Strategies to Meet the Child Care Needs of Low-Income Parents Seeking Education and Training: Executive Summary

Gina Adams, Teresa Derrick-Mills, and Caroline Heller

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Nationwide, there are low-income parents who need additional education or training to better support their families. However, they can face daunting challenges to achieving this goal. In addition to challenges common among low-wage workers—low education levels, financial pressures, and limited opportunities—low-income parents struggle with child care needs that limit their ability to participate in and complete education and training.

While the child care needs of these families have generally not received widespread public attention or funding, and are not often a priority for either the workforce development or child care systems (Adams, Spaulding, and Heller 2015a), there is a growing interest in strategies that address these needs. Our interviews with individuals and organizations across the country suggest that although significant challenges to addressing this issue exist (Adams, Spaulding, and Heller 2015a), local organizations and agencies are taking steps to overcome these barriers. These organizations come from a diverse group, including workforce development organizations, postsecondary education institutions, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies, child care subsidy agencies, child care resource and referral agencies, and local community organizations. Despite their different approaches, these organizations share a common goal and vision around supporting the child care needs of parents seeking to participate in education and training to improve their skills and mobility through postsecondary education, workforce development programs, TANF work activities, or career pathways programs.

This brief presents findings from a review of 17 programs and initiatives working to meet the child care needs of low-income parents seeking education and training. It highlights common strategies these
organizations have implemented to meet the challenges of serving this population. Our goal is to provide ideas to other organizations and initiatives interested in supporting these families, such as

- colleges and universities interested in boosting completion rates,
- workforce development agencies investigating how to better serve populations with more challenges,
- career pathways initiatives working to support parents over the long term from education and training through employment retention and advancement in the labor market,
- child care organizations seeking to meet the needs of low-income parents, and
- two-generation programs seeking to meet the needs of children and parents simultaneously.

This brief is part of a series from the Urban Institute’s Bridging the Gap project (see box 1 for more information).
BOX 1

Bridging the Gap: The Intersection of Workforce Development and Child Care

With the support of the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Urban Institute is conducting a phased set of studies examining the intersection of child care and workforce development systems, policies, and practices, and the implications of that intersection for low-income, low-skill parents seeking education and training. Our publications and projects focus on four areas and are listed below:

1. Exploring and documenting challenges
   - An overview of the child care and workforce development systems, their intersection, and implications for policy, available in a report (Adams, Spaulding, and Heller 2015a) and policy brief (Adams, Spaulding, and Heller 2015b).
   - An analysis of low-income parents and their participation in education and training efforts (Eyster, Callan, and Adams 2014).
   - An analysis of low-income student parents who are employed (Spaulding, Derrick-Mills, and Callan 2016).

2. Supporting the development of effective policies
   - An overview of Child Care and Development Fund state eligibility policies and services for families in education and training (Adams et al. 2014).
   - An examination of the implications of the reauthorized Child Care and Development Fund for parents seeking education and training (Adams and Heller 2015).
   - An overview of the implications of new provisions in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for families needing child care to participate (Spaulding 2015).
   - An overview of challenges and opportunities around supporting the child care and workforce development needs of TANF families (Hahn et al. 2016).

3. Supporting the development of effective practices

4. Supporting collaboration and dialogue
   - An online discussion among practitioners working to bridge the gap between child care and education and training.\(^a\)

Common Challenges Facing Parents

Our interviews with practitioners revealed several core challenges facing organizations working on behalf of low-income parents. These are highlighted in greater depth in our earlier study (Adams, Spaulding, and Heller 2015a), but include the following:

- **Complex child care needs and schedules.** Parents seeking education and training may require multiple providers to meet their complex child care needs, which include difficulty matching their education and training schedules with the times that child care is available. This can be even more difficult for the many parents who have more than one child and/or work while also enrolled in education and training activities. Transportation is another common barrier for low-wage workers and can be especially complex for parents who have to drop off and pick up their children from child care.

- **Inadequate information about child care options and understanding of what is available.** Parents seeking education and training may not know what child care options are available in their community to meet their complex needs.

- **Unaffordable care and inadequate public funding.** Child care can be expensive and public funding for early childhood programs and child care assistance is insufficient to serve all who are eligible.

- **Inadequate supply of quality care.** Supply of high-quality child care is inadequate overall. Quality child care available during the nontraditional or unpredictable hours that parents in workforce development or education programs may need is especially hard to find. There are also systemic gaps in care for infants and toddlers, children with special needs, school-age children after school hours, and children in some geographic areas (e.g., rural areas, etc.).

- **Policy and systems barriers.** Policies of the child care and workforce development/postsecondary systems are often not designed to effectively meet the child care needs of low-income families, forcing practitioners to design work-arounds and fill in gaps. Conflicting measures of performance may exacerbate these gaps.

