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Understanding Belongingness, Support, and Perseverance: An Exploratory Study of the Educational Experiences of Foster Youth in California

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# Understanding Belongingness, Support, and Perseverance:

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

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# BACKGROUND

**Foster youth are an underserved population in the United States, often facing barriers that impede their educational success** (Geiger et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). **With approximately 570,000 youth in the foster care system** (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2023), **understanding their unique experiences and needs is important. Notably, students with experience in foster care (SEFC) have markedly lower high school graduation and college enrollment rates (22%) compared to their non-foster peers (53%)** (Johnson, 2024; Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Okpych, 2022).

In terms of college completion, by the age of 29–30, approximately 11.6% of foster youth graduate from college compared to 27.7% of first-generation low-income students within six years (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). In California, foster youth graduated high school at a rate of 61% compared to the statewide average of 85% during the 2021–22 academic year (California Department of Education, 2023). The reasons for the disparities in graduation rates are numerous. SEFC face many challenges while they attend school, navigate the child welfare system, and pursue postsecondary aspirations (Harvey et al., 2021; Roberts, 2022).

Given these alarming statistics, it is essential to explore the challenges and obstacles that SEFC encounter on their educational journeys. California is home to approximately 67,000 individuals in foster care and leads the nation in foster care placements (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2023), providing a crucial context for examining the educational experiences of these youth. The aim of this study was to explore the high school and college experiences of SEFC in California.

The study was 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?**

In answering these research questions, we examined the individuals and systems that either facilitated or hindered SEFC’s pathways toward educational success. Specifically, the findings of the report focus on belongingness and the influence of adult support. We also emphasize the resilience and agency of SEFC. This report informs better practices and policies toward enhancing the educational success of SEFC, creating a more equitable educational experience for all students.



## STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

From their first introduction to the foster care system, the complexities of navigating the foster care system to the demands of high school and college experiences, SEFC encounter both individual and systemic barriers that hinder their academic progress (*Johnson, 2021*). Scholars have increasingly focused on how structural challenges (e.g., financial challenges, housing instabilities, limited resources) are carceral entanglements (*Roberts, 2023*), highlighting how intersecting systems — such as the penal and child welfare systems — create compounded challenges for youth and their families (*Villegas et al., 2014*). Specifically, SEFC are more likely to have experienced trauma and be monitored, policed and disciplined (*Burns et al., 2022; Flores & Losen, 2023*). Additionally, SEFC will experience an average of 2.8 different foster care placements that can create instability leading to negative educational outcomes (*The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education [NWGFCE], 2014*). We posit that these overlapping structures lead to increased instability and disruption, further complicating the educational trajectories of SEFC. It is important to underscore that SEFC should not have to endure these various structural inequities in their pursuit of an education.

## K-12 EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH

As we name above, SEFC lag behind their peers in crucial life domains, particularly in education, where their outcomes are also markedly lower than their non-foster youth peers (*Courtney et al., 2018*). Some of these low educational outcomes are due to low expectations from educators, insufficient support systems, attending under-resourced schools, and lack of academic guidance, all of which contribute to the challenges they face (*Harvey et al., 2021; Pears et al., 2015; Villegas et al., 2014*). Other educational barriers SEFC face include increased school suspension, chronic absenteeism, and placement in special education and independent educational programs at a disproportionate rate relative to their peers (*Blackenship, 2018; Flores & Losen, 2023*).

Another challenge contributing to the lower educational outcomes of SEFC is school instability (*The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Villegas et al., 2014*). School instability can impede socio-emotional competence and increase disruptive or problematic behavior among SEFC (*Pears et al., 2015; Schroeter et al., 2015*). SEFC experience a school transfer rate that is double that of their non-foster youth peers (*NWGFCE, 2014*).

## COLLEGE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH

The significant systemic challenges that SEFC face during their K-12 years also impede their pursuit of higher education (*Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Watt et al., 2018*). Research indicates that many foster youth initially enter higher education through community colleges, which serve as a crucial gateway to further academic opportunities (*John Burton Advocates for Youth [JBAY], 2022*). However, the college persistence and completion rates for SEFCs reveal a troubling trend: These students often remain enrolled in community college for more than six years, far exceeding the typical timeframe for degree completion (*Dworsky & Pérez, 2009; Piel, 2018*). This prolonged enrollment underscores the need for targeted support and resources tailored to address the unique barriers faced by foster youth as they navigate their college experiences.

*Johnson (2024)* points out the complexities of experiences that many SEFC encounter in the pursuit of a college education. He asserts that the persistence of structural inequality by way of poverty and racism, challenges with reunification, unresolved trauma, and excessive residential placements all contribute to significant obstacles for college attainment, even though upward of 70–80% of the SEFC have aspirations to attend college. Moreover, he asserts that focusing on placement stability and preparing educators to support youth in foster care would improve the educational experiences and outcomes for foster youth (*Johnson, 2024*).





