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RECOMMENDATIONS ON PRESCHOOL

CALIFORNIA WORKING FAMILIES POLICY SUMMIT
JANUARY 24, 2003

Introduction

No value is more widely held by working parents than commitment to the healthy and positive development of our children. Preschool has as its primary purpose the enhancement of learning and growth opportunities for young children. To accomplish this purpose and promote academic readiness, preschool must not only nourish children's minds, but also foster their social, emotional, and physical development. Inasmuch as children begin learning at birth, preschool for three- to four-year-olds must be linked to high quality infant and toddler programs and high quality child care during the hours that children are not in "school." We must be conscious of the risk of further fragmentation of the child care and early education system, which would be certain to result if California were to establish preschool as a separate new program while the rest of the early care system is dismantled around us. Finally, we should protect our state's investment in the child development system and refuse to sacrifice any child's access to quality programs on the altar of a balanced budget.

I. Create Access to High Quality Early Learning Opportunities for All Children, Including Preschool for All Three- to Five-Year-Olds; Give Priority to Low-Income Children

Background

Quality early childhood education is a fundamental equity issue. Research shows that many low-income children enter kindergarten lacking necessary language skills that other children already have. By first grade, children in low-income families have vocabularies of 5,000 words, compared to vocabularies of 20,000 words for more affluent children.¹ In designing expansion of preschool, we should adopt best practices from Head Start programs, state contracted child care centers, and city and county initiatives.

Recommendations

- A. The Legislature and Governor should invest in a seamless, quality early care and education system that is accessible to all children from birth through age five.
- B. Policymakers should design and fund a system that is accessible first for all low-income young children 0-5, with universal early education, including preschool, as the longer-term goal.
- C. Agency staff and practitioners should ensure that preschool programs offer needed comprehensive services to all families, including those working to achieve self-sufficiency.
- D. Policymakers should coordinate preschool planning and implementation with kindergarten and elementary school programs to ensure that schools are ready for children.

¹ Hart and Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (1995).

II. Preserve the Quality Infrastructure and System That California has Built

Background

Government aid in meeting child care costs for working families in California dates back to 1943, when publicly funded child care centers were opened for women who were working during the war effort. In the mid-1960s, Congress established Head Start as a national program, and the California legislature authorized the State Preschool Program. State policy has reflected an understanding that child care must offer both nurturing and early education for all children, and research shows that child care centers in low-income California communities offer high-quality care²

Recommendations

- A. The Governor and Legislature should not reverse progress toward universal access to high quality preschool opportunities by realigning the state system, but rather maintain the commitment to the statewide child care and early education infrastructure and programs.
- B. The Legislature, in coordination with CDE and advocates, should establish a process to ensure that preschool initiatives do not lead to further fragmentation, including addressing regulatory differences and funding streams.

III. Ensure Broad Access to High-Quality Preschool, Especially for Families Facing Barriers, by Involving All Stakeholders in System Design

Background

Studies show that children from low-income backgrounds derive the greatest benefit from preschool. As the administering agency, the California Department of Education (CDE) should collect and fund best practices and new initiatives. The Legislature should ensure funding designated to eliminate barriers.

Recommendations

- A. Eliminate barriers based on income by giving first priority in funding and development to low-income children, and simultaneously increase access to preschool and to infant/toddler programs.
- B. The Legislature should convene CDE, parents, and advocates to ensure development of preschool programs that eliminate particular barriers, including those based on disability, linguistic and cultural access (including migrant and tribal communities), geography and non-traditional parental work hours.
- C. CDE should develop incentives to integrate children in informal and license-exempt care into part-day preschool programs, and launch a Head Start/preschool work group to examine other ways to maximize access to preschool programs for these children.

IV. Focus on Quality

Background

California must maintain and enhance the high quality of its entire child care system in order to support the development of preschool programs.

Recommendations

- A. The Legislature should establish a process to determine the real cost of quality care (including preschool programs), considering, among other factors, infrastructure, training, adequate reimbursement rates, and wages, and should integrate this review with the work of the Quality Education Commission called for in the K-12 Master Plan.

² Policy Analysis for California Education, *Preschool and Child Care Quality in California Neighborhoods* (August 2001), available at www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/PACE/pace_publications.html.

