

Emergency Aid at Scale: State Efforts to Support Student Parents



SHEEO

State Higher Education
Executive Officers Association



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INTRODUCTION

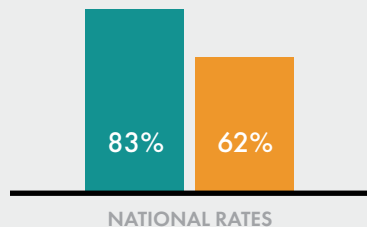
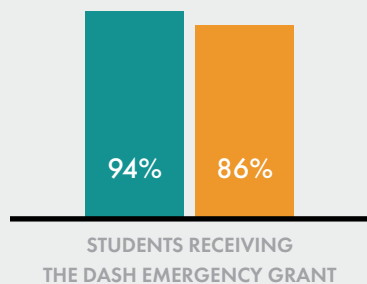


The four million student parents that make up the postsecondary education population in the United States face unique barriers to success that reach far beyond the high cost of tuition. Of these four million students, 43% are single mothers, nearly 10% of the undergraduate population. Single mothers with only a high school diploma in the U.S. are three times more likely to live in poverty than when they hold a postsecondary degree.¹ The high cost of postsecondary education, combined with the added expenses of raising children, makes it difficult for many student parents to afford continuing their education. Over half of student parents stop-out before earning their degree, many due to financial reasons. Student parents frequently need additional resources to help them juggle the responsibility of being a parent, attending school, and often working.

Students who run into unexpected costs can benefit greatly from emergency aid. Early research shows that students who receive emergency aid, combined with comprehensive supports, are more likely to persist and complete their program. Statewide pilot programs exemplify the impact of emergency aid and just how integral it can be in carrying students over the finish line. Based on findings from Ascendium's Dash Emergency Grant pilot program for statewide implementation, 94% of emergency aid recipients at four-year institutions re-enrolled, graduated, or transferred and 86% of emergency aid recipients at two-year institutions persisted. In comparison, nationwide, students enrolled during the same time period had a persistence rate of 83% at four-year institutions and 62.2% at two-year institutions.

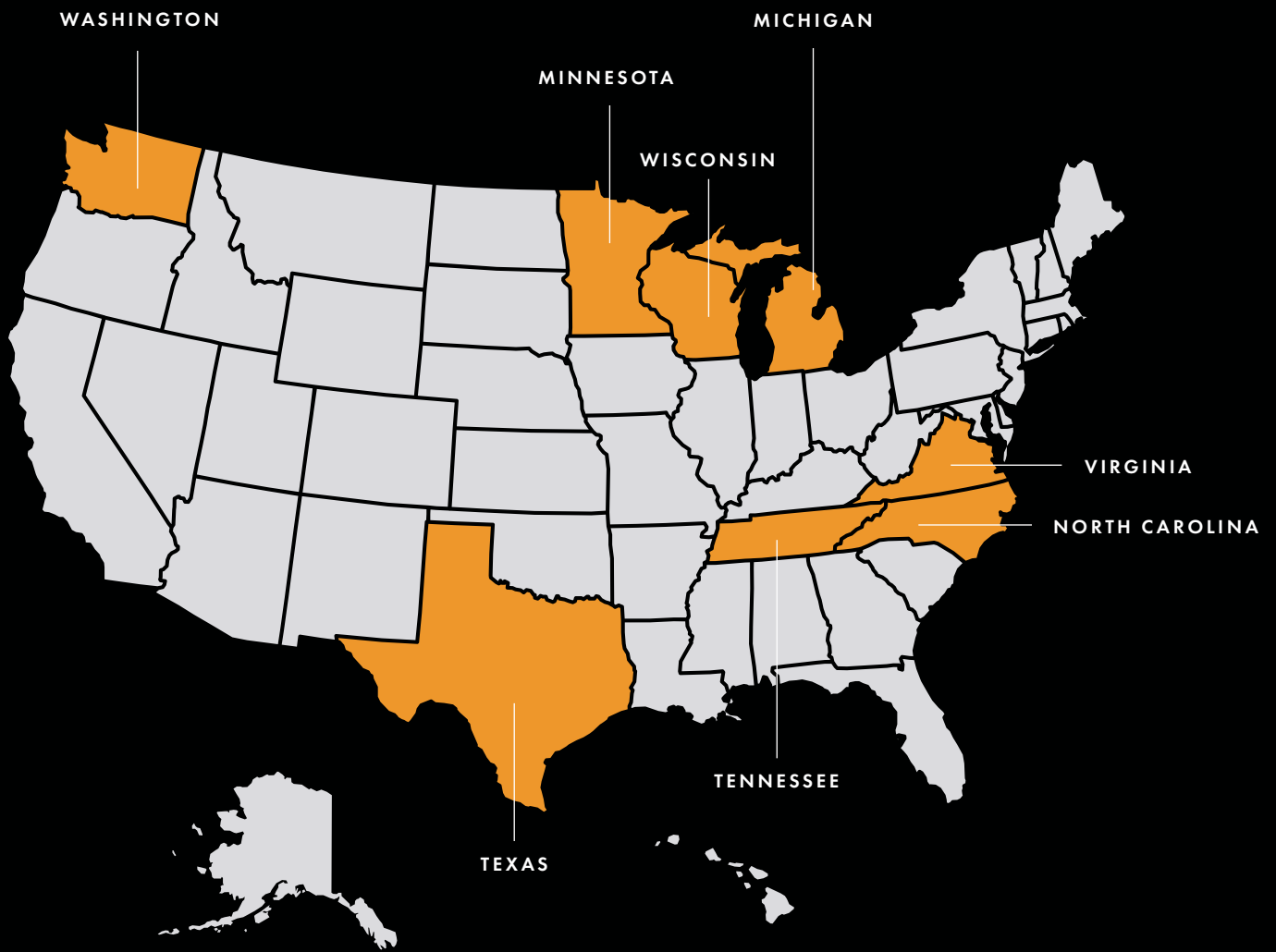
Comparison for Students Receiving the DASH Emergency Grant vs. National College Persistence Rates

