

PUTTING POLICY INTO PRACTICE: STATE ACTIONS FOR THE POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS OF STUDENT PARENTS

Background and Introduction

Nearly a quarter of all undergraduate students in the U.S. are parents.¹ All parents, especially younger parents and those returning to school after years in the workforce, face a system that was not designed to accommodate their needs as caretakers. The needs of student parents have become even more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced many parents to reconsider, postpone or cancel their postsecondary education plans due to unexpected childcare, schooling needs or other associated hardships.

Further compounding this trend, a recent survey from the Lumina Foundation and Gallup revealed that postsecondary students are too often uncertain as to whether institutions offer the kinds of support they may need, such as food assistance, child care support or career counseling.² At the same time, however, 45 states have established postsecondary attainment goals in an effort to encourage more learners to enroll in and complete postsecondary education—increasingly a prerequisite for success in today's economy.³

As the demographics and related needs of postsecondary learners continue to change and as policymakers increasingly emphasize the importance of postsecondary completion, better understanding and responding to the needs of this growing student population is quickly becoming a national imperative. After all, thriving families contribute to dynamic state and local economies. To meet these needs and to help states meet their ambitious postsecondary attainment goals over the next decade, state governments and postsecondary institutions must commit to working closely together and increasing coordination across education, training, and human services systems.

Governors are uniquely positioned to facilitate the necessary coordination across human services, workforce development and postsecondary education systems to holistically support student parents as caregivers and learners simultaneously. Governors can draw attention to this issue and, using the bully pulpit, raise awareness and build public support around the need to do more to support student parents. Governors are also well positioned to leverage a coordinated, cross-systems effort and to work with state legislatures so they can enact necessary legislative changes to better support student parents.

With generous support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices (NGA Center), in partnership with Ascend at the Aspen Institute⁴, convened and hosted a roundtable of experts focused on the postsecondary attainment of student parents.

This convening aimed to:

- (1) Facilitate a conversation that uplifts the experience of student parents and offers opportunities for improved engagement;
- (2) Identify the levers that state leaders can use to ensure success for student parents; and
- (3) Create a framework for serving student parents through cross-sector collaborations.

This roundtable contributed to the wider national conversation about supporting student parents as a way to ensure greater economic mobility for families. In order to engage individuals with lived experience, the NGA Center invited Generation Hope⁵ and three student parent scholars from the program to provide insights on the multigenerational benefits of postsecondary success for student parents. Unanimously, the scholars highlighted the important role their own parents played in their educational attainment, specifically in helping with childcare or offering encouragement, which was integral to their pursuit of college degrees. As such, it is critical for state governments and institutions of higher education to consider how to reach beyond two generations and leverage the support that is available through family members.

This brief summarizes insights from the roundtable and offers actionable strategies for Governors to explore as they commit to more intentionally serving student parents, including by:

- Using data more effectively;
- Facilitating collaboration across agencies and institutions;
- Helping overcome longstanding or unexpected financial obstacles; and
- Leading on cultural change and collaborations with community-based organizations.

This brief highlights the lived experience of student parents and offers strategies that can help Governors better serve an important segment of the nation's postsecondary student population.

Actionable Strategies for State Leaders to Ensure the Success of Student Parents

Using Data More Effectively

To ensure the success of student parents, states can use data to better calculate what proportion of their student population is caring for children. States and postsecondary institutions often lack information regarding the exact number of students with children. Consequently, postsecondary systems and institutions can be ill-equipped to make the administrative, operational and funding decisions needed to identify student parents and to provide them with the necessary resources and supports to ensure their success. To make more informed decisions and more efficiently allocate resources to where they are needed most, states and institutions must find ways to collect and analyze the needs of student parents more effectively.

Improving data collection is a multifaceted challenge. It is essential to ensure data quality by giving thoughtful consideration to the structure of the initial information collection. Moreover, collecting comprehensive information that allows stakeholders to better understand the individual circumstances of student parents can allow for more appropriate and individualized policy responses. In **Washington**, the community and technical colleges collect and disaggregate information on students' familial status that allows for more tailored support for those who are enrolled and have one or more dependents.⁶ With a strong foundation built upon reliable data, policymakers and stakeholders can analyze this information to better understand the needs of students and how best to structure the systems and position the institutions serving them.

Without thorough analysis and strategic planning, data collection often only serves to meet statutory requirements or to satisfy independent philanthropic priorities rather than informing programmatic decision making. Through intentional efforts, states can improve the data landscape to identify the needs of the student parent population and begin to address them in a more targeted fashion.

