

**Midwestern Rural Superintendents' Perceptions About Foster Student Challenges  
and the Supports P-12 Personnel Provide to Equip Them for Academic Success and  
College Attendance**

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## **Abstract**

Foster care can be traced all the way back to the Old Testament where orphans were boarded with worthy and caring widows for care. While abundant research has examined foster parents, the academic achievement and post elementary and secondary school performance of foster students, and their success during the adult years, no researchers have investigated the perceptions of P-12 school superintendents about the challenges foster students face as they consider attending college, the supports P-12 faculty and staff currently provide to encourage foster students to attend college, or the supports P-12 faculty and staff could provide to encourage foster students to attend and be academically successful if they enter college. Ten superintendents from one Midwestern state participated in this qualitative phenomenological study. Four themes were identified after the analysis of the interview transcripts: challenges foster students face as they consider attending college, ways P-12 faculty and staff encourage foster students to attend college, supports P-12 faculty and staff are currently providing to foster students to assist them to be academically successful, and actions P-12 faculty and staff could implement to assist foster students to attend and be academically successful at a technical, two-year, or four-year college. Challenges included lack of training for foster parents to understand the social, emotional, and special education needs of foster students, and frequent moves from foster home to foster home resulting in increasingly poor academic achievement throughout the elementary and secondary school years. Taking foster students on college visits, assistance with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and helping with college applications were cited as ways P-12 faculty and staff encourage college attendance. The supports superintendents

reported P-12 personnel provide to encourage academic success included Individual Plans of Study, teaching self-advocacy, development of financial and independent living skills, strategies to support emotional needs, career exploration including college visits, assistance in completing the FAFSA and college applications, and before and after school tutoring. Actions P-12 staff could implement included allowing foster students to keep school email addresses so staff could stay in touch after a student moves to a new foster family and school or matriculates into a college setting. Participants also suggested that developing stronger relationships with higher education institution personnel could increase their awareness about foster students and the supports that would be beneficial once these students have matriculated into college. While approximately 80% of foster students aspire to earn a college degree (Courtney & Hook, 2017), fewer than 10% complete a degree (National Foster Youth Institute [NFYI], 2023). Although society has come a long way from the orphan trains that placed foster students in the homes of total strangers away from their families (Carson & George, 2019), additional research is needed that will lead to actions that will improve the lives and educational opportunities for foster students.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate the completion of my EdD to my wife and family. My wife, Lori, has been a positive force in my corner for over 40 years and continues to support me in all of my endeavors. You are my rock and I love you to Disney and back. My son, Luke, has shown through his efforts to become a Marine that dedication and effort can lead you to your goal. My daughter, Dr. Lyndsey Brown, challenged me to get my doctorate before she did (She obviously beat me!) and showed me it can be done even when life happens and that I can't use the excuse I'm too busy to get this done since she did it raising five young children. Completion of my degree is also dedicated to my parents, Bill and Anna Geist, who worked so hard to provide for our family of five children and to give us a loving environment to thrive in. My sister, Dr. Marjorie Geist, set the bar high for all of her siblings that came after her. Thank you! I am grateful to my colleagues who continue to work in an environment that is not always easy but push on to educate our future. I thank the hundreds of students who have helped shape me as an educator over these past 40+ years, especially the many foster students who I have been blessed to work with and help on their journey. To foster students who still contact me, I am forever grateful. Last, but not least, I dedicate completion of this dissertation to God above, who has graced me with years of working with children and all the blessings they have become.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

According to the NFYI (2017), a quarter of foster youth in the U.S. don't graduate from high school. While 80% of foster students would like to attend a technical, two-year or four-year college (Courtney & Hook, 2017), fewer than 10% complete a higher education degree (NFYI, 2023). Nathanael and Courtney (2017) stated, "In the Midwest in 2017, 24% of foster youths in three Midwestern states were enrolled in college at age 19, compared to 56% of youths from a national sample" (para. 3). The challenges foster students experience, their poor trajectory in the elementary and secondary education system, and employment opportunities have been well researched. There is limited research that focuses on the perceptions of P-12 school personnel about the challenges foster youth face that inhibit enrollment in higher education, or the efforts of P-12 staff to encourage enrollment and academic success in technical, two-year, and four-year higher education institutions. The introduction section of this study provides a brief overview of the history of foster care, describes reasons for children to enter foster care, details the challenges foster students experience that inhibit academic achievement, and outlines federal and state transition services that support students who attend a higher education institution.

Foster care is defined as, "affording, receiving, or sharing nurturing or parental care though non-related by blood or legal ties" (Foster Care, 2019, p. 494). Foster care can be traced back to the Old Testament (Yeban, 2018, para. 1). One of the first characters in the Bible related to foster care was Moses who was found in a basket floating in the river and was raised by a princess who was non-related by blood. "Early

Christian church records also show children were boarded with worthy widows who were paid by collections from the congregation” (Sabini, 2017, para. 1).

According to Sethi (2019), “Around 1830, a large population of homeless children emerged in big cities in the Northeast. Some children were orphaned after their parents died in epidemics like typhoid and the flu, while others were neglected due to poverty” (Sethi, 2019, para. 3). Extended families were unavailable to care for these children, so many children became orphans. To combat the number of orphans who were homeless, orphanages were created to care for the increasing number of children left without parents (Yebe, 2018). According to Keiger (1996), “Orphanages often were dangerous. The mortality rate was not much better than on the streets” (para.15). Orphaned children did not have any organizations to represent them when abuse did occur. Consequently, in 1807, Mary Ellen Wilson’s case was taken up by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “Her attorneys argued that laws protecting animals from abuse shouldn’t be greater than laws protecting children” (Yebe, 2018, para. 8). In 1910, Henry Chapin, a pediatrician who treated children in orphanages, began to circulate information concerning the care of children in institutions. “His conviction that “a poor home is often better than a good institution” spread quickly among child welfare and public health professionals” (Herman, 2012, para. 2).

In 1853, the minister and director of the New York Children’s Aid Society, Charles Brace, became concerned with the number of immigrant children who were sleeping on the streets (Sabini, 2017). He came up with a plan to advertise to families in the west and the south who were interested in providing free homes for these children. From 1853 to 1929, more than 150,000 children were transported to foster homes using

the orphan train movement. The purpose of the orphan train was to take homeless children from the east coast to homes in the west. The western towns had to be along an established rail line. Agents selected a route and sent information out to the towns along those routes announcing the train would be stopping at their towns. Each town established a screening committee to select possible families for these children. According to Carson and George (2019), “The screening committee (mostly men) was often made up of a town doctor, clergyman, newspaper editor, and store owner and/or teacher” (para. 3).

The use of the term foster began with the passing of the Social Security Act of 1935 (Herman, 2012). Sabini (2017) reported, “Children were placed into homes of non-related individuals because their parents or guardians were deceased rather than because they had been abused in their home, as child abuse was largely socially accepted and legal” (para. 2). According to Sabini (2017), in the early 1900s, social and governmental agencies began to monitor and supervise foster parents. The practice of placing a child with just any willing family was over. These agencies took the child’s welfare and needs into account and began a system of written reports and records (Sabini, 2017).

The National Foster Parents Association (2019) tied foster care to the English Poor Law:

It was the English Poor Law, however, that led to development and eventual regulation of family foster care in the United States. In 1562, these laws allowed the placement of poor children into indentured service until they came of age. This practice was imported to the United States and was the beginning of placing children into homes. Even though indentured service permitted abuse and

exploitation, it was a step forward from almshouses where children did not learn a trade and were exposed to horrendous surroundings and unsavory adults. Various forms of indenturing children persisted into the first decade of this century. (Para. 2)

Some children were treated with love and respect by foster parents, while others were treated as slaves or even abused, and were often found to be working overly long hours (Sabini, 2017). The U.S. government became interested and involved itself in finding and providing homes for homeless children. “Throughout the early- to mid-1900s, several laws were created that gave federal funds to states for child welfare services and established a department in the government strictly devoted to child welfare” (Sethi, 2019, p. 1). While these laws had a positive impact on early foster care, there were still gaps in services and oversight in many states pertaining to foster care. “Finally, in 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act was established to solidify the federal funding structure for child welfare systems and services and involved the courts to oversee this system” (Sethi, 2019, p. 1). Throughout the 1980s, amendments were made to these laws to begin including teen services, as well as working toward placing foster children into the care of relatives. “In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act was established to add stricter limits to the amount of time a child was allowed to remain in foster care before adoption or reunification” (Sethi, 2019, para. 8).

Harmon (2016) stated the eight major reasons children enter foster care include abuse, neglect, illness, incarceration, death, drug abuse, child’s choices, and voluntary placement. “Abuse is usually thought to be the number one reason children are placed in foster care” (Harmon, 2016, para. 2). However, the number one reason children are placed in foster care is neglect (Bruskas, 2008). “Neglect includes leaving a child alone

for an extended period, lack of food or clean living, or lack of necessary medical care” (Harmon, 2016, para. 3). According to Harmon, “The two most confusing reasons for an individual to be placed in foster care are a child’s choices and voluntary placement” (para. 8). Child’s choices have to do with choices the child has made, not the child choosing foster care. If a child makes poor choices such as running away, skipping school, or breaking the law, the courts may place the child into foster care. “There are also situations where the parents find themselves unable to raise the child so they relinquish their rights as parents and the child is placed into foster care as a temporary placement until adoptive parents can be found” (Harmon, 2016, para. 9).

Table 1 provides comparative data related to foster care children along with relative information on various topics related to foster care. Each statistic increased over the four years included in the table. Foster care funding also increased.

Table 1

*Kansas Foster Care Statistics for the Years 2015 and 2019*

| Category                        | 2015 <sup>a</sup> | 2019 <sup>b</sup> | Difference   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Child maltreatment victims      | 1992              | 2945              | + 953        |
| Children in foster care on 9/30 | 7223              | 8066              | +843         |
| Three or more placements        | 1756              | 2243              | +487         |
| Placement for abuse/neglect (%) | 59                | 74                | + 15         |
| Average per month placement     | 317               | 344               | + 67         |
| Average months out of home      | 18.2              | 21.4              | + 3.2        |
| Emancipation                    | 355               | 432               | + 77         |
| Foster care funding (\$)        | 87,268,002        | 205,000,000       | +117,834,998 |

<sup>a</sup>Kansas Legislative Research Department. <sup>b</sup>Kansas Legislative Research Department.

Educating students who are placed in foster care comes with a multitude of challenges. According to Dworsky (2017), one challenge students in foster care often experience is a delay in records arriving at a new school for up to two weeks. These delays in the arrival of the student's records can cause foster students to not receive services they are eligible for or may cause the school to not be able to place them in the classes they need. For every move a foster student makes, the likelihood of graduating on time decreases by as much as 20% (Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, & Tis, 2018). When foster students move from school to school, they also lose valuable instruction from teachers in their core subjects.

Each time these transitions co-occur, academic growth is reduced on average by 3.7 percentile points in reading, 3.0 percentile points in writing, and 3.5 percentile points in math, which in turn reduces the next year's achievement

level, which then provides a lower base for future growth. (Clemens & Lalonde, 2016, p. 92)

According to Kaufman (2020), “Schools don’t always teach the same information at the same time. The new school might expect students to already know something that your foster child wasn’t taught at the previous school” (para. 26).

