

College and Career Access for Young Parents

*Insights from Literature, Lived Experience Experts, and
College and Career Professionals*

Kate Westaby
Urban Institute

Rachel Johnson
Ubuntu Research and Evaluation

Kimberly Salazar
Urban Institute

Stephanie Gramann
Madison Metropolitan School District

Jessie Loeb
Madison Metropolitan School District

M. Muska Nataliansyah
Medical College of Wisconsin



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Young Parent Collective is dedicated to empowering and supporting young parents by breaking down barriers to education, health, and well-being and building a community where young parents can thrive. It cultivates a supportive and inclusive network of young parents and allies; provides paid skill-building opportunities and research and advocacy training for young parents; develops leadership skills; and helps navigate challenges related to schooling, health care, and social capital.

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Young Parent Advocates

Brandon Martinez
Guadalupe Cosme

Mary Lott
Mia Maia

Advisory Board Members

Ann Westrich, Wisconsin Technical College System

Annie Johnston, Madison Metropolitan School District

Ashley Hoeft, Common Wealth Development

Brian McMahon, Operation Fresh Start

Janella Benson, Wayne State University

Emily Gutierrez, Urban Institute

Kaitlyn Sargent, Dane County Dept of Human Services

Karishma Furtado, Urban Institute

Karla Ausderau, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Kelly Ruppel, Fund for Wisconsin Scholars

Kimberly Robertson, Public Health Madison & Dane County

Kristine Omen-Kaul, Public Health Madison & Dane County

Margaret Filkins, Madison Metropolitan School District

Marianne Hirsch, Wisconsin Department of Children & Families

Marianne Matt, Madison Metropolitan School District

Shayne Spaulding, Urban Institute

Stephanie Glynn, Wisconsin Technical College System

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Executive Summary

Young parents—those who had their first child before age 25—face significant and preventable barriers to completing high school, enrolling in postsecondary education, and accessing family-sustaining careers. Young parents are more likely to be disconnected from both school and work (approximately 30 percent compared to only 11 percent of their peers). Also, only 1 out of 10 young parents is enrolled in college a few years after high school compared to almost 1 out of 2 of their peers (Westaby 2025). Although young parents demonstrate strong motivation to pursue postsecondary education and stable employment, systemic barriers often limit their opportunities.

This report aims to identify how K–12 institutions can address these gaps by synthesizing insights from three data sources: a literature scan of evidence about policies, programs, and practices affecting young parent success; an advisory board that includes young parents, school district staff, higher education partners, and workforce leaders; and two focus groups with current high school and early career young parents. From these sources, we synthesized eight promising strategies:

1. **Increase visibility of young parents through data collection.** Develop consistent data-collection mechanisms in K–12 systems to identify pregnant and parenting students to better provide supports and measure outcomes such as persistence and graduation.
2. **Provide career exposure and learning opportunities oriented to young parent experiences.** Ensure pathways incorporate considerations related to parenting responsibilities and family-sustaining wages (e.g., family-friendly scheduling and flexibility).
3. **Address young parents' unique experiences.** Understand, recognize, and respond to stigma, shame, and invisibility to dispel myths about success that influence young parents.
4. **Support young parents individually through advising, mentoring, and case management.** Offer stable, relationship-based navigation and bridging programs across K–12, postsecondary, and workforce transitions that are provided for several years.
5. **Ensure programs and pathways secure basic needs for young parents.** Integrate supports for child care, transportation, housing, mental health, and financial stability to ensure academic and career progress.
6. **Prioritize financial and resource investment for young parents.** Expand funding, reform restrictive program rules, and invest in long-term mentoring and wraparound supports.

7. **Provide opportunities for young parents to advocate for their needs and shape systems.**

Increase access to legal rights information and create leadership roles that allow young parents to influence policy and practice.

8. **Cultivate and sustain collaborations with community and governmental partners.** Strengthen cross-sector coordination among schools, colleges, workforce boards, human services, public health, employers, and community-based organizations.

Taken together, these approaches reflect a shift toward system responsiveness and two-generation opportunity. They center young parents' strengths, goals, and lived realities, offering actionable strategies for K-12 districts and partners to expand equitable pathways to college and family-sustaining careers.

College and Career Access for Young Parents

Young parents—people who had at least one child before age 25—experience barriers to completing postsecondary education and accessing family-sustaining careers. A few years after high school, most young parents (90 percent) are not enrolled in college compared to their non-parenting peers (46 percent) (Westaby 2025). Further, young parents are more likely to be disconnected from the workforce; 30 percent of young parents are not enrolled in college and are either unemployed or out of the labor force, whereas only 11 percent of their peers are in this category (Westaby 2025). This report synthesizes what we learned from a scan of the literature, convenings of an advisory board, and focus groups with young parents to identify strategies that close college and career gaps. We describe eight promising approaches to guide K–12 school districts and partners in strengthening supports to expand access to college and family-sustaining career pathways for young parents.

About the Partnerships for Success Project

The Partnerships for Success Project is a collaboration between the Urban Institute, the Madison Metropolitan School District, the Young Parent Collective, and the Medical College of Wisconsin. Partnerships for Success is a school-based initiative started in January 2025 that is aimed at strengthening supports for student-parents in K–12 settings to improve health, educational, and career pathways. This project responded to data showing that teen parents often face significant barriers to prenatal care, mental health support, academic success, and long-term economic mobility. The original project focused on the health and well-being of young parents, and with support from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, it expanded in fall 2025 to focus on college and career pathways for young parents. The project had three main activities: (1) coalesce an advisory board of young parents, college and workforce experts and partners, and community organizations; (2) conduct a landscape scan of literature related to college and career programming and policy for young parents; and (3) conduct focus groups with current young parents. The aim was to understand effective approaches to better connect young parents to college and career from a K–12 perspective. The long-term goal is to build a scalable model that other school districts can adopt to better serve young parents and improve their educational, career, and health outcomes.

Introduction

Young Parents in College and Careers

Young parents navigate education and workforce systems not designed for the realities of early parenthood. Research shows that when young parents have the space and support to combine work and education, they see increased earnings by age 30 (Sick et al. 2019). Yet, young parents with intersecting disadvantages face compounding barriers to completing high school, accessing postsecondary programs, and securing stable employment (Sick et al. 2018). Notably, even academically strong teen parents face obstacles—reinforcing that their challenges are structural, not individual.

Despite a growing evidence-base, aligned supports across K–12, postsecondary, and workforce systems remains fragmented and disconnected from young parents' lived realities. Supports for student-parents in higher education are expanding, but rarely address the specific circumstances of younger student-parents. K–12 college and career readiness efforts, meanwhile, routinely overlook the child care needs, schedule constraints, stigma, and basic needs challenges that shape young parents' daily lives.

This project responds directly to those gaps. Drawing on a national landscape scan, an advisory board of young parents and practitioners, and focus groups with current high school and early-career young parents, it examines not only postsecondary access but workforce preparation, employment pathways, and the institutional supports young parents need to navigate both. The recommendations that follow offer concrete, actionable strategies that K–12 districts and partners can adopt to ensure young parents are recognized, supported, and equipped to pursue long-term, family-sustaining goals.

