Supporting Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care: Education Programs

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Supporting Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care

Issue Brief 1: Education Programs

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Youth transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood need many supports to navigate the challenges they face. Over the past three decades, federal child welfare policy has significantly increased the availability of those supports. In 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the Chafee Program). This amendment doubled the maximum amount of funds potentially available to states for independent living services and gave states greater discretion over how they use those funds. In addition to allowing states to provide services such as training in daily living skills, education and employment assistance, counseling, case management, and a written transitional independent living plan, this amendment also allowed them to use up to 30 percent of Chafee funds for room and board.[1] More recently, a provision in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gave states an option to extend eligibility for Title IV-E foster care for youth beyond age 18 until age 21. In states that have taken this option, young people can receive an additional three years of foster care support to prepare for the transition into adulthood.

Although Chafee dollars can be spent on a wide range of services and supports, much of the funding is being spent on services aimed at promoting educational attainment. This probably reflects the relationship between educational attainment and success in other domains. Not only has postsecondary education become increasingly essential to economic self-sufficiency, but in addition, higher levels of education are associated with better health, increased civic engagement, and better outcomes for children (Baum and Ma 2007).

Chafee-Funded Independent Living Services: What We Know About What Works

The Foster Care Independence Act requires that a small percentage of Chafee Program funding be set aside for the rigorous evaluation of independent living programs that are "innovative or of potential national significance." According to the legislation, evaluations must assess programs' effects on employment, education, and personal development. In 2003, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) contracted with the Urban Institute and its partners, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and the National Opinion Research Center, to conduct the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs. Of the four programs evaluated using a randomized control design, only one had a statistically significant effect on youth outcomes.[2] Nearly 15 years after the Chafee Program's creation, the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs is still the only rigorous evaluation of independent living programs for youth transitioning out of foster care. Thus, we still know little about which independent living programs are effective, for which youth they can be most effective, and which program components are essential.

Typology of Independent Living Programs

ACF has again contracted with the Urban Institute and its partner Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to plan for the next generation of evaluation activities funded by the Chafee Program. As part of that planning process, the research team developed a typology to categorize the array of existing independent living programs. The typology includes 10 categories of independent living programs for youth transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood.[3] This issue brief focuses on the category of programs that aim to improve educational outcomes. It explains why these programs are important, suggests a way to think about the types of existing programs, and summarizes what we know about their effects. It then discusses the need to build an evidence base for these types of initiatives in the context of independent living programs and explores some next steps for moving toward that goal. Although the scope of this brief is limited to independent living programs with an education focus, some of the issues it raises may apply to independent living programs in other categories.

What Do We Know About the Educational Attainment of Youth in Foster Care?

Many studies have examined the educational outcomes of youth in foster care and a fairly consistent picture has emerged.

- When youth enter foster care, they are more likely to be "old" for their grade level (i.e., have been held back one or more years) and to perform more poorly on standardized assessments than other students their age (Smithgall et al. 2004; Smithgall et al. 2010).

- The schools that youth in foster care attend are often among the lowest performing (Smithgall et al. 2004; Barrat and Berliner 2013).
- While they are in foster care, youth continue to lag behind their peers academically (Burley and Halpern 2001; Courtney et al. 2004; Smithgall et al. 2004; Pecora et al. 2006; Barrat and Berliner 2013).
- Youth in foster care are less likely to graduate from high school than their peers (Barrat and Berliner 2013; Burley and Halpern 2001; Courtney et al. 2011; Pergamit and Johnson 2009; Wolanin 2005).
- Although a majority of youth in foster care aspire to attend college (Courtney et al. 2004; McMillen et al. 2003), they are less likely than their peers to enroll in college (Brandford and English 2004; Wolanin 2005).
- Compared with their peers, college students who had been in foster care are less likely to earn a college degree (Courtney et al. 2011; Davis 2006; Day et al. 2011; Emerson 2006; Pecora et al. 2003; Wolanin 2005).

What Education-Focused Programs Exist and How Do They Serve Youth in Foster Care?