Agencies are sometimes unable to find suitable homes for the children and care for the children in an office. According to Fox (2018), 108 Kansas foster children slept in contractor offices in 2018:

From April to September of 2018, St. Francis Community Services, the foster care contractor for the western half of the state, had 764 children in one-night placements. Its eastern counterpart had 695 kids stay just one night in a placement. (Para. 15)

Fox (2018) described a 2018 lawsuit filed by The National Center for Youth Law and Children’s Rights on behalf of foster children who were not receiving appropriate placements. According to Fox, in the lawsuit it was argued,

Contractors had kids sleeping overnight anywhere - a bed, couch, office, conference room, shelter, or hospital - that could be found. Then they were picked up the next morning and kept in a foster care contractor’s office for much of the next day, often into the next evening. (para. 6)

Parton (2018) reported that “Children were subjected to churning, a practice that moves foster kids from placement to placement, with some moving more than a hundred times, according to the complaint” (para 3). According to Fox (2019), 167 cases of churning were documented in Kansas in 2019.

A factor decreasing the likelihood of students completing high school on time is the limited training foster parents receive to deal with the challenges they will face while fostering (Bass, 2017). Kansas requires all foster parents to complete the Massachusetts Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) training. Bass (2017) researched foster parent training programs and found that even though 13 states currently require MAPP training, it has not made a difference in the likelihood of a positive fostering experience for either the child or the foster parent.

Another challenge facing foster care students is their mobility. Stringer (2018) stated, “About one-third of foster care students change schools at least five times before they reach adulthood, and for each school change, they tend to fall four to six months behind” (para. 5). “Statistics show most foster students move more than 3.46 times during their four years of high school” (Clemens, 2005, para. 1). According to Lahey (2014), foster students lose between four and six months of academic progress every time they experience a school change. Clemens et al. (2018) stated, “As the average number of school changes increased, the odds of earning a high school diploma decreased and the odds of earning an equivalency diploma (e.g., GED) or exiting without a credential increased” (para. 1).

According to the NFYI (2017), for many foster students, emancipation (the age at which individuals are no longer eligible for foster care) is the beginning of additional hardships:

- After reaching the age of 18, 20% of the children who are in foster care become instantly homeless.

- Only 1 out of every 2 foster kids who age out of the system have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24.
- There is less than a 3% chance for children who age out of foster care to earn a college degree at any point in their life.
- Seven out of 10 girls who age out of the foster care system become pregnant before the age of 21.
- The percentage of children who age-out of the foster care system and still suffer from the direct effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome is 25%.
- 75% of women and 33% of men receive government benefits to meet basic needs after they age out of the system.
- One out of every 2 kids who age out of the system develop a substance dependence.
- Sixty percent of young men who age out of the foster care system and are legally emancipated are convicted of a crime.
- About one in four kids who age out of the system do not graduate from high school. (Para. 2)

Sabini (2017) reported that to help with the problem of foster students aging out before high school graduation, the federal government in 2016 began to offer incentives to states to provide services to foster students until they turn 21. These incentives originally dated back to the Social Security Act of 1935, when the federal government enacted laws to provide states with funds for dependent children (Sabini, 2017).

According to Sabini, the legislation included the following statement:

SECTION 401. For the purpose of enabling each State to furnish financial assistance, as far as practicable under the conditions in such State, to needy dependent children, there is hereby authorized to be appropriated for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1936, the sum of \$24,750,000, and there is hereby authorized to be appropriated for each fiscal year thereafter a sum sufficient to carry out the purposes of this title. The sums made available under this section shall be used for making payments to States which have submitted, and had approved by the Board, State plans for aid to dependent children. (p. 127)

Even with the monetary incentive, only about half the states have taken advantage of the program and require emancipation of foster students at 18 years of age (Ryssdal, 2017). Kansas ages foster students out at age 18 unless the state does not feel the student is ready to live on his or her own (KVC, 2022). However, just because a foster care student ages out does not mean they no longer have rights or benefits.

There are numerous programs available to help foster students wanting to transition to college. The first program is a federally mandated transition plan all students in foster care have available to them (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Ninety days before the foster student's 18th birthday, case workers should help the student establish a transition plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), only 11% of states met the federal requirements in 2015. "The Kansas Foster Child Education Assistance Act passed in 2006 waives tuition and fees at state universities, technical schools, community colleges, and Washburn University for students who were in foster care" (Associated Press, 2017).

Foster students are also assigned an independent living (IL) agent to help them navigate through college life by counseling them with finances, finding housing, and establishing credit and part-time jobs (KVC, 2022). The IL agent is supposed to help the student through the process of enrolling in college and getting set up for benefits. However, the IL agent is not always the answer to challenges the foster student might have during the transition. A former student who had been in foster care, shared the following situation that made it impossible for her to attend college,

I aged out at 18 (the state can keep you until age of 21 if they feel like you are not ready to be on your own) and am 20 now and have gone through 4 different IL workers. The turnover rate is high. They do not respond in a timely manner, and some seem to not want to help you. They also are hardly ever working so if you have an emergency, you will most likely get an automated reply that they are out of the office until whatever their return date is. (V. Dominguez, personal communication, January 21, 2019)

Because she couldn't get her IL agent to respond and help her get enrolled, she took a full-time job. To qualify for financial support benefits, she had to either have a full-time job or be a full-time student.

### **Background**

In 2012, the State of Kansas privatized foster care to save money. According to Fox (2018), two agencies, the Kansas Department of Children and Families (KDCF) and the St. Francis Foster Care Agency, were selected to handle all foster care cases in the state beginning in 2012. Between December of 2012 and December 2017, the number of foster children in Kansas increased 43% (Fox, 2018). "Kansas repeatedly set records for

the number of children in foster care over the last five years” (Fox, 2018, para. 20). In March of 2019, 7,445 children were in foster care in the KDCF (2019). According to the KDCF, foster care continues to outgrow the resources.

Foster Care (2019) reported, “Up to 80 percent of children in foster care have significant mental health issues, compared to approximately 18-22 percent of the general population” (para. 1). According to the North American Council on Adoptable Children (2022),

Foster children and youth and those adopted from care are also more likely to receive or need special educational services than other children and youth. Many of these children and youth also have behavioral issues or special needs that may make succeeding in school more challenging. (para. 1)

Healey and Fisher (2011) described two major conditions that impact foster students: motion regulations and school adjustment. Motion regulations are part of a Foster Parent Bill of Rights and a Foster Children Bill of Rights (National Council of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2019, para. 1) that inform foster children and foster parents about their rights. According to the NCSL, in 2019, 17 states had passed Foster Parent Bill of Rights legislation and 15 states had passed Foster Children Bill of Rights legislation. The NCSL (2019) stated, many children’s bills of rights provide that requirements must be posted in a place where children will see them and include the following provisions:

- Foster children must be informed about why they are in foster care and how the process will proceed. Many foster children are taken from school when they are removed from the home with little or no warning or

explanation. The Bill of Rights insists students know the reason they are being removed from their home. They must also be informed of what the process will be for placement as well as reunification.

- Participation in extracurricular or community activities are encouraged. Foster children are also immediately eligible for any extracurricular activities they may have been involved in at their home school as opposed to meeting transfer requirements. Efforts must be made to ensure foster children continue to take part in any community or social activities such as Girl and Boy Scouts.
- Efforts must be made to maintain educational stability. Efforts should be made to allow the foster student to remain in their home school. This effort will decrease the chances of the student losing educational progress by being transferred to a different school.
- Access to guardian ad litem must be provided. An ad litem guardian is a court appointed person to closely monitor the foster student and their living conditions to ensure all the needs of the child are being met.
- Access to mental, behavioral, and physical health care must be provided. Since removal from their home, foster children have a great need for mental health access. Combined with the reason they were removed from the home; mental health access is essential for the child. Behavioral care is also an essential part of the foster child's care. As noted, foster children are moved around too often, and this process can result in the foster student having behavioral issues in school or in the foster home.

Great care must be taken to address these issues as future success in school and placement is dependent on finding the underlying issues causing the behaviors. If these behaviors are not addressed, the foster child is more likely to be expelled from school and foster parents may be reluctant to accept them in their home. Behavior care must go hand in hand with the mental care of the foster student. Foster children have a high likelihood their physical needs have not been met. Foster children are given immediate access to free health screenings including dental care and medical reviews.

- Access to or communication with siblings and family members are major features of the foster children's bill of rights. Foster care agents must do everything in their power to keep families together when placing children in foster care. If this is not possible, regular communication and contact with siblings must be provided if it can be done safely. Foster children are placed on an island when being removed from their home and every effort must be made to make this transition as harmless as possible. (Para. 1)

School adjustment is a term used to describe foster students coping with the number of schools they are enrolled in during their time in foster care. While Stringer in 2018 reported that the average number of times a foster student changes schools during the elementary through secondary school years was five times, Camp in 2021 indicated that the average number of school changes had increased to seven. According to Lahey (2014), with each school change, students usually lose up to six months of educational progress.

While changes in school enrollment can have a significant impact on the long-term success of foster children, many also have mental health issues that can also play a role in their coping skills. Healey and Fisher (2011) studied the impact of mental health issues on foster students. These authors reported that a lack of foster parent training impacted the success of foster students. Healey and Fisher (2011) concluded, “Because of the lives these children live, half to two thirds of them will need mental health treatment” (p. 1822). Several factors have been identified as catalysts leading to foster students acting out when certain stressors are present. According to Healey and Fisher (2011), identifying these stressors for foster students helps agencies better prepare foster parents to react to these situations in a more positive manner, leading to more positive relationships between foster students and parents, thus decreasing need of finding an alternate placement for the student. Healey and Fisher stated,

Foster students are not able to control stressors that non-foster students may be able to handle easily. Instead of dealing with the situation in a calm manner, many foster students choose to strike out at the stressor, yell, or cry when dealing with a stressful situation. (p. 1822)

In 2019, the percentage of foster students in Kansas who graduated from high school was 60.8% as compared to the non-foster student graduation rate of 88.3% (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 2020). The 2021 Kansas high school graduation rate for foster students was 61.2% while the statewide average for non-foster students was 88.1% (Howard, 2022, p. 7). According to the Kansas Legislative Research Department (2020), high school graduation or completion is one of the factors that inhibits the ability of foster children to enter higher education institutions. Not having

the same opportunities to graduate high school on time as non-foster students also limits career choices. The NFYI (2023) reported that only 3-4% of foster youth obtain an undergraduate degree from a four-year higher education institution and 2-6% obtain an associate degree from a community college.

Foster students wanting to go on to higher education face a multitude of additional roadblocks hampering their efforts. Included are non-academic factors such as mid-year school changes, suspension from school, expulsion from school, skipping a day of school, physical fights with students, verbal fights with teachers, and even physical fights with teachers (Martin, 2003 ). Other factors mentioned earlier include a lack of support after the foster student ages out of the program and lack of confidence in their abilities (Sabini, 2017).

It is no surprise the percentage of children who have spent time in foster care attending post-secondary institutions is much lower than children who were not in foster care. For example, in 2016, “24% of foster youths in three Midwestern states were enrolled in college at age 19, compared to 56% of youths from a national sample” (Nathanael & Courtney, 2017, para. 3). According to Courtney and Hook (2017), as adolescents, about 80% of foster youth aspire to earn a college degree. Foster children start out with high ambitions of attending an institution of higher education when they are young, but the reality of foster care soon takes a toll on those ambitions (Courtney & Hook, 2017).

