

STATE POLICY FOR STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS: A LANDSCAPE SCAN OF POLICY SOLUTIONS ENACTED AT THE STATE LEVEL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While promoting student-parent success has mainly been left to institutions of higher education, several states have considered or adopted a range of policy initiatives to support student parents in postsecondary education. This paper provides state policy stakeholders, including governors, state agencies, and advocates, with a snapshot of the multitude of issues faced by student parents and with options to utilize state policy to address these issues.



States have considered or implemented policy solutions that fall into several categories: improving the collection and availability of data on student parents; addressing the cost of college for parenting and other non-traditional students; meeting student parents' basic needs, including housing and food; improving the availability and accessibility of childcare for parenting students; and supporting the availability of on-campus services for student parents.

Further, some state initiatives promote student parent success by providing direct support to students, while others seek to improve the ability of institutions of higher

education to meet the needs of student parents. Policymakers should consider both approaches when considering ways to best meet the needs of parenting students.

There has been a significant focus on policy initiatives to improve college retention and completion rates, and it is critical that federal and state policymakers prioritize the student-parent population in those discussions. In particular, state policymakers should consider ways to ensure that student parents are visible and consulted throughout the process of policy development. Further, state policymakers should consider the impacts of policy changes beyond the education sector—such as housing and social safety net programs—on this population.

INTRODUCTION

Earning a college degree has long been critical to unlocking many high-paying jobs – and, as a result, to economic mobility and security. Increasingly, however, the traditional “norm” of a college student—one who enrolls straight out of high school, receives some support from their parents, lives on campus, and does not have substantial work or family responsibilities outside of school—does not fit the reality of much of the student population.

Today, students who are themselves parents make up a significant percentage of those enrolled in college. Despite growing recognition that supporting the ability of parents to pursue postsecondary education is critical to both meeting the demands of the economy and bolstering the ability of low-income parents to lift their families out of poverty, it has mainly been left to institutions of higher education to meet the needs of this group of students.

Across the United States, many states have explored a range of policies aimed at bolstering student parents' ability to pursue educational goals, either by providing resources and opportunities that may be particularly beneficial for parenting students; or by supporting the capacity of postsecondary institutions to develop or expand resources available to enrolled student parents.



This paper provides a landscape scan of how state governments have used various policy levers to support student parents, address challenges and barriers they face, and make postsecondary education more accessible to people caring for children. By providing an overview of existing policy mechanisms to support student parents, this paper aims to offer state policy stakeholders – including legislators, governors, state agencies, and advocates – a snapshot of the multitude of issues faced by student parents and options to utilize state policy to address these challenges.

State policy—adopted by legislators, governors, or agencies—can be a critical driver of change and make a tangible difference in the lives of student parents. Previous IWPR research found that “state-level policy and resource investment play a vital role in shaping student parents' access to assistance and supports across systems and making college more affordable” (White and Reichlin Cruse 2021), calling on states “to invest in systemic reform that aims to increase affordable postsecondary opportunities and better service provision for student parents across higher education and workforce sectors.”

Further, student parents are impacted by a wide range of policy issues, including those tied directly to higher education as well as broader systemic issues, including food, housing, and other basic needs assistance, as well as immigration and citizenship. When these policies fail to prioritize student parent needs, they can create additional barriers for parents seeking postsecondary education. The needs of student parents must be considered in a full spectrum of policy conversations, and

states can better support parenting students by including student parents themselves in those conversations.

The policies discussed in this paper fall into five main categories:

- Initiatives to expand and improve data collection, disaggregation, and analysis around student populations, including parental status;
- Efforts to address affordability and cost of college with a particular focus on non-traditional students, including student parents;
- Policy changes intended to expand student parents' access to basic needs support, such as housing and food assistance;
- Programs, policies, and funding intended to improve availability and accessibility of child care for students; and
- Initiatives and resources supporting the provision of on-campus services and support for student parents.

While this paper is not an exhaustive list of all policies considered or enacted, it provides examples of policy solutions in each of these categories from states across the country.

Finally, some state policies have embraced a two-generation (2Gen) approach, which looks at a family in its totality, recognizing that the well-being of children and parents are interconnected. Policies rooted in a 2Gen approach are informed by the entire family's needs and seek to address the needs of both children and adults (Ascend Aspen Institute).

WHO ARE STUDENT PARENTS: AN OVERVIEW

Each student parent is, first and foremost, an individual with a complex web of identities, needs, aspirations, and challenges. Data published by IWPR provide a snapshot of who student parents are and why addressing the challenges they face should be a priority for policymakers. More than one in five college students are parents; 3.8 million students are raising children while pursuing a postsecondary degree, 2.7 million (70 percent) of whom are mothers (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019). Most mothers in college are single or unpartnered (divorced or widowed). By contrast, the majority of fathers who are student parents are married (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019).

The largest share of student parents attends community college – 42 percent of degree-seeking students who are parenting are enrolled in a community college, compared with 18 percent who attend private for-profit institutions, 17 percent who attend public four-year institutions, 13 percent who are enrolled in private non-profit four-year institutions, and 10 percent who are enrolled in some other type of institution or more than one institution. Student parents also make up a disproportionate number of students at for-profit colleges: research by IWPR and Ascend at the Aspen Institute noted that 45 percent of all students at for-profit institutions have children, and 39 percent are single mothers (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019).

Data indicate that student parents are more likely to be people of color. Across racial/ethnic identities, Black college students are the most likely to be parents: 33% of Black college students are raising children, and two in five Black women in college are mothers (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019).

POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENT PARENTS

Many factors impact postsecondary degree attainment and persistence among student parents, including the limited availability of high-quality, affordable childcare, the cost of tuition and other related expenses, and competing work demands to provide for their families, among other issues. The federal government and several states have taken specific policy and legislative action to support postsecondary degree attainment and persistence among student parents by enhancing data collection efforts, increasing financial assistance as well as housing and child care support, and developing on-campus programs to support student parents and their families.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH ON STUDENT PARENTS

At all levels—federal, state, and institutional—data on student parents are limited, siloed, or non-existent. Very few national entities, state data systems, or campuses collect specific information about parenting students, or their unique needs, or the challenges to degree attainment or



persistence that they confront. The lack of comprehensive data on this population contributes to a general lack of visibility for student parents and can lead to institutions and policymakers underestimating their prevalence and ignoring or misunderstanding their needs (Lewis and Polk 2021).

Better data collection can help to inform better policy, and data collection at all levels is important to create a complete picture of student parents' experiences. For example, better use of existing topline data sources or improved collection of demographic data might enable states to better understand the magnitude of their student parent population but will yield little detail on

the specific needs of that population in a given state. Data collection at the institutional level could identify geographic discrepancies, urban/rural divides, or other regional differences among student parents. Surveys could add additional layers to understanding the student parent experience by asking questions around prioritization of needs, and help policymakers better understand how student parents interact with various support systems and safety net programs. States should explore opportunities to improve data collection and research at all levels, include information on student parents in existing data collection initiatives, explore opportunities to survey student parents or support institutions to collect information on enrolled student parents, and identify ways to comparatively assess outcomes for student parents.

Data Collection at the Federal Level

Several federal data sources that include information on student parents and provide a topline understanding of the national population of parenting students. The primary existing source of data

at the federal level is the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES), which publishes relevant data from several surveys:

- The [National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey](#) (NPSAS) data can be used to calculate the share of students who are parents and to compare characteristics and academic outcomes of student parents with other students at the national level;
- The [Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study](#) (BPS) data can be used to analyze student parent completion rates from their first year through their third and sixth years; and
- The [Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study](#) (B&B) includes data on student parents who graduated from four-year institutions, at the time of graduation and 1, 4, and 10 years later.

Federal-level information on student parents is also available through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which includes a question on whether a student has dependent children. Previous IWPR analysis found that the FAFSA form, while useful for helping to determine financial aid eligibility for students, does not capture pertinent information such as the age of children (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020), and it does not collect information on non-custodial parents or students who may not be legally responsible but nevertheless are doing the work of parenting minors in their household. The FAFSA also does not collect information on student needs—for example, whether the student requires child care. Further, while the FAFSA can help colleges estimate the number of students with children, it only captures students who both qualify for federal aid and complete the FAFSA form and does not provide a comprehensive picture of all parenting students. FAFSA data may help colleges estimate the number of parenting students on their campus, but, even when fully utilized, cannot provide a comprehensive picture of this population.

Data Collection at the State Level

Policymakers in some states have passed laws requiring improved data collection on student parents. For example, Illinois enacted the Student Parent Data Collection Act ([Illinois SB 0267](#)) on July 9, 2021. This legislation requires each public institution of higher education to determine the parental status of each enrolled student and collect specified information about those students who are parents. Similarly, Oregon passed [Senate Bill 564](#) on June 10, 2021, requiring a question or questions allowing each student to identify whether they are a parent or acting as a parent or guardian, as part of the annual collection of demographic information by public postsecondary institutions of education. In 2020, Michigan adopted [legislation](#) requiring that public universities “collect demographic information from students with dependent children,” allowing institutions to determine the method of data collection.

In addition to legislation that specifies student parents as a population, broader efforts to improve overall student data collection mechanisms could also impact the data collected on student parents. For example, in 2021, California legislatively established the Cradle-to-Career Data System, a statewide, [longitudinal data system](#) for the state (through [A.B. 132, the Postsecondary education trailer bill](#)). The Cradle-to-Career Data System is described as “dashboards, query tools, and an analytical data set for researchers, policymakers, educators, and community members.” As of this writing, California is beginning year three of a [revised five-year](#) implementation plan for the system. California should engage student parents, advocates, and other stakeholders around ways to utilize the nascent data system to collect actionable data on student parents. Inclusion of student parents



in this longitudinal data system could not only help policymakers better understand the scope of the population but also be used to assess outcomes for student parents and measure the success of state- and campus-level initiatives in providing services.

State-level surveys can provide some insight into the specific characteristics and needs of student parents for state policymakers. For example, in January 2023, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) Washington's cabinet-level agency dedicated to improving educational attainment, published a report outlining the findings from a statewide basic needs survey of over 9,700 students (Washington Student Achievement Council 2023). The survey provides details about the lives of student parents, finding that parenting students reported basic needs insecurity at substantially higher rates than non-parenting students, and offering some additional detail about their

experience. For example, 30 percent of respondents reported needing to use child care during the academic year and, of those, 66.5 percent reported they could not afford to pay for child care. The report was also illustrated some differences in experience, highlighting which educational sectors and geographic regions of the state experienced the highest and lowest rates of students who were unable to afford child care.

Including questions on parenting status in surveys, as well as questions about availability, accessibility, and cost of child care, help to provide policymakers with a more complete understanding of the student parent experience. While surveys can be limited in their representativeness, they can help policymakers better understand the challenges that student parents face by unearthing details about their experiences. As such, surveys can serve as an additional tool to aid policy development.

Other Data Collection

Some postsecondary institutions collect additional information or data related to student parents and may use the information to support student parents, create programs and initiatives, and better understand persistence and degree attainment. Data collection at the institutional level could serve as a model for broader efforts to collect data on student parents.

In addition, several private surveys collect data on student parents. These include the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), a product of the [Center for Community College Student Engagement](#) at the University of Texas at Austin. This survey includes several questions on dependent care and its implications for student parents' education.

