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A **SECOND CHANCE** INC.



# National Kinship Review

News, Networking & Information for  
Kinship Care Professionals & Advocates



**Made it to the finish line.** Since 2008, Patricia Newell (center in pink) has directed the Phasing Up Scholars program at Johnson C. Smith University. Like a growing number of campus support programs for kinship care alumni and those served by foster care, it's putting college success within reach. (Photo: Jonathon Keitt)

## **The Need for Access and ESSA: Getting Kinship Youth from High School to College and Beyond**

For hundreds of thousands of anxious high-school seniors (and their families) across the nation, college application season is in full swing. Many want to reach college, a frenetic process that is seen as a rite of passage on the way to independence and adulthood.

It all leads to higher education. But for one of the most marginalized student populations, a lack of access can keep them from getting on that path. Students in kinship care and foster care want to attend college, even later in life, but for many, postsecondary education becomes a dream deferred: only 20 percent of youth in kinship care who graduate from high school enroll in college. They face system challenges and accessibility issues—things that contribute to the wide gap between youth in care and other young adults who pursue college.

For decades, federal and state policies have been aimed at increasing college attainment rates for all students, but youth in care continue to slip through the cracks. Of the estimated 141,000 youth in kinship care, only 46 percent will earn a high-school diploma and less than 3 percent will obtain a bachelor's degree.

What can help narrow this postsecondary education gap? Some child welfare and education experts point to access and opportunity. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is shining a new spotlight on foster youth and what they need to achieve educational stability. ESSA provides youth in care, and all students, access to provisions that make college and career readiness a priority in the nation's public schools.

When young adults have access to networks of support that help them navigate the path to college and graduation, it also makes a

difference, as does removing common barriers to college. For college-bound youth in care, finding money to pay for postsecondary education can mean turning to family—and to state and federal funds earmarked for them—for support.

[The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program](#) is the primary source of federal funding used to prepare youth in foster care for the transition to adulthood. There are also a host of programs that typically pay for tuition and fees not covered by traditional sources of financial aid. Still, a student must pay for housing, books, transportation and childcare. Without a navigator or network of kin, community and practitioners, a student may be unaware of the financial aid available to them.

### **Access and Opportunity Under ESSA**

President Obama signed ESSA into law in 2015 to give states a say on issues of school accountability, standardized tests and education standards. For youth in kinship care, ESSA marked a new commitment to and focus on their academic performance—taking steps to address issues that make reaching successful outcomes a struggle for them.

A student's trauma, the need for transportation to and from school and having to change schools often, have a lot to do with educational instability, and ultimately whether they achieve and excel in school.

At the same time, a handful of the law's provisions have a strong correlation to practices in kinship care, and the stability that comes when youth stay connected to their communities, schools and families. For instance, under ESSA, a student in care may stay in their "school of origin" (a term ESSA does not define), even if it is not located in their new district. A relatively new law, ESSA has the potential to improve poor, education outcomes and meet the needs

of students in care. But some who have tracked ESSA's progress say it has been slow to pack a punch—for all public-school students—especially as states continue to lag in compliance, including collecting data and drafting plans to improve student outcomes and educational stability.

ESSA also mandates each state to work with school districts and local child welfare agencies to transport students to school and back. The law called for a transportation plan to be put in place by 2016, but a 2018 analysis by the [Chronicle of Social Change](#) found that states are still struggling to comply with this mandate. The news agency estimates that 162,000 foster children—about 37 percent of those in foster care nationally—are living in states where compliance with ESSA is murky.

Efforts to identify and count students in kinship care and gauge how they are doing academically, are required under ESSA and are expected to provide a fresh look. This year, for the first time, state report cards are expected to capture graduation rates and measure how well students in kinship care and foster care are doing academically—the same as they do for other student “subgroups,” including students of color.

This practice will answer important questions, say researchers at the [College and Career Readiness and Success Center](#) of the American Institutes for Research. That is because this kind of data, they report, “can help promote the college and career readiness of these youth by ensuring that their outcomes are clear and transparent, making it easier to identify achievement gaps.” And when harnessed, outcome and achievement data can be leveraged to develop supports and interventions that never existed for foster youth, and that kin, educators and practitioners can use to help put their students on a path to postsecondary success.

