Youth Engagement in Policy Profile: Georgia EmpowerMEnt

Jessica Conway, Kyra Stoute, Deven Rudy-Johnson, Ja'Chelle Ball, Amy McKlindon, and Samantha Holquist

Georgia EmpowerMEnt's Policy Council advocated for SB 107 and formed the Tuition Waiver Coalition to expand access to postsecondary education for young people with foster care experience.

Executive Summary

Georgia EmpowerMEnt is an initiative housed within the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC), founded by current and former young people with foster care experience to improve Georgia's foster care system. Based on survey input from other youth and interest from the youth advocates, Georgia EmpowerMEnt identified postsecondary education as its primary area of focus.

In 2021, Georgia EmpowerMEnt's Policy Council, comprised of youth advocates who are supported by MAAC staff, successfully advocated for the passage of Senate Bill (SB) 107, which provides students with foster care experience with tuition waivers to attend vocational colleges. Since 2021, the Policy Council has continued to advocate for expanded access to postsecondary education by forming the Tuition Waiver Coalition with other organizations. The Tuition Waiver Coalition seeks to extend the tuition waiver to four-year state postsecondary institutions and make it possible for young people to use both the tuition waiver and other forms of financial support for students with foster care experience. Across both efforts, youth advocates met with decision makers, collaborated with partners, and raised awareness of these issues. Youth advocates have been supported by a variety of partners, including MAAC staff, partner organization staff, a legal consultant, and a communications consultant. Social work students have provided data for advocacy, and young people have received training on strategic sharing of their stories, the policy process, communication, and collaboration. Young people value the ways in which MAAC staff care for their holistic well-being and advocate on their behalf.

In addition to the policy outcomes of passing SB 107 and forming the Tuition Waiver Coalition, the young people on the Policy Council reported personal outcomes such as an increased sense of belonging, personal growth, and professional development opportunities; organizational outcomes such as stronger relationships between Georgia EmpowerMEnt and partner organizations; and community outcomes such as increased awareness of the issues facing young people with foster care experience. As Georgia EmpowerMEnt's youth advocates looked ahead to the future, they were preparing for the upcoming legislative session and drafting suggested legislative language to address gaps in SB 107.

Introduction

In recent years, policy advocates and decision makers have increasingly turned to young people with lived experience navigating youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, employment) to inform policy.[i, ii] The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth and Opportunity Youth Initiatives ("Initiatives") have prioritized grantmaking to organizations that engage youth in their policy efforts. Child Trends partnered with the Initiatives and five of their grantee organizations—including Georgia EmpowerMEnt—to explore the roles youth play in the policy process, factors that support or hinder authentic youth engagement, and the outcomes associated with authentic youth engagement. Georgia EmpowerMEnt and the other four participating organizations each identified one youth and one adult representative from their respective organizations to serve on the Research Group, which met regularly throughout this project to participate in the design of the study, data analysis, and dissemination of findings (see Methodology and Data).

Child Trends built on existing frameworks[iii, iv] to refine the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework (Framework), which was adapted based on the experiences of the Research Group and findings from this study. The Framework details (1) the roles youth play in the policymaking process, (2) the stages at which youth are engaged, (3) how organizations support and empower youth, (4) local contextual factors that influence authentic youth engagement, and (5) how authentic youth engagement influences outcomes. This Framework guided data collection and analysis and may serve as a tool for readers to examine their own work and opportunities to expand and support authentic youth engagement in the policy process.

This brief applies the Framework to Georgia EmpowerMEnt's experiences engaging young people to advocate for expanded access to postsecondary education for young people with foster care experience. Each section begins with a brief overview of the Framework; for a more detailed overview, see the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework.

Definitions:

- **Youth or young people**: These terms are used interchangeably to refer to youth and young adults with lived experience navigating the child welfare, education, employment, and other youth-serving systems. For Georgia EmpowerMEnt, youth advocates are typically ages 14 to 26.

- **Authentic youth engagement**: Youth are active partners in shaping decisions, policies, and programs. They are empowered and valued as contributors, co-creators, and decision makers in their communities and intentionally supported in these roles.

- **Policy process**: Policy identification, formulation, advocacy, and implementation. This study focused on local and state policies, including legislative and administrative policies.

