

FOSTER CARE TO 21: ENROLLMENT TRENDS AFTER TWO YEARS

Revised January 2009

BACKGROUND

Washington State is responsible for youth in the foster care system up to the age of 18. At 18, youth in a licensed foster care setting can remain in care while attending high school or working on their General Educational Development (GED) test if they sign a voluntary placement agreement.¹ The Foster Care to 21 program (FC to 21), established by 2SHB 2002, allows youth who are over the age of 18 and have completed their secondary school education to remain in a licensed care setting as they pursue postsecondary academic or vocational training.² To be eligible, the youth must be a state dependent at 18 and be in a licensed placement. Once admitted to the program, youth must remain in a licensed placement and continue to be enrolled in an approved technical or academic program in Washington State. Youth can remain in the program until they turn 21. FC to 21 was limited to 50 youth per year from 2006 to 2008.

Testimony for the bill was extensive with foster parents, former foster youth, and advocates testifying in favor. Speakers contrasted the assistance that many families provide to their children after they turn 18 to the loss of support experienced by foster youth when they turn 18 or complete their secondary education. In addition, they spoke of the poor outcomes experienced by many foster youth as they transition to independence and argued that continued foster care support would be cost-effective. Speakers urged offering foster youth

SUMMARY

The 2006 Legislature passed 2SHB 2002, establishing a three-year program for up to 50 youth per year to remain in foster care until their 21st birthday while attending a post-high school academic or vocational program. This program, commonly known as Foster Care to 21 (FC to 21), began enrollment in July 2006; enrollment ends December 31, 2008.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) was directed to evaluate the program, with a preliminary report due in 2008 and a final report in 2009. This preliminary report focuses on the characteristics of youth who enrolled in FC to 21 prior to 2008, their persistence in the program, and how they compare with other youth who exited foster care during the same period.

Findings

- 85 youth enrolled in FC to 21 prior to 2008.
- As of November 2008, 25 (29 percent) were still enrolled in FC to 21, 6 (7 percent) had turned 21 or had completed their postsecondary program, and 54 (64 percent) were no longer enrolled.
- 39 (46 percent) stayed in FC to 21 for at least one year.
- Compared with other youth exiting licensed foster homes, youth in FC to 21 were more likely to be female and less likely to have ever run away or been in detention/juvenile rehabilitation while in foster care.

¹ Youth in unlicensed relative placements can continue to receive TANF support until the age of 19 while they work to complete their secondary education. Exceptions can be granted for youth over the age of 19.

² Chapter 266, Laws of 2006

the opportunity to remain in a foster care placement while they attend a postsecondary program.

Foster youth who enroll in FC to 21 do not have to leave their foster home and do not have housing expenses. They do, however, have to find ways to cover the costs associated with their academic or technical program. In addition to the financial support available to all low-income students, foster youth can receive financial assistance through the following three programs:

- Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV). A federally subsidized program which provides up to \$5,000 per academic year for costs (tuition, books, housing, etc.) while a youth is enrolled in a college or postsecondary vocational program. ETV funds cannot be awarded to students solely enrolled in remedial college classes.
- Governors' Scholarship for Foster Youth. A scholarship program managed by the College Success Foundation which awards scholarships worth \$2,000 to \$4,000 a year to approximately 30 foster youth per year attending a college in Washington State.

- Passport to College Promise Scholarship Program. The 2007 Legislature authorized a scholarship program for foster youth attending college. The first awards, covering tuition and living expenses up to \$6,793 per year, were made in September 2008.

ENROLLEE CHARACTERISTICS, PROGRAM PARTICIPATION, AND EXITS

Exhibit 1 presents information on the 85 youth accepted into FC to 21 before January 1, 2008. Funding for the pilot program started in July 2006, and the law authorizes enrollment through December 2008. Although the pilot program is commonly described as lasting three years (2006 through 2008), enrollment did not start until July 2006. As of November 2008, 25 (29 percent) of the 85 youth who enrolled before 2008 were still in FC to 21, 6 (7 percent) had completed their postsecondary program or turned 21, and 54 (64 percent) had left the program. One youth who left the program in 2007 re-enrolled in 2008.

Exhibit 1
Enrollment in Foster Care to 21 by Year

	2006		2007		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Accepted Into Program	27		58		85	100%
Enrollment Status						
Still Enrolled	3	11%	22	38%	25	29%
Graduated or Turned 21	4	15%	2	3%	6	7%
Disenrolled	20	74%	34	59%	54	64%
Length of Time Enrolled*						
Less than 90 days	4	15%	12	21%	16	19%
Between 90 and 180 days	2	7%	6	10%	8	9%
181 days up one year	10	37%	12	21%	22	26%
1-1.5 years	2	7%	6	10%	8	9%
Over 1.5 years	6	22%	na	na	6	7%
Currently Enrolled (2006 group enrolled at least 1.5 years; 2007 group for 1 year)	3	11%	22	38%	25	29%

*Includes youth who completed their postsecondary program or turned 21.

