

## Policy Brief

Topic: Child Welfare

Policy Brief: How children in foster care are negatively impacted through the educational system.

### **Goal Statement**

This brief aims to examine the post-secondary outcomes of older foster youth. The goal of this brief is to highlight the child welfare system and the adverse effects of foster care on school aged children navigating the school system and obtaining post-secondary education. Foster youth in the child welfare system have a disadvantage to obtaining adequate education, navigating academic systems, and applying for higher education due to the lack of resources including financial, counseling, and planning tools. In addition to uncovering and discussing foster youth adversities, we hope to gain and appropriately allocate resources to help these students in need.

### **Audience**

This brief aims to begin the discussion of the future of our youth with groups advocating for the betterment of all children. The voices of foster care youth, educators, and child welfare workers who are willing to participate in a policy forum with council members in New York City to investigate barriers to educational success and policy and practice implications are consulted in this brief. This brief is focused towards the New York City Department of Education, New York Administration of Children Services and the members of the New York City Council.

### **Scope of the Problem**

For foster adolescents, it is uncommon to have access to the financial aid, mentoring, support, stability, and direction required to finish higher education or training programs. Research shows that just 3-4% of former foster children complete a four-year college program and 2 to 6% of people earn a two-year degree. Living expenditures, stable housing, access to technology and high-speed internet, and assistance navigating the complexity of the academic world are all impediments to obtaining a degree for individuals who are able to enroll. Former foster kids may enter college later in life or take longer than four years to finish a degree because of this. Homelessness and the foster care-to-prison pipeline also make it difficult or impossible to complete college. Foster youth may be unprepared for college-level work because they regularly move schools when their placements change, are tracked into basic education rather than college ready classes, or attend low-performing elementary and secondary schools. Many students who enter college are required to attend remedial courses before they may enroll in degree-related courses. This lengthens the time required to graduate and raises the expense of obtaining a degree. The scholastic obstacles that current and former foster adolescents confront are extremely likely to transfer into greater difficulty in finding and maintaining meaningful employment when they join the workforce (National Foster Youth Institute, 2022).

Many foster youths cannot turn to their parents for college information, help with college applications, financial aid for college, or emotional support to deal with the academic demands and social strains of college life. They also cannot rely on their caseworkers, foster parents, or other caretakers for support with college inquiry or application. Furthermore, adolescents in foster care are frequently ignorant of their eligibility for financial aid from federal and state programs, their college or university, and private scholarships, or they lack access to someone to assist them with the application process.

Adults who were formerly in foster care are more likely than the general population to be homeless, unprepared for employment and restricted to low-skill occupations, and dependent on assistance or Medicaid. They are also more likely to be convicted of crimes and jailed, to get addicted to drugs or alcohol, or to have poor physical or mental health. Women who have been in foster care have a greater likelihood of early pregnancy and are more likely to have their own children put in foster care. Adults who were previously placed in foster care were shown to be dissatisfied with their experiences in school in surveys. Respondents said that the foster care system failed to motivate them to have high educational ambitions. According to one poll, older foster adolescents have high educational goals and are resentful that others have low expectations for them. They said they would have benefitted from more adult encouragement. This shows that adults may bear part of the blame for foster children's troubles in the classroom, as well as a lack of effective adult representation and support. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, accountability, and responsibility for the educational results of foster children are uncertain.

### **Past Policy**

The United States Department of Education, in collaboration with the United States Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, and Labor, as well as foster youth and practitioners, created a Foster Care Transition Toolkit to motivate and encourage current and former foster children pursuing college and career opportunities. The toolbox contains advice and tools to assist foster adolescents in overcoming social, emotional, educational, and skill challenges as they enter adulthood (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) put in place measurements that revealed achievement inequalities between historically underprivileged students and their counterparts, resulting in a major national discussion on education reform. This emphasis on responsibility has been crucial in guaranteeing the best possible education for all students, but it has also exposed problems in achieving this aim effectively. Parents, educators, and lawmakers around the country recognized the need for a robust, updated law to increase opportunities for all children, assist schools, teachers, and administrators, and build our educational system and economy (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

In 2012, the Obama era began offering states flexibility on NCLB standards in return for challenging and comprehensive state-developed plans meant to eliminate performance gaps, expand equality, improve instructional quality, and improve outcomes for students.