Georgia EmpowerMEnt's advocacy

Georgia EmpowerMEnt was founded by young people with foster care experience and brings together youth advocates and their adult supporters to create positive change in the foster care system. It is an initiative of the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC) which is based in Atlanta, Georgia, and supports youth advocacy efforts and leadership opportunities statewide. Georgia EmpowerMEnt has primarily focused on expanding access to postsecondary education for young people with foster care experience, which they prioritized based on survey input from young people and interest from the youth advocates.

Georgia EmpowerMEnt's Policy Council, comprised of youth advocates and supported by MAAC staff, successfully advocated for [Senate Bill 107](#) in 2021. SB 107 provides tuition waivers to students with foster care experience attending vocational colleges in the Technical College System of Georgia. The Policy Council provided testimony at the Georgia State Capitol, worked with partner organizations to raise awareness, and met with key stakeholders.

Following SB 107's enactment, the young people on the Policy Council have continued to advocate to fill gaps left by the legislation and expand access to postsecondary education for young people in Georgia with foster care experience. Specifically, they are advocating to extend the tuition waiver to four-year state postsecondary institutions and make it possible for young people to use both the tuition waiver and Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) to cover the cost of tuition.[1] In pursuit of these goals, Georgia EmpowerMEnt developed the Tuition Waiver Coalition alongside public and private organizations with aligned missions in the postsecondary access arena, including the Division of Family and Children Services as well as academic institutions. As part of the Tuition Waiver Coalition, young people have worked with adult supporters to study similar policies in other states and meet with decision makers in the university system and staff from the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget.

> **This profile focuses on the following policy win:** Youth advocates, as part of Georgia EmpowerMEnt's Policy Council, advocate to expand access to postsecondary education for young people in foster care or with foster care experience. Young people advocated for SB 107 (2021), which provides tuition waivers for vocational colleges, and later formed the Tuition Waiver Coalition alongside partner organizations to continue to advocate for expanded postsecondary financial support.

How Were Youth Involved?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

There are many different roles that youth may play in the policy process as they share their lived expertise. Their roles may continuously shift over time and depending on the activity. In this study, youth roles were organized into:

- **Speaking**: Adults lead policy change, and youth share their ideas and opinions for policy change
- **Co-designing**: Youth and adults partner to lead policy change
- **Designing**: Youth lead policy change and adults assist

Youth often start in speaking roles and with scaffolding, support, and intentional organizational shifts in leadership from adults to youth, move into co-design and design roles over time.[v]

Youth may play these roles at different stages within the policy process, which we organized into four stages for the purposes of this study:

- **Policy identification**: Identifying the problem and gathering background information
- **Policy formulation**: Formulating policy solutions, including drafting policy
- **Policy advocacy**: Advocating for policy change through a variety of mechanisms such as building coalitions, educating decision makers, and building public awareness
- **Policy implementation:** Monitoring and supporting implementation of policy changes

---

[1] [Education and Training Vouchers](#) provide additional financial support to students with foster care experience.

Georgia EmpowerMEnt engages young people in activities that cut across speaking, co-designing, and designing. For example, young people reviewed legislative language drafted by adults (speaking), co-lead meetings of the Tuition Waiver Coalition (co-designing), and continue to organize and conduct meetings with decision makers to educate them on the postsecondary needs and experiences of young people with foster care experience (designing).

Over the last several years, young people on the Policy Council have been informed of or directly involved in all aspects of the policy process. The Policy Council informed the initial advocacy strategy to pass SB 107, and then, as part of the Tuition Waiver Coalition, they continued to shape efforts to address gaps left by SB 107 and further expand access to financial assistance for postsecondary education. Most of the activities described by interviewees relate to policy advocacy, including meeting with decision makers, coalition building, testifying before government bodies, and strategic planning. See Figure 1 below for examples of youth roles and activities.

"So I helped lead focus groups, helped do research on outcomes and things for former foster care alumni. So basically, what are the rates of youth that want to go to postsecondary education or technical school and what are the rates of those that actually attempt? What are the barriers to entry? […] What are the outcomes in terms of housing, health care, things like that, If they don't achieve some postsecondary education? So I worked within that group, speaking to the Senate, speaking to the legislators… Finding and talking to actual youth who had attempted school, were in school, or who hadn't, and why they couldn't." **- Young person**

Figure 1. Youth Roles and Activities in Supporting SB 107 and Forming the Tuition Waiver Coalition

