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Policy Agenda: Improving Child Care Access for Parenting Students

Richard Davis Jr. & Stephanie Baker

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Richard Davis Jr. is a policy analyst on the higher education team within New America's Education Policy program.

Stephanie Baker is a senior policy analyst in the Higher Education program at New America.

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About Student Parent Initiative

New America's interdisciplinary team conducts research, policy analysis, and advocacy work in the student parent space.

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Introduction

The United States is in the midst of an unrelenting child care crisis, marked by inadequate supply and high costs, especially for families in rural communities and among historically underserved populations. In 38 states, child care now costs more than college tuition,[1] and in 49 states, more than average annual rent.[2] For student parents, particularly those in community colleges, this crisis threatens their ability to stay enrolled and complete a degree.

Parenting students make up a significant share of college students, about one in five undergraduates, with half raising at least one child under age six.[3] These students are just as academically capable as their peers without children as evidenced by studies showing parenting students have similar or slightly higher GPAs than their peers,[4] but they face additional barriers to success, including limited access to affordable, quality, and flexible child care. Balancing coursework, work obligations, long commutes, and caregiving, often during evenings and weekends when centers are closed, can become untenable without support.

A core finding of our child care work with 10 community colleges across the nation[5] is clear: There is not enough money in the child care system to support a sustainable network of providers, affordable care for parents, and living wages for workers. Despite the critical role child care plays in supporting student success, colleges struggle to meet the demand. Some offer campus-based care, often held together by multiple funding streams, while others lack the resources to provide any support. The result: Parenting students are frequently left without viable options, jeopardizing their educational and career goals.

We need a universal right to early education and bold public investment to make the system work. Programs like Early Head Start, Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) offer critical support but fall far short of meeting most families' needs. Just 10 percent of eligible families are served by Early Head Start,[6] and just 13 percent of qualifying children under five receive CCDF subsidies.[7] Meanwhile, nearly half a million middle-class families fall into a lower income quintile each year due to child care costs.[8]

Head Start remains chronically underfunded, with many programs operating on thin margins that have forced some to reduce services or shut down altogether, highlighting the fragility of the current system. In response, states like Vermont and cities like New Orleans and Austin have passed local taxes to expand access to high-quality care.[9] In the absence of sustained federal investment, more states and municipalities must follow their lead.

Our policy agenda offers short-term strategies to support parenting students now, while acknowledging that broader efforts to build a universal, high-quality system—from better compensation for early childhood educators to subsidy models that reflect the true cost of care—are essential to addressing the child care crisis for all families. Through our engagement with community colleges across the country, we've seen what's effective: on-campus care, strong partnerships, and wraparound support for parenting students. Expanding these solutions requires policy leadership and investment.

Child care access shouldn't be a barrier to higher education. It's essential infrastructure, vital not just for student success, but for strengthening families, fueling economic mobility, and building a more inclusive child care system. It's time to treat it that way.

How to Use This Policy Agenda

This agenda is divided into federal and state policy recommendations. Advocates for parenting students and child care can use any of our recommendations to help improve child care access for parenting students. Both the federal and state policy ideas within this document reflect what we learned from student parents, child care practitioners, college staff, and policy and advocacy teams with higher education and child care expertise.

The state recommendations include examples, where relevant, of changes that have helped unlock child care options for parenting students. We have not included examples for the policy suggestions that we have not yet seen enacted in practice.

We aim for this policy agenda to inspire change within the current system of child care to reduce barriers for parenting students, knowing that this work must happen alongside efforts to build universal child care and early education for all families.

Federal Recommendations

1. Increase Funding and Accessibility for Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)

Problem

The CCDF is the primary source of federal funding to help low-income families afford child care. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act of 1990 authorizes discretionary grants to state, territorial, and tribal agencies. Discretionary CCDBG funds are combined with mandatory Child Care Entitlement to States (CCES) funds, commonly referred to together as CCDF.[10] These may be supplemented by states transferring up to 30 percent of their Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to CCDBG. Agencies use these funding streams together to subsidize child care for eligible children and to improve child care quality and supply, as governed by CCDBG rules.

