



# Building Policy Momentum for Foster Youth Support in Postsecondary Education

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Former foster youth pursuing a postsecondary credential are an often-overlooked student population.<sup>1</sup> However, across the country, policymakers at the federal, state and institutional levels are creating policies to increase their access to higher education. Four states in particular — **Colorado, Iowa, Oregon** and **Texas** — have demonstrated success in creating policies aimed at increasing the percentage of foster youth with a postsecondary credential.

Capitalizing on the policy momentum in these states and others, Education Commission of the States hosted a two-day State Policy Academy, “Strengthening State Support for Foster Youth in Postsecondary Education.” This convening, held mid-September in Austin, Texas, brought together multiple state teams to understand the current policy landscape, collaborate on how to develop and/or redesign programs to better support foster youth postsecondary attainment, and brainstorm best practices for continued policy development and implementation.

The state teams comprised individuals from multiple state agencies, legislative bodies and departments. Participants shared the historical overview of policy development in their states, current initiatives and future goals. These states have similar goals — to increase postsecondary degree attainment — and also face similar roadblocks that can derail well-intentioned policy actions. This policy academy provided key opportunities for states leading this work to collaborate and learn from each other, while receiving technical assistance from Education Commission of the States.

In addition to state teams from **Colorado, Oregon** and **Texas**, legislative staff from **Iowa** — which has seen particular success with foster youth policy development — highlighted policy design and implementation approaches in their state; and researchers provided an overview of federal policies likely to impact state policy agendas.

To increase foster youth attainment, states need strong leadership, collaboration across silos and commitment to policy development that prioritizes program support and resources for this population.

This brief discusses key takeaways from the collaborative convening, in addition to providing:

- Information about existing foster youth support programs.
- Goals for foster youth educational attainment in **Colorado, Oregon** and **Texas**.
- Highlights of state policy efforts in **Iowa** and pending federal policies concerning foster youth.
- Considerations to assist policy development that supports foster youth attainment.

During the convening, state teams used the Four Principles for State Financial Aid Redesign to guide discussion. These principles aim to serve as guideposts for state policy leaders as they seek to rethink state financial aid policies and programs focused on foster youth. More information about this framework can be found [here](#).

## Four Principles for **STATE FINANCIAL AID REDESIGN**

### Principle 1

**Financial aid programs should be student centered.** Aid programs designed around students and their needs set students up for successful outcomes.

