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Foster children turn 18, then turned aside

John Johnston's <http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?Dato=20090522&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=905230339&Ref=AR> target="_new">profile of **Quatez Scott** tells the story of a remarkable young man's determination to succeed. Growing up in the child welfare system and then going to college isn't just an achievement, it is an epic quest.

According to a Pew research study, about 24,000 children per year "age out" of the child welfare system in the U.S. They turn 18 and are "emancipated."

According to the Pew study, within two years of turning 18:

25 percent of those 24,000 kids will be incarcerated.

20 percent will be homeless.

Only 58 percent of them will have finished high school, compared with 87 percent of the general population.

Only 3 percent of the total will earn a college degree.

"Our figures pretty much match the national numbers," said Moira Weir, director of the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services.

About 120 to 150 kids are "graduated" from the system every year in Hamilton County. Only about half finish high school. Last year, only three - not 3 percent, just three - went on to any post-high-school education.

Those of us with children know that parenting seldom ends at the child's 18th birthday. We expect to remain connected to our children's lives, to continue to help them, to support them - certainly emotionally and probably financially. We expect to hear from them when they are homesick, or broke, or happy.

For most children of the "system," whatever supports they had with foster parents or caseworkers get cut at 18.

"I hate that term 'emancipated,'" said Greg Vehr, vice president for governmental relations at the University of Cincinnati. "If you are in foster care and turn 18, you are not emancipated. You are thrown to the wolves."

The starkness of the numbers has brought together a useful coalition of UC and Hamilton County officials to try to do something. Weir, Vehr, County Commissioner Greg Hartmann and Lawrence J. Johnson, dean of the UC College of Education, have formed the Higher Education Mentoring Initiative, which aims to match those aging out of the child welfare system with educational opportunities at UC, Cincinnati State and Great Oaks vocational school. The first step is to tell the kids about their options. "Most of them have never had a conversation where someone has said 'Education is a possibility for you,'" Weir said.

Those possibilities will be outlined to teenagers in Hamilton County's system at an open house May 30 with representatives of UC. UC wants to match up interested students with mentors already enrolled in the College of Education. The school also hopes to house those who enter in its Generation I dorm complex, helping create home and peer support structures for the students.

Given the existing statistics, just bringing two or three students into such a program would double the current rate of "emancipation" success.

These are our children. We, as a society - through the courts, the cops, the social workers - decided to step into their lives because they needed something better than what they had. We shouldn't stop parenting them just because they turn 18.

David Wells is editorial page editor of the Enquirer; e-mail dwells@enquirer.com