About Young Parents

Hundreds of thousands of young people become parents each year (Osterman et al. 2025). Yet they are often an overlooked population in education and workforce systems. Many young parents are actively pursuing educational and career pathways while raising children, motivated by a strong desire to create stability and opportunity for their families. Yet young parents' experiences are primarily absent from policy conversations about educational access, economic mobility, and student success.

The absence of a focus on young parents exists within a broader policy context shaped by decades of disinvestment in public supports for families with low incomes. Policy changes following the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act¹ shifted public narratives and policy

approaches toward emphasizing individual responsibility while reducing access to comprehensive supports. These shifts contributed to systems that often expect young parents to succeed while providing limited supports—particularly in areas such as child care, housing stability, and financial assistance.

Public discourse also has long been shaped by deficit-oriented or punitive narratives about young parenthood (Westaby 2025). Young parents—especially young mothers—are frequently framed as cautionary examples rather than as students, workers, and community members with aspirations and potential. These narratives can influence how institutions respond to young parents, sometimes resulting in policies or practices that inadvertently create barriers to continuing education or accessing supports.

To further detail characteristics of young parents, they are disproportionately represented among populations already experiencing structural inequities. Many young parents come from households with low incomes, and racial and ethnic disparities in educational opportunity, economic mobility, and health outcomes shape their experiences. These overlapping inequities mean that barriers faced by young parents often reflect broader structural challenges—including access to affordable child care, stable housing, and educational pathways that accommodate caregiving responsibilities.

Despite barriers, young parents consistently demonstrate resilience and commitment to their goals. In focus groups conducted for this study, young parents described strong motivations to pursue education and career pathways as a way to build better futures for their children. Participants spoke about wanting to “do more” for their families and about the importance of being able to continue their education while parenting. At the same time, they emphasized that motivation alone is not enough; meaningful support from institutions and systems is critical to making these pathways possible.

Methods

Landscape Scan Methods

The scan focused on US-based sources published between 2000 and 2025 that examined teenage pregnant and parenting students, undergraduate student-parents, young parents (typically ages 16–24), or closely related populations such as opportunity youth—young people disconnected from education and work. Sources were included if they addressed educational access, postsecondary persistence, workforce preparation, employment outcomes, or structural supports such as child care,

housing, transportation, advising, or data systems. Materials focused solely on pregnancy prevention or unrelated populations were excluded. A structured search strategy was conducted using Google Scholar and targeted searches of policy and advocacy organizations. Search terms combined population identifiers (e.g., “young parents,” “student parents,” “teen parents”) with system-level and outcome terms (e.g., “high school,” “college,” “workforce development,” “employment”). Citation chaining was used to identify additional relevant sources.

This landscape scan synthesized research, policy analyses, and program reports to identify strategies that support young parents’ access to college and family-sustaining career pathways. A narrative landscape approach was selected because the topic spans multiple systems (K–12, postsecondary, and workforce) and includes diverse evidence types, including peer-reviewed studies, policy briefs, and program evaluations. These varied methodological sources cover a wide range of populations: pregnant and parenting high school students; young parents ages 16–24 enrolled in community colleges and four-year institutions; opportunity youth; Black, Latina, Indigenous, and low-income young mothers; and, in smaller numbers, young fathers and co-parents. Geographically, the articles span Wisconsin and the Midwest; California; Washington State; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County; and national datasets and programs.

Sources were screened in two stages (title and abstract, then full text) and classified by system focus and methodological type. Findings were synthesized using a pathways framework organized around three domains: (1) K–12 supports and readiness, (2) postsecondary persistence and institutional infrastructure, and (3) workforce preparation and employment pathways. In total, we identified 104 unique sources, including 41 published articles and reports and 63 programs or organizations. Articles were organized by primary system focus — K–12 (17 articles), college (15 articles), and workforce (9 articles) — with some articles spanning more than one domain.

Advisory Board Methods

We convened an advisory board consisting of experts, including people with lived experience as young parents, college access and persistence experts, career access experts, school district members, collaborating partners, and community organizations. These experts worked at various K–12 and college institutions; research institutes and universities; nonprofit organizations; and public health, human health, and children and family services organizations.

We held two advisory board meetings in fall 2025. Each meeting was two hours long and included a review of the project and accomplishments to date. We had breakout room discussions that were

facilitated by our team, which incorporated a Zoom whiteboard function to capture notes to which all advisory board members could contribute. The advisory board offered a wealth of expertise on a range of topics and considerations for supporting young parents and their families. The most relevant feedback and results of these meetings are incorporated in the sections below.

Focus Group Methods

We conducted two focus groups with eight young parents who were currently in high school and six young parents who had been out of high school for at least a couple of years. We recruited participants from a local school district for the first focus group, which asked about future plans for work and college. For the group of young parents who had been out of high school for at least a couple of years, we recruited from the Young Parent Collective network. Each focus group was between 60 and 90 minutes long, and each participant received a \$50 gift card for participating. One participant provided feedback via text after they were unable to attend. The high school focus group was conducted in person and online via Zoom. The alumni focus group was held on Zoom. We transcribed focus group recordings and analyzed transcripts for themes, including the demonstrative quotes throughout this report.

Findings: Strategies to Improve College and Career Access

The recommendations in this section were developed by synthesizing insights across the landscape scan, advisory board discussions, and focus groups with young parents. We began with themes identified in the literature and then refined and expanded them using practitioner and lived-experience perspectives. Despite methodological variety, the evidence converges on a consistent central finding: young parents' educational and career trajectories are shaped less by individual factors and more by modifiable features of the systems they navigate. Across K–12, college, and workforce settings, the most common themes and recommended areas for action are summarized in table 1.

TABLE 1

Recommended Activities for K–12 Institutions to Support Young Parents in College and Career Success

Recommended K–12 Activities for Young Parent College and Career Success

1. Increase visibility of young parents through data collection.
2. Provide career exposure and learning opportunities oriented to young parents' experiences.
3. Address young parents' unique experiences.
4. Support young parents individually through advising, mentoring, and case management.
5. Ensure programs and pathways secure basic needs for young parents.
6. Prioritize financial and resource investment for young parents.
7. Provide opportunities for young parents to advocate for their needs and shape systems.
8. Cultivate and sustain collaborations with community and governmental partners.

Source: Authors' analysis.

Below, we detail each of the eight approaches, including examples as needed.

1. Increase visibility of young parents through data collection.

While there are some state-level legislative and technical assistance efforts designed to increase student-parent data collection in college, we found no legislative efforts and few institutions collecting these data in K–12. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2023, there were 140,977 live births to mothers ages 15–19 (Osterman et al. 2025). This statistic accounts for only one year of births, so the number of young mothers and fathers is much larger. This gap in identification and data collection within schools at the K–12 level may contribute to young parents' feeling that their needs are not recognized within school systems. In our focus groups, some participants described experiencing school environments in which they did not feel noticed or supported. It is important for districts to take teen and young parent experiences into account to meet their educational goals related to graduation, college, and career success.