CCDF subsidies reach only a fraction of income-eligible families nationally due to chronic underfunding. Student parents, in particular, face compounded challenges: Many are excluded due to state-level policy decisions around eligibility for parents enrolled in education or training,[11] and colleges often lack the capacity, infrastructure, or awareness needed to help student parents navigate subsidy access.

In addition to increasing overall funding levels, stronger federal leadership is needed to ensure that student parents are recognized and prioritized in child care policy. Many campuses lack access to dedicated funding to renovate, expand, or build child care facilities, and public higher education institutions are often excluded from accessing resources meant to improve care quality. Clearer federal guidance can help states leverage existing flexibilities to support student parents through CCDF, including recognizing education and training as valid participation activities and supporting on-campus service delivery.

Recommendations

1a. **Increase congressional appropriations to expand child care access for more low-income families**, including student parents, through a significant increase in the CCDBG. Advocates, including congressional leaders, urged Congress to provide at least $12.4 billion for CCDBG in federal fiscal year 2026.[12] Fiscal year 2025 CCDBG funding was authorized at $8.75 billion.[13]

Intended outcome: More eligible families are able to access child care subsidies.

1b. **Establish dedicated facilities grants to fund renovation or construction of on-campus or community-based child care centers** that serve student parents.[14]

Intended outcome: More campuses and community-based child care centers are resourced to build or expand child care centers, reducing capacity constraints and wait-lists for student parents.

1c. **Allow public higher education institutions to be eligible for the 9 percent CCDBG quality improvement set-aside funds** to strengthen on-campus child care services.[15]

Intended outcome: Institutions are able to improve the quality of on-campus child care services.

1d. **Issue guidance to states encouraging the prioritization of student parents in education and training programs and clarifying allowable activities** under CCDF. Although federal rules already allow education and training to qualify families for CCDF, many states still impose additional barriers, such as requiring student parents to work in addition to participating in education or training or restricting which types of educational programs qualify.[16] Guidance should clarify that education and training alone qualify families for CCDF support and encourage states to remove unnecessary restrictions.

Intended outcome: Student parents have improved access to CCDF subsidies through state implementation of federal guidance that removes barriers to access for student parents.

2. Increase Funding and Simplify Processes for Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program

Problem

Since 1999, the CCAMPIS program has supported Pell-eligible student parents by enabling colleges to subsidize child care for them. Evidence from campus-level research indicates that student parents who access on-campus child care have higher persistence and graduation rates.[17] Yet CCAMPIS remains underfunded and difficult for many institutions to access. Public data on who the program serves is lacking, making it difficult to evaluate reach or equity, and recent research suggests that institutions serving high numbers of Black students are underrepresented among grantees.[18] Without racially disaggregated reporting, these disparities persist unaddressed. In the most recent publicly available data (2016–2017), 3,300 student parents were served. [19] In 2018, when the program was funded at $50 million annually (it is now funded at $75 million), the Institute for Women's Policy Research estimated 11,000 student parents were served, when an estimated 1.8 million student parents could qualify.[20]

Additionally, colleges face restrictive grant requirements, limited flexibility in how funds can be used, and burdensome application and reporting processes. Current rules around national accreditation can exclude otherwise high-quality providers who meet state quality standards. Currently, institutions lack the authority to use funds to develop or improve campus-based child care facilities, further limiting capacity. Colleges have no formal channel to provide input on program design or receive technical assistance, limiting the program's responsiveness to institutional and student-parent needs.

Finally, CCAMPIS does not currently support more flexible options like family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care, even though student parents often need care during evenings and weekends, or they live in child care deserts where traditional providers are unavailable.

Recommendations

2a. **Increase CCAMPIS appropriations to $500 million annually** to better meet student need.[21]

Intended outcome: More student-parent families are able to access quality, subsidized care through CCAMPIS.

2b. **Allow CCAMPIS grants to go towards child care for parenting students** with providers that are nationally accredited, working toward national

accreditation, or at any level of quality rating in a state's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).[22]

Intended outcome: Colleges that have historically not applied for CCAMPIS grants because they lack the resources to provide students with access to nationally accredited care are now able to access the grant and connect students to quality child care.

2c. **Simplify the grant application and reporting process to reduce administrative burdens** on colleges. Simplification should allow institutions to focus on describing how they will use funds to support students rather than conforming to rigid or duplicative requirements.[23]

Intended outcome: CCAMPIS is more accessible to colleges with limited resources and capacity for grant application and reporting processes.

