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# NORTH CAROLINA STUDENT PARENTS

ISSUE BRIEF  
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## INTRODUCTION

North Carolina has established an ambitious [statewide attainment goal](#): by 2030, 2 million adults ages 25 to 44 will hold a high-quality credential or postsecondary degree. Achieving this target will require intentional investment in populations that have been historically underrepresented in higher education, including the nearly one in five undergraduate students who are raising children.

Student-parents represent a significant and largely untapped segment of North Carolina’s workforce pipeline. An estimated [1.2 million](#) North Carolinians under age 65 have some college experience but no degree, and a substantial portion are parents whose family responsibilities have made credential completion difficult to sustain. Persistent barriers such as the high cost of childcare, limited scheduling flexibility, and financial constraints contribute to stop-out rates among this population.

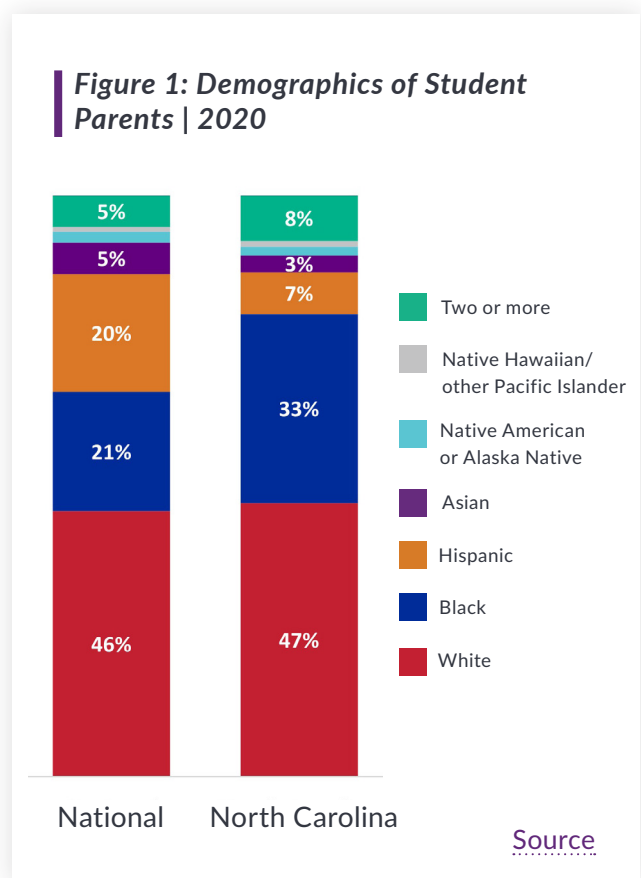
Targeted investment in student-parents yields [benefits](#) that extend beyond individual attainment. Research consistently shows that children of college-educated parents are more likely to enroll in and complete postsecondary education themselves. Increasing credential completion among student-parents can therefore strengthen workforce participation in the near term while advancing long-term economic mobility and educational attainment across generations.

## WHO ARE STUDENT PARENTS?

Student parents are individuals at postsecondary institutions who are raising children. This includes blended families, young parents, and individuals who have assumed caregiving responsibility for younger siblings. The following data reflect the 2019-2020 academic year from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

## The Data Landscape of Student Parents

In the 2019-2020 academic year, about 18.2 percent of undergraduate students in the United States and about 17.8 percent in North Carolina were parents.



North Carolina had significantly more Black student parents compared to national numbers (a difference of 12 percentage points).

The gender makeup of student parents in the state versus nationally was quite similar in 2020, with a slightly higher proportion of women in North Carolina (about 2 percentage points).

In the 2019-2020 academic year, 71.3 percent of student parents nationally made less than \$50,000, compared to 21.4 percent who made between \$50,000-\$99,000 and 7.3 percent who made over

\$100,000. In North Carolina, about 72.1 percent of student parents made less than \$50,000, and 22.3 percent made between \$50,000-\$99,000, with only 5.5 percent making over \$100,000, about 2 percentage points less than national numbers.

