Every Nine Seconds in America a Student Becomes a Dropout

*The Dropout Problem in Numbers**

Millions of students leave school before high school graduation.

- In School Year 2002-2003, US public schools awarded 2.7 million diplomas and the National Center for Education Statistics calculated the graduation rate to be 73.9%. Graduation rates varied greatly by state, from 87% in New Jersey to under 60% in the District of Columbia and South Carolina. Thirty-nine states increased their graduation rates from 2001 to 2003 while most southern states, plus Alaska, the District of Columbia, and New York, experienced declines.[1] Other authoritative research found the 2002 graduation rate to be 71%, little changed from 1991's 72%.[2]

- In 2004, there were 27,819,000 18-24-year-olds in the United States. Of these, 21,542,000 (78%) had either graduated from high school, earned a GED, completed some college, or earned an associate's or bachelor's degree. The balance, 6,277,000 (22%), had not yet completed high school.[3] Some scholars exclude GED holders, resulting in a much higher noncompletion figure. Similarly, if researchers count the adult population over age 24, the high school noncompletion rate would be higher still.[4]

- An estimated 3.8 million youth ages 18-24 are neither employed nor in school—15% of all young adults. From 2000 to 2004, the ranks of these disconnected young adults grew by 700,000.[5]

- From 1990 to 2000, high school completion rates declined in all but seven states and the rate of students dropping out between 9th and 10th grades increased.[6]

Members of some demographic groups are at much greater risk of dropping out of school.

- Nationally, only about two-thirds of all students who enter 9th grade graduate with regular high school diplomas four years later. For minority males, these figures are far lower.[7] In 2001, on average, 72% of female students, but only 64% of male students graduated. African American students had a graduation rate of 50%, the lowest of racial and ethnic groups identified; the other student groups graduated at the following rates: American Indian, 51%; Latino, 53%; White, 75%; and Asian and Pacific Islander, 77%. But there were enormous disparities among state graduation levels, and even larger disparities by ethnicity and gender within the same states.[8]

- In SY 2000-2001, high school students from low-income families (the lowest 20%) dropped out of school at six times the rate of their peers from higher-income families.[9]

- In SY 2000-2001, only 47.6% of persons with disabilities ages 14 and older graduated with standard diplomas while 41.1% dropped out.[10]

When young people drop out of school, they—and American society at large—face multiple negative consequences.

- Of those who fail to graduate with their peers, one-quarter eventually earn a diploma, one-quarter earn the GED, and about one-half do not earn a high school credential.[11]

* There is no generally-accepted definition of a dropout. Some use school enrollment figures; others rely on US Census population surveys. Some include GED recipients; others do not. Some keep records of transfer students; many do not.

- Three-quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts, as are 59% of federal inmates.[12] In fact, dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be incarcerated in their lifetime.[13] African American men are disproportionately incarcerated. Of all African American male dropouts in their early 30s, 52% have been imprisoned.[14] 90% of the 11,000 youth in adult detention facilities have no more than a 9th grade education.[15]

- The earning power of dropouts has been in almost continuous decline over the past three decades. In 1971, male dropouts earned $35,087 (in 2002 dollars), but this fell 35% to $23,903 in 2002. Earnings for female dropouts fell from $19,888 to $17,114.[16] The mean earnings of Latino young adults who finish high school are 43% higher than those who dropout.[17]

- The earnings gap widens with years of schooling and formal training. In 2003, annual earnings of male dropouts fell to $21,447. High school graduates earned an average of $32,266; those with associate's degrees earned $43,462; bachelor's degree holders earned $63,084—about triple that of dropouts.[18]

- In 2001, only 55% of young adult dropouts were employed, compared with 74% of high school graduates and 87% of four-year college graduates.[19]

- Between 1997 and 2001, more than one-quarter of all dropouts were unemployed for one year or longer, compared with 11% of those with a high school diploma or GED.[20] In 2003, more than one-half of African American young adult male dropouts in Chicago were unemployed.[21]

- The US death rate for persons with fewer than 12 years of education is 2.5 times higher than for those with 13 or more years of education.[22]