The United States Departments of Education and Health and Human Services issued joint guidelines to states, school districts, and child welfare agencies on requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for helping foster children. The guideline was intended to help local and state partners understand and execute the law, as well as facilitate state and municipal collaboration with academic and child welfare organizations across the country for the welfare of foster children. ESSA's expanded safeguards for foster children will apply to all foster children attending public schools. This joint advice builds on ESSA's increased emphasis on the special needs of foster adolescents and will empower local governments with tools to implement new provisions of care to foster youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

ESSA contains measures that will assist students and schools to succeed. This includes advances of equity by preserving key safeguards for America's poor and at-risk youth. Each student in America must be educated to the highest academic standards in order to excel in

college and later in life. It also aims to guarantee that essential information is made available to educators, students, their families, and communities through yearly statewide assessments that track the progress of learners toward those high goals. Another action of the ACT aids in the development and expansion of local innovations, such as evidence-based initiatives produced by local leaders and educators. Leadership's historic commitments in expanding access to excellent early childhood education are sustained and expanded. Lastly, the ESSA maintains the expectation that responsibility and action would be taken to effect good change in our weakest-performing schools, where certain populations of kids are underperforming, and exhibiting lower graduating rates over periods of time (Department of Education, 2017).

### **Current Policy**

Policymakers at the state as well as the national level have developed initiatives to reduce or eliminate financial barriers to higher education for foster adolescents. Adolescents in foster care may be qualified for specific scholarships or grants in some areas, although eligibility rules and the amount of support given vary greatly between states. Tuition waiver programs in twenty-eight states allow foster youngsters to study at public universities and colleges for free or at a considerably discounted fee. Tuition and fees not compensated by other forms of financial aid are often paid by programs, but students are responsible for housing, books, transportation, and childcare, and eligibility standards vary greatly among states. Federally supported initiatives are another form of assistance for young people in foster care (Dworsky, 2017).

The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program is the principal federal funding source for preparing foster youth for their adjustment to adulthood, and states can spend their Chafee funds on initiatives and resources that promote postsecondary educational completion.

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program provides up to \$5000 per year to eligible youth who are or were in foster care to cover postsecondary educational expenses (e.g., fees, tuition, books, educational equipment, computers, or housing) as well as qualified cost of living expenses such as, rent, meals, transportation, medical coverage, or childcare). The amount of the award is determined by the availability of money and the cost of attendance that isn't paid for by additional forms of financial aid. Youth are required to start receiving help before the age of 21, however are eligible until 23 years of age if they are progressing in obtaining success in their program.

Furthermore, while these programs may reduce some of the financial obstacles to higher education, the majority were developed with the traditional high school-to-college road in mind. Youth in foster care, on the other hand, are frequently older than their classmates when they finish high school and may postpone postsecondary education owing to family obligations or the need to work full-time. Furthermore, because taking remedial classes lengthens the time it takes to complete a degree, adolescents in foster care could end up ineligible for programs designed to encourage postsecondary study (Dworsky, 2017).

### **Proposed Solutions**

Allowing children in care in foster homes to attend a private or public institution of their choosing using an education scholarship is one approach to increase their educational possibilities. Foster children might be provided voluntary education vouchers to enroll and continue in an accredited private or public institution of their or their caretakers' choosing. Providing foster children the chance to attend a school of their choosing may assist to solve the widespread issue of educational insecurity. A scholarship or preference option would enable them to continue attending the same school where geographically viable even if they were

relocated to a new household. A program of this type might be designed to address typical issues such as insecurity, persistent lack of expectations, poor adult support, life-skills training requirements, special education requirements, and cultural sensitivity.

Greater stability may also provide societal advantages. Building a feeling of community and establishing peer groups have been highlighted as crucial variables in the development of foster children in surveys. It seems to reason that enabling a kid to continue attending the same school might have a favorable impact on certain foster children by permitting them to establish long-term connections and peer groups. This might allow foster children, who frequently lack significant social connections at home, to have a feeling of identity and belonging.

Foster children confront unique problems in life that are not shared by others in the community. Former foster children, for example, have emphasized the need for greater life-skills teaching to assist equip them for their journey to adult freedom. Permitting foster children to choose their preferred school might create an atmosphere in which schools are incentivized to provide programs that address these unique requirements. In Baltimore City, a group has suggested establishing a charter school that is publicly funded and dedicated to delivering outstanding education for underprivileged foster children. A specialized institution like this may hire instructors and professionals who are qualified and equipped to handle the needs of foster children. Joining such a school might be beneficial for certain foster children.

