



# Growing Together:

*Fostering Belonging for Parenting  
Students at California State University*

# Executive Summary

Fostering a strong sense of belonging on campus can be life-changing for California's parenting students by helping them achieve their aspirations of earning a degree. This brief offers findings from a survey of 200 parenting students across 13 California State University campuses. In the survey, students shared their experiences, shedding light on how to build a sense of belonging.

## Key Findings



### Finding 1:

Many parenting students find motivation and develop key academic skills because of their parenting.



### Finding 2:

Roughly half of the surveyed parenting students feel they don't belong on their campus and are not adequately supported.



### Finding 3:

Parenting students are often unaware of programs, resources, and policies that support them, although priority registration is a promising example of positive change.



### Finding 4:

Many parenting students experience a lack of awareness of family-friendly policies from faculty, administration, and other students.



### Finding 5:

Parenting students need more flexibility and dedicated spaces on campus.

## Recommendations

Drawing directly from parenting students' responses, the brief offers five recommendations for specific actions that policymakers, system-level decision-makers, and campus leaders can take to increase parenting students' sense of belonging on campus and empower them to complete their degree.

### Individual campuses should do the following:

1. Clarify and standardize family-friendly policies and guidance.
2. Communicate broadly and often about available resources and supports.

### The California State University Chancellor's Office should do the following:

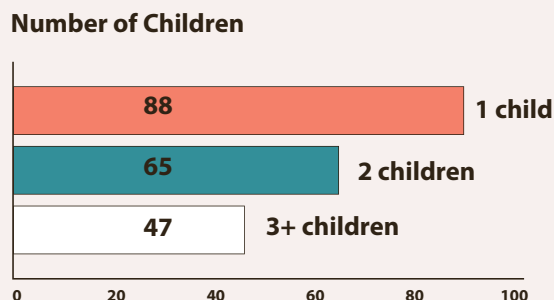
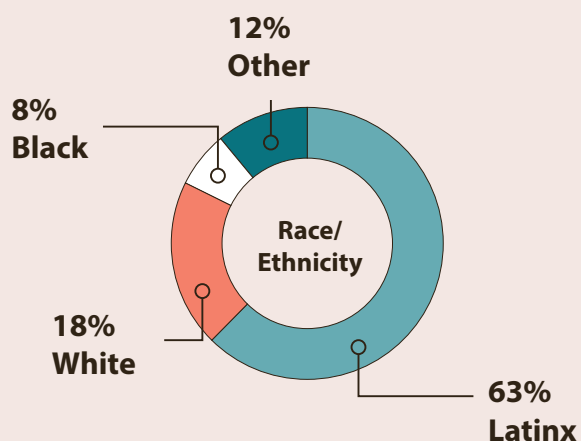
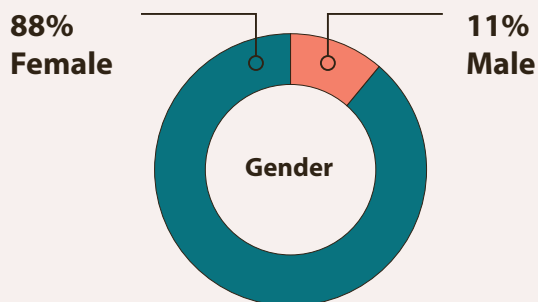
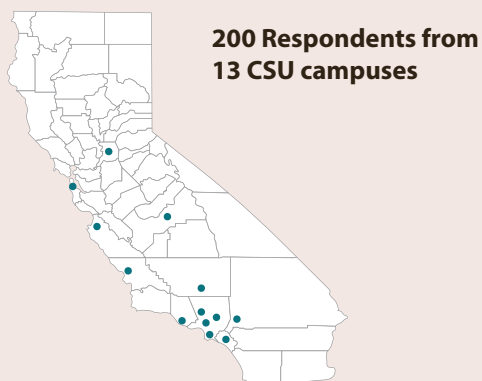
3. Collect and use both qualitative and quantitative data to inform continuous improvement.
4. Develop and issue system-wide guidance on children-on-campus policies.

