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STRENGTHENING POLICIES for Foster Youth Postsecondary Attainment

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Postsecondary education in the United States has historically been the bedrock of individual social mobility and collective economic growth. Toward that end, policies at the state and federal levels have for decades sought to expand the reach of postsecondary education so as to provide individuals and communities with pathways to prosperity.

Although progress has been far slower than is optimal, a greater percentage of individuals residing in the United States have completed or participated in postsecondary education than at any other time in the nation's history.¹ As of 2015, 69 percent of high school graduates had participated in or completed some postsecondary education.²

Despite the relative success of public policies supporting the expansion of postsecondary participation, inequities remain. These inequities unnecessarily limit the ability of individuals to benefit from postsecondary enrollment and completion and can create additional obstacles for individuals already facing significant barriers to social mobility. Such is the case for youth within the foster care system, a population confronted by a labyrinth of state and federal public policies that can often fall short of their intent to support postsecondary enrollment and completion.

This policy report provides an overview of the challenges youth who are in foster care, have been adopted, or have aged out of the foster care system confront when pursuing a postsecondary credential, including those barriers caused – often unintentionally – by public policies. Specifically, the report focuses on the treatment of these youth by state financial aid programs and offers potential remedies that state policy leaders may pursue as part of holistic efforts to support reducing inequities for this population and promoting their collective upward social mobility. Given the autonomy states have in adopting policies and responding to federal initiatives intended to support foster youth, state policymakers can create tangible educational pathways for foster care youth.

Of the **415,000** foster youth in care, only **46 percent** will earn a high school diploma and less than **3 percent** will obtain a bachelor's degree.

Nationally, **28 states** have enacted **tuition assistance programs** for foster youth or former foster youth seeking a postsecondary degree.

To date, **41 states** have adopted federal recommendations to extend foster care eligibility **beyond 18 years old**, helping to bridge the high school to college transition.



The Foster Care System in the United States

Foster care refers to the formal and informal care of children outside of their own biological home. Placement within the system occurs when parents are unable, unwilling or prohibited from caring for their children. Typically, the state government or a social service agency, arranges the removal of a child from their biological parents through the implementation of a wide variety of outcomes and institutional practice.

According to the most recent data, there are more than 415,000 youth in foster care in the United States.³ The average age of a child in the foster care system is eight years old, but can range from birth to 18 years old.⁴ While in care, youth typically experience four housing transitions, bouncing from non-relative foster families, kinship care and residential/group home facilities.⁵

Youth spend an average of two-three years in foster care. However, time spent in the foster care system can range from short term placements consisting of a few weeks, months or exceed 18 years.⁶ Although many reasons exist for youth being placed in foster care, three main outcomes remain consistent for individuals placed in the foster system: reunification, legal adoption and long-term foster care (or aging out). Based on their respective criteria, each of these outcomes has a different effect on how state financial aid policies impact foster youth. This distinction between foster youth in the system and those who have been adopted or aged out can be particularly relevant to the way they are impacted by certain financial aid policies.

Outcomes of Youth in Foster Care: Reunification, legal adoption and long-term care

Reunification

Reunification refers to the process of returning children in out-of-home care to their biological families. There continues to be debate, both colloquially and through policy discourse, surrounding the issues of reunification and whether it is the most desirable option for the child; however, reunification remains both the primary goal, and most common outcome, for the majority of foster youth cases.⁷

In most circumstances where a child is reunited with their biological family, state policies addressing foster youth eligibility for financial aid cease to impact these individuals. In most cases, these individuals are treated, for financial aid purposes, similarly to their non-former foster youth peers.

Legal Adoption

After reunification, the second most common outcome for foster youth is legal adoption. Of the 415,000 youth in foster care in 2014, approximately 107,000 had adoption as the primary case goal, while approximately 50,000 youth were actually adopted. The Children's Bureau estimates that more than 80 million families consider adopting from the foster care system but are misled by myths of bureaucratic red tape, high adoption costs and the mischaracterization of foster youth.⁸ As such, federal initiatives such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893) have greatly increased support services for families looking to adopt children from the foster care system, creating a relatively easy, and low-cost, licensing and preparation pathway through adoption tax credits, financial subsidies and healthcare coverage. Similarly, more efficient and equitable processes now exist for home studies and hearings, increasing and diversifying those who successfully adopt from foster care.



