Aspen POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS for PARENTS

Success in Workforce Programs for Parents

Introduction and Context

In more than 90 percent of families with children under age 18, at least one parent works and among married-couple families with children, 97.4 percent have at least one employed parent and 63 percent have both parents employed.[1] For the parents who make up nearly one-third of the U.S. civilian workforce, accessing quality jobs and increasing their economic mobility is critical to ensuring all families thrive.[2] There are several types of investments in workforce, including WIOA and Pell grants, as well as a variety of workforce development programs aimed at helping workers obtain the skills needed to secure quality jobs. However, these supports often fail to recognize the constraints parents face when balancing a career and raising children. Additionally, workforce training opportunities offered by employers frequently go to upper income individuals. These also tend to overlook the unique needs of parents.

Definitions:

To level-set the conversation, Ascend led a robust discussion with participants to workshop the definitions for "workforce pathway" and "credential." The following working definitions were established for the conversation:

Workforce pathway: Any non-baccalaureate pathway that leads to a job or career, including, but not limited to: apprenticeships, earn and learn models, and training.

Credential: Any non-baccalaureate certification, qualification, and/or licensure for employment or career advancement.

To identify opportunities to make workforce programming better for parents, Ascend recently brought together 15 organizations representing a mix of direct workforce providers as well as analysts, advocates, and researchers who work on workforce programs. The strategic session was part of Ascend's Postsecondary Success for Parents (PSP) Initiative, which aims to foster solutions, bolster political will, and influence leadership to accelerate the educational and economic success of parents by creating stronger workforce pathways for parents. The conversation focused on:

- Understanding the breadth and depth of workforce pathways of interest to parents; and
- Elevating two-generation (2Gen) approaches to workforce development pathways and policies that support families.

The discussion highlighted challenges workforce providers face when developing support services for families, such as access to data about program participants, as well as the barriers parents face. Participants also identified federal policies that exacerbate these challenges by classifying making a child a barrier to employment that can directly or indirectly impact access to workforce programming. The group explored approaches that are helping to break down these barriers and shared ideas for applying these approaches on a broader scale.

This brief shares insights from the conversation that offer space to consider changes needed in workforce development policies and practices to be more supportive of parents. By sharing these perspectives, Ascend hopes other practitioners, policymakers, and researchers will use these ideas to identify and address similar gaps in their own efforts.

Identifying Parents in Workforce Pathways: The Data Landscape

Parents bring different motivations, conditions, and requirements into the workforce development equation. To best serve them, these fundamental differences and needs must be taken into consideration. Parents' voices are essential to developing systems and services that are flexible and meet a variety of needs. A fundamental, baseline condition for providing optimal supports and a maximum voice for parents is knowing who among a program's participants are parents. However, for many academic institutions, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training programs, a top challenge is identifying who the parents are. Often the enrollment forms for these programs do not ask if the applicant is a parent.

For example, workforce programs in California are required to enroll participants through a statewide data system called CalJobs. The adult enrollment form includes eligibility screener questions about family structure to determine household size and income, but it does not ask whether someone is a parent. The youth enrollment protocol in California allows (but does not require) case managers to document parenthood as a "barrier to employment." Since documenting parenthood requires participants to provide a birth certificate, which many parents do not have, program data significantly understate the enrollment of parents.

Other state data collection systems pose different challenges. In Oklahoma, groups collecting data about children and families are required to secure parent consent each quarter, a prohibitively resource-intensive process that makes it difficult to track outcomes over an extended period of time. In many states, the social systems and workforce systems do not share data with each other, which hinders impact reporting.

How questions are phrased can also impact accuracy. Some surveys ask, "Are there children in the house?" This does not screen for parents whose children do not live in the same household. Service providers can be wary of tracking data on parents for fear they will be penalized for inaccurate data.

For organizations that track their own data, capacity can be a barrier. Case managers, who are already required to document a tremendous amount of data, can be resistant to adding more data points to track. Programs that serve parents who are coming in from other programs need resources to streamline information and fill gaps. Collecting this data is a tedious process that requires dedicated staff and funding. Programs that send staff into the field to collect survey information report success on a small scale, but staff resources required for this type of direct data collection would likely prohibit using this approach on a larger scale.

Some workforce providers have had success gathering data about parents by partnering with child care providers or Head Start programs, but note the process can be hard to navigate. Career pathway programs at colleges may be able to work with financial aid offices to share information with parents, but the information goes to a wider list, not only parents.