Until recently, the [#RealCollege Survey](#), administered by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University, was the largest annual survey focused on basic needs and security among college students nationwide (The Hope Center 2021). The survey included disaggregated data

along several demographic variables, including parenting status. Starting in 2023, the [Student Basic Needs Survey](#) will replace the #RealCollege Survey to improve awareness about basic student needs on college campuses and to provide actionable data for advocates and policymakers.

The Student Financial Wellness survey by the Trellis Company also provides insight into the financial well-being of postsecondary students. The fall 2021 report aggregates findings from 104 colleges and universities across the country, and it includes detailed findings on the financial circumstances of student parents (Fletcher et al. 2022).

AFFORDABILITY AND THE COST OF POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENT PARENTS

The cost of college has risen sharply in recent decades, significantly outpacing inflation; the price of college increased 63 percent from 2006 to 2016 alone (compared to a 21 percent increase for all items) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Financial support is available for many low-income students but falls far short of the actual current costs of an education. Pell Grants—the single largest source of federal grant aid supporting postsecondary education students—once paid nearly 80 percent of the cost of a four-year public college degree, but currently cover only about one-third of the expense.

These costs can be particularly burdensome for student parents. A model developed by California Competes estimated that student parents pay \$7,592 more than their non-parenting peers annually, once child care and food expenses are included (California Competes 2020). Legislative and policy solutions at the state and federal levels should examine the impact of rising costs and living expenses on degree attainment for student parents, assess the short- and long-term implications of student debt, and consider options to provide financial assistance targeted toward student parents as well as free or reduced tuition for students with a demonstrated financial need.

Student Debt

Student debt remains a nationwide crisis that extends far beyond student parents: one in six adults, or 43 million Americans, has federal student debt, for an overall total of \$1.6 trillion (Congressional Research Service 2022).

This issue is particularly salient for student parents: IWPR research shows student parents borrow more for college than other students (Reichlin Cruise et al. 2019, Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023). In 2015-2016, median debt among student parents was 2.5 times higher than debt among students without children. Single mothers borrow at higher rates than other student parents and students without children. Black student parents hold more student debt than parents (and nonparents) of every other racial/ethnic background.

IWPR research has further highlighted that student parents also have more difficulty paying off their educational loans than students without children (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023). Student mothers struggled more than student fathers. Black student parents were more likely to take out loans for their degrees and struggle with loan repayment, compared with the overall student-parent population.

At a federal level, President Joe Biden initially pursued a “one-time student loan debt relief policy” that offered up to \$20,000 in loan cancellation benefits for each available per qualifying individual.

Since the Supreme Court ruled against the President's plan in June 2023, the Biden Administration has continued to pursue federal strategies to address the nationwide student debt crisis, including utilizing authority given under the Higher Education Act to create a new pathway to relief, and announcing about \$39 billion in loan forgiveness for over 800,000 borrowers through fixes to the loan system's income-driven repayment plans.

While these actions are not specific to student parents, they will likely yield critical benefits for this population, due to the disproportionate debt burden faced by student parents. In particular, the Biden Administration's changes to income-driven repayment may benefit many student parents: among other changes the new plan lowers the threshold to qualify for \$0 monthly payments, from 150 percent of the federal poverty line to 225 percent, enabling more individuals to qualify. IWPR research has found that over two-thirds of student parents are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Reichlin Cruse et al., 2021).

On a state level, all 50 states and Washington, D.C. have some form of student loan repayment or forgiveness program; however, most offer loan repayment assistance programs that are tied to a specific qualifying profession or require participants to work in a specific location. Generally, participants in these plans must agree to work in underserved areas or areas with shortages of practitioners of their occupation—for example, teachers or medical providers who serve a designated period of time in a low-income or rural area, or lawyers who work for legal aid organizations or as public defenders. While these programs may be an option for some student parents, the industry and work location requirements make them inherently inflexible, and only beneficial to students studying certain topics and pursuing specific careers. Loan forgiveness programs requiring recipients to live and work in specific areas might pose challenges to parents, who often must consider factors including child care access, proximity to family and other support systems, and education (including early childhood and primary) in determining where to live and work.

Financial Assistance

In addition to loans, financial assistance may be available through scholarships and grants. Several state programs offer financial assistance targeted at adult learners and other non-traditional students. While student parents may fit the criteria for these programs, the financial assistance does not specifically target student parents. States could extend existing financial assistance programs to student parents by including parenting status as a qualifying factor. State policymakers could also create new financial assistance programs expressly aimed at student parents.

Examples of states with existing grant programs for adult learners in general include Massachusetts, which offers a [Part-Time Grant Program for](#) adult students who "find themselves needing to return to the classroom on a less than full-time basis," and Minnesota, which has the [Alliss Two-Year Opportunity Grant](#) for adults returning to college. Indiana offers an [Adult Student Grant](#) through the *You Can. Go Back.* campaign, which aims to help working adults studying for an associate degree, bachelor's degree, or certificate. Tennessee has a [Reconnect Grant](#), available to students classified as independents on the FAFSA or who are at least 23 years of age. West Virginia offers a [Higher Education Adult Part-Time Student \(HEAPS\) Grant](#) program aimed at supporting adults who are continuing their undergraduate education part-time.

It is likely that significant numbers of student parents already qualify for these scholarship and grant programs for adult and non-traditional students because student parents are, on average, older than their peers without children (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019). States could improve student parents'

access to these existing programs by expanding criteria to include all student parents, regardless of age; states could also market these grant programs directly to parenting students and conduct targeted outreach to this population. Further, states could create new grants designed specifically for parenting students and explore other opportunities to reduce the burden of tuition and related costs of post-secondary education for student parents.

