Kentucky Parenting Students: Holding the Future in Their Arms

An analysis of the child care imperative through a Kentucky parenting student lens

2026

The Kentucky Student Success Collaborative

Trellis Strategies

CPE

About ECMC Foundation

ECMC Foundation is a national foundation whose North Star goal is to eliminate gaps in postsecondary completion by 2040. The Foundation uses a spectrum of funding structures, including strategic grantmaking and program-related investments through Education Innovation Ventures, to invest in both nonprofit and for-profit ventures. In pursuit of system change, the Foundation's grantmaking and investing are concentrated on the three following strategic priorities: removing barriers to postsecondary completion; building the capacity of organizations, institutions and systems; and transforming the postsecondary ecosystem. Learn more about our approach.

About the Kentucky Student Success Collaborative (the KYSSC)

To accelerate meaningful transformation around student success, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) launched the Kentucky Student Success Collaborative (KYSSC) a first-of-its-kind statewide program supporting greater degree completion and successful transition into early career attainment. The KYSSC works to foster a culture of collaboration, build capacity of campus partners to lead change, and drive measurable gains in student success in support of CPE's strategic agenda and 60x30 goal.

Through the convening of the Student Basic Needs Action Network in 2023, the KYSSC facilitated meaningful conversation about student basic needs and built momentum for discovery research, partnership development, and strategic planning that led to the prioritization of child care access for parenting students in the 2024 grant submitted to ECMC Foundation. Learn more about the KYSSC by visiting: https://kystudentsuccess.org.

About Trellis Strategies

Trellis Strategies is a research and technical assistance firm that is focused on helping the postsecondary education system transform to meet the needs of the Modern Learner. Guided by our mission, we navigate the non-linear landscape of postsecondary education, assisting institutions and states to adapt policies and programs to accommodate diverse learner journeys. Since 2018 we have also administered the Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS), a self-reported, online survey that documents the financial wellbeing and success indicators of postsecondary students across the nation. To date, we have captured the learner voice of today's college students by surveying over 8.9 million students at 600 institutions in 47 states. You may learn more about our organization by visiting: www.trellisstrategies.org/about-us/

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Executive Summary

Postsecondary education is one of the most durable and reliable poverty disruptors available to our society. While safety net programs provide critical short-term resources for people experiencing financial hardship, public benefit policies often promote employment at any cost, perpetuating instability from low wages and maintaining the poverty cycle.

Education changes family trajectories. It is a launch pad, not a safety net. When a parenting student completes a degree or credential, the impact multiplies across generations. When parents earn a college credential, it's one of the surest ways to break the low income cycle and improve their children's longterm chances for success.

Parenting students across the country navigate complex circumstances in their pursuit of a credential or degree. They simultaneously balance work, caregiving, and learning. Unlike their peers, they enter education while already carrying responsibility for other lives. Among all parenting students, 48 percent are first generation, versus 27 percent of non-parenting students.[1] This means the people with the fewest inherited advantages—and the highest immediate costs—are the ones most likely to invest in education, even when the pathways to completion are long.

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The benefits of education for parents and their children can only be realized if parents can complete a credential, but child care is a persistent barrier for parenting students. Parenting students face unique challenges because their schedules and incomes rarely line up with traditional work and school schedules, and fluctuating schedules make them less appealing to child care providers who prefer stability. As a result, what may appear to look like a failure of academic readiness or motivation can often be attributed to child care instability.

This report uses the Commonwealth of Kentucky as a case study to explore the primary child care issues and barriers for parenting students. We examine how these challenges intersect with the unique lives of parenting students and their children. We offer examples of policy, practice, and partnership opportunities that improve access to child care for parenting students. Through this analysis, we determined that the highest impact interventions are:

1. Improved affordability: ensure access to state child care subsidy programs and identify other funding sources that support child care costs.
2. Ensure the right kinds of care exist: nontraditional hours, drop in care, and flexible options.
3. Help students access supports: program awareness, application navigation, flexible academic policies, and priority registration

Introduction: Parenting Students in Kentucky

A postsecondary credential remains one of the best pathways to the middle class. People with credentials and degrees beyond high school benefit from higher earnings, greater access to employer-sponsored health insurance and retirement accounts, and lower unemployment rates on average. Their children also experience better health and educational outcomes and are more likely to enroll in and complete a credential themselves.[2]

Kentucky is an important case study for addressing child care challenges at the intersection of early childhood, workforce development, and postsecondary education. Kentucky leaders have intensified efforts to address the statewide child care crisis; a challenge heightened during the pandemic, which resulted in several initiatives over the past couple of years. For example, Governor Andy Beshear created the PreK for All Advisory Committee and the Kentucky Collaborative on Child Care (KYCCC) and convened stakeholders to outline recommendations to strengthen access to affordable, high quality child care.[3] Further, through the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS), the state has access to robust, linked data that informs understanding of child care needs and supports integrated education workforce planning.

Recognizing the direct link between child care access and postsecondary success, the Kentucky Student Success Collaborative (KYSSC) has prioritized removing child care barriers to improve enrollment and completion, especially for adult learners, in complement to statewide initiatives.

