

# LEVERAGING HEAD START FOR STUDENT PARENT FAMILIES

## Federal and State Policy Opportunities

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## INTRODUCTION

Accessible pathways to postsecondary attainment are critical to achieving economic security for families, especially in light of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For parents without post-high school credentials and with incomes at or near the poverty threshold, strengthening support for them to pursue higher education can improve their ability to secure employment, promote their long-term economic security, and improve their children's chances of success (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2011; Attewell and Lavin 2007; Vilorio 2016).

Opportunities to promote parents' attainment of college credentials exist among both currently enrolled college students and the population of adults more broadly who do not hold a degree. Nearly a quarter of undergraduate students in the United States are raising dependent children, or nearly four million students, over half of whom (53 percent) have children under the age of six (IWPR and Ascend at the Aspen Institute 2019; GAO 2019). One-third of all adults who do not hold a college degree are parents of children 18 or younger living in their households. Roughly two in five of these parents—or 13 million people—have children under six (IWPR 2021a).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The share and number of adults who do not hold a college degree who are parents includes adults with some college credit, but no degree, as well as those who hold a high school diploma or less as their highest level of educational attainment.

Any effort to improve parents' ability to pursue and succeed in postsecondary education must ensure access to high-quality, affordable care and learning opportunities for children, as well as tailored guidance to navigate postsecondary education and support systems (Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse 2021; Evans et al. 2017). Evidence suggests, for example, that caregiving demands without adequate support can threaten student parents' ability to persist in school and that access to child care can substantially increase their ability to complete postsecondary programs (CCSSE 2020; Hess et al. 2014; Johnson and Rochkind 2009; Reichlin Cruse et al. 2018). Despite the importance of affordable child care to parents' educational success, however, campus-based child care centers have been in decline in recent years, and high-quality, community-based care is often hard to secure and largely unaffordable for families living with low-incomes (Adams, Derrick-Mills, and Heller 2016; Gault et al. 2019).

**Partnership with Head Start offers an opportunity to increase services for student parent families and improve their chances of achieving economic security.**

To better meet the needs of parents interested in earning college credentials, innovative partnerships can create opportunities for leveraging existing support systems, capacity, and funding streams (Gault, Reichlin Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). Partnership between the higher education system and the Head Start system (referred to collectively as "Head Start"), in particular, offers an opportunity to harness the largest early learning program in the United States to increase services for student parent families living in or near poverty and improve their chances of achieving economic security.<sup>2</sup>

Head Start-college partnerships can take a number of forms. These might include services on-campus for eligible student parent families, in partnership with an existing campus child care center; off-campus services at a Head Start program with reserved slots for eligible student parents; or a credential program developed with the college or university designed for parents being served by Head Start.<sup>3</sup>

This briefing paper describes how federal and state policy could encourage greater support for parents pursuing postsecondary education through Head Start. It was developed with input from policy and issue-area experts and informed by research by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) (Gault et al. 2019).<sup>4</sup> The policy recommendations described below are intended to help federal and state policymakers increase access to Head Start services for current and prospective student parents and their children, ultimately improving those families' chances of educational and economic success.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this briefing paper, "Head Start" refers to Head Start, Early Head Start, and other related grant types.

<sup>3</sup> For more detail on the landscape of existing Head Start-college partnerships, common partnership models, and examples of partnerships, see Gault et al. 2019.

<sup>4</sup> A list of experts interviewed for this research is included in Appendix A.

# THE BENEFITS OF HEAD START COLLABORATION WITH HIGHER EDUCATION

In a 2019 study, IWPR identified 82 partnerships between Head Start and higher education institutions in the United States (Gault et al. 2019). Of these, 62 served student parents, with 24 prioritizing student parents' children for enrollment in Head Start. With committed partners, IWPR's research found that Head Start-college partnerships can provide eligible student parents with support—such as individualized coaching and assistance accessing resources—to help them persist in and graduate from college, while providing their children with high-quality education that promotes child development and kindergarten readiness. It also found important benefits for the Head Start and higher education partners, helping them meet established goals for families and students while leveraging cross-system capacity and funding.

## COLLABORATION BENEFITS FOR STUDENT PARENT FAMILIES

Educational attainment is essential for economic security, yet parents with low incomes often face constraints to entering college and completing degree and certificate programs. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened these obstacles for many families. Pandemic-related job loss led to unprecedented insecurity, with unemployment especially acute among mothers—particularly Black and Latina mothers—and adults who did not hold college credentials (Carnevale 2020; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021; Henderson 2020). For parents who were already enrolled in higher education, the pandemic led to delays in their educational plans at higher rates than students without children (Rothwell 2021). For many of these working and studying families, caregiving demands and lack of child care were major factors for their work and enrollment disruptions (Sun 2021; Rothwell 2021).