California has long been a champion for enhancing the educational support of foster youth through a robust network of campus-based foster youth support programs (FYSP) designed to increase opportunities and support systems for these students (Geiger et al., 2018; Whitman et al., 2023). Initiatives began with the launch of the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University, Fullerton in 1998, followed by the establishment of the Foster Youth Success Initiative by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office in 2006, which appointed foster youth liaisons at every community college in the state. Today, there are over 100 comprehensive FYSPs across California Community College (CCC), California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems.

These FYSPs provide dedicated personnel who offer wraparound services, mentoring, and advising to SEFC throughout their college experience (California College Pathways, 2012). SEFC who attend community colleges with strong support networks are more likely to successfully transfer to four-year universities (Lopez et al., 2022). By focusing on holistic support and guidance, FYSPs improve college-going rates for SEFC and provide the emotional support necessary for their academic success (Salzar et al., 2016).

### **CALIFORNIA POLICY ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR FOSTER YOUTH**

While not an exhaustive list, the table on the next page highlights several policies that aim to enhance educational success for foster youth in California. Familiarity with these policies help stakeholders navigate the educational landscape and empowers them to advocate effectively for the needs of SEFC. These policies ensure that SEFC have access to the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive academically.

BILL NUMBER/ POLICY NAME	SUMMARY
<a href="#"><u>California AB (Assembly Bill) 12, also known as the “Extended Foster Care” Program</u></a> 2010	The California Fostering Connections to Success Act extended foster care to age 21 in California.
<a href="#"><u>California AB (Assembly Bill) 592</u></a> 2015	Authorizes the California Department of Social Services to provide verification of foster care status to current and former foster youth.  The U.S. Department of Education Dear Colleague Letter GEN-13-18 (2013) clarified that extended foster care payments made directly to foster youth are to be excluded when determining Title IV federal student aid eligibility.
<b>K-12 POLICY</b>	
<a href="#"><u>Right to Remain in School of Origin</u></a>	Foster youth have the right to remain in their school of origin after they move to a new foster care placement. “School of origin” can be: (a) the school they attended when they first entered foster care, (b) the school they most recently attended, or (c) any school they attended in the last 15 months that they feel connected to.
<a href="#"><u>Right to Immediate Enrollment in School</u></a>	Foster youth have the right to immediately enroll in their regular home school after a placement change. They cannot be forced to attend a continuation school or alternative education program, such as independent study, even if they are behind in credits or have discipline problems at school.
<a href="#"><u>Right to Partial Credits for High School</u></a>	If a foster youth changes schools during the school year, they have the right to partial credits in all classes that they are passing when they leave their old school, even if they do not complete the entire class.
<a href="#"><u>School Discipline Rights</u></a>	Foster youth cannot be suspended for more than five school days in a row or for more than 20 days in a school year. They have the right to be told why they are being suspended and the right to provide their version of events and evidence before they are suspended, unless there is an emergency. If they are facing school discipline, their ERH, attorney and social worker must be notified. If they are in special education, they must be invited to a meeting to decide whether their behavior was related to their disability.
<a href="#"><u>Right to Your School Records</u></a>	Foster youth have the right to access their school records if they are 16 years or older or have finished grade 10.
<a href="#"><u>California AB (Assembly Bill) 167/216: Graduation Rights</u></a> <i>Amended 2013</i>	If a foster youth is behind on credits, and they have transferred schools after their second year of high school, they can be eligible to graduate by completing only the state graduation requirements (130 credits in specific classes) instead of their school district’s requirements.
<b>COLLEGE POLICY</b>	
<a href="#"><u>College Rights</u></a>	Foster youth have the right to have the application fee waived when they apply to a community college in California. They have the right to receive the maximum amount of federal student aid and may be eligible for up to \$5,000 per year from the Chafee scholarship.
<a href="#"><u>H.R. (House of Representatives) 3443 Foster Care Independence Act</u></a> <i>1999, Amended in 2000 to create the “Chafee Grant”</i>	The Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program supports youth who spend time in foster care on or after their 16th birthday via a postsecondary grant of \$5,000.
<a href="#"><u>California AB (Assembly Bill) 1393</u></a> 2009	Requires University of California and CSU campuses to give foster youth priority for on-campus housing. California community colleges are requested to give priority to foster youth. In addition, CSU campuses with student housing open during school breaks are required to give first priority to current and former foster youth. UCs are required to do so only for foster youth who are otherwise eligible for a particular campus housing facility.
<a href="#"><u>California AB (Assembly Bill) 669</u></a> 2009	Allows colleges and universities to grant resident status to foster youth under age 19 who were residing out of state as a dependent or ward under California’s child welfare system.
<a href="#"><u>California AB (Assembly Bill) 194</u></a> 2011	Provides priority registration at community colleges, California State Universities, and University of California campuses for current and former foster youth.
<a href="#"><u>California SB (Senate Bill) 1023, also known as the “NextUp” Program</u></a> 2014	The California State Legislature passed SB 1023 (Liu), which established a special program for foster youth enrolled in community colleges, known as the Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support (CAFYES) program, later rebranded as NextUp. This program is in place at 45 community colleges, serving 2,100 current and former foster youth annually.
<a href="#"><u>California AB (Assembly Bill) 183</u></a> 2022	The 2022–2023 budget bill included funding for campus support programs for foster youth across all three California public postsecondary systems. Language governing these programs was included in AB 183, the higher education budget trailer bill.

