

PRIORITIZING STUDENT PARENTS IN COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RELIEF: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY



Student parents sit at the intersection of risk in this moment of global pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly four million U.S. undergraduate college students are parents or guardians of children under the age of 18.¹ These student parents, who already faced immense financial, child care, food, and housing insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic, are now dealing with multiple new barriers, including school closures, lay-offs, and child care disruptions, among other challenges.²

In March 2020, Congress passed the “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act” or CARES Act, which included \$6 billion in emergency aid for college students. This aid, which can help students cover the costs of housing, food, and child care, among other expenses, is an important first step to helping student parents’ meet their immediate needs. To date, however, funds have not reached many of the students and families in need.³

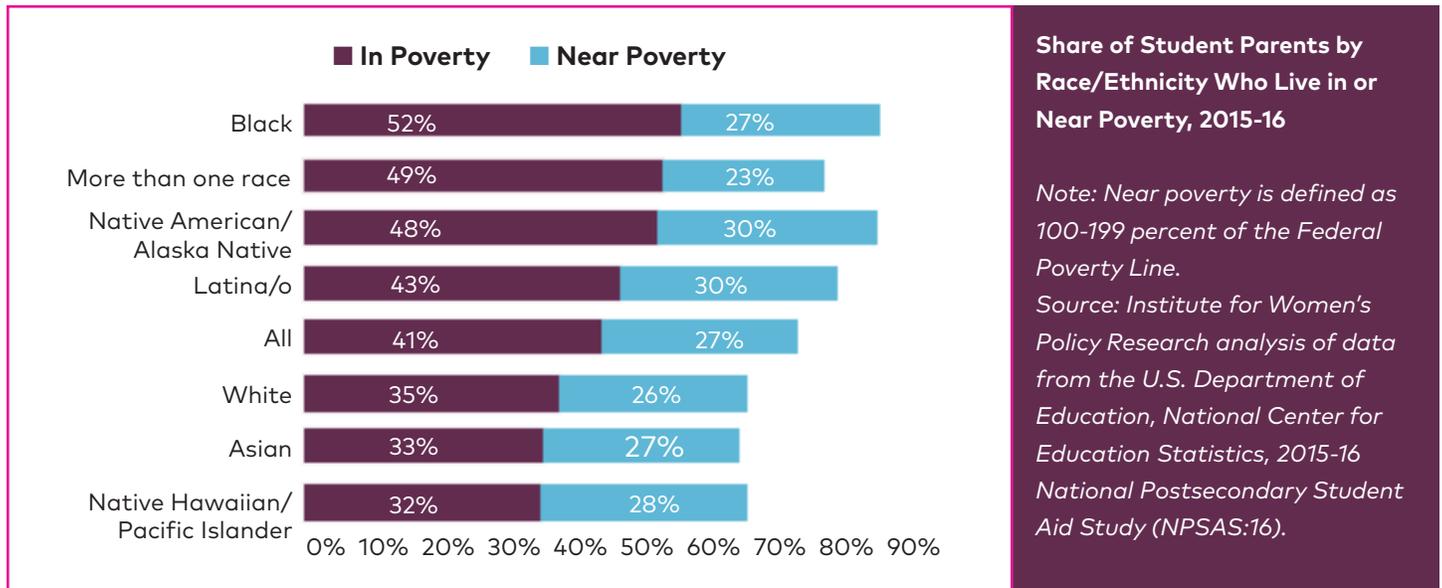
This briefing paper outlines how state and federal policymakers can center the immediate and longer-term needs of student parents in policy responses to the pandemic, so that they are able to safeguard their families’ economic well-being and continue along their pathway to college attainment.

THE IMPERATIVE TO CENTER STUDENT PARENTS IN PANDEMIC POLICY RESPONSES

Student parents sit at the intersection of risk in this moment of global pandemic. More than half of student parents have children under age six (53 percent) and 41 percent have children ages 6-17.⁴ Child care and K-12 school closures mean these parents are juggling 24/7 care and homeschooling on top of completing their own coursework—creating particular strain for the nearly two million students who are single mothers.⁵ Many also have limited or no broadband internet access and inadequate technological resources to meet both their and their children’s remote educational needs.

Compounding these challenges is the fact that the majority of student parents were already living with in- or near-poverty wages before the pandemic began.⁶ Black student parents, student parents who identify as more than one race, Native American student parents, Alaska Native student parents, and Latino/a student parents—who represent populations which have been hardest hit by COVID-19—are especially likely to live with significant financial insecurity (Figure 1).⁷ Now, student parents, the majority of whom work while in school, are facing even greater financial need due to lay-offs, furloughs, and reduced work hours.⁸

Figure 1. Black, Multi-Racial, Native, and Latino/a Student Parents Face High Levels of Economic Security While in College



For student parents who hold essential jobs, their need for reliable and affordable child care and paid sick and family leave has been accentuated.⁹ The vast majority of all student parents are women (70 percent), who make up the majority of employees in essential industries (as well as the majority of workers experiencing job loss as the result of the pandemic).¹⁰ In addition, while available data make it difficult to estimate the number of student parents working in essential industries, mothers in college are most likely to be studying health care—38 percent—and parents make up a third of all students studying health care while in college.¹¹ These parents' ability to complete their degree programs will be essential to maintaining the capacity of the U.S. health care system.



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The economic instability and uncertainty triggered by the pandemic has forced many student parents to delay or discontinue their education. As a group, student parents are likely to be disproportionately represented among those who decide they cannot continue their studies for economic reasons. In the short-term, delaying or discontinuing education may seem like the only viable option for student parents who are struggling to take care of their families and cover the costs associated with obtaining their degrees. In the long-term, however, it can affect the educational and health outcomes of their children, as well as their future earnings and employment.¹²



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The United States also stands to lose if student parent families are not able to continue along their educational pathways. Meeting the demands of a rapidly changing workforce—made more urgent by the ongoing pandemic—will not be possible without increasing the number of skilled workers who can fill in-demand jobs in key industries. Now, more than ever, retaining today's student parents and attracting the more than 12 million parents who have some college credit, but no degree, to postsecondary spaces is vital to the health and resilience of the U.S. economy.¹³

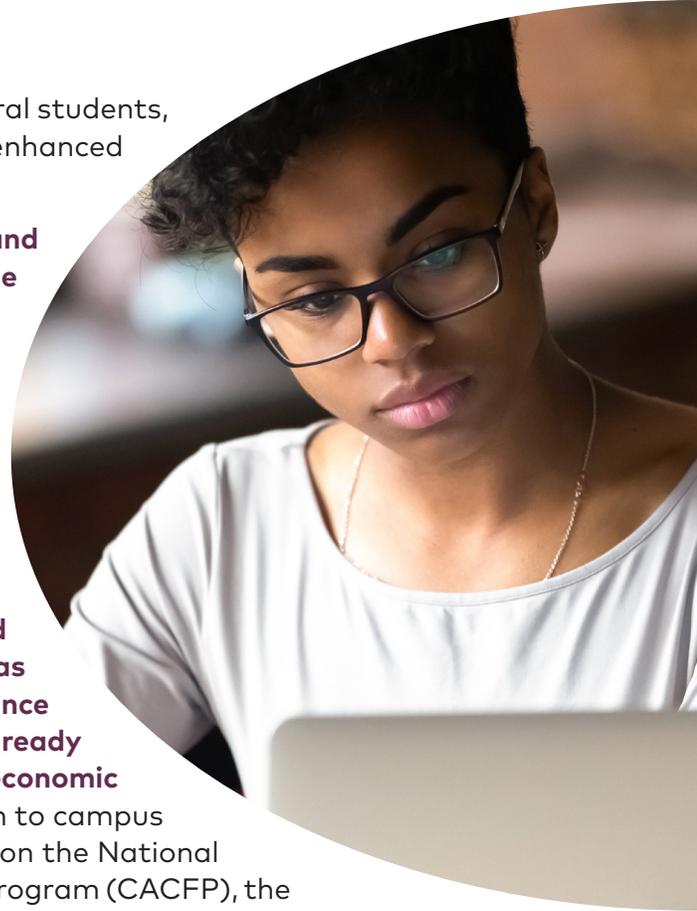
To ensure student parents, prospective students, and their children are able to pursue their educational ambitions, policy responses must enable them to cope with the enhanced financial, caregiving, and work demands they are experiencing as a result of the pandemic and economic fallout. Centering the needs of this student population will improve their chances of college completion now and increase their ability to reap all the attendant benefits that come with holding a postsecondary credential in the future.