■ Four-Year Institutions
■ Two-Year Institutions



As states and institutions grapple with the issue of affordability and the barriers to student access and completion it presents, emergency aid has emerged as a strategy for alleviating costs and promoting retention. This brief provides state examples of emergency aid and the implications for student success, emerging state-level approaches to supporting student parents, and recommendations for states seeking opportunities to support this population.





STATE EXAMPLES OF EMERGENCY AID

In 2019, prior to the global pandemic, four states (**Minnesota, North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin**) had state-funded emergency aid initiatives.² Since then, four additional states have developed emergency aid initiatives, **Michigan, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia**. As the student parent population continues to grow, states will need to include students with children in their efforts to address the enrollment cliff and expand talent pipelines. Nearly one in five undergraduate students are raising children while enrolled and 10% of the undergraduate population are single mothers. It is estimated that single mothers represent 7-12% of undergrad student bodies at the state level, making it a critical population to states aiming for attainment goals and looking to produce degrees that align with workforce needs.

Nearly one in five undergraduate students are raising children.





STATE APPROACHES TO EXPANDING AND SUPPORTING EMERGENCY AID

States have taken different approaches to integrating emergency aid into their strategies and budgets. Incorporating emergency aid into student population-specific programs or targeting specific student groups is an approach a few states have taken to help align with existing priorities and garner support for emergency funding.

MINNESOTA



Minnesota's Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students Grant distributes funding to institutions with high populations of students experiencing homelessness for the purpose of addressing food and housing insecurity and financial emergencies.

NORTH CAROLINA



Starting as a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)-funded, workforce-oriented program, **North Carolina's** Finish Line Grant initially targeted working adults in the community college system. As of 2022, the program is now administered by the North Carolina Community College System, shifting from WIOA funds and allowing sustainability through the present day.

TENNESSEE



Tennessee COMPLETE started as a completion grant pilot program for Tennessee Promise students facing unforeseen financial burdens. This grant is aimed at helping students from low-income backgrounds complete their degree. Students applying for the grant must be enrolled in Tennessee Promise and be Pell-eligible.