# METHODOLOGY

## STUDY DESIGN

To better understand the high school and college experiences of SEFC, this study used a concurrent mixed-methods design. The quantitative data was derived from a survey instrument (n=165). The qualitative data came from individual interviews (n=29). The goal of a concurrent design was to triangulate the findings and contribute to their breadth and depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### Youth-Engaged Research Approach

The study took on a youth-engaged research approach in which SEFC were included as research collaborators. Researchers partnered with California Youth Connection (CYC), a prominent statewide youth-led policy and advocacy organization. Such an approach afforded the opportunity to hear directly from individuals with their particular lived experiences. Moreover, the insights provided insider perspectives, which reduced the need to infer, interpret, or make meaning of a situation, wherein data or viewpoints come directly from those involved (Clark, 2017). We adapted Rodriguez & Brown's (2009) Youth Participatory Action Research framework to apply it to our youth-engaged research approach. Youth-engaged research:

1. Considers how the subject matter under investigation stems from the lived experiences and issues pertinent to young individuals.
2. Partners with youth actively engaged as partners in establishing the research process's methodology and pedagogical framework.
3. Is transformative in nature, aiming to intervene actively to alter knowledge and practices with the goal of enhancing the well-being of youth and their communities.

Through multiple collaborative sessions between the research team and CYC leadership, rapport was established, and the research project was outlined. These meetings were pivotal in drafting a recruitment strategy for the Community Research Collaborators (CRCs), young CYC leaders with lived experience in foster care. CRCs were compensated for their expertise and contributions to the study. Subsequently, biweekly meetings were held with CRCs to co-create and distribute surveys, refine interview protocols, recruit and interview students, and aid in preliminary analysis. Aside from drafting the report, their involvement spanned every phase of the research project. The youth-engaged approach aligned with our commitment to integrating the lived experiences, talents, and voices of young people with foster care backgrounds.

## DATA COLLECTION

### Participant Criteria

SEFC in California aged 18–26 were invited to participate, using purposeful and convenience sampling (Merriam, 2015). Every participant had been involved with the foster care system at some point, irrespective of their current foster care status. The targeted population included current or former foster youth, in California, between the ages of 18 and 26. Having been emancipated out of foster care was not a consideration for recruitment. Study participants were recruited from stakeholders working with SEFC. For example, we contacted the directors of foster youth campus support programs (i.e., NextUp and Guardian Scholars), as well as Independent Living Program (ILP) coordinators across the state. The research team also emailed SEFC in our network who met the criteria for the study.



### Survey

During summer 2022, the survey was administered, and we collected data on participants’ demographic backgrounds, foster care experiences, and high school and college experiences. The survey process took approximately 25–35 minutes. We received 165 completed surveys. Students who participated in the survey were given a \$25 Amazon gift card.

### Individual Interviews

Interviews were conducted with SEFC who expressed interest in being interviewed when they completed the survey. The interviews were semi-structured, facilitated via Zoom, and ranged from about 60 to 90 minutes. Students who participated were given an additional \$25 Amazon gift card. It is important to note that both the survey data and interview data were collected concurrently. The survey data was accessed only to gather contact information for SEFC who were interested in being interviewed. Our first interview was conducted in summer 2022 and our last interview was completed in fall 2022. We were intentional about including a wide representation of foster youth across California. The counties represented in the study are listed in Table 1. The sample used for these analysis is not representative; however, it does offer a glimpse into foster youths’ educational journeys in the state.

