Transitioning from High School into Adulthood: Schools Helping Youth in Foster Care Achieve Success

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There are approximately 500,000 children in foster care who live in either a foster home with relatives or non-relatives, a group home, an emergency shelter, or a residential or treatment facility.[i] Foster care is intended as a short-term, safe placement for children who are suspected to have been abused or neglected. Most often, children will leave foster care placement and be reunified with a biological parent, guardianship will be granted to a relative, or will be adopted by another family—which was true for approximately 85 percent of all children who exited foster care in 2007.[ii]

The child welfare system strives for permanent placements for all children placed in its care. Unfortunately, for almost 10 percent of these youth, this does not occur. These are the youth who emancipate or "age out" of foster care and no longer receive services through the child welfare system.*

More than 26,000 youth emancipated or aged out of the foster care system in 2006[iii]. This transition is challenging for most youth, but youth who have been raised in the system find it especially daunting. They are expected to find adequate housing, get a job, enroll in post-secondary or vocational educational opportunities, take care of their basic needs, and assume numerous other adult responsibilities. Most often, they must face these tasks alone and without support.

Purpose

This brief presents best practices on preparing high school-age youth to transition out of the child welfare system by providing information and resources on graduating from high school, preparing for post-secondary education or vocational training, transitioning into the workforce, and preparing for independence.

Safe Schools/Healthy Students project directors are in a unique position to share this information with a variety of audiences. Through this initiative, they have access to guidance counselors, teachers, social workers, mental health workers, child welfare workers, school-based juvenile probation officers, and community partners who are directly involved with youth in foster care who range in age from 14 to 18. Project directors can also have conversations with agency professionals on the importance of strong collaborations among education, child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, and law enforcement systems in working with youth in foster care while they are still in the system. Providing

life skills training to youth while they are still enrolled in schools, group homes, or other facilities will give them a strong foundation as they transition out of foster care.

Did you know that all these famous and successful people were involved in foster care at some point in their young lives?

Anthony DiCosmo - Former pro-football star; Director of Public Affairs at Nickelodeon Kids and Family Group

Dr. Wayne Dyer - Motivational speaker; author of international bestseller Your Erroneous Zones

Marilyn Monroe – Actress

Malcolm X – Activist

Eriq La Salle – Actor

Victoria Rowell – Actress

Babe Ruth - Baseball legend

Ice-T - Rapper

Risk Factors for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Youth in foster care face a number of risk factors that can hamper their success in transitioning to adulthood. They have lived through the abuse and/or neglect that resulted in their placement in foster care. They have endured the stigma of being a "foster child." The trauma of their own life experiences often leaves these youth with behavioral and emotional issues, mental health diagnoses, substance abuse problems, and other related challenges.

Although there are no national data representing statistics on emancipating youth, numerous longitudinal studies and other forms of research have identified risk factors that are most consistently associated with youth who have left the foster care system without a stable, lifelong connection to a caring adult. These risk factors include the following:

- **Homelessness and lack of stable housing.** The Midwest Study, a large-scale longitudinal study by Chapin Hall, found that youth who were formerly in foster care were two times less likely to be able to pay rent or a mortgage than their peers.[iv] Even more alarming are the findings from the study conducted by Casey Family Programs: More than 20 percent of youth in foster care experienced homelessness for one day or more within a year of their emancipation from the state.[v]

- **Lack of employment and job training.** For a variety of reasons, including frequent moves and changes in placement, many youth in foster care have limited work histories, have had little or no access to career counseling or on-the-job training, and have had few opportunities to fulfill the requirements necessary to attend college or a job training program. Youth who do obtain

employment may only find jobs with lower-paying wages, which makes them vulnerable to poverty and exploitation and less able to establish complete independence.[vi]

