



Fostering Youth Success Alliance
Prepared for Submission to the Joint Legislative Public Hearing
On the FY 2026 Executive Budget Proposal
February 25, 2025

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of the statewide Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA). We would like to thank Chair Toby Ann Stavisky of the New York State Senate, Chair Alicia Hyndman of the New York State Assembly, and the honorable members of the Committees on Higher Education, Senate Finance, and Assembly Ways & Means for the opportunity to provide feedback about the 2024- 25 executive budget proposal. This testimony seeks to address funding for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI). First established in the 2015-16 budget, FYCSI aims to bridge the gap from foster care to college success, for the state’s most marginalized youth. There are currently over 1,200 students, who are on the path to college success, participating in FYCSI across more than 100 public and private colleges and universities throughout New York State. Over the past decade, this make or break program has served over 2,000 individual students. We anticipate over 1,500 youth with a foster care background will access FYCSI funding in FY 2025-26.

FYSA is a statewide advocacy group that promotes responsive policy and programs to improve the socioeconomic, physical and mental health, housing, and educational outcomes for youth in and aging out of foster care. The alliance is comprised of concerned foster care providers, activists, and youth who are committed to securing stabilizing supports that empower youth across New York to overcome barriers and excel in life. FYSA is housed at and managed by Children’s Aid, a multi-service human services organization located in New York City.

To date, the state has invested \$58.804 million towards the college initiative to support the educational goals of young people with a foster care background. We appreciate that Governor Hochul’s Executive Budget proposal included \$7.92 million in funding for FYCSI and yet there is still more to be done. We ask the legislature to support an additional \$2.08 million in funding for a total of \$10 million in funding for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative. As more students with a foster care background become aware of and utilize FYCSI, it is essential that we ensure the support they need to make it to and through college is available to them. This funding has had a tremendous impact for young people with a foster care background as they pursue their higher education goals. Recent data from SUNY has shown that FYCSI support is

associated with both higher retention rates and graduation rates for youth with a foster care background.

FYCSI funds have and continue to allow students to cover expenses such as tuition, housing, transportation, medical and personal expenses. As many as 66% of students report skipping buying assigned course material - a textbook, an access code, or both - during their time at school because of its cost. As students with a foster care background balance these high costs and multiple demands of transitioning out of the foster care system, this support can allow education to remain both a possibility and a priority. FYSA Youth Advocate, Tariq, a current student at Canisius University, stated, “Students with a foster care background...need a robust support system like the Foster Youth College Success Initiative to thrive in higher education.”

Youth in Foster Care in New York State

In New York State, there are approximately 14,000 children and youth in foster care¹, many of whom will eventually age out of the foster care system. However, many youth with a foster care background leave care without the support of a caring adult or family. When barriers or emergencies arise, many don’t have savings, relatives, or friends to rely on.

For any youth seeking to go to college, the process can be daunting from before even reaching the classroom. The application and financial aid processes alone can be overwhelming hurdles for young people with a foster care background who lack support networks to help them make sense of these confusing processes. When faced with the cost of a college education, this well-recognized pathway out of poverty can seem inaccessible to many students with a foster care background.

Throughout the past decade, the FYCSI program has helped young people to account for the funding gaps that other financial aid resources do not always accommodate. It opens the door to college that may otherwise seem impossible to accomplish. In discussing FYCSI, FYSA Advocate, Starr, a current student at Trocaire College, stated that, “Having options when you leave the system and knowing there...is help to turn to is one of the things to keep myself and other kids like me...pushing forward for a more successful future.” By ensuring that basic needs, such as housing, books, transportation, food, personal and medical care, and emergency expenses, FYCSI allows students an opportunity to make choices with intentionality rather than focus solely on survival. Additionally, colleges are able to provide increased support services (coaching, mental health, etc.) to young people who may not otherwise have a support system to persist through college.

¹ <https://scaany.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SONYC-2023-Data-Book.pdf>

For youth in care with limited resources, work experience, and skills, obtaining a college degree is a sure way to help gain employment with a livable wage and to achieve self-sufficiency. According to the 2015 Bridging the Gap report, by graduating just one cohort of 375 students, the state can save approximately \$19 million, representing increased tax payments and a decrease in public expenditures in health care, food stamps benefits, and shelters².

Promising Results at the State University of New York³

While FYCSI students attend colleges and universities across New York State, the most considerable portion of students benefiting from FYCSI attend institutions that are part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system. As such, [data from SUNY](#) is a telling marker of the impact of FYCSI on student success. Through analyzing information in its SUNY Data Warehouse, SUNY was able to provide insights into the impact of FYCSI for SUNY students. To begin with demographics, SUNY FYCSI awardees are 66.5% female. Racially, 66.8% identify as Black, Hispanic, or multi-racial - this approximate two-thirds of students represents a higher percentage of Black, Hispanic, or multiracial students than the SUNY population overall. In considering outcomes for FYCSI awardees, SUNY's data analysis found the following positive outcomes:

- ***FYCSI recipients have higher retention rates than their peers.*** Students receiving the benefits of FYCSI are more likely to re-enroll from their first to second year in college at rates higher than Pell Grant recipients, underrepresented minority groups, and even SUNY students overall.
- ***FYCSI awardees at SUNY consistently posted higher two-year, three-year, and four-year associate degree graduation rates than their peers*** with a foster care background who may have yet to access FYCSI. They also post higher associate's degree graduation rates than their Pell Grant peers. It is of note that two earlier cohorts of FYCSI students posted higher graduation rates than SUNY students overall.
- ***FYCSI awardees post higher graduation rates than their peers for bachelor's degree completion rates*** when adjusted for six-year degree completion. This is an area for further study as there have been fewer cohorts of young people to follow due to the length of the program.

