



The CALIFORNIA ALLIANCE *for* STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS



ADMINISTERED BY CALIFORNIA COMPETES: HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR A STRONG ECONOMY AND THE EDUCATION TRUST-WEST

Empowering Bright Futures: *The Alliance's Policy Agenda for California's Leaders to Support Student Parents and Their Families*

To empower bright futures for all Californians and bolster a robust state economy that increasingly depends on a skilled workforce, state leaders must support the higher education attainment of the 6.8 million Californian adults without a college degree, the majority of whom (57%) have children.^{1,2} Facilitating their academic success, which is one of the strongest predictors of their children's educational attainment, will create a multiplier effect that will improve the livelihoods of numerous generations and build a more prosperous California.³

State policymakers have invested billions of dollars in higher education in the last year alone to increase the number of Californians completing college.⁴ However, in both the design and implementation of these investments, student parents have been largely left out or deprioritized. For example, institutional and statewide data systems often do not identify student parents as such, financial aid offers do not reflect their true costs, and fewer than 2 percent of the new affordable student housing units being constructed are designated for students with families.^{5,6} Without thoughtful planning, California will continue to miss out on the promise of current and prospective student parents.

The continued lack of family-serving policies and practices at institutions of higher education hinders student parent success and forces them to choose among their education, career, and family obligations. Despite having higher grade point averages than their nonparenting peers, student parents are less likely to complete college, likely because they face many challenges, including housing and food insecurity, at greater rates than students without dependents.^{7,8,9} Consequently, California leaders must seize the opportunity to support Californians with children—including the state's 300,000 undergraduate student parents, 61 percent of whom are first-generation college students—so that they can successfully access and complete a credential, improving both their families' lives and the state as a whole.^{10,11} Crucially, supporting student parents—the majority of whom are Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American—will also help close persistent racial equity gaps in college readiness, access, completion, and degree attainment, and in the workplace.^{12,13}



To pave the way to prosperity, The California Alliance for Student Parent Success (The Alliance) crafted this policy agenda for California policymakers and higher education leaders to support student parents and their families. We urge state leaders to prioritize and invest in five core strategies:

1. Strengthen financial aid to cover student parents' true college costs
2. Provide enough quality, affordable child care options to address student parents' needs
3. Meet the housing needs of student parents and their families
4. Advance family-serving institutional policies and practices
5. Collect and utilize data on student parents' pathways to improve their well-being and success

1. STRENGTHEN FINANCIAL AID TO COVER STUDENT PARENTS' TRUE COLLEGE COSTS

College affordability is one of the biggest barriers to student parents successfully earning a credential.¹⁴ Beyond tuition and fees, students must pay for non-tuition college costs, such as transportation and living expenses, which—even before child care—can exceed \$26,000 annually in California.¹⁵ Despite federal law permitting financial aid administrators to account for child care costs in financial aid packages, 75 percent of student parents report not being informed about this allowance.¹⁶

To cover rising college costs, a larger proportion of California student parents (52%) borrow student loans, compared with their nonparenting peers (35%), and they borrow more on average (median amount at graduation of \$16,750 versus \$15,000).¹⁷ Additionally, 47 percent of California student parents work at least 40 hours per week, compared with 19 percent of nonparenting students.¹⁸ Increasing access to financial aid enables student parents to participate more fully in their studies and raises their likelihood of completion. **To make college affordable for student parents, California policymakers and higher education leaders should:**

- **Strengthen transparency around true college costs for student parents** by utilizing reliable data and student feedback to inform campus cost of attendance budgets and net price calculator outputs that estimate students' out-of-pocket costs;



- **Require financial aid offices to ensure that student parents' cost of attendance budgets, which dictate the amount of financial aid for which they are eligible, account for students' true college costs**, including through cost of attendance budget adjustments, which can employ the federal dependent care allowance;¹⁹
- **Maximize student parents' receipt of all available financial aid**, such as the Cal Grant Access Awards for Students with Dependent Children, by requiring financial aid offices to share information about available programs with student parents and support them as they navigate the entire financial aid application process;
- **Expand student parents' access to financial aid programs by removing eligibility barriers that disproportionately impact them**, such as requirements that exclude students who are older or attend part time; and
- **Increase the amount of need-based financial aid available to sufficiently cover non-tuition college costs**, which include child care and living expenses.