### State leaders should do the following:

5. Provide ongoing and dedicated funding to meet the needs of parenting students and their children.

We hope this new evidence helps inform action and close gaps in degree completion for parenting students working to earn a degree that unlocks doors not just for themselves but for their families.

**Figure 1. Survey Respondent Demographics**



## Introduction

As California State University (CSU) launches its [Pregnant and Parenting Students Initiative](#) to increase graduation rates for parenting students at its campuses and works to implement the [Greater Accessibility, Information, Notice, and Support \(GAINS\) for Student Parents Act](#), an exciting window of opportunity has opened for student voice to inform campus actions and system-wide change (see more on page 4). We hope this brief increases awareness of parenting students' experiences and helps their voices influence policy and practice changes at the campus, system, and state levels to ensure they feel a strong sense of belonging and are supported in thriving.

Parenting students are deeply invested in succeeding academically and are often motivated by a desire to be strong scholarly role models to their attentive children. Yet our colleges too often fail to help parenting students graduate. By dedicating institutional focus and resources to breaking this cycle of inadequate support, colleges have the potential to create multigenerational benefits, thus increasing the economic prospects and earnings of parenting students and creating positive ripple effects for their children. Research has shown that children whose parents hold a college degree are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and earn a degree themselves, meaning that supporting California's roughly 300,000 undergraduate parenting students is an investment that pays off multiple times over.<sup>1,2</sup>

This brief shares new research that helps answer this question: What can colleges and universities do to make sure every parenting student can leverage their strengths to earn their desired degrees? EdTrust-West partnered with NewWorld to conduct a survey of 200 parenting students across 13 CSU campuses in the fall of 2024 to learn about what is working, what is not, and what is needed when it comes to ensuring parenting students feel welcome and supported as they work toward their degree (Figure 1).



## What Is a “Sense of Belonging,” and Why Does It Matter?

Cultivating a sense of belonging is critical for supporting parenting students’ success. Students with a strong sense of belonging feel accepted, valued, and connected to their college community and are more likely to experience higher academic achievement, persistence, and better long-term mental health.<sup>3,4</sup> On the other hand, research has shown that “belonging uncertainty” — which occurs when students doubt that they belong or are accepted — creates stress, exacerbates feelings of isolation and disengagement, and threatens students’ goals of completing a degree.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, colleges tend to foster a lower sense of belonging for students of color (especially Black, Latinx, and Native American students) and first-generation college students, who report the lowest levels of belonging in four-year colleges.<sup>6</sup> Given that 72% of California’s parenting students are students of color and 61% are first-generation college students, parenting students often feel particularly marginalized or invisible on campuses, making it all the more critical to understand their experiences and ensure they feel welcome and integral in their classes and cohorts.<sup>7</sup>

The good news is that campuses, higher education leaders, and policymakers have the power to change the status quo and actively foster a sense of belonging for parenting students. Physical campus environments; formal institutional policies; informal norms and practices; and interpersonal relationships with peers, faculty, and staff can all affect students’ sense of belonging, for better or worse.<sup>8</sup> We designed our survey to understand parenting students’ experiences with each of these elements and to outline specific actions the CSU, individual campuses, and the state can take to better support parenting students as they work to earn their degrees.

**The Greater Accessibility, Information, Notice, and Support (GAINS) for Student Parents Act is designed to help reduce financial barriers parenting students face and better connect them with information and resources. It requires all California Community Colleges and CSU campuses to do the following:**

1. Starting in the spring of 2025, update their parenting student website before the start of each new semester or quarter.
2. By July 31, 2025, develop and disseminate a cost-of-attendance adjustment policy for students.
3. By the start of the 2026-2027 academic year, implement the cost-of-attendance adjustment policy, collect data identifying parenting students through campus data management information systems and share it with the Chancellor’s Office for inclusion in the state’s Cradle to Career Data System, and update the campus net price calculator to include a baseline student parent cost estimate.