Three types of families adopt children: former foster parents (53 percent), relatives (32 percent) and non-relatives (15 percent). Of the families who adopt children from foster care, 67 percent are married couples, 28 percent are single females, 3 percent are single males and 2 percent are unmarried couples.⁹

Long-Term Care (Aging Out)

Due to the increasing numbers of displaced youth and lack of successful adoption or reunification efforts, many youth remain in long-term care. In any given year, of the approximately 415,000 youth in foster care, about 28,000 will age out of the system at 18 years old, never having been reunified with their families or adopted.¹⁰ Much of the extant literature on foster youth focuses on this subset population as the prolonged time and lack of successful placement has been linked to exponential negative effects.¹¹

Foster Youth and Higher Education

A few important challenges of long-term foster care include prolonged experiences of abuse and maltreatment, disruptions in educational development as a result of numerous transitions, and long-term disparities in resources for support services - all of which have the propensity to negatively impact educational attainment.¹² Research suggests grim expectations of educational attainment for former foster youth in comparison to their non-foster peers.

Of the 415,000 foster youth annually in the system, only 46 percent will earn a high school or GED diploma and less than 3 percent will obtain a bachelor's degree - an outcome with little variation over the last two decades.¹³

Youth who have spent time in the foster care system are among the most marginalized student populations. As a result of personal, social and systemic issues, many of these youth struggle to reach successful outcomes in a variety of areas, including postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment.¹⁴ In recent decades, both federal and state governments created policies to increase college attainment rates for all students, but some groups, specifically foster care alumni, continue to slip through the cracks.

Policy Confusion Deterring Educational Success

Regardless of the ever-increasing need for a highly-educated workforce, for many foster youth, postsecondary degree attainment is out of reach. Significant social policy and program development aimed at supporting foster care reform exists, and while social policy has intended to increase supports, gaps remain in the policy framework.

Foster youth continue to suffer unique challenges as a result of **entangled policy initiatives** and an **inconsistent spectrum of support**. Policymakers have the ability to **untangle these barriers**, and create **tangible educational pathways** for foster youth.



A more inclusive scenario is a tuition assistance program that applies to a broader range of foster youth – those who have been adopted and those currently in the system. **Maine and Florida** have programs that include both groups.

Maine uses federal funds to implement the Child and Family Services Post-Secondary Education Tuition Waiver program.¹⁷ Maine residents are eligible for this tuition waiver if they have been accepted to an in-state university, technical school or the Maine Maritime Academy, and meet one of the following criteria: (1) are in the care of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) when the student graduates from high school or receives their GED; (2) were adopted from foster care and their adoptive parent(s) receives a subsidy from DHHS or (3) are under permanent guardianship from foster care and their legal guardian(s) receives a subsidy from DHHS. Students must also complete the FAFSA annually, achieve satisfactory academic progress and re-apply for the tuition waiver each year. Although Maine has approximately 1,700 foster youth, the state caps this program at 30 new students per year; yet, they have never reached the cap since the program's inception in 2007.

Florida's tuition waiver program provides funding to any public university or college in the Florida College System and School District Workforce Education Programs.¹⁸ The waiver remains valid until the student turns 28 years old and covers tuition and fees. Students are eligible for the waiver if they meet one of the following criteria: (1) under 18 years old and still in foster care; (2) more than 18 years old and was in the custody of the department on their 18th birthday; (3) under 18 years old and in the custody of a relative; (4) more than 18 years old and was in the custody of a relative on their 18th birthday; (5) more than 18 years old and in the custody of a non-relative on their 18th birthday; (6) spent six months in the custody of the department after reaching 16 years old and (7) adopted after May 5, 1997. As a result of the broad eligibility requirements, Florida's tuition waiver program encompasses current foster youth and those who have been adopted or aged out. Though inclusive, this program excludes students who were reunited with their biological parents prior to their 16th birthday.