Proposed solutions targeted towards combatting the struggles of post secondary enrollment by foster youth include the use of mentors who are able to offer direction and encouragement for academic accomplishments. Additionally, child welfare departments should encourage additional adult relationships that carry on and mature past the temporary stage of foster child placement.

Foster children should be exclusively involved in college access programs like the federal TRIO program. While in school, youth should be encouraged to cultivate relationships with foster care graduates to offer help to garner success. Children in foster care, 16 years of age or older, should have increased access to education at public colleges and universities in their community, including funds and implementation of tuition waiver programs (Lips, 2007).

Recommended practice implications should include connection of mentors or other structured social supports with foster youth for the development of skills needed to cope with potentially increased stress that coincide with college attendance. Services and resources for scholastic and social success, such as tutoring, year-round housing, financial aid, and mentoring should be provided. Child welfare professionals and guidance counselors in high schools should be informed about the resources accessible to foster youth that support college access. Lastly, older foster youth and youth who were adopted as teenagers should be offered services to help them become more prepared for post-secondary education, inform them of post-secondary educational opportunities, and give them mentors and other supportive services to help them succeed in post-secondary education.

### **Involvement of Local Communities**

Cross-system participation may result from a lack of community-based services and support, particularly in underprivileged and racially/ethnically excluded populations. Concerned community leaders and groups can actively contribute in this area to lessen the likelihood that young people will become entangled in the child welfare systems. Children who are involved in the child welfare systems may exhibit risky behaviors and situations simultaneously. The degree of treatment is frequently higher for young people associated with many systems than it is for those who are dealing with just one risky behavior or disease.

For instance, many young people who are participating in several systems face academic challenges, such as truancy and subpar academic performance. Even the most driven young people's hopes for higher education can be dashed by these educational problems. Early detection of these educational problems by educators can result in effective intervention to better serve crossover adolescents. Planning for school completion, academic performance, and job training must take into account the prevalence of diagnosed and undiagnosed learning disorders as well as any other conditions that may affect learning.

In order to provide young people with the essential support they need as they navigate the obstacles of young adulthood, strong family and community ties are crucial. In many situations, out-of-home placement in either the child welfare system can intensify tensions in families and communities, making it even harder for young adults to successfully integrate into society and make the transition to adulthood. Youth's future performance in terms of career, education, and financial matters may be hampered if they are allowed to leave either system without making an effort to mend these family and community links. However, providing enough support from families and the community throughout a young person's transition can have an equally dramatic effect on helping rather than hurting their development and future trajectory (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023).

Current child maltreatment policy and program development places a strong emphasis on the ongoing interaction and reciprocal interplay among a variety of domains, including environmental pressures, caregiver and familial traits, and child features. These models are among the most complex and frequently utilized in the field. The ecological paradigm sees individual-family behavior as being a part of larger cultural, societal, and local contexts. Although individual functioning and competence of parents are the most frequently mentioned

risk and protective variables for maltreatment, a variety of community factors can also have an impact on parent-child relations. Community norms define when and how parents should ask for aid from others, as well as what parents may perceive as proper or necessary ways to engage with their children. By affecting how people feel about their personal safety that is, by fostering a sense of community or reinforcing isolation context can either increase or decrease parental stress.

Resources in the community might provide a short-term break from parenting responsibilities. Professional community services can help parents feel better mentally and be better able to parent. Few academics can agree on the most important contextual factors and, more importantly for our purposes, how to manipulate these factors to increase the likelihood that parents will seek out, find, and effectively use necessary and appropriate support. Although many scholars can agree on the need to cast a wide net in examining how the vulnerable infant becomes the responsible adult, few can agree on the most salient contextual factors. A theory and empirical evidence contend that neighborhood-level intervention is likely to stop child abuse within families. The two elements of intervention that seem to hold the most promise are community coordination of tailored services and social capital development. According to the social disorganization hypothesis, communities can generate social capital by fostering an atmosphere of reciprocity where inhabitants are all actively involved in helping one another and protecting children.

Expanding capacity, enhancing coordination, and streamlining service delivery are important ways to build a community's service infrastructure, according to research on the effectiveness of care delivery systems in areas with high rates of maltreatment. Both social work and public health have a long history of addressing social issues through a combination of

grassroots community activity and coordinated professional personalized services. Workers at settlement houses worked with immigrant communities at the turn of the 20th century to address both social injustices like poor working conditions and limited educational opportunities as well as individual difficulties like raising a baby and assuring kid safety.

