

# Updates on State Policies and Programs to Support Alternative Routes to Education and Employment

Jessica Pearson, Ph.D. and Rachel Wildfeuer, Ph.D.  
Center for Policy Research

While years of completed schooling are the strongest predictors of higher earnings and other positive outcomes, there are alternative routes to both education and employment for fathers who lack traditional credentials.<sup>1</sup>

State initiatives to improve high school graduation rates, post-secondary education for low-income students, and career and technical education are summarized in Chapter 6 of *Policies and programs affecting fathers: A state-by-state report* (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022).<sup>2</sup> Chapter 7 describes state initiatives dealing with apprenticeships and other employment training opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the initiatives highlighted in the report, the following identifies more recent state policies and programs related to nondegree credential attainment, tuition assistance, innovative postsecondary funding strategies, and support for student parents that promise to facilitate alternative routes to education and employment.



1 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2023). *Reducing intergenerational poverty* (Chapter 4: Children's Education). The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27058>.

2 Pearson, J., & Wildfeuer, R. (2022). *Policies and programs affecting fathers: A state-by-state report* (Chapter 6: Education). Center for Policy Research and Fatherhood Research & Practice Network. <https://www.frpn.org/asset/policies-and-programs-affecting-fathers-state-state-report-chapter-6-education>.

3 Pearson, J., & Wildfeuer, R. (2022). *Policies and programs affecting fathers: A state-by-state report* (Chapter 7: Employment). Center for Policy Research and Fatherhood Research & Practice Network. <https://www.frpn.org/asset/policies-and-programs-affecting-fathers-state-state-report-chapter-7-employment>.

## Nondegree Credential Attainment

In the past two years, at least 17 states (**Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia**), through a mix of executive and legislative actions, have removed bachelor's degree requirements from most or all public sector job requirements.<sup>4</sup> Related to this shift towards skill-based hiring approaches, there is increased interest in nondegree credential programs. These programs, which are shorter in duration and less costly than traditional degree programs, include certificates, industry certifications, microcredentials, occupational/professional licenses, and apprenticeships. The expansion of these programs to a variety of fields increases the number of professions that no longer require a degree.<sup>5</sup>



There have been recent state initiatives to support nondegree credential attainment. **Indiana** funded the \$3 million Workforce Ready Grant Program in fiscal year (FY) 2022 to enroll those with a high school diploma but not a postsecondary degree in no-cost training programs in certain high demand fields including manufacturing, building and construction, and health and life sciences. In another \$17 million legislatively created program, the Next Level Jobs Employer Training Grant Program, employers in **Indiana** can obtain up to \$5,000 per employee that they train in high-value industry programs that lead to a certificate with a wage gain for the employee. The **New Jersey** legislature has also enacted several measures to improve the quality of postsecondary, short-term certificates and other nondegree credentials. **Louisiana** has enacted statewide quality standards for nondegree credentials as well as a “last-dollar” scholarship to be used in high-demand and high-wage industry sectors at all community and technical colleges. In **Virginia**, the legislatively created FastForward program helps to develop a supply of credential workers for high-demand occupations. FastForward programs, which are mainly between six and 12 weeks long, are offered at all community colleges in the state.<sup>6</sup>

4 Smalley, A. (2023). *States consider elimination of degree requirements*. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/education/states-consider-elimination-of-degree-requirements>.

5 Smalley, A., & Jacquinot, L. (2023). *State approaches to nondegree credentials*. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/education/state-approaches-to-nondegree-credentials>.

