

Employment and the Labor Market

Student-Parent Families at the Center

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In addition to family and school responsibilities, student parents are more likely to spend time in paid employment than nonparenting students and are much more likely to work full time (<https://urbn.is/3UDkVcX>). Many of these student parents work jobs that may not offer adequate wages, schedules, or benefits. Ensuring student parents can find high-quality jobs with supportive employers can not only help parenting workers return to school but also excel while there (<https://urbn.is/3T5TkPP>).

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY ISSUES FACING STUDENT PARENTS

Student parents are more likely to be women and people of color, populations that experience systematic wage gaps. And lack of paid or guaranteed parental leave makes it difficult for parenting students to balance caregiving, personal care, and career and education goals (<https://urbn.is/3UIrDnL>). On average, women earn 82 cents for every dollar earned by men, with Black women and Latina women earning 62 cents and 54 cents, respectively (<https://urbn.is/3qWf0IA>). Although antidiscrimination laws are in place to eliminate these gaps, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, unequal treatment in the workplace continues to persist.

Complicating matters, the federal government does not guarantee any paid parental leave, and only nine states and the District of Columbia require some amount (<https://urbn.is/3DFwv0Q>). Less than a quarter of civilian workers have access to paid family leave, though 9 in 10 have access to unpaid family leave (<https://urbn.is/3DFwzO8>). Low-wage workers and part-time workers are less likely to have both paid and unpaid family leave. The Family and Medical Leave Act requires 12 weeks of unpaid leave, but it does not apply to small employers, new employees, or people who are not immediate family by blood or marriage (<https://urbn.is/3Uod6HR>).

KEY COMPONENTS OF JOB QUALITY

Without support from their employers, student parents are often put in the difficult position of choosing between their education and family. Below, we have highlighted some key components of high-quality jobs that student parents need.

- **Wages.** From 1979 to 2018, real wages (adjusted for inflation) have increased less than 2 percent for the lowest paid workers, and the federal minimum wage has not increased since 2009, despite continued inflation (<https://urbn.is/3RVWrcW>). Policies around minimum and living wage could better support families, especially Black and Latinx families (<https://urbn.is/3UsNh9q>). Additionally, many workers are paid less than minimum wage or are not subject to minimum wage laws (<https://urbn.is/3qRfFoj>, <https://urbn.is/3DH9St1>).
- **Unpaid internships.** Many internships are required by educational programs or expected of job applicants, which can lead some students to take on additional debt to participate in unpaid internships (<https://urbn.is/3Ls7F6J>). Those who cannot afford to take unpaid internships may decline them, which can limit career-building opportunities. Unpaid internships that count for college credit may mean that students have to pay tuition for the credit *and* work for free.
- **Remote work policies.** Remote work policies have expanded since the COVID-19 pandemic, and while they may allow some parents to watch children and work from home, they do not fully address the needs of student parents, especially as more companies return to in-person arrangements (<https://urbn.is/3Sne4Cu>).

- **Consistent scheduling.** Parenting students face added challenges when it comes to managing schedules, with both predictable and flexible work hours needed to accommodate child care and schooling.
- **Educational assistance programs.** Employers can support their employees by offering programs to support degrees and skill-building. The first \$5,250 of employer education assistance can typically be excluded from a worker's taxable income (<https://urbn.is/3UrxyHW>). Direct tuition payments help employees more than after-the-fact reimbursement as workers do not have to front the full cost. Employers can also cover education costs, like books and supplies.
- **Employment benefits.** Health insurance, retirement accounts, disability insurance and leave, life insurance, and transportation benefits are also important elements of job quality. For parents, the quality of health care packages, coverage of dependents, and policies on pregnancy and parental leave may be especially relevant.

INTERSECTION WITH OTHER POLICY SYSTEMS

For many parenting students, finding employment is not as simple as applying for an open position. Here we detail some considerations student parents must keep in mind when seeking employment:

- Eligibility for social safety net benefits frequently includes employment, and outside of certain exceptions, is a prerequisite for receiving SNAP and TANF. But some student parents may be wary of receiving additional income that could leave them ineligible, often referred to as the cliff effect (<https://urbn.is/3thWGph>).
- Employers often provide benefits such as health care, tuition support, and training to high-wage or full-time employees, but many student parents are low-wage or part-time employees who do not receive these benefits and therefore go without or rely on public systems.
- Education and employer partnerships can help students gain work experience, provide mentorship, and ease the transition to career pathways (<https://urbn.is/3jLSk1c>).
- The flexibility of academic schedules and availability of child care play a role in student parents' participation in the labor market. Employers are eligible for tax credits for providing child care benefits (<https://urbn.is/3S1k2Jm>).

EMPLOYER AND PUBLIC POLICY OPTIONS TO BENEFIT STUDENTPARENTS

To ensure that student parents can find high-quality jobs and are supported in both their work and education, policymakers and colleges can consider enacting the following:

- Employers could offer paid internships or apprenticeships, and states or the federal government could require job-based training be paid. Colleges can also provide full scholarships or living-wage stipends to students who take on unpaid work experience. Licensing bodies could reevaluate the practice of not paying for required on-the-job training in some sectors, such as clinical rotations in nursing (<https://urbn.is/3S1KZfN>).
- Employers can expand benefits packages to employees, including those who work part time, and increase benefits to support students, such as educational assistance and family leave. Federal and state governments can support these efforts through tax incentives and labor protections.
- Employers can continue flexible remote work policies and allow flexible work schedules where possible.
- Employers can address inequitable treatment in the workplace by engaging equity advisors, audit existing company practices, and promote policies that encourage workplace equity, such as expanding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; conducting pay and promotion equity analyses; working to remove bias during hiring and within the workplace; and promoting an inclusive workplace culture.
- Federal and state governments can guarantee paid family leave either by mandating employers to provide it to all workers or by creating a government-operated paid family leave program.
- Federal and state governments can raise and index the minimum wage to a local living wage and eliminate current minimum wage exemptions for certain classifications of workers—including full-time students.