

# Troubled Water

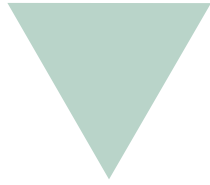
## Foster Care Youth and College

Educational Challenges for Foster Care  
and Youth Aging Out of Care

By  
Rosalind Folman, PhD, Project Coordinator  
Gary R. Anderson, PhD, MSW, Principal Investigator

MICHIGAN STATE  
UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF  
SOCIAL  
WORK



“Education is a bridge over troubled water.  
Education is not a guarantee of success,  
but a precondition to survival.”

—*Kweisi Mfume, Director, U.S. Urban League*



## Acknowledgments

**T**he Michigan State University School of Social Work extends appreciation to everyone who participated in this exploratory research project. We want to acknowledge and express our appreciation to the MSU Families and Communities Together (FACT) Coalition, which provided the funding and support that made this project possible. Special thanks to Dr. Cris Sullivan, MSU Department of Psychology, for her consultation and advice. Thanks to Toby Salzman, MSU School of Social Work,

and Rose Homa for their assistance in completing the monograph. Thanks to Dr. John Seita, MSU School of Social Work, for his helpful comments. Special thanks to the child welfare professionals and to the current and former foster care youth whose narratives and insights advanced our knowledge of the foster care experience, affirmed the challenges faced by youth in the foster care system, and provided some directions for future support and program improvements.

## Overview

**P**reparation of foster care youth for college is an under-explored research topic. This study was conducted in an attempt to identify and explore educational challenges facing youth in out-of-home care and factors that affect their capacity to succeed in post-secondary education. It was designed to look at the foster care system in Michigan from the perspective of key stakeholders, a necessary step before determining responses likely to facilitate foster children's success in post-secondary education and to provide the foundation for additional research.

This information was gathered from a targeted sample of informants from two Michigan counties, representing a broad range of stakeholders, from current and former youth-in-care to agency directors and program managers. It is difficult to separate issues of education of foster children and higher education of youth aging out of the system from other issues of foster care. The information gathered from these focus groups and interviews also reveals the interrelatedness of child welfare with other systems and suggests some tension between systems, insufficient resources and divergent perspectives.

### **Federal and state government**

Federal law made no specific mention of foster children's education until passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Title I of this Act recognizes the need for special help for youth ages 18 to 21. It provides funding, services and supports to older youth aging out of the foster care system, as well as offers states greater flexibility in designing programs. In reality, the funding has not been sufficient to continue services at previous levels, or add

sufficient transition services for older youth.

Although there was no federal mandate for education of foster care youth 14 and older prior to 1999, Michigan's Youth In Transition program existed to prepare eligible foster care teens for independent living. With the 1999 directive to develop an Independent Living Plan for foster care youth and authorization for services up to age 21, the state had to adapt its programs.

But even with the additional federal funding specified in the Act, the state has insufficient resources to provide personnel to implement this legislation. There are fewer staff today and less money for training and less outreach being done to identify eligible youth and to coordinate community resources.

Federal and state policies put a priority on keeping youth safe from abuse and neglect and planning for permanency. Education is not explicitly stated in the system's mission, and educational outcomes are not the main concern and might not be taken into account during decision-making. Also, the number of foster children is increasing, and there is a shortage of foster homes, resulting in larger caseloads and fewer resources per child. Placing children is the priority; continuity of education is a lower priority and rarely a determining factor in decision-making.

### **Agencies**

Federal and state mandates for safety and permanency are child welfare agency priorities. Attending to mandated work may take precedence over addressing educational issues and accessing community resources. Workers may be unaware of available services, or agency resources may not be available.

Coordinating and sharing of information between the foster care system and the schools might not happen. There is a focus on daily problems and immediate concerns, leaving little in the way of time or resources to do long-range educational planning with foster children. Due to limited staff time and limited funding, there may be little planning for youth aging out of the system.

### **Schools**

Foster care workers and school personnel do not generally receive training on each other's policies, even though the child welfare and educational systems seem to have different languages, different philosophies and different sets of rules, regulations and roles. This sets up conditions that easily lead to miscommunication and faulty conclusions.

Few specialists are available to concentrate on educational issues. There is often insufficient interaction among teachers, foster parents and child welfare workers. Furthermore, foster children are over-represented in the special education population.

A number of foster children and child welfare workers believe that school personnel act out of erroneous preconceptions about foster children, do not understand their situations and special needs, stigmatize them and potentially overreact with unwarranted penalties.

Teachers might not know a child is in the foster care system and then find it difficult to understand their special needs and circumstances; teachers who do know are sometimes seen as not responding appropriately. A cycle of misperception and misunderstanding may be initiated.

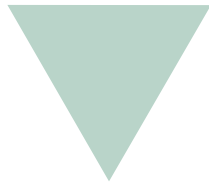
### **Families**

Moving children from home to home takes a critical toll not only on children, but also on both the foster parent's involvement in the children's education and on the values related to education that are given to the child. Some foster families might respond to the impermanent nature of many placements by not entering into long-range planning with the youth, or foster children may be getting competing messages about the value of higher education from their foster families and their birth families. Each time foster children are moved, they lose continuity in their daily lives, with implications for an ability to focus on their education.

When early education is fragmented, it is difficult for any of the parties to focus on higher education goals. Foster care workers report that some foster parents act as effective advocates for their children's education. Communication and training play a role here, too, as foster families and birth families may not have sufficient knowledge as to what is required for youth to attend college, or know about available resources or services or how to advocate for their children.

### **Youth**

Many youth enter the foster care system with existing emotional and behavioral problems which are often exacerbated by their removal and placement into care. These difficulties interfere with their ability to learn and plan for future education. Even children receiving services may only be dealing with current situations without addressing underlying problems. Once in care, new obstacles



are added, e.g., social stigma, learned helplessness, difficulty with trust, which compromise both youths' functioning in school and their ability to reach out to others for emotional and informational support.

When youth age out of the system, they must deal with the stressors of being on their own. There are few services available for older youth, and even with the 1999 legislation, it is up to the youth to request services that they may not even know are available. Often, once on their own, they find themselves without any supports, and survival takes precedence over education. Youth who do succeed in higher education are reported to have entered care with a strong inner core and have built up a history of successes which gave them the confidence to pursue higher education. They were more able to reach out to others and to access the external resources that they may need in order to attend college. Most importantly, they had someone who was there to support them—a worker, foster parent, birth parent or teacher.

Youth who manage to succeed in higher education rarely do it in isolation. Unfortunately, many youth who age out of foster care lack the necessary supports and so continue at

a disadvantage, with few going on to succeed in higher education.

### **Preparation, communication and support**

There are exceptions to this picture. There are a number of foster children who prove to be more resilient or are more ambitious and able to achieve their goals. There are foster parents who work with their foster children and their schools to provide a good educational foundation and instill in the foster children a value for higher education. There are birth parents who provide that same message. This study found that in a number of cases, foster youth and foster parents experienced supportive teachers and school administrators. There are schools and programs that seem to provide fewer barriers to success or coordinate better with foster care agencies. There are additional programs that may provide the advantage a youth needs. There are community resources which may have a positive impact that “make the difference.” Some youth may find success through community college programs.

This study is a compilation of the reflections of some youth and stakeholders; it will begin to identify challenges for all.



## Introduction

For many young people in Michigan and across the United States, in addition to access to guidance counselors and teachers, there are parents who are knowledgeable of educational systems or can acquire this knowledge and draw upon their own experiences with college life and academics to provide special guidance and support for their children. This information, encouragement and support for education permeate the family atmosphere, providing intentional and informal support for the young person's aspirations. There is concrete assistance in preparing for entrance exams and meeting prerequisites, acquiring college information material, even taking trips to visit colleges and universities. There may be funds that have been saved or invested to help pay for this education. This family encouragement of educational success began early in the young person's life, including elementary and middle as well as secondary school. It is reinforced by extended family, neighbors, school personnel, friends and classmates.

The possibilities associated with post-secondary education may be evident within the family through employment, educational resources and even cheering for one's alma mater's sports teams. Underpinning all of this is parental reinforcement that the young person is capable and has the strengths to succeed in school. This support will continue through the inevitable adjustments of a freshman year at college and the financial, educational and personal challenges that accompany growing independence and educational achievement. These are some of the aspects of family privi-

lege that many children and youth experience, but not all (Seita, 2003).

Young people, who have experienced abuse and neglect severe enough to require their removal and separation from their biological parents and the resulting separations, traumas, and stressors, often miss out on these privileges and resources. This may be compounded by poverty, health concerns and discrimination. The imperative of physical safety may trump all other concerns. Permanency—living with caring adults who have a lifetime commitment to the young person—is precarious.

Attention to the well-being of young people—their health, mental health and educational needs—may be compromised by other risk factors and further threatened by budget cutbacks to those systems committed to these concerns. However, issues of well-being are not tangential to a young person, her or his family and the well-being of larger society. Kweisi Mfume, director of the U.S. Urban League, proclaimed, "Education is a bridge over troubled water. Education is not a guarantee of success, but a precondition to survival" (*MSU News*, 2001). This exploratory study will examine issues related to the educational needs of youth in foster care and aging out of foster care.

The purpose of this report is to raise issues for discussion and further examination. Further study is needed, but hopefully the comments from some youth and stakeholders will stimulate consideration and improvements. Although at times some of the observations are critical, hopefully, constructive attention will improve outcomes for all children and youth.



## Background

### Children in care

Poverty, family violence, substance abuse and homelessness have led to increased numbers of children and youth being placed in out-of-home care. Nationally, over the past decade, the numbers have increased from 360,000 to 565,000, 40% being between 11-18 years of age (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). In Michigan, the out-of-home placement rate was 10% higher in 1997 than in 1988. According to *KIDS Count Michigan*, over 15,700 children were living in out-of-home care in Michigan, with an additional 4,300 children in kinship care. This results in large caseloads and overcrowding of foster homes, reducing the individual attention that can be given to children in care (Besharov, 1990).

Many young people enter the system with multiple risk factors, including but not limited to poor academic performance, limited social skills and/or severe behavior problems (Lamphear, 1985). Once in care, new risk factors may be introduced, including multiple moves and social stigma. How well children adjust in foster care is determined, in part, by the number and type of protective factors in their lives (Werner, 1989).

One study noted that approximately 50% of children and youth in care report that foster care provided them with better parenting, improved structure and consistency, better experiences in school, more helpful teachers and safer neighborhoods. Yet despite these protective factors, their ability to benefit from a good placement and better school was often undermined by failure to address the emotional problems and complications with which they entered the system (Johnson, Yoken and Voss, 1995).

### Child welfare system

Children in care may be unintentionally put at risk for poor educational outcomes by the child welfare system itself. In fact, factors such as frequent changes of school, lengthy periods spent out of school due to failure to transfer children's records, low expectations of what foster children can achieve and low priority given to education among the many responsibilities of caseworkers and foster parents may outweigh the protective factors provided in care (Fletcher-Campbell, 1998; Folman, 1998; 1996; Folman & Hagen, 1996; 2001).

White, Carrington & Freeman (1990), studying foster children in Oregon, found that children with multiple foster home placements were less likely to be above grade level or to participate in extra-curricular activities. Multiple placements had an even greater impact on children needing special educational services, yet these children were less likely to be receiving these services than foster children in more stable placements. While 39% of foster children had Individualized Educational Plans, only 16% received special educational services.

In a California study, 80% of foster children assessed were found to have developmental, emotional and/or behavioral problems, yet only 32.9% were reported by the foster parent or caseworker to have any problems (Klee & Halfon, 1987). In another large study where half the children were assessed as having school-related problems, educational improvement was considered a specific objective for only six children (Knapp, Bryson & Lewis, 1985).



