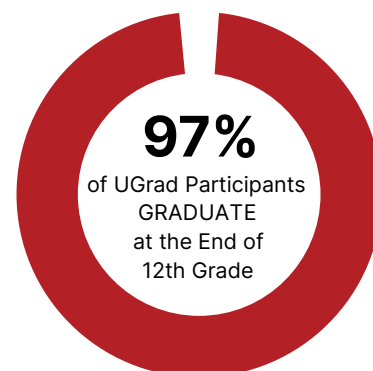
GRADUATION RATE



More UGrad participants (97%) graduate from high school at the end of twelfth grade than non-participants (83%). Only one UGrad participant did not graduate at the end of twelfth grade.

Note: Delaware DOE reports the 4-year adjusted graduation rate for youth in foster care at 54-56% during the study period¹; the 4 year adjusted graduation rate for non-UGrad participants was not available for this study.

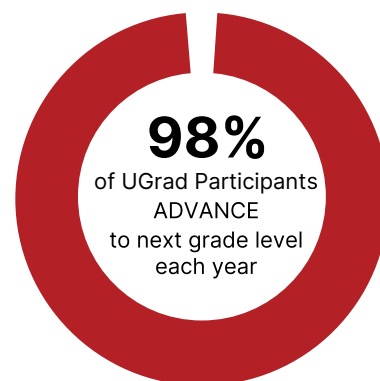
According to Kind to Kids records, and confirmed by Kind to Kids with DE's Division of Family Services, all of these UGrad graduations occur within four years, an important achievement for young people involved in foster care, who often age out of supports at age 18.



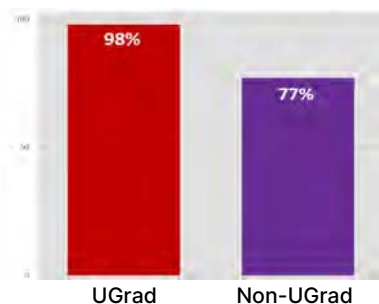
GRADE PROMOTION RATE



More UGrad participants (98%) advance to the next grade level (i.e., ninth to tenth, tenth to eleventh, eleventh to twelfth, graduate) compared to non-participants (77%). This important achievement enables the youth to stay on track with their education and with their peers.



Comparison of Grade Promotion Rates

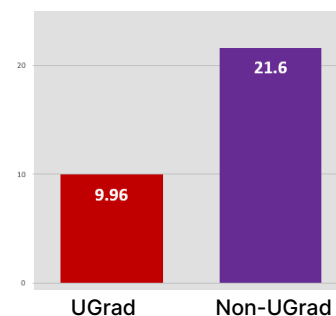


ABSENCES



UGrad participants have less than half the absences from school compared to nonparticipants (average 9.96 days per year and 21.6 days per year respectively). Additionally, across UGrad participants, the range in the number of absences is smaller than the range for foster care-involved youth who are not participants. This is another indicator of the effect of the UGrad program on school attendance.

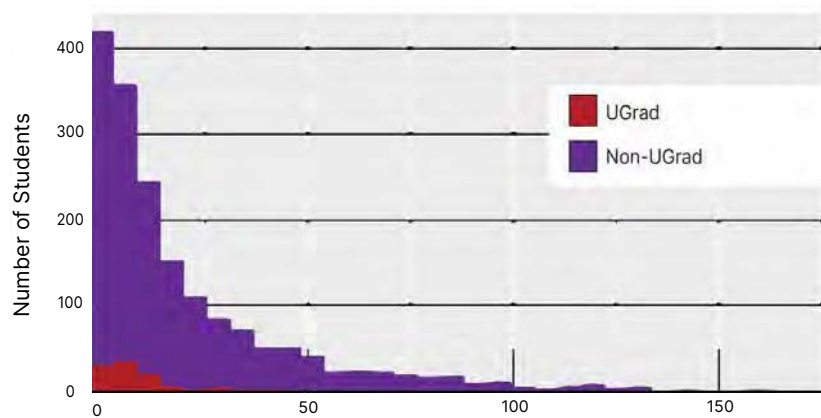
Mean Number of Days ABSENT per School Year



