

Student Parent Support Initiative in Governor Walz's Proposed Budget
House Higher Education Policy and Budget Committee – January 31, 2023
Testimony from Beth Hamer, St. Catherine University, Access and Success office

Thank you to Chair Pelowski and the House Higher Education Policy and Budget Committee Members for the opportunity to advocate for the Student Parent Support Initiative supported by the Governor. My name is Beth Hamer and I am the director of Access and Success at St. Catherine University, which offers support and programs to meet the needs of pregnant and parenting students. St. Catherine University is a small, private, women-focused, Catholic university in St. Paul educating women to lead and influence.

At St. Catherine University (St. Kate's), nearly a quarter (22%) of our students are pregnant and/or parenting. The vast majority of our parenting students are mothers, and, in the undergraduate College for Women, 75% are single parents. Over half (51%) of St. Kate's pregnant and parenting students are low-income, 46% are first-generation college students, and 42% identify as BIPOC. By comparison, roughly one-third of St. Kate's overall student population falls in each category. In other words, student parents at St. Kate's are disproportionately from marginalized groups that are unlikely to have their family's basic needs met or be well-served in higher education, and thus, are at greater risk for non-completion.

Focused on educating women, St. Kate's was early to recognize and respond to the challenges of pursuing a college degree while raising children when, in 1993, it established one of the first campus-based student parent centers in the nation, Access and Success. Through Access and Success, licensed social work staff work in collaboration with pregnant and parenting students to help them navigate challenges to staying on their educational paths. Access and Success services, which range from on-campus child-friendly study and lactation rooms to parenting support groups, intensive case management for single parents, public benefits screenings, and referrals to community providers, have been instrumental to the persistence and completion of thousands of student parents over the last three decades.

Data from 2017-2021 indicate that, on average, 80.5% of student parents who were "high users" of Access and Success services were retained annually. This compares to a 73.8% retention rate among student parents who made little or no use of Access and Success services. Nationally, among undergraduate students who are parenting, more than half leave college without completing their degree program, which is roughly double the exit rate of non-parenting students. Outcomes are worse for parents 18-24 years old, who are often poorer than older parenting students, with only 8% having attained an associate degree or higher. Roughly a quarter of St. Kate's undergraduate student parents are mothers in this age group. In Academic Year 2021-2022, the median income among these young moms was just \$12,084.

We know that Access and Success' model of comprehensive support for pregnant and parenting students positively impacts persistence and degree completion, and the state has recognized that too: Access and Success has been used as a model by the MN Department of Health to help launch student parent support programs at other colleges and universities statewide.

While Access and Success has helped scores of pregnant and parenting students complete their degrees and go on to successful careers in their chosen fields, the University remains challenged to fill gaps in support for pregnant and parenting students. One of the biggest

ongoing barriers for St. Kate's pregnant and parenting students is finding and paying for child care, the costs of which are often out of reach. Increasingly, student parents experience food, housing, and transportation insecurity. These stressors contribute to poor mental health - on the rise among all students, but compounded for those who must juggle parenting along with school and work, leaving little time to engage with campus life or their peers.

The Student Parent Support Initiative is needed to ensure that raising children isn't a barrier to higher education in Minnesota. Successful degree completion is not only critical for student parents' job options and earnings capacity, but research has demonstrated that parents' level of educational attainment is the best predictor of economic mobility for their children.ⁱ By enabling colleges and universities without pregnant and parenting support programs to launch this important work on their campuses and providing the resources for existing programs like Access and Success to fill current gaps in services and programming, the Initiative will bolster college completion statewide - with ripple benefits for the economy, communities, families, and the next generation of students in Minnesota.

ⁱ Ascend (2012). Two Generations, One Future: Moving Parents and Children Beyond Poverty Together. The Aspen Institute