2d. **Allow CCAMPIS funds to be used to develop and improve on-campus child care facilities**.

Intended outcome: Increase the number of colleges that have capacity to offer child care services to student parents by providing resources to build or renovate spaces that can be used for care.

2e. **Convene a U.S. Department of Education campus advisory group** to inform the CCAMPIS program, application process, reporting requirements, and areas of need for technical assistance.

Intended outcome: CCAMPIS program design, technical assistance, and implementation strategies are shaped by stakeholders with experience with the program. Longstanding challenges in applying for or reporting on the grant are addressed to make the process more manageable for underresourced colleges.

2f. **Allow funds to support student parents who need FFN care** when traditional child care centers cannot meet their needs on evenings and weekends, or where student parents live where traditional child care centers or in-home providers are not available.

Intended outcome: Student parents can access flexible care options that fit their dynamic lives using CCAMPIS subsidies.

2g. **Direct the U.S. Department of Education to publish de-identified CCAMPIS performance data**, disaggregated by race and summarized by institution or sector, and to conduct a federal equity analysis of CCAMPIS awardees to evaluate how well the grant process and distribution reflect the racial demographics of parenting students and to identify gaps in access.

Intended outcome: Policymakers and the higher education community can understand and address existing gaps in how CCAMPIS serves different populations of student parents.

3. Enhance Student Parent Data to Strengthen Child Care Access

Problem

Most higher education institutions do not systematically track student parents, leaving schools unable to identify and support this population effectively through comprehensive services. Without data collection, colleges may overlook student parents in decisions about campus programming, child care infrastructure and services, financial aid, and academic policies. Integrating parenting status into student records allows institutions to coordinate support more effectively, by, for example, aligning course schedules and services with students' family responsibilities.[24] As highlighted in an analysis of recent federal and state proposals,[25] better data would strengthen institutional planning, enable more targeted funding, and help build an evidence base for strategies that support child care access and retention of parenting students.

Recommendations

3a. **Mandate standardized federal data collection on student parenting status and related caregiving responsibilities** across all higher education institutions in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. At a minimum, require collection of key child care-related metrics, including number and ages of dependents, type of child care used (e.g., on-campus, off-campus, informal, or none), weekly hours of care, unmet child care needs, caregiving responsibilities, and whether the student receives support through CCAMPIS or other public program.

Intended outcome: Data on the prevalence of student parents in higher education and their needs informs targeted child care services, funding allocation, and policy decisions.

3b. **Provide funding and technical assistance to support institutions in integrating student-parent data into enrollment and support systems**, improving colleges' ability to collect and use data to inform the development of services and policies for student parents.

Intended outcome: Colleges have the data infrastructure needed to track and serve parenting students, and policymakers are informed about parenting students' needs.

4. Strengthen Title IX Protections for Parenting Students

Problem

While Title IX prohibits discrimination based on sex, including pregnancy-related conditions, it has historically failed to provide strong, enforceable protections for parenting students. Although the 2024 Title IX rule made significant progress for pregnant and postpartum students, those regulations were vacated, leaving the 1975 law and 2020 Title IX rule in effect. The 2020 rule is silent on pregnant, postpartum, and parenting students. Because Title IX's definition of sex discrimination has been narrowly interpreted, parenting students' protections are premised on whether they can demonstrate differential treatment based on gender or pregnancy. This framework limits the law's utility for addressing the day-to-day barriers that parenting students (mothers and fathers) face in higher education. Further, enforcement by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is currently limited by staffing constraints and political interference, undermining Title IX's effectiveness. Federal leadership is needed to establish durable, targeted protections for parenting students through new legislation, stand-alone regulations, or robust guidance divorced from the broader Title IX rulemaking process.

Recommendations

4a. **Codify the protections for pregnant and parenting students found in the 2024 Title IX rule** through stand-alone federal legislation or targeted regulations, ensuring that excused absences, reasonable caregiving accommodations, and class participation modifications are guaranteed and enforceable across institutions.

Intended outcome: Parenting students are legally protected in accessing higher education, and access to lactation spaces, child care services, and flexibility to manage caregiving responsibilities is assured.