- **Health care and general well-being.** Most often, youth lose their eligibility status for Medicaid and other forms of public assistance when they become emancipated. Any physical, mental, or other forms of health treatment they may have received while in the child welfare system abruptly stops. Unless youth enroll in higher education or obtain a job with medical insurance, they are usually without health insurance, which limits their access to adequate health care. This is especially problematic because this population is at a higher risk of becoming pregnant, using or abusing substances, and contracting sexually transmitted diseases.[vii] Many of these youth also have mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety that will be left untreated without any form of insurance.[viii]

- **Legal involvement.** The uncertainties and problems that youth may face upon emancipation can put them at greater risk for becoming involved with the criminal justice system. A study of 100 youth who were formerly in foster care and who'd been on their own for six months found that 45 percent had been in trouble with law enforcement, 41 percent had spent time in jail, 26 percent were involved in the court system (up to and including having formal charges filed), and 7 percent were incarcerated.[ix] Although this is not a large sample study, it is worth noting since almost half the youth in foster care who age out of care are becoming involved with law enforcement almost immediately after emancipation.

Youth aging out of foster care do have significant obstacles to overcome as they transition to independent living and self-sufficiency. Social workers, judges, schools, and other child welfare professionals need to recognize these issues and work together to ensure that the youth have the tools and resources they need to ease this period of transition.

It is especially important to find permanent adult ties for these youth prior to their 18th birthday, to ensure that they will have continued ongoing support as they enter adulthood. This does not necessarily mean adoption or guardianship by a family; rather, a lifelong connection with an adult mentor can provide the sense of permanence that is so essential for these youth.

Preparing for a High School Diploma

The quality of life for most adults largely depends on the amount of education they receive. For instance, in 2008, for young adults who were employed full-time for a full year, the median annual salary for those with a high school diploma or general educational diploma (GED) was $30,000. For those with an associate's degree, it was $36,000, and for those with a bachelor's degree, it was $46,000. Conversely, the median annual salary for a young adult without a high school diploma or GED was $23,500.[x]

Youth involved with the child welfare system typically have encountered many obstacles during their educational journey that can keep them from graduating with their class or receiving a high school diploma. The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education cites the following obstacles to the academic success of youth involved in foster care:[xi]

- Multiple placement changes that result in changing school districts

- Lower standardized test scores

- Grade retention

- Higher incidences of behavioral problems

Youth may also not be on track to graduate due to low credits, missing information in their educational record, or different graduation requirements due to a change in schools. Schools can offer a number of options to assist youth with credit recovery, including extra-credit work, online credit recovery classes, tutorials, and distance learning.

Traditional secondary, alternative, residential, and other types of schools attended by youth in foster care are in a unique position to engage these youth while their attendance is mandated. School staff and child welfare workers can collaborate to ensure that the youth are in a position to receive all the tools they need to graduate from high school and begin the transition to adulthood.

It's important to keep in mind, though, that while a high school diploma is desirable, it might not be an option for all youth. Enrolling and preparing for a GED certificate might be the best path for some youth as they transition out of care. It is important to examine all options with an open mind and help youth make the best decision based on their own unique circumstances.

The Importance of a Transition Plan

Approximately 13 percent of students' in the foster care system, ages 6 through 14, have at least one documented disability.[xii] These youth generally receive special education services through their school district, and their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) will include a transition plan.

> *"I remember during fall and winter break at the university I was attending . . .*
> *all my friends went home to their families, and I didn't have a family to go to. I*
> *hid in the dorms hoping that they wouldn't find me. A friend noticed and*
> *began taking me home with her during breaks." — Jessica, a youth formerly in*
> *foster care, who graduated with a B.S. in nursing.*

A transition plan outlines life goals and services that will help the youth seamlessly transition into adulthood, starting around age 16. It is a strengths-focused plan that considers the youth's skills, interests, and academic aspirations beyond high school. The plan should include both independent living and vocational options. In addition to the special education team, the youth's foster parents, social workers, caseworkers, and other key adults in the youth's life should attend IEP meetings and assist in developing and carrying out the plan.