Youth Roles	Stage of the Policy Process			
	Policy Identification	Policy Formulation	Policy Advocacy	Policy Implementation
Speaking	Youth surveys informed GA EmpowerMEnt's initial focus on postsecondary education.	Youth reviewed SB 107 legislative language drafted by adults.		
Co-Designing	After the passage of SB 107, youth worked alongside other members of the Tuition Waiver Coalition to identify gaps to inform their next advocacy steps.	Youth helped lead focus groups and do research on postsecondary educational outcomes for former foster youth to inform the policies.	Adult supporters help connect youth with relevant stakeholders in their network (e.g., postsecondary school administration, government officials, advocates from other states) to build relationships and support to expand access to postsecondary education. Youth and adults on the Tuition Waiver Coalition strategically plan advocacy efforts together (e.g., drafting an advocacy narrative with youth testimonials and an advocacy roadmap). Youth co-lead Tuition Waiver Coalition meetings alongside MAAC staff and other adult supporters.	Youth collect data (e.g., youth surveys, peer-to-peer listening sessions, focus groups) and use their own lived experience to inform legislators and the Division of Family & Children Services about SB 107 implementation and the consequences of students not being able to use ETVs and the waiver simultaneously.
Designing			Youth organize and conduct meetings with decision makers such as state legislators and the stakeholders in the university system Board of Regents. Youth used their existing relationships (e.g., other youth advocates, other organizations) and networking events to educate potential partners.	

How Did Georgia EmpowerMEnt Empower and Support Youth?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

Organizations create environments that empower youth to engage in the policy process by implementing supportive structures and facilitating meaningful connections.

- **Structures** include:
  - o **Centering youth** in the organization's work by adopting specific frameworks (e.g., holistic well-being framework) or broader values related to shifting decision-making power and leadership to youth and viewing youth as experts.
  - o Implementing **practices** that support authentic youth engagement, including recruitment strategies, regular meeting structures, mutual respect between adults and youth, safe spaces where youth feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences, flexible and accessible participation options, regular debriefing of youth experiences, and transparent communication.
  - o Providing **resources** to youth, such as financial compensation and transportation to facilitate participation, connecting youth with external resources to meet their individual needs, training youth and adults, and equipping youth with data and information.
- **Connections** include:
  - o **Peer support**: Youth foster an inclusive community, build relationships, and provide emotional support to one another when needed.
  - o **Adult support**: Adults develop mentoring relationships with youth and connect youth with external resources to support their engagement.
  - o **Connection to future benefits**: Youth have access to professional development opportunities such as internships and networking opportunities.

For Georgia EmpowerMEnt, **adult support** was the most common connection identified. Young people received support from MAAC staff, staff from partner organizations in the Tuition Waiver Coalition, a legal consultant, and a communications consultant. Young people received support from MAAC staff on both the policy process and their holistic well-being. Young people described feeling cared for and advocated for when MAAC staff stepped in to address other adults treating them paternalistically (e.g., other adults talking *at* the young person instead of *with* them). MAAC staff mediated between young people and other adult partners when needed. Staff from partner organizations supported young people through trainings, capacity-building support, and networking opportunities.

Within structures, **data and information** and **youth training** were most prevalent. Social work students

> "And even when there's times where we like, hey, y'all jumped ahead of us, this wasn't youth voice, the staff have reevaluated themselves and said "hey, my bad," like 'cause, they really hold youth voice super seriously and they're accountable to it as they expect us to be accountable to what we say we gonna do too. And so it's a mutual, mutually beneficial relationship. And also if there's ever an issue […] between a young person and a staff member, there's always been a middle ground conversation where there's a mediator in the midst of it. Now, sometimes we don't like the outcomes, but […] they aim their best to be as fair as possible and to make sure that everybody's voice is heard."
> **– Young person**

and partners from other organizations provided data on young people's needs and policy solutions from other states to inform the youth advocates' efforts. MAAC staff, young people, and partners provided ongoing training on topics including strategic sharing (i.e., telling your story in a way that minimizes retraumatization), the policy process, communication, and collaboration. For additional examples of Georgia EmpowerMEnt's organizational strategies to support youth advocates, see Figure 2.

