

## Apprenticeship as a Pathway to Success for Foster Youth

For youth that are exiting foster care, gainful employment can be an important factor in supporting their transition into adult life. Youth from the foster care system face additional challenges when it comes to employment compared to their peers not in the foster care system. Work-based learning (WBL) programs, such as apprenticeships, can provide a powerful opportunity to receive hands-on educational and career experiences without accumulating debt. However, simply enrolling in WBL programs will not always be sufficient in supporting youth transitioning out of foster care. Apprenticeship programs and employers should consider providing additional support and mentorship to reach these young people and help them to succeed in the workforce. Understanding the impacts of individual lived experiences ensures that programming meets the unique needs of apprentices. This paper provides a series of tips and resources for developing inclusive programs and support systems that support career advancement opportunities and economic mobility.

## Challenges and Opportunity

In 2020, there were more than 407,000 children in the American foster care system.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 20,000 young people exit foster care each year without permanent families or the support and resources they need to thrive.<sup>2</sup> The age of transition for foster youth varies by state, with some states ending foster care system support as early as age 18 and others as late as age 23.<sup>3</sup> Federal law requires that caseworkers work with youth starting at age 14 to develop a transition plan that includes personalized goals for housing, health insurance, education, employment, and support services to ensure that youth are prepared for when they age out of the system.<sup>4</sup> Youth within the foster system and those that have recently aged out are at a higher risk for homelessness, mental and physical health challenges, unplanned pregnancy, and incarceration, compared to their counterparts not in foster care. By age 24, 46% of youth that have aged out of foster care are unemployed.<sup>5</sup> The tens of thousands of youths aging out of foster care each year leave the system without the support they need to successfully transition into adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

Within four years of aging out:

- 70% of foster youth will be on government assistance.
- 25% will not have completed high school.
- 50% will have no income.
- Those that do will make an average of \$7,500 per year.

Walsh, A. (2021). College Affordability Challenges Facing Youth with Experience in Foster Care.

<sup>1</sup> Walsh, A. (2021). College Affordability Challenges Facing Youth with Experience in Foster Care. Retrieved from <https://tcf.org/content/report/college-affordability-challenges-facing-youth-experience-foster-care/?session=1&agreed=1>

<sup>2</sup> Administration for Children and Families. (2020). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport28.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Jim Casey Initiative. (2020). Retrieved from <https://assets.aecf.org/m/blogdoc/aecf-jimcaseyinitiativebrochure-2020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022). Extension of foster care beyond age 18. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2016). Foster Youth Transition Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ackman, P. (2023) *Bowling with Bumpers: Increasing Social Capital for Foster Care Youth*. Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy, Georgetown Law. Retrieved from <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-journal/blog/bowling-with-bumpers-increasing-social-capital-for-foster-care-youth/>

<sup>6</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2013). Retrieved from <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/JCYOI-CostAvoidance-2013.pdf>



Many experience network poverty, meaning they are primarily surrounded by individuals who lack the resources, skills, and information to support or prepare them for the often prohibitively selective college admissions process. The result is that many foster youth do not have the financial or administrative support to navigate college applications, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and other forms of college funding.

Youth apprenticeship programs can help foster youth access the technical as well as soft skills needed to navigate their transition out of foster and enter the workforce. Registered Apprenticeship Programs' (RAPs) 'earn-as-you-learn' model provides an opportunity for post-secondary learning when traditional tertiary education is financially inaccessible or not feasible for the individual. As apprenticeship programs are often sponsored by trade groups, unions, or employers, participants develop industry-relevant skills that are in high demand. On average, 90% of apprentices secure employment when their apprenticeship ends, and earn an average starting salary of more than \$60,000.<sup>7</sup>

## How to Expand Access to Apprenticeship for Foster Youth

There are several ways in which apprenticeship programs can expand access and tailor their program to meet the needs of youth transitioning from the foster care system.

**1. Develop relationships with Departments of Social Services and foster care agencies.** The first step to expanding apprenticeship access to foster youth is to understand the system they're navigating and the existing supports available to them. The process of transitioning from foster care is different in every state. Some states offer extended supports after youth have aged out of formal foster care that may include housing, health insurance, academic support, financial assistance, and mentoring, among others.<sup>8</sup> When designing supports for foster youth in an apprenticeship program, research existing supports by State and leverage the supports already available to them. Developing relationships with social services and foster care agency workers will also aid in outreach to foster youth as they can promote apprenticeship programs as a career pathway directly with the youth. Contact local agencies and schedule a meeting to learn more about their work, the transition services available to youth, and to explore the mutual benefits of collaboration.

