



School of Social Work
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Increasing College Access of Foster Care Youth: A Review of Education and Training Voucher (ETV) programs

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ABSTRACT This policy brief examines the education and training voucher (ETV), a federal program that provides post-secondary education funding to current and former foster care students. Research recommendations are provided to ensure the desired outcomes of the program are achieved.

The education and training voucher (ETV) is the first federal program specifically created to address the post-secondary educational needs of current and former foster youth. The population of ETV eligible youth (those who have been in foster care on or after their 14th birthday and those who have not been adopted before their 16th birthday) is considerable. According to the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), more than 26,000 young people aged out of foster care (11% of the total foster care population) in 2011.

Transition to adulthood for foster youth is fraught with risks like homelessness, incarceration and mental health problems. Moreover, foster care alumni frequently have significant specialized needs related to college access, often stemming from the lack of legal or supportive connections with birth parents or other caring adults.

Despite the economic advantages of completing high school and obtaining a post-secondary education credential, foster care youth lag far behind the national trends in terms of college access. In addition, there is a significant gap in college readiness, enrollment, retention and graduation between

students who were in foster care and their peers who were not.

According to a study conducted by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, only 18% of foster care alumni are pursuing a four year degree versus 62% of their 19-year-old peers. This study also suggests that even when foster youth do attend college, they are less likely than their non-foster care counterparts to earn a degree. At age 25, less than 3% of foster care alumni completed a bachelor's degree or higher versus 24% of their counterparts. Only 26% of foster care alumni who enroll in college have earned a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment compared to 56% of their peers.

A number of barriers can make it difficult for foster care youth to succeed in higher education. One is inadequate academic preparation. Youth in foster care may experience several placement changes,^{4,11} which may interrupt their primary or secondary education.⁸ Even if youth in foster care graduate from high school, they may not be academically prepared for postsecondary education. Studies have shown that foster youth are much less likely to take college preparatory courses in high school than their peers^{2,8} even when the two groups have similar test scores and grades.⁷

Over the past decade, federal policymakers have responded to the many educational challenges faced by young people aging out of foster care. In 2001, under Title II of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments (P.L. 107-133), Congress authorized the educational and vocational training programs for older youth, leaving foster care under the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). CFCIP is a capped state entitlement program, with an initial appropriation of \$182 million (of which \$42 million is dedicated to funding ETVs). Since 2003, this appropriation has fluctuated between \$44 million and \$46 million.

Each state receives an annual allocation based on their percentage of children and youth placed in foster care; they have two years to spend each year's allocation. States are required to provide 20% of their annual allocation through an in-kind or cash match. States can use their ETV funds to provide current and former foster youth with up to \$5,000 per year for postsecondary training and education. The ETV can be used to defray the costs of the following types of expenses: tuition/fees, books and supplies, room and board, and miscellaneous personal expenses, including purchase of a personal computer, transportation, and child care.

Youth participating in the program before their 21st birthday remain eligible until age 23, as long as they are making satisfactory progress toward completion of their postsecondary training program. Satisfactory process has been defined by the federal government as the maintenance of at least a 2.0 GPA and no more than one incomplete or course withdrawal per semester. The most recent major federal child welfare legislation, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, also contains provisions that promote educational stability and expands eligibility for the ETV program to youth who exit foster care through adoption or relative guardianship when they are at least 16 years old.

It is estimated that around 150,000 youth nationally meet the criteria to receive ETV funds. Despite this, mechanisms have not yet been developed to facilitate communication between educational institutions and child welfare agencies in a manner that allows proactive encouragement of students to

apply for and use ETV resources. In addition, Although ETV was enacted in 2001, it was not operative in most states until 2003 – 2004, making it a relatively new federal initiative with little longitudinal research as to its effectiveness. Finally, little is known about the extent to which foster care alumni access ETV programs or the effects of ETV receipt on college retention or graduation.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice Reform

- Initiate research studies evaluating the effectiveness of ETV programs in the United States.
- Institute communication protocols between child welfare and education professionals that ensure that youth are aware of their eligibility to receive ETV benefits.
- There is need for increased investment by the federal government, states, and communities to effectively monitor the quality and quantity of services provided, and the outcomes experienced by young people enrolled in these programs.

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