Improving the Educational Well-being for Older Youth Placed with Kin: A Review of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act

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It has been over nine years since the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) was signed into law. The law was enacted, in part, as a response to the number of children across the country who have lacked permanent homes and are over-represented in school dropout statistics - issues that harm their prospects to transition successfully into adulthood.

Permanency and education well-being are intrinsically connected. Youth placed in homes without the permanency afforded by kin who either adopt or care for children through legal guardianships, on average, move to new foster care placements up to three times per year, with each move resulting in a change of school (Julianelle, 2008). It is not unusual for high school youth residing in foster care to have changed schools ten or more times. Since it takes time to recover academically after each school change, many children in foster care not only fail to recover, they actually lose ground (Yu et al., 2002). This largely explains the negative relationship found between placement instability and high school completion (Pecora, et al., 2005). One study found that youth who had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school (Pecora et al., 2003). Less than 60 percent of former foster youth graduate from high school by age 19, compared to 87 percent of students in the general population (Courtney, 2009).

Those that do graduate from high school are less likely to attend college (Courtney, 2009) and those who do enroll in a post-secondary institution are less likely to graduate (Day et al., 2011). By age 19, only 18% of foster youth are pursuing a four-year degree, compared to 62% of their peers (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009). By age 25, less than 3% of former foster youth had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 24% of the general population (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009). Davis’ study found that only 26% of foster care alumni who enroll in college have earned a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment compared to 56% of their peers. Not completing postsecondary education limits prospects for employment, which has significant implications on lifetime earning potential. A U.S. Department of Education funded study found that 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 (Aud et al., 2010).

Key educational provisions identified in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCSA) impacting children placed with relatives through either adoption or legal guardianship include the expansion of eligibility criteria of independent living services to include children who leave foster care after age 16 for kinship guardianship or adoptive

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placements, making them eligible for the education and training (ETV) vouchers as defined under Title II of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments (P.L. 107–133) (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009). It is estimated that around 150,000 youth nationally meet the criteria to receive ETV funds. Through this program, states can provide current and former foster youth with up to $5,000 per year for postsecondary training and education (P.L. 107-133, 107th Congress, 2001). The ETV can be used to defray the costs of the following types of expenses: tuition/fees, books and supplies, room and board, and miscellaneous personal expenses, including purchase of a personal computer, transportation, and child care. Youth participating in the program on their 21st birthday remain eligible until age 23 as long as they are making satisfactory progress toward completion of a post-secondary education credential (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009). Satisfactory progress has been defined by the federal government as the maintenance of at least a 2.0 GPA and no more than one incomplete or course withdrawal per semester (National Foster Care Coalition & Casey Family Programs, 2007).

Several states have also begun to implement their own postsecondary educational assistance programs; many of these programs include services to youth placed in kinship care arrangements. These services include tuition waivers and other scholarship-based programs for foster youth attending state-supported colleges and universities (Hernandez & Day, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Social Science Research Center, College of Sciences & Humanities, Ball State University, 2007). States that contribute targeted educational resources for foster youth realize greater numbers of these youth accessing postsecondary education and training (Collins, 2004). For states that supplement the Education and Training Voucher program, opportunities are expanded to allow for public university education in addition to vocational education or community college classes. Children raised by kin may also benefit from the College Cost Reduction Act of 2009 (P.L. 110-84), which allows students who were in foster care, but adopted or placed in legal guardianships on or after their 13th birthday to claim independent status when applying for federal financial aid (Fernandez, 2008).

It is important that kinship care providers who provide permanent homes to former foster youth through adoption or legal guardianships are aware of these policies and resources that can be used to support the post-secondary goals of youth in their care.

References:


