Policy Brief

The Impact of COVID-19 on College Students from Foster Care

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There are more than 400,000 children in the foster care system. Twenty thousand are youth in transition or have aged out of the foster care system every year[1]. Youth transitioning out of foster care face multiple challenges including unstable housing or homelessness, lack of employment and job training, problems with physical and behavioral health, lack of access to healthcare, justice system involvement, lack of social connections, and lack of adequate elementary and secondary education [2]. Although a majority of these youth want to attend college, fewer than 20% actually enroll and less than 3% graduate with a four-year degree [3]. College Promise programs seek to improve college access and success by removing the barrier of college tuition and fees and applying student supports. Yet to truly move the needle on postsecondary attainment for vulnerable groups like students from foster care it is necessary to incorporate programming that recognizes and addresses their unique challenges. This brief explores ways policy levers can be utilized to better support students from foster care by examining three studies and applying lessons learned to federal policy development and implementation.

COVID-19 has Caused Major Setbacks for Students from Foster Care

In March 2020, COVID-19 created an unprecedented crisis for postsecondary institutions worldwide. Colleges were forced into emergency remote instruction and many shut down campuses, forcing students to return home and assume virtual instruction. Although the pandemic disrupted educational pathways for all students, youth from foster care may have experienced some of the biggest setbacks as, unlike their peers, youth from foster care often have fewer support networks or safety nets to turn to in a time of crisis [4].

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Dr. M. Sebrena Jackson, LICSW is an Assistant Professor and Director of the MSW Program at The University of Alabama School of Social Work. Her research, scholarship, and practice focuses on two lines of education research: post-secondary education access for youth transitioning from foster care via pre-college programs and online social work education.

She has published and presented on these topics at the national and international levels. The pre- college program she founded, the National Social Work Enrichment Program (NSEP), provides a six week campus experience for foster youth and has received consistent funding for over 10 years.

Dr. Jackson has received numerous awards for her work, including NASW Social Worker
of the Year in Georgia and Alabama and the University of Alabama's Innovation Scholar Award. Dr. Jackson is a trailblazer in the social work profession, and through her leadership, practice, and research, a college education has become a viable option for hundreds of youth transitioning from foster care.

The sudden closing of college campuses created uncertainty and emotional stress. For some students, returning home meant returning to toxic and dangerous home environments. For others, COVID-19 meant job loss, food insecurity, and limited access to technology to continue educational studies in a virtual setting [5]. One student who lost her job during the pandemic had challenges paying a late fee that was withholding the release of her diploma, stating, "the university had the damn audacity to not give me my degree over a $70 late fee that I absolutely could not afford because I lost my job. Thankfully, my foster care college support program was able to cover the cost. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have gotten my degree in time to start my job as a social worker at a local homeless shelter."

Studies on the Impacts of COVID-19 on Youth from Foster Care

Three recent studies have been conducted to assess the impact of COVID-19 on youth from foster care, including effects on college access and retention behavior for this student population.

The Experiences of Older Youth In and Aged Out of Foster Care during COVID-19

Dr. Johanna Greeson and colleagues conducted a national study of 281 foster youth across 32 states in April 2020 that examined the experiences of youth in foster care and youth aged out of foster care in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 281 participants, 134 (48% of the full sample) [4] enrolled in college full- or part-time:

HEALTH AND WELLNESS
- 60% screened positive for symptoms of depression, anxiety, or both.
- 45% reported a negative impact on their living situation.
- 16% reported having been or being forced to leave their current housing situation.
- 59% reported a negative impact on their food security, including very low access to food and no access to food.

FINANCIAL
- 57% reported a negative impact on their employment.
- 80% reported being financially stable for a month or less.

TECHNOLOGICAL
- 19% reported not having reliable access to a cell phone during the pandemic.
- 25% reported not having reliable access to the internet during the pandemic.
- 29% reported not having reliable access to a computer during the pandemic

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Angelique Day, PhD, MSW, is an associate professor in the school of social work at the University of Washington Seattle and co-founder of the National Research Consortium on Foster Alumni in Higher Education (NRC-FAHE).

She is a product of the Michigan child welfare system. Angelique was removed at age 11 because of her mother's mental illness and reunified at age 13 with her father. Dr. Day is a first-generation college graduate who was supported by Pell grants and other need-based aid demonstrating that college can be a meaningful way out of poverty. Dr. Day's lived expertise, research, and legislative experience undergird her national leadership on education access and support for youth who experience foster care.

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Opportunity Passport Participant Survey

The Jim Casey Youth Initiative conducted an October 2020 survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on Opportunity Passport participants. Over 2,700 participants responded to the survey [5]. Students reported detrimental effects to many aspects of their lives and 12% of respondents were forced to drop out of school or had their schools closed.

Students saw negative impacts on:	Students reported having difficulties with:
18% Housing	32% Rent Money
39% Employment	33% Food Money
43% Mental health	26% Transportation Money

FosterClub: Checking In on Young People from Foster Care as COVID-19 Continues

FosterClub conducted a poll with 474 foster youth between November 24, 2020 and December 5, 2020 [8]. Key findings related to education indicated that while education and schooling seems to have stabilized since the beginning of the COVID-19 period, youth reported having difficulty focusing, reported challenges with virtual learning, and lack of access to computers or reliable internet. Some also reported they needed to suspend their education plans in order to make money for necessities.

