



School of Social Work
CENTER FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Challenging Minds, Leading Change,
Transforming Lives

policy & practice brief

ISSUE THREE

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Foster Care Youth and Education

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ABSTRACT The brief highlights the post-secondary outcomes of older youth in care, looking first at the perceptions of currently enrolled high school and college aged foster youth with regard to their status on where they are in their transition from high school to college and then describes persistence in post-secondary education for a sample of foster care alumni who are enrolled at a four year university.

THE ISSUE: Approximately 58,000 (U.S. Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 2009) foster care youth are likely to “age out” of the system as they remain in care or are granted independence. There are a number of negative outcomes that foster youth are at risk of, including poor physical and mental health, substance use, unemployment and more (Courtney, 2009). Educational access and degree completion are among the more important deficits that foster youth face which negatively impact their future.

Education is critical to finding employment, having higher socio-economic status, better health and reduced incarceration and homelessness (Leone & Weinberg, 2010). But foster youth are at a great disadvantage with regard to education:

- Foster youth are less likely to graduate from high school than non-fostered peers (Courtney et al, 2005)
- Foster youth are far less likely to attend college (Brandford & English, 2004).
- Economic difficulties and interruptions in learning (Merdinger et al. 2005) and lack of educational preparedness (Sheehy et. al. 2001), hinder foster youth from completing a degree.
- Foster youth deal college staff that are not familiar with or prepared to help (Dworksky & Perez, 2010).

In a study by Day and colleagues (2011) a comparison of foster youth and low income, first generation college students

found that foster students dropped out by the end of the first year at rates higher than the comparison group (21% v 13%). The foster youth were also more likely to drop out prior to degree completion (34%), than the first generation students (18%). These findings show that access alone is not sufficient to improve foster youths’ educational outcomes. For those that graduated, students who had been in foster care graduated at a slower rate than a comparison group of low-income, first generation students. The median time of enrollment to graduation was 11 semesters for foster care youth vs. 10 semesters for other low-income, first generation college students (Day, Dworsky & Feng, 2013). semesters.

Formal advocacy toward improving outcomes for foster care youth is present across the county. However, foster youth have rarely been able to advocate for their own concerns since they lack access to the institutions that shape policy. This briefs blends research and advocacy experience with the voices of foster care youth who were able to participate in a policy forum with legislators in Michigan to explore barriers to educational access and success, as well as policy and practice implications.

Foster youth face multiple barriers that make avoiding the negative outcomes more difficult. In open testimony to state legislators and policy makers youth identified several items that were summarized

into eight themes (Day, 2012). Among the key barriers noted include:

- The lack of caring adults to support their educational success
- Teachers who do not understand their personal challenges and are not available to provide additional assistance during the day
- Teacher who can accommodate learning disabilities and students who are often behind grade level due to frequent school changes
- Foster youth have many basic needs for school that are unmet, which limits engagement and achievement
- Foster youth are seldom able to participate in afterschool activities known to promote stability and success

Addressing the barriers

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: Federal policy with respect to increasing college access for foster care youth has advanced in the past few decades. The 1986 Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative and the 1999 John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act provided states with additional funding and mechanisms such as educational training for preparation of foster youth until they are 21. In 2001 Congress, through the Education and Training Voucher program (ETV), specifically provided for up to \$5000 of post-secondary education funding with eligibility until age 23 with satisfactory progress. More recently in 2008, provisions in the Fostering Connection to Success Act expanded ETV eligibility and in 2009 the College Cost Reduction Act allowed those who were in foster care at age 13 or older to claim independent status for financial aid applications.

These policy efforts are important, but additional work is needed in light of what we know about foster care youth seeking higher education. Many have a history of transitions and repeating grades that means foster care youth are older when they enter college. For these reasons, policies that extend the ETV funding beyond age 23 would benefit many foster care alumni. The new USDOE policy that limits access to Pell Grants to a maximum of 12 semesters. This means that many foster care youth will lose access to critical financial aid resources just short of their post-secondary goals. In addition, policy and

practice coordination among child welfare agencies, high schools and post-secondary institutions is necessary. Many services and resources are available, but navigating the multiple systems is a challenge for even the most capable, supported young person. An intermediary organization or co-located staff from the three agencies may be able to provide better coordination and information to aid youth in successfully navigating the path to secondary education.

Other policy implications:

- Child Welfare Departments should promote additional adult relationships through the use of mentors who can provide guidance and support for educational achievements.
- Promote educational stability through extending services such as those provided homeless youth through the McKinney Vento Act.
- Provide dedicated slots for foster youth in college-access programs such as the federal TRIO program.
- Once in college, provide foster youth with access to other foster youth and foster care alum who have graduated to provide support.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS: In order to improve retention and graduation rates among foster care youth is to provide them with assistance to remove additional barriers that they face in college.

- Provide youth with mentors or other formal social supports (e.g. specially trained counselors), to provide positive connections needed to handle the increased stress that college may bring.
- Offer additional academic and social supports and services such as tutoring, year-round housing, and financial aid, mentoring health care and counseling services.
- Provide priority placement of foster care alumni into federally-funded work study programs which can meet students' need for flexible employment and may enhance retention
- Provide additional services through child welfare agencies to encourage, prepare and direct foster care youth and those aging out to seek post-secondary educational opportunities.
- Train child welfare workers and high school counselors about resources available to foster youth that promote college access. Many workers and

counselors are not aware of these resources, so they can not.

For further information about the ideas presented here, please see:

An examination of post-secondary retention and graduation among foster care youth enrolled in a four-year university. Angelique Day, Amy Dworsky, Kieran Fogarty, Amy Damashek. Children and Youth Services Review (2011)

Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change. Angelique Day, Joanne Riebschleger, Amy Dworsky, Amy Damashek, Kieran Fogarty. Children and Youth Services Review (2012)

An analysis of foster care placement history and postsecondary graduation rates. Angelique Day, Amy Dworsky, Wenning Feng. Research in Higher Education Journal (2013, volume 19)

A Discrete Time Survival Analysis of the Relationship Between Foster Care Placement. Day, A., Dworsky, A., & Feng, W. (2013)

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