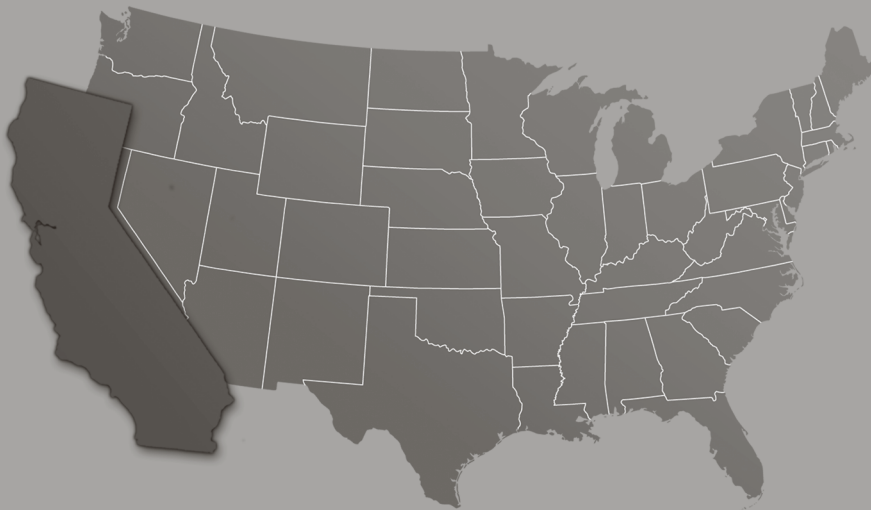


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ON THE CUSP IN CALIFORNIA:

How PreK-3rd Strategies Could Improve Education in the Golden State

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If children are the future, then looking at a state’s educational system is like peering into a crystal ball. California is a state teeming with young children—4.7 million under age 8, to be exact. One in every eight young American children lives in California. And many of these children come from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds and speak languages other than English. If Americans want to get a glimpse at our future as a “majority minority” country they don’t have to look beyond California.

As we peer into the California crystal ball, the forecast for a well-educated population doesn’t look too good. This report on the state’s early education system offers a dark assessment, but not a fatalistic one, especially if leaders can seize and build on reform efforts that have already started in patches throughout the state.

Educational challenges often seem particularly daunting in California. In the 1950s, the state had one of the country’s best educational systems. But today it ranks among the bottom states in educational outcomes. Only 23 percent of the state’s fourth-graders scored “proficient” in reading in 2007, according to the federally administered National Assessment of Educational Progress, placing California behind every state except Mississippi and Louisiana. In math the state does slightly better—besting Mississippi, New Mexico, and Alabama—but it still ranks 46th among all states.

In addition to weak overall academic performance, California also has large achievement gaps for poor and minority students. Only 13 percent of black fourth-graders, and 11 percent of Hispanic students, scored “proficient” in reading in 2007, compared with 40 percent of white students. That’s particularly troubling in light of the large and growing share of California’s student population that racial and ethnic minority youngsters comprise.

Over the past two decades, policymakers and reformers have pursued numerous reform strategies in an effort to improve the state’s dismal student outcomes and to narrow achievement gaps. Among other strategies, policymakers and advocates have repeatedly proposed universal preschool to improve student achievement.

In 2006, the state almost got there with Proposition 82, a ballot measure that would have used a tax on wealthy residents

to fund universal education for all California 4-year-olds. The measure drew national attention from advocates who saw it not only as a potentially dramatic expansion of pre-K in the nation’s largest state, but also as a potential bellwether for successful efforts elsewhere. But the measure failed, and although the state has made some progress since then to improve early childhood education quality and access, it continues to lag behind states that are national leaders in this area. California trails national averages in the percentage of children enrolled in state preschool or Head Start programs, it has low-quality standards for preschool teachers, and until recently it relied on a complex and inefficient collection of programs to deliver early childhood services.

Moreover, early childhood efforts and school reforms in California have rarely been linked together to create seamless, high-quality PreK-3rd early learning experiences for the state’s children. Expanding access to high-quality preschool opportunities—particularly for low-income and minority youngsters—is critical to raising student achievement and narrowing achievement gaps in the Golden State. But one—even two—years of preschool alone won’t be enough to narrow the tremendous gap between California and the highest-performing states, or between well-off children and poor, racial or ethnic minority youngsters within California. If California is serious about improving education outcomes for its students, it needs to provide seamless, high-quality early learning experiences—ideally for all children, but particularly for those from disadvantaged and language-minority backgrounds—focused on the goal of enabling all children to achieve proficiency in reading, math, English language, and social and emotional skills by the end of third grade.

Doing that requires both expansion of access to high-quality preschool programs and fundamental changes in how the

state's elementary schools serve their youngest students—along with far better linkages and integration between pre-school programs and the early elementary grades.

That's a tall order, and particularly so in a state with the kind of budget woes California currently is facing. But it's not impossible. A small but growing number of counties, school districts, and charter schools across the state are making progress to build seamless PreK-3rd early education systems. Even in the current climate, advocates and policymakers are taking steps that lay the groundwork for a more robust PreK-3rd system in the future. These include convening leaders from the state's early childhood and K-12 systems, implementing new preschool learning standards aligned with the state's K-3 academic standards, building a data infrastructure to collect information on children's early learning experiences, and linking that data with K-12 data systems.

There's much more that policymakers, advocates and the state can—and should—be doing to work toward a day when all California children have access to seamless early learning experiences that enable them to achieve proficiency by the end of third grade. California is on the cusp, poised to make real improvements. Key state officials, along with early childhood advocates and school reformers, need to exert leadership to raise the profile of and create a sense of urgency around PreK-3rd reform as a strategy to close achievement gaps and boost academic performance.

This report seeks to help policymakers and advocates in California focus more on PreK-3rd—the promise of the reforms, the hurdles, and the steps the state can take to overcome them. High-quality preschool is a critical component to any PreK-3rd system, and this report begins by surveying the state's current programs, examining their quality, and determining how many children are being served by them. It also looks at efforts over the past two decades to offer slots to more children and improve preschool quality, efforts that have led to both disappointments and signs of progress.

The latter half of this report goes beyond discussions of pre-school to address the need for broader PreK-3rd reforms in California. The state is home to some promising local initiatives, as well as some state-level efforts that help lay the groundwork for PreK-3rd. But despite a variety of features that should have encouraged this type of approach, a PreK-3rd movement is just now beginning to emerge in California.

Young Children in California, by the Numbers

California is home to 4.7 million children aged 8 or under—one out of every eight young children in the United States. Of them:

- 52 percent are Hispanic
- 28 percent are white
- 10 percent are of Asian descent
- 5 percent are black

The remaining 5 percent come from other racial ethnic groups or identify multiple races.

Poor and Low-Income Children

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty*:

- 21 percent of young children in California are poor
- 45 percent of young children in California live in low-income families (family income less than 200 percent of poverty)

These percentages are roughly comparable to the national average.

Language—Minority Students

One in four students in California public schools is an English-language learner.

One-third of California preschoolers speak a language other than English at home.

**Data refer to children ages 0-6.*

*Sources: U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates, "State Estimates by age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin," <http://www.census.gov/popest/datasets.html> (retrieved July 28, 2009); Lynn A. Karoly, Bonnie Ghosh-Dastidar, Gail L. Zellman, Michal Perlman, Lynda Fernyhough: *Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Age Children in California* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 68; California Department of Education, Ed-data "Special Programs," <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Navigation/fsTwoPanel.asp?bottom=%2Fprofile%2Easp%3Flevel%3D0%26reportNumber%3D16> ; "50-State Data, Income levels of children under age 6," National Center for Children in Poverty, <http://www.nccp.org/tools/table.php?db=dem&data=per&state=&ids=1&states=CA&title=50-State%20Data&age=6&unit=Children&inc=Low-Income&denom=char&cat=1>.*

This report considers why and examines opportunities for greater linkage and collaboration between the early childhood and school reform movements on shared solutions.

Lastly, this report recommends 13 steps California policy-makers should take to improve early childhood quality and access and move toward a more seamless PreK-3rd early learning system in the state:

- 1) Replicate and scale up models of effective partnerships occurring between local school districts and early childhood education providers, allowing successful local practices to “trickle up” to the state level.
- 2) Create incentives for districts to use Title I funds to build seamless PreK-3rd early education systems.
- 3) Study and develop alternative funding mechanisms to ensure that pre-K spending is adequate, stable, and in line with overall K-12 spending levels.
- 4) Implement a comprehensive early childhood data system that is fully integrated with the state’s longitudinal student data system for public schools and leads to improved support and outcomes for students in PreK-3rd.
- 5) Engage families, providers, policymakers, and the media in efforts to improve California’s recently consolidated State Preschool Program as a foundation for a seamless PreK-3rd system statewide.
- 6) Ensure that providers participating in the State Preschool Program receive per-pupil payments that are at least competitive with those provided through the Alternative Payment (child care vouchers) program.
- 7) Establish a PreK-3rd teaching credential.
- 8) Allow some outstanding community colleges to offer bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education and a PreK-3rd teaching credential.
- 9) Use data to identify schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism in pre-K, kindergarten, and

the early grades, and target these schools for interventions to reduce early absenteeism.

- 10) Implement a voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System that rewards early childhood programs with higher reimbursement rates if they reach higher levels of quality.
- 11) Build capacity of preschool providers, elementary schools, and districts to meet the needs of English-language-learner students and to implement consistent strategies to develop children’s skills in both English and their home language throughout the PreK-3rd continuum.
- 12) Implement strategies to specifically address the underrepresentation of young Hispanic children in high-quality preschool programs.
- 13) Develop and implement a state-level strategy to address early childhood facilities needs.

California has a long way to go before it provides all of its young children with the education they need and deserve, and it faces many obstacles. But by bringing together early childhood advocates and public school reformers today, it has the opportunity to begin working to build the kind of education system that will equip its youngsters to meet the next generation of challenges, offering them a brighter future now. 📌

California’s Complicated Early Childhood Care and Education System

For roughly 50 years, the California Department of Education (CDE) has administered child development programs targeted primarily to children in low-income families. The State Preschool Program, for example, was born in 1965, the same year as the federal Head Start program. Over time, the department’s Child Development Division has come to oversee several overlapping early childhood funding streams that have different regulations and eligibility requirements for children and their families, but serve similar purposes. The California Preschool Study, a series of reports recently published by the RAND Corporation, identified nine different child care or education programs serving young children managed by the Child Development Division. A related child care program, serving children with parents entering the state’s

Table 1. California’s Myriad Early Childhood Programs, pre-2008

Program Name	Purpose	Preschoolers Served *** (2007-2008)	Funding (2007-2008)	Eligibility Criteria	Applicable Regulations
<i>Title 5 Programs</i>					
General Child Care and Development*	Serves low-income children 0-12 (up to age 21 for those with disabilities). Provides care and educational services in licensed child care centers and through networks of child care homes.	55,838	\$804.6 million	Family income <75% of the State Median Income (SMI).	Title 22 and Title 5
State Preschool Program (Part-day and Full-day)*	Provides low-income young children a comprehensive, center-based educational program for two years prior to kindergarten.	91,096	\$441.8 million	Family income <75% of SMI.	Title 22 and Title 5
Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program (Part-day and Full-day)*	Provides children with a literacy-focused educational program the year before kindergarten. Includes a parent involvement component.	6,734	\$55 million	Family income <75% of SMI. Up to 20 percent of families can earn more if their income increased since initial enrollment.	Title 22 and Title 5
Migrant Child Care and Development	Provides child care services for children of migrant workers, typically between May and October.	1,152	\$40.8 million	Family income <75% of SMI. Parents must earn at least 50 percent of their income from fishing or agricultural work.	Title 22 and Title 5
<i>Title 22 Programs</i>					
California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKS) Stage 1**	Provides child care services for parents receiving welfare while they are working or training for work.	59,630	\$387 million	Families are at Stage 1 when they enter the CalWORKS program. Recipients must be participating in a welfare-to-work plan. Participation in Stage 1 is limited to two years.	Title 22. May also be license-exempt.
CalWORKS Stage 2	Provides child care services for children up to age 12 for parents receiving welfare while they are working or training for work.	20,488	\$474 million	Families move into Stage 2 when a county welfare department determines that the family is stable. Participation in Stage 2 is limited to two years after the family stops receiving a CalWORKS grant.	Title 22. May also be license-exempt.
CalWORKS Stage 3	Provides child care services for children up to age 12 for low-income parents.	14,908	\$404.9 million	Families enter this stage when they have “timed-out” of Stage 1 and/or Stage 2 but are still earning less than 75 percent of the State Median Income.	Title 22. May also be license-exempt.
Alternative Payment Program	Provides subsidized child care vouchers for children up to age 12 while their parents are working, looking for work, or training for a job. Program also emphasizes parent choice in finding a provider.	10,948	\$257 million	Families must earn less than 75 percent of the State Median Income.	Title 22. May also be license-exempt.