### In Their Own Words

Being a parent makes me a stronger student because ...

*“It is everything. It has shifted my entire purpose. My children give me all the push I need to continue and succeed, no matter the hardships.”*

-Cal State Long Beach, parent of two





## Findings



### Finding 1: Many parenting students find motivation and develop key academic skills because of their parenting.

Most survey participants felt that raising their children helped them develop specific strengths that made them better students. More than three-quarters (77%) of all survey respondents chose to answer an open-ended question that asked how being a parent makes them a stronger student. Of these, 73% shared that they felt more motivated and determined to succeed in their programs. Many identified the source of that drive as the desire to act as a good role model for their children (27%), whereas others named the need to provide financially and to secure better opportunities not just for themselves but for their families (28%).

Additionally, parenting students shared that they gained useful academic skills while juggling parenting with school. These skills included better time management and responsibility (36%), greater resilience in the face of challenges (35%), and a stronger drive to be academically successful (30%).

**“Being a parent has made me a better student by improving my time management and prioritization skills, as balancing family responsibilities forces me to stay organized. I’m strongly motivated by my children’s future, which drives me to work harder. Parenthood has also built my resilience and problem-solving abilities, helping me overcome academic challenges. My broader life perspective enhances my learning, and I strive to be a positive role model for my kids, showing them the value of education and perseverance.”**

— Cal Poly San Luis Obispo student, parent of two

Too frequently, parenting while in college is characterized exclusively as a burden or challenge, but these themes clearly show that assets and advantages also come from parenting while in college. These should be acknowledged, valued, and celebrated.



## Finding 2: Roughly half of the surveyed parenting students feel they do not belong on their campus and are not adequately supported.

Although two-thirds of survey participants (67%) shared they generally feel included on their campus, and the majority (86%) feel that people on their campus want them to succeed, when asked specifically to consider their experience as parenting students, they presented a different picture of their sense of belonging. When asked to think about their identity as a student parent, 42% of survey participants said they felt they did not fit in on their campus, and more than half (55%) shared they did not always feel they belonged.

Respondents who expressed belonging uncertainty shared that they sometimes felt “isolated” or “excluded” because they had children or were older than most of their peers. One characterized this experience as feeling “like an anomaly,” and several respondents mentioned that they did not share with peers the fact that they are parents, perceiving that the norm on campus is akin to a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy when it comes to being a parent while in school. Many of these students were not aware of groups on campus dedicated to supporting students with dependents, had encountered challenges finding classes that fit their schedule, or had experienced inflexibility from faculty regarding attendance and assignments.

In contrast, students who felt like they belonged on campus or reported experiencing supports and accommodations and mentioned specific instances

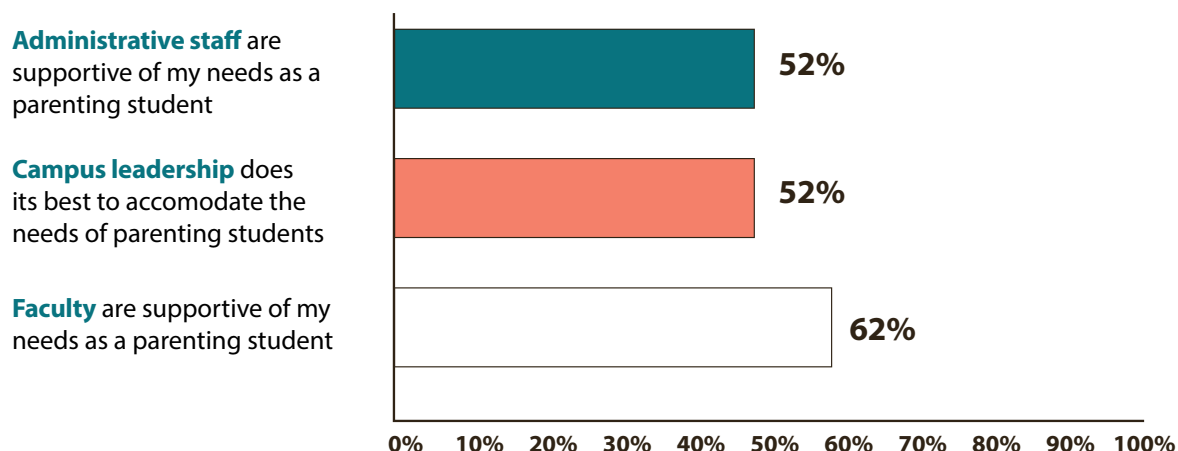
when professors were encouraging and willing to provide thoughtful flexibility and grace on things like deadlines for assignments. These parenting students were also more likely to be aware of groups and programs on campus dedicated to supporting parenting students than those who felt belonging uncertainty. This suggests the tremendous importance of ensuring that all parenting students are aware of and can use resources and programs that support them.