### Principle 2

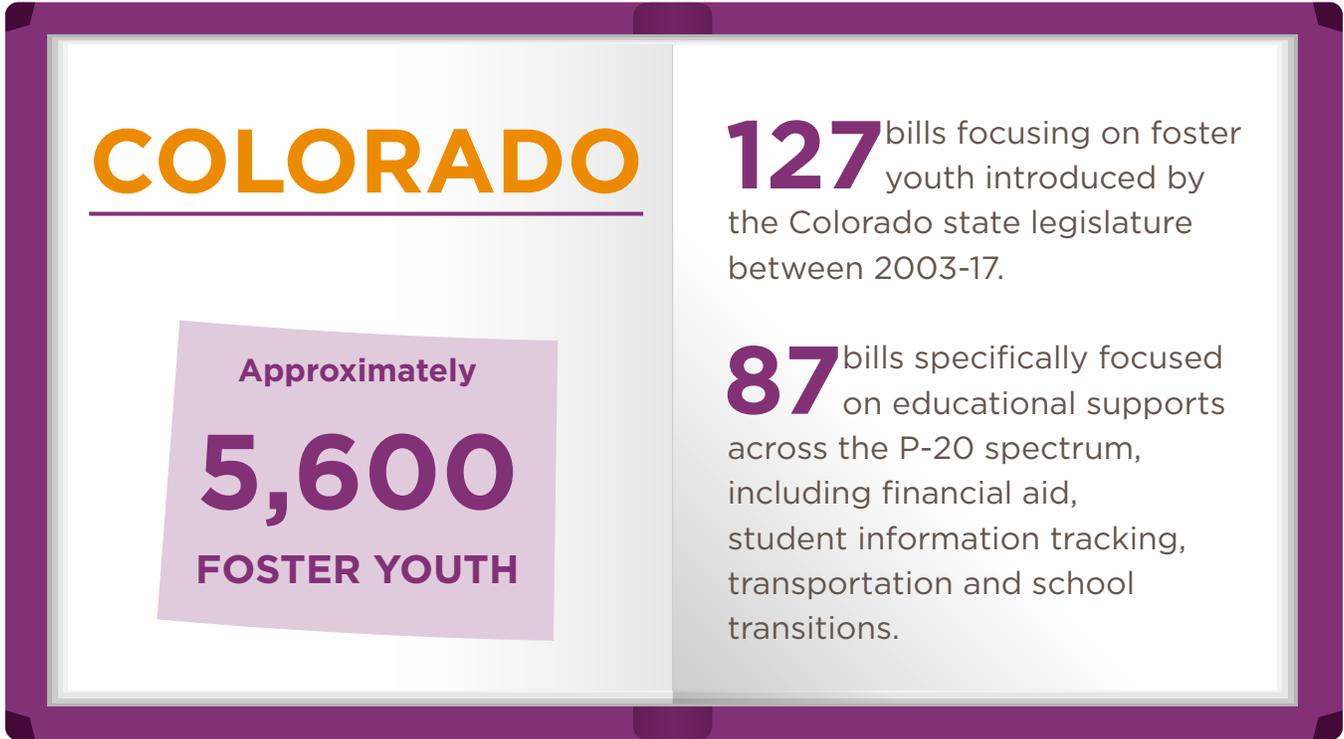
**Financial aid programs should be goal driven and data informed.** Aid programs should have a clearly defined and easily understood intent aligned with measurable state education and workforce goals.

### 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.



## Current Initiatives

Colorado has several support initiatives across the P-20 spectrum, and many are broad and inclusive enough to still act as important streams of support for this population.

The Colorado Every Transition Counts report offers a statewide perspective on educational success among foster youth through an examination of the relationship between mobility, partnerships and achievement.<sup>2</sup> Leaders continue to see slow, but steady, academic gains for students. Much of Colorado’s demonstrated success is due to a commitment from state leaders to collaborate across education sectors and state agencies to leverage statewide data for transformative change. The Colorado Department of Education launched the [Foster Care Education Program](#) in 2012 to support local education agencies and communities serving these students. The program operates through a four-pronged framework, utilizing legislation, resources, coordinated responses and community-school partnerships to help students in foster care achieve postsecondary success.

The [Colorado Children’s Caucus](#) provides a forum for all members of the Colorado General Assembly to discuss the challenges facing Colorado youth and to work together to develop policy recommendations. In addition to cultivating state innovations through programming, the Children’s Caucus also tracks all proposed legislation across advocacy issues that impact children in care.

The Colorado legislature has targeted efforts to ensure positive transitions for foster youth by implementing policy that delineates guidelines for sharing transcript information and school permanency recommendations across counties.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, this policy requires each school district and the state charter school institutes to designate a person to act