The creation of supportive residential communities with residents who share a conviction in our shared obligation to protect children from harm, as well as the expansion of the range of services and instrumental supports that are directly available to parents, have been the main focuses of community strategies to prevent child abuse and promote child protection. Individual accountability as well as a robust formal service framework are crucial. The difficult part is figuring out how to create a community plan that strikes the right mix between private and public investment (Daro & Dodge, 2009).

The long-held belief that the community plays a crucial role in a child's education is a major component of education reform. Community members working together can guarantee safety and offer assistance to faculty, students, and family members. Community organizations that collaborate with child welfare, law enforcement, and library systems provide safeguards that can boost students' resilience and make it easier to deal with problems when they develop. A safe and encouraging environment can be created both within and outside of the classroom by schools with strong ties to the neighborhood (Daro & Dodge, 2009).

### **Involvement of Faith Community**

The crucial task of finding, preparing, and supporting families for children and teens in foster care has long been a focus of faith-based communities. They still play a significant role in helping child welfare agencies achieve permanency for the children and young people who are

waiting to be adopted. The expansion of meaningful collaborations between child welfare agencies and persons and organizations who have authority and deep ties in areas where prospective adoptive parents might be reached is made possible by building and maintaining relationships with faith communities.

Although states continue to heavily rely on faith-based organizations even though the government has increased its role in the care of vulnerable children over the past few decades. For services like foster care, adoption, and the search for foster and adoptive families, states frequently enter into contracts with private child welfare organizations, including organizations with a religious mission. Communities rely largely on the assistance and labor of religious organizations. Due to rules that would force them to go against their real religious beliefs, faith-based agencies in some locations have been forced to stop offering foster care and adoption services (Goodnow, 2018).

One of the numerous ways faith groups around the nation are increasingly assisting children and families involved or at danger of being entangled with local child welfare systems is by connecting with and mentoring adolescents in care. The necessity for homes for abused and neglected children in local communities is being brought up by churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. In addition to offering respite care and support groups for current foster parents, adoptive parents, and persons caring for kin, they assist in the recruitment and training of foster and adoptive parents. For foster children, they donate everything from blankets to backpacks, and they offer housing and career training for young people leaving the system (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023).

The majority of orphanages in the United States were historically started and run by religious organizations. However, as social policies and governmental child welfare systems

developed in the early 20th century, religious initiatives had a considerably less significant part in raising children. Today, faith communities are coming full circle and supporting child welfare institutions and organizations dealing with populations at risk. The religion community is recognized as a crucial player in this endeavour as states now strive toward regulations to retain children within their families and communities instead of in congregant care. Despite significant budget cuts at the state and municipal levels, faith communities are providing resources to support systems that maintain and improve services for children and families.

Between child welfare and religion, there is a strong, favorable association. The Christian community and professionals who are concerned for children's welfare share a compassion for children and a dedication to family life. A certain amount of tension exists as well, though. Given the clergy and other religious authority figures who have sexually abused children, some in the child welfare field may criticize the church's attentiveness in preventing child abuse or neglect. Various religious perspectives may be interpreted by some as supporting abusive parenting and harsh physical discipline. In contrast, religious persons could be wary of the government's involvement in parenting and potential intrusions because they perceive it as undermining the family's autonomy and possibly even its integrity. The church had a significant part in the creation of this system in the United States as a sponsor and protector of private child welfare services. Many of the first orphanages and asylums were run by different religious groups at first. Over time, churches and the organizations that work with them have adapted to changes in child welfare by offering the necessary services, either through contracts with the government or through private practice. Currently, a large number of foster care and adoption placement organizations in the United States are connected to the religious community, with Bethany

Christian Services, Catholic Social Services, and Lutheran Social Services serving as three examples.

A dedication to children's well-being, safety, and connections with caring adults and family members appears to be perfectly consistent with a Christian worldview. For legitimate reasons, churches took the lead in establishing early child welfare programs. Working with vulnerable children and families would seem to be a natural expression of a Christian social worker's Christian beliefs and ideals. The idolatry in Canaan, where some people worshipped Molech and forced the sacrifice of children, compared with the religion of the Jewish people, their bond with Jehovah, and their valuing of human life. Jesus embraced small children who were being kept away by the disciples during his mission. Concern for children's safety and wellbeing as well as efforts to build their ties to family are consistent with scripture and Jesus' example. Child welfare organizations should be commended for their efforts in family preservation, helping orphans and fatherless children, and providing for the most vulnerable kids, including lowering their risk of engaging in criminal activity or abusing drugs (Anderson & Mulka, 2023).

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