Tennessee serves as a potential model for how to approach the collection and subsequent analysis of data on student parents with intentionality. A collaborative effort across multiple organizations (Tennessee's Department of Human Services, community colleges, four-year institutions, spearheaded by the Tennessee Reconnect program) streamlined efforts to re-enroll adult learners seeking to return to or to finish postsecondary education and complete new degrees or credentials.

Specifically, Tennessee uses a common intake process across education and basic needs support programs that poses a series of questions to prospective adult students.⁷ These questions allow the state to collect a range of important information including student demographics, eligibility for other means-tested benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and

additional information vital to determining an individual student's needs. This collaborative effort has improved data sharing among participating institutions, a crucial added benefit given that many adult learners often enroll at multiple institutions throughout their educational journeys. Significantly, the intake process also assesses if a student has additional barriers to completion. In this way, program partners and institutions can use the information to tailor supports specific to these identified challenges and ensure more adult learners make it across the proverbial finish line.

Oregon passed a law in 2021 that requires the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to add a question to demographic forms so each student can indicate whether they are a parent or a person acting as parent or legal guardian. This information will be collected in a common format, and a schedule for information collection and will be used on an annual basis by all public higher education institutions in the state.⁸

Facilitating Collaboration Across Agencies and Institutions

One major issue facing student parents is that they may qualify for targeted programs or services for student parents or learners with similar needs, but they are offered by different agencies or systems that do not effectively coordinate with one another. Uncoordinated systems of education and related supports often means students don't know about these benefits. For instance, recent survey data from Lumina Foundation and Gallup shows that many learners, particularly students of color and first-generation collegians, don't know how to make use of supports such as food assistance, career counseling and tutoring despite their widespread availability on many campuses.⁹

In many instances, student parents may be eligible for wrap-around support services that can help them enroll in postsecondary education and support their longer-term success. However, much like their peers, far too many student parents remain unaware of these services or greatly underestimate what they may qualify for.

For example, a 2019 United States Government Accountability Office report found almost two million students eligible for SNAP did not report receiving benefits from the program in the examined academic year.¹⁰ Federal guidelines concerning student eligibility for SNAP have the potential to be confusing and may discourage people from receiving benefits. Some students also may not know whether their campuses offer food assistance – the Lumina-Gallup survey noted above found only 43 percent and 32 percent of students pursuing bachelor's and associate's degrees respectively were aware of their schools' food assistance services despite major expansions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Strong state leadership can mandate partnerships between postsecondary institutions and other state agencies, including supporting the colocation of supportive services on postsecondary campuses. Centralizing student services in a single, easy-to-access location can make it more straightforward to understand and apply for benefits, counseling, financial aid and other services that support student parents. For example, **Connecticut's** State

Colleges and Universities system has recently partnered with the state's Department of Transportation to develop the UPass program—an initiative that provides unlimited access to state public transit for one year at an affordable cost to students.¹¹ State leaders and policymakers can play an important role in fostering more cross-agency and institutional collaboration like this as a way to ensure more learners, especially the student parent population, can make use of the critical supports often needed for their postsecondary success.

Pennsylvania is another state working on a solution to some of these challenges through its Parent Pathways Initiative.¹² This program is a collaboration between the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The program establishes comprehensive, community-specific models to support access to and success in postsecondary education and training for single parents. The program will be implemented via two interrelated strands of work. The first is focused on the state working with relevant stakeholders such as community and non-government organizations, subject matter experts and educational institutions to create service models customized to meet the needs of specific communities in Pennsylvania. The second is focused on providing flexible funding to meet the needs of the future participants in the programs being developed. This initiative will lead to investments in holistic models across Pennsylvania that address the needs of parents and their children by offering sustainable, customized solutions to the barriers that prevent families from economic empowerment. While this program was authorized, appropriations were disrupted by the COVID pandemic. The program is being revived in 2021 through a grant program coordinated by Ascend at the Aspen Institute.¹³

Helping Overcome Longstanding or Unexpected Financial Obstacles

Given that student parents are often the primary caretakers for their families, financial stability and wellbeing can play an outsized role in their postsecondary success and rates of completion. Unexpected financial emergencies—such as unforeseen healthcare costs or other unanticipated expenses—can sometimes derail students who are close or otherwise on track to completing postsecondary education. State leaders and policymakers should therefore consider strategies that can provide learners with direct financial assistance that can help them overcome these challenges that far too often inhibit postsecondary completion.

