

From Policy to Practice: How Parenting College Students Experience New Supports in Texas

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August 2026

Ashton, B., Cornett, A., Riza, C., and Welton, C. (2026, August). From Policy to Practice: How Parenting College Students Experience New Supports in Texas. Trellis Strategies.

Background

From mid-June through early July 2026, Trellis Strategies conducted the Texas Parenting Student Survey, a targeted survey of Texas-based college students who identified as parents through the Modern Learner Network. The survey was designed to better understand parenting students' experiences in higher education and assess awareness, implementation, and perceived impact of recent state-wide policies intended to support parenting students.

Survey invitations were sent to 4,030 Texas students, and 397 currently enrolled parenting students across 30 two-year colleges and 19 four-year universities completed the survey. Respondents closely resembled the broader population of parenting students attending Texas institutions, with demographic characteristics generally consistent with statewide estimates. Student mothers were somewhat overrepresented in the sample; additional information about respondent characteristics is provided on page 4.

During the 88th Texas Legislature (2023), lawmakers enacted a series of policies aimed at reducing barriers to higher education for pregnant and parenting students.

House Bill 1361 (HB 1361), effective June 12, 2023, established a framework for institutional support by requiring public colleges and universities to designate a liaison who connects student parents with resources such as child care, transportation assistance, public benefits, health services, and academic support, while also improving state data collection on parenting students.

Senate Bill 412 (SB 412), effective September 1, 2023, strengthened protections for pregnant and parenting students by prohibiting discriminatory practices, requiring reasonable accommodations related to pregnancy and childbirth, and ensuring students can continue their education without being



forced to withdraw, change programs, or forfeit academic standing because of pregnancy or parenting responsibilities.

Senate Bill 459 (SB 459), effective September 1, 2023, further supported student parents by requiring institutions that offer priority registration to any student group to extend the same opportunity to parenting students, helping them secure class schedules that better align with work and caregiving obligations.

Collectively, these measures reflect the Legislature's intent to improve college access, persistence, and completion for pregnant and parenting students by expanding institutional supports, protecting educational opportunities, and increasing flexibility for students balancing academics with family responsibilities.

To better understand how these policies are being implemented and experienced by students, the Texas Parenting Student Survey asked parenting students about their awareness of available supports, interactions with institutional resources, access to accommodations and priority registration, and challenges and opportunities they face while pursuing a postsecondary credential.

Parenting Students Face Significant Competing Demands

Parenting students are a significant presence on campuses across the country, representing just over one in five students nationally (NPSAS:20). In the 2025 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS), Trellis Strategies collected data from over 59,930 students attending 153 institutions and found that 15 percent identified as a parent, primary caregiver, or legal guardian to any children. Among these students, 60 percent reported spending 40 or more hours each week providing care for dependents, and one in five reported missing at least one day of class during the previous semester because of child care challenges.

The SFWS findings illustrate the competing demands many parenting students navigate while pursuing a degree. In addition to managing coursework, parenting students are often balancing substantial caregiving responsibilities, employment, and household obligations. As a result, they frequently experience time scarcity, or a shortage of time to meet academic, family, work, and personal needs. Parenting students are more likely to enroll part-time, stop out, and take longer to complete their degrees than their non-parenting peers, even though they often perform as well as or better academically when enrolled.

While parenting students face challenges unique to raising children while enrolled in college, their experiences also reflect broader trends affecting today's modern learners and the increasingly non-linear pathways students navigate toward a degree.

Findings from the Texas Parenting Student Survey demonstrate that these challenges remain common for parenting students in Texas. One-third of respondents indicated they expect it will take longer to complete their degree than they originally anticipated. Nearly one in two said that child care conflicts had forced them to drop, miss, or rearrange their classes, highlighting the ongoing challenges of balancing parenting responsibilities with academic schedules.