Among the 50 states, **North Carolina** has taken intentional steps to offer the broadest spectrum of support for foster youth.¹⁹ The North Carolina Reach program covers tuition and fees at any of the 74 North Carolina public community colleges, colleges or universities. In addition to financial support, the state also provides housing, meals, books and supplies, transportation, child care, comprehensive student support, mentoring, internships and even care packages for the students. In order to meet program eligibility requirements, students must: (1) be a resident of North Carolina; (2) be eligible for in-state tuition; (3) be either adopted after turning 12 years old or aged out of care on their 18th birthday; (4) be under 26 years old; (5) submit the FAFSA annually and (6) maintain satisfactory academic progress. As inclusive as the North Carolina Reach program is, it still omits certain students who gain independence prior to their 18th birthday or who were adopted before they turned 12 years old. Because of the thoroughness of the support services offered and the comprehensive eligibility requirements, North Carolina Reach is one of the most successful tuition waiver programs in the country.

Where are the gaps?

This snapshot of tuition assistance programs for foster youth transitioning to higher education demonstrates how these policies support foster youth both broadly and narrowly. Many states have funding options, but it can be difficult to understand what is available, who is eligible and under what guidelines. Additionally, some policies have seemingly extraneous guidelines that can create further obstacles for foster youth seeking to utilize these options.



One challenge with many of the tuition assistance programs is that they do not cover additional costs beyond tuition and fees. State policies that have narrow allowances for how funding can be utilized often fail to take into account additional expenses faced by students for housing, books, transportation and childcare. Many of these auxiliary expenditures could make enrolling in college more difficult for foster youth.²⁰

Similarly, other policies narrow the population eligible for support under tuition waiver provisions by establishing state limits or caps on how many individuals can receive funding. **Alaska** and **Maine** both cap the number of tuition waivers awarded per year at 10 and 30 respectively. These caps have the potential to exclude foster youth in need of coverage. Lastly, some financial aid policies that require additional prerequisites for funding, beyond what their non-foster peers must navigate create additional barriers for foster youth. A number of programs require volunteer hours, work requirements, personal financial contributions and certain academic standards -common elements of some non-foster focused aid policies, but these requirements take on additional weight when placed on a student population already overcoming significant odds by seeking postsecondary enrollment.

Additionally, some existing policies can pose more serious challenges for students than others. For instance, one state requires applicants to have adequate social skills (as determined by a social worker), in order to be eligible for aid.²¹ Although well intentioned, the practical application of requirements, such as these, creates additional barriers to postsecondary entry for foster-youth - barriers not required of non-foster youth and ones that place burdens on some of the most disadvantaged of aspiring college students.

The spectrum of support for foster youth attainment through state financial aid policy is broad but can be difficult to navigate. While several viable financial aid options exist, they differ from state to state and offer varying definitions and eligibility requirements, creating an ambiguous pathway for policymakers looking for useful policy lessons and foster youth seeking aid. The degree of variance across implementation of these programs is due to the large amount of autonomy states have in adopting these policies. This entanglement of policies continues at the federal level as a number of policy initiatives are designed to incentivize states' intentionality in increasing educational attainment of foster youth.

Federal Policy Levers

Federal policies outlining requirements and guidelines for foster care began in 1967 with major laws enacted by Congress, resulting in more than 65 federal programs committed to providing resources that directly or indirectly support educational attainment among foster youth.²² Many of these initiatives, while federally funded, are administered by individual states - sometimes unintentionally exacerbating an already complicated menu of financial aid policy options.

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) and the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA) are two landmark federal policies that incentivize states to increase postsecondary degree attainment for foster youth. These two policies fundamentally changed the landscape of the foster system and increased efforts to encourage postsecondary enrollment and support.

