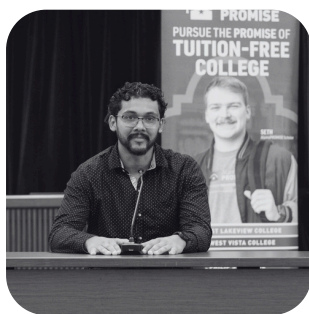


Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE



Top to Bottom: Jericho Doherty, Alamo Colleges Scholar; Bryan Barney, Hope Chicago Parent Scholar; Brandon Keyes, University of Michigan Graduate and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer

Ready to Learn, Ready to Work: How Student Fathers Can Transform America's Workforce

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Executive Summary

America faces a workforce crisis that an overlooked population could help solve. While employers will need to fill 9.7 million new jobs paying over \$90,000 annually by 2035, nearly 14 million fathers with children under 18 have some college but no degree (1). These men, many from communities that have historically faced barriers to educational access, bring motivation and real-world experience that higher education has yet to embrace fully.

A national convening in San Antonio brought together over 80 higher education leaders, policymakers, researchers, Promise programs, community partners, and students to address this opportunity. What emerged was clear: student fathers remain "the invisible of the invisible" on college campuses, yet supporting them yields remarkable returns: \$5.36 for every dollar invested, with bachelor's degree holders earning 31% more over their lifetimes (2).

The solution requires a three-tier approach:

- Foundational support ensures the basics are right by tracking student progress through data collection, expanding access via reconnect programs, and creating bridge programs for adult learners.
- Integrative support connects services strategically, providing priority registration, offering virtual and hybrid classes, assigning dedicated navigators, and utilizing data to proactively meet student needs.
- Comprehensive support builds lifecycle systems, linking education and workforce data, providing wrap-around supports, and focusing on credentials that lead to family-sustaining wages.

Six states (California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, and Texas) have already passed laws requiring the collection of student parent data. Thirty-five states offer higher education at no tuition costs for adults, and proven models, such as CUNY's programs, show 64% completion rates versus 43% for comparable students (3).

The opportunity is unprecedented: supporting student fathers creates generational change—when fathers succeed, children see education modeled, family economic stability improves, and communities benefit from skilled workers who remain locally invested. The tools exist; now, leadership commitment is needed.

"When we focus on student fathers, we have the opportunity to change generations." — Rosye Cloud, Interim CEO of College Promise.

The Hidden Workforce Solution

Behind this gathering lies a compelling reality: a significant workforce solution is already in place, and its members are engaged and motivated. While 875,000 student fathers currently navigate higher education, 13.1 million additional fathers with children under 18 have high school diplomas or some college but no degree. These men, many from communities that have historically faced barriers to educational access, bring motivation and real-world experience that higher education has yet to embrace fully. The most effective support strategies benefit all student parents, creating stronger coalitions for change (4).

The timing couldn't be more critical. By 2035, employers will need to fill 9.7 million new jobs paying over \$90,000 annually that require postsecondary credentials. Meanwhile, traditional college enrollment is declining while nearly half of current degree holders will be 55 or older, creating workforce challenges that demand innovative solutions. Supporting credential-ready fathers who bring work experience, maturity, and powerful motivation to succeed could play an important role in addressing these gaps.

What the Convening Uncovered

This convergence of opportunity and need is precisely what drove the San Antonio convening. Representatives from 12 higher education institutions, 12 national organizations, including the Urban Institute, and six community partners, such as the YMCA of Greater San Antonio, came together to explore how higher education could better serve this population. What they uncovered was both troubling and promising.

The troubling reality is that student fathers remain "the invisible of the invisible," their unique strengths and needs consistently overlooked, despite comprising nearly 900,000 students nationwide. But this invisibility also revealed the opportunity; institutions have been missing a population that could help address both educational equity and workforce development goals.

Understanding the Unique Challenge

The convening participants quickly discovered why traditional adult learner supports fall short for student fathers. Unlike childless adult learners, student fathers simultaneously balance three demanding roles: parent, provider, and student. This balancing act creates specific challenges that require targeted approaches beyond standard supports. The numbers tell the story: Among the nearly 600,000 student fathers working more than 30 hours weekly, about one-third experience financial shortfalls six or more times a year due to family costs, such as childcare and healthcare. Nearly one-quarter are veterans whose dual identity as fathers and service members often goes unrecognized by campus support systems. Daily responsibilities, such as caring for sick children, managing school closures, and responding to family needs, require flexible academic structures. Yet, most institutions still operate on rigid schedules designed for traditional-age students.