¹ <https://education.delaware.gov/community/data/reports/graduation-rates/>

UGRAD WORKS

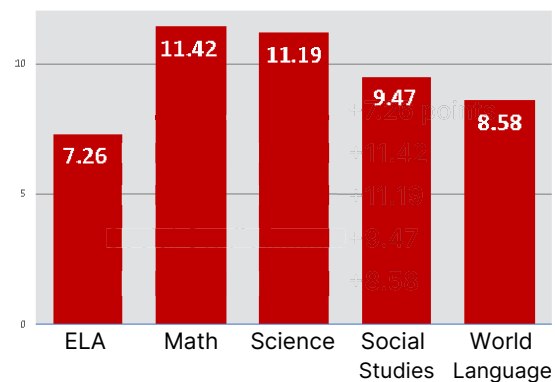
UGrad vs. Non-UGrad Absenteeism
Number of Days Absent by Program Participation



GRADES

UGrad participants surpass their foster care-involved peers in final grades for core subjects, earning on average a difference of +9.65 points higher on a 0-100 point scale. UGrad participants outperform for each subject.

UGrad Grade Increase
Compared to Non-UGrad Participant



All of the above findings are statistically significant.

These analyses also controlled for the possible effects of individual characteristics such as gender or race, as well as the possible structural influence of being a student in a particular school or school district. We also statistically accounted for the fact that our data contained more than one case from some individuals. By applying these statistical controls, we have even more confidence that these results are due to the UGrad's program's effect and not some other factor.

We also assessed disciplinary incidents but found no statistically significant effects. On average, UGrad incidents (which include detentions) (5.25 and 4.63, respectively). (Note: there were no expulsions recorded this is likely due to the small number of disciplinary incidents, which reduced statistical power to detect a significant effect of the program. Continuing to collect and analyze these data over time may help to better understand the effect of UGrad on disciplinary incidents.

PART 2 Qualitative Study

In the second part of the evaluation, we sought to extend our understanding of the mechanisms through which positive academic outcomes are achieved. To do this we developed a qualitative interview study in which we collected perspectives and experiences from both UGrad program participants and the staff serving as their advocates. These dual perspectives allowed us to not only triangulate information about potentially key mechanisms of the program but to more deeply understand the relationship between Advocate actions and UGrad participant experiences.

QUALITATIVE STUDY: Method

A total of 27 interviews (20 with UGrad participants and 7 with UGrad Advocates) were completed. Interviews were conducted and recorded via the Zoom platform and then transcribed. These transcriptions were used for analysis. By using a grounded theory approach in which patterns and themes emerge from the data, we identified several key themes.

Participant Interviews

UGrad participants (n=20; ages 14-22; 14 female and 6 male) were recruited by UGrad Advocates based on participant grade level (grades 9-12 and college) and their current or past participation in the UGrad program. All the current UGrad Advocates, including the President/Founder and Program Director, both of whom regularly perform advocacy work on behalf of UGrad participants, were interviewed. Interviews with UGrad participants were structured to explore topics such as the support they received from program staff, participant connectedness to program staff, plans for the future, perceived self-efficacy, and academic behaviors (such as completing school work, studying for exams, and participating in classes). Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Advocate Interviews

Interviews with UGrad Advocates began by covering their experience and role within UGrad. We then explored their perceptions of participants' needs as well as barriers to achieving academic goals, and strategies that the Advocates implemented to address these challenges. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes.

Consent and Assent

We provided all potential interviewees age 18 and older with information about the evaluation project. They were then asked to formally consent to participate in the interview. Because youth in foster care are in the legal custody of the State of Delaware, we obtained consent from the Division of Family Services for all UGrad participants who were below 18 years of age. Once consent was obtained, UGrad participants under the age of 18 were provided with information about the evaluation project and asked to give their assent to participate.

Interview Process

Children and youth in foster care are introduced to a variety of unfamiliar professionals as they navigate the complex child welfare system. To reduce stress, UGrad Advocates who have established relationships with the UGrad participants were present at the beginning of the youth interview. Advocates facilitated the introduction and handoff to the Cornell interviewer, and then relocated to a separate Zoom breakout room where they remained available for the entire interview. Although none of the UGrad Advocates were called back into the interview room, this arrangement allowed quick access to support if a participant experienced discomfort or required immediate assistance.

