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Aging Out Is Not a Graduation

Breaking Down Higher-Education Barriers for Youths in Foster Care

BY AMY WOOLARD

For youths in foster care, the hours spent at school sometimes offer the most stability these young people experience in a day, just as school teachers and staff members can represent the most consistent adult presence in their young lives. Youths who experience chaos and crisis in their home lives and foster placements can find school to be a reliable refuge, a place where they simply become students like any other peer. While their parents or caseworkers might call them “foster kids,” they will never hear a teacher identify them as a “foster student.”

But the structural design and situational practices of foster care can generate disruptions in the educational progress of these youths. Such disruptions create a domino effect of school failures that can shut down opportunities before they even become available—most notably milestone goals such as attaining a high school diploma and achieving a college degree.

A majority of children who come into foster care are entering the system from low-income families. Many have experienced abuse, neglect, and inadequate housing. Still others have been living with one or more parents struggling with substance abuse, or they have been deprived of a parent because of incarceration. Poverty alone sets up risk factors that make educational achievement seem nearly impossible; the added trauma and instability endured by children in foster care can create an environment where success is the exception, not the rule.

Despite these odds, educational achievement is still viewed as an opportunity to escape from poverty and, by extension to youths in foster care, a chance to change the trajectory seemingly set by the circumstances that brought them into care. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, “[i]n 2011, young adults with a bachelor’s degree earned almost twice as much as those without a high school diploma or its equivalent (97 percent more), 50 percent more than young adult high school completers, and 21 percent more than young adults with an associate’s degree.”¹



Youths who turn 18 while in foster care are not suddenly, on their 18th birthdays, granted the guidance they were due before they reached adulthood.

Thus school success can serve as an important ingredient in helping youths in care overcome the obstacles that both their prior home life and their life in foster care create. Family stability, however, is often another critical component in keeping kids on track—certainly toward high school graduation but also during the transition years afterward and throughout any postsecondary education attainment. This is partly why ensuring family permanency for youth in care is paramount—family support can give the stability, guidance, discipline, encouragement, and praise that can help kids invest in their own educational and life success.

“Aging out of foster care,” however, is not a kind of graduation, nor is it permanency—youths who turn 18 while in foster care are not suddenly, on their 18th birthdays, granted the guidance they were due before they reached adulthood. And just as many parents and families do not resign from their relationships when children in their families turn 18, states that take custody of children through foster care, and thereby stand in as parents, should not abandon these youths so abruptly when that custody ends.

Good Work Can Mask Poor Work in Reducing the Foster Care Population

Virginia boasts the lowest average rate of children placed in foster care in the nation,

¹ SUSAN AUD ET AL., NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, *THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION 2013*, at 16 (May 2013).

at around 2.6 per 1,000 children.² But for the last several years the Commonwealth of Virginia has held the distinction of placing either 50th or, most recently, 49th in the nation in achieving permanency for its youths in foster care before they “age out” at 18. While the state has been doing well over the past five years in reducing the number of its children in foster care overall, it is challenged to reduce likewise the number of youths who are in care and turn 18 while still in state custody. The goal of any child coming into state custody via foster care is permanency, which in Virginia is defined as transfer of custody back to the child’s prior family (also known as reunification), transfer of custody to a relative, or adoption.

harmful than being in the family from which a child had been removed. As youths in family foster homes and relative placements saw higher rates of permanency and lower stays in care and as caseworkers began infusing efforts toward kinship care and diversion, the total number of youths in care decreased significantly in the state.

Still, Virginia had over 670 youths “age out” of foster care in 2012; they represented over 25 percent of all youths who exited care in that year.⁵ And again the deck was somewhat stacked—although total numbers of children in care came down, over half of the kids who did come into care were 13–19, many of whom were poised to “age out” simply either because they were already so close to adulthood or

a true constant among several variables experienced by youths in care. If educational barriers are removed for these youths and school success—from grade school through college—is truly made a priority, then permanency takes on a new, more lasting meaning, well beyond age 18.

“Fostering Connections” Aims to Meet Youths in Care Where They Are

Educational challenges for many youths in foster care begin well before they even enter care; however, educational policy directed toward children in foster care is necessarily limited by its own condition—i.e., the policies a state puts in place directed toward youths in foster care apply only to youths who are already in care. Although these policies are often aimed at reducing the harm that foster care status might inflict on a youth’s education, they are sometimes ineffective because many youths in care come into the system with educational deficits already well cemented.

