



TAKING CARE OF OUR CHILDREN: RECOMMENDATIONS ON PRESCHOOL

**CALIFORNIA WORKING FAMILIES POLICY SUMMIT
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INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that preschool-age children (3- and 4-year-olds) are better prepared for success in kindergarten and beyond when they have attended a high-quality preschool program.¹ Preschool attendance also has been shown to decrease the educational achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students.² Furthermore, the benefits of preschool extend beyond individual children to society as a whole. In terms of society's progress, the opportunity cost of not educating our children as best we can is tremendous. And, in terms of hard financial costs, a recent RAND Corporation report found that every \$1 invested in high-quality preschool in California creates \$2.62 in long-term savings.

Yet today, 58% of California's 3- and 4-year-olds *do not attend* any kind of preschool or group care. What's more, our knowledge of the quality of the programs that do exist is very limited.³ This puts California's children, and the state as a whole, at a distinct disadvantage. Particularly alarming is the disparity in the preschool attendance rates of Latinos, our largest ethnic group of preschool-age children. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Latino 3- and 4-year-olds are *not* in preschool, compared to 55% of white, 50% of African American and 52% of Asian American children.⁴ Another key disparity is that children from higher income families are much more likely to attend preschool than children from poor families.

California's future prosperity is dependent on reversing this situation. We must expand access to preschool and take steps to ensure quality preschool programs are the norm across the state. Research shows that having a college-educated preschool staff improves children's educational and developmental outcomes, yet the minimum education requirement in California for a teacher in a state-funded preschool is only 12 college-level units.⁵ The vast majority of other states (30 out of 40), which offer state-funded preschool, require preschool programs to have at least one teacher with a bachelor's degree.⁶

Last year, California took an incremental, yet important step toward expanding preschool to children who would most likely benefit. In the May Revision, the Governor proposed a targeted expansion of preschool and in September 2006 he signed AB 172 (Chan), which allocated \$50 million towards preschool programs for 4-year-olds living near the lowest performing 30% of elementary schools. A one-time \$50 million augmentation was also added to the budget to fund preschool facilities. Total preschool funding in FY 2006-07 was \$400 million.⁷ We must build on this progress in 2007.

POLICY OBJECTIVE #1

Increase access to early education experiences, and ensure that publicly-subsidized programs are user-friendly for families with children who are most in need of high-quality preschool.

Background

In order to fulfill our goals for student achievement in grades K-12, children must be better prepared to learn when they enter kindergarten. To achieve this, we must expand access to quality preschool and early education opportunities to all children. More specifically, our goal is for all 3- and 4-year-old children to have access to a quality preschool program, and for all early care and education programs to meet measurable and appropriate standards. Currently:

- Many public preschool programs are only half-day, although working families need full-day care;
- Many families prefer relative care, especially for very young children, and would participate in early education opportunities if they incorporated caregivers, relatives, or both; and
- Participation rates vary due to cultural and language barriers.

Given such realities, California's preschool system must evolve to better accommodate the needs of families. Providing full-day care for families that need it and offering linguistically and culturally-appropriate outreach are necessary. The state has committed funds for some low-income children, yet the State Preschool Program still served only 11% of 4-year-olds and 5% of 3-year-olds in 2005.⁸ Clearly, the demand for quality preschool far exceeds supply, as three out of four publicly-funded preschools have waiting lists.⁹

Recommended Actions

The Legislature should adopt policies that:

- A. Ensure access to high-quality early care and education and voluntary, high-quality preschool for all of California's 3- and 4-year-olds. Begin with targeted expansion of preschool to children who need it most. Focusing on children who reside in low-performing elementary school areas may be an effective strategy, given the high correlation between low-performing schools and high need and low-income students.
- B. Make state-subsidized full-day, full-year care and education available to working families that are eligible and cannot take advantage of half-day programs. Strategies such as braiding or stacking federal and state funds (e.g., Head Start, Title I, State Preschool Program and General Child Care) should be used to meet this goal, along with exploring other opportunities to fund expansion of those services.
- C. Identify appropriate methods to integrate informal, license-exempt care with part-day preschools.
- D. Support linguistically and culturally appropriate outreach, particularly in communities with eligible children who are not participating in public programs.
- E. Examine locally-developed programs that can be rolled out statewide to improve preschool quality. The child care rating system pilot project adopted in Los Angeles County is one such recent example.
- F. Eliminate financial disincentives for preschool programs that offer full-day care. Currently, a program can receive a higher daily rate from the state if it offers two half-day preschool programs rather than one full-day program. Programs that can demonstrate demand for a full-day program, that can demonstrate their enrollment could be jeopardized by the lack of full-day care, or both, should receive at least the same rate as two half-day programs.

POLICY OBJECTIVE #2

Invest in the quality of early education and preschool programs.

Background

Establishing new standards of program and workforce quality is a necessity. It would ensure children receive all of the potential benefits of preschool. There is strong evidence these standards need to include a well-trained and educated workforce, and a stronger commitment to adequately fund programs to meet this and other requirements.

