Expanding Promise: Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Student Parents

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Background
Student parents have long been a marginalized population in higher education. This brief is a summary of the work of the 2019 College Promise and ETS convening on ecosystems of support for marginalized groups. The convening included design teams made up of researchers and practitioners thinking through how the Promise commitment might inform policy making and institutional practice for student groups with support needs that are often ignored, including student parents.

Introduction
College students with dependent children represent 3.8 million of all college students where 70% percent of those are mothers (2.7 million), 30% are fathers (1.1 million), and a majority are single parents [1]. One in five college students--or 22 percent of all undergraduates--are parents [2]. Moreover, student parents are more likely to be students of color, have children who are preschool-aged or younger, accrue twice as much student loan debt than students without children, and have higher GPAs than students without children [1]. Student parents are less likely to attain a degree or certificate of completion than students without children and more likely to leave college before earning a degree or certificate [2,3]. Holding a degree has been shown to lead to higher paying jobs, higher-quality employment, better health outcomes, and improved outcomes for children, including a higher likelihood that they will attend college themselves.
The model promise program our team proposed in the full paper strove to increase higher education access, persistence, and degree completion for students with dependent children through comprehensive support systems. Elements of the model promise program included: free or subsidized childcare, both campus and community-based, and a series of wrap-around services intended to help student parents navigate complex systems and meet basic needs, including discretionary resources, food and housing security resources, health and wellness services, institutional practice reforms, and intensive case management. Additionally, this model was developed under the assumption that a baseline promise program covering tuition and fees already exists. The full paper concluded with a review of possible financing and implementation strategies for the student parent promise program.

**Project Overview**

At the center of the promise to student parents is a commitment to high-quality childcare for dependents aged 0-13 and older children who also need care. Ideally, that high quality care should be flexible, allowing students to increase or decrease their course loads as needed and to move from one campus or institution to another in line with their academic, personal and professional needs, while still having access to desired care. When the childcare is campus-based, it should be built around the goal of making both the student and parent feel like they are part of campus life. The ideal program would maximize all four of the following elements: quality, affordability, predictability, and flexibility.

**At institutions with campus child care, the Promise will include:**

- Access to either a subsidized slot on campus or subsidized off-campus care, including home-based care, of their choosing, within certain quality parameters, for the duration of their enrollment, up to 150% of program length.
- Subsidies will be enough to guarantee that no student will pay more than 7% of their income on child care.
- On-campus slots will be distributed to students via a lottery.

**For Students Using Off-Campus Care, The Promise Will Include:**

- Assistance identifying care options that fit students’ needs around scheduling, age, and care type (age, curriculum, setting) and securing slots.
- Assistance applying for additional aid that could be put towards the cost of additional care needs.
- Subsidized off-campus care of their choosing, including home-based care within certain quality parameters.
- Subsidies will be enough to guarantee that no student will pay more than 7% of their income on child care.
Wrap-Around Supports for Student Parents & Institutional Practice

According to a report by The Hope Center, of parenting students at two-year colleges, 54% were food insecure, 69% were housing insecure, and 17% experienced homelessness [5]. In addition to high-quality and affordable childcare, it is crucial that the promise also includes access to additional wrap-around supports for student parents. These supports can help student parents stay enrolled and eventually complete their postsecondary credentials and include:

- Discretionary/Monetary Resources
- Emergency Aid
- Scholarships
- Financial Aid Designations that Account for Child Care
- Tuition Reimbursement
- State Financial Aid
- TANF Cash Assistance
- Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- Public Housing
- Access to Physical and Mental Health Services

Parenting students have expressed strong dissatisfaction towards the lack of programming for student parents at institutions and do not believe their university’s policies were accommodating of their needs [8]. There are several institutional practices that can serve to reduce student parent barriers. Institutional practices include:

