



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

# SUPPORTING YOUNG PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION



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## ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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# INTRODUCTION

Raising children is always challenging; it can be particularly difficult for *young* parents, who must balance caring for their children with the demands of going to school, training for a career and working to support their families — often without adequate support. In 2018, the Annie E. Casey Foundation began to focus on these young parents and the support and services they need to succeed. At the time, roughly 3 million 18-to-24-year-olds were parenting (“young parents”), and an estimated 1 million additional young people were parents who didn’t have primary custody. In all, 3.4 million children had parents 18-to-24-years old; of those children, comprising mostly infants, toddlers and preschoolers, nearly 40% lived in poverty.<sup>1</sup> Between 2018 and 2022, 9% of American Indian or Alaska Native, 8% of Hispanic or Latino, 7% Black and 5% of white young adults were parents.<sup>2</sup>



A third of young mothers are “disconnected” — neither working nor in school. And young women who are disconnected are four times more likely to be mothers than other young women who are working or in school.<sup>3</sup> This pattern contributes to economic challenges, as parents who have children at a young age experience greater economic instability during their children’s early formative years, and families headed by young parents are more likely to struggle to meet their basic needs, including food, housing and child care.<sup>4</sup> While there is limited data on young fathers, research shows that only around 6% of young men (ages 16–29) who are disconnected from school and work are caring for a child, reflecting the gender differences in child-care obligations.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these challenges, many young parents are determined to give their children every opportunity. The Casey Foundation found that many young parents are motivated to enroll in higher education or training to move toward a good job and a family-supporting career. Research shows that a single mother with an associate degree will earn roughly \$329,500 more over her lifetime than she would with a high school education, or \$625,000 more with a bachelor’s degree.<sup>6</sup> And while most student parents are mothers, 11% of all undergraduate male students — or 800,000 — are student fathers.<sup>7</sup> Research shows that student fathers are significantly more likely to temporarily withdraw from their studies (71%) than student parents overall (52%).<sup>8</sup>

Young parents pursuing a degree or credential face daunting barriers, including the challenges of finding quality child care; juggling the time demands of parenting, work and school; not having enough income to meet their family’s basic needs; and navigating the sometimes-complex world of postsecondary education. Too often, systems, programs and policies are not equipped to fully support these young people as they strive to advance in school and at work while having the means to provide a good life for themselves and their children. This brief shares what the Casey Foundation has learned since it began focusing on supporting young parents, highlighting specific lessons from a pilot program aimed at supporting young student parents in college.



# ABOUT THE EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG FAMILIES INITIATIVE

The Casey Foundation invests in interventions that can improve outcomes for both parents and children, supporting overall family well-being. In 2019, the Foundation launched the [Expanding Opportunities for Young Families](#) (EOYF) initiative to better understand how to support young parents as they pursue jobs or education. The Foundation funded the work and partnered with several national organizations — along with community-based groups in Austin, Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina; Miami-Dade County, Florida; and Santa Fe, New Mexico — to pilot programs designed to better support young parents and their children. The community-led efforts included workforce and education partners and early childhood education and youth programs. View the [appendix](#) to see a map and more details about each partner site.

To meet initiative objectives, the Casey Foundation worked with Child Trends, a research organization focused on improving the lives of children, youth and families. As a core partner to the Foundation, Child Trends managed EOYF, including overseeing the implementation of the pilot programs across sites, facilitating peer learning and documenting learning from the work. Peer-learning opportunities offered members of the community-led partnerships a way to share best practices and promising approaches.

## Partnering with Community Colleges to Support Young Parenting Students



Three EOYF sites — Austin, Miami-Dade County and Santa Fe — chose to focus on young parents in community college. Piloting programs at community colleges made strategic sense, since 51% of parents pursuing a postsecondary degree or credential attend a two-year institution, and 22% of all community college students have dependent children.<sup>9,10</sup> Two-year colleges have an open admission policy, lower tuition costs and flexible class schedules. Their missions also include academic learning and skills training that prepares graduates to transfer to four-year institutions, join the workforce or both. These institutions serve students with a range of experiences, including significant numbers of students with low incomes, parenting students, first-generation college students and students of color.<sup>11</sup>

While attaining a degree is associated with improved outcomes for both parents and children, the complex set of challenges parenting students face leads them to leave college at higher rates than their nonparenting peers.<sup>12</sup> According to the U.S. Governmental Accountability Office, 52% of parenting students left college without a degree in the 2015–2016 academic year, compared to 32% of students who were not parents.<sup>13</sup>

# EOYF INSIGHTS: YOUNG PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This section highlights key challenges identified through the EOYF initiative that parenting students reported facing in their pursuit of higher education. The subsequent sections highlight practice and policy recommendations to respond to these challenges. Whenever possible, we include data about young parenting students between the ages of 18 and 24. If data are not available, we use broader insights about all parenting students.