Around one in five of today's undergraduate college students are parents.[4] Furthermore, parents of children under 18 comprise 31 percent of all adults (ages 25-64) with a high school diploma or GED and 35 percent of adults with some college but no credential, representing some 24 million unenrolled learners who could benefit from postsecondary education. In Kentucky, there are around 375,000 adult parents who have a high school diploma or GED but no college credential and are currently unenrolled.[5]

The combination of caregiving, work, and learning that parenting students juggle often delays or threatens their ability to complete a credential or degree. Around half of first-time enrolled students with children leave college before they complete a credential.[6] For independent students who persist, including those with dependents, the median time to complete a bachelor's degree is almost seven years, and nearly 30 percent take more than 10 years to complete.[7] Parenting students are also more likely to borrow student loans, and borrow larger amounts than their non-parenting peers, with the average parent in the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (2020) borrowing nearly $15,000.[8] Despite the challenges they may face, when parents are able to enroll, they are more likely to achieve a high GPA (≥3.5) than their non-parenting peers.[9]

Completing a postsecondary credential can be a powerful tool to break intergenerational poverty cycles, though not everyone experiences these benefits to the same degree.[10] For these reasons, parents are a crucial target for increasing postsecondary degree attainment.

Profile of a Kentucky Parenting Student

The average Kentucky student parent is a female pursuing an associate degree at a two-year institution. She attends school part-time while working 40+ hours per week. She is in her early thirties and is the first member of her family to attend college. She receives the Pell grant and has also taken out student loans. She has multiple children and the youngest one is under the age of 5. The estimated time it will take her to complete her associate degree is approximately 5 years.

In Kentucky, there are around 375,000 adult parents who have a high school diploma or GED but no college credential and are currently unenrolled.

Typical Kentucky Student Parent

- **Female, early 30s.**
- **Pursuing an associate degree at a two-year college.**
- **Attends part-time while working 40+ hours per week.**
- **First-generation college student.**
- **Receives Pell Grant aid and student loans.**
- **Raising multiple children, including one under age 5.**
- **May take approximately five years to complete a degree at current pace.**

Supporting college completion for parents is a high return on investment for a state's workforce. Student parents are highly motivated, typically attaining higher GPAs than students who are dependents themselves,[11] and research has shown that targeted interventions and resources for parenting students are highly effective at increasing retention.[12] Successful graduates are likely to earn more and rely less on public benefits.[13] Furthermore, parental education is correlated with children's postsecondary success, including when the parent had a gap in their educational journey.[14]

Access to child care, in particular, is a core component of college success for student parents, as well as a mechanism for broader economic development across state workforces.[15] Postsecondary institutions are a key player in the broader child care ecosystem, serving as hubs for education and workforce development, regional employers, and loci of collaboration within their communities.

Child Care Availability Across the U.S. & Kentucky

Families across the country have struggled for years to access affordable, high-quality child care for their children. According to recent research, nearly 4.2 million children lack access to child care in their community, costing our economy between $216 billion and $329 billion over 10 years.[16] The average cost of child care for one infant exceeds rent in 17 states and more than in-state college tuition in 38 states.[17] Child care barriers have received growing attention from state leaders, policymakers, and employers during the past five years, in part due to the fragility of the child care system that was exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.[18] The industry began to recover after an influx of resources from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Child Care Stabilization funds in April 2021.[19]

However, the short-term boost provided by ARPA funds did not solve ongoing challenges of supply, demand, affordability, and workforce availability across the child care system. These interrelated issues, outlined below, have direct consequences for families in Kentucky and across the U.S. and require long-term, system-level solutions.

Defining Child Care Availability

Supply is often estimated using the authorized capacity of licensed and state-recognized providers, that is, the maximum number of slots a provider can legally offer based on the physical limitations of their space. However, research suggests that this metric is an overestimate of child care supply, since actual availability of slots is constrained by additional factors such as workforce availability, the age of the enrolled children, and the enrollment preferences of different providers.[20,21] Furthermore, some measures of supply attempt to go further by analyzing the quality of available child care.[22]

Demand aims to measure how many young children need care. One common method for estimating demand is to record the number of children aged five and under with all available parents in the labor force, as reported in census data.[23] This method does not account for other factors that impact whether and when a family requires child care, such as specific work hours, time constraints from education, the presence of kinship care, or disability. Child Care Aware of America suggests using additional data sources—for example, leveraging Google Analytics data to track changes over time—to create a more holistic picture of child care demand.[24]

Based on data from 2019-2023, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute calculated a 28-percentage point gap between the supply and the potential need for child care, representing around four million children nationwide who could benefit from child care. This gap between supply and demand is substantially higher in rural regions. Based on the data limitations described above, it is likely that this calculation represents an *under-estimate* of how many families can access high-quality child care that meets their needs.

