

Recommendations to Improve the Education and Training Voucher Program

I. Introduction and Background

In March 2022, the Journey to Success campaign launched a national policy initiative to advance solutions that improve outcomes for youth who are in or transitioning from foster care. The campaign's initial [white paper](#) outlined a set of goals centered on healing, family connections, and economic opportunity—themes that continue to guide its policy development.

From the outset, the campaign's defining approach has been its [methodology](#): pairing rigorous research and data with the insights and leadership of young people with lived experience in foster care and those who support them. This commitment to shared expertise has shaped every phase of the campaign's work, from identifying challenges to formulating actionable policy recommendations.

The following recommendations to strengthen the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program are grounded in that same approach. Now nearly 25 years old, the ETV program offers a substantial record of what works—and what does not—based on decades of implementation. The campaign is deeply grateful to the young people with lived experience in foster care, agency partners, researchers, caregivers, and others whose perspectives continue to inform efforts to ensure that this vital program fulfills its promise. We owe special thanks to the expertise and experience of the network, [Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide](#) (FAAN). FAAN is made up of organizations providing services to youth, researchers, and advocates, and seeks to build capacity in the field of postsecondary education and foster care across the country.

A. Youth in Foster Care Have the Same Desire to Gain Workplace Skills and Attend Postsecondary Programs as Their Peers; Access to Vocational Training and the Some Postsecondary Education is Critical to Economic Stability

Research shows that youth in foster care want to pursue post secondary education and job training to the same degree as their non-system peers, with over 95% expressing a desire to pursue education and training beyond a high school diploma.¹ While there has been some improvement in entrance and persistence at postsecondary programs, significant disparities remain: young adults in the general U.S. population complete a 2-year or 4-year degree at a rate that is about five times higher than the rate for youth with experience in foster care.² Access to post-secondary education, whether a vocational certificate, associates degree, bachelor's degree or beyond is key to lifelong self-sufficiency and quality of life. Over time, post-secondary education or training has become increasingly essential. Between 2010 and 2017 the U.S. economy lost 5.6 million jobs that require only a high school diploma or less and gained 8.4 million jobs that require a bachelor's degree.³ In 2024, workers with a bachelor's degree earned on average 66% more than those with a high school diploma and were 59% less likely

¹ Mark Courtney et al., [Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study \(CalYOUTH\): Conditions of Youth at Age 23](#) Page 45 (Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago 2020).

² Nathaniel Okpych et al., [Secondary and postsecondary education outcomes of students with experience in foster care: Systematic review of the literature from 2000-2023](#). AERA Open, 11(1), 1-23 (2025).

³ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, [America's Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have-Nots](#) (2016).

to be unemployed.⁴ Postsecondary education does not just result in higher wages, it also results in more family and community involvement and less reliance on public benefits.⁵

B. The Education and Training Vouchers Program

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program, which began in 2001, provides young people with experience in foster care up to \$5,000 annually for up to five years until they reach age 26 to support participation in vocational training or postsecondary education programs.⁶ Young people can use these funds to help cover the cost of attendance in education and training as defined by 20 U.S.C.A. 1087 ll.⁷ With few exceptions, funding for the ETV program has remained at \$43.3 million a year and has never reached the authorized amount of \$60 million annually.

All Chafee eligible youth are also eligible for the ETV program. That is:

- Youth who are in foster care and are between the ages of 14 and 21; and
- Youth who were in foster care and left foster care at age 14 or older to a permanency plan other than adoption or guardianship or aged out; and
- Youth who left foster care to kinship guardianship arrangements or adoption of age 16 or older.⁸

To remain eligible, young people must make "satisfactory academic progress" or SAP.⁹ As noted above, the law only permits funds to be used for the cost of attendance as determined by the school the youth is attending.¹⁰

C. Education and Training Vouchers Significantly Improve the Likelihood of Educational Success for Youth with Experience in Foster Care

The ETV program has strong evidence to support its positive impact on educational outcomes. A 2020 study found that foster youth with experience in foster care who received an ETV grant were nearly three times more likely to persist in college than those who did not.¹¹ Recent research completed by the Urban Institute for the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation Administration for Children and Families US Department of Health and Human Services found that by age 24 there were "higher rates of persistence among young adults who had received ETVs, with 85 percent of young adults receiving ETVs completing one year of college compared with 61 percent of eligible young adults who had enrolled without an ETV. Among those who first enrolled in college by age 21, only 9 percent of those

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Earning and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment 2024](#).

⁵ Jennifer Ma and Matea Pender, [Education Pays 2023](#) (College Board).

⁶ 42 U.S.C.A. § 677 (i).