A number of states have sought to help more of their learners meet these challenges in recent years. In **North Carolina**, for instance, Governor Cooper leveraged \$7 million in Workforce Innovation and Opportunity (WIOA) funds to establish the state's Finish Line grant program.¹⁴ As initially conceived, the program encourages the state's community colleges and workforce boards to collaborate and jointly review funding requests from any student who has completed at least half of their degree or credential program. Students may receive up to \$1,000 to pay for costs ranging from instructional materials, tuition and related institutional fees to wider basic needs expenses such as transportation, childcare, housing and even medical expenses among other allowable expenditures.¹⁵ According to the most

recent data available, over 1,700 students have been successfully supported through this initiative.

Aside from efforts like this, state policymakers can maximize and leverage every funding resource available—including local, state, federal and philanthropic resources. By blending or braiding funding from different sources, policymakers can maximize their use and ensure student parents have the tools to understand, navigate and access the programs and services they need and meet wider program or service eligibility requirements.

States can blend and braid funds to address another major issue: food insecurity. A recent survey from the Hope Center found that, among student parents participating in postsecondary education, over 53 percent were food insecure in the last month.¹⁶ Ensuring that student parents can meet basic needs such as food, especially for their dependents, is a critical hurdle that must be overcome before these learners can succeed in postsecondary education. While many programs and services exist to help individuals cope with food insecurity, they are often difficult to navigate or are not well embedded in other systems of education or training. Structuring complementary funding streams that seek to meet these needs can be one way to mitigate these challenges.

A partnership between the **Oregon** Department of Human Services and Oregon's 17 community colleges is one such as example of blended funding, where federal and non-federal funding is comingled to better serve participants. This collaborative effort has led to the creation of The Oregon Community College SNAP 50/50 Consortia,¹⁷ which subsequently evolved into the SNAP Training Employment Program (STEP). STEP programs now exist on each community college campus in Oregon. This program is intended to support SNAP-eligible participants by increasing their training and employment opportunities, directing them to career pathways and providing the necessary training and supports leading to fulfilling career opportunities. To achieve this, participating students are provided individualized college and career coaching to develop a plan of action for their education and guide their progress. In some instances, students are provided additional financial assistance to help them overcome critical barriers to postsecondary success such as assistance with transportation, education or training program costs and food.

The federal SNAP reimbursement is invested directly back into the STEP program to pay for staff and the provision of important supports for students. Due to SNAP rules exempting student parents from many of the federal program's eligibility requirements, student parents are a key focus for this program.¹⁸ Using federal funding streams to work with community colleges that engage student parents creates greater opportunities to align the efforts of workforce systems, community colleges, and community-based organizations to stabilize economic situations and help more learners, especially student parents, succeed both in the classroom and in life.

Leading on Cultural Change and Collaboration with Community-Based Organizations

One key area where state and education leaders can work together is to make campuses more student parent and family-friendly is by changing campus culture and more intentionally acknowledging the needs of student parents. This can be achieved through more inclusive forms of communication, by providing greater course schedule and student support flexibility across campuses and by dedicating more resources to meet the needs of student parents. While student-parent support is not the sole responsibility of campuses, it must be prioritized by institutional leadership and made an accessible and evident part of the campus culture.¹⁹

Both the state of **Minnesota** and the University of Minnesota have worked extensively to support student parent programs throughout the state. This is most evident through the Student Parent Support Initiative.²⁰ This program, funded by a United States Department of Health and Human Services grant, focuses on collaboration between state officials, university staff and local non-profits in order to provide educational and public health activities for student parents.

As part of this work, the University of Minnesota dramatically expanded its capacity to assess student-parent needs and make successful referrals for learners who would benefit from additional support. Additionally, the program created awareness of an on-campus need that was not being adequately addressed. Institutions of higher education must be prepared to serve student parents by making changes to policies, infrastructure, and mindset both inside and outside of the university setting, including third-party service providers. The University of Minnesota Student Parent Help Center was a key partner in providing the wrap-around social services to student parents. This work was important as the center found student-parent referrals were being declined or denied by community-based organizations that believed students weren't sufficiently in-need due to their enrollment status at the University of Minnesota. This common misconception can prevent learners from receiving the support they need to complete their degrees.

Another way policymakers can better support student parents is by collaborating with community-based organizations. These entities can offer additional capacity, support, and flexibility to help serve this learner population. Housing remains another key issue that prevents student parents from achieving educational and economic stability. Partnerships with community-based organizations can help policymakers more effectively meet these basic housing needs and support a greater number of student parents as they pursue postsecondary educational success.