STUDENT PARENTS' ACCESS TO BASIC NEEDS SUPPORTS

Parenting students not only must pay for the cost of their education, but also are often responsible for contributing to—or covering—the costs of basic needs like food, housing, and transportation for their family. IWPR research has found that student parents are more likely to report not having sufficient funds for basic needs in the past three months than are non-parenting students (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023).

In many cases, students who are parents may be eligible for social programs designed to support low-income families. Because these programs are not designed for students, parenting students may face particular challenges navigating the process and accessing the benefits. In addition, many social safety net programs have federally-imposed requirements that prioritize work, forcing some students to abandon their education in order to access these programs.

In some cases, states have explored options to improve student parents' access to benefits or to expand access to education for participants in social safety net programs. States should prioritize efforts to ensure that low-income student parents can access basic needs assistance, including by allowing recipients to satisfy the work requirements attached to the programs through pursuit of a full spectrum of postsecondary educational opportunities.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is a federal block grant program intended to improve the ability of states to provide assistance and support low-income families. Federal TANF funding totals \$16.5 billion per year and has neither increased nor seen adjustment for inflation since the law passed in 1996 (Congressional Research Service, 2023). States are also required to contribute funds toward TANF-related activities and are responsible for determining how the funds are used in pursuit of the program's statutory objectives.

TANF faces a number of systemic challenges that have ramifications far beyond student parents, but the program's shortcomings may have particular impacts on students trying to access its benefits. The program is chronically underfunded: because of the lack of increased investment in the program and failure to adjust for inflation, the Congressional Research Service estimates that the basic TANF block grant lost 45 percent of its value between 1997 and 2022 (Congressional Research Service 2023). This loss translates into fewer eligible families receiving assistance through the program. In addition, federally-imposed work requirements mean that a majority of families receiving cash assistance in each state must be engaged in work 20 or 30 hours per week (depending on the age of the children).¹ Studies have found that working students earn fewer credits than their peers who are not working, take longer to complete their degrees, and are less likely to graduate; student parents

¹ The racist underpinnings of TANF's "work first" policies have been documented by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Floyd et al. 2021); these underlying paradigms have contributed to the deterioration of the cash assistance program and continue to cause particular harm to Black women and other women of color.

may face still greater difficulties balancing degree requirements and work obligations because of additional child care responsibilities (Ecton, Heinrich, and Carruthers 2023).

Federal guidance permits certain educational activities to count toward the work requirement for up to twelve months. An Urban Institute analysis found that 45 states allow some postsecondary education to count as a work activity, though many exclude bachelor's and advanced degree programs (Payne, Green, and Anderson 2022). Such restrictions mean that many states do not provide TANF recipients with broad access to postsecondary education.

Only a small number of states allow time spent completing homework to count toward the work requirement. For example, Nevada [considers](#) one hour of unsupervised homework time for each hour of class time as an approved activity in a critical recognition of the outside-the-classroom time needed to complete a degree.

Some states provide specific educational opportunities for TANF-recipient parents. For example, Maine has a [Parents as Scholars](#) monthly benefit for TANF recipient parents enrolled in a two- or four-year degree-granting program. Maine also offers a [Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment](#) (HOPE) program for TANF recipients, which provides financial support for education costs for Maine parents who enroll in and complete training and education beyond high school. These programs were both [legislatively established](#) by the Maine legislature.

Similarly, the District of Columbia [provides](#) TANF recipients with financial assistance to enroll in postsecondary education programs. DC's [Tuition Assistance Program Initiative](#) (TAPIT) offers TANF recipients up to \$4,000 per academic year, which can be used for postsecondary tuition, books, and mandatory fees.

In 2005, Arkansas launched the [Career Pathways Initiative \(CPI\)](#), a program to fund tuition and related expenses for low-income parents and support their advancement into high-demand careers. Using federal TANF dollars and leveraging the state community college system and other agencies and stakeholders, the initiative aims to help certain low-income parents obtain employment-centric education and training through funding and other supports. According to an analysis of the program by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), CPI student graduation rates are higher than those of all Arkansas community college students, and earnings for CPI students exceed those of other TANF recipients (Taliaferro 2017). Since 2005, CPI has [expanded](#) from 11 to 25 community colleges throughout Arkansas. The program is open to current and former recipients of transitional employment assistance, current recipients of other social service programs, and parents who fall below a certain percentage of the poverty line.

Kentucky has expanded educational access for low-income families through the [Ready to Work](#) (RTW) program, a partnership between the Kentucky Community and Technical College System and the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services Department for Community Based Services. RTW is designed to help parents participating in the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (KTAP), Kentucky's TANF block grant-funded financial assistance program, to enroll in community or technical colleges in the state. The program has evolved since its inception in 1998 and now boasts a statewide network of more than 70 campuses.

These examples illustrate some of the ways that states have worked within—or in spite of—federal restrictions. Expanding access to postsecondary education for TANF recipients is a critical way that

states can support student parents. In addition, however, the federal government should re-examine the structure, requirements, and design of the TANF program itself, with particular attention to its impacts on the pursuit of higher education for low-income parents.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is the federal government's anti-hunger program, providing food assistance to low-income people nationwide. As with TANF, eligibility for SNAP is determined based on household income, and SNAP also has work requirements. While most postsecondary students are ineligible to receive SNAP benefits, there are several exceptions, including for students caring for young children.

Food insecurity is a major issue on college campuses, extending beyond student parents. A 2019 survey among college students by the Hope Center at Temple University found that 45% of respondents were food insecure in the previous 30 days (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019). Because SNAP is known to largely exclude students, those categories of students who may be eligible under current restrictions, such as student parents, may not be aware of their eligibility or know how to apply. A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report published in 2018 found that fewer than half of the 3.3 million students who were potentially eligible in 2016 participated (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2018).