Closing the achievement gap between youth in foster care and their non–foster care peers will require programs targeting all grade levels from preschool through postsecondary education. However, because Chafee Program funds support independent living programs for youth who are likely to remain in foster care until age 18, we limit our discussion to those focused on secondary and postsecondary educational outcomes.

A review of the literature suggests that these programs fall into three broad categories, though the categories are not mutually exclusive and some programs may fit into more than one:

- high school completion programs (Tyler and Lofstrom 2009)
- college access programs (Domina 2009; Gullat and Jan 2003; Perna 2002; Tierney et al. 2009)
- college success programs (College Board 2011; Meyers 2003)

Programs within each of these categories include those designed to serve general youth populations or populations of at-risk youth and those designed specifically to serve youth in foster care.

Table 1 provides information about the programs in each category, including the purpose of the programs, common program elements, and different types of interventions. It also provides examples of programs mentioned in the literature aimed at general youth populations or populations of at-risk youth. Although these programs may be serving foster youth, they were not designed specifically for

that purpose. Table 2 provides examples of education-focused programs designed specifically to serve youth in or transitioning out of foster care. Programs for youth in care that focus on high school completion often involve helping caseworkers or foster parents navigate the education system and maintaining school stability; these are often quite different from the programs for youth more generally that focus on high school completion. Aside from education and training vouchers and state tuition waiver programs, college access and college success programs serving youth in care and broader youth populations generally share more common elements such as academic enrichment, counseling, and financial assistance.

TABLE 1

Summary of Education-Focused Programs

Category	Purpose	Common elements	Types of interventions	Examples of programs
High school completion	▪ Increase high school graduation rate	▪ Counseling and monitoring ▪ School restructuring ▪ Curriculum redesign ▪ Financial incentives ▪ Community services	▪ Dropout prevention is the primary goal of the intervention versus dropout prevention is part of broader school reform ▪ Interventions that target at-risk students versus interventions for all students in a community or school	▪ Achievement for Latinos with Academic Success ▪ Advancement Via Individual Determination ▪ Career Academies[a] ▪ Check and Connect ▪ First Things First ▪ High School Redirection ▪ Early and Middle College High School[a] ▪ Project GRAD[a] ▪ Talent Development High School ▪ Twelve Together ▪ Small Schools Initiative programs
College access	▪ Increase college readiness ▪ Increase enrollment	▪ Academic enrichment ▪ Counseling ▪ Parental engagement ▪ Scholarships ▪ Mentoring	▪ Summer enrichment interventions versus year-round interventions ▪ Interventions integrated into school day versus interventions implemented before or after school ▪ Interventions that target at-risk students versus interventions for all students in a community or school	▪ Career Beginnings ▪ EXCEL ▪ GEAR UP ▪ Quantum Opportunities[b] ▪ Sponsor-a-Scholar ▪ Talent Search[b] ▪ Upward Bound[c] ▪ FAFSA Experiment[d] ▪ Expanding College Opportunities Project[d]
College success	▪ Increase retention ▪ Increase college graduation	▪ Orientation ▪ Early warning ▪ Academic advising ▪ Faculty-student interaction ▪ Mentoring ▪ Summer bridge ▪ Supplemental instruction ▪ Learning communities	▪ Interventions that target at-risk students versus interventions for all students on campus	▪ TRIO/Student Support Services such as HORIZONS ▪ Personal Development Portfolio ▪ First Year Student programs ▪ Completion by Design Initiative ▪ Accelerated Study in Associate Program

Notes:

[a] Sometimes identified as a college access program.

[b] Sometimes identified as a high school completion program.

[c] Sometimes identified as a college success program.

[d] These are atypical college access programs because intervention involves providing information.