**2. Engage youth with experience in the foster care system in program design.** Many systems that foster youth navigate have been designed without their input and leave them with limited power to make decisions. When designing an apprenticeship program that aims to support foster youth, seek input from the youth in the development and administration of that program as they are the experts on their experiences and needs.<sup>9</sup> They can provide unique insight into the needs and challenges of current and former foster youth and inform recruitment and retention of apprentices that have navigated the foster system. There are many ways to engage young people in the process, including advisory boards or councils, roundtable discussions, and youth leadership boards. When evaluating how a RAP will work with former or current foster youth,

“NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US” is a rallying cry that originated in the disability rights movement, but it has been widely adopted by young people who have been in foster care to illustrate the desire to be included in the planning of strategies and policies that affect their lives.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Labor. Equal Opportunity in Apprenticeship for Apprentices and Job Seekers. Retrieved from [https://www.doleta.gov/OA/eo/pdf/Apprentices\\_and\\_Job\\_Seekers\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://www.doleta.gov/OA/eo/pdf/Apprentices_and_Job_Seekers_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022). Extension of foster care beyond age 18. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/>

<sup>9</sup> Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2014). Realizing the power of youth and young adult voice through youth leadership boards. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/realizing-the-power-of-youth-and-young-adult-voice>



determine how involved youth will be in the process, what their role will be, how to include a diverse representation of experiences, and how much power their input will have in the decision-making process.<sup>10</sup> Youth and family advocates from Family Voices United, Children’s Trust Fund Alliance, FosterClub, and Generations United collaborated to create briefs on [how agencies and organizations can prepare for youth engagement](#) and [best practices in working with youth advisory boards](#). There are also existing [state youth advisory boards and foster care alumni associations](#) that apprenticeship programs can consult for their expertise.

*The Passport to Careers program in Washington is designed for former and current foster youth, as well as unaccompanied homeless youth who are enrolled in state-recognized apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. The program offsets costs related to the program by helping with expenses such as tuition, occupation-related tools, and clothing. It also covers a range of needs related to transportation, utility bills, and emergency services. Case management is provided to encourage long-term goal setting.*

**3. Develop a pre-apprenticeship program.** While foster youth may need a job to pay the bills, they may be unsure about which career pathway best aligns with their skills and interests. Some may be better suited for a job opportunity that allows them to explore a career, rather than immediately starting down a career pathway.<sup>11</sup> In these instances, pre-apprenticeships can be valuable, as they provide youth with on-the-job training needed for a career without the long-term commitment. Quality pre-apprenticeship programs allow pre-apprentices to shadow an employee, helping them to understand the day-to-day responsibilities of that position and ask questions about the work. The curriculum for pre-apprenticeship programs links to at least one apprenticeship program, which provides the opportunity for advancement in that career path.<sup>12</sup>

**4. Focus on soft skills development for youth.** Programs should encourage the development of executive skills, which are a set of cognitive skills that allow individuals to plan, organize, make rational decisions, and regulate self-control.<sup>13</sup> An inability to adapt, manage time well, control emotions, or stay organized often indicates diminished executive functioning skills.<sup>14</sup> Evidence indicates that youth who have experienced trauma are significantly more likely to lack executive functioning skills. Programs can leverage curriculum such as the [Goal, Plan, Do, Review, and Revise](#) framework to develop an individual’s executive functioning skills.

**5. Provide additional wraparound services to ensure youth are supported.** Youth transitioning out of foster care are often focused on meeting their basic needs, such as figuring out where to live and how to pay for necessities like transportation and food. Many do not have families to provide financial and emotional support during this time. Employment programs serving youth transitioning out of foster care are most successful when combined with other services to ensure basic needs are met.<sup>15</sup> Programs that provide financial and in-kind services help support youth outside of work, which ensures that they continue to be productive and attentive while at work. This could include

