



Supporting Student Parents Through Access to On-Campus Childcare: A Partnership that Makes Sense

The Kids on Campus initiative opens the doors for new partnerships between colleges and Head Start centers.

BY STEVE JURCH

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE ESSENTIAL PILLARS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, OFFERING diverse student populations accessible pathways to academic and career advancement. Within these institutions, a significant demographic often overlooked in discussions on higher education policy and practice is student parents. Juggling the roles of both student and parent, these individuals face unique challenges and barriers to academic success.

Financial constraints, inadequate childcare options, limited support services, and the constant struggle to balance competing responsibilities are among the myriad challenges encountered by student parents. Financial barriers such as tuition costs, textbooks, and childcare expenses pose significant obstacles, especially for those from low-income backgrounds. Moreover, the lack of affordable and reliable childcare options further impedes their ability to attend classes and dedicate time to their studies. Tailored support services like academic advising, counseling, and childcare assistance are often lacking. Balancing academic coursework with parenting responsibilities demands exceptional time management skills and frequently leads to feelings of stress, overwhelm, and burnout.



ACCT Vice President for Public Policy Carrie Warick-Smith, Howard Community College President Dr. Daria J. Willis, and ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee speak at the Kids on Campus project launch event in February.

So what does the community college student parent look like? The demographic profile of student parents in community colleges varies by location, socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, and family structure. However, common trends emerge. Student parents tend to be older than traditional college students, with many in their late 20s, 30s, or even older, reflecting delays in pursuing higher education due to parenting responsibilities. While predominantly female, there is a growing recognition of male student parents. Student parents come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, with Black and Hispanic/Latino student parents disproportionately represented compared to their White counterparts, likely due to systemic inequalities. Often from low-income or working-class backgrounds, many rely on financial aid and scholarships to afford college expenses. Balancing employment alongside their studies is common, further complicating their academic engagement.

Supporting Student Parent Success

Understanding the demographics of student parents is critical for designing effective support services, policies, and programs tailored to their unique needs and circumstances. By recognizing their diversity and addressing the challenges they face, community colleges can better serve and empower student parents to achieve their educational goals.

Various strategies can support the academic success of student parents in community colleges, including offering comprehensive support services such as childcare assistance, academic advising, counseling, and financial aid resources. Flexible learning options like online courses, evening classes, and accelerated programs accommodate their schedules. Targeted financial aid and scholarships alleviate the financial burden, while establishing peer support networks and mentorship programs fosters a sense of community on campus.

Providing affordable and accessible childcare options is one of the most impactful supports institutions can offer student parents, removing a significant barrier to academic participation. While childcare options include subsidies and partnerships with local providers, affordable on-campus childcare enhances academic outcomes by making education more accessible, reducing stress, improving concentration, and ultimately increasing retention and graduation rates.

Securing funding for childcare services is essential, with potential sources including federal grants like Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), state funding programs, and private foundations. Various models exist for providing childcare on campus, including operating childcare centers, partnering with external providers, or establishing family resource centers.

Kids on Campus: Partnering for Student Parents

A unique strategy involves forming co-location partnerships between community colleges and Head Start centers. In February, ACCT partnered with the National Head Start Association (NHSA) to embark on a five-year initiative to increase the number of Head Start centers located on community college campuses. The Kids on Campus initiative builds on a previous planning grant that confirmed both the need for and feasibility of the co-location of Head Start programs on community college campuses as a solution for on-campus childcare needs. While there are already approximately 130 Head Start programs on community college campuses nationwide, with over 1,200 colleges and 17,000 Head Start locations, the opportunity is ripe for large-scale, systemic expansion. Participants in the first stage of work highlighted that there is no “roadmap” to follow for establishing these partnerships, making it a difficult process, despite the vast potential benefits.



Attendees brought their children to the Kids on Campus launch; Howard Community College Student Abigail Bediako with ECMC Foundation Career-Readiness Program Officer Amber Angel

Initially, we will screen potential organizations for interest and preparedness to partner, then work to match aligned community colleges and Head Start centers through the partnership process. To help facilitate the progression from matchmaking to marriage, technical assistance will be provided throughout. One significant tool that will be leveraged is a user guide developed during the planning project. The guide covers a range of processes, from helping the partners understand each other's structures, where and how to start conversations, and the negotiation process to marketing and launching this new venture. In addition to some of the framing and basics of partnerships, there are examples and guides for MOUs and contracts, along with considerations for retrofitting space for these programs.

In addition to this resource, technical assistance webinars, peer learning opportunities, facilitated conversations, workplan review, and partnership coaching will be carried out by staff from both ACCT and NHSA. Various subject matter experts will be engaged along with convenings, site visits as needed, and a variety of dissemination activities. One critical component of the project is the engagement of Head Start and student parents. The inclusion of lived experience is critical to program sustainability and success. Each college/organization that meets certain benchmark criteria will receive a stipend to support an advisory panel of student parents from both the Head Start center and the community college to share suggestions and provide insight to the partnership from their perspective.

We expect each pairing and eventual partnership to move on its own timeline, with start to completion date ranges varying greatly due to factors such as existing partner infrastructure, construction timelines, institutional planning schedules, and other variables.

The resources created during the planning project will be living documents that will be updated regularly based on feedback and lived

experience building new partnerships. Additional resources will be developed, such as one-page guides on topics like MOU structure, transportation solutions, academic program partnerships, food service and play area solutions, and leveraging local funding sources. By making a concerted effort to hone the resources and technical assistance, scalability becomes more efficient as challenges to the partnership process are addressed.

The proactive and strategic use of data to track project progress from the start will be central to helping institutions gain insight into the student parents on their campuses and the success of creating on-campus childcare centers and assessing their outcomes.

At the end of the project, we plan to increase the number of operational partnerships by 50 to 75 and have a publicly available, advanced user guide that has been refined to support the creation of additional partnerships after the grant concludes. We will also have demonstrated the viability of this sustainable model of providing affordable, on-campus childcare for student parents.

To stay updated on our progress or for information on how to participate in the project, please visit www.acct.org/center-for-policy-practice/kids-on-campus.

To get your college involved with the Kids on Campus initiative, contact Miya T. Simpson, Ph.D., at msimpson@acct.org.



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