In 2020, about 57.3 percent of student parents nationally were first-generation college students compared to 53.2 percent in North Carolina, with either parents' highest level of education being middle school/junior high or high school. About 55.5 percent of student parents nationally received some form of Pell grant, compared to about 53.9 percent in North Carolina.

In 2020, the age makeup of student parents in North Carolina was similar to numbers nationally—where 8.2 percent were 15-23, 25.9 percent were 24-29, and 65.9 percent were 30 or older.

40.4 percent of student parents nationally were at 2-year public institutions, 25 percent were at 4-year public institutions, and 34.5 percent were at other institutions. North Carolina differs notably from national patterns, where 69.1 percent of student parents were at 2-year public institutions, and only 16 percent were at 4-year public institutions.

## CHALLENGES FACING STUDENT PARENTS

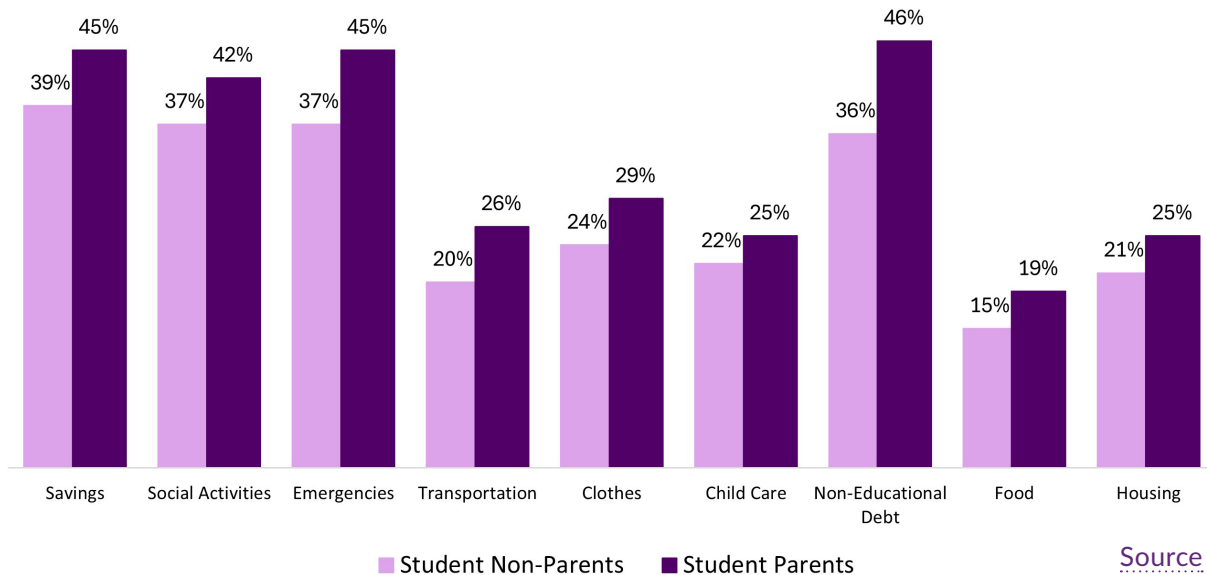
Students with dependents face unique obstacles compared to their non-parent peers. They juggle more than the average student, often balancing a full courseload, a [full-time job](#), and being a full-time caretaker. These competing demands are not only time-intensive but financially taxing.

Student parents are [25 percentage points](#) more likely to take out student loans than student non-parents. They are also more likely than student non-parents to report not having enough money to pay for basic needs, including childcare, food, and housing.

### Childcare

Childcare can be costly, especially for student parents already working hard to make ends meet. One way to overcome this barrier is for institutions to provide childcare services. In North Carolina, [27.6 percent](#) of institutions provide on-campus childcare.