TABLE 2

Education-Focused Programs for Youth in Foster Care

Program category	Examples of programs	Program details
High school completion	■ Treehouse's Graduation Success (Seattle, WA)	■ Education specialists help youth develop a student-centered education plan; monitor student progress; and ensure that students receive appropriate services and supports from Treehouse, the school, and community partners
	■ Solano County's Project HOPE (CA)	■ Process to notify Office of Education within 24 hours of a change in foster placement ■ Integrated data between Office of Education and Child Welfare Services ■ Transportation protocol minimizes school changes ■ Student Support Specialists help caseworkers navigate the education system ■ Training on educational rights and the foster care system provided to partner agency staff ■ Foster Youth Success Initiative helps youth navigate the community college system, teaches life skills, provides resources and connections, supports youth during their senior year in high school and offers a summer bridge program
College access	■ First Star's Foster Youth Academies (CT; Los Angeles; RI; Washington, DC)	■ 4–6 week residential college immersion program each summer through high school graduation ■ Undergraduate academic course credits ■ Motivational training and life skills instruction ■ Monthly follow up
	■ United Friends of the Children's College Readiness Program (Los Angeles, CA)	■ College counselors help students create an academic goal plan; provide educational advocacy; coordinate access to support services; act as mentors and advisors; and follow students for 6 years through home and school placement changes ■ Weekend college information workshops and local college campus tours ■ Career Department helps students secure internships, employment and leadership and community service opportunities ■ Workshops help caregivers create a college-bound atmosphere in their home. ■ Annual college preparatory event features workshops and a college resource fair
	■ Chafee Education and Training Voucher program	■ Up to $5,000 per year for postsecondary education or training ■ Youth can be eligible until 23rd birthday if enrolled by age 21 and making satisfactory progress
	■ State tuition waiver programs	■ Allow students to attend public colleges and universities by waiving tuition and fees, but eligibility requirements vary by state
College success	■ Sam Houston State University's Forward Program ■ Western Michigan University's Seita Scholars Program ■ San José State University CME Society ■ California Polytechnic University, Pomona's Renaissance Scholars ■ California State University, Fullerton's Guardian Scholars	■ Campus support programs provide an array of financial, academic, social/emotional, and logistical (e.g., housing) supports to help former foster youth stay in school and graduate

Notes: This list of programs is not exhaustive; rather, it illustrates the types of education-focused programs for youth in or transitioning out of foster care that currently exist.

Source: Authors' review of the literature and discussions with program administrators and evaluators.

What Do We Know About the Effectiveness of Education-Focused Programs?

To date, there has been little progress in developing an evidence base for education-focused programs that target youth in foster care. None of the programs listed in table 2 have been rigorously evaluated. In fact, with the exception of a few programs included in the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, the research team is not aware of any education-focused programs targeting youth in foster care that have been subjected to a rigorous evaluation. This includes the federal Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program (which provides current and former foster youth with up to $5,000 per year for postsecondary training and education), state tuition waiver programs, or any of the growing number of campus support programs that aim promote college success among students who have been in foster care.[4]

Thus, the best available evidence about the effectiveness of education-focused programs comes from evaluations of programs implemented with other populations. Table 3 provides information about programs in each of the three categories (i.e., high school completion, college access, and college success) that have been shown to have a positive effect on one or more outcomes.[5] For each category, it lists the name (or description) of the programs that were evaluated, the design used (i.e., randomized control trial [RCT] or quasi-experimental design [QED]), and the outcomes affected.

TABLE 3

Education-Focused Programs with Some Evidence of Positive Impacts

Program type	Evidence base	Programs	RCT/ QED	Staying in school	Progressing in school	High school graduation
High school completion	▪ Review of 21 dropout prevention program studies that met What Works Clearinghouse evidence standards with or without reservation (Dynarski et al. 2008) ▪ Seven rated as showing positive or potentially positive effects on staying in school, progressing in school, or high school graduation	Achievement for Latinos with Academic Success	RCT	Y	Y	NR
		Career Academies	RCT	Y	Y	N
		Check and Connect	RCT	Y	Y	N
		High School Redirection	RCT	Y[a]	Y[a]	N
		Talent Development High School	QED	Y	Y	NR
		Talent Search	QED	NR	NR	Y
		Twelve Together	RCT	Y	N	NR
High school completion	▪ MDRC evaluation found positive effects of small high schools on academic achievement and graduation (Bloom and Unterman 2013; Bloom, Thompson, and Unterman 2010)	Small Schools Initiative (New York City)	RCT	NR	Y	Y
High school completion	▪ Evaluation of North Carolina's Early College High School model found positive effects on taking and succeeding in college preparatory courses (Edmunds et al. 2012) ▪ Evaluation of Seattle's Middle College High School model failed to find an effect on dropping out or completing high school (Dynarski et al. 1998)	Early and Middle High Schools	RCT[b]	N	Y	N
College access	▪ Review of 16 studies of 10 programs that met What Works Clearinghouse evidence standards with or without reservations (Tierney et al. 2009) ▪ Four rated as showing positive or potentially positive effects on financial aid application or college enrollment[c]	Career Beginnings	RCT	NR	NR	Y
		Free Application for Federal Student Aid	RCT	Y	Y	Y
		Sponsor-A-Scholar	QED	NR	NR	Y
		Talent Search	QED	Y	Y	Y
College access	▪ An evaluation by Mathematica Policy Research found no effect overall on postsecondary enrollment, but positive effects were found on enrollment among students with lower educational expectations (Seftor et al. 2009)	Upward Bound	RCT	NR	NR	Y[d]