Groups are making progress in data collection by:

- Asking for the birth dates of children, not just their ages, to make upkeep easier and more accurate over time;
- Screening for parents by including questions about child care needs on program registration forms (although some noted this can be misleading as parents who already have childcare may answer no);
- Asking parents to list all children (not just those in the same household) and asking both mothers and fathers to complete the questionnaire;
- Re-registering participants who leave a program and come back later to ensure information is up to date; and
- Tracking workforce training outcomes for parents and documenting this work. Although not required by HEA or DOE, some TRIO programs—specifically EOC, SSS, VUB—track postsecondary outcomes and some workforce outcomes for parents on a site by site basis and may be a resource for learning more about the adults, specifically parents, returning to postsecondary education.

Afraid to self-report for fear of the stigma that can be associated with being a parent, parents themselves can also be a barrier to accurate data collection. A critical first step toward improving data collection about parents is changing the narrative to be more supportive of parents in these systems.

Advocating for changes to federal programs such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to include reporting requirements that identify parents will also make it easier to create bridges to other data collection services and ensure workforce programs are designed to meet parents' needs. The current version of WIOA, signed

into law in 2014, promised to put a greater emphasis on serving people with barriers to employment, including parents with low income. However, according to a recent

report from the Urban Institute, heavy data collection requirements under WIOA, combined with a lack of resources and capacity, may discourage data collection beyond what is minimally required.[3] As a result, the program does not always serve parents as well as it could. For example, WIOA classifies single parents as a special population, but barriers to data collection can prevent providers from identifying single parents and leveraging this opportunity.

A coalition of groups representing both the education and the workforce development fields, along with researchers and data experts, created the Workforce Data Quality Campaign (WDQC) to tackle some of these data challenges. The effort encourages Congress and federal agencies to strengthen support for strategic data collection, management, and usage that protects individual privacy while enabling the analysis and research needed to advance the nation's skilled workforce.

Data collection efforts within higher education that are focused on veterans, military families, and students may offer best practices for data collection within workforce programs. For example, many states require colleges to provide a liaison who helps students who are veterans or active-duty military navigate support systems and access available benefits.

Expanding Opportunities for Postsecondary Success for Parents

Although access to better data is critical to making workforce programs work for parents, other supports, including flexibility in scheduling and child care subsidies, can go a long way in supporting parents through the completion of these programs. Participants discussed approaches to providing parents workforce skills and job training beyond traditional collegiate pathways and identified best practices for ensuring parents succeed.

Funding quality child care. Access to on-site or nearby quality child care remains a top barrier to parents successfully completing workforce pathways. Vermont is one of only a few states that guarantees every child who needs child care has a slot. The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), the federal block grant that funds states to provide child care assistance to families with low income, offers funds that can help alleviate this barrier. However, the CCDF eligibility requirements and priorities for service are set at the state level, and states make different decisions as to how to allocate CCDF resources.

As a result, CCDF funds for parents seeking education and training varies across states. According to a recent study from the Urban Institute, nationally, 13.2 percent of families receiving CCDF subsidies do so to support education and/or training. This varies substantially by state, ranging from 70 percent in Virginia to less than 5 percent in Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kansas, Nevada, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.[4]

Flexible pricing or vouchers for parents who only need child care services for part of the day (e.g., mornings only) lowers child care costs. Non-traditional hours also help parents who need to attend class or job training programs outside of the regular 9-to-5 work-day hours.

Engaging employers. States are working to determine how best to engage employers in workforce pathways for parents. This may include offering incentives for Earn and Learn models, which include paid certification programs, build training programs into the work day, or feature partnerships with nearby education centers to help employees gain the skills needed to advance.

Employers can facilitate access to workforce support and programs by providing on-site child care with flexible hours that accommodate a parent's work, training, or class schedule. Stable hours and scheduling—with plenty of advanced notice when hours are changing—are also critical to balancing work and family needs.

Workforce development boards can advance career pathways for parents by leveraging partnerships and resources that help make the business case to employers for why it makes sense to make training and child care available to workers. In Maryland, the Montgomery County workforce board, WorkSource Montgomery, is working with Montgomery Moving Forward to bring businesses and public officials together to advance stronger access to child care.

Adapting political structures. Return on investment studies by human service agencies in several red states, including Texas, have led these states to combine their workforce and child care offices in order to streamline services. Under its Pathways Initiative, the Texas Education Agency works closely with the Texas Higher education and Coordinating Board (THECB) and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to create strong pathways to higher wage and high-demand careers.

Other states are considering structures that combine education and labor. For example, Missouri recently restructured to combine the state's Department of Labor and Department of Education. The two departments now share higher education and workforce data. Other states are experimenting with shared office space to break down silos between these departments and some states are also looking to add the Department of Transportation into the mix.

Blending and braiding funding. States like Kentucky and Alabama are tapping flexible funding available from TANF to support workforce development activities. Arkansas uses TANF to fund the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI), which combines adult education and postsecondary training with critical supports like coaching and coordination for parents, and also helps with child care, transportation, and the costs of tuition, books, supplies, and testing fees.