Campus staff and leadership have the power to create more inclusive campus environments, yet only half of the students surveyed (52%) felt their campus leadership was accommodating of parenting students’ needs. Roughly the same share felt that administrative staff support their needs (52%), and a slightly higher share of participants felt that faculty are supportive of their needs as a parenting student (62%) (Figure 2).

These findings underscore that creating an accommodating culture for parenting students is a collective responsibility, shared across all levels of the institution, from staff to leadership. The goal is for campus staff and leadership to translate that knowledge into action by providing accommodations where feasible and connect students to resources and supports.

### Figure 2. Perception of Support From Campus Staff, Faculty, and Leadership

Percentage of participants who agreed with the following statements





## In Their Own Words

Being a parent makes me a stronger student because ...

*“It is literally the only reason I came back to school after dropping out. I feel behind in life, so being a parent fuels me to let nothing deter me from obtaining a degree and a higher-paying job so that she can live a better life with better options.”*

-Cal State Long Beach, parent of one



## Finding 3: Parenting students are often unaware of programs, resources, and policies that support them, although priority registration is a promising example of positive change.

In recent years, CSU campuses have begun to improve data collection and have made efforts, spurred in part by state legislation, to expand resources and policies designed to support parenting students.<sup>9</sup> Providing resources and amending policies are half of the equation for increasing students' sense of belonging. The other half is making sure that students are aware of supportive policies and resources and can take advantage of them. Fewer than half (48%) of surveyed students shared that they could find out about supports for parenting students with ease (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Share of Participants Who Feel They Can Find Out About Parenting Student Supports With Ease**



Only 48% of survey participants agreed with the statement “It is easy to find out what supports are available on campus to parenting students.”

Most respondents shared they were not aware of and had not used many resources, including designated parenting student centers (60%), lactation rooms (35%), and peer clubs or support groups (53%) (Figure 4 ). These relatively low rates of awareness and uptake of supportive resources could reflect both an uneven distribution of resources across campuses and a lack of clear, consistent communication with students about resources that are available. It is a legal requirement, for example, to provide lactation rooms on every campus.

One notable bright spot was that more than half of participants (56%) had taken advantage of the ability to register for classes early, known as priority registration,

