

# CLOSING THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR FOSTER YOUTH THROUGH MENTORSHIP

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## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To help foster youth succeed in higher education, career readiness, and achieve independence, Congress should 1) require all colleges and universities receiving Educational Training Voucher (ETV) funds to provide dedicated campus support programs for foster youth, 2) increase award amounts for both Pell and ETV programs, and 3) amend the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to expand dedicated mentorship opportunities for foster and adopted youth in secondary and post-secondary education.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Foster youth face significant barriers in higher education and career readiness. They often lack the relational support and stability necessary to succeed academically, resulting in lower graduation rates and limited career outcomes. To address this, federal policy should focus on establishing mentorship initiatives to guide foster youth through their educational journey, provide increased funding for support programs, and raise awareness of available resources. Providing comprehensive support, from financial aid to career development, is crucial for helping foster youth achieve relational permanency, independence, and long-term success. Consistent, supportive relationships enable positive academic and professional outcomes.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I am passionate about mentorship and support in higher education for foster youth because I have experienced firsthand the systemic barriers foster youth face. Starting in high school, I lacked the proper guidance and entered college unprepared for the challenges ahead. I began my college journey at the University of Connecticut (UConn) during the height of COVID-19. I quickly found myself without the support systems needed to manage the emotional and practical challenges I encountered. The isolation of the pandemic only made things harder. I was left to figure everything out on my own, without the relational support that many of my peers were afforded — the emotional, social, and practical help that comes from having strong personal connections with friends, family, mentors, or peers. As a full-time student, I faced constant stress. At one point, I experienced housing instability due to data entry errors resulting in late tuition payments, which led to major setbacks.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

At my college, students typically aren't allowed to remain in housing unless they are athletes or student workers, so these clerical mistakes had serious consequences. Without consistent case management or mentorship, I struggled through these issues and others by trial and error. The pressure became overwhelming, and I frequently considered dropping out. These problems persisted even when I transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University.

These experiences are not just personal hardships. They reflect deeper failures in how the foster care and educational systems support foster youth. While many of my peers had family members or mentors to guide them through college, I had to navigate many steps on my own. We, as foster youth, are often expected to act like independent adults before we have been given the tools or support to succeed. Most young people are free to take risks and pursue their goals without fearing that their world will fall apart if they fail, because they have relational permanency. Foster youth often don't have that same safety net, and the absence of stable, long-term support means that even small setbacks can lead to major consequences.

My college journey changed when I connected with SUN Scholars Inc., an organization dedicated to supporting foster and adopted youth. They offered mentorship, academic support, and career guidance with staff, many of whom had firsthand foster care experience, addressing each student's individual needs. They also helped with college registration and communication with the Department of Children and Families, ensuring I had the resources I needed. I went from being on the verge of dropping out to graduating with my bachelor's degree and building a vision for my future. Today, I am pursuing my Master of Business Administration with a concentration in supply chain management at the University of Hartford. These programs changed my life and brought me here today. All youth, including those in foster care, deserve support and opportunity because, with the right systems, we can thrive and give back.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Only 14% of foster youth earn a degree within six years, compared to 31% of their peers, contributing to long-term risks like unemployment and poverty (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Education is one of the most important predictors of future success and self-sufficiency. However, the structure of the foster care system often denies youth the relational and financial support that other young adults rely on when navigating college or starting a career. Foster youth are often expected to become independent without the stable, supportive networks that help others thrive in early adulthood. This lack of relational permanency, such as consistent and supportive relationships with caring adults, makes it harder for them to manage academic stress, access resources, and persist through challenges (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024). While some financial aid is available, such as Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) and Pell Grants, these supports are limited in scope. The maximum Pell Grant award is \$7,395 for the 2025–2026 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

The ETV program provides a maximum of \$5,000 per year (Congressional Research Service, 2024). These amounts combined often fall short of covering total college expenses, including housing, food, books, and technology. Notably, the ETV program's maximum award has remained unchanged since it was introduced in 2001. As a result, financial instability remains a key factor contributing to college dropout rates among foster youth.

Mentorship is essential to increasing educational retention and success for foster youth, who often lack access to consistent, trusted adults to guide them through higher education; effective programs boost access, retention, and graduation by providing both emotional and practical support (Juvenile Law Center, 2018). For example, California's Torero Renaissance Scholars combine financial aid with relationship-based guidance and can serve as a model for supporting foster and adopted students nationwide (Alvarado, 2022).

## THE CHALLENGE: FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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This infographic contrasts our existing programs with proven solutions, analyzing key metrics to understand shortfalls and impacts. It offers insights into potential challenges and guides strategies for helping achieve success through modifying existing laws and programs.

### THE PROBLEM: LESS ACCESS AND LESS SUPPORT, NOT LESS MOTIVATION OR ABILITY

**70%**  
of 17- and 18-Year Old  
Foster Youths aspire  
to attend college

Compared to their  
peers, foster youth  
achieve a degree  
**45%**  
less often

Lack of informed  
mentorship in high  
school and university  
lead to missed  
opportunities and lower  
graduation rates

### ACCESS TO INFORMED MENTORSHIP IS KEY



**LESS THAN 1/3 OF  
ETV ELIGIBLE YOUTHS  
APPLIED FOR THE PROGRAM**



**ESSA TITLE IV-A DOESN'T REQUIRE  
MENTORSHIP OR TRAINING RELATED TO  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

### PROJECTED FUNDING SHORTAGES



Since 2001, total cost to  
attend college has increased  
**OVER 125%**



while the PELL Grants and ETV  
funding have only increased an  
**AVERAGE OF 35%**

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To help foster youth succeed in higher education, career readiness, and achieve independence, Congress should:

- **Require all colleges and universities receiving ETV funds to provide dedicated campus support programs for foster youth**, including advising, mental health services, academic coaching, and career development, while providing funding to help cover these costs.
- **Increase award amounts for both Pell and ETV programs** and expand and create federal scholarships for foster youth. Expanding tuition waivers nationwide can ease financial burdens and support college completion.
- **Amend the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to expand dedicated mentorship opportunities for foster and adopted youth in secondary and post-secondary education.** Modify Title IV-A to create a national mentorship initiative connecting foster and adoptive youth with trained mentors. Additionally, Title I-A should be amended to require local education agencies to train counselors on the education rights and unique needs of foster and adopted youth to support coordinated transition planning focused on career development, college readiness, and financial aid.