



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

**Testimony Re: House Bill H7225 Governor's FY2025 Budget, Article 3,
Section 28 – Higher Education Opportunity Incentive Grant
House Committee on Finance
February 14, 2024
Kelsey Bala, Policy Analyst**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for elements of Article 3, Section 28 of the Governor's FY 2025 budget regarding the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF)'s Higher Education Opportunity Incentive Grant.

Rhode Island children who enter foster care overwhelmingly have overlooked educational, physical, and mental health needs. Multiple, prolonged, and unstable placements can negatively affect children's long-term well-being and academic achievement. Older youth who age out of foster care are at risk for low educational attainment, homelessness, and unemployment. Nationally, an average of 1 out of every 4 youth in foster care will become homeless within 4 years of aging out of foster care. Students who experience foster care are four times more likely than the general population to struggle with prolonged financial insecurity.

As of the 2017-2018 school year in Rhode Island, data on reading and math proficiency and high school graduation for students in foster care is publicly available. Since this data was made available, we have a clearer picture of the disparate educational outcomes youth in foster care experience compared to their peers. Most troubling is the high school graduation rate among children in foster care. Among the Class of 2022, 83% of Rhode Island students graduated high school in four years, compared to 52% of students in foster care, the lowest rate of any student subgroup. Additionally, **less than 1% of youth in foster care in Rhode Island obtain a college degree.** Within the next decade, jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education. This would leave many youth who have experienced foster care disproportionately left out of economic advancement opportunities and financial security if they are unable to obtain a postsecondary degree. This poses both an individual and societal cost.

Nearly 50% of foster youth who drop out of college do so because they cannot afford to continue. To combat this financial barrier, 37 states have tuition waiver programs for students who experienced foster care. Rhode Island has the Higher Education Incentive Grant but does not have a tuition waiver program. Currently, only \$200,000 is appropriated annually for the Higher Education Incentive Grant and **we believe this needs to be increased.** This appropriation is based on college tuition estimates from 2003. In the past 20 years, the cost of attendance has increased by almost 130%, and yet the grant fund has remained the same.

We know that many youth who experience foster care possess the academic ability and interest to pursue higher education, but face barriers to reaching that goal. There are many contributing factors that create barriers to higher education including lack of educational advocacy during early high school years, lack of familial support, lack of access to information about local and federal financial aid they might qualify for, and difficulty finding and maintaining affordable housing. These barriers that current and former foster youth face often place the dream of higher education out of reach. This makes efforts to support access to college among foster youth more important than ever.

Estimated Number of Foster Youth Graduating from High School Each Year

Cohort Year	# in Cohort	4-year graduates	5-year graduates	6-year graduates
2016	31	14	3	3
2017	55	28	6	2
2018	60	28	7	
2019	66	34		

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Cohort Graduation Rates. The 2019 cohort began 9th grade during the 2018-2019 school year and expected to graduate in spring of 2022.

In 2022, a total of 43 students in foster care graduated from high school -- 34 in 4 years, seven in 5 years, and two in 6 years. This is not a large population, but with appropriate funding, we can ensure that all of our most vulnerable youth are able to both access higher education and have the appropriate nonacademic financial support needed to persist and complete their degrees.

We support several of the updates to the eligibility for the grant and the administration of the program including active outreach to youth in foster care starting at age 14. We believe that informing youth about their options and opportunities should start as early as possible, but support outreach at the beginning of their high school years at age 14. We support the expansion of what the grant can be used for to address a greater number of nonacademic barriers including transportation, food, and housing, as well as books and tutoring. Supporting students to and through college means addressing the totality of the factors that may keep them from being successful. We also support removing the grant period limit, as some students who have spent time in foster care may need additional time to complete their degree.

We support the enhancements to the Higher Education Opportunity Incentive Grant program included in this Budget Article, and we also believe that increasing funding for this grant and legislation creating a tuition waiver program are also needed to expand access and eligibility and improve the postsecondary educational attainment and related outcomes for current and former foster youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.