**Head Start holds promise for promoting postsecondary success among eligible student parent families.**

Finding solutions to meet student parents' child care needs is essential, therefore, to family and economic recovery from the pandemic. Improving access to affordable, high-quality early child care and learning, and to individualized support for parents, can play a role in reversing declining enrollment observed in the aftermath of the pandemic among student parents (Barker et al. 2021; Rothwell 2021). It can also create opportunities for greater support for parents who do not already hold a college credential and might want to pursue postsecondary education as a route to reentering the labor force and securing higher-pay employment than prior to the pandemic. Higher education-Head Start partnerships hold promise for strengthening the patchwork of support available for these families, given the combination of fully federally funded, high-quality early childhood education services for children and wraparound parental supports offered by Head Start.

In addition to providing culturally and developmentally appropriate high-quality educational services for children, the federal Head Start program works with families to set and make progress toward self-sufficiency goals, such as goals related to education and career pathways (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement 2013). These family supports can help parents who are already enrolled in college persist and complete

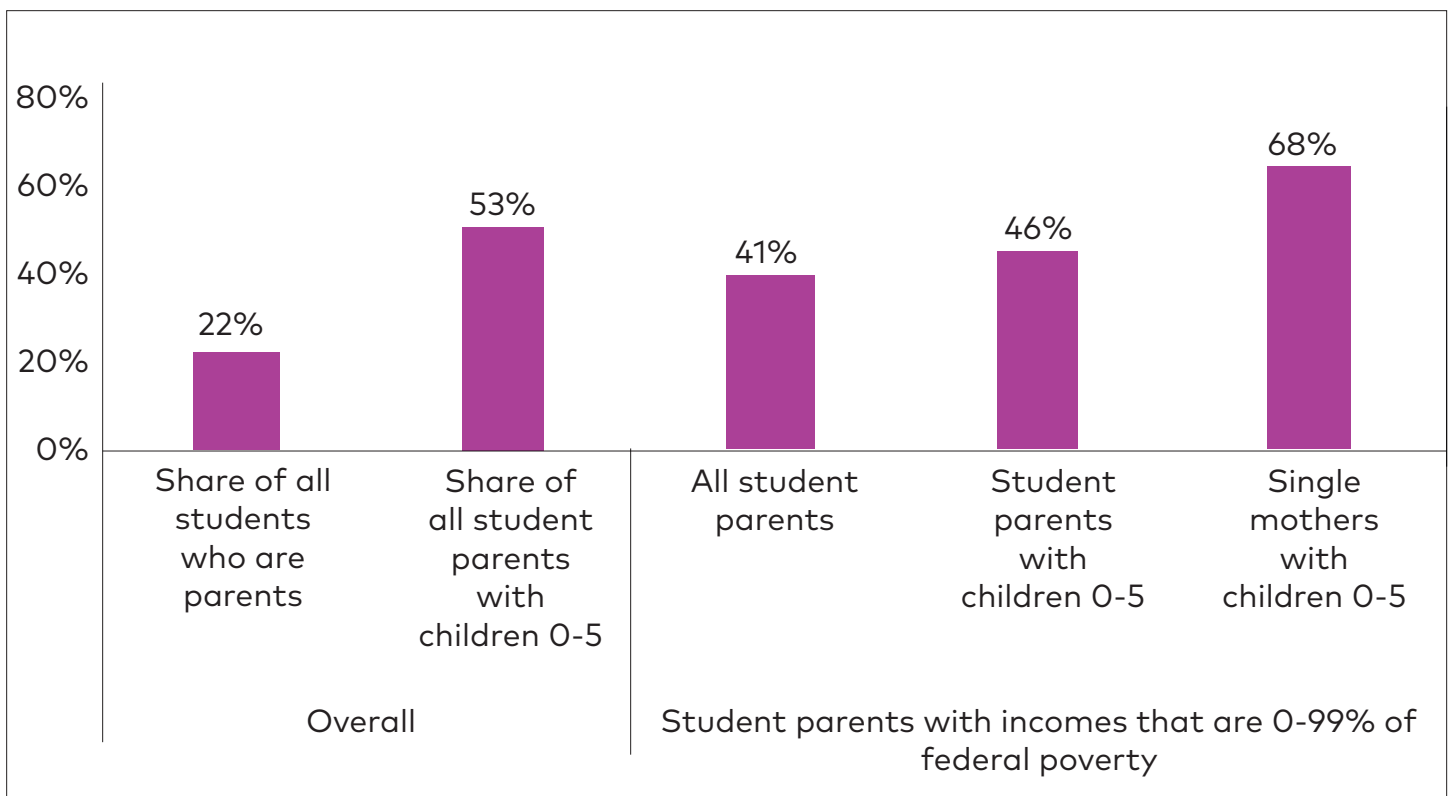
their education, in addition to facilitating the enrollment and credential attainment of parents who are being served by Head Start and are interested in earning a degree or certificate (Eckrich Sommer et al. 2016; Eckrich Sommer et al. 2018; Gault et al. 2019). Head Start family support staff fill the role of a coach or case manager for parents who are enrolled in college. Especially when located on a college campus, Head Start staff often have insight into campus services and relationships with college staff that can enhance support for student parents. Head Start family support advocates are well-equipped to help student parents navigate college systems and processes and gain access to needed resources to help them meet their family's basic needs (Gault et al. 2019).