TABLE 1. COMPARING CHILD CARE SUPPLY & DEMAND

	Supply	Potential Need	Gap		
			Urban	Rural	Average
KY	145,940	201,759	18%	40%	28%
US	10.8 million	14.8 million	27%	32%	28%

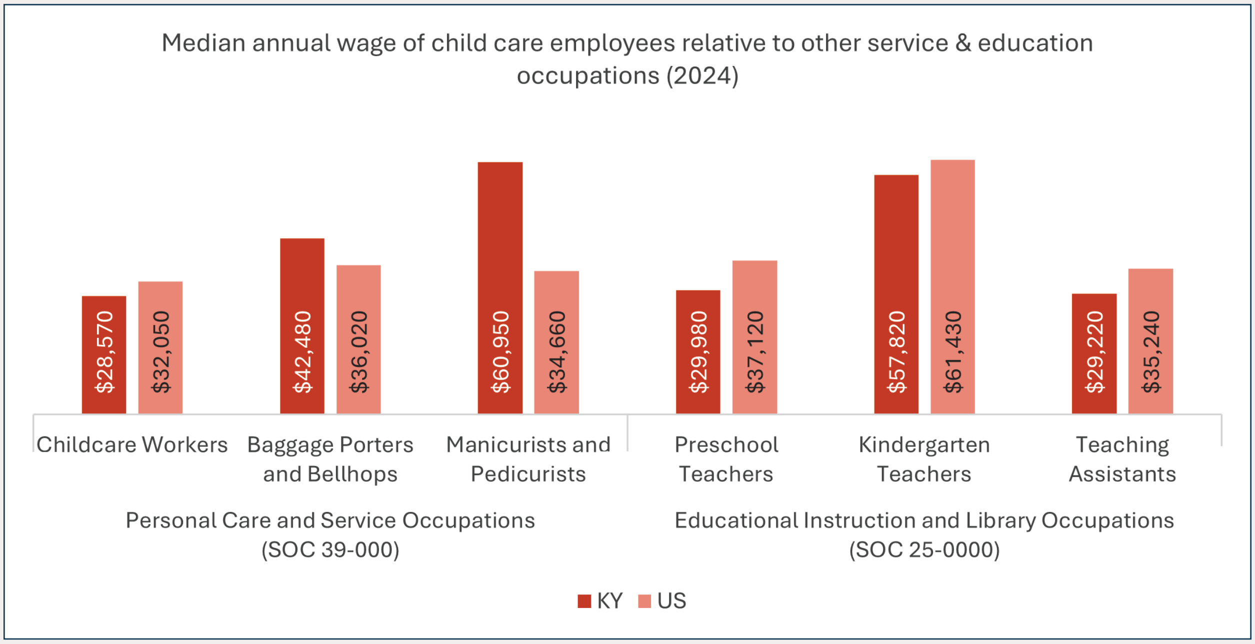
Source: Buffett Early Childhood Institute.[25]

Affordability, measured as the cost of care as a percentage of household income, plays a key role in a family's ability to access child care. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services limits co-pays for federally subsidized child care to 7% of household income, establishing a de facto index of affordability.[26] Methodologies for calculating income and cost of care vary, but sources agree that most states fall short of providing affordable child care. For example, Child Care Aware of America's report on price and supply of child care identified that the average cost of care for a single child would account for 35 percent of the median income for a single mother in the U.S. (and 39 percent for a single mother in Kentucky).[27] The burden of these costs is only compounded for parents pursuing postsecondary education: an analysis by the Education Trust estimated that a student parent working for minimum wage would need to work 54 hours a week on average to cover the cost of both college and child care.[28]

> ***A student parent working for minimum wage would need to work 54 hours a week on average to cover the cost of both college and child care.***

Workforce availability is a crucial factor underpinning supply and affordability. Despite the important role that early childhood caregivers and teachers play in our children's lives, working with young children is one of the lowest paid professions,[29] with early childhood educators failing to earn a living wage in any state.[30] These workers also receive far fewer employer-provided benefits than other occupations.[31] In 2024, the median wage for child care workers was around $16 per hour nationally and less than $14 per hour in Kentucky.[32] According to the Early Childhood Workforce Index, around 13 percent of early childhood educators lived in poverty in 2022.[33]

FIGURE 1. WORKFORCE AVAILABILITY: CHILD CARE WORKER WAGES



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.[34] SOC = 2018 Standard Occupational Classification system.

Inadequate compensation results in many child care workers being unable to afford their living expenses, leading to high turnover rates in the industry that disrupt child-teacher relationships and negatively impact child development.[35]

Insights from Kentucky: Bridging the Child Care Gap

As noted above, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute calculated a 28-percent point gap between the supply and potential need for child care in Kentucky, with a 40-percent point gap in rural regions of the Commonwealth. When child care demand outstrips supply, parents struggle to find reliable care for their children, which can have negative impacts on their individual careers and the broader economy through lost wages, productivity disruptions, and lower tax revenue.[36] Accounting for these factors, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute estimates that the child care gap in Kentucky has a long-term economic impact of at least $2.4 billion.[37]

One important strategy for addressing the child care gap is supporting development of the child care workforce through improved compensation and benefits, including ensuring child care workers can afford care for their own dependents. The Economic Policy Institute has estimated that the annual cost of infant care in Kentucky would amount to 30 percent of the median child care worker's earnings in the Commonwealth.[38] To address this challenge, in 2022, Kentucky led state action in increasing child care accessibility for care workers by excluding industry workers' income from the eligibility determination for the Kentucky Child Care Assistance Program.[39] Early evidence suggests this initiative supported recruitment and retention in the industry while also connecting some employees to benefits for which they were already eligible but had never applied.[40]

Other state-led initiatives to improve access to quality child care include partnering with employers to provide child care subsidies for working parents and investing in training for the child care workforce. Promising investments and interventions across the country are outlined later in this report.