While these data highlight only one sector of FYCSI awardees, these promising results paint a picture of the importance of state support for young people with a foster care background as they navigate college. Additionally, this investment represents a commitment to more equitable access to education, as FYCSI plays a role in closing gaps in graduation rates across racial groups.

² https://www.fysany.org/sites/default/files/document/bridging_the_gap.pdf

³ <https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-01-30a-Fostering-Success-at-SUNY.pdf>

Additionally, this data is in line with findings across the country pointing to the effectiveness of providing robust financial and socioemotional support on increasing higher education success for students with a foster care background. In Texas, it was found that the 60% of eligible foster youth who accessed the state's fee waiver were 3.5 times more likely to receive a bachelor's degree than the students who did not, controlling for waiver eligibility, demographic characteristics, and academic performance⁴. The pandemic served as an example of just how vital support programs are for student persistence: support programs such as FYCSI, were and continue to be vital in helping students to navigate the obstacles they faced - 83% of the students who reported continuing on in college through the pandemic, stated that they were actively participating in college support programs such as FYCSI. Additionally, a survey conducted by John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) found that students with a foster care background who accessed basic needs centers on their college campuses were more likely to persist in college than their peers who did not.⁵

to persist in college than their peers who did not.⁶ It is essential to note that while these programs provide financial resources, supports such as advisement, tutoring, and community are also crucial to student success. With this understanding, FYSA will continue to work with young people, colleges, and state partners to ensure students accessing FYCSI have comprehensive support in place to support them through their college experiences.

Making College Success a Reality

For the past nine years, the state has devoted a total of \$58.804 million in resources to support youth with a foster care background in obtaining their college degree. It is essential that New York State upholds this commitment as we all search for a way to move forward from the pandemic. The Governor's inclusion of \$7.92 million to the Foster Youth College Success Initiative is a start at supporting youth with a foster care background, but does not account for the full level of support that youth with a foster care background require to persist through their higher education goals. As more students have accessed the initiative each year, the allotment available to each young person has decreased. For 2024-25 academic year, the average amount per student is approximately \$6,500; this is a decrease of about \$1,500 from the allotment just two school years ago in the 2022-23 academic year. Funding the initiative at \$10 million will allow the state to fulfill its obligation to support all foster youth's successful transition to independence. As the acting parent for foster youth, New York State is responsible for ensuring that all young people have the resources necessary to pursue a college degree. In

⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740920309506?via%3Dihub>

⁵ <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/JBAY-COVID-19-Impact.pdf>

⁶ <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/JBAY-COVID-19-Impact.pdf>

addition to the investment of funds, it is also crucial that FYCSI funds be easily accessible for youth to access.

Through the Making College Success working group that includes partners from the Higher Education Services Corporation, State Education Department, Office of Children and Family Services, Administration for Children's Services, SUNY, and CUNY that FYSA convenes monthly, changes were secured to the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) application that ensure young people can more easily disclose their foster care background at the time of applying for financial aid. This change has helped to make FYCSI more widely known and utilized. FYCSI served an estimated 1,148 students in the 2023-24 academic year. In the current 2024-25 academic year, this reach has been maintained, with the initial count of eligible students identified for FYCSI landing at 1,285 students. The Office of Children and Families continue to receive consent forms from eligible students throughout the academic year and anticipate that more students will be found eligible by the end of year.

FYSA understands the importance of continued awareness building around the resources available for students with a foster care background. ***We support and urge passage of S378 (Brouk), A5658 (Zinerman) that requires the State Education Department and Office of Children and Family Services to prepare and disseminate pamphlets with information regarding state and federal higher education funding opportunities for foster youth. The bills would require the information to be posted publicly at admissions and financial aid options at SUNY and CUNY campuses, on their websites, and on SED and OCFS websites.*** Making information readily available removes a barrier for young people considering college but unsure of how they will cover the cost. Building awareness around available benefits for youth with a foster care background, such as FYCSI, can be aided through required signage and materials being visible in educational institutions.

Conclusion

Youth with a foster care background face uncertainty throughout many aspects of their lives; having consistent support to access higher education should not be one of those uncertainties. it is necessary that we strengthen the resources that help us work towards stability. For young people with a foster care background, having continuous financial, mental health, and other supports allows them to persist in their college education even in the face of unforeseen circumstances. New York State must continue to honor its obligation to support its most vulnerable community members on their path to independence. We must work collaboratively to ensure that all students are able to access a college education. While Governor Hochul's current \$7.92 allocation for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative is a start, there is still a need for more support for New York's youth with a foster care background. ***We ask that the legislature support an additional \$2.08 million, for a total of \$10 million, for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative in the final enacted FY26. We also urge passage of S378(Bouk)***

/A5658 (Zinerman) to ensure young people know their available resources. A \$10 million investment in FYCSI ensures that young people with a foster care background have access to the resources -tuition & fees, housing, personal expenses, and more - they need to make their college dreams a reality. By championing FYCSI, the state is ensuring that all foster youth who come into the care of the state and want to attend college, have the opportunity to further their education and become independent, and make their unique impact on society.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the approximately 14,000 children and youth in foster care in New York State. If you have any questions regarding this testimony, please contact Deidra Nesbeth, Director of the Fostering Youth Success Alliance at dnesbeth@childrensaidnyc.org or (646) 477-4322.