



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Understanding Belongingness, Support, and Perseverance:

**An Exploratory Study of the Educational Experiences
of Foster Youth in California**

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately 570,000 youth were served by our nation’s foster care system in September 2022 (*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2023*). **California leads the nation with approximately 67,000 young people in foster care, more than 70% of whom are of school age** (*Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2023*).

In terms of educational outcomes, the high school graduation rate for foster youth in California was approximately 61% during the 2021–22 academic year (*California Department of Education, 2023*). Despite these graduation rates, foster youth encounter significant challenges as they navigate their educational journeys, the complexities of the child welfare system, and their aspirations for postsecondary education (*Harvey et al., 2021; Roberts, 2022; Whitman, 2021*).

PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Following the launch of the initial foster youth campus support program at California State University, Fullerton, several foundations — including the Anthony & Jeanne Pritzker Family Foundation, The Walter S. Johnson Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation, In-N-Out Burger Foundation, and Stuart Foundation — supported the expansion of foster youth support programs across the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems (California College Pathways, 2012). In 2006, the Community College Chancellor’s Office established the Foster Youth Success Initiative, which appointed foster youth liaisons at every community college in California. Today, there are over 100 comprehensive FYSPs across California Community College (CCC), California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems.

FOSTER YOUTH SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Foster youth face numerous challenges throughout their educational journeys, from navigating foster care to managing secondary and postsecondary education (*Smithgall et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2021; Johnson, 2021; Roberts, 2022; Whitman, 2021; Whitman et al., 2023*). Research indicates that these challenges are compounded by racial inequalities, with foster youth experiencing higher rates of grade retention, absenteeism, and special education needs — issues that have worsened over recent decades (*Stone, 2007; Scherr, 2007*).

The adverse experiences foster youth face prior to and within the system — including challenges in their original homes and the difficulties of carceral environments — significantly impact their educational outcomes (*Dettlaff, 2023; Harvey et al., 2021; Johnson, 2021; Roberts, 2022*). From systemic problems such as uneven school discipline and placement instability to personal struggles with past trauma, foster youth face additional inequities that hinder their educational attainment. Examining



California and its large foster care population is a critical need to address the unique challenges these youth face in their educational journeys. This study aims to explore the high school and college experiences of students who experience foster care (SEFC) in California. By examining their educational paths, the research seeks to identify key obstacles and opportunities that shape their academic success. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How did foster youth experience the foster care system?

2. What were the high school experiences of foster youth?

3. What were the college-going experiences of foster youth?

The findings aim to provide valuable insights into the educational challenges faced by SEFC and inform strategies for improving support systems to better serve this vulnerable population. This study examined, through a survey and interviews, how these individuals persevere through the challenges of the education and foster care systems to pursue meaningful lives. It used a concurrent mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data from a survey of 165 participants with qualitative data from 29 individual interviews to provide a comprehensive view of the educational experiences of foster care youth. A youth-engaged research approach was employed, partnering with California Youth Connection (CYC) to involve SEFC as research collaborators in all stages, from designing methodology to co-creating surveys and conducting interviews, ensuring that the research reflected the lived experiences of foster youth.



FINDINGS

This study explored how SEFC experienced foster care, high school, and college. Our study revealed three major findings:

- 1. SEFC had contrasting experiences of support and isolation while navigating belonging in the foster care system.**
- 2. SEFC experienced a mix of support, belonging, and safety in high school, with some contrasting aspects.**
- 3. Support systems were critical for SEFC in navigating college choices and persistence.**

Together, these findings demonstrate how important belongingness and adult support are instrumental in the educational success of foster youth.

FINDING 1

SEFC had contrasting experiences of support and isolation while seeking belonging in the foster care system.

This finding highlights the participants' sense of belonging within the foster care system. Despite the system's intent to offer supportive and caring environments, a significant majority of participants reported feeling a lack of belonging during their placements, with many also experiencing discrimination or prejudice while in care. As Sofia, from Kings County, said:

"I actually had a total of three social workers.... My first social worker was a male. He placed me [in] my first foster home, and when I was having issues there I would report to him and I would tell him, but he kind of ignored me, so he didn't really care."

Sofia continued to discuss how she and her sister's experiences were often ignored by social workers and foster parents, which led to frustration for her:

"A lot of the social workers and foster parents just saw her [my sister] like, 'Oh, she's just not listening. She's just a rebel. She's just going out and doing whatever she likes.' But [my sister] didn't feel comfortable being around men, because when we were younger, we lived with one of my aunts and my uncles and it turns out that my uncle actually abused her [and] sexually assaulted her."

FINDING 2

SEFC experienced a mix of support, belonging, and safety in high school, with some contrasting aspects.

This finding emphasizes the critical role of belongingness and adult support in the participants' high school experiences. Our study found that feelings of connection and acceptance were key to fostering academic engagement and well-being, while those who felt isolated or unsupported struggled with mental health and academic success, highlighting the need for inclusive and nurturing environments for SEFC.