**Nearly half of college students who are parents of children under six meet the income-eligibility requirements for Head Start.**

**How Current Student Parents and Head Start Parents Could Benefit from Partnerships**

A substantial share of enrolled college students with children stand to benefit from Head Start services. Nearly half (46 percent) of college students who are parents of children under six meet the income-eligibility requirements for Head Start (below 100 percent of the federal poverty line), as do nearly two-thirds of single student mothers with children under six (68 percent; Figure 1; Gault et al. 2019).

**Figure 1. Student Parents and Single Mothers Are Likely to Be Income-Eligible for Head Start**  
Share of Undergraduate Students Overall and Those Living Below the Federal Poverty Line by Parent Status, Age of Youngest Child, and Marital Status, 2015-16



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

Parents engaged with the Head Start system also stand to benefit. In 2019, 15 percent of all Head Start parents reported enrollment in job training or postsecondary education (including GED and degree programs; IWPR 2021c). Greater collaboration between their Head Start programs and their education institutions could enhance support for their journey to completion. Another 18 percent of Head Start parents expressed an interest in advancing their education through job training, college selection, or GED programs. Intentional partnerships with local colleges could facilitate these parents' postsecondary enrollment while enabling more targeted support as they begin on a path to credential attainment.

### **Student Parents Face Obstacles that Head Start is Designed to Help Families Overcome**

Student parents are also likely to face obstacles that Head Start programs are set up to help families overcome. According to a 2019 survey of more than 23,000 student parents, for example, 53 percent were food insecure and 68 percent were housing insecure. Another 17 percent reported homelessness, a factor that makes them automatically eligible for Head Start (Goldrick-Rab, Welton, and Coca 2020). The same study found that nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of student parent respondents feel that their current child care arrangement is unaffordable, which has implications for their own college outcomes. Of the parents surveyed, over half (56 percent) who reported that their care was too expensive missed class or work because of child care problems. Access to the early childhood services provided by Head Start could help student parent families alleviate these child care challenges while enrolled in college.

Evidence also suggests that when student parents do have access to safe, reliable, and affordable child care, they are more likely to persist in school and complete their programs (Chase-Lansdale et al. 2019; Hess et al. 2014; Johnson and Rochkind 2009). For example, descriptive analysis of eight years of data from a community college in New York suggests that access to subsidized child care on college campuses can improve student parents' attainment rates by as much as 21 percent when compared with their parenting peers who do not have access to care (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019).

### **BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION FOR HEAD START**

Collaboration with colleges and universities offers a range of benefits to Head Start providers. Head Start programs can gain access to in-kind contributions from college and university partners in the form of classroom space, custodial services, and access to human resources departments that can process payroll, for example. Head Start can also benefit from the assistance of Federal Work Study students, as well as students studying early childhood, nursing, and psychology, who need sites to fulfill their practicum hours (Gault et al. 2019).

Collaboration with colleges can also create professional development pathways for Head Start staff to attain the certification or degrees required to advance in the Head Start workforce.<sup>5</sup> Head Start regulations require all lead teachers to have either an associate's degree or a state certificate and half of all Head Start teachers must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (45 CFR § 1302.91). Colleges are a key partner to help

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of professional development benefits of partnerships with academic institutions are outlined on the Early Care and Learning Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website, operated by the federal Office of Head Start. See ECLKC 2018.

Head Start grantees meet these education requirements. As of spring 2017, there were 143 Head Start centers working alongside local colleges to train Head Start teachers (Bernstein et al. 2019).

In addition, Head Start providers can benefit from new avenues for reaching eligible children and families. Head Start enrollment for three- to five-year-old children has been declining over time due to the expanding availability of universal pre-kindergarten (Bassok 2012; Child Trends 2020). To fill open slots, Head Start programs can increase their efforts to attract and serve eligible student parent families who are not already enrolled in their services.

## **BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

Colleges and universities stand to benefit from partnerships with Head Start as well.<sup>6</sup> Leveraging existing Head Start grants to provide services to eligible student parent families can promote educational attainment while minimizing the impact on institutional budgets. The provision of free early learning services for children and wraparound, individualized coaching for parents can facilitate navigation of college and enable their ability to more effectively juggle parenthood and enrollment, increasing their likelihood of persistence and completion (Bettinger and Baker 2014; DVP-PRAXIS 2019; Evans et al. 2017; Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019).

In addition, these partnerships can offer colleges and universities built-in expertise and capacity for helping student parent families access resources related to basic needs, such as help assessing eligibility and applying for public assistance programs. Finally, on-campus partnerships with campus child care centers that operate as lab schools create opportunities for students studying early learning and other relevant areas to complete their practicums in a Head Start setting.

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the benefits of Head Start-college partnerships for colleges and universities, see Gault et al. 2019. For guidance on potential partnership models, see IWPR 2021b.

