



INTRODUCTION

There are few available solutions to the problem of family leave while enrolled in rigorously intensive schooling, like medical school. Adequate family leave policies are essential in supporting medical students who face the challenge of balancing family life while staying on track to complete medical school training as planned. Studies have also shown the benefits of adequate family leave policies for both parents and newborns. Medical residents with an adequate length of family leave (> 8 weeks) are less likely to experience postpartum depression and burnout and more likely to breastfeed longer and have a higher satisfaction with parenthood (Stack et al. 2018).

Parental leave policies among U.S. medical schools lack consistency and administrative support for their students. In addition to unclear policies, there is a lack of professional and financial support options for students seeking leave. These stressors disproportionately burden female students' mental and physical wellbeing, contributing to postpartum anxiety and depression, for example (Kraus et al. 2021). It is particularly important to address social issues in medical education that affect this vulnerable population, especially as it includes the raising of children.

For many medical schools, students are advised to take a leave of absence (LOA) to constitute as maternal or paternal leave. LOA can be short or long term, but ability to complete coursework and continue medical education during this time is unclear. This leaves a gap in a student's preclinical and/or clinical coursework and ultimately changes the timeline in which they planned to complete their medical education. This creates financial and time-consuming burdens for the student and their family (Ortega et al. 2022).

More than two-thirds of 199 reviewed medical schools failed to post explicit family leave policies (Kraus et al. 2021); WSUSOM does not have a specific family leave policy. The WSUSOM MD Handbook and Policies 2022-23 states that there are five types of LOAs (Leave of Absences): Administrative (ALOA), Educational (ELOA), Personal (PLOA), Medical (MLOA), and Financial (FLOA). Based on these categories, requesting PLOA is the most applicable to requesting family leave. However, there is no written statement with a timeline specific for a student taking family leave, support offered to student parents, or possibility to continue education during this time.

The goal of this project is to better define student experiences of family leave at WSUSOM to gain understanding of how well students are served by the current policy and to identify potential areas for improvement. A better understanding of these policies and how it affects student parents can assist in promoting administrative changes to best support students seeking family leave.

METHODS

Data will be collected through a survey sent to all of WSUSOM's student population (MS1-MS4) via email. The survey includes questions that asks students:

- if they have children; the ages of their children
- familiarity with WSUSOM policy
- satisfaction with WSUSOM policy
- use of family leave per policy, personal experience
- impacts of family leave policies on educational pursuits and family/support
- suggestions for improvement

Core narrative questions ask:

- "How has the family leave policy at WSUSOM impacted your educational pursuits and family/support?"
- "Ideally, how should family leave be offered at WSUSOM?"
- "What do you suggest WSUSOM do to improve their policy?"

Students who indicated interest were followed-up with an email interview first, and then a phone interview to supplement narrative opportunities.

Medical student parents ideally prefer a family leave policy that allows for flexible, personal, and transparent arrangements. One full school year of family leave is not the desired or maximally beneficial policy. A compromise of balancing time off with continued education might encompass lenient time to complete requirements and online accommodations.

Scan QR code to the right with your device's camera in order to access the survey which is still live to be completed by WSUSOM students who are parents.



REFERENCES

Kraus, MB, Talbott, JMV, Melikian, R, Merrill, SA, Stonnington, CM, Hayes, SN, et al.. "Current parental leave policies for medical students at U.S. medical schools: a comparative study" *Academic Medicine* 2021; 96:1315-8.

Ortega, Sheila R., Barnes, Jacob M. and Waller, Jacquelyn D.. "Parental leave in medical school: supporting students as parents" *Journal of Osteopathic Medicine*, vol. 122, no. 5, 2022, pp. 229-233.

Stack, Shobha W, McKinney, Christy M, Spiekerman, Charles, Best, Jennifer A.. "Childbearing and maternity leave in residency: determinants and well-being outcomes" *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 2018; 94:694-699.

Link to [WSUSOM MD Handbook and Policies 2022-23](#) (Page 125 for leave policies)

RESULTS

Seven survey responses and three follow-up interviews have been conducted thus far. Age of respondents ranges from 24-36, six identifying as female vs. one as male. Their children's ages varied from infancy to school age.

The data suggests three main positions:

- Student parents are not generally familiar with the family leave policy at WSUSOM, with three respondents "not familiar at all."
 - "Didn't know that we could take family leave. It should be advertised as an option." - 31 year old female with two children
- Student parents are generally not satisfied with the family leave policy at WSUSOM.
- Family planning requires consideration of social factors more than educational pursuits.
 - "Students should be able to take shorter periods of time off rather than having to interrupt medical education for an entire year" - 27 year old female student with two children

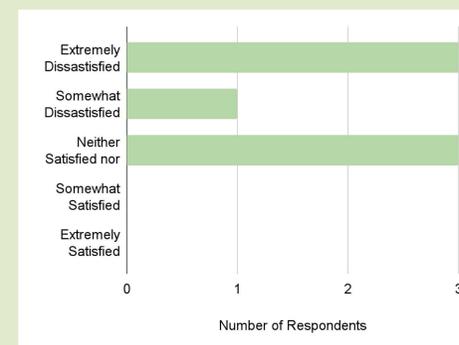


Figure 1. Response to survey question regarding WSUSOM family leave policy satisfaction among medical student parents.

Note: This survey will remain open. Interviews are ongoing and more data is expected to change the results of this project.

CONCLUSIONS

This project is currently a work in progress. The aim is to collect data from student parents that will outline impressions and implications of current policy and point to quality improvement. This data will be supplemented with additional surveys; student parents will be identified and interviewed first via email and then by phone. The collected data will provide a better understanding of family leave sanctions at WSUSOM and will assist in promoting administrative changes to best support students seeking family leave. Results thus far imply that student parents are not satisfied with the current family leave policy and lack adequate accommodation from the school. Student parents prefer flexibility and transparency as top priorities in a family leave policy. Parents deserve a voice in the policies that directly affect their personal and familial success, as well as their children's well-being. As this project continues, additional conclusions will be made about the specific needs of parents and will be presented to the WSUSOM administration as suggestions for policy improvement. These findings will hopefully provide substantial suggestions for improvement to our current policies to allow medical student parents the flexibility they desire from a transparent family leave policy.