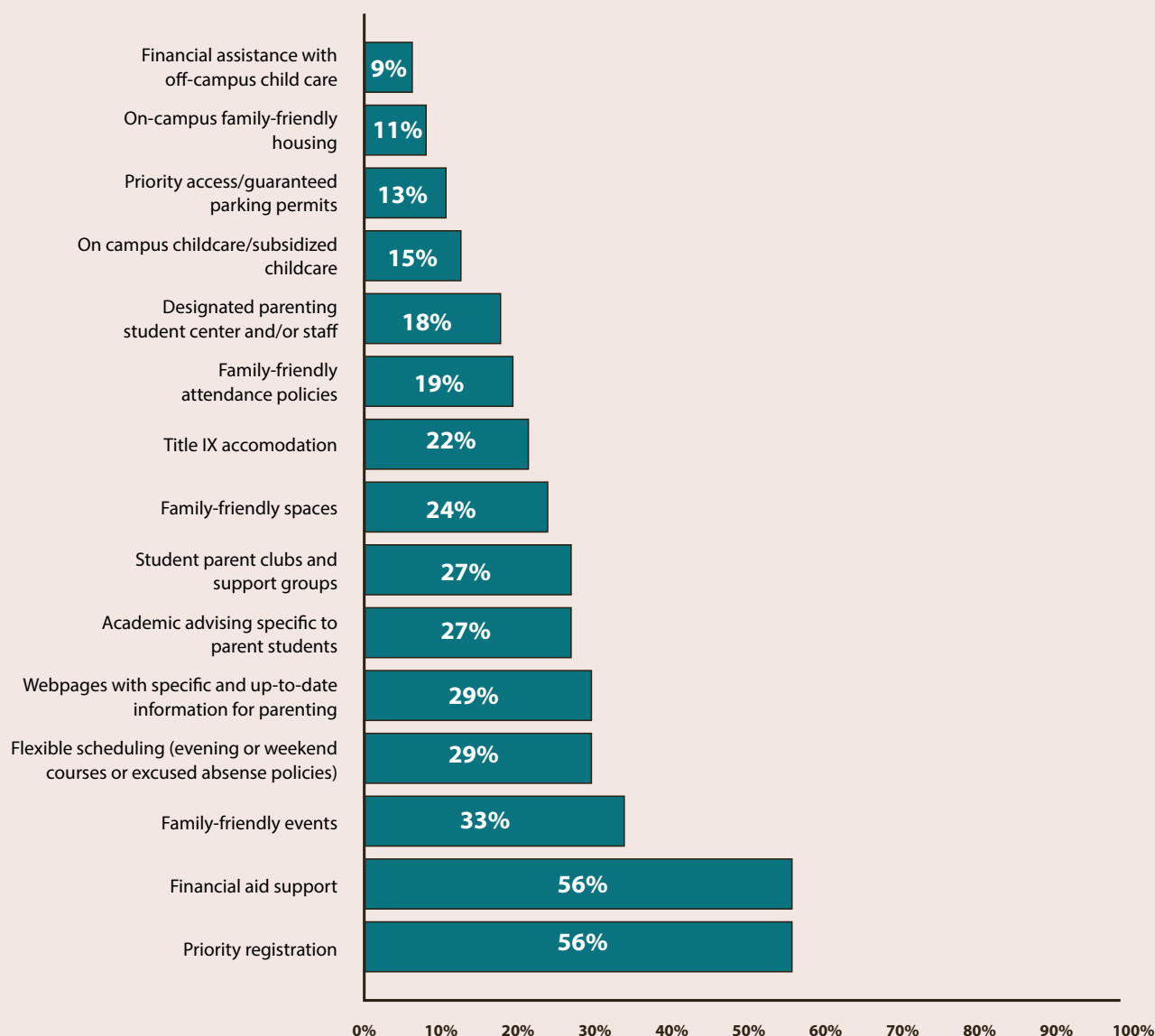
a right newly guaranteed to parenting students by state legislation ([AB2881](#)) starting in 2023. Along with financial aid (56%), priority registration was the resource that had the highest rate of use among students in our sample. Work remains to be done to ensure that all parenting students are aware of this option, as 32% of respondents reported being unaware they could take advantage of priority registration. However, students who registered early expressed gratitude for the much-needed agency this provided when it came to organizing their schedule to balance school, work, and parenting responsibilities.

When asked what actions their university could take to help them attain their degree, respondents most frequently indicated increasing awareness and transparency about available services on their campus.

One student from Sacramento State summed up this recommendation by suggesting every campus provide a “list of resources and information available to all parenting students from daycare, family rooms exclusively for parenting students, and other necessary resources to accommodate the needs of parenting students in general” as well as an “orientation of procedures on the list of resources and information and contact person if having issues or problems.” The most promising avenue for increasing this visibility is likely through campus websites, which is how 45% of participants said they found information about supports for parenting students. Training staff, faculty, and leadership is also critical, as these were the next most common sources students relied on for information (39%).