**Table 1. Survey Participants: Age, Gender, and Race/Ethnic Group Affiliation (n=165)**

Mean Age, in years (SD)	Minimum Age	Maximum Age
21.66 (2.68)	18	30
Gender	N	%
Man	39	23.64%
Woman	121	73.3%
Not sure/Gender questioning	1	0.61%
Gender-nonconforming	4	2.42%
Race/ethnicity <sup>1</sup>	N	%
Black/African American	38	23.03%
Latinx	97	58.79%
White	44	26.67%
Asian	14	8.48%
Native American/Alaska Native	6	3.64%
Multiracial	29	17.58%

<sup>1</sup> Youth can identify in more than one racial/ethnic group.



**Table 2. Interview Participants (n=29)<sup>2</sup>**

Pseudonym	County	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Highest Level of Education Attainment
Adan	Santa Barbara	19	Man	Latinx	Completed high school
Alejandra	Los Angeles	23	Woman	Latinx	Bachelor’s degree
Amani	Los Angeles	22	Woman	Black and Middle Eastern	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Alyssa	Los Angeles	19	Woman	Latinx	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Bryson	Alameda	20	Man	Black	Completed high school
Ceci	Riverside	26	Woman	Latinx	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Chela	Los Angeles	24	Woman	Latinx	Currently enrolled at community college
Cory	San Joaquin	26	Man	White	Bachelor’s degree
Derreck	Madera	24	Man	White	Completed high school
Eva	Los Angeles	20	Woman	Latinx	Currently enrolled at community college
Ernesto	San Bernardino	18	Man	Latinx	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Genesis	Los Angeles	25	Woman	Black	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Irene	San Bernardino	18	Woman	Latinx	Currently enrolled at community college
Jamal	Los Angeles	22	Man	Black	Currently enrolled at community college
Jacqi	Los Angeles	26	Nonbinary	Latinx	Currently enrolled at community college
Kari	Riverside	24	Woman	Latinx	Bachelor’s degree
Kaya	Sonoma	24	Woman	Native American	Bachelor’s degree
Leem	Alameda	23	Woman	South Asian	Bachelor’s degree
Liliana	Los Angeles	24	Woman	Latinx	Currently enrolled at community college
Michaela	Los Angeles	21	Woman	Mexican	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Moore	Butte	23	Man	White	Bachelor’s degree
Marcela	Los Angeles	24	Woman	Latinx	Bachelor’s degree
Ricardo	Los Angeles	24	Man	Latinx	Currently enrolled at community college
Robert	Santa Barbara	19	Man	Black	Completed high school
Sean	Yolo	21	Man	White	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Sara	Los Angeles	25	Woman	White	Bachelor’s degree
Sofia	Kings	21	Woman	Latinx	Currently enrolled at four-year college
Theresa	Marin	25	Woman	Latinx	Bachelor’s degree

<sup>2</sup> Demographic information is reflected at the time of the study.



## ANALYSIS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA

Once data collection was completed, descriptive statistics was used to describe the quantitative data. To address the qualitative data, the interviews were transcribed using Rev and uploaded to Dedoose. The research team (including the CRCs) analyzed the transcript data. In the first round of analysis, the research team used an open coding process, followed by focus coding to search for the most frequent or significant codes (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2013). In the last step of analysis, the research team created categories with the codes, which helped us develop major themes from the participant narratives. This thematic analysis was used to connect themes and make meaning of students' experiences. To ensure trustworthiness of the data, the research team met twice weekly, wrote research memos, and reflected on the research process. These meetings helped to better understand the data and reduced bias.

## RESEARCHERS' POSITIONALITIES

All of the CRCs were current students with experience in foster care. Two of the three research team members had experienced foster care as well. Whitman experienced nonrelative foster care and Thompson was in kinship (relative) care. Most of the authors (Espino, Thompson, Whitman, and Howard) have personal and/or professional experience working with SEFC. This is important as it demonstrates a deeper understanding of the experiences of a marginalized and often misunderstood population. Furthermore, we used our positionalities to mitigate further harm of SEFC and avoid contributing to a deficit narrative about them. Rather, we centered the brilliance and courage of the students in this study and exposed how the foster care system has not fully lived up to its promise to support and care for these students.