States that take custody of children through foster care, and thereby stand in as parents, should not abandon these youths abruptly when that custody ends.

In 2007 children in Virginia’s foster care system numbered over 8,100.³ By 2012, due in part to a sea change in state child welfare policy called the Children’s Services System Transformation, that count had been reduced to around 5,200.⁴ The policy focused strongly on shifting the tide toward family-centered placements for children in foster care; the policy acknowledged that the high number of youths placed in congregate settings such as group homes and institutions—and the attendant risk factors those placements engendered—was stacking the deck against a majority of youths in foster care and lending credence to the notion that being in foster care was perhaps more

because securing permanency for older youth is—or at least is perceived to be—more difficult for caseworkers to achieve.

And so Virginia stands with two issues that are necessarily intertwined: too few (especially older) youths achieving permanency before turning 18 and consequently too many youths “aging out” without adequate family supports to help them transition to adulthood successfully. The commonwealth has not yet answered how to prepare youths to become adults while the commonwealth ensures that they become members of a permanent family.

Within this kind of “dual citizenship” of “nearly an adult/still needs a family,” a strong educational foundation can become

The most significant child welfare law aimed at reducing educational barriers for children in foster care is the relevant provisions of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.⁶ Fostering Connections was built upon lessons learned from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act.⁷ Fostering Connections recognized that youths in foster care can be both highly mobile and subject to bias in schools based solely on their foster care status. The law attempted to create educational stability and reduce time out of school for these youths through these critical ways: (1) when a youth comes into care or changes placements in a home that

2 [Council on Virginia’s Future, Foster Care](#) (Feb. 1, 2013).

3 [Chmura Economics and Analytics, Measuring the Costs of Foster Care and the Return on Investment for the “Great Expectations” Initiative](#) 8 (n.d.).

4 [Snapshot of Children in Foster Care in Virginia](#) 1 (Oct. 1, 2012).

5 E-mail from David Bringman, Data Administrator, Virginia Department of Social Services, to me (April 3, 2013) (in my files).

6 [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#), Pub. L. No. 110-351, 122 Stat. 3949.

7 [McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001](#), 42 U.S.C. §§ 11431–11435.

would necessitate a school change, the youth is presumed to remain in the same school, unless attending the new home school is in the youth's best interests; (2) if a school change is necessary, the youth will be immediately enrolled and attending classes and activities, even if all the necessary paperwork is not yet complete; (3) all educational records should be transferred immediately with the student if a school change is required; and (4) transportation is to be provided from the new placement to the youth's original school if the youth remains there.

The need for the law was clear, if only on an anecdotal level: legal aid offices in Virginia, at least, had been flooded with calls from caseworkers, group home administrators, and foster parents who were struggling simply to enroll their children in school. Foster parents were sent away from registration desks for not having the proper paperwork to enroll or were told that their child could not come to school until an individualized education program was found or a new individualized education program was agreed upon. Group home administrators were told that their young residents needed to attend what looked suspiciously like disciplinary panels, wherein school administrators or office personnel "interviewed" a student about the student's prior school, behavior, and grades before the student could be "placed" in a classroom. Caseworkers saw the whole gamut and often described how youths in care would be excluded from school for days, weeks, or even months while enrollment problems were resolved. This delay often disrupted placement as workers sought to find a viable school first and then a corresponding home for their clients. The cycle repeated with each new placement change—young students falling behind scholastically, between time lost

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waiting for successful enrollment, failure to transfer credits between schools, lost school records preventing proper course scheduling, and the insidious bias that came with being identified as "a foster kid," which was (and likely still is) often used synonymously with "delinquent."

In Virginia this portion of Fostering Connections was implemented via changes in the state's education code and joint guidance established between the commonwealth's Department of Education and Department of Social Services—a collaboration that has become a model nationwide for states implementing a complex law that requires cooperation between two large state agencies.⁸ Still, how these changes might improve school outcomes for youths in foster care is not yet known—either in Virginia or nationwide. Many states either have not yet fully implemented the changes or have done so only recently. Virginia has only just adapted its educational data systems to be able to collect outcome information specific to youth in foster care.

