

# Measuring progress toward self-sufficiency for transition-age youth in foster care

Publication #2019-6

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth Strategic Initiative (the Initiative) focuses on supporting older youth in foster care to become self-sufficient and thriving adults. The Initiative strives to improve education and employment outcomes for transition age foster youth (foster TAY), ages 16–24, in Los Angeles County (LA) and New York City (NYC). The Initiative has three strategic objectives<sup>1</sup>:

- 1. Systems and Policy Change:** Promote comprehensive systems reform and policy change and enhance cross-system collaboration to expand funding and increase the field's ability to support foster TAY.
- 2. Knowledge Development and Dissemination:** Develop and share new knowledge and research to guide strong evidence-based policy and practice and improve outcomes for foster TAY.
- 3. Innovative programs:** Find effective programs and models to help foster TAY gain the skills they need to become self-sufficient and thrive, with a primary emphasis on education and career success.

The role of Child Trends, as the Initiative's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) partner, is to track progress toward the Initiative's goals, understand the grantees' and the Foundation's contributions, and identify opportunities to continue collective progress.<sup>2</sup> This role includes facilitating continuous learning and supporting the incorporation of evaluative findings back into the strategy, as well as strengthening the field by sharing and disseminating what we learn. We developed a Results Framework that defines the Initiative's goals, establishes benchmarks of progress toward those goals, and specifies evidence of the expected progress in both LA and NYC. The Results Framework is based on the Initiative's 2017–2022 strategy, input from Foundation staff, conversations with grantees, and assessments of grantee reports and materials.

## Evaluation approach

### Strategic Objectives

- Systems and policy change
- Knowledge development and dissemination
- Program support

### Results Framework

- Defines the goals and benchmarks that mark progress toward the Initiative's vision: All transition age foster youth in LA and NYC become self-sufficient and thriving adults

### Metrics and measures of how the systems are supporting TAY

- Evidence of political will, policy, programs, and data for each benchmark
- Indicators of how youth are faring

<sup>1</sup> The full 2017–2022 strategy is available at <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/learning/2017-2022-foster-youth-strategic-initiative-strategy>.

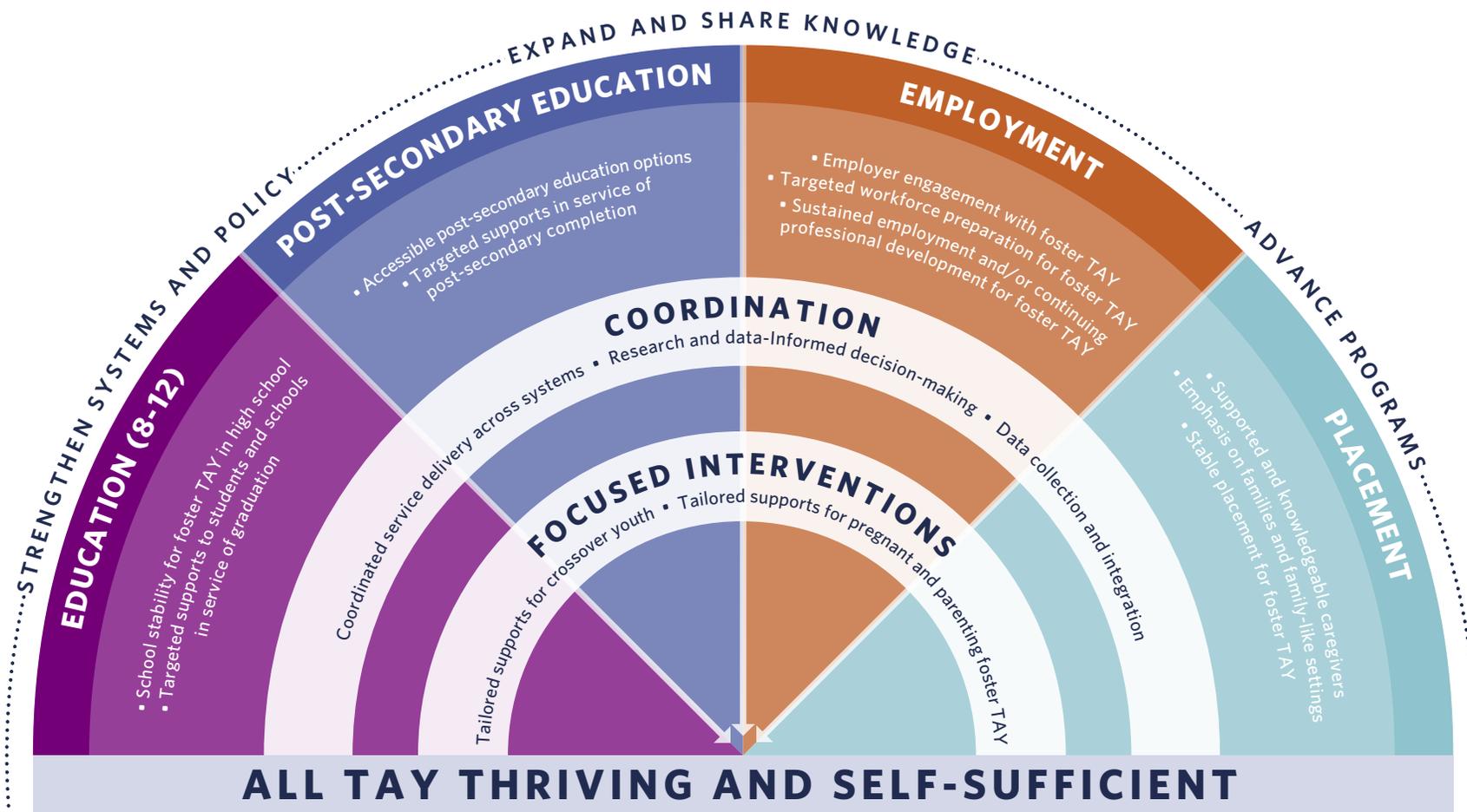
<sup>2</sup> To learn more about the role of the MEL at the Foundation, see <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/news/151-emphasizing-the-l-in-mel-guest-post>.