* The State Preschool Program, the Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program, and the preschool part of General Child Care and Development were consolidated in 2008 to form the California State Preschool Program.

CalWORKS Stage 1 is administered by the California Department of Social Services. *Some children may be served by multiple programs.

Table 2. Federal Funding Streams for Early Childhood Programs in California

Program Name	Purpose	Preschoolers Served (2007-2008)	Funding (2007-2008)	Eligibility Criteria	Applicable Regulations
Head Start	Provides preschool children in low-income families with comprehensive health, education, nutrition, and social services.	88,669	\$824.9 million	Parents must earn at or below the federal poverty level, though if openings remain, families at 130 percent of poverty or below may be eligible.	Title 22 and Head Start Performance Standards
Early Head Start	Provides infants and toddlers in low-income families with comprehensive health, education, nutrition, and social services. Also includes prenatal services for mothers.	7,488	\$84.9 million	Parents must earn below the federal poverty level. Ten percent of families can earn more than the poverty level.	Title 22 and Head Start Performance Standards
Title I	Provides low-income preschoolers with educational services that will help close the achievement gap between low- and high-performing students.	Unknown. 57 California school districts (out of more than 1,000) used Title I funds for preschool in the 2006-07 school year.	\$12.8 million	Program is meant to serve the most disadvantaged children. Districts receive Title I grants based on different funding formulas. Local schools receive Title I funds to operate school-wide programs or for targeted assistance. Preschoolers considered eligible are those that are at risk of not meeting state academic standards.	Title 22 and Head Start Performance Standards

Source: RAND Corporation

welfare system—called CalWORKS Stage 1—is handled by the state Department of Social Services.

Preschool Programs and Funding Streams in California

State Preschool and Child Care Funding

California spends about \$3.7 billion in federal and state funding on preschool and subsidized child care for children from birth through age 12 (not including funding for the federal Head Start program).¹ Six of those programs—General Child Care and Development, the State Preschool Program (full- and half-day), the Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program (full- and half-day), and Migrant Child Care and Development—are authorized under Title 5 of the state’s Code of Regulations, and are commonly

referred to as “Title 5 Programs.” Title 5 programs generally operate in centers that contract with the state. The California Department of Education recently consolidated all of the initiatives for preschoolers contained within these programs into a single State Preschool Program, with the exception of the migrant program.²

The CDE also administers three state and federally funded child care programs linked to the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKS) welfare program (as mentioned, CalWORKS Stage 1 is administered by Social Services). Parents qualify for these programs based on how long they have been on welfare. Providers offering these programs—including centers and family child care homes—are governed by Title 22 regulations, which means they are required to have a license but do not have to meet

Table 3. Programs Funded with Tobacco Tax (Known as Proposition 10)

Program Name	Purpose	Children Served (2007-2008)	Funding (2007-2008)	Applicable Regulations
Proposition 10	Provides grants to fund a range of health, child care, and education services for California children from before birth to age 5. Funds are distributed through a state “First 5” Commission and 58 county commissions.	Delivered child development services—including health, prenatal, and other services as well as education and care—to 297,386 children in 2007-08.	\$590 million (20% through the state commission; 80% through local county commissions)	Child care and preschool programs funded with Proposition 10 funds must comply with existing regulations.

the stricter ratios, staff education, and curriculum requirements that apply to Title 5 programs. Title 22 funds flow to a variety of child care providers, including both centers operating under contract with the state, and to a variety of providers who receive vouchers, including caregivers—such as family members, friends, and neighbors—who are exempt from state licensure. (See table 1.)

Head Start and Title I

A significant amount of federal funding—\$825 million—comes into the state for Head Start.³ This money does not go through state coffers but flows directly to local agencies that run Head Start programs, including school districts and other community-based agencies. The majority of Head Start providers—70 percent—also contract with the state to provide additional wrap-around or full-day early childhood programs to Head Start families using state funds. Half of those grantees receive funding from the State Preschool Program, and 40 percent receive funding through general child care programs. Many Head Start providers also offer federally funded Early Head Start programs, which serve low-income pregnant women and young children up to age 3.

California Secretary of Education Glen Thomas notes that the cooperation between Head Start and the State Preschool Program dates back more than 30 years and was “very progressive at the time. We felt like we were providing a better and broader service to children and families.” Head Start has also been a way for school districts to become involved in educating young children before they enter school—about 36 percent of the state’s Head Start programs are operated by school districts, according to a report released in 2008 by the California Research Bureau.⁴

School districts have also long had the option of directing the federal Title I dollars they receive for high-poverty schools toward early childhood services. The RAND study showed that 57 districts in 27 counties choose to spend some of their Title I funds to either implement school-wide preschool classes or to target services to preschoolers who are most at risk for later academic problems, but an internal study by the Packard Foundation found that districts, on average, set aside less than \$222,000 of their Title I funding for preschool last year.⁵ (See table 2.)

Although districts are delivering preschool using Head Start, Title I, and state preschool funds, that doesn’t necessarily mean that these programs are well-integrated with the districts’ early elementary grades. Even when preschool programs are located on school district property, preschool teachers often have little contact or communication with elementary school teachers, and may even be located in separate buildings.

Proposition 10

In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 10, which levies a 50-cent tax on tobacco products and distributes the proceeds to a state-level Children and Families Commission and 58 county “First 5” commissions, which use the funds to provide a range of health and education services for children from before birth to age 5. Increasing access to preschool has been a major part of the agenda, both at the state and local levels. (See table 3.)

In 2003, the state First 5 Commission approved \$100 million to establish the Power of Preschool Demonstration Program. In the 2005-06 school year, nine counties began operating the program, and in 2008 more than 9,600

children, primarily 4-year-olds, were served. County offices of education serve as fiscal managers of the program and the participating preschoolers must reside in communities served by low-performing schools. In addition to expanding access to quality preschool, the Power of Preschool program is building closer relationships between preschool providers—including family child care centers and the public school system, creating a foundation for birth through early elementary—approaches to learning that could serve as models for other school districts in the state.

Several local First 5 commissions have also committed much of their revenue to preschool. In 2002, the Los Angeles County First 5 Commission voted to spend \$100 million over five years to expand access to high-quality preschool in the county; in 2003, it provided \$500 million more. Today, Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) serves roughly 8,000 preschoolers and has also begun to invest in the development of PreK-3rd schools.⁶ LAUP receives funding from both local sources and the state First 5 Commission's Power of Preschool Program. Los Angeles County's experience, however, shows that some who envisioned a truly universal program are now focusing their resources on children whose parents are least likely to afford or find preschool. "While universal is still our aspiration, we've taken a very targeted approach," says LAUP CEO Gary Mangiofico.

A Complex System

State officials created different programs over time in an effort to respond to the differing needs of young children and their families. But in doing so, California policymakers built up a complex system that has not always made sense for families or providers. "It's built and it's been protected, but it's antiquated and it's not streamlined," says Arron Jiron, a program officer at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, which has funded the RAND studies and is supporting efforts to make public preschool available to all families in California that want it.

For example, a 1997 budget agreement created a full-day version of the State Preschool Program to meet the needs of parents who are either working or attending training programs. But centers offering this program had to follow its regulations plus those required for the half-day class.

Another example is the relatively young Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program, which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed into law in 2006, following the

failure of a ballot initiative to establish voluntary, universal pre-K in California. Rather than being integrated into the larger, existing State Preschool Program, the Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program was set up as a small, separate program serving only 7,000 children. And instead of one Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program, the law created two—a part-day version and a full-day version, each with slightly different rules for providers.

Both versions are among those recently folded into the California State Preschool Program, which the legislature enacted in 2008 to help streamline the state's preschool programs. But complexities remain.

One consequence of the complex system has been that, even in a state with waiting lists for preschool and child care programs, early childhood funds sometimes go unspent. For example, a provider may receive a contract to offer part-day preschool but wind up with unfilled slots because families in the community need full-day options. The RAND study concluded that the savings that could be realized from this unused money would be "modest," but still "are a potential source of dollars that could allow more children to be served."⁷

Limited Access

California spends billions of dollars annually on early childhood education programs and provides pre-K or child care subsidies to more than a quarter of a million children. But even with these investments, many California children lack access to preschool or quality child care. According to Camille Maben, the director of CDE's Child Development Division, thousands of California preschoolers meet age and income eligibility criteria for publicly funded child care and preschool programs but are not being served.

Thousands more children come from middle-class families with incomes too high to qualify for subsidized programs, but not high enough to afford unsubsidized preschool programs.⁸ Only children from families with incomes below 75 percent of the state median income—53 percent of California 3- and 4-year-olds—are eligible for the state's preschool program or other Title 5 programs. Families of the other 47 percent of California preschoolers are left to make their own arrangements when it comes to preschool.

The RAND project provided information on the numbers of children attending publicly funded preschool programs in

California. In 2006, 28 percent of the state's 537,000 4-year-olds were enrolled in either Head Start, a Title I preschool program, or one of the state Title 5 programs. Including children enrolled in subsidized child care programs, the number rises to 31 percent. Thirteen percent of all California 3-year-olds were enrolled in one of these programs, and including children in subsidized child care, the number rises to 16 percent. Of those children who are eligible for subsidized preschool programs, only 53 percent of 4-year-olds and a quarter of 3-year-olds were enrolled in publicly funded preschool programs.⁹

RAND's evaluation also shows significant differences in children's rates of pre-K participation depending on their families' socioeconomic circumstances. Fewer than half of children whose mothers have less than a high school diploma are in center-based programs, compared with 80 percent of children whose mothers have a graduate degree. Latino children are also less likely than those in other racial-ethnic groups to participate in center-based preschool programs. Their participation rates increase, however, when family income increases.¹⁰

A recent McKinsey & Company report on the nation's achievement gap makes the case for increasing enrollment in California's preschool programs. Texas and California have similar demographics, and public preschool programs in the two states meet comparable (albeit low) quality standards. But Texas serves 45 percent of its 4-year-olds in state pre-K, while California serves only 12 percent. And fourth-graders in Texas are roughly one to two years of learning ahead of their counterparts in California.¹¹

Mixed Quality

Unfortunately, California gets mixed marks for preschool quality on two important fronts—the qualifications of its teachers and what happens inside classrooms. The situation is exacerbated by a reimbursement system that sets up perverse incentives, essentially rewarding providers for maintaining low standards.