The Investment Opportunity



“At the Alamo Colleges District, we believe in meeting students where they are and designing pathways that reflect the realities of their lives. Student fathers are a vital part of our college communities, and too often, their experiences go unseen in higher education policy and practice. This convening represents a critical opportunity to share data, elevate voices, and create actionable solutions to ensure student fathers and all parents can thrive in college, career, and life.” – Dr. Mike Flores, Alamo Colleges District Chancellor

Yet these challenges shouldn't obscure the remarkable return on investment that supporting student fathers represents. For individuals, bachelor's degree holders earn 31% more over their lifetimes than high school graduates. For society, supporting student parents yields \$5.36 for every dollar invested. More importantly, research and practice converged in San Antonio to reveal evidence-based approaches that can benefit both individual families and workforce development goals.

This convergence of research, practice, and economic opportunity points toward a clear path forward.

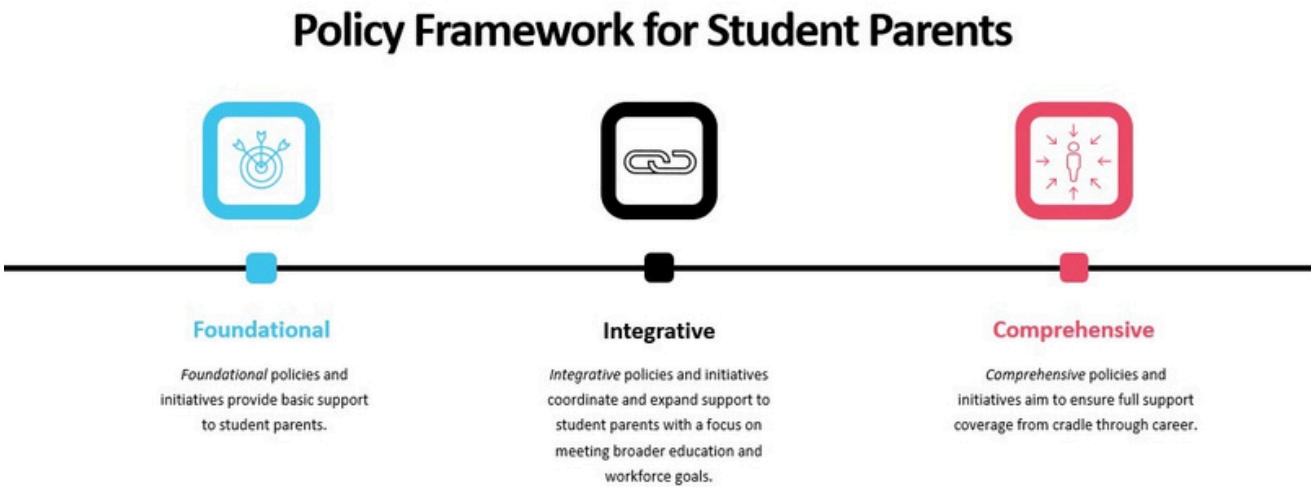
A Framework for Action

What follows are the actionable strategies that emerged from this unprecedented gathering—a roadmap for better supporting student fathers while contributing to America's skilled workforce needs.

A Three-Tier Framework for Action

The San Antonio convening identified that student fathers need layered support. States and institutions can start at any level and build momentum:

Figure 1: Policy Framework for Student Parents



Level 1: Foundational Support

Get the basics right first

- Track student fathers with data collection. Six states (California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, and Texas) now require colleges to identify and track student parents. Without data, there's no way to measure progress or allocate resources effectively.
- Expand access through reconnect programs. Promise programs in thirty-five states offer higher education at no tuition costs, so adults don't have to pay for college. Covering tuition removes a significant barrier for student parents who often face competing financial pressures. Massachusetts recently invested \$117 million, with Michigan and Louisiana following suit (5).
- Create bridge programs for adult learners. Wichita State's program, which supports 2,200 adult learners, demonstrates how a structured orientation helps student fathers navigate college systems (6).

Level 2: Integrative Support

Connect services strategically

- Provide priority registration. California became the first state to give student parents first choice of classes—essential when 85% of courses happen during traditional work hours.
- Assign dedicated navigators. Minnesota and Texas now require staff to help student parents coordinate childcare, healthcare, and academic support. Austin Community College's family-centered model demonstrates this approach works (7).
- Use data proactively. Washington state surveys 11,000 students to identify needs, then automatically connects eligible student parents to state benefits (8).

SPOTLIGHT: CUNY's Wrap-Around Support Model

The City University of New York (CUNY) demonstrates that comprehensive support is an effective approach. Their programs—Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), CUNY Reconnect for adult learners, and Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) for bachelor's programs—provide scholarships, priority registration, textbooks, personalized advising, transportation, and childcare coordination.