The data nationally and from other states consistently demonstrate the dire educational straits that children in care endure. A recent California study found that only 58 percent of 12th graders in foster care graduated from high school in 2010, compared with 84 percent of their peers statewide, likely reflecting a variety of barriers acting either on their own or in layers to stall

educational achievement.⁹ For example, researchers looking at the adult functioning of former foster youths, in what is commonly called "The Midwest Study," found that over a third of the study's participants reported experiencing five or more school changes, and nearly 18 percent reported missing at least one month of school due to foster care placement problems.¹⁰ Nearly half of youths in foster care had been placed in special education at some point in their grade school experience. On average, participants were reading at a seventh-grade level and were more likely to receive failing marks and less likely to receive superior marks than their peers.¹¹

Many of these conditions may be resolved through the Fostering Connections Act reforms—school changes should decrease; immediate enrollment should prevent long stretches of registration-related absences; and expedited records transfer could improve the effectiveness of individualized education programs. But youths in the study were also "at higher risk for grade retention, more than twice as likely to be suspended, and nearly four times as likely to be expelled from school as their peers."¹² These effects often reflect at best a school staff inadequately trained to respond to the unique needs and trauma experiences of kids in care, and at worst a persistent

⁹ VANESSA X. BARRAT & BETHANN BERLINER, CENTER FOR THE FUTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING AT WESTED, *THE INVISIBLE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: EDUCATION OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE IN CALIFORNIA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS, PART ONE* 40 (2013).

¹⁰ Mark E. Courtney et al., *Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of Youth Preparing to Leave State Care—Executive Summary* 7–8 (2004).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 7.

⁸ See "Virginia" portion of [National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, Fostering Connections: Education](#) (n.d.).

and pernicious bias that equates foster care with “bad kids.” These are actions not readily legislated away. Recommendations:

- States should fully implement the Fostering Connections educational protections and codify these policies in both education and child welfare state law. Fostering Connections, as currently enacted, demands only that social services agencies comply with the law or suffer potential IV-E sanctions; it does not serve as a mandate to state education agencies.¹³
- States implementing these educational protections must put adequate and comprehensive data collection mechanisms in place to ensure proper compliance and to begin to measure educational outcomes for youth in state care. Several national child advocacy organizations, including the American Bar Association’s Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, have produced materials and recommendations on data-sharing strategies across state agencies.¹⁴
- Training on these laws and policies should be embedded in any required training modules for both social services and school staff, preferably as joint training, so that both agencies’ personnel can work through any questions or conflicts together.

13 The Fostering Connections Act amends Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The Fostering Connections Act has the force of law, but the only consequence of a state’s noncompliance is (after several opportunities for a state to come into compliance after being cited for noncompliance) for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to restrict federal “IV-E” funding to the state. To receive this funding, states must maintain compliance with their “IV-E plan,” a written plan that details how they will structure programs and services to meet federal requirements.

14 See [Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, Search Our Document Database](#) (2014); use the keywords “information sharing” and “Fostering Connections” for several related briefs on structuring student data sharing between social services and education agencies.

Higher-Education Challenges for Older Youths Are K–12 Challenges that Have Metastasized

School changes, forced absences, and lost education records do not impede youth in care in their present tense only—they can close off any hope of higher education before the idea even surfaces in the youth’s mind. Youths in general are more likely to attend college if one or more parents attended college themselves, but many youths in foster care would be the first in their families to attain any postsecondary education, much less complete a degree. As such, youths who have no family history of higher education, foster youths included, begin their potential postsecondary careers at somewhat of a deficit: these youths must depend on others for guidance in planning, preparing, applying to, and paying for college. Caseworkers, foster parents, friends, teachers, counselors, coaches, and other mentors are so tasked.

Multiple school changes can cause setbacks in the form of grade failures and retention, of course, but they can also interrupt a youth’s steady accumulation of the courses, activities, and relationships that build a successful résumé to which an admissions officer will respond favorably:

- If a youth’s transcripts are incomplete or do not reflect necessary coursework (even if actually completed), a college application can be rejected outright.
- If a student has not spent enough consistent time at a school to be able to participate in sports, drama, music, or other extracurriculars that bolster an application, the student might not stand out in comparison to peers who did sustain these activities.
- If a youth is not able to create long-lasting, positive relationships with counselors and teachers—either

because of too many school changes or unfair treatment and bias—soliciting recommendation letters and nurturing other informal networking benefits that can often tip the balance on a particular applicant’s chances of admission can be difficult. Further, since youths in care would often be the first in their families to attend college, they are consequently denied any benefits of being a “legacy” at a particular school and must rely more heavily on outside relationships to gain any available advantages.

