

Youth Taking Charge of Their Lives

Better Futures Project
Pathways to Positive Futures

Laurie Powers
Lee Ann Phillips
Maylyn Kane



Youth Exiting Foster Care: Compounded Marginality

- Approximately 350,000 youth in U.S. foster care system
 - Almost 24,000 age out of foster care each year
- Numerous barriers
 - Abuse, family stressors, placement change, separation from bio family, restricted educational opportunity, lack of supportive adults, low expectations, stigma
 - A highly intersectional group
 - Disproportionately youth of color, especially African American and Native American; and disproportionately identified with disabilities and mental health conditions
- Trajectory of dismal young adult outcomes is well-documented
 - Poverty, unemployment, low postsecondary participation, homelessness, social isolation, incarceration, early parenting, drug and alcohol abuse, poor mental and physical health

Efforts to Improve Outcomes

- 1999 John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and amendments
 - Independent living (ILP) services
 - Educational Training Vouchers
 - Chafee housing assistance
- More states allowing youth to remain in care until 21
- State college tuition assistance
- Affordable Care Act health coverage until 26

Despite these enhancements...

- ❖ Very modest improvements have been realized
- ❖ Efficacy of ILP services or any other approaches has not been substantiated

Supporting Youth to Take Charge of their Lives Through Self-determination Enhancement

- Self-directed action to achieve personally valued goals – change agency
- Cross-cutting components
 - Consistent, committed, accepting, and transparent relationship with an adult or near peer coach
 - Learn to apply achievement, partnership, and self-regulation strategies to achieve self-defined goals
 - Do activities in the community that support goal achievement
 - Workshops with peers and successful near peers: youth-defined topics and fun
 - Self-attribution of success through achieving goals and managing barriers
- Experimental Studies
 - My Life Pilot (n=69)
 - Project Success (n=133)
 - Better Futures (n=67)
 - My Life (n=350)
 - ✓ Over 600 youth in foster care, ages 15-18 at enrollment
 - ✓ Population-based, inclusive recruitment
 - ✓ Intervention for 9-12 months with high fidelity
 - ✓ Baseline, post-intervention, and 6-12 month follow-along assessment; low attrition

Highlights of Findings to Date (at follow-up)

- Across Studies:
 - Increased youth self-determination, quality of life, direction of transition planning, accomplishments, independent living and/or postsecondary preparation
- My Life Pilot
 - 72% vs. 50% completed high school
 - 45% vs. 28% employed
- Better Futures
 - 73% vs. 36% enrolled in higher education
 - Significant differences on measures of mental health empowerment and hope
- Project Success
 - Increased credits toward high school graduation
 - 60% vs. 37% employed
 - Reductions in depression and anxiety

Maylyn's Words of Wisdom

- Work through the students, not around them
- Meet them where they are and listen
- Include them in decisions that are about them and let them lead their meetings
- Keep communication open, positive and transparent
- Recognize young person's goals and support those goals even if you don't agree with them
- Interpret lack of follow-through as a need for more support
- Assist, encourage and challenge youth