Transcription and Coding

After the interviews were conducted, audio recordings were transcribed. To protect the privacy of participants and Advocates, any personally identifiable information was excluded from the transcripts. The research team used a grounded theory approach to identify qualitative codes emerging from the data. For example, some codes reflect the types of support provided by UGrad staff, as spontaneously described by the participants. Each transcript was coded independently by two members of the research team. Coders discussed any discrepancies in code application until they reached a consensus. The agreed-upon codes were then used for analysis and interpretation, leading to the emergence of several themes from the UGrad participant and staff interviews.

QUALITATIVE STUDY: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The themes that emerged from the interviews with UGrad participants and staff reflect the overall experience of the youth participants, the actions and qualities of the Advocates, and the structure and implementation of the program. During interviews, youth participants described their program experiences, including their perceptions of and feelings about the program. By conducting interviews with both youth participants and staff, we were able to identify connections between the perceptions and feelings of the youth and the actions described by the Advocates. Although the youth were often unaware of the actions described by the Advocates, these actions were reflected in participant experiences.

Our analysis suggested several key themes. First, many Advocates express compassion and motivation to help, and the UGrad participants feel cared for. The environment of caring that Advocates create is enhanced by a larger support system nurtured by UGrad staff. In turn, this support system gives UGrad participants a sense that they have a safety net and relieves them of emotional and administrative burdens.

Finally, the flexible but consistent structure of the program provides a framework for the other themes, reinforcing the sense of a caring environment and support system, and enabling Advocates to lighten participants' burdens. Although there are some overlapping concepts between these themes, each one is distinct and nuanced. Below we describe each theme in detail, including relevant quotes drawn from the interviews.

CARING ENVIRONMENT

Interviews illuminated the relationship between the Advocates' motivations and background and the UGrad participants' feelings of being genuinely cared for by their Advocate. Participants consistently expressed feelings of trust in and companionship with their Advocates, as well as a sense that their Advocates truly enjoy helping them succeed.

One reason for this positive relationship is that the Advocates all come from backgrounds working directly with youth or in related fields, such as case management, social work, or education. Many of the Advocates described their reason for taking part in this work as being driven by compassion and a desire to help others. Advocates' life experiences and a sense of purpose may make it easier for them to connect with the UGrad participants.

“I came to understand the struggles that children in foster care face, and realized, oh my gosh, as a society, we should be doing more. There are lots of gaps in the services.”
Advocate

QUALITATIVE STUDY: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

One of the ways Advocates express care is through positive reinforcement. By getting to know the young people they are working with on a personal level, the Advocates better understand what motivates them. Advocates explained the importance of celebrating the youth at every opportunity, and this personal connection can help make celebrations more meaningful. For instance, one Advocate discovered that their UGrad participant was interested in a particular fashion brand. Using this knowledge, the Advocate acknowledged the participant's hard work to achieve their academic goals by rewarding them with an item from that brand. Motivators like these recognize accomplishments in a personal way that helps participants feel particularly encouraged in their progress.

SUPPORT SYSTEM

Related to, but distinct from, participants' feelings of being cared for is their overall sense of how the UGrad program builds a support system around them. The participants reported a strong sense of support from the people involved in the program, not just from their Advocates. Advocates in the UGrad program cultivate this network by connecting with other adults in the participants' lives, such as their caregivers, parents, social workers, teachers, coaches, and counselors. Many of the activities described by Advocates are their efforts to develop and maintain these connections. One of the primary benefits of this support system is that it allows all adults involved in supporting a UGrad participant to gather and share information with each other. By building rapport with other adults important to the participant, the Advocate can stay informed about what's happening at school, with their foster family, and in many other domains of the young person's life. With the participant's permission, the Advocate can also share information with other adults. This level of communication can help everyone have a more complete understanding of the complex challenges the young person is facing.

The Advocates described several scenarios demonstrating the benefit of information-sharing. One Advocate shared a story about how they exchanged weekly emails with the teacher of a subject in which the participant was struggling. The teacher provided details about the work the participant was struggling with, and the Advocate shared some of the challenges the participant was facing outside of class. Together, they collaborated to help develop and implement supports to help the student pass the class.

RELIEVING BURDENS

One of the most meaningful benefits of the UGrad program, described by both youth and their Advocates, is how the UGrad program relieves small burdens that can lead to more substantial problems for the youth participants. Both participants and their Advocates mentioned that seemingly minor tasks and obstacles can make the difference between success and failure.