In the literature scan, we found that systematic mechanisms are absent in K–12 institutions to identify pregnant and parenting students and that young parents struggle with feeling invisible. Many districts rely on a student's disclosure to a single staff member or ad hoc communication between teachers and counselors. This means that pregnant and parenting students often navigate fragmented systems of support that depend heavily on whether an individual staff member has necessary training, whether that person can connect a student to resources, and whether the district has an established approach to support young parents.

Our literature review identified limited published evidence about the extent to which schools collect these data. For example, a California review found that although some districts tracked information about pregnant and parenting students, schools were not required to do so consistently, making the population and its needs less visible in district data (American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California 2015). The review also found that districts often did not capture whether these students transferred to alternative schools, whether they dropped out, and the reasons for those transitions.

This lack of data about pregnant and parenting teen students leads to inconsistent accommodations. Without formal identification, pregnant or parenting teen students miss out on case management, mentoring, and external resources (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families teen-parent requirements; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; Early Head Start). Further, without this visibility, pregnant or parenting students can be unaware of required accommodations they have access to under Title IX,² such as excused absences, the ability to make up missed work, and lactation space access (National Women’s Law Center 2021). In the context of high dropout rates for teen parents (42 percent) (Westaby 2025), access to these resources could improve long-term educational and career pathways.

This absence of data not only limits access to the services that young parents need but also diminishes opportunities for schools to achieve their goals. Many schools aim for high rates of graduation and postgraduation college enrollment. Yet when teen parents perceive that the school environment, staff, or peers are unwelcoming or judgmental, or that the resources they need to graduate do not readily exist (e.g., child care, transportation), they are more likely to drop out, thwarting the long-term successes a district is aiming to achieve. We found that a reactive approach to supporting young parents also places schools, whose resources are often constrained, in a position to fail at meeting student-parents’ needs. As a result, schools are expected to respond to complex and interconnected young parents’ needs without strong, well-resourced approaches to do so effectively. Tracking young parents is part of improving visibility so schools note this population and create and systematically implement these strong, well-resourced approaches.

At a minimum, it is important for K–12 institutions to build stronger data-collection efforts. Ideally, though, these institutions also would explore cross-sector data integration to better understand health or educational outcomes and to guide cross-sector partnerships to collaborate on holistic approaches to supporting young parents. For example, schools could partner with public health datasets or electronic health care record companies to understand local outcomes or to collect or merge datasets, linking

educational and health outcomes. Further, longitudinal tracking is desirable as capturing pathways over time provides better insight into postsecondary and career outcomes.

In our focus groups with young parents, we did not ask directly about data as visibility. However, three young mom participants described feeling their high school did not care about their outcomes. One current teen mom said the following:

“When I got pregnant [at my comprehensive high school], it wasn't helpful at all. They didn't care if you go to school or not.”

—Maria, a young mom in high school who left school but had returned

Other young parents described that they felt most visible in high schools where staff noted their identity, cared if they attended school, and provided resources needed to succeed. This visibility occurred most in alternative school parenting programs and did not occur in general high schools. These experiences underscore the need to improve visibility beyond data collection and ensure that any data-collection efforts are tied to increased access to resources and support. Increased attention, research, and data systems about pregnant and parenting teens ensure that this overlooked population of students can be more visible and subsequently better supported in school.

There are few models that offer examples of systematic identification through data collection for young parents in K–12. However, the path to better tracking is an important opportunity to meet educational and health outcomes for this population and their families. For example, school districts could use student services, health intake forms, or annual needs assessments to identify parenting status. State departments of education could embed data-collection processes in requests to their school districts. Further, the tracking of these data demonstrates that this population is important and worthy of investment. Box 1 further details reflection questions for K-12 institutions.

BOX 1

Questions for K–12 Institutions to Consider in Improving Visibility Through Data

- What processes can institutions use to identify pregnant and parenting students, and how can those data be documented in existing systems?
- What processes could be implemented to ensure data collection leads to improved resource use by the district's teen parents?
- How can data visibility be secured to ensure that vulnerable populations of young parents are not harmed and their information remains protected?

- How can data on pregnant and parenting teen student-parents support their transition to college?
- What information could K–12 institutions share, where appropriate, to support smoother transitions for young parents into postsecondary education or training?
- What minimal and feasible data elements could K–12 institutions collect to better understand young parents’ school engagement, support needs, and transitions after high school? How often should institutions collect data on young parents to track their education and employment pathways?
- What partnerships could help schools better understand young parents’ outcomes over time while protecting student privacy? What safeguards are needed to ensure that collecting and sharing data do not harm young parents or expose sensitive information?

K–12 data collection could rely on the example of colleges and universities in recent years. While there is no national mechanism to identify or track young parents at colleges and universities, some states (e.g., Oregon, California, Illinois, Texas) have implemented policies to require colleges to track parenting-status questions. Colleges have implemented tracking via enrollment, class registration, and financial aid forms, created student-parent dashboards, and prioritized student-parents for institutional supports (e.g., basic needs centers) (Sick and Anderson 2025). Colleges that have implemented parenting-status identification have the ability to improve internal coordination across departments and secure external funding to offer more support to student-parents. This can lead to increased wraparound services for student-parents and enable colleges with additional resources for child care planning or other basic needs to help student-parents persist in college.

With data identifying parenting students, organizations can increase the identification of resource needs that support persistence and graduation for young parents (Goodman et al. 2023). Beyond the existence of data to track K–12 outcomes, it would be powerful to track career outcomes for this population. Since parents are more likely to enter college and leave without degrees (Dundar 2025; Westaby 2025), they are more likely to be stuck in low-wage jobs without promotional or increased wage opportunities. As a result, stronger identification of young parents and longitudinal tracking can help K–12 systems meet persistence and graduation goals and contribute to educational and career success for young parents.

2. Provide career exposure and learning opportunities oriented to young parents' experiences.

Strategies for career exposure and learning for high school students are established in the literature (Amin et al. 2020; Coffin et al. 2025). Career pathways share a common framework focusing on five similar key activities:

- postsecondary planning and transition support
- career awareness and exploration
- work-based learning
- sector-based training
- job readiness and soft skills training

These typical pathway opportunities expose middle and high school students to different sectors and occupations through guest speakers, employer visits, and career fairs. However, for young parents, typical pathways and approaches often need to be adapted. Being a parent changes the feasibility of pathways and young parents' comfort with these options; one young parent in a focus group expanded on this phenomenon:

“Before I got pregnant, I would say that my career goals were more focused and motivated by my passions and really nothing else. I wasn’t concerned about pay. I wasn’t concerned about hours. I wasn’t concerned about flexibility. It was more just, ‘What do I want to do?’ And then having spontaneity and flexibility and the unknown was exciting to me, and that drove what I wanted to do. ... But once you get pregnant and have a kid and become a parent, I feel like it does change. ... The pay was the biggest thing that changed when I thought about jobs once I got pregnant, which is making sure that I could actually support my child, support myself. I needed a flexible job, a flexible employer—that was a nonnegotiable—and I was willing to sacrifice on things that I was more passionate about. It caused me a lot of anxiety because factors like pay and stuff, they were never the most important thing, but all of a sudden they were.”