Nathanael and Courtney (2017) described several reasons that explain why children in foster care start with lofty goals and don't meet them. Foster children are moved from place to place during their time in foster care. Frequent movement from

school to school and home to home creates gaps in a student's education that are magnified the longer the student stays in foster care. According to Nathanael and Courtney, foster children may develop mental health issues. "Among foster youth, maltreatment and placement instability have been linked to an increased risk of psychopathology, such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, externalizing behavior disorders, and substance-use disorders" (Nathanael & Courtney, 2017, para. 4). In addition, multiple issues including those that are psychopathological, result from multiple placements. According to Nathanael and Courtney,

Multiple placement changes common among adolescents in foster care lead to gaps in school attendance, create discontinuities in learning, require acclimation to each new school community and culture, and impede the development of lasting connections to school staff and peers. (para 4)

According to Dworsky (2017), while steps have been taken to decrease some of the issues described by Nathanael and Courtney (2017), statistics still show a disparity in the number of foster students who attend higher education institutions when compared to non-foster students. "Compared to their non-foster care peers, youth in foster care are less likely to enroll in college if they complete high school, and less likely to graduate from college if they enroll" (Dworsky, 2017, para. 2). According to Dworsky there are three reasons that inhibit foster students from going on to higher education:

- The reality for many youth in foster care is that they cannot turn to their parents for information about college, assistance with college applications, help paying for college, or emotional support to cope with the academic demands and social stresses related to college life.

- Youth in foster care may be unprepared for college-level work because they frequently change schools when their placements change, are tracked into basic education (rather than college preparatory) courses, or attend low performing elementary and high schools.
- Non-academic challenges can also be a barrier to educational attainment for youth in foster care in college. For example, mental and behavioral health problems are more prevalent among youth in foster care than among their non-foster peers, and these problems may interfere with their ability to succeed in college, particularly if, as frequently occurs, they discontinue treatment after they leave care. (paras. 3-5)

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to Yeban (2018), foster care can be traced back to the Old Testament. In the U.S., the origins of foster care were initiated around 1830 when a large population of homeless children emerged in big cities in the Northeast. Some children became homeless after their parents died in epidemics like typhoid and the flu, while others were neglected due to poverty (Sethi, 2019). Orphanages were created to care for these homeless orphans (Yeben, 2018). Sabini (2017) reported that Charles Brace became concerned about the significant number of orphaned children who were abandoned and created the Orphan Train Movement, asking families in the west and south to provide homes for these children. This was the first example of foster care in the U.S. The term foster care was not officially used until the passing of the Social Security Act of 1935 (Herman, 2012).

Educating students who are placed in foster care comes with a multitude of challenges. Nathanael and Courtney (2017) found that many foster children move from place to place during their time in foster care. Clements (2005) reported that foster students move an average of 3.46 times during the high school years. According to Lahey (2014) foster students lose up to half a year of academic progress every time they experience a move. Dworsky (2017) indicated that moving may result in a delay in records arriving at a new school for up to two weeks. Clemens et al. (2018) indicated that the likelihood of graduating from high school on time decreases by as much as 20% each time a foster student moves resulting in loss of valuable instruction from teachers in their core subjects. Another factor that decreases the likelihood of students completing high school on time is the limited training foster parents receive to deal with the challenges they will face while fostering (Bass, 2017).

NFYI (2023) reported that 40% of school aged foster youth have educational difficulties. Yeban (2017) stated that 25% of foster children don't graduate from high school. According to Courtney and Hook (2017), as adolescents, about 80% of foster youth aspire to earn a college degree. However, the NFYI (2023) stated that fewer than 10% of foster youth obtain a college degree. Dworsky (2017) reported, "Compared to their non-foster care peers, youth in foster care are less likely to enroll in college if they complete high school, and less likely to graduate from college if they enroll" (para. 2). Three to four percent of foster youth complete a four-year degree while two to six percent obtain a two-year degree (NFYI, 2023). According to Nathanael and Courtney, in 2017, 24% of foster youths in three Midwestern states were enrolled in college at age 19, compared to 56% of youths from a national sample" (para. 3). Dworsky (2017) described

three reasons that inhibit foster students from going on to higher education: the lack of parents to provide information about college or assistance with paying for college, insufficient preparation for the academic expectations of college classes due to frequent moves while in foster care, and mental and behavioral health problems.

Current research has focused on non-academic factors such as family support, cultural inclusion, and finances when showing roadblocks for foster students who would like to attend college (Dworsky, 2017). Few researchers have focused on the support foster students receive from P-12 personnel related to academic achievement or college attendance. No research was found in the literature review related to the perceptions of P-12 superintendents about challenges foster students face as they consider attending college, how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to consider attending college, support P-12 personnel are currently providing to foster students to assist them to attend college, or what P-12 personnel could do to assist more foster students to attend college equipped with the academic knowledge to be successful in college classes. Additional research on the perceptions of P-12 superintendents about the efforts of faculty and staff to encourage and support foster student college attendance may impact the success of these students in pursuing college completion.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examined the perceptions of P-12 superintendents in a Midwestern state about challenges foster students face as they consider attending college and the efforts of P-12 personnel to encourage and support foster students as they transition from high school to college. Four purposes guided the implementation of this study. The first purpose was to examine the perceptions of Midwestern P-12 superintendents about

challenges foster students face as they consider attending a technical, two-year, or four-year college. The second purpose was to investigate the perceptions of Midwestern superintendents about how P-12 school personnel are encouraging foster students to consider attending a technical, two-year, or four-year college. The third purpose was to study the perceptions of Midwestern school superintendents about supports P-12 school personnel provide to foster students to assist them to be academically successful if they attend a technical college or two-year or four-year college. The final purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Midwestern superintendents about actions P-12 personnel could take to encourage foster students to attend and be academically successful at a technical college or two-year or four-year college.

### **Significance of the Study**

No researchers have investigated how P-12 school superintendents perceive the challenges foster students face or the supports P-12 school personnel provide to encourage foster students to attend a technical, two-year, or four-year college. This study contributed to the research on foster students and factors that promote college attendance. Results of this study may be of interest to superintendents, P-12 school personnel, the KDCF, State Board of Education, legislators, foster students, foster parents, and case workers as they consider factors that inhibit or promote the success of foster students in higher education settings. The findings from this research may also be of interest to personnel in higher education institutions as they work with foster students who have matriculated into a college or university setting.

### **Delimitations**

According to Naar (2021), “Researchers identify and articulate delimitations to explain what their studies will and won’t cover while also defining the methodologies and approaches they’ll use to carry out their studies” (para. 2). Participants in the current study had a minimum of three years of experience as a superintendent in a public school district in the Midwestern state in which the study was conducted. All respondents had experience working with foster students in their school districts and were aware of some of the struggles foster students face while attending their schools.

### **Assumptions**

Wargo (2019) defined an assumption as “a statement that is presumed to be true, often only temporarily or for a specific purpose, such as building a theory” (p. 2). In the current study it was assumed the interview participants understood the interview questions and answered them honestly. It was also assumed that the interpretation of the data accurately reflected the perceptions of the respondents.

### **Research Questions**

“A research question is a question that a study or research project is designed to answer. This question often addresses an issue or a problem, which, through analysis and interpretation of data, is answered in the study’s conclusion” (Bouchrika, 2022). Four research questions guided this study.

**RQ1.** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about challenges foster students face as they consider attending college?

**RQ2.** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to attend a technical, two-year, or four-year college?

**RQ3.** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about supports P-12 personnel are currently providing to foster students to assist them to be academically successful if they attend a technical, two-year, or four-year college?

**RQ4.** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about actions P-12 personnel could implement to assist more foster students to attend and be academically successful at a technical, two-year, or four-year college?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Foster care.** According to the KVC (2022), “Foster care in Kansas provides a temporary arrangement for a child when they are not able to live with their biological parents or other natural caregivers” (p. 1).

**Foster parent.** According to U.S. Legal (n.d.), the term foster parents generally refers to adults who are licensed by the state or county to provide a temporary home for children whose birth parents are unable to care for them.

**Massachusetts Approaches to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP).** According to the Massachusetts Department of Children & Families (2022) the MAPP program was adapted from a Child Welfare Institute document designed by the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families in 2001. MAPP provides foster and adoptive parents with the knowledge and critical skills to support healing for children and youth while they are in foster care (Massachusetts Department of Children and Families, 2022).

## **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction and background information related to foster care and foster students. In addition, this chapter summarized the statement of the problem, purposes of the study, significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, research questions, and definitions for terms used in the study. Chapter 2 includes a literature review that focuses on three areas: historical aspects of foster care in the U.S., foster care funding, and hurdles foster students experience when pursuing higher education. Chapter 3 explains the methods used in the current study including the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data analysis. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a study summary, findings related to the literature, and conclusions.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

This study examined perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about challenges foster care students face as they consider attending a higher education institution, supports P-12 personnel are currently providing or could provide to encourage foster students to attend college, and the preparation provided to promote academic success for those who do matriculate to a higher education institution. The review of the literature includes three sections. The first section provides an overview of historical aspects of foster care in the United States. The second section describes foster care funding. The third section summarizes hurdles foster students have pursuing higher education.

#### **History of Foster Care in the U.S.**

Caring for others' children dates to the earliest days, with references even found in ancient religious texts.

The placement of children in foster care homes is a concept that goes as far back as the Torah and Bible, which refers to caring for dependent children as a duty under law. The Quran carried on this tradition of caring for orphans and widows. Early Christian church records indicate orphaned children lived with widows who were paid by the church. (Yeban, 2018, para. 1)

According to Yeban (2018), English Poor Laws were established in the 1500s allowing poor children to be involved as indentured servants until they reached adulthood. The practice was brought to the United States which took the place of almshouses which harbored abuse. The first cases of foster students evolved from orphanages looking for

ways to place children in homes after they were left abandoned on the streets of New York. Children became orphans when their immigrant parents either died from disease or work-related accidents or immigrant parents could no longer care for their children because of the hardships they encountered in the new world. “At this time, children were placed into these homes because their parents or guardians were deceased rather than because they had been abused in their home, as child abuse was largely socially accepted and legal” (Yeban, 2018, para. 4).

According to Keiger (1996), “Orphanages sprang up in large numbers in the early 1800s as part of an American institutional building boom. The United States was a very young country, socially unsettled and all but devoid of institutions” (para. 9). During this time, few if any social services were available for families. The public school system was in its infancy and provided little or no assistance in educating children. America was growing at breakneck speed and families were not able to keep up causing the breakdown of the family (Keiger, 1996). State and private organizations began to step into this situation to try and make corrections that might help new immigrants pursuing the American dream become more productive and responsible citizens. “If they were children, take them from the corrupting influence of impoverished or immoral (the two were often equated) adults and put them on the path to productive, law-abiding adulthood” (Keiger, 1996, para. 11).

The term orphanage proved to not be relevant in many of these institutions as it is estimated that only 10-20% of the children were actual orphans.

Most had one or two living parents who were unable (usually due to poverty), unwilling, or had been deemed unfit to care for them. Many of the children had

been rescued from another institution, the poorhouse, where conditions were often abysmal. When they defined who to admit, they defined who was an orphan.

(Keiger, 1996, para. 12)

The orphanages were not established to raise these orphans to adulthood but to possibly teach them a trade, send them back to their parents, or find a suitable home for them.

According to Keiger (1996),

Some orphanages tried to teach children a trade. The Catholic New York Protectory had 400 boys working in its shoemaking factory in 1875, and by 1900 the Protectory was training boys in plumbing, masonry, bricklaying, steam fitting, and sign painting. The girls worked in sewing rooms. (para. 14)

Keiger (1996) continued by stating:

Institutions in Massachusetts, for example, worked vigorously to place children with "respectable" foster families. Children in other states were sent to households and farms as indentured servants--basically forced labor--doing domestic or agricultural work in exchange for food and shelter. Orphanages shipped children to other states on so-called orphan trains; the Midwest was a popular destination. (para. 13)

During the mid-1800s a minister by the name of Charles Loring Brace founded the Children's Aid Society after he became concerned with the number of homeless children and their living conditions (Sethi, 2019). According to Sethi, Brace believed providing shelter and food for these children while teaching them a trade would be the best option. Brace further felt the children would benefit from living away from the city. He developed a plan to transport these children to the Midwest. "In 1854, 45 children

were transported to various places in the Midwest via railroad and were adopted by local families” (Sethi, 2019, para. 4). This first attempt to distribute homeless children to rural areas in the midwest in search of a better life for them eventually was known as the Orphan Train Movement (Carson & George, 2019). “Between 1854 and 1929, an estimated 250,000 orphaned, abandoned, or homeless children were transported to rural communities across the country in hopes of providing a better life for them” (Carson & George, 2019, para. 1).

