



## **Post-Secondary Support for Parents with Low Incomes in Maine**

*Charting Success, Bridging Gaps, and  
Illuminating Pathways for Economic Mobility*

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**Executive  
Summary**  
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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE) program, established in 2018 under Maine's bipartisan LIFT 2.0 legislation, is a vital initiative designed to empower low-income parents with educational and training opportunities. Originating from its predecessor, Parents as Scholars (PaS), created in 1997 in response to federal welfare reforms, HOPE recognizes the transformative potential of post-secondary education in breaking the cycle of poverty.

HOPE provides comprehensive support to low-income student-parents by covering tuition, childcare, transportation, books, supplies, technology, and other associated costs. Despite these efforts, HOPE students still face challenges in making ends meet each month, highlighting persistent financial hardships. To bridge these gaps, the Build HOPE Project was launched in January 2022 by [Maine Equal Justice](#). This project offers financial grants of up to \$2,000 annually to eligible students, addressing basic and emergent needs.

The Build HOPE Project not only seeks to alleviate immediate hardships for families, but by incorporating a research component aimed at providing policymakers with evidence to inform long-term improvements, fostering economic opportunity and mobility for families, it also endeavors to contribute valuable insights for refining future programs. By understanding the dynamics of supporting student-parents, this research aims to enhance policies, lift more families out of poverty, and fortify Maine's communities and workforce.

### **Key Findings**

Establishing a sustainable family income through post-secondary education is the most reliable means to cultivate an educated workforce prepared for emerging, well-compensated jobs. Additionally, it contributes to the reduction of public assistance spending; alleviates poverty, particularly among children; enhances post-secondary education completion rates; stimulates economic growth; and fosters stability and success in the next generation, closely linked to the educational attainment and [mobility](#) of parents.

As one of the survey respondents so aptly stated:

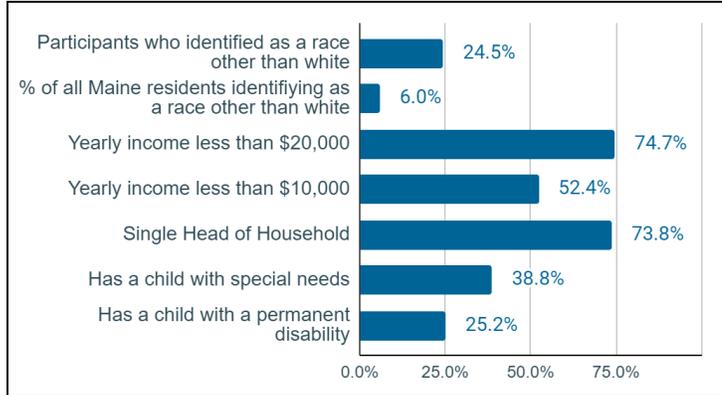
*As a single mom to three children, I am almost always in survival mode. Unfortunately, my children have also been affected by the stressors the financial hardships that can come along with single-income households. It can be a vicious circle of stress, guilt and worry. When our basic needs are met, we get along better, and we all do better in school. When you are not using all your energy just to survive it gives you an opportunity to make some steps forward. I am in the last year of my program. My goal is to be able to provide for my family independently.*

The key findings presented below, elaborated throughout this report, not only offer a comprehensive grasp of the existing landscape but also lay the groundwork for informed discussions on potential interventions and improvements.