California's State Preschool Program requires teachers to have specialized training in early childhood education, but it does not require a bachelor's degree—generally regarded by preschool experts as a benchmark for teacher quality—or even an associate's degree. This is one of the reasons that California meets only four of the 10 benchmarks in the National Institute for Early Education Research 2009

Yearbook that gauge the quality of state-funded preschool classrooms. (In addition to requiring teachers to have specialized early childhood training, California met NIEER benchmarks for requiring at least 15 hours of in-service training each year, having a staff-to-child-ratio of 1-to-10 or better, and having a monitoring system.)¹²

Fewer than half of children whose mothers have less than a high school diploma are in center-based programs, compared with 80 percent of children whose mothers have a graduate degree. Latino children are also less likely than those in other racial-ethnic groups to participate in center-based preschool programs.

Yet the RAND preschool study finds that many teachers in the State Preschool Program, as well as those in public school pre-K programs, have education levels that exceed the state requirement. Children in state preschool classrooms are more likely than those in private preschools and child care centers to have teachers with postsecondary credentials, and are also more likely to have teachers with such credentials than the state's regulations would suggest.¹³

Unfortunately, the teachers with higher degrees are not necessarily serving children in the demographic groups that need them most. For example, only 13 percent of African-American preschoolers were in classrooms led by a teacher with an associate's degree or higher in early childhood education, compared with 34 percent of teachers of Latino children and more than 40 percent for white and Asian children.¹⁴

To provide a more nuanced view of quality, based on what actually happens inside preschool classrooms, the RAND researchers also conducted observations of a sample of preschool and center-based child care classrooms in the state. They found that most center-based programs in the state meet or exceed recommended staff-to-child ratios and group sizes. Center-based programs in California also receive high marks on measures of the emotional support teachers provide children and of how well they manage the classroom and engage students in learning.¹⁵

But teachers in center-based programs are not doing enough to help children develop the strong language and problem-solving skills that they will need for success in school. The RAND researchers used CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), an instrument developed by researchers at the University of Virginia, to measure the quality of instructional support provided to students in California preschool classrooms. According to Robert Pianta, who developed the instrument, a score above 3 on the 1-to-7 scale used by CLASS indicates that a classroom has become “cognitive and intentional in terms of teachers’ language stimulation, feedback, and conceptual focus.” RAND researchers found that preschool classrooms in California, both private and public, achieved an average score of only 2.6 in the category of instructional support for learning. By way of comparison, classrooms in Oklahoma’s pre-K program, which has been found to have positive effects on school readiness, have an average instructional support score of 3.2.¹⁶ “Only a small minority of students in California are in settings that consistently support the development of the higher-order thinking skills associated with later academic success,” the RAND authors wrote.¹⁷ Although the State Preschool Program and public school pre-K programs get better scores than other early childhood settings in California, even scores for these programs did not rise to the level of “good.”¹⁸

Classrooms also showed a need for improvement on measures of basic health and safety—something parents should expect at the bare minimum from early childhood settings. The RAND researchers found that on average, classrooms serving California children met only eight of 12 items on a health and safety checklist. The most common shortcomings involved failures to cover electrical outlets, secure exits, and provide classrooms with fire extinguishers. In a few cases, teachers also reported a lack of working smoke detectors in classrooms.¹⁹

Beyond the picture it provides of classroom quality, the RAND study also describes how California’s current mish-mash of early childhood programs falls short, structurally, in encouraging providers to improve quality. Unlike the states that have done the most to improve quality across diverse preschool providers, California has done little to build infrastructure or systems to incentivize or support quality improvement. In fact, some of the policies the state has in place actually create disincentives for quality. RAND notes that the reimbursement rate paid to providers offering the school readiness-oriented Title 5 programs has remained

stagnant for years and does not take into account local variation in the costs of providing services. In contrast, child care subsidies that flow through the Alternative Payment (vouchers) Program, in which caregivers are required only to meet the less-stringent Title 22 standards, are based on market rates that differ across the state’s 58 counties.²⁰ The gap between the standard reimbursement rate offered to providers in Title 5 programs and the market rates offered to providers receiving child care vouchers makes the less rigorous voucher programs seem more attractive to providers and creates a disincentive to participate in the higher-quality Title 5 programs.²¹

California Secretary of Education Glen Thomas concurs that the state’s early childhood policy framework has historically focused on increasing services for families. “We pushed access more than quality,” he says. Now, as Gov. Schwarzenegger nears the end of his administration, the focus has shifted toward improving program quality, even though there still aren’t enough high-quality early-learning programs to meet the demand.

Preschool Outcomes

Despite its significant investments in early childhood programs, California has made surprisingly little effort to evaluate their effects on young children’s learning. A new study from NIEER provides some of the first data available on how participation in California’s State Preschool Program affects children’s learning. It includes observations and other data from 207 State Preschool classrooms located in public schools in Los Angeles, San Diego, Fresno, and Sacramento. The researchers found that even though the classrooms fall short of high-quality standards, children who attended them still received a better early learning experience than those served by other programs. More important, students in State Preschool classrooms made greater learning gains than those served elsewhere. “When looking at classroom quality and child outcomes together,” the authors wrote, “it is reasonable to conclude that efforts to improve the quality of State Preschool could result in even larger gains.”²² ■

A Two-Decade Struggle to Expand Access to Quality Early Childhood Programs

Recognizing the weaknesses of California’s early childhood system, as well as the growing body of evidence of the benefits of high-quality preschool, political and educa-

Local Efforts to Expand Preschool Access and Improve Quality

Early childhood initiatives in several of California’s counties are demonstrating that the issues of low quality and limited access to preschool can be significantly improved. First 5’s Power of Preschool Program has built on investments made by the most forward-looking counties:

- Los Angeles Universal Preschool has addressed the need for facilities in what it is calling “areas of greatest service need” by partnering with local school districts and charter schools to build additional classroom space. LAUP also uses its own quality rating and improvement system—the “star quality rating assessment”—to evaluate existing programs and help design an improvement plan.
- By the fall of 2008, Preschool for All in San Francisco became available in every ZIP code in the city. The program is available to all families, regardless of income. A 2007 study by the American Institutes for Research shows that providers participating in the program receive high scores on the CLASS assessment in the areas of emotional support, student engagement, and classroom management, and in the middle range for instructional support—better than the average for state-funded preschool programs nationally.
- The Preschool for All effort in San Diego County serves more than 2,000 preschoolers in eight communities. Roughly half of those served are English-language learners.

Sources: Los Angeles Universal Preschool, <http://www.laup.net/>; First 5 San Francisco, <http://www.first5sf.org/pfa.htm>; San Diego County Preschool for All, <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/student/eeps/pfa/?loc=home>; American Institutes for Research, *Evaluation of Preschool for All Implementation in San Francisco and San Mateo Counties: Year 2 Report* (Palo Alto: American Institutes for Research, 2007), http://www.first5sf.org/downloads/pfa_eval_y2.pdf

tion leaders in the state have long wanted to build a more robust system.

Throughout the 1990s, state and national leaders were captivated by neuroscience research documenting how early experiences shape children’s developing brains. At the national level, President Clinton increased federal investments in child care and Head Start and hosted a White House conference highlighting research on the importance of early childhood development. Governors in Georgia, Oklahoma, and New York initiated ambitious early childhood initiatives. In California, state Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin convened a Universal Preschool Task Force. Just as Georgia and New York were rolling out their “universal” preschool programs, California’s task force called for a program that would serve all 3- and 4-year-olds, operate in a variety of settings, and be funded by a combination of local, state, federal, and private dollars. While the task force recommendations weren’t put into action, their final report, *Ready to Learn*, helped set the stage for later work on upgrading and expanding early childhood education.²³

The California Master Plan for Education echoed the task force’s call for voluntary universal preschool. Begun in

1999 and published in 2002, the Master Plan is intended to provide the legislature with a road map for improving educational outcomes in the state. The Plan calls for voluntary access to preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds, a more-coordinated and expanded system of screening infants and toddlers for developmental needs, and moving from half-day to full-day kindergarten.

Beyond calling for universal preschool, the Master Plan also calls for better alignment between preschool and the elementary grades to sustain and build on early learning gains. Recommendation 11.1 of the Master Plan states that, “The State should ensure that early learning gains are continued, by aligning developmentally appropriate guidelines, standards, and curricula for preschool, early childhood education, kindergarten, and the primary grades.” To support this goal, Recommendation 23.1 states that, “The California Department of Education should encourage and provide support for continuity of guidelines, standards, and curricula of kindergartens and state-supported preschools; it should strive for similar continuity with non-state supported preschools.” Sections of the plan dealing with data collection and improving the quality and preparation of teachers also indicate that these efforts should

address early childhood in concert with elementary and secondary needs.²⁴

Unfortunately, neither the Universal Preschool Task Force's vision nor the Master Plan's early childhood recommendations have come to fruition—although not for a lack of effort on the part of universal preschool advocates in the state. As advocates and policymakers have focused their energies on the pursuit of universal preschool, however, the Master Plan's emphasis on strengthening alignment between preschool, other early childhood programs, kindergarten, and the elementary grades seems to have slipped through the cracks.

Preschool on the Ballot, Twice

In 1998, filmmaker and actor Rob Reiner, who had become a high-profile spokesman for the movement to expand access to early childhood education in California, successfully spearheaded efforts to enact Proposition 10, an initiative creating a new tobacco tax to fund early childhood programs. With one successful ballot measure behind him, Mr. Reiner began work on another—a plan to make preschool available to all 4-year-olds in the state, regardless of their parents' income. He teamed up with the powerful California Teachers Association and designed a proposal to raise taxes on commercial businesses to pay for the program. But the business community and Gov. Schwarzenegger opposed the plan, and it was eventually withdrawn.

A revised proposal, which made it on the June 2006 ballot as Proposition 82, called for a tax on the state's wealthiest citizens to fund preschool for all 4-year-olds. Preschool advocacy groups, education organizations, legislators, law enforcement officials, college professors, local chambers of commerce, and many others influential in California politics lined up in favor of the plan.

But when faced with the decision over whether state-funded preschool should be targeted to the neediest children or open to all 4-year-olds, the public opted for a more conservative approach. Voters soundly rejected the measure, apparently swayed by critics, such as Berkeley professor Bruce Fuller, who argued that the plan wouldn't serve the neediest children, would provide free preschool to families who could already afford it, and would ultimately widen achievement gaps in the state. In a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, Fuller argued that "lower-income children would get less than half of the estimated \$2.4 billion in new annual pre-school funding that

would be raised by taxing the wealthiest Californians. That's partly because over half of these children already attend free preschool. At least \$1.4 billion would go to subsidize better-off parents who can already afford to pay for preschool."²⁵

A proposed requirement for all preschool teachers to hold a bachelor's degree was also contentious. Fuller and other critics—not persuaded by the existing research linking bachelor's degrees with improved student learning outcomes in pre-K²⁶—argued that the requirement would homogenize the workforce, push non-English-speaking and bilingual providers out of the field, and reduce the number of teachers who share the language and culture of many of the families being served.²⁷

Existing preschool providers also feared that they would be shut out of the program. Many child care providers serve children from birth to age 5 and use funds from preschoolers to cross-subsidize more costly infant and toddler care. These providers feared that universal pre-K would transfer preschoolers out of child care centers and into the public schools, undercutting the providers' economic viability. They also opposed the requirements that teachers have bachelor's degrees and receive compensation equal to that of public school teachers.²⁸ As a result, many in the early childhood community came out of the experience soured on the universal preschool movement and skeptical of further engagement with the K-12 system.

Preschool as a Strategy to Narrow the Achievement Gap

Since the defeat of Proposition 82, policymakers and researchers have continued to promote preschool, as well as a broader range of early childhood investments in children from birth to age 3, as necessary to improve academic outcomes for California's students—particularly the significant numbers of low-income, racial and ethnic minority, and English-language-learner students.