The participants explained that these issues can reduce their emotional and mental capacity and quickly snowball into larger challenges. For example,

“I don't know how to explain it, but they have me.”
Student

“That's where we are, we're realizing they're in trouble before they even realize it.”
Advocate

“With other programs it's something that I had to consciously think about and reach out if I need help. And even then, it was mostly on me to figure things out... But when it comes to UGrad I can express what I need and (an Advocate) or someone is able to help me, rather than me having to do like the grunt work of trying to get what I need.”
Student

“I was never a foster kid, or anything like that. But with a lot of these kids, I identify with the story. I was the kid who had my own struggles growing up. So again, for me, it's mission and purpose, which helps me identify that much more.”
Advocate

young people in foster care or about to transition out of the system often need to complete a large amount of paperwork to obtain and maintain academic and other benefits. Advocates make sure they are getting the right paperwork to the right people on time.

Because Advocates know their UGrad participants well, frequently connect with them, and are in regular contact with the other adults who form their support system, the Advocates can identify and find ways to address issues and tasks like these before they become bigger problems.

This way, the Advocates can relieve the participants' mental, administrative, and logistical loads. Advocates stay on top of participants' assignments, schedule private tutoring sessions, get them supplies, check in with other adults, facilitate therapy appointments, and much more. With Advocates taking on these tasks and their management, UGrad participants have more time and space to focus on schoolwork.

CONSISTENCY WITH FLEXIBILITY

Finally, Advocates expressed that the design of the UGrad program is a significant advantage for conducting their work successfully. Specifically, the UGrad program model ensures that Advocates have a small caseload, enabling them to check in with their participants at least once every two weeks.

Advocates explained that this consistent approach helps build strong, trusting relationships with participants, who know their Advocate will always be there at a certain time. By completing these bi-weekly check-ins, Advocates stay current with UGrad participants' lives and needs. One Advocate compared their role to a lifeguard, explaining that participants may not realize they are struggling until it's too late. The Advocate looks for signs of trouble and provides necessary support and help.

In addition to this bi-weekly check-in model, Advocates are also given—and give to the program—flexibility in their working hours, allowing them to more easily respond to emerging issues. Advocates often need to travel to meet with participants. That travel must sometimes take place outside of normal business hours to meet each participant's unique needs.

“It’s very nice to have a more mature and more understanding person come and look at my situation from a third perspective, to give insight as to like, what I could be doing better or if there’s another way to go about things. So it’s very nice to have the ability to rely on someone.”
Student

“Let’s set up some gold markers, like checkpoints. And hey, once the student gets to this point, maybe they can get something. ...So just giving them these small gold checkpoints for them to really feel like wow, okay, I can do that.”
Advocate

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation study reveals that UGrad has a statistically significant, positive effect on the academic outcomes of foster care-involved students. The outcome evaluation found that UGrad participants are more likely than their non-participant peers to graduate from high school or advance to the next grade level, with a 97% graduation rate and a 98% grade promotion rate. Additionally, UGrad participants had less than half the school absences (46%) of their peers, and their final grades for core subjects and overall core subject averages were significantly higher. The evaluation also suggests that UGrad participation may reduce in- and out-of-school suspensions. However, the overall number of disciplinary incidents was small, and therefore the analysis may be underpowered. Future studies with more data points may reveal a significant program effect on this outcome.

The evaluation study demonstrates that UGrad has a positive effect on important academic outcomes of youth in foster care.

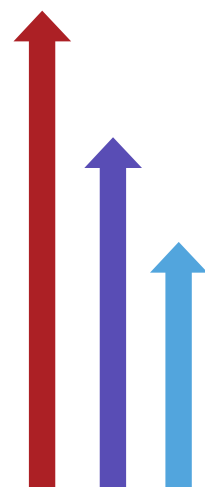
Through the direct collection of qualitative data from youth participants and Advocates, we obtained a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of UGrad. The program is designed in a flexible yet consistent manner, which enables Advocates to provide specialized support to each individual young person with whom they work. UGrad participants feel cared for and have a trusting relationship with their Advocate, a safe adult in whom they can confide. Advocates also assisted participants with academic tasks, helped them meet important deadlines, and provided guidance to enable them to achieve their goals. Additionally, participants expressed their enjoyment in spending time with their Advocates and looked forward to their bi-weekly meetings. The successful combination of these elements creates a life-changing experience for UGrad participants.