## Figure 4. Utilization of Parenting Student Resources

Share of participating students who have used each resource







## Finding 4: Many parenting students experience a lack of awareness of family-friendly policies from faculty, administration, and other students.

Parenting students navigating a complex maze of campus resources to understand what family-friendly policies exist are often faced with the need to simultaneously educate faculty and staff on these policies. In some instances, campuses do not have clear policies in place on issues such as whether children are allowed in classrooms or campus spaces like advising offices, opening the door to inconsistencies and confusion as each professor or staff member is left to create their own approach. When nearly half (43%) of surveyed parenting students experience policies that limit absences regardless of the reason, more than a third experience policies that mandate in-person instruction (37%), and more than a third experience others' assumptions that children are not allowed in the classroom (37%), it becomes clearer why so many feel they do not belong on their campus.

Uncertainty around what policies exist to support their success negatively affects parenting students' sense of belonging on campus. The lack of consistent campus-wide guidance places an undue burden on them to both learn what supportive policies exist and educate their peers, faculty, and staff on the protections provided by these policies. When faculty or staff are unaware of family-friendly policies or maintain classroom expectations that are rigid rather than accommodating, the result is a classroom far less likely to foster the success of parenting students.

**“At the beginning of each semester, all professors give the same standard warning that missing a certain number of classes will result in being dropped, with no mention of accommodations for emergencies or child care needs. This rigid approach can be particularly stressful for parenting students who may face unforeseen challenges. The lack of information and clarity often leads to awkward moments, as bringing a child to campus can attract looks from other students and even professors, making us feel out of place.”**

— CSU Bakersfield student, parent of one





## Finding 5: Parenting students need more flexibility and dedicated spaces on campus.

We asked parenting students what advice they would give to their campuses to improve parenting students' sense of belonging. The two most common themes across students' open-ended responses were that colleges should do the following:

1. Provide more family-friendly campus facilities and events for parents.
2. Improve communication and outreach.

Students felt that focusing on these tangible changes would help reduce feelings of isolation and would create a sense that parenting students were fully woven into the fabric of the campus community rather than an afterthought.

We also asked what supports students needed from their campuses to graduate. One common response was a need for colleges to provide child care or assistance with child care. Students shared that they would benefit greatly from more on-campus child care options, which often lacked sufficient slots and had long waitlists. Parents of school-age children expressed a desire for campus-based after-school programs or homework spaces their children could use while they studied. Another common support students expressed a need for was more flexible learning options, including more evening classes and online options. Compared with their peers, parenting students are more likely to work while in school, so this flexibility is especially valuable in striking the balance needed to persist and complete a degree.

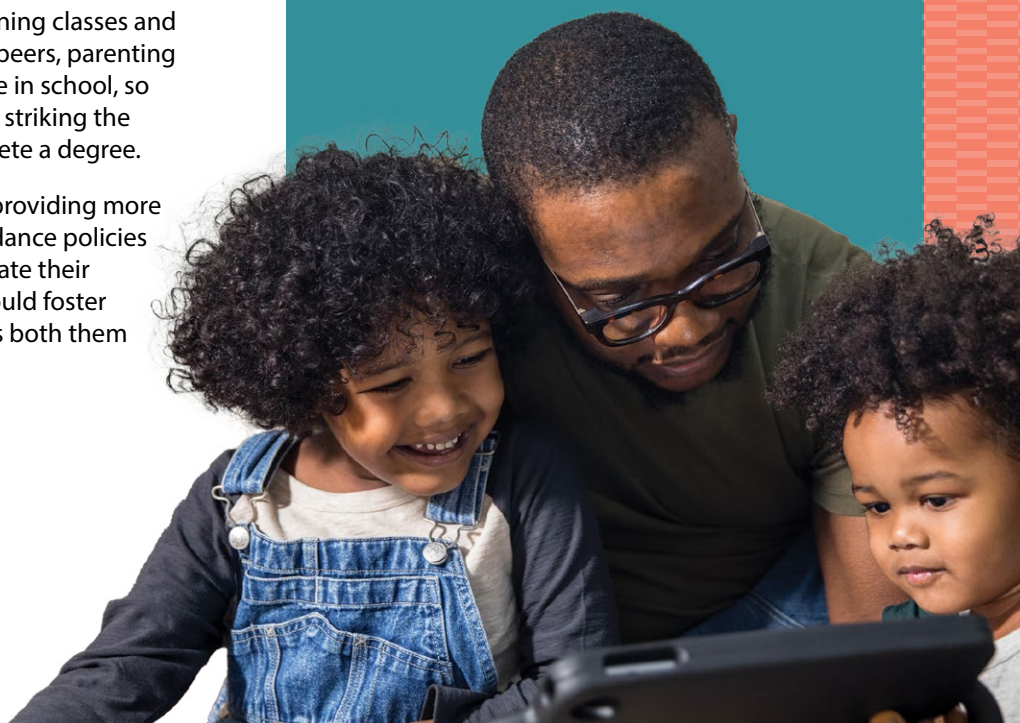
Students' responses make clear that providing more flexible classroom options and attendance policies would help parenting students navigate their education with fewer barriers and would foster a learning environment that supports both them and their children.