At the same time, only 47 percent said they felt supported by their institution of enrollment. This finding represents an opportunity for colleges and universities to strengthen awareness, visibility, and utilization of the resources and protections available to parenting students. Recent state policies were designed to help address many of the barriers identified by student parents, but their effectiveness ultimately depends on whether students know these supports exist and can easily access them when needed.

Finding 1: Priority Registration Is Associated with Positive Experiences, but Awareness Is Limited

In the 88th Legislative Session, SB 459 required institutions of higher education to provide priority registration to parenting students if that opportunity is extended to any other student group. This policy recognizes that many parenting students face significant time constraints as they balance course scheduling and sequencing alongside caregiving responsibilities, employment, and other household obligations. Data from the 2025 Student Financial Wellness Survey highlights the magnitude of these demands: 59 percent of parenting students reported working 40 or more hours per week, while 60 percent indicated spending the same amount of time caring for dependents. Priority registration can help alleviate some of these pressures by giving student parents greater flexibility to build a class schedule that aligns with child care availability, work schedules, and family responsibilities.

Despite the potential value of this benefit, 62 percent of respondents in the Texas Parenting Student Survey did not know if their institution offered early or priority registration. Furthermore, 79 percent were unaware that parenting students are entitled to early registration benefits when it is available to other student groups. Less than one in five, just 18 percent, reported having received the benefit.

The good news is that students who did receive priority registration generally reported positive experiences. Most (94 percent) indicated that it was an easy process, and nearly 80 percent said it had a positive impact on their ability to align their class schedule with child care availability.

Finding 2: Parenting Student Liaisons Remain Largely Invisible to Students

Parenting students often navigate a complex system of offices, programs, policies, and support services while balancing caregiving responsibilities, employment, and academic commitments. For students already experiencing time poverty, locating resources and determining which office can provide assistance can become a barrier in itself.

Recognizing these challenges, HB 1361 established a framework requiring public colleges and universities to designate a liaison for parenting students. These individuals are intended to serve as a centralized point of contact, connecting parenting students to available resources such as child care assistance, public benefits, financial aid, transportation support, health services, and academic assistance. By helping students navigate institutional systems more efficiently, liaisons have the potential to reduce administrative burdens and improve access to supports that can promote persistence and completion.



Despite the availability of this support infrastructure, awareness of the liaison requirement was limited among respondents in the Texas Parenting Student Survey. Nearly 88 percent of respondents were unaware that their institution was required to designate a liaison, and only 10 percent knew how to contact that individual on their campus. Even more surprisingly, only three percent of respondents reported having interacted with a liaison.

Among the small number of students who did know about the liaison office, accessibility remained a challenge. Nearly half of these students (45 percent) indicated that the liaison contact information was difficult to find or that they were unable to locate it on their institution's website.

Students who did engage with a liaison most commonly sought academic or financial aid support. Encouragingly, 61 percent of those students reported that the interaction was helpful or extremely helpful.

Moving from Compliance to Impact

The findings suggest that Texas has established a meaningful policy foundation for supporting parenting students, but implementation has not yet translated into consistent student awareness or use. Priority registration and campus liaison requirements are well aligned with the realities parenting students describe, especially the need to coordinate coursework with child care, employment, transportation, and family responsibilities. However, when most parenting

students do not know these supports exist, the practical value of the policy is limited. Moving from compliance to impact will require institutions to make these supports visible, easy to access, and embedded in the routine touchpoints students already encounter.

Institutions should treat communication and navigation as core components of implementation. Parenting student supports should be clearly described on institutional websites, included in registration and advising communications, and reinforced through financial aid, student affairs, academic advising, and faculty-facing channels. Because parenting students often navigate multiple offices to meet academic and basic needs, institutions should ensure that staff across departments know how to identify parenting students, explain available supports, and make warm referrals to the designated liaison when appropriate.