—Alma, young mom focus group participant

Alma's quote illustrates that becoming a parent can change one's priorities. Accordingly, all career pathways should be offered with additional information that young parents can use to understand the likelihood that a career will align with their goals and needs. Career pathways should be assessed for fit with young parents' realities, including schedule flexibility, expected work hours, likely wages, and how feasible the pathway is alongside the child care arrangements a parent is likely to rely on. And young parents should not be discouraged from considering pathways they want to explore but instead should be supported in brainstorming solutions to challenging pathways (e.g., discussing the likelihood of 12-hour shifts and their impact on child care). Table 2 provides further details about common career pathways and learning options and how they might need to be adapted to better fit young parents.

TABLE 2

Career Pathway Opportunities and Suggested Adaptations for Young Parents

Strategy	Description and Considerations	Adaptations for Young Parents
Postsecondary planning and transition support	Postsecondary planning supports help students learn about education and training options after high school, including two-year and four-year colleges, certificate programs, and other structured training opportunities. The following are helpful supports for young parents and others: - coverage of costs for and coordination of college entrance exams - assistance with filling out the FAFSA application and other financial grants - dual enrollment - credential stacking - bridge-to-college programs Note that it seems beneficial to pair these with intensive coaching and case management.	Young parents are considered independent on the FAFSA application, meaning they are likely to have tuition covered at many public institutions. Further, their high financial need may make them strong candidates for the larger financial aid awards at some highly selective institutions. However, young parents may select a college based on factors that other students do not have to consider, such as availability of child care on campus, family housing, or proximity to their support network.
Career awareness and exploration	Career exploration increases students' knowledge about career pathways and often includes the following: - job shadowing - guest speakers - interests and skills inventories - career fairs - informational interviewing	Many young parents have limited time for out-of-school activities like job shadowing; thus, these could be more accessible if paired with child care. Interest and skill inventories do not consider teen parent status or responsibilities.
Career and technical education training	K–12 schools often offer career and technical education coursework that aligns with workforce credentials and often includes careers such as the following: - skilled trades (e.g., carpentry, welding) - culinary arts - graphic design - health care (e.g., certified nursing assistant)	Career and technical education can offer important early exposure to career fields and credentials. If young parents do not have child care that allows them to participate in school, they may miss out. Also, institutions should consider whether related coursework, clinical requirements, or transition steps after high school would be feasible alongside caregiving responsibilities and available supports.

Strategy	Description and Considerations	Adaptations for Young Parents
Work-based learning (WBL)	WBL opportunities provide students with hands-on exposure to the workforce and often employer connections. WBL often includes the following: ▪ internships ▪ apprenticeships ▪ summer employment	Some WBL opportunities encourage students to pursue lower-wage pathways that sometimes have limited wraparound support. Also, WBL often has limited wraparound supports and requires schedule flexibility that can be hard for parents. Unpaid internships might be particularly unfeasible for young parents whose children rely on them to meet basic needs.

Source: Career pathways opportunities and adaptations reflect findings from the landscape scan, advisory board, and focus group results.

The opportunities displayed in table 2 can be useful for young parents, but they often need to be adapted to fit parenting responsibilities and family needs. Importantly, navigators like counselors and coaches should take care to avoid discounting parents from certain pathways (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) but rather ensure they feel informed about their pathway and confident they can find strategies to circumvent any barriers. Discussing potential barriers with a young parent could identify how to navigate around roadblocks. Additional recommendations from the literature and advisory board include the following:

- Avoid tracking parents into low-wage, unstable jobs with little opportunity for advancement or for family-sustaining wages (providing an array of options is particularly important for young parents who are often tracked into stereotypical occupations, e.g., Latina moms into early childhood education, fathers to quick-to-workforce tracks despite interest in advanced education).
- Identify child care, transportation, flexible scheduling, and financial supports as part of in-school programming and any resulting career or employment outcomes (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2025).
- Consider flexible scheduling, parenting stipends, transportation assistance, and integration with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families teen-parent requirements.
- Consider that predictability of hours, stability of pay, and benefits can be as vital as the wage itself.
- Help young parents learn more about expected wages, hours, flexibility, likelihood of openings, and promotional opportunities as they are exploring careers.

Further, the advisory board members suggested coupling these approaches with intensive coaching and case management as well as clear postsecondary bridges. Notably, continued coaching or advising support during the first year of postsecondary enrollment or employment appears critical for persistence.

While this report primarily intends to help K–12 institutions create better pathways for young parents, we would be remiss not to mention the larger federal policy context. Federal workforce policy (e.g., Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) provides funding and eligibility frameworks within which local workforce systems operate. These workforce systems offer a collaborative space with which to partner and seek out opportunities that could be advantageous for young parents. However, federal change is needed to better support young parents because child care support is inconsistent

across states and local workforce boards, and youth eligibility definitions do not always explicitly account for parenting status. K–12 institutions can suggest that workforce partners consider how to offer child care.

In addition to helping young parents explore sectors and credentials, K–12 and college institutions can help guide young parents into career pathways that can serve them by identifying employers who are supportive of parental responsibilities. Directing young parents toward employers who offer flexible hours and robust sick and vacation time can expand their opportunities to access and persist in careers.

Finally, focus group participants talked about a wide variety of interests and an excitement for exploring careers. Their goals and focus may shift over time, but their children were often at the center of their plans:

“I want to work with kids or make a difference, help people. That’s kind of like my main goal for my career. ... For me, the world my son grows up in, I don’t want it to be some scary place.”

—Hanna, mom currently in high school

Hanna’s quote demonstrates the importance young parents’ children have in their lives and why career and college pathways must account for the fact that many young parents make decisions with both their own futures and their children’s well-being in mind.

3. Address young parents’ unique experiences.

While many high schools offer a range of resources to support career and college pathways, some may not consider young parents’ experiences. Across the landscape scan, advisory board discussions, and focus groups, several themes emerged about how young parents uniquely experience college and career pathways:

- how stigma and shame may influence punishing or disinvesting behaviors
- the invisibility of being a parent and its related responsibilities in these pathways
- how young parents might respond given stigma and invisibility

Young parents report being shamed and having negative interactions in and outside of K–12 schools. Previous research documents teachers’ judgmentally asking pregnant teens their age, medical

staff chastising a young mother about her daughter even though she had scheduled an appointment for an unrelated reason, and grocery store staff reacting judgmentally after asking and learning that the little girl in line with a young person is their daughter and not their little sister (Westaby 2025). Few young parents escape these confrontational experiences and judgments. It is important for high school staff to understand these experiences because their own bias might affect the support they provide and create further marginalizing experiences for young parents.