- Dropouts are substantially more likely to rely on public assistance than those with a high school diploma.[23] The estimated lifetime revenue loss for male dropouts ages 25-34 is $944 billion. The cost to the public of their crime and welfare benefits is estimated to total $24 billion annually.[24]

- Dropouts contribute to state and federal tax coffers at only about one-half the rate of high school graduates; over a working lifetime about $60,000 less, or $50 billion annually for the 23 million high school non-completers, ages 18-67.[25]

- The US would save $41.8 billion in health care costs if the 600,000 young people who dropped out in 2004 were to complete one additional year of education. If only one-third of high school dropouts were to earn a high school diploma, federal savings in reduced costs for food stamps, housing assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families would amount to $10.8 billion annually.[26]

- Increasing the high school completion rate by 1% for all men ages 20-60 would save the United States $1.4 billion annually in reduced costs associated with crime.[27]

- Federal investments in second-chance education and training programs fell from $15 billion in the late 1970s to $3 billion (inflation-adjusted) today.[28]

- Dropouts "cost our nation more than $260 billion dollars...That's in lost wages, lost taxes, and lost productivity over their lifetimes. In federal dollars, that will buy you ten years of research at the National Institutes of Health."[29]

- The statistic bears repeating: every nine seconds in America a student becomes a dropout.[30]

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National Working Group on
Foster Care and Education

Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster and Out-of-Home Care
Fact Sheet
December 2006

For the over 800,000 children and youth served in foster care each year in the United States, educational success is a potential positive counterweight to abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence. Positive school experiences enhance their well-being, help them make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase their chances for personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency, as well as their ability to contribute to society.

Unfortunately, the educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care are dismal. As this current research summary reveals, young people in foster care are in educational crises. Although data are limited, particularly national data, research makes it clear that there are serious issues that must be addressed to ensure the educational success of children and youth in foster care.

SCHOOL PLACEMENT STABILITY/ENROLLMENT ISSUES

School Mobility Rates of Children and Youth in Foster Care

- Children and youth have an average of one to two home placement changes per year while in out-of-home care.[1]
- A 2001 study of more than 4,500 children and youth in foster care in Washington State found that at both the elementary and secondary levels, twice as many youth in foster care as youth not in care had changed schools during the year.[2]
- In a New York study of 70 children and youth in foster care, more than 75% did not remain in their school once placed in foster care, and almost 65% had been transferred in the middle of the school year.[3]
- A three-state study of youth aging out of care (the Midwest Study) by Chapin Hall revealed substantial levels of school mobility associated with placement in out-of-home care. Over a third of young adults reported having had five or more school changes.[4]
- School mobility rates are highest for those entering care for the first time. According to another Chapin Hall study of almost 16,000 children and youth in the Chicago Public School system, over two-thirds switched schools shortly after their initial placement in out-of-home care.[5]

Negative Effects of School Mobility

- A 1996 study students in Chicago Public Schools found that students who had changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of educational growth by their sixth year.
- A 1999 study found that California high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate as those who did not change schools, even when controlling for other variables that affect high school completion.[7]
- In a national study of 1,087 foster care alumni, youth who had had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving care.[8]

Suspensions/Expulsions

- 66.8% of youth in out-of-home care in the Midwest Study had been suspended at least once from school (compared to a national sample of 27.8%). About one
  4.6% of the national sample.[9]

Enrollment Issues

- In the New York study, 42% of the children and youth did not begin school immediately upon entering foster care. Nearly half of these young people said that they were kept out of school because of lost or misplaced school records.[10]
- A 2001 Bay Area study of over 300 foster parents found that "missing information from prior schools increased the odds of enrollment delays by 6.5 times".[11]

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ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Academic Achievement