- Transfer Supports for Student Parents
- Priority Registration
- Flexible Course Options
- Non-Traditional Business Hours for Support Services
- Student Parent Friendly Classroom and Facilities Policies
- Priority Employment for Student Parents on Campus
- Physical and Mental Health Services
- Case Management
- Finance and Implementation
COLLEGE PROMISE

Estimated Cost, Demand & Financing the Promise

Eighty-two percent of students with children are parents or caregivers to children from infancy to age 12 (53 percent have children ages 0-5 and 29 percent have children ages 6-12). An estimated 88 percent of these student parents with children under 13 are eligible for the Pell grant based on their Expected Family Contribution—or roughly 2.8 million students—making them also eligible for CCAMPIS services. A third (34 percent) of student parents with children under 13 attend school full time, 46 percent attend part time, and a fifth (20 percent) attend a mix of full and part time. Based on a combination of age and number of children, attendance intensity, and marital status, currently enrolled student parents with children under 13 are in need of an estimated 1.8 million full- and part-time child care slots.

According to an analysis of 2018 childcare costs from Child Care Aware of America (the most recent available), the national median cost of center-based child care across age groups is $10,267; prorated to the academic year, or nine months of care, this amount comes to $7,700 [2,3,4]. Further adjusting for the cost of part-time care, assuming a part-time slot will cost half of what a full-time slot costs, brings the total to $5,775. With this cost per child, the total cost of covering the totality of student parents’ child care needs amounts to roughly $10.4 billion. Nearly two million student parents have children under 13 and live with incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty threshold. These parents need an estimated 881,000 full- and part-time child care slots. At this level of demand, the total cost of meeting the child care needs of student parents with children under 13 and living below 150 percent of the federal poverty line would come to $5.1 billion, or about half of what it would cost to meet the full needs of enrolled student parents as of 2015-16 [2,3,4,6].

The cost of the child care promise could be covered partly through leveraging existing federal programs that support parents’ child care needs. We do not, however, advocate any financing solution that would reduce support for non-student parents who currently benefit from programs. Instead, the intent would be to use any savings from reduced demand for existing programs as a partial trade-off against the cost of the promise, or to incorporate existing programs directly into the promise where appropriate. A patchwork of funding and service provision, between federal, state, and institutional programs, will be necessary to fully meet student parents’ care needs, especially in a situation in which the supply of high-quality child care remains inadequate for
existing demand. In addition, many institutions with campus child care centers do support those centers through both financial and in-kind contributions. Financial contributions can originate from student government funds or student fees, while in-kind take the form of physical space, utilities, maintenance services, grounds keeping, staff lines, and other support. The same financing principles apply to funding wraparound supports, which are also likely to experience higher demand during economic downturns when states and local government budgets are already strained. Existing federal programs that could be involved in the administration and delivery of services and child care assistance to parents enrolled in higher education include:

- Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), U.S. Department of Education - $55 million in FY21
- Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - $8.7 billion in FY20 plus $3.5 billion in funding from the CARES Act and $38.9 billion in the American Rescue Act
- Head Start/Early Head Start, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - $10.8 billion in FY21 plus $750 million from the CARES Act and $1 billion in the American Rescue Act
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) - $70 billion in FY21 for SNAP and related food assistance programs, including SNAP E&T, WIC, and others; plus $1.15 billion from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA), U.S. Department of Labor

There is potential for states to leverage existing federally-funded programs to better support student parents. The federal government provides guidance on how funds should be spent, but states have significant responsibility and flexibility in establishing eligibility requirements for the programs. Again, we do not advocate for a reduction of support for students without children, but the portion of the budgets currently being used within existing federal programs to help student parents are potentially available to contribute to the cost of implementing the wraparound support component of the student parent promise. This model promise program aims to serve as a blueprint, that can be expanded upon based on state and local resources, to create a foundation for leveraging existing support services that create and sustain cohesion between established systems to more effectively serve students with children.
References


6. Estimates of student parents’ child care needs derived from data from NPSAS:16 and IPEDS.


Please see the following for a full copy of the report: