

TRENDS & BEST PRACTICES

Impacting the Foster Care Community in 2026



first star
putting students first

WHO IS FIRST STAR?

First Star began in 2000 as a policy organization advocating for children and youth who experienced abuse or neglect and lacked a voice in decisions shaping their lives. In 2011, First Star launched a direct-service Academy model that brings high school youth in foster care onto partnering college campuses to receive long-term mentoring, academic support, and life skills training.

Since then, First Star has supported more than 3,000 youth and young adults impacted by foster care, with 96% of First Star scholars graduating high school and 90% pursuing higher education. Through our four core pillars – *Academies, Alumni Services, STEAM, and Coalition Building* – we empower youth in foster care by replacing instability with consistent guidance, meaningful opportunities, and sustained investments that promote long-term success.

ACADEMIES | ALUMNI SERVICES | STEAM VIRTUAL LEARNING | COALITION BUILDING

Leading the Way: First Star's Impact



3,000+ youth served
since 2011



96% of First Star Scholars
graduate from high school



90% of First Star Scholars
enroll in higher education

TRENDS IMPACTING THE FOSTER YOUTH COMMUNITY

PREVENTATIVE FAMILY SUPPORT, KINSHIP CARE & HOLISTIC STABILITY

A significant trend in foster care is the focus on preventative family supports and kinship care, which is reflective of foster youths' need for holistic stability. Youth need access to stability in their schools, relationships, and emotional support, not just within their housing.



In 2024, it was reported that 39% of all foster youth nationwide were placed with relatives or kin, placing significant responsibility on grandparents and extended family caregivers.

As kinship placements increase, programs such as the Kinship Guardian Assistance Payment (Kin-GAP) in California have been put in place to help offer financial assistance to family members providing long-term care to foster youth. This is similar to the Guardianship Assistance Program in Florida that supports caregivers for former foster youth with monthly payments. This is a step in the right direction at the state level. However, despite financial assistance, caregivers still face many challenges, highlighting the need for expanded caregiver assistance resources. This trend underscores the opportunity—and responsibility—for organizations like First Star to support both scholars and the caregivers who anchor their stability.



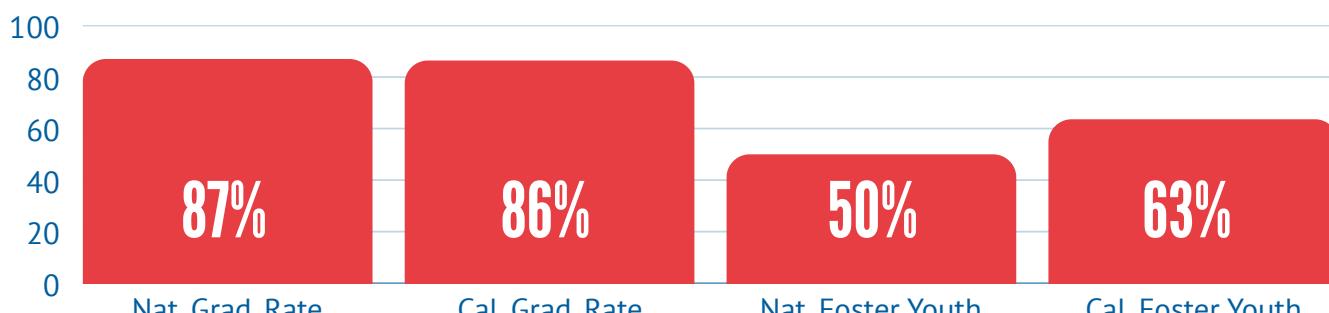
First Star's model of mentorship, caregiver engagement, and long-term stability already aligns with the core values of kinship care. By expanding more caregiver-focused resources within First Star, the organization strengthens the "whole-scholars" approach and provides youth with the stability that is essential for their success.

First Star is actively achieving this is through the Modeling Permanency Project. This project is designed to strengthen permanency and caregiver support programming within First Star programs by providing consistent hands-on, structured support to help scholars in First Star programs and their caregivers achieve sustainable, holistic stability.

Source: Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network, Kinship/Grandfamilies Data, <https://www.gksnetwork.org/kinship-data>; Source: California Department of Social Services, Kinship Guardian Assistance Payment (Kin-GAP) Program, <https://www.cdds.ca.gov/inforesources/foster-care/kinship-guardianship-assistance>; Source: The Florida Senate, 2025 Florida Statutes - Title V - Chapter 39 - Section 6225, <https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2025/39.6225>

IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND SUPPORTING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Another major trend is the increasing emphasis on educational access as a primary pathway for foster youth to create stable futures. In the past couple of years, states have expanded tutoring, mentoring, and school-based support, and we are beginning to see the results.