One such example can be found in **Ohio** with the Columbus Scholar House—a partnership among Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority, the YMCA of Central Ohio, and the Ohio Capital Corporation for Housing. This collaborative effort has created a multilateral support system for first-generation student parents. Through partnerships with public housing

authorities, parent support staff can rely on their housing partners to provide expertise and create a more effective and efficient programmatic experience.²¹ The Columbus Scholar House succeeds by delivering a holistic set of supports through a program that alleviates housing concerns and childcare issues, along with providing extensive academic, emotional and social support. Since its inception, the program has grown from just 10 units in 2012 to 48 units in 2017, and another 30 units are planned with the award of state tax credits in 2019.²²

Strong state leadership is vital for collaborations and culture change to resonate between the state, institution and community-based organizations. Governors serve as key conveners for these efforts and can play an important role in setting priorities and urging greater consideration of the needs of student parents. Governors can initiate the conversation among college presidents, public agency leaders and social service providers to facilitate the establishment of future partnerships like those presented above.

Conclusion

Long before COVID-19, student parents needed a unique set of support systems to aid their efforts in pursuing postsecondary education. The issues noted above, like food insecurity, housing instability, a lack of childcare, and many others have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Given the widespread transition to virtual classroom settings for student parents and their children, student parents require greater investment than ever before.

Governors play a key role in creating the conditions for success for student parents. This can be achieved by ensuring the collection and analysis of high-quality data, effectively marketing support services to those who need them most, prompting culture shifts at institutions that lead to a better climate for student parents and leveraging private and public dollars to carry out these critical responsibilities. Through carefully managed data collection and the blending and braiding of funding streams, Governors can cultivate action and collaboration among state institutions, public agencies and community-based organizations. Moreover, Governors can tap the recent and substantial federal investments in higher education and other social programs to execute on these key strategies and deliver support to student parents. Under Governors' direction, state systems can improve educational stability, bolster economic mobility and support more families and children so they can thrive in the 21st century.

- ¹ [https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers/#:~:text=%5B1%5D%20Of%20the%203.8%20million,are%20fathers%20\(Figure%201\)](https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers/#:~:text=%5B1%5D%20Of%20the%203.8%20million,are%20fathers%20(Figure%201))
- ² <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/327851/half-college-students-say-covid-may-impact-completion.aspx>
- ³ <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2021/#nation>
- ⁴ Ascend at the Aspen Institute promotes serving student parents through a two-generation approach. More details can be found in this policy brief: https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Ascend_Postsecondary-Success-for-Parents_Policy_2018-1.pdf
- ⁵ Generation Hope is a nonprofit organization that supports parents in becoming college graduates. The organization started because the founder and chief executive officer, Nicole Lynn Lewis, believed that more parents should have the opportunity to achieve their goal with their children beside them — the core of a two-generation approach. More information about Generation Hope is available here: <http://supportgenerationhope.org/>.
- ⁶ https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Understanding-the-Student-Parent-Experience_Final.pdf
- ⁷ <https://formstack.io/59794>
- ⁸ <https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2019R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/SB794/A-Engrossed>
- ⁹ <https://www.gallup.com/education/327485/state-of-the-student-experience-fall-2020.aspx>
- ¹⁰ More information about the GAO report here <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-95>
- ¹¹ <https://www.ct.edu/files/pdfs/Access%20and%20Opportunity%20-%20Moving%20Connecticut%20Forward.pdf>. Pp 25.
- ¹² More information about the Parent Pathways Initiative can be found here: <http://www.paproviders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Parent-Pathways-Webinar-12.19.19.pdf>
- ¹³ [Wolf Administration Receives Grant for Parent Pathways Initiative to Support Economic Advancement for Families](#)
- ¹⁴ <https://www.nccommerce.com/jobs-training/workforce-professionals-tools-resources/finish-line-grants>
- ¹⁵ <https://files.nc.gov/nccommerce/documents/files/FINISH-LINE-GRANT-EXPENDITURES-72319.pdf>
- ¹⁶ https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2019_ParentingStudentsReport.pdf
- ¹⁷ More information about The Oregon SNAP 50/50 Consortia can be found here: <https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/m-Oregon-SNAP-50-50-Breakout.pdf>
- ¹⁸ More information regarding SNAP rules for student parents can be found here: <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2017/10/SNAP%20for%20College%20Students-An%20Overview.pdf>
- ¹⁹ More research from the Center for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan can be found here: <http://www.cew.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/CEW-Student-Parent-Paper-13-June-FINAL-1.pdf>.
- ²⁰ <https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/womeninfants/studentparent/index.html>
- ²¹ <http://socialcollegeaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Eliminating-Barriers-to-Post-Secondary-Success-Cross-Sector-Collaborations.pdf>
- ²² <https://www.bizjournals.com/columbus/news/2019/05/15/this-affordable-housing-project-helps-keep-parents.html>