The inadequate and inconsistent response of the child welfare system to the educational needs of foster children is in part due to inadequate tracking of the children's education (Ayasse, 1995). This, together with the discontinuity in foster children's schooling, results in schools often being unaware of the children's problems and the services they are supposed to receive (George, 1990).

The low priority of education within foster care was demonstrated more recently in a longitudinal study comparing foster children with a community cohort matched on demographics and on standardized math and verbal scores. Despite the same test scores, youth in care dropped out of high school at a much higher rate, were significantly less likely to obtain a GED or receive a high school diploma and were more likely to participate in training programs rather than in post-secondary educational programs. The adults in the lives of youth in foster care were also less likely to monitor their homework, attend teacher conferences or visit their classroom. The adults' low expectations were reflected in the youths' own expectations, as significantly fewer youth in care than community youth expected to graduate high school (Blome, 1997).

### **School system**

The Chicago Panel Policy Study (1989) found that missed school days, especially in the early years, related to increased dropout rates for all children. Children in care, particularly those with multiple placements, have more difficulty achieving consistent attendance.

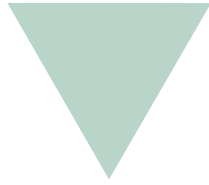
Currently, many school systems do not reach out to children in foster care, possibly

because the students' transience makes this difficult. Another reason may be that because foster children are over-represented in special education (29% vs. 11%); schools see them as costly (George, 1990). Problems may be further exacerbated by teachers who are not trained to handle or even understand the special problems presented by youth in foster care, often misinterpreting emotional problems as mental incapacities (Kellam, 1999a). School personnel have little training or opportunity to learn about the unique challenges of children in care (Fletcher-Campbell, 1998; Folman, 1998; 1996; Folman & Hagen, 1996; 2001).

Retrospective studies of former foster children reveal the singular importance of their earlier school experiences in adult adaptation. Results indicate that despite traumatic early histories and multiple challenges in foster care, all of which place foster children at risk for maladaptive behaviors in adulthood, educational attainment was the single factor that differentiated between former foster children who were and were not able to adapt in adulthood (Zimmerman, 1982). Yet, educators, child welfare professionals and the courts often seem to ignore the educational needs of youth in foster care (Seyfried, Pecora, Downs, Levine & Emerson, 2000).

### **Youth "aging" out**

Youth in foster care are among the most vulnerable of high-risk populations. This is especially the case for those youth who have aged out of care. These are youth who are considered too old to qualify for foster care and are discharged from the system. These former foster care youth were much more likely to be



When the system fails, the children are very likely to move out of the system into the juvenile justice system, into the welfare system, into the adult criminal justice system.

(Richard Gelles, Dean, University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, in support of the Adoption and Safe Families Act)

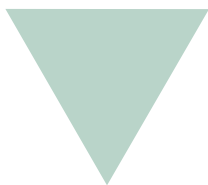
unemployed (51%), incarcerated (27%), teenage parents (42%) or homeless (25%) than in college (under 5%) (Bloome, 1997; Westat 1991). Only 63% were found to have completed high school (Courtney & Pillavin, 1998). This figure is an improvement over the 54% found a few years earlier (Westat, 1991) but still high even in comparison to teens in the lowest socio-economic group in the general population (37% of foster care youth had no diploma compared to 11% of low socioeconomic youth). Generally, 22.1% of males in the general population go on to college compared to 2.3% of male youth in foster care. Foster youth are also significantly less likely than youth in the general population to get a GED (Blome, 1997).

While 69% or higher of former foster care youth reported wanting to go to college, less than 5% were found to do so (Blome, 1997; Courtney and Pillavin, 1998). A comparison of former youth in care who went on to college with those who did not showed that foster parents' attention to youths' educational needs made the difference. Significantly more foster parents of the successful group attended school events, showed interest in the youths' developmental progress, and gave their foster children career advice (Jackson and Martin, 1998). This is in contrast to another study that found that a significant number of youth in care who

wanted to go to college had not taken the necessary preparatory courses (Edmund Muskie School of Public Services, National Child Welfare Resource Center for Educational Improvement and Institute for Public Sector Innovation, 1998).

Unlike the small percentage of foster care youth who went on to college, the majority of youth who age out have a more difficult future. Within 2-1/2 to 4 years after aging out, 40% of former foster youth ended up posing some cost to the community (receiving some form of government assistance), with 60% of the young women having had a child. Conversely, those youth who had completed high school were more likely to have stable employment and to have a higher level of self sufficiency than those who did not complete high school, independent of whether they had received any type of skills training (Westat, 1991).

In a more recent study of Texas foster children who aged out, it was found that despite the fact that 74% of the youth had in fact graduated high school, 60% had a history of unemployment and financial instability, 40% were found to have experienced homelessness at least once, and most had a high incidence of physical and mental health problems which were not being addressed because of lack of



The majority of researchers assert that among the multiple and complex challenges facing youth and children in foster care, low educational achievement has the most troubling consequences for adult quality of life.

(Levine, 1999)

health care and because of lack of familial and agency support. The study concluded that emancipated foster youth are not given the help they need before, during or after transition. Once on their own, they live from day-to-day and are often unable to develop long-range goals and career strategies, such as college attendance (Texas Foster Care Transitions Project, 2001).

### **Independent living programs**

Although education continues to be neglected, there has recently been a focus on providing training in independent living skills for youth in care. For the small percentage of youth who do receive this training, the emphasis is primarily on concrete skills needed to live on one's own (Westat, 1991; Courtney & Pillavin, 1998) rather than pursuit of advanced education. Those who have received such services fare better, being more likely to complete high school, be employed and be self sufficient (Scannapieco, Schagrín & Scannapieco, 1995). Unfortunately, only a minority of foster youth are given this training.

The recently-passed Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (known as the "Chafee legislation") provides funding to states for additional supports to young people aging out of foster care, to help them make the transition to independent living. It increases funding

for independent living activities, expands services and supports and extends Medicaid eligibility until age 21. This could allow more youth to obtain education beyond high school, but states are allowed great flexibility in designing their independent living programs. At this time, Michigan will pay for one month's rent, leaving Michigan youth more concerned with survival than with pursuing advanced education (MFIA, 2001).

It is not yet known whether the Chafee legislation is benefiting youth. There is no data available yet on how well it has been implemented, the number of youth it has reached and what impact it has had on youth with regard to pursuing a college education.

### **Innovative solutions**

States realize that child welfare alone cannot successfully help children advance academically and that other systems must become involved if they are to effectively help foster care youth succeed. Guided by this belief, several states have established innovative multi-system programs to improve educational opportunities and accomplishment for children and youth in care. While the programs are diverse, most utilize collaboration across systems.

In Illinois, the Center for Child Welfare and Education at Northern Illinois University,



funded by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, provides individual interventions for foster and adoptive families. Educational advisors across the state train liaisons to be the “first line of educational supports” for foster parents. They handle over 3,000 cases a year.

In New York, the Vera Institute of Justice created two programs for foster children. In the first, school districts and the city’s child welfare agency have created a database that allows officials to closely monitor the school attendance and academic progress of the city’s more than 34,000 foster children, allowing educators and caseworkers to get children the help they need more quickly. In the second, child welfare caseworkers are assigned to schools to provide individual counseling to students and to run voluntary group discussions for foster children.

One of the most comprehensive programs is in Massachusetts where the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Department of Education are collaborating. DSS provides training to teachers on foster care issues, and the schools train foster parents and workers on school policy and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). DSS also provides clinicians who work in the classrooms with disruptive foster and adopted children and train teachers on working effectively with the children. In addition, there are educational liaisons between agencies and schools in every school district and after-school programs, such as tutoring and group therapy for children in

foster care, kinship care and adoptive homes.

San Francisco formed a collaborative program with the Juvenile Court, Department of Human Services and the school districts that uses tracking of children’s school records; educational advocacy; training for teachers, foster parents and workers; and intervention in regard to behavioral problems. School districts using this program show an increased number of foster youth graduating high school (70%).

Pennsylvania has established an educational law advocacy center that advocates for foster children in the schools, monitors their school performance and researches the state’s educational performance in regard to children in its care.

Other states have instituted educational passports for foster children that contain their entire educational history and travel with the children as they move from one school to another. Some smaller programs that are helping children are those that train foster parents in advocacy and on their rights under IDEA (Kellam, 1999a). Also, some recently-established programs work with emancipated youth who have dropped out of school to help them obtain GEDs and free college tuition or scholarships (Kellam, 1999b).

If Michigan is to improve academic achievement for foster care youth, effective use must be made of limited resources. This improvement begins with information about current obstacles in the system as well as programs and protective factors that support success.

## Study plan

Several studies have explored the experience of foster care youth in the educational system and as they age out of care. These studies are relatively recent, state-specific and exploratory. This study was designed to explore the experience of youth in Michigan to add to the national picture of aging out of care and identify the challenges and resources for Michigan foster care youth. This exploratory-descriptive study gathered information from two qualitative sources: (1) focus groups with foster care youth currently in care, foster care parents and foster care workers; and (2) interviews with a range of child welfare stakeholders, including youth who have left the foster care system. The subjects were drawn from Ingham and Wayne Counties. An effort was made to involve a broad representation of participants in the child welfare system.

### Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted with 52 participants in three categories:

1. Youth currently in out-of-home care
2. Foster parents who currently have youth in their care
3. Foster care workers

The project coordinator moderated all groups, which each met for 1-1/2 to 2 hours.

Based on their personal knowledge, participants were asked to identify aspects of the foster care system that impede foster youths' capacity to follow an academic career path, the untapped resources in the community vital to all youth planning on a college career and the protective factors that enable youth to pursue a college education. The specific questions in each focus group were informed by the literature on foster children and asset development.

### Interviews

A total of 25 individuals were interviewed. Categories of key informants were:

1. Private agency foster care directors, supervisors, workers and therapists
2. Administrators from the Michigan Family Independence Agency
3. Private agency Independent Living Program staff
4. Private agency teachers and educational liaisons
5. Foster care youth currently in care
6. Former foster care youth currently in college or college graduates. Some of these youth were identified by responding to ads in colleges' newspapers.
7. Foster parents
8. Community college GED staff

### Limitations

The persons who participated in this exploratory study were not randomly selected, and they represent the views of a small number of youth and respondents from only two Michigan counties. Some were selected due to their stakeholder roles. Others, such as youth in college, responded to a request for participants. Consequently, the findings reported are from a very limited sample and represent a preliminary exploration.

However, even with these limitations, the findings will affirm the results of studies in other states. Even if the experiences noted here were experienced by only a few youth, that is still sufficient cause to take note. Hopefully, the broader and deeper studies needed in Michigan will be forthcoming in the future.



## Responses

This section contains the picture that emerged from the summarized responses of focus groups and key informants.

### Obstacles

#### Federal

Federal Legislation Title I of the federal Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 provides additional supports to young people aging out of foster care. It increases funds to states to assist youth to make the transition from foster care to independent living and self-sufficiency; recognizes the need for special help for youth ages 18 to 21 who have left foster care; offers states greater flexibility in designing their independent living programs; establishes accountability for states in implementing the independent living programs; establishes the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which increases funding for independent living activities and expands services and supports to help older youth who are leaving foster care prepare for adulthood. It also increases the asset limit for Medicaid eligibility from \$1,000 to \$10,000 that a young person in foster care can have and still maintain Title IV-E eligibility.

**Federal funding.** Until passage of this legislation, federal law made no mention of foster children's education. Lack of an educational mandate led to a corresponding lack of funding for services to support youths' educational needs. Even with the 1999 Chafee legislation, insufficient funding is provided for additional personnel to implement the mandates, such as assessments and services to support youths' education. The lack of funding to implement mandates impedes a state's ability to provide

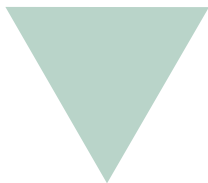
the identified services.

#### State

**Federal mandates.** Study participants report that there seems to be a gap between the federal mandate to assist youth 14 and older in their pursuit of formal education and its implementation in Michigan. According to one child welfare program director, the Chafee legislation requires states to develop an individualized "Independent Living Plan" that provides information on the assessment, needs and services for each youth. According to child welfare personnel interviewed, there is new staff training on how to use Chafee criteria to assess youths' needs and how to access Chafee fund resources for new workers, but efforts to inform and educate current/veteran workers need to be improved.

**State and federal resources.** Under the Chafee legislation, states are to provide tuition support, transportation to and from school, tutoring, employment support, interviewing and job retention skills training, uniforms and apprenticeship fees, using both state and federal funds, with federal funds to be used as a last resort. The Chafee legislation allows for certain supports for youth until age 21, but leaves it up to the states to decide for how long and for what services.

While Chafee allows for states to cover housing for youth until age 21, it leaves it up to the states to decide the upper limit. Federal funds for housing are limited to 30% of the total federal funds allotted to the state under Chafee and may only be used for youth ages 18-20 who were in foster care on their 18th birthday. In Michigan, due to lack of funds to support all youth exiting foster care with room



and board and about to be homeless, housing assistance is limited to the first month's rent and damage deposit.

In Michigan, federal Chafee funds are funneled through the Youth in Transition (YIT) program. YIT is a state program, established in 1986 with a staff of six who provided conferences, technical assistance and support around the state. Since passage of Chafee, there is only one staff person to oversee Chafee implementation throughout the state. This reduction in staff greatly weakens FIA's ability to provide outreach, training and coordination of available community resources. Budget cuts in Michigan have made it difficult to fully staff initiatives. Early retirements have resulted in a loss of experienced managers and reorganization. At the time of this study, FIA was in the process of collecting data on Chafee implementation .

**State policy.** Respondents reported that safety from abuse and neglect and permanency are the missions of foster care, and that the impact of placement decisions on educational outcomes may not be considered a high priority. State policies do not facilitate keeping children in the same school even near the end of the term or near graduation. According to one administrator, the state only "suggests" that workers consider education as a factor in their decision to move a child. A foster care director said that, in fact, the state says education is not a determining factor in how long a child stays in a placement. Respondents felt that the increasing number of foster children and the shortage of foster homes leads to a high priority on finding any home, with little ability or prioritization to maintain children in their current school. Consequently, disrupted edu-

cation can result. They state that because education is not explicitly stated in the system's mission, continuity of education is often not a significant consideration in planning for children.

**Independent living program.** While Independent Living Program (ILP) services are authorized for youth 14-21 years of age, only a small percentage of youth in care receive training in independent living skills. Foster care cases close when a youth is age 18-19, with typical funding for closed case services after that being limited to tangible items, such as first month's rent and damage deposit. For youth pursuing post-secondary education, there is funding for some tuition through the TIP program and for items, such as computers and books. According to another program leader, many youth over 19 do not receive these services after their foster care case is closed. This is likely due to the fact that many youth are unaware of independent living service eligibility after their case closes or they may choose to stay away from child welfare agencies for other reasons.

While services to youth in ILP must be provided until the youth turns 21, regardless of whether their case is open or closed, both workers and former youth in care report that these services are often cut off abruptly when the youth turn 19 years old.

### Agency

**Legislative mandates.** Decisions at the federal and state levels directly affect the facilitation or lack of facilitation of educational assistance to foster children at the agency level. A worker's top priority is compliance with federal and state mandates for safety and permanency.

**Worker:** Caseworkers can't help with educational issues because they must focus on finding placements, mandated court appearances for termination of parental rights and adoptions and attending to the daily crises. There is no time to get school records or go to the schools to monitor children or meet with teachers.

In practice, attending to educational issues and accessing community resources comes after workers have completed the work they are mandated to do.

**Worker:** We have kids who are in homes that are unsupervised, court hearings that have to be attended to, allegations of abuse that have to be attended to. College is kind of down on the list.

**Program director:** Workers can't do anything. They are so overworked. They have so many guidelines that they can't maneuver.

**Supervisor:** The worker has many other pressures in this kid's life. College is on the back burner.

**Worker:** The biggest barrier is that I'm only one person.

**Therapist:** Often we need to put supports in place just to maintain the placement. School is low priority.

**Mission.** Despite the state's suggestion for workers to consider education as a factor in the decision to move, too often the decision to move might not consider the impact of the move on the child's education.

**Foster care director:** The consequence of failing to consider education is that when a child is doing well, then it's time for him to go home even if it is near the end of school. Or right before graduation, they will switch a youth into Independent Living. Or if a kid is in level 5 (top

level) of group home and has only a month to graduate, they'll move him to an independent living program.

**Supervisor:** Completion of school is not considered a strong enough reason to maintain a child in placement if they are determined to have completed the group home program.

Former youth in care report that sometimes group home staff put little value on education. They were not only unable to help with homework, but, in fact, there were instances when staff placed obstacles in youths' ability to do their homework.

**Former youth in care:** The time in group homes is structured so that youth were given one hour to do their homework. However, the staff used that time for youth to get rid of excess energy, through house cleaning. Even when they let us do homework they would put the TV right where the kids were studying.

**Teacher in group home:** The group home staff are low paid, high school graduates. They don't value education. The staff makes the kids clean during homework time or puts the TV on during homework.

In the two quotes above, the former youth was in care 20 years ago, and the teacher is in a group home today, suggesting that little has changed over the past two decades in regard to supporting foster children in obtaining an education.

**Implementation gap.** In many cases, legislation and community resources exist to help youth, but workers either do not know of them or do not have time to add them to their efforts with each child in their caseload. Many workers interviewed were unaware of the Chafee mandates. One worker reported



attending a recent full-day training that didn't cover assessment or resources available for older youth.

Another worker, previously unaware of the state's provisions under the Chafee legislation, wondered how and when she would be able to access these resources, given her limited time and already multiple demands.

The number of children in foster care is rising and, additionally, increasing numbers of youth have been diverted into the foster care system from the juvenile justice system. There has not been a corresponding increase in staffing, resulting in larger caseloads and fewer resources per child.

It seems that new programs or requirements are added without the resources necessary for implementation and information dissemination. An example of this is an all-expense-paid national college tour for youth in foster care created in one Michigan county. Only about 30 youth participated because workers did not have the time to disseminate the information and/or work out the details to enable more youth to participate.

Other workers reiterated that educational needs are a low priority when put up against all the existing guidelines and other pressures, such as finding supports to maintain placements and dealing with unsupervised homes, court hearings and allegations of abuse.

Limited funding undermines not only agencies' ability to fund aftercare services and hire more workers to implement new policies, but to hire skilled personnel to work with youth. Group home staff are generally paid minimum wage and might not have gone to college.

**Educational services.** Agencies that oversee residential and group homes often have per-

sonnel to act as liaisons between the foster care system and the schools, but few other agencies do. For two agencies in this study, these liaisons are the sole resource for workers, as well as the sole connection between teachers and foster care workers and parents and are critical resources to workers and foster parents. In one agency, however, the liaison was let go one month after the interview due to funding cuts.

***Foster parent:** It was great when we still had the educational liaison. She gave foster parents training on the IEP, and she would come with me to school when I needed to go and advocate when the teacher wouldn't help.*

***Worker:** When the liaison was here, we could go to her whenever we had a question on something to do with the schools. Now there's no one to help us.*

Many foster care workers, agency staff and foster parents have little knowledge or experience for helping youth in their care to get on a path to college.

***Worker:** We don't have much experience with kids who want to go to college, so we don't know about any of the resources that are available to help them.*

***Foster parent:** I never had a foster kid who even graduated high school, so I don't know what courses and tests they need to take to go to college. I don't know anything about funding or any resources for kids who want to go to college.*

**Short-range vs. long-range goals.** Both workers and foster parents reported feeling that it takes all their time to deal with the daily problems that arise, leaving planning for an objective beyond the immediate future, such as college, a low priority.

**Worker:** *We can't prepare them for college. There is no time to look at things down the road. Even with "low maintenance" kids, we don't have time to help them with college applications. We focus on the present, not the future, but we'd like to.*

**Foster parent:** *We can't plan for the future. We need to get the kids stabilized, to take away the terror. With our birth children, we had a lifetime of dealing with them, and we dealt with the stability issue at a much younger age; with foster children, establishing inner stability is most important.*

**Worker:** *For kids to use resources, caseworkers have to get kids and transport them. Priority-wise, college is not a priority.*

This focus on the present to the neglect of the future is true even for an educational liaison, whose job it is to help youth with their educational pursuits. One said:

*I have no time to even think about getting kids on a college track. I am too busy dealing with the daily crises in school, putting out the fires, dealing with the kids who are being suspended or expelled.*

**Aftercare planning.** The need to consider the future is most obvious when considering youth who age out of the system. Despite the Chafee legislation focus on youth who have aged out and mandate on the provision of closed case services (services to 18-21 year olds who have aged out of the system), there often seems to be little or no planning for the needs of youth once they are on their own. This is largely the result of limited staff time and limited funding.

Even though the Chafee legislation was created for the specific purpose of helping youth after they aged out, once youth turn 18, they are no longer the agency's responsibility.

**Former youth in care:** *At (a Michigan Public University) there was no one I could turn to, and I wasn't getting any information about financial help that would lead me to believe that there is someone who would help. I even called back to the agency and asked, do you guys have any suggestions to help me. They said no. I called my FIA social worker, and that didn't help. She said I was 18 and on my own now. I was just a smart-mouthed kid to her. I thought I would get more help from FIA than my agency, but it was the same. When the case is done, the worker is done with it, and they move on.*

This particular youth aged out a number of years ago, but feedback from current workers portrays a similar picture, where workers do not have the time to focus on the 18 and older youth who are leaving the system.

**Former youth in care, currently a worker:** *Most caseworkers focus on getting a kid through the system not helping them after the system, so kids don't have someone to help them negotiate college.*

**Worker:** *By the time they're ready to go to college, they're dismissed from our caseload.*

**Worker:** *We don't have the time or energy to follow up after they age out.*

In effect, the system in Michigan seems to cut youth off at age 18 regardless of where they are in their education, with limited or patchwork attempts to identify family members who might be able to provide some ongoing support to help youth enroll in school, set up finances, or make sure there is a job.

**Foster care director:** *One kid who wants to go to college is out of his foster family as soon as he finishes high school. He won't be able to live there because the foster parents can't afford to take care of him without money. We would have*

to modify their license to (allow) keeping him in their home. What we're doing is contacting relatives who weren't able to raise him into being a non-formal Independent Living type of placement; they would help him along in getting enrolled in school, getting him set up with finances, a job.

Using this approach, the agency has bypassed the problem of limited agency funds and tapped into the boy's natural resources, his family.

### School

Foster children and youth often enter school with a number of problems relating to their early abuse and neglect, which may be compounded by their placement in care. These school-related problems may be further exacerbated by areas of misunderstanding between child welfare and school personnel.

**Two systems.** Workers, supervisors and foster parents spoke of the tension between themselves and school personnel. What emerged from their feedback is a picture of two systems, education and child welfare, with different languages, different philosophies and with different sets of rules, regulations and roles. However, workers report that training on school policies is very infrequent, and they do not have the time to keep up with school policies on their own. Added to this is the limited number of educational liaisons, who generally only work with residential and group homes.

Because neither system knows the language, philosophy or rules of the other, miscommunication often occurs between schools and child welfare workers.

