BRIEF

Double Duties: Student Parents' Struggle to Find Child Care and How State Policy Can Help

BY JENNIFER PALMER

Introduction

Twenty percent of higher education students are parents. That's 4 million postsecondary students who are juggling classes, homework, jobs and caregiving in pursuit of a credential or career to further their learning and increase their earnings. While they often earn higher grades than their classmates without children, they face numerous barriers to graduation. For student parents, the majority of whom live near the poverty line, the shortage of licensed child care and sky-high prices are a big barrier to staying in school.

Despite working more hours than their peers without children, student parents are more likely to struggle to meet their basic needs, such as food and housing. For the 89% of student parents with children elementary age or younger, access to reliable child care is also a basic need. Without it, they miss class and are more than twice as likely to drop out before graduating than their non-parenting peers, potentially leaving them with debt but no credential to draw higher earnings.

Supporting student parents' ability to complete their postsecondary education creates pathways to higher earnings and greater financial stability for them and their children. Single mothers who earn a bachelor's degree can expect to earn approximately $625,000 more over their lifetime than those with only a high school diploma. Higher earnings mean greater tax revenue benefitting their local community, state and nation. For this to be possible, student parents need reliable, high-quality child care just like parents in the workforce.

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Profile of Student Parents

1 in 10

1 in 10 college students are single mothers.

Most are people of color.

89%

89% have elementary-aged children or younger.

Nearly half have children under the age of 5.

Two thirds receive no financial support from family.

Nearly half attend community colleges.

They spend more time on paid work and are more likely to work full-time than their peers without children.

2.5x

They have 2.5 times more student debt than their non-parenting classmates.

Why is child care so difficult to find?

Finding affordable child care is a challenge for nearly all parents of young children. By some estimates, over half of the country live in child care deserts, in which there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care spots. For parents of infants and toddlers or children with disabilities, it can be next to impossible to find licensed care. Pandemic-related closures, persistent staffing shortages and the end of federal stabilization funds have added to the scarcity of child care throughout the country.

The average cost of licensed care means single parents— like the more than 2 million student-parents who are single— sometimes spend up to one-third of their income on care for just one child. Parents of school-age kids face similar challenges in accessing and affording care before and after the school day.

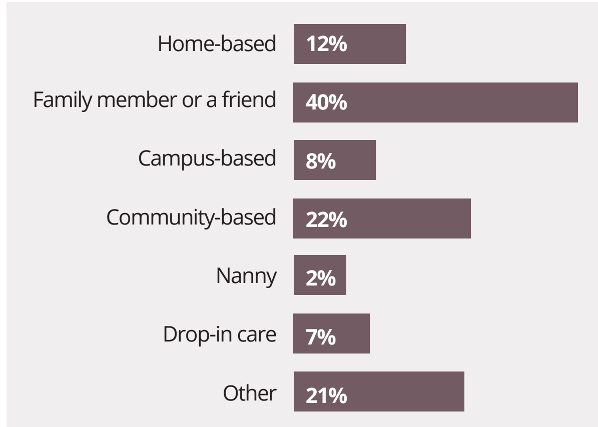
What kinds of child care do student parents use?

Student parents most often rely on a family member or friend for child care. Informal, unlicensed child care typically with someone familiar to the parents—also known as family, friend and neighbor care—is the most widely used type of care among all parents of young children. Parents generally choose this approach because it is more affordable, they feel comfortable and have greater trust in a familiar caregiver and/or they desire a caregiver who shares their language and culture. Families, including student parents who juggle jobs, classes and studying, sometimes choose informal care arrangements because they need flexibility or care outside the 9-to-5 schedule offered at home- or center-based child care settings.

Many low-income parents are priced out of licensed care and have no other choice but to turn to informal caregivers. This is likely the case for many student parents who report cost is the biggest factor when choosing care.

Cost might also explain why fewer than 10% of student parents reported relying on campus-based child care. Long waitlists for enrollment, lack of extended hours and the fact that fewer than half of all postsecondary institutions offer on-campus care underscore the dearth of child care options for student parents.

Child Care Usage by Student Parents



Source: National Student Parent Survey, Hope Center at Temple University

How do student parents pay for child care?