## In Their Own Words

Being a parent makes me a stronger student because ...

*"I am familiar with self-sacrifice, patience, failure, resilience, and accountability. My actions don't just affect me, but everyone. As a result, when I do something, I do it with purpose."*

-CSU Channel Islands, parent of two





# Campuses Leading the Way

Some campuses are leading the way in designing programs and connecting parenting students to resources that strengthen their sense of belonging and help them succeed. We highlight two CSU campuses where efforts provide an example for expanding and deepening parenting student supports.

## California State University, Dominguez Hills

**“CSUDH is also offering housing for parents to live on campus with their kids so they can finish school. Also, they have a funding program to help single parents, and I am happy for each of these programs because I am a single mother.”**

— CSU Dominguez Hills student, mother of one

### **Building a sense of belonging begins with meeting basic needs**

California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), stands out for the recent launch of its [Pregnant and Parenting Students Program](#), which aims to empower, understand, and support the diverse needs of its parenting students. As part of these efforts, CSUDH is assessing the housing needs of its parenting students and setting the stage for an on-campus family housing pilot.<sup>10</sup>

Parenting students experience higher rates of financial instability than their non-parenting peers and experience high levels of housing insecurity.<sup>11</sup> On-campus housing provides opportunities for students to fully immerse themselves in campus life by participating in community-building events and learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Moreover, on-campus housing provides opportunities for students to more readily attend events and to deepen their peer relationships and professional networks.

Arguably, there is no better way for an institution to communicate belonging than by providing students with a physical representation of their commitment and investment in their academic success — a safe place for their families to call home.





## California State University, Bakersfield

**“I would not have graduated if my professors didn’t allow my children to sit quietly in class when my child care fell through. I was struggling and was successful because a few of them gave me the opportunity to be.”**

— CSU Bakersfield student, mother of two

### **Flexibility and compassion from faculty foster an inclusive learning environment**

Parenting students often withhold their parenting status from faculty, staff, and peers because of fear of judgment, however faculty at California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB), have cultivated a culture of transparency, ushering in the voluntary disclosure of students’ parenting status.<sup>12</sup> In our survey, nearly 70% of CSUB respondents reported feeling included by others on campus, the highest percentage among surveyed campuses.

Faculty’s flexibility with class assignments, which include extending exam and homework deadlines, permissive attendance policies, and penalty-free tardies, signal to parenting students that they will not be judged or penalized for being

a parent. In some cases, CSUB parenting students report professors permitting exceptions from no-electronics policies, allowing parenting students to step away for a phone call or respond to text messages to confirm their children’s school drop-off and pick-up. Additionally, parenting students at CSUB report that it is not uncommon for faculty to allow them to join class remotely or to bring their children to class when child care arrangements fall through.