Types of Care & Intersections with Postsecondary Education

Child care comes in many forms, from informal networks of family and neighbors to licensed centers (Table 2. Types of Child Care & Challenges for Parenting Students). Ideally, parents have the opportunity to leverage multiple forms of care to best suit their needs and priorities. In reality, however, child care deserts, long waitlists, and high costs often prevent families from accessing high-quality child care, negatively impacting parents' ability to maintain employment or pursue postsecondary education and training.

Furthermore, the hours and structure of most child care facilities rarely align with the needs of parenting students who are often balancing caregiving responsibilities alongside college courses, work shifts, and study time. This mismatch forces parenting students into unstable patchworks of care arrangements leading to missed classes, reduced course loads, or stopping out altogether. In the 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey conducted by Trellis Strategies, almost a quarter of parenting students reported missing at least one day of class due to lack of child care. When faced with a hypothetical loss of child care, 34 percent of parents indicated they would need to take fewer classes and 27 percent indicated they would be less likely to enroll in future semesters.[41]

Insights from Kentucky: Child Care Gaps for Parenting Students

As part of this project, we interviewed more than 15 institutional, community, nonprofit, and business stakeholders across Kentucky. Interviewees reinforced that child care functions as core educational infrastructure for parenting students rather than a peripheral support. These stakeholders described chronic scarcity marked by long waitlists and limited slots, conditions that disproportionately affect students with fluctuating schedules or unstable income, which were worse in rural areas.

Interviewees highlighted a persistent misalignment between traditional center-based models and adult learners' lives. Evening, weekend, and short-notice "backup" options are rare, so a small change in class or work schedules can cascade into a larger barrier. When institutions provide on-campus supports, parenting students report increased selfefficacy and a stronger sense of belonging—two factors that are essential for persistence and completion. However, even on campuses with child care centers, students are frequently deprioritized for available slots behind faculty or community members. Family, friend, and neighbor care and small home-based providers often fill gaps—especially outside metro areas—but typically lack access to quality-improvement supports or stable funding mechanisms, limiting reliability and scalability.

Stakeholders also identified information and navigation gaps. Institutions reported difficulty identifying and reaching parenting students, while many students are unaware of subsidy eligibility or the steps required to access available support. Colleges are viewed as trusted messengers and potential anchors, but they face capacity constraints. Short-term pilots that end abruptly can erode trust and disrupt student progress.

Overall, these interviews reinforced that child care functions as core educational infrastructure for parenting students rather than a peripheral support. Interviewees emphasized that child care challenges are tightly intertwined with transportation, housing, broadband, and local workforce constraints. Together, these overlapping barriers create persistent instability that undermines parenting students' ability to access and complete postsecondary education.

TABLE 2. TYPES OF CHILD CARE & CHALLENGES FOR PARENTING STUDENTS

Type of Child Care	Description	Distinct Challenges for Parenting Students
Child Care Centers	Operate in nonresidential buildings; larger groups by age; staffed by multiple adults. May be nonprofit, forprofit, or faithbased. Commonly but not always licensed.	• **Limited nontraditional hours**: Centers generally operate only Mon–Fri, daytime—conflicts with class/lab schedules, evening classes, and weekend work. • **Long waitlists**: Especially for infants; delays can prevent enrollment or force stopouts. • **High cost**: Often the *least affordable* option for student parents. • **Subsidy barriers**: Some centers do not accept subsidies or have limited subsidized slots.
Family Child Care Homes	Care for small groups of children in the provider's residence; often more flexible with hours; fewer children; homelike environment. May be small or large family homes, depending on enrollment.	• **Variable quality & licensing**: Some homes may not be required to meet minimum health/safety standards, making quality hard to assess. • **Uncertain capacity**: Very small provider-to-child ratio means slots fill quickly. • **Irregular schedules**: Although more flexible than centers, providers may not consistently offer the exact hours student parents need or want to take on families with irregular schedules. • **Limited subsidized availability**: Not all family child care providers accept child care subsidies.
Family, Friend & Neighbor (FFN)	Care provided by relatives, friends, or neighbors; typically unlicensed and less formal. Used when families need flexible, trusted arrangements. Not always regulated.	• **Inconsistent availability**: Caregiver schedules may change, causing instability that disrupts attendance. • **Subsidy complications**: Some FFN providers can be paid through subsidies, but lack of awareness and burdensome paperwork cause many to opt out. • **Quality & safety vary**: Students who have few choices may be forced to sacrifice developmental quality ratings for convenience.
Preschools/ PartTime Programs	Operate parttime; sometimes faithbased or schoolbased; may be licenseexempt depending on state regulations.	• **Hours rarely align** with college schedules; programs may run only mornings or a few days per week. • **Need for wraparound care**: Students must patch together multiple care arrangements, raising costs and logistical complexity.
SchoolAge Programs (Before/After School Care)	Programs for K–6 children in schools or community centers; hours vary; may be licensed or license-exempt.	• **Gaps during evenings/weekends** when parenting students often attend class or work. • **Transportation burdens**: Getting children between school, care sites, and campus can be difficult without reliable transportation.
Head Start / Early Head Start	Federally funded programs for children birth to age 5; free to eligible families; focus on early learning and family well-being.	• **Limited slots**—not enough seats for all eligible families. • **Restricted hours** that may not cover full school/workday. • **Eligibility and documentation burdens**, causing delays.
LicenseExempt Care / Drop In Care	Operate with fewer licensing requirements (e.g., faith-based, Parent's Day Out, YMCA, gyms, retail).	• **Ineligible for subsidies**: Many license-exempt programs cannot accept public child care assistance. • **Parttime schedules** require parents to assemble multiple care arrangements. • **Limited availability,** these options are hard to find and usually for specific use like gym members.