WISCONSIN



After a successful, private-funded pilot program, **Wisconsin** was one of the first states to authorize a state-funded emergency aid program for their 2- and 4-year systems. The pilot program started as an effort to assist low-income students facing financial emergencies.

WASHINGTON



Another approach to expanding emergency aid is the use of existing agendas and coalitions to garner support. The **Washington** Postsecondary Basic Needs Coalition helped build support for emergency aid by developing policies and support for emergency aid grants and similar policies. Subsequently, the Student Emergency Assistance Grant (SEAG) was piloted in 2019 and enacted as a full program in 2022.

MICHIGAN



Most recently, **Michigan** launched student success competitive grant opportunities as part of their efforts to reach the state's attainment goal. As part of these grant opportunities, the "Barrier Removal: Direct to Students" program awards grants to institutions to provide emergency aid grants for students most in need.

TEXAS



Although only in effect during the pandemic, **Texas'** emergency aid program was an example of a program born from a strong public-private partnership, another strategy states have used to establish emergency aid programs.



IMPACT OF STATE EMERGENCY AID PROGRAMS

Tennessee

In the first year of the COMPLETE program, 708 students received completion grants, totaling almost \$250,000. Due to high demand, additional funding was provided in subsequent years; years two and three provided \$1.8 million and \$2.0 million in grants, respectively, to over 3,000 students each year. Data from the program show persistence rates for COMPLETE grants recipients are higher than non-recipients. At community colleges, COMPLETE grant recipients persisted at a rate of 64.2% from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023, while the comparable retention rate of Pell-eligible first-time, full-time freshmen at Tennessee community colleges was only 54.9 percent. Similarly, the 2023 fall-to-fall retention rate was 80.5% for university students who received the grant, while the rate was only 72.0% for first-time, full-time Pell-eligible students.³

*The grants
reached
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students
each year.*

80% of students receiving emergency aid grants were students of color.



Texas

Texas launched the Texas Emergency Aid Grant Program at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, supported by a private-public partnership between the Texas Higher Education Foundation, a nonprofit entity, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Funding for the program came from various philanthropies in the state. Approximately \$1.25 million was awarded in block grants to institutions of \$10,000-\$35,000. The grant amounts were based on two criteria: the financial need of the institution's student body and the institution's total enrollment.

The program had a strong impact, particularly for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. More than 80% of students receiving emergency aid grants were students of color. Over half were Pell Grant recipients, who had particularly positive outcomes. Ninety-three percent of students who received direct aid re-enrolled, while 98% of Pell Grant recipients re-enrolled.

Wisconsin

The benefits of emergency aid are particularly strong for students from low-income families. Through the Great Lakes Emergency Aid Program, the Wisconsin Technical College System helped 73% of low-income recipients persist or graduate, about 14% higher than the national rates for community colleges.⁴

The benefits of emergency aid are particularly strong for students from low-income families.





STATE-LEVEL EXAMPLES OF STUDENT PARENT-FOCUSED EFFORTS

In addition to emergency aid, states are expanding efforts to support student parents more broadly.

States, along with the federal government, have developed policies and legislation that support postsecondary attainment and persistence among student parents. This includes improving data collection for this population, increasing financial assistance for housing, child care, and basic needs support, and creating on-campus programs for students and their families.⁵ These areas are crucial to delivering the additional support needed for student parents to succeed and create economic mobility for their families.

Making Child Care More Accessible and Affordable

Child care is largely inaccessible to student parents working to raise children while pursuing an education. Research shows that a student parent would need to work 33 to 81 hours per week to pay for the cost of their education at a four-year institution and child care.⁶ Aside from the high cost of child care, student parents have few options to enroll their children in close proximity to campus. Despite the growth of student parents pursuing postsecondary education, on-campus child care options have decreased since 2003.⁷ Only 38% of public institutions have on-campus child care available for students.⁸ Even so, the institutions that do provide child care have limited availability, with long waitlists and student parents competing for slots against faculty and staff.⁹ Campus child care also has limited hours and may not be suitable for student parents balancing school and work. Access to child care is vitally important to student parents' ability to persist and complete their degrees.