⁷ Cost of Attendance is defined by each institution and can include the costs of tuition and fees, room and board (or living expenses), books, supplies, transportation, loan fees, and miscellaneous expenses (including a reasonable amount for the documented cost of a personal computer), allowance for childcare or other dependent care, costs related to a disability, and reasonable costs for eligible study-abroad programs.

⁸ 42 U.S.C.A. § 677 (i)(1) & (2).

⁹ 42 U.S.C.A. § 677 (i)(3).

¹⁰ During the pandemic, this requirement was waived and ETV funds could be used for costs outside of the cost of attendance that helped the youth stay enrolled.

¹¹ Nathanael J. Okpych et. al, [The roles of Campus-Support Programs \(CSPs\) and Education and Training Vouchers \(ETVs\) on college persistence for youth with foster care histories](#), Children and Youth Services Review 111 (2020).

who enrolled without an ETV had graduated by age 24, compared with 17 percent of young adults who had received an ETV.”¹²

D. Robust Postsecondary Counseling and Campus Based Supports Improve Access and Retention But Do Not Reach a Large Number of Foster Youth

Across all populations, having individuals with expertise in postsecondary program counseling and navigation has been shown to improve program access and retention.¹³ However, some of these programs are limited when they do not have expertise in the specific challenges that youth with experience in foster care face. Many social workers are already burdened with large caseloads and expanding responsibilities. Asking them to take on this task, which requires specialized skill and knowledge, is not viable. Some states have attempted to fill the gap by contracting with programs that specialize in college and vocational program access and investing in staff who play this role specifically for youth in and leaving foster care. Some states have also invested in campus based student support programs that are tailored to serve youth with experience in foster care.¹⁴ Many of these programs can assist with college access and then provide continued assistance to help with retention.¹⁵ Foster Success, which administers the ETV program in five states—Indiana, Arizona, Ohio, Missouri, and Maryland—provides a combination of student support in navigating the postsecondary education and training process, financial aid and other supports as well as supporting students as they persist through programs.¹⁶

E. State ETV Programs are Run in Different Ways and Many Programs Do Not Conduct Outreach or Publish Clear Information

ETV funds are allocated to the states based on their foster care ratio, which is defined as “the ratio of the number of children in foster care under a program of the State in the most recent fiscal year for which the information is available to the total number of children in foster care [of all ages] in all States for the most recent fiscal year.”¹⁷ States are provided great discretion in how they administer the program. Recent research shows that the child welfare agency administers the program in about half of the states, another state agency administers the program in 14% of the states, and 37% of the states contract administration out to third parties.¹⁸ The variation in state programs extends to how and what information is shared with youth and stakeholders. In addition, some states have instituted eligibility criteria that are not required by federal statute and that create additional barriers to access:

¹² Devlin Hanson et al., [Do Education and Training Vouchers Make a Difference for Young Adults in Foster Care?](#) Vii (Urban Institute 2022).

¹³ [Supporting Students To and Through College: What Does the Evidence Say?](#) (Brookings 2024); [Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success Programs](#) (The Institute for College Access and Success).

¹⁴ [Secondary and Postsecondary Education Outcomes of Students with Experience in Foster Care: Systematic Review of the Literature From 2000–2023](#) at page 16.

¹⁵ Nathanael Okpych et al., [Building Bridges: How State Policies Can Support Postsecondary Education Success for Students with Experience in Foster Care](#) 5-11 (FAAN March 2022).

¹⁶ Maggie Stevens, Ed.D., [Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare, Aging Out is Not a Plan: Reimagining Futures for Foster Youth](#) (June 12, 2025)

¹⁷ 42 U.S.C.A. § 677 (c).

¹⁸ [Unlocking Potential: Strengthening the Education and Training Voucher Program For Students with Experience in Foster Care](#) 8 (Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide 2022)(“Unlocking Potential”)

- In many cases, information about the ETV was hard to find or not clear. 24% had websites with unclear information and 6% had no information.¹⁹
- 24%, or 12 states, did not have an online application.²⁰
- Several states imposed criteria for ETV eligibility that are more restrictive than that in federal law. Examples include: (1) Requiring a minimum duration of time in foster care; (2) Narrower criteria for age in care, for example, a requirement that a youth was in care after the age of 16 rather than 14; (3) Completion of an interview or orientation session with the ETV administering entity; (4) Submission of an application that includes required essay questions; (5) Requiring a specific Grade Point Average above the SAP requirement.²¹