# FINDINGS

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

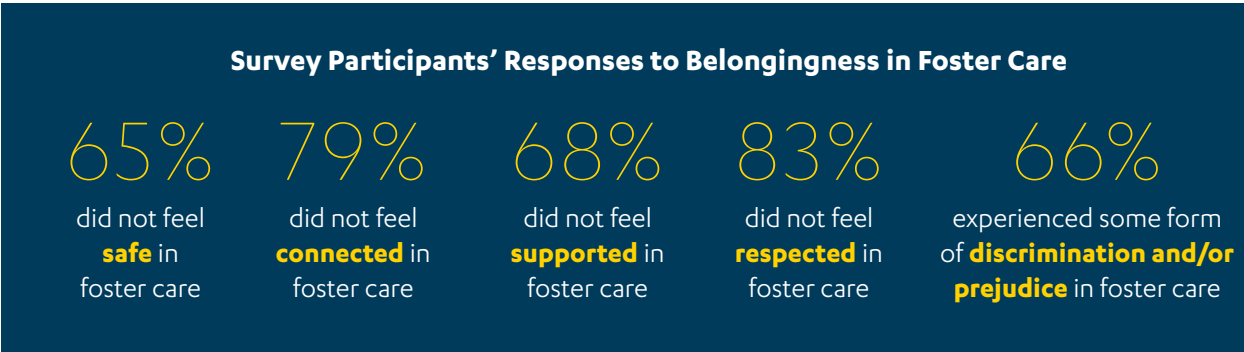
- 1. **SEFC had contrasting experiences of support and isolation while navigating belonging in the foster care system.**
- 2. **SEFC experienced a mix of support, belonging, and safety in high school, with some contrasting aspects.**
- 3. **Support systems were critical for SEFC in navigating college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

Together, these findings demonstrate how belongingness and adult support are important and 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 discusses the participants’ experiences with belongingness in the foster care system. Foster care is intended to provide a supportive and caring home for youth in the system. Unfortunately, an overwhelming percentage of participants in this study reported that they did not feel like they belonged while they were placed in foster care. Moreover, the majority of respondents indicated that they experienced discrimination or prejudice while in care.



Students we interviewed further unpacked their experiences related to belongingness in foster care. 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."*

Another interview participant mentioned how her foster mom used her as a way to get money, not to support her. Veronica, an 18-year-old from Santa Barbara County, said:

*"There were times when she [my foster mom] would have friends over and she'll tell her friends like, 'Oh, you should do foster care. It's really good money depending on the kids that you get.'"*

Lilana also attributed her challenges with belongingness while in foster care to not being supported by her foster family or her biological family:

*"I always saw other families being supportive, showing up to events, doing events together. I felt alone all the time. Not having that support system or family, my body still craves my mom being there. That itself affected my whole life because it affected the way I saw myself, which affected my focus, which affected the way I learned."*

Sadly, Sofia, Lilana, and Veronica's stories were not uncommon. Many of the participants expressed how they experienced varying types of unsupportive and unhealthy environments in their foster homes that impacted their mental, physical, and emotional health. However, it is important to note that not all of the students' experiences were negative. Kaya shared how going into foster care and getting support from her foster mom and friends provided a new life outlook and helped her become more focused on her academics. In the interview, Kaya said that having a supporting and loving home helped her develop a further sense of purpose and focus. She said she not only gained purpose but she also became academically determined to strive for more education after "falling in love" with learning:

*"When I was put into kinship care with my aunt, she and my uncle, they have a very stable, healthy relationship. The whole family is just so mellow and supportive, and she was adamant about me finishing my education.... She told me, 'Hey, I really need you to finish getting your diploma, and I need you to go to community college right after. I don't care what classes you take, but you've got to enroll.' And I was like, 'Yeah, you care for me, you put a roof over my head, you feed me, [so] I'm going to do that.' And then I fell in love with learning again, because I hadn't loved learning since I was very young."*