4b. **Issue federal guidance, through expanded Title IX regulations where appropriate,** as well as through other avenues outside of the Title IX regulatory framework, that clarifies institutions' obligations to support student caregivers, including access to lactation spaces, referral to child care services, and the right to flexibility during postpartum recovery and child illness.

Intended outcome: Institutions adopt inclusive policies for parenting students and prioritize their access to lactation spaces, child care services, and accommodations to meet caregiving responsibilities while enrolled in school.

4c. **Fund and direct the OCR to improve enforcement capacity and develop specialized technical assistance** for complaints related to pregnancy and parenting, including model policies, compliance reviews, and training modules.

Intended outcome: Colleges receive and implement OCR guidance to protect pregnant and parenting students' right to access higher education. Institutions that fail to accommodate parenting students are investigated and compelled to resolve related civil rights complaints.

4d. **Incentivize colleges to voluntarily adopt protections aligned with the vacated 2024 Title IX rule and recommendations** from the National Women's Law Center,[26] such as excused caregiving absences and protection from retaliation, by tying eligibility for federal grants, such as CCAMPIS, FIPSE's Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program, or Title III/Title V Student Success grants, to adoption of these practices.

Intended outcome: Colleges proactively address parenting students' needs, even as formal regulatory protections remain in flux or under legal challenges.

State Recommendations

Below, we outline six areas for state-level policy that can help improve access to child care for parenting students. Each state operates within its own context, priorities, and budgetary constraints. States have varying governing structures for higher education, state agencies that administer higher education and child care programs, and job functions that exist to address child care challenges. For example, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidy is administered by social or human service agencies in some states, and by departments of education or early learning in others. Implementing state-level solutions to child care challenges for student parents will require an understanding of state context and the roles of various state agencies, and developing relationships and collaborative solutions across agencies that support higher education and early learning.

1. Coordinate Child Care Provision in Public Higher Education

Problem

Many colleges that provide or want to provide on-campus child care face financial challenges related to facilities, staffing, liability insurance, and other operating costs. Often, institutions receive little or no financial or coordinating support in this area from their state higher education agency or system. This can be even more challenging for community colleges, which tend to have higher percentages of student parents and fewer financial resources. Our research found that gaps in coordination leave colleges without a model of best practices to follow and limited awareness of funding streams that could support, expand, or sustain their programs. Campus child care centers often are expected to be self-supporting and receive little financial support at the institutional or system level. As a result, centers often charge market rates for tuition, which can be unaffordable for student parents.

Additionally, research and resources related to child care access for student parents are limited. Colleges and researchers need access to state-level data about the impacts of child care access on college completion, so they can design solutions for student parents and understand the returns on investing in child care for this population.

Finally, colleges need support to connect student parents to off-campus care and child care subsidy options. They are often not well integrated into local efforts to solve child care challenges. If they are connected to workforce

boards, state early childhood agencies, or chambers of commerce working on this issue, they may find it easier to refer student parents to relevant child care services. This kind of connection might help state leaders working to address child care solutions better understand the challenges facing student parents and consider their needs in developing solutions.

Recommendations

1a. **Designate a coordinator within the state higher education agency (or equivalent) to support on-campus child care centers** in knowledge sharing and joint purchasing to achieve cost savings.

Louisiana's Board of Regents offers a model. A program manager was hired in 2021 to focus on early childhood initiatives. This work includes coordinating early learning centers at colleges, finding and securing grants to support their work, liaising between the Board of Regents and the Louisiana Department of Education, and providing professional development to campus-based child care center staff. The coordinator is also a matchmaker between colleges that have space to offer and local child care providers who can offer care but need space to run their businesses.

Other state higher education governing boards or coordinating agencies could follow suit and designate a coordinator to help colleges engage in knowledge sharing, tap into local and state efforts to develop child care solutions, and help identify and apply for funding sources to support child care. A coordinator could also help colleges engage in joint purchasing or tap into other state joint purchasing efforts to maximize cost savings for child care center supplies and liability insurance.