**Foster care director:** *The educational system and the child welfare system are both very complicated. Those who work within them know them very well, but it is difficult for others who do not to understand how it works and how to navigate through it in order to access services and advocate for kids. For example, a foster care worker may have difficulty in a meeting with all school personnel in accessing special education services for a child, who is really struggling because he or she does not have a firm grasp of special education laws, rules and procedures.*

**(Another) example:** *A teacher may have a child who is having extremely problematic behaviors within the classroom. The foster care worker will get frantic calls from the school telling us to "fix" the child and get him/her "more intensive therapy or medication," so that things will get better in the classroom. Sometimes it's not that simple, and many times the child is already receiving these services, and we have to do a lot of advocacy with the school in an effort to get some type of school intervention with that child (e.g., social work intervention, special education, case aides).*

**Special education.** Foster children may be costly to a school district because they are over-represented in the number of children who require special educational services. This reportedly results in some administrators not wanting foster children in their school, preferring that the foster children go to another school or that agencies provide home-based schooling. Some workers have actually been told that a school does not want foster children. Consider the following quotes from foster care workers:

*Schools know that the kids are temporary. If a child needs an assessment, the teacher will ask, "Well, how long will he be here?" They don't want to invest the resources.*

*The schools want foster kids to have in-home tutoring. They tried to do this with one-third of my caseload.*

*Currently, it's so difficult to get a special education plan for a kid or some sort of classroom intervention to assist the child—a paraprofessional, behavioral plan, social work intervention, classroom with less transition in the day.*

*The special education director told me not to place any more foster care kids in their school district.*

*I was told that they have no more room for emotionally impaired kids in their special educational classes.*

Even though foster children are over-represented in special education, there are still many more who need to be there but are denied access.

**Educational liaison:** *Many children cannot handle the transition through the day from one subject to another but are not eligible for special education.*

Some students who have been approved for special education might not have access. This keeps them from the resources provided in the special education classroom as well as the information and guidance on pursuing post-secondary education that is given to special education youth.

**Attitudes.** Respondents reported that some teachers have pre-conceived attitudes about foster children and believe that because teachers do not know a child's history, they are unable to understand a child's needs and behaviors.

**Worker:** *If there is a behavioral problem in the classroom, teachers automatically assume it is the foster child.*

**Worker:** *They don't bother to call the worker to find out the child's history to see why the kid is having problems.*

**Therapist:** *Teachers see them as a pain in the butt when they have 25 other kids to deal with.*

**Worker:** *The kids are very oppositional and defiant, and the teachers just can't handle them.*

Workers reported that sometimes teachers cope with foster children's behaviors by removing the children from the classroom. All stakeholders reported that foster children are suspended often and spend an inordinate amount of time in the principal's office. While foster parents and workers report being upset by the frequency of suspensions and the impact on youths' grades, youth currently in care did not seem bothered; rather, they oftentimes seem to have given up.

**Therapist:** *Teachers are inflexible in tailoring their teaching and disciplinary strategies to the needs of the foster child.*

**Worker:** *Foster parents (report that their) biological children in the same school engaging in the same behaviors as their foster children do not get suspended, while their foster children do.*

**Foster parent:** *Foster kids are singled out and suspended. My foster son was suspended for 30 days and got a zero for every day he was suspended. When the zeros were averaged in, he got E's in all his courses.*

**Youth in care:** *I get suspended almost every day. They gave me zeroes when I was on suspension. I don't care. I get so many zeroes anyway so it doesn't mean anything to me.*

Some have reported that the alienation and hostility is even greater for black children



who are placed in all-white schools and neighborhoods. Both a current supervisor describing children's experiences today and a former foster child, describing life in care 30 years ago, reported the same distress experienced by black foster children placed in white communities.

Caseworkers in this study reported feeling that schools are sometimes negative not only to foster children, but to foster parents as well. Many foster parents reported advocating for the children in their care, only to have it backfire. After foster parents advocate, children not previously known by the teacher to be a foster child are now identified as such, which is perceived as influencing the teacher's behavior and attitude towards the child.

*Worker:* Those foster parents who do advocate for the children are punished by the schools.

*FIA administrator:* Foster parents are bullied by the schools.

*Worker:* When a foster parent registers a child, the schools know that he is a foster child and he now has the stigma of being a foster child and is automatically labeled as troublemaker.

*Youth in care, doing well in school, not a "behavioral problem":* If you're a foster child, you're a peon. Schools won't return calls if you're a foster child.

Feedback from most participants depicts school as stressful and an unrewarding experience for many foster children. In the end, school becomes just another negative aspect of foster care.

*Foster care director:* The kids who don't make it have a negative experience in school. They

*hate school. They may not be getting the services they need because they've come in with their educational needs neglected.*

*Supervisor:* The kids are so busy striving to just get through high school that it discourages them from going further.

*Worker:* It takes everything for them to get through the day, much less make good grades.

*Therapist:* They have very little success.

This study found that in a number of cases foster care youth (and foster parents) experienced supportive teachers and school administrators. However, frequently the school environment was perceived to be negative and dangerous. Foster children and youth may enter school with a number of problems relating to or compounded by the neglect and abuse they have experienced. Consequently, a number of youth pose challenges for the school system and are either overlooked, ostracized or attended to when behavior reaches extreme proportions. Unintentionally, children may learn that they get attention only if they act up. In the end, some foster children, whose emotional and educational needs may already have been neglected are then placed in what is perceived to be and oftentimes experienced as a negative school environment which might not understand them or want them. Vulnerable children and youth need a safe and caring environment in which to learn.

## Family

**Foster parents.** A critical role for foster parents is to meet foster children's educational needs by meeting with the teachers, coming to school when there is a problem and advocating

for their foster children and helping to find positive opportunities for the youth. They receive little training to enable this. Foster care workers are generally occupied with other tasks rather than working with foster parents on educational issues and advocacy. Workers report that it is a challenge for foster parents to be actively involved in the children's education.

*Worker: The caseworker has many other pressures in this kid's life. College is on the back burner. The school needs to work with foster parents.*

*Foster care director: It's a given that the school is not something we have to deal with since the foster parent is dealing with it, but with some foster parents who don't know about school, we co-opt the role.*

*Foster care director: We work collaboratively with the foster parents, and some foster parents are very involved in the school.*

*Worker: The foster parent needs to go to conferences and help the kids with homework, but only about 25% do all of this stuff.*

Even foster parent involvement may not be effective if the youth does not see the importance of education. Instilling the value of education and of pursuing a college path may also fall to the foster parent.

*Worker: College must be important to a foster parent in order for the child to value it.*

*Worker: Foster parents need to show kids that higher education is important and show them the benefits of college. Most foster parents don't do that.*

**Birth parents.** There are situations where the birth parent's actions or values may undermine the foster parent's involvement with their

foster children's education, both for children who are returning home and those aging out of care. One worker noted that reunification of children with their parents was sometimes an obstacle to youth furthering their education.

*Worker: Among the kids who can really make it academically but don't, are those who go back home. Their parents don't make them go to school. This is even true for those kids who talked about going to college. They just drop out.*

Due to impermanence and biological parents discouraging education, a foster parent discussing youth in her care who were temporary wards or permanent wards, stated she felt it would be much easier to help foster children further their education if they have parental rights terminated. Another foster parent suggested the only way to resolve this dilemma for the youth might be if caseworkers and foster parents integrate the child's family into their lives.

**Repeated moves.** In the foster care system, children may frequently be moved from home to home. This results in the fragmentation of children's lives and, consequently, the fragmentation of their education. Information about foster children's school histories as well as their strengths and weaknesses are lodged with different adults, each of whom is involved with them for a short period of time. The information might not be passed on with them when they move. With each move, children lose the school environment that has become familiar, sometimes losing their IEP plans and school records as well as the educational values of the home they were living in. Worker turnover may contribute to a loss of information and service continuity.

The end result of this process is that there may be no one adult who knows where the children are in school. The schools, foster parent and agencies may have little or no information on the children's educational level, their educational needs, even whether or not they have an IEP. Educational assessments might not be made when children enter a new school, regardless of whether there is information on the child's educational history. Without information, children might be incorrectly or inappropriately placed with regard to grade or year.

Moving children from home to home takes a critical toll not only on the children, but also on the foster parent's involvement in the children's education and on the values related to education that are given to the child. Foster parents who have the children only temporarily might not prioritize the child's educational future. Educational values and expectations are likely to change every time children are replaced.

**Worker:** *A foster parent may be interested in their foster child succeeding, but they don't know how long the child will be with them, so it's hard for them to buy into really supporting the kid, especially if she has five to six foster kids.*

**Program director:** *If a foster parent has a kid for only two years, there is no need to work with him on college. Future foster parents might not invest in college.*

**Worker:** *A lot of the problem is turnover; lot of times they don't have the kids more than a year or so, so don't get invested in their future.*

**Worker:** *A lot of it could be that the foster parent doesn't know where the kid is going, if he's going back to his parents, to another foster home next week. They don't know where this*

*child is going to be, so how can they try to teach them where they could go?*

**Worker:** *Foster parents think of it as a job; get kids coming and going all the time; so here's another one, send him off to school, and when he comes home, make him do his homework, and that's it.*

### Youth in care: internal obstacles

**Life experience.** Many youth enter foster care with existing emotional and behavioral problems, which may be further exacerbated by the problems in the foster care and educational systems. Every stakeholder, when asked why youth in care do not go to college, identified obstacles related to the youths' internal thoughts and feelings about themselves, such as lack of motivation and poor sense of self and the emotional problems with which they were struggling. Because these issues may go unaddressed, children bring them to school, and this interferes with their ability to learn and to plan for future education.

**Worker:** *It's not intelligence that prevents these kids from going to college. It's that they need a lot of support, financial, emotional, medication, in fact everything they have now.*

**Therapist:** *Kids who don't go to college are struggling with basics, trying to maintain the placement and figure out what their role is in the foster family, dealing with emotional issues, lots of behavioral problems—that preclude them from sitting at their desk long enough to learn and to have fun at school.*

**Therapist:** *Some kids are starting from ground zero since they've had their emotional needs neglected. Many have been socially promoted and marginally gotten by. While many children in care are provided psychotherapy, the focus is mainly on putting out the fires. There is no time for addressing underlying problems.*

*Youth in care: I'm going to go to college, but not right afterwards because a lot has happened in my life, and going to school right now is hard. It's not easy because I have so much on my mind. If I go to college, I'll probably have a nervous breakdown. I have to get it off my mind.*

The foster care system's level of control over the lives of the children and youth in its care has the potential to induce a sense of learned helplessness in the youth that takes its toll in adolescence when they are preparing to live on their own. Plans and decisions are made by caseworkers without the input of the youth, and problems may be resolved by placing youth into a new home. Youth then have little experience in controlling aspects of their own lives and have not been adequately taught how to solve problems or develop effective coping strategies. In addition, many youth have learned that assertiveness can lead to being moved. This can be especially problematic as youth face life on their own without the rules and structure of foster care.

*Program administrator: The kids are blocked every step of the way. When they try to assert themselves, they are blocked, so they just get to feel completely helpless.*

*Former youth in care: I went from no responsibility to having to look out for myself. All of a sudden when they suddenly released me from my group home, I had to plan every aspect of my day and how to make sure I accomplished what I needed to. Nobody explained the financial stuff to me. No one explained the work-study money to me. I thought if I worked it was my money. I didn't know it was supposed to go for my tuition. So I spent it. I felt I earned it, so I spent it. So I was kicked out (of school and dorm).*

**No vision of future.** Because youth in care might not be involved in decisions about their lives or even given information regarding these decisions, they might not know where they are going and when or what will happen to them. This hampers their ability to project themselves into the future, which in turn impacts their ability to develop goals and ideals. This takes its toll on adolescents when they should be thinking about their futures and may, in part, account for their lack of preparation for their futures.