However, a transition plan is just as important for youth who do not receive special education services. The youth's foster parents, guidance counselors, teachers, caseworkers, social workers, and other key adults in the youth's life should work together to map out goals and a plan to help the youth transition into young adulthood.

Once the plan has been established, one team member should take responsibility for helping the youth follow the plan.

Involving Mentors

The single most important component of helping youth in foster care make a successful transition to adulthood is for them not to do it alone. A positive, ongoing relationship with at least one caring adult can help these youth navigate the complicated path toward becoming an adult.

There is little continuity for youth as they move through the foster care system, experiencing multiple placements or coming in and out of care frequently. Therefore, a priority for school staff and child welfare workers should be to find a person or persons that can assist or mentor youth as they begin to think about their future. Most often, natural mentors present themselves—for example, a foster parent the youth bonded with during any placement, a Big Brother or Big Sister, a friend's family member, a caseworker—any person who has established a solid relationship with the youth. In some cases, social workers or guidance counselors will need to work to find someone to fill this role.

Whoever the mentor is, it is vital that this person understands the commitment that he or she is undertaking. Ideally, this relationship will continue into young adulthood.

At a minimum, mentors should possess the following skills:

- **Consistency and dependability.** Youth involved in the foster care system have usually not had consistency in their lives, especially if they have had multiple placements.

- **Patience.** Due to past experiences, youth may be untrusting of adults in general or may have a difficult time developing relationships because of past broken relationships they have experienced. It will take time for mentors and youth to get to know one another and to build a safe and trusting relationship.

- **The ability to make and sustain a commitment.** After high school, youth in foster care may go away to college, join the military, or live on their own in another community. Just as parents maintain strong connections with their young adult children as they make their way after high school, mentors must continue to support their mentees even if they are no longer in the community, as these youth will continually need support in whatever path they choose.

It is important for caseworkers and school staff to make sure that youth have a "safety net"—a connection with someone who is a constant in their lives—before sending them out in the world to live on their own.

Preparing for Post-Secondary Education

High schools must present higher education as a viable option for youth in foster care. A 1999 survey found that 75 percent of youth in foster care in Maine wanted to go to college but did not have the necessary coursework for admittance.[xiii] A study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that only 15 percent of youth in foster care were enrolled in college preparatory classes, versus 32 percent of students not in foster care.[xiv]

Research indicates that students who are exposed to rigorous and challenging coursework are more likely to attend post-secondary education than those who do not have this exposure.[xv] Caseworkers

and school staff should work to foster high academic aspirations among youth in foster care and teach them to advocate for their educational goals and desires.

Navigating through the world of standardized college admittance tests, financial aid, finding a place to live, and all the other challenges associated with preparing for college is not easy, even for youth who have a strong support system. These tasks can be overwhelming for youth in the child welfare system. A mentor can help them navigate through the confusion.

> *For youth who desire to attend a college, university, or technical school after graduation but are not able to afford the tuition, TRIO programs offered through local colleges and universities may be an option. TRIO is a federally funded grant program that offers programs to low-income, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. TRIO provides academic tutoring, personal counseling, and other supports needed to achieve educational success and remain in school. Caseworkers should consult with high school guidance counselors to see if TRIO programs are an option at their school.*

As part of the transition plan, guidance counselors should encourage youth to prepare for the SAT, ACT, or other standardized tests required for admittance to a college or university. This prep should begin as early as sophomore year, so that the youth have time to re-take the tests, if needed.

Youth in foster care may receive grant money and financial aid via the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), a process that usually begins in the senior year of high school. However, these youth will likely need assistance in completing the form, since they often don't have access to the required information, and they may feel uncomfortable sharing all the details of their lives. Once the form is completed, these youth will also need someone to monitor the status of their application and continue to follow up to make sure that the college or university that the youth hopes to attend has all the required information.