Figure 2. Organizational Strategies Used by Georgia EmpowerMEnt to Empower and Support Youth Advocates

Structures		
Centering Youth	**Practices**	**Resources**
• "Nothing about us without us" philosophy that centers youth • Focus on restoration and healing for youth • Staff strive to ensure youth are not tokenized in any setting	• **Mutual respect** (adult to youth and peer to peer) • **Regular meetings** with established norms, standing agenda items, activities to promote learning and connection, and meeting notes • **Safe spaces** to share, ask questions, and hold one another accountable both in and outside of meetings • **Recruitment** of new members through word of mouth, conferences, and partner organizations • **Communication** platform to connect between meetings • **Flexible opportunities** for participation • Regular group check-ins and **debriefing** • Celebrating incremental wins in the policy process youth milestones	• **Data** provided by social work students and partner organizations • Group and one-on-one **training for youth** (e.g., on strategic sharing, the policy process) • **Supportive resources**, including compensation and concrete supports (e.g., transportation, clothing for meetings)
Connections		
Adult Support	**Peer Support**	**Future Benefits**
• MAAC staff, partner organization staff, and legal and communications consultants provided support • Staff holistically care for youth and provide individualized support • Staff hold other adults accountable to youth and mediate any conflicts	• Older youth support younger youths' growth in advocacy (e.g., cheering them on, helping them draft emails, emotional support, mentorship) • Shared experience of foster care helps youth to relate to each other and build relationships • Peer relationships extend outside of Georgia EmpowerMEnt	• Professional development (e.g., networking, skill building) • Connection to other opportunities • Preparation for graduate school

While most of the identified strategies supported, rather than hindered, authentic youth engagement, interviewees did identify a handful of challenges. One interviewee reflected that while young people received training, more could have been done to prepare them for the realities and often long-term horizons for legislative change. Interviewees also spoke about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth advocacy (e.g., difficulty scheduling focus groups). Interviewees described their efforts to ensure diversity of young people's perspectives (e.g., from marginalized communities, group homes, rural areas); prevent tokenization of young people (i.e., making sure they are involved in decision making); and support young people in navigating their own experiences of trauma (e.g., debriefing after testifying or sharing stories, checking in on their mental health), all of which were identified as challenges in authentic youth engagement efforts.

What Local Factors Helped or Hindered Youth Engagement?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework
Local contextual factors include any characteristics of the local environment (e.g., political, geographical, historical) that help or hinder authentic youth engagement in the policy process. In this study, contextual factors were organized into five categories: • **Stakeholder and partner engagement**: Stakeholders' and partners' receptivity to and engagement with youth • **Political landscape**: The effect of local and/or state politics (e.g., majority political party's policy priorities) on youth engagement and state and local policies • **History of youth engagement**: Historical and recent examples of youth engagement in the community • **Philanthropic/private support**: Funder investments in youth engagement • **Historical local and systemic inequities**: Inequitable access to supports and resources • **Geography and infrastructure**: Physical landscape and infrastructure (e.g., transportation) available to support youth engagement

In discussions of Georgia EmpowerMEnt's youth engagement, three local factors were noted frequently: (1) stakeholder and partner engagement, (2) political landscape, and (3) history of youth engagement.

Stakeholder and partner engagement. The young people on Georgia EmpowerMEnt's Policy Council have worked in close collaboration with partner organizations on the Tuition Waiver Alliance and social work graduate students to advance their advocacy priorities after the passage of SB 107. Additionally, postsecondary leaders (e.g., the Board of Regents and Chancellor's office of the University System of Georgia); nonprofit leadership (e.g., of Fostering Success Act, Inc.); and state representatives (e.g., House and Senate leadership in the Georgia General Assembly) have broadly responded positively to young people's efforts to engage with them.

Political landscape. At the same time, young people described challenges in engaging some elected officials and other stakeholders. They described meetings with state representatives and other stakeholders where young people felt dismissed or disrespected. A bill expanding access to tuition waivers that was passed by the legislature was vetoed by the governor. Additionally, young people also faced challenges navigating the budget process and deadlines for the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, impacting when and how support is garnered for tuition waivers among 4-year universities.

History of youth engagement. Despite these challenges, Georgia EmpowerMEnt has benefited from prior youth engagement efforts in Georgia. Beyond gathering input from young people through multiple surveys over time, young people have been engaged through townhalls, conferences, advisory boards, and panel discussions hosted by various organizations engaging young people across a range of topics and projects. Georgia EmpowerMEnt was able to recruit young people and garner support for their advocacy efforts through this collaborative infrastructure.