The work of a coordinator should be aligned with existing state priorities in meeting workforce needs or college completion goals to help build buy-in for the work and sustain it. In addition to colleges, a coordinator should be connected to relevant state or local workforce boards, early childhood education organizations, and/or commerce departments that are working to address child care solutions. This will allow the coordinator to help integrate child care work into the higher education system in the state and help colleges connect to resources and solutions for their students and workforce. While a full-time coordinator would be ideal, a part-time coordinator could support some of these tasks.

Intended outcome: Colleges have access to shared, local knowledge on best practices for offering on-campus child care and/or supporting their student parents in accessing off-campus care. Colleges have improved access to funding opportunities and connections to state and local efforts to solve child care challenges.

1b. **Issue clear state-level guidance to help colleges navigate liability concerns related to having children on campus**, including policies on drop-in care and where children are welcome (e.g., libraries, certain types of classes with instructor permission). Guidance can be developed by state early education agencies or a higher education coordinator and should address legal, safety, and operational considerations.

Intended outcome: Colleges have access to clear guidance on welcoming kids on campus, in child care, and other settings. Colleges adopt policies that protect children's health and safety while welcoming children on campus where possible. Student parents are informed and afforded flexibility to bring their children to campus when safe and appropriate.

1c. **Fund and enable state-level data collection and analysis about student parents' access to child care and its impact on retention and graduation** in order to help colleges, states, and higher education systems understand the return on investment in offering child care services both on and off campus to student parents. Make data publicly available so that it can be analyzed by institutions and researchers working to improve completion rates for parenting students in higher education. This work could happen through state higher education coordinating boards or agencies or longitudinal data systems.

Intended outcome: Colleges, researchers, and policymakers have good information to understand the impact of child care access and types of child care services on retention and graduation for student parents. Colleges and policymakers are equipped to make decisions about where to devote resources to student parents and child care to increase parenting students' academic success.

1d. **Explore state and system-level solutions to fund on- and off-campus child care for student parents** by helping colleges tap into federal and state resources. Provide technical assistance to identify and apply for funding streams such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds,[27] Perkins,[28] and CCDF subsidies.[29]

One existing example is Tennessee's TANF Opportunity Act and Educational Opportunity Pilot, which provides enhanced cash assistance to people pursuing educational opportunities and helps them access essentials like child care.[30] Another example is Massachusetts's Quinsigamond Community College, which leverages Perkins funding to support student-parent services. Though the Perkins funding doesn't directly support child care services, Perkins funds supported the hiring of a student parent coordinator who refers student parents to resources and who will oversee drop-in care on campus.[31]

Intended outcome: Colleges are clear on available funding streams to finance campus-based child care or related services. Colleges are supported in

applying for new funding streams and are able to offer more subsidized child care support to parenting students.

1e. **Improve coordination between state higher education systems and the state agency that administers CCDF subsidies** to identify and address barriers that prevent campus-based child care centers from accepting subsidies. Solutions may include: providing true cost of care reimbursement rates for providers, providing outreach and education to campus-based child care centers on subsidy application processes, and simplifying CCDF applications.

Intended outcome: Campus child care centers accept their state's CCDF subsidy, and student parents are able to use CCDF subsidies to access campus-based child care.

1f. **Incentivize colleges to open and operate child care centers** that serve student parents. In addition to federal funding streams referenced throughout this document, policymakers should explore providing state grants, tax credits, or other incentives that make offering campus-based, high-quality, affordable child care to student parents more financially feasible for colleges.

Intended outcome: More campuses open and operate child care centers that serve student parents, and more student parents are able to access child care on their campus.

2. Prioritize Student Parents in Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Program

Problem

Student parents' access to CCDF subsidies varies by state.[32] Some states impose work requirements on top of education, unrealistic time limits for benefits while students are enrolled in education or training, and/or they restrict the types of education or training that are allowable. States vary in how they treat travel and study hours in terms of eligible activity hours, which can limit student parents' access to subsidies for these critical tasks. Our research found that restrictive requirements, coupled with wait lists for subsidies in about one-fifth of states,[33] can prevent student parents from even applying for the subsidy. Additionally, some college-based child care centers do not accept the subsidy, making it more difficult for student parents to access care on campus.