F. ETV Has Not Kept Pace with the Cost of Post Secondary Education and Training for Youth with Experience in Foster Care

Federal funding for the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program, which began in 2001, allows states to provide vouchers to young people with experience in foster care up to \$5,000 annually for up to five years until they reach age 26 to support participation in postsecondary programs of education or training which are defined as Institutions of Higher Education.²² Young people can use these funds to help cover the cost of attendance. The cost of attendance includes expenses like: tuition and fees, housing, food, books, transportation, a computer, child care, costs related to special services and personal assistance for an individual with a disability, equipment and cost of certifications of licenses for certain programs.²³

With the cost of attendance far outstripping the availability of financial aid, the ETV program has made it possible for thousands of youth, who typically do not have access to family support, to attend training or college who otherwise would have been shut out of post-secondary education. Funding for the ETV program has never reached the authorized amount of \$60 million annually. FY2022 funding for the ETV program was \$43.3 million.²⁴ The funding for the ETV program has not meaningfully increased since its inception in 2002, resulting in a 38% erosion of the value of the award due to inflation.²⁵ The Pell Grant, for example, has seen increases over time: it has increased from around \$4231 before 2009 to its current maximum of \$7395.

Exacerbating the loss of value of the ETV benefit is significant increases to the cost of attending college. Further, the laudable expansion of ETV eligibility to youth through age 26 through the enactment of the Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123) was not accompanied by a funding increase and while making the vouchers available to more young people during their transition to adulthood, puts

¹⁹ Id. at page 9.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Id. at page 10.

²² 42 U.S.C.A. § 677 (i). Similar to eligible institutions for which a student can use a Pell Grant, ETV can be used at an Institution of Higher Education (IHE). An IHE includes: two- and four-year colleges and universities and schools that provide programs of one year or more and train students for employment. IHEs must be accredited by entities approved from the Department of Education. The full definition of IHEs can be found at 20 U.S.C.A. 1001.

²³ The full definition of cost of attendance can be found at 20 U.S.C.A. § 1087 II.

²⁴ Additional funding was appropriated and the ETV award maximum was raised to \$12,000 as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 to respond to the impacts of the pandemic. These additional funds were appropriated on a temporary basis despite an ongoing increase in need.

²⁵ CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/2002>.

increasing demands on available funds. As a result, substantial numbers of eligible students do not have access to these resources.

Recent research shows that students with foster care history are doing what they can to meet the cost of postsecondary education; they are choosing the least expensive options by mostly attending public two-year institutions and attending part time. Despite this, the cost of attendance for young people with foster care history may still be higher than that of their peers, as they often do not have the option of living with their parents while they attend school.²⁶ Urban Institute researchers concluded:

Students with foster care history have more unmet need even when compared with students with low incomes and no foster care history. Despite having similarly low expected family contributions compared with students with foster care history, students with low incomes but without foster care history have familial support to rely on. Having family to live with, eat with, or go to with small financial issues can relieve the fiscal stress of attending college. While some students with a foster care history have access to extended foster care, many do not either because their state does not have extended foster care, the students are 21 or older, or they are not eligible for extended foster care (e.g., they reunified with their families). Even at the lowest-cost institutions, the net price for young people with foster care history is more than 100 percent of their income.²⁷

Additional research confirms continued economic barriers. For example, multi-state research concluded that “three post-enrollment factors play a particularly large role as barriers to degree completion: needing to work full time, being a parent, and facing economic hardships.”²⁸

G. Access to ETV is Gamechanging for Young People, But States are Underutilizing the Program

A January 2025 GAO Report shows that many states are not fully using their Chafee and ETV allotments. For example, states returned an average of about 5 percent of Chafee and ETV federal funds between fiscal years 2018 and 2022, representing an average of about \$8.4 million per year.²⁹ However, most of the data on postsecondary enrollment and financial need indicates that this failure to adequately use funds is not a result of lack of eligibility or need.

The available data shows that only a small number of youth who are ETV eligible and enrolled in college are receiving ETV, indicating an access problem. For example, Urban Institute’s ten state survey showed that only 37% of ETV eligible youth enrolled in eligible programs were actually receiving ETV.³⁰

²⁶ [Foster Care, Postsecondary Education, and the Need for Financial Aid: How Affordable is Postsecondary Education for Young People with a Foster Care History? 15 \(Urban Institute 2023\)](#),