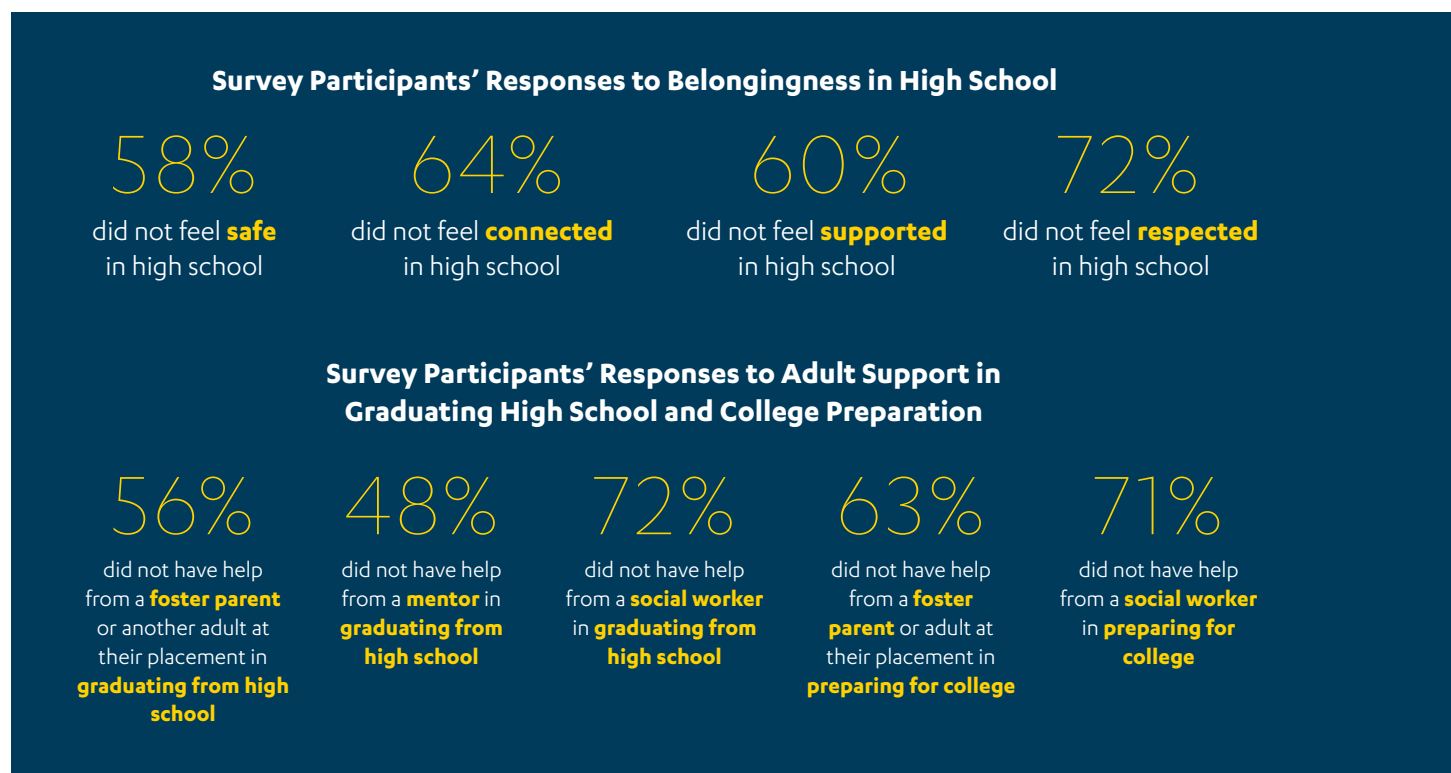


This contrasting narrative highlights the intricate dynamics of the foster care system. Like the belongingness survey data on feeling safe (35%) and experiencing discrimination (66%), Sofia and Veronica’s experiences underscore the detrimental impact of unsupportive environments on the well-being and development of young people, revealing a stark reality that many SEFC face. In contrast, Kaya’s story exemplifies how a nurturing and stable environment can significantly bolster educational outcomes for foster youth. Together, these narratives highlight the critical role that diverse experiences play in shaping the academic progress of students in foster care, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions and supportive frameworks (Pecora et al., 2018; Johnson, 2021). Ultimately, these insights call for a deeper understanding of how both positive and negative environments influence the trajectories of SEFC, emphasizing the necessity for systemic change and support.

## FINDING 2

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

Like belongingness in foster care, this finding discusses how belongingness and adult support were shown to be important aspects of the participants’ high school experiences, especially in high school. Our study of SEFC revealed that feelings of connection and acceptance during their high school experience significantly influenced their academic engagement and overall well-being (Geiger et al., 2018). Conversely, those who felt isolated or unsupported reported struggles with their mental health and academic success, underscoring the necessity of cultivating inclusive and nurturing environments for SEFC.



Many of the students we interviewed discussed how they loved school. Participants shared statements like, “school was an escape,” and “it was the only thing I could control.” However, without support from adults, many of the students still struggled. Eva, a 24-year-old from Los Angeles County, talked about her relationship with teachers at school:

*“When I was young, I hated them [teachers]. They were [rude] and I was always rude. They would always put [themselves] like in my business. They were so concerned with me, and there [were] days where [they would] always be like, ‘I know what you’re going through,’ or like, ‘What’s wrong?,’ and [I would] just be confused.”*

She later shared:

*“But now I do have a better relationship with my teachers because I think around when I started high school, I started to understand they’re like, so nosy and concerned because they want me to do good in school. It took me so long to really be OK with that.”*

Other students discussed how they felt unsupported during high school by their foster parents. Kari, a 24-year old from Riverside County, said she was not encouraged to go to school: “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.” Another student unpacked how they felt unsupported during their high school experiences. Ceci, a 26-year-old from Riverside County, shared:

*“I felt unsafe, unsupported, and unconnected just because of how many different schools I was in. I want to say I went to 20 schools, overall. There was never, really, any time, or anyone, advocating for me to feel safe and connected, [or] the ability to reach out for assistance if I needed it.”*

It is important to note that there were some students who did feel supported in high school. For students who received support and guidance from the adults at their high school, it was clear this support was valuable in their educational journeys. 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.”*

These small gestures of support allowed the participants to feel cared for in school. Kari also shared how small gestures would go a long way to make her feel cared for by teachers:

*“My English teacher knew I loved to read, and so I’d always ask him about certain books. Really, most of the books he’d give me were kind of older books from the 1900s and all that. But, I would sit down and read them, and I’d enjoy them. It was fun.”*

Feeling safe and cared for matters for all students when it comes to school success, but this support takes on greater value for foster youth because of the lack of support from their home life. However, it is important to note that concerned adults are not always teachers and administrators. As Bryson, a 20-year-old from Alameda County, noted:

*“School was fun because I had different coaches [at school] that were supportive. The teachers were caring and at least would look out for the students who wanted to be helped.... I always felt connected with the teachers.”*

Similarly, 24-year-old Chela of Los Angeles County mentioned that other school personnel were also supportive in school environments that did not always feel inviting and welcoming:

*“My senior year, I got lucky because I just told some of my teachers about my living situation. They were willing to help me out with either making up assignments or work something out so that I could get a passing grade. Because it was really unfair the circumstances that I was in.... In the group home, I had to work under their rules and regulations, like if they shut down the building because one of the girls was acting out, then everybody got consequences [and I couldn’t use the computer]. So, one of the teachers, specifically my English teacher, helped me out. I was grateful that they really just understood that I was just one of those kids that really needed [a second chance].”*

Ultimately, the survey data and the interviews provide starkly different findings. In the survey data, the majority of the respondents indicated that they did not have support from school staff, teachers, or social workers as they navigated their educational trajectory. The interviews, however, underscored how fostering feelings of safety, respect, and belonging is essential for success of high school students in foster care. The support from adults, whether through mentorship or simple acts of kindness, can profoundly influence their educational journeys and personal development (Geiger et al., 2018). As we explore our next finding, it becomes clear that the presence of these supportive adults not only enhances high school experiences but also plays a vital role in the college choice process and ongoing support systems on campus (Geiger et al., 2018; Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Watt et al., 2018).

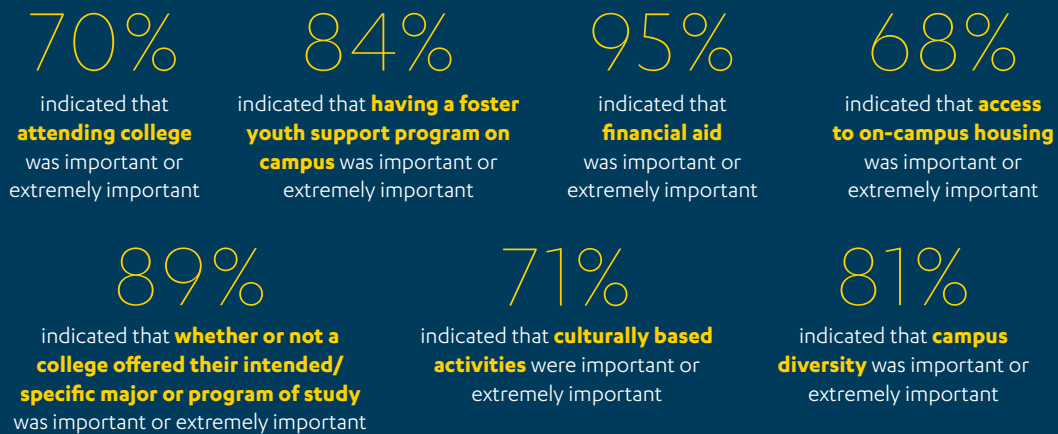
### FINDING 3

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

This finding focuses on the college-going experiences of the participants, emphasizing the pivotal role that support systems play in shaping their college choices and persistence. For many participants, the transition to college can be fraught with challenges, often exacerbated by a lack of resources and guidance. While not all participants pursued college, those who did shared valuable insights into how support — both from adults and peers — was instrumental in their journeys.

The interviews reveal that adult support, whether from foster parents, mentors, teachers, or social workers, significantly influences students' decisions about which colleges to apply to and how to navigate the complex admissions process. Many participants highlighted the gaps in guidance they faced, indicating that the absence of a reliable support system made them feel uncertain and overwhelmed. In contrast, those who benefited from proactive encouragement and practical assistance reported greater confidence in their ability to pursue college.