Some states have leveraged SNAP funding in innovative ways to support student parents. For example, Washington's Basic Food Employment and Training (BFET) program uses SNAP Education and Training funds and provides participants with financial support for the direct costs of college and coursework, as well as for support services like child care, transportation, and case management, to enable their participation and completion of education and training credentials (White and Reichlin Cruse 2021).

Housing Assistance

While access to affordable housing is a much broader issue, student parents may experience specific challenges in accessing housing for themselves and their families. Analysis of data from the Wellesley Centers for Women's Campus Family Housing Database found that only "eight percent of all U.S. colleges and universities offer on-campus housing for college students who are parents" (Green 2020). This analysis did not examine whether that housing was affordable.

The main source of federal housing support is the Housing Choice Vouchers Program (commonly referred to as Section 8 assistance), which provides vouchers to help low-income families afford housing. While most students do not qualify for Section 8 housing vouchers, students who are parents may qualify (Perez-Felkner, Baker-Smith, and Goldrick-Rab 2022). Local public housing agencies administer the program, but depending on the location, availability shortages can translate into substantial waitlists.

A 2021 study from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that, due to funding limitations, households that received assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher Program waited an average of 28 months to receive housing vouchers (Acosta and Gartland 2021); in some locations, like Dallas, families complete an application, and then a lottery system is used to select which families can join the waitlist to receive a voucher. These wait times can create specific challenges for student parents. In some locations, wait times may extend beyond the length of degree programs. For

instance, a student in a two-year degree program, for instance, who encounters a wait time of over two years to access housing vouchers, would be forced to find other housing options for the entire duration of their program. (Kelliher 2021). Similarly, student parents moving to other cities or states for school might encounter different Section 8 procedures, leaving them (and their families) housing insecure while they wait to clear the program's hurdles in a new location.

On a local level, some solutions have been implemented to support student parents with Section 8 housing. The city of Columbus, Ohio, piloted a [partnership](#) to provide housing to qualified students eligible for Section 8 housing. The Columbus Scholar House is a development established in partnership among Community Properties of Ohio (CPO), the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority, Ohio Capital Corporation (OCCH), and the Affordable Housing Trust of Columbus and Franklin County. Residents must be 18 years or older, low-income, custodial parents of at least one child, and enrolled in a degree-seeking program; they get access to Section 8 vouchers and affordable on-site child care.

On a state level, Kentucky has a [statewide](#), two-generation Scholar House program, providing affordable housing, child development services, and other support systems to parents pursuing postsecondary education, with priority given to single-parent families. Housing is provided through Section 8 subsidies. Scholar houses are located throughout the state and administered separately; they include the [Family Scholar House](#) in Louisville, the [Learning Villa Scholar House](#) in Owensboro, the [Lincoln Grant Scholar House](#) in Covington, and the [Northern Kentucky Scholar House](#) in Newport.

AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF CHILD CARE FOR STUDENT PARENTS

Widespread shortages of accessible and available child care are well documented in research (Kashen 2021; Haspel 2021). In addition to these pervasive child care challenges, student parents face specific accessibility and financial obstacles to obtaining child care in academic settings. On-campus child care is available at fewer than half of U.S. institutions of higher learning; even where on-campus programs, student parents often face limited availability and long waitlists, and few on-campus programs offer extended or evening child care hours (Williams et al. 2022).

In fact, despite increasing numbers of student parents enrolled in institutions of higher education, there is evidence that on-campus child care access has decreased since 2003. An IWPR study found that the share of community colleges reporting an on-campus child care center declined from 53% in 2004 to 44% in 2015, and the percentage of public four-year institutions with campus child care declined from 55% in 2003 to 49% in 2015 (Noll, Reichlin, and Gault 2017).

Federal Child Care Programs

Child Care Access Means Parents in School: The federal government runs the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program, a federal grant program that provides funds to support or establish campus-based child care primarily serving the needs of low-income students enrolled in higher education. The statutory underpinning of the program is the Higher Education Opportunity Act, passed in 2008 (as a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965). For FY2022, \$82,274,847 in funding was allocated for CCAMPIS grants; this funding translated into 301 awards averaging \$273,338 per grant.

A 2019 GAO study found that, in 2016-2017, CCAMPIS supported 3,300 student parents, and there were over 4,000 children on waiting lists (Edgerton 2023). The report also noted that the median

monthly child care payment for low-income student parents was \$160 after receiving around \$385 in CCAMPIS-funded subsidies.

For many years, Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) has introduced [the CCAMPIS Reauthorization Act](#). If enacted, this bill would permanently authorize the program and \$500 million of funding per year. It would also make several policy changes, including eliminating barriers for students to access benefits, making it easier for childcare providers to apply for grants, and connecting student parents to programs supporting access to food, housing, and health care. The bill would further require the collection of disaggregated data on the student parents served by the program.

Child Care and Development Fund: The federal government provides broader child care support to states through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant program. Through this program, which is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, the federal government provides grants to state, territorial, and tribal agencies, which then use the funds to subsidize child care expenses for eligible families. Although the federal government sets the broad eligibility rules, CCDF is administered by the states, and state agencies have substantial flexibility in its implementation.



While children of adults participating in education and training activities are eligible under federal CCDF rules, most states have imposed additional requirements. According to an Urban Institute analysis, as of 2020, all but eleven states and territories considered postsecondary education to be a qualifying activity for CCDF subsidies, but several also require that parents work a certain number of hours, on top of their time in school (Minton, Dwyer, and Kwon 2022).