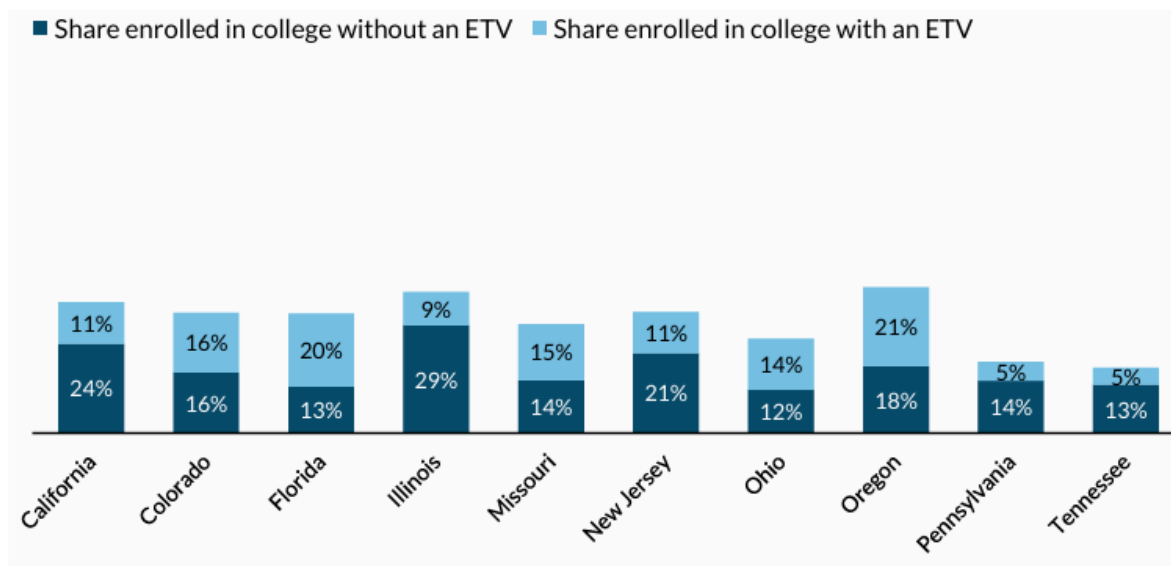
²⁷ *Id.* at 15-16.

²⁸ Nathanael J. Okpych and Mark E. Courtney, [When Foster Youth Go to College: Assessing Barriers and Supports to Degree Completion for College Students with Foster Care Histories](#), [IRP Focus on Poverty](#), Vol. 39, No. 1, Page 10 (June 2023).

²⁹ [GAO Report: HHS Should Help States Address Barriers to Using Federal Funds for Programs Serving Youth Transitioning to Adulthood \(January 2025\)](#).

³⁰ Devlin Hanson et. al, [Do Education and Training Vouchers Make a Difference for Young Adults in Foster Care?](#) (Urban Institute 2022). This Report focused on the following 10 states: California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. The chart reproduced above can be found on

Rates of Enrollment and ETV Award/Use by Age 21 for ETV-Eligible Young Adults by State



The chart above can be found at page 18 of [Do Education and Training Vouchers Make a Difference for Young Adults in Foster Care?](#)

Another report found that as many as 80,000 to 100,000 students may meet the basic age eligibility, school enrollment and foster care experience requirements for ETV.³¹ The current federal allocation can fund just about 8,660 awards at the full award amount, or 10,392 when the 20% state match is included. According to the Children’s Bureau, the actual number of awards made each year is around 15,000, as some states do not provide the full maximum award amount of \$5,000 and others contribute beyond the 20% match. While there are other factors that may reduce the number of eligible students receiving ETV, the amount of available funding falls far short of meeting the need.³²

II. Recommendations to Improve the ETV Program

The recommendations below are responsive to the documented challenges facing young people who seek access to ETVs as well as to the administrative complexities of the programs described in section I.

page 18 of the Report. The three takeaways from this Report are: (1) Many young adults eligible for ETVs do not receive them. (2) There is wide variation in how ETV is implemented across states, and (3) Receiving an ETV is correlated with better educational outcomes for young adults. Page 30.

³¹Unlocking Potential at page 6.. This Report is based on an array of data and research, including survey responses from the following 24 states: California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin

³²Id.

To Improve ETV Program Awareness and Access:

1. Consistent with the current cadence for case planning and case review, require that youth in foster care are notified about the ETV program beginning at age 14 and at least at every status review hearing (every 6 months) and 6 month case review.
2. Improve information available to youth, caregivers, case workers and others by requiring that information about the state's ETV program (and how to apply) is posted in a clear and accessible way online, including providing a link to the application.