**Figure 2: Students Reporting Difficulty Meeting Basic Needs | 2022**



However, on-campus childcare services have decreased in recent years:

- Nationally, in [2021-22](#), 38 percent of public institutions and 7 percent of private, for-profit institutions provided on-campus childcare. Between 2012 to 2021, the percentage of institutions that provided on-campus childcare dropped 24 percent (by 264 institutions). This decrease was seen strongest at community colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the [largest proportion of student parents](#) attending community colleges.
- In 2025, some [Child Care Access Means Parents in School \(CCAMPIS\)](#) grants were not renewed and federal budget proposals introduced uncertainty around the program's future. While funding has since been maintained, these disruptions created instability for institutions relying on CCAMPIS to support on-campus childcare for student-parents.
- At UNC-Chapel Hill, the [Child Care Scholarship Program](#) concluded at the end of 2025. This program provided financial assistance to full-time UNC-Chapel Hill staff and students with children under thirteen enrolled in a 4- or 5-star licensed childcare facility in the state.

On-campus childcare centers are resource-intensive to operate, and institutions nationwide have [reduced capacity](#) or closed programs in response to rising costs, staffing shortages, and shifting enrollment patterns. These constraints have limited the availability of campus-based childcare, even as demand among student-parents remains high. Reduced access to on-campus childcare [removes a critical support](#) that enables student-parents to persist, complete credentials, and participate in the workforce.

## Limited Flexibility in Scheduling

Student parents also face barriers because of limited flexibility in higher education. Classes are typically scheduled during traditional work hours (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.), forcing student parents

into nontraditional working hours where they are pressed for lack of access to childcare. Furthermore, many schools have [strict](#) attendance policies and a lack of online/hybrid class options. With so many students having to balance both the schedules of their workplace and childcare centers, flexibility and alternative pathways for student parents could increase the participation of parents pursuing degrees.

## Mental Health

Approximately [4 in 10](#) student parents report feeling challenged, overwhelmed, panicked, and other serious mental health effects, including 38 percent indicating that they have considered dropping out within the past 30 days. Some of the [challenges](#) these students reported include lack of sleep, feeling permanently exhausted, financial stress, and balancing parenting, employment, and school. Many of these students indicated interest in support services such as access to early childhood education, social activities for student-parents, and access to counseling and therapy.

## Rural Communities

As childcare centers [continue to close](#), rural communities are hit hard. In rural counties, the average proportion of household income that goes towards childcare costs is [higher](#) than in many urban counties. Furthermore, rural areas receive [less funding per child](#) from Child Care Stabilization Grants than urban counties, setting back childcare centers capacity for both more children and staff.

Forty of North Carolina's fifty-eight community colleges serve at least one rural county. With so many rural-serving community colleges, there are additional barriers for student parents in these areas. Limited childcare options in rural counties present a higher need for on-campus childcare on rural community college campuses, where students may face issues including a lack of transportation for their children and limited childcare options.

## Federal Financial Aid and Implications for Student Parents

Student-parents are more likely than their peers to rely on federal financial aid, with 65.5 percent receiving some form of aid in 2020 compared to 54.3 percent of non-parent students. Recent federal policy changes enacted through the [One Big Beautiful Bill Act](#) update several long-standing financial aid programs, including adjustments to student loan limits based on enrollment intensity.

Under these changes, students enrolled part-time have proportionally lower annual borrowing limits. For example, a professional student enrolled at half-time status would see their annual loan limit reduced from [\\$50,000 to \\$25,000](#). Because student-parents are more likely to enroll part-time, with 48.9 percent enrolled part-time compared to 26.9 percent of non-parents, these updates may influence how this population finances their education while balancing work and family responsibilities.

## CURRENT SUPPORTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina institutions already have several supports in place for student parents and caretakers. Effective March 2025, Wake Forest University provides infant through pre-k care (ages 6 weeks to 5 years) through [KinderCare](#), located in the University Corporate Center. This service has priority enrollment for Wake Forest faculty, staff, and students, as well as affiliate full-time employees at Wake Forest properties.

In 2022, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro received a [\\$75,000 grant](#) from Ascend at the Aspen Institute. These funds helped to support the development of supports such as lactation spaces, Quiet Zones, and designated parking spaces for pregnant individuals.