- The 2001 Washington State study found that children and youth in foster care attending public schools scored 16 to 20 percentile points below non-foster youth in statewide standardized tests at grades three, six and nine.[12]
- Youth in foster care in the Midwest Study, interviewed primarily after completing 10th or 11th grade, on average read at only a seventh grade level. Approximately 44% read at high school level or higher. Few excelled in academic subjects, especially relative to a comparable national sample. Less than one in five received an "A" in English, math, history, or science.[13]
- Chapin Hall's research on Chicago Public School children and youth in out-of-home care indicates they lag at least half a school year behind demographically similar students in the same schools. (There is an overall achievement gap of upwards of one year. However, some of this is attributed to the low-performing schools that many of them attend). Almost 50% of third to eighth grade students in out-of-home care scored in the bottom quartile on the reading section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) test.[14]

Grade Retention/Old for Grade

- In the Washington State study, twice as many youth in foster care at both the elementary and secondary levels repeated a grade compared to youth not in care.[15]
- Nearly 45% of youth in care in the New York State study reported being retained at least once in school.[16]
- In the Midwest Study, 37.2% of youth in foster care (compared with 21.5% of a comparable national sample) reported repeating a grade.[17]
- Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care were almost twice as likely as other students to be old for their grade, by at least a year, even after demographic factors were taken into account and comparisons made to other students attending the same schools.[18]

SPECIAL EDUCATION ISSUES

Number of Youth in Special Education

- Numerous studies indicate anywhere between one-quarter and almost one-half (23%-47%) of children and youth in out-of-home care in the U.S. receive special education services at some point in their schooling.[19]
- At both the elementary and secondary levels, more than twice as many foster youth as non-foster youth in the Washington State study had enrolled in special education programs.[20]
- Nearly half of the youth in foster care in the Midwest Study had been placed in special education at least once during the course of their education.[21]
- Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care between sixth and eighth grades were classified as eligible for special education nearly three times more frequently than other students. [22]

Advocacy Regarding Special Education Services

- In research done in 2000 by Advocates for Children of New York, Inc.:
  - 90% of biological parents of children in foster care surveyed did not participate in any special education processes concerning their child.[23]
  - 60% of caseworkers/social workers surveyed "were not aware of existing laws when referring children to special education" and over 50% said "that their clients did not receive appropriate services very often while in foster care".[24]
- A 1990 study in Oregon found that children who had multiple foster care placements and who needed special education were less likely to receive those services than children in more stable placements.

SOCIAL-BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

Mental Health

- In a recent study of foster care alumni in Oregon and Washington (Northwest Alumni Study), 54.4% of alumni had one or more mental health disorders in the past 12 months, such as depression, social phobia or panic syndrome (compared with 22.1% of general population).[25]
- In the same study, 25.2% had post-traumatic stress disorder within the past 12 months (compared with 4.0% of general population), which is twice the rate of U.S. war veterans.[26]

Social-Behavioral

- Several studies have found that children and youth in foster care are significantly more likely to have school behavior problems and that they have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions from school.[27]
- Recent research in Chicago confirmed previous statewide research findings that children in foster care are significantly more likely than children in the general population to have a special education classification of an emotional or behavioral disturbance.[28]
- In the Midwest Study, by about 19 years of age, almost half of the young women had been pregnant, a significantly higher percentage than the 20% in a comparative national sample.[29]

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES

High School Completion Rates/Drop-Out Rates

- A recent report by the EPE Research Center indicates that the nationwide high school completion rate for **all** students is 70%. More are lost in ninth grade than in any other grade (9th: 35%; 10th: 28%; 11th: 20%; 12th: 17%).[30]
- Studies have found differing rates of high school completion (through a degree or GED) though the measures have been defined somewhat differently:
  - In the Washington State study, 59% of youth in foster care enrolled in 11th grade completed high school by the end of 12th grade.[31]
  - The young adults in the Northwest Alumni Study completed high school **(via diploma or GED)** at 84.8%; which is close to the general population rate of 87.3%.[32]
  - Over one-third of the young people the Midwest Study had received neither a high school diploma nor a GED by age 19, compared to fewer than 10% of their same-age peers in a comparable national sample.[33]
  - A national study in 1994 of young adults who had been discharged from foster care found that 54% had completed high school.[34]
  - In the Chapin Hall study of Chicago Public School youth, fifteen-year-old students in out-of-home care were about half as likely as other students to have graduated 5 years later, with significantly higher percentages of students in care having dropped out (55%) or incarcerated (10%).[35]