ENSURING STUDENT PARENTS' IMMEDIATE WELL-BEING

- **Congress and states should continue to provide enhanced funding for emergency grant aid or other forms of cash assistance to college students—including priority funding for students with children and others with high need.** Provisions attached to the distribution of aid should ensure students have maximum access by removing any requirements—such as minimum credits or full-time enrollment—for receiving such aid, as they may limit access for student parents and other vulnerable students. In addition, ensure that undocumented students and noncredit students have access to emergency aid and other supports provided through COVID-19 relief packages.
- **Federal benefit programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) child care assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which require recipients to work or participate in other activities should suspend those requirements for the duration of the pandemic and throughout recovery.** Suspending activity requirements will ensure individuals and families who have lost their jobs, had their hours reduced, had to drop out of education or job training, or who are facing personal or family illness can maintain their economic security and support their families. Funding for these programs should also be increased to ensure eligible families are able to benefit.
- **Stimulus funding should facilitate access to technological resources—like computers, free or low-cost broadband internet, printers, among other materials—or provide funding to acquire needed resources, to enable remote instruction for student parents and their children.** In all likelihood, social distancing measures and remote education will continue into the fall semester. Providing technological support and resources to student parent families will be essential to their ability to continue their educational progress, while also assistance their children's learning and development.

Student parent families, students with low incomes, rural students, and students with disabilities, must be prioritized for enhanced technological support.

- **Congress and states should provide emergency and ongoing housing assistance and rent and mortgage waivers or freezes to families with low incomes and student parent families.** Student parents were already likely to be at risk of housing insecurity; the unemployment crisis triggered by the pandemic has enhanced that risk substantially.¹⁴ Housing refunds and assistance should also be provided to student parents who were or are still living on campus or in university-affiliated housing.
- **Congress and states should provide increased food assistance to students who rely on campus meal plans, as well as increase funding for national nutrition assistance programs, to ensure student parents who were already food insecure, and those who are newly experiencing economic hardship, can adequately feed their families.** In addition to campus meal plans, many student parent families also depend on the National School Lunch Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the nutrition program of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and now the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program; these programs should be strengthened and provide expanded access, including for non-school age children. In addition, funding for SNAP should be increased, in addition to halting the elimination of categorical eligibility, to increase access and restrictions on receiving benefits to purchase prepared hot foods during the national pandemic emergency should be waived.
- **Stimulus packages should include dedicated funding for campus food banks to continue operations and provide food and other high need items to directly benefit student parent families and other students experiencing food insecurity.** This must include essential supplies for student parents with young children, such as diapers, wipes, toilet paper, and formula, in addition to cleaning and sanitizing supplies.
- **Additional stimulus funds should be dedicated to providing compensation to eligible parents and family members who are now providing family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care as a result of the closure of their existing child care arrangements, in addition to supporting child care providers.** Parent co-payments should be waived, and states should institute a streamlined process for families to apply to become eligible FFN providers so they can receive benefits in lieu of their normal child care arrangements.
- **The Department of Education should clearly articulate the flexibility allowed for Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grantees to use funds to support student parent families while schools and child care centers are closed.** CCAMPIS programs are well-positioned to provide support to student parent families, including through virtual mechanisms as well as the provision of physical resources.