"A culture that puts students first should start with its youngest students. Research and common sense show that waiting until kindergarten or 1st grade to begin educating our children is educationally foolish and fiscally unwise," says the 2007 report of the Governor's Committee on Education Excellence, an independent group of experts charged with recommending strategies for improving how the state governs and finances its schools. "California should provide every child with quality preschool opportu-

nities to ensure that they begin school ready to undertake the challenges of kindergarten and the primary grades.”²⁹

While early childhood services were outside the scope of the committee’s mission, member David W. Gordon, the superintendent of the Sacramento County Office of Education, says the committee was in agreement that the topic should be addressed. “The kids are behind at age 4,” he says. “So if you don’t start at age 4, you have a problem.” Preschool is also part of the P-16 Council established by the state’s superintendent of public instruction, Jack O’Connell.

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Unfortunately, while both reports identified preschool and early childhood investments as important to enable California to raise student achievement and narrow achievement gaps, neither addressed the need to sustain early learning gains by improving quality at the elementary school level and integrating preschool, kindergarten, and the early grades into a seamless PreK-3rd early educational experience.

State spending on preschool and general child care has increased significantly over the past decade. Between 2003-2004 and 2007-2008, spending on the State Preschool Program grew by more than \$128 million, and general child care funding increased by more than \$88 million. Following the defeat of Proposition 82, the Schwarzenegger administration backed creation of the new Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program. And the state First 5 Commission launched demonstration preschool programs that are increasing children’s access to high-quality classrooms in certain counties—and taking important steps to integrate preschool and early elementary grades in those counties. The Harvard Family Research Project attributes these gains in part to the Packard Foundation’s commitment to

preschool expansion in California. (The foundation has awarded \$45 million in grants to pursue this goal.) “Without Packard-funded advocates continuously championing the preschool cause, this funding could have been an easy target for spending cuts,” the Harvard researchers wrote in a mid-point evaluation of Packard’s preschool work.³¹

Improving Preschool Quality and Access Despite Fiscal Challenges

This funding has not translated, however, into anything close to the universal preschool system envisioned by some advocates. Such a system seems unlikely to materialize in the near future, especially as the state grapples with a fiscal shortfall of more than a quarter of its total budget. Yet even amid current budget shortfalls, California continues to make modest progress. Just last year the legislature passed new laws to streamline the state’s existing preschool programs³² and to support the development of a quality improvement system for early childhood providers in the state.³³ The California Department of Education also published new preschool standards that align early learning benchmarks with the state’s K-12 academic standards.

Streamlining Preschool Programs

California policymakers have made significant changes in the state’s preschool program structure that could have meaningful effects on early childhood services in the future. The California State Preschool Program Act of 2008 consolidated five different “Title 5” child development programs administered by the state education department into one, streamlined program called the California State Preschool Program. (The five programs that now fall under the new label include the half-day and full-day State Preschool programs, the half-day and full-day Prekindergarten and Family Literacy programs, and the preschool portion of General Child Care and Development.) The move addresses inefficiencies that the RAND study identified in the previous system.

Previously, agencies providing subsidized early education and care would contract with the state to administer not just one, but several different programs to reach as many families as possible. Because each program had different reporting and contract requirements, redundant paperwork consumed substantial staff time, both for the providers and for the education department. The burden of accounting for funds from multiple sources and documenting compliance with multiple program requirements had proved too

much for some providers, leading to budget woes, closures of some centers, and unspent funds that must be returned to the state.³⁴

Consolidation should provide programs with greater flexibility to use funds in ways that best meet the needs of families they serve. This revamped California State Preschool Program also creates an opportunity for policymakers to expand and improve one streamlined program, advocates say.

Learning Foundations

Another development with the potential to improve quality in preschool programs and support better linkages with the early elementary grades is the release of the *California Preschool Learning Foundations*. Published in 2008 by the state's education department, the document outlines the knowledge and skills that young children should acquire in an early childhood education program.

"In California, priority has been placed on aligning expectations for preschool learning with the state's kindergarten academic content standards and complementing the content areas with attention to social-emotional development and English-language development," the document says.³⁵

The *Foundations* document includes literacy and math foundations aligned with the state's K-12 academic standards for elementary school students, to facilitate alignment of curriculum and teaching practices between preschool and the early elementary grades. But by also including the domains of social-emotional and English-language development, it reflects research that shows the importance of these domains for young children's development.

A 2000 report released by the National Research Council, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*, emphasized this integrated approach. "Care and education cannot be thought of as separate entities in dealing with young children," the report says. "Adequate care involves providing quality cognitive stimulation, rich language environments, and the facilitation of social, emotional, and motor development."³⁶

More recent research further demonstrates the relationship between literacy and social skills. In a 2006 study, Stanford University researchers Sarah Miles and Deborah Stipek showed that children who made friends easily in first grade were likely to display strong reading skills in third grade. Similarly, those with poor reading skills in

first and third grades were more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior in third and fifth grades. Miles and Stipek suggested that interventions for struggling readers could prevent later behavior problems. "Children do not develop in particular domains independently of other domains," they wrote. "To the contrary, social development and academic development are inextricably connected."³⁷

By including a domain focused on English-language development, California's *Learning Foundations* also acknowledges the reality that English is not the first language for a large percentage of children served in state-funded preschool and child care programs. Thirty-nine percent of California children aged 3-5 are English-language learners.³⁸ The preschool learning foundations in this domain are designed specifically to help teachers in gauging and supporting children whose home language is not English.

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Some advocates for these children have questioned the *Foundations'* approach here, arguing that it could lead some teachers to set unrealistically high goals for English-language acquisition. These groups would have preferred an approach encouraging teachers to mark children's progress in learning English instead of, as one goal states, expecting all youngsters to "appropriately use words and tone of voice associated with social conventions in English," by the time they are 5.

A coalition of groups, including the Alliance for a Better Community, Asian and Pacific Islanders California Action Network, and LAUP, has also advocated addressing the needs of "dual or multi-language" learners throughout all the domains of the *Foundations* document, rather than relegating them to a separate section. Ofelia Medina, the educa-

tion project coordinator at Alliance for a Better Community, says that state education officials have been responsive to the coalition's concerns, but adds that providers will need training to use the *Foundations* appropriately. "They should be seen as a resource and not a checklist," she says.

Since the release of the *Foundations*, the CDE's Child Development Division has organized training for providers on how to implement the standards. A companion "frameworks" document is currently being developed to give teachers practical information on how to apply the standards in their classrooms, and should be available in early 2010. Division director Camille Maben says that this frameworks document will address some of the concerns that advocates and early childhood educators have raised, and will clarify that the *Foundations* represent a set of "destinations" for children's learning that can be reached through play if children attend well-designed, high-quality preschool programs.

Birth to 5

Advocates and policymakers in California have also begun to expand their thinking beyond preschool, looking at ways to move the state toward a more comprehensive "birth to 5" system that supports young children's health and development from birth through school entry. Policymakers in other states are also pursuing birth-to-5 systems, and at the federal level, the Obama administration's proposed Early Learning Challenge Grants would support state efforts to implement such systems. California, however, might be more ready than other states to implement more comprehensive systems because of its experience with First 5, which has funded both health and education initiatives. "I'm hoping that we are moving away from a preschool-centric model," says Kris Perry, director of the state First 5 Commission. "People now have a slightly broader view of early childhood."

Contributing to this emphasis on the birth-to-5 period is the expansion of the federal Early Head Start program, which serves pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provides more than \$1 billion to expand the number of Early Head Start programs nationally. First 5 and other organizations are already providing training opportunities to school districts and other agencies interested in applying for that money.

Quality Rating and Improvement

One example of this new birth-to-5 emphasis is California's effort to implement a Quality Rating and Improvement

System (QRIS) for child care providers. A growing number of states have implemented these systems, which include rating scales and incentives to encourage early care and education centers, including preschools, to improve their programs. Providers earn better ratings if they meet higher standards in areas such as teacher qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, and the classroom environment. Rating scales are intended to inform parents about the components of a well-designed program and to display a center's level of quality to the public. Many also offer incentives, such as offering providers who serve low-income children higher child care reimbursement rates as they advance on the scale.

In the fall of 2008, Gov. Schwarzenegger signed legislation creating an advisory committee that will begin the process of designing such a scale. The 13-member Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee is examining the state's current early care and education system and working to design a rating and improvement initiative. The process is scheduled for completion at the end of 2011.

In addition to rating centers and preschools, many QRIS systems also support quality improvements by providing opportunities for providers to earn additional expertise or to better equip their facilities.

Such rating scales have the potential to help centers target the areas where they most need to improve and to allow them to earn recognition for the level of quality they are reaching. But some experts warn that these ratings won't result in meaningful improvement if there is not enough money in the system to actually help centers improve.

W. Steven Barnett, the director of NIEER, says these systems can be merely "window dressing" if states aren't prepared to spend money on quality improvements. "There has to somehow be the money to support the movement from one tier to the next, or it will be phony," he says.

California's advisory committee—which includes policymakers, educators, and other key leaders in the field—will have some examples to follow from states that were among the first to offer centers an opportunity to participate in a QRIS. Eighteen states currently have these systems in place statewide, and 27 others are working toward them or piloting at the local level.³⁹ A recent RAND study showed that even though a lot of work has been done in states to develop rating scales, best practices are not being shared across states and

knowledge on whether these scales are having the desired effects is lacking.⁴⁰ Committee members should evaluate the lessons learned in various states to determine which elements of these programs are most appropriate for California.

A few recommendations that emerge from the research include securing funding for the program before it is implemented, conducting broad public-awareness activities, and making sure that the people who rate the centers are different from the ones who provide training and technical assistance. The committee should also look within California to learn from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other counties that have developed rating scales.

Some observers also note that a QRIS demonstrates acceptance of the diverse mix of providers that have long been supplying early childhood education services in California but might also need additional resources to improve. No one early learning model may be right for all California families with young children, but all providers have elements that can be strengthened. By supporting quality across a diverse mix of providers—including public and privately funded preschools, child care centers, and family child care homes—California can improve the quality of early care and learning experiences available to young children from birth through the age of school entry, including those who are not enrolled in or eligible for publicly funded preschool. ❏

Moving Beyond Preschool to PreK-3rd

Even as California takes steps to improve quality and access in its fragmented preschool and early childhood system, some educators and advocates in the state are looking beyond preschool to build integrated preschool-through-early-elementary—or PreK-3rd—early learning experiences for children. As noted above, the California Master Plan for Education envisions such a system, in which standards, curriculum and instructional materials are aligned both with one another and from year to year across preschool, other early childhood programs, kindergarten, and the early elementary grades.⁴¹

Many education experts believe PreK-3rd systems, which align children’s early learning experiences from preschool through the early elementary grades, are essential to improve educational outcomes for children who are at risk of school failure. Preschool, they assert, should be the first level of a seamless primary education that continues through the 3rd grade.⁴²

In a 2006 paper for the New America Foundation, Kristie Kauerz, an early-childhood policy expert, wrote that, while pre-K and full-day kindergarten can be effective in preparing children for later academic challenges, “one or two strong rungs, however, do not guarantee a successful climb up the ladder of learning; there must be an ongoing succession of sturdy rungs.”⁴³

Unfortunately, such sturdy ladders remain more the exception than the rule for California youngsters.

Local Efforts Lead the Way

California is home to a handful of efforts to improve integration and alignment between preschool and the K-12 system and create seamless PreK-3rd early learning experiences for young children. Most of this work, however, is being done at the local level, with little involvement from state education officials. “There are some districts that do it very well,” says the Department of Education’s Camille Maben, but “there is a lot of building to be done between the early childhood community and K-12.”

