

Policy Brief | Supporting Student Parents and their Young Children in California's Institutions of Higher Education



Executive Summary

The academic success of student parents enrolled in higher education and the well-being of their young children are heavily influenced by the level of institutional support available to them. In particular, the availability or lack of child care options and resources on campus impacts families raising infants and toddlers, who are going through their most critical period of development. As efforts are underway in the state of California to support student parents pursuing higher education, and with Early Edge California's goal of ensuring quality Early Learning and Care opportunities are available to all California children starting at birth, this brief shares early recommendations on how institutions of higher education (IHEs) can position themselves to address the unique needs and challenges of student parents with infants and toddlers. By identifying this population's diverse needs and addressing unique challenges, IHEs can foster the educational success, economic mobility, and well-being of both parents and young children in a two-generational approach.



Background

The early years of a child's life are crucial to their overall development, especially so for infants and toddlers, with approximately 90% of brain development occurring before the age of five, making those the formative years for their cognitive, emotional, and social growth¹. For infants and toddlers whose parents are pursuing higher education at a community college or university, their development can be affected by the institution's course availability, child care options, and support services. For instance, a working student parent attending evening classes has limited access to child care options and student services normally offered during traditional hours, which can make it difficult to maintain a consistent daily routine for their child, potentially impacting the child's overall development. For student parents, especially those with infants and toddlers, the challenges of balancing academic responsibilities can be overwhelming, especially when there is inadequate institutional support, ultimately resulting in delayed enrollment times² and lower graduation rates³.

Across the nation, momentum is building amongst students, faculty, researchers, and advocates in a movement to identify and support student parents pursuing higher education. California has emerged as a leader in this movement with the passage of legislation like [Assembly Bill 2881](#) in 2022 and [Assembly Bill 2458](#) this year. Assembly Bill (AB) 2881 granted priority registration to student parents, established dedicated webpages with parent resources and services, and provided information on tax credits and assistance programs. AB 2458 directs the higher education

systems to have a policy by the 2026–27 academic year to estimate and adjust for the cost of attendance information for student parents, to create a data field within their management information system to identify student parents for a variety of purposes like providing public benefits information, and to include within their campus net price calculators a baseline cost estimate for student parents. Prior to these bills, colleges and universities were largely at their own volition regarding their approach in identifying and helping student parents on their campuses, which has led to a lack of uniformity within and across higher education systems.



Many institutions have identified incoming student parents based on the information submitted through a student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. As a result of recent FAFSA simplification, the new FAFSA subjects all applicants to one general dependency question to determine eligibility, asking the student if they are living with children or other dependents who receive more than half of their financial support⁴.

This criterion is problematic as it can fail to recognize differences among students; for example, a single, unemployed student parent who lives with their infant child but cannot provide the required financial support versus a student who provides support to an elderly parent who requires care. This lack of differentiation in FAFSA's dependency question overlooks important distinctions that should be made in the financial aid process to accurately reflect, allocate resources to, and provide tailored support for student parents, especially those with infants and toddlers. As a result, many campuses struggle to answer key questions about the characteristics, circumstances or needs of their student parents, such as their children's ages, child care arrangements, or eligibility for subsidies. Institutions must often rely on data beyond FAFSA to accurately capture a more comprehensive representation of their student parent population on campus.

As efforts increase to gather data on California's estimated 400,000 undergraduate and graduate student parents, it is crucial to learn more about the circumstances and needs of student parents with infants and toddlers as they make up a substantial portion of this population. At a statewide level, research by the [California Alliance for Student Parent Success](#) estimates that 32 percent of student parents in California have a child under the age of 3⁵. At a local college district level, a report from UNITE-LA focused on the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) revealed that less than half of LACCD parenting students report having safe, reliable child care, with more than one-third of parents having children age 5 or younger⁶. Given that a majority of student

parents are of color, and more than half are first-generation college students⁷, capturing data on these parents is important to understand the circumstances and challenges they face as they pursue higher education to enhance their earning potential, and create better educational and economic mobility for their children.

Student parents with infants and toddlers have diverse needs, such as the need for accessible on-site child care and resources, supplemental financial support, and flexible academic policies that not only foster their academic success, but also promote the well-being of their young children⁸ by providing a stable, nurturing and supportive campus environment. Institutions that can effectively address the diverse needs and unique challenges of student parents have a chance to improve the application, retention, and graduation rates while promoting the well-being of their students' young children. To better understand the experiences of student parents with infants and toddlers attending college, Early Edge convened its [parent advisory groups](#) and hosted a student parent listening session.



Unique Challenges for Student Parents with Infants and Toddlers

Early Edge's parent advisory groups, which include current and former student parents, are two networks of parents who have regularly met since 2020 to share insights and shape policy decisions related to California's Early Learning and Care system. Early Edge also invited over 50 student parents from across California's public higher education system with children, ages birth to five, to participate in a student parent listening session. The goal of the two advisory meetings and the listening session was to learn more about the factors that influence parents' decisions related to continuing postsecondary education, as well as information regarding their child care arrangements, needs, and challenges faced throughout their academic journey. The following challenges and themes emerged from these convenings.

1) Limited access to affordable child care options

Access to affordable and trustworthy child care on or near campus offered during traditional and non-traditional hours was the top priority for many parents. The availability of reliable child care aligned with class schedules heavily influenced parents' decisions to pursue higher education. Finding suitable child care has proven difficult for employed parents working traditional hours and attending college due to fewer available options during evening classes. For others, reliable, subsidized child care options on campus was the determining factor that facilitated their enrollment. Parents also emphasized that the high cost of child care

places a significant economic burden which poses a barrier for many in pursuing higher education.

One student parent underscored:

"Unfortunately, finding child care that hits affordability, flexibility, and proximity is often a challenge. Many centers are expensive or have limited hours and quality can vary. The distance can also be a problem especially if I have a tight schedule or limited transportation options."

A second parent shared: *"One of the challenges is finding a trustworthy child care service, if institutions can give some recommendations on good child care providers, it would be welcomed by student parents."*

2) Lack of identification, inclusion, and accommodations for student parents

There was a widely shared sentiment of feeling unseen or unwelcome on campus. Parents shared how the lack of support from professors and staff hindered their academic experience, performance, and participation. Although highly motivated, parenting students said they can be deterred from college when they feel unwelcome or do not receive reasonable accommodations that otherwise would enable them to succeed both academically and in caring for their young children. Some parents reported missing out on priority enrollment due to the institution's failure to identify them or communicate to them about the opportunity. Additionally, a lack of accommodations, such as excused absences and assignment extensions when family matters arise, poses unnecessary barriers for parents who are trying to balance their school and parenting responsibilities.

A student parent shared: *“Having a supportive classroom environment can make parents like myself feel comfortable discussing their needs and concerns without fear of judgment.”*

Another parent commented:

“Juggling class schedules, studying, assignments, child care, and personal needs can be overwhelming. I have difficulty attending all classes due to inflexible child care or sick children.”

Another parent shared: *“I just wish the institution could be more inclusive and accommodating, irrespective of what situation people find themselves in...I feel emotionally down at times, because I can’t do much about it.”*

3) Lack of connection to and support in navigating available programs and services

The dissemination of information regarding vital programs like Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), child care options, and eligible subsidies are often lacking, leaving many student parents unaware of the resources that could alleviate burdens and help them balance their academic and parenting responsibilities. While access to information is beneficial, parents also expressed a strong need for campuses to provide help navigating programs, such as assistance with bureaucratic and time-consuming application processes, to make effective use of resources.

A comment from a student parent on navigating programs: *“Sometimes I find myself in a position where I do not know which option is suitable for*

me and my child and that doesn't favor me as a student parent.”

Parents also highlighted disparities in the types of institutional support they experienced across different colleges and universities. Those with experience in both community colleges and university campuses noted that community colleges tend to foster more family-friendly environments and supportive faculty, while both public and private universities were criticized for their lack of inclusion and support. Disparities were also raised between undergraduate and graduate programs, with some parents observing less overall support for graduate student parents compared to their undergraduate counterparts. These insights from parents underscored the importance of students’ need to connect to and navigate programs, along with creating a continuity of support across higher education institutions and their offerings.

Another parent shared their concern on institutional support: *“I’m in the process of applying to law school and it’s very stressful right now, because I’ve been through this once in undergrad and feel like it’s going to be more challenging than before in these years.”*

4) Need for supplemental financial assistance and benefits

Parents shared that the combination of direct and indirect costs associated with both college and child care places a significant additional financial strain on them, limiting their ability to focus and maintain academic performance. Grants for diapers, food or other necessities can be especially useful for parents and make a substantial difference in their ability to continue their education.

Another issue raised was a “graduation cliff” of benefits, where essential support services like housing assistance and subsidized child care for student parents are abruptly discontinued after graduation. A sudden discontinuation of benefits leaves families vulnerable when arrangements or employment may have not yet been secured, exacerbating any preexisting financial instability. Ensuring parents have access to a continuity of services beyond graduation is necessary for a smooth transition for the student parent to enter the workforce and to prevent a lapse of care or support for their infants or toddlers.

A student parent said it best: *“A lot of student parents are at a cliff, and once benefits are no longer available to them after graduation, they fall off of the cliff and are back in the same position as they were before.”*



Recommendations for Supporting Student Parents with Young Children

As various proposals and initiatives gain traction across the state, we share the following recommendations to be considered at

campuses across the California Community Colleges (CCC), California State University (CSU), and University of California (UC) systems, and at the state and federal levels, to specifically address the challenges and needs of student parents with infants and toddlers.

At Institutions of Higher Education

Recommendation 1: Foster a Welcoming, Affirming, and Supportive Campus

Institutions should **foster a welcoming, affirming, and supportive campus** for all students including non-traditional students like student parents with infants and toddlers who often juggle the demands of coursework, child care, and employment.

In addition to providing accessible and affordable child care options on campus, IHEs should dedicate staff and spaces designed to enable parents to access resources and services to meet both their parental and academic needs. Namely, this would be a family resource center (FRC) supported by dedicated staff like a coordinator, who helps guide student parents through institutional systems and services, and a success coach, who provides academic advising and support to help student parents balance their coursework and family responsibilities. An FRC would also be equipped with a lactation room and a children's play area. Once an FRC is established, an IHE can further its impact by fostering collaboration with other student parent-oriented departments to share information on student parents and coordinate services to them. An FRC could also play a role in bridging community resources and facilitating partnerships between nearby Early Learning and Care programs and organizations, such as

Head Start. Having a dedicated coordinator and support staff would allow the FRC to provide reliable and comprehensive support for student parents, working in partnership with the financial aid and basic needs offices, and serving as a liaison to connect them with resources offered by the larger campus community.

A welcoming, affirming, and supportive campus also includes policies that are accommodating and responsive to student parents and their young children. Lapses in child care, children falling ill, or family emergencies are seemingly inevitable occurrences that can disrupt a parent's attendance and academic progress. Institutions should adopt flexible campus and classroom policies that do not penalize parents for circumstances beyond their control, such as allowing parents who are nursing to bring their babies along to class, providing extensions on assignments, and flexible attendance policies.

Access to on- and off-campus quality child care options, dedicated resource centers and staff, and accommodating campus and classroom policies are all foundational for student parents to feel supported and confident that both they and their young children have the resources needed to thrive on campus.

Recommendation 2: Structured and Holistic Data Collection and Collaboration

Institutions must also implement **structured and holistic data collection and collaboration** to better understand the characteristics and circumstances of student parents and their young children, along with their needs and challenges.

A major barrier for campuses in addressing student parent needs is the absence of data systems designed to capture key information about student parents and their young children throughout enrollment⁹. In addition to the student parent data element required and requested by AB 2458, other important information that should be captured by an institution includes the number and age(s) of children at home, their child care needs and arrangements, their course load, their transportation and housing situations, employment situation and income status, and other factors impacting their academic success. Intentional campus outreach efforts by IHEs are also necessary to gather accurate and comprehensive data, especially given that student parents are often overlooked and may feel unwelcome on campus. Without more comprehensive data collection and institutional efforts to actively engage with and gather information from student parents, it will be difficult to restructure campuses to create an environment that meets the needs of parents and their young children.

Data that is collected on campus should be shared securely and systematically across different departments that have connection points with student parents. This could include using coordinated systems or platforms to allow timely access to information, such as income status, child care needs, and housing situations. For example, the financial aid office could share income status information and the number of dependents with child development center staff to tailor child care options and financial assistance. Regular communication, data-sharing, and collaboration between departments can lead to a more cohesive

support network that gives student parents access to resources that can help mitigate barriers to their educational success.

Without data as a guiding tool, efforts will remain fragmented, fail to address key areas of need, and be uneven in providing equitable access and support. Robust data collection and cross-departmental collaboration between campus departments, and state departments, are key to creating effective interventions and ensuring families have access to subsidies or resources they are eligible for or that can benefit their child's crucial early years of development.

At the State Level

Recommendation: Ensure Basic Needs of Student Parents with Young Children Are Met

As campuses shift towards supporting the basic needs of their respective student parents, which often refer to food and housing generally, California should **ensure institutions can systematically meet specific basic needs of student parents with infants and toddlers**, such as child care support.

California has paved the way to better understanding student parents with the passage of AB 2458 which requires IHEs to create a data field in their management systems to identify student parents, to grant them priority registration, and provide information on available resources and public benefits. This success can be built upon by mandating and fostering collaboration within and between campuses of the CCC, CSU, and UC systems. Data collection and collaboration should be focused on the number of student parents on campus and their specific needs, how many

children they have and their ages, the parent's accessibility to child care and eligibility for subsidies, the availability of on-campus resources, and more, to help identify gaps in support and opportunities in expanding services. Additionally, this data could be shared with the [California Cradle-to-Career Data system](#), which was designed to integrate and utilize educational and workforce data to foster multigenerational success, to give the state a better understanding of the barriers and opportunities for student parents throughout their academic and professional journeys.

To effectively lead the way in meeting the needs of student parents, the state should know how many student parents are attending its IHEs, the specific child care needs and challenges of those students, the types of child care services available on campus, and the extent to which those services are being utilized, including information on subsidies and waitlists. Collecting and sharing this detailed information will help identify gaps, streamline support, and enhance the effectiveness of services offered to student parents. When data is shared across IHEs in different systems, such as between a local community college and a nearby state university, it can provide a continuity of child care and support services throughout a parent's academic journey. The state can also assist IHEs' data efforts by sharing data from important entities such as the Department of Social Services, which holds key information about subsidies and eligibility, child care access, and other related programs throughout California.

Without a top-down leadership structure of data-gathering and collaboration, campus efforts risk being unsustainable and can fail to

reach their full potential in serving students. This can lead to critical areas of need being unaddressed, as evidenced by the current lack of affordable and accessible child care options across campuses. The state must take further steps to ensure institutions can systematically meet the basic needs of student parents with infants and toddlers.

Meeting the basic needs of this student parent population also involves sustaining, and ideally increasing, the [Students with Dependent Children Grant](#), which supplements the Cal Grant award up to \$6,000. This additional financial support alleviates some of the financial strains faced by student parents with infants and toddlers, who balance the high costs of college, child care, medical care, and other child-related needs while pursuing their education.

At the Federal Level

Recommendation 1: Reconsider FAFSA's Dependency Question

The federal government should **reinstate but also expand the recent change to the dependency question made under FAFSA simplification**, revising it to ensure more accurate identification and representation of student parents, as the previous language narrowly defined them based on financial contributions, excluding many student parents.

Ideally, the financial aid process should be the foundation upon which institutions can rely for obtaining a clear picture of their incoming student parent population. However, as the dependency question is currently written in FAFSA, which groups student parents with infants and toddlers along with all other

students with dependents, colleges must determine for themselves what their student parent population truly looks like, lacking clear data or insight into their unique needs. Adjusting FAFSA to differentiate student parents with children from other students with dependents, along with additional questions about the specific circumstances, such as the ages of children and child care needs, would help address this gap and capture consistent information on student parents on a national scale.

Recommendation 2: Sustain, Expand, and Assess the CCAMPIS Program

Campuses receiving funding from the federal program Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), which is intended to support low-income student parents by providing access to affordable, high-quality child care, should be able to rely on the sustainability of funding to continue providing crucial on-campus child care and resources. Sustainable funding of CCAMPIS will ensure continued and successful programs, preventing student parents and their young children from losing essential resources and maintaining their access to vital supports. Additionally, increasing CCAMPIS funding would allow successful programs to expand their reach and enable more campuses to participate, especially for campuses looking to expand their capacity for infant care. Lastly, an impact report should be conducted to highlight the program's effectiveness across institutions, showcasing benefits, successes, and best practices.

Conclusion

California and its institutions of higher education have an opportunity to improve the well-being, academic success, and economic mobility of both student parents and their young children. This can only be achieved if student parents feel welcomed and supported on campus. Addressing the challenges and implementing the recommendations discussed in this brief are important steps to support families in a two-generational approach, setting up both parents and their young children for success.

Appendix

Institutions of Higher Education Bright Spots

In light of the aforementioned needs and challenges for student parents of infants and toddlers, we uplift Pasadena City College, the University of California, Los Angeles, and California Polytechnic University, Pomona, as bright spots among IHEs that have worked to address these challenges through innovative initiatives designed to support student parents of young children.

Pasadena City College

In 2022, Pasadena City College (PCC) established a Family Resource Center, where parenting students receive extensive support that goes beyond course prioritization. The FRC has a dedicated staff consisting of a coordinator, two program assistants, and a success coach, all focused on ensuring that parenting students obtain access to direct services, resources, and guidance to achieve their educational goals. The FRC is the hub to campus resources for incoming and existing parenting students.

In addition to priority registration, academic counseling, and coaching, the FRC provides a study space with computer and printing access, and a designated play area for young infants and toddlers to engage while their parents study. The FRC also offers a comfortable private lactation room for students who are breastfeeding and a diapering station where all diapering supplies are provided. Parenting students have access to a children's closet where students can both donate and take essential baby items such as clothing, diapers, wipes, formula, and shoes. Beyond being a support hub, the FRC actively engages in outreach initiatives across campus, collaborating with the basic needs department and child development center. Future programming for the FRC will

include workshops, pop-up emergency child care, family-friendly events, celebrations for graduates, and the establishment of a student advisory board to guide its initiatives.

Marisol Jara-Garza is the Coordinator for the FRC, having prior roles such as a Child Development Program Specialist and Adjunct Faculty in Child Development, and has personal experience as a student parent. Her vision of the FRC is to build community among parenting students and find comfort in knowing they have a support system at PCC that will help them navigate the dual responsibilities of being a parent while simultaneously achieving their academic goals. She shares: *“The Family Resource Center has made it easier for them to feel supported as they balance higher education and parenting responsibilities. We have successfully connected parenting students with the Child Development Center, allowing their young children to be enrolled in its programs. This support significantly propels them closer to achieving their educational goals. The Family Resource Center and parenting students are fostering a strong sense of community. It’s inspiring to see graduates return to the FRC, giving back by donating items and sharing their accomplishments while acknowledging the FRC as an integral part of their success.”*

PCC has a child development center near campus that serves children of students, faculty, and the community and is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

University of California, Los Angeles

Since 2009, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) has had the Students With Dependents (SwD) program, which offers support to undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who identify as parents, guardians, or caregivers. With a dedicated staff consisting of a director, a grant manager, and a coordinator, the SwD program directs students to resources tailored to support their families throughout their academic journey.

When a student parent engages with the SwD program, they gain access to subsidized child care, essential supplies like diapers and formula, access to priority enrollment, connection to peer support groups, and more. In addition to the priority enrollment process, the SwD staff also helps parents in applying to CalWORKS, employment services, family housing opportunities, and financial assistance. The SwD program works with the admissions office to find student parents but relies heavily on outreach and word of mouth connections of the program and its offerings.

There is also a task force under SwD composed of students, faculty, staff, and university leaders who meet to cultivate a more family-serving campus by sharing information, reviewing current institutional policies and processes in place, gathering data, and advocating for equitable

environments. For campus community support, UCLA has the student organization Bruin Parent Scholars, which promotes campus engagement and advocacy opportunities for student parents.

Ishia Orozco-Barajas is the Director of the SwD program at UCLA. With experience as a prior student parent, she believes equitable and accessible environments at institutions of higher education lead toward intergenerational growth within family units. She shares: *“By providing access to resources such as the CCAMPIS grant, parenting students’ financial needs are met for their child care needs, allowing them to focus on their educational goals. Having relationships with early care and education sites, both on and off campus, creates opportunities of collaboration to bring awareness and access to state subsidy options available to families. Our goal is to reduce the stressors of navigating the plethora of resources available, which can often become overwhelming and add to the time poverty experienced by parenting students.”*

Although SwD may feel like a drop-in program when contact is first made, SwD takes a case management approach in how it connects with student parents and meets their needs on a quarterly basis. Many of the services are made possible through funding from CCAMPIS, which is awarded on a four year basis and expires for UCLA in September 2025. UCLA offers three nationally accredited on-campus child care sites for students, as well as three off-campus partnerships that accept CCAMPIS and it provides information on additional child care options like [Crystal Stairs, Inc.](#)

Cal Poly Pomona

At [California Polytechnic University, Pomona](#) (CPP), a group of faculty, staff, and students across campus formed the [Parent Student Support Team](#) to lead efforts in strengthening support for this population of students. The team plays an important role in uplifting parenting student needs and fostering a family-friendly environment, and plays an active role in helping the campus smoothly transition when policies and administrative changes occur. Additionally, the team has a large role in updating the university’s [dedicated website](#) which openly welcomes parenting students and displays information from a variety of on- and off-campus resources. Together with the Parenting Broncos Club, the Parenting Students Support Team celebrated CPP’s first National Student Parent Month this September by hosting weekly events, including a family-friendly campus resource carnival.

A family-friendly environment on campus can be seen at the library with its Bronco Family Space, which was specifically designed for those who need to use library services while caring for a younger family member. With features like interactive and age-appropriate toys, a children’s book collection, rentable children’s iPads, and accessible changing tables, the Bronco Family

Space is an enriching environment for children whenever parents or caregivers visit the library. This space is also used for monthly “Connect and Play” events which welcome parenting students and their young children to a space that emphasizes literacy and social play.

The University’s Early Childhood Studies (ECS) Department has also made concerted efforts to create a welcoming environment for parenting students through its family-friendly department policy that all faculty include in their syllabi. The policy acknowledges the persistence and determination of parenting students that is strengthened by their aspirations for the children. By adopting a faculty-supported, department-wide policy that explicitly welcomes pregnant and parenting students, student parents are granted accommodations like assignment extensions and excused absences, with the option to bring children to class during child care gaps and unrestricted access to in-person classes for their breastfeeding babies.

Dr. Giselle Navarro-Cruz, an Associate Professor in the ECS Department and a previous student parent herself, shares: *“Parenting students have shared the importance of feeling seen, welcomed, and supported. In response, our department has implemented a policy that explicitly affirms our commitment to parenting students. This policy communicates that parenting students are not only welcomed but are also provided with the necessary support to thrive in their academic pursuits.”*

CPP has a nationally accredited Children’s Center that provides subsidized child care from ages 18 months to five years for students, faculty, alumni, and community members.



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