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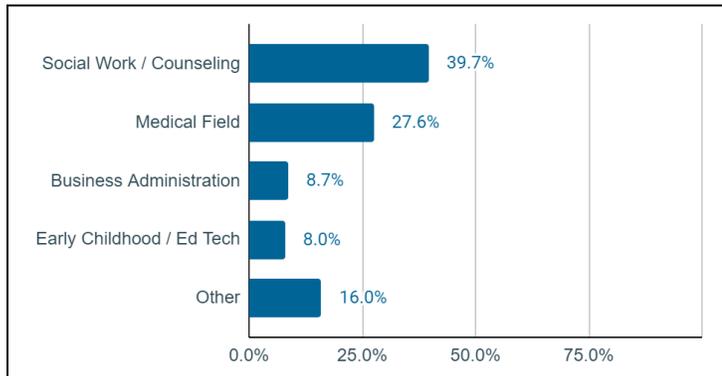
**Demographics of Participants**

Parents pursuing higher education with support from PaS/HOPE/ASPIRE disproportionately represent populations that have historically encountered and experienced inequity when it comes to economic security and access to post-secondary education:



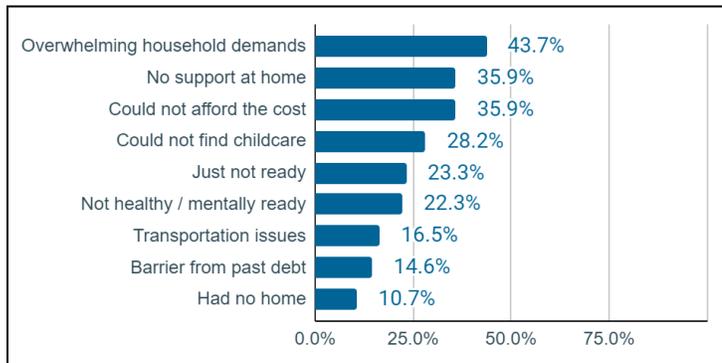
**Student-Parent’s Career Goals**

Many parents in PaS/HOPE/ASPIRE are pursuing jobs in high-demand fields, which can help address Maine’s workforce shortage. Primary areas of focus for parents in these programs are in the behavioral health and medical fields:



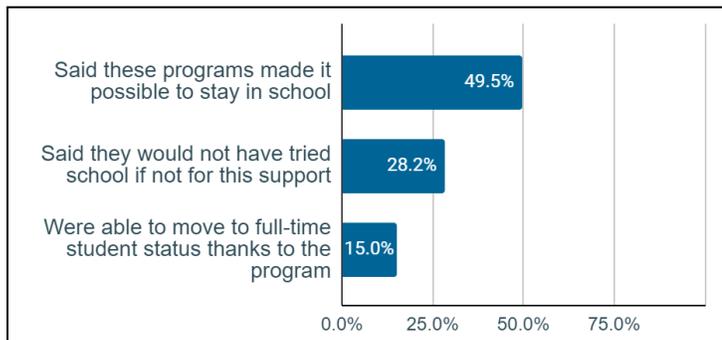
**Previous Barriers to Continuing Education**

Nearly eight in ten (79.6%) of student-parents surveyed had tried accessing education or training in the past without help from PaS/HOPE/ASPIRE but had not been successful for a number of reasons:



**The Difference Made by PaS/HOPE/ASPIRE**

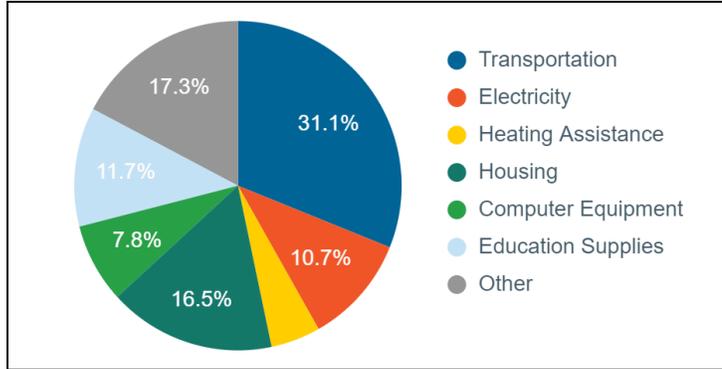
Programs like PaS/HOPE/ASPIRE that provide financial and navigational support to parents pursuing higher education helps make it possible for many to achieve a degree, certificate, or professional credential:



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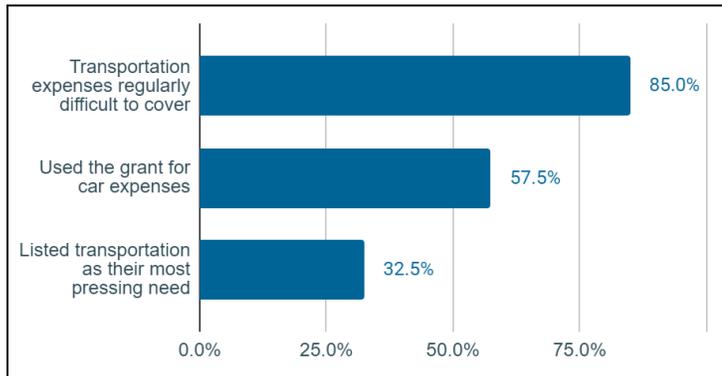
**Most Pressing Needs Parents Sought to Address**

Even with help from PaS/HOPE/ASPIRE, many parents continue to face unmet needs that run the risk of derailing their success in reaching their educational goals. The most pressing needs people sought to address through the Build HOPE project were:



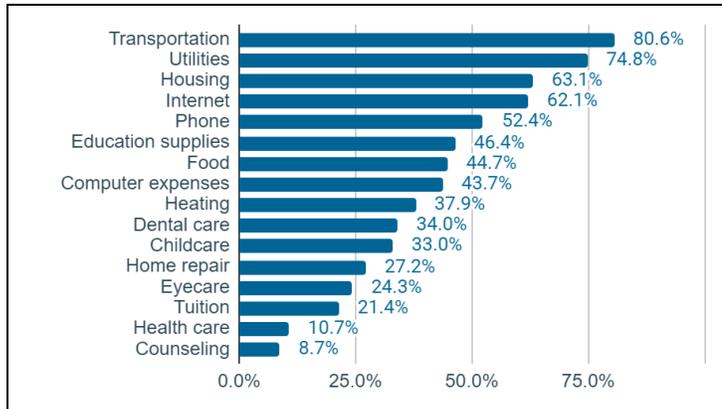
**Transportation Challenges for Parents of Children with Special Needs**

Among the 38.8% of respondents who had children with special needs, having a reliable car was essential for medical and therapy appointments, and at those times when an immediate “pick-up” at school or day care was necessary.



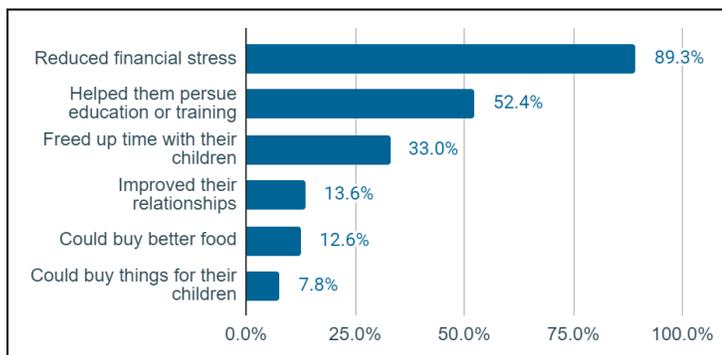
**Parents Used the Grant to Pay for**

The additional income support provided through the Build HOPE grants helped respondents cover their basic needs and education program expenses:



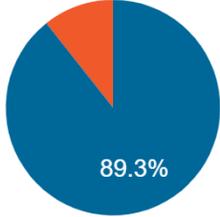
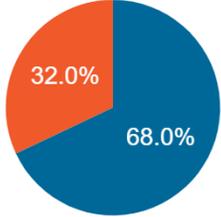
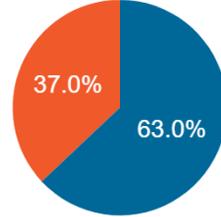
**Effects of the Build HOPE Grant**

Because of the Build HOPE Fund grant’s flexible and unrestricted nature, parents said the funds had the following effects:



