



**Communities
for Our Colleges**

WORKING CONNECTIONS:

THE NEED TO **EXPAND CHILD CARE
ACCESS** TO UNDOCUMENTED
STUDENTS IN WASHINGTON STATE



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INTRODUCTION

Every day, Bertha gets up early, feeds her four young children, does some homework, goes to class, attends to her kids, does more homework, puts them to bed, and goes to sleep late. As a student parent, she is pursuing a Dietitian Nutritionist degree at Yakima Valley College. She hopes to switch from a lifetime of field labor and packinghouse jobs to work as a nutritionist in a clinic.¹

“I believe obtaining a university degree opens the door for me to find a better job with less effort and better pay,” she said.

But every day, it’s a challenge to juggle taking her classes with caring for her children.

“Sometimes I fall behind in my classes because I don’t have money to pay for my children’s care and to go to college,” she said. “Sometimes it isn’t easy to take the [online] classes because my children are with me, and I cannot concentrate because I have to attend to them.”

If she had access to child care, she said, she’d have more time to do her coursework, and she’d be able to manage her schedule much more easily. “I would go more relaxed taking my classes at college,” she said. “It would help me be a more efficient student.”

Bertha is one of nearly four million U.S. college students—about 22 percent of students—who are raising children while they pursue their studies, according to an analysis by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR).² Student parents have to perform a complex balancing act between work, school, and the kids’ everyday needs. The family’s immediate financial needs often take priority over homework, making it harder for them to stay in college. Students with children are nearly twice as likely to leave college before graduating than students who aren’t parents, according to a 2021 IWPR report.

This report by Communities for Our Colleges (C4C) highlights the impossible choice forced on students like Bertha in Washington State. They are forced to choose between work, caring for children, and educational opportunities.

Communities for Our Colleges (C4C) is a multiracial student-centered coalition in Washington State that works to improve the state’s community colleges by engaging students, faculty, staff, and the community to advocate for improved funding, access, and racial equity. C4C knows that racial and economic equity in higher education is essential to serving underserved communities and will benefit the state as a whole.

1. NOTE: To protect their identities and privacy, this report uses only the first names of the student parents featured. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and are presented here in translation.

2. Cruse, Lindsey Reichlin, et al. “Parents in College By the Numbers.” *IWPR*, 11 Apr. 2019, <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers/>.



Child care is essential for student parents to succeed. When caregiving needs are covered by child care, the parents can reprioritize their schoolwork and more successfully navigate competing demands. Research shows that affordable, accessible child care plays an important role in helping student parents stay in school.³ Finishing a degree or obtaining a credential can pave the way to better-paying jobs, increasing student parents' ability to establish family economic security — as Bertha dreams.

But it's becoming harder and harder for them to afford both child care and tuition. A recent Education Trust report found that a student parent would need to work an average of 52 hours per week to cover both child care and tuition costs at a four-year public university in the U.S.⁴ There is no state, including Washington, in which a student parent can work 10 hours per week at the minimum wage and afford both costs. According to data gathered by the Department of Education in 2021, college costs have risen by 28% at public institutions and 19% at private nonprofit institutions since 2008. These tuition increases over the years, as well as the economic impacts of the pandemic, are compounding financial pressures on student parents.

Child care aid helps sustain access to higher education and long-term economic possibility, which is vital as communities continue to recover from the pandemic—especially communities of color, which have been particularly devastated.⁵ Child care needs have disproportionately disrupted the jobs of parents of color, who are less likely to have access to flexible telework and to afford quality child care.⁶ In addition, across the world, women lost jobs at roughly 1.8 times the rate of men during the pandemic, due in part to increased demands at home.⁷ Access to college education for all is a vital step in working towards closing the gender and racial wealth gaps across the state.

3. Gault, Barbara, and Lindsey Reichlin Cruse. "Access to Child Care Can Improve Student Parent Graduation Rates." *IWPR*, 12 May 2017, <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-general/access-to-child-care-can-improve-student-parent-graduation-rates/>.

4. Williams, Brittani, et al. "For Student Parents, The Biggest Hurdles to A Higher Education Are Costs and Finding Child Care." The Education Trust, <https://edtrust.org/resource/for-student-parents-the-biggest-hurdles-to-a-higher-education-are-costs-and-finding-child-care/>. Accessed 3 Sept. 2022.

5. "Hispanic and Black Americans Have Been Hardest Hit in COVID-19 Wage, Job Losses; Most Do Not Have Rainy Day Funds." *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ft_2020.05.05_covidrace_01.png. Accessed 3 Sept. 2022.

6. Novoa, Cristina. "How Child Care Disruptions Hurt Parents of Color Most." *Center for American Progress*, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/child-care-disruptions-hurt-parents-color/>. Accessed 3 Sept. 2022.

7. Anu Madgavkar, Olivia White, Mekala Krishnan, Deepa Mahajan, and Xavier Azcue. "COVID-19 Impact on Women and Gender Equality." *McKinsey*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-counteracting-the-regressive-effects>. Accessed 3 Sept. 2022.