First 5’s Power of Preschool effort is fueling local preschool/K-12 connections in the nine participating counties. One of the Power of Preschool grantees, Los Angeles Universal Preschool, is working to establish PreK-3rd programs in several school districts in the county. The initiative will focus on improving preschool-to-kindergarten transitions and aligning curriculum from preschool through 3rd grade. “We’re going to look at it as a whole, so we can accomplish things up and down” the PreK-3rd spectrum, says LAUP CEO Gary Mangiofico. He added that school readiness isn’t just about “withstanding the challenges of going to elementary school.” It’s also about making a large enough impact on achievement in the primary grades to improve third-grade reading scores.

A partnership between the city of San Francisco, the public school districts, and private funders has also launched a PreK-3rd grade initiative in San Francisco. This six-year effort, which will begin when children enter preschool at 3 and continue until they finish third grade, will involve two schools where children tend to perform below grade level—Dr. Charles Drew Child Development Center, which serves a largely African-American population, and the predominantly Latino Sanchez Elementary. The project, implemented in fall 2009, will focus on parent engagement, extended learning opportunities after school, and English-

What Is PreK-3rd?

Key features of PreK-3rd early education programs:

- High-quality, voluntary universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds
- Full-day kindergarten
- Qualified teachers with both a bachelor's degree and specialized training in how young children learn
- Opportunities for teachers to share data, planning, and professional development across grade levels
- Strong leadership committed to providing children with a seamless educational experience
- Opportunities for parent and community engagement
- Quality, developmentally appropriate curriculum and standards that are aligned from pre-K through third grade
- Shared accountability, between preschools, public schools, parents, and communities, for ensuring that all children read and do math on grade level by the end of third grade

Source: *America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3rd Education* (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2008), http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=711495.

language acquisition—all with the goal of ensuring that children are reading and doing math on grade level by the end of third grade. Professional development and curriculum planning will involve both early childhood and primary teachers.

“Melding and bringing in that pre-K world is a huge cultural shift” for elementary educators, says Elizabeth Gutierrez, the program director of Education Opportunities at the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, one of the philanthropies involved in the effort. She adds, however, that she hoped the work could be a model for other districts, or the state, to follow.

Water Cooler Process

Another initiative building connections between K-12 and early childhood education in California is the Water Cooler, a project that brings together early childhood advocates to identify common ground and coordinate advocacy efforts. Many of the advocates involved in the Water Cooler are focused on building a birth-to-5 early childhood system in the state. But Water Cooler efforts have also emphasized the importance of building connections between early childhood and the K-12 public school system and integrating early childhood into the “larger conversation” about improving California’s entire education system, birth through higher education, raising student achievement, and narrowing achievement gaps. The initiative was launched by the Advancement Project, a civil rights-focused organization that advocates for more equitable educational opportunities—including expanded preschool

access, better facilities, and more equitable school financing—for low-income children and youth.

The first Water Cooler conference, held in March 2009, brought together some 500 funders, advocates, educators, and others from across the state at a time when budgets are tight and travel has been restricted. Building on that conference, the Water Cooler process has convened working groups to address critical areas related to early childhood and PreK-3rd. The working groups are expected to produce recommendations based on this work in November 2009.

Advancement Project co-director Molly Munger hopes the process will continue to encourage conversation and cooperation across the early childhood and K-12 sectors. “We’re not trying to force anything,” she says. “We’re just trying to create enough gravitational pull toward ideas.” Ms. Munger sees signs that some of the barriers between the preschool and K-12 communities in California are beginning to crumble. But more work will be needed for early childhood providers and those in K-12 to truly value each other’s contributions and to work in partnership toward making sure more children have the support they need to succeed in school.

Why Doesn't California Have a More Robust PreK-3rd System?

These local and philanthropic initiatives are promising. But Karen Hill-Scott, who chaired both the Universal Preschool task force and the school readiness task force for

the state Master Plan, argues that the state must provide more leadership and create incentives for more districts to move in the direction of PreK-3rd. “Unless it’s in the state education code, these things are only going to happen because local superintendents and principals want them to happen in their community,” she says. The 2008 release of California’s *Preschool Learning Foundations* is one small step forward, because the *Foundations* aligned with the state’s K-12 academic standards, providing a tool to help pre-K, kindergarten, and early elementary teachers align curriculum and instruction. But much more aggressive state leadership and policy change will be needed to create a truly seamless PreK-3rd system in the state.

In some ways, it’s surprising that California hasn’t done more, at the state policy level, to support development of PreK-3rd early learning systems. The state has several features that should support it. For example, unlike other states, where early childhood programs are scattered across a variety of agencies, and preschool programs are administered by different agencies than those responsible for public schooling, California’s preschool program and all but one of its state-funded child care programs are in the Department of Education. That should make it easier for state officials to coordinate preschool and early elementary policies, but it hasn’t worked out that way. Ms. Hill-Scott says that it is as if the child development division has existed as part of its own “micro-climate” in the Department of Education.

Ms. Maben, who runs the department’s Child Development Division, notes that the lines of communication are opening and that K-12 groups in the state, such as the school boards’ and county superintendents’ organizations, and the California Teachers Association, are showing greater interest in early learning issues and asking for presentations at their conferences. But the fact that this is a new development underscores the degree to which early childhood programs and K-12 schooling have historically been divided. “These are places we haven’t been much in the past,” Ms. Maben says, but “more and more people are seeing the value and importance of the connections.”

California also has a long history—dating back to the end of World War II—of co-locating preschool and child care centers on public school campuses. Local school districts have long played a role in operating Head Start and other preschool programs in the state. More than one-third of California’s Head Start programs are operated by either

local school districts or county offices of education, entities that oversee multiple school districts.⁴⁴ Three-quarters of children participating in the state’s preschool program attend programs operated by public schools.⁴⁵ And 57 of the state’s school districts also use their own, federal Title I funds for preschool.⁴⁶

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But this district role hasn’t typically translated into seamless PreK-3rd programs that integrate preschool or Head Start with local elementary schools. Even when preschool or Head Start programs are located on the same property as public elementary schools, there is often little interaction with elementary school teachers or formal effort to align instruction and curriculum across the preschool and early elementary grades. Preschool or Head Start programs often follow different schedules than elementary school classes and may be located in a separate building. Student information is rarely transferred from pre-K settings and classrooms to children’s kindergarten teachers. California law allows state-funded preschool and early childhood programs to transfer student records and other information to the child’s elementary school, if parents give their permission, but there’s no evidence that this happens with any regularity.⁴⁷

The fact that preschool in California is not universal, but serves only a fraction of eligible children, is one reason for the lack of greater PreK-3rd alignment. It’s much harder for educators to align such curriculum and instruction when children come to kindergarten with highly varied and often low-quality early learning experiences—and many lack any preschool early education experience at all. But that’s not a complete explanation: Other states have made significant strides toward PreK-3rd even in the absence of universal pre-K. Washington state for example, serves a smaller percentage of children in preschool

than California does, but has established state leadership to support PreK-3rd and with support from philanthropic foundations and state leaders, a growing number of Washington school districts are creating integrated PreK-3rd experiences by building relationships with the various community-based child care and private preschool programs operating in their communities.

The biggest obstacles to greater PreK-3rd alignment in California, however, may be a lack of state-level leadership and distrust between the early childhood and K-12 sectors in the state.

Until now, state officials have not given a lot of attention to strengthening the links between early learning programs and the early grades. Although the California Master Plan for Education recommended aligning standards and curriculum in preschool, kindergarten, and the early elementary grades, state policymakers have not acted to translate that recommendation into policy. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell has long emphasized that learning starts before kindergarten, but Gov. Schwarzenegger has not been viewed as a strong early childhood education leader, nor has he emphasized PreK-3rd alignment.

The early childhood community has often viewed K-12 as a better-funded, well-organized and more-powerful system that is too eager to push young children into a high-stakes environment of standards and testing. The battle over Proposition 82, which some early childhood educators mistakenly viewed as an effort to move children from community-based settings into public schools, also created scars that are still healing.

Similarly, public schools have often overlooked the role of child care centers and other community-based providers, ignoring early childhood altogether or favoring school-based pre-K programs that closely resemble kindergarten classrooms. Gordon MacInnes, a former assistant commissioner of education in New Jersey, where the state has built a high-quality, diverse-delivery preschool system aligned with the early elementary grades in 31 high-poverty districts, identifies two major obstacles to integrating high-quality pre-K and the early elementary grades: “The leadership in many urban districts does not accept the connection between a quality preschool opportunity and stronger literacy; and early-childhood education is still a stepchild in most universities, state education departments, and district headquarters.”⁴⁸

These conflicts, biases, and misconceptions have been a barrier to more integrated PreK-3rd systems in California. “We’ve had years where we had a lot of infighting,” says state Education Secretary Thomas, who has worked in both early childhood and K-12 circles. Fortunately, the Water Cooler process and other efforts to bring together early childhood and K-12 educators and advocates in California are helping break down the barriers.

Collecting and Sharing Data to Improve Programs

One area in which California is making progress to better integrate its early childhood and K-12 education systems is data: recent legislation, part of an effort led by Children Now, should help the state to eventually collect better information about children’s early care and education experiences and link that information with records that follow students throughout their experiences in the state’s public school system. Local initiatives are also under way to help preschool and early elementary teachers use student data to work together, a change that could help the state better address learning problems that might keep children from succeeding in the early grades.

In 2008, Gov. Schwarzenegger signed into law the Education Data and Information Act, which requires the CDE to establish a process for assigning children in publicly subsidized child care and preschool programs a “unique pupil identifier,” just as it already assigns identification numbers to students in K-12 public schools. These unique pupil identifiers allow the state to track information on individual students’ educational experiences and learning outcomes from year to year and across educational settings as they progress through the state’s public education system—even if they move among settings, schools, or districts within the state. Gathering and analyzing this data for early childhood programs as well, the bill states, will allow officials to “fully understand critical education policy and education finance questions.” The 2008-2009 state budget provided funding to begin the process but not to finish it.

Connecting preschool and the two K-12 data systems—the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System and the California Longitudinal Teacher Integrated Data Education System—will enable educators and policymakers to continue following children’s progress once they enter school. This can help demonstrate the long-term benefits of the state’s early childhood investments, suggests Scott Moore, senior policy adviser for Preschool California.

Linking pre-K and K-12 data will enable California “to answer the question of how to best prepare students for kindergarten and the grades beyond,” according to a 2008 report by McKinsey & Company. “The goal is to determine which factors in a student’s Pre-K experience correlate with success in K-12.”⁴⁹ In addition, linking early childhood and K-12 data systems could improve coordination between preschool and the early grades and enable teachers to identify and address learning problems that might prevent children from progressing in the early grades.

Exactly what information to collect from the state’s child care and preschool programs, how the data will be used, and who will have access to it, however, are still questions that present new challenges and will need to be addressed. For example, school districts have personnel in charge of maintaining data systems, but this would be a new responsibility for many preschool and child care center directors. The McKinsey report recommended that these duties be centralized, perhaps at the county level, to improve data collection and reduce the burden on providers. “Pre-K is unique in that there is no pre-existing body that currently manages Pre-K data,” the authors wrote.⁵⁰

New strategies might also need to be developed to protect the privacy of children and families in small community-based centers and home-based child care settings.

Elizabeth Laird, a program manager at the Data Quality Campaign in Austin, Texas, says the fact that California has passed legislation that would allow data on early childhood programs to be part of a longitudinal student data system puts it ahead of other states working through these issues. Many states are wrestling with the same questions, she says.

“You need to think not just about the technology to enter the data, but the training to use the data,” she says, adding that states need to be very clear to providers on why they want to collect certain pieces of information.

California needs a statewide data system that “ties together a coherent cradle to career picture of our educational system and related supports, with particular attention to critical transitions throughout the educational system, beginning with kindergarten readiness,” says Brad Strong, the education director for Children Now, an advocacy group for California children. Such a system would include detailed information on the children enrolled, workforce, and pro-

grammatic information including data used for the quality rating and improvement program.