Factors Contributing to Dropping Out

- Multiple studies suggest that being retained in a grade significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out.[36] For example, one study found that being retained even once between first and eighth grade makes a student four times more likely to drop out than a classmate who was never held back, even after controlling for multiple factors.[37]
- The recent report by the EPE Research Center indicates that repeating a grade, changing schools, and behavior problems are among the host of signals that a student is likely to leave school without a traditional diploma.[38]
- The book, Drop Outs in America reports research that shows the following students are at-risk for dropping out: students of color, students who had been held back, students who are older than others in their grade, and English-language learners.[39]

POST-SECONDARY ENTRANCE/COMPLETION RATES

Post-secondary Entrance/Completion Rates

- The Northwest Alumni Study found that of the foster care alumni who were interviewed,
  - 42.7% completed some education beyond high school
  - 20.6% completed any degree/certificate beyond high school
  - 16.1% completed a vocational degree (21.9% among those age 25 or older)
  - 1.8% completed a bachelor's degree: (2.7% among those age 25 or older) (24% is the completion rate among the general population of same age)[40]
- Recent longitudinal data (from the general population) suggests that 39% of students who enrolled in a public two-year institution received a credential within six years (28%--associate degree or certificate, 11%--baccalaureate).[41]

College Preparation/Aspiration

- The majority of those youth in out-of-home care interviewed in the Midwest Study at age 17-18 hoped and expected to graduate from college eventually.[42]

- Another study indicates that only 15% of youth in foster care are likely to be enrolled in college preparatory classes versus 32% of students not in foster care.[43]
- Strong academic preparation has been found to be the single most important factor in enrolling and succeeding in a postsecondary program. However, in the United States, studies of the general population have found that:
  - Only 32% of all students leave high school qualified to attend a four-year college.[44]
  - Only 20% of all African American and 16% of all Hispanic students leave high school college-ready.[45]
  - Between 30-60% of students "now require remedial education upon entry to college, depending on the type of institution they attend".[46]

Endnotes

Visit www.casey.org/friendsandfamilies/partners for fact sheet citations.

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Promoting Educational Success for Young People in Foster Care
National Foster Youth Advisory Council

We, the members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC), believe that every child and young person in foster care is entitled to the wide range of supports, services, and opportunities that promote our educational success.

We believe that all children and youth in foster care need:

- Caring and involved adults who *know* us, understand our experiences in foster care, and can assist us with educational planning and achievement;
- Safety, stability, and permanency, and the ability to attend our "home school" without disruption;
- Confidentiality of records and respect for our right to privacy;
- Support in accessing opportunities that promote our well-being and the ability to reach our full potential;
- The ability to pursue an educational or training program of our own choosing;
- Immediate enrollment in a new school, timely transfer of school credits, and continuity with regard to educational records when moves to other schools occur;
- Access to information, resources, and strategies that promote positive educational experiences;

"What Worked" - Key Components of Our Success

Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council convened on two occasions during 2003, to address the many challenges facing young people in foster care with regard to education. To move beyond a focus on the problems that youth encounter, group members were asked to identify *What Worked* and the range of supports that facilitated their educational success. The group articulated the following key components:

1. NFYAC members identified caring people, those individuals who comprise our "circle of support," as the most critical support. For some, foster parents, siblings, mentors, "homework buddies" (peers who support completion of assignments), coaches, guidance counselors, and teachers were the individuals who made a difference. Others identified educational advocates and tutors – those individuals charged with supporting the educational achievement of the youth with whom they work.

2. Overwhelmingly, NFYAC members stressed the importance of having permanency and a sense of safety and stability. One Council member expressed, "young people need permanent homes and need to know that they're not going to be randomly moved from place to place." Having a safe place to live and call "home" makes it easier to build relationships with caring adults, and to ultimately develop a circle of support that facilitates success across the board, especially around education. Members felt strongly

The National Foster Youth Advisory Council is supported by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the Child Welfare League of America.

about the custodial agency's responsibility to maintain the youth's school placement, even if the young person is attending private school.

On the issue of safety, a number of young people raised the issue of bullying in schools. For many who struggled with "always being the new kid in school," not having a group of close friends, and not having the resources to wear the "latest fashions," school often represented a place where they were misunderstood, ridiculed, and singled out as different. Efforts to address bullying in school settings and its root causes are critical to ensuring safety and an affirming learning environment for all young people, but especially for those in foster care.

3. Financial assistance was also an important component of the 'recipe' for educational success. Many NFYAC members identified resources that support the pursuit of post-secondary education, such as tuition waivers, support for room and board, cash assistance and scholarships. A number of members also highlighted the importance of having assistance with college visits and tours and the completion of applications, especially for federal financial aid. There was also quite a bit of discussion around health care and obtaining insurance if you leave the state where you were in care to attend college. Lastly, other supports, such as free breakfast and lunch programs, having a dress code and school uniforms (to defray the costs of clothing for school), providing school supplies, and transportation assistance were helpful to young people struggling to be successful in elementary through high school.

4. Flexibility with educational planning, such as the ability to choose classes and deal with multiple absences, credit recovery programs, and summer school were helpful to young people trying to stay on track with their education. Because the timely recovery of credits and transfer of school records pose major challenges to young people attempting to enroll in new schools, the aforementioned supports were essential to promoting academic continuity and success. NFYAC members also expressed that having teachers who understood their experiences in foster care made a big difference.

5. Programs promoting child and youth development were particularly supportive of young people in foster care. Many NFYAC members remembered being involved with Head Start programs and reflected on the important role that extracurricular and after school programs had on their educational success.

Recommendations for Improving Educational Outcomes

Given the list of challenges and corresponding supports that the group identified, NFYAC members were asked to generate a list of recommendations for improving educational outcomes for young people in foster care. As the discussions took place, it was evident that these recommendations were not solely limited to improving educational outcomes, but spoke to a much broader need to revisit the way in which success is defined and pursued for America's foster youth.

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The issue of educational underachievement is related to many of the other negative outcomes experienced by young people leaving foster care. With limited supports and resources, young people are forced to focus on day-to-day survival. As one member said, "If all aspects of your life are unbalanced and you need to figure out where you're going to spend the night, it's going to be difficult to think about your education."

Members of NFYAC believe in the strengths, talents, and potential of all young people in foster care. Our central message is that young people in foster care require what all young people need to become contributing members of society - unconditional love, care, and support and a strong connection to caring adults and communities that are willing to invest in our well-being and success.

NYFAC's Top Ten Recommendations for Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care:

Help me create my circle of support.

Everyone needs to feel loved and cared for! Young people in foster care need to experience a sense of belonging - they need to have someone to rely on when things get tough and also need to have someone to call upon when it's time to celebrate. Parents, caregivers, peers, teachers and other supportive adults need to be engaged in supporting young people in a variety of ways, especially when it comes to educational decisions and planning. To improve educational outcomes, we need to revisit the broad range of youth outcomes that we articulate for young people involved with the child welfare system. Having access and connections to "people resources" as well as opportunities to create one's own "circle of support" are critical components of facilitating the positive development of youth in care.

Make sure I have a place to call home.

A "home" is much more than just having a place to live – it's knowing that you're safe, feeling "wanted," and having a permanent place to *be*. Having a home means having a place to go for the holidays and summer vacations. It means you don't have to take all of your belongings with you when you leave. The research shows that placement instability negatively impacts the educational achievement of young people in foster care. When youth are moved from place to place – it's challenging to focus on anything beyond immediate day-to-day survival. All young people, regardless of what their experiences are or where they come from, need a place to call home.

Let me be involved in making decisions about my life.

Young people learn to make good decisions by having opportunities to make choices and be held accountable. Sometimes that involves making mistakes. Because of the way in which the child welfare system works, adults often presume that they know what's best without really understanding the experiences, hopes, and dreams of the young people with whom they work. Young people should be involved in making decisions about their educational future – we have a right to have our voices heard.

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Get to know me for who I am, NOT what I'm in.

The stigma of foster care has negatively impacted the lives of many young people who have spent time in out-of-home care. Many young people who are involved with the foster care system grow up believing that they are incapable of achieving success. One NFYAC member remembers a school policy that prevented her from being allowed to bring school textbooks home *simply because she was in foster care.* The messages inherent in these types of policies and practices send damaging and discouraging messages to young people about their value and their potential for success. Negative assumptions about and low expectations for foster youth are so pervasive in our society. We need to "raise the bar" for young people in foster care, refrain from labeling them, and make sure that we're communicating belief and confidence in their ability to accomplish great things and fulfill their dreams. As one NFYAC member exclaimed, "Talk to me about getting a PhD., not just a GED!"

Focus on what's "right" about me, not just what's wrong.

Many young people in foster care have experienced abuse and neglect, and as a result, may be dealing with a range of issues. While young people need to be supported in accessing treatment and/or counseling when necessary, the child welfare system tends to focus on the problems and challenges and does little to highlight the strengths of individuals and families. Members of NFYAC call for a shift in deficits or failure focused thinking when dealing with young people. Young people need support in identifying their strengths, thinking about their potential, and highlighting their interests and aspirations. When caring adults focus on what's right with young people, the possibilities are endless.

Help adults in my life, especially my teachers and guidance counselors, understand the system with which I'm involved.

The general public does not have an understanding of foster care and the young people that are involved with the system. We need to build awareness and educate the public about the unique strengths of and challenges facing youth in care. It is especially important to provide information, resources, and training to educators – and to involve young people and foster parents in the design and delivery of such staff development opportunities. Young people in foster care possess a wealth of information about the system. Their knowledge, insights, and expertise represent an untapped resource that is invaluable to the adults who work with them.

Connect me with information.

Young people need to have access to information and support in navigating many of the resources that exist. Whether it's information about scholarship opportunities, health insurance, college tours, or community programs that support educational success, young people also need to develop their own strategies for managing multiple sources of information. Members of NFYAC articulated the importance of ensuring that young people have opportunities to manage information about themselves and specifically highlighted "educational passports" as an effective tool. Lastly, young people need to be connected with information about state and federal

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policies that have the potential to impact their foster care and educational experiences – the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the Education and Training Vouchers programs are examples of key federal policies.

Respect our privacy.

"Would _____ please come to the office? Your social worker is here." Many of the members of NFYAC remember hearing their names called over the intercom system at school and these announcements often included pieces of personal information that didn't need to be shared with the entire school. Others recall that sensitive information about their circumstances was unnecessarily accessible to students and administrative personnel working in school offices.

The issue of confidentiality is a sensitive one for many young people in foster care, particularly in school settings. While members of NFYAC understand that there are times when information about the lives and families of young people in care needs to be shared, there is also a sense that the information sharing is not always conducted in a manner that prioritizes the privacy of the young people involved. NFYAC members highlighted the fact that many young people in foster care do not want information about their family history or living situation shared with their peers or other adults not involved with their educational planning. In school settings, administrators, teachers, social workers, and counselors can support young people by using discretion with sensitive and personal information, maintaining confidentiality of records, and respecting their right to privacy.

Teach me to take care of myself.

"Life skills development begins with learning to tie your own shoes – it's not something that starts when you turn 16!" Developing the skills needed to take care of oneself occurs over time. This process begins in childhood and continues throughout the lifespan. Young people in foster care need both formal and informal learning opportunities to acquire, practice, and utilize basic living skills. These skills include "tangible" or competency-based skills like completion of high school and the pursuit of post-secondary education as well as "intangible" skills such as a sense of self confidence and purpose and the ability to make good decisions.

Develop federal and state policies that promote our success.

While there has been much legislative activity benefiting young people in foster care during the last five years, much remains to be done. Members of NFYAC are committed to supporting and partnering with decision makers at the local, state, and federal levels to craft legislation that prioritizes the health and well-being of foster youth in our country.

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