But state compliance is key for this innovation to have impact. The latest analyses of statewide compliance by the Chronicle of Social Change and other child welfare and education outlets show that of the initial dozen education report cards that have been released, only a few states are including this specific information.

To gather important data, such as how many students attending the nation's public schools are in foster care and kinship care, state departments of education are required to work together—a complex process for entities not accustomed to collaborating, even to benefit their students. Although the number of school-aged youth in the system is small, it represents “an important and vulnerable population, and one that needs the most help,” says Christine White-Taylor, Ed.D., the education liaison at A Second Chance, Inc., and a former elementary school principal.

### **The Strength of the Village**

Helping students in kinship care emerge from high school as college- and workplace-ready young adults takes the backing of federal law. It also takes committed communities and networks of support. The process begins with planting seeds of possibility and then nurturing students' aspirations, wherever they lead. That is something kin, caseworkers and educators—the village—know how to provide.

This is a snapshot of the education landscape: Many kinship youths do not begin to stabilize their lives (and start their post-secondary educations) until an average age of 26. As such, it is no wonder that even the most optimistic studies show just [6 percent](#) will earn their bachelor's degrees. By comparison, [68 percent](#) of American high-school graduates enrolled in college in 2014, and [34 percent of 25-to-29-year-olds](#) completed their bachelor's degrees.

For many practitioners and kinship care advocates, these are familiar

and dismal numbers for youth in pursuit of higher education—and a pathway to adulthood. When unpacked, the numbers can reflect struggles with school, mental health and trauma.

Despite the odds, for some education and child welfare experts, what matters most is helping students in kinship care to dream big, make smooth transitions and earn degrees. It's a tall order. But when the process includes exposing youth early to higher education and putting caregivers in the driver's seat, the outlook for these students is hopeful.

### **Keeping Kin and Students Connected**

“Young people in kinship care and foster care need to know that they can pay for college, but they also need direction from relatives and other caring adults to plant the seed that college is attainable, and then to help put them on the path to get there,” says Patricia Newell, who directs [“Phasing Up Scholars,”](#) a year-round advocacy and academic program for kinship care and foster care alumni at [Johnson C. Smith University](#) in Charlotte, N.C. It is one of several colleges in the nation dedicated to helping current and former foster youth who enroll, stay in school and graduate.

Kimberly Bartholomew was one of the program's scholars. The future social worker credits two families for getting her to graduation last May: her own grandmother and aunts, and those who were like kin on the North Carolina campus. Distance limited visits from her grandmother, but her caring and regular phone calls were constants, says Bartholomew. These relatives helped keep her focused on one of her most important goals: to be the first in her family to graduate college.

The important link to family that kinship offers young people like Bartholomew, is pivotal to their college success. Newell, a former

child welfare administrator, says that when she considers the youth in her program who have the best college experiences and academic success, it's those who grew up in kinship care.

"Their success has a lot to do with the quality of the people surrounding them and the continued presence of relatives and kin in their lives after they get to campus and reach the finish line."

Think of a village approach to igniting dreams—about college, success and beyond. "For foster youth to flourish in interdependence, it will take college supports and fixing the system, not just caring relatives and kin," urges Sharon McDaniel, MPA, Ed.D., president and CEO of A Second Chance, Inc., and an alumnus of care.

More than three decades after McDaniel was an undergraduate at Penn State and a teen who had aged out of care, the school now offers the [Fostering Lions Program](#). Launched in 2018, it is one of the newest efforts to give a fair shot at success to students placed with relatives and who received foster care. The campus program comes with a host of academic, social, financial and emotional supports, so these students can achieve their academic goals.

Transitioning to college is traditionally an occasion to celebrate, but it can also trigger stress and impose new trauma for kinship and foster youth, says Sara Gorman, who directs high-school programs for the [Jed Foundation](#), a nonprofit that works with youth and families regarding mental health needs and suicide prevention. Maintaining mental health supports when students are away from home or living on campus, she says, cannot be an afterthought when making college plans.

