

Closing the Dream Gap: An Implementation Science Blueprint for Statewide Postsecondary Support for Youth with Foster Care Experience

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Youth with foster care experience face steep barriers to higher

education due to inequities, disrupted schooling, and limited supports. In 2022, more than 19,000 children and youth—about one third of them transition-age youth—were placed in Pennsylvania’s foster care system. Yet too few of these youth go on to complete a postsecondary credential. This article presents the Foster Care to College (FC2C) initiative, the first statewide model grounded in implementation science in Pennsylvania. Using an integrated logic model and core components framework, we describe FC2C’s theory of change, key activities, and outcomes, offering a replicable blueprint to advance equity and help close the foster care “Dream Gap.”

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***Positionality Statement:** I acknowledge my positionality as a White, socioeconomically privileged woman and my lack of lived experience in foster care. Grounded in practice and academic training and informed by relevant scholarship and impacted voices, I attend to power dynamics in representation and approach this work with ethical reflexivity and a commitment to centering lived experience.*

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Each year, thousands of young people cross a threshold: they leave foster care and step into adulthood, with 15,379 young adults emancipating in 2024 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). Yet far too often, they do so without the steady hands, safety nets, or guiding voices their peers can count on—facing college, work, and independence largely on their own. Decades of research affirm what these young people already carry in their bones: The path to higher education is steep, and the obstacles are not of their making but are woven into the very systems meant to support them. Most aspire to college (McMillen et al., 2003), but aspiration rarely blossoms into a degree. Nationally, just 7–13% of youth with foster care experience ever enroll, and early studies found that fewer than 4% earned a four-year degree—compared to nearly one in four of their peers (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Pecora et al., 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Newer data suggest some modest gains, with 8–12% attaining a postsecondary credential, whether a two- or four-year degree (Okpych et al., 2025). Still, the distance between their dreams and their realities remains a daunting divide—a “Dream Gap” that speaks volumes about the supports they deserve but too often lack.

The roots of the Dream Gap are complex and deeply entrenched. Youth in foster care often endure disrupted schooling, frequent placement changes, and limited access to rigorous college-preparatory opportunities—barriers compounded by the cumulative effects of trauma (McMillen et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2006). Too often, they face these hurdles without the steady guidance of a committed adult to help navigate applications, financial aid, or the daunting transition to campus life (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). At the systems level, fragmentation magnifies these challenges: Child welfare, K–12 education, and higher education typically operate in silos, producing services that are inconsistent, duplicative, or incomplete (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023). Together, these inequities do more than create obstacles—they derail educational journeys at the very moment young people are striving for independence and opportunity.

Yet despite these formidable challenges, higher education remains one of the most powerful levers for stability and long-term well-being. Each additional year of schooling is linked to gains in health, financial

security, and social outcomes (Wolfe & Haveman, 2002). For youth with foster care experience, the difference can be transformative—but only when systems align to provide the wraparound supports that make persistence possible: safe housing, financial aid, mentoring/support, and a community of belonging (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Promising models across the country—from California’s campus-based programs to multi-state coalitions such as Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide (FAAN)—demonstrate that coordinated, cross-sector approaches can begin to close the Dream Gap and create genuine pathways to success.

In Pennsylvania, this recognition gave rise to the Foster Care to College (FC2C) initiative, launched in 2014 by the Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania. As the first and only coordinated statewide effort dedicated to this population in Pennsylvania, FC2C convenes higher education institutions, child welfare agencies, legal advocates, policymakers, and—centrally—youth with lived experience. Anchored in the values of equity, interdependence, and resilience, and guided by implementation science, FC2C seeks to transform fragmented efforts into a cohesive, sustainable system of support. This article presents Pennsylvania’s evolving model, offering not just a program but a replicable blueprint to move youth from aspiration to achievement in higher education.

