

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 21, 2018

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

Students who are parents of dependent children make up a large and growing share of the population of students enrolled in higher education. U.S. Department of Education data indicate that over one-quarter of undergraduate students were raising children in 2012, a 30 percent increase compared to 2004.ⁱ Many of these students fail to graduate and subsequently struggle to repay their student loans. For example, a recent analysis shows that half of student parents who began college in the 2003-04 school year and borrowed a federal loan for their undergraduate education defaulted within 12 years of enrolling; this default rate is double the rate of borrowers without children.ⁱⁱ

Finding and paying for high-quality child care is a significant challenge for all parents, including students enrolled in higher education. In most states, child care costs more than the tuition at an in-state university.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, research shows that low-income children benefit from high-quality programs with well-trained educators that prepare them for success in kindergarten.^{iv} However, too many communities and college campuses do not have enough high-quality child care that allows both children and their parents to thrive.^v

When student parents do not have access to high-quality child care, student parents may be forced to enroll part-time, making it even more difficult for them to complete their education and find a good paying job that can adequately provide for their family.^{vi} Student parents often face compounding challenges, including a lack of financial stability, food insecurity, and other factors that make it exceedingly difficult to complete higher education while raising children.^{vii}

The Child Care and Development Block Grant is designed to provide access to high-quality child care for low-income parents. However, some states may place limitations on college students' ability to access assistance under this program, including through work or grade point average requirements.^{viii} Some college students may not know about the program at all.

Additionally, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program is designed to provide campus-based child care services specifically for low-income student parents, but historically low funding levels have prevented the program from meeting even a fraction of the high demand for child care services on college campuses.^{ix}

More must be done to understand the unique challenges student parents facing in accessing and succeeding in higher education, including when it comes to accessing high-quality child care. Therefore, we would like GAO to examine the following questions:

- What challenges do student parents face that impede their ability to access and complete higher education?
- What federal programs are available to help student parents, and what barriers hinder their ability to effectively access and use these programs to complete their education?
- How can federal programs be improved to meet the needs of student parents?
- How do barriers for student parents accessing federal programs vary across states?
- How do the academic outcomes of student parents who receive some type of child care assistance compare with similarly-situated student parents who are not able to receive child care assistance?
- What are colleges doing to support these students and enable them to successfully achieve their academic goals?

We appreciate your attention to this request and GAO's assistance on this matter. For any questions related to this request, please coordinate with Bryce McKibben on the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions at Bryce_McKibben@help.senate.gov or (202) 224-5501, or Edward Edney with the Office of Senator Tammy Duckworth at Edward_Edney@duckworth.senate.gov or (202) 224-2854. Thank you.

Sincerely,


PATTY MURRAY
United States Senator


TAMMY DUCKWORTH
United States Senator

ⁱ Noll, E., Reichlin, L., and Gault, B. Elizabeth Noll, Lindsey Reichlin, and Barbara Gault, College Students with Children: National and Regional Profiles, report (Washington D.C.: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017). <https://iwpr.org/publications/college-students-children-national-regional-profiles/>

ⁱⁱ Colleen Campbell, "The Student Loan Default Crisis for Borrowers with Children," Center for American Progress, November 15, 2017. <http://ampr.gs/2A1fVst>

ⁱⁱⁱ Elise Gould and Tanyelle Cook, High Quality Child Care is Out of Reach for Working Families, issue brief no. 404 (Washington D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2015). <https://www.epi.org/publication/child-care-affordability/>

^{iv} Margaret Burchinal et al., "Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programs," Early Childhood Research Quarterly 25, no. 2 (2010).

^v Catherine Hill, "Child Care on Campus: A Must for Mothers in College," American Association of University Women, May 06, 2014, accessed March 14, 2018, <https://www.aauw.org/2014/05/06/child-care-on-cc-campus/>.

^{vi} Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Eleanor Eckerson, and Barbara Gault, Understanding the New College Majority: The Demographic and Financial Characteristics of Independent Students and their Postsecondary Outcomes, issue brief no. #C462 (Washington D.C.: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018).

^{vii} Sara Goldrick-Rab, Jed Richardson, and Anthony Hernandez, Hungry and Homeless in College: Results from a National Study of Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education. University of Wisconsin-Madison (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Hope Lab, 2017). <http://www.wihopelab.com/publications/Hungry-and-Homeless-in-College-Report.pdf>

^{viii} Eleanor Eckerson et al., Child Care for Parents in College: A State-by-State Assessment, report no. #C445 (Washington D.C.: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2016). <http://bit.ly/2psGTCu>

^{ix} Mary Sykes, Lindsey Reichlin, and Barbara Gault, The Role of the Federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program in Supporting Student Parent Success (Washington D.C.: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2016).