

A Policy Agenda for California Student Parents



EXPANDING PATHWAYS FOR STUDENT PARENTS

As California’s public higher education system shifts to better address the needs of today’s college students, who are often juggling work and academic obligations, the segments must not overlook the growing number of student parents—which must also include pregnant students, students on parental leave, and others with dependent care responsibilities. These hundreds of thousands of students with dependent childrenⁱ have greater financial need than their nonparenting peers and are less likely to persist from year to year or earn a degree or certificate.ⁱⁱ Additionally, the majority of student parents intend to enroll in a community college, rather than a public four-year or private university,ⁱⁱⁱ and steps need to be taken to ensure they achieve their educational goals. Therefore, prioritizing their needs and carving a pathway to and through higher education, specifically community colleges, would not only benefit the parents, but improves their child’s success, and strengthens California’s economy, creating more vibrant communities.^{iv}

As such, it is imperative that California addresses the needs of student parents through four main strategies:



- Increase the availability of affordable and quality dependent care
- Increase higher education affordability for student parents
- Advance student-parent friendly institutional design
- Collect and share data on student parents

Increase availability of affordable and quality early care and education for student parents

Student parents face significant obligations outside the classroom that institutions must be prepared to address, most notably caring for dependent children. Access to affordable child care—including a range of options, from family and friend care to center-based care, for infants and older children—and investing in early childhood education pathways are some of the most important supports that can help student parents succeed in college. In fact, one study found that student parents who used campus child care had a 21 percent increase in degree attainment over student parents who did not access campus care.^v However, student parents often do not have access to affordable care, thereby affecting their academic progress.

As a result, California should:

- Increase access to high quality affordable childcare, such as by reforming the state’s subsidized childcare system, expanding campus-based childcare options, growing aftercare options for school-age children, and providing child care tuition relief for student parents
- Address the growing child care provider shortage by leveraging early care and education apprenticeship and training programs^{vi} and increasing provider wages

Increase higher education affordability for student parents

College affordability is one of the biggest barriers to student parents accessing higher education. Student parents face substantial financial insecurity that has been exacerbated by COVID-19. However, one in three student parents never even applied for financial aid in their first year of enrollment.^{vii} Improving college affordability and increasing access to financial aid options, including Cal Grant and Pell Grant, allows them to continue on their education pathway.

As a result, California should:

- Actively support student parents and prospective student parents in maximizing receipt of available financial support by increasing the completion of financial aid applications and use of the dependent child care allowance, along with federal and state public benefits



- Reform state financial aid to meet the needs of student parents by accounting for the total cost of attendance, including increased child-related costs, and removing age-based eligibility requirements and time-out-of-school limitations
- Improve net price calculators to promote clarity in the true cost of college for student parents

Advance student-parent friendly institutional design

Higher education must restructure in order to successfully serve student parents and pregnant students. These students bring a unique set of assets and strengths to postsecondary institutions and balance significant family and work responsibilities. Institutional reforms will not only serve the student parent population but also the needs of today's students who increasingly have experiences and challenges that reflect those of student parents.

As a result, California should:

- Enable more flexible pathways and versatile learning methods that are accessible, cost-effective, portable, and tailored to the needs of student parents, such as competency-based education and credit for prior learning
- Foster child-friendly campuses and reduce stigma faced by student parents by offering family-friendly spaces, services, and supports, such as administrative offices that allow students to bring children to appointments
- Increase the accessibility and availability of online courses and programs with family-friendly structures, such as more frequent enrollment opportunities

Collect and share data on student parents

Public policy focuses on problems we can measure. However, because limited data exist on student parents, their experiences, and their outcomes, state and institutional leaders tend to overlook this population's needs. Without accessible, accurate, and actionable data, policymakers and other leaders cannot gain better insights into this population, provide targeted support, and improve their outcomes.

As a result, California should:

- Require postsecondary institutions to identify, collect, and report data on student parents applying and enrolling at their colleges, including success metrics such as persistence and completion
- Include data on student parents and their educational trajectories in the Cradle-to-Career Data System

- Direct relevant government offices, such as the proposed Cradle-to-Career Office in the state’s Government Operations Agency, to regularly analyze student parents’ progress into and through higher education, including their transitions into the workforce and vocational systems

This policy agenda was made possible by support from Tipping Point. We are grateful to the insight and many helpful suggestions provided by external reviewers: Lande Ajose, Office of Governor Gavin Newsom; Rosie Torres and Patrick Bourke, ECMC Foundation; Leanne Davis, the Institute for Higher Education Policy; David Croom, Aspen Institute; Manny Rodriguez, Ed Trust-West; Veronica Garcia, Students Making a Change; Taylor Myers, the Community College Research Center; JoAnna Reyes Walton, Mothers of Color in Academia de UCLA; Daniel Rivas, UC student parent advocate; Sarah Crow, First 5 Center for Children’s Policy; Darcie Harvey; and Institute for Women’s Policy Research members. All errors are our own.

ⁱ Young Invincibles. (2019). *Today’s Student: Student Parents in California*. https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LuminaFactsheets_California_StudentParents.pdf

ⁱⁱ Reed, S., Grosz, M., Kurlaender, M., and Cooper, S.(March 2021). *A Portrait of Student Parents in the California Community Colleges: A New Analysis of Financial Aid Seekers with Dependent Children*. https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_2_v2.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Reed, S., Grosz, M., Kurlaender, M., and Cooper, S.(March 2021). *A Portrait of Student Parents in the California Community Colleges: A New Analysis of Financial Aid Seekers with Dependent Children*. https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_2_v2.pdf

^{iv} Ascend, the Aspen Institute. *What is 2Gen?* <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/two-generation/what-is-2gen/>

^v Huerta, A.H., Rios-Aguilar, C., Ramirez, D., and Munoz, M. (March 2021). “*Like a Juggler: The Experiences of Racially Minoritized Student Parents in a California Community College*.” https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_3_final.pdf

^{vi} Alameda County Social Services Agency, First 5 Alameda County, Tipping Point Community, and the YMCA. *Alameda County Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program Pilot*. <http://www.first5alameda.org/files/ECE%20Apprenticeship%20Brief.pdf>

^{vii} Reed, S., Grosz, M., Kurlaender, M., and Cooper, S.(March 2021). *A Portrait of Student Parents in the California Community Colleges: A New Analysis of Financial Aid Seekers with Dependent Children*. https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_2_v2.pdf