Background: The Dream Gap in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania-specific data remain limited, but the most recent Annual Report on the FosterEd tuition waiver legislation shows a significant gap in program utilization. In the 2022–2023 academic year, 441 students received a Pennsylvania Chafee Education and Training Grant, and of those, only 149 participated in the state’s Fostering Independence tuition waiver program (FosterEd), typically because most students received enough aid from other sources to meet their tuition cost and mandatory fees (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024). For context, these are relatively small numbers compared with the roughly 6,300 transition-age youth (ages 14–21) in Pennsylvania’s foster care

system in 2022 (Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, 2024). With the annual flow of youth in and out of foster care, and many young people not enrolling in higher education until after their exit from foster care, is impossible to count the exact number of potentially eligible students. This disparity in older youth served in foster care and FosterEd program utilization suggests that many who could benefit are not accessing the program, with institutions of higher education noting barriers such as lack of resources at the high-school level and assistance with the transition from high school to postsecondary education, lack of access to stable housing and transportation, lack of academic preparedness, history of adverse childhood experiences and unaddressed trauma/lack of access to mental health resources, external obligations such as child care and work schedules, and more (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2025).

The structural causes of the Dream Gap are deeply rooted. Disrupted educational trajectories are common; youth in foster care frequently experience school changes tied to placement instability, often leading to lost credits, lower test scores, and diminished access to advanced coursework (McMillen et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2006). Many also face trauma-related challenges—ranging from mental health needs to difficulty forming trusting relationships—that directly affect academic performance and persistence (Pecora et al., 2006). Unlike their peers, youth exiting foster care often navigate the college application process without the steady guidance of a parent or other adult mentor (Courtney & Heuring, 2005).

At the systems level, fragmentation compounds these barriers. Historically, Pennsylvania's child welfare and higher education systems operated with limited coordination, leaving students to fall through the cracks. Prior to 2016 there were no campus-based support programs specifically designed for students with foster care experience. Information about available supports was scarce, and consistent points of contact within institutions were not widely identified. This absence of coordinated infrastructure meant that many young people faced postsecondary education alone, despite the growing recognition among

professionals that higher education is a critical protective factor against poor life outcomes (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013).

Taken together, these realities illustrate the persistence of the Dream Gap in Pennsylvania—an utter disconnect between what youth aspire to and what the system enables. Yet they also signal opportunity. Research and emerging practice highlight the power of coordinated, cross-sector interventions to reduce barriers and expand pathways to higher education for this population (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Recognizing this, leaders in Pennsylvania mobilized to develop a statewide, sustainable strategy—an effort that ultimately gave rise to the Foster Care to College (FC2C) initiative.

The Foster Care to College (FC2C) Initiative

Established in 2014, FC2C is the first coordinated, statewide effort dedicated to improving postsecondary access and success for students with foster care experience in Pennsylvania. The initiative emerged from a recognition that piecemeal, siloed efforts are insufficient and that real change requires cross-sector collaboration linking higher education, child welfare, legal advocacy, philanthropy, and—centrally—youth themselves.

FC2C's vision is anchored in three values: equity, interdependence, and resilience. Equity demands attention to the disproportionate barriers facing youth with foster care experience and the systemic changes necessary to remove them. Interdependence acknowledges that no single system—whether child welfare, higher education, or legal advocacy—can solve this challenge alone; progress depends on shared responsibility and mutual reinforcement across sectors. Resilience centers the strengths and potential of young people, affirming their capacity to thrive when given the right supports. Together, these values shape FC2C's theory of change and day-to-day work.

From its inception, FC2C has drawn on national exemplars while tailoring strategies to Pennsylvania's unique landscape. Membership in Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide (FAAN) situates the initiative within a growing national network of backbone organizations

committed to advancing educational equity for youth in foster care. At the same time, FC2C addresses state-specific gaps. Prior to its work, Pennsylvania had no campus-based support programs for students with foster care experience. Today, through FC2C's training, technical assistance, and advocacy, more than 16 institutions host such programs, with over 300 students served annually.

Uniquely, FC2C functions as a statewide convener and capacity-builder. It brings together professionals across child welfare and higher education through quarterly networking meetings, professional development workshops, webinars, symposia, and conference, creating space for knowledge exchange and collective problem-solving. Building on past events that centered the expertise of college students with experience in foster care, FC2C envisions a future where youth voice is both the heartbeat and the guiding light—where the wisdom of lived experience animates the work, illuminates the path forward, and with funding for ongoing support, ultimately takes shape in a Youth Advisory Council designed to lead with insight, courage, and creativity. FC2C's advocacy efforts helped pave the way for Pennsylvania's Fostering Independence Through Education Act of 2019 (Pennsylvania General Assembly, Act 16), which created a statewide tuition and fee waiver program for students with foster care experience—a landmark step in aligning policy with equity goals.

Taken together, these efforts position FC2C not simply as a program, but as a blueprint for systemic change. By combining policy advocacy, direct support for institutions, professional training, and network-building, FC2C strengthens Pennsylvania's infrastructure for supporting youth in foster care on their educational journeys.

Conceptual Framework: From Logic Model to Implementation

FC2C's work is guided by a logic-model theory of change that links resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes, clarifying how its strategies are expected to drive meaningful change. This framework helps keep

FC2C’s approach intentional, measurable, and adaptable across child welfare, higher education, and legal advocacy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Foster Care to College Initiative Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-Term Outcomes	Intermediate Outcomes	Long-Term Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field Center personnel • National coalition membership • Funding • Regional and statewide workgroups • Statewide network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene statewide networking group • Provide technical assistance to colleges • Provide professional training for programming • Create and maintain a resource library • Produce and disseminate quarterly newsletter • Conduct evaluation activities • Engage in advocacy related to college access for youth with foster care experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 300 Students receiving campus support services • 30-50 Attendees at network meetings • 373 Individual network members • 19 Colleges trained; 16 Campus programs launched • 3-5 Annual trainings • 100 Professionals trained • 5+ Original resources created • 4 Newsletters published/year • 1-2 Annual briefs or academic articles written 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased knowledge of higher education barriers • Increased understanding of best practices • Increased number of campus support programs • Increased awareness of campus programming and college access, including financial aid • Increased confidence in college application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased professional competency regarding college access for youth with foster care experience • Increased number of college applications • Improved college-readiness • Increased college enrollment • Increased college retention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved graduation rates • Passage of impactful legislation • Reduction of financial barriers and basic needs insecurity • Increased access to sustainable careers • Improved outcomes across multiple life domains

Note. For more information on how these activities were developed and implemented—including how FC2C grew its partner network from an initial core group to a statewide coalition and expanded participation among postsecondary institutions—please contact the corresponding author.

Inputs—Building the Foundation: FC2C draws strength from five primary inputs: (a) existing Field Center personnel (cross-disciplinary faculty, professional staff, and MSW interns, with the initiative led by the Center’s senior staff member); (b) national coalition membership (active participation in FAAN); (c) funding from private philanthropy for the Center’s portfolio of activities and time-limited grants to support periodic FC2C initiatives; (d) regional and statewide workgroups grounded in collective impact principles; and (e) a statewide network

of more than 300 professionals from nonprofits, government, higher education, advocacy organizations, and more.

Activities—Driving Change Across Systems: With these resources, FC2C carries out a diverse portfolio of activities designed to address barriers at multiple stages of the educational journey. These include (a) convening a statewide networking group; (b) providing technical assistance and training to colleges developing and operating campus-based programs; (c) delivering professional development via webinars, annual conferences, and workshops; (d) developing and maintaining a resource library for students, caregivers, and professionals; (e) publishing a quarterly newsletter; (f) engaging in advocacy to advance legislation and policy reforms; and (g) conducting research to inform practice and policy.

Outputs—Measuring Immediate Reach: These efforts have produced measurable growth in Pennsylvania's capacity to support students with experience in foster care in higher education. Tangible outputs include: (a) 30–50 professionals regularly attending quarterly meetings (with more than 300 connected statewide); (b) 19 higher education institutions receiving training, with at least 16 now operating campus support programs; (c) three to five trainings annually, reaching hundreds of professionals; (d) a growing body of publications, videos, and newsletters disseminating best practices; and (e) campus-based programs collectively serving more than 300 students each year. Together, these outputs represent a significant shift from isolated supports to a statewide infrastructure of opportunity.

