

Best Practices: Higher Education for Children and Youth in Foster Care

Introduction

College students coming from foster care require more attention than most other first generation students because of their background and their early independent status. Students can arrive at college in a survival mode, focused on basic needs such as safe and stable housing (especially during school breaks and summers), food, transportation, healthcare, and adequate financial aid. This document was created to address some general information around Foster Care and Higher Education access and resources.

Foster Care Definition

The Federal Student Aid (FSA) Application and Verification Guide (AVG) states the definition of foster care is a student who, at any time since the age of 13, was a foster child or a dependent/ward of the court is independent, for the purposes of Title IV financial aid, even if her status changed later.

A foster parent or a legal guardian is not treated as a parent for FSA purposes. When a dependency court creates a guardianship over a dependent child and “closes the court case,” the court still retains jurisdiction over the child. This is true even when the court-appointed legal guardian is not a relative. The child is therefore a ward of the court for purposes of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

What you Need to Know

If a young person has been in foster care at any time after turning 13, his or her classes will likely be paid for at most Washington state colleges. A young person turning 18 in foster care has even more resources available to them. A resource guide for young people in foster care can be found in the [Passport to Careers Guide](#).

1. FAFSA Question – Student Personal Circumstances

At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?

The 2025-2026 FAFSA now has questions regarding the personal circumstance of student applicants. For help understanding this question, you can refer to the [Tips for Completing the FAFSA](#). If a guardian or student is unsure of their foster care status they can contact their [DCYF Regional Education Lead](#) to find out. They should ask the Regional Education Lead to fill out a "Dependent/ Ward of the Court Verification Letter." The youth should be sure to print and keep several copies of this document because the college may ask for it to verify their status as a foster youth.



2. Educational Training Vouchers (ETV's)

Students may receive up to \$5000 a year for qualified school-related expenses. Funding is limited and available on a first-come, first-served basis to eligible students. Students may be eligible for ETV if they meet any one of the following:

- They are 15 or older, in a dependency action through a Washington state or tribal court and are in the custody of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) or a tribal child welfare agency. They may also qualify if they were in foster care in another state.
- They are 18 through 20 years old and left foster care at age 18 because they became a legal adult.
- They are 15 through 20 years old and left Washington state or tribal foster care at age 15 or older to live with adoptive parents or entered a relative guardianship placement.
- They received ETV money before they turned 21. If so, they can keep getting ETV until they turn 26, or up to 20 quarters or 15 semesters.

Find out more here: [Education and Training Voucher \(ETV\) Program](#).

Dual Credit/Running Start students enrolled in an eligible program may receive up to \$2,000 per academic year. To verify if they are enrolled in an eligible program, contact the ETV Program at etvwash@dcyf.wa.gov.

3. Passport to College Promise Scholarship Program (Passport)

Passport is a comprehensive program providing support to students from high school through higher education completion. Three primary components are administered by the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC): 1) a student scholarship 2) campus incentive funding to provide recruitment and retention services, and 3) a partnership with the College Success Foundation to provide support to students and training and technical assistance to campus staff.

The primary purpose of the Passport program is to provide former foster youth with financial assistance beyond other state, federal, private, and institutional financial aid for which they are eligible. In addition, the program provides incentive funding to postsecondary institutions that designate campus support staff and take other steps to recruit and retain former foster youth.

In the 2014–15 academic year, 376 students were served. Since 2008, the Passport scholarship has been awarded to an average of 325 students annually.

A groundbreaking data exchange was developed between WSAC, DCYF, and colleges to enable verification of student eligibility. Intensive support services on college campuses assist student retention rates and postsecondary success. Currently, 50 institutions are participating in the “viable plan” to offer these support services.



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4. Supplemental Education Transition Planning Program (SETuP)

SETuP provides information to youth, foster families, and school staff about post-high school education and training opportunities for youth in foster care. Contracted SETuP providers in your region can help young people get SETuP for college by offering:

- Financial Aid application assistance.
- Transportation and Housing information and assistance.
- College Application coaching and assistance.
- Pre-College Testing guidance based on educational goals.
- Course planning to help achieve educational goals.
- Resource Links to programs and services especially for youth ages 14–21 in foster care.

For more information, visit [Supplemental Education Transition Planning Program\(SETuP\)](#).

5. Washington State Governors' Scholarship for Foster Youth

The Washington State Governors' Scholarship for Foster Youth is a scholarship program that helps young men and women from foster care continue their education and earn a college degree.

The program has been supported by the current and former governors in Washington state. Proceeds from the Governors' Cup—an annual golf tournament—provide funding for approximately 40–50 new scholars each year.

Scholarship award amounts range from \$2,000 to \$4,000 depending on the college of attendance. The scholarship can be accessed for up to five years to complete an undergraduate study. Students must be enrolled full time and maintain satisfactory academic progress in order to renew the scholarship each year.

You can find more information on the [College Success Foundation Website](#).

For More Information

Please contact Stacey Klim, Foster Care Program Supervisor or Savanna Cavalletto, Foster Care Program Specialist at 360-725-6050 or by email at fostercare@k12.wa.us. You can also visit the Foster Care Program [website](#).



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