This brief is based on the evaluation strategy developed by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth Strategic Initiative and Child Trends.

The Results Framework includes:

- **Issues areas:** Overarching focus areas to improve foster TAY systems
- **Goals:** Measurable results by issue area
- **Benchmarks:** Essential elements of progress toward each goal. Progress toward each benchmark is monitored by evidence of four implementation components (political will, policy, programs, and data)
- **Indicators:** Specific measures of progress used to track improvements in foster TAY well-being and the systems that serve them

## Systemic issue areas and Initiative goals



For the full Results Framework, including benchmarks and indicators, see page 5.

## Gathering information and monitoring progress

Over the next three years, Child Trends will monitor the Initiative’s progress toward its goals. To understand how systems serving foster TAY are changing and to identify areas of challenge and opportunity, we look for evidence of advancement within each benchmark. Advancement is tracked by examining four implementation components: political will, policy, program, and data.<sup>3</sup> These four components demonstrate the extent to which LA and NYC have progressed along each benchmark, and how they have done so. Data collection includes interviews with agency or other system leaders, as well as grantees working in LA and NYC. We also review documents and communications materials produced by key stakeholders and incorporate youth voice through available survey data and a focus group. In addition to mapping the systems movement, we analyze existing administrative data to gain an understanding of how TAY are faring in LA and NYC.

**How it works.** The table below shows how Child Trends uses the four implementation components to evaluate progress toward a specific benchmark. This benchmark is an example from the postsecondary issue area under the goal “Accessible postsecondary options.” The table also identifies the data we use to monitor that progress. In the right-hand column, we highlight examples of recent work in LA with respect to the benchmark. These examples illustrate the work of the Initiative along its three strategic objectives (systems and policy change, knowledge development and dissemination, and program support).

**Benchmark:** Supports are available to help foster TAY complete postsecondary prerequisites (e.g., selection, application, standardized tests, and financial aid)

Implementation Components	Types of Evidence	Postsecondary Education (Example of progress in LA)
<p><b>Political Will</b> Agency or institution central to the benchmark (or a multi-agency or multi-sector collaborative) has made a documented commitment to addressing benchmark.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Events</li> <li>• Commissions, taskforces, working groups take a stance</li> <li>• New public agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DCFS Director sent letters to all DCFS staff regarding the importance of postsecondary education and financial aid and encouraging staff to engage in the FAFSA Challenge.</li> <li>• LA Board of Supervisors signed a letter of support for the passage of SB 12.</li> <li>• LA Board of Supervisors passed a motion in October 2018 directing enhanced postsecondary support for youth in foster care through participating in the FAFSA Challenge.</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> We borrowed the implementation components from the generic “policy, practice, and data” framework often used to examine public policy reforms, including shifts in human service systems. “Practice” was changed to “programs” in recognition of Foundation’s investment in direct services. “Political will” was added in the interest of capturing nascent steps toward change, where new programs and policies are not yet established.

