Issues | An in-depth look at some of the public policy issues affecting children and youth in Michigan.

for Michigan's Children

Voices for Michigan's Children

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Does College Enrollment Constitute Success? Measuring Post-secondary Access and Success of Michigan's Foster Care Youth

Changes in Michigan's economy have made the attainment of a higher education credential more important than ever to ensure self-sufficiency. Therefore, it is critical that the child welfare, K-12, higher education, and workforce development systems encourage and support the postsecondary educational aspirations of foster care youth. When the state makes the decision to remove a child from his/her biological home, it bears the responsibility to provide educational guidance and assistance otherwise provided by families during the transition from high school to college and from college enrollment through degree completion.

Foster care youth face great educational disparities, including low high school graduation/GED completion rates. Only 54 to 58 percent of foster youth graduate from high school by age 19 compared to 87 percent of youth in the general population.[1] Even if they graduate from high school or successfully complete a GED program, foster youth may not be prepared for postsecondary education. According to a report published by the National Resource Center for Youth Services in 2001, only about 15 percent of foster youth take college preparatory courses in high school, a rate that is half that of non-foster youth; this gap has been observed even when the two groups had similar test scores and grades.

Due to poor experiences with academic preparation, fewer than 10 percent of foster youth attend college[2]. This occurs despite the fact that more than 70 percent report a desire to go to college and an additional 19 percent report a desire to attend graduate school.[3] Of the 10 percent of foster care youth who are successful in enrolling in a post-secondary program, only 26 percent of them will complete any kind of degree or certificate.[4]

Michigan can't afford not to invest in higher education programs that not only promote college access but also foster retention for foster care youth

The economic benefits of a college education are well documented. In the year 2005, 25-34 year olds who had a least a bachelor's degree earned, on average, 61% more than those with only a high school diploma or GED.[5] Those who experience higher levels of educational attainment are much less likely to experience incarceration and homelessness and much more likely to experience stable, meaningful employment.

[1] Courtney, M.E. (2009). The difficult transition to adulthood for foster youth in the U.S.: Implications for State as a corporate parent. *Social Policy Report, 23* (1). 3-19.

[2] Courtney, M.E., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001). Foster youth in transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare,80 (6)*, 685-717.

[3] Tzawa-Hayden, A. (2004). Take me higher: Helping foster youth pursue higher education, Child Law Practice 23 (10) pp. 163–166.

[4] Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., O' Brien, K., Roller White, C., Williams, J., Hiripi, E., English, D., White, J., & Herrick, M.A. (2006). Educational and employment outcomes of adults formerly placed in foster care: Results from the NW Foster Care Alumni Study. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*. 1459-1481.

[5] Dworsky, A. & Pérez, A. (2009). *Helping former foster youth graduate from college: Campus support programs in California and Washington State.* Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Foster youth from across the state have offered the following recommendations for policy and practice reform for post-secondary education:

Provide community college and universities incentives to build and strengthen campus support programs designed to target foster care youth. Foster care students who transition from high school to college campuses have needs that differ from those of their non-foster peers. One possible explanation for this disparity may be the fact that many foster care youth who come to campus may not have strong connections to caring adults. Different supports may be needed on campus to make up for or counteract the lack of access to informal networks. Student service personnel at most post-secondary institutions are not familiar with or prepared to address the unique needs of this population. Even programs that target low-income and first-generation-in-college students are not designed with the specific challenges faced by former foster youth in mind. This has certainly been the rationale behind the growing number of higher education programs that provide former foster youth with a wide array of services and supports they need to succeed in school and graduate[6]. No two programs are alike, but general commonalities include opportunities for academic, social and emotional support, year round housing, and access to financial aid targeted to the population. Preliminary data from Michigan's foster care and higher education programs indicate that 80 percent of foster care youth being served by the programs are being retained- a rate equal to the general college-going population.

Increase the age restrictions on scholarships and the federal educational training voucher (ETV) program to age 24; and do not restrict access based on age of first application. The ETV program, the largest financial aid program that specifically targets foster care youth, is designed for students following a traditional college career path. Many foster care youth do not begin college at the age of 18; they tend to be older than their non-foster care peers.[7] Additionally, many foster care students take longer than the traditional 4-year trajectory to graduate with a bachelor's degree. The ETV program is structured in a way that it requires foster care youth to apply for funding before their 21st birthdays, and they are only eligible until they turn 23 years of age.[8] These restrictions are not conducive to the educational success of foster care youth for several reasons: (1) because many foster care youth will repeat a grade before they graduate from high school they will graduate older than their peers, thus they are older when they enter college; (2) many foster care youth may be required to enroll in remedial college courses before they are ready to begin college level work and (3) remedial course work doesn't count towards degree completion, so it adds time to graduation.

Adopt full tuition waivers to increase access to post-secondary school (including vocational, community and four-year colleges). Several states have already adopted tuition waiver programs. Foster youth lack families who can help pay for their tuition, co-sign college loans, or provide them a free place to live while they are attending college or during school breaks. Waivers of tuition and fees help reduce the financial barriers to higher education for foster care youth.

For more information on current advocacy efforts that impact youth in transition, visit Michigan's Children's website at http://www.michiganschildren.org, or contact Angelique Day at angelique@michiganschildren.org.

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[6] Western Michigan University Seita Scholars Program, Michigan State University Foster Youth Alumni Services Program, University of Michigan Blavin Scholars Program

[7] Ali, F. (2010). Paper presented at the New Visions Foundation Center for Educational Justice Event "Overcoming College Obstacles for Foster Youth" Los Angeles, CA. Retrieved from http://www.newvisionsfnd.org/taproot/wordpress/?p=1120

[8] Center for the Study of Social Policy (2009). Chapter 8. Youth in Transition to Adulthood. In *Policy Matters: Setting and Measuring Benchmarks for State Policies. Promoting child safety, permanence, and well-being through safe and strong families, supportive communities, and effective systems.* Washington D.C.: Center for the Study of Social Policy. 88-95.