## Experiencing Barriers to Entering or Returning to College

Navigating the path to college can be difficult for young parents. Like other adults in this formative period of brain development from ages 18 to 24, young parents are still developing executive skills, or cognitive abilities, in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. These abilities help with planning, organizing, managing time, regulating emotions and achieving goals. The support young people receive during adolescence and early adulthood, such as positive relationships with older adults, coaching and navigation services, can prepare them for long-term success in college and beyond.<sup>14</sup>

Without adequate support, having a child during these formative years can hinder a young parent's ability to smoothly transition into higher education. About half of teen mothers do not graduate high school, though many later earn a GED.<sup>15</sup> Parenting students are also more likely than nonparenting students to delay college enrollment after high school graduation.<sup>16</sup> At the three EOYF sites, many young parents — often first- or second-generation immigrants — faced barriers to higher education because English proficiency requirements meant they needed language support before enrolling.

The cost of college weighs heavily on student parents pursuing an associate degree. Among these students, 57% take out student loans compared to 33% of nonparenting students. Parenting students are also more likely to take out larger loans than their nonparenting peers

### About Young Parenting Students<sup>17</sup>

**3 MILLION**

Undergraduates  
Parents



**275,000**

Undergraduate  
Parents Under  
25 Years Old

**86%**

Undergraduate  
parents who  
are female

**65%**

Undergraduate  
parents who are  
people of color

**44%**

Undergraduate  
parents who are  
first-generation  
college students

across degree levels.<sup>18</sup> This challenge is compounded by the fact that parenting students are less likely than nonparenting students to have family financial support as they strive to pay for higher education.<sup>19</sup> Black students are more likely to borrow, have higher levels of student debt and struggle with repayment more than their peers, because they collectively have fewer financial resources.<sup>20</sup> Black mothers, in particular, take on more debt than other groups, with more than one-third taking out more than \$27,000 in loans for undergraduate studies.<sup>21</sup> This debt burden has far-reaching financial consequences, and research also shows that student debt contributes to poor mental health.<sup>22</sup>

Student parents returning to college and participating in EOYF programs commonly reported financial challenges, including debt from unpaid tuition, institutional fines such as unpaid parking tickets from previous institutions or existing student loans.<sup>23</sup> These challenges can keep many student parents from re-enrolling and finishing their education.<sup>24</sup>

## Lacking a Sense of Belonging on Campus

During the EOYF initiative, young parenting students expressed feeling isolated from other students and the college culture itself. Students said they wanted to connect with other parenting students for mutual support. Research shows that feelings of isolation can be particularly difficult for young parenting students, who are more likely than older parenting students to report mental health challenges including depression, substance use and low self-esteem.<sup>25</sup> Because the federal government and most states do not require colleges to collect data on parenting status, many institutions don't know which of their students are parents. This lack of information hampers colleges' ability to offer programs and services to parenting students to address needs and foster a sense of community for this population.

## Struggling to Meet Basic Needs and Caregiving Responsibilities

Students who are parents often struggle with financial insecurity.<sup>26</sup> Many students participating in EOYF programs expressed worry about paying rent and other bills and affording child care and food for their family. Research shows that parenting students experience higher rates of housing and food insecurity compared with their nonparenting peers.<sup>27</sup> A 2024 study from the SPARK Collaborative found that 34% of undergraduate parents could not come up with \$500 for an emergency, compared with 15% of students without children.<sup>28</sup> Parenting students also experience more financial distress than their peers without dependents, which frequently translate into feelings of anxiety — one study found that over half of all undergraduate parenting students worried about being able to pay their current monthly expenses.<sup>29</sup> This financial insecurity and the stress that it causes pose a key threat to parents' ability to stay on track toward their educational goals.