A 2005 survey of California preschool teachers by the Yale University Child Study Center indicated that at least 82% of teachers in the State Preschool Program exceed current state qualification requirements. Yet there remains concern that preschool teachers are not appropriately prepared. We need to address the uncertainty surrounding preschool teacher preparation by reevaluating the competencies required to be an effective preschool teacher, director or aide, and updating the requirements, as necessary. We then need to move to ensure all preschool staff meet those standards. In addition, we need to work towards retaining staff, as staff stability impacts program effectiveness. Bringing greater stability to the preschool workforce will require increases in compensation and improvements in working conditions.

Programs must also have adequate financial support to meet the new standards for quality. The low daily reimbursement rate paid by the state to half-day preschool programs (\$20.30) and full-day programs (\$32.89)—which in many counties is less than the amount paid to other state-subsidized child care programs that meet fewer program requirements—is too low to support the quality outcomes desired by all. We must secure a commitment to fund preschool at a daily rate that can support the desired quality.

Recommended Actions

The Legislature in collaboration with the California Department of Education (CDE), early care and education, K-12, and parents should:

- A. Identify indicators of quality preschool classrooms, including the competencies necessary to be an effective preschool teacher, aide and program director, and the actual cost of providing for such a classroom. The process for this step must include a diverse group of stakeholders and should integrate the new preschool learning standards scheduled to be adopted in 2007. State requirements for preschool teachers and other Title 5 directors and staff should be updated accordingly and incorporated in early care and education (ECE) college courses taught throughout the state.
- B. Provide and/or direct funding toward the development of training for preschool teachers on how to incorporate the new preschool learning standards. Teachers will need to learn how to use the standards in an appropriate way with their students. This training should be developed with assistance from institutions of higher education, ECE and K-12 experts, providers and parents. First 5 and other preschool programs should be encouraged to support and participate in this training.
- C. Support professional development for existing staff. Increasing the education and skill levels of existing staff in this low-paying field will require substantial financial support. Expansion of programs, such as CARES and AB 212, can assist the workforce in meeting their educational goals. However, increasing the salary for staff who continue their education and training is the most effective route for sustainable qualification improvements in this profession.
- D. Base reimbursement rates for preschool programs on reliable estimates of program costs associated with the desired quality. During the ramping up of quality for all programs, incentives in the form of higher reimbursement rates should be provided to those programs that meet higher standards.

POLICY OBJECTIVE #3

Build greater accountability into the early care and education system.

Background

Accountability for public investments in preschool education is essential to its expansion. In order to build a system that is strongly supported by the public, we need to improve our data collection and begin to analyze where programs currently are and where we would like them to be in the future. Currently, we have very little information on the actual benefits of California's state-subsidized early care and preschool programs. We have no statewide information on child outcomes and little information on program quality. We also do not know how many classrooms or how many staff are funded with state preschool dollars.

Recommended Actions

CDE in partnership with key stakeholders from the early care and education field and K-12 should:

- A. Develop an assessment system that can inform the public on the results of their investment in preschool. This assessment system for preschool, which must have input from the early care and education field and K-12, will need to be very different from the K-12 assessment system, but should be designed to connect with it. Parents must receive the results, like they do in the K-12 system, and the assessments must be based on goals for children in preschool programs that are aligned to the new preschool learning standards. Using or modifying existing early education assessments to meet this need is an option.
- B. Work towards a more seamless information system with structured transitions between child care, preschool and kindergarten. Current law allows and encourages state-funded early care and education providers to share information with schools that the children in their programs will attend. Some programs and schools do a good job of receiving and transferring assessment information between preschool and kindergarten teachers. These efforts should be expanded.
- C. Use the program data collected by the state more effectively and make it available to parents. The state must make better use of the information it collects from providers through the many enrollment, financing and monitoring documents that programs are required to complete. Most, if not all, data necessary to determine program quality is likely already being collected. This information should be accessible to parents and the public.

For more information, please contact:

Giannina Perez, Senior Policy Associate
Children Now
1212 Broadway, 5th Floor
Oakland, CA 94612
Phone: 510.763.2444, x125
Email: gperez@childrennow.org
www.childrennow.org

¹ Lawrence J. Schweinhart et al., *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40* (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 2004).

² Margaret Bridges et al., "Preschool for California's Children: Promising Benefits, Unequal Access," *Policy Brief* 04-3 (September 2004).

³ Key components of high-quality preschool often referred to in research include teachers and staff, who are well-educated and adequately compensated; low child-staff ratios and small group sizes; a validated curriculum that supports all aspects of children's development—cognitive, social, emotional, physical; and active parent involvement.

⁴ Children Now analysis of data from the 2005 American Community Survey 1% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), accessed through IPUMS, a project of the Minnesota Population Center, as cited in Children Now's 2006-07 *California Report Card: The State of the State's Children*.

⁵ In order to be a "fully qualified" teacher in a California Department of Education-funded program, a teacher must have 40 units: 24 in early care and education and 16 general education units.

⁶ Pre-K Now, *Pre-K Across the Country Fact Sheet* (Washington, DC: Pre-K Now, 2006).

⁷ The state of California also provides funding for full-day care for 3- to 5-year-olds in the General Child Care Program, which adheres to the same curriculum and program standards as the State Preschool Program.

⁸ National Institute for Early Education Research. *The State of Preschool: 2005 State Preschool Yearbook* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2005).

⁹ Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California, *Public Safety Can't Wait: California's Preschool Shortage, A Missed Opportunity for Crime Prevention* (Oakland, CA: Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California, 2005).