The CCDF program has also been historically underfunded to meet the need for subsidized child care. In recognition of the need for more funding, Congress substantially increased funding for this program in the FY 2023 [Omnibus Appropriations Act](#) to \$8 billion, a 30 percent increase over the previous

fiscal year. States can support student parents in their CCDF funding by funding on-campus child care or by prioritizing access to child care subsidies for student parents.

State Child Care Programs

State provision of childcare subsidies may be one way to reduce the burden of childcare costs for student parents. In May 2022, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) announced that student parents would be considered a "priority group" for receiving financial assistance through the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program (Georgia DECAL 2022). This program helps families with no or low incomes pay for child care so parents can work or attend school; it also helps them "find high-quality early learning programs [and] maintain stability in their childcare arrangements." The CAPS program is funded by federal CCDF dollars as well as state funds.

Minnesota offers a child care grant for postsecondary students who do not receive support through the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), the state's basic needs support program. [The Postsecondary Child Care Grant](#) program is run through the Minnesota Office of Higher Education and provides certain low-income postsecondary students with financial assistance to pay for child care during class attendance. Eligibility is open to Minnesota residents with children under 12 years old (or under 14 years in certain circumstances), who meet family size and income requirements, and who attend an eligible institution. The maximum award available is \$6,500 per child, except in areas with higher market rates for infant care where the award may be increased by up to 10 percent. In award year 2020-2021, the state distributed grants totaling \$5,489,484 to 1,136 students (Hopkins 2021).

In Washington, legislation has been enacted to improve access to child care for student parents. The [Fair Start for Kids Act](#), signed into law in 2021, included a provision removing a 20-hour work requirement for full-time students with children to receive Washington Child Care Connections (WCCC) childcare subsidies. It also allowed student parents pursuing an associate degree to be eligible for support. Currently, under the program, students can either attend community, technical, or tribal college full-time and in pursuit of an associate or vocational degree; or they can attend part-time while working 20 hours a week.

While the child care shortage does not solely affect student parents, and child care access is a crisis in many parts of the country, student parent needs and considerations must be part of broader policy solutions on child care

CAMPUS-BASED SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENT PARENTS

Throughout the U.S., many higher education institutions have endeavored to establish programs, support systems, or other institutional policies to support student parents during their educational journey. While these programs and policies are largely institution-specific, several policy levers exist to support, encourage, or require campuses to consider the specific needs of student parents.²

State Legislative Options to Improve or Expand Campus Support Services

Legislation has been introduced or considered in several states to support, incentivize, or require certain types of support for student parents at institutions of higher education. For example, in 2022, California [AB 2881](#), the "Public postsecondary education: students with dependent children" bill was signed into law. This legislation requires colleges and universities in California to provide priority registration for student parents and to notify them of resources and supports—including information on enrolling in the California Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC), the Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC), and the California Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). This legislation further mandates that each campus of the California State University (CSU) and California Community Colleges (CCC) systems create a website with resources for student parents, and provide the website link to students during orientation and via faculty.

² There have been recent legislative attempts, at the federal level, to provide resources to higher education institutions for improved services for student parents. None of these bills has been enacted, but they are indicative of growing policy awareness around the challenges faced by student parents. The proposals include the College Equity Act, the College Completion Fund Act of 2022, and the Helping Student Parents Succeed Act.



In May 2023, the Minnesota legislature approved a state higher education [budget bill](#) that included a provision funding the Student Parent Support Initiative. As laid out in the bill, the initiative will “address the needs and support the educational goals of expectant and parenting college students across Minnesota” through the award of grants to institutions and organizations to support this population. Grant recipients can be postsecondary institutions, professional organizations, or community-based organizations, and funds must be used to “offer services to support the academic goals, health, and well-being of student parents.” Possible activities to be supported by grants include starting on-campus child care programs, providing direct assistance to student parents, and offering scholarships. The initiative also requires participating postsecondary institutions to collect and annually report data on student parents.

In other states, legislation has been proposed, but not passed. For example, in West Virginia, the [Supporting Students Who Are Parents Act](#) sought to require the West Virginia Department of Education to establish a policy to support the educational and parenting goals and improve the educational outcomes of pregnant and parenting students and, among other requirements, alter the required contents of the pregnant and student-parent attendance policy developed by each county board. In Texas [HB 3462](#) proposed requiring the designation of liaison officers at each institution of higher education, to work with students who are parenting and to provide information about support services. As part of this legislation, institutions would also be required to submit data on parenting students annually.

Beyond existing policy levers, many institutions have taken steps to create campus resources for student parents, including on-site childcare, one-stop-shop support centers, and housing suitable for students with children. Other institutional design opportunities include adjusting class schedules, improving class schedule flexibility, providing lactation rooms in all campus buildings, and adjusting registration hours or hours of other critical campus services, such as bookstores. While these are not policy solutions, these examples provide a reference for future state or federal action to incentivize or require institutional action.³

³ Examples to consider include: the Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC) [Family Resource Center](#), a resource center for student parents at a California community college, offers on-campus tutoring, childcare resources, information about funding opportunities, and other support services for parenting students. The [University of Minnesota’s Student Parent HELP Center \(SPHC\)](#), founded in 1967, is the nation’s longest-standing student program. SPHC offers support services to student parents, including financial support, support networks, trained social workers, and child care. It also engages in advocacy in support of student parents. The [Family Friendly Campus Toolkit](#), created by Endicott College, offers a self-assessment process and guide for higher education staff and institutions to improve supports and outcomes for students who are parents or raising children. Numerous colleges and universities have utilized the toolkit, including Kent State University, Mount Wachusett Community College, and Texas Women’s University.

Other State Policy Levers to Promote Campus-Based Support Services

With the financial support of Ascend at the Aspen Institute, a number of states have created, expanded, or advanced initiatives in government agencies to improve on-campus efforts to serve student parents. In 2021, six public entities received Policy Acceleration Grants, which supported cities, counties, and states committed to increasing economic mobility and well-being for students who are parents (Croom 2021).