6 *Ibid.*

## Tuition Assistance

States are also pursuing initiatives to support tuition assistance. Twenty-three states (**Arkansas, California, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia**) have adopted some form of a state-funded tuition program for two years at a community college. Although six of these programs (**Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, South Dakota, Virginia, West Virginia**) limit eligibility to associate degrees from "in-demand" or "high-demand" fields, four states (**Indiana, New Mexico, New York, Washington**) cover both two-year and four-year degrees.<sup>7</sup> In addition, **Maine** recently extended its tuition-free college initiative begun during the pandemic through 2025. In 2023, enrollment in **Maine's** community college system increased 16% with 61% of students qualifying for the free college program.<sup>8</sup>



**Virginia, West Virginia** limit eligibility to associate degrees from "in-demand" or "high-demand" fields, four states (**Indiana, New Mexico, New York, Washington**) cover both two-year and four-year degrees.<sup>7</sup> In addition, **Maine** recently extended its tuition-free college initiative begun during the pandemic through 2025. In 2023, enrollment in **Maine's** community college system increased 16% with 61% of students qualifying for the free college program.<sup>8</sup>

Notably, **New Mexico** has the only state-funded scholarship program that is available to both recent high school graduates and returning adult learners, to full and part-time students, and can be used for training certificates in addition to associate and bachelor's degrees. In addition to covering full tuition and fees at in-state institutions of higher education, the **New Mexico** scholarship is a "first dollar" program that lets students stack other aid received through federal aid or private scholarships and to obtain additional aid to cover other expenses, such as housing, childcare, and books. "First dollar" programs, which are more flexible and ideal for students, are more expensive for states, and thus less common, than "last dollar" programs.<sup>9</sup> First dollar approaches help to avoid student debt, a problem that disproportionately affects Black students, who are more likely to take out student loans to pay for higher education and carry the largest average student loan debt of all racial demographics in the nation.<sup>10</sup>

The **Virginia** FastForward program, described above, offers students tuition reductions upon registration in community college training programs in high-demand occupations. Students pay only one-third of tuition costs upon registration with an additional one-third paid by the state upon training completion, and the final one-third is paid by the state when the credential is earned.<sup>11</sup>

---

7 Collins, C. (2022). *This community college month, states should follow New Mexico by increasing educational opportunities*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/blog/this-community-college-month-states-should-follow-new-mexico-by-increasing-educational-opportunities/>.

8 Smalley, A., & Deye, S. (2024). *Legislators explore career-ready postsecondary education programs*. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/legislators-explore-career-ready-postsecondary-education-programs>.

9 Collins, C. (2022). *This community college month, states should follow New Mexico by increasing educational opportunities*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/blog/this-community-college-month-states-should-follow-new-mexico-by-increasing-educational-opportunities/>.

10 Geiman, J., & Taylor, A. S. (2022). *Disproportionately impacted: Closing the racial wealth gap through student loan cancellation, payment reforms, and investment in college affordability*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/disproportionately-impacted-closing-the-racial-wealth-gap-through-student-loan-cancellation-payment-reforms-and-investment-in-college-affordability/>.

11 Smalley, A., & Jacquot, L. (2023). *State approaches to nondegree credentials*. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/education/state-approaches-to-nondegree-credentials>.



## Innovative Postsecondary Funding Strategies

Innovative postsecondary funding strategies are other ways states are exploring to support students. Rather than funding higher education institutions exclusively on traditional metrics that only consider the number of full-time students enrolled, some states are using funding formulas that consider the enrollment of low-income or first-generation students or performance metrics such as the number of degrees awarded. In 2020, **Colorado** adopted performance funding metrics that include Pell-eligible student population, underrepresented minority student population share, retention and graduation rates and first-generation undergraduate student population share. In 2023, **Texas's** formula for funding community colleges modified to include performance metrics that consider the incidence of high school students who complete at least 15 hours of sequential college credit (dual enrollments), the proportion of community college students who transfer to a four-year university (successful transfers), and student success in achieving degrees, certificates, and workforce credentials, especially in high-demand occupations. **Montana** passed legislation in 2023 to expand a tax credit to that is available to employers paying training- or education-related expenses for a trades profession to include agriculture, construction, IT, and medical professions.<sup>12</sup>