2. PROVIDE ENOUGH QUALITY, AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE OPTIONS TO ADDRESS STUDENT PARENTS' NEEDS

Student parents require affordable, reliable child care to remain enrolled and complete their programs, yet many areas lack sufficient or affordable options. In California, 60 percent of Californians live in “child care deserts.”²⁰ Student parents in California pay an average of \$7,600 annually per child for child care and food costs—more than the annual full-time statewide tuition and fees at community colleges and The California State University (The CSU).²¹ **To support student parents' child care needs, California policymakers and higher education leaders should:**

- **Increase the number of quality, affordable child care providers both on and off campus to meet demand** by leveraging early care and education apprenticeship and training programs and partnering with community-based organizations, and
- **Establish and expand child care options, including after-school programs, and design them to align with student parents' schedules** (for example, making care available during evenings and weekends, when students are in class, studying, or doing coursework).



3. MEET THE HOUSING NEEDS OF STUDENT PARENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Student parents need access to affordable, family-serving housing so that they can focus on their education rather than searching for or working multiple jobs to cover the cost of safe, stable living arrangements for them and their children. With median rent in California at \$1,856 per month—over \$22,000 for an entire year—it is alarming but not surprising that a substantial share of student parents have experienced housing insecurity, even more than their nonparenting classmates (73% compared with 48%, respectively).^{22,23} Despite California investing billions of dollars in affordable student housing, fewer than 2 percent of new units being constructed are designated for students with families.²⁴ **To support student parents' housing needs, California policymakers and higher education leaders should:**

- **Expand access to affordable family-serving housing**, including by connecting student parents with housing vouchers and subsidies;
- **Increase the supply of affordable family-serving student housing both on and off campus**, including through intersegmental housing partnerships that do not require families to move when student parents transfer or graduate; and
- **Consult with student parents and incorporate their feedback into the design and development of housing to serve families** (for example, preferences for apartment-style units instead of dorm rooms and options that are available year-round).

4. ADVANCE FAMILY-SERVING INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Institutions of higher education are not designed for students with children and frequently fail to meet their needs, despite the prevalence of student parents on campus and the millions of Californians who have dependents and intend to go to college.²⁵ Nationally, more than one-third of student parents reported not seeing any family-serving characteristics, such as child care or play areas in waiting rooms, on their campuses, and nearly half felt somewhat or very disconnected from their college community.²⁶



Many campuses have yet to comply with policies mandated by law, like providing priority registration and ensuring lactation spaces are available to students who need them.^{27,28} Or campuses have imposed barriers, like failing to offer sufficient diaper changing stations.²⁹ When resources do exist, they are often siloed, underscoring the need for campuswide reforms to support student parents, who are nearly twice as likely to leave college without graduating as students without children (52% versus 29%, respectively), despite having higher grade point averages.^{30,31} **To advance family-serving institutional policies and practices that support student parent success, California policymakers and higher education leaders should:**

- **Institute flexible pathways and implement versatile teaching methods that are accessible, are effective, and allow student parents to advance efficiently toward their credential**, such as competency-based education and credit for prior learning.³²
- **Increase the availability and accessibility of courses and programs with family-serving structures that account for student parents' busy schedules and multiple responsibilities**, such as online and eight-week courses and more frequent enrollment opportunities. These structures should give attention to closing the digital divide by providing broadband service for all, as well as access to devices and technology.
- **Implement scheduling policies that optimize flexibility for student parents** (for example, providing evening and weekend courses and revising excused absence policies).
- **Facilitate student parents' access to campus resources and supports** by:
 - providing campuswide tailored assistance and designated staff to advance student parents' persistence and completion;
 - ensuring highly visible, accessible, and hygienic diaper stations and other parenting spaces are available on campus;
 - extending the availability of campus resources and services when student parents take medical leave, such as for the birth and sickness of a child; and
 - providing and promoting academic accommodations, such as class recordings and notes, and flexible deadlines and leave policies, inclusive of those available to students with disabilities.
- **Ensure institutions equitably implement existing policies to support student parents**, such as priority registration and access to lactation spaces.