These policies and practices, although informal and ad hoc, steer parenting students on a path toward degree completion by not forcing them to choose one identity over the other but by allowing their identities as students and parents to coexist. CSUB survey respondents expressed the desire for a more family-inclusive campus and formal parenting student policies, but one thing is clear: Supportive faculty have a lasting impact on the parenting students with whom they engage, and they are a critical piece of fostering belonging and contributing to students’ academic success and degree completion.







## Recommendations: Following Parenting Students' Lead

Based on the experiences shared by parenting students, we encourage individual campuses, the CSU system, and state policymakers to implement the following recommendations.

### Individual Campuses

#### 1. Clarify and standardize family-friendly policies and guidance

Create and encourage all professors to use family-friendly syllabus statement templates and attendance policies that include language on expectations for attendance and participation, while also outlining support for parenting students and flexibility around parenting responsibilities, which include caring for an ill child.

#### 2. Communicate broadly and often about available resources and supports

Create a coordinated communications campaign that uses all available avenues, including campus websites and orientation events, to increase awareness of existing supports, including campus child care centers.\* Inform faculty and staff of these student supports and resources by conducting awareness campaigns and investing in programmatic initiatives, like [Bring Your Kids to College Day](#), that increase parenting student visibility.

*\*CSU East Bay and CSU Channel Islands did not offer campus-based child care services at the time this report was written, although [planning is underway to open an on-campus child care facility](#) at CSU Channel Islands.*

### CSU Chancellor's Office

#### 3. Collect and use both qualitative and quantitative data to inform continuous improvement

Regularly collect data on parenting students' experiences and sense of belonging using instruments like this survey, consistent with the requirements of the GAINS Act [AB 2458](#) (Berman, 2024), and leverage this data to inform improvements to programming and practices. As a starting point, the full survey instrument is included in the appendix for adaptation.

#### 4. Develop and issue system-wide guidance on policies regarding children on campus

Eliminate ambiguity and make it clear when and where the children of parenting students are allowed on campuses, balancing inclusivity with practicality and safety for all, particularly children. This includes guidance on access to classrooms and facilities and participation in events.

### State Leaders

#### 5. Provide ongoing and dedicated funding to meet the needs of parenting students and their children

Dedicated funding could be used for the development or expansion of campus child care centers, postsecondary child care grants, and on-campus after-school care for school-aged children. It could also be used to fund the creation of family-friendly campus environments through the development of family-inclusive spaces, including staffed student parent centers, 24-hour family study rooms, and portable lactation spaces.



## Conclusion

Although “sense of belonging” can feel like an abstract concept, the findings in this report make it clear: Belonging is deeply rooted in the implementation of equitable policies and provision of tangible resources and services on every campus. What does that look like in practice, according to parenting students? It looks like clean, secure, and accessible lactation spaces; a spacious family

resource center adorned with games, books, and colorful toys; highchairs and booster seats in dining halls; frequent, joyful family-inclusive events; and flexible attendance policies. State policymakers, the CSU Chancellor’s Office, and campuses can make this vision a reality, and in doing so, supercharge student parents’ rates of degree completion.

# Appendix

## Survey Methodology

### Fielding

We surveyed current CSU student parents across two fielding waves. Wave 1 included 49 participants and was conducted from August through September of 2024, and Wave 2 included 151 participants and took place in October 2024. The survey was fielded across 18 CSU campuses, with student parents opting into the survey.

### Sample

This sample is not representative of all parenting students in the CSU system and should not be interpreted as statistically generalizable. Rather, the survey data provides valuable insights into common themes and lived experiences shared by the participants.

### Campuses represented:

Bakersfield (32)	Long Beach (21)	San Bernardino (14)
Channel Islands (6)	Los Angeles (3)	San Francisco (7)
Dominguez Hills (42)	Monterey Bay (24)	San Luis Obispo (19)
Fresno (15)	Northridge (2)	
Fullerton (6)	Sacramento (9)	

For access to the full set of survey questions, [click here](#). We encourage campuses to adapt and use the survey to better understand the experiences and needs of their parenting students.

## Acknowledgements

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