The state of Minnesota utilized its grant to [create](#) the first-ever position of Whole Family & Student Coordinator at the Minnesota Department of Higher Education. This coordinator is the focal point for agency efforts to serve student parents, driving efforts and initiatives on college campuses throughout Minnesota. This innovative model ensures that student parents have a dedicated champion in the halls of government; the coordinator is responsible for ensuring that the specific challenges faced by student parents are part of policy conversations within the government.⁴

The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS), in cooperation with the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice at Temple University, leveraged funding from Ascend at the Aspen Institute to [launch](#) the PA Pathways Parent Learning Network in 2022. Through this program, DHS offered up to 10 institutions of higher education and community organizations the opportunity to join the network and receive training and technical assistance to serve this population.

In Georgia, the Ascend grant supported Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), to establish 2Gen Community Leadership Teams at three Technical College System of Georgia campuses. These teams sought to build an understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing single mothers and student parents, while bringing together representatives from various sectors and programs to inform state-level policy change.



ADDITIONAL STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY LEVERS TO SUPPORT STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS

In addition to legislative and executive action in the key areas outlined above, there have been several additional ways that state and federal policymakers have recognized the unique challenges faced by student parents and attempted to support this population. These mechanisms include the passage of resolutions raising awareness around issues faced by student parents, enforcement of Title IX regulations, and use of federal stimulus funds to support programs for non-traditional students.

⁴ The Minnesota Department of Health previously ran a Student Parent Support Initiative, utilizing funding from the 2010 Affordable Care Act via the Office of Population Affairs (OPA) at the US Department of Health and Human Services. The Department of Health provided grants to nine postsecondary institutions to establish or grow Student Parent Centers (SPCs). The OPA funding ended in 2017; the Minnesota Office of Higher Education was able to provide state funds to eight of the SPCs upon the cessation of federal funds, and many went on to secure alternative funding.

Student Parent Resolutions

In both 2021 and 2022, the U.S. Senate passed resolutions recognizing September as National Student Parent Month and acknowledging the contributions and achievements of student parents. The resolutions, [S. Res. 362](#) and [S. Res. 777](#), were introduced by Sen. Duckworth (D-IL), and cite data showing the prevalence of student parents within postsecondary education and their unique challenges. Though they do not explicitly change or shape policy, resolutions like these can play a role in raising awareness and drawing attention to the need for policy engagement on student parent issues.

Title IX Regulations

Title IX regulations provide some protection from discrimination for student parents. In 1975, what was then called the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare issued regulations prohibiting schools from discriminating against students based on parental or family status or based on pregnancy and related issues. The Department of Education issued limited further guidance: in 2007, on avoiding discrimination against pregnant students in athletic scholarships, and in 2013, on supporting the academic success of pregnant and parenting students.

The Biden Administration has proposed a Title IX regulation titled [Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex in Education Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance](#). The proposed rule includes some clarification on protections around pregnancy and parenting, prohibiting schools from discriminating based on pregnancy or related conditions (including lactation). It also requires the provision of information to pregnant students on their rights under Title IX.

Some states have considered legislation around enforcement of Title IX regulations. In 2019, California enacted [Assembly Bill 809](#), to require postsecondary institutions to post protections for pregnant and parenting students on their websites, to ensure that students know their rights under Title IX. The bill further encouraged child development programs established by state community colleges, colleges, and universities to give priority to children of students who are single parents and who meet specified income requirements. A similar bill, [H.B. 356](#), was introduced in Maryland; the bill's sponsor stated that the legislation is modelled after the California law (Healey, 2023). In 2022, this bill passed the Maryland House of Delegates by a vote of 132-1, but it did not receive a vote in the Senate. The California law could offer a model for other states seeking to ensure that student parents are aware of their rights under Title IX.

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES MAY CREATE PARTICULAR BARRIERS FOR STUDENT PARENTS

While this paper focuses on policy solutions to specific problems student parents face, it is essential to note that other aspects of parenting students' lives might also create barriers to educational attainment. While these are not *per se* "student parent issues," an intersectional approach requires that policymakers consider student parents' lives in their totality and consider the impact of additional factors on their ability to enroll and remain in school.

Immigration and Citizenship Status

According to data available through the Higher Ed Immigration Portal, there are an estimated 427,000 undocumented students in higher education (Higher Ed Immigration Portal 2023). Almost 90 percent of those students are in undergraduate programs, while about 10 percent are in graduate

or professional programs. Undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid, and their eligibility for in-state tuition rates varies by state.

For undocumented students, the threat of immigration enforcement may be a pressing issue, regardless of parenting status. A 2021 paper studying undocumented high school students in San Diego, found that these students limited their college applications to schools within their same county to avoid crossing immigration checkpoints (Valdivia, Ibañez, and Carreon 2022). These concerns could limit parents' postsecondary options and restrict their opportunities more broadly.

Further, citizenship status may impact the ability of student parents to connect with available benefits and services. In a 2021 article published in the *American*



Journal of Economics and Sociology, researchers Victoria Ballerini and Miriam Feldblum analyzed the barriers facing undocumented students in postsecondary settings, including that the threat of legal action or deportation might prevent student parents from seeking available services or applying for financial support mechanisms (Ballerini and Feldblum 2021). This threat could prevent student parents from utilizing the various economic and social support tools available on campus. In cases of mixed immigration status within a family, a non-citizen student parent might be reluctant to apply for federal or state programs for which their child is eligible, potentially creating additional financial hardship.

Discrimination and Bias

As student parents are more likely to be people of color, according to IWPR research, they are also subject to the racism and discrimination that remain prevalent throughout higher education (Riechlin Cruse et al. 2019). A 2018 Center for American Progress study examined the racial gap in higher education and included a range of findings, including that Black and Hispanic students face gaps in access to higher education and are also less likely to graduate. The same study noted that this population is more likely to have attended for-profit colleges than White students—which the study authors cite as a noteworthy finding given evidence around the lower quality of education available at for-profit colleges. Black and Hispanic students also earn certificates and associate's degrees—rather than bachelor's degrees – at higher rates than White students (Libassi 2018).

These racial equity gaps may impact the ability of parents to become students and remain enrolled in their field of study and have long-term implications for their earning potential and financial well-being.

In order to fully understand the challenges faced by student parents—and to promote student parent success—it is critical that policymakers understand and consider the implications and impacts of racism, discrimination, and bias, as well as issues of immigration and citizenship and other systemic issues that play a critical role in the experiences of many student parents.

POLICY OPTIONS

Student parents comprise a substantial population of students in postsecondary education – and attainment of a college degree is a critical component to economic security and mobility. As a result, it is essential that policymakers at both the state and federal levels consider opportunities to leverage policy solutions and government funding in support of student parent success. This landscape scan has identified a number of options for policymakers and advocates looking to support student parents through state policy and programming. Looking forward, IWPR makes the following recommendations for state policy stakeholders:

- Create and expand efforts to improve data collection on students, including accurate and timely information on students' parental status. Better data would support the development of better policy by providing a complete picture of the population of student parents, helping to identify the most pressing challenges and barriers that keep parents from enrolling in degree programs. States should consider options including:
 - Legislating requirements for state institutions of higher education to collect detailed demographic information on their student population, including questions specific to parental status; and
 - Requiring and facilitating state cabinet agencies and other state entities to design and implement mechanisms to collect and analyze this information about students throughout the state.
- Improve financial accessibility of postsecondary education for parents. Postsecondary education should be an investment, not a financial millstone around a family's proverbial neck. Policymakers should seek options to address existing student debt and make education more affordable, with a specific focus on student parents, including by:
 - Making existing grant and scholarship programs for adult and returning learners expressly available to student parents, and conducting targeted outreach to this population; and
 - Considering options to provide financial assistance targeted directly at student parents, as well as free or reduced tuition to students with a demonstrated financial need.
- Prioritize broader efforts to address the financial accessibility of college and the student debt crisis. Stakeholders should ensure that student parents are represented in these broader policy discussions, and that the specific challenges faced by student parents are considered as part of broader education accessibility policymaking.
- Pursue policies that promote student parents' access to federal programs, resources, and benefits, and consider ways to better leverage federal investments in support of student parents, including by:
 - Identifying options to make existing benefits more accessible, including by streamlining the application and enrollment process for different programs and working with colleges and

universities to distribute benefit information to students. This includes supporting approaches such as co-locating benefits offices on campuses and designating benefits navigators in campus support offices to help student parents access programs for which they may be eligible.

- Removing obstacles to accessing federal benefits programs by counting postsecondary education as work activity to the maximum extent allowed under federal rules, and removing restrictions around what type of degree programs can count toward work requirements. States can further allow a variety of educational activities, including homework, to count toward requirements.
- Identifying ways to modify, revise, or rewrite federal policies that create specific obstacles for student parents, including programs with work requirements.
- Invest in child care infrastructure, affordability, and accessibility nationwide, as well as in specific solutions geared toward student parents. Policymakers should create, expand, and support policies and programs that provide or subsidize child care for postsecondary students, and support the eligibility of student parents to participate in broader state-led child care programs by including pursuit of postsecondary degrees as a qualifying activity.
 - States should prioritize student parents – and provision of on-campus child care for students –within federally-funded child care programs, including the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).
 - State policies should support institutions' ability to leverage other federal funding, including CCAMPIS grants, to provide campus-based child care for parenting students.
- Raise awareness of student parents as a significant and growing population of college students, including the issues and challenges they face, as part of an effort to ensure that policymakers explicitly consider this group in policy conversations. Consider the establishment of a student parent coordination mechanism across state government agencies, or creation of a coordinator position within the state government, to ensure that different policy spaces consider the needs of student parents. Student parents face an array of issues, and state policy must include a way to understand how these challenges intersect, interact, and combine to make it challenging or impossible for parents to enroll or remain in postsecondary education.
- Consider opportunities to support student parents directly, as well as to expand the capacity of higher education institutions to provide services to the student parents on their campuses. Both approaches can provide critical support to student parents.
- Provide ample and multi-year funding to the state agencies working on student parent programs, and direct sustainable funding to student parent initiatives throughout the state budget process. Many of the programs discussed in this paper have struggled to maintain funding or face uncertain futures around the availability of funds.
- Utilize 2Gen approaches to support entire families and help children and parents succeed together. Studies have underscored the value of this approach, and policymakers should look for opportunities to enact it on a state level. The needs of student parents and their families are complex, and policymakers should look to the full range of available funding streams and programmatic supports to address these challenges in a holistic way that considers the full needs of both the adults and the children.

- Listen to student parents themselves, a core principle of the 2Gen approach. As this landscape scan shows, student parents face an array of interconnected but distinct challenges, and they are uniquely affected by policies like work requirements. Policymakers seeking to support this population should carve out time to hear from student parents and to consider their voices and perspectives when advancing solutions meant to support them.

Acknowledgements: The authors of this paper would like to thank the IWPR staff who contributed to this Policy Brief, including Robyn Watson Ellerbe, PhD, Ksenia Dombo, Miranda Peterson, Cristy Mendoza, and Shannon Emmett. IWPR appreciates the many experts, state government officials, and stakeholders who contributed their time and expertise to this project.

This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

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