Source: Child Care Aware, n.d., accessed February 2026. [42]

Child Care Funding Opportunities for States and Institutions

As discussed above, lack of access to affordable high quality child care is estimated to cost the U.S. economy over $216 billion dollars in lost productivity.[43] To expand opportunities for low-income families to secure work or pursue education and training, the federal government and individual states provide funding to reduce the cost of child care. For brevity we have only covered the primary sources of funding in this report.

Major Funding Streams for Early Care and Education

Most federal funding for subsidized child care comes through three interrelated programs administered by the Office of the Administration for Children & Families. The Child Care & Development Fund (CCDF), authorized under the Child Care & Development Block Grant (CCDBG), is the primary funding stream and is specifically dedicated to helping low-income families afford child care.[44] The federal government allocated a total of $9 billion to CCDF in 2022, with states contributing an additional $888 million (see Table 3. Funding streams for early care and education, 2022).

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program can also be leveraged to subsidize child care and has become the second largest public source of child care funding.[45] States spent around 23 percent of TANF funds on early care and education in fiscal year 2022 and transferred an additional three percent of funds to CCDF,[46] although transfers of up to 30 percent are permitted.

Finally, **Head Start and Early Head Start** services are available to families with children age 5 and under whose incomes are at or below the federal poverty level, or up to 200% FPL depending on the state. Families receiving TANF, SSI, or SNAP benefits and children in the foster care system, are also eligible regardless of income.[47] National spending for Head Start totaled $11 billion in 2022, with $186 million in Kentucky funding 14,514 slots.[48]

TABLE 3. FUNDING STREAMS FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION, 2022

	CCDF Allocations		TANF Expenditures						Head Start	Total
			Child Care		Pre-Kindergarten/ Head Start		To CCDF			
	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal	State
KY	$154 million	$7 million	$1 million	$19 million	$0	$0	$0	$185 million	$341 million	$26 million
US	$9.0 billion	$888 million	$1.3 billion	$2.5 billion	$98 million	$3.1 billion	$976 million	$11 billion	$22.5 billion	$6.6 billion

Source: Administration for Children & Families[49, 50 ,51]

Despite a total of approximately $29.1 billion in federal and state government expenditures in 2022, these child care subsidy programs fail to reach all families that need support. An analysis of CCDF and TANF distribution estimated that these programs only served about 15 percent of the children eligible under federal rules.[52] Similarly, the National Head Start Association estimates that only 10 percent of eligible children have access to Early Head Start due to underfunding of the program.[53] In many cases, states are forced to ration limited resources, deciding who receives support, how much, and who goes without. These state choices determine income eligibility, provider reimbursement rates, family co-pays, and the workforce and training activities people can participate in while receiving subsidized child care.

Child Care Subsidies and Postsecondary Education

Many parenting students are unable to receive support for child care due to policy barriers such as time and type of credential limits, academic requirements, and more.[54] Similarly, states place restrictions on funds for types of child care that can accommodate the work and school schedules of parenting students.[55]

The federal government allows broad leeway in how agencies define work, training, and educational activities, with no federal requirement for the number of hours families engage in qualifying activities to be eligible for CCDF and TANF. Despite this flexibility, and the strength of education in lifting families out of poverty, only 11 percent of caregivers receiving subsidies from CCDF reported that they received benefits due to their participation in training/education or training/education combined with work.[56] The lack of sufficient funding for families has meant that many states have placed a lower priority on parenting students.

The Kentucky Child Care Assistance Program

The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services program that administers funds received through CCDF. Kentucky has an integrated eligibility system (IES) where residents can prescreen and apply for multiple benefit programs at once including child care, food assistance, health care, and more.[57] In grant year 2022, Kentucky received a total of around $154 million in federal funding under CCDF. Kentucky is one of only a few states which spend the majority of their TANF funds on basic assistance, spending only nine percent of funds on child care and transferring no funds to CCDF (see Table 3. Funding streams for early care and education, 2022).[58]

Kentucky families are eligible for child care subsidies under CCAP if their income is at or below 85 percent of the state's median income,[59] the same as the federal threshold. Children must be younger than 13 years of age or have a disability. Caregivers must participate in a qualified activity such as employment, job searching, training through the SNAP Employment & Training program or Kentucky Works, or education at the high school (for teen parents) or postsecondary level.[60]

Kentucky has leveraged many of the available options to improve parenting student eligibility for CCAP. Full-time students qualify for a subsidy without having to combine attendance with work. Students enrolled in at least 6 credit hours and working 20 hours a week on average may also qualify. Kentucky also permits students enrolled in online programs to qualify and counts time spent on study groups and labs towards the weekly hours spent on education.