## FEDERAL POLICY LEVERS

Expanding economic mobility for families with low incomes is a national priority set by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (Administration for Children and Families 2021). Given the role of postsecondary attainment in achieving economic security, greater collaboration between Head Start and academic institutions to serve eligible college students with children fits squarely within this priority. The Office of Head Start, the U.S. Department of Education, and Congress have opportunities to encourage greater collaboration between Head Start and higher education at the national level. This section provides recommendations for ways that the Office of Head Start at HHS and the Department of Education can encourage these collaborations.

### OFFICE OF HEAD START

The Office of Head Start, located in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awards grants to and manages local agencies providing Head Start services. It also provides grantees with guidance, oversees the program's regulations, and connects grantees with technical assistance and other opportunities to grow and strengthen Head Start services.<sup>7</sup>

The Office of Head Start could use several methods to encourage greater collaboration between Head Start and colleges and universities to increase support for eligible student parent families. Recent Office of Head Start guidance around the usage of American Rescue Plan Act funds, for example, highlighted community colleges as a potential partner in which Head Start programs could invest to support the education and employment goals of Head Start families (ECLKC 2021a). Further examples of how the Office of Head Start could promote partnership between academic institutions and Head Start programs to promote the educational success of student parents are described below.

#### Including Student Parents in Community Needs Assessments

Head Start community needs assessments represent an opportunity to document the need for Head Start services among parents who are enrolled in local colleges and universities. Including student parents in these assessments is critical to ensuring the needs of a key population of potentially eligible families inform the provision of Head Start services. The Head Start Performance Standards, updated last in 2016, require Head Start grantees to conduct these assessments and the Office of Head Start provides a resource for grantees with guidance on how to conduct them (45 CFR § 1302.11).<sup>8</sup> Future reform of the Performance Standards should include guidance about how Head Start grantees can collaborate with academic institutions to provide pathways to college for parents interested in earning degrees or certifications. The Office of Head Start could then supplement its existing community needs assessment resource with guidance on how to do so. In lieu of such reform in the near term, the Office of Head Start can provide resources and technical

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<sup>7</sup> To view the Head Start Performance Standards, visit <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>.

<sup>8</sup> To read the Office of Head Start's guidance for conducting community assessments, visit <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/program-planning/community-assessment-foundation-program-planning-head-start/community-assessment-foundation-program-planning-head-start>.

assistance to help programs understand how to integrate the needs of college students with children into their regular needs assessments.

Guidance on assessing student parents' need for Head Start services would better equip grantees to incorporate this population into their needs assessments and increase the likelihood that Head Start services reach student parent families. While many campuses do not regularly collect data on parental status of their students, a growing number of academic institutions—particularly community colleges—are taking steps to document the student parent population. Office of Head Start guidance could include information on the data sources to use in community needs assessments and feature examples of current data collection methods used by colleges and universities that do collect data on students' parent status. Encouraging Head Start community needs assessments to engage colleges and universities in their efforts to assess need could build on existing momentum to improve data collection on student parents and increase understanding of how Head Start can better serve these families.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The next iteration of Head Start Performance Standards should include guidance for assessing need for Head Start services among parents enrolled in local colleges and universities.
- The Office of Head Start should produce a supplemental resource, similar to its existing community assessment guide, describing how programs can collaborate with local colleges and universities to assess student parents' need for Head Start services and provide examples of data sources that could be used to inform community needs assessments.

## STRATEGIES FOR ASSESSING NEED AMONG STUDENT PARENTS

Guidance for Head Start community needs assessments should describe how programs can assess need among parents enrolled at local colleges and universities, in addition to interest in college among parents in the community who are not yet enrolled.

- **Higher education institutions can share aggregate data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) on students who report having dependent children in their household.** Though not all students complete the FAFSA, FAFSA data can provide insight into the share of students on a campus who are income-eligible for Head Start services and may have caregiving needs.
- **Some institutions and state higher education systems collect data on students who are parents or guardians of dependent children.** Sources might include: data on single parents collected for Perkins programs, registration surveys or admissions forms; Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant applications and reports; #RealCollege survey results, which include data on housing, food insecurity, and homelessness; Community College Survey of Student Engagement survey results; campus advising or counseling offices; and campus services such as



TRiO programs, and centers for transfer students, women, LGBTQ+ students, and veterans.

- **Institutions with child care centers on campus can share data on the student parent families they serve and those on their wait lists.** Data on how many of the families on campus child care wait lists are students, and the care needs of those student parent families—e.g., the number waiting for infant/toddler slots versus slots for pre-school age children—can demonstrate demand for care and shed light on students' specific care needs.