- Similarly, if a youth has already been tracked or labeled as “not college material,” breaking that mold and enlisting the aid of knowledgeable adults to help navigate other necessary parts of the process such as financial aid and prerequisites and take advantage of vital supports such as SAT prep courses or mock interviews can be difficult.

Youths in foster care are so often “priced out” of all these intangible, informal accessories that have become not just advantageous but mandatory when competing (or even simply qualifying) for college admission. And yet so many are still motivated toward college—the Midwest Study reveals this in data, and countless advocates and caseworkers confirm it anecdotally.¹⁵ Caseworkers, foster families, school staff, and other mentors not only must hear young people when they express these aspirations but also must inquire actively about their interest in higher education and respect such goals by helping achieve them.

In one instance, for example, adults’ lack of response to a young person in care left her defeated: Michelle was in foster care in Northern Virginia, where she was interested in and excelling in academics.¹⁶

15 Courtney et al., *supra* note 10, at 7.

16 The youth’s name has been changed for purposes of this article.



She was both tired of being in the foster care system and driven to go to college. As such, she took on an accelerated course load in order to graduate from high school a year early and both exit care and move on to higher education. A placement change caused her to be moved to Central Virginia into a group home. With the move came lost school records, course credits that her new school would not accept, and an enrollment delay that put her out of school entirely for nearly two months. Consequently Michelle lost all the progress she had made toward an early graduation and lost her motivation to go on to college and her trust in both the foster care and school systems. Michelle eventually decided to take the GED (general educational development) tests instead, making her college prospects certainly not impossible but more challenging to achieve. If Michelle had been maintained in her home school or ensured proper enrollment with credits intact and had strong school support that honored her academic plan, she likely would have stayed on the path toward her original goals. Recommendations:

- In alignment with Fostering Connections provisions, foster care placement decisions should always make educational best interests a top priority for youth and encourage youth

participation in determining those best interests whenever appropriate.

- Caseworkers and foster parents should identify and nurture relevant mentorships for youth, aligned with youth's expressed academic or vocational interests.
- School administrators and counselors should seek out partnerships with nearby colleges and universities to encourage student groups and organizations to mentor and make themselves available to potential first-generation college students, most especially youth in care.
- All adults involved in the lives of youths in foster care should guard against "tracking" them away from college because of a perceived lack of ability or interest. Adults should actively ask youths their college or career goals as early as possible and work collaboratively with them to help achieve these goals.

Age Is More Than Just a Number, Or 18 Years Does Not Get You What It Used to

Consistently in Virginia, young people, 13 to 18, constitute a majority of youths in the foster care system.¹⁷ Throughout 2013, monthly totals reveal that youths 16 to 18 made up 25 percent of the total number

¹⁷ See [Virginia Department of Social Services, Foster Care \(FC\) Related Reports](#) (2014) (multiple foster care monthly snapshot reports for 2008–2014).

of youths in state care; the monthly totals of youths in state care in 2013 averaged over 1,270 youths each month.¹⁸ At these later teen ages, youths are on the brink of aging out of care but find themselves at several crossroads at once: they are finishing up their high school education; they are leaving the confines of state custody; and they are becoming—in the eyes of the law and society—adults, with the power to make decisions for themselves and the responsibility of facing the consequences of those decisions.

But laws, and society for that matter, have begun to recognize that 18 is often a kind of floor, rather than a ceiling, for young people. The Pew Research Center found recently that 36 percent of U.S. young adults, 18 to 31, now live in their parents' homes—the highest percentage in 40 years.¹⁹ Economic struggles, unemployment, and the cost of higher education may contribute to this trend, but the number of young adults living with their parents alters the common understanding of what being "an adult" means. Furthermore, recent research in adolescent brain development undercuts the myth that young people are fully mature at 18. This research demonstrates that in areas of long-term planning, present-oriented thinking, modulating risk-taking behavior, and susceptibility to peer influence—among other psychosocial behavior—young people's brains are still developing until 26.²⁰ Add to this science the preponderance of youths who are in care and have experienced trauma, substandard living conditions, abuse and neglect, and other crises, and you can envision how especially

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ [Andrea Caumont, Pew Research Center, 13 Data Milestones for 2013](#) (Dec. 23, 2013).