*Worker: Foster kids are afraid to even think about going to college. They could conjure up so many awful things happening to them.*

*Former youth in care: I got scared thinking of the size of a university. It can be very intimidating. That's why I didn't go to (a Michigan University), but chose to go to (another Michigan University). But even (that University) was too large, and now I had another large system to deal with. Community college wasn't presented as an option. It really should be, especially for foster kids because it's more personable, and foster kids need that.*

*Worker: Foster children live from crisis to crisis. They're so focused on the day-to-day things, that making such a grand plan is not possible. (They) don't know any different, so to plan differently is not possible—too many crises that they can conjure up.*

*Worker: When they're 13-14, when other kids are beginning to plan for college, foster kids can't. They can't think that far ahead because of how they've lived. They pretty much live from moment to moment, hoping that they have a place to live.*

**Values conflicts.** Many youth in care are faced with the choice of whether to identify with a birth family who did not value education and



may have discouraged them from higher education goals, or to choose a new path, one possibly supported by foster parents, leading to higher education. When there has been no termination of parental rights, the youth are in contact with their parents and often return to them when they age out, making it very difficult for them to break away from their parents' values. Even when the workers and foster parents emphasize the importance of college, the birth parent might undermine these efforts.

*Worker:* Often the pull towards their birth families outweighs the pull to go to college or to remain in college once started.

*Youth in care:* If I go to college, I'm leaving where I came from.

*Worker:* Motivation is the biggest problem. If the birth parent is involved, I don't know how to get them motivated to go to school.

**Survival needs and priorities.** Many youth in care, once they graduate from high school, are totally on their own, separated from their families and from the child welfare system. Their strongest need is to focus on the necessities of daily life.

*Worker:* These kids know when they age out at 18, and their first priority is food and shelter. School is not even a thought. How can you go to school if you don't have a place to live, you don't have clothes on your back, you don't have food. School is very distant, something that is not achievable.

*Program director:* Caught between supporting themselves and going to college, the logistics of balancing life is overwhelming for them. They are unable to see how they can have both choices simultaneously.

*Administrator:* There are so many unknowns — they don't know where they're going to live, how they're going to feed themselves. In addition, they do not know how to pursue college, what is needed to go to college, how to finance it.

*Worker:* (Youth in care think) "I am going to have to survive on my own without any help," and that doesn't include going to school. They don't realize there are other options. They don't have to have all the money or have the parents to provide the money.

These concerns have been reported by former youth in care who have aged out and are currently in college.

**Unrealistic expectations.** While these concerns about survival were reported by former youth in care who have aged out and are currently in college, this was not necessarily the case for youth currently in care. Contrary to the workers' perceptions that most youth in care are concerned about survival, many current youth in care seemed unaware of the financial problems they will face once they are totally on their own.

*Youth in care:* Foster care helps. You get free tuition for two years. Sometimes if you don't have a good job, and you're trying to pay off the bill, and you have to have two or three jobs to pay it off, it's too stressful. So it helps a lot because you can save up during those two years if you want to keep going with your education.

*Youth in care:* I knew that foster care pays for kids to college, which is why I'm lucky to be in foster care.

These youth are partially correct regarding the benefits of two years of free tuition (Michigan's TIP program), but they seem unaware of the other costs and obstacles they will face

once they are out on their own and in college. Possibly, no one is telling them about the challenges they will have to confront once they are on their own.

***Youth in care:** When I turn 18, after I graduate, I don't know what's going to happen. I just know whatever it is I'm going to make the best of it. Nobody has told me what will happen when I turn 18.*

***Youth in care:** My foster mom and I talk about what I want to be, but not about aging out.*

Other youth currently in care presented unrealistic solutions. They may expect to depend on the birth families who have been unable to come through for them in the past or on foster parents, who even though devoted to them, may not be their foster parents when they age out or may not be there for them once they leave.

*I have family support. My brother (22 years of age) said I can live with him. So I'll have a house, and he'll help me get a car.*

*If I go to college and I take drama classes, I'll try to have a job on the side in acting and live off of that. I was told that actors make \$560/day.*

*I have some family who will bend over backwards for me. I know my foster mom will bend over backwards for me any day.*

*I'll try to do it on my own, but after I put my whole effort into the problem, then I'd call my foster mom.*

**Stigma.** Many of the children feel that being in foster care carries a stigma, and that prevents them from seeking out resources, approaching teachers and peers and attempting to get the support and guidance they need.

***Youth in care:** If you tell people that you're in foster care, they have a different outlook on you. They feel foster kids are supposed to be bad, not supposed to carry yourself with respect. That's not me. I respect myself. I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me. I don't feel sorry for myself. I don't need it.*

***Youth in care:** When teachers find out I'm in foster care, they feel sorry for me. I wish they didn't know.*

***Former youth in care:** I wanted to discuss my concerns about going to college with my friends at school, but I was too frightened that they might find out that I was in foster care.*

***Group home teacher:** Some kids refuse to apply to college feeling that colleges will not want them because they are foster children.*

**Distrust of authority.** Many seem to have learned not to trust people in authority, and so do not reach out for help or support.

***Foster care director:** Foster kids don't tell us when they're hurting, much less when they have something that they want to do and can you help me do that. I mean physically hurting.*

***Former youth in care:** I didn't ask to see anyone for help because the agency really soured me on people helping me. Then when I was 16, I found my own therapist, but at 18 I no longer was getting health care, she dropped me. So my trust really went down. I didn't trust anyone.*

**No one cares.** Other foster children, after feeling abandoned by their parents and then being seemingly shuffled among foster parents and caseworkers, end up feeling that no one really cares about them, and may act as if they do not care about themselves. They tend to downplay their need for others and/or highlight how independent they are. They may

opt to take care of themselves, unaware of the many obstacles they will have to face when on their own, as related by or expressed by youth currently in care:

*No one has asked me what I'm going to do when I turn 18, planning nothing. If they don't care, I don't need them to care. I'm not begging them to care about my situation. It's whatever.*

*I don't turn to nobody. I just deal with it on my own.*

*I consider myself an independent person. My foster mother told me no one can take care of me better than myself. So I don't want to go back to my family or anyone and say I need help. I want to take care of myself. I want to be able to say I did this and I didn't have to get help for it. I don't like having to depend on other people. I'll take care of myself mentally and physically, of all the problems I have inside me. Then I'll be able to get a job and get my own place. Just take care of me.*

*I really don't want to deal with the agency. Whether they can help me with my education, which I doubt, but no one has brought it up. I don't need them.*

*I don't need help from anyone. I'm going to do this on my own. I don't think I'd reach out to no one.*

## Resources

### Schools and teachers

Both foster parents and former youth in care spoke of good schools and teachers who take the time to understand the children and to reach out to them. Oftentimes, these were smaller schools, such as charter schools and religious schools. Foster parents commented:

*I am very impressed with the teachers. They call me immediately if there is a problem.*

*Whenever I speak to my foster child's teacher, the first thing he always says is, "You have a great kid." He's always positive first. Then he will discuss the problem with me.*

*They know the foster children, and they watch to see what their issues are.*

It might be that small schools are able to take more of an interest in the foster children, to give them personal attention and to work with the foster parents. However, there are also public schools that provide youth in care with the supportive environment necessary to get them on a college path. Several foster parents spoke of public schools in poor neighborhoods that were willing to reach out to foster children:

*(A Michigan school district) Schools are very supportive of the kids. They help the kids who are having problems learning. When I went to enroll them, I was told that there are tutors in the school, and they gave me a list of tutors I can contact. Also, the school counselors have been very helpful. I go to them whenever I need help.*

*In (a Michigan school district), the high school takes the kids to visit colleges in Michigan. In other schools, though, the teachers had no interest in my kids.*

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) can play a critical role in foster children's education. Unfortunately, not many foster children have CASAs, and it is unknown how many play a role in foster children's education.

*Parent: My foster child's CASA would go to the schools. She would go to all the meetings*

*and help decided which classes would work for her or not. She got her a tutor. She also meets with the teacher once a month to check on how she's doing. When there's a problem, she has even come up with some really creative solutions that work for everyone.*

Some of the former youth in care currently in college or who have graduated from college also talked about the good public schools they attended and what these schools provided them.

### **Foster parents**

Some foster parents have found ways to be involved and work with the schools to make the school work for the children in their care. Here are some comments:

*Once a school district knows that you'll work with them, they'll cooperate. You first have to get over the hurdles of the kids' behavior and drug use.*

*The first time my foster child cut up, they wanted to suspend him, but I spoke to the teacher, and we came up with creative ways to help him*

*You must be forceful and aggressive with the school. I hold very high standards and won't settle for anything less. The schools will try to bully you, but if you go the extra step, they will look out for your kids. Now my foster son brings me progress reports every day.*

*You must become extremely involved, become the kids' cheerleader. I try to pull in all resources. I get the school handbooks to identify what resources they offer, and then I work with my foster kids to get involved in after-school programs.*

*If I have a kid, like now, who is having problems in school, I go to class and monitor him, hold his hand if necessary. I hold high standards for my*

*children and for the schools and won't settle for anything less.*

*I have seen foster kids destroyed in public schools. They have no time for any one child. The classes are too large. So now I have permission to home school my foster kids.*

*I call my foster children's teachers every week to find out what's going on.*

### **Extreme needs**

There are other resources to help youth in care pursue education, but they are available only to those children with the most severe emotional and behavioral problems, even though they would be beneficial for any child. Most children do not meet the very stringent criteria needed to access these services in either the child welfare or educational systems.

**Specialized foster care.** Children whose conditions are too complicated for regular foster care are eligible for more intensive services related to their education.

*Foster care director:* *In specialized foster care, the workers have smaller caseloads, so they're able to see them once a week. Also, the worker has the time to go the schools a lot and, consequently, there is a really good collaboration between the worker and the teacher.*

**Residential care.** Youth whose problems are too severe for specialized foster care are often sent to residential care, where the educational services may be even more extensive. As the severity of a child's problems increases, so too does the range of educational supports available. As indicated earlier, workers in residential programs have access to educational liaisons to help them help the children with their problems in the schools. In addition,



in residential programs education may be addressed up front in an effort at prevention.

**Former residential director:** *In residential, they have preventive planning for children's education. When kids enter residential, they do educational testing to assess the child's skill level. They also have an education staff on the team, so if a child is not making it in public school, he is brought to the on-grounds school where he stays until he is stabilized. Then he is slowly moved to regular school, starting with two hours in public school and the rest of the time in the on-grounds school.*

**Agency administrator:** *Many residential treatment programs have on-grounds classrooms but not all. Some have their own charter schools with teachers they have hired. We have the intermediate school district teach our kids. It is only from 6th through 8th grades, however. Since part of our treatment program is short-term (90 days), the representative from the school district helps with the initial school screening. Some children in lower grades are enrolled in our on-grounds classrooms.*

### **Special education.**

**Educational liaison:** *Kids in special education get much more help with pursuing post-secondary education than the other kids. They really work with the kids to get them on a college track. When they turn 15, the teachers and counselors work with them to plan for their future, their goals, their future education.*

**Transition consortium.** Still another resource, one that is overseen by community mental health, is a transition consortium that brings together professionals in child welfare, mental health and education. The consortium advocates for youth transitioning to adulthood. However, youth must have a severe emotional disturbance (e.g., danger to themselves or others, diagnosis of severe mental illness) to

access these services.