In 2023, the U.S. Department of Education issued federal CCAMPIS grants to multiple institutions, including four in NC, to support or create on-

campus childcare programs for low-income students. UNC Greensboro received \$224,102, Carteret Community College received \$105,000, East Carolina University received \$353,007, and Forsyth Technical Community College received \$372,991. However, the ED has not reported which grant recipients had their funding cut, so these supports are subject to change.

Housed at [Forsyth Technical Community College](#) in Winston-Salem, NC, the [Student Parent Advocacy Research Center](#) (SPARC) provides many services to student parents, including drop-in childcare, advising services to support flexibility for these students, and events for student parents to connect with one another.

## The North Carolina Community College Child Care Grant

Since 1993, the North Carolina General Assembly has funded the [NC Community College Child Care Grant](#), which gives each NC community college funding to distribute to student parents for childcare costs. In FY 2024-25, about [\\$3 million](#) was allocated to this grant, with each school receiving \$20,000 in base funding and \$10.16 per curriculum budget full-time equivalent student. However, this only covers full-time center-based childcare for about less than two infants or less than three four-year-olds per institution per year, based on state childcare cost averages.

Additionally, based on data from the past three fiscal years, only [about a third](#) of colleges have spent all of their grant funds each year. Limited money distribution is due to issues such as annual budgets being passed after classes have begun, and difficulty articulating what students are allowed to use the funding for, despite inclusive requirements of what classifies childcare (e.g. licensed or unlicensed facilities, family members, afterschool programs, etc.).

## Other Gaps in Support Services

Despite several institutions making large strides, as of 2025, only [13 out of 58](#) NC community colleges provide licensed, five-star, on campus childcare. Infant care in North Carolina costs an average of \$11,720 a year, over 50 percent more expensive than the average in-state tuition at four-year public colleges in the state, \$7,453. This poses a significant challenge to student parents who often struggle to find affordable sources of childcare, despite preexisting support such as the NC Community College Child Care Grant.

## Data Collection

Any current data on student parents in the state are [estimates](#) based on state-level enrollment numbers. This was mandated by the state of [Oregon](#) in 2021, with such data being important to provide [necessary services](#) such as childcare, flexible scheduling, family housing, and more. Data collection is also [required](#) in Illinois, California, and Texas, with states such as Minnesota and Maryland moving in a similar direction.

For example, the [California State University Channel Islands \(CSUCI\)](#) collects local college data on student parent enrollment as part of the Urban Institute's [Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students](#). Data-to-Action team members "braid" together multiple data sources, such as applications and financial aid records, to document student parents. Through this approach, CSUCI has documented [61 percent more](#) student parents. Furthermore, once a CSUCI student is flagged as having a dependent (whether it was indicated on their application, FAFSA, etc.), they [remain flagged in following terms](#), ensuring accuracy in properly providing services.

North Carolina has acted on this before, with Representative Deborah Ross (D-NC) [introducing the "Understanding Student Parent Outcomes Act,"](#) which would require the US ED to collect data about different college graduation obstacles,

with the goal of finding best practices to increase graduation rates for students who are parents or caregivers. This bill would also create a [standard definition](#) for a student parent and require colleges to collect and report student parent data to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

A 2024 survey by Higher Learning Advocates and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) found that only [27 percent](#) of institutions reach out to potentially eligible students about benefit programs using FAFSA and other data. Comprehensible data systems can be utilized to [collaborate with public agencies](#) and connect eligible students to public programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

In 2024, the [Greater Accessibility, Information, Notice, and Support for Student Parents \(GAINS\) Act](#) was passed, requiring all California Community Colleges and California State University campuses and requesting the University of California campuses to take certain actions to both identify and support student parents. Some of these requirements include having updated student parent websites with on-and-off-campus resources for student parents, a cost of attendance adjustment for student parents, establishing a data field to identify student parents, and reporting this data to the Chancellor's or President's Office for inclusion in the California Cradle to Career Data System.