Kindergarten readiness assessments, already being used in many states as well as some California counties, could also provide useful data to target preschool resources, improve programs, and screen for kindergarten readiness. Santa Clara County, which in 2004 began collecting school readiness data on a sample of more than 2,000 children, provides one model that the state as a whole, or other counties, might imitate. Kindergarten teachers collect data on all areas of children’s development, including academic skills, self-regulation, self-care, motor skills, and any issues the child might have had with transition into school. Parents are also surveyed to provide demographic data and information on the home. San Francisco and other counties have implemented similar kindergarten readiness assessments, and LAUP has begun to use a modified kindergarten readiness assessment tool for its preschool programs.⁵¹

In conjunction with these efforts, preschool and kindergarten teachers have begun to work together in joint professional development, and policymakers, parents, and advocates have used data provided by kindergarten readiness assessments to push for more PreK-3rd investments.

Federal stimulus funds, as well as the proposed federal Early Learning Challenge Grant Program, could provide additional impetus and funding to spur these efforts forward.

Strengthening Kindergarten

Kindergarten is a particularly important link in the PreK-3rd continuum, because it bridges preschool and the early elementary grades. But this important link is also often one of the weakest: While early childhood advocates have focused on improving preschool quality and access over the last decade, and K-12 school reformers have focused on improving instruction in the early elementary grades, kindergarten has been largely ignored.

California is no exception. But two debates currently under way in the state could help strengthen this critical link in the PreK-3rd continuum.

Cutoff Date Debate

California teachers and legislators have long debated proposals to move the date by which children must turn 5 to enter kindergarten—otherwise known as the kinder-

PreK-3rd Snapshot: Hacienda La Puente Unified School District

The 25,000-student Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, east of Los Angeles, has been working for several years to integrate its preschool classrooms into the learning and activities in its 22 elementary schools, and serves as an example of a school system trying to create a PreK-3rd experience.

The district serves more than 1,100 preschoolers through a combination of Head Start funds, California State Preschool contracts, and general child care funding. And recently, Los Angeles Universal Preschool classes were added at five schools to serve additional low-income families that earned too much to qualify for the other publicly funded early-childhood programs.

Preschool classes are typically located in portable trailers near an elementary school's kindergarten rooms to make it easy for the children to interact. Preschool teachers meet regularly with kindergarten teachers—either monthly or every two months—to plan activities and talk about ways to connect the curriculum.

Examples of this cooperation include sharing responsibility for tending a school vegetable garden, traveling on field trips together, or working on joint projects. Relationships between preschool teachers and those in the other primary grades are also developing and sometimes result in pairing second- or third-graders with preschoolers for reading activities.

“I’ve had excellent support from my district,” says Gabriela Chavarria, the district’s director of child development and primary programs. The district will also be able to share its experience with others as part of Los Angeles Universal Preschool’s new PreK-3rd project. Ms. Chavarria added, however, that the state hasn’t actively encouraged PreK-3rd arrangements. “The state still has to come a long way in defining and funding this kind of transition experience.”

garten cutoff date. California’s December 2 cutoff date is one of the latest in the country. Because school starts in September, a December cutoff date means that many children enter school several months before turning 5. Lawmakers have tried several times to move the cutoff date up to September, which is more in line with other states. Most recently, a bill was defeated in 2008. A similar bill, introduced in the 2009 legislative session, is currently inactive.

Many experts and researchers have said that the age at which children enter kindergarten doesn’t really matter and that kindergarten classrooms will always have older and younger students, with birthdays spread out over a period of almost a year—a major time span in the life of a young child.⁵²

But Carol Nicoli, a past president of the California Kindergarten Association, who lobbied for several years to move the cutoff date back, argues that allowing 4-year-olds to enter kindergarten can set children up for failure, especially if they haven’t had a strong preschool experience.

“The consequences are that we have children who have late-fall birthdays who are really not ready for the academic challenges of our very, very scripted standards for students in kindergarten in California,” she says.

As the state wrestles with a budget crisis that is forcing painful cuts in education programs, policymakers and school leaders might see another reason to move up the cutoff date: By reducing the number of children eligible to enter kindergarten the following fall, moving up the cutoff date produces a savings for state and school district budgets. Given the other arguments for moving up the cutoff date, this may be one of the more benign cost-saving strategies available to state officials—especially if savings are used to help maintain preschool and other early childhood programs that serve children who miss the cutoff.

But to benefit children over the long-term, an earlier cutoff date will need to be accompanied by increased access to preschool, so that children who fall short of the date aren’t shut out of early learning altogether. If an earlier

Pre-K-3rd Snapshot: Sacramento County

The Preschool Bridging Model, an initiative of the Sacramento County Office of Education, demonstrates how the K-12 community can reach out to early childhood education providers to improve program quality and make the transition into kindergarten smoother for children. The model enables early childhood specialists to provide training and coaching to child care providers. It began as a pilot program with the Elk Grove Unified School District in 2007.

“Family child care providers were very hungry” for information, says Carmen Garcia-Gomez, a school readiness coordinator at First 5 Sacramento.

The program has now been expanded to providers in all 13 districts in the county and involves 100 centers and family child care homes. Providers receive instructional materials to improve their programs and are guided toward higher education and other professional development opportunities. County Superintendent David W. Gordon says he has worked to make courses for an associate’s degree available locally so providers don’t have to drive to a community college.

Events traditionally targeted to parents of incoming kindergarteners—such as the county’s “transition summit” and a health and development screening fair in Sacramento City Unified—are now being opened to providers as well.

Mr. Gordon says the project is helping to improve the overall quality of early childhood programs in the county. “You have to improve the private sector because you don’t have the capacity in the public sector,” he says.

cutoff date simply means children wait an extra year to participate in formal learning opportunities, the change will do little to improve student achievement.

Full-Day Kindergarten

California does not require school districts to offer full-day kindergarten. It is one of 21 states that provides neither a financial incentive nor disincentive for districts to offer full-day kindergarten. California school districts receive the same amount of state funding per pupil for each kindergartner they enroll as they do for each first-grade student, regardless of whether they offer full- or half-day kindergarten.⁵³

Some California school districts have moved ahead of the state by using local funds to help provide full-day kindergarten. The largest example of a district implementing full-day kindergarten is the Los Angeles Unified School District, which began phasing in full-day programs in 2004, following a successful school bond measure that allowed the district to build additional classroom space.

Research on the long-term benefits of full-day kindergarten is mixed—in part because many initiatives do not explicitly align full-day kindergarten with the early elementary grades to create seamless early learning expe-

riences for children. But experts say that full-day kindergarten makes practical sense for children who are used to a full-day preschool or child care program. Many working parents prefer full-day programs because they alleviate the need for child care and transportation. “When kindergarten length is not well-aligned with that of other early learning programs, many children in working families often cope daily with multiple settings,” Ms. Kauerz wrote in a 2005 paper that explored the mismatch between state policies that apply to kindergarten and those that apply to other early childhood and elementary programs.⁵⁴

The LAUSD is conducting its own evaluation to better understand how the transition to full-day kindergarten affects the amount of instructional support teachers receive and how deeply the content is covered. Future reports will examine the relationship between social skills and literacy outcomes in a full-day program, as well as whether full-day kindergarten allows children to spend more time on a broader array of subject areas.

Focus on Early Literacy

Under No Child Left Behind, the state has also had the opportunity, through the Reading First initiative, to strengthen the literacy skills of children once they enter

school. California received \$712 million in Reading First funds over seven years, targeted specifically to schools in which at least 40 percent of the second- or third-graders score below or far below the basic level on the California Standards Test. High-poverty schools and those in “program improvement” under NCLB were also eligible. Funds were used for a broad array of purposes, including professional development, reading assessments, instructional materials, and an outside evaluation.

In spite of a national debate over the effectiveness of this program and uncertainty over its future, the six-year evaluation of the state’s efforts showed that Reading First has had a significant positive effect on literacy skills in California, and leads to higher performance in the later elementary grades. Educators’ engagement in the program has a lot to do with its success. “Active principal participation and positive teacher perceptions of the program are likely to increase program effectiveness to a significant degree,” the authors wrote. Among the earliest schools using Reading First, however, there is a “flattening” of achievement growth.⁵⁵

Cuts in federal funding for the Reading First program raise questions about California’s ability to sustain these literacy initiatives, particularly in light of the state’s larger fiscal challenges. Carrie Roberts, a consultant to the California Department of Education, says that most school districts that received Reading First funds have “carryover” funds that will allow them to sustain current initiatives through September 2010, and that the state is working to develop a sustainability plan for Reading First districts to continue literacy investments after that date. “Many of the elements that have been put into place are sustainable and in speaking with teachers and administrators that have implemented the program, they want to keep up the momentum and continue to support the positive changes that have resulted in increased student achievement,” Ms. Roberts says. ❏

Shared Challenges Create Opportunities for Collaboration

Building stronger connections between the early childhood and public school sectors in California also creates opportunities for early childhood advocates and school reformers to work together to address shared challenges. Many of the most pressing challenges facing education in California are common to both sectors.

Funding Cuts

As California grapples with major fiscal shortfalls due to the current recession, both the state’s public school system and early childhood programs have taken budget hits.

California’s school districts have seen major cuts in their funding over both the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years—totaling more than \$20.7 billion in elementary and secondary school funding. In the 2009-2010 school year, districts will experience an 18 percent cut in general state aid and a 20 percent cut in the amount of aid they receive from numerous “categorical” funding streams, through which the state provides funding targeted to specific expenses and activities, such as textbooks or class size reduction.

Beyond the obvious impacts of funding cuts, the budget crunch has also created cash flow problems for many districts, as the state postponed some payments to districts and changed the schedule under which state funds flow to school districts.

Even before the most recent cuts, California schools received almost 10 percent less funding per pupil than the national average, and ranked 33rd of the 50 states in per-pupil funding—in a state with some of the highest costs of living in the country.⁵⁶ Inadequate funding for public education, particularly for low-income and minority students, has long been an obstacle to improving educational outcomes in the state, and the current cuts further undermine districts’ ability to deliver a high-quality education, including in the early elementary grades.

Beyond the obvious impacts of funding cuts, the budget crunch has also created cash flow problems for many districts, as the state postponed some payments to districts and changed the schedule under which state funds flow to school districts.

One casualty of the state’s current budget woes is the state class size reduction program for early grades. To reduce staffing costs, school districts will now be allowed to

exceed the 20-to-1 maximum class size. Although based on research demonstrating that smaller classes produce greater learning gains in the early grades, CSR has been controversial, because the increased demand it created for teachers led to a sudden influx of underprepared teachers, especially in poor communities, possibly negating any benefits from lowered class sizes.⁵⁷ The new waivers will give school districts greater flexibility, but the effects on student learning will likely depend on whether or not school administrators are able to let go of less-effective teachers and hold on to those who are more effective in the classroom.

Early childhood programs have also seen funding cuts from the budget crisis. Although the state's fiscal year 2009 budget for the Child Development Division provided an additional \$18.9 million to support preschool enrollment growth, the office also was forced to take a mid-year cut of \$55 million, wiping out the initial increase.

In the fiscal year 2010 budget, funding remains about the same, but that's only because of the additional funding provided by the federal stimulus, which brought more than \$220 million into the state for child care over two years, along with an additional \$25 million for quality improvement efforts. Head Start agencies were slated to receive more than \$82 million. While early childhood advocates in the state may have had high hopes for the additional funding, in practice much of it will be used simply to uphold existing funding and services.

The early education community also faced the possibility of losing much of the funding for birth-to-5 programs that flows through the state First 5 Commission and the local county First 5 commissions. As part of Gov. Schwarzenegger's plan to address the state budget crisis, a measure was placed on the May 19 ballot that would have redirected all the money from the statewide commission and half of what the local panels receive to the general fund in order to fill budget gaps for other state-funded services for young children. Voters, however, soundly defeated the measure, as well as others that would have helped shore up state finances.