Chafee Foster Care Independence Program

The CFCIP was established as part of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 to incentivize broad state support for foster youth regarding employment, financial and household stability, healthcare coverage, community support, education attainment and personal development. Under CFCIP, the federal government funds an annual allotment of \$140 million, which is proportionally allocated to states based on their percentage of all foster youth, with a minimum state award of \$500,000 regardless of the number of individuals in care.²³

To meet eligibility requirements, states must submit a five-year plan for program design and development, including a designation of a state agency (or agencies) to serve as administrator of the programs. Additionally, states are required to match 20 percent of the federal funds they receive. States must spend any CFCIP funds within two years, and, while states can only allocate 30 percent for housing initiatives, they can use the rest to supplement a wide variety of support or enrichment programs that align with the overall goals of the CFCIP.²⁴ This flexibility in funding design allows states the freedom to opt-in to develop programs that serve the needs of foster youth in their state.

The CFCIP notably increases education pathways for foster youth by incentivizing states with federal dollars to create increase support initiatives, but also provides direct financial compensation to foster youth seeking postsecondary enrollment.

Education Training Vouchers

The Educational and Training Vouchers Program (ETV) for youth aging out of foster care was added to the CFCIP in 2002. The program not only provides financial support to students, it is a system of academic and social support designed to help foster youth successfully complete their education. ETVs are grants that extend support of the CFCIP directly to students. Also administered at the state level, but funded federally, the ETV program incentivizes students with up to \$5,000 toward enrollment in a Title IV, accredited training or postsecondary program. Award amounts are determined by unmet financial need and may be used for tuition, room and board, books, student loan repayments and qualified living expenses, such as rent, childcare and health services. To meet eligibility requirements, youth must be at least 16 years old, have obtained a high school diploma or GED and either be currently in foster care, adopted from foster care after turning 16 years old or aged out of foster care.²⁵

Students must enroll in the ETV program before they are 21 years old, but the maximum age to receive the ETV support services varies from state to state. While the award is decided at the federal level, each state's ETV program liaison is responsible for determining applicant eligibility, managing various state caseloads and dispersing the funds accordingly. Students must reapply each year and participants must demonstrate satisfactory progress toward academic goals, establish biweekly contact with ETV program administrator and submit ongoing academic progress reports in order to maintain the benefit. Awards can be combined with other loans, scholarships and state-based foster youth tuition waivers in hopes of providing broader and more substantive support.²⁶

The other landmark federal initiative that reshaped the foster care system is the FCA. The FCA is the most comprehensive child welfare reform bill to be passed and signed into law, and provides opportunities for additional federal funding sources while increasing opportunities to better serve children in foster care. This legislation not only increases adoption pathways, but broadens support for foster youth through various social service initiatives, easing the transition into adulthood and subsequently, enrollment in postsecondary education.



Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was enacted on Oct. 7, 2008, and amended the Social Security Act to expand adoption incentives and support for caregivers. It also extended foster care for individuals more than 18 years old. This change in federal policy was informed by findings from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (The Midwest Study)²⁷ - the largest longitudinal study of young people aging out of foster care and transitioning to adulthood since the passage of John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program in 1999.²⁸ As a result of this initiative, states that adopt this legislation can claim federal reimbursement for the costs of foster care payments made on behalf of foster youth until they are 21 years old.

For states to qualify for reimbursement of care costs, the individual must be: (1) either completing high school or participating in an equivalent program; (2) enrolled in postsecondary or vocational school; (3) participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment; (4) employed for at least 80 hours per month or (5) incapable of doing any of these activities due to a medical condition. They can be living independently in a supervised facility, as well as placed in a foster home or group home setting.

This extension of care until the individual turns 21 years old affords them all the benefits, protections and services of the foster care system.²⁹ The program also requires state child welfare agencies to help young people develop a youth-directed transition plan during the 90 days immediately before they exit care. Extending care not only creates a longer window to build overall life competency skills, but extends necessary supports to navigate the college enrollment and transition process.³⁰ Extending care is particularly important to bridge the transition period when foster youth are graduating from high school and potentially enrolling in a postsecondary program. In response to the federal recommendation for extended care, states created their own extended care policies to provide services to foster youth beyond their 18th birthday.