- **Maximize student parents' receipt of public benefits and community resources beyond traditional financial aid**, such as:
 - public assistance, like CalFresh; California Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and CalWORKs;
 - tax credits, including the federal and California Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Young Child Tax Credit, and the child and dependent care credit;
 - vouchers and subsidies for child care and housing, such as the Alternative Payment Program (CAPP) and housing choice vouchers (Section 8); and
 - parenting classes and community health care services.

- **Automate and streamline access to public benefits, removing administrative burdens and barriers faced by student parents** by:
 - modernizing and simplifying language and requirements in public benefits programs and outreach materials;
 - eliminating steps not required by federal law, like applicant interviews or extra documentation submission;
 - utilizing data, community, and social services partnerships to maximize outreach and uptake;
 - reducing the stigma by providing access to all eligible students automatically and establishing opt-out practices; and
 - developing a single application process for multiple public benefits.

- **Cultivate family-serving campus climates that build trust and a sense of belonging** by:
 - actively prohibiting discrimination against student parents and ensuring institutions meet legal standards;
 - establishing peer networks and supporting student parent involvement in student government and campus leadership positions, so they can share experiences and feedback with each other and the wider campus community;
 - creating institutional ally programs with networks of faculty and staff who are highly visible, capable, and ready to respond to student parents' needs;³³ and
 - uplifting the presence and value of student parents and their families to the entire college community, including by amplifying their voices and holding family-serving activities during campus events.



5. COLLECT AND UTILIZE DATA ON STUDENT PARENTS' PATHWAYS TO IMPROVE THEIR WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS

California needs comprehensive data on student parents to evaluate how programs and policies impact them and their families and to craft needed reforms. However, because California does not uniformly collect data on student parents, their needs tend to be overlooked or insufficiently understood.³⁴ Without accessible, accurate, and actionable data—that also maintains individuals' privacy—state and institutional leaders cannot identify student parents' needs, provide targeted support, and improve their outcomes. **To support multigenerational prosperity through actionable data, California policymakers and higher education leaders should:**

- **Mandate that colleges collect, share among campus departments, and make publicly available comprehensive de-identified data on student parents'** application, enrollment, and campus experiences, and their academic and workforce outcomes; and they should disaggregate data by key demographics, such as race and ethnicity, gender, income, geographic location, first-generation status, and education level;
- **Require relevant government agencies that administer programs utilized by student parents and their families (such as the California Department of Social Services, California Student Aid Commission, and Employment Development Department) to train staff to regularly analyze and publish data on student parents,** including applications for and receipt of financial aid and public benefits, and postsecondary and employment outcomes; and they should disaggregate analyses by key demographics; and
- **Include data on student parents with linkages to their families in the California Cradle-to-Career Data System**—containing information such as uptake of social services, higher education attainment, and postsecondary and workforce outcomes—to examine whether policies are strengthening outcomes for and improving the well-being of student parents and their children.³⁵



The Alliance looks forward to working with state and institutional leaders to advance equitable policies and practices through these five core strategies that support student parents' attainment of meaningful credentials that lead to secure, gainful employment and prosperity for multiple generations. To learn more about our policy agenda and how we can partner, please reach out to studentparentsucces@californiacompetes.org.

About The California Alliance for Student Parent Success

The California Alliance for Student Parent Success (The Alliance) is led by [California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy](#) and [The Education Trust–West](#), with support from an Advisory Committee composed of student parents and other field experts. The Alliance is building diverse membership to include organizations focused on a range of issues that impact student parents, such as basic needs security and poverty elimination, child welfare, civil rights, economic development, health, housing, higher education, and social justice.*

*While we use “student parents” for clarity, we recognize this population has many names, such as “parenting students” and “students with dependents,” and honor all students in this community.

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