Recommendations

2a. **Allow education and training as stand-alone eligible activities for CCDF subsidies**, eliminate restrictive time limits on receiving subsidies, and count travel and study time toward activity hours for which families can access child care. These recommendations are articulated in other research and reports on CCDF rules for student parents by state[34] and on improving access to child care for Black student parents.[35]

Intended outcome: More student parents have access to CCDF subsidies to pay for child care. These student parents have enough child care access to support the time they spend traveling to/from school and work.

2b. **Prioritize student parents as a designated population for CCDF subsidies**, as the state of Georgia has done within its 2025–2027 CCDF State Plan,[36] to support student parents in accessing child care. Because there is typically not enough funding available to support all eligible families that apply, states and territories can choose how to prioritize special populations[37] for child care subsidies. Prioritizing student parents for CCDF subsidies can help reach this population and support their continued enrollment in higher education through improved access to affordable child care.

Ultimately, states should codify in law or regulation that participation in postsecondary education is equal to work in determining eligibility activities and distributing CCDF subsidies. This would help protect the agency of income-eligible parents when postsecondary education is necessary to meet their career goals. Guidance can serve as an intermediary solution while states are working to change law or regulation.

Intended outcome: More student parents access their state's CCDF subsidy and are able to afford child care.

2c. **Place staff at community colleges to assist student parents with applying for CCDF subsidies** and other state or local services.

For example, Georgia has piloted placing consultants at three Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) campuses to assist student parents in applying for child care subsidies and connecting them to wraparound services.[38] Similarly, Kentucky has placed experts at Kentucky Community & Technical College System campuses to help students apply for child care assistance programs and other supports.[39] Placing staff full time, part time, or on designated days at community colleges can help student parents, as well as other families in the community, apply for subsidies and connect to other state programs or services.

Intended outcome: Parenting students receive support on campus to apply for child care subsidies and other services that support their families.

2d. **Partner with public higher education institutions to distribute CCDF dollars via contracts or grants**, allowing campus-based child care centers to streamline access to subsidized on-campus care for low-income student parents.

New York offers a model for this by allocating a portion of CCDF funds through an agreement with its public college systems, the State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY). In 2023, New York allocated $2.213 million to SUNY and $2.161 million to CUNY to support child care subsidies for income-eligible families.[40]

Intended outcome: Colleges receive streamlined access to CCDF subsidies to make it easier to offer them to eligible parenting students. Colleges are more predictably able to serve low-income parenting students with child care on campus.

3. Offer Guidance and Licensure Flexibility to Public Colleges and Universities

Problem

Many student parents rely on informal child care arrangements (often called family, friend, and neighbor, or FFN, care) due to cost and availability constraints,[41] yet they face gaps in care that could be addressed through occasional drop-in child care services on campus.[42] In our research, college staff cited concerns about state licensure requirements and liability that can prevent their institutions from considering offering drop-in care. Student parents need options that supplement FFN care to fill gaps they face in child care. At the same time, health and safety standards must be prioritized when children are watched in unlicensed drop-in care.

Recommendations

3a. **Implement narrowly tailored licensure exemptions for prescheduled and emergency drop-in child care programs based at public higher education institutions**, when care is offered for four or fewer hours per day and the parent is nearby and available to return to the care site as needed. State exemptions should follow the model of existing carve-outs for short-duration care settings (such as gyms or summer camps) and include safeguards such as staff background checks and minimum staff-to-child ratios.

Intended outcome: More public higher education institutions offer drop-in care to meet the needs of student parents. Student parents are better able to access occasional care that helps them stay enrolled.

3b. **Issue guidance to public higher education institutions on licensure and exemption from licensure**, on offering drop-in care, and on minimizing liability while keeping kids healthy and safe in campus-based drop-in care. In some cases, colleges refrain from offering drop-in care because of concerns about liability and licensure, even when they operate in states where licensure exemptions would allow them to offer drop-in care. Providing colleges with clear guidance on offering drop-in care, including information on licensure exemptions and on health and safety, could encourage colleges to consider offering drop-in care on campus.

Intended outcome: Colleges better understand state licensure and exemption from licensure for child care services, and develop child care services within these parameters to safely serve the children of parenting students. Children's health and safety are prioritized, while parenting students are afforded increased flexibility that covers gaps in their child care.