Nearly all states have some form of extended care policy, but these policies differ in their components. Similar to tuition assistance programs, extended care policies vary by age and eligibility criteria across states. For example, **Connecticut** has extended care until an individual turns 24 years old, which aligns with the age at which a student becomes an independent student for financial aid purposes. Other states, like **Delaware, Idaho** and **Nebraska** have extended care policies, but only increased the age limit to 19 years old from 18 years old, the age at which foster youth historically aged-out of the system.³¹ Programs also vary in terms of who is eligible for extended care. For example, in **Florida**, youth wishing to remain in care beyond their 18th birthday must meet with a case worker monthly and have their case reviewed in court every six months.

Chafee grants, education training vouchers and extended care opportunities support foster youth through the college transition process and into enrollment by making these students **eligible** for **additional state-based supports**.



Untangling the Policy Web

The entanglement of federal, state, local and institutional policies, the broad range of programs, and the diverse needs of foster care youth can be difficult to articulate, and foster youth may experience increased barriers because of this. Education Commission of the States reached out to speak with state program leadership in four states in an effort to assess some of the barriers in navigating these complex policies and their impact on program development and implementation at the state-level.

Education Commission of the States posed several questions to state policy implementer and decision makers to support a dialogue about state efforts to craft financial aid policies that support foster youth. Questions discussed included:

- How much and where is your state allocating CFCIP funds to support the goals of this program?
- Where is your state-required CFCIP 20 percent matching investment being spent?
- Are tuition waiver programs funded by federal, state or institutional dollars?
- How is your program information distributed by key constituents in your state?
- How is your state assessing program success?
- What are the barriers (policy, funding, social) that impact policy implementation?

In posing these questions to program leadership, it was overwhelmingly clear that while states have various funding-based initiatives in place to assist college-going in foster youth, there is a fair amount of confusion as to who exactly finances those initiatives and how are funds appropriated. For example, two agency employees from different states said while they receive and process ETV applications, they did not understand how individual monetary awards were decided once applications were sent to the capital.³² Similarly, almost all of the individuals that Education Commission of the States talked with expressed ambiguity in understanding how CFCIP funding and state appropriations were specifically outlined to support foster youth education attainment. While well intentioned and dedicated to foster youth, the complexity and overlaying of local, state and federal policy creates an environment likely limiting the positive impact policy prescriptions could otherwise have.

Because states are given the authority over many policies and programs related to the experiences of foster youth, it creates a wide variance of support. As demonstrated, there is a historical national policy agenda supporting this population, yet the prevalence of underachieving foster youth continues to persist. Through an increased focus on coordination and communication,

POLICYMAKERS AT THE STATE LEVEL CAN ENHANCE THE IMPACT OF EXISTING PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT RATES FOR FOSTER YOUTH.

Policy Recommendations

Education Commission of the States does not suggest that states recreate the wheel, but rather, make better use of current policy supports to implement policies that intentionally target postsecondary attainment. To support intentional policy redesign, Education Commission of the States has continued dialogue with state financial aid experts, challenging them to take a clean sheet approach to rethinking state financial aid that would best align to



the needs of today’s students and support aggressive state postsecondary education goals. **A set of principles** were developed as a result of this work which frame and advance state aid redesign conversations. These four key principles are intended to serve as guideposts for state policy leaders as they seek to rethink state financial aid policies and programs.

Moving Forward: Recommendations to support educational attainment for foster youth

States should consider filing for reimbursement provided by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) and promoting training vouchers (ETV) for foster youth

This will not only incentivize students to pursue postsecondary enrollment, but provide states with the level of financial support necessary to sustain target policy reform and administration.