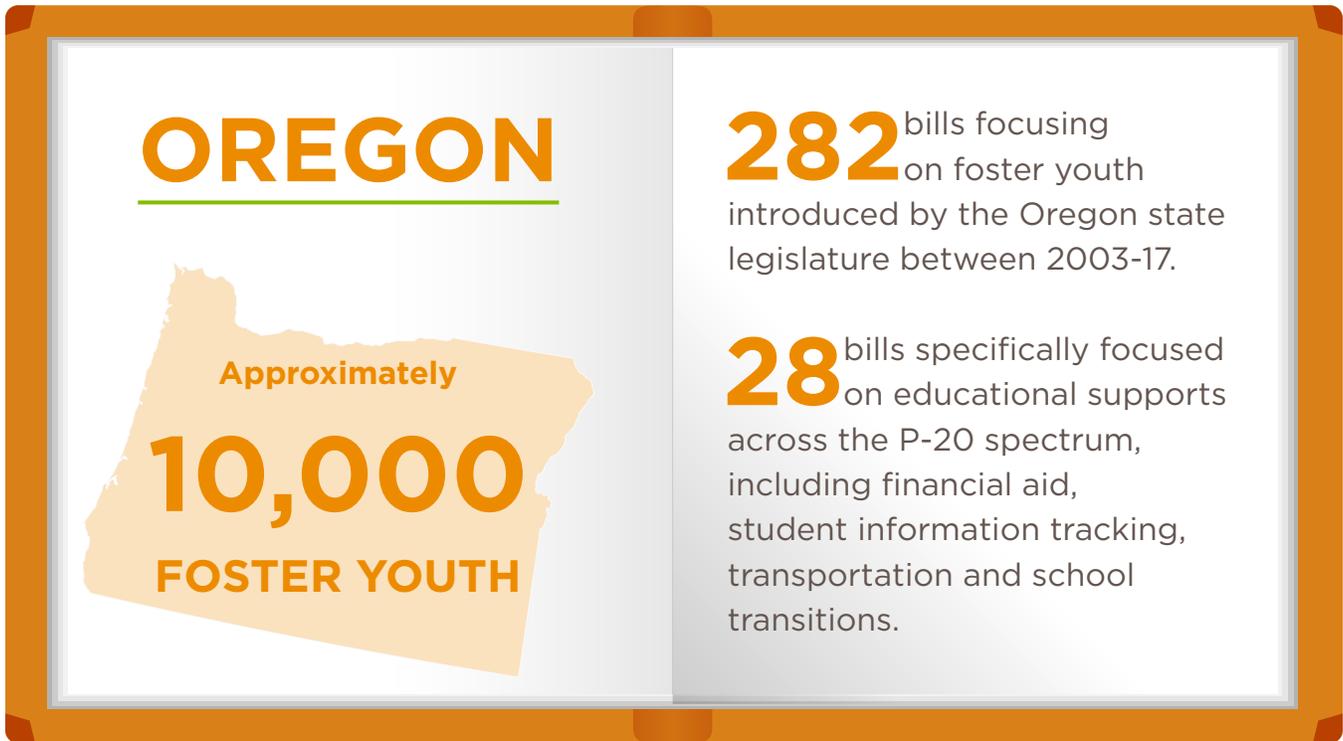
as the district's child welfare education liaison. The duties of the liaison include working with child placement agencies, county departments and the state department to facilitate the prompt and appropriate academic placement, transfer and enrollment.

## Next Steps

Despite these broad efforts, youth in care still face barriers to postsecondary attainment. Foster youth matriculate to Colorado postsecondary institutions at a rate of 26.7 percent, compared with 57.4 percent of their non-foster peers.<sup>4</sup> The 2018 Colorado strategic state goals aim to dramatically close these equity gaps through ongoing policy development, collaboration across agencies and by scaling up current practices.

As an emerging response to these efforts, education and policy leaders in Colorado have established an interagency taskforce to assess and redesign solutions to support foster youth and incarcerated youth. Preliminary goals include:

- Establishing education liaisons at each county department of human services to bridge agency divides and work with practitioners at higher education institutions.
- Organizing a district grant program dedicated to educational stability and opportunities and success for foster youth mobility, enrollment and postsecondary completion.
- Leveraging existing programs that may not specifically target foster youth but are able to support them. Examples include Colorado Student Leaders Institute, the department of education's Independent Career and Academic Plan program and the Single Point of Contact Model for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth.



## Current Initiatives

Oregon's programs for former foster youth in postsecondary education are broadly inclusive and narrowly targeted. For example, the [Oregon tuition waiver](#) for current and former foster youth covers tuition and required fees remaining after funds from the Pell Grant, the Oregon Opportunity Grant and other institutional aid have been applied at any state public institution. To be eligible, students must have spent at least six months in the foster care system after age 14 and remained in care through at least the age of 16. Beyond the academic and financial requirements, the program also requires recipients to perform 30 hours of community service each academic year.