## Balancing College and Life

Parenting students must balance the complex demands of work, school and caring for children.<sup>30</sup> Many EOYF program participants had to reduce their course loads or withdraw for a semester to focus on meeting their family's immediate needs and supporting their child's development. This is consistent with national trends that show parenting students enrolled in community and technical colleges are more likely to be enrolled part-time than their nonparenting peers.<sup>31</sup> Parenting students are also more likely to enroll in programs that provide greater flexibility to accommodate their busy lives, such as online programs or classes.<sup>32</sup> While parenting students demonstrate remarkable resilience in navigating these complex demands, the strain on their mental health and well-being can have far-reaching consequences for public health. A 2024 U.S. Surgeon General's advisory called attention to the need for systemic solutions to better support parents' well-being.<sup>33</sup>

# PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

The EOYF initiative demonstrated the need for student parents to have access to a range of supportive programs and systems to meet their often complex and intersecting challenges. From 2019 to 2024, EOYF sites and their partners tested practices designed to help young parents enroll in community college and stay on course through graduation. Each college adopted practices that aligned the school's resources with their parenting students' needs.

This section shares lessons from the three EOYF program sites, outlines the supportive services and practices that were codesigned by EOYF parenting students and recommends practices to help colleges and their partners support parenting students ages 18 to 24. While these practices focus on younger parenting students, they will also help colleges — both two-year and four-year — better serve parenting students of all ages.



## Build Pathways to College

- **Partner with community organizations for targeted recruitment.** Colleges can work with local youth-serving organizations to lead outreach programs to identify and recruit young parents who might be considering college. Partnership efforts might include translating college materials into different languages or inviting guest speakers from the college to programming for specific groups such as young fathers.
- **Provide precollege programming.** Colleges can help young parents who do not meet entrance eligibility criteria become ready to enroll. Resources such as high school equivalency programs and English-language learner courses might already exist within the institution or can be provided by partners. Colleges can also offer orientation or summer bridge programs to help parents understand the school environment and develop tools for success.

### Miami Dade College: Mission North Star



Through its EOYF pilot program, Mission North Star, Miami Dade College (MDC) provides young parenting students (ages 18 to 29) with support for basic needs like housing, transportation, and food; stackable credentials; and financial coaching to earn higher wages while their children meet developmental milestones and reach academic achievement.<sup>48</sup>

In the 2023–2024 academic year — the final year of the pilot — Mission North Star served 160 young parenting students and 202 children. Parenting students have earned 59 degrees and credentials with support from the program since 2021. Plans are underway to scale the pilot to the estimated 15,000 student parents of all ages across MDC's eight campuses.

“Mission North Star gave me the financial resources I needed to afford college and connected me to programs that helped me grow as a parent. They’ve taught me how to manage my time and handle the pressures of being a full-time student, employee and father.”

— Khalil Peters  
Former participant of Mission North Star



- **Improve enrollment processes.** Resource fairs and “one-stop shops” can help parents complete the enrollment process, register for classes and financial aid, meet their advisors and connect with on-campus and community-based resources to address their basic needs. Colleges might also consider waiving or deferring students’ unpaid institutional fines and fees from previous enrollment so they can reenroll.



## Engage With Parenting Students

- **Listen to parenting students to understand their experiences.** Hearing from parenting students directly helps institutions build trust and identify opportunities to meet their needs. Colleges can host focus groups and conduct surveys with young parents to understand their unique experiences in pursuing degrees or certificates. Partnerships with community organizations can also help them recruit students with varied perspectives and experiences that represent the demographics of the institution and the local community.
- **Engage parenting students in identifying better ways to support them.** Institutions can recruit parenting students to serve as advisors who participate in planning meetings with college leadership and community partners. They should consider how to encourage collaboration and formalize participation and roles for parenting students (for example, through a Parenting Student Advisory Council or as a voting member of a leadership team). Institutions can also proactively connect parenting students with student government and college leaders.
- **Create opportunities for parenting student leadership and advocacy.** Young parenting students are effective ambassadors for connecting their parenting peers to services.<sup>34</sup> Colleges can hire parenting students, such as through work-study positions, to lead events or conduct peer outreach. Colleges can also support young parents’

professional development and leadership skills through an internship or fellowship program, and by providing storytelling and advocacy trainings.

- **Ensure parenting students are compensated fairly.** Institutions can use work-study positions, stipends, consulting fees or other payment structures to compensate parenting students for their expertise. Colleges and partner organizations should understand how paying students could affect their financial aid or public benefits eligibility and take steps to avoid unintended consequences. Colleges can also consider providing additional nonfinancial benefits, including sharing information and resources, offering resume assistance, preparing students for interviews and creating networking opportunities with peers and professionals.



