

BRIEF

Maximizing
Access &
Success
for Special
Populations

Supporting Single Parents in Career Technical Education

Career Technical Education (CTE) policies and programs have increasingly focused on supporting the needs of historically marginalized learners and closing access and performance gaps among learner groups. Perkins V, the latest iteration of federal CTE legislation known as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, is part of this trend. The law defines nine learner groups as special populations and includes a number of provisions that address expanding access to and supporting success within CTE programs for special populations. This brief will describe strategies for supporting one of these special populations: single parents, including single pregnant women.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN PERKINS V

LEARNER GROUPS DEFINED AS SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN PERKINS V:

- Out-of-workforce individuals
- English learners
- Individuals experiencing homelessness
- Individuals with disabilities
- Single parents, including single pregnant women
- Youth who are in/have aged out of the foster care system
- Individuals preparing for careers that are non-traditional for their gender
- Youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty
- Individuals from economically disadvantaged families, ex. low-income youth and adults

*CTE educators are developing strategies to support learner groups who, while not special populations under the law, may need additional supports, including **migrant and undocumented, LGBTQ+, justice-involved and Tribal learners.***

DEFINING SINGLE PARENTS

Perkins V does not define single parents or single pregnant women, but some states have developed definitions. For instance, Nebraska and Michigan define this term on the secondary level as “an individual who meets all of the following criteria: age 19 or below; without a high school diploma; unmarried or legally separated from their spouse; and pregnant or has a minor child or children for which the parent has custody or joint custody.” At the postsecondary level, it means “an individual who is: unmarried; legally separated from a spouse; and has a minor child or children for which the parent has either custody or joint custody.”

Perkins V supports these learners for a number of reasons. For one, many postsecondary learners are parents — more than one in five college students are parents, the largest share of whom attend community colleges.¹ In addition, 1.7 million undergraduate learners are single mothers, and about 25 percent have trouble accessing child care.² On the secondary level, only about half of teen mothers are awarded a high school diploma by the age of 22.³

STRATEGIES FOR SINGLE PARENTS

Single parents, including single pregnant women, have been identified within CTE as a population of interest since 1984. Potential state (🏛️) and local (📍) approaches include:

Cross-agency coordination and partnerships 🏛️ 📍

On the state and local levels, CTE agencies and departments can coordinate with Women, Infants and Children program providers, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program providers, health care clinics and parenting organizations to understand the needs of pregnant, postpartum and parenting learners.

Flexible and accelerated learning 🏛️ 📍

State and local policies can enable CTE courses to be offered in online and hybrid formats, with extra flexibility for pregnant and postpartum learners. Single parents can also benefit from credit for prior learning and experience, competency-based education and other self-paced models.

Data collection 🏛️📍

Identifying single parents can be a challenge, particularly on the postsecondary level. In 2021 Oregon passed [legislation](#) requiring that data annually reported by public postsecondary institutions include an option for each learner to identify themselves as a parent or guardian. Data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and/or state financial aid applications can also help identify learners with dependents.

Free or low cost childcare and other family-centered supports 📍

For parenting learners, one of the most significant barriers to participating and completing their education is finding high-quality, affordable childcare.⁴ Schools and campuses can provide a number of supportive services to help single parents and pregnant learners balance their education and family responsibilities, including free or low-cost, on-site licensed childcare; easy-to-access lactation rooms; and parenting classes and support groups.

Coordination of supports across special populations 🏛️📍

Many learners qualify under multiple special population designations. On the state and local levels, CTE professionals can coordinate with educators and other service providers to deliver coordinated, comprehensive programming and supports.

Financial and tangible aid 🏛️📍

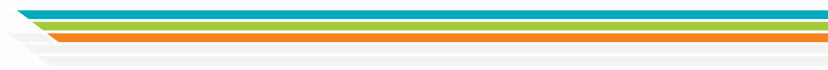
Single parents may also benefit from financial assistance and tangible supports such as food pantries. Under Perkins, local recipients may support costs associated with fees, transportation, child care or mobility challenges for special populations, including single parents. Other federal funding streams can be leveraged to provide additional financial and tangible aid to single parents, and [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) has several funds that institutions can apply for to support initiatives for parenting learners.

For additional resources, visit [Advance CTE's Perkins V Section](#), the [Maximizing Access and Success for Special Populations in Career Technical Education series page](#) in the [Learning that Works Resource Center](#) and [ACTE's Perkins Implementation page](#).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The strategies described in the previous section are not mutually exclusive, and not all will be appropriate based on the needs of your single parent population. Before enacting new strategies, assess the current state of single parents and pregnant learners in your CTE programs and dig into root causes of barriers and challenges:

- What do single parents tell you about their needs, challenges and successes?
- What does your data show about the CTE participation and concentration of single parents?
- What does your data show about the performance of single parents?
- What flexible delivery models support single parents and other learners to balance education with other responsibilities?
- How do you encourage single parents to self-disclose their status so they can be eligible for services?
- What policies award credit for prior learning and work experiences to single parents, among other populations?
- What support services are available for single parents, among other learners? How are they made aware of these services?
- Which agencies or community organizations could you connect with to support single parents?



CASE STUDY

Bunker Hill Community College in Boston has taken numerous steps to identify and support parenting learners. The college has added an optional checkbox to admissions materials to identify these learners and plans to add this group as a filter to its data dashboard to support further analysis. In addition, the college includes parenting learners among its pool of learners who assist with orientation and will be hiring parenting learner ambassadors to engage with this population.

Bunker Hill is also pursuing a grant through the U.S. Department of Education's Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program for hiring a full-time staff member to serve as a parenting learner liaison, connecting this population to resources on and off campus, developing a website for these learners and providing other services.



RESOURCES TO SUPPORT SINGLE PARENTS

- **Transforming Data into Action: Fostering College Success for Single Mothers and Parenting Students** (World Education, National College Transition Network, Achieving the Dream, PERG Learning and ECMC Foundation, September 2023)
- **Tapping the Talent of Student Parents: A Playbook for Postsecondary Leaders** (Ascend, April 2023)
- **Pathways Matter to Families: What Parents and Young Adults Believe and Want to Know About Education to Workforce Pathways** (ExcelinEd, July 2021)
- **Family Friendly Campus Toolkit** (The Family Friendly Campus)

¹ Doorley, N. B., Elakbawy, S., & Dundar, A. (2023, August). State policy for student parent success: A landscape scan of policy solutions enacted at the state level. Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Student-Parent-State-Policy-Brief-FINAL.pdf>

² Higher Learning Advocates. (2023, June 27). 101: Single moms in higher education. <https://higherlearningadvocates.org/resource/101-single-moms-in-higher-education/>

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, November 15). About teen pregnancy. <https://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/about/index.htm>

⁴ The Education Trust & Generation Hope. (2022, August). *For student parents, the biggest hurdles to a higher education are cost and finding child care*. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/For-Student-Parents-The-Biggest-Hurdles-to-a-Higher-Education-Are-Cost-and-Finding-Child-Care-August-2022.pdf>