Exhibit 1 also displays the length of time youth remained in FC to 21. The 25 youth still enrolled in the fall of 2008 had been in the program for at least one year, and 14 youth had remained for at least one year before leaving. Thus, 39 (or 46 percent of) youth who enrolled before 2008 stayed in FC to 21 for at least one year and maintained their enrollment in a postsecondary program during that time.

Exhibit 2 shows the basic characteristics of youth enrolled in FC to 21 along with their length of stay in the program. The last column shows the proportion of youth who stayed in for one year or more; for example, 41 percent of males stayed in care for one year or more as compared to 49 percent of females.

Exhibit 2
Youth Characteristics and Enrollment in Foster Care to 21

	Total		<u>By Length of Time Enrolled in FC to 21</u>		
	Number	Percentage	Enrolled Less Than One Year	Enrolled One Year or More	% Enrolled One Year or More
Gender					
Male	34	40%	20	14	41%
Female	51	60%	26	25	49%
Race/Ethnicity¹					
Asian	4	5%	2	2	50%
Black	15	18%	8	7	47%
Caucasian	45	53%	28	17	38%
Hispanic	6	7%	3	3	50%
Indian	9	11%	2	7	78%
Unknown or Multiple	6	7%	3	3	50%
Dependency Status¹					
Dependency	45	53%	28	17	38%
Dependency Guardianship	40	47%	18	22	55%
Type of Postsecondary Program					
Four-year College	12	14%	5	7	58%
Community College	58	68%	34	24	41%
Vocational, Other or Unknown ³	15	18%	7	8	53%
Receipt of Governor's Scholarship for Foster Youth¹					
Yes	18	21%	7	11	61%
No	67	79%	39	28	42%
Receipt of Education and Training Voucher in 2007-08²					
Yes	18	21%	7	11	61%
No	67	79%	39	28	42%

¹ p<.15. For race/ethnicity the comparison was between whites and non-whites.

² p<.10.

³ Information was not available for two applicants.

Exhibit 3 displays information obtained from youth, foster parents, and case files on the reasons youth left FC to 21. Ideally, the youth themselves would have provided this information, preferably at the time they exited. In October 2008, the Children’s Administration (CA) attempted to contact youth and foster parents to collect information on why youth had left the program. Nineteen foster parents and one youth were reached. Notes made by social workers at the time that youth exited the program were reviewed as well. For some youth, multiple factors contributed to their decision to drop out of the program and it was difficult to isolate a primary reason.

Sixty youth who enrolled in FC to 21 prior to 2008 left the program by November 2008. According to the information collected by CA, 33 of the 60 left for foster care-related reasons. Over one-quarter (28 percent) left FC to 21 primarily because they were no longer interested in postsecondary education or training.³

For the 33 youth who left the program for foster care-related reasons, Exhibit 4 provides greater detail. The particular circumstances were diverse, ranging a youth who was ready to live independently after being in the program for a year, to a youth who developed conflict with his foster parent and a youth who became pregnant and decided to move in with her boyfriend.

Exhibit 3
Primary Reason Given by Youth, Foster Parents, and Social Workers for Youth’s Disenrollment From Foster Care to 21
(Total = 60 youth)

	Number	Percentage
Reached 21	3	5%
Completed Program	3	5%
No Longer Interested in School	17	28%
Foster Care-Related Reasons	33	55%
Other (joined military, left state)	2	3%
No Information	2	3%

Exhibit 4
Detail on Youth Leaving for Foster Care-Related Reasons
(Total = 33 youth)

	Number	Percentage
Youth felt ready to live independently	5	15%
Youth wanted to live with partner or relative	9	27%
Breakdown in placement (foster parent not renewing license or youth behavior issues)	5	15%
Stayed with foster parents but mutual agreement to leave foster care system	2	6%
Desire to leave foster care not coded into one of above categories	12	36%

³ The distribution of reasons given by foster parents or recorded by social workers were similar.

Exhibit 5 displays the school status at disenrollment for the 60 youth who exited FC to 21 by November 2008. Forty percent of youth who left the program had dropped out of their postsecondary program, 27 percent were still in school at the time they left, and 10 percent had either completed their postsecondary program or turned 21.⁴ The school status of almost one-quarter of the youth was unknown. Based on information from foster parents and ETV payments made to foster youth for the 2007–08 school year to support educational and vocational expenses, it appears that at least 5 of the 24 youth who dropped out of school and FC to 21 later returned to a school or vocational program. Comments indicate that while some students were successful in their academic or vocational studies, other students were struggling or had to enroll in remedial classes.

