



## **A PRESCHOOL AGENDA THAT BEGINS AT BIRTH**

**CALIFORNIA WORKING FAMILIES POLICY SUMMIT  
JANUARY 13, 2009**

### **INTRODUCTION**

2008 was a landmark year for the early care and education movement in California, resulting in several major legislative victories (SB 1629, SB 1298, and AB 2759). The Early Learning Quality Improvement Advisory Committee was established to plan for a Quality Improvement System; five existing child care and development programs were consolidated into one California State Preschool program; and a process was established through which the California Department of Education (CDE) will assist local education agencies to issue, maintain, and report information for center-based early care and education (ECE) programs using a unique pupil identifier.

These successes were especially significant because the legislation received widespread support, due in large part to stronger partnerships among preschool, child care, and K-12 advocacy groups. Coupled with a series of “Water Cooler” meetings that brought together early care and education, K-12, labor and business organizations, significant progress has been made in creating a statewide dialogue to identify a common vision for early learning in California.

However, the 2009-10 state budget crisis threatens the very core of early care and education, and it will require this new coalition to come together to protect education and child care and development programs from deep budget cuts.

Recent RAND research on three- and four-year-old children in California has shown that:

- Only 53 percent of low-income children attend preschool, while 80 percent of children whose families make more than \$100,000 attend.<sup>i</sup>
- Early gaps in children’s school readiness mirror standardized test results for third graders, indicating that the same groups of students who fall short of state standards by third grade were behind when they entered kindergarten.<sup>ii</sup>
- According to a longitudinal study of nearly 1,000 low-income children in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers’ preschool program, children who attended high-quality preschool did significantly better in K-12 and were less likely to be held back or placed in special education than children who attended preschool.<sup>iii</sup>

Preschool California and its partners believe that learning occurs throughout a child’s first years. We must advance policies which benefit our state’s preschoolers, infants and toddlers, and that support working families in their need for full-day, full-year care. Furthermore, the historic election of Barack Obama to the presidency has resulted in what will be an unprecedented opportunity at the federal level for progress on early learning programs for children birth to 5. Therefore, it is fitting that we “borrow” the Obama campaign’s theme when we create a policy agenda that is “a preschool agenda that begins at birth.”

## **POLICY OBJECTIVE #1**

**Advocate for increased federal early education investments, maintain existing state early care and education funding, and support state budget reforms that protect and do no harm to children and families.**

### ***Background***

Much of next year will be spent protecting early care and education programs against deep state budget cuts, while simultaneously advocating for increased federal investments due to the Obama administration's focus on early education. Clearly the specter of budget cuts presents an acute threat to the existence of state-funded child care and development programs. If funding is cut, hundreds of thousands of the youngest and most needy children in California could lose their preschool and child care services. This would be devastating not only for those children's school readiness and later school success, but for the entire state economy which relies on these services to help working poor families to go to work.

Of particular concern are the General Child Care infant-toddler programs, which provide a critical service that is in very short supply given the massive unmet need for quality infant-toddler care. We recognize that while this is not the year for additional funding, it is critical that the state begin to address the grossly inadequate funding of infant-toddler programs so that California does not lose much-needed capacity. Even without budget cuts, these programs are barely surviving, often forcing local education agencies and community-based nonprofits to take on significant deficits. With the likelihood of a second year of no cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), after decades of no or low COLAs, these programs are at significant risk of closing down, and something must be done to ensure they continue to serve children during their most formative years.

### ***Recommended Actions***

- A.** The Legislature and Governor should put the needs of young children first, and protect and preserve child care and development programs. To achieve this support, it is important that a broad coalition of K-12, child care, preschool, labor and business interests unite.
- B.** Advocate for increases in federal early care and education investments, including federal infrastructure funding for facilities.
- C.** The Governor should appoint or designate the federally mandated state Early Learning Council so this body can inform the federal debate on early learning, encourage increased investments for California, and provide greater oversight and coordination of California's ECE system.
- D.** Through legislation and the state budget process, the Legislature and the Governor should establish a funding mechanism that allows for future augmentation of the General Child Care Infant-Toddler program when the state budget allows it or federal funds become available.

## **POLICY OBJECTIVE #2**

**Continue to reform state administration of early care and education programs in order to further lift the administrative burden on providers and reduce unspent funds.**

### ***Background***

Early care and education providers still face daunting administrative burdens due to multiple contracts, complex reporting requirements and a lack of flexibility, which causes both federal and state funds to go unspent despite a significant unmet need of eligible families. The California Department of Education is leading an administrative reform effort, which had a major success last year with the passage of, AB2759 (Jones), the California State Preschool Program Act. This Act accomplishes the following:

1. Consolidates five state preschool programs into one creating the California State Preschool program (CSP), which is the largest state preschool program in the nation.
2. Empowers local preschool providers to offer full-day or part-day services, depending on the needs of the families they serve, not the funding they receive.
3. Expands the eligibility of the \$50 million Prekindergarten Family Literacy program (as part of CSP) from just four-year-olds, to both three- and four-year-olds.
4. Enables children whose parents no longer qualify for full-day services to still qualify for part-day preschool, thereby achieving continuity of care.

### ***Recommended Actions***

- A. The California Department of Education should partner with state-funded child care and development organizations to identify and reform, either through administrative or legislative action, existing regulations which hamper the optimization of existing child care and development funding or are considered an unnecessary administrative burden. These reforms should retain requirements that ensure access to our most vulnerable children and families.

## **Policy Objective #3**

**Continue progress towards the long-term goal of expanding access to and improving the quality of early care and education so that all children, regardless of their family's ability to pay, have access to high-quality programs.**

### ***Background***

A 2008 RAND study found that only 13 percent of the children who need it most receive high-quality preschool that prepares them for school.<sup>iv</sup> A vast body of research shows that only high-quality programs result in a child being ready for success in school. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, in 2007, California was one of only 8 states to meet less than 5 out of 10 benchmarks for high-quality preschool. In contrast, Illinois and Washington met 9, and North Carolina and Alabama met 10. Last year, SB 1629 (Steinberg), the Early Learning Quality Improvement System (ELQIS) Act, was signed into law. SB 1629 creates the ELQIS Advisory Committee to make recommendations to raise the quality and accountability of early learning programs for children 0 - 5, including a quality rating scale and a tiered reimbursement structure that will increase funding for higher levels of quality.

### ***Recommended Actions***

- A.** The State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Secretary of Education should create a significant and meaningful stakeholder engagement process to inform and shape the Advisory Committee recommendations.
  
- B.** CDE should work to optimize and expand existing child care and development funding, including federal quality improvement funds, to raise program quality. Other funding mechanisms should be identified to increase access for those children who currently do not receive ECE services.

For more information on these recommendations, contact:

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<sup>i</sup> Karoly, L., et al. (2008). *Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Age Children in California*. RAND Corporation.

<sup>ii</sup> Karoly, L., et al. (2007). *Who is Ahead and Who is Behind? Gaps in School Readiness and Student Achievement in the Early Grades for California's Children*. RAND Corporation.

<sup>iii</sup> Reynolds, A. et. al. (2001). Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285.

<sup>iv</sup> *Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Age Children in California*, by Lynn A. Karoly, Bonnie Ghosh-Dastidar, Gail L. Zellman, Michal Perlman, and Lynda Fernyhough, 2008. The specific measure referred to was instructional supports in the CLASS instrument.