## Childcare Development Fund

The [North Carolina Child Care and Development Fund \(CCDF\)](#) currently provides subsidies to low-income families to lessen childcare costs. However, narrow [eligibility requirements](#) and long waitlists can make it hard for parents to receive such subsidies.

In Georgia, the state Department of Early Care and Learning [prioritizes student parents](#) who apply to their CCDF funded program, Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS). North Carolina could replicate this model, which could both encourage more student parent applications for subsidies and therefore expand child support for this population.

## The Two-Generation (2Gen) Approach

States such as Tennessee have implemented Ascend's [two-generation \(2Gen\) approach](#) at a large scale, into the state [Department of Human Services](#) and various DHS [programs](#). One of these programs is [Families First](#), a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) workforce development and employment program. Families First participants can use funds for childcare, education, job support, and other services, many of which are applicable to student parents.



## Head Start on Campus

Across the United States, various community colleges already have Head Start programs on their campuses, including two in North Carolina at Halifax and Lenoir Community Colleges. This is through the [Kids On Campus](#) initiative, a five-year joint project by The Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the National Head Start Association (NHSA) to increase Head Start sites on community college campuses. The program includes various [benefits](#) for student parents, including:

- Free and high-quality early childcare and education for qualifying student parents
- Head Start families can enroll in the college, and some receive support from Head Start if receiving a GED or credential is part of their family goals

The program also serves as a work-learning opportunity for students in early education and other fields of study.

## Priority Course Registration

To overcome issues such as course scheduling conflicts, in 2022 the state passed the [California Assembly Bill 2881](#). This [mandated](#) that all California State University institutions and community colleges give student parents priority registration. This was done through partnership with the CSU Office of the Chancellor and individual technology teams on campuses to develop a system to collect student parent data. Students who were identified as parents receive prompts prior to registration that they must self-register for priority registration.

## Student Parent Scholarships

For example, Wilson College in Chambersburg, PA has the [Single Parent Scholar Program](#). This program provides up to 12 students who are single parents with up to two children between the ages

of 20 months to 10 years with free on campus housing. Students in this program also find local childcare, and the school subsidizes the costs.

Misericordia University in Dallas, PA has the [Women with Children Program \(WWC\)](#), providing single mothers with free housing, free books, priority placement for Federal Work-Study positions, career planning, and other benefits to advance them through their education. Children of students must be between 2 and 8 years old upon parental admission to the program. As of 2023, [forty families](#) have successfully graduated from the program, and each student has found a job related to their studies.

## CONCLUSION

Increasing opportunities for student-parent success would move North Carolina closer to its goal of 2 million adults ages 25 to 44 holding a high-quality credential or college degree by 2030. With just under [one million](#) North Carolinians under age 65 having some college but no degree, targeted strategies can better meet this population where they are and support more student-parents in completing postsecondary education.

These efforts can be aligned with broader wraparound supports that address both academic and family needs, including approaches that integrate access to childcare, financial assistance, and flexible learning options. A focus on the full family through a [Two-Generation \(2Gen\)](#) approach can strengthen outcomes for both parents and children and support long-term economic mobility.

Investing in the nearly [one in five](#) undergraduate students who are parents represents a significant opportunity to strengthen household stability, expand workforce participation, and improve economic outcomes at the local and state levels.

## Policy Considerations

- **Designate Student-Parents as Priority Population.** Establish student-parents as a priority population within state-administered childcare subsidy programs to improve access and reduce wait times. Align eligibility and funding criteria to support enrollment, persistence, and completion.
- **Expand On-Campus Childcare Capacity.** Invest in scalable Two-Generation (2Gen) childcare models on community college and university campuses. Leverage public-private partnerships to expand access in high-need regions and support working families.
- **Remove Administrative Barriers to Childcare Access.** Reform eligibility, scheduling, and reporting requirements that force student-parents to choose between childcare access and required coursework. Align institutional and state policies to support flexible attendance and care arrangements.
- **Fund Completion Grants for Student-Parents.** Increase targeted financial support for student-parents nearing degree completion to address the completion gap. Prioritize last-dollar grants and emergency aid that support persistence through final credit requirements.



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