With the state's budget deficit expected to grow again, however, it will be a struggle for the state to make progress toward raising quality or providing services to children on waiting lists for programs.

"There are a lot of kids out there who still need care," says Ms. Maben.

The state's budget woes have affected early childhood programs in ways that budget numbers don't always reflect. When the state has cash flow problems, some child care providers don't receive their state payments on time. While some providers are able to manage through those delays, those periods often result in some closures of preschool centers. Budget cuts have also put a freeze on staff travel for the California Department of Education, meaning CDE staff haven't been able to visit as many early childhood classrooms to ensure programs are meeting expectations.

In and of themselves, these budget cuts, as well as uncertainty about future funding levels, pose a major challenge to both early childhood providers and school districts in California. But they also highlight deeper problems with the state's system of education funding: It is extremely complicated, aggravates California's difficulties in balancing its budget, and fails to provide adequate and equitable education funding for all students—at either the preschool or elementary and secondary level.

Getting Down to Facts, a 2007 research project called for by the governor's education committee and other leaders, highlighted the complex and sometimes duplicative array of K-12 categorical funding streams administered by the state education department. "The highly prescriptive finance and governance systems thwart incentives for local schools and districts in their efforts to meet the needs of their students and promote higher achievement," Stanford University professor Susanna Loeb and other researchers wrote in an overview of the research findings. "The restrictions also lead to sub-optimal allocation of resources, in that schools spend money as the regulations demand, not necessarily to meet the needs of their students. Compliance with regulations and associated paperwork also take time away from work with students."⁵⁸ This critique could easily be applied to the state's early childhood education system as well.

Different funding mechanisms for early childhood programs and K-12 public schools also contribute to the disconnect between preschool and elementary schooling in California and the lack of more solid PreK-3rd efforts in the state. Public elementary and secondary schools receive funding through Proposition 98, a state constitutional

school funding guarantee driven by a complicated formula based on state revenues and student enrollment. Child development programs also receive Proposition 98 funds, but they are not subject to the same formulas and guarantees, instead receiving a fixed amount determined each year as part of the budget process.

Although school reformers and education advocates in California have long called for overhaul of the state's school finance system, the current fiscal crisis gives those calls new urgency and weight. As California reformers and advocates work to improve the state's troubled education finance system, they should use that opportunity to better incorporate early childhood into a more transparent, less complicated school finance system, rather than segregating early childhood funds into separate silos.

Teacher Quality and Distribution

Research shows that teachers' skills and effectiveness are among the most important factors determining how much children learn in both early childhood and elementary school settings. Unfortunately, California's early childhood programs fall short on indicators of teacher quality, and disadvantaged children are least likely to have the most qualified teachers.

Raising the Bar for Preschool Teachers

California has set the bar for teaching preschool lower than many other states with publicly funded preschool programs. The California State Preschool Program allows individuals to work as lead teachers with a minimum of a Child Development Associate Teacher permit, which requires 12 units in early childhood education and 50 days of work experience in a classroom.⁵⁹

The RAND project has demonstrated, however, that most California preschool teachers actually exceed that standard. More than two-thirds of preschoolers in the state—including those in state pre-K, Head Start, subsidized child care, and private preschool programs—have a lead teacher with a two-year college degree or higher, and 42 percent have a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree or higher.⁶⁰ The experience of First 5's Power of Preschool initiative also indicates that California preschool teachers have more educational credentials than the state's lax requirements would suggest. Officials expected that most lead teachers in the participating centers would start out at the "entry" level of the program's three-tiered career ladder for early

educators (meaning teachers have completed 24 units of early childhood coursework), and that it would take five years for the project to raise education levels. But after just three years, more than 90 percent of lead teachers in participating centers were already at the "advancing" level (60 college units, with 24 in early childhood) or at the "quality" level—a bachelor's degree.⁶¹

Debate over bachelor's degrees aside, there is increasing consensus in California that early childhood educators, like those in public elementary and secondary schools, should have a set of "competencies" in order to care for and teach young children.

Proposals to raise educational requirements for preschool teachers have been the subject of contentious debate in California—most recently during the debate over Proposition 82, which would have required preschool teachers to have a bachelor's degree and state certification to teach early education.

Although state policymakers have declined to raise teacher education requirements, Marcy Whitebook, director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at UC-Berkeley, suggests that the question has in part already been decided by new federal requirements that at least half of Head Start teachers have a bachelor's degree by 2013, since the federal funds flowing into the state for Head Start exceed spending on state-funded preschool.⁶² The 1998 Head Start reauthorization, which introduced an associate's degree requirement for the program, sparked growth in associate's degree programs and the number of early educators holding associate's degrees. But teachers in state-funded preschool and child care programs will remain subject to lower standards unless the state changes its own policies, too.

Debate over bachelor's degrees aside, there is increasing consensus in California that early childhood educators, like those in public elementary and secondary schools, should have a set of "competencies" in order to care for and teach young children. "The job has gotten harder," says

Ms. Whitebook. “What we’re expecting of people is more complicated.” The California Department of Education and the state First 5 Commission are working with experts and stakeholders to define the skills and knowledge that early childhood educators need to effectively support and teach young children.

If educational requirements are raised, however, the state’s higher education system will need to increase its efforts to accommodate early childhood educators who are working during the day and face a range of obstacles to furthering their own education.

“Most ECE students in California are working full-time, typically at low-wage jobs; many speak a language other than or in addition to English; and many face significant challenges in pursuing college-level work in English,” says a 2007 paper by CSCCE.⁶³ One promising practice noted in the study is targeting courses to cohorts of students, including providers who are learning English or have limited English-language skills, seeking higher education credentials. Under this cohort approach, a group of early childhood educators take all of their degree coursework together and benefit from peer support as they complete their degrees. Other strategies to support mid-career early childhood educators seeking to earn degrees include student advising and counseling, financial support, tutoring and assistance with technology, and providing courses at nontraditional hours and at more convenient locations.⁶⁴

Early childhood faculty at the state’s community colleges have also focused on identifying core competencies for early childhood educators and adopting curricula to fit them. Working collaboratively, the state’s community colleges established the Curriculum Alignment Project, a set of eight courses that has been described as “a foundational core for all early care and education professionals.” More than 70 of the state’s 103 community colleges have since indicated that they would adopt this coursework.⁶⁵ One goal of this project is to enable credits for these courses to transfer into the California State University system so that students can continue toward a bachelor’s degree more quickly.

Another possible option to help more providers earn higher education credentials might be to authorize some community colleges with strong track records in serving early childhood educators to begin offering bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education. Many community colleges already

play a critical role in preparing early childhood educators to receive a CDA or associate’s degree, and these institutions are often better oriented to serve the needs of nontraditional, working, and English-language-learner students than are more traditional four-year institutions. Community college coursework is also cheaper than at four-year institutions. While allowing community colleges to grant bachelor’s degrees would be unusual and is not envisioned under the current state Master Plan for Higher Education, it is not without precedent. For example, Miami-Dade Community College in Florida (since renamed Miami-Dade College) was authorized in 2002 to confer baccalaureate degrees, in part as a way to address shortages in the supply of teachers. California currently allows institutions within the California State University system to offer a doctorate in education, even though the California Master Plan did not foresee CSU institutions offering doctoral degrees.

State officials are also pursuing the creation of a statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), similar to those used in numerous other states, as well as some Power of Preschool sites, as a way to create incentives for teachers—in whatever setting they are working—to seek more training and improve their level of education.

And a long-standing effort—Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards (CARES)—rewards early childhood teachers who earn more education and stay in the field, since preschool teachers often move into the K-12 system once they earn four-year degrees. Both family child care providers and center-based providers earn stipends and other financial incentives for raising their educational levels. In 2007-2008, more than 9,300 providers in 44 counties participated in the program, which has been found to improve teacher retention. A survey of participants released by First 5 in 2008 showed that most would “probably” or “definitely” stay in the profession for the next five to 10 years.⁶⁶ The program is jointly funded by the California First 5 Commission and county First 5 agencies, but funding from the state group is scheduled to stop at the end of 2009. The state commission is studying whether to continue the program, and county-level agencies will have to decide whether they want to sustain it using their own funds.

Preparing Teachers to Work in PreK-3rd settings

Efforts to improve the skills of early childhood educators also lead to questions about the skills of teachers work-

Helping Early Childhood Educators Earn Degrees

When First 5 of Alameda County began its Professional Development Coordinator program almost 10 years ago, the community colleges were most interested in why early childhood students were taking enough courses to earn their child development credential, but weren't pursuing any education beyond that. The answer was that the students, many of them English learners, struggled in the general education courses needed to obtain a two-year degree.

"You have to know the individuals, but also what this college is not doing," says Rory Darrah, the former early care and education director for First 5 Alameda, and now a consultant.

The Alameda program assigns coordinators—specialized advisers who understand the early childhood field—to work with anywhere from 20 to 100 early childhood educators and help them earn two- or four-year degrees. This approach is now in place at the four community colleges in the county, and it has sparked a variety of efforts to help cohorts of early childhood educators take the courses they need to earn degrees and advance in their careers. For example, one college began offering coursework in Spanish. A couple of campuses employed translators to work in the classrooms to improve understanding between the instructor and the students. "It has changed the attitude of the system," Ms. Darrah says.

Similar programs now exist throughout the state, and the coordinator model has even been put in place at California State University-East Bay, where 15 early childhood students from diverse backgrounds, who started as a cohort at the community college level, were expected to graduate with their bachelor's degrees this spring. The program illustrates that non-English-speaking preschool providers can earn college degrees if assistance is available.

ing in the early grades. "Whether they are coming from preschool, a day care center or grandma's house, children are plunged—ready or not—into the same kindergarten classes with teachers who are not familiar with them or their learning experiences," noted a recent report from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Education Commission of the States, "That needs to change."⁶⁷

Research is confirming the importance of employing elementary teachers who understand how young children learn. A 2005 study by researchers from the University of Virginia showed that first-graders who are at risk for problems in school can perform just as well as their peers if they are placed with teachers who are sensitive, supportive, and give children ongoing feedback about their progress—qualities that tend to be present in high-quality early childhood classrooms. But when children with low socioeconomic status or social-emotional troubles don't have this type of classroom environment, they don't do as well as their peers.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, California's approach to teacher credentialing does little to ensure that teachers in the early elemen-

tary grades have a strong understanding of young children's development, or the skills to address the unique needs of children in this age range. Until the 1970s, California had an early childhood teaching credential that prepared teachers to work in grades 3 and below. But it was replaced with a new certificate that allows districts more flexibility in assigning teachers across grade levels. In a 2004 paper Ms. Whitebook and colleagues suggested that that previous early childhood certificate represented "a historical recognition in California that a bachelor's degree and a credential have value for preschool teachers, as they do for K-12 education, and that preschool and the early elementary grades are vitally linked in a continuum of learning and development. Over the past three decades, the loss of this credential has gone hand in hand with a gradual decline in the number of B.A.-level teachers in early care and education programs in California."⁶⁹

Today, elementary teachers in California are required to have the Multiple Subject Teaching Credential, which allows them to teach any grade from kindergarten through eighth grade. Teacher education students are supposed to have field experience in a variety of classroom settings,

including early childhood classrooms, but they may still not have the same understanding of young children's learning as do those who are specially trained to work in early childhood settings.

One salve for this problem is a recently created assessment, required for all new teachers in the state, that places increased attention on the particular needs of young learners, notes Margaret Gaston, the director of the Santa Cruz, Calif.-based Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning. The assessment, known as the Teaching Performance Assessment, tests novice teachers' knowledge of California's Teaching Performance Expectations, which state that teachers need specific skills to work with certain age groups. The expectations state that teachers in grades K-3 are expected to "design academic activities that suit the attention span of young learners. Their instructional activities connect with the children's immediate world; draw on key content from more than one subject area; and include hands-on experiences and manipulatives that help students learn."