## Address Basic Needs

- **Partner with community organizations to help parenting students access resources.** Colleges cannot meet the full needs of their students alone, but they can partner with local organizations, such as housing, legal, health and advocacy groups that provide students resources like housing vouchers, emergency rental assistance, legal aid and mental health services. These partnerships should be seen as mutually beneficial — for example, colleges can offer space for partners to hold events or provide services. Formal agreements can help ensure clear roles and expectations.
- **Increase parenting students’ awareness of available resources.** Institutions can design targeted outreach for parenting students, such as a dedicated resources page on the college website, to make sure they know about available support programs and opportunities. Colleges can also train staff to connect parenting students with campus and community resources. Staff can provide practical guidance on maximizing benefits, such as requesting cost of attendance adjustments for child care.



- **Provide support to parenting students facing financial needs.** An unplanned expense — like a child-care emergency or a car repair — can derail parenting students' progress. To help students weather unexpected events and help them stay enrolled, colleges and partner organizations can take steps such as establishing an emergency fund. Other financial support resources like scholarships, tuition waivers and debt forgiveness for fees that were previously incurred can relieve the financial strain on parenting students.
- **Appoint a designated liaison for parenting students in an office of student services.** Having a dedicated point of contact within student services can help parenting students understand what resources they are eligible for, such as child-care assistance, financial aid and public benefits.

The liaisons can advocate for parents' needs within the institution and help them navigate potential hurdles in connecting to support services.



## Promote Belonging and Community

- **Track data on parenting students.** One of the biggest barriers for colleges in starting and sustaining engagement efforts is a lack of data about their parenting student populations. These data can give colleges vital information such as students' motivations for obtaining their degree or credential, as well as allow them to track retention and completion rates and direct resources more effectively. To identify parenting students, colleges

could start by asking students to voluntarily disclose their parenting status upon enrollment and registration.

- **Appoint student parent success coaches.** A success coach can help parenting students set both educational and family goals. Colleges can include family goals in academic advising, for example, by asking students about how the institution can accommodate their aspirations for themselves and their children. During regular check-in meetings, students can share progress on their goals, their classwork and their children's well-being, as well as any challenges they have navigating college or accessing supportive services. (In EOYF, parenting students commonly reported needing support in completing financial aid appeals, finding child care and enrolling in child-care assistances subsidies, developing and editing resumes and cover letters and identifying ways to approach course instructors about making up missed work.)
- **Create family-friendly spaces on campus.** Parenting students often desire more child-friendly areas on campus to help them care for their children and introduce them to the college environment.<sup>35</sup> For example, colleges could include playgrounds and family accommodations such as diaper-changing stations, nursing rooms and dedicated study areas for parents accompanied by their children. Colleges can also sponsor on-campus family activities and events.
- **Foster a sense of community between parenting students and the college.** To build community on campus, colleges and their partners can provide information sessions or learning events on topics relevant to parenting students. Colleges can also

promote and dedicate staff time to facilitating peer networks, social groups and clubs to help parenting students meet and support each other. To more effectively connect with young parenting students, institutions might consider developing marketing materials that include images of parenting students and communicating via popular social media channels and text messaging.



## Create Flexible Learning Environments

- **Offer flexible pathways to attaining a degree.** Institutions can accommodate parenting students' complex lives by exploring alternative arrangements such as shortened academic terms, online learning options and flexible scheduling and classroom policies.
- **Help parenting students navigate academic requirements.** Colleges may need to work with parenting students to develop course schedules that accommodate family and work responsibilities, while also advising them on academic progress and the financial aid implications of a reduced courseload.
- **Review institutional policies to support the success of parenting students.** Colleges can examine campus-wide policies to understand how they hinder or promote the success of parenting students. For example, they might adapt their existing excused-absence policy to include classes missed due to a child or family emergency. Where possible, colleges should engage a cross-departmental team to explore explicit, implied or unclear policies that may affect parenting students.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As seen through the EOYF initiative, colleges are working to expand support for parenting students, but they often lack adequate resources and supportive policies. This section identifies recommendations for changes in state and federal policies that can produce better outcomes for parenting students.