Stereotypes and biased assumptions not only psychologically affect young parents but also influence their families and friends and can affect how counselors and other advisors guide young parents in changing directions (i.e., away from advanced or career pathways in which they are interested). Some high school staff exclude young parents because they assume young parents would not be able to pursue college or careers due to parental responsibilities or lack of support at home. Camila's and Amara's quotes below, from a focus group, illuminate the existence of discouraging beliefs among family members or internalized by young parents; both describe the solution as not tracking young parents away from advanced pathways but encouraging them and rejecting the other negative narratives.

“Helping the young parents envision themselves in college to increase their beliefs and abilities, because we can lose a lot of hope and passion for things we really originally wanted to do before we had any kids or were pregnant. ... It’s just tough in general. ... You start to feel like you’re going to be alone, you don’t have support, especially if your family and home is fucking broken and can’t help you with anything.”

—Amara, a young mom enrolled in high school

“Especially if you don’t have a supportive family, because they push those agendas on you. In my experience, I definitely have a lot of family members who were teen parents and didn’t graduate or didn’t go further than just being a mom. And because of that, they tend to tell me that I’m not going to make those like goals and put those doubts in your head. So addressing the fact that you could do it is probably really important.”

—Camila, high-school-age young mom

The Young Parent Collective created an assessment that illuminates perceptions of young parents that can help staff with reflection on young parent–related biases. Also, institutions can adopt asset-based frameworks that recognize young parents’ resilience, leadership, and long-term aspirations.

Siena’s quote below illustrates the marginalization that young parents can feel because of the stigma and lack of resources related to their young parent identity. This mother wanted to go to college but described the stigma-related self-doubt that can hold back young parents:

“I think that the biggest hurdle for me was feeling I was reinventing the wheel by going to school with a child. I felt there was no example. There was no one for me to look to. There was no one for me to talk to. Even on the internet, I was scouring forums and discussion threads and social media pages, trying to find examples of people who were doing or had done the kind of thing that I wanted to do, and I just was not finding it. And that was the biggest challenge, the self-doubt of, ‘Is this even the thing? Have I just lost my mind, and I’m going to put myself in a stupid position, because this isn’t feasible?’ And it was. I have a degree, and so I’m glad I didn’t just get lost in self-doubt. But yeah, there is nothing that can prepare you for—the sense of responsibility was one thing—but the feeling that my identity was completely fractured and I didn’t know who I was anymore, or I didn’t know how other people saw me, was not something that I was ready for in becoming a parent. And as much as college is important, because it’s supposed to be about education, it’s also very much a social, communal experience, and when you’re totally shut out from that, it can feel really overwhelming, and that’s a really difficult problem to address ... and there are no clear answers.”

—Siena, young mom focus group participant

This quote explains the marginalizing feeling of being a young parent who is trying to navigate college and career pathways where the young parent’s experience feels invisible. Other parents have described not feeling able to reveal their parenting identity for fear of shame or judgment. Without community or people combating these negative perceptions, young parents can discount themselves given all the negative messaging they are navigating.

Beyond stigma, the second unique young parent experience to address is the invisibility of being a parent and its related responsibilities in these pathways. Parenting while enrolled in postsecondary education, training programs, or early employment settings can feel misaligned with college or employer expectations. Flexible pathways that include wraparound supports are an important

approach that can support parents in accessing and persisting in college and career. Parenting students benefit from flexible learning modalities, targeted advising, and multilayered supports that respond to the complexity of balancing school, work, and caregiving. Online, hybrid, and asynchronous courses significantly increase feasibility for young parents, especially those with infants or unpredictable child care arrangements.

Cultivating social support, belonging, and community is crucial for institutions endeavoring to increase support for young parents. This can take a variety of forms, such as structuring programs to accommodate the complex schedules of young parents. This recognition and belonging are important to increasing belonging in college spaces, which is particularly important to mothers who are re-engaging with college (Cheung et al. 2020). Advisory board members also noted that high schools can do things to be more family-friendly by considering the experiences and interests of young parents and their children, using a two-generation framing.³ A high-school experience would look very different if administrators and teachers were adapting teaching, requirements, and extracurricular opportunities to young parents and their children. Board members also suggested partnering with others to create more innovative supports for young parents, such as parenting and personal development, skill building, child development, and family nutrition in their schools.

High schools should intentionally focus on and support young parents, for example, by cultivating welcoming language and messaging that normalizes college and family-sustaining career pathways for young parents. Schools also should cultivate belonging by creating family-friendly environments, such as designated family spaces, access to child care, and programming that accommodates parenting schedules. This should include building a community so young parents know they are not the only ones navigating these barriers.

4. Support young parents individually through advising, mentoring, and case management.

Across all three of our data sources, we found support for providing young parents with intensive and frequent individual support such as coaching, case management, navigation, advising, and mentoring for an extended period. While the most effective combination of approaches (e.g., coaching, resource navigation) should be identified, as should the context, this type of individualized support was an important concept for young parents' career and college success.

In the literature, we found recommendations for education and career navigators within schools, colleges, and community programs (e.g., Wisconsin Works, Department of Children and Families'

Education Navigators) during young parents' time in K–12. We also found strong support for mentorship programming, peer cohorts, and coaching (Gesner 2008; Sadler 2007; Schumacher 2013).

Advisory board members underscored the importance of institutional coordination and warm handoffs, recommending collaborating systems to support transitions (e.g., high school to college, college to career) so student-parents are supported at the institutional level and are not dependent on individuals. They also recommended personalized career coaching, pairing students with mentors who understand their strengths and family goals.

The advisory board and literature noted that school and personnel stability are important for supporting young parents (Pressfield et al. 2020). Continuity of supportive personnel (e.g., counselors, mentors, teachers) is a critical protective factor for students. When students have stable, caring adult relationships in school, they tend to remain engaged despite substantial life stressors. This consistent and supportive presence for young parents can influence attendance and persistence. In focus groups, our lived experience experts confirmed the importance of knowing that others care. Maria's quote below is an example.

“And when I got pregnant over there [in a comprehensive high school rather than an alternative program], it wasn’t helpful because they didn’t care if you go to school or not, and at [alternative school name], they’re like, ‘Are you okay? Are you coming?’ because that’s how we know we’re important. ... I was supposed to graduate in 2023, and I didn’t know about this resource. I heard about this school that helps pregnant people and people that have kids or whatever, but I didn’t know it was this school. It wasn’t helpful at [comprehensive high school]. It was like so much, and I was just skipping school because I wasn’t even feeling good. And it was just like, I feel like the teachers, they wanted me to graduate, but they didn’t like—how can I say it?—they didn’t help me to try to graduate. Or be like, ‘Hey, you can do this, or you can come this day, and we can talk about how we can help you and everything.’ And I feel like [alternative school name], it helps you a lot.”