²⁰ See Laurence Steinberg, *Risk Taking in Adolescence: What Changes, and Why?*, ANNALS OF THE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, June 2004, at 51. See also [Brief for the American Psychological Association, and the Missouri Psychological Association as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondent, Roper v. Simmons](#), 543 U.S. 551 (2005) (No. 03-633).

precarious a ledge that age 18 can be for youths “aging out” of foster care.

Youths Aging Out of Care Lack Money, Access, and a Support Network

If the first barrier to college for youths who “age out” of foster care is constructed of all the roadblocks faced during their K–12 years, then the second barrier is certainly the cost of postsecondary institutions. Certainly some foster parents and relatives simply ignore the proposition that their duties as caregivers somehow end when youths turn 18, but, for many young people, even the adults in their lives who have the best of intentions can lack the financial resources to help with college tuition and expenses.

Several federal programs established since the mid-1980s have attempted to increase the level of educational achievement of youths who “age out” of foster care by solving the problem of cost. The Title IV-E Independent Living Program, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, and the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act all dedicated funding or authorized federal funds to be used on postsecondary education for these youths.²¹ Education Training Vouchers, a component of the Chafee Program, can offer relief of up to \$5,000 per year to qualifying youths toward tuition assistance, vocational training programs, and other related “costs of attendance,” as defined by federal law.²²

Similarly, state programs such as the Virginia Community College Tuition Grant Program can assist many youths who

“age out” of care with school tuition and related expenses within the community college system, if some limited qualifying conditions are met.²³ The way state and federal education assistance is structured, however, can often leave students with large financial gaps to fill. State funding mechanisms are often applied to school costs only *after* federal assistance is utilized; even if a portion of available state funding is left unused by a student, it is not then refundable to help pay for “life costs” that might not qualify as “costs of attendance” but are nonetheless critical to a student’s attending school—costs such as phone bills, utilities, and clothing. Students who are then forced to work while attending school in order to make up the difference are at greater risk of discontinuing their higher education.

Perhaps one of the greatest supports now available to youths, for states that choose to opt into the program, is a Fostering Connections Act provision that allows states to draw down additional IV-E reimbursement funds if they expand foster care supports and services to age 21, as a voluntary option for youths who “age out” of state custody at 18. Perhaps most important, the increased level of reimbursement for states means that youths who “age out” of care can receive housing at no cost to them. With this extension of care, youths continue to have “placements” that are available to them and run the full spectrum of options from independent apartments to family foster homes.

In many states, when youths turn 18, local departments of social services may, in qualifying cases, offer some limited continued support through these transition years to age 21. Currently in Virginia, such support can come in the form of mentorship, life skills workshops, counseling, help in navigating housing needs (but not in obtaining or paying for placements),

and a small monthly stipend to help cover any expenses (including rent and utilities). Although these programs can be beneficial in unquantifiable ways, the limited financial assistance means that many youths in the commonwealth must be employed and must continue that employment even while they are enrolled in college, and this can prove a difficult balancing act.

In the Midwest Study, for example, “needing to work” was the most common reason offered by the study’s participants who had enrolled in college but subsequently dropped out. Of those study participants who had not enrolled in college, nearly 40 percent listed “not having enough money to pay for school” and nearly 20 percent offered “needing to work full time” as primary reasons for not pursuing postsecondary education.²⁴

With housing costs, as well as tuition and education-related costs subsidized by the state, youths who “age out” of care can then use monthly stipends for other living expenses and may be able to work fewer hours while they are attending college or perhaps avoid having to work at all, allowing them to focus on their academic and career goals. The Midwest Study, which measured outcomes for a group of youths who were in care and received extended care to age 21 versus a group who did not receive such care, found that those who received the extended support were almost twice as likely to have attended college and more than twice as likely to have completed one year of college as their peers whose services stopped at 18—encouraging results suggesting that investments in the educational stability of young people, even past 18, can make a difference.²⁵ And completing any postsecondary education, even if a student does not attain a degree,

21 [John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, 42 U.S.C. § 677 \(2010\); Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-133, 115 Stat. 2413; Title IV-E Independent Living Program, Pub. L. No. 99-272, § 12307, 100 Stat. 82 \(1986\).](#)

22 The [Higher Education Act of 1965 § 472, 20 U.S.C. § 1087ll \(2011\)](#), defines “cost of attendance,” the key components of which include tuition and fees, books and supplies, transportation, dependent care expenses, disability-related expenses, loan fees, and licensing and certification fees.

