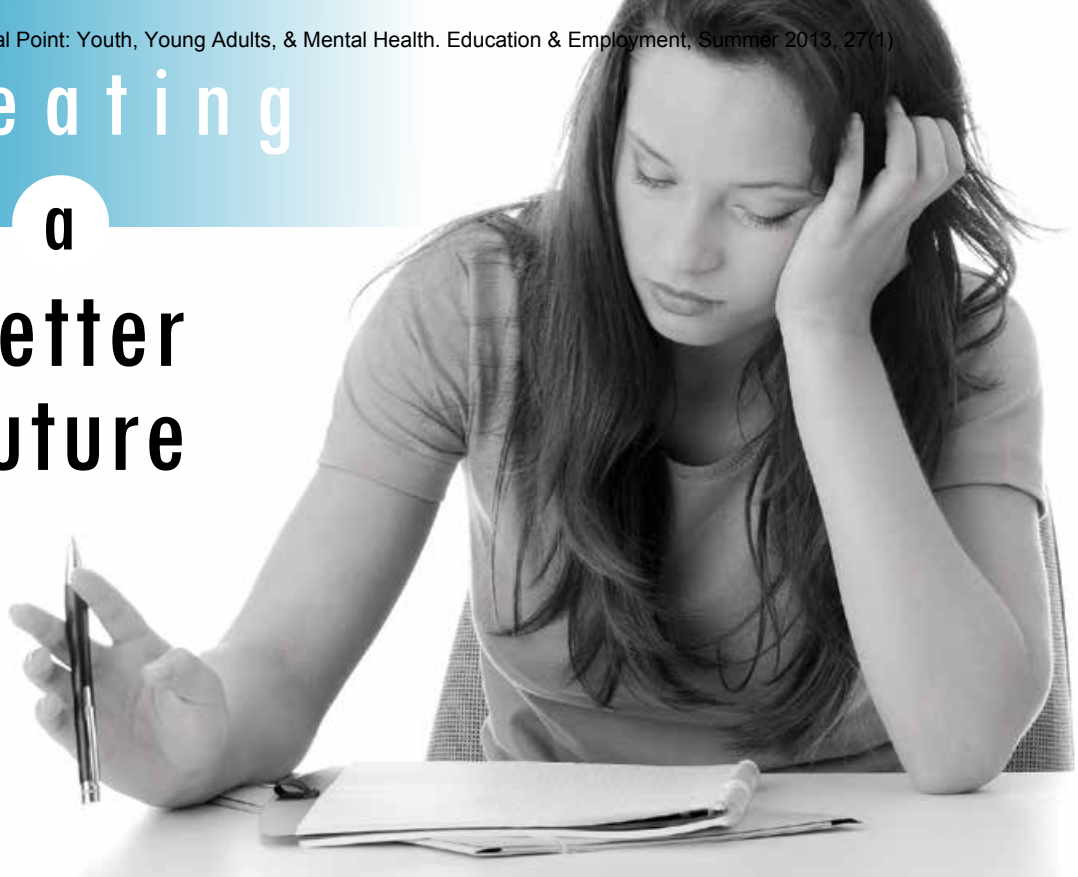


# Creating

a

# Better Future



**W**e spend twelve years of our lives working towards one day; twelve years of homework, reading books, and hopefully learning skills we'll need to succeed in life. We do all this to walk across a stage and receive a high school diploma. For most students, these years come with some struggles but end with graduation. However, for foster youth struggles are more common. In fact, only half of all foster youth graduate from high school or receive a GED – with 89 percent receiving their GED rather than a diploma.<sup>1</sup>

Being in foster care brings on many problems in the area of education. Most youth report having gone to seven or more schools and eighty percent are held back by their third grade year.<sup>1</sup> These numbers can be disheartening; however, they can also be empowering. By having the knowledge that I do, I have become determined to be part of the other side of these statistics.

I have been in foster care for about nine years. During that time, I've been in six placements, and have gone to 15 schools. Although being in foster care comes with few guarantees, one thing that never failed was going to a different school with each move. This inconsistency was one of the biggest problems for me. In elementary school I rarely went to the same school for an entire year and because of all the moves I was usually behind in multiple subjects. School went from being a fun place that I looked forward to going to each day, to being a place where I struggled to keep up with the other kids.