Implementation Components	Types of Evidence	Postsecondary Education (Example of progress in LA)
<p><b>Policy</b></p> <p>Codified requirements committing key agencies or institutions to action regarding the benchmark</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statutes and ordinances</li> <li>• Legislation</li> <li>• Administrative requirements</li> <li>• Memoranda of understanding</li> <li>• Activities to facilitate policy implementation or interpretation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SB 12 (2017) was supported by many Hilton Foundation grantees and requires: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Social workers to document in the case plan who is responsible for assisting foster youth with postsecondary and financial aid applications, and</li> <li>○ California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to work with the Student Aid Commission to develop an automated system for verifying TAY’s status as foster youth for financial aid eligibility.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• AB 1567 (2017) requires California State University and the California Community Colleges to notify foster youth about eligibility for financial aid and campus support programs.</li> <li>• AB 1809 (2018) extends the FAFSA deadline for foster youth attending community colleges.</li> <li>• An All County Letter was issued in September 2018 to provide implementation guidance to counties on SB 12.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Program</b></p> <p>Sustainable and scalable local services aligned to the benchmark</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct services</li> <li>• Memoranda of understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Antelope Valley Postsecondary Project is a collaboration involving John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY), National Center for Youth Law, LA Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS), and Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) seeking to provide training and build a culture of social workers supporting postsecondary pathways for TAY.</li> <li>• JBAY has partnered with the Foster &amp; Kinship Care Education Program to develop a training curriculum for caregivers on accessing postsecondary education.</li> <li>• United Friends of the Children, First Star, and other grantees directly support TAY with SAT preparation, college tours, application for school and financial aid, and enrollment.</li> </ul>

Implementation Components	Types of Evidence	Postsecondary Education (Example of progress in LA)
<p><b>Data</b></p> <p>Regular administrative or survey data collection activities to track local progress related to the benchmark over time</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collection</li> <li>• Data monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a result of the FAFSA Challenge, LA County is now tracking FAFSA completion rates for TAY (37% in 2017-2018 school year).</li> <li>• California Department of Education (CDE) now requires that all Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs report on financial aid completion for foster youth.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Benchmark Progress To-Date</b></p> <p>Los Angeles is making significant strides toward achieving this benchmark across all four implementation components, particularly as it relates to supporting foster TAY to apply for financial aid. DCFS leadership has issued statements regarding the importance and responsibility of DCFS social workers to support postsecondary pathways for youth, and collaborative efforts in Antelope Valley are seeking to further instill this value into agency culture. LA is tracking FAFSA completion rates, and reporting requirements have been institutionalized. Recent legislation has been signed into law to support foster TAY to learn about postsecondary pathways and access financial supports, although the successful implementation of these legislative changes remains to be seen and will continue to be monitored. Similarly, while programs exist to support TAY with postsecondary prerequisites, the sustainability and scalability of these efforts will be assessed in the coming years. Child Trends will also continue to monitor system progress toward supporting foster TAY with other postsecondary prerequisites, such as taking standardized tests and selecting and applying for higher education.</p>		

## Goals, benchmarks, and youth-level indicators

During the first half of 2018, the Foundation and Child Trends worked together to develop the following goals, benchmarks, and youth-level indicators. While this list is current as of the date of this brief, it may be changed and adapted over time due to the quickly shifting landscapes in LA and NYC. As the table shows, many of the youth-level indicators are currently unavailable in LA and NYC. Proxy data are noted where available. Although many indicators are currently unavailable, we will be monitoring the work of both jurisdictions to gather and share more data on foster TAY.