Arkansas's Career Pathways Initiative provides assistance for education expenses and child care to low-income student parents.¹⁰

Through the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program, **Georgia** has designated student parents as a "priority group" for receiving financial support from The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). The CAPS program helps low income families pay for child care.¹¹

Maine's Rural Initiative helps eligible rural parents with demonstrated financial need at select community colleges, including expanding an existing scholarship to include child care assistance.¹²

The **Minnesota** legislature passed a bill in 2023 to grant awards to institutions for the purpose of offering services and supports to student parents. For students who do not receive support from the state's basic needs program, Minnesota's Postsecondary Child Care Grant program offers financial assistance for child care costs. These grants award up to \$6,500 per child (under 12 years of age) to Minnesota residents who are enrolled in college.¹³

North Carolina distributes grants to state community colleges for disbursement to student parents for child care services.¹⁴

Oregon awards Student Child Care Grants of up to \$10,000 per academic year for eligible students at associate or bachelor's degree-granting institutions.¹⁵

In 2021, the Fair Start for Kids Act was enacted by **Washington** State, including a provision that removes a 20-hour work requirement for full-time students with children to receive Washington Child Care Connections (WCCC) childcare subsidies.⁶ Student parents pursuing an associate degree are eligible for the subsidy.

Improving Student Parents' Access to State Programs, Benefits, and Institutional Resources

Texas is one of few states with a legislative mandate in place that requires institutional support for student parents. Texas Education Code requires public institutions to provide support and resources for student parents.¹⁶ Institutions must designate at least one liaison to help student parents navigate student services and resources at their institution, consisting of access to public benefits, parenting and child care resources, employment assistance, transportation assistance, academic success supports, and any other resources available to students. Institutions are also required to report data on student parents to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) each academic year. Texas Education Code also requires the THECB to adopt rules relating to the protection of pregnant and parenting students, resources for such students, and reporting requirements.

California has also legislatively mandated institutions to provide priority registration for student parents and to inform them about resources and supports. Furthermore, each campus of the California State University (CSU) and California Community Colleges (CCC) systems must create a website with resources for student parents and distribute the website link during orientation.⁶

Some states also provide additional resources to student parents who receive TANF aid. **Maine** has established the "Parents for Scholars" benefit, providing monthly cash assistance to student parents enrolled in two- and four-year degree granting programs.⁶

Kentucky's Ready to Work program offers a comprehensive network of support services for low-income parents enrolled in Kentucky's community and technical colleges. Services range from tutoring to career planning and job placement services.¹⁷



Data Collection for Student Parents

Comprehensive data on the student parent population is limited at all levels, federal, state, and institutional. Without better data, all entities lack the information needed to inform policy and improve supports for this population. Although some data are published at the federal level through the National Center for Education Statistics, the data are not comprehensive enough to assess the complete needs and comparative outcomes of student parents. States like **Illinois**, **Oregon**, (temporarily) **Michigan**, and the aforementioned **Texas** have passed legislation to mandate collection of information on student parents and improve data collection.¹⁸

Under Oregon's legislation, institutions are required to collect and report data on students who identify as parents or caregivers.¹⁹ This has prompted institutions like the University of Oregon to administer surveys to their students to collect additional information on the needs and challenges student parents face.²⁰ In addition to identifying student parents, Illinois collects demographic data to learn who their student parents are, how many are being served by campus child care services, and where gaps exist in student outcomes.²¹ Similarly, Texas requires demographic and academic data to be collected on student parents.¹⁶ The above-named states recognize that without data on student parents, it is difficult to adequately serve this population. Their efforts aim to uncover who their student parents are, how to better serve them, and address disparities while improving outcomes.

State-established Programs for Student Parents with an Emergency Aid Component



For **Virginia**, emergency aid is integrated into their student parent programs, offering a comprehensive approach that tailors to the needs of student parents. Motivated by the 20% of students who are parents in Virginia, the state has established student parent-focused programs that provide direct supports to participating students. Virginia's College Attainment for Parent Students (CAPS) program is a pilot program, introducing an innovative approach to creating opportunity for student parents and advancing a two-generation anti-poverty solution.²² Through this philanthropy-funded program, student parents receive funding for child care-related and unexpected expenses to assist with program completion. Funding provided through the program also helps student parents offset the cost of child care. CAPS is administered at five institutions in the Virginia Community College System, providing grants of up to \$4,800 to 20 students each semester to support child care and emergency expenses. Students must be single parents and Pell-eligible to receive funding. Additionally, students participating in CAPS receive a \$2,000 stipend per semester.