### **Technical Assistance to Expand Head Start-Higher Education Partnership**

Head Start training and technical assistance (T/TA) can be leveraged to help grantees and providers consider how to extend services to student parents and build partnerships with higher education institutions. For example, the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) provides T/TA to strengthen the capacity of Head Start grantees and the child care community to achieve positive outcomes for children and to improve family well-being. From 2015-2020, the NCPFCE focused on strengthening Head Start's ability to improve families' basic economic security and mobility. As a part of this focus, the NCPFCE launched the Building Foundations for Economic Mobility initiative. Among other services, the initiative offered a webinar series featuring topics specifically related to employment, training, education, and career pathways, including how Head Start programs can partner with apprenticeship programs, community colleges, and workforce training programs to help parents gain access to and finance their educational and career goals.<sup>9</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Office of Head Start guidelines for future T/TA providers should direct them to provide guidance around how Head Start can help families achieve economic security through parents' attainment of postsecondary degrees and credentials and how to form partnerships with academic institutions that promote parents' attainments of degrees and certificates.
- New T/TA centers should develop practical resources and tools that Head Start providers can use to think strategically about how to partner with colleges and universities to facilitate educational goal achievement among Head Start families and how to extend the reach of their services to parents who are already enrolled in higher education institutions.

### **Leveraging Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships**

Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) grants present another set of opportunities for leveraging partnerships with colleges and universities to target support at student parents. The EHS-CCP federal grant program represents a collaboration of

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<sup>9</sup> To view past webinars, visit <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-support-well-being/article/employment-training-education-career>.

Early Head Start and the main federal child care program in the United States—the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF). CCDF, a federal block grant administered by the U.S. Administration for Children and Families and awarded to states, territories, and tribal governments, is the main source of federal funding to help families with low incomes access child care through child care subsidies. It also regulates and supports child care licensing, quality improvement systems, and professional development for child care providers.<sup>10</sup> EHS-CCP grants layer funding from Early Head Start and CCDF with a goal of improving the quality of child care and education provided to infants and toddlers from families who are receiving subsidized child care services through CCDF.<sup>11</sup>

EHS-CCP grantees have included states as well as universities, such as the Ohio State University. In some cases, grantees have partnered with colleges and universities or campus child care centers. Though not all collaborations have intentionally served college students with children, when they do, they provide flexible services to student parent families that support parents in achieving their educational goals. IWPR's 2019 research identified at least 13 EHS-CCP collaborations that involve colleges or universities and provide services to parenting college students (Gault et al. 2019).

EHS-CCP grantees that partner with campus child care centers can build their capacity to serve infants and toddlers and improve the quality of care for families receiving child care assistance. In some cases, partnerships with campus child care centers expand the provision of infant/toddler care, or services for more students with very young children (Gault et al. 2019). Though demand for infant care is high among all families, infant care access can be integral to the ability of parents enrolled in college to stay enrolled, or for those who are interested in going to college to enroll at all. In addition, EHS-CCP programs on college campuses can provide student parents access to subsidized care for hours that extend beyond the normal duration of a typical Early Head Start class.

## **SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENT FAMILIES THROUGH AN ON-CAMPUS EARLY HEAD START-CHILD CARE PARTNERSHIP GRANT**

In Tacoma, Washington, Puget Sound Educational Service District 121—the main Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grantee—partners with **Tacoma Community College** to provide Early Head Start services to eligible parenting college students. Through the grant, the campus center provides slots to the children of 12 student parents. Early Head Start standards are applied to care provided in all three of the center's classrooms, even if children in those rooms are not technically part of the Early Head Start program. In addition, the center's Family Engagement Coordinator supports all the parents at the center, helping them navigate campus and community resources to meet their family's needs while they pursue a postsecondary degree or certificate (Gault et al. 2019).

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on CCDF, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/fact-sheet>.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about EHS-CCP grants, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/eecd/early-learning/ehs-cc-partnerships>.

State agencies can also receive EHS-CCP grants and they have flexibility in implementing grant-related programming. State EHS-CCP grantees can leverage this flexibility to establish partnerships with state university and community college systems to increase services for eligible student parent families, as a part of broader efforts to promote family economic security and mobility. For example, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, a statewide EHS-CCP grantee, sub-contracted with **Atlanta Technical College** Early Learning Center to serve eligible student parents. The campus-based program provides all parents with access to family engagement services and community resource referrals, even if their children are not specifically receiving Early Head Start services as a part of the grant partnership (Gault et al. 2019).

States can also leverage the technical assistance and financial resources associated with EHS-CCP grants to build new credentialing and teacher training pathways for the infant and toddler workforce and build quality among participating providers, including family child care homes. In some cases, states have undertaken this work in partnership with academic institutions, such as the state of Alabama's partnership with **Auburn University** (Schumacher et al. 2019). In instances where a local college or university is involved (or are grantees themselves), they should assess the needs of student parent families on their campus as well as the needs of the community to determine how they can effectively reach current or prospective students with children who may benefit from participation.

## **PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND FAMILY CHILD CARE**

EHS-CCP grantee support for family child care providers could creatively partner with academic institutions to assist in increasing quality services available for student parents. Family child care is often more affordable and flexible than center-based care, and may present an attractive care option for student parents with complex scheduling needs.

For example, though not supported by an EHS-CCP grant, the partnership between the **University of Michigan** and the **Campus Child Care Homes Network** demonstrates how partnership between a university and a family child care network can improve the quality of care provided to families while also serving eligible student parent families. The University offers providers in the Network training, support, and resources to enhance the quality of care they offer and enable their ability to become accredited through the National Association for Family Child Care. In return, the Campus Child Care Homes Network prioritizes services for university-affiliated families, including students, faculty, and staff. For more information about this partnership, visit <https://hr.umich.edu/benefits-wellness/work-life/child-care-resources/campus-child-care-homes-network>.

Utilizing EHS-CCP funds to support networks of family child care homes would provide student parents with flexible and affordable care, while also improving the availability and quality of local family child care.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- EHS-CCP funding opportunity announcements present an opportunity to encourage applicants to consider how they might support the needs of student parent families to increase their economic security. In the criteria used for the selection of new grantees for future rounds of EHS-CCP funding, the Offices of Head Start and Child Care should consider how applicants plan to serve parents enrolled in college and how they intend to build pathways for unenrolled parents to college.
- State EHS-CCP grantees should consider establishing partnerships with state university and community college systems, as well as State Higher Education Executive Officers, with the intent of creating new and supporting existing services for eligible student parent families.
- EHS-CCP grantees which involve networks of family child care homes could be encouraged to serve the student parent families, since family child care may be attractive to them given its flexibility, and smaller, diverse care environments (Henly and Adams 2018; Jessen-Howard et al. 2018).

## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) can play a leading role in unlocking opportunities for forming partnerships between higher education institutions and Head Start to better serve student parents. The Office of Head Start already identifies the need to build pathways to postsecondary opportunities for Head Start parents who have identified goals related to educational attainment as a route to establishing self-sufficiency. Greater alignment between the Office of Head Start and ED in their efforts to improve chances for economic security and mobility via educational attainment among underserved and marginalized communities could improve the chances that both systems will achieve their goals.

For example, ED's guidance on reopening of colleges and universities following the COVID-19 pandemic included information on supporting the needs of students with caregiving demands (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development 2021). The Department should continue to call attention to this population's unique needs and provide additional guidance and recommendations for how institutions can support their student parents' enrollment and persistence.

For example, profiling student parent data collection models would help build will and provide concrete blueprints for increased collection of data on students who are parents—which is integral to informing Head Start community needs assessments and efforts to partner with Head Start to serve student parent families. ED guidance could include examples of how Head Start-college partnerships can benefit higher education institutions. ED resources, which could be developed in collaboration with the Office of Head Start, can connect these benefits to pressing priorities of academic institutions and communities. Presenting models of successful partnerships and spotlighting the roles of and benefits to partners, students, and families would allow academic institutions to envision what those partnerships could bring to their campuses and how they might go about setting them up—in

## A BLUEPRINT FOR BETTER DATA: STUDENT PARENT DATA COLLECTION MODELS

Profiling specific data collection models used by colleges and universities as well as state higher education institutions could build will for expanded data collection efforts that shed light on the college student population who could benefit from Head Start.

**Monroe Community College**, located in Rochester, NY, collects information on students' parent status through a student survey during course registration, and then links those data, along with data on students' participation in campus child care, to their administrative records (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020).

In addition, as of 2021, two states—Oregon and Illinois—passed student parent data collection laws. The Oregon law requires the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to design a question that enables the annual collection of data on whether a student is a parent or legal guardian (Oregon State Legislature 2021). In Illinois, the law puts the onus on public academic institutions to collect information on students' parental status and mandates that public institutions operating or partnering with child care centers to collect data on the number of children they serve (Illinois General Assembly 2021).

in addition to lending credibility to the strategy among higher education administrators.<sup>12</sup> ED runs the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant program, which makes grants to academic institutions to provide subsidized child care on- and off-campus to Pell-eligible students with children.<sup>13</sup> Leveraging CCAMPIS grant programs as potential partners for Head Start could expand the reach of available caregiving and family support for student parents with low incomes. The Department could, for example, highlight campus programs that utilize both CCAMPIS and Head Start funds to support student parents' access to child care, such as **Lane Community College** (Eugene, OR) and **Edmonds Community College** (Lynnwood, WA); create peer learning opportunities among CCAMPIS grantees and Head Start grantee and program representatives; and train CCAMPIS program officers on models for successfully leveraging CCAMPIS and Head Start for eligible parents so they can guide interested grantees in setting up new partnerships.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ED should provide guidance, examples, and recommendations for how institutions can establish partnerships with Head Start programs that intentionally support eligible student families and highlight the benefits of those partnerships to stakeholders.
- ED should encourage and provide examples and technical assistance about how CCAMPIS grantees could partner with Head Start to serve the family and caregiving needs of eligible student parents with low incomes.
- ED should increase collaboration between ED and the Administration for Children and Families to strengthen the systems that support parents and their children.

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<sup>12</sup> For guidance on the benefits of Head Start-college partnerships and the steps that academic institutions might take to explore whether these partnerships are right for their campuses, see IWPR 2021b.

<sup>13</sup> For more information about CCAMPIS, visit <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/campisp/index.html>.

## CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

Congress could take several actions to encourage and support institutions, Head Start providers, and other partners to leverage Head Start to support family economic security through intentionally serving student parent families. Ensuring student parents and their children who are eligible for Head Start have clear pathways to those services should be integral to any future reauthorization of the Head Start Act. In addition, Congress should increase appropriations for Head Start and continue to fund the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) grant program to increase access to eligible families, including student parent families.

In the meantime, issues of child care access and basic needs concerns among college students are gaining traction among advocates, in Congress, and with the Biden-Harris administration—particularly in light of COVID-19 (see, for example, Smith, McHenry, and Einterz 2021; White House 2021). The American Families Plan, proposed by the Biden-Harris administration in 2021, for example, includes \$62 billion for a grant program to provide evidence-based wraparound supports to college students to improve retention and completion rates. The White House proposal highlights child care as a potential student support that could be provided under this program (White House 2021).

Head Start-college partnerships could be integrated into such innovative proposals to strengthen the systems supporting parents and their children. Congressional leaders can take advantage of this momentum to articulate the opportunity to leverage Head Start for student parents and their children and the benefits of doing so for higher education, Head Start, and children and families.

### **Integrating Head Start-College Partnerships into Legislation**

Many advocates and policymakers are working to expand access to high-quality educational opportunities and ensure equity in outcomes for students of all ages. For example, the Preparing and Resourcing Our Student Parents and Early Childhood Teachers (PROSPECT) Act, introduced by Senator Cory Booker in November 2019, proposed awarding \$20 million in grants to community colleges interested in strengthening their capacity to serve student parents with young children through free access to infant and toddler care, as well as to train up high-quality infant/toddler educators. Though the Act did not specify Head Start as a partner for colleges to help provide services to the children of student parents, it did allow prospective grantees to use funds to help campus child care centers meet the standards of a Head Start program and suggested that grantees work to facilitate professional training and development opportunities for local Head Start providers.

In addition, recent legislative proposals have sought to improve the availability of basic needs support for college students, typically defined as assistance with housing, food, and increasingly, child care. These proposals have encouraged institutions to enact mechanisms to help students access public benefit programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), in addition to other support infrastructure, such as food pantries and emergency aid. Head Start is a prime partner for these efforts moving forward.

## LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COLLEGE STUDENTS' ACCESS TO BENEFITS

Members of Congress have introduced legislative proposals in recent years to improve college students' ability to meet their basic needs. Head Start could be a key partner in these proposals.

- The College Student Hunger Act (2019) proposes an expansion of SNAP benefits to include Pell Grant-eligible students and independent students, and the reduction of SNAP's current work requirement for college students from 20 hours to 10 hours per week. It also directs the Department of Education to inform low-income students about their potential SNAP eligibility.
- The Basic Assistance for Students in College (BASIC) Act (2021) proposes to increase college students' ability to meet their basic needs—including food, housing, transportation, child care, health care, and technology—by requiring the Department of Education to coordinate with the Departments of Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services to identify students who may be eligible for federal aid programs, and assist institutions of higher learning in enrolling students in public benefit programs.
- The Food for Thought Act (2019) proposes to amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to create a pilot program that would provide grants to community colleges so they can offer free meals to students who need them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Congress should increase appropriations for Head Start to broadly expand access to eligible families, including student parent families, as well as continue to fund or expand funding for the EHS-CCP program; renewed EHS-CCP grant rounds should also include support for partnerships that involve academic institutions and seek to serve parenting college students.
- Congress should increase awareness of the potential for Head Start to benefit student parent families and increase the likelihood of partnership development with academic institutions by naming Head Start as a viable partner in legislation intended to improve educational access, quality, and outcomes for both parents and children.
- Legislative efforts to improve students' access to basic needs assistance should include explicit guidance on how to help students with children find and pay for high-quality child care and early learning services, including naming the Head Start system as a possible partner or resource. Legislation should include provisions that encourage or require institutions to screen students for Head Start, as well as child care assistance eligibility. Colleges and universities should also be encouraged to proactively provide information and support to eligible students for applying for these services, which could be low- or high-touch, depending on the institution.

## Higher Education Act Reauthorization

The Higher Education Act (HEA) has been up for reauthorization since 2013 and its prospects remain uncertain. However, the legislation provides an opportunity for Congress to encourage greater efforts on the part of colleges and universities to help students meet their caregiving needs. A reauthorized HEA could encourage institutions to seek out opportunities to collaborate with the early education and child care system to ensure students with children receive needed services. Congress should add explicit language about leveraging existing child care and early learning providers in the community—including Head Start—to help student parents access care. The legislation should encourage colleges and universities to provide student parents with information on available Head Start services and help in determining their eligibility and with the application process.

The HEA should also require the collection of data on students who are parents and the extent and nature of student parent caregiving demands. Such data can help lay the groundwork for collaboration between higher education and Head Start by communicating the need for affordable early learning opportunities among parenting students (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020). These data are also important for understanding student parents' academic outcomes compared with those of students without dependent children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- HEA reauthorization efforts should consider including provisions to encourage and incentivize institutions to provide assistance to students with children who are eligible for Head Start services, including referrals to nearby programs, assistance applying to those programs, and partnerships with Head Start grantees to offer services to student parents.
- HEA reauthorization should require institutions and the U.S. Department of Education to work together to collect better data on students with dependent children and their caregiving and family basic needs.