Goal	Benchmarks	<b>Youth-level indicators</b> <i>Data known to be available for LA and NYC marked with *</i> <i>Proxy data are marked with a ^</i>
<b>Issue area: Education (Grades 8-12)</b>		
School stability for foster TAY in high school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools and child welfare agencies prioritize school stability when placements change</li> <li>• Cost sharing arrangements between education and child welfare support foster TAY with transportation and planning to promote school stability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # and % who attend only one school during a one-year period^</li> <li>• Of foster TAY with two or more placements in a school year: # and % who attend only one school during a one-year period</li> <li>• Of foster TAY ages 16-18:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ # and % enrolled in high school^</li> <li>◦ # and % who ever attended two or fewer high schools</li> <li>◦ # and % receiving academic support services</li> <li>◦ # and % on track to graduate in 4 years^</li> <li>◦ # and % on track to graduate in 5 years^</li> <li>◦ # and % who missed &gt;= 11 days of school in past 12 months^</li> <li>◦ # and % with &gt;= 2 suspensions on the past 12 months^</li> <li>◦ # and % expelled in past 12 months^</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Of foster TAY in 12<sup>th</sup> grade: # and % of those in 12th grade proficient in reading and/or math</li> <li>• Of foster TAY ages 19-20:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ # and % who graduated from high school in 4 years^</li> <li>◦ # and % with a high school diploma^</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Of foster TAY ages 16-20: # and % who dropped out of high school^</li> <li>• Of foster TAY ages 21-24:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ # and % with a high school diploma</li> <li>◦ # and % who dropped out of high school</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Goal	Benchmarks	Youth-level indicators <i>Data known to be available for LA and NYC marked with *</i> <i>Proxy data are marked with a ^</i>
Targeted supports to students and schools in service of graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools prioritize student engagement and persistence when supporting foster TAY during school transitions</li> <li>• Foster TAY have consistent graduation counseling (e.g., designated individuals assigned to youth, case management plans, specialized services)</li> <li>• Academic support services are accessible to foster TAY</li> <li>• School environments support the socioemotional and/or behavioral needs of foster TAY</li> <li>• Schools receive tailored supports to assist foster TAY, and are held accountable for foster TAY performance</li> </ul>	

Goal	Benchmarks	Youth-level indicators <i>Data known to be available for LA and NYC marked with *</i> <i>Proxy data are marked with a ^</i>
<b>Issue area: Postsecondary education</b>		
Accessible postsecondary education options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic bridge programs facilitate transition into postsecondary education for foster TAY</li> <li>• Supports are available to help TAY complete postsecondary prerequisites (e.g., selection, application, standardized tests, &amp; financial aid)</li> <li>• Foster TAY are given priority in enrollment decisions and course access</li> <li>• Foster TAY have access to career and technical education as a viable postsecondary option</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of TAY ages 18-24:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ # and % who have ever submitted a college application^</li> <li>◦ # and % who have ever submitted two or more college applications</li> <li>◦ # and % who have completed the FAFSA in the prior 12 months^</li> <li>◦ # and % who have taken the SAT^</li> <li>◦ # and % ever enrolled in post-secondary education^</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Of foster TAY age 22-24:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ # and % who have completed a 4-degree</li> <li>◦ # and % who have completed a 2-year degree</li> <li>◦ # and % who have completed a technical credential</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Targeted supports in service of postsecondary completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial supports are available for foster TAY for tuition and related expenses (excluding housing)</li> <li>• Programs and/or structures designed to support foster TAY students are available (e.g., designated foster liaison, programs to identify and support foster TAY students, Guardian Scholars and EOP programs)</li> <li>• Programs and/or structures are available to provide year-round housing supports for foster TAY students</li> </ul>	

Goal	Benchmarks	Youth-level indicators <i>Data known to be available for LA and NYC marked with *</i> <i>Proxy data are marked with a ^</i>
<b>Issue area: Employment</b>		
Employer engagement with foster TAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal structures enable foster TAY to directly engage employers (e.g., job fairs, online tools, training programs).<sup>4</sup></li> <li>• Training and mentoring opportunities are available to support employed TAY</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # and % of foster TAY ages 16-19 who are employed<sup>^</sup></li> <li>• # and % of foster TAY ages 20-24 who are employed<sup>^</sup></li> <li>• Among employed foster TAY:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Average quarterly earnings<sup>^</sup></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Targeted workforce preparation for foster TAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training opportunities (e.g., skill building workshops, internships, apprenticeships, etc.) are available to TAY unprepared for employment</li> <li>• Reengagement strategies exist to identify and reconnect foster TAY who lack access to high school equivalency, higher education, and employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ # and % of foster TAY earning a living wage at age 25</li> <li>◦ % of foster TAY who have ever been employed for four consecutive quarters</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup>Training programs that provide foster TAY with the opportunity to directly engage with employers across a variety of fields are included here. This benchmark does not include internships or apprenticeships that connect youth with a single employer.