Early in the 1930s, the federal government stepped in to help states establish foster care systems that had to meet stricter standards of care for the children. For the first time in U.S. history, funding for the care of foster children was provided by the government (U.S. Congress, 1935). While this was a good start, funding continues to fall short to meet the needs of foster students (Sethi, 2019).

According to Harmon (2016), there are eight major reasons why children are placed in foster care: abuse, neglect, illness, incarceration, death, drug abuse, child’s choice, and voluntary placement. In Kansas, approximately 25% of foster children live with relatives (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2016). While this sounds like a high percentage of children that end up with family members they already know, the fact remains that leaves a vast majority, 75%, who are not living with someone they know (KVC, 2022). According to KVC (2022), the federal government established funding for states to provide for foster children.

In Kansas, more than one in four children in the custody of the Secretary of the Kansas Department for Children and Families (KDCCF) live with relatives who are dedicated to providing primary care

for grandchildren, nieces, nephews, or siblings. Relatives providing care for children in out-of-home placement have options for financial assistance and access to other support. (para. 1)

Relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins are the first desirable option to provide a safe and caring environment for children. In the U.S., an estimated 2.7 million grandparents are raising their grandchildren (KVC, 2022).

Kinship care is the term used to refer to placing foster children with relatives (KVC, 2022). While placing foster children with relatives is the most desired option for placement, many times family members may not be able to care for these children. In this case, the next most desired placement is within homes the child may be familiar with to decrease the trauma felt in out of home placement.

Non-related kin refers to a person, typically a neighbor, family friend, teacher, coach, fellow church member or other acquaintance, who is familiar with the child or his or her family and is willing to provide a safe home for the child until they can safely return home or another permanency option is determined. (KVC, 2022, para. 4)

The least desirable placement for a foster child is the traditional placement that the majority of foster students experience (KVC, 2022). This placement involves a child being placed with total strangers who have met the requirements of individual states to be considered potential foster homes.

Individuals who meet the requirements and complete the training to become a foster parent can care for any child, teen, or sibling group in state custody for an

undetermined amount of time. Foster parents provide care and support for a child until a permanent plan is implemented. (KVC, 2022, para. 5)

According to statistics released by the Kansas Department of Children and Families (2019), kinship placement resulted in less than 33% of foster children ending up with family members while 53% were placed in family foster homes in 2018.

### **Foster Care Funding**

With the establishment of the Social Security Act of 1935 (U.S. Congress, 1935), foster care was included under Title IV Grants for Aid to Dependent Children.

SECTION 401. For the purpose of enabling each State to furnish financial assistance, as far as practicable under the conditions in such State, to needy dependent children, there is hereby authorized to be appropriated for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1936, the sum of \$24,750,000, and there is hereby authorized to be appropriated for each fiscal year thereafter a sum sufficient to carry out the purposes of this title. The sums made available under this section shall be used for making payments to States which have submitted, and had approved by the Board, State plans for aid to dependent children. (U.S. Congress, 1935, para. 1)

That is the equivalent of \$587,322,919.71 in 2022 (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 2022). The amount provided by the federal government for dependent children was one-third of the amount available for foster care with the other two-thirds provided by each state.

The term *dependent child* was defined in the 1935 Title IV Grants for Aid to Dependent Children Act.

The term dependent child means a child under the age of sixteen who has been deprived of parental support or care by reason of the death, continued absence from the home, or physical or mental incapacity of a parent, and who is living with his father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, brother, sister, stepfather, stepmother, stepbrother, stepsister, uncle, or aunt, in a place of residence maintained by one or more of such relatives as his or their own home. (U. S. Congress, 1935, para. 16)

What stands out in this definition is that only family members are mentioned as possible foster care providers. While sending foster children to live with family members is usually preferred, it rarely happens.

#### **Hurdles Foster Students Experience When Pursuing Higher Education.**

According to Buhler, Rhodes, Orme, and Cuddeback (2006), “Federal standards for child welfare require that foster parents are trained and evaluated in skills in a range of domains, including parenting, relationship-building, and effective behavior management” (p. 523). With the extreme shortness of foster care homes, states have shirked their duties in preparing foster parents for the role they must play as the caregivers of children who have been taken from their homes for a variety of reasons (Bass, 2017). According to Bass, ill prepared foster parents find themselves immersed in situations they have no idea are coming and, worse yet, have no training to prepare them to handle. The fact students are in foster care indicates that most have had issues with attendance, multiple placements, behavior problems, academic deficiencies, and trouble with the law (Bass, 2017). Zetlin (2006) added that foster children are up to five times as likely to need special education services only enhances the possibility of students being

moved from one foster home to another because foster parents do not know how to handle the needs of the children placed in their care. According to Zetlin, this may lead to foster children experiencing trauma. Turner and Wildeman (2016) indicated traumatized children suffer ADD/ADHD, depression, anxiety, and behavior problems at a much higher rate than their peers. Lightfoot, Hill, and LaLiberte (2011) estimated that approximately 30 to 50% of foster youth are eligible for special education compared to 10% of youth in the general population. According to Bass (2017), this may actually be an underrepresentation of the number of foster youth who are eligible for special education because placement moves and failure to perform evaluations often interferes with the special education process. Bass reported that many times, foster students are not in the same school long enough to be tested for any special needs they may have. However, Clemens and Lalonde (2016) indicated that with new legislation in place, the Every Student Succeeds Act, schools are paying closer attention to how they can help students in foster care succeed.

As a result of the Every Student Succeeds Act and its requirement that students in foster care be included in education report cards, states have a renewed sense of urgency surrounding accountability for the academic achievement of this vulnerable group of students. (Clemens & Lalonde, 2016, para. 1)

According to Kaufman (2020), the Every Student Succeeds Act still does not guarantee foster students get the help they need. In most states, biological parents still have the right to make decisions on their student's education. While foster parents can be a major influence on the success of a foster student, they may not even have the right to know if their foster child has even been identified as a special education student. "Depending on

the state they live in, foster parents may not even have the right to know if their foster child has been identified by the school as having a learning or thinking difference”

(Kaufman, 2020, para 6). According to Kaufman,

It’s also not clear whether foster parents have the right to view school records.

Some legal experts think that child welfare agencies can release the records to foster parents under FERPA. Others think that biological or adoptive parents must give their consent first. (para. 7)

Kansas law was changed in 2005 to include the involvement of foster parents in an Individualized Educational Plan meeting for their foster child if they have been appointed by the court and agree to be the educational advocate for the foster child (Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE], 2022). The KSDE (2022) defined the term parent as

(1) A natural parent; (2) an adoptive parent; (3) a person acting as parent; (4) a legal guardian; (5) an education advocate; or (6) a foster parent, if the foster parent has been appointed the education advocate of an exceptional child (K.S.A. 72-3404), p. 4)

According to the KSDE (2022), in Kansas, a foster parent may make educational decisions for an exceptional child only if the foster parent receives the required training and is appointed by the Kansas State Board of Education as an education advocate. This requirement can slow the identification and placement of foster students in special education classes. Education advocates in Kansas must complete training through Families Together to become approved (KSDE, 2022). The training takes about 5.5 hours. According to Families Together (2022), there are more than 900 children with disabilities in Kansas whose parents are unknown, unavailable, or whose parental rights

have been terminated. The many hurdles foster families face increase the chances of them playing foster child roulette by asking for their present foster child to be moved in the hopes the next one will be less hassle and fit into their family better. According to The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022), 672,000 children were in foster care in 2019. About one-third of them were children of color (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Because these children move between multiple homes and multiple schools each year, many of them will not receive a traditional education (Kaufman, 2020). According to the Kansas Legislative Briefing Book for 2020, an average of 344 children were removed from the home and placed into foster care each month, with a total number of 4,125 children placed during fiscal year 2019 (Families Together, 2022)

Where do these children end up once in the system? According to Orr et al. (2020) 54% are reunified with their families, 35% are adopted, and nearly 9% end up in other planned permanent living arrangement (OPPLA). The Kansas Legislative Research Department (2020) stated, “OPPLA is a permanency option only when other options such as reunification, adoptions, or guardianship have been ruled out” (p. 1). In 2020, 367 foster children who remained in the system without a chance of reunification or adoption (Orr et al., 2020). In other words, these children remain permanent wards of the State of Kansas until they age out at 21. When added to previous year’s statistics, this equated to an average of 569 foster children in OPPLA per month in the State of Kansas alone. According to Kaufman (2020), when permanency is not likely, these children historically get moved around from foster home to foster home. “Foster children generally move four times in their first year and up to fifteen times for children that grow up in foster care” (Kaufman, 2020, para. 2).

School mobility is thought to be one of the hurdles foster students have to overcome to succeed in high school and allow them the opportunity to pursue higher education. Clemens and Lalonde (2016) stated, “It is important to recognize that regardless of school mobility, youth in foster care are at a heightened risk for many behavioral and psychological concerns that may impact high school dropout rates” (p. 194). Camp (2021) reported that the average number of times a foster student moves is seven. “Many foster families are not supported enough or well-equipped to care for these children, so foster children are moved often” (Camp, 2021, para. 5). According to Camp, lack of support and training are the main contributing factors leading to foster students being moved so often.

Fox (2018) described the process that occurs when a foster child is in need of a home. The phone rings in one of two agencies in Kansas indicating that a foster child is in need of a home. The first calls go out to family members. According to Fox (2018),

If the contractor is picking up a school-aged kid, workers will call the school to get information about teachers, coaches, or parents of friends who might take them. Older kids can offer their own suggestions about nearby family members. If those options don't pan out, contractors look for shelters and group homes. (para. 4)

What happens if none of these options work out? According to Fox (2018), churning takes place.

This process of churning has kids sleeping anywhere a bed, couch, office, conference room, shelter or hospital can be found overnight. Then they're picked up the next morning and kept in a foster care contractor's office for much of the next day, often into the next evening. (para. 5)

This practice became so blatant that Kansas was sued. According to Fox (2018),

The class-action suit alleges the state violated foster kids' rights by shifting some of them more than 100 times throughout their time in care often from one single-night placement to the next. The suit says that this practice renders kids in care effectively homeless. (para, 3).

