Foster Youth and Schools

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System report indicates that 437,465 children were in foster care as of 2016 (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2018). This was a 2.3% increase from 2015 (National Council for Adoption, 2018). Youth transitioning out of foster care often do so with limited educational attainment and end up with relatively high rates of homelessness, unemployment, involvement with the criminal justice system, and mental health and substance abuse problems (Courtney & Heuring 2005).

Foster youth at different ages experience unique challenges. Many have experienced trauma in their original homes, as well as instability within the foster care system (e.g., often changing housing placements and schools). Some manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems at school and experience difficulties when aging out of the foster care system. As public concern has increased, government agencies, non-profits, universities, and school districts have heightened their focus on improving the lives of these young people.

Addressing Barriers to Learning and Positive Life Outcomes

Before the *Every Student Succeeds Act* was passed in 2015, schools were not mandated to report academic achievement data for children in foster care. This allowed for what has been called the "Invisible Achievement Gap." Now that schools are required to record and report foster youth academic performance each year, the gap is exposed. For example, Clemens and colleagues (2018) indicate that 87% of foster youth are below grade level in math when entering high school.

The Invisible Achievement Gap

In California, foster youth scored 79.2 points below the state standard in English Language Arts and 114 points below the state standard in Mathematics. Foster children were among the lowest scoring group, only scoring slightly better than students with disabilities. In addition, almost 19% are chronically absent. And, their high school graduation rates are 59%, the lowest among any student population with only 10.4% of those who graduate prepared to go to college (California Department of Education, 2018).

Before even entering the system, those in foster care often have experienced abusive or neglectful home lives. On average, the worst test scores for foster youth are within the year before being removed from their original homes (Clemens, et al., 2018).

As they move through the foster care system, many experience harmful instability (i.e., multiple changes in placement, school moves, disrupted social networks). Available data indicate that 22 to 70 percent experience placement disruption each year (Clemens, et al., 2018). For example, in one large school district, more than one third of foster children attend two or more schools each school year (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2018).

Moving to a new family usually means leaving behind familiar environments and important social connections such as teachers, classmates, neighbors, friends, and family members. This contributes to stress and can interfere with school performance and well-being. Clemens and colleagues (2018) note that "Each time [placement and school] transitions co-occur, academic growth is reduced on average by 3.7 percentile points in reading, 3.0 percentile points in writing, and 3.5 percentile points in math, which in turn reduces the next year's achievement level, which then provides a lower base for future growth." Such outcomes contribute to adverse consequences for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Estimates suggest that more than 23,000 children age out of the foster care system in the United States each year (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). Aging out refers to the process in which youth transition from government appointed living arrangements to an independent living situation (Courtney, 2009; Lee & Berrick, 2014). With this transition, they lose basic government resources, such as secure housing, food stipends, and medical care. (This transition contrasts markedly with the trend for many adolescents who continue receiving parental assistance well into their twenties.)

Evidence indicates that youth who were supported by the state until 21 experience better life outcomes such as increased levels of education, increased perceived social support, and decreased homelessness. With respect to education, findings indicate an 8% increase in completing high school and a 10-11% increase in college enrollment. In 2008, the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* was passed to give some assistance to states that provide for foster youth until the age of 21. As of 2017, 25 states and the District of Columbia had extended foster care beyond the age 18 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017).

About the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*

Goals: to encourage permanent placement with willing relatives by providing them federal financial assistance; to support and allow youth to maintain family and sibling connections by keeping sibling groups together; to increase the number of adoptions for waiting children by providing monetary incentives to states; to improve outcomes for older and transitioning youth by providing reimbursement to states that choose to support foster youth beyond the age of eighteen (given they are attending school/vocational training or are employed at least 80 hours a month); to improve outcomes for American Indian and Alaskan Native children by allocating federal money to tribal lands; to improve skills of individuals working with these children by allocating money to support the development and training of workers in the Child Welfare System; and finally, to increase educational stability and improve the coordination of medical needs by allowing students to remain in their school of origin if in the child's best interest (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services).

Various organizations are focused on helping youth transitioning out of foster care. For example, the Jim Casey initiative (part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation) works to improve policy that affects youth who are aging out of the foster care system. It also works directly with youth by matching their savings and increasing their financial education (Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative, n.d.).

For foster youth who have already aged out and find themselves without a place to go, The Covenant House in many cities offers immediate, short-term housing as well helping to find longer-term transition housing and independent living (www.covenanthouse.org). Various other organizations provide resources to current and former foster youth (e.g., chool supplies, tuition aid, emotional support financial management, career counseling). Individuals in a community are encouraged to promote foster care and adoption in their workplaces, give to or start a donation center, become mentors or Court Appointed Special Advocates, or provide pro bono therapy or legal services (Foster Coalition, http://www.fostercoalition.com/foster-coalition-work).

The Role of K-12 Schools

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) added new accommodations for foster youth that comply with the requirements stated in the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*. To increase a stable environment for children in foster care, ESSA provides for transportation services so that despite changes in placement they can remain at their current school. If this is deemed not in the student's best interest, the law requires the youngster be enrolled immediately in the new school with all necessary records promptly transferred. The act also requires a point of contact within the state and local education agencies for each foster youth. And, each year schools are mandated to report the academic scores of foster students (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2015).

All students need schools that maximize *safety, stability, and support.* These concerns have been especially emphasized as essential for foster youth (California School Boards Association, 2016; National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2010). For example, schools are expected to (a) ensure prompt enrollment, (b) provide emotional support, (c) minimize school transitions by making students aware of their right to maintain enrollment at their current school, and (d) provide accommodations if school moves are unavoidable, including allowing for partial credit and immediate transfer of records and enabling recover of credits. They also are expected to actively communicate with the child welfare services and help student's widen their social networks by introducing them to various personal, professional, and community connections.

Community College & Four Year Universities

About 60% of foster youth graduate high school (California Department of Education, 2018). Available data indicate that fewer than 10% of foster youth go on to pursue a college education and of the 10% that apply only 26% complete a degree or certificate of any kind (Tzawa-Hayden, 2004). Only about 3% of foster youth graduate from a four year university (National Foster Youth Institute). These numbers are particularly poignant given a study in which over 70% of foster youth ages 15 to 19 years old expressed a desire to attend college, and 19% expressed a desire to attend graduate school (McMillen et al., 2003).

Clearly, foster youth lack many of the resources possessed by their peers such as financial, social, and emotional supports (California College Pathways, 2017). Fortunately, a significant number of community colleges and four year universities offer programs to help address these inequities. For example. in 2006, California instituted the *Foster Youth Success Initiative* (FYSI) in every community college, equipping each campus with a liaison to clarify financial aid opportunities and provide academic counseling. A program called NextUp also provides former foster youth with resources such as books and supplies, child care, mental health services, career and guidance counseling, tutoring, health services, financial planning, educational planning, and transportation assistance (California Community Colleges, 2018).

A Model Program at a Four Year University
https://www.guardianscholars.ucla.edu/

The Bruin Guardian Scholars Program at the University of California, Los Angeles is designed to help support former foster youth attending the university. It provides scholarships, career counseling, the aid of a social welfare intern, one on one coaching opportunities, a supportive community of peers who have gone through similar life experiences, and workshops covering topics like filing taxes, writing resume and cover letters, and finding affordable housing, and a supportive community of peers who have gone through similar life experiences. By having adults in mentorship roles, youth are able to have a supportive base amongst the stressors of a college environment. Other universities are replicated this model.

Concluding Comments

Children who end up in the foster care system usually have experienced a range of prior adverse living conditions. Once in the system, they often have to endure stressful and unstable situations over a prolonged period. Each school change may result in falling farther and farther behind their peers. Those who stay in the system until the age limit often are forced to transition to adult life without adequate resources to survive, never mind succeed.

Schools are expected to play a significant role in helping foster care youth and all others who encounter barriers to succeeding at school. Given the overlapping nature of the problems manifested by different subgroups of students, policy makers must move beyond the tendency to design so many separate assistance programs. Instead, school improvement efforts need to focus on (1) unifying all activities at a school for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and then (2) developing them into a comprehensive and equitable system that weaves together school and community resources.

> For more on school improvement practices designed to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for preventing problems and providing all students with essential supports, see the following (free) resources from the Center at UCLA:
>
> >*Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide*
> > http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
> >*Improving school improvement*
> > http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

References Cited

Ahrens, K., DuBois, D., Garrison, M., Spencer, R., Richardson, L., & Lozano, P. (2011). Qualitative exploration of relationships with important non-parental adults in the lives of youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*, 1012-1023. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019074091100017X

California College Pathways. (2017). *Accelerating success: Turning insights into action for foster youth at California community colleges*. Online http://www.cacollegepathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Accelerating-Success.pdf

California Community Colleges. (2018). *NextUp*. Online http://nextup.cccco.edu/#what

California Department of Education. (2018). *State performance overview*. Online https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2018#mathematics-card

California School Board Association. (2016). *Our foster youth: What school boards can do.* Online https://www.csba.org/-/media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/GovernanceBriefs/201 605FactSheet_FosterYouth.ashx?la=en&rev=57164f0d64ec4c61965b61a00de598c6

Clemens, E. V., Klopfenstein, K., Lalonde, T. L., & Tis, M. (2018). The effects of placement and school stability on academic growth trajectories of students in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 87*, 86-94. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740917309659

Courtney, M. E. (2009). The difficult transition to adulthood for foster youth in the U.S.: Implications for the state as corporate parent. *Social Policy Report, 23*, 3-18. https://partnersforourchildren.org/resources/publications/difficult-transition-adulthood-foster-youth-us

Courtney, M.E., & Hughes Heuring, D. (2005). The transition to adulthood for youth "aging out" of the foster care system. In D. W. Osgood, E. M. Foster, C. Flanagan, & G. Ruth (Eds.), *On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Park, K., Harty, J., Feng, H., Torres-García, A., & Sayed, S. (2018). *Findings from the California youth transitions to adulthood study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of youth at age 21*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/CY_YT_RE0517_1.pdf

Fawley-King, K., Trask, E. V., Zhang, J., & Aarons, G. A. (2017). The impact of changing neighborhoods, switching schools, and experiencing relationship disruption on children's adjustment to a new placement in foster care. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 63*, 141-150. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27919001

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative website. http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/

Lee, C., & Berrick, J.D. (2014). Experiences of youth who transition to adulthood out of care: Developing a theoretical framework. *Children and Youth Services Review, 46.* https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740914002928

Legal Center for Foster Care and Education. (2013). *The uninterrupted scholars act: How do recent changes to ferpa help child welfare agencies get access to school records?*. Online http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/portals/0/dmx/2013/02/file_20130211_145758_xjnFqt_0.pdf

Legal Center for Foster Care and Education. (2015). How will the every student succeeds act support students in foster care?. Online https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/how-will-the-every-student.pdf

Los Angeles Unified School District. (2018). *Foster Youth Achievement Program.* Online https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/12905

McMillen, J.C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thompson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare, 82*, 475-495. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12875372

National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention. (2010). *National center brief: Childhood trauma and its effect on healthy development*. Online http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/childhood%20trauma_brief_in_final.pdf

National Conference of State Legislators. (2017). *Extending foster care beyond 18.* Online http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/extending-foster-care-to-18.aspx

National Council for Adoption. (2018). *Stats that show our nation's foster care system is in trouble*. https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/blog/2018/01/stats-show-our-nations-foster-care-system-is-in-trouble

National Foster Youth Institute. (2017). 51 useful aging out of foster care statistics. Online https://www.nfyi.org/51-useful-aging-out-of-foster-care-statistics-social-race-media/

Taussig, H & Weiler, L. (2017). *National Mentoring Resource Center population review*. http://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/images/PDF/Mentoring_for_Youth_in_Foster_Care_Population_Review.pdf

Tzawa-Hayden, A. (2004). Take me higher: Helping foster youth pursue higher education. *Child Law Practice, 23*, 163–166. https://www.americanbar.org/digital-asset-abstract.html/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/clp/artcollections/education/takemehigher.pdf

U.S. Children's Bureau. (2018). The adoption and foster care analysis report. Online https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport25.pdf

U,S, Department of Health and Human Services Website (2019). *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351).* https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/federal/fosteringconnections/

Virginia Department of Education, (2017). *Fostering Connections and the Every Student Succeeds Act: joint guidance for school stability of children and youth in foster care.* Online https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/fc/intro_page/educational_stability/VDOE_VDSS_-_Joint_Guidance_for_School_Stability_of_Children_Youth_in_FC_-_Oct_2017.pdf

For more resources on *Foster Youth*, see the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/fostercare.htm