—Maria, a young mom in high school who left school but had returned

Advisory board members recommended supporting young parents through transition periods of work, parenting, and school. They shared that transitions to education and learning platforms are likely to continue happening throughout one's early adulthood and that young parents could benefit from a trusted ally or advocate to walk alongside them and make connections throughout those periods. Two

highlighted ideas from the advisory board include bridging programs and individual-level support. One example of a bridging program could include a course that spans high school and college, including young parents in both, and provides information needed to succeed in and access college. Young parents could benefit from programs like Starting Point, a pre-college program at Fox Valley Technical College that provides training, transportation, and support to low-income single mothers.⁴ In addition, incorporating an individual level of support for young parents can help with this transition period. This can include providing additional skills such as executive functioning.

In addition to navigating the transition from high school to college and accessing resources to support enrollment and persistence in these spaces, academic supports for young parents are important to include. Institutions that provide community and academic tutoring support that is frequent, reliable, available at times that are convenient to parents, and family-friendly can help ensure that young parents feel academically prepared for success as well.

The transition from high school to college is challenging—even more so for young parents who are navigating other responsibilities. The importance of first-year supports is underscored to help with this transition period for young parents. This first year can be a vulnerable period given delays in financial aid, child care transitions and gaps, and transportation disruptions. These challenges can derail young parents in their pursuit of higher education without adequate supports. Programs that extend first-year support, mirroring the Back on Track model's third phase (Anderson et al. 2019), show higher persistence for students and can support young parents as well. Back on Track is a program for youth disconnected from education and work, and the program provides coaching through the first year of college or career.

Targeted advising models in college (e.g., Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education, NextUp) and related student-parent resource offices with dedicated advisors can decrease the time and cost of college through improved course sequencing, financial aid navigation, crisis response, and transfer planning for parenting students. These advisors play a critical role in ensuring student-parent success. With specialized advising, students generally tend to report higher levels of connection, reduced stress, and more realistic academic planning. This is crucial for young parents who often feel disconnected, have increased stress, and have difficulty navigating academics within their lives.

5. Ensure programs and pathways secure basic needs for young parents.

For pregnant and parenting teen students, basic needs challenges negatively affect the K–12 schooling experience. The landscape scan highlighted basic needs barriers as central drivers of absenteeism, disengagement, and dropout risk among K–12 parenting students. The most impactful barriers shared by the focus group young parents were child care, transportation, housing, and financial stability. Evidence clearly indicates that basic needs infrastructure is a primary determinant of whether parenting students can remain enrolled and make academic progress in K–12 and college.

“Affordable, safe housing; health care; and transportation—that is key, the health care and then affordable, because if you have a job or not have a job, or if your family’s not making enough, um, and the transportation, yeah, for sure, because the bus—that’s a lot—and then asking like your parents for rides if they have a job. ... Like if they don’t have their own car, that could be a struggle for them.”

—Amara, a young mom enrolled in high school

Child Care

The availability, affordability, and reliability of child care can determine whether young parents attend school consistently. Unreliable child care leads to repeated absences, which can trigger truancy processes if there are no compassionate policies. School-based child care is rarely available and is unevenly funded across schools and districts. When schools do provide child care for young parents, there are often limited spots that can serve only a handful of families. In addition, in some states, young parents cannot receive state subsidies to help pay for child care without their parents’ income being considered, regardless of their involvement.

College campus child care availability is declining despite large student-parent populations across two-year and four-year institutions (Anderson et al. 2024) and documented interest and need (Ryberg et al. 2024). Existing centers frequently have limited infant slots or operate on schedules misaligned with class times, clinical rotations, or evening coursework. Lack of child care is among the most cited reasons for dropping out among parenting students (The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs 2025). One young mom focus group participant who is currently in college mentioned that she had to take her child to class one day. Luckily, that professor was accommodating in that instance, but having drop-in options could have alleviated that stress for her.

Advisory board members recognized the barriers to child care and the lack of finances to address these issues for young parent families. They recommended efforts to create more accessible child care

options for these families as well as financial supports. While there may be local child care options and availability for young parents to choose from, these options are often inaccessible based on young parents' unique needs. Advisory board members called for free or subsidized child care, flexible scheduling, and campus-adjacent options for young parents. These specific solutions recognize and aim to address these needs. Young parents, who are in the early stages of their careers and often are pursuing education to advance themselves, benefit from free and affordable child care options. When young parents are engaging in the workforce and at times have unstable job opportunities or inflexible schedules based on specific positions, child care that offers flexible scheduling rather than traditional scheduling can support these young parents. Child care located on or near campus may help some young parents, especially when it aligns with class schedules, but it may be less useful for those also balancing paid work or other responsibilities. More flexible child care options, therefore, may be needed.

Given that many young parents are interested in child care provider career paths, the child care workforce field could offer financial incentives linked to their workforce positions. This can take different shapes, including improving the wages for those in child care education, providing free tuition for child care providers, and offering child care stipends for parents.

Young parents may be living with their parents, caregivers, or guardians, so it is important to be cautious of program requirements that consider the household composition. For example, when child care subsidies are based on household income and teen parents are not earning money, or enough money, to pay for child care, and their parents earn money but aren't responsible for/willing to pay for child care, their income can limit access to these subsidies.

Transportation

Parenting students frequently need flexible transportation arrangements for themselves and their children. Long or unreliable bus routes, restrictions on transporting infants, and limited access to car seats or gas funds are recurrent themes that highlight the range of transportation barriers that young parents experience that can limit their ability to attend school, college, and work. Further, these transportation gaps often interact with child care schedules, creating cascading barriers. Studies emphasize the importance of proximity to reduce time and transportation barriers. For example, when housing, child care, campus, and work are located near one another, access and support for young parents who need this flexibility are increased.

Housing

Housing is another central barrier for young parents. We heard from focus group young parents that housing instability, in particular, disrupts school attendance and reduces continuity with supportive adults. Older teen parents experience higher rates of temporary housing, couch surfing, or disconnection from family networks. When these basic needs are not met, it is hard to prioritize academics, resulting in an increased risk of dropping out (Kava et al. 2020). Housing instability disrupts not only attendance but also child care planning and academic studies. At the college and university level, family housing options are extremely limited, often with multiyear waitlists that exceed students' enrollment periods. When students have access to stable housing, they have increased academic engagement and a sense of belonging on their campuses.

Financial Resources

Young parents experience higher financial strain and instability than do nonparents due to the costs of rent and utilities, food and diapers, transportation, child care payments, and health care. Many young parents work 20–30 hours per week to provide for these basic needs, which negatively affects their ability to enroll in and persist in college, complete coursework, and finish their degrees. This, in turn, extends their enrollment in college and their ability to graduate and focus on careers and higher earning potentials. Public benefits like child care assistance, food and nutrition programs, and energy assistance can provide some relief by offsetting other costs (Colorado Office of Early Childhood 2020), and refunds from scholarships and financial aid can be additionally helpful.