EXISTING SOLUTIONS: Working Connections Child Care

In recognition of these needs, Washington State has provided the Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) program since 2018. WCCC provides subsidies to help families pay for child care, provided their income is below a certain threshold and the parent is employed or in college. Both full and part-time college students are eligible — if their children are citizens. The state has made progress in improving access to child care through the Fair Start for Kids Act in 2021, expanding eligibility to WCCC by raising the income threshold and lowering the maximum copayment from about \$700/mo to \$115/mo.

It is projected that by the end of this year, WCCC will have served 20,686 individuals in 2022, and will serve 24,999 individuals in 2023.

Not all college students who need the WCCC subsidies can access them. Because of the use of federal funding in the budget, non-citizen children are excluded from the program. Out of the \$698,515,000 total budget for WCCC, the bulk of the funding comes from federal appropriations, totaling \$595,805,000. About half of that—\$283,375,000—comes from a federal child care block grant that restricts eligibility to lawful residents and immigrants whose children are citizens. This currently prevents WCCC from being able to serve undocumented college students with children born outside the US. The Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families estimates that 781 student parents fall into this category.

In the meantime, these students are left with insufficient options and resources. There are two programs available to them: a federal program called Head Start provides childcare to college students whose children are 3-5 years old, even if the children are undocumented, and common public school-based after-school programs are available to undocumented students as well. When Head Start providers also offer childcare for the non-Head Start parts of the day, the ineligibility for non-citizen children may be reasserted. Furthermore, the strict age limitations in Head Start mean that only a sliver of student parents can use it. K-12 childcare programs are not universally available, and they often only run during after-school hours. These programs are not adequate to meet the needs of student parents who cannot use WCCC.



Because of this, some students, like Sandra, have been unable to go to college at all.

Sandra is a single mom with four children who lived in Bellevue until recently. Her dream has been to go to nursing school.

“Since I was a child, I have always dreamed of being a doctor or a nurse,” she said.

But when she went to a local college to ask about taking classes, they told her they didn’t offer afternoon classes and only had morning classes available, which conflicted with her work schedule. Even if she could find a way to make it work, she found out that she would only receive child care assistance for two of her children because they are citizens. “The other two boys do not qualify because they are not citizens.” There was no way she would be able to balance work, classes, and caring for her two boys without extra child care support.

“The lack of child care is what has always stopped me from being a college student,” she said. “If I had the opportunity to go to college, I would.”

Having a college degree would in turn allow her to help her children by providing them a more financially stable base. Even those undocumented college students whose children are citizens, and therefore have legal access to WCCC, are often turned away from the program. This is what happened to Juana.

Juana pursued her associate’s degree in business management from Yakima Valley College. She needed child care for her two girls, but since she was a full-time student, a full-time mom, and a wife at the same time, she couldn’t work to afford it.

The Department of Social & Health Services told her she’d have to work at least twenty hours a week to be eligible for child care. She then went to her college’s work source department and asked if she could qualify for child care without having to work and relinquish her student status. Since she qualified for food stamps, they said she could—but when she started to fill out the application, they asked her about her social security.

“I told them that I didn’t have it because my status didn’t allow it,” she said. “But I told them that my daughters had social security and that they were born in the United States.”

Even though her daughters were citizens, they said they couldn’t help her if she didn’t have good social security herself.

“They turned me away,” she said



This illustrates the need to train counselors at community and technical colleges, and any offices where WCCC eligibility is determined, in order to make the process more navigable, welcoming, and equitable for undocumented people. As a baseline, those who are eligible for WCCC should be able to receive the benefits smoothly.

Meanwhile, there are many who need child care and are still ineligible for WCCC.

Kayla graduated from Yakima Valley College as an Administrative Office Assistant in the summer of 2022 and hopes to become a receptionist to eventually afford to pursue a B.A. in Sociology. After years of working in cherry warehouses, she yearns to work a 9-5, Monday-to-Friday job and provide her family with a higher quality of life.

Though she beat the odds and completed her degree, it was extremely difficult without child care support. Sometimes, her husband helped, but other times, she had to study and care for them at the same time.

“Since my youngest daughter was very small, I had to take my classes and hug her simultaneously,” she said. “It was challenging for me. Because sometimes I had exams and I needed to focus and I couldn’t.”

If she had child care support, she said, things would have been different. “Perhaps I would have enjoyed that stage in my life. I would have had more time to study and offer quality time to my children.”



FUNDING RENEWAL FOR WORKING CONNECTIONS

When state legislators next spring refund WCCC, they can easily do so in a way that eliminates the citizenship requirement for WCCC and makes the program available to all who need it.

Funding for WCCC is not permanent or stable. Much of the appropriation for the program now comes from COVID relief provided by the federal government. These resources are temporary and will begin to run out in the coming biennium.