The results speak for the ASAP program itself:

- 64% completion rate vs. 43% for comparable students
- \$3 returned to taxpayers for every \$1 invested
- \$46 million in net fiscal benefits

These programs show that upfront investment in comprehensive support pays dividends for students, institutions, and communities.

Level 3: Comprehensive Support

Build lifecycle systems

- Link education and workforce data. California connects student parent data to its statewide system tracking progress from early childhood through career advancement.
- Provide wrap-around supports. CUNY's programs offer scholarships, priority registration, advising, and childcare coordination. Result: 64% completion rate versus 43% for comparable students, with \$3 returned for every \$1 invested (9).
- Focus on credentials of value. Texas defines success as affordable degrees leading to jobs that pay more than high school wages—and aligns all policy around this goal (10).

SPOTLIGHT: California's Cradle-to-Career Data Integration

California's Assembly Bill 2881 demonstrates how to connect student-parent support to statewide education goals. The legislation creates a three-part strategy:

- Collect student parent data to help students reach educational goals
- Align data to meet the statewide goal of 70% of Californians with postsecondary credentials
- Link student parent data to California's Cradle-to-Career Data System

The California C2C Data System (12) is a public, statewide longitudinal system that tracks student progress, social service use, and postsecondary experiences from early childhood through career advancement.

The impact: By including student fathers in this comprehensive system, policymakers can identify needs, track progress, and develop targeted policies that improve both educational and workforce outcomes—insights impossible without statewide integration.

Key takeaway: Linking student parent data to broader state systems amplifies impact and demonstrates a return on investment.

What States Can Do

Start with legislation that works:

- Require student parent data collection. Six states have passed statutes. A more detailed, companion College Promise Student Fathers Landscape Analysis provides greater details and examples.
- Expand reconnect programs. Cover tuition costs for adults over 25.
- Mandate priority registration for student parents at public institutions.
- Fund student parent navigators to coordinate support services.
- Align education and workforce goals around credentials that lead to family-sustaining wages.

SPOTLIGHT: Addressing Pushback on Student Parent Policies

Policies that provide specific benefits to student parents, like priority registration, can face pushback for appearing to favor one group. However, state leaders successfully frame these policies as supporting broader goals, such as increasing college attainment and addressing workforce shortages.

- Texas legislators emphasized that parent liaisons play a crucial role in delivering resources to support student success, ultimately benefiting the entire state's educational goals ([House Bill 1361](#)).
- Michigan Governor Whitmer (11) signed an executive directive focused on young men and fathers, noting the state's goal to reach 60% postsecondary attainment by 2030. In the Michigan Reconnect program, women outnumber men by a ratio of 2 to 1. As the governor stated: "Too many men don't have the resources they need to succeed... I'll keep working with anyone to make sure that everyone can make it in Michigan."

Key strategy: Position student parent support as essential for meeting statewide education and workforce goals, not special treatment.

What Employers Can Do

- Student fathers need workplace partners:
- Offer family-friendly internships with flexible schedules and childcare support.
 - Hire locally—student fathers' family ties create stable, committed employees.
 - Provide family-sustaining benefits like healthcare and childcare assistance.

The Bottom Line

The evidence is compelling: supporting student fathers yields significant economic returns while creating generational change. Bachelor's degree holders earn 31% more over their lifetimes, and every dollar invested in student parent support returns \$5.36.

The tools and successful models exist—what's needed is leadership commitment. Whether starting with data collection, integrating existing resources, or building comprehensive support systems, student fathers represent untapped workforce potential and an opportunity to strengthen families for generations.

Call to Action

The convening made clear that student parents need immediate action. Jericho Doherty, a student father in the Alamo Colleges District, shared his powerful journey of balancing college, work, and parenting, reminding participants that investing in student fathers means investing in families and communities. Amber Angel from the ECMC Foundation, herself a former student parent, emphasized that student parents must be visible drivers of policy change, not invisible populations.

The time for action is now. Student fathers can't wait for perfect policies; they need champions who will start where they are and build momentum.

State Policymakers	Higher Education Leaders	Employers	Advocates and Philanthropists
Introduce student parent data collection legislation this session.	Begin tracking student fathers on your campus immediately.	Create family-friendly internship pilots with local colleges.	Fund demonstration projects at receptive institutions.
Implement or expand reconnect programs to serve fathers better.	Implement priority registration for student parents next semester.	Review hiring practices to support working student fathers better.	Support research on long-term economic impacts.
Fund pilot navigator programs at public institutions.	Identify one community partner for childcare support.	Offer benefits that recognize family responsibilities.	Amplify successful models to drive policy adoption.

Student fathers are ready to learn and ready to work. The question is: are we ready to lead? The workforce crisis demands bold action, and student fathers offer a proven solution. Let's give them—and America's economic future—the support they deserve.

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