According to ThinkImpact (2021), 86% of students in the United States graduated on time with 65% enrolling in higher education. For foster students, those numbers drop dramatically. For fiscal year 2019, about 60% of foster students graduated from high school in Kansas, with around 3% enrolling in post secondary programs (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022)

## **Summary**

Chapter 2 provided an overview of the history of foster care which began as a way for orphaned youth to be placed with families in order to get them off the streets of New York. Most of these children were orphaned due to their parents being killed in industrial accidents or even being left on the streets to fend for themselves after the newly arrived immigrants could not find suitable employment to support their families. The first step toward foster care was made by shipping orphans to scheduled stops along the railroad in the Midwest on what were referred to as orphan trains. Funding of foster care was mainly left to the people who supported these children by allowing them to do menial tasks or through financial support provided by religious organizations who initially took these children in to try and teach them a trade. With the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, the federal government took over the funding of foster children in the U.S. Since then, various laws have been passed to keep up with the ever-

changing needs of the foster care system. Foster students often face significant challenges that impact academic achievement including lack of placement in a foster home, frequent moves from foster family to foster family, lack of identification for special education placement, and mental health issues. All of these challenges can impact a foster student's academic achievement and graduation from high school which are prerequisites to admission into a technical, two-year, or four-year higher education.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology of this qualitative study. In Chapter 3, the research design, setting, sampling procedure, and interview instrument are described. In addition, the data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, the role of the researcher, and the limitations of the study are annotated.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

This qualitative study examined perceptions of Midwestern superintendents about challenges foster care students face as they consider attending a higher education institution, supports P-12 personnel are currently providing or could provide to encourage foster students to attend college, and the preparation provided to promote academic success for those who do matriculate to a higher education institution. This chapter explains the methods used to conduct the study. The research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations of the study are explained.

#### **Research Design**

A qualitative phenomenological research design involving a social constructivist paradigm was chosen for this study. According to Creswell (2009),

Phenomenology is a study that aims to understand the subjective, lived experiences and perspectives of participants. This is based on the main idea that there are multiple interpretations of the same experience, and these multiple interpretations or meanings make up reality. (p. 9)

Phenomenological research allows the researcher to focus on interpretation of the lived experiences of those interviewed. This process requires the researcher to withhold personal feelings while conducting the study and to only report on the responses from the participants. "In social constructivism human interests are important for research purposes and knowledge is constructed through social interaction" (Adams, 2006, para. 4). This

paradigm allowed the researcher to ask questions leading to the gathering of data from Midwestern P-12 school superintendents who have had foster students enrolled in their school districts about challenges foster students face that can impact attending technical, two-year, or four-year colleges, efforts of P-12 personnel to encourage foster student to pursue college attendance, academic supports provided to foster students by P-12 personnel, and recommended actions P-12 personnel could provide to assist foster students to be prepared for college matriculation and academic success.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study included one Midwestern state. School districts were located in the central, north-central, south-central, and northeast, portion of the state. The size of school districts ranges from 1A (10 – 110 students) to 4A (323 – 699 students).

### **Sampling Procedures**

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of participants in the study. Purposive sampling has gained in popularity since Patton (2002) described the importance of purposive sampling. According to Patton, the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. According to Patton (2002), information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. According to Patton, studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding of phenomenon.

Purposive sampling procedures were used to select interviewees who met two criteria. All participants were superintendents in the same Midwestern state in a school district with at least one foster student enrolled during the past three years. Names and

contact information for participants were obtained from the Greenbush Education Service Center. All respondents had been a superintendent for a minimum of three years. One of the respondents worked in both a 1A and a 4A school during the past three years.

### **Instrument**

An interview protocol that included 4 four demographic and six open-ended interview questions aligned with the research questions was designed for the current study. Demographic questions included the following,

***IQ1.*** What is the classification of your school district (1A, 2A, etc.)?

***IQ2.*** How many high school teachers are employed in your district?

***IQ3.*** How many foster students have attended high school in your district in the past three years?

***IQ4.*** How many of these foster students have attended college?

The open-ended interview questions aligned with the research questions are provided below.

***RQ1.*** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about challenges foster students face as they consider attending a technical, two-year, or four-year college?

***IQ5.*** In your opinion, what challenges do foster students face as they consider the possibility of attending a technical, two-year, or four-year college?

***RQ2.*** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to attend a technical, two-year or four-year college?

**IQ6.** What are some examples of how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to attend college?

**RQ3.** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about supports P-12 personnel are currently providing to foster students to assist them to be academically successful if they attend a technical, two-year, or four-year college?

**IQ7.** What are some examples of supports P-12 personnel are providing to foster students that will assist them to be academically successful if they attend college?

**RQ4.** What are the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about actions P-12 personnel could implement to assist more foster students to attend and be academically successful at a technical, two-year, or four-year college?

**IQ8.** What kinds of additional actions could P-12 personnel implement that could assist more foster students to apply to college?

**IQ9.** What kinds of additional actions could P-12 personnel implement that could assist foster students to be academically successful if they attend college?

**IQ10.** What challenges do P-12 schools face encouraging foster students to seek higher education?

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to data collection, a request to conduct the study was submitted to the Baker University Institutional Review Board on July 21, 2023. The Baker University IRB granted approval to conduct the study on August 1, 2023 (see Appendix A). Upon approval to conduct the study from the Baker University IRB, the researcher contacted the Greenbush Education Service Center and requested the names and contact information for superintendents in the Midwestern part of the state served by the agency.

Once names were procured, the researcher emailed the Invitation to Participate (see Appendix B) to identified superintendents. The Invitation to Participate indicated that the interview would be recorded. Also included in the Invitation to Participate was an overview of the study including the interview questions, the amount of time the interview would require, and a statement that participation in the study was voluntary and had no risks, discomforts, or compensation. In addition, the researcher indicated that participants could withdraw from the study at any time and could say that they did not want to respond to any question during the interview. The Invitation to Participate indicated that anonymity would be provided through assigning an anonymous code known only to the researcher (e.g., Participant A, Participant B, etc.) to each interview transcript and recording. This code would also be used in reporting the results of the study. The researcher also explained that each participant would receive a transcript of the interview to review for additions, omissions, or factual corrections.

Individuals who responded that they were interested in participating in the study were contacted via email to answer any additional questions they had about the study. The Consent Form (see Appendix C) and written interview questions were sent via email to each individual who indicated interest in participating in the study. The researcher had intended to conduct interviews in person or using Zoom. However, due to the timing of the request for an interview (the beginning of a new P-12 academic year), all participants requested an option to provide written responses to interview questions instead of trying to add another meeting to conduct the interview to an already overscheduled calendar. Several researchers including Airoidi (2018), Bampton and Cowton (2022), Caliandro

(2018), and Dahlin (2021) have reported that having respondents respond to emailed interview questions is a valid approach in qualitative research.

To validate the research questions, prior to providing the research questions to participants two reviewers familiar with qualitative research methods reviewed the interview protocol to ensure the questions were aligned with the research questions, were sufficient to gather the needed data, and to insure they were worded in such a way that made them easy to understand and respond to. Peer reviewer one was employed at a Midwestern public university. Peer reviewer two was employed at a private Midwestern university. Both reviewers were familiar with qualitative research design. The same two peer reviewers who examined the interview questions also participated in two pilot interviews. The two pilot interviews were conducted with peer reviewers to ensure accuracy of the questions and to refine the interview process.

Before participating in an interview, each study participant signed and emailed a consent form (see Appendix C) to the researcher. The consent form included the same information that was included in the invitation to participate. Responses to the interview questions were saved to a secure personal computer backed up on a thumb drive and kept in a locked safe. All data were kept for five years and then destroyed.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Data analysis involved following Creswell and Creswell's (2018) five steps for qualitative data analysis: organize and prepare the data, read and look at all the data to determine the overall meaning, code the data, identify themes, and develop a narrative to convey the findings of the data analysis. In this study, the researcher implemented Creswell and Creswell's first step by reviewing the written responses to each interview

question. Since participants wrote responses to the interview questions there was no need to prepare a transcript. This allowed the researcher to proceed to implementation of Creswell and Creswell's second step, read and look at all the data, to determine the overall meaning. This was accomplished by reading and re-reading the responses to each interview question multiple times. Creswell and Creswell's third step, code the data, was accomplished by reading the responses to the same question across all the transcripts and highlighting similar words or phrases with a colored marker. Unique words or phrases in responses were highlighted with a different colored marker. Review of the common responses to each question were written on a large piece of chart paper. This process was used to implement Creswell and Creswell's fourth step – identify themes. To implement Creswell and Creswell's fifth step, develop a narrative to convey the findings of the data analysis, each theme was described in a phrase or sentence. Direct quotes from participants were then used to describe each theme.

### **Reliability and Trustworthiness.**

Qualitative research deals with the experiences of the study participants. As opposed to quantitative research, qualitative research does not depend on numerical data to present evidence. “Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research” (Bhandari, 2023, para. 1). Validity is established by the ability of the interviewer to provide evidence that the research meets the three standards of qualitative research in that it is plausible, credible, and trustworthy. These indicators must be present for the researcher to defend the findings when challenged. In this study, plausibility,

credibility, and trustworthiness were assured through engaging peer reviewers familiar with qualitative research in reviewing the alignment of the interview questions with the research questions. In addition, each of the peer reviewers reviewed the interview questions to insure that each question was directly related to the research question. Peer reviewers also reviewed the interview questions for understandability. Once data analysis was completed, peer reviewers examined the written interview transcripts and data analysis and concurred with the results of the data analysis. The researcher made overt efforts to interpret the data in a professional and unbiased manner. These actions promoted reflexivity in the analysis and synthesis of data.

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher's interest in the P-12 superintendents' perceptions about the challenges of foster students and the actions of P-12 faculty and staff to encourage and support college attendance stemmed from his professional relationship with foster students while serving as a principal or superintendent in schools foster students were attending. The researcher in this study was not employed at any of the school districts where study participants were employed. The researcher was purposeful in obtaining objective data and took steps to eliminate bias by remaining objective and maintaining integrity throughout the study.

### **Limitations**

According to Price and Murnan (2004),

The limitations of the study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from the research.

Study limitations are the constraints placed on the ability to generalize from the

results, to further describe applications to practice, and/or related to the utility of findings that are the result of the ways in which the researcher initially chose to design the study, or the method used to establish internal and external validity or the result of unanticipated challenges that emerged during the study. (pp. 66-67)

Five limitations were identified for the current study.

1. Participants in the study provided written responses to the interview questions due to the number of activities they were engaged in at the beginning of a new school year. This format did not allow probing of responses for additional depth or clarification of the information provided. The written responses to interview questions may have limited the completeness of responses provided by participants.
2. The responses of the interview participants may have depended on their experiences working with foster students as a classroom teacher, principal, or superintendent. Not all foster care situations are alike, and statements made by those interviewed do not represent the views or experiences of all superintendents in the Midwest.
3. School districts differ in the number of P-12 personnel assigned to teaching or support role duties. The size of the district may have influenced the support services offered to foster students in and out of the classroom.
4. Research data were based on the perceptions of the respondents and their understanding of the questions. Data were also based on the perceived truthfulness of the participants answering the questions. Participants may

have had preexisting biases based on their experiences with students who were in foster care.

5. Participants in the current study included superintendents in one Midwestern state. Superintendents from other states in the Midwest and those from states outside the Midwest may not have similar perceptions about foster students.

### **Summary**

This chapter describes the methods used to conduct the current study. The research design, setting, sampling procedures, instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations were described. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data analysis.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This study examined perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state about challenges foster care students face as they consider attending a higher education institution, supports P-12 personnel are currently providing or could provide to encourage foster students to attend college, and the preparation provided to promote academic success for those who do matriculate to a higher education institution. Chapter 4 includes a summary of the demographics and descriptions of the Midwestern superintendents who participated in the study. Results of the analysis of interview transcripts are also included in this chapter.

#### **Descriptive and Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Ten superintendents of P-12 public school districts from one Midwestern state participated in this study. Five superintendents were from 1A school districts (10-110 students in grades 9-12), two were from 2A school districts (110-173 students in grades 9-12), two were from 3A school districts (173-322 (students in grades 9-12) and one was from a 4A school district (323-699) students in grades 9-12). All 10 participants had experience with foster students in their school districts. The number of foster students in their school districts ranged from 1 to 17 students. The superintendent from the largest school district (4A) reported that 10 foster students had attended high school during the past three years. The largest number of foster students who had attended school in the smallest district (1A) was 17. Superintendents were leaders of public-school districts in the south central (3), central (3), north central (2), northeast (1), and south central (1) portions of the Midwestern state in which the study was conducted.