<sup>10</sup> Casey Family Programs. (2022). How can agencies and organizations prepare for authentic youth engagement. Retrieved from [https://www.casey.org/media/22.07-QFF\\_SComm-Youth-Engagement-1-Agency-Prep.pdf](https://www.casey.org/media/22.07-QFF_SComm-Youth-Engagement-1-Agency-Prep.pdf)  
<sup>11</sup> Edelstein, S. & Lowenstein, C. (2014). Supporting youth transitioning out of foster care. Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/43271/2000128-Supporting-Youth-Transitioning-out-of-Foster-Care-2000128-Supporting-Youth-Transitioning-out-of-Foster-Care-Employment-Programs.pdf>  
<sup>12</sup> Browning, B. & Sofer, N. (2017). Making apprenticeships work for opportunity youth. JFF. Retrieved from <https://www.jff.org/resources/making-apprenticeship-work-opportunity-youth/>  
<sup>13</sup> Harvard University. (2020). *Executive Function & Self-regulation*. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>  
<sup>14</sup> Treat, A. E., Sheffield Morris, A., Williamson, A. C., Hays-Grudo, J., & Laurin, D. (2019). Adverse childhood experiences, parenting, and child executive function. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(6), 926-937.  
<sup>15</sup> Edelstein, S. & Lowenstein, C. (2014). Supporting youth transitioning out of foster care. Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/43271/2000128-Supporting-Youth-Transitioning-out-of-Foster-Care-2000128-Supporting-Youth-Transitioning-out-of-Foster-Care-Employment-Programs.pdf>

providing support for transportation, housing, clothing, food, and utility costs. Additionally, young parents who were previously in foster care are less likely to achieve the same economic status as their foster youth peers that do not have children.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, programs that provide support for childcare would be especially valuable. Support does not have to be solely financial. Training and other educational opportunities such as tutoring to support GED or other course completion support personal and professional development. The [Children's Bureau at the Office of the Administration for Children & Families](#) provides specific resources and programs that can support foster youth's career advancement and training.

The [Works Wonders® program](#) supplemented paid work experience with skills training and individualized career coaching to young people who were previously in foster care. Over three years, 180 youth between the ages of 14-21 participated in the program.

An [evaluation of the program](#) showed that young people who participated in Works Wonders were more likely to be employed and to stay connected to school and training opportunities one year after completion when compared with non-participants.

**6. Create opportunities for mentorship and guidance.** Programs should provide opportunities for mentoring and coaching via formal or informal channels.<sup>17</sup> To ensure adequate guidance is provided, classroom instructors should be informed about the unique challenges facing youth transitioning from foster care and should be knowledgeable about how to best communicate with these individuals.<sup>18</sup> When possible, connect these youth with professionals who come from similar backgrounds or who have shared experiences, as they may be able to share advice and encouragement. All staff and mentors who directly interact with youth transitioning out of foster care should be trained to provide coaching and support with a trauma-informed lens.

**7. Consider partnerships with local organizations.** When choosing partners, consider which would be able to provide supports to apprentices, including academic and tuition support, housing support, legal services, financial assistance, mentorship, and counselling. Local agencies that serve youth are often disconnected from each other and therefore miss opportunities to combine resources and share knowledge that would help them to better serve their target

population.<sup>19</sup> To mitigate the likelihood of this occurring, build a network of youth-serving agencies across domains, including workforce agencies, community-based organizations, education providers, and justice providers.<sup>20</sup> Partnering with other agencies and organizations serving foster youth can help to develop an understanding of the systems navigated by foster youth navigate and can help to streamline the experience. Programs looking to connect with apprenticeship networks can contact community or technical colleges, American Job Centers, and other youth-focused intermediaries.

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<sup>16</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). The economic well-being of youth transitioning from foster care. Retrieved from [https://www.aecf.org/m//resourcedoc/AECF\\_EconomicProgressionBrief\\_11.1.2017.pdf](https://www.aecf.org/m//resourcedoc/AECF_EconomicProgressionBrief_11.1.2017.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Kis, V. (2016). Work-based Learning for Youth at Risk: Getting Employers on Board. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 150. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1787/5e122a91-en>

<sup>18</sup> Glier, R. (2018). Apprenticeships for youth now have national momentum. Youth Today. Retrieved from <https://youthtoday.org/2018/12/apprenticeships-for-youth-now-have-national-momentum/>

<sup>19</sup> Rosenberg, L. et. al. (2021). National evaluation of the performance partnership pilots for disconnected youth (P3): Summary of the evaluation's report and findings. Mathematica Policy Research. Retrieved from: <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/P3%20Summary%20of%20All%20Reports.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Jobs for the Future. (2021). Framework for a High-Quality Pre-Apprenticeship Program: Opportunity Youth. Retrieved from <https://www.iff.org/resources/iffs-framework-high-quality-pre-apprenticeship-program-opportunity-youth/opportunity-youth-pre-apprenticeship-framework-component-5-offering-of-academic-career-exploration-and-wraparound-supports/>