

STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT PARENTS

Leverage State and Federal Policy Opportunities



INTRODUCTION

Parents are a sizable but often overlooked student population in postsecondary systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed new demands on all parents with young children and shed new light on the multiple demands of students who are parents. Seeking to strengthen supports for parents and boost overall completion rates, [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) launched the [Aspen Postsecondary Success for Parents \(PSP\) Initiative](#) in 2018. Ascend has engaged a diverse group of leaders, including parents, researchers, workforce development experts, college presidents, philanthropies, and policymakers, to develop strategies and innovations that better support parents as they achieve their postsecondary goals. Through our research activities and convenings, we have identified barriers that make it difficult for parents to complete their studies to the best of their abilities.

Students who are parents are mainly [women of color](#) who tend to face more systemic barriers to postsecondary completion than their white peers. In the economic shock caused by COVID-19, Black and Hispanic women experienced higher unemployment due to the sectors impacted; without income, continuing

their postsecondary journey is even more daunting. The long-term impact of COVID-19 is uncertain, but it is clear that we have an opportunity to rebuild our systems to better support those who are parenting young children. As colleges, service providers, policymakers, and advocates engage in relief and rebuilding measures, identifying and addressing the barriers students with dependent children face will support their desire to remain enrolled and not stop out.

Some of these barriers can appear minor yet addressing them can be impactful. For example, bookstores and resource centers that stay open beyond typical business hours can accommodate parents who also work. Or college campuses with dedicated spaces for children can change the cultural norms that stigmatize students who are parents. Many of the solutions shared below were generated by the experts who attended Ascend's PSP convenings, and they are meant to spark innovation of current policies and programs. Postsecondary leaders who understand their students' diverse roles and needs, and the systemic gaps, are better positioned to pursue additional strategies that support their institutional as well as national achievement goals.

STRATEGY: LEVERAGE STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Many of the constraints that impact the success of students who are parents and the institutions that serve them are the result of state and federal policies and priorities. For example, according to an [Urban Institute survey](#), many workforce development boards believe that state policies on funding limit their ability to serve parents. However, policies at the state and local level can also be opportunities to leverage additional support for parents. Specific policy guidance, modifications, or implementation at the federal and state level can greatly impact the experience and success of students who are parents. Before institutions embark on one of these student parent-informed strategies, they should first survey the students they serve to better understand them and their needs. Second, institutions need to understand the policy levers at the federal, state, and local levels to understand how funding and regulations impact their ability to serve their mission.



Below are specific policy opportunities postsecondary institutions should keep in mind as they explore and learn how policy can support students who are parents.

STATE

- Every state should allow participation in postsecondary education to meet activity requirements for supports such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), health care, and subsidized child care. (Example: [Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning CAPS Scholarships](#))
- Head Start and Early Head Start grantees should explore opportunities to partner with colleges to ensure eligible families in which the adults are enrolled in college are receiving these crucial early childhood services.
- States and localities should leverage the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act's (WIOA) identification of single parents as a target population to prioritize funding and provide supportive services, such as child care, transportation, and the like, that can enable parents to participate in programs.
- States should invest in tailored services and programs for students with children to increase their ability to enroll and complete. (Example: [Cal Grant Awards for Students with Dependent Children](#))
- States should provide state-allocated/performance-based funding incentives to colleges for student parents who complete and attain a high-quality credential.
- States should establish free community college programs to enroll significant numbers of students who are parents. (Example: [Tennessee Promise](#))

FEDERAL

- Ensure federal financial aid policy is responsive to the needs of students who have caregiving responsibilities so they are able to cover the range of tuition and non-tuition costs associated with their college enrollment.
- Improve and promote the dependent care allowance (in federal financial aid) to request additional funds to pay for child care costs or other dependent needs. (Example: [GAO report "More Information Could Help Student Parents Access Additional Federal Student Aid"](#))
- Exclude access to Title IV funding to low-performing schools or services that enroll a significant population of student parents, including some for-profit institutions.
- Create a loan repayment program that takes parenting and associated costs into consideration as an opportunity for additional forgiveness.

INSTITUTIONAL

- Establish subsidies for high-quality child care and early childhood development on campus, specifically for enrolled parents.
- Ensure that every college Title IX coordinator is well-versed on the protections the law provides for pregnant and parenting students and that they have the tools and resources they need to advocate effectively for student parents.



STRATEGY IN POLICY



The Pennsylvania FY 2019-20 budget signed by Governor Tom Wolf included \$2.5 million in state funding for Parent Pathways, led by the state's Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Education (PDE). The Pennsylvania Parent Pathways Pilot seeks to establish community-specific, comprehensive models to support access to, and success in, postsecondary education and training for single parents. Specifically, the departments will invest in holistic models that address the needs of parents and children together and successfully leverage partnerships to offer sustainable solutions to the multiple barriers often facing families experiencing economic challenges. Removing barriers to education empowers parents to obtain the skills needed for family-sustaining careers. In late May 2020, this program was put on indefinite hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.