In addition to CAPS, Virginia launched the Connie Kinchloe Fund for Parent Student Success in 2024, securing nearly \$400,000 in donations. This fund aims to provide students supports, alleviate the barriers that student parents face, and foster student success. The fund's mission seeks to not only help student parents succeed, but to empower and strengthen communities in Virginia by uplifting entire families.²³



BUILDING MOMENTUM AROUND EMERGENCY AID AND STUDENT PARENT SUPPORT

Institutional resources for emergency aid are typically limited. In order to continue to build momentum around emergency aid and expand its reach, institutions will need support from states.

Emergency aid is typically led by institutions, but recent investments at the state-level have demonstrated an interest and investment in this type of financial support. In combination with the initiatives for student parent populations, there is clear alignment between emergency aid and student parent support. Institutional resources for emergency aid are typically limited. In order to continue to build momentum around emergency aid and expand its reach, institutions will need support from states. Specifically, targeting these funds towards student parents helps address the needs of 22% of undergraduate students. State investment in student parents means more than contributing to a stronger talent pipeline. Investment in student parents provides opportunity for upward mobility with generational impact.

What We Can Learn from States about Establishing Emergency Aid and Student Parent Initiatives

Start small, expand later

States have garnered support for emergency aid programs by using pilot programs to assess demand and impact. Many state programs started small and expanded over time in funding, coverage, and capacity. For North Carolina, WIOA funding helped kickstart the Finish Line Grant, which allowed the state to collect more data on need and impact and to identify other funding sources. In Texas, the state's efforts began without any direct funding, but rather supporting the existing institutional emergency aid programs through an emergency aid network. Tennessee's COMPLETE grants are funded as a four-year pilot program.

Build emergency aid into existing programs or agendas

States like Washington and Virginia leveraged their existing agendas and priorities to elevate emergency aid and support for student parents. In Washington, emergency aid was a piece of a larger basic needs agenda. A basic needs coalition in the state garnered support for advancing policy and expanding emergency aid. Virginia's population-specific program, CAPS, incorporates emergency aid into their student parent efforts, helping to build support and illustrate the impact of emergency aid.

Improve data for casemaking

As states improve their data collection on student parents, it's important that the data is used for creating good policy and promoting supports for student parents like emergency aid funding. Robust data collection systems are a critical component of delivering successful emergency aid programs at the institution level and can be expanded at the state-level to make the case for statewide efforts. For example, North Carolina started with a smaller program that relied on WIOA funds. Because of impact data, Governor Cooper continued to advocate for increased funding and sought to expand the program to four-year institutions and non-credit workforce programs. Data not only measures impact of emergency aid, but can make the case for expanding emergency aid and other programs that benefit student parents.



CONCLUSION



Amid national enrollment declines and a growing number of students with some college but no credential, states must take action to support student success and completion—especially for nontraditional students who have historically been underserved by a higher education system that was never designed with their needs in mind. Student parents, who face the dual responsibilities of supporting their families while pursuing a degree, should be at the forefront of state priorities when designing emergency aid programs. Prioritizing the needs of student parents creates greater opportunity for a significant portion of the undergraduate population and empowers a resilient group that is eager to succeed and contribute to their futures, their families, and their communities.

The aforementioned states are leading the way in efforts to support student parents, demonstrating the value of this population to state economies and local communities while offering examples of effective policies and practices for others to follow. Elevating and supporting this population requires adequate and tailored student supports that meet the unique needs of student parents. Pairing these supports with emergency aid not only supports students during financial setbacks, but also helps them cross the finish line. Emergency aid and complementary supports for student parents provide a strategy to boost educational attainment, align with workforce needs, and advance a two-generation approach to reducing poverty. **Supporting student parents means more than bolstering families— it is a chance for positive impact on entire communities and states.**

ENDNOTES

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Due to the removal of this report from Ascendium's website, an earlier archived version of this report is linked and may reference outdated data.

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