23 See [Great Expectations, Scholarships](#) (n.d.).

24 [Amy Dworsky & Mark E. Courtney, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Does Extending Foster Care Beyond Age 18 Promote Postsecondary Educational Attainment? 5](#) (March 2010).

25 *Id.* at 2.

can still result in higher earnings.²⁶ Although results between the two groups “evened out” past 21, once services and supports were no longer available for either group, further examination of supportive policies and programs, perhaps more tailored to the youths’ actual educational experiences and needs, could generate even greater returns on investment.

Thus far, 18 states have opted into the Extension of Care provisions of Fostering Connections, and more are exploring the option. Virginia’s legislature will be considering this program during its 2014 session, and the proposal has already received encouraging endorsements from the outgoing McDonnell administration and many legislators from both parties. The Jim Casey Foundation, through its *Success Beyond 18* campaign, has led the charge nationwide in facilitating states’ adoption of the policy, demonstrating not only the human benefits of a breadth of transitional support for youths but also the cost-avoidance benefits of preventing these same youths from straying toward the negative outcomes associated with “doing nothing,” namely, homelessness, unemployment, school dropout, early pregnancies, and criminal justice involvement.²⁷ Recommendations:

- States should opt into the “Extension of Foster Care to 21” provisions of the Fostering Connections Act to help with housing and other life needs of youths “aging out” of care abruptly at 18. If implemented well, this program could increase young people’s access to higher-education opportunities and perhaps allow for greater achievement in that realm.
- States should structure their own tuition reimbursement and subsidy programs for foster youths such that youths

are able to receive “refunds” on any unused portion of their grants to help pay for life expenses for which federal programs do not allow grants to be used. In the alternative, state programs could expand the types of expenses reimbursable under the state grant program, which could assist youths in meeting these additional expenses.

In considering higher-education opportunities for these youths a bit further, notice that, perhaps even more so than in the K–12 environment, success in college is dependent upon much more than simply attending class, completing assignments, and achieving good grades. A college environment, whether it is created through living independently and attending community college or residing in dorms on campus, creates a kind of “dress rehearsal” for many youths, allowing them time to “practice” living as independent adults while being comforted by the knowledge that family is often there to step in and help when needed—if not financially, then with advice, encouragement, and solace.

Youths who have “aged out” of foster care, however, often do not have available to them during college what some describe as that “phone call home”—not just in emergencies but also at times that can be just as important, namely, to have a parent or family member express pride and praise over accomplishments. Programs such as Virginia’s “Great Expectations,” which is connected directly with the state’s community college system, can offer older youths in care and former foster youths mentorship, guidance, skills, and information to help them navigate what can often be a complicated path as they work toward their higher-education goals.²⁸ Strong relationships with caring adults and access to informal social networks are critical to connecting young people

to a positive college experience that sets them on a path to success. States and their higher-education systems should offer financial assistance and other basic needs to youths in care and should strive to create formal and informal networks within college environments to offer mentoring, peer support, social interaction, and access to vital information such as career planning and mental and physical health care services to these youths.

Older youths in foster care and youths who “age out” of the system at 18 may have experienced educational deficits before entering care, and quite possibly *because* of entering care, making higher-education prospects even more difficult to reach. Because of these interrelated challenges, states must focus on the intersection between child welfare and education, at the earliest stages and all along the way, to restack the deck for these youth and offer them a realistic chance at college success. Recent developments in federal law, most notably through the Fostering Connections Act, have refocused attention on the educational risks faced by youths in foster care and their attendant needs. Fostering Connections, the Chafee Act, and other earlier federal child welfare programs have created unique opportunities for states to invest in the full spectrum of school supports and services for these youths, who come into the system already in crisis. These laws encourage and empower states to ensure, as they must, that these youths do not leave in crisis either.

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²⁶ *Id.* at 6.

²⁷ See [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Success Beyond 18](#) (n.d.).

²⁸ See [Great Expectations](#), A Resource for Virginia’s Foster Youth (2014).

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