Mental Health and Insurance Supports

These basic need barriers have negative impacts on young parents' mental health. Compounded with stigma, it can be extremely difficult for young parents to access life-saving mental health services that can offer a space to process these experiences as well as learn coping skills and strategies and other ways they can support their mental health and wellness.

It is important for mental health providers to not only understand these barriers and the impacts of them, but also understand the context of these barriers that have painted young parents as deserving of punishment and unworthy of investment. These narratives shape individuals and institutional supports; therefore, mental health practitioners need to ensure that they are addressing this bias in their practices in order to provide support that affirms young parents.

Braiding and Evaluating Basic Needs Resources

The landscape scan findings emphasized the importance of holistic supports to meet young parents' and their families' needs. Parenting students consistently identify the importance of supports such as meal plans and food security supports; emergency grants; transportation assistance; and access to parenting supplies such as diapers, formula, and wipes.

Some of the landscape scan articles noted that with increased home visitation services for teen parents and young parents, the parents are better positioned to have their needs addressed through case management. While these services have the potential to provide wraparound and holistic services to young parents, it is important to acknowledge the surveillance and harm that some services cause (Holland et al. 2024). For young parents, who are a stigmatized group of parents, home visitation services carried out by workers who view young parents negatively can shape the services they provide. Judgment and increased scrutiny of young parents, rather than care and compassion, can create a dynamic wherein increased home visitation services can lead to breaking up children from their families and criminalizing parents.

Advisory board members proposed ways to understand the impact of basic needs resources through evaluation. Collecting data on which resources are most critical to student-parents' success can support data-driven decisions about which resources to expand and which resources potentially can be reduced. By identifying enabling supports for young parents, these institutions are positioned to make better decisions about how they allocate resources, particularly to support their students. In addition to identifying these specific resources and supports, institutions and programs for young parents can conduct evaluations to capture how well they are meeting young parents' needs across different areas (e.g., child care, mentoring, flexible scheduling).

6. Prioritize financial and resource investment for young parents.

Young parents are a large population, as *each year* there are almost 150,000 teen mothers and over 600,000 mothers ages 20 to 24 giving birth (Osterman et al. 2025). However, career and educational outcomes are stunted with punishing narratives of 'you made your choice, so now you have the consequences' influencing many young parents' experiences. These punishing narratives are operationalized through disinvestment of resources or by providing limited support. Despite this general context, young parents are a worthy population whose outcomes influence the next generation, whom they are already raising. Young parents show strong motivation and commitment to education as a solution to instability (SmithBattle 2007). Despite strong grades for college student-parents, completion rates are lower, primarily due to basic needs instability and caregiving demands rather than

academic ability. Also, their enrollment is often longer than traditional enrollment, extending well beyond age 24.

We identified four themes in the literature and from the advisory board for improving investment. These strategies are detailed in table 3.

TABLE 3
Strategies for Increasing Investment in Young Parents

Strategy	Example
Increase local, organizational, state, and federal funding to support young parents	Assess trend data about funding allocations at the local, state, and federal levels, and identify advocacy approaches for each
Advocate for rule changes in governmental or organizational programs that inhibit young parents' success	Ensure state child care subsidies include education and career training as acceptable activities to receive child care support and subsidies cover four years
Engage families of young parents to support career and college pathways	Email or engage parents of young parents to inform them of college, career, and training options
Invest in mentoring for pregnant and parenting youth	Support young parents through long-term mentorship while they navigate education and career

Source: Authors' analysis.

Funding for programs that support young parents has notably decreased during the past few decades, leading to a pressing need for financial investment. Many programs discovered in the scan were funded temporarily (e.g., through the Pregnancy Assistance Fund) or are operating with limited capacity and resources. For example, from 2013 to 2021, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction received 13 federal grants that it awarded to 37 targeted high schools in several public school districts to carry out the In School Pregnant/Parenting Interventions, Resources and Education (InSPIRE) project.⁵ The goal of InSPIRE was to improve education, economic, health, and social outcomes for school-age parents and their children. Specifically, the program aimed to support teen parents in completing their high school degrees or earning general equivalency diplomas, and most relevant to this brief was the program's goals to increase high school graduation rates and increase enrollment in postsecondary schools for school-age parents. Once InSPIRE ended, there was no prescribed approach to continuing to fund this investment in young parents.

We found evidence to support engaging with families of young parents so they can further support young parents in postsecondary and career planning. One literature source recommended sending letters to parents of young parents, informing the students and families about postsecondary options (DeBaun and Ross 2020). This engagement can provide additional support and motivation from the young parents' closest networks.

The advisory board suggested working with LearnFair in Wisconsin to adjust how it approaches W-2 benefit loss for the parents of young parents. If the young parent does not attend school (e.g., for maternity leave or because they do not have child care), the parent of the young parent can lose their W-2 benefits. Further, some state child care subsidies strictly limit how much time a student can be engaged in education and still receive subsidies. This should at minimum include time for a four-year degree, but knowing that student-parents often need additional time due to part-time statuses, the subsidy should be extended.

Evidence-based and promising practices demonstrate the importance of mentorship for pregnant and parenting youth. There is also recognition that long-term program support for young parents has a greater impact on their academic and career pursuits than does short-term programming. These extended transitional and continuous supports can provide young parents with the resources they need to complete college and explore career pathways.

While this report highlights some strategies for investment in young parents, there are many more approaches that could be implemented. At the root of our findings is the importance of increased investment to support young parents and demonstrate their and their children's worth. Policymakers and institutions can allocate resources to support these efforts that demonstrate greater impacts for young parents and their families.

7. Provide opportunities for young parents to advocate for their needs and shape systems.

Young parents are highly motivated to create stable futures for themselves and their children, often through education and career pathways. However, many face barriers not only to opportunities but also to information about the rights and protections available to them.

“I want to make money. Whether I have a man or not, I want to be able to take care of my kids. You have to have a good-paying job to make it out here and have a nice—own your own house eventually, keep up with paying on your car. I want to get a car right now. That’s what I want. And food is expensive. You need to be able to keep food in your house. I know that’s a struggle for a lot of people, whether you have money or not, whether you have food stamps or not, the pantries, food pantries, all resources you have to rely on. You’ve got to be able to make money and rely on yourself.”

—Amara, a young mom enrolled in high school

Pregnant and parenting students and workers are afforded legal protections and accommodations (e.g., Title IX), but information about these rights is often difficult to access, fragmented, or deprioritized as irrelevant to young parents. K–12 schools and other institutions can play an important role by providing clear, accessible information about rights and offering guidance about how to exercise rights. For example, knowledge of policies such as the Providing Urgent Maternal Protections for Nursing Mothers Act, which requires workplace lactation accommodations, could provide young parents with the knowledge, language, and confidence to request these supports. Further, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2018) created a resource that translates relevant statutes into a short, question-and-answer format that describes services and educational supports available to young parents in school districts. Approaches like this can help demystify policies and make rights more actionable.

At the same time, strengthening young parents' ability to navigate systems should extend beyond individual knowledge and include opportunities for them to shift systems upstream. Advisory board members emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for young parents to share in programs and policies that affect them. Leadership roles, advisory councils, and peer advocacy opportunities can allow young parents to share their experiences and help shape more policies and systems.