4. Coordinate Services with Child Care Resource and Referral Organizations (CCR&R)

Problem

Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies help families locate and access child care and help child care providers with training and technical assistance. CCR&Rs are a critical component of early care infrastructure, yet many college campuses that serve student parents are not well connected to these networks and could benefit from stronger partnerships with them.[43] Our research found that the location of CCR&R agencies in proximity to colleges matters in connecting student parents to this resource and facilitating partnerships between college staff and CCR&R staff. Additionally, CCR&Rs often operate with limited funding, reducing their ability to serve more student parents.

Recommendations

4a. **Facilitate relationships or partnerships between community colleges and CCR&R networks**. Staff at colleges who help parenting students connect to resources (e.g., navigators, advisors, basic needs coordinators) should be made aware of CCR&R services. CCR&Rs and college staff should be

encouraged to develop relationships and processes to smooth the referral process for student parents who need CCR&R services. Successful partnerships at some community colleges and CCR&Rs show that colleges and CCR&Rs can coordinate to connect student parents with resources.

For example, Forsyth Technical Community College partners with the local CCR&R, the Child Care Resource Center, to make a warm handoff for students who need services. With students' permission, Forsyth Technical Community College staff provide a student's name and phone number to the Child Care Resource Center. In turn, the Child Care Resource Center calls students directly to offer services to make sure they do not slip through the cracks.

State higher education agencies or early education agencies can provide communications to colleges and CCR&Rs, or host events that connect staff from the two types of organizations, to encourage collaboration and highlight the need for services for student parents.

Intended outcome: Parenting students have improved access to CCR&R services, including help finding child care and applying for child care subsidies.

4b. **Explore the possibility of situating CCR&R services at community colleges**, either by co-locating services within a college or lending CCR&Rs community college space and other resources.

Linn-Benton Community College in Oregon offers a model for this. The CCR&R is operated by the college and serves three local counties and student parents enrolled at the college. Because it is located on campus, faculty and staff are aware of the resource and are able to refer student parents there. The CCR&R benefits from college infrastructure, including space, human resources, and information technology resources. The Linn-Benton college community (including student parents, faculty, and staff) benefits from CCR&R services that help families locate and access child care.

Intended outcome: Community college infrastructure is leveraged to support CCR&Rs in focusing their limited resources on delivering child care services. Community college students, faculty, and staff have better access to CCR&R services while CCR&Rs continue to support local communities that are both campus affiliates and non-campus affiliates.

5. Fund or Strengthen Postsecondary Child Care Grant Programs

Problem

While a handful of states provide child care grants specifically for postsecondary students via state aid agencies or higher education systems, most states do not offer this type of targeted financial support. Our research identified only five such programs nationwide. Expanding state-funded grants could fill in the gaps for student parents who are not served by CCAMPIS or CCDF. Targeted child care grants could also help parents with some college credit but no degree with the support they need to reenroll and complete a credential.

Recommendations

5a. **Create or expand state-funded grant programs to increase access to affordable child care** for student parents enrolled in postsecondary institutions.

Existing state postsecondary programs differ in eligibility requirements and population served.[44] North Carolina and Maine (via a rural initiative scholarship) have programs open to community college students only, while Oregon's program is open to undergraduates at community colleges and four-year universities (both public and private). Washington's program is available for undergraduates at its six four-year public colleges. Minnesota's program is open to undergraduate and graduate students at public and private community colleges and four-year institutions.

State priorities and budgets will impact how states target grant funding and design eligibility criteria, and states should explicitly align these programs with their state priorities (such as supporting rural populations or undergraduates in specific workforce priority programs). Because the majority of parenting students are enrolled in community college, programs should be available to this population. They should also be open to part-time students, who make up 60 percent of parenting students at community colleges[45] and 43 percent of parenting students at public baccalaureate institutions.[46] Including parenting students at four-year colleges or in graduate school as eligible for postsecondary child care grants when possible can help states increase college completion and meet workforce needs.

Intended outcome: Parenting students are able to access dedicated funding for child care support, particularly when CCAMPIS or CCDF subsidies are not available.

5b. **Design postsecondary child care grants for timeliness and flexibility**. Grants should be accessible year-round, supporting student parents who begin at different points in the academic year. The application and disbursement process should be simple and quick, to help student parents who are making decisions about whether they can afford to enroll and can access child care for a given academic term.