A final challenge for youth who attend post-secondary schooling is determining where to live during school holidays and summer vacations. This should also be addressed in the transition plan.

Preparing for Independent Living

National studies show that all youth, even youth from the most advantaged families, are taking a longer time to transition into adulthood, which is traditionally defined as finishing school, obtaining a job with benefits, finding a house, and getting married.[xvi] However, youth in foster care are usually expected to become a self-sufficient adult at age 18.

Youth who choose not to attend a four-year institution have the added stressor of finding a place to live once they are emancipated from the state. This can be even more challenging if they enroll in a

technical or two-year college (which traditionally do not offer dormitory living arrangements) and have to work a full-time job.

Child welfare professionals and education staff can begin to prepare youth for this transition by teaching and giving them hands-on practice with life skills. Youth who are taught important life skills are more likely to feel prepared to live on their own and are more satisfied with their living arrangements once they've left foster care.[xvii]

Encourage youth to create a list of their housing needs—e.g., Where do they want to live? Do they have transportation to get to and from work or school? Do they want to live with others whom they identify with? Are they capable of living on their own? This will help them systematically think through their best options.

Assisting youth with finding employment that will enable them to be self-sufficient can be somewhat challenging. Building relationships with employers through Job Corps and other high school work programs, and then connecting youth in foster care to these programs, can help the youth gain job readiness skills. Furthermore, these part-time high school positions might lead to a full-time position after graduation. Youth who have actual work experience while still involved in foster care have a better chance of regular employment after emancipation.[xviii]

Schools and child welfare agencies can collaborate to ensure that youth have a clear sense of their options prior to emancipation, for example, by providing youth with opportunities to explore careers; tour colleges, universities, and technical schools; talk with military recruiters; visit lower-cost housing options; and speak with foster care alumni who "made it" through the transition to adulthood.

Online Resources for Older Youth in Foster Care

There are many resources available to help the team when developing a transition plan, assisting with college entrance paperwork, and preparing the youth for adult living, a number of which are available online.

Many online resources are targeted specifically to youth, offering helpful tips for enrolling in college, filling out the FAFSA, budgeting for housing, and otherwise helping with the transition. The team should make sure that the youth they advise are aware of and know how to access these resources. If youth know what assistance is available to them, they are better able to advocate for themselves.

Some good online resources include the following:

- **FosterClub.** This national network for young people who are currently or have been in foster care offers a transition toolkit with resources on finance and money management, job and career choices, life skills, education, scholarships, and developing a transition plan. The FosterClub website also houses the National Foster Youth Advisory Council, made up of current and former foster care youth who convene to advocate for support, resources, and opportunities for youth in care and to issue policy recommendations that support permanency for all children in foster care. www.fosterclub.com

- **Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA).** FCAA's vision is to improve outcomes for youth who have been in foster care after their emancipation from the child welfare system. FCAA connects

alumni with one another to advocate for policy change and for improvements in foster care practices. www.fostercarealumni.org

- **National Resource Center for Youth Development.** This center provides training and technical assistance to child welfare agencies on establishing permanent connections and transitioning into adulthood. The website houses resources on promising practices for positive youth development, contacts for State Independent Living Coordinators, and information on federal legislation. www.nrcyd.ou.edc

- **StrengthofUs.** Developed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, this is an online community for young adults who are transitioning into adulthood. Topics include mental health, campus life, relationships, employment, and financial matters. Social networking opportunities are provided for youth to share their stories and give and seek advice. www.strengthofus.org

- *It's Your Life: Opening Doors: Improving the Legal System's Approach to LGBTQ in Foster Care.* This downloadable booklet, published by the American Bar Association, discusses the rights of and supports for LGBTQ youth and whether the child welfare system is meeting the needs of these youth. new.abanet.org/child/PublicDocuments/ccw_vol11_no4.pdf

- **Youth Communication.** This group publishes *Represent Magazine,* which is written by and for young people in the foster care system. www.youthcomm.org

These are just a few of the online resources available. Many more resources are published by individual states' social service and nonprofit organizations, which specifically address the services available at the local level for youth in foster care.

