

Despite their Numbers, Student Parents Remain Outliers on College Campuses; Child Care, Food and Housing Insecurity, Homelessness among Major Challenges

March 17, 2021 – Paty was in high school when she had her daughter. Today, she is months away from preparing to defend her doctoral dissertation at Michigan State University, job hunting, and overcome with worry about summer child care options for her fun and sociable 11-year-old who has disabilities. With an open smile that belies the stress she’s holding back, Paty describes the challenges parents seeking college degrees face when they’re away from family and friend networks that can sometimes help.



"Everything is centered around the traditional student...there's not much consideration for the outliers—we're outliers..."

There's a ton of resources if you are a veteran or...for traditional students.

But there's hardly anything out there for adult single parents who are returning to school."

– Adrian

Source: Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse, 2021. Busy with Purpose.



Student parents have constant financial worries as one balances the cost of attaining a post-secondary degree with caring for a family, juggling college loans and high credit card debt, but topping the list of worries for her is lack of available, affordable child care, Paty said. “I’m a person who dreads summer. Every time the school year ends, in my heart I’m thinking, what am I going to do now?”

With more than 4 million adult learners balancing families and college work nationwide, in addition to the millions more completing high school or acquiring another skill, the drive to achieve academic and career success and build a better life for one’s children is filled with serious challenges. Child care, financial struggles, food and housing insecurity, and homelessness are among them, according to a new [national report](#) on adult learners seeking post-secondary advancement. The report was cited in an online program hosted by the [Michigan State University Student Parent Resource Center](#) this month. Paty and several other Mid-Michigan student-parents shared their stories before a [listening panel](#) organized in collaboration with Lansing Community College and the Capital Area College Access Network.

The lived experiences shared by the parent students cast a spotlight on inadequate social systems for parents and non-traditional students at a time when Michigan has set a goal to increase college attainment for its residents in order to meet growing labor demands and increase family economic security. Michigan’s Children was not a sponsor of the event, but our own [policy priorities](#) address the state’s broken child care system, the need to better support adult learners, and a myriad of recommended changes needed to strengthen families and improve outcomes for kids in the state.

Citing research from the report, [“Busy with Purpose: Lessons for Education and Policy Leaders from Returning Student Parents,”](#) researcher Lindsey Reichlin Cruse told an online audience of public officials and community representatives that an estimated 22 percent of Michigan college and university students (117,000) are raising children and the majority of those (56,000) are single mothers. More than half of these parents have children ages 0-5 and most work at least 25 hours per week. For many parents, not working is not an option because of the cost of housing, care and putting food on the table. Many student parents are the focus of equity concerns, including:

- Black and indigenous women in college are particularly likely to be mothers; 40 percent of undergraduate students who are parents are black.
- And 62 percent of student parents in college live below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.
- More than half of student parents in college are first-generation students
- Many report food and housing insecurity, and homelessness.

“Student parents juggle significant demands on their time,” Reichlin Cruse said. “Over half (53 percent) have children under age 6. They need high quality care when in school or work. Affordable, trustworthy care is essential for them in order to enroll or stay in school. Without care, they’re much more likely to drop out.”

Paty has been able to hold on despite the lack of affordable child care through sheer, tireless grit. Her husband, a restaurant cook, is their main income earner. Because of that income, they’re not able to qualify for child care subsidies, but even if they did, she said they would not be able to afford their share of the cost because their daughter’s special needs require costly one-to-one attention. Risks to her daughter’s health precluded her from attending school in-person during this pandemic year. Instead, Paty took charge of her child’s daily class schedule, leaving her stressed and guilty that she wasn’t able to devote enough attention to either her daughter’s or her own course work.

Other parents echoed Paty’s struggles. “My biggest financial concern is how are we going to afford child care and be in school at the same time?” said Izabella, an MSU graduate student of osteopathic medicine who’s had to put her degree on hold. She’s married to a student, pregnant with their first child, and raising her 14-year-old brother. Both are first-generation college students. “I don’t want to choose between a good student and being a good parent.”

Izabella and others said they sometimes feel ostracized on campus. Some professors look disapprovingly if they attend class with a child in tow; and there aren’t enough welcoming spaces on campus for students with children.

Brandy spent 10 years as a medical assistant and is back in school to further her career options and make a better life for her and her two daughters, ages 4 and 8. She said she looked into child care subsidies but decided against the help when she couldn’t find a licensed provider, a requirement of the grant program. Because she’s usually tending to her children while “attending” her online classes, she makes a point to keep her camera turned off.

“The education system is not set up for student parents to succeed,” said Reichlin Cruse, noting just 17 percent of student-parents earn a degree within six years of enrolling. “This matters because we know that earning a BA leads to lower poverty rates for Michigan families. We all stand to gain when they graduate successfully.”

Michigan’s Economy Also Stands to Gain when Student Parents Earn Degrees

Cumulative Tax Revenue Increases and Public Assistance Savings for All Single Mothers Expected to Earn A.A.s or B.A.s



Source: Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019. Investing in Single Mothers' Higher Education in Michigan.

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