Four themes were identified after the data analysis: challenges foster students face as they consider attending college, ways P-12 faculty and staff encourage foster students to attend college, supports P-12 faculty and staff are currently providing to foster students to assist them to be academically successful, and actions P-12 faculty and staff could implement to assist foster students to attend and be academically successful at a technical, two-year, or four-year college. Each of these themes are explained in the following sections. Direct quotes from respondents are included to provide examples for each theme.

### **Challenges Foster Students Face as They Consider Attending College**

All 10 respondents indicated that foster students who want to consider attending college need support – emotional, financial, and overcoming stereotypes associated with being a foster child. Participant H stated, “They do not have much, if any, family support going into college and are almost put into the world on their own without the tools to succeed in college.” According to Participant H, without the support of a solid home life, foster students feel like they don’t deserve to go on to higher education. Many times, their goal is to just get through the process, age out, and go on with their lives.

Participant A had a similar response to participant H and stated,

Sometimes the foster children in my experience have a hard time looking past next week because so many things in their lives have been temporary. Often, they may not have a model in their personal lives realizing the importance of continued education.

Participant F replied, “A challenge is getting the students to believe they are capable.

Many foster children have been misled by adults. Therefore, some are a little untrusting.”

According to Participant F, “Students don’t care what you know until they know you care.”

Participant F highlighted the financial burden most foster students have and stated, “I am sure the FAFSA would be overwhelming if parents have not lost parental rights and they can’t be contacted privately. Also, yearlong housing. Where do they go in the summer?” Participant J responded, “Knowing what resources are out there for them, and where to find those resources” articulates yet another struggle foster students have when considering the possibility of higher education. Even if the resources are there, where do they find them?”

Participant D commented, “I believe foster students face the challenge of being labeled. Many foster kids are seen as a challenge and not given the benefit of the doubt. They do not see a future for themselves and get very little guidance or direction.”

According to Participant D, “Without encouragement from a solid home life, many foster students don’t consider themselves higher education material.”

All study respondents indicated that academics can also be a challenge for foster students as the losses they suffer from frequent changes in residence put them behind their non-foster student classmates. Participant H stated, “Counselors, teachers, social workers, and other P-12 personnel try to help the foster students with academic and social needs the foster students would need to be successful in college”. Participant I stated, “Counselors help them one-on-one with their Individual Plans of Study and how their situation can lead to better scholarships.” According to Participant I, “Foster students don’t fit into the same mold as non-foster students and therefore must be given individualized instruction to help get them caught up with their peers.”

All respondents indicated that finding role models to encourage foster students to move on to higher education is another hurdle these students face. According to study participants many foster parents are not trained to help foster student navigate their journey toward higher education. Participant G commented, “Often they may not have a model in their personal lives who realizes the importance of continued education.” Study respondents also indicated that this is an area where P-12 educators must take a more active role for foster students.

All study respondents indicated that many times, foster students are not in one school long enough to establish a relationship with educators at the P-12 level. They explained that in these cases, great efforts must be made to teach the foster student to advocate for themselves. Finding and keeping that connection is vital to the success of the foster student entering higher education. Something as simple as a consistent email address could make a difference. Participant F offered what their school does to try and keep the lines of communication open. “We let them keep the school email address and contact them with words of encouragement and offer continued assistance if we can provide it.” According to Participant F, “Even if the foster student moves, they still have a solid connection they can turn to when needed. This offers an alternative connection since once a foster student leaves a school, DCF can no longer give the school information on that student.” Participant A shared their concern with staying in contact with former students and stated, “I think it would be great to be able to keep in touch with our foster children after they leave here. Sometimes that is impossible because DCF keeps the transfer information confidential. Allowing the students to keep their school email address opens up that opportunity to continue to communicate and help.”

Participant D expanded on this concept by stating, “We check on them a couple of times during their first year to see how they are doing.” Participant H added,

Hopefully, some P-12 teachers or staff stay in touch and make contact regularly with the foster students. If they could assist them in tutoring, encouraging them and assisting them to get help and how to go about it would be helpful. Checking in and staying in touch with a helping hand would seem to be the most helpful.

All study respondents indicated that most foster students are unaware they can attend a higher education institution in Kansas for free. According to study participants, many times, trying to navigate through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application process is enough to discourage many most students.

Superintendents indicated that P-12 educators step in to fill the foster students’ gap in information. Many of the participants in this study felt the FAFSA was a hurdle for foster students entering higher education. Participant B indicated P-12 educators in their school “help foster students complete the FAFSA.”

Participant D stated, “Having a FAFSA completion and college application night.”

Participant I delved deeper into the issue by explaining the lack of training foster parents have related to college attendance requirements.

Get the message out about cost of college for foster kids with their case managers. Foster parents are under pressure to provide a safe home environment and don’t have the background to understand how the college/post-secondary process works.”

All study participants suggested communication is the key to the success for foster students.

### **Ways P-12 Faculty and Staff Encourage Foster Students to Attend College**

All 10 respondents described ways that P-12 faculty and staff encourage foster students to attend college. Study participants indicated that the importance of high school counselors cannot be overstated. Participant B stated,

Counselors in my district function in loco parentis for many of our students - not so much in the legal sense, but they're taking kids on college visits, they're collecting items for the dorm room, they're moving kids into the dorms, they're helping them complete the FAFSA, they're stepping them through scholarship applications, they're calling to check in after college move-in to make sure the student is attending classes and eating regular meals.

More than half of the study respondents suggested that foster students in small schools may have an advantage over their peers in larger schools where counselors are overwhelmed by the sheer number of students they serve. According to these respondents, in the smaller districts, counselors and social workers may be more involved on a personal level than their counterparts in large districts just because of the smaller student body and time available to support students.

Participant D described several ways their high school helps foster students prepare for higher education,

Staff take them on college visits to see what is available to them; help them fill out applications and the FAFSA; help them make connections in the community where the college is located through churches and organizations. Staff start early by letting them know the possibilities and give them opportunities to see the community.

Participant C contributed several additional actions P-12 school faculty and staff provide to assist foster students to prepare for higher education that included, “Individual Plans of Study, mock interviews, interviews with panels of post-secondary students, financial aid night, etc.”

### **Supports P-12 Faculty and Staff are Currently Providing to Foster Students to Assist Them to be Academically Successful**

All 10 study participants stated that academics are usually not a strong area for foster students. Respondents described how important it is to find avenues foster students can take to overcome academic deficiencies. Participants noted that academic success is critical in effectively encouraging foster students to consider higher education.

Participant I said, “We help them one-on-one with their Individual Plans of Study and discuss how to apply for scholarships.” Participant H provided additional comments that illustrated how P-12 schools can encourage foster students to consider higher education and stated,

Counselors, teachers, social workers, and other P-12 personnel try to help the foster students with academic and social needs the foster students would need to be successful in college. Too often, this help seems to be limited to getting foster students through high school. My belief is the P-12 staff try to direct and support them [foster students] to what they feel would make the student most successful and a future contributing citizen. I do believe most staff members work hard to help foster students to succeed, yet it is difficult as a significant number of foster students are behind in where they should be in academics, have behavioral issues, and have other special needs.

Participant E described programs foster students who want to pursue a college education can participate in in their district. “We have numerous routes foster students who are interested in pursuing a college education can follow, and a fabulous counselor that treats all students as individuals. She provides the same opportunities and focus to all students.” Participant F listed specific programs their district has with local community colleges. “We have both Labette County and Neosho County Community Colleges work with them [foster students] through Talent Search. College Planning Conferences are attended as well.”

### **Actions P-12 Faculty and Staff Could Implement to Assist Foster Students to Attend and be Academically Successful at a Technical, Two-Year, or Four-Year College**

All study participants suggested that while their P-12 faculty and staff are currently very engaged in supporting foster students, additional efforts could be undertaken. Participant H explained,

Although to some extent, colleges now provide tutoring centers and advisors, P-12 generally provides more support to students in high school than college does. P-12 teachers and staff who develop relationships with the foster students and other students who are at-risk can help encourage the foster students in many ways as mentioned earlier with FAFSA applications, college applications and as much as anything, encouragement to help them.

Participant A acknowledged that intervening early is of great importance. This respondent stated,

I think we should direct our efforts as much as possible to help younger children in foster care to be successful in school and to be surrounded by positive adults at

school who care about them. Like every child, the younger they can be successful in school, the less likely they will be to be closed off to help when they are older. I feel it is important to help these children to overcome their trauma and to help meet social-emotional needs first. Once a relationship is built, and trust is formed, then the child or teen will be more likely to accept help and guidance for their future plans.

Participant D explained the importance of teaching skills foster students will need including “life skills, study skills, financial skills, and organizational skills.”

All study participants described challenges P-12 schools encounter in educating foster students. Participant I described a major challenge for P-12 schools and foster students, “They are not always there long enough to create a connection, so having a liaison with the foster parent is critical to the post-secondary success of foster students.”

Other respondents indicated that many times their hands are tied by a system that is broken. According to study participants, the lack of school counselors available to schools greatly hampers efforts to have a positive impact on foster students. Study participants indicated that many foster students have experienced significant trauma, have behavior or mental health challenges, and inconsistent schooling due to frequent foster family or school changes. According to study respondents, these issues contribute to poor academic achievement which results in the road to higher education being bumpy if not unreachable. Participant H emphasized the importance of providing foster students with college and career advising, advising on courses students should take to pursue that career, and providing caring adult advice and support. Since many times foster students

are behind in their academic progress, missing class is usually not an option. Participant H added, “This additional work with students happens after or before school.”

### **Summary**

Superintendents participating in this study indicated that foster students in P-12 schools need emotional support and assistance in overcoming stereotypes associated with being a foster student. All study participants noted that foster students are challenged to get through each day. This results in many foster students not believing that they are capable of academic achievement. Study participants indicated that P-12 faculty and staff provide significant support to foster students including taking them on college visits, helping them complete the FAFSA, and academic support including Individual Plans of Study. In addition to describing the actions P-12 faculty and staff are taking to support foster students, all of the study respondents also explained challenges P-12 schools face that make it difficult for foster students to attend college. According to the superintendents who participated in this study, inconsistent foster home placements, limited numbers of high school counselors and significant academic, behavioral, and mental health needs of foster students are challenges P-12 school faculty and staff encounter that make it difficult to prepare foster students for admission to and success in higher education. Chapter 5 includes the interpretation and recommendations for the study. This final chapter provides a study summary, findings related to the literature, and conclusions.

## Chapter 5

### Interpretation and Recommendations

This study investigated the perceptions of superintendents from a Midwestern state about the impact foster care has on students successfully transitioning to higher education. Chapter 5 is divided into three major sections. The first section provides a study summary which includes an overview of the problem, purpose statement and research questions, review of the methodology, and major findings. The second section includes how findings in the current study are related to the literature. Finally, the third section states the conclusions that include implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

#### Study Summary

This section contains a summary of the study, including an overview of the problem. Also included in this section is the purpose statement and research questions used in the study. The section concludes by reviewing the methodology as well as the major findings.

**Overview of the problem.** Courtney and Hook (2017) indicated that 80% of foster students would like to attend a technical, two-year, or four-year higher education institution. Dworsky (2017) reported that foster care youth are less likely to attend college and less likely to graduate if they do attend. According to Nathanael and Courtney (2017), “In the Midwest in 2017, 24% of foster youths in three Midwestern states were enrolled in college at age 19, compared to 56% of youths from a national sample” (para. 3). NFYI (2023) reported that fewer than 10% of foster students complete a higher education degree.