Program type	Evidence base	Programs	RCT/ QED	Staying in school	Progressing in school	High school graduation
College access	▪ Receiving information about the college application process and net costs as well as application fee waivers had a positive effect on college applications and admissions as well as enrollment in selective colleges among high-achieving, low-income students (Hoxby and Turner 2012)	Expanding College Opportunities Project	RCT	N	N	Y
College success	▪ Few rigorous evaluations of college success programs (Valentine et al. 2011) ▪ Most have focused on community college programs (Moss and Yeaton 2006; Barnett et al. 2012; Scrivener and Coghlan 2012; Visher et al. 2012)	Developmental education program	QED	Y	Y	NR
		Developmental summer bridge programs	RCT	Y	Y	N
		Performance-based scholarship, learning communities, and enhanced targeted services	RCT	Y	Y	Y[e]
		One-semester learning community programs	RCT	Y	Y	N
College success	▪ An MDRC evaluation found that the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs increased full-time enrollment, the average number of credits earned, proportion of students who completed their developmental coursework, and the proportion of students who enrolled in college during the second semester (Scrivener et al. 2012)	Accelerated Study in Associate Program	RCT	Y	Y	Y

Source: Authors' review of the literature and discussions with program administrators and evaluators.

Notes: Y = Yes, program had a positive effect; N = No, program did not have a positive effect; NR = Not reported.

[a] One of three sites.

[b] Studies looking at the college outcomes of students who attend ECHSs and MCHSs have been primarily descriptive.

[c] An early evaluation of Quantum Opportunities found positive effects on college enrollment but a more recent one did not.

[d] Effects were limited to students with lower educational expectations.

[e] Performance-based scholarships only.

Six of the nine high school completion programs were found to have a positive impact on staying in school and seven were found to have a positive impact on making progress in school but only two (Talent Search and the Small Schools Initiative) were found to have a positive impact on high school graduation. None of the programs was found to have a positive impact on all three outcomes. Only two of the six college access programs were found to have a positive impact on applying for financial aid, but all six were found to have a positive impact on college enrollment. Finally, all five of the college success programs were found to have a positive impact on academic achievement, and two were found to have a positive impact on persistence.

Considerations for the Field

We shared our review of what is known about education-focused programs for youth in foster care with a group of researchers, program directors, and federal staff with expertise in foster care or education programs at a convening in September 12, 2013. Based on our review and the discussion at that convening, we have identified several broad issues for the field to consider as we move toward the next evaluation of the Chafee Program:

- **Unique needs of youth in foster care**. The education-focused programs that have been shown to be effective with youth not in foster care might lead to similar improvements for youth in foster care, but youth in foster care differ in many ways from the populations on which these evidence-based programs have been tested and these differences could limit their effectiveness. For example, at least some of the achievement gap between youth in foster care and their non–foster care peers may stem from the abuse, neglect, or other trauma they experienced before their first placement (Smithgall et al. 2004). Unaddressed, the effects of this trauma may continue to affect their ability to learn (Smithgall et al. 2010). In addition, youth in foster care are classified as needing special education services at a much higher rate than other students, especially for emotional or behavior problems (Burley and Halpern 2001; Courtney et al. 2004; Lee and Jonson-Reid 2009; Pecora et al. 2006; Smithgall et al. 2004; Barrat and Berliner 2013). Some of these youth may be reacting to traumatic life events and thus not merit a special education classification (Smithgall et al. 2005). Others who do have chronic impairments may not receive the services they need (National Center for Youth Law 2010). In light of these differences, we should consider ways in which evidence-based education programs for the general population may need to be adapted for youth in foster care in order for the positive effects found in those studies to be replicated.
- **Program location and modality of service delivery.** The geographic distribution of youth in foster care and their high rate of mobility (relative to the general population) pose a challenge for place-based approaches to service delivery and the evaluation of such programs. Outside jurisdictions with the largest child welfare populations, there may be a need to explore virtual programs (e.g., online credit-recovery programs) or programs that have a more person-centered design, staying with the young person outside school and supporting her or him during transitions to new schools or educational programs.

- **Targeted population for the intervention.** The intended recipients of education programs are an important consideration. Parent engagement in education is critical, and some programs may target parents or include a component aimed at increasing parents' ability to provide educational advocacy and supports. For youth in the child welfare system, programs may need to target both biological parents (or adoptive parents or legal guardians) and substitute caregivers (including group home staff), particularly in jurisdictions where children have relatively short stays in foster care. While evaluations must ultimately address the impact of the program on the youth themselves, they will also need to consider the intermediary impact on caregiver behavior.
- **Identifying and recruiting students for programs.** Increased data sharing between education and child welfare agencies may support the development of targeted program recruitment strategies. Programs often rely on older youth to self-identify as eligible for and interested in an education program; however, in a few jurisdictions (including Seattle) education and child welfare agencies are collaborating to identify youth who may benefit from particular programs. One caution in taking this approach is that when linked administrative data are used for targeted recruitment, school-age youth in foster care who have dropped out, are highly mobile, or are being served in specialized settings will be missed unless additional measures are taken to include them.

Conclusion

Changes made to federal child welfare policy since the Chafee Programs were created—coupled with trends in the larger economy—have made building an evidence base for education-focused independent living programs more important than ever. As of August 2013, 18 states and the District of Columbia have extended foster care eligibility to age 21 using the provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.[6] Youth in those states can now remain in foster care until their 21st birthday as long as they meet at least one of five requirements: completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential; enrolling in an institution that provides postsecondary or vocational education; participating in a program or activity designed to promote—or remove barriers to—employment; maintaining employment for at least 80 hours per month; or proving incapability of engaging in any of these educational or employment activities due to a medical condition. Given that two of these requirements involve education, many of the youth who opt to remain in foster care beyond age 18 may be participating in secondary or postsecondary educational programs, and some of those youth may need educational services or supports if they are to succeed. By providing youth in extended foster care with those services and supports, states have an opportunity to improve the educational outcomes of youth in foster care that did not exist when the Foster Care Independence Act became law in 1999.

Yet another important reason to build an evidence base for education-focused programs is that postsecondary education has become increasingly essential to economic self-sufficiency. Although the need for at least some postsecondary education is not unique to youth in foster care, research suggests

that far too many youth in foster care will not have the credentials needed to succeed in this economy without programs that can improve their educational outcomes and close the achievement gap.

Notes

1. The use of Chafee room and board funds varies by state. The most common uses of these funds include covering rental start-up costs, ongoing support, and emergency uses. More information on how states use Chafee funds for housing needs can be found in Pergamit, McDaniel, and Hawkins (2012).
2. For the final reports from the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, please see "Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Project)," Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, accessed June 26, 2014, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/chafee/index.html.
3. The 10 categories include education services, employment services, housing, mentoring, behavioral health services, permanency enhancement, pregnancy prevention, parenting support, financial literacy and asset building, and multicomponent services.
4. Different states have different names for their ETV programs. Although many campus support programs track student outcomes such as retention rates, we are not aware of any formal evaluations of these programs.
5. Much of the information about the effectiveness of dropout prevention and college access programs came from two recent reviews by the What Works Clearinghouse. The What Works Clearinghouse has not done a comparable review of college success programs.
6. This includes 16 states with approved plans and two with plans pending approval from the US Department of Health and Human Services as of May 5, 2013.

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