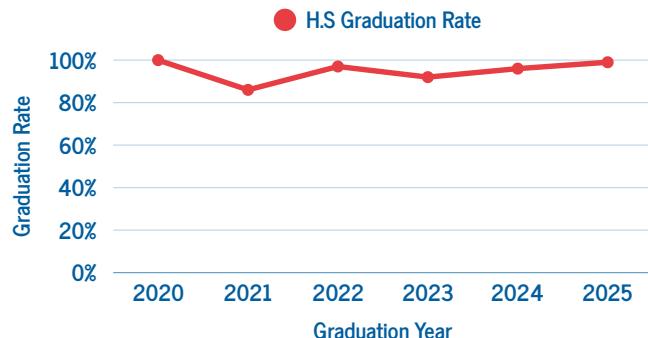
California's high school graduation rate for foster youth hit 63.6% in 2024.

California's graduation rate for foster youth in 2024 is still lower than their peers, which was 86.7, but shows meaningful progress compared to a few years ago. There is also more focus on what happens after high school; this includes not only college, but also trade programs, short-term credentials, workforce training, and military opportunities. Post-secondary education is only one of many viable paths; for example, 4% of First Star scholars who graduated in June 2024 entered the workforce.

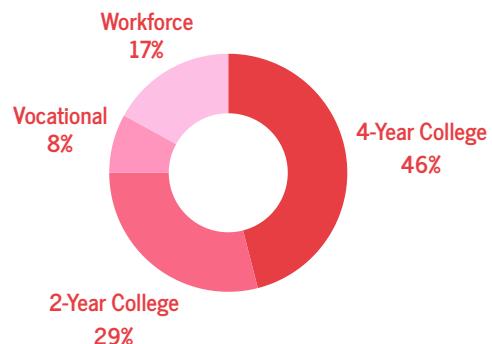
This shift presents an opportunity for First Star to deepen partnerships with community colleges, trade schools, and military programs to make sure every scholar's decision is supported and resources are provided. Scholars frequently express a strong desire for real choices and clear guidance, especially when facing the transition to adulthood on their own. Programs like Chafee ETV and campus support centers are beneficial, but many students still find the system confusing or overwhelming.

This is where First Star aligns directly with emerging best practices. The First Star college readiness model, mentoring, and long-term relationships offer the steady academic and emotional support that research shows can make a difference.

First Star has had a 95% or higher high school graduation rate since 2020, compared to just 50% nationally.



Post High School Graduation Pathways



To further address persistent gaps in transition-age supports, First Star is expanding its Alumni Services program. Many scholars who graduate from the program enter an unfamiliar world that is built with the odds stacked against them. The alumni program provides ongoing guidance, community connection, and resource navigation to alumni as they explore adulthood, careers, and education pathways.

Source: California School Dashboard, State of California Academic Engagement, Graduation Rate of Foster Youth, <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2024/academic-engagement#graduation-rate>
Source: Information above gathered from Internal First Star 2024 Graduating Class Report

CHANGING NONPROFIT FUNDING PATTERNS & THE PUSH FOR MEASURABLE IMPACT

The nonprofit sector is facing increasing financial volatility, and foster youth organizations are no exception. Federal grant delays, budget negotiations, and changing agency priorities make it more difficult than ever for nonprofits to depend on a single source of funding.



According to a 2025 Urban Institute survey, approximately a third of nonprofits were experiencing grant freezes or delays. This heightens the demand for data-driven results and provides an opportunity for communities to come together to work on supporting the next generation of young people.

This is a challenge for nonprofits, but it also represents an opportunity to build a more sustainable system for foster youth through collective action. Sustainable solutions require shared leadership!



First Star has taken the initiative by strengthening its Coalition Building pillar, convening partners to align strategies, share data, and pursue collective impact. This collective impact improves coordination, addresses service gaps, and supports data-informed decision-making.

By creating a structure for organizations to come together, it ensures that foster youth are being advocated for at the local, state, and federal levels. By focusing on addressing challenges through community-based solutions, collective work can also mitigate the financial challenges that nonprofits have been facing.

Source: Urban Institute, How Government Funding Disruptions Affected Nonprofits in Early 2025, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/how-government-funding-disruptions-affected-nonprofits-early-2025#:~:text=How%20Prevalent%20Were%20Government%20Funding,receiving%20a%20stop%20work%20order>