

## Opening Doors to Higher Education for Youth in Foster Care

Reminisce about how great it was to turn 18 with your whole life ahead of you. Now imagine being 18, with no parent or guardian and trying to pay for college. This is how countless youth in care<sup>1</sup> feel. Nationally, only 20% or 30,000 college eligible youth in care obtain a postsecondary degree.<sup>2</sup> New York State's youth in care population reflects the national statistic.

We have failed to support *our* youth in care. Without the necessary assistance, entering college and obtaining a postsecondary degree is nearly impossible for these youth. This brief addresses the financial aid reforms necessary for them as they strive to attain a postsecondary education.

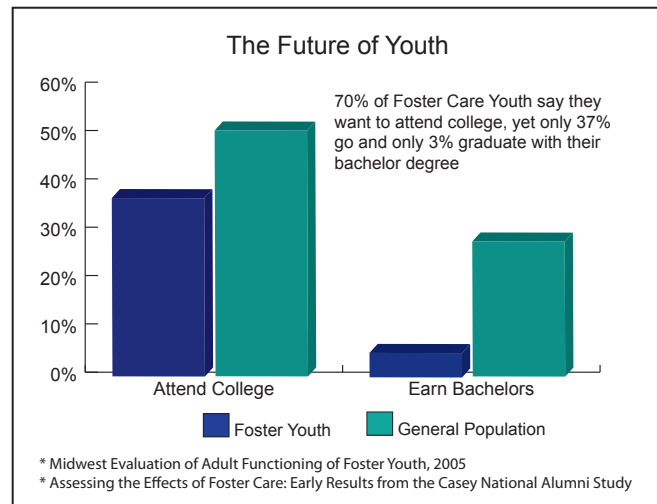
### THE IMPORTANCE OF REFORMING FINANCIAL AID

SCAA is cognizant of the fact that financial support is not the only form of assistance needed for youth in care who are embarking on postsecondary education. Without academic, physical and social-emotional guidance it is very difficult to succeed in receiving a degree. However, financial support and awareness are crucial because the ability to pay for a degree is the only way to get one. Youth in care do not have the same access to educational funding as traditional students. To ignore this gap in access is to proclaim that only certain youth can obtain a postsecondary degree.

A recent U.S. survey of about 600 adults found that of the 22 to 30-year-olds surveyed, 81% of those who did not graduate from college felt that allowing part-time students to qualify for financial aid would have significantly helped someone in their circumstances get a college degree.<sup>3</sup> Of those who graduated, 83% felt that the cost of attending college should be cut by 25%. Since financial assistance is important to college students, how can youth in care expect to succeed if traditional students, who often have the social-emotional support and resources to pay for college, face their own financial setbacks?

### WHAT NEW YORK IS DOING

New York has gradually implemented services and programs to improve higher education for youth in care including: an Education and Career Planning Resource Directory and Geographic Information System that lists and helps locate educational and job training programs<sup>4</sup>;



Education and Training Vouchers (ETV); Education Forums<sup>5</sup>; and the 2010 *Executive Budget* proposal to eliminate the current independent schedule and create a new TAP (Tuition Assistance Program) schedule for certain financially independent people.<sup>6</sup>

### HOW NEW YORK SHOULD IMPROVE

The actions listed above are insufficient to ensure the success of these youth in obtaining a postsecondary degree. There are still obstacles that require reform, including:

- **The proposed reduction of TAP awards for two-year degree programs, the cornerstone for higher education.** Reduction of TAP awards to these programs will hurt low-income and minority students.<sup>7</sup>
- **The restriction on part-time TAP awards. In order to be eligible for part-time TAP, a student must first attend school full-time.**<sup>8</sup> This is a problem as most students who attend school part-time do so because full-time study is unrealistic due to work or family responsibilities.
- **The lack of ingenuity with regard to tuition assistance compared to other states.** Texas, California, Florida and Illinois waive tuition or provide scholarships for public universities, colleges, community colleges and technical schools.<sup>9</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing an effective financial plan is imperative to help youth in care acquire a postsecondary degree. SCAA recommends that the state:

- **Reform certain TAP requirements.** Tuition assistance is an important resource for youth in care attending college.
  1. Eliminate the independent schedule;
  2. Eliminate the part-time TAP eligibility requirements; and
  3. Do not reduce the maximum TAP award for two-year programs.
- **Make higher education more accessible for youth in care by waiving tuition to two-year state degree programs as well as state colleges and universities.** Many youth in care do not have credit cards or a parent or guardian. Without a credit history and/or co-signer, it can be difficult to secure loans, the primary means of paying for school.<sup>10</sup> This obstacle would not exist if tuition were waived for in-state public degree programs. While SCAA is aware that implementing this proposal in this economic climate is difficult, it should be seriously examined and considered.
- **Increase awareness about programs that inform youth in care of their financial options for higher education.** Youth's knowledge and comprehension of what resources exist for them bears on their success in getting a postsecondary education. Student Financial Aid Awareness Month is an example of how the state is getting the word out about resources and assistance for this population.

We cannot afford to neglect those who need the public's aid the most – their failures are costly to the state. Homelessness, poverty and incarceration are what many youth face without the opportunity for higher education. If education is the great equalizer, then we must invest in methods that will get foster care youth into postsecondary degree programs that will positively impact the economy, their futures, and the future of the state.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The term “youth in care” applies to any youth who is currently in foster care, or has been placed in a facility operated by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). It also applies to older youth who have been adopted from the child welfare system after age 16. Taken from [www.ocfs.state.ny.us](http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us)
- <sup>2</sup> *A White Paper on: Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care*, OCFS; May 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> DuPont, P., Ott, A.N., Johnson, J. & Rochkind, J.; *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them*; New York, NY: Public Agenda; 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Carrión, G. (2010). *Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Youth in Care*. New York State Association of Counties News; Counties and Higher Education. Volume 31, Issue 1.
- <sup>5</sup> [www.hesc.com](http://www.hesc.com). A training effort between OCFS and HESC.
- <sup>6</sup> [www.budget.state.ny.us](http://www.budget.state.ny.us)
- <sup>7</sup> *Higher Education Funding in the 2010-2011 Executive Budget*; Krug, Patrick; Testimony of the New York Public Interest Research Group before the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means Committees; January 27, 2010. Youth in care are often low-income and minorities.
- <sup>8</sup> [www.hesc.com](http://www.hesc.com)
- <sup>9</sup> *A White Paper on: Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care*, OCFS; May 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Anderson, G.; *Aging Out of the Foster Care System: Challenges and Opportunity for the State of Michigan*; Michigan State University's Applied Public Policy Research Program; September 2003.