Federal Legislation

It is important that schools, community organizations, and all others involved with transitioning youth have a general understanding of the key pieces of federal legislation developed specifically for youth emancipating from the child welfare system.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169) established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 (P.L. 107-133) established states to authorize the Education and Training Voucher Program (commonly referred to as Chafee ETV or the ETV Program). These critical pieces of legislation support youth between the ages of 18 and 21 in their transition to adulthood.

Although caseworkers are usually aware of these federal funding opportunities, guidance counselors, college and vocational program counselors, financial aid office personnel, and social service agencies should also be aware of them and should make sure that youth they advise know how to access these funds.

The following text was taken with permission from *Frequently Asked Questions III: About the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program* and *The Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program*, published by the National Foster Care Coalition, May 2005, available at www.nationalfostercare.org/pdfs/ChafeeFAQIII1.pdf.

John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program

From the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, P.L. 106-169

Purposes of the program:

- *To identify children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age and to help these children make the transition to self-sufficiency by providing services such as assistance in obtaining a high school diploma, career exploration, vocational training, job placement and retention, training in daily living skills, training in budgeting and financial management skills, substance abuse prevention, and preventive health activities (including smoking avoidance, nutrition education, and pregnancy prevention).*

- *To help children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age receive the education, training, and services necessary to obtain employment.*

- *To help children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age prepare for and enter post-secondary training and education institutions.*

- *To provide personal and emotional support to children aging out of foster care, through mentors and the promotion of interactions with dedicated adults.*

- *To provide financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, and other appropriate support and services to former foster care recipients between 18 and 21 years of age to complement their own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and to assure that program participants recognize and accept their personal responsibility for preparing for and then making the transition from adolescence to adulthood.*

- *To make available vouchers for education and training, including post-secondary training and education, to youths who have aged out of foster care.*

Education and Training Voucher Program

From Title 2 of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001

The following conditions shall apply to a State educational and training voucher program under this section:

- *Vouchers under the program may be available to youths otherwise eligible for services under the State program under this section.*

- *For purposes of the voucher program, youths adopted from foster care after attaining age 16 may be considered to be youths otherwise eligible for services under the State program under this section.*

- *The State may allow youths participating in the voucher program on the date they attain 21 years of age to remain eligible until they attain 23 years of age, as long as they are enrolled in a post-secondary education or training program and are making satisfactory progress toward completion of that program.*

- *The voucher or vouchers provided for an individual under this section: (1) May be available for the cost of attendance at an institution of higher education as defined in section 102 of the Higher Education Act of 1965; (2) Shall not exceed the lesser of $5,000 per year or the total cost of attendance, as defined in section 472 of that Act.*

- *The amount of a voucher under this section shall be disregarded for the purposes of determining the recipient's eligibility for, or the amount of, any other Federal or Federally supported assistance, except that the total amount of educational assistance to a youth under this section and under other Federal and Federally supported programs shall not exceed the total cost of attendance, as defined in section 472 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, and except that the State agency shall take appropriate steps to prevent duplication of benefits under this and other Federal and Federally supported programs.*

- *The program is coordinated with other appropriate education and training programs.*

A complete list of state contacts for the Chafee ETV program is available at www.statevoucher.org.

Conclusion

Although many resources are available for youth in foster care as they begin the transition to adulthood, one essential resource stands out: a lifelong connection and relationship between the youth and a caring adult. This is the single most important thing that youth need as they begin to make the leap from foster care. The child welfare and education systems can work together to ensure that all youth have a positive mentor or adult who will guide them from the moment they are emancipated.

References:

*The juvenile or family court usually terminates its jurisdiction over the youth in its care when they reach 18, the age at which most states define adulthood. However, Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, and Vermont allow youth to remain in care until age 21.

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