Despite these efforts, many parenting students who are eligible for CCAP do not receive support. Internal data from the Kentucky Center for Statistics shows that an average of 582 students at in-state public institutions received CCAP benefits each year from 2018 to 2023, representing just seven percent of eligible student parents at these schools. Participation in training/education (alone or combined with work) accounts for just 15 percent of CCAP access in Kentucky, with 76 percent of recipients reporting that they received a child care subsidy for employment alone.[61]

Child Care Access Means Parents in School

Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) is the only federal program that supports child care specifically for parenting students. CCAMPIS funds can be used to provide subsidies for low-income, Pell Grant-eligible students as well as to pay for personnel, benefits, supplies, and indirect costs but not for the construction of facilities.[62] In project year 2023-2024, the Department of Education reported 264 active CCAMPIS awards totaling $83.7 million, including four awards in Kentucky totaling $898,170.[63] A Government Accountability Office (GAO) study of CCAMPIS programs in academic year 2016-2017 found that around 4,000 children received subsidized care through the program, with an additional 4,200 children on waiting lists, and identified that rural institutions received the least support.[64]

As of this publication the Department of Education has not conducted a CCAMPIS grant competition in more than three years. However, in February 2026 Congress voted to continue funding for CCAMPIS at $75 million, with a requirement that the Department open grant applications in fiscal year 2026.[65] The bill also included language to prioritize applications that propose flexible child care arrangements (such as evening, weekend, and drop-in child care), conduct direct outreach to parenting students regarding public benefit programs and tax credits, and collect data on the total number of parenting students enrolled at the institution and the number of parenting students served by CCAMPIS grant funds.

Since 2015, Kentucky institutions have received eight CCAMPIS awards totaling over $5.3 million, underscoring the critical need for this program to continue for Kentucky parenting students (Table 4. CCAMPIS awards in Kentucky since 2015).

TABLE 4. CCAMPIS AWARDS IN KENTUCKY SINCE 2015

Institution	Sector	Control	Region	Obligated	Start	End	Award ID (P335A__)
Northern Kentucky University	4-year	Public	Southern Bluegrass	$583,700	10/1/17	9/30/22	170092
Berea College	4-year	Private	Southern Bluegrass	$252,400	10/1/18	9/30/22	180213
Somerset Community College	2-year	Public	Cumberland	$395,600	10/1/18	3/30/23	180270
Eastern Kentucky University	4-year	Public	Southern Bluegrass	$616,500	10/1/18	12/21/23	180277
Northern Kentucky University	4-year	Public	Southern Bluegrass	$706,800	10/1/21	9/30/25	210042
Bluegrass Community & Technical College	2-year	Public	Southern Bluegrass	$876,200	10/1/21	9/30/25	210061
Hazard Community & Technical College	2-year	Public	Eastern Mountain	$582,300	10/1/22	9/30/26	220039
Somerset Community College	2-year	Public	Cumberland	$1,300,000	10/1/22	9/30/26	220047

Source: Search of HigherGov.com, Federal Grant Awards, for CCAMPIS awards in Kentucky, accessed January 2026.
Region = Kentucky Department for Community Based Services service region.

We do not know enough about the effect of CCAMPIS on the persistence and completion of parenting students. While institutions are required to submit detailed reports as part of their CCAMPIS grant compliance, that information is not made public and requests for information for that data have gone unanswered.

Other Sources of Child Care Funding

Institutions can also assess opportunities to leverage the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Perkins (funding to states to support the development, implementation, innovation and improvement of career and technical education (CTE) programs), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) to provide resources that can support child care.[66] For example, after a needs assessment revealed that 40 percent of its career and technical education students are parents, Quinsigamond Community College in Massachusetts used Perkins funding to hire a full-time student-parent coordinator.[67] This role has resulted in expanded child friendly spaces and the construction of a drop-in child-care center. The college's leadership recognized that even modest investments in staff and infrastructure could make the campus more responsive to the needs of student-parents.

Promising Investments & Interventions

Recent research has highlighted the high economic cost of the child care coverage gap. The Bipartisan Policy Center estimates each missing child care slot leads to a burden of over $40,000 over 10 years.[68] A series of reports from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation found that individual states lose billions of dollars annually from unseen tax revenue and decreased worker productivity.[69] As states look to increase workforce participation and economic mobility, improving child care access can be a vital tool. Interventions that target parenting students can generate a particularly high return on investment through increased tax revenue and decreased reliance on public benefits in the long term. For example, an analysis from the Urban Institute estimated that providing on-campus child care at Viriginia public colleges would generate a return on investment of $1.24 per $1.00 spent.[70]

By supporting child care access, states are effectively investing in two generations at once—helping parents earn credentials that meet labor-market needs while promoting better long-term outcomes for their children.

