Juvenile Law Center

Fighting for the rights
and well-being of youth

Higher Education Success for Youth in Foster Care: Identifying and Addressing Barriers

Youth involved in the foster care system face unique barriers to accessing and completing higher education.

Lack of family and supports—coupled with histories of neglect, abuse, trauma, mobility, and deep poverty—create roadblocks to their path to and through post-secondary education. Yet, higher education is a powerful avenue for economic independence and healthy lives.

We can make a difference in these young people's lives by eliminating barriers to success by supporting the Fostering Independence Through Education Act.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

High Aspirations: 70% of 17- and 18-year-old youth in foster care aspire to go to college.

Low Matriculation/Enrollment: Youth in foster care attend college at less than half the rate of their peers.

Low Completion Rates: Only 3 to 11% of youth in foster care attain a bachelor's degree.

Importance of Higher Education:

- College graduates with a bachelor's degree typically earn 66% more than those with only a high school diploma.
- By 2020, two-thirds of job openings will require postsecondary education or training.
- Higher education leads to lower crime rates, higher political and community involvement, and healthier lifestyles.

BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION SUCCESS

Financial Barriers:

- Youth in care do not have the support of family either to make ends meet while attending college or do such things as co-sign for loans.
- Federal grants are rarely enough to cover tuition and living expenses.
- Financial stress affects the ability of youth in foster care to complete college. Many cite the need to

work and make money as a reason for dropping out.[1]

- Financial aid is a strong predictor of degree attainment among vulnerable students.[2]
- Students are unaware of financial aid resources, including federal higher education grants and other sources of funding, and high school and college administrators may not be familiar with aid specifically for youth in the foster care system.[3]

Support and Safety Net Barriers: Youth in foster care often lack family support and a social network that provides crucial support in college.[4] Barriers come in the form of:

- Lack of advice and moral support that is vital in navigating the new world of college.
- Lack of financial assistance and support when there are emergencies.
- Lack of a place to stay or "home" to return to on breaks or in times of crises.
- Lack of a champion and unconditional supporter that helps youth cope with the stresses of ollege and prevent them from dropping out.

For more information, contact Nadia Mozaffar, staff attorney, at nmozaffar@jlc.org.

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1 M. Courtney, A. Dworsky, A. Brown, C. Cary, K. Love, & V. Vorhies, Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26 (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2011)
2 See Association of Community College Trustees, *Aiding Success: The Role of Federal and State Financial Aid in Supporting California Community College Students.*
3 *Id.*
4 See *Id. at.* 22.