**Consortium director:** *Anyone who meets the criteria can access our services, the foster parent, youth or teacher. The coalition helps kids rethink their futures. The kids identify their goals and the life domains that they want to focus on. We provide foster families as mentors for kids who are aging out. We also help youth become aware of what funding and services they are entitled to. Another thing we have is a special program at (a Michigan community college) for kids with mental health problems. They teach them study skills. Only about 1% of children in foster care meet these criteria and are eligible for the services provided.*

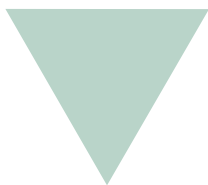
For a similar consortium to be created in another community to address the needs of foster children, it must first become a community concern. The community must become aware of the gaps in the system serving youth who are aging out of care. Currently, the average foster child must seek out that type of guidance and services for themselves because there is nothing available that reaches out to the children.

**Therapist:** *There aren't counselors who are going to approach kids to talk about college, or ACTs or grades, plans. It's more the kids have to go to the counselors. The only time they see counselors is for behavioral problems.*

### **Community resources**

Each stakeholder could name a few community resources. The following list resulted:

**Upward Bound** is a federally-funded program that takes youth on college tours and works on building self-esteem. However, very few youth in care are selected since the program takes only those they feel will benefit. In grades 9 and 10, the selected kids meet once per week with a tutor who exposes them to higher edu-



cation and prepares them for college. Youth also spend part of the summer at a university.

**TRIO** is a federally-funded program, located at universities. It is a summer incentive program that takes youth who have potential, but have poor grades, and gives them a sense of what college is like and the work they would need to do.

**Community Learning Post** in Washtenaw County provides tutors and mentors in an effort to build self-esteem.

**Boys and Girls Clubs** provide tutoring and mentoring. (Only 5% of foster children currently participate.)

**Michigan Tuition Incentive Program (TIP)** is state-funded and provides tuition for two years at a two-year college and limited tuition assistance for an additional two years ([www.michigan.gov/mistudentaid](http://www.michigan.gov/mistudentaid)).

**Michigan Rehabilitation** will pay full tuition for youth with learning disabilities and those who were former substance abusers.

**Michigan Works** is a rehabilitation service that helps youth to complete their GED.

**Community colleges**<sup>1</sup> offer preparation for GEDs, vocational training and associate degree programs. Their programs are geared towards students who have many of the needs of youth in care, e.g., students with learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder or who were unable to succeed in traditional classrooms. They even have special programs for youth with mental health problems; in Lansing, these operate through community mental health. They provide small class sizes, personal attention, peer support, workshops in study skills,

help negotiating the school environment and filling out applications—all the skills and support that youth in care need to succeed. Given the programs, support and personal attention, community colleges provide an excellent environment not only for youth in care who want to go to college, but for those youth who dropped out of high school and need a second chance.

In addition to these local resources, there are also national resources specifically for youth in care, none of which were known to the stakeholders interviewed:

**Scholarships** for youth in care are provided through the Orphan Foundation and the Casey Family Foundation. The **Orphan Foundation** also provides E-Mentors to former youth in care who are attending college ([www.orphan.org](http://www.orphan.org)).

In addition to community resources, some community events were noted. For example, an Ingham County agency sponsored a “speak out” for youth in care with educational leaders as “listeners.” This heightened understanding and led to sustained dialogue: action between the public schools and child welfare system.

## Youth in college

### Obstacles

For those foster youth who make it to college, the obstacles just cited continue (e.g., stigma, lack of support, need for family) often interfering with their ability to perform academically. However, once in college and on their own, new obstacles emerge, one of the major ones being finances.

---

<sup>1</sup>This information was gathered from faculty at Washtenaw Community College, but the services are available to students at all community colleges.

**Finances.** Former youth in care currently in college or who have graduated from college identified finances as the major hurdle to continuing their college education. Supporting oneself while in college is reportedly the main reason for former youth in care dropping out of college.

*I always had two jobs, sometimes three or four.*

*Just to survive, I have to work. Most of the time I don't have groceries. I eat peanut butter sandwiches. I can't buy nice stuff.*

*I almost took a job as a stripper, but my boyfriend stopped me.*

*If I have a money problem now, I don't know where I'd go. I can't have a money problem. I don't have a back up plan. This is it. If my car dies or if I have a big medical expense, I'm finished. That's why I have a budget. That's why I'm conscious of how much everything costs. It can't go wrong.*

The difference between former youth in care and other students is that the very system that assumed the role of parent is no longer available to them, and few have any type of safety net.

Independent Living Programs are available, but the majority of youth in care do not go into ILP and these programs are limited in what they provide.

**ILP director:** *Once in college, schoolwork is not a problem. The problem is where to live during school breaks and summer; ILP pays foster parent to keep beds open, but few foster kids (make use of this). Often, even kids who are getting ILP funding are suddenly cut off at age 19.*

**ILP director:** *They don't know or understand grant requirements and applications. They need*

*to be taught how grants work. They don't understand what the Pell grant is. What I do is go with them to the financial aid counselor.*

Even youth with caring relatives and foster parents must, like many other college students, work several jobs and take out loans. One young woman who was in kinship care was able to turn to her relatives if she had a crisis, but she clearly distinguishes between one-time assistance in time of crisis and having parents who will help out financially on an ongoing basis.

*My aunt and uncle give me nice one-time gifts, but they don't support me. They're not like normal parents. I knew they weren't going to help me out. But if my car broke down, they would help out. And they bought me a laptop, but they're not going to pay for rent.*

Another former youth, while feeling very fortunate to have foster parents who are still supporting him emotionally, tells a similar story.

*My foster parents help out with some expenses like joining a fraternity or taking special classes like karate, but not for my big expenses like tuition and living expenses. I have loans for all of that stuff.*

**Isolation.** Many youth in care reported a feeling of isolation interfering with their ability to succeed in college.

**Former youth in care:** *I felt separated from my family. Without family and peer supports, the large size of the school becomes a big problem. It prevents kids from getting to know their professors so as to reach out. Freshman classes are huge, so there's no direct contact. I was completely lost. There was no one who gave a damn about me.*

*My peers were not a support system I could depend on because they didn't know I was in foster care. I didn't want anybody to know.*

The fact that universities are rarely proactive in providing support to youth exacerbates their financial problems and other aspects of their adjustment. Former youth in care are often afraid to seek out guidance and information concerning their financial problems because of the stigma of foster care. This concern, plus the fact that many youth in care do not trust adults, having repeatedly been betrayed by the adults in their lives, makes them very reluctant to seek assistance of any kind. Former youth in care talked about the absence of a safety net:

*Former youth in care: There was nothing set up, nothing at the school and no kind of family support, so I had to beg my way back into school. I cried for two weeks to get into school. Then I took out another loan to get back into school.*

*Former youth in care: (a Michigan public university), now aware of foster youths' problem, did not take moves to help other former foster children. Did they say they really ought to find other foster kids in the school and help them? NO. I was not given a counselor to give me direction or maybe a peer group type of thing so that I could have someone to speak to about some of the things that was going on. That didn't happen.*

### internal strengths

**Resilience.** Although youth in care come from a background with some degree of abuse and/or neglect, there is variation in the degree of trauma they have experienced, their individual character traits and reactions to those early experiences and their experiences in foster care. According to both stakeholders and former

youth in care, some children enter care with a strong inner core.

*Therapist: The kids who are going to college have had less severe trauma. It hasn't gotten to the core of their being. It hasn't destroyed their strengths and coping mechanisms. And they had relatively positive experiences in school.*

*ILP program director: The kids who get on a college path are the ones who see the independent living program as an opportunity. They take advantage of resources, as opposed to just taking the free money. They get these things from the way they were raised. What ILP does is that we explain to the kids what they need to do in order to go to college. IL doesn't change kids a lot. If they enter with motivation and skills, they will make it. They must be ready. If they don't feel good about themselves, they will most likely fail.*

**Determination.** Some of the youth interviewed knew what they wanted to do and knew they needed college to attain it. Others were not sure exactly what their career choice was and had no one to turn to for help but were motivated to find out and not waste their time.

*I am here to be an art major, and you can't really do much without an art degree. I have to have more training to be better.*

*I dropped out of school after a year and a half because I didn't know what I wanted to do. No one at school to talk to about why I was going to school. I didn't have a counselor that was available to me. So I was in school basically wasting time, and I got tired of that. I felt I should get a job and figure out what I want to do. I took four years off and held several jobs and did volunteer work at different agencies, just anything to fill that void and figure out what I wanted to do.*

*I'm well-rounded. Whatever I do, I gotta do the best that I can do. If I see something and I want to do it, I'm going to pursue it.*



*I just made a goal for myself that I wanted to continue my education because I didn't want to be in poverty my whole life. So I decided to go to school despite my eye disease (gradually going blind). I didn't let that stop me. I decided I was going to go as far as I can. Nothing stopped me because I always had that goal that when I become successful that I'm going to help my biological family.... I was in denial about my eye disease. I said I was going to be like regular students and be in regular classes. I felt that I could just do anything I put my mind to. I'm not special. I can learn quickly and fast. I just need to be up close to see my work. I catch on quick. I'm an auditory learner. You tell me. I got it.*

*Some foster parents would say to me that I'm never going to make it even though I was doing well in school. I would just ignore them and go to my room and read a book. I was determined to prove them wrong. I was determined to be the best that I could be.*

**Past successes.** Several of the students interviewed had known success in the past, which gave them the confidence to go to college. For some, school was a respite from the many stressors that came with being in care.

*School was at least one area that I had some strength in.*

*I always like to shine in school. I was on the honor roll. I was on swim team. I tried out for lots of activities. I won the French award.*

*School came sort of easy. Well, it was easier than having to deal with the people, any people, residents, staff, my family.*

*I knew it was going to be hard living on my own, but I always made it. I never totally failed at anything. I've always been making it.*

**Religion.** Some of the former youth in care stated that their religious beliefs played an

important role in helping them to get on a college path and succeeding to college.

*I use faith to help me. I believe in God, that God can do anything. Even when I was abruptly cut off from Independent Living funds, I wasn't worried because I knew that God would look out for me.*

*Religion is very important to me. It's the center of my life. Without God, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't get to college or through it.*

### External resources

**Support systems.** Youth who were able to get on a college path while in care and pursue a college education after aging out did not do it alone. Sometimes it is a foster parent who remains supportive after the youth in their care age out of the system. Any significant adult in the youth's environment can provide the necessary support.

**Therapist:** *Those who make it have somebody, some identified person that has seen to it that they get through school, a teacher who likes them, foster parent, mentor, coach, counselor, therapist, a go-to person who helped these kids to have more success.*

**Worker:** *One kid successful in sports had a good peer group and positive mentoring from coaches. Sports were an incentive for him to keep his grades up so he could play. It kept him out of trouble because he was so busy with football, basketball and track.*

**Worker:** *One of the kids now in college had trouble in his sophomore year in high school due to vandalism. He was able to turn it around through support from a therapist, who was there above and beyond duty. She worked closely with the foster parent to address issues in a non-shaming way, so he got back on track.*

**Former youth in care:** *(My birth mother) is the person I know that is always going to like me. She lets me down all the time, but I know she's always going to like me. She's always there for emotional support if I need it. Or if I feel crappy or just want to bitch about something, I call my mom.*

Only one former youth in care interviewed for this project reported having strong peer support.

*In high school, my friends and I would always talk about going to college. We said wherever we go, we'll all go together and they're all here with me now. Now, whenever I have a problem, I just call my friends, and my friends will give me support.*

**High expectations.** Another factor for former youth in care who went on to college seemed to be that a future in college was either assumed or made to seem attainable.

