



BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS: Advancing Comprehensive Policies for Infants, Toddlers, and Families



Education and Training Programs: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

Low-income parents of infants and toddlers should have access to affordable education and training to improve their employment opportunities. Parents' education is one of the strongest, most consistent predictors of children's health, development, and achievement over time. Parents' education levels affect how they seek, understand, and use information about their children's health and development, which gives their children early advantages.¹ Moreover, increased education levels open doors to better-quality jobs: positions that offer paid time off, regular hours, worker autonomy and flexibility, and adequate, stable pay. Parents who are employed in high-quality jobs tend to have better health, more stable incomes, and lower levels of stress. Infants and toddlers benefit, too, because parents with less stress have more time and energy to develop strong bonds with their young children.² Over time, children whose parents have higher levels of education are less likely to be obese and are more likely to be in better health, score higher on measures of academic achievement, and graduate from high school.³

Because children's early experiences are so critical to their long-term outcomes,⁴ ensuring that parents of infants and toddlers have access to education and training that lead to stable, well-paying jobs is especially critical. Affordable, accessible education and training services can provide low-income parents with the skills they need to obtain fulfilling jobs that allow them to provide for their families. The federal government makes these services available in one of two ways: through providing direct financial aid to students and by funding states' workforce development systems.

The federal government administers several student financial aid programs that support low-income students, including the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, the Federal Work-Study

program, federal student loans, and the Pell Grant program, which is the largest federal grant program for students.⁵ Pell Grants are awarded directly to students through the institution they choose to attend and can be used to cover the cost of tuition, fees, housing and food expenses, books and supplies, transportation, and child care. In general, students must have a high school diploma or equivalency to receive Pell Grants. However, recent changes to the Pell Grant program included an “ability to benefit” exemption to the rule, which allows eligible students without a high school diploma or equivalency to use Pell if they are enrolled in career pathway programs.⁶

Two primary federal funding streams support states’ workforce development systems. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides formula—or noncompetitive—grants to states, which support employment and training services as well as adult basic education. States grant WIOA funds to local communities, which are responsible for administering targeted services to adults and youth, including job search assistance, employment planning, career counseling, and training services.⁷ States must prioritize high-intensity services for adults who are public assistance recipients, other low-income individuals, and people who lack basic skills.⁸ States are required to spend the majority of their funds available for youth services on out-of-school—or “opportunity youth”—and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24, including youth who are pregnant or have children.⁹ Funds support a variety of specific services for youth, including dropout recovery and reengagement, mentoring, leadership development, postsecondary preparation, wraparound supports, and work experiences.¹⁰ WIOA also has a separate program focused on adult education, which is academic instruction and education services for adults who are below the postsecondary level.

The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins) is also a formula grant to states. States grant funds directly to secondary or postsecondary institutions that provide career and technical education (CTE). Funds can be used to develop CTE curricula; to develop and administer programs for special populations; or for mentoring and support services, adaptive technology, or staff development.¹¹ Institutions must ensure that services are accessible to low-income individuals, single parents, and others who commonly face barriers to education and training.

Research demonstrates that federal financial aid and workforce development programs are effective in promoting low-income students’ success in education and training and improving their employment prospects. For example, adults who participated in services through the Workforce Investment Act (WIOA’s predecessor) had higher levels of employment and higher earnings, while also being less likely to receive public assistance compared to non-participants.¹² Programs are most effective when focused on a particular occupational sector, when they lead to a credential recognized by employers, and when basic skills instruction is provided in the context of job training.¹³ Programs that provide or connect participants to additional support services that address student barriers to completion are also more effective.¹⁴

Low-income parents face significant barriers to attending and completing education and training programs. An estimated 9.6 million parents of young children have no more than a high school education, which limits their employment prospects and their families’ long-term financial stability.¹⁵ Yet only 1 in 10 low-income parents report being enrolled in some form of education and training.¹⁶ Once enrolled, student-parents have high rates of attrition—just one-third of them complete a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment.¹⁷

The population of student-parents is overwhelmingly female and women of color. Sixty percent of mothers in school are single parents.¹⁸ Approximately 1 million low-income parents work while they attend an education or training program, and just under half are parents of infants and toddlers.¹⁹

Affordability, accessibility, and child care issues are among the most commonly cited challenges for student-parents.²⁰ Juggling work and family is difficult for parents in low-wage jobs, and adding coursework to the mix further strains their time and household budgets. Financial aid removes some of the cost barriers, but still falls short for many student-parents.²¹ Student-parents report struggling to pay their bills while participating in education and training programs, a challenge further compounded

by the lack of reliable transportation and affordable child care.²² While some colleges and universities offer child care on campus, the need far exceeds available support.²³ Affordable child care options may not be located near parents' schools or workplaces, and parents may have to travel long distances between their homes, workplaces, schools, and child care arrangements.

Increased federal investment in student aid programs—especially Pell Grants—is important to ensure that awards are sufficient to meet students' needs. States can also strengthen their own aid programs and target assistance to adults who traditionally face barriers to higher education,²⁴ including working parents. But addressing cost is not enough. Parents need reliable and affordable transportation, child care, and other wraparound services to remove barriers to their success. States and local governments can leverage existing federal funds to provide these services.²⁵ The federal government and states can also reduce unmet need by ensuring that public assistance programs—particularly child care subsidies—are accessible to student-parents.²⁶ Increasing parents' access to educational opportunities and the wraparound services needed for success will open doors to better-quality jobs, improving families' economic stability and children's wellbeing in the long run.

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