Young people need educators and caregivers in their corners who are "mental health literate," adds Gorman. To support this, her

foundation is launching a new evidence-based mental health curriculum for use in high schools.

### **Being 'All In'**

When deciding if a school is the right fit, it is important to consider how it supports kinship care alumni and what mental health services are available, says Dr. White-Taylor. “Caregivers have to be all in when it comes to readying youth for college and making smooth transitions to training programs and the workplace.”

Being “all in” begins with educating caregivers. As a longtime caseworker at A Second Chance, Inc., it has also been Gerald Thompson's approach to supporting the youth he serves.

"When it comes to our children, I'm all in, too," Thompson says. "These kids deserve to get to the next level. Along with caregivers, we have to be a part of their village of support."

Improving academic achievement and postsecondary success, as well as helping students in kinship care make smooth transitions, does take a village. And it means dismantling barriers that can hold back students and ensuring their access to a network of resources, including kin and those in the community, to help open doors as they climb. But to make these goals possible and give students what they deserve, multiple systems—education, courts and child welfare—must work together for their good.

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**SAVE THE DATE**  
**Saturday, February 16**



**The Red Hat Healthy Heart Symposium and Luncheon**  
**A Kin-Focused and Community Event**



Rhonda D. Wright

For the third year, A Second Chance, Inc., is hosting the [Rhonda D. Wright Red Hat Healthy Heart Symposium and Luncheon](#) at the Rhonda D. Wright Family Center in Pittsburgh, Pa.

As the leader in kinship care, ASCI believes that strong, healthy communities contribute to strong, healthy children and families. That's why this annual focus on heart health and healthy lifestyles has become a much-anticipated, family-focused and community event. The luncheon, named for Rhonda D. Wright, honors the late ASCI executive and beloved sister of Dr. Sharon McDaniel, the agency's founder, president and CEO. Mrs. Wright, who died due to heart disease, was an ardent champion for children and families. Both Wright and McDaniel grew up in kinship care and foster care.



2018 Red Hat Healthy Heart Symposium and Luncheon

The Red Hat event is free to attend. Last year's event drew more than 300 guests to the ASCI campus for a day of cooking demonstrations, workshops, fitness and dance classes, health screenings, a heart-healthy luncheon and more.

If you would like to attend this free event, please call [A Second Chance, Inc.](#) at 412-342-0600 or register online with [Eventbrite](#). And don't forget to wear your favorite red hat or cap (ladies and gentlemen)!

## NEWS YOU CAN USE

**KENTUCKY:** [A dozen issues to watch in this year's Kentucky General Assembly](#)

Restoring monthly kinship care funding is among the issues before legislators.

**NATIONAL:** [Demonizing 'Crack Mothers,' Victimizing Their Children](#)

A mother who lost custody of her children because of drug use describes how “racism and unjust treatment” led to her family’s being torn apart.

**COLORADO:** [Colorado child abuse hotline receives record number of calls last year](#)

More than 13,000 cases of abuse and neglect were substantiated by child welfare departments.

**PENNSYLVANIA:** [Support group aims to help Centre County ‘grandfamilies’ affected by the opioid epidemic](#)

Amy Mitchell lost her 29-year-old daughter to opioid addiction. Today she is the sole caregiver to her grandson and founder of a support group for other grandfamilies.

**MONTANA:** [Mark new calendar for MSU classes](#)

The Montana State University Extension Program will offer a leadership training seminar for grandparents and other kinship caregivers in Great Falls on April 9, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Accommodations, meals and mileage will be provided for participants traveling more than 60 miles. For more information and to register call 466-2492, text 590-2492 or email [Teton@montana.edu](mailto:Teton@montana.edu).

**UNITED KINGDOM:** [Kinship carers are being 'ignored and exploited' by the system, MPs are warned](#)

A new parliamentary task force examines funding and other issues that confront the growing number of relative caregivers.

[www.asecondchance-kinship.com](http://www.asecondchance-kinship.com)