- B. In cooperation with the Legislature and CDE, advocates should develop funding streams that enable existing child care programs to meet standards for preschool programs.
- C. Policymakers and advocates should ensure a broad definition of accountability and adopt assessments based not on testing individual children but rather on multiple factors such as program quality, strength of the curriculum, and parent involvement. These assessment factors should be developed in collaboration with parents, teachers, community colleges, Head Start and other stakeholders.
- D. Policymakers and practitioners developing preschool programs should support statewide collaborative efforts to enhance the importance of nutrition and active play for young children through the *California Preschool 5 A Day Campaign*.

V. Encourage Parental Involvement and Highlight Parents' Role in School Readiness

Background

Parents are a child's first and most important teachers. Children whose parents participate in their school activities are much more likely than other children to feel comfortable and therefore succeed in school. Parents whose own experiences in school were negative need particular encouragement to be involved.

Recommendations:

- A. CDE should coordinate planning and implementation of preschool programs with school-readiness efforts initiated through First Five California (formerly the California Children and Families Commission).
- B. Policymakers should meet the needs of working parents by offering both part-day and full-day/full-year, high quality early education options and by offering subsidies to families who cannot pay for wraparound care.
- C. Legislators, in collaboration with CDE and advocates, should expand parent choice by using a mixed preschool delivery system that includes schools, child care centers, Head Start, and licensed family child care homes. They should ensure that all settings are licensed and meet state-established standards.

VI. Ensure the Availability of Well-Trained and Well-Compensated Staff

Background

Compensation should be an integral part of the financing infrastructure policy discussions, and a state commitment should be made to seek additional resources.

Recommendations:

- A. First Five Commission boards, community colleges, universities, local planning councils, and resource and referral agencies should begin planning to develop the capacity to recruit and train staff for preschool expansion, ensuring that training and support opportunities are available for child care providers and preschool teachers in the languages and cultures of California's many communities.
- B. The Legislature should commission a study of the capacity of community colleges and universities to train an expanded preschool and infant and toddler work force,
- C. The Legislature should ensure that experts on preschool and child care are members of the Commission established by AB 2217 to study compensation rates.

VII. Develop and Increase Investment in Child Care and Preschool Facilities

Background

As the number of children in child care increases, we must develop new facilities and repair aging ones to ensure access to quality care for all children in all communities. Innovative financing mechanisms and public-private partnerships are critical to this effort.

Recommendations:

- A. The Legislature should pass SB 14 (Senator Escutia) to support funding for preschool facilities, as well as the bill to include child care in general land use plans that will be introduced by Assemblymember Simitian.
- B. The Legislature, state agencies and local practitioners, should coordinate preschool program development with the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Affordable Buildings for Children's Development (ABCD) program.
- C. The Legislature should establish child care facilities as a priority funding area for Community Development Block Grant funds.

VIII. Engage in a Broad, Inclusive Planning Process for Early Care and Education

Background

It is important to build on the 2002 planning processes of First Five California and Superintendent Eastin's Universal PreSchool Task Force of 1998 and to include the perspectives of parents, child care providers, and preschool and elementary school teachers.

Recommendations:

- A. Legislators and stakeholders should 1) develop specific blueprints for broader access to early care and education by linking preschool to other early care and education programs and funding streams, to K-12 so schools can anticipate children's educational needs, and to other school-readiness programs; and 2) increase coordination with Head Start and encourage state-level planning integrating a Master Plan for Child Care with the Master Plan for Education.
- B. Policymakers should coordinate with other entities launching major Universal Preschool initiatives, including the First Five California, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trust.
- C. Policymakers should coordinate with and learn from local initiatives to establish Universal Preschool, including those in Los Angeles, San Mateo, and Alpine counties and Union City.
- D. The Legislature should maintain funding for CDPAC.

IX. Explore Alternate Funding Strategies

Background

Despite its budget crisis, California remains one of the world's largest economies, yet our child poverty rate exceeds that of other large states. California must invest in children at the level necessary to provide for their early care and education.

Recommendations

- A. Seek additional ongoing state revenue sources, including the reversal of tax cuts of recent years and/or increasing taxes.
- B. During reauthorization and each year, lobby Congress to increase state resources and strengthen programs such as CCDBG, TANF, IDEA, Child Nutrition Act, and Head Start.
- C. Lobby Congress to oppose revenue and tax policies that will reduce federal resources available for children and families and to support policies that will increase federal resources.