Future UGrad evaluation could replicate and expand these findings in several ways, including evaluating the program as it is implemented with a younger population, assessing additional outcome measures, or utilizing different study designs. First, a similar study could be conducted with younger participants; the current evaluation focused on young people in grade 9 and older but UGrad works with children as early as first grade. Second, following a cohort of UGrad participants from entry to exit would allow a better understanding of the impact of UGrad on additional outcome measures associated with youth in foster care, such as mental health outcomes, self-efficacy, and post-secondary education or job status. Additional study designs worth considering include a randomized controlled trial or a waitlist design, which would further strengthen confidence in program effects. With more time and resources, continued evaluation efforts will build upon the foundation developed by this study and provide a stronger understanding of the impact of UGrad structure and activities on positive outcomes.

Continued work with Delaware's Department of Education could also enhance the quality and consistency of data gathered by the Department to be used as a secondary data source. Specifically, it is important for the field to understand the post-secondary education, careers, or other paths taken by youth who exit the foster care system. While UGrad staff consistently collect this information and follow their participants beyond their involvement in foster care, data are not consistently collected for other youth in the system.

The evaluation study presented in this report yields evidence for the positive impact of the UGrad program. The circumstances that lead a child or youth to become involved in foster care typically, if not always, include trauma that can present this population with serious challenges potentially affecting myriad life domains (for example, education, employment, housing, and mental health). UGrad's compassion and commitment to the success and well-being of foster care-involved youth in Delaware is strongly evident in interviews with staff and participants.

The evidence from this mixed methods study demonstrates that the UGrad program effectively intervenes and supports participants as they navigate the complexities of the educational system in tandem with overlapping systems, setting them up for success as they exit the foster care system and transition to independent living, college, other vocational training, or career. **We conclude that children and youth in foster care would benefit from the expansion of the UGrad program**, achieving their educational goals and making the transition through a challenging childhood and adolescence knowing that they have a caring Advocate and network of support to hold them up, advocate for them, and guide them on their journey through school and into adulthood.



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Kind to Kids Foundation

Mission

Kind to Kids Foundation provides children in need with the skills and resources to succeed—because every child deserves a bright future. We serve children in foster care and at-risk youth through educational programs and support services that help them overcome trauma, abuse, and instability.

Since its founding, Kind to Kids has served more than 18,000 Delaware children. Our flagship program, UGrad Academy, offers intensive educational support and case management for children and youth in foster care. It also provides life skills instruction and well-being support to help children succeed in school and in life.

Support services include:

- **My Blue Duffel**, which delivers emergency care kits to children who have experienced abuse or neglect.
- **Help-A-Kid**, which provides birthday and holiday gifts, along with items that encourage children's interests—bringing joy, normalcy, and emotional support.

History

Kind to Kids was founded in 2008 by Caroline Jones and her family, inspired by her volunteer work as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for children in foster care. What began as a family initiative became a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2011. Caroline's husband, Mark Jones, serves as an active board member, and their children, Christopher and Catherine, inspired the mission and remain involved today.

Since its inception, Kind to Kids has focused on children in foster care—many of whom are removed from their homes for safety and face aging out of the system without the support they need. Nationally, only 56% of foster youth graduate from high school, and fewer than 2% earn a college degree.

In response, Kind to Kids launched UGrad Academy in 2018—an innovative education and case management program now serving over 100 students, from kindergarten through college. With a goal of reaching 400 foster youth annually in Delaware, the program has achieved impressive results:

- **97% high school graduation rate**
- **98% grade promotion**
- **Improved grades in all core subjects**
- **50% reduction in absenteeism**

UGrad Academy includes transitional guidance, resources, and support for youth aging out of care. Paired with the **Kind to You Guidebook for Youth in Foster Care**, authored by Caroline Jones, the program equips teens with essential life skills, including financial literacy, employment readiness, housing, education planning, self-care, healthy relationships, and more.

Kind to Kids Foundation is honored to serve our community's most vulnerable children. We are deeply grateful to the federal and state partners, corporations, foundations, and generous donors who make this work possible. Together, we deliver compassionate, effective programs that help children heal, grow, and thrive.

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Kind to Kids Foundation

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Cornell Human Ecology



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Kind to Kids[®]
A future for every child

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