## State Policy

- **Expand and prioritize child-care access for parenting students.** States can make parenting students a priority population for federal Child Care and Development Fund grants, as Georgia has done.<sup>36</sup> State and local governments should maximize funding for prekindergarten and Head Start and streamline processes for qualifying for child-care subsidies. Governments should also consider diversifying child-care options to give parenting students access to child care that meets their needs and preferences, including home-based child-care providers and family, friend and neighbor care.
- **Provide campus-based support services for parenting students.** State policymakers can address challenges for parenting students by mandating support services and accommodations on college campuses. For example, California passed legislation requiring colleges to give parenting students — including those who are expecting — priority class registration and to create a webpage for sharing information on resources they may be eligible for, like tax credits and food assistance.<sup>37</sup> In Texas, all college campuses are required to have liaisons or navigators for parenting students,<sup>38</sup> while Minnesota established a grant program for colleges to better support pregnant and parenting students.<sup>39</sup> States should provide additional funding to help implement these types of services.

## Improving Data Collection



Requiring colleges to collect data on parenting status is a critical policy priority that can be pursued at both the state and federal levels. Parenting students represent a significant share of undergraduates, yet most institutions don't have a good picture of this population, hindering efforts to provide targeted support. This data gap also poses challenges for states striving to meet postsecondary educational attainment goals. In response, institutions — including the three EOYF partners — have adopted innovative practices such as focus groups, surveys and revised enrollment forms to identify and better understand parenting students.

Congress has considered legislation that would require colleges to collect data on parenting students. To be effective, such laws should be developed with input from researchers, colleges and students, and be grounded in best practices. Legislation should also include funding to help states and colleges implement the changes and track the data. States can take action, too, as seen in California, Illinois, Minnesota, Oregon and Texas, which have already passed similar laws.



- **Identify targeted strategies to increase enrollment and graduation rates of subgroups of parenting students.** Undergraduate parenting students comprise a significant percentage of multiple demographic groups: 30% of Black students,<sup>40</sup> 18% of Hispanic students,<sup>41</sup> 28% of first-generation students,<sup>42</sup> 32% of American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students,<sup>43</sup> 8% of Asian students,<sup>44</sup> 19% of immigrant students<sup>45</sup> and 18% of students with disabilities.<sup>46</sup> Each group will require targeted strategies and policy reforms to remove barriers to attaining a degree or credential.<sup>47</sup>
- **Provide guidance on Title IX protections for pregnant and parenting students.** Title IX protects students who are pregnant or postpartum. States can strengthen these protections, as Texas and Minnesota have done, by passing nondiscrimination laws and guiding colleges on federal and state rules. States can also work with colleges to offer extra support, such as priority class registration and private lactation spaces, and help raise student awareness about their Title IX rights.
- **Simplify the process to obtain public benefits.** State health and human services agencies must take the lead in supporting current and potential parenting students within existing statutes. They should start by exploring how to increase access and enrollment in two key federal programs: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). For example, eliminating the requirement that SNAP recipients recertify their eligibility in person would ensure college students do not lose access to SNAP benefits.
- **Expand and refine financial aid programs to support parenting students.** States can revise their financial assistance programs to include parenting status as a qualifying factor for grants and scholarships. At the same time, colleges can explore increasing grants and scholarships to parenting students — to supplement federal Pell grants and loans, the two primary sources of financial aid.

## Federal Policy

- **Expand investment in the child-care system and delivery of services.** The federal government should continue and increase funding for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) programs to expand access to child-care benefits for parenting students.<sup>49</sup>



# CONCLUSION

The Expanding Opportunities for Young Families initiative generated important lessons about the critical need for institutions to engage with parenting students, offer clear pathways to academic success, develop flexible approaches to help students balance parenting and school, make campuses more family friendly and support parenting students' basic needs. Key lessons summarized in this report can guide colleges and community-based partners in providing the services and resources parenting students of all ages need to be successful in higher education.

Colleges looking to embrace similar practices should consider existing and emerging research on adolescent brain development, promising practices within the parenting student field, two-generation strategies and other efforts to improve students' access to basic needs.

More broadly, policymakers should act to give colleges more tools to support young parenting students, including strengthening state child-care systems, expanding funding for support programs, reforming financial aid and making federal benefit programs more flexible.