BUILDING SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS FOR STUDENT PARENTS' FUTURE SUCCESS

- **Congress should dramatically increase funding for early care and education providers, including targeted support for campus early learning and child care centers.** Re-opening the economy will depend on the ability of child care providers to re-open. Providers who have had to shut down will need enhanced support to resume operations. Campus child care, which was already in decline across the country and serves an essential need of many student parent families, will need targeted funding to ensure its sustainability.¹⁵
- **Congress should increase Pell grant funding, including raising the maximum award amount and pegging funding to inflation.** Expanding Pell grants and ensuring they adequately cover the true costs associated with college attendance will help student parents accommodate heightened financial need and promote their ability to enroll in the fall and future academic years. In addition, new ways of communicating acute financial need must be developed to better reflect the realities faced by student parents and other students with low incomes, and methods for adjusting aid awards to account for unexpected need should be streamlined and communicated widely to students.
- **Congress should increase authorized funding for the CCAMPIS program to allow for new grant making, as well as the guaranteed renewal of existing grants.** CCAMPIS is the only dedicated funding to support low-income student parents' access to child care.¹⁶ Increased CCAMPIS funding will be critical to sustaining campus child care centers and CCAMPIS programs, which provide essential support to students with children and without which many cannot continue enrollment.
- **Congress and the federal government should provide enhanced funding to states for higher education to ensure that low-resourced nonprofit educational institutions, especially community colleges and others that serve a large number of student parents, Pell eligible students, and students of color, do not suffer unnecessarily as a result of state budget cuts triggered by the pandemic.** Open access institutions and those in education deserts and rural areas, where their closure would have a disproportionate impact on students and the community, should also be prioritized. Enrollment in higher education increased, particularly among adults, parents, and other "non-traditional" students, during the last economic recession. If enrollment increases in coming years, the system must have the funding needed to serve these students.

- **Congress, the Department of Education, and states should take steps to ensure predatory for-profit institutions do not target student parents and other vulnerable students for enrollment in the face of declining higher education funding at the state level.** As in the last recession, for-profit institutions may ramp up marketing to vulnerable student populations, including student parents and students with low incomes. Ensuring these students have access to quality educational opportunities is essential to protecting them from predatory institutions which often confer sub-par credentials and lead to high levels of student debt.¹⁷
- **Federal, state, and institutional data systems should collect and report data on students' parent status, including breakdowns by gender, race/ethnicity, income, and other variables, to understand and document the experiences of vulnerable student populations in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the following years.** These data can help higher education leaders and policymakers pinpoint areas of high need and inform the design of interventions that support student parents' ability to pursue postsecondary education.



CONCLUSION

The decisions made by Congress, the administration, and state governments during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic will have concrete implications for student parents' ability to pursue postsecondary education now and in the months and years to come. Knowing that earning a postsecondary credential is one of the surest pathways to family economic security, building systems that are responsive to the needs of student parents and their children will be essential to their long-run economic well-being, in addition to benefiting other students and families who are experiencing similar needs.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Jessica Milli, Susana Contreras-Mendez, Tessa Holtzman, and Barbara Gault. 2019. "Investing in Single Mothers' Higher Education: National and State Estimates of the Costs and Benefits of Single Mothers' Educational Attainment to Individuals, Families, and Society." Briefing Paper, IWPR #R600. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/investing-in-single-mothers-higher-education-national-state-costs-benefits/>> (accessed April 24, 2020).
- ⁶ IWPR. 2020. IWPR analysis of data from the 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).
- ⁷ Samantha Artiga, Rachel Garfield, and Kendal Orgera. 2020. *Communities of Color at Higher Risk for Health and Economic Challenges due to COVID-19*. San Francisco, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation. <<https://www.kff.org/disparities-policy/issue-brief/communities-of-color-at-higher-risk-for-health-and-economic-challenges-due-to-covid-19/>> (accessed April 24, 2020). "In or near poverty" is defined as incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.
- ⁸ Reichlin Cruse, Contreras Mendez, and Holtzman. 2020. "Student Parents in the COVID-19 Pandemic."
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ariane Hegewisch. 2020. "Women Lost More Jobs than Men in almost all Sectors of the Economy." Quick Figure #Q080. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/women-lost-more-jobs-than-men-in-almost-all-sectors-of-the-economy/>> (accessed April 24, 2020); Campbell Robertson and Robert Gebeloff. "How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America." *The New York Times*, April 18, 2020. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>> (accessed April 27, 2020). Institute for Women's Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute. 2019. "Parents in College: By the Numbers."
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- ¹⁴ Baker-Smith et al. 2020. *#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity*.
- ¹⁵ Barbara Gault, Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, and Rachel Schumacher. 2019. *Bridging Systems for Family Economic Mobility: Postsecondary and Early Education Partnerships*. Report, IWPR #C482. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/C482_Bridging-Systems-of-Higher-Ed.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2020).
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