Disparities Within the PreK-3rd Continuum

Disparities in the credentials required for preschool and early elementary teachers can create further barriers to improving PreK-3rd alignment, because they send a message that preschool is less educational than the early elementary years. At the same time, elementary school teachers—who often have less training in child development than even preschool teachers with lesser educational credentials—may also lack skills and knowledge necessary to collaborate with early childhood educators to meet young children's needs.

Such disparities exist in most states, but they are particularly striking in California. The state has lower educational requirements for preschool teachers than many other states, but requires prospective elementary and secondary teachers to complete more schooling than many other states require. Most states allow teachers to become certified with a four-year bachelor's degree, but California requires prospective elementary and secondary teachers to complete both a bachelor's degree and an additional year of post-baccalaureate teacher preparation.

This creates yet another disjuncture between the two sectors. Efforts to improve the skills of early childhood educators have tended to focus on helping preschool teachers

earn bachelor's degrees, while discussions of teacher quality at the K-12 level have focused on certification and meeting the No Child Left Behind Act's requirements for teachers to be "highly qualified"—which at the elementary level means having a major in an academic subject area. But in California, completing a bachelor's degree is not enough for preschool teachers to become certified teachers. In order to obtain teacher certification, preschool teachers would need to complete both a bachelor's degree and an additional year of teacher training—a substantial burden for mid-career professionals who are pursuing higher education while working full time.

At the same time, some observers argue that by requiring prospective teachers to complete at least five years of higher education, California dissuades potentially skilled teachers from entering the profession, contributing to teacher shortages and widespread use of "emergency" credentials that allow teachers to enter the classroom with little formal preparation. Not surprisingly, low-income and minority students are the most likely to be taught by teachers with the least preparation and experiences.

Inequitable Distribution

California children with the greatest need for high-quality teachers are, both in preschool and in the elementary school grades, least likely to get them. Although most teachers working in California's State Preschool Program exceed the state's educational requirements,⁷⁰ the low level at which those requirements are set allows for considerable variation in teachers' education levels. Moreover, most young children receiving subsidized care are not in the State Preschool Program or in Head Start, but in other child care settings with less qualified teachers.

"For the lowest-income children, it's the luck of the draw in terms of teacher preparation and background," Ms. Whitebook says. "If they end up in Head Start, it's likely they will have a teacher with a four-year degree or working toward one. If they end up in subsidized license-exempt child care, they will have a provider who is not required to meet any educational or health and safety standards. And, that's just two of the five main options for low-income children who receive subsidized services. It's not rational, equitable, or good for children."

Trends in funding and enrollment have exacerbated these disparities. "The growth has been primarily though the

voucher system,” Ms Whitebook says. “One system has higher quality, but not the system that is growing.”

A 2007 study by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment examined the differences in teacher quality between those centers receiving vouchers and those that receive funding through a contract to offer preschool, either with the state’s education department or Head Start. “The evidence suggests that children of low-income families who attend contracted centers will encounter more ethnically and linguistically diverse teachers, with higher levels of education, and a greater likelihood of being trained to work with dual language learners and/or children with special needs, than will children in centers receiving vouchers,” the study says.⁷¹

Once they enter school, California children who need the most support in order to achieve—those in economically disadvantaged schools—are the least likely to have highly qualified teachers, according to the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning. The group’s research shows that by the time an elementary student reaches sixth grade, those in the lowest-achieving schools are twice as likely as those in the highest-achieving schools to have an “underprepared” teacher. And the odds of having more than one underprepared teacher are 14 times greater for children in low-performing schools than for those in high-performing schools.⁷² “Children are resilient, to a point,” says Ms. Gaston, director of the center.

Once they enter school, California children who need the most support in order to achieve—those in economically disadvantaged schools—are the least likely to have qualified teachers, according to the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning.

These statistics mirror the nationwide trends found by Robert C. Pianta and his colleagues at the University of Virginia, who documented that the quality of the early grades varies widely, not just from school to school, but even classroom to classroom. Their recent paper, appearing in the *Elementary School Journal*, showed that nation-

ally, first-graders who are most at risk for difficulty in school are the least likely to be assigned to what Pianta calls “high-opportunity” classrooms, and are more likely to be in low-quality classrooms with overwhelmed teachers who see barriers to success for their students.⁷³

Facilities

Lack of sufficient facilities is another challenge facing both early childhood and K-12 education in California—but it is also creating new opportunities for collaboration across the two sectors.

California school districts, particularly urban districts, have long struggled with overcrowding and a lack of adequate space to serve a growing student population. In the mid-1990s, the state’s class size reduction initiative, which required thousands of new early elementary classrooms across the state, further exacerbated this challenge.

Lack of appropriate facilities has also been a barrier to improving access to preschool. “A preschool program cannot be offered where there is no space in which to house it,” says the 2007 report *California’s Preschool Space Challenge*, released by the Advancement Project. The study documented how a lack of facilities would hinder efforts to expand pre-K access in the state, whether through a targeted or a universal approach. The report also showed that preschool facilities were least available to poor and minority children, but that the demand for buildings could be met through “thoughtful planning and budgeting” and the “creative use of existing K-12 campus facilities.”⁷⁴

Two years after that report, some experts are calling on state officials to target some of the federal stimulus dollars toward construction. “New families can’t be served until new classrooms are erected,” wrote Berkeley’s Fuller, in an op-ed for the *San Jose Mercury News*.⁷⁵

The state has some programs in place to fund early childhood facilities investments, but they narrowly restrict how providers can use funds and exacerbate divisions between preschool and elementary schools. The Child Care Facilities Revolving Loan Fund, for example, currently funds only modular classrooms for state-contracted early childhood programs on school district property. “If a contractor wants to access the money for something other than a modular, that’s virtually impossible,” explains Maria Raff, who directs the Affordable Buildings for Children’s

Development initiative at the San Francisco-based Low Income Investment. Not all contractors, she adds, need modular buildings and many are not on school property. As a result, a substantial share of funds appropriated for the program—\$93.2 million since 2002—has gone unspent and reverted to the Department of Education for other purposes. The program was recently amended to make more providers eligible, but regulations were never written to fully implement the changes, and the state doesn't have enough staff to administer the an expanded program. Legislative efforts are under way to make the fund more efficient. "It's a gem that if managed right could actually be a great resource," Ms. Raff says.

The state has some programs in place to fund early childhood facilities investments, but they narrowly restrict how providers can use funds and exacerbate divisions between preschool and elementary schools.

Creating additional space for early childhood and PreK-3rd classrooms is one area in which emerging relationships between early childhood advocates and public schools could translate into action. Negotiations are already occurring with the governor's office to include money for building preschool facilities in a 2010 state-wide K-12 school construction bond issue, which would help to simultaneously address both preschool and elementary facilities challenges.

Serving English Learners and Young Hispanic Children

Addressing the needs of California's growing population of English-language-learner students is another challenge facing both preschool providers and public school districts in the state. Nearly one in four students enrolled in the state's public schools is an English-language learner,⁷⁶ and 34 percent of the state's 3- and 4-year-olds speak another language at home.⁷⁷ Experts expect that most young children in state-funded early childhood programs in California will soon be English learners or live with family members who do not speak English. While Spanish is, by a large margin, the most common home language other than English, many other home languages are also repre-

sented in California's schools. Unfortunately, California has struggled to meet the needs of English-language-learner students. These children are underrepresented in preschool programs in the state, there are large achievement gaps for those enrolled in the state's schools, and the state has been embroiled in contentious debates over how best to teach them.

High-quality preschool can be an important tool for narrowing achievement gaps and helping young children build skills in both English and their home languages prior to school entry. Yet research shows that language-minority children are less likely to attend preschool than their peers. Nationally, 58 percent of language-minority children attend preschool the year before kindergarten, compared with 72 percent of non-language-minority children. RAND's research confirms that this is also true in California, where only 48 percent of children from "Spanish-dominant" households—the lion's share of English learners in California—attend preschool programs.⁷⁸ Serving more of these children in high-quality preschool should be an important goal for California, if the state is to improve outcomes for its English-language-learner youngsters.

But one or even two years of preschool is not sufficient to close achievement gaps for language-minority youngsters. Research shows that, while young children often pick up basic conversational English quite quickly, it takes years for children to attain real proficiency in English, at the level fully needed to engage the academic curriculum. This points to the importance of aligned PreK-3rd early learning experiences for English-language-learner students, with teachers using a consistent approach to support children's development in both English and their home language, building to proficiency in both languages by the end of third grade.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, California has been home to contentious battles over how to teach English-language learners, which could interfere with efforts to deliver an aligned consistent approach to English and home language development across the PreK-3rd continuum.

In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 227, an initiative intended to end bilingual education in the state and require most instruction to be conducted in English. Parents, however, are still allowed to request special waiv-

ers if they want their children to receive some instruction in their native language, and many children in fact do receive instruction in their home languages, along with the sheltered English immersion mandated by Proposition 227.

A 2006 study by the education research group WestEd showed that elementary school students at various stages of English-language development have made achievement gains on state tests since Proposition 227's passage. But achievement gaps between English learners and native English speakers have not narrowed. The study also suggested that there is no one best method for teaching English learners, but schools that carefully analyze data and focus on English-language development for all students have found these practices to be successful.⁸⁰

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Proposition 227 does not apply to the state's preschool programs, giving early childhood educators greater freedom in how they educate English-language-learner preschoolers. But this is another area in which differences in policies governing preschool and the K-12 schools create divisions and misalignment between the two systems, undermining educators' ability to take a consistent approach to supporting language development from preschool through third grade.

Research shows that young children, including both English-language learners and native English speakers, are quite capable of learning more than one language at a time. And the young benefit academically if schools and early childhood education programs support development of language and literacy skills in their home language, because the increased fluency actually assists them as they acquire English-language skills. Preschool and early elementary programs that have strong relationships with

parents can communicate the importance of reading, singing, and continuing conversations with young children in their native language. At the same time, preschools and elementary schools serving English learners should build children's vocabulary and literacy skills in English so that they can develop dual literacy by the end of third grade.⁸¹

But many young language-minority children aren't getting the kind of high-quality PreK-3rd early learning experience that would allow them to achieve dual literacy by the end of third grade. Not only are English-language learners less likely to attend preschool, they often attend lower-performing elementary schools and are taught by less-prepared teachers in the elementary grades. Research shows that schools with high concentrations of English learners also struggle to fill teacher vacancies with teachers well qualified to work with these students. These schools often have a higher proportion of new teachers as well as teachers who are not yet fully certified. Experts recommend that districts take more responsibility for helping teachers become highly qualified and that colleges and alternative certification programs make courses on teaching English learners part of the general teacher education curriculum.⁸²

As the number of English-language-learner youngsters in California continues to grow, building the capacity of preschool providers, schools, and districts to effectively serve these students will continue to be an important challenge for the state. Greater cooperation between K-12 and preschool programs can help teachers at both levels better serve children by enabling teachers to share information about the level of language skills children have, the approaches teachers at both levels can use to support children's development of home and English-language skills, and the language support that children will need once they enter public school.

Narrowing Access and Achievement Gaps for Latino Children

More than half of California children under age 8 are Latino,⁸³ and there are large achievement gaps between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students in the state. Only 49 percent of California's Latino fourth-graders achieve proficiency on the state assessment in English language arts, compared with 78 percent of white, non-Hispanic students.⁸⁴

A 2007 report from the National Task Force for Early Childhood Education for Hispanics showed that achieve-

ment gaps between Hispanic children and non-Hispanic children start even before kindergarten: “