

Policy Agenda for California Student Parents

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Expanding Pathways for Student Parents

As California's higher education system shifts to better address the needs of today's college students, the needs of student parents must also be elevated. California's 300,000+ student parents¹ have greater financial need than their non-parenting peers and are less likely to complete a degree or certificate, despite having higher GPAs. Moreover, to close the state's credential gap, addressing the needs of current student parents will enable the 3.9 million Californians with children but no college degree¹ to see college as a realistic option. Further, supporting student parents improves their children's academic success and life outcomes, strengthens California's economy, and creates more vibrant communities.²

As such, California must address the needs of student parents through four main strategies:

1. Increase the availability of affordable, quality dependent care
2. Improve higher education affordability for student parents
3. Advance student-parent-friendly institutional design
4. Collect and share data on student parents

INCREASE THE AVAILABILITY OF AFFORDABLE, QUALITY DEPENDENT CARE

Student parents face significant obligations outside the classroom that institutions must be prepared to address, most notably, caring for dependent children. Access to affordable childcare and quality early childhood education programs can help student parents succeed in college. For example, student parents who had access to campus childcare had a 21 percent increase in degree attainment over student parents who did not access campus care.³ However, student parents often do not have access to affordable care, negatively affecting their academic progress. To aid student parents in accessing childcare, 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 childcare tuition relief for student parents
- Address the growing childcare provider shortage by leveraging early care and education apprenticeship and training programs⁴ and increasing provider wages

IMPROVE HIGHER EDUCATION AFFORDABILITY FOR STUDENT PARENTS

¹ California Competes calculations of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2016–2020.

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

³ 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. *UC Davis: Wheelhouse*, 6(3).
https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_3_final.pdf

⁴ 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>

College affordability is one of student parents' biggest barriers. However, one in three student parents never even applied for financial aid during their first year of enrollment.⁵ Improving college affordability and increasing access to financial aid allows student parents to enter and successfully complete their education pathway. To increase student parents' chances of success, California should:

- Actively support student parents in defraying the cost of college by increasing the completion of financial aid applications and access to federal and state public benefits
- Reform financial aid by accounting for the total cost of attendance, including increased child-related costs and use of the federal dependent care allowance
- Fully fund financial aid changes to remove age-based and time-out-of-school requirements
- Improve net price calculators to promote clarity in the true cost of college for student parents

ADVANCE STUDENT-PARENT-FRIENDLY INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Colleges must restructure to successfully serve student parents, who bring a unique set of assets to higher education, balancing significant family and work responsibilities. These institutional reforms will serve the student parents and non-parenting students who increasingly have obligations and needs that reflect those of student parents. To advance student-parent-friendly design, California should:

- Grow flexible pathways and versatile learning methods that are accessible, effective, and meet student parents' needs, such as competency-based education and credit for prior learning
- Increase the accessibility and availability of courses and programs with family-friendly structures, such as online and eight-week courses and more frequent enrollment opportunities
- Increase access to online courses and student supports by advancing broadband for all
- Foster child-friendly campuses and reduce stigma faced by student parents by offering family-friendly spaces, services, and supports

COLLECT AND SHARE DATA ON STUDENT PARENTS

Public policy focuses on problems we can measure. However, because limited data exists on student parents, their needs tend to be overlooked. Without accessible, accurate, and actionable data, policymakers and other leaders cannot gain insights into the needs of student parents, provide targeted support, and improve their outcomes. To generate actionable data, California should:

- Require colleges to report data on student parents applying and enrolling, including progress and success metrics
- Include data on student parents in the Cradle-to-Career Data System
- Direct relevant government offices to regularly analyze data on student parents, including workforce outcomes

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⁵ 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. *UC Davis: Wheelhouse*, 6(2). https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_2_v2.pdf