In addition to the tuition waiver for foster youth, Oregon also has the [Oregon Opportunity Grant](#), which is the largest need-based financial aid program in the state. All students are eligible for the tuition and fee waiver, unless they have an adjusted gross income of \$70,000 or more. They are also eligible for a prioritized waiver that is applied after federal and state grants and only covers tuition and fees. Very few students apply for and receive the tuition waiver because the cost of tuition is met by other sources.

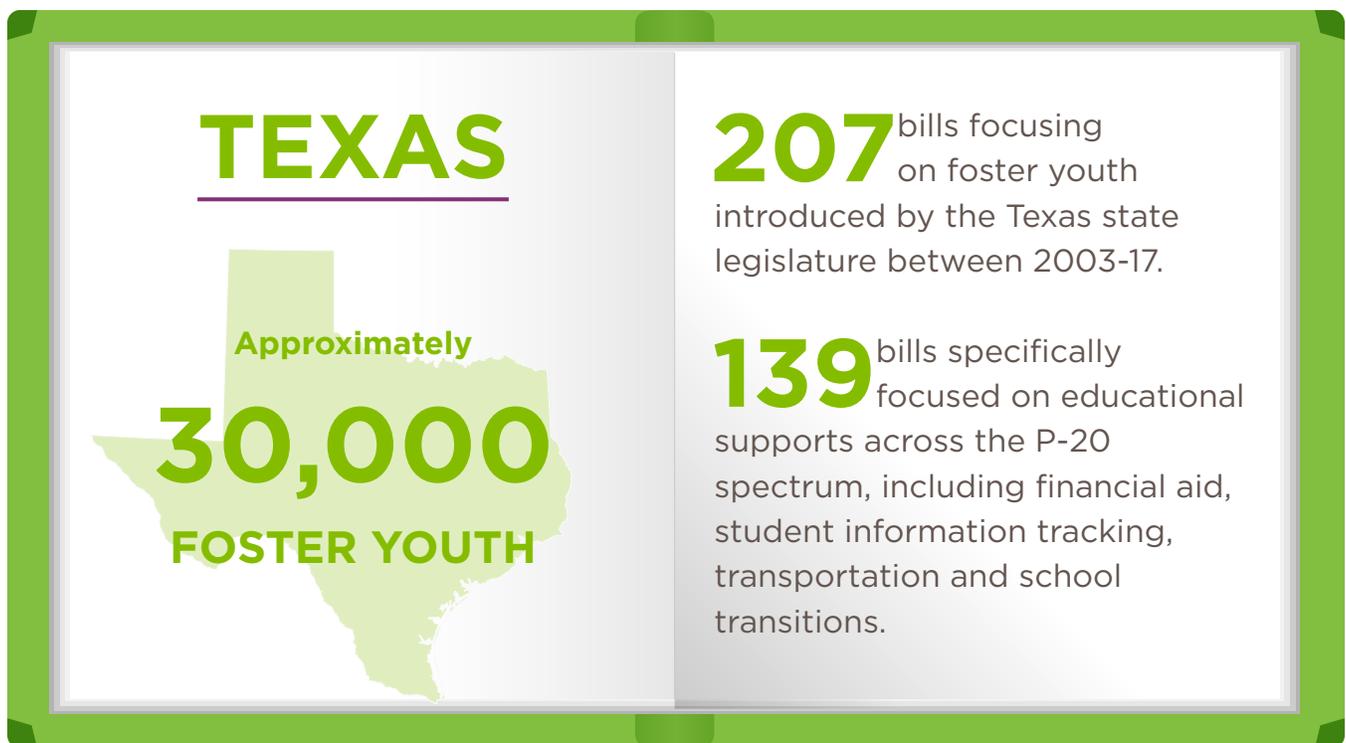
## Next Steps

Participants from the Oregon state team identified that policies for foster youth pursuing a postsecondary credential in Oregon suffer from a curse of excess — meaning multiple programs in multiple agencies create a tangled web of rules and regulations. When designing tuition assistance programs for foster youth, states should consider the whole financial

aid landscape in their state to best identify unmet need and not duplicate efforts. While Oregon is making progress and funneling resources toward foster youth in the state, the state team expressed that Oregon would benefit from communication, clarity and messaging both about and to this important population.