Postsecondary programs can help parents who are students navigate benefits to access funding for child care, including integrating child care expenses into financial aid calculations. Income share agreements (ISAs) allow students to borrow money from

their university to fund their education. In exchange they agree to pay the university a percentage of their salary after graduation. In some cases, the school is more likely to help the student land a higher-paying job in order to recoup the funds faster. San Diego Workforce Partnership recently launched the nation's first workforce development Income Share Agreement (ISA).

Acquiring work credits. Competing demands on a parent's time—a concept known as time poverty—can cause parents to pursue the shortest possible route to a degree or credential, even if it does not line up with the best opportunity for advancement. Earning credit from previous work experience helps parents complete education or training programs more efficiently, while continuing to advance their careers.

The National Skills Coalition offers resources for broadening the apprenticeship pipeline through pre-work-based learning training. Additionally, programs like the Alternative Certification Program at Johns Hopkins University allow students to complete job training while simultaneously earning credits. Some apprenticeship programs are also experimenting with shorter programs. Ohio's Hard Hatted Women made an intentional move to recruit more women into the electrical field by shortening the apprenticeship program from 10 weeks to five.

Time pressures can also prevent parents who finish their credential from moving into a higher-paying work track for fear they will lose flexibility or find their new work schedule untenable. For these workers, peer mentoring from other parents who have already completed the program and entered a new career path can help them navigate new opportunities and alleviate stress.

Social Capital. Education and training programs that help parents build social capital by connecting them and using a cohort model can bolster parent success. Parents help other parents acclimate to the program, share lessons learned, trade off child care, and help each other with transportation. Cohort models allow workforce training programs to gather insights from participants about their needs and then tailor supports to meet those needs.

Through coaching, parents engaged in workforce programs are able to explore different fields and industries, identify a suitable career path, and set goals and a strategy for successfully progressing along that path. This may include connecting with employers in the community to understand what skills are in high demand and then working with those employers to bridge the gap between diploma and employment. By exposing students to good jobs, these programs help students increase their earning potential.

Emergency funding. Families working to move up the economic ladder are often living from one paycheck to the next. An unexpected expense—such as a flat tire—could be a major setback. Workforce programs that establish a hardship fund or offer other flexible funding for these unexpected expenses help families stay on track.

The prohibitively high cost of housing near job training centers or urban centers where most jobs are located is also creating added transportation expenses for parents, who often need to travel long distances between their home, their workplace and/or campus, and child care centers. Some workforce programs are mitigating these expenses by providing bus passes or otherwise supplementing transportation costs.

Ensuring Better Outcomes for Students Who Are Parents: Where are the Gaps?

As Ascend continues to deepen its work in this area, it is exploring additional gaps that must be addressed to bring best practices like these to scale and strengthen workforce pathways for parents. To inform this effort, participants offered their perspectives on other aspects of workforce development that need to be addressed, issues for Ascend to consider as it engages with employers, and additional individuals or organizations to bring to the table.

Participants agreed that meeting demand for access to quality child care is a top priority that requires raising up the child care workforce by ensuring child care workers earn family-sustaining wages. To professionalize child care, states must create pathways to a degree for child care workers. Policymakers and the private sector can infuse funds into this field to move this in the right direction.

Additionally, participants noted the need to support parents with low income in accessing quality jobs, starting with addressing gaps in the quality of training programs. One challenge for workforce boards when it comes to education training is the quality and consistency of Eligible Training Provider Lists (ETPLs). A trainer must be on the ETPL to provide training to a workforce development board. Different states have different criteria for who gets on the list. Workforce boards can remove providers that are not generating outcomes, but they cannot go outside the list, which limits their choices.

Access to information about good jobs that goes beyond income will help parents assess what they need right now versus what they need to further their careers in the future. Parents seek to understand the true outcome of long-term workforce training models and this requires better advising and more centralized outcomes.

By partnering with workforce development boards and participating in coaching, local businesses have an opportunity to shape the local workforce and recruit talent. Job

shadowing opportunities also help parents in workforce development programs sample different career paths and determine which one is best for them.

Moving forward, changing the narrative and implementing supportive policies for parents in the workforce development system—while continuing to prioritize racial and gender equity—is critical to helping all parents succeed and businesses thrive.

With Gratitude to Our Philanthropic Partners

Lead postsecondary success for parents partner: Omidyar Network

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Endnotes

[1] https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf

[2] https://www.gnapartners.com/infographic/working-parents-american-workforce/

[3] Spaulding, S. & Gebrekristos, S. (2018). Family-Centered Approaches to Workforce Program Services, Findings from a Survey of Workforce Development Boards. Urban Institute. Retrieved from: https://irpcdn.multiscreensite.com/dc0a626e/files/uploaded/FamilyCentered_Approaches_to_Workforce_Program_Services.pdf

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