The findings also point to the importance of reducing administrative friction. Priority registration is most useful when students can access it without having to self-advocate repeatedly, search across multiple webpages, or disclose personal circumstances to numerous offices. Institutions can strengthen implementation by developing clear eligibility processes, automating access where possible, and making the liaison role easy to find through a central parenting student webpage, student portal, syllabus statements, orientation materials, and advising scripts.

At the state and system level, implementation support should focus on consistency, accountability, and shared learning across institutions. State leaders can support campuses by providing model language, common reporting expectations, implementation checklists, and opportunities for institutions to compare approaches. Continued data collection will also be important for understanding whether increased awareness and use of these supports are associated with improved course-taking patterns, persistence, and completion among parenting students.

Looking Ahead

Ultimately, the survey results underscore that policy design is only the first step. For parenting students, the difference between a statutory right and a meaningful support often depends on whether the benefit is communicated clearly, delivered consistently, and connected to the day-to-day decisions students must make about time, care, work, and school. Ensuring parenting students can fully realize the benefits of postsecondary education is not only a student success strategy it is an investment in families in Texas that ensure the economic, educational, and social benefits of credential completion are realized across generations.

About the Survey

From June 16 to July 2, 2026, Trellis Strategies conducted the Texas Parenting Student Survey, a targeted survey of currently enrolled parenting students attending 49 colleges and universities across Texas through the Modern Learner Network. The survey was designed to better understand

parenting students' experiences in higher education and assess their awareness, use, and perceptions of recent state-supported resources and policies. Respondent characteristics are presented below alongside statewide estimates for undergraduate parenting students residing in Texas and attending a Texas institution of higher education.

CHARACTERISTIC	RESPONDENTS (%)	TEXAS PARENTING STUDENTS (NPSAS:20) (%)
Gender		
Female	82%	76%
Male	17%	24%
Other/Not reported	1%	1%
Institution Type		
Two-year institution	63%	–
Four-year institution	37%	–
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	<1%	–
Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	3%	3%
Black/African American	16%	16%
Hispanic/Latino	36%	42%
Multiple races	3%	6%
White	35%	33%
Not reported	6%	–
International student	2%	–

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. NPSAS:20 estimates represent undergraduate parenting students residing in Texas and attending Texas institutions of higher education. Categories with very small respondent counts are included for transparency; comparable NPSAS:20 estimates are suppressed when sample sizes are insufficient for reliable reporting.

Recent Trellis Strategies publications

Bridging the Gap: Understanding Mental Health Disparities Among College Students

Beckham, M. (2026, August). Bridging the Gap: Understanding Mental Health Disparities Among College Students. *Trellis Strategies*. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/bridging-the-gap-understanding-mental-health-disparities-among-college-students/>

Who is the modern borrower? Insights from the 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey

Plumb, May Helena. (2026, May). Who is the modern borrower? Insights from the 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey. *Trellis Strategies*. https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Research-Brief_TSMay26_ModernBorrower.pdf

Student Financial Wellness Survey – Fall 2025 Results

Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., Plumb, M.H., Schuette, A., Mentzer, L., and Ashton, B. (2026). Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2025. *Trellis Strategies*. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2025/>

Degrees of Responsibility: Caregiving Students in the 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey

Plumb, May Helena and Welton, Carrie R. (2025). Dual Roles, Double Pressure: Caregiving Students in the 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey. *Trellis Strategies*. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/degrees-of-responsibility-caregiving-students-in-the-2024-student-financial-wellness-survey/>

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Trellis Strategies is an experienced research partner dedicated to advancing education and workforce development. With nearly 40 years of expertise, we specialize in qualitative and quantitative research services, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and case studies. Our proficiency in qualitative research and quantitative analyses enables us to extract insights from extensive datasets, guiding strategic decision-making in areas such as student success and outcomes.

Our expertise extends to diverse fields including data analysis, market research, policy analysis, and more. We address topics such as adult learners, student finances, and institutional effectiveness. Trellis Strategies offers a collaborative approach to data-driven decisions, contributing to positive transformations in education and workforce development.

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