Many student parents rely on family, friends, and neighbors for care and do not have access to child care centers if those are not close to them, hard to get to, and/or closed evenings or weekends. Student parents need flexibility in grant programs that account for the type of care they may need and are able to find. Child care grant programs that require a student parent to prove their child is currently enrolled in a formal child care center may inadvertently lock them out of receiving grant aid precisely because they haven't been able to find or afford a spot at a child care center.

Intended outcome: Parenting students who may enroll at various points during an academic year, be enrolled part time, and have a high need for flexibility are able to access child care grants that enable them to afford care while in school.

5c. **Ensure that child care grants administered by a college or university financial aid office include clear communications to grant recipients** about how and why to request a cost of attendance adjustment to include a dependent care allowance. When students receive financial aid, one form of aid can displace or cause them to lose other types of aid, depending on how that aid is applied to their account, their Student Aid Index, their overall cost of attendance, and their calculated need. Often, parenting students are unaware that their cost of attendance can be adjusted to account for dependent care expenses. Incorporating a dependent care allowance into the cost of attendance can help prevent child care grant aid from displacing any other aid students receive to help with tuition or nontuition expenses.

Intended outcome: Parenting students have access to both child care subsidies and traditional financial aid to help them better afford tuition, child care, and other living costs while in school.

6. Fund Preschool, Pre-K, and After-School Programs at Colleges

Problem

While campuses struggle to provide affordable on-campus child care for student parents, in some states, subsidized preschool and pre-kindergarten

(pre-K) programs can offer care for eligible student-parent families. However, these programs can be disconnected from higher education institutions, making it difficult for colleges to connect student parents to them. Student parents with school-age children also face gaps in care after-school hours, when they need to be at work, in class, or studying.

Recommendations

6a. **Facilitate the availability of state-funded preschool and prekindergarten programs at campus child care centers**. This can be done by contracting a number of preschool or pre-K spots to be offered at campus-based child care centers. Campuses can prioritize the spots for eligible student parents to ensure equitable access.

Designate funds to help colleges develop and implement partnerships to address child care on campus for student parents. Minnesota offered an example of this when its legislature appropriated one-time funds to help colleges participate in the Kids on Campus initiative to bring more Head Start programs to community colleges.[47]

Intended outcome: Parenting students have access to subsidized or free preschool or pre-K programs on campus, and campuses have improved access to funding through offering preschool or pre-K spots.

6b. **Facilitate referrals from colleges to help student parents connect to state preschool and pre-K programs off campus**. By strengthening relationships between administrators of state preschool and pre-K programs and college staff who support student parents, states can help eligible student-parent families find free or low-cost preschool and pre-K programs.

Intended outcome: Parenting students are referred to relevant preschool and pre-K programs they may be eligible for, because colleges have good information through partnerships with state program administrators.

6c. **Partner with colleges to offer after-school programming on college campuses** and help colleges tap into available state or local sources of funding to pay for these programs on campus. One example is UCLA's Little Bruins Clubhouse program, which provides free and low-cost programming for students' dependents.[48] Bringing after-school programs to college or university facilities can help student parents access care and enriching activities for their school-aged children while parents attend class or study.

Where possible, coordinate to facilitate after-school programming on campuses, especially those with a large number of students with dependents or located in areas with few after-school options for care. Strengthening college relationships with CCR&Rs may also help colleges leverage support in connecting student parents to after-school care options.

Intended outcome: More parenting students in need of after-school care are able to access these programs on campus.

Why These Changes Matter

These recommendations aim to create avenues to support child care for student parents, since lack of child care access can impede their success in higher education. By strengthening federal funding and support and streamlining state-level policies, we can promote access to care for student parents.

Implementing policies in this agenda will support student parents. Solving the child care crisis in the United States, however, requires addressing larger-scale issues that affect the entire population, not just student parents. Child care is needed by families across the socioeconomic spectrum, and it should be approached within the framework of a universal right to early education. Workforce compensation, subsidies that cover the true cost of care, and regulatory frameworks that support quality and safety are all critical to building a robust child care infrastructure that serves all workers, students, and children.

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