## Support for Student Parents

Finally, advocates are calling for better support systems in postsecondary schools to address the lived experiences and backgrounds of student parents, especially the 1.1 million student fathers (15% of all enrolled men), many of whom face serious and unique challenges that imperil their mental health and their ability to succeed. Key takeaways about student fathers in colleges and their experiences are as follows: compared with White men, Black men enrolled in college are more likely to be fathers (21% vs 14%), less likely to be married (54% vs. 69%), and significantly more likely to "stop out" than student parents overall (71% vs. 53%). Higher rates of non-completion for Black and Latinx fathers are tied to their higher day-to-day responsibilities for work, childcare, and the financial burden of higher education. Lack of institutional support is also a factor with single Black student fathers using campus supports at half the rate of single Black student mothers (34% vs. 69%) and with 67% of Black student fathers attending institutions that do not have on-campus childcare options.<sup>13</sup>

As discussed in Pearson and Wildfeuer (2022), the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program is the only grant program specifically designed to fund childcare services for low-income student parents.<sup>14</sup> The CCAMPIS program faces an uncertain future as the House's FY 2024 appropriations bill eliminates the program altogether and the proposed Senate FY 2024 appropriation of \$80 million falls far short of the \$500 million that advocates contend is needed to address the needs of approximately 100,000 student parents.<sup>15</sup>

12 Smalley, A. (2024). *Innovative postsecondary funding strategies*. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/education/innovative-postsecondary-funding-strategies>.

13 Heckstall, I., & Collins, C. (2023). *Expand access to affordable high-quality child care to better serve Black student fathers*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/expand-access-to-affordable-high-quality-child-care-to-better-serve-black-student-fathers/>.

14 Pearson, J., & Wildfeuer, R. (2022). *Policies and programs affecting fathers: A state-by-state-report* (Chapter 6: Education). Center for Policy Research and Fatherhood Research & Practice Network. <https://www.frpn.org/asset/policies-and-programs-affecting-fathers-state-state-report-chapter-6-education>.

15 Heckstall, I., & Collins, C. (2023). *Expand access to affordable high-quality child care to better serve Black student fathers*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/expand-access-to-affordable-high-quality-child-care-to-better-serve-black-student-fathers/>.

A promising development is a five-year initiative to support student parents by bringing more Head Start centers to community college campuses throughout the country. Developed through a partnership of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the National Head Start Association (NHSA), the Kids on Campus Initiative aims to dramatically increase the number of on-site Head Start centers at community colleges from its 2023 baseline of 100 campuses and make high quality childcare accessible for student parents.<sup>16</sup>



## Conclusion

Career and technical education pathways in high school, occupational skills training programs in high demand industries, and degrees and certificates from two-year colleges all have labor market value. Some states are trying to enhance the fraction of low-income students who take advantage of these opportunities, including student fathers. They are attempting to achieve these goals by making it less expensive for colleges to enroll low-income students and/or provide financial assistance, childcare, and other support services for students to attend college and improve their completion rates. More could be done to enhance outcomes for low-income students and, in particular, student parents. This would include scaling up sectoral programs that train low-income adults with children for well-paying jobs in specific industries and occupations that do not require degrees for which there is local demand, offering free tuition to a wide array of students including returning adults and part-time students using first dollar approaches that allow them to stack other aid from federal or private scholarships, and expanding campus-based childcare programs. Other critical improvements can only be addressed at the federal level. These include forgiving student debt, revising repayment options, increasing Pell Grants, reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, and lifting restrictions on food assistance for students under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Association of Community College Trustees. (2024). *Kids on campus*. <https://www.acct.org/center-for-policy-practice/kids-on-campus>.

<sup>17</sup> Geiman, J., & Taylor, A. S. (2022). *Disproportionately impacted: Closing the racial wealth gap through student loan cancellation, payment reforms, and investment in college affordability*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/disproportionately-impacted-closing-the-racial-wealth-gap-through-student-loan-cancellation-payment-reforms-and-investment-in-college-affordability/>.