To Improve the Reach and Effectiveness of the ETV Program:

3. Allocate the full \$60 million in ETV funds.
4. To better reflect actual need, revise the allocation formula to reflect the number of children in foster care who are ages 14-21 under a program of the State in the most recent fiscal year for which the information is available to the total number of children in foster care in all States for the most recent fiscal year.
5. Allow states to award up to \$12,000 per year per youth to respond to the rising cost of attendance and the additional costs of youth with experience in foster care.
6. Expand the reach of ETV and support permanency by making youth who leave foster care to a kinship guardianship arrangement or adoption at age 14 or older eligible for ETV.
7. Amend the grant's lifetime eligibility cap so that usage is prorated based on the portion of the academic year in which a student is enrolled. For example, if a student attends for only a single academic term—only that fraction of a full year should count toward the maximum five years of grant eligibility, rather than a full year being deducted.
8. To clarify program eligibility criteria, review state eligibility criteria to ensure consistency with statutory requirements.
9. Allocate \$25 million in Chafee funds specifically to provide counseling and support related to access and success in postsecondary programs. These funds should be flexible so that states can enlist a range of strategies and partners to deliver educational support, including but not limited to tutoring, remediation, educational coaching, advising, and accessing financial aid, including ETV.
10. Allocate \$5 million to create an ETV technical assistance center that will support establishment of basic program standards, provide oversight, provide opportunities to share best practices and build expertise in the field.
11. Require that the Administration for Children and Families, in collaboration with the Department of Education, community stakeholders, including alumni of the foster care system, to promulgate basic ETV program standards and provide Technical Assistance (TA) on those standards.
12. Help more young people succeed in training and educational pursuits by defining the Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirement in ETV to allow students who are struggling academically to receive funds for two years before a loss of benefits, provided that after one year of not making SAP, they have developed a plan to improve academic progress. Allow students who previously did not meet academic progress requirements who have disenrolled to have ETV grants reinstated upon subsequent re-enrollment without precondition.
13. Improve oversight and decision-making by requiring more transparency of ETV expenditures and uses by requiring states to report to ACF annually, with reports to Congress and public posting of data on:

- The number of ETV eligible youth.
 - The number of ETV applicants.
 - The number of ETV award recipients.
 - The average award amount.
 - The number of ETV eligible youth enrolled in Institutions of Higher Education.
14. Help institutions better understand the intersection of foster care programs and financial aid by requiring The Administration for Children and Families and the Department of Education/Federal Student Aid issue joint guidance that addresses the specific laws and regulations related to how foster care and ETV funding are to be counted and packaged along with federal financial aid.³³

To Increase connection with workforce programs and training:

15. Allow Chafee ETV grants to be used by students receiving Workforce Pell Grants, counting only the time actually enrolled toward the five-year eligibility limit.
16. Pass the following provision of A Stronger Workforce for America Act, HR 6655 of 2023:
- a. Create a new \$65 million competitive grant program called the Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grant program.
 - b. Create a new definition of “opportunity youth”, to replace “out-of-school youth”, by including youth experiencing homelessness and youth in foster care in the definition regardless of school enrollment status.
 - c. Streamline the enrollment process by allowing programs to begin serving youth while an eligibility determination is being made, shifting the burden of determining eligibility to providers, and aligning the documentation requirements to determine foster youth status with those of the Higher Education Act.
17. Require the Administration for Children and Families, in consultation with the Secretary of Labor, the Secretary of the Department of Education, the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, and the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Services, and state based community stakeholders to:
- (1) Inventory all federally funded workforce and career readiness programs, including apprenticeship programs and programs funded through the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act³⁴ that serve young people between ages 14 and 21;

³³ See e.g. 20 U.S.C.A. § 1087vv(i)(4) (“For purposes of determining a student's eligibility for funds under this subchapter, other financial assistance not received under this subchapter shall include all scholarships, grants, loans, or other assistance known to the institution at the time the determination of the student's need is made, including national service educational awards or post-service benefits under title I of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 12511 et seq.), but excluding veterans' education benefits.”)

³⁴ Youth who are in or have been in foster care are considered “special populations” in the Perkins Act. 20 U.S.C.A. § 2301 (48)(H). The state plan must include a description of how access to CTE programs will be expanded to include special populations, 20 U.S.C.A. § 2342 (d)(4)(B)(ii), and how the state will “improve outcomes and reduce performance gaps for CTE concentrators, including those who are members of special populations.” 20 U.S.C.A. § 2342 (d)(4)(C)(vii). The accountability measures described in 20 U.S.C.A. § 2323 include reporting on the performance of all program participants, including special populations, and reporting on how special populations can be better supported to excel in CTE programs.

- (2) Identify barriers to access and retention of youth with experience in foster care in these programs, including, but not limited to financial, social, and skill readiness barriers, and provide recommendations to address any barriers identified, including those that would leverage ETV and Chafee funds; and
- (3) Develop and issue guidance to State and local child welfare agencies on how to connect youth to vocational and technical training and any wraparound support that should be provided to facilitate successful persistence and completion.