State efforts to strengthen early childhood support systems have accelerated in recent years, with legislatures across the country passing 326 early childhood bills in 2025.[71] Several states have made historic financial commitments—including large-scale investments in subsidy programs, operating grants modeled on federal stabilization funding, and new endowment or trust funds—to support early childhood education.[72] At the same time, states are advancing workforce supports like wage increases and benefits to improve retention, while others are modernizing governance structures and expanding prekindergarten. Together, these efforts reflect a broad, bipartisan recognition that child care access is essential to family economic stability and state workforce needs.

By supporting child care access, states are effectively investing in two generations at once—helping parents earn credentials that meet labor-market needs while promoting better long-term outcomes for their children.

State-wide child care access programs

States are investing in subsidy programs, expanding eligibility, reducing copayments, and adopting employer-focused strategies such as tax credits and cost-sharing models to boost access for working families.[73]

TABLE 5. EXAMPLES OF STATE-EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIP CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

State	Program Structure
Kentucky	Through the Kentucky ECCAP Matching Program, the Commonwealth matches employer subsidies for child care costs, effectively doubling the benefits offered to employees. The matching value tapers off for higher-income families.
Michigan	Under Tri-Share Childcare Program, the cost of child care is evenly split between the employer, the employee, and the state. Michigan was among the first states to pilot this type of program, with New York and North Carolina investing in similar strategies later.
Wisconsin	Partner Up!, which ran from 2022 to 2024, allowed employers to reserve child care slots at approved providers for their employees. Employers contributed at least 25 percent of the true cost, with parents paying up to 10 percent as a copay and the state contributing the remaining 65 percent.
Tennessee	Non-Profit/Employer Workforce (NEW) Care Partnership Grants support employer-provider partnerships that increase child care capacity in underserved areas of the state. Funds may be used to expand existing care centers, establish care centers co-located at workplaces, or underwrite employees' child care costs.

See also: Merchen & Nicholas, 2025.[74]

TABLE 6. EXAMPLES OF STATE TAXES & DEDICATED FUNDS TO SUPPORT CHILD CARE

State	Details
Louisiana	Louisiana dedicates 25 percent of revenue from its online sports wagering tax, up to $20 million, to the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund. In 2025, the state increased the tax rate from 15% to 21.5%, which is likely to add nearly $4 million in additional revenue to the fund.
New Mexico	On November 1, 2025, New Mexico became the first state to guarantee no-cost universal child care. To build capacity for this care, the state is investing in expansion of child care facilities and launching a statewide campaign to recruit providers.
Vermont	Vermont's Child Care Bill (Act 76), passed in June 2023, increased public funding for the child care sector by establishing a new 0.44% payroll tax. The tax is expected to generate approximately $80 million annually to promote affordability, accessibility, and quality of child care, including increasing CCDF-funded child care subsidy payment policies.

See also: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2024;[75] *Child Care Aware, 2025.*[76]

Investments in the child care workforce

Some states have dedicated funding for early childhood education compensation enhancement, with the goal of maintaining the stabilization offered by American Rescue Plan Act funds which expired in September 2024. Beyond direct compensation, some states including Kentucky have sought to increase other employment benefits for early childhood educators, such as retirement programs, training and development opportunities, and access to care for their own children.[77]

Research supports the effectiveness of these programs, with a third-party evaluation in D.C. estimating that the Pay Equity Fund generated a 23 percent return on investment.[78] Unfortunately, compensation stabilization programs have been targeted for funding cuts; for example, D.C's Pay Equity Fund is slated to be eliminated for FY 2027-2029.[79] However, Maine legislators removed proposed cuts to child care-related programs after backlash from industry workers.[80]

TABLE 7. EXAMPLES OF STATE INVESTMENTS IN THE CHILD CARE WORKFORCE

Program Type	State/ District	Details
Compensation	District of Columbia	Funded by a local wealth tax, the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund helps early childhood educators reach pay equity with the District's public school employees.
	Maine	The Maine Early Childhood Workforce Salary Supplement System provides salary stipends of up to $540 per month to child care providers across the state.
	Minnesota	The Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program funds increases in compensation, benefits and premium pay at licensed child care providers, as well as for additional costs such as rent, equipment, and professional development at family child care programs.
Benefits expansion	California	As a result of a collective bargaining agreement with the Child Care Providers United union, the state provides funding for a retirement benefit trust and a health benefits trust, available to all family child care providers. With this two-year agreement, California became the first state to fund a retirement program for early educators.
Workforce development	Georgia	Georgia's DECAL is piloting a program to offer tuition assistance benefits to program staff. The program includes funding to offset the cost of child care for some employees.
	Kentucky	The Early Childhood Development Scholarship covers tuition and fees for current child care workers to pursue postsecondary credentials in child development and early childhood education. Kentucky further invests in the child care workforce through the Non-College Scholarship Program and Early Childhood Apprenticeship Portfolio.
Child care assistance	Kentucky	Income from employment at a recognized child care provider is excluded from the eligibility determination for the Kentucky Child Care Assistance Program, functionally providing subsidized child care for all industry workers.

See also: McLean, et al., 2024;81 National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2024.[82.]

