

Higher Education Opportunity Act: Homeless and Foster Youth

Youth experiencing homelessness or in foster care face numerous barriers to higher education. Inadequate college readiness, the complexity of the financial aid process, and lack of housing and support services once enrolled in college make obtaining a college degree an often insurmountable challenge. Yet a college education offers these youth the best opportunity to escape poverty and realize their dreams.

Higher Education Opportunity Act:

In August 2008, President Bush signed the Higher Education Opportunity Act, H.R. 4137. This legislation reauthorizes the Higher Education Act. It includes numerous amendments designed to increase homeless and foster students' access to postsecondary education.

College Preparation and Support Programs: The Federal TRIO programs consist of programs that support at-risk junior high and high school students to graduate from high school, enter college, and complete their degrees. These programs include Talent Search, Upward Bound, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, Staff Development Activities, and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP). Students experiencing homelessness or in foster care are at great risk of academic failure due to their extreme poverty and residential instability, yet, prior to this reauthorization, they were not specifically mentioned or targeted by any of the TRIO programs.

The Higher Education Act now:

- Requires each applicant for TRIO programs to identify and make available services, including mentoring, tutoring, and other services, to homeless children and youth, or youth in foster care (including youth who have left foster care after reaching age 13).
- Makes homeless children and youth, or youth in foster care (including youth who have left foster care after reaching age 13), automatically eligible for TRIO programs.
- Includes as permissible services under the federal TRIO programs and GEAR UP program activities specially designed for homeless children and youth and for students who are in foster care or aging out of the foster care system.
- Amends the purpose of the Student Support Services Program to foster an institutional climate supportive of success in postsecondary education for homeless children and youth and students who are in foster care or aging out of foster care.
- Includes as a permissible service under the Student Support Services Program assistance in securing temporary housing during breaks in the academic year for homeless students and students who are in foster care or are aging out of the foster care system.
- Includes as content in training programs under Staff Development Activities strategies for recruiting and serving homeless children and youth and students who are in foster care or aging out of the foster care system.

- Requires entities not using a cohort approach for GEAR UP to include homeless children and youth and youth in foster care as priority students.

In addition, the following provisions were included in the reauthorized Higher Education Act:

- Public Awareness: Requires the U.S. Department of Education, in coordination with organizations that provide services to youth who are or were homeless, or youth in foster care, and many other organizations, to implement a public awareness campaign that will increase awareness about the availability of financial aid under the Act.
- Grant Program: Includes a grant program in the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education that would assist colleges, other postsecondary schools, and public and private nonprofit institutions to provide support services and housing (when that housing is generally unavailable to other students) to homeless students or students who were in foster care before the age of 13. (Please note that the intent here was probably to offer this program to students in foster care “after”, not “before”, the age of 13.) This grant program is authorized, but funding has not yet been appropriated for this purpose.
- Independent Student Status for Youth in Foster Care: Congress passed legislation last year, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, that expanded the definition of “independent student” to include any student who is an orphan, is in foster care, or is a ward of the court at any time when the student is 13 years of age or older. This language is in effect for the 2009-2010 FAFSA. The Higher Education Improvements Act makes a technical change to this provision, to include, additionally, in the definition of independent student those youth who were orphans, in foster care, or a ward of the court at any time when the individual was 13 years old or older. Since this is a broader group of students, there is a budget impact; hence, this corrected language does not go into effect until July 1, 2010.

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