What Outcomes Did Youth Achieve?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework
Authentic youth engagement in the policy process can lead to changes at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels. This project focused specifically on organizational and policy outcomes; however, we share examples across all relevant levels: • **Policy outcomes**: Administrative and/or legislative policy changes, and the intermediate steps that lead to these changes (e.g., increased decision maker awareness, new coalitions) • **Community outcomes**: Changes within the community (e.g., how youth are engaged by other entities, shifting community narratives and mental models of youths' strengths and needs, and more equitable access to services) • **Organizational outcomes**: Changes in how the organization engages youth • **Youth outcomes**: Changes for individual youth (e.g., increased self-efficacy; skill development, including transferable skills; and sense of belonging)

Georgia EmpowerMEnt's Policy Council achieved outcomes across all four domains in their efforts to expand access to postsecondary education, with policy outcomes cited most frequently. See the table below for the full list of outcomes.

Table 1. Outcomes of Authentic Youth Engagement

Outcomes	
Policy	• **Legislation**. SB 107 was enacted in 2021, which provides a tuition waiver to vocational colleges in the Technical College System of Georgia. Two bills introduced in the 2023-2024 legislative session garnered bipartisan support were ultimately not signed into law. • **Coalition-building**. Georgia EmpowerMEnt's Policy Council joined with public and private partner organizations to form the Tuition Waiver Coalition.
Community	• **Increased awareness**. SB 107 and the advocacy efforts surrounding it raised awareness of the needs of young people with foster care experience and has inspired community partners and private donors to fill gaps. • **Representation**. Young people described increased efforts to engage youth from diverse backgrounds and different experiences in foster care (e.g., group home placement, achieving permanency).

Outcomes	
Organization	• **Strengthened partnerships**. Georgia EmpowerMEnt has strengthened relationships with its partners.
Youth	• **Belonging**. Young people described their relationships with peers and adult supporters as fostering a sense of family and belonging. • **Personal growth**. Young people developed confidence in themselves, developed their communication skills, and enhanced their knowledge of policy processes. • **Networking and professional development**. Young people strengthened and expanded their networks and were connected to other organizations (e.g., through the Tuition Waiver Coalition) and opportunities (e.g., conferences, travel for advocacy).

Georgia EmpowerMEnt's youth advocates, in partnership with the Tuition Waiver Coalition, continue to advocate for increased financial supports for postsecondary education for students with foster care experience. At the time of our interviews, the Policy Council was preparing for the 2025-2026 legislative session and drafting suggested language for a new bill to address the gaps in SB 107.

Acknowledgments

Suggested Citation
Conway, J., Stoute, K., Rudy-Johnson, D., Ball, J., McKlindon, A., and Holquist, S. (2025). Youth engagement in policy profile: Georgia EmpowerMEnt. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/4288x2109c

Appendix: Methodology and Data

This project was a community engaged research project – a collaborative approach to research that enables researchers and community members to develop and/or conduct research that is motivated by and meets the needs of a community. Child Trends conducted this project in partnership with a Research Group comprised of one youth representative and one adult representative from each of the five grantee organizations participating in the study, including Georgia EmpowerMEnt. Research Group members were paid consultants to Child Trends. Child Trends served as the research and technical assistance partner and convened the Research Group ten times from July 2024 to June 2025 to participate in the design of the study, data analysis, and dissemination of findings.

Members of the Research Group identified this policy win and recruited their peers and partners to participate in interviews. This profile of Georgia EmpowerMEnt is informed by six interviews with a total of four youth, two staff, and three external partners, supplemented with information gleaned from six documents. We coded all transcripts and documents in Dedoose and conducted thematic analysis with the Research Group to distill our findings and finalize the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework. For more information on study's methodology, please see https://www.childtrends.org/publications/authentic-youth-engagement-policy-framework.

References

[i] Conner, J. O., Ober, C. N., & Brown, A. S. (2016). The politics of paternalism: Adult and youth perspectives on youth voice in public policy. *Teachers College Record*, *118*(8), 1-48.

[ii] Forenza, B., & Happonen, R.G. (2016). A critical analysis of foster youth advisory boards in the United States. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 45*(1), 107-121.

[iii] Holquist, S. (2019). Student voice in education policy: Understanding student participation in state-level K-12 education policy making. Retrieved from the University Digital Conservancy, https://hdl.handle.net/11299/206658.

[iv] Petrokubi, J. (2014). Building bridges, making change, and inspiring engagement: A case study of youth-adult partnership in a local government youth commission. Retrieved from https://dp.la/item/82db9fd32d5e368168d68c2acc4b9f1f.

[v] Holquist, S. (2019). Student voice in education policy: Understanding student participation in state-level K-12 education policy making. Retrieved from the University Digital Conservancy, https://hdl.handle.net/11299/206658.