The team expressed interest in documenting and streamlining data and resources on foster youth. Because different state agencies are responsible for administering different parts of the foster care system, there is a lack of communication and knowledge about what resources exist.

The team also expressed a desire to drop the community service requirement for the foster youth tuition waiver and formalize the practice of having a foster youth liaison at each postsecondary institution. The state team discussed potential legislators with whom to partner to champion these policies in the legislature.



## Current Initiatives

With about 10 percent of the population nearing college-going age, Texas chose to extend foster care eligibility up to age 21, prolonging child welfare benefits and services often integral in helping youth transition between education sectors.

Additionally, two broad state financial aid programs in Texas increase access for foster youth. First, the Texas Educational Opportunity Grant is a need-based grant for students enrolling in two-year institutions. There is no upper age limit, high school test requirement or full-time enrollment requirement to be eligible for the grant. Though not specifically targeted at foster youth, this program is inclusive to the diverse enrollment criteria for youth in care. In contrast, the TEXAS Grant, the largest state aid program, is focused exclusively on traditionally aged college students. Students must enroll in a postsecondary institution within 16 months of graduation, have a 2.5 GPA, obtain certain high school course requirements and be a full-time college student. The eligibility requirements make the program potentially inaccessible for foster youth who may take a nontraditional path to higher education.

The [Texas College Tuition and Fee Waiver](#) benefits foster youth. The waiver exempts payment of tuition and fees at state-supported colleges or universities for foster youth currently or formerly in the conservatorship of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and for those adopted from DFPS. Students' eligibility requirements include: in care between ages 14-18; high school graduate; adopted from care after Sept. 1, 2009; and enrolled in an undergraduate program by age 25.

Participants from the Texas state team explained that public postsecondary institutions have a designated liaison officer to assist students formerly under the conservancy of DFPS. The [Texas Higher Education Foster Care Liaisons Information and Reference Guide](#) is a resource for the designated foster care liaisons at institutions or for any stakeholders that serve foster care students. In addition, high school counselors are required to talk to students about the Texas College Tuition and Fee Waiver. The state tracked a cohort of 3,855 students who were in foster care in 2008-09 and who had turned 18 years of age; the team shared the following findings:

- Thirty-three percent of those students enrolled in postsecondary education.
- Thirty-three percent of those enrolled in higher education used the fee waiver.
- 1.5 percent received a bachelor's degree.
- 96.4 percent have no degree.

## Next Steps

The team identified two goals in supporting foster youth degree attainment in Texas. The first is to improve outcomes by making support programs a priority for student success. The group discussed the need for changes in financial aid packaging to ensure that students receive the most funding available. They identified maintaining funding for the [Education Reach for Texans](#) as a sustainability challenge. The second goal is to reach foster students through innovative communications, such as student videos that market the tuition waiver and other support systems available to foster youth.

## The Iowa Experience

Policymakers from Iowa, a state that has been a recognized leader in foster youth tuition assistance, attended the convening to share their experiences and best practices.

Over the past year, Iowa folded its [All Iowa Opportunity Foster Care Grant](#) program into its broader All Iowa Opportunity Scholarship. Lawmakers made this change in the education appropriations bill during the 2017 legislative session to reduce the budget by approximately \$450,000 while trying to minimize student impact. The All Iowa Opportunity Scholarship now includes requirements that define foster care student eligibility, and it is available for up to eight full-time semesters of continuous study.

Through the work of some dedicated policymakers, the program for foster youth was not repealed. Instead, by engaging stakeholders — including students, parents, education leaders and elected officials — former foster youth applying for the All Iowa Opportunity Scholarship are given priority for funding. The Iowa experience shows the value of having passionate policymakers who champion these complex issues in the legislature. These champions are vital to the development, enactment and sustainability of policy initiatives.