Aside from the federal child care block grant, another portion of WCCC's federal funding — \$312,430,000 — comes from temporary federal pandemic relief programs: CARES, CRRSA, and ARPA. Funds from ARPA (the American Rescue Plan) must be allocated by December 2024 and expended by December 2026. The other two sources will run out much more quickly. CARES is a one-time appropriation for child care funding, without any set renewal plan. Funding from CRRSA, a general COVID relief fund, is only available to state governments through September 2023.

This means that \$312,430,000 of the biennial appropriation for WCCC — almost half — is destined to disappear because they are temporary or one-time funds. Some of it will vanish as soon as next September.

Thus budget writers will need to find new sources to fund the WCCC. They can do this in a way that also includes non-citizen children by using state money, not just the federal money that excludes non-citizens.

The state has done this before. It provides a separate student aid system for tuition and books for undocumented students. Similarly to the federal child care block grant, the Pell Grant program—which provides tuition assistance to low-income college students—also excludes non-citizens. In this case, Washington State has recognized this barrier and has developed a separate aid system using state funding for those ineligible for Pell Grants. Undocumented students thus have access to tuition aid through the Washington Application for Student Aid (WASFA). If a prospective undocumented student is ineligible for the federal aid system because Pell Grants exclude them, they can use the state system.



The state can extend the kind of access and support it already provides for tuition to the realm of child care, continuing its movement towards equity and economic growth by making sure all college students have access to both vital resources. By strategically organizing the new funding in a way that permits access for non-citizen families, leaning on state funding instead of the federal child care block grant, the state can provide all residents equitable access to child care subsidies and thus to a college education.

The issue of affordable child care is only one of many issues affecting access to college by students from traditionally marginalized communities. Lack of flexible workweek scheduling, difficulty affording non-tuition expenses like laptops and textbooks, and academic under-preparation due to historic segregation and under-resourcing of schools all contribute to uneven access to college and reduce students' ability to complete college. Providing child care aid to all students who need it is just one step in an ongoing process of driving equity, supporting all Washington families, and building a stronger economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Communities for Our Colleges coalition recommends that Washington State's Governor, the Department of Children Youth and Families, and the Legislature work with students and providers to make **the following changes in the Working Connections Child Care program:**

- 1. Find permanent, long-term funding for the WCCC program;**
- 2. Organize funding** for the program in such a way as to permit access to child care subsidies for all undocumented families;
- 3. Provide resources** to the DCYF to redesign the website for the Working Connections Child Care program so that it no longer will appear to deny access to Washington's undocumented families; and
- 4. Provide appropriations** for training and materials that will enable CTC counselors and staff; child care providers; and, state agency personnel to enable them to help undocumented students find child care while they attend college.
- 5. Clarify access to Head Start programs** for non-citizen children in all instances where they would otherwise qualify.



If the state follows these recommendations, it will allow Laura, a student at Yakima Valley College with four young daughters, to finish her Early Child Education certificate in Spanish. Every day, Laura packs in a myriad of activities: sending the oldest daughters to school, doing her homework, taking her classes on Zoom, picking them up from school, and feeding her family. Her goal is to become an Associate of Early Child Education and work in child care herself. She aspires to work in a daycare or preschool, or even open her own.

“I have always worked in the field or packing, and getting my college degree will allow me to work in what I like,” she said.

While classes are online, allowing her the flexibility to take care of her daughters, they will become face-to-face soon, making it much more challenging to balance caretaking and school. Having child care aid would be a “great advantage” for her, she said, allowing her to attend classes smoothly and with peace of mind.

“If I [don’t] have the support of child care and no one to take care of them,” she said, “I would practically drop out of college and forget about my dreams.”



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Isabella Zou is a freelance writer and journalist focusing on issues of race and justice. She has covered anti-racist education for the Texas Tribune, worked as an inequity and disparity reporting intern for the CT Mirror, and reported for the Austin American-Statesman's Westlake Picayune. Her work on community policing in Hartford has been featured by the Solutions Journalism Network. Isabella studies Ethnicity, Race and Migration at Yale University and is a Yale Journalism Scholar, serving as senior editor of the Yale Daily News Magazine.

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ABOUT COMMUNITIES FOR OUR COLLEGES

Communities for Our Colleges (C4C) is a multiracial student-centered coalition in Washington State that works to improve the state's community colleges by engaging students, faculty, staff, and the community to advocate for improved funding, access, and racial equity. Washington's thirty-four community and technical colleges are engines of local economies, individual advancement, and racial justice. Community colleges are essential to successful four-year colleges. They serve communities of color and low-income communities, prepare tomorrow's workers, and offer opportunities to the underserved. Our community colleges benefit all Washingtonians. Full funding for our colleges is an investment in a prosperous and equitable future for the state. C4C is a project of the nonprofit Alliance for Just Society.

ABOUT ALLIANCE FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Alliance for a Just Society (AJS) is a national center for innovative organizing and strategy based in Seattle, Washington. We build powerful organizations and communities. We fight for racial, social, and economic justice.

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