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Investing in student parents serves us all | GUEST COMMENTARY

By [Jermaine F. Williams](#)

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In Maryland, nearly one in five college students is a parent, balancing the demands of higher education with the responsibilities of raising children. This reality calls for a closer look at our practices, procedures and policies to ensure student parents have equitable opportunities to access education, complete their studies and succeed beyond graduation.

Whether these students are reskilling, upskilling, changing careers or transitioning directly from high school, it is critical that the post-secondary sector focuses on supporting their path to earning a family-sustaining wage.

At Montgomery College, where I'm president, we have a longstanding commitment to supporting student parents in attaining valuable degrees and credentials while also helping them develop as engaged members of their community — all while juggling parenting demands. At Montgomery College, 72% of our student parents also work over 20 hours a week. As student parent [Najah Mills](#) says, "Being a student parent is challenging. I am still learning to care for my family full time while also working." Participants in Montgomery College's Student Parent Alliance benefit from friendships with other student parents, share tips about successful strategies, and learn about local resources. Since 85% of Montgomery College's student parents have a child younger than five, the group was instrumental in providing guidance to make our college spaces more equitable and family-friendly. Now, Montgomery College has lactation stations on each campus, identified parking for families, highchairs in the cafeterias for young children and 58 baby changing tables across our three campuses. We will soon launch an app that will serve as a single point of entry to determine eligibility for a variety of child care assistance and subsidies in Maryland while streamlining the application process.

In celebration of National Student Parent Month in September, Montgomery College [hosted](#) three pop-up events to distribute free baby supplies, hygiene items and food packages to our student parents. Montgomery College also hosts a family empowerment conference each year offering free workshops on nutrition, finance and stress-management. About 40% of our student parents are also single, so we recognize that they may need additional support while enrolled. We are working to provide dedicated support to student parents through both systemic and systematic improvements to our practices, procedures and policies. This involves building partnerships with external organizations to ensure

comprehensive support. Such efforts have the potential for generational impact. In the State of Maryland, single mothers who graduate with an associate's degree are nearly 50% less likely to live in poverty than individuals whose highest level of education is a high school degree. Among other implications, this means their children are less likely to experience the significant negative impacts of poverty, enhancing the socio-economic impact of this family investment.

Mitigating the impacts of poverty is also part of our approach. At Montgomery College's September Family Empowerment Resource Fair, for example, student parents found support to enhance housing and food security, while their kids enjoyed face-painting and balloon animals. Connecting student parents with assistance for basic needs and employment helps ensure they have the opportunities to attain degrees and certificates that boost their potential for family-sustaining wages and can contribute to their communities as engaged residents.

I know our student parents are engaged and willing to contribute because I talk with them. These conversations give me insights into their lived experiences, informing my leadership decisions. Furthermore, as a teenager, I saw firsthand the challenges my sister faced as she balanced parenting while pursuing her education. Student parents are dedicated, strong and determined, bringing unique assets to our communities. They know education can make an indelible mark, often increasing the likelihood that their child will follow in their footsteps toward a successful college experience. We need to be as dedicated, strong and determined, if not more, to ensure they have equitable paths to success, both inside and outside of the academic space.

Inspired by student parents, Montgomery College remains deeply committed to investing in their success. With guidance from national organizations such as Ascend at the Aspen Institute and Generation Hope, we will continue to expand our efforts. It is exciting to see this momentum, and I encourage other higher education leaders to reflect on how they can better support some of the most dedicated, resilient students at their institutions.

Jermaine F. Williams is the president of Montgomery College.