

## SECURING STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS: POLICY OPTIONS FOR STATES

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 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 substantial percentage of those enrolled in college. Despite growing recognition that supporting parents’ ability 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 student parents. However, state policy can be a critical driver of change and can make a tangible difference in the lives of student parents.

### STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Collect Accurate and Timely Data

Existing data collection on student parents is extremely limited; 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. **States should create and expand efforts to improve accurate and timely data collection on students’ parental status by:**

- Legislating requirements for state institutions of higher education to collect specific information on their student population, including parenting status.
- Requiring and facilitating state cabinet agencies and other state entities to design and implement mechanisms to collect and analyze data on student parents.
- Utilizing existing mechanisms, including data systems and surveys, by including questions on dependents and care needs.
- Supporting data collection at all levels, from topline demographic data to institutional surveys.

#### Improve Affordability of Post-Secondary Education

The cost of college has risen sharply in recent decades, outpacing inflation, and can be particularly burdensome for student parents. Accessibility and affordability create educational opportunities and remove barriers for student parents balancing family responsibilities and expenses to pursue and complete their degrees. **States could help alleviate the financial burden of postsecondary education for student parents by:**

- Making existing grant and scholarship programs for adult and returning learners explicitly available for student parents and conducting targeted outreach to promote awareness of these opportunities.
- Targeting loan repayment assistance directly to student parents.
- Considering options to provide financial assistance targeted specifically to student parents, as well as free or reduced tuition for students with a demonstrated financial need.

#### BY THE NUMBERS:

##### WHO ARE STUDENT PARENTS?

- More than **one in five** college students – or over **22 percent** of all undergraduates – are parents.
- There are **3.8 million** students raising children while pursuing a postsecondary degree, **2.7 million (70 percent)** of whom are mothers.
- Most mothers in college are single or unpartnered (divorced or widowed) parents.

- Prioritizing broader efforts to address financial accessibility of college and the student debt crisis, and ensuring that student parents' needs and interests are represented in these broader policy discussions.

### **Promote Student Parents' Access to Basic Needs Assistance**

Parenting students not only have to pay for their college education, but they are also often responsible for covering the costs of basic needs like food, housing, and transportation for their family. Student parents may face particular challenges with accessing social programs and services, which are generally not designed for students, and often include federally imposed work requirements. **States should prioritize efforts to ensure that low-income student parents can access basic needs assistance by:**

- Improving access to existing benefits, including by streamlining the application and enrollment process for different programs and working with colleges and universities to distribute benefit information to students.
- 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.

### **Expand Available and Accessible Child Care**

While child care availability and accessibility are far-reaching problems in the United States, student parents face specific challenges accessing child care in academic settings. On-campus child care is available at less than half of U.S. institutions of higher learning; even where it is available, student parents often face long waitlists because of the limited availability. **State policymakers can improve child care access for student parents by:**

- Prioritizing the provision of on-campus child care for students within federally-funded child care programs, like the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).
- Utilizing two-generation (2Gen) approaches in policy making, which look at a family in its totality and recognize that the well-being of children and parents are interconnected, to support entire families and elevate student parents' voices in broader policy discussions on child care reform.

### **Supporting Establishment of Campus-Based Support Services**

Many colleges have established programs, support systems, or other institutional policies to support student parents during their educational journey. **Policymakers should consider options to support, encourage, or require campuses to consider the specific needs of student parents through on-campus services by:**

- Designating funding for student parent programs (e.g. Minnesota's [Student Parent Support Initiative](#)); and
- Requiring state colleges and universities to offer certain services for student parents (e.g. California's [law](#) requiring schools provide priority registration for parents and notify parents of resources and supports).

## **ADDITIONAL IWPR RESOURCES**

[State Policy for Student Parent Success: A Landscape Scan of Policy Solutions Enacted at the State Level](#) (Policy Brief, August 2023)

[Underwater: Student Mothers and Fathers Struggle to Support Their Families and Pay Off College Loans.](#) (Research Brief, April 2023)

[Black Women have Made Major Gains in Higher Education, but Black Single Mothers Still Struggle to Attain Degrees](#) (Fact Sheet, June 2023)

[Supporting Student Parent Recovery Through State Policy: Lessons from Georgia, Texas, and Washington State.](#) (Report, 2021)

[Understanding the Student Parent Experience: The Need for Improved Data Collection on Parent Status in Higher Education.](#) (Briefing Paper, 2020)

[Parents in College By the Numbers.](#) (Report, 2019)

[College Students with Children: National and Regional Profiles.](#) (Report, 2017)