*In my junior or senior year, my English teacher asked me if I thought about being a teacher. At that point a light went off that questioned, just how smart are you?*

*My relatives had the expectation that I would go to college. Even the staff (in my group home) had the expectation that I would go to college. No one knew what I was studying, but all expected me to go to college.*

*My birth mom always said that of all six of her kids, she just knew that I was going to be the one to be successful in life, that I would really become something.*

*My aunt and uncle went to college. She's a teacher. He's an engineer. She would take me on college tours. I realized the only way to make it is to go to college.*

*My foster mom told me you are going to college!! I just had to go. That's what I was expected to do.*

*I went to a rich school so everything was there. The school I went to—you're going to college! My high school is very college-oriented, college track. Our school counselors would make sure we were taking all the right classes to make sure we would get into college. We had a career resource center in our high school where I can look up careers I was thinking about. And the lady would give you college applications. And we had people coming from colleges to us. I knew the only way to make it and to have what I want is to go to college.*

*Everyone at (a Michigan high school) went to college. I didn't know that I had a choice.*

**College preparation.** Workers and former youth in care both highlighted the importance of being provided with information and skills and being able to effectively use the opportunities offered. Having information on available funding can be the difference between planning and not planning to attend college and, once in college, between graduating and dropping out.

**Worker:** *The youth who went on to college were able to reach out to their family network for assistance. They also had job skills. They had jobs throughout high school, took college preparation courses, learned about health issues. They really utilized their foster families as mentors.*

**Former youth in care:** *I knew that I would be able to get scholarships because I was a foster kid. My foster parents always told me that. My school counselor in HS told me about FASFA. When I fill out FASFA, I don't have to claim my foster parents, so for my income I just write zero. That's how I get money to pay for tuition. The government tells (the university) how much I need, and (the university) offers me scholar-*

*ships to pay for tuition. Then I take out loans to pay for rent and books and living expenses.*

**Former youth in care:** *Each year in high school counselors sat down with me and told me what courses to take in order to graduate. I would also always go to them to ask for help on what I needed to go to college. My high school counselor would tell me about ACT and SAT.*

**Former youth in care:** *In my junior year, I learned about Upward Bound. That's a federally-funded program for poor kids with a goal to inform students about college. I heard about it from one of my classmates who was in the program. They really prepare students to enter into college.*

In summary, this study identified a number of factors related to the resiliency of youth. One set of factors were internal capabilities that created a strong inner core to one's person. Their internal strengths enabled them to benefit from the resources that were available. The descriptors given of these youth, e.g., good sense of self, drive, spark still there, determination to better themselves, motivation,

maturity, more realistic understanding of the world and ability to engage with adults are not surprising for resilient youth. What is surprising is that these are descriptions of abused and neglect children in foster care. Because of these strengths, their experiences in school were better than that of the average foster child. In short, they enter with strengths and are able to build on them.

The interviews and focus groups with former foster care youth in college noted that youth who were able to get on a college path while in care and pursue a college education after care did not do it alone. They had external resources. One of most critical ones was some type of support, e.g., from birth family, foster family, peers, workers, positive school environment. Having someone as a support is especially critical for youth once they age out because at that point they may lose all relational support. Once they enter college, they are then faced with a new and often overwhelming situation and, more than ever, need someone to turn to if in crisis.

## Summary

There are many obstacles to the achievement of an education for foster care youth in care and aging out of care. These obstacles exist at every level, from the federal level on down to the youth themselves, while the protective factors seem few and, for the most part, limited to the youths' own internal resources or those that existed within their personal relationships with an occasional teacher or worker, a foster parent, and/or biological relatives. These narratives noted that the current situation regarding foster children's education seems characterized by the lack of a clear and powerful educational mandate, and workers who face many demands and limited resources. Youth are left on their own once they age out, and educational needs may be overlooked while they are still in care. Who will instill or how will these vulnerable youth acquire the value of education?

### **The role of the child welfare and educational systems**

Oftentimes, caseworkers do not feel that they are in a position to meet the children's most basic educational needs, let alone help them to get on a college path. Obstacles appear to be almost built into the foster care system with the repeated movement of children, multiple school interruptions, changing educational values and expectations with each replacement and, consequently, the lack of stability so necessary for children to take educational risks.

In addition, the foster parent, who often bears the main responsibility for the children's education, is often not provided any training or support in dealing with the children's education or the schools. Hence, the foster par-

ents, like the workers, feel at a loss to help the children temporarily in their care. The Chafee legislation, although a helpful step, is modest, under-resourced, and there are challenges in its full implementation.

With the focus of child welfare legislation on basic survival and safety, there is little time or money to even consider the educational needs of foster children. It may be that only when there is a crisis in the schools that involvement by workers and foster parents is triggered. Prevention programs or programs to prepare youth to attend college are almost non-existent.

The schools, the most critical component in children's education, are also lacking policy or training on foster children's needs or any connection to the foster care system, factors that might allow educators to work more effectively with foster children. Absent these supports, the schools remain uncertain about the needs of foster children and appropriate strategies for working with them, and unaware of foster care policies. This may result in a reluctance to providing services to foster children and in some cases even allowing foster children to attend. In the end, when it comes to foster children's education, neither the schools nor the foster care system appears to be set up to facilitate their education.

Although the number of persons interviewed was relatively small and only from two urban counties so that comments may reflect the experiences of only a few foster care youth and stakeholders, it is disconcerting that some scenarios above reported by former foster youth from 20 years ago matched present-day experiences. Is it possible that very little has

changed over the past two decades in regard to supporting foster children in obtaining an education?

### **The predicament for youth in foster care**

The interviews and focus groups noted the internal challenges for youth:

1. *Lack of experience in decision-making and exercising personal responsibility.* This leads to a loss of control and a sense of learned helplessness. Without the rules and structure of out-of-home care, aging out of care moves, as one youth described it, “from total lack of control to total freedom.” Even the most resilient of youth may be unable to effectively cope with independence without constructive successes to draw on.
2. *Impact of social isolation.* Many foster youth when they graduate from high school are totally on their own, separated from their families and no longer connected to the child welfare system.
3. *Lack of preparation for aging out of care.* While this may in large part be attributable to the shortcomings of the adults in their lives to prepare them, the youth themselves may

not be able to see a vision of their future and may resist any preparation. These feelings may be attributable to experiences with the foster family, birth family, agency and/or other adults.

4. *The impact of social stigma associated with being in foster care.* This may stop youth from seeking out resources, approaching teachers or peers. This effectively prevents them from getting the support and guidance they so badly need, which may reinforce a preexisting fear and distrust of adults and social systems.

Ultimately, whether youth in care are unaware of needing support or aware and fearful of seeking support, the end result is the same. They remain alone and vulnerable while facing the challenges of living on their own and, for the relatively few who pursue post-secondary education, coping with the stressors of college life. For foster youth to succeed in college—even the most resilient ones—a range of supports is needed. These include a number of internal capacities and external supports, but also systems that have policies, structures and formal supports in place to proactively assist these youth.



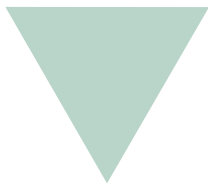
## Needs and recommendations

The recommendations that follow acknowledge that for foster children to be provided with a good education and the potential for post-secondary education, there must be changes at every system level, and there must be collaboration among these systems. Some of the needs and recommendations for meeting these needs are identified here as a beginning point for developing a comprehensive commitment to education. Despite the lack of funding and resources, there are still ways to improve the response to foster children's educational needs. All of these recommendations may not be feasible, but, hopefully, the discussion about how to improve educational outcomes will be enhanced.

For **child welfare agencies**, already stressed in meeting children's basic survival needs, there is a strong need for attention to educational outcomes for children and youth and additional personnel (or time for current personnel) to address educational needs, e.g., work with the schools, access resources, provide training on college preparation.

### Recommendations

- A. Develop or affirm an educational policy for out-of-home care. A statewide educational policy could guide caseworkers in how they address children's educational needs, e.g., mandating that the child's schooling be given priority in considering replacements, e.g., being sensitive to where in the school term a child is when considering a move to a new school, requirements to give top priority to keeping children in the same school district when they are replaced.
- B. Fund educational liaisons or educational specialists so that there are staff dedicated to building relationships with children and youth with an educational focus, identifying and developing educational resources, assisting foster parents, serving as internal resources to staff and collaborating with school's and other related systems. Also, manageable caseload size would increase the probability that the person who already has a relationship with a child could provide this educational assistance.
- C. Develop resource guides and other educational materials for all workers so that they have the information for effective information and referral for foster parents and for youth in foster care.
- D. Develop collaborative relationships with individual schools, school systems and other educational entities to facilitate policy development, monitoring, revision and implementation.
- E. Explore development and use of neighborhood-based placement models that keep children and youth in their same school district even though placed in out-of-home care.
- F. Explore model programs in other states that have demonstrated some level of effectiveness in addressing educational outcomes.
- G. Provide new and continuing workers training on educational needs and mandates, including how to access services and resources provided under Chafee.



H. Create aftercare plans in which foster parents or relatives are selected to become supports for youth aging out of care, e.g., contacting relatives who were not able to raise a youth and asking them to become a non-formal independent living type of support by which they can help youth to enroll in school, set up a budget, obtain a job. The aftercare plan should include the services provided by Chafee.

**2** For **foster parents**, there is a need to equip and support them in their role of promoting education and academic success and instilling and supporting the value of education, and facilitating educational planning.

#### Recommendations

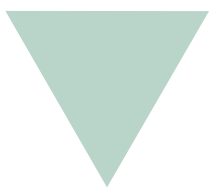
- A. Provide foster parent training on working with the schools, e.g., information on policy, rules and regulations, including training on how to advocate in the schools.
- B. Provide foster parents with information on available community resources, educational programs, enrichment and supplementary educational experiences and information about post-secondary educational options.
- C. Include kinship care and relative resources in these educational and informational initiatives.

**3** For **youth in care**, there are needs related to concrete and instrumental assistance, as well as those needs that are basic and

at the core of their functioning, e.g., need to be valued, self confidence, motivation, a history of success, an adult committed to them in care and after care, supportive school environment, transitional program to help adjust to life on their own—in effect, the internal strengths and external resources needed to get on a college path, needs which require long term commitment by the adults in their lives.

#### Recommendations

- A. Provide youth with as much as information as possible and engage in actions that promote youth responsibility and decision-making. Involve youth in their own transition planning.
- B. Promote continuity of care with committed foster parents and workers. A stable foster home and retention of well-qualified child welfare workers will promote the opportunity for relationships that can support youth and demonstrate that someone cares about the young person in out-of-home care.
- C. Find opportunities to instill the value of education and of pursuing a college path through finding and funding extra-curricular activities, educational enrichment and exposure to schools and colleges.
- D. Assign an educational mentor.
- E. Provide workshops or other educational opportunities to address skills, such as studying, preparing for college and vocational planning.



**4** For **youth who have aged out of care**, the need for emotional, social and concrete support was consistently noted. Former youth in college noted that the transition to independence and to such opportunities as post-secondary education posed a number of challenges and potential discouragements.

Recommendations

- A. Explore development of post-child welfare foster youth support groups.
- B. Address identification of ongoing relationships for information and support.
- C. Identify an educational mentor for those continuing their educations.
- D. Address financial support, including housing.
- E. Provide information on college and university aid programs, special supports, tuition reimbursement programs and other types of assistance (Michigan’s TIP, Casey programs, Orphan Foundation, others).

**5** For **school personnel**, there is a need for information about the child welfare system and the children and youth who are served by this system, as well as the need to address the special educational challenges facing children and youth who have entered the child welfare system due to parental neglect and abuse.

Recommendations

- A. Provide training for school personnel on the social and emotional needs of foster

children and on the policies and procedures of foster care. This training should include ongoing consultation and support.