Parenting students face complicated paths to earning a college degree or certification. With the right support and policies at the local, state and federal levels, these paths can become more straightforward and achievable. This benefits not only parenting students but also their children and communities. Education and training increase parenting students' earning potential, allowing them to provide greater financial stability for their children and to strengthen their communities with a skilled workforce.





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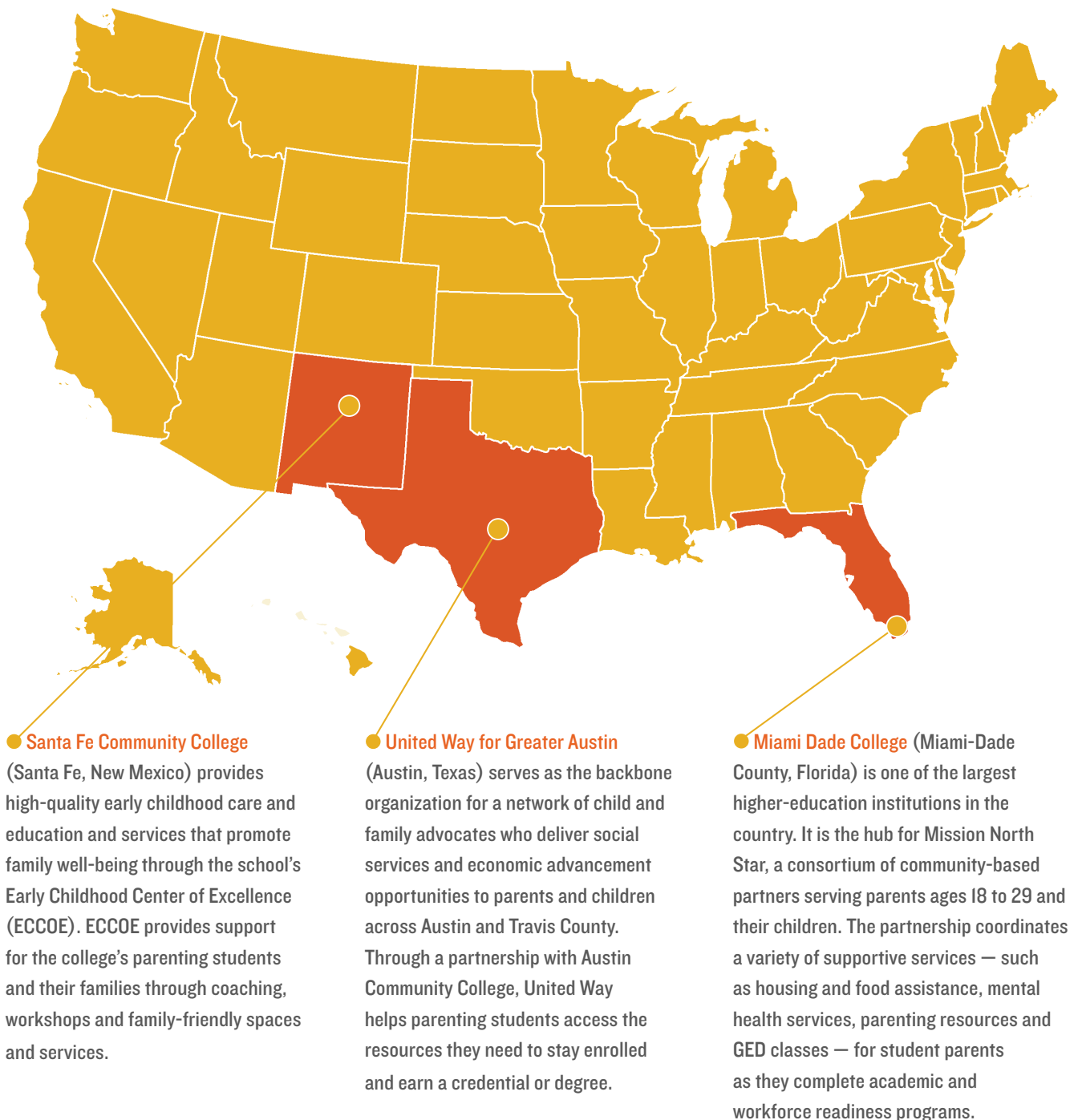
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# APPENDIX

## Map of EOYF Sites

EOYF sites supported parenting students through coordinated services like early childhood care, academic coaching, housing assistance and workforce readiness programs. Each site consisted of community-based organizations and a community college to help student parents stay enrolled in school and achieve educational and economic success.





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