Alongside state investment, stakeholder organizations are also contributing to workforce development. For example, the Kentucky Small Business Development Center Childcare Initiative provides business coaching and training, with a focus on improving financial management, sustainability, and quality ratings.[83]

Dedicated state child care funding for postsecondary students

Improving access to child care for parenting students directly strengthens states' educational attainment goals by removing one of the biggest barriers to college persistence and completion. When student parents—who make up a significant share of today's postsecondary population—have stable, affordable child care, they are more likely to attend class regularly, maintain full course loads, and graduate on time. This boosts overall completion rates, particularly among low-income, first-generation, and adult learners. In turn, states benefit from a larger, more skilled workforce, higher earnings and tax revenues, and reduced reliance on public assistance. However, these programs often rely on appropriate investment from institutions, which can be limited by institutional capacity and priorities. A recent evaluation found that only about a third of North Carolina's community colleges maximize use of child care grant funds each year.[84]

TABLE 8. EXAMPLES OF STATE-FUNDED CHILD CARE GRANTS FOR POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS

State	Details
Minnesota	The Postsecondary Child Care Grant is available to Minnesota residents who have a child age 12 or under, with award amount of up to $6,500 per child per academic year, determined based on the Student Aid Index (SAI, formerly EFC)and required care hours.
North Carolina	The Child Care Grant provided an average award of $3,263 per student served in the 2023-2024 academic year. Funding is allocated to each of the 58 community colleges based on enrollment. Eligibility requirements are determined by the college, with institutions generally requiring a minimum enrollment intensity of 6 credit hours per semester.
Oregon	The Student Child Care Grant is available to Oregon residents with a child age 12 or under and provides up to $10,000 per student per academic year. Grantees are undergraduates only and must maintain satisfactory academic progress.
Pennsylvania	The Parent Pathways Grant, administered through postsecondary institutions, assists student parents with a range of expenses including tuition, emergency funding, and child care. In 2025, the Commonwealth allocated over $1.5 million in funding to the program.

See also: Baker, 2025.[85]

Key Takeaways

Improving the ability of parenting students to access and complete a college credential is one of the most commonsense strategies states and institutions can undertake. Parenting students are among the most dedicated and persistent learners in higher education. They understand what is at stake for themselves, their children, and their economic futures. When parenting students complete a credential or degree, the investment pays off across generations—strengthening family economic stability, increasing educational attainment, and strengthening the state's workforce and tax base.

Yet even the most determined students cannot reach their full potential without child care strategies designed for the realities of parenting while in school. Ensuring that parenting students can access and complete credentials, in less time, reduces student loan borrowing, accelerates entry into the workforce, strengthens family financial security, and reduces reliance on public benefits. The strategies outlined in this report highlight the critical levers state and institutional leaders can activate to make meaningful progress.

Action Steps to Improve Support for Parenting Students

Funding

- Increase federal investments in child care by expanding funding for the Child Care & Development Fund (CCDF) and the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program.
- **Establish dedicated state child care grants for postsecondary students** to reduce competition for scarce subsidy slots and ensure that this priority population can reliably access care.

Policy

- **Streamline access to care under CCDF and CCAMPIS** by simplifying reporting requirements and allowing for greater provider flexibility.
- **Recognize education as a steppingstone to economic mobility** by ensuring that eligibility requirements for state child care assistance programs treat education as equal to work and including study time and time spent on study groups and labs towards the weekly hours spent on education.
- **Align eligibility rules with student parents' enrollment patterns**, for example by including online programs under state education & training designations and allowing both full-time and part-time students to qualify for child care assistance.
- **Expand the options available to parents** by extending child care benefits to children served by family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers.[86]

Institutional Efforts

- **Advocate for parenting students** to ensure their needs are reflected in decisions that shape funding and policy choices relating to federal, state, and local child care resources.
- **Collect and disaggregate student enrollment and success data by caregiving status** to develop a more robust understanding of caregivers on campus.
- **Involve parents directly in institutional initiatives** through surveys, focus groups, and taskforces.
- **Eliminate financial aid displacement policies,** instead ensuring that new grants or scholarships increase a students' overall aid package.
- **Streamline the process of including dependent care in a student's cost of attendance** and proactively notify parenting students of financial aid options available to cover these costs.
- **Leverage multiple funding sources**—such as WIOA, Perkins, SNAP E&T, and emergency grants—to help address child care barriers.
- **Foster cross-sector partnerships** with local child care providers, Resource & Referral agencies, employers, human service agencies, and community-based organizations that provide allied support resources.
- **Pair child care assistance with wrap-around supportive services** such as basic needs hubs, peer communities, public benefits navigation and application assistance, and mental health supports.

Conclusion

Supporting parenting students with reliable, affordable child care is one of the most powerful levers for intergenerational economic mobility. When parents can pursue and complete postsecondary credentials without interruptions caused by unstable child care, their earning potential rises significantly, strengthening household financial stability. At the same time, children benefit from high-quality care environments that support early development, setting stronger foundations for their own long-term educational and economic outcomes.

Parenting students bring extraordinary resilience, purpose, and talent to Kentucky's colleges and universities. By investing in child care solutions that match their needs, the Commonwealth and its institutions can unlock higher completion rates, strengthen the state's workforce, and create opportunities that transform families for generations. By removing child care as a barrier to persistence and completion, states and institutions can help families break cycles of poverty and create upward mobility that extends across generations.

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