Foster students may encounter many challenges throughout the elementary and secondary school years that impact the ability to enroll in and complete a higher education degree. According to Patton (2018) many foster students experience a delay in being placed with a foster family. Bass (2017) described the lack of preparation of many foster parents to deal with the behavioral and mental health needs of foster students resulting in frequent transition to a different foster care setting. Lahey (2014), Stringer (2018), and Patton (2018) reported that frequent moves from foster home to foster home and school to school had a negative impact on the academic performance of foster students. Clements (2016) found that the average foster student is placed in three different foster families during the high school years. Dworsky (2017) reported that with each foster family to foster family or school to school move it was not uncommon for a delay to occur in the transfer of student records. Lahey (2014) indicated that student record delays have resulted in foster students not being placed in classes they need and lack of placement in special education if appropriate. Stringer (2018) reported that with each move, foster students lose an average of four to six months of academic growth. Dworsky (2017) indicated that due to mobility issues, foster youth are not well prepared for the academic rigor of higher education classes.

The challenges foster students experience, their poor trajectory in the elementary and secondary education system, and employment opportunities have been well researched. No studies have focused on the perceptions of school district superintendents about the efforts of P-12 personnel to encourage foster students to enroll in higher education and the preparation provided to prepare these students to successfully meet the academic demands of higher education classes.

**Purpose statement and research questions.** Four purposes aligned with four research questions guided this study. The first purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of P-12 superintendents about challenges foster students face as they consider attending college. The second purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions of P-12 superintendents about how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to consider attending college. The third purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of P-12 superintendents about the support P-12 personnel are currently providing to foster students to assist them to attend college. The fourth purpose of the study was to probe the perceptions of P-12 superintendents about what P-12 personnel could do to assist more foster students to attend college equipped with the academic knowledge to be successful in college classes.

**Review of the methodology.** A qualitative phenomenological research design with a social constructive framework was chosen for the study. “In social constructivism human interests are important for research purposes and knowledge is constructed through social interaction” (Adams, 2006, para. 4). This paradigm allowed the researcher to ask questions leading to the gathering of data from 10 Midwestern P-12 school superintendents who have had foster students enrolled in their school districts about challenges foster students face that can impact attending technical, two-year, or four-year colleges, efforts of P-12 personnel to encourage foster student to pursue college attendance, academic supports provided to P-12 personnel, and recommended actions P-12 personnel could provide to assist foster students to be prepared for college matriculation and academic success.

Once the IRB was approved by Baker University (see Appendix A), an Invitation to Participate (see Appendix B) was emailed to 25 Midwestern superintendents serving in school districts that have experience serving students in foster care. Names and contact information for participants were obtained from the Greenbush Education Service Center. All respondents had been a superintendent for a minimum of three years. Prior to conducting interviews with study participants, two external auditors reviewed the alignment between the interview protocol questions and the research questions. Both auditors were familiar with qualitative research and had conducted qualitative research studies.

The first 10 superintendents who indicated interest in participating in the study after receiving the Invitation to Participate were sent interview questions via email. Due to the activities associated with beginning a new school year, all 10 participants responded to the interview questions via email. All participants signed and returned a Consent Form (see Appendix C) with written responses to the 10 interview questions.

Creswell and Creswell's (2018) five steps for data analysis were used to analyze the data: organize and prepare the data for analysis, read or look at all the data, code the data, generate a description and themes, and represent the description and themes in the context of the study's narrative. Responses to interview questions were anonymized using a code (e.g. Participant A, Participant B, etc.) to insure confidentiality. Once data analysis was completed, the two external auditors who reviewed the interview protocol also evaluated the interview transcripts and theme identification. Both reviewers agreed with the results of the data analysis.

**Major findings.** Four themes were identified after data analysis: challenges foster students face as they consider attending college; ways P-12 faculty and staff encourage foster students to attend college; supports P-12 faculty and staff are currently providing to foster students to assist them to be academically successful; actions P-12 faculty and staff could implement to assist foster students to attend and be academically successful at a technical, two-year, or four-year college.

When asked about challenges foster students face, study respondents offered many responses. Study participants described the loss of academic achievement every time foster students move to a new foster family or new school. Further exasperating the situation, foster students are usually far enough behind in their academics they are not able to take college preparatory classes making it difficult for them to succeed early in their higher education experience. According to study participants, foster students usually do not have good role models to follow into higher education, and therefore do not have the self-confidence they need to succeed in higher education. Respondents indicated that all too often, foster students must advocate for themselves finding ways to attend a higher education institution. The path can be very daunting for students who are in a stable home, much less a foster student who must find their own way. Superintendents indicated that many times foster students are not aware of what benefits they are entitled to because of the lack of guidance from their foster parents and their case workers. Study respondents suggested that foster students have a hard time seeing past next week let alone next year. According to study participants, foster students lack the emotional and financial support that students outside of the foster care system receive from someone, usually parents. Something as simple as applying to a higher education

institution for a non-foster student becomes a major challenge for the foster student.

Without a support system, most foster students give up on the application process. This adds to the stereotypical image they are not destined to attend college.

P-12 staff often function in loco parentis for many foster students, not so much in the legal sense, but in assuming the duties of a parent in taking them on college visits, collecting items for their dorm rooms, helping them move into dorms, completing the FAFSA, helping them fill out scholarship applications, and even calling to check in on them once they are in college. Personnel in P-12 schools often create Individual Plans of Study for foster students that include a two-year after high school plan to give the foster student a sense of direction. According to study participants, most staff try to direct and support foster students to pursue areas of preparation that would make the student the most successful. These actions become difficult when one considers that many foster students have special needs in academics, social emotional issues, and behavioral issues. Study participants reiterated that frequent moves from foster home to foster home and school to school makes it more difficult for P-12 staff to have the time to work with the foster student before they are moved again and the process starts all over again.

All study participants echoed that while P-12 staff work diligently to ensure every student is well prepared for higher education, foster students present a much larger challenge. One of the first steps P-12 staff take to help foster students succeed is to teach them ways they can advocate for themselves. Since many foster students age out at 18, they quickly lose any advocates they might have had up to that point. P-12 faculty and staff work hard to support the development of independent living skills to foster students by teaching them study, life, and financial skills. They also work at helping the foster

student learn organizational skills that will help them once they are on their own and juggling academics with college and work life. Many P-12 institutions allow foster students to keep their school email address so faculty and staff can continue to offer encouragement and support for the foster student. P-12 faculty and staff also offer information on various career paths by offering career counseling and exploration opportunities. After helping them select a career path, P-12 faculty and staff then direct them to the courses they need to advance toward their selected career. Many times, the efforts P-12 faculty and staff offer to foster students entails before and after schoolwork with the students since missing class during the day could further hamper their efforts to maintain their academic levels. Respondents F and G stressed the importance of offering foster students financial literacy education to help them understand budgeting and responsible money management.

When asked what actions P-12 faculty and staff could implement that could assist more foster students to attend college, multiple suggestions were provided by study participants. Participant F stated their school district allows foster students to keep their school email so school personnel can keep in touch with foster students after they leave the school. Participant A stated, “This is difficult to do since the Department of Children and Families keeps the transfer information confidential.” Participant F indicated they make all graduating seniors apply to the local community college before completing high school. According to Participant F, “If the foster student chooses to enroll elsewhere, that is fine but at least they are enrolled somewhere.” Participant D stressed the importance of getting to know the foster student on a more personal level to help them feel more attached to staff members. Other responses related to actions P-12 faculty and staff are

currently engaged in included helping foster students fill out college applications and taking them on college visits, so they don't feel overwhelmed with the college process. Involving the foster family in the foster student's activities was mentioned by participant D as a very important action as it leads to a more stable environment for the foster student.

When asked about additional actions that could take the P-12 commitment to the next level, Participant H indicated that colleges should consider having a conduit to the P-12 schools that may help the higher education institution gain a better understanding of the needs of the foster student. According to Participant H, while many colleges offer tutoring centers, unless the student is an athlete or in a special program, foster students may not know about the availability of academic support. Participant E indicated that steps should be taken to encourage foster students to not dwell on their situation, which in most cases, they have little or no control over. Respondents A, D, and H shared the importance of keeping in contact with foster students once they enter the higher education world. Study participants indicated that follow up with foster students once they leave the district is sometimes difficult since the Department of Children and Families can't share information about a foster student once they leave the P-12 setting. According to study participants, it is difficult for foster students to make connections in different environments since they often do not have the opportunity to make those connections when they are moved around so much. According to respondent H, P-12 faculty and staff can act as an anchor for foster students if they take the opportunity to get to know the foster student and create a professional and personal connection with them. Knowing they have a person to turn to when they need help can be the difference

between a successful experience in higher education and a failed attempt. As with any successful educational experience, the human connection is vital. Foster students are less interested in what the P-12 faculty or staff person knows than knowing the staff member cares about them.

### **Findings Related to the Literature.**

Several researchers including Bass (2017), Dworsky (2017), Clements et al. (2005), Healey and Fisher (2011), Lahey (2014), and Stringer (2018) described some of the challenges foster students face as they pursue higher education opportunities. Healey and Fisher (2011) indicated that the lack of foster parent training leaves them ill-equipped to deal with the mental health needs of foster students. This often leads to alternate placements that require attending a new school, often in a different school district. Bass (2017) reiterated that the limited training foster parents receive to deal with the challenges they will face while fostering decreases the likelihood of students completing high school on time. The Midwestern state in which the study was conducted requires all foster parents to complete the MAPP training. Bass (2017) researched foster parent training programs and found that even though 13 states currently require MAPP training, it has not made a difference in the likelihood of a positive fostering experience for either the foster child or the foster parent. All participants in this study described the lack of training foster parents receive and the challenges they often experience in dealing with the mental health, social, and learning needs of the children placed in their care. According to study respondents, the academic impact of being in foster care disrupts academic learning resulting in significant academic deficits. These challenges often result in academic achievement that prohibits foster students from graduating from high

or college attendance. Participant D stated, “Foster kids face lots of challenges. Unless they are in a stable home for a long period of time, they may not get the information they need to enroll in college. If the foster family is not active, they must navigate a system that is not user-friendly to figure out what to do, where to go, how to apply.” Participant H expanded on this concept by responding,

They [foster students] have many challenges as most had a home environment that was not conducive to success in school. Many did not perform well and oftentimes did not take college prep-type courses. They do not have much, if any, family support going into college and are almost put into the world on their own without the tools to succeed in college.

Participant B described the extent P-12 educators are willing to go to help foster students and stated, “Staff in my district function in loco parentis for many of our students...not so much in the legal sense, but they're taking kids on college visits, they're collecting items for the dorm room, they're moving kids into the dorms, they're helping them complete the FAFSA, they're stepping them through scholarship applications, they're calling to check in after college move-in to make sure the student is attending classes and eating regular meals.”

Another challenge facing foster care students is their mobility. Stringer (2018) stated, “About one-third of foster care students change schools at least five times before they reach adulthood, and for each school change, they tend to fall four to six months behind” (para. 5). According to Clemens et al. (2018), “Statistics show most foster students move more than 3.46 times during their four years of high school” (para.1). According to Lahey (2014), foster students lose between four and six months of

academic progress every time they experience a school change. Clemens et al. (2018) stated, “As the average number of school changes increased, the odds of earning a high school diploma decreased and the odds of earning an equivalency diploma (e.g., GED) or exiting without a credential increased” (para. 1). All study participants described the academic challenges foster students experience as they matriculate through the elementary and secondary school years. Participant H captured the views of study participants when describing the impact of frequent foster home moves when they stated,

I do believe most staff members work hard to help the students to succeed, yet it is difficult as a significant number of foster students are behind in where they should be in academics, have behavioral issues, and have other special needs.

Participant C cited the instability of foster families and negative impact the transition from foster family to foster family has on academic performance. Participant I explained the challenge of being moved from school to school and how this impacts P-12 educators having a positive influence on foster students by saying, “They are not always there long enough to create a connection, so having a liaison with the foster parent is critical to the post-secondary success of foster students.”

Courtney and Hook (2017) indicated that 80% of foster students would like to attend a technical, two-year, or four-year higher education institution. Dworsky (2017) reported that foster care youth are less likely to attend college and less likely to graduate if they do attend. According to Nathanael and Courtney (2017), only a quarter of Midwestern foster youth compared to almost 60% of same aged students in three Midwestern states were enrolled in college at age 19 in 2016. NFYI (2023) reported that fewer than 10% of foster students complete a higher education degree. All participants

shared concerns about the limited number of foster students who graduate high school or who attend college. Participant H captured the major challenge related to pursuing a college education when they said,

Counselors, teachers, social workers, and other P-12 personnel try to help the foster students with academic and social needs the foster students would need to be successful in college. Too often, this help seems to be limited to getting foster students through high school.

Participant A shared the following, “Of the three foster students who have attended school in my district in the past 4 to 5 years, one graduated from Sterling College, and two are incarcerated.” Participant F further supported these findings by reporting, “In the last three years we only had 1 foster student graduate from high school. She was the only senior foster student still enrolled with us at the end of the term.”

Jeban (2017) reported that many foster students age out of foster care at the age of 18 and become instantly homeless. According to Jeban, these individuals are not aware of what benefits they are eligible to receive that will assist them with gainful employment or college tuition. All participants described the lack of knowledge foster students have related to college admission and attendance. Participant A replied, “Foster students need an advocate to help them navigate the ins and outs of planning for life after high school. This can be an overwhelming process for anyone, but especially for someone coming from foster care.” Participant F also described the challenge for foster students to look toward higher education by responding, “I am sure the FASFA would be overwhelming if parents have not lost parental rights and they can’t be contacted privately. Also, yearlong housing. Where do they [foster students] go in the summer?” Participant H commented,

“Counselors, teachers, social workers, and other P-12 personnel try to help the foster students with academic and social needs the foster students would need to be successful in college.”

## **Conclusions**

This study examined the perceptions of superintendents from one Midwestern state about their perceptions related to foster students – the challenges they face, efforts of P-12 faculty and staff to support academic achievement and college attendance, and challenges P-12 schools face in educating foster students. Ten participants responded to the interview protocol questions. This section includes implications for action, future research recommendations, and concluding remarks.

**Implications for action.** While all the superintendents who participated in this study provided responses to the interview questions asked, the majority of responses suggested strategies and actions for foster students that were similar to those that would be implemented for all students. There was a general lack of focus on the importance of trauma informed instruction for foster students. Foster students face unique challenges that most other students in the superintendents districts do not experience including placement in a foster home, frequent foster home changes, and interrupted placement in schools. The first suggested action is to provide trauma-informed training to all school superintendents and school counselors with an emphasis on the needs of foster students.

While P-12 administrators, faculty, and staff have encountered foster students in their schools, many individuals outside of P-12 settings may not be as familiar with the needs of foster students. To familiarize non-P-12 professionals with these challenges, an Executive Summary of this research will be shared with state legislators as well as

personnel in the Kansas Department for Children and Families and the Kansas Foster Care Licensing Division. Research will also be shared with the 10 participants and will be provided to superintendents throughout the state to help educate them on the state of foster care in the Midwestern state that was the setting for this study. In addition, suggested steps needed to improve the opportunities to foster students will also be provided. The researcher will also present the research results at local, state, and national conferences.

**Recommendations for future research.** Seven recommendations are provided for future research based upon the results of this study.

1. This research was conducted in one state located in the Midwest. It was conducted as a qualitative phenomenological research design. Ten superintendents serving in school districts in the Midwest participated in the study. Future research could be conducted using a larger number of participants in multiple states.
2. A qualitative research design was used in this study. Future research could be conducted using a quantitative research design. A qualitative study using a survey would increase the number of participants expanding our understanding about challenges foster students face in P-12 settings, the efforts of P-12 faculty and staff to build academic sufficiency, and the success of foster students in entering and succeeding in college.
3. The challenges of providing adequate foster parent training have been cited in the literature. Additional research is needed to inform the training of foster parents to better prepare them for their roles as foster parents. Training can

become a two-edged sword that may drive possible foster parents away if it is too difficult or time consuming for prospective parents to complete. At the same time, training needs to be complete enough to meet the needs of preparing foster parents to meet and support the unique needs of foster children.

4. Research is also needed to study the impact of removing children from harmful environments at an earlier age. While family preservation should be the first step in helping students in trauma filled households, state agency personnel may give parents too many chances to improve before removing children from the home. Future research could examine the advantages and disadvantages of removing a child from a harmful environment including when and under what circumstances removal is most beneficial.
5. Additional research could examine the role of foster care agencies in informing educational institutions on how best to meet the needs of foster students. Studies could focus on 'best practices' for improving academic achievement and social-emotional skill development.
6. Future research could also investigate the success of monitoring agencies hired to care for foster students. Kansas has appointed an oversight committee to report back to the legislature on the success or failure of these agencies. Qualitative research studies could provide the oversight committee and legislators with additional information about the experiences of foster children and their experiences in foster care and P-12 schools.

7. Every state has a different process for handling foster children. Kansas is one of only two states that have turned foster services entirely over to private agencies. Future research could explore what works for other states and agencies related to meeting the needs of foster students. Research could focus on foster parent training, educational strategies, and post P-12 opportunities for foster students.

**Concluding remarks.** The pursuit of higher education is at a crisis level for foster students. Too many foster students age out before they have the opportunity to go into higher education. Kansas has taken steps to improve the opportunity to attend college by offering free tuition and housing to students who are in foster care. More steps need to be taken to understand the trauma foster students go through while in foster care and finding ways for P-12 schools to better serve the needs of foster students so that they are equipped to enter college. While the private systems caring for foster students have many challenges, additional efforts need to be taken to find and keep case workers. Case workers are spread far too thin for them to do an effective job at serving the needs of our most vulnerable children. Constituents and legislators need to be informed about the plight of foster children to ensure adequate funding for the programs that serve them. Internal improvements need to be made to the foster care system as a whole to find ways to serve foster students with all they need to succeed. Society has come a long way from the orphan trains that relocated these students with total strangers away from their families. However, additional research is needed to identify actions that will improve the lives and academic performance of foster students.

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## Appendices

**Appendix A: Baker University IRB Approval**



Baker University Institutional Review Board  
July 25, 2023

Dear Larry Geist and Tes Mehring,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
  2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
  3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
  4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
  5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
  6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.
- If you have any questions, please contact me at [skimball@bakeru.edu](mailto:skimball@bakeru.edu) or 785.594.4563.

Sincerely,

Scott Kimball, PhD  
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee

Jiji Osiobe, PhD  
Tim Buzzell, PhD  
Susan Rogers, PhD

## **Appendix B: Invitation to Participate**

## Invitation to Participate

Date 7/28/2023  
Larry D. Geist  
Baker University

Dear Colleague:

My name is Larry Geist, and I am a doctoral candidate at Baker University in Overland Park, Kansas in the Graduate School of Education. For my dissertation I am conducting a qualitative study on the *Perceptions of Superintendents in a Midwestern State about foster students in P-12 schools*. Specifically, I am examining challenges foster students face as they consider attending college, how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to consider attending college, supports P-12 personnel are currently providing to foster students to assist them to be academically successful if they attend college, actions P-12 personnel *could take* to assist foster student to attend college and actions P-12 personnel *could take* to assist foster student to be academically successful if they attend college.

Participation in the study will involve an approximately 45-minute interview or you may simply respond to the questions below and return your answers to me via email. Please complete the signature form on the consent to participate form. I have provided a list of the interview questions below. After the interview, I will email you a copy of your interview transcript and you will have an opportunity to review your transcript to make any clarifications, additions, or omissions. You will also be sent a summary of the findings once the study is completed. You will have an opportunity to review the findings and share comments with the researcher. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

If you choose to participate, your interview transcript will be assigned an anonymous code (e.g., Participant 1) to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Your name will not be used in the research summary. During the interview, you may choose to withdraw from the study or indicate that you prefer not to respond to a question. There are no risks or discomfort associated with this study. You will not receive any compensation or benefits for participation. Your participation will benefit foster students, foster parents, and colleges and universities who serve foster students. Your involvement in the study will also broaden the research on this critical and understudied topic. If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me or my major advisor. Thank you for your time and consideration.

With regards,

Larry D. Geist, EdS  
620.778.5508  
lgeist@usd397.net

Major Advisor  
Dr. Tes Mehring  
tmehring@bakeru.edu

### **Interview Questions**

1. What is the classification of your school district (1A, 2A, etc.)?
2. How many high school teachers are employed in your district?
3. How many foster students have attended high school in your district in the past three years?
4. How many of these foster students have gone on to college, vocational technical school, or received a certificate of completion from a trade school?
5. In your opinion, what challenges do foster students face as they consider the possibility of attending college?

6. What are some examples of how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to attend college?
7. What are some examples of support P-12 personnel are providing to foster students that will assist them to be academically successful if they attend college.
8. What kinds of additional actions could P-12 personnel implement that could assist more foster students to apply to college?
9. What kinds of additional actions could P-12 personnel implement that could assist foster students to be academically successful if they attend college?
10. What challenges do P-12 schools face encouraging foster students to seek higher education?

## **Appendix C: Consent Form**

## CONSENT FORM

Please read the following information carefully before deciding if you are willing to participate in this research.

### **Purpose of the research:**

This qualitative study is being undertaken to research the perceptions of superintendents in a Midwestern state *about foster students in P-12 schools*. Specifically, I am examining challenges foster students face as they consider attending college, how P-12 personnel are encouraging foster students to consider attending college, supports P-12 personnel are currently providing to foster students to assist them to be academically successful if they attend college, actions P-12 personnel *could take* to assist foster student to attend college and actions P-12 personnel *could take* to assist foster student to be academically successful if they attend college.

### **What will be the expectations of participants?**

Participants will be expected to provide written responses to 10 questions (four descriptive and six open ended) to understand perceptions about the challenges of foster students and their experiences in P-12 settings that assist them to consider attending college and be academically successful.

### **Risks:**

There are no risks anticipated to the participant in this study. If the participant becomes uncomfortable with an interview question, the participant may that question and go on to the next interview question.

### **Benefits:**

Participants will receive no compensation for taking part in the interview.

**Confidentiality:**

Participant confidentiality will be kept at the highest level possible. At no time will the identity of a participant be revealed to anyone outside of the interviewer. Confidential codes (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) will be used to maintain confidentiality and anonymity and to distinguish participants from one another. Transcribed interviews and will be kept on a thumb drive kept in a locked file accessible only to the researcher and will be destroyed five years after completion of the study.

**Participants and Withdrawal:**

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and the participant will be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time if they so choose. Participants wishing to withdraw may do so by simply requesting to be removed from the study and no questions will be asked.

**To contact the researcher:** Larry D. Geist (620) 778-5508 [LarryDGeist@stu.bakeru.edu](mailto:LarryDGeist@stu.bakeru.edu).

**Agreement:**

The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty. My signature below indicates agreement to participate in the study

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_