Student parents are more likely to rely on federal student loans to cover educational and personal expenses than students without children. Almost half of them pay an average of $500 per month for child care. Dependent care is an eligible cost for determining student financial need; however, most student parents reported their school's financial aid office did not notify them that child care could be part of their financial need calculation. Child care subsidies are another option for some student parents. Resources from the federal Child Care and Development Fund are administered by states, territories and tribes to increase the quality of child care and help low-income families afford care through subsidies. In general, parents must be working or enrolled in job training or other education programs to qualify. States can set eligibility policies, within federal parameters, that can impact student parents' ability to access financial assistance. For instance, states can specify the type of training or education program that qualifies (e.g., nearly all exclude graduate studies), the maximum time in a program a parent may be enrolled and/or stipulate a minimum grade point average parents must maintain.

As of 2021, at least six states (Arizona, Kansas, Montana, Pennsylvania, Utah and Wisconsin) require postsecondary students to work a minimum number of hours to receive subsidies. Delaware is the only state that fully excludes postsecondary students from accessing child care subsidies unless their enrollment is part of an employment and training program through the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program or TANF.

How are state legislatures responding to the problem?

During the pandemic, more low-income families used child care subsidies due to a temporary increase in federal funds and expanded income eligibility in nearly all states. In 2022 and 2023, respectively, **New Mexico** and **Vermont** approved use of state dollars to make their expanded eligibility policies permanent. Both states so significantly expanded access to child care subsidies (for families earning up to 350% and 575% of the federal poverty level, respectively), student parents in those states would almost certainly benefit.

Georgia, Oregon and **Washington** amended their subsidy policies to make it easier for student parents to receive child care assistance. As of 2022, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning considers student parents a priority group among applicants to the state's subsidy program. Oregon's HB 3073 (2021) eliminated the required work hours for student parents receiving child care subsidies. The bill also allowed for additional paid hours of care so parents can study. Washington's HB 5237 (2021) removes a requirement that parents must be enrolled full-time and work a minimum number of hours. It also added pursuit of an associate degree as an approved educational activity for eligibility.

Legislatures in **Minnesota** and **North Carolina** appropriated funds for additional financial support for child care to student parents. North Carolina community college students who have completed at least 50% of their credential can apply for a $1,000 Finish Line Grant to put towards child care or other living expenses. Student parents in Minnesota can qualify for $6,500 per child each academic year through the state's Postsecondary Child Care Grant Program.

Connecticut and **Illinois** passed legislation to help lawmakers better understand the number of postsecondary students who are also parents and their ability to find on-campus child care. Connecticut's HB 6565 (2023) requires the state's Department of Education to conduct an assessment of child care needs of the student body and existing child care services and facilities on community colleges, technical colleges and state university campuses. Illinois SB 267 (2021) requires public institutions of higher education to annually collect data on students' parental status. Furthermore, institutions that operate on-campus child care centers must report the total number of children served each semester specifying how many are children of students.

What's happening at the federal level?

Federal policymakers are shoring up the Child Care Access Means Parents in School grant program. After years of flat funding, the program budget has increased fivefold in five years—from $15 million in federal fiscal year 2017 to $82 million in 2022. Over 300 institutions of higher education (up from 86 in 2017) can use these funds to directly support child care access for low-income students. Grants can fund campus-based care, contracts with child care providers in the community and before- and/or after-school care.

A recent review of the program revealed some schools use the funds to cover the full cost of care for students. Most offer subsidies to student parents on a sliding scale and require a copayment. In the 2016-17 school year, parents paid a median of $160 out of pocket after receiving a monthly subsidy of about $385. In 2019, grant funds served 3,300 student parents by subsidizing care for around 4,000 children. Nearly the same number of children (4,200) were on waiting lists to receive assistance.

On-campus child care may soon be an option for more student-parents who attend community colleges. The Association of Community College Trustees and the National Head Start Association have recently established a new partnership to develop a road map for collaboration between community college and Head Start administrators that includes free on-campus space for the early learning centers. Head Start will provide high-quality, culturally relevant learning opportunities for children birth to age 5 at no cost to eligible families. Parents will also have access to Head Start family navigators who can connect them to community resources and make referrals for services.

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