Jamal, a 22-year-old from Los Angeles County, talked about how teachers made a difference by checking in on him:

"With foster kids, checking in matters. I had one teacher; he would always check up on us. I think every two weeks or something. I had a really good connection with him. We would always talk. He would always offer assistance, if I needed it, from when I was doing track and he offered to get some things I needed to compete. That was a really good connection. He would give us little gift cards every now and then, if we were doing good, he'd always congratulate us if we were doing good."

Kari, a 24-year-old from Riverside County, mentioned that she was not encouraged to go to school, but she was determined to do that for herself.

"I guess my foster parents never really pushed me to go to school, I would say. It was just something that I knew I had to do."

Later in the interview, Kari shared:

"I didn't think that I was going to graduate from high school. It was something that I knew I needed to do, but the idea of going to college was not something that I considered."



FINDING 3

Support systems are critical for SEFC in navigating college choices and persistence.

This finding focuses on the college-going experiences of participants, highlighting the critical role of support systems in shaping their college choices and persistence. While not all participants pursued higher education, those who did emphasized how adult and peer support — ranging from mentors to foster parents — were key in navigating the college application process, with those lacking such support feeling uncertain and overwhelmed, while those with guidance reported greater confidence and success.

Moore, a 23-year-old from Butte County, felt that he needed to be a “stellar” scholar so that he could access financial resources to afford college:

“It’s not just going to college anymore. It’s affording college. I would ask myself, ‘How do I now set myself up to be able to get scholarships, to be recognized as a good student when financial aid is a barrier?’ Because that’s the other barrier. It’s not just getting in, a lot of times people get in places, but they can’t afford it. And it’s not even just school costs, It’s everything else!”



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

Based on our analysis of the current landscape of SEFC in California, we propose 11 distinct initiatives aimed at enhancing educational systems which will enable them to better support the educational pursuits of SEFC, ensuring that they have equitable access to opportunities and resources.

Recommendations for the **Foster Care and Child Welfare Systems**

01 **Redirect funding that promotes keeping children with their biological/legal families.**

Placing children in foster care should be the last resort. Redirecting funding toward promoting family stability, unity, and reunification should be a priority. Family stability improves the educational outcomes of youth.

02 **Mandate trauma-informed training for foster care caregivers, social workers, and other child welfare personnel.**

Caregivers should receive specialized training in trauma-informed care and strategies that support and empower SEFC to express their needs and facilitate healing from trauma.

03 **Increase investments in Department of Children and Family Services collaboration and data-sharing to better track the educational outcomes of SEFC.**

An enhanced collaboration will enable the identification of gaps in educational support and facilitate targeted interventions, ultimately improving academic performance and long-term success for SEFC.

04 **Mandate that case managers learn about foster care resources and legislation.**

Foster youth case managers should receive comprehensive training on essential resources, including key legislation like California AB 12, which extends foster care support up to age 21, as well as local community programs and mental health services. By fostering partnerships with local agencies, case managers can enhance their ability to connect youth with vital support systems, empowering them to make informed decisions and build confidence as they transition to independence.

Recommendations for **K-12 Education**

05 Increase funding to support school personnel who work with SEFC.
Increasing personnel, particularly foster youth school liaisons, creates manageable caseloads, which enables students to be properly served and prevents staff burnout.

06 Increase investment toward creating high school foster youth support programs.
Following the lead of California's college-based foster youth support programs, it would be advantageous for California to invest in creating high school-based foster youth support programs to increase high school graduation and college enrollment. At the college level, these programs have been proven to provide vital support systems for foster youth. Such programs could tailor workshops and provide resources for foster youth.

07 Rethink secondary education disciplinary policy.
The disciplinary measures for foster youth often include suspension, out-of-class detention, and displacement from their schools of origin (*Kothari et al., 2018*). These traditional forms of punishment can be particularly detrimental for foster youth, who may already face significant challenges and instability. Schools should adopt more constructive restorative practice approaches such as understanding the root causes of behavioral issues and collaboratively developing solutions with the student.

08 Provide training for all school staff on trauma-informed practices.
Understanding the impact of trauma on behavior can help educators approach discipline with greater sensitivity and effectiveness. For example, a teacher trained in trauma-informed practices might recognize that a student's disruptive behavior is a response to underlying stressors and respond with support and understanding rather than immediate punishment.



Recommendations for **College**

09 **Expand dual enrollment opportunities for students with experience in foster care.**

Enabling foster youth to earn college credits while still in high school via California AB 359 can increase college access and completion for foster youth.

10 **Revisit California AB 854 - Educational Services to incorporate intentional mentorship and support networks into types of educational services provided.**

To enhance the success of foster youth in college, it is essential to increase their access to supportive adults who can provide mentorship and guidance. Policymakers should revisit California AB 854 to mandate the development of structured mentorship programs that connect foster youth with caring adults, including faculty, alumni, and community members who understand their unique experiences. Training college staff and faculty on the specific challenges faced by these students will enable them to build trusting relationships and offer tailored support that addresses the emotional and academic hurdles foster youth often encounter. Colleges collaborating with local nonprofits specializing in foster youth services can help create a robust network of mentors and advisors who can provide invaluable insights and encouragement.

11 **Offer tuition-free college for SEFC attending public postsecondary institutions.**

This initiative would alleviate the financial burdens that foster youth experience. By providing a tuition-free pathway, foster youth can access the education they deserve.



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