Steps to Address Challenges

We conducted phone interviews with staff in 17 programs and initiatives and asked them what strategies they use to meet the child care needs of low-income parents seeking education and training. The strategies they described can be conceptualized as six steps.

**Step 1: Assess Needs and Identify Partners**

- Identify potential partners and develop collaborative relationships.
- Identify shared goals and build trust and communication.
- Assess child care needs, share data, conduct an asset map, and identify barriers.

**Step 2: Structure and Schedule Workforce Development Activities to Facilitate Access to Child Care**
- Consider timing and scheduling of education and training activities to facilitate easier access to child care.
- Create cohorts of students.
- Be strategic in locating child care services in relation to education and training services.

**Step 3: Assess Child Care Needs as Part of Intake and Planning and Provide Ongoing Support**
- Make child care part of intake and screening.
- Consider financing for child care as part of intake.
- Include child care needs as part of the client’s employment and training plan.
- Continue to work with parents to address child care challenges that may arise.

**Step 4: Help Parents Understand and Find Child Care Options in Their Community**
- Help parents get information about child care options and resources and refer parents to providers in the community.
- Provide extra supports around finding and retaining care.

**Step 5: Help Parents Access Child Care Subsidies to Offset the Cost of Care**
- Screen for eligibility and refer families to public child care subsidies and other assistance.
- Help parents navigate the public child care subsidy system.
- Provide subsidies from other sources.
- Advocate for policy changes and adjustments.

**Step 6: Facilitate Access to a Supply of Affordable Care**
- Explore and build upon existing subsidized or publicly funded programs where available.
- Use other strategies to help families access programs, such as providing services directly or partnering with community agencies.
- Explore cooperative approaches.
- Work to address the particular challenges of securing care during nontraditional hours.

The full report (Adams, Derrick-Mills, and Heller 2016) contains information on how sites employed these strategies, as well as profiles of the 17 programs we highlighted in an appendix. Table 1 highlights the information we have on each of these steps for the different programs.

**TABLE 1**

Highlighted Programs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Step 4</th>
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<td>Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative</td>
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<td>Basic Food, Employment, and Training Program</td>
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<td>Project QUEST</td>
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<td>4C for Children</td>
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*Note:* Programs are marked with an “X” if our interviews revealed use of strategies related to the corresponding step. Programs may also be using strategies in steps that are unmarked, but these were not reported to us.

**Bringing It All Together and Making It Work**

Our interviews revealed several insights into how local initiatives make their efforts work despite funding and policy constraints:

- Meeting the child care needs of low-income parents seeking education and training often requires cross-system collaboration, linkage, and communication (Derrick-Mills, Heller, and Adams 2016).
- Flexibility is needed to respond to changing opportunities and constraints.
- Organizations must be creative and multifaceted in identifying funding opportunities. Interviewees identified a range of public funding sources:
  - Funds available to institutions of higher education (e.g., student fees, the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School program, and university donations).
  - Other sources (city/county dollars, the United Way or other local partners, local foundations, private philanthropy, etc.).
  - Shared and blended resources and funds. See Adams, Spaulding, and Heller (2015a) for more information on funding sources.
- Leadership and vision are needed to develop solutions.
- Organizations should use data to document the problem, target resources, and assess program effectiveness.
- Maintaining focus on the success of participants and their children was essential to keeping momentum and supporting partnerships.

While these strategies are not meant to constitute an exhaustive list and generally have not been evaluated, they provide a sample of the activities that are possible through an initial scan of the landscape. A more systematic review and assessment of these strategies is needed.

Conclusion

Our previous work under Bridging the Gap has highlighted the challenges that programs and organizations face in supporting families, whether because of funding inadequacies, policy constraints or barriers, or lack of awareness of the importance of these issues. Although programs and organizations are obviously challenged by a lack of resources, individuals and organizations working to support low-income parents have developed a range of innovative approaches.

The strategies highlighted in this paper illustrate the barriers and challenges that impede efforts to serve parents effectively, but they also demonstrate the possibilities for designing innovative solutions. The efforts these programs have made to work around barriers and redesign their services when funds dry up are significant. For more of these programs to flourish and help families succeed, steps must be taken to address the fundamental barriers that constrain them, such as funding inadequacies, policy barriers, low awareness of the needs of these families or willingness to make them a priority, and a lack of an evidence base about the most effective ways to support their success. A focused effort to address these constraints across the domains of child care and workforce development/postsecondary education will be critical to helping low-income parents succeed in improving their skills and abilities while supporting their children’s well-being and development.
Notes


References


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Gina Adams, a senior fellow in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute, is a national expert on factors that shape the affordability, quality, and supply of child care/early education services, and the ability of low-income families to benefit from them.
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