Outcomes—Advancing Systemic and Student Success: Short-term outcomes include (a) increased awareness of barriers to higher education; (b) increased understanding of best practices for professionals; (c) an increased number of campus support programs; (d) increased professional knowledge of campus programming and college access, including financial aid; and (e) increased confidence for students in the college application process. Intermediate outcomes include (a) greater confidence and competence among students and professionals; (b) growth in the number of youth in foster care applying to college; (c) increased college readiness; (d) increased enrollment; and (e) increased retention. Long-term outcomes include (a) improved retention and graduation;

(b) policy gains that sustain support; (c) reductions in financial and basic-needs insecurity; (d) increased access to sustainable careers; and (e) improved outcomes across multiple life domains. Ultimately, the initiative envisions enhanced life outcomes—economic stability, health, and civic participation—resulting from expanded postsecondary success.

FC2C pairs its logic model with implementation science principles that emphasize scalability, adaptability, and fidelity: strategies are tested, refined, and continuously evaluated to ensure effectiveness in diverse contexts (Fixsen et al., 2005). In practice, this means FC2C does not simply introduce programs, but also embeds them within a cycle of design, delivery, evaluation, and revision. Core activities are guided by the principle of fidelity to evidence-based practices, while simultaneously allowing for contextual adaptations to fit the realities of Pennsylvania's diverse institutions and communities. Through ongoing data-driven feedback loops, engagement of involved parties, and iterative learning, FC2C creates mechanisms for continuous improvement. For example, feedback from students, campus practitioners, and child welfare professionals informs real-time adjustments to trainings, technical assistance, and advocacy priorities. This intentional alignment with implementation science ensures that FC2C remains responsive to emerging needs, while also building the infrastructure required for long-term sustainability. Importantly, this approach advances the initiative's broader goal: to establish a replicable and transferable blueprint that other states can adapt, balancing fidelity to core principles with the flexibility necessary to thrive in distinct policy and institutional environments.

Innovation and Expansion: Looking Ahead

FC2C imagines a bold horizon of innovation and expansion, with the potential to transform opportunity into impact. A central aspiration is to strengthen infrastructure through strategic capacity-building, including the vision of hiring a full-time coordinator to provide the oversight and partnership-building necessary for sustainability and scale (Fixsen et al., 2013). Adequate funding is essential to the expansion of the initiative

to include a dedicated staff person with expertise at the nexus of child welfare and higher education. Under such new leadership, FC2C also hopes to establish a Youth Advisory Council to institutionalize youth voice, ensuring programs remain responsive to lived realities while fostering leadership (Casey Family Programs, 2022).

Pennsylvania's higher education landscape presents significant opportunity, with more than 140 institutions yet to establish campus-based support programs. FC2C envisions a future where every student with foster care experience has access to tailored supports, drawing on evidence that such programs improve persistence (Day et al., 2011) and inspired by models of rapid statewide expansion elsewhere (The Kresge Foundation, 2015).

Importantly, FC2C's forward-looking agenda is grounded in sustainability. Rather than conceiving innovation as a series of one-time projects, it aspires to embed its initiatives into the long-term fabric of Pennsylvania higher education and child welfare systems. Cross-sector collaboration will remain the backbone of this work, engaging colleges, agencies, nonprofits, and youth leaders to share resources and accountability for student success. In this way, FC2C seeks to create a durable and replicable infrastructure that ensures students with foster care experience are not only welcomed into higher education but empowered to thrive there.

Evaluation and Replicability

Evaluation is central to FC2C's vision for sustainability and impact. As with many statewide initiatives, FC2C's work spans multiple systems, which makes continuous feedback and adaptive learning both essential and challenging. Current evaluation relies on a combination of engagement metrics, feedback from collaborators, and outcome tracking (see Table 1). For example, the initiative monitors participation in quarterly networking meetings, professional trainings, and webinars; tracks the growth of campus support programs; and monitors reach of resources such as the statewide directory and newsletter.