States could consider expanding foster care age eligibility

While this policy option does not directly generate financial support for postsecondary access, it does increase engagement of foster youth during the college transition process with an extension of support networks and benefits. To that end, policies need to be inclusive in supporting those goals. Programs that are centered on college access must also be designed to offer supplemental supports that engender retention. Wrap-around services that cover housing, childcare, transportation, education supplies, financial literacy, counseling and academic development are integral in achieving foster youth education attainment. Layering support and wrap-around services on top of financial aid may reduce the number of foster youth alumni who fall through the cracks during the transition to postsecondary education. Policymakers and program leadership should scaffold their efforts in this way to maximize federal and state funding to meet attainment goals.

States should consider the creation or enhancement of tuition waiver programs

Extending additional financial supports for foster youth create tangible pathways to postsecondary attainment. Programs should be broad enough to recognize the diversity in the foster youth experience and include youth who are currently in foster care, adopted or have aged out instead of targeting one particular

Education Commission of the States designed these four key principles to serve as guideposts for state policy leaders as they seek to rethink state financial aid policies and programs.

4 Principles of State Financial Aid Redesign

Principle 1: Financial aid programs should be student centered

Student-centered financial aid programs define students as the primary beneficiaries of aid programs, and, in the process, utilize dollars to support student access and success. Placing students at the center of financial aid policy development requires that states review how students access the benefits of state aid programs.

Principle 2: Financial aid programs should be goal driven and data informed

Aid programs should have a clearly defined and easily understood intent aligned with measurable state education and workforce goals. Setting a goal for what state aid programs are meant to achieve must inform program design.

Principle 3: Financial aid programs should be timely and flexible

Aid programs should provide financial support to students when it can have the greatest impact on enrollment and persistence decisions.

Principle 4: Financial aid programs should be broadly inclusive of all students’ educational pathways

Aid programs need to respond to the diverse enrollment options available to students. As the variety of educational delivery models and enrollment options available to students diversifies, aid programs should adapt to allow for students to select options best designed to meet their needs.



subset of foster youth or capping the number of waivers granted. The impact of aid programs is limited when extensive eligibility requirements are present. Work and community service requirements, social assessments and financial contributions only further diminish the possibility of foster youth taking advantage of these programs. Expanding these tuition waiver guidelines will likely increase the number of applications, which will require making programs broad enough to support the totality of foster youth in their state.

States should consider increasing outreach initiatives to raise awareness of support programs for foster youth

Many state examples do not meet the caps established for their programs. This could be attributed to a lack of understanding by foster youth of viable support options. Specifically, program administrators must center their efforts on increasing awareness, centralizing information and providing assistance during the application process. Working with local, community-based organizations can help share information about state initiatives, likely resulting in more foster youth utilizing the mechanisms in place to support their own attainment.

Final Thoughts

Though there is a long history of social policy development and program implementation regarding foster youth, there has been less policy intentionality directed toward measuring the impacts of these initiatives on postsecondary attainment. Many states are already investing resources toward increasing the postsecondary degree attainment rate for foster youth alumni. However, these resources are not always effectively targeted resulting in significant social and educational implications. Through a realignment of priorities and support for foster youth, state policymakers can help move the needle on attainment rates.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs produces a range of research papers, policy briefs and practice tools on child welfare topics, and works to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families and the communities where they live. <http://www.casey.org/>

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)

The (AFCARS) collects case-level information from state and tribal title IV-E agencies on all children in foster care and those who have been adopted or aged out. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/about-afcars>

Court Appointed Special Advocates Association (CASA)

CASA, together with its state and local member programs, supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy through a network of nearly 1,000 local community programs, training and curriculum, policy technical assistance and funding development. http://www.casaforchildren.org/site/c.mtJSJ7MPIsE/b.5301295/k.5573/National_CASA_Association.htm

Foster Youth In Action (FYA)

FYA is a national organization of foster youth leaderships that establishes, trains and supports a growing list of youth-led groups to organize, take action, and work for policy and practice change in their states and communities. <http://www.fosteryouthaction.org/>

Fostering Care To Success (FC2S)

FC2S is the oldest and largest national nonprofit organization working solely with college bound foster youth and provides tuition assistance, transition support, mentorship, workforce and life skills development, policy tracking, and collective networking. <http://www.fc2success.org/about-us/>



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