## IMPROVING DATA COLLECTION ON STUDENTS WITH CHILDREN THROUGH THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT

The Higher Education Act (HEA) requires Title IV higher education institutions to collect and report data to the U.S. Department of Education, which then compiles it into several datasets, including the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS). While some IPEDS data are disaggregated by key characteristics such as race and ethnicity, gender, age, and military or veteran status, no data are collected on parent status.

Adding data on parent status to regularly collected IPEDS data would allow postsecondary education institutions to measure progress in serving student parents. These data would also provide important insight for efforts to assess student parents' need for Head Start services. The Head Start and higher education systems could use this information to facilitate dialogue and inform how partnership might serve their respective goals and boost student and family success.



## STATE POLICY LEVERS

Connecting student parents with Head Start to improve parent and child outcomes aligns with state-level efforts to address workforce and early learning needs for the whole family (Cawthorne Gaines, Bonino-Britsch, and Matthews 2021). At the state level, Head Start State Collaboration Offices and Head Start state funding are two mechanisms for increasing collaboration between Head Start and higher education. Though COVID-19 has severely impacted state budgets, it has also illuminated the critical importance of safe, high-quality, and affordable early care and education arrangements for families to recover and go back to work. States should use their Head Start funds strategically to ensure parents pursuing postsecondary education have the support they need to remain on those pathways, which will be essential to their post-pandemic economic security.

## STATE COLLABORATION OFFICES

Head Start Collaboration Offices operate at the state level to facilitate partnerships and collaboration between Head Start and other state entities that provide services to children and families with low incomes (ECLKC 2020). These offices also focus on supporting special populations, such as homeless families and children in foster care. Student parents with low incomes, who very often face basic needs insecurity, are not currently included as a special population. However, they could be, and Collaboration Offices' scope of work could be expanded to include partnerships with state systems of higher education and State Higher Education Executive Officers.

Efforts to bridge gaps between Head Start and higher education to serve student parents may be of particular interest to state offices focused on family economic mobility and two-generation approaches to education. State Collaboration Offices might pilot initiatives that focus on serving student parents in college settings, and build off a growing number of program models that initiate credentialing programs for Head Start parents in partnership with a local higher education institution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- State Collaboration Offices should expand their scope of work to include student parents with low incomes as a special population and should initiate partnerships with state systems of higher education to intentionally serve student parent families as they pursue postsecondary pathways.
- State Collaboration Offices that partner with universities to increase the supply of high-skilled Head Start educators can leverage those partnerships to start conversations about intentionally providing Head Start services to eligible student parent families.

## STATE HEAD START FUNDING

While Head Start is a federally funded program, states can devote their own resources to support Head Start programs' ability to fill identified gaps in services or access. As of 2020, 14 states devoted state dollars to supplementing Head Start federal funds. For example,

as of 2020, Maryland committed \$3 million to expanding the number of hours and days Head Start provides care in order to better support working families (National Head Start Association 2019). State funding for Head Start has worked to fill gaps in access for high-need populations, such as homeless families and tribal families. Student parents often overlap with these populations and states could identify them as a population in need of intentional support. State, system, and institutional data identifying the student parent population that is income-eligible for Head Start, their need for affordable care, and the extent to which they are experiencing basic needs insecurity could inform targeted state efforts.

To promote the utilization of state Head Start funding, advocates should work with both the state Head Start Collaboration Office and with the state Head Start Association, if one exists. The state association will have the expertise and relationships necessary to lobby the state legislature, while the collaboration office is usually connected to the governor's office and likely will better understand the governor's policy agenda and goals. Filling gaps in access for student parents would have the effect of both serving a high-need population while also improving the likelihood that their families will achieve self-sufficiency goals that lead to increased economic security.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Student parent families that intersect with existing special populations could be identified as a high need for targeted Head Start services supported by state Head Start funding efforts.
- States should consider devoting state funding to Head Start to support greater access to Head Start services for enrolled or prospective student parents. For example, states can facilitate partnerships between Head Start and colleges and universities, extend the duration of Head Start services for student parents, support additional slots at on-campus centers, and build formal pathways to postsecondary education for Head Start parents to access educational opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Student parents face significant caregiving and financial challenges that can limit their ability to enter, persist in, and graduate from college. They are also often living with some level of basic needs insecurity, making their access to support and guidance particularly beneficial as they navigate parenthood and higher education simultaneously. Head Start is well-positioned to apply its two-generation approach to promote self-sufficiency to parents enrolled in college. Collaboration between higher education and Head Start is a promising strategy to bring together essential supports to set student parents and their families up for long-term success.

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Photo credit: Courtney Hale via Getty Images

## APPENDIX A. LIST OF EXPERT INTERVIEWS

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