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## Federal Policy Influence on State Goals

States continue to make great strides in innovating ways to create and sustain better supports for foster youth. As demonstrated in **Colorado, Iowa, Oregon** and **Texas**, policymakers and practitioners continue to leverage cross-agency collaboration, policy and program redesign through legislative activity and increased data-sharing to meet well-articulated goals. While significant reform efforts continue, gaps to support attainment may remain in policy frameworks. And since state policy often hinges on federal policy to maximize limited resources, it is crucial to recognize the entanglement of these two levels of policy.

Two influential pieces of federal legislation that are likely to impact both foster youth receipt of support services and state incentives for delivery of care are:

1. [H.R. 253 Family First Prevention Services Act of 2017.](#)
2. [H.R. 2847 Improving Services for Older Youth in Foster Care Act.](#)

For the [21 states](#) that extend the age of foster care eligibility beyond age 18, this bill would allow them to offer assistance and services up to age 23 and allow individuals to be eligible for an education training voucher through age 25. Extending care like this is particularly important to bridge the transition period from high school graduation to potential postsecondary enrollment. The benefits of these two pieces of legislation also reward states by allowing for the reallocation of unused state-specific federal dollars to other states, thus likely helping move more foster youth move through the education pipeline.

## Moving Forward

So where do we go from here? As equity continues to be a prime focus for many state policy agendas, policymakers must understand the needs and experiences of a growing and diverse student body — and that includes foster youth who continue to face multiple barriers. Through this convening and the great impact that these states have had so far, we have identified a few common themes to assist policy development that supports foster youth postsecondary attainment in all 50 states.

**Find and utilize the foster youth champions in your state.** The child welfare system, in conjunction with education systems and entangled federal and state policies, can be hard to navigate for those who are not intimately involved. Yet many advocates and practitioners are already doing important work in states. Leverage these networks of strong voices to help inform policy development, and when able, bring foster youth into the conversation to help policymakers understand the impacts of policy decisions.

**Make equity an integral component to your state's strategic plan.** Equity measures cannot be met without the careful consideration of diverse student groups and how best to meet their needs in your state. While we provide a few state exemplars, the guiding Four Principles for State Financial Aid Redesign show that there are many ways to drive an equity agenda that supports all students, including those from historically underserved groups.

**Work across silos.** Collaboration is paramount for policy change that supports better outcomes for foster youth. Because foster youth must traverse many different agencies, systems and disciplines to pursue educational attainment, policymakers and practitioners must work together to help untangle these often well-intentioned, but inadvertently limiting, policy barriers that can deter their success.

Bringing states together to learn from each other will continue to serve an integral role in the development of equity-minded policy solutions. The policy answers will differ between states and depend on many variables, including funding, governance, population, geography and postsecondary programs.

## ENDNOTES

1. Emily Parker and Molly Sarubbi, *Tuition Assistance Programs for Foster Youth Pursuing Postsecondary Education*, (Denver: Education Commission of the States, March 2017), <https://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/Tuition-Assistance-Programs-for-Foster-Youth-in-Postsecondary-Education.pdf>.
2. Elysia V. Clemens and Alison Phillips Sheesley, *Every Transition Counts: Educational Stability of Colorado's Students in Foster Care 2007-08 To 2013-14*, (Greeley: University of Northern Colorado, May 2, 2016), [http://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/pdf/reports/Every\\_Transition\\_Counts\\_V1\\_Interactive.pdf](http://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/pdf/reports/Every_Transition_Counts_V1_Interactive.pdf).
3. Colorado Revised Statute 22-32-138, Out-of-home placement students, transfer procedures, absences, exemptions, (2010), <http://www.lpdirect.net/casb/crs/22-32-138.html>.
4. The Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement, *2015-16 State Policy Report: Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement*, (Denver: Colorado Department of Education, March 2017), <http://www.cde.state.co.us/dropoutprevention/2015-16statepolicyondpse>.

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