Finally, improving access to information can reduce the time spent by young parents navigating many needs. One potential solution is the creation of a centralized resource hub that compiles information about rights, services, and supports in one place. This hub could include resources related to basic needs (housing, child care, transportation, mental health), education pathways, and workplace rights, making it easier for young parents to identify and access the supports available to them.

8. Cultivate and sustain collaborations with community and governmental partners.

The advisory board recommended convening education organizations and collaborations to support the academic persistence of and outcomes for young parents. Increased collaboration across agencies that provide pregnant and parenting youth with support has the potential to create streamlined and comprehensive basic needs access, described above as a significant need. For pathways to the workforce, we heard recommendations for partnerships between schools, employers, workforce boards, public health, and health care. Often, some partnerships exist, but few have focused on how to build pathways for school-age parents.

We also found support for convening across sectors and partners; for example, college, high school, and workforce board staff could review local and current conditions for young parent college success to

learn together through data sharing and co-interpretation, and then collaborate on how to better support teen and young parents. This collaboration encourages idea generation that can help shape which resources and supports are offered in institutions. Further, this collaboration can help foster pathways and pipelines supporting the transition from high school to college that are informed by experts across institutions, are data-driven, and are grounded in teen and young parents' experiences.

Advisory board members recognized the importance of collaboration across institutions that provide basic needs resources to support young parents' holistic needs. They recommended partnerships with community and governmental organizations to ensure young parents have access to basic needs. For example, a partnership with governmental children and family departments could streamline access to child care subsidies for young parents.

Limitations and Future Directions

The landscape scan highlighted several areas where the available literature and programmatic evidence appear limited, suggesting priorities for future research. Often, research sources fail to humanize or center the lived experiences of young parents, describing them in derogatory terms (Westaby 2025). Research that does exist focuses primarily on young mothers, with minimal attention to young fathers, co-parents, or noncustodial parents. Also, there is limited understanding of how young parents' needs differ by race, ethnicity, immigrant status, age, and caregiving structure. Investment in researching the former areas would help understanding of young parent contexts and supports.

In addition to broadening how success is measured, programs for young parents can move beyond traditional notions of success and shift to indicators of success that are based on parents' lived experiences. Narrow metrics of success can make it seem (1) like young parents are failing and (2) that it is not important to measure how they are able to thrive with the lack of necessary supports and resources. One solution is moving from these narrow metrics to more holistic and context-sensitive measures. For example, instead of focusing on young parents' enrollment or retention outcomes, they could center lived realities of young parents and include measures that focus on their persistence in college despite interruptions. Success in various education and career pathway programs can also be redefined by young parents themselves. They can provide self-definitions of success that are based on their own goals and whether they achieved them, instead of focusing on externally imposed standards.

Our advisory board discussed the limits and opportunities of measuring success. This included both expanding and redefining what success means for young parents. The advisory board proposed a

multidimensional framework for measuring success, spanning individual achievement, economic mobility, system responsiveness, and intergenerational outcomes. The advisory board emphasized that success for young parents should be defined by completion of any chosen education or training pathway (degree, certificate, credential) and employment aligned with personal career goals, not simply job placement.

Of the studies included in the landscape scan, very few engaged in rigorous evaluations to assess the effectiveness of student-parent support models (e.g., child care subsidies, advising centers, housing assistance). Experimental or quasi-experimental models could fill in a puzzle piece of interventions that show promise for young student-parents. We found no evidence of return on investment approaches either. Measuring the return on investment in young parent supports (e.g., child care, basic needs) for long-term benefits such as workforce participation and reduced dependency is an important statistic for case making.

Also, evaluations of workforce programs must expand to include young parents as well as track other indicators of success. For instance, many traditional evaluations measure short-term employment placement, but they do not track wage progression, credential stacking, employment stability, and alignment with family-sustaining wages. These key areas can demonstrate which strategies are successful in supporting young parents in accessing and persisting in high-wage career pathways that are aligned with their career interests and goals.

Finally, there is little evidence that connects postsecondary supports and workforce transitions, leaving a blind spot in pathway continuity. As discussed in this report, young parents' transitions from high school to college or the workforce are vulnerable periods that need more support. These gaps in programming and research illuminate the opportunity to examine existing models to bridge college and career and understand what works for young parents.

Note

¹ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act is a 1996 federal law that overhauled the welfare system. It replaced aid programs with time-limited assistance, focusing on work requirements and state-level administration.

² Title IX is a federal law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in education or activity receiving federal financial assistance. It protects students from sexual harassment, assault, and pregnancy discrimination.

³ Two-generation approaches consider the whole family in complex or systemic solutions. See more about two-generation approaches from the Aspen Institute at “The 2Gen Approach,” Ascend at the Aspen Institute, accessed May 29, 2026, <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/2gen-approach>.

⁴ Starting Point: Opening Doors to New Opportunities Through Education,” Women’s Fun Fox Valley Region, accessed May 29, 2026, <https://www.womensfundfvr.org/starting-point-2-0>.

⁵ “InSPIRE,” Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, accessed May 29, 2026, <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/school-age-parent/inspire-grant>.

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About the Authors

Kate Westaby, PhD, is a senior research associate at the Urban Institute and founding director of the Young Parent Collective. She specializes in mixed-methods and community-participatory research, with a focus on young parents in education, health, and economic mobility. Her work centers on college opportunity, well-being, and dignity for young parents and student-parents, with additional expertise in student basic needs and child care in higher education.

Rachel Johnson, PhD, is a strategist at Ubuntu Research and Evaluation. Her work focuses on advancing equity through partnerships with communities, nonprofits, and public systems, with an emphasis on translating research into actionable insights for policy and practice.

Kimberly Salazar is a research associate at the Urban Institute. Her work focuses on education access and equity, including efforts to better understand and address the barriers faced by young parents and students with basic needs insecurity. She contributes to mixed-methods research and policy analysis that inform programs and policies aimed at improving student success and well-being.

Stephanie Gramann, DNP, RN, CPNP, is a pediatric nurse practitioner with the Madison Metropolitan School District. She works at the intersection of health and education to support the well-being of students and families, including young parents. Her work focuses on integrating health services within school systems and advancing holistic supports that help students thrive academically and personally.

Jessie Loeb is a young parent program lead with the Madison Metropolitan School District; in this role, she supports programs and services for young parents and their families. Her work focuses on ensuring students have access to the resources, guidance, and supports needed to continue their education while parenting.

M. Muska Nataliansyah, PhD, MD, MPH, is an assistant professor at the Medical College of Wisconsin and a strategic planning leader for the Center for Advancing Population Science. His work focuses on implementation science and health services research, with an emphasis on improving access to care across clinical and community settings. He specializes in mixed methods, qualitative research, and large database analyses, with additional expertise in community-engaged research and the development of practical, implementation-informed strategies to improve health and well-being.

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