- B. Find a balance between respecting the privacy of children and youth and sensitivity to stigma, while also paying attention to these particularly vulnerable youth and addressing their special needs.
- C. Reinforce the role of foster parents and develop formal and informal processes to increase the frequency and quality of interaction between teachers and foster parents and workers.
- D. Identify an educational specialist from the child welfare system (or the school) who is placed in or assigned to a school to facilitate these relationships.
- E. Promote dialogue between schools and child welfare agencies. Identify barriers to the sharing of information between schools and agencies and draw up plans for overcoming them.
- F. Establish clear and simple standardized procedures for the quick transfer of records when children change schools.
- G. Use educational passports to alleviate the problems of lost records and unknown educational histories that result in children being placed in inappropriate grades and not receiving the services they need.
- H. Provide training to foster parents and case-workers on school policies, rules, regulations and procedures.



**6** For **community colleges and universities**, there is a need to extend commitment to the educational needs of youth in care by providing a proactive, hospitable, and supportive learning environment.

#### Recommendations

- A. Cooperate with agencies, trade schools and other community resources to provide workshops for youth on career exploration, preparation for college, funding availability and study skills.
- B. Provide special educational events, such as summer camps, to address college preparation skills and encourage exposure to a college environment.
- C. Inform college administrators of the unique challenges of foster youth, e.g., no housing during school breaks and summer, no support system.
- D. Do outreach to agencies, e.g., planning a college day for youth in care, providing workshops to youth as to the what they need to get into college.
- E. Have designated persons to check up on youth, e.g., to see if they are okay, to reduce isolation and communicate interest or to see if they need to talk to someone.
- F. Provide workshops for foster parents and caseworker on requirements for youth interested in pursuing post-secondary education.
- G. Collaborate with agencies, particularly through their service learning programs, to

arrange for college students to be placed at agencies to function as tutors, mentors, workshop leaders on how to prepare for college and to expose foster youth to local colleges and their students.

- H. Provide targeted financial assistance for youth aging out of foster care.

**7** For **courts**, there is a need to assume responsibility for overseeing the educational progress of children in care throughout the life of each case.

#### Recommendations

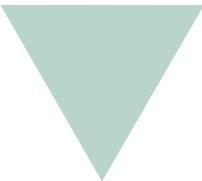
- A. As part of youth case planning, ensure that teens preparing to age out of the system are receiving independent living services.
- B. Monitor case plans to ensure that educational goals are met.
- C. Monitor so that youths' educational needs are assessed at age 14 and the needed services are being provided as mandated by the Chafee legislation.
- D. Encourage CASAs and GALs to make foster children's education a high priority, monitoring to see if they are getting the educational services they are supposed to, advocating for them when necessary, assisting in the development of the Chafee plan and in the implementation of services.
- E. Assist in the sharing of information between FIA and schools regarding the children in their care and the manner in which it is done so as to avoid, whenever possible,

breaches of confidentiality or the stigmatization of these youngsters because of their status as “foster children.”

**8** There is a need for coordination and **collaboration between systems** to assure attention to educational outcomes for youth across systems.

#### Recommendations

- A. Identify a funding stream that would help school districts to offer educational supports to children in foster care regardless of whether the children have formally been identified as having special needs.
- B. Consider a funding stream to provide each school district with an educational liaison, a person who is knowledgeable about foster care and educational policy, to coordinate records, services and intervene when problems surface.
- C. Collaborate to establish programs similar to the Family Youth Services Program, a San Francisco collaborative program that ensures that the educational needs of foster children are being met through the tracking of school records, assistance with school placement, advocacy, training and linkage with the juvenile court regarding the coordination of services.
- D. Establish a collaboration between schools and FIA similar to the Massachusetts collaborative (an educational caseworker in each school district funded by the schools using funds from special education) that provides workshops for teachers, foster parents and caseworkers, works with teachers to tailor their teaching strategies to address the unique needs of foster youth and provides for behavioral management personnel to assist teachers in classrooms when needed.
- E. Consider a transition consortium involving child welfare, mental health and the schools, similar to the Lansing transition consortium, created to serve youth with severe emotional problems, that might be created to provide services to foster youth aging out of care.
- F. Enlist community programs (YMCA, YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4H) that enhance youth social, educational and personal skills to reach out to foster care children and youth.
- G. Encourage agencies to tap into the wealth of resources that exists among former youth in care who went on to college. Many of these younger adults are eager to help children currently in care, but there is no mechanism to do this.
- H. Enlist faith-based and civic organizations to provide tutors, mentors and other assistance for youth in foster care and those aging out of care.
- I. Establish a system for investigating and promptly resolving educational problems involving children in foster care and provide that system with staff who are knowledgeable about the rules of both foster care and the education systems.



### Research needs and opportunities

While we were able to document some of the educational challenges in foster care and the schools that affect foster children's succeeding academically, we know little of the impact on the day-to-day functioning of foster children in the schools. Likewise, we have heard from some workers, foster parents and youth about the problems they have had with the schools. Yet we do not know how teachers perceive the children, understand their behaviors, attempt to cope with their disruptive and often confusing behaviors, and we do not know which student coping strategies have or have not succeeded. *Finally, we also do not know from the teachers' perspective, what obstacles and opportunities they perceive in working with the foster care system.*

We recommend additional studies that will investigate the "classroom" climate as experienced by the foster children and the teachers. For example:

1. Explore, among other factors, foster children's perceptions of their teachers and classmates. Do they feel they fit in, do they feel accepted by their classmates, what is it like when they enter new schools, who helps them to adjust, what do they perceive as obstacles to adjustment, and what are their own future expectations, both academically and otherwise?
2. Explore, among other factors, teachers' beliefs about foster children and their

knowledge of foster care issues (e.g., children's replacements, trauma). What do they know about the academic and familial history of the specific foster child in their class, are they able to understand and cope with the foster care related problems of the child (e.g., inability to trust, extreme reaction to any type of separation), do they have a working relationship with a child's foster parent and caseworker, what resources/training do they feel they need to work more effectively with foster children, what are their expectations of the child.

3. Assess the children's functioning in the school with regard to academic performance, behavioral problems, peer interaction, teacher/student interaction, coping skills, class participation, attitude towards learning, and their ability to use resources.

In addition, a larger scale study of aging out of care in Michigan, examining the outcomes for youth over time, would significantly advance knowledge that could inform policy and practice. How many youth face obstacles? What are the most formidable obstacles to educational success?

An evaluation of existing resources and institution of new pilot programs may also increase our understanding of what works with youth and how to strengthen systemic commitment to the education of youth involved in the child welfare system.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, states are beginning to realize that child welfare and other systems must collaborate and work together if we are to help children and youth advance academically.

No one would say that a child's education is not important. However, this issue deserves higher priority. To identify what is the best way to use our limited resources to help facilitate foster children's education and to get them on a path to higher education, we need to learn why problems continue to exist despite repeated documentation that education is one

of the most critical factors in giving foster children a chance to succeed.

What is it that allows these obstacles to continue on? What is the full range of factors and reforms that will allow foster youth to succeed academically?

It is by learning from the perspective of the stakeholders and the youth that we can begin to create policies and practices that will build on the strengths of children, youth, families and communities and enhance the ability of foster care youth to succeed as adults.

## References

- Ayasse, R. H. (1995). "Addressing the needs of foster children: The Foster Youth Services Program," *Social Work in Education*, 17(4), 207-16.
- Besharov, D. J. (1990). "Crack children in foster care." *Children Today*, 12, 21-26.
- Blome, W. (1997). "What happens to foster kids: Educational experiences of a random sample of foster care youth and a matched group of non-foster care youth." *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 14(1), 41-53.
- Courtney, M. E. & Pillavin, I. (1998). "Youth transitions to adulthood: Outcomes 12-18 months after leaving out-of-home care." Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Edmund, S., & Muskie School of Public Service. (1998). "Improving economic opportunities for young people served by the foster care system: Three views of the path to independent living," Phase 3 conference proceedings. Portland, ME: Author. [Citation Record].
- Festinger, T. (1983). "No one ever asked us...A postscript to foster care." New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fletcher-Campbell, F. (1998). "Progress or Procrastination? The education of young people who are looked after." *Children & Society*, 12, 3-11.
- Folman, R. D. (1998). "Building kid's bank accounts: One adult at a time." 19th Annual Conference of Agencies and Organizations Serving Troubled Youth, Snowbird, UT.
- Folman, R. D. (1996). "Foster care experiences: How they impact the transition to adulthood." Pathways to Adulthood National Conference, San Diego, CA.
- Folman, R. D. & Hagen, J. W. (2001). "Teens in foster care: Risk and protective factors," 296-301 in Lerner, R. M. and Lerner, J. V. (Eds.) *Adolescence in America: An encyclopedia*.
- Folman, R. D. & Hagen, J. W. (1996). "Foster children entering adolescence: Factors of risk and resilience." Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Boston, MA.
- Garmezy, N. & Masten, A. S. (1986). "Stress, competence and resilience: Common frontiers for therapist and psychopathologist." *Behavior Therapy*, 11, 500-521.
- Goerge, R. (1990). "Personal communication." Chapin Hall, University of Chicago.
- Hochstadt, N., Jaudes, P. K., Zimo, D. A., & Schachter, J. (1987). "The medical and psychosocial needs of children entering foster care." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 11, 53-62.
- Jackson, S. & Martin P. Y. (1998). "Surviving the care system: Education and resilience." *Journal of Adolescence*, 21, 569-583.
- Johnson, Penny, Yoken, Carol I., & Voss, Ron. (1995). "Foster care placement: The child's perspective." *Child Welfare*, 14(5), 959-974.
- Kellam, Susan (1999a) "New school, new problems: Foster children struggle in U.S. schools." <http://www.connectforkids.org>
- Kellam, Susan (1999b). "Voices of foster care: People who make a difference." <http://www.connectforkids.org>
- Klee, L. & Halfon, N. (1987). "Mental health care for foster children in California." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 11, 63-74.
- Knapp, M., Bryson, D. & Lewis, J. (1985). "The objectives of child care and their attainment." *Discussion Paper*, 373, PSSRU University of Kent.



- Lamphear, Vivian S. (1985). "The impact of maltreatment on children's psychosocial adjustment: A review of the research." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 9(2), 251-263.
- Michigan Family Independence Agency (2001). Personal communication. *MSU News Bulletin*. "Quotable." January 25, 2001, p. 6.
- Michigan State University (2001). Martin Luther King Day Celebration. *MSU News Bulletin*, Vol. 32, No. 10. East Lansing: University Relations News, p. 2. (<http://newsbulletin.msu.edu/jan25/quotable.html>)
- National Center for Educational Statistics (1999). Dropout rates in the U.S. 1999. <http://nces.ed.gov/index.html>.
- Scannapieco, M., Schagrin, J., & Scannapieco, T. (1995). "Independent living programs: Do they make a difference?" *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 12, 381-390.
- Seita, John R. (2001). "Growing up without family privilege." *Journal of Reclaiming Youth*. Vol. 10 No.3 Fall 2001.
- Seyfried, S., Pecora, P., Downs, A. C., Levine, P., and Emerson, E. (2000). "Assessing educational outcomes of children in long term foster care: First findings." *School Social Work*, 24, 64-75.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *AFCARS Report*. <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov>.
- Texas Foster Care Transitions Project (2001). "All grown up and nowhere to go: Texas teens in foster care transition." <http://www.cppp.org/kidscount/index.html>
- Werner, E. (1989). "High risk children in young adulthood: A longitudinal study from birth to 32 years." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59(1), 72-81.
- Westat, Inc. (1991). A national evaluation of Title IV-E foster care independent living programs for youth. Washington, DC: HHS.
- White, J., Carrington, J., and Freeman, P. (1990). "A study of the educational status of foster children in Oregon: Research and statistics." Portland, Ore: Oregon Department of Human Resources, Children's Services Division.
- Zimmerman, R. B. Foster care in retrospect. *Tulane Studies in Social Welfare*, 14, 1-119.