These formative evaluation practices align with implementation science principles that emphasize iterative learning, attention to context, and data-informed decision-making (Fixsen et al., 2005). By regularly assessing metrics and intentionally collecting and incorporating ongoing feedback loops from youth, practitioners, and institutional partners, FC2C refines strategies in real time, ensuring that remain responsive to evolving needs while strengthening the infrastructure for long-term systems change.

Looking ahead, evaluation is also the foundation for replicability. FC2C aims to serve as a blueprint for other states and documenting what works—and why—is critical for successful transfer. Replication will not mean rigid duplication of Pennsylvania’s model. Rather, it will involve identifying core principles—such as cross-sector collaboration, authentic youth engagement, and equity-centered design—and adapting them to distinct policy environments and institutional landscapes. As implementation science scholars emphasize, effective scaling requires fidelity to core elements with flexibility for local adaptation (Fixsen et al., 2013). FC2C’s membership in national networks like FAAN enhances this potential by connecting Pennsylvania’s lessons with those of other states engaged in similar efforts.

Table 1

Evaluation Measures for the Foster Care to College Initiative

Evaluation focus	Measures/tools	Intended outcomes
Engagement metrics	Attendance at quarterly networking meetings, webinars, trainings	Broad, consistent participation across sectors
Program growth	Number of campus support programs developed; number of students served	Expansion of institutional supports for students with foster care experience in higher education
Resource utilization	Distribution and use of statewide program directory, FC2C newsletter, resource library	Increased access to reliable, centralized information

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Evaluation focus	Measures/tools	Intended outcomes
Feedback from involved parties	Campus program surveys; network program evaluation surveys, event evaluation forms, qualitative feedback from professionals and partners	Ongoing refinement of strategies based on practitioner input
Youth voice	Youth/lived experience participation in network meetings, advisory roles, event panels, and feedback forums	Authentic and essential integration of lived experience into program design
Policy/systems impact	Legislative outcomes (e.g., Act 16 tuition waiver); cross-system collaborations initiated	Sustained systemic change supporting post-secondary access and success

Note. This table summarizes current evaluation measures guiding FC2C's continuous improvement and scalability.

Conclusion

The Foster Care to College (FC2C) initiative represents a bold and necessary effort to reclaim the promise of higher education for students with foster care experience. Its journey makes clear that closing the Dream Gap cannot be achieved through scattered programs or piecemeal interventions; it requires deep system alignment and authentic cross-sector collaboration. By uniting child welfare, higher education, legal advocacy, and community partners around a shared vision, FC2C is demonstrating how fragmented supports can be transformed into a cohesive, durable ecosystem of opportunity.

Equally essential, FC2C is advancing a future where youth voice is not peripheral but central—where lived experience consistently shapes program design, policy priorities, and everyday decision-making. This commitment not only empowers young people as co-creators of solutions but also ensures that the work remains grounded in their realities, aspirations, and resilience. For practitioner-scholars, the message is

unmistakable: Sustainable change emerges only when we dismantle silos and elevate the insights of those most directly affected.

Pennsylvania's experience reinforces that meaningful progress must be built to endure. The gains achieved through FC2C call for strong policy support, stable funding streams, and resilient networks of trust across sectors. By embedding supports into the very fabric of child welfare and higher education systems, FC2C is laying the groundwork for a replicable model—one that can be adapted by other states committed to equity and opportunity. Indeed, Pennsylvania's story is more than a state initiative; it is a blueprint for systemic transformation.

Most importantly, the Dream Gap is not inevitable. It is the predictable result of systemic barriers that can—and must—be dismantled. Closing it will require the collective will of policy-makers who champion equity, funders who invest in infrastructure, higher education leaders who institutionalize campus-based programs, and practitioners who walk beside youth as steady allies. FC2C shows what becomes possible when these forces act in concert: postsecondary success shifts from a rare exception to an expected outcome. We therefore call on all parties—across systems, sectors, and communities—to embrace educational justice for youth in foster care not as charity, but as a shared responsibility and a moral imperative. Because when we act together with urgency and resolve, the Dream Gap does not simply narrow—it disappears.

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