#### Survey Participants' Responses to College Choice



#### Survey Participants' Responses to Belongingness in College



Interview participants provided insights into how they navigated their college choice and how the support they received on campus shaped their unique journeys as foster youth. Moore, a 23-year-old from Butte County, reflected on the numerous barriers to college affordability as he made his decision to attend college. Moore believed that he needed to be a “stellar” scholar so he could access the 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!”*

Moore shared the importance of affording college and how affordability was part of the barrier to going to school. This barrier is critical to understand as SEFC students make college choice decisions. While navigating the financial burdens of college posed significant challenges for many participants while in high school, they also highlighted the invaluable support they received from college campus-based foster youth support programs as they made their decision. These programs not only offered financial guidance and resources to students after they were admitted to college; they also played a crucial role in helping students make informed decisions about their college choices while they were still in high school. Although FYSPs are resources available to students once they are in college, having access to information about these programs during their college decision-making process and knowing where they can find support and meet basic needs, is crucial. Marcela, a 24 year-old from Los Angeles, shares how impactful it was for her to have a support system while she was in college:

*“My [FYSP] understood the need for a safety net and the need for family. I’ve always said, if it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t have made it through college because anything and everything I needed, things that you go to your mom and dad for, I had the [FYSP]. I had the advisors, and then I had my peers, who were in the program, who were my friends. Because of the program I learned how to drive.... I looked to them for everything, mental health support, financial support, housing support, academic support. And the good thing about the program was that they had people on their advisory committee that worked at the university and were able to support us in different capacities.”*

Similarly, Leem, a 23-year old from Alameda County, shared that her college had an intentional space where SEFC congregated to build a community and where she felt connected and supported.

*“A really good thing that I had in college was a physical space on campus where all the people that were roaming around in that area all experienced foster care, too. Because we have this shared history, you don’t really have to ask [about their foster care background], you just knew and you didn’t have to talk about that. You can talk beyond that, and knowing that deep down you both have something in common is such a deeply important thing.”*



The participants who reported that they appreciated having the physical space to be around other SEFC said that having an unspoken similarity and community made a positive difference in their college experience, further underscoring the necessity of fostering these vital relationships. Theresa (25-year-old from Marin County), a student who experienced foster care and who was formerly incarcerated, shared:

*“When I was in the program, I was like, ‘OK, this is my community. These are people that understand what I’m going through.’ If I was having a really rough mental health day, they’re not going to freak out and just police me, because that has happened before. In academic spaces, you have to really micromanage yourself. And it can be suffocating when people don’t understand or aren’t trauma-informed.”*

*“When I’m having a mental health crisis, and I don’t know what to do, I had my mentors in the program that were like, ‘I understand it. I’m here for you. Let’s get you what you need.’ That was the most important thing — just having people that understand what you need... These people cared about me, and I cared about them, and I care about my community and I want to be able to also create a safe space for others that are coming [to my college].”*

Additionally, we illustrate that once students entered college, the presence of a strong support network continued to be crucial for their persistence (Geiger et al., 2018; Whitman et al., 2023). In the survey, a majority of students felt safe, connected, and a part of the community, especially those who participated in a FYSP. Factors such as academic advising, access to mental health resources, and connections with faculty can make a significant difference in helping students manage the challenges of college life (Geiger et al., 2018; Johnson, 2024). The presence of a FYSP as a support system played a pivotal role in the college choice and persistence of students. These supportive relationships are essential for equipping foster youth with the resilience and resources needed to thrive in their academic goals.



# 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.

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## 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.



## CONCLUSION

### **When the government assumes custody of children, it effectively steps into the roles of caregivers and parents, and bears a fundamental obligation to provide a safe and supportive living environment.**

Many youth find themselves in foster care due to structural inequities that lead to generational poverty, structural racism, and vague definitions of “neglect” that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. The pursuit of higher education for SEFC is complex and fraught with obstacles, influenced by interconnected systems that require comprehensive analysis. For many youth in foster care, access to higher education is a tangible way to improve their life experiences and chances. To that end, there must be a collective effort at national, state, and local levels to do better in supporting pathways to postsecondary education. While SEFC face unique challenges, these difficulties also present significant opportunities for growth and success.

For many SEFC, we see tremendous human potential squandered because of a failure to recognize the unique sets of practices that many possess that are undervalued in the wider society. As we discovered in our findings, many SEFC activate their capital to navigate systems that were not designed for them and certainly do not serve them well. Our systems must be better, our policies must be better, and our practices must be better to transform the lives of those who have been overlooked and underserved for far too long. The constellation of these factors coalesces in ways that enable SEFC to chart a path toward their dreams of college.

Our findings emphasize the importance of campus support programs tailored for youth with foster care backgrounds, as these initiatives play a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating successful transitions to college. Moreover, our findings revealed that K-12 systems must be better equipped to provide early intervention, guidance, and mentorship in assisting students to acquire college knowledge. Additionally, dedicated adults who provide consistent mentorship and support can have a transformative impact on their educational journeys. Therefore, we implore policymakers to invest in these students’ futures by enhancing resources, support systems, and understanding of their specific needs, ultimately enabling them to overcome barriers and thrive in higher education.





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