Being used to changing schools meant I was good at making friends, but it also meant that I had missed gaps in the curriculum and became frustrated trying to learn what seemed to come easily to my friends. Unlike my friends, up

to this point I had been surrounded by foster parents and family that did not think school was important, and like my family, I figured that I would just stop going to school at some point.

Changing schools and having gaps in my learning was constant, but when I finally had a sense of permanency my experience with school changed completely. In sixth grade I was placed with my grandparents and they immediately made it very clear that school was a priority. One big difference with moving in with my grandparents was that I didn't have to change schools. They drove my siblings and me to and from school every day, and during the summer before I started middle school we moved so that we could stay in the same school district. When I started middle school, I realized something I hadn't before – even though I had gone to 13 elementary schools, I had learned a lot. In fact I went from just getting by in school to being an honor roll student and getting a 4.0 GPA. Doing well in school felt amazing, but I still couldn't picture the day I would walk across a stage, receive my high school diploma and officially be a high school graduate. Finishing high school felt like a dream, not something I could actually do.

Although I haven't always been able to picture myself completing high school and going to college, I have always worked hard to make it happen. When I learned that only 50% of all foster youth graduate from high school or get a GED, I became determined to be a part of the 50% of foster youth who do graduate high school. Fortunately, these struggles I had early on in my educational experience have not defined me as a student now.

During my senior year I became involved in Better Futures. Better Futures is a year-long program that partnered me with a coach who was also in foster care and

**"I lived in the dorms for 3 nights and 4 days and attended classes and tours. This experience was very fun but educational at the same time."**



had experience going to college. My coach helped me by meeting me at school or home and working on my goals for my future. She was able to take me on college tours, and help with securing financial aid, applying for Chafee (John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program grants), taking placement tests, and more. On my own I knew what steps I needed to do, but didn't know how to get them done. Having a coach who knew what to do and believed in me was a huge support. My coach helped me to make a timeline of important dates and forms that I needed to complete before the end of the year, and checked up on me to make sure I was completing them. Having someone to keep me accountable for getting things done and help me complete them was a big part of how I finished the pre-college process.

Another part of Better Futures was the Summer Institute, which gave me a taste of college life. I lived in the dorms for 3 nights and 4 days and attended classes and tours. This experience was very fun but educational at the same time. During our time on campus we attended workshops that informed us about the forms and applications that were necessary to complete before starting college.

Throughout the year, I attended more Better Futures workshops that focused on key steps to entering college and self-care once in college. Since there are many stressors in our lives now and there will continue to be more when we do go to college, the workshop on self-care was one of my favorites. Speakers from Oregon Youth M.O.V.E (a youth-led organization that improves services and systems through youth voice) led the workshop and we learned about all the famous people who once were diagnosed with a mental health issue who now are actors, musicians and stars. It really helped to normalize our experiences. We each talked about tools we have used to manage our stressors and were given new ones to try out. We then talked about college and the resources available there for us to access if needed. At the end of each workshop we all went

out as a group to have dinner and get to know each other. It was helpful to be around peers who shared experiences similar to mine.

The support that I received from my family and Better Futures helped me turn my dreams into reality. The only things that have gotten me where I am are this support and my determination. The support I have had has given me the power to show the people who doubt my ability to succeed that I can do anything I put my mind to. I am now a high school graduate and a college student. Currently I am majoring in education, and finished my first term with straight A's. I plan on becoming a teacher, and hopefully working with foster youth in some way in the future.

I believe that most foster youth desire and have the dream to go to college, but what they're missing is the support. Being a foster youth doesn't make us any different from anyone else; we just have had different life experiences. Like everyone else, foster youth need support from the people around them. Without support a dream will stay a dream and never become a reality. I know from experience, however, that just one person saying, "You can do this," can tune out some of the "You're never going to get there" messages that are commonly conveyed to youth in care. It just takes one person to inspire youth to create a future for themselves.

## REFERENCE

1. Wertheimer, R. (2002). Youth who "age out" of foster care: Troubled lives, troubling prospects. *Child Trends, Publication #2002-09*. Retrieved from: <http://www.childtrends.org/files/FosterCareRB.pdf>

## AUTHOR

*Jessica McKenna* is a foster youth and student in her first year of college.