Goal	Benchmarks	Youth-level indicators <i>Data known to be available for LA and NYC marked with *</i> <i>Proxy data are marked with a ^</i>
<b>Issue area: Focused Interventions</b>		
Accessible reproductive health care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caseworkers, courts, providers, and caregivers are knowledgeable of reproductive health services and encourage TAY to access the services</li> <li>• Reproductive/sexual health education is available to all foster TAY</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # and % of foster TAY receiving reproductive health education^</li> <li>• # and % of foster TAY with health insurance coverage^</li> <li>• Among female foster TAY ages 16 to 24: # and % who have given birth at ages 15 – 21^</li> <li>• Among male foster TAY ages 16 to 24: # and % who fathered a child at ages 15 – 21</li> <li>• Of foster TAY ages 16-24 who have given birth to or fathered a child: # and % with a substantiated maltreatment allegation^</li> <li>• # and % of foster TAY diversions</li> <li>• # and % of foster TAY with adjudicated delinquent cases</li> <li>• # of foster TAY placed in juvenile residential facilities^</li> </ul>
Tailored supports for expectant and parenting foster TAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectant and parenting foster TAY are connected to prenatal services, home visitation and parenting supports, and housing</li> <li>• Affordable child care options are available to parenting foster TAY</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # of foster TAY on probation</li> </ul>
Tailored supports for crossover youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiatives are in place to prevent foster TAY arrest and promote diversion</li> <li>• Crossover TAY are assessed for educational needs and receive appropriate educational services</li> <li>• Crossover TAY have access to supports to prevent recidivism (e.g., parenting, legal, health, and mental health resources)</li> <li>• Employers and postsecondary institutions do not inhibit applications from crossover youth</li> </ul>	

Goal	Benchmarks	<b>Youth-level indicators</b> <i>Data known to be available for LA and NYC marked with *</i> <i>Proxy data are marked with a ^</i>
<b>Issue area: Placement</b>		
Caregiver support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sufficient number of appropriate caregivers are recruited and retained to provide family-based placement to all TAY</li> <li>• All caregivers, including relative caregivers, receive ongoing and adequate financial supports</li> <li>• Caregivers are supported to meet the mental and physical health, education, and developmental needs of the foster TAY placement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of TAY in foster care:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ % with no placement changes after the first 45 days in care</li> <li>◦ % in non-relative foster families*</li> <li>◦ % in relative foster families (licensed and unlicensed)*</li> <li>◦ % in congregate care*</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Of TAY in foster care &lt;6 months:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ % in non-relative foster families*</li> <li>◦ % in relative foster families (licensed and unlicensed)*</li> <li>◦ % in congregate care*</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Of TAY exiting residential treatment center in a given year: % whose stay in RTC was &lt; 12 months</li> <li>• Of TAY who enter care in the 12-month period: rate of placement moves per day*</li> <li>• # of licensed foster care families who will accept foster TAY, relative to the # of foster TAY^</li> <li>• # of licensed foster care families who will accept youth pregnant and parenting youth, relative to the number of pregnant/parenting foster TAY</li> <li>• % of licensed foster care families who will accept TAY, with tenures of &gt; 1 year and no disrupted placements</li> <li>• % of licensed foster care families who will accept youth pregnant and parenting youth, with tenures of &gt; 1 year and no disrupted placements</li> </ul>

Goal	Benchmarks	Youth-level indicators <i>Data known to be available for LA and NYC marked with *</i> <i>Proxy data are marked with a ^</i>
Emphasis on families and family-like settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child welfare agency gives priority to placements with families, including kin</li> <li>• Child welfare agency works to reduce placement and length of stay in congregate care with appropriate planning for step down and into family settings</li> </ul>	
<b>Issue area: Coordination</b>		
Coordinated service delivery across systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal structures connect foster TAY-serving systems, such as child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and workforce</li> <li>• Public and philanthropic funding sources are aligned to create a robust service array for foster TAY</li> </ul>	These systems changes will indirectly affect youth level indicators.
Data collection and integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agencies collect disaggregated administrative data on foster TAY and its subgroups</li> <li>• Agencies use sophisticated techniques (e.g., student identifiers or probabilistic matching) to regularly link data across systems</li> <li>• Agencies are linking data across systems</li> <li>• Formal structures support data sharing between agencies</li> </ul>	
Research & data-informed decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service providers have access to administrative data on foster TAY</li> <li>• Policymakers use research and data to inform their decision-making</li> <li>• Service providers use research and data to inform their decision-making</li> </ul>	

**Sharing what we learn.** The Initiative will be able to use the Results Framework to understand progress toward each benchmark, in addition to progress toward the overarching goal to which the benchmark aligns. The Results Framework also allows us to examine how progress in one issue area creates opportunities, generates lessons learned, and allows for shifts and growth across the other issue areas and the systems as a whole. Quarterly briefs and periodic webinars will update the Foundation’s partners on progress toward systems’ goals and allow for ongoing dialogue around system movement and successful strategies that could benefit other communities seeking to improve services and support for older youth in foster care.