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Many parents felt trusted and respected in receiving this type of flexible income support, able to use it to cover what they needed most. When asked about their experience receiving flexible and unrestricted income support from the Build HOPE Fund:

		
<p>89.3% said they felt <i>respected</i> because they were <i>trusted</i> to know what their family needs</p>	<p>68.0% indicated that it was much <i>easier</i> to receive the Build HOPE funds than it had been to get help from programs administered by DHHS that have <i>more requirements and restrictions</i></p>	<p>63.0% reported that because there were fewer restrictions and they could <i>use the funds for what (they) needed most</i>; they were able to focus more of their time and energy on other things like school and family</p>

**Recommendations for Action**

To ensure the personal success of low-income student-parents and their positive impact on the state's economy, it is imperative that policymakers invest in and fortify programs like PaS, HOPE, and ASPIRE. These programs play a pivotal role in enabling low-income parents to access and succeed in post-secondary education and can address disparities to obtaining an education based on race, disability, and family composition. They also have a significant role to play in strengthening communities and bolstering Maine’s workforce, by helping fill high-demand jobs.

To ensure success, policymakers must proactively eliminate barriers preventing parents from accessing these programs, address unmet needs, and ensure that the support provided is sufficient in both meeting the diverse needs of students and enhancing their chances of success.

This study highlights the need for targeted policy initiatives and action in the following areas:

**1. Addressing Financial Hardships: A Call for Increased Support and Resources for Student-Parents in the Context of Maine's High Cost of Living**

In light of Maine's high cost of living, student-parents and their families face significant financial challenges, necessitating increased financial support and improved access to reliable resources. The Build HOPE Fund grants, which

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aided most respondents in paying bills, demonstrate the positive impact of additional income assistance in addressing the financial hardships associated with pursuing education in a state where making ends meet is exceptionally difficult.

### **2. Fostering Empowerment: The Transformative Impact of the Build HOPE Fund's Flexibility on Family Well-being and Educational Pursuits**

Families need the opportunity to respond to areas of need without retribution or restrictions. Flexible income support not only alleviated financial stress but empowered families to address diverse needs, facilitating education and training, quality time with children, and improved food purchases.

### **3. Navigating Roadblocks: Addressing Transportation Challenges for Student-Parents in Pursuit of Educational and Career Success**

Transportation emerges as a critical challenge for survey respondents and interviewees, particularly those in rural areas, relying heavily on cars to meet various needs. While PaS and HOPE offer some transportation assistance, many parents need additional financial help. Increasing allocation levels and providing resources for repairs and vehicle purchases are essential steps to help parents overcome this significant barrier to achieving educational and career goals.

### **4. Urgent Housing Concerns: Affordable Rentals, Evictions, and the Critical Need for a Home**

The soaring cost of housing, particularly for renters, has led to a crisis. Housing shortages and high costs, combined with inadequate living conditions, jeopardize families' stability and pose risks to children's health and development. To address this, immediate attention and financial assistance, such as rent relief, are crucial for families with low incomes, especially renters, to ensure proper and safe housing.

### **5. Energy Struggles: Urgent Calls for Affordable Utilities in Low-Income Families**

With Maine ranking 6th highest in the U.S. for monthly household energy bills, the escalating costs of electricity and heating oil are overwhelming respondents. A substantial portion of study participants utilized the HOPE Fund for utilities, emphasizing the critical need. Policymakers must urgently address the affordability of utility costs for low-income families with children.

### **6. Empowering Student-Parents: Strengthening Institutional Support and Coordination**

To enhance support for student-parents in pursuing post-secondary education, it is crucial to align state programs with educational institutions and programs. This involves coordination between state departments and increasing coordination among agencies to streamline access to resources. Additionally, creating dedicated web pages for student-parents, making Navigators available, and enhancing coordination with special needs services can further amplify awareness and support, ensuring that these families receive the necessary assistance in their educational journey.