Exhibit 5
School Status at Disenrollment
From Foster Care to 21
(Total = 60 youth)

	Number	Percentage
Reached 21	3	5%
Completed Program	3	5%
In School at Disenrollment	16	27%
Dropped Out of School	24	40%
Unknown	14	23%

COMPARISON OF FOSTER CARE TO 21 YOUTH WITH OTHER YOUTH EXITING FOSTER CARE BETWEEN JUNE 2006 AND DECEMBER 2007

To explore the possibility that FC to 21 enrollees differ from other youth exiting licensed family home placements, we compared the basic characteristics of youth who enrolled in FC to 21 with youth who exited a licensed family home placement between June 2006 and December 2007.⁵ Those results are presented in Exhibit 6. Although youth in licensed settings such as group homes or regional assessment centers are eligible for FC to 21, to date only one youth

⁴ Two of the three youth who reached 21 continued in their postsecondary program; it was uncertain if the third remained in school.

⁵ All of the youth who enrolled in FC to 21 prior to 2008 would have exited foster care between June 2006 and December 2007 if the program had not been in existence.

outside of a licensed foster home setting has participated in the program.

Youth who enrolled in FC to 21 are more likely to be female and less likely to have ever run away from their placement or been in detention or juvenile rehabilitation during the time that they were in foster care than youth who did not enroll in FC to 21.⁶ No differences were found between the two groups in the other placement variables that were examined (removal reason, age at first placement, and average length of last placement episode).

All youth in FC to 21 have either graduated from high school or received their GED. The educational attainment of youth in the comparison group was unknown; thus it was not possible to restrict the comparison group to youth who had completed their secondary school education.

⁶ Females do not appear more likely than males to remain in licensed foster care after they turn 18. Female foster youth are more likely than males (65 percent versus 35 percent) to attend the summer program offered to foster youth interested in college (see L. Schragger (2008). *Make It Happen!: Preliminary Report on College Summer Program for Youth in Foster Care*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document no. 08-01-3902). This suggests that female foster youth have more interest in attending college than male foster youth, in line with national data indicating higher rates of college attendance by females (see, for example, US Census Bureau (2008). *School Enrollment in the United States: 2006*, <www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p20-559.pdf>). Higher rates of high school graduation among females than males contribute to this finding; in Washington State, the extended high school graduation rate for females was 78 percent in 2006 compared with 72 percent for males (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2008). *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools: School Year 2005-2006*, <www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/pubdocs/GradDropout/05-06/2005-06GradDropoutStatistics.pdf>).

Exhibit 6
Characteristics of Youth in Licensed Family Home Placements,
by Enrollment in Foster Care to 21

	In Foster Care to 21 Program (n=85)		Not in Foster Care to 21 Program (n=524)	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Gender*				
Male	34	40%	283	54%
Female	51	60%	241	46%
Race/Ethnicity				
Asian	4	5%	6	1%
Black	15	18%	80	15%
Caucasian	45	53%	275	52%
Hispanic	6	7%	64	12%
Indian	9	11%	68	13%
Unknown or multiple	6	7%	31	6%
Region				
Region 1	7	8%	67	13%
Region 2	13	15%	73	14%
Region 3	13	15%	65	12%
Region 4	13	15%	120	23%
Region 5	22	26%	91	17%
Region 6	17	20%	108	21%
Guardianship				
Yes	40	47%	222	42%
No	45	53%	302	58%
Number of On-The-Run Events**				
None	77	91%	388	74%
One or More	8	9%	136	26%
Number of Detention or Juvenile Rehabilitation Events**				
None	78	92%	412	79%
One or More	7	8%	112	21%

* Comparison significant at .02 or less.

** Comparison significant at .01 or less.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRAM MODIFICATION

Many youth leave the FC to 21 program because they drop out of school or want to leave foster care. Comments made by youth, foster parents, and social workers indicate that some of these youth later regret their decision. Increased flexibility in program requirements might help youth succeed in their college or vocational training and successfully transition to adulthood. Possible ideas include:

- tuition support for students solely enrolled in remedial classes and thus not eligible for ETV tuition awards;
- one-time break in school enrollment of up to three months with opportunity to remain in foster care; and
- an option for youth who leave the program to re-apply to the program until they turn 21.

The original regulations for the FC to 21 program allowed a six-month window during which time a youth who had left foster care could apply for acceptance into the FC to 21 program. In considering ways to modify the program to increase participation, the state may want to consider the following option:

- allowing youth who have left foster care the opportunity to apply for acceptance into FC to 21 on a space available basis up to the age of 21.

FUTURE REPORTS

The 2006 Legislature asked the Institute to study the outcomes for foster youth enrolled in Foster Care to 21 and estimate cost savings associated with that participation. For the 2009 report, the Institute will have information on high school enrollment, GED completion, and college enrollment for all youth who have aged out of foster care in recent years. That information will make it possible to:

- examine the relationship between educational attainment and adult outcomes for foster youth who age out of foster care; and
- evaluate the impact of FC to 21 on college enrollment, persistence in college, and adult outcomes.

The 2009 report will assess impacts and cost savings by looking at the following outcomes:

- Receipt of public assistance (TANF and Food Stamps)
- Teen births
- Arrests and convictions
- Homelessness
- Employment
- College attendance and persistence

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Document No. 08-12-3901R



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