Policy and Practice Recommendations for Promise Programs Serving Students from Foster Programs

College Promise programs are a powerful opportunity for increasing access to and success in postsecondary education among foster youth both during and after the COVID-19 period. Yet it will require a concerted effort on the part of practitioners, policymakers, and educational advocates as well as Promise program leaders to address pressing the needs of this student population through scholarships and wraparound supports, including basic needs support and student success support. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provides new flexibilities and new assistance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that directly impacts youth in foster care. Directing these resources in the following ways can maximize college access and retention rates of foster youth:

- **Providing adequate financial supports**
  In the absence of substantial financial assistance, foster youth may decide to forgo their educational plans beyond high school and enter the workforce. This financial assistance should include not only the tuition and fee coverage available through Promise programs, but also funding to cover daily expenses, such as food, housing, and transportation assistance. Many Promise programs have created student emergency funds during the pandemic, and these types of grants to cover

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Lauren currently serves as the Interim Director of Strategic Initiatives and Planning in the San Mateo County Community College District. Prior to this role, Lauren was responsible for new student recruitment at Skyline College where she created invaluable relationships with PK-12 partners to aid in students' successful transition to higher education.

Throughout her 10 years in higher education, Lauren has held positions in both public and private universities in California and Texas where she focused on college access and helped students achieve employment success while in college and post-graduation. In 2018, Lauren was selected to become a Biden Foundation Higher Education Fellow supporting Community College research on best practices surrounding access, affordability, and student success and completion.

Lauren also serves as a consultant with the Skyline College Equity Institute, Hotep Consultants, and Career Ladders Project, where she supports colleges and organizations seeking to evolve into more equity-advancing institutions through strategic thought partnership.

basic needs, rather than loans, minimize the burden to these students of a lot of student debt.

In addition to the financial support College Promise programs can provide students from foster care, these students can also take advantage of certain sources of financial aid that may be easier to access while students are still in care (e.g., independent living stipends, Education Training Vouchers (ETV). For this reason, these students should be encouraged to remain in foster care for as long as they are able. In addition to the regular appropriations allocated for fiscal year 2021 under the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, the bill appropriates $400 million in supplemental funding for the John H Chafee Program, of which $50 million must be used for ETV. This supplemental appropriation requires no state match requirements to obtain. ETV award amounts are increased from $5,000 to $12,000 and extend eligibility from age 26 to age 27 through September 2022.

- **Providing access to year-round, on-campus housing or other housing supports**
  Safe, stable, and affordable housing is essential if foster youth are able to pursue postsecondary education. The consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 waives the 30% limitation states can draw down to support older youth with housing under Chafee Foster Care Independence Act. Using this resource to increase the capacity of institutions of higher education to offer campus-based housing, where these students can live year-round can substantially increase their ability to attend four-year colleges and universities. Additionally, these COVID resources could also be used to provide housing subsidies through the Family Unification Program (FUP) or the Housing Choice Voucher program for off-campus housing which would help students with foster care histories attend two-year colleges and technical schools.

- **Provide access to transportation supports**
  The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provides new authority to provide driving and transportation assistance of up to $4,000 per year for youth between the ages of 15 and 26 years of age. These funds can be used flexibility to cover a wide array of transportation related expenses including the purchase of a vehicle, car insurance, car repairs, bus and subway passes and more.

- **Expand use of targeted campus support programs across two- and four-year colleges**
  Financial support alone does not solve the retention issue with our population. Financial aid has to be matched with targeted wraparound supports to maximize the success of students in foster care in meeting their educational goals. Campus support programs and College Promise programs should provide wraparound supports to address the needs of students who have experienced foster care. Specific student support elements include advising/case management, peer mentoring, academic support, and fostering community and career connections [9]. These support programs are uniquely positioned to assist students in becoming aware of their eligibility for new resources under the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and drawing it down.

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Angelique serves as the Ohio Policy and Outreach Manager Alliance for the Great Lakes. She manages the Cleveland municipal policy agenda and related legislation at the state level in Ohio Angelique has a wealth of policy experience and has a personal passion for advancing equity. Her career includes roles with the offices of U.S. Senators Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) and Ron Wyden (D-OR). Most recently, Angelique served as a fellow with the City of Cleveland Department of Public Utilities.

Prior to joining the Alliance, Angelique was a Legislative Correspondent for Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) where she managed constituent engagement and policy priorities in the areas of education, child welfare, transportation, and infrastructure.

Angelique has earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Binghamton University in New York as well as a Project Management Certificate from the Kent State Center for Corporate & Professional Development in Ohio. Angelique graduated in 2020 obtaining a Masters in Policy Management from Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy.

- **Extending foster care to age 21**
During the COVID period, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 allows all foster youth who exited foster care due to age during the time of the public health emergency (on or after Jan 27, 2020) to voluntarily reenter foster care. Since 2010, states have had the option to extend federally funded foster care from ages 18 to 21 under the Fostering Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, and more than half the states have exercised this option. Given that access to postsecondary education is higher among foster youth who were still in foster care at age 19 than among those who had exited at an earlier age, states that have not extended foster care to age 21 should consider making foster care extension permanent after the COVID provisions in the Consolidated Appropriations Act expire.

Conclusion

If students who have experienced foster care are to pursue postsecondary education, they will need a range of supports, including adequate financial assistance, safe and affordable housing, and transportation. Although such supports require a significant financial investment on the part of state and federal governments as well as local and state College Promise programs, research suggests that the returns on those investments are likely to be substantial. The College Promise movement has worked with local and state governments to strategize ways to remove the financial burden of higher education for students in order to increase economic access. Although the policy recommendations made here are built around federal policy, the lessons learned are readily transferable for local and state Promise programs. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities with educational and economic access. As local and state governments are determining a way forward, it is crucial that foster youth are included in any future planning to right size historical inequities in order for communities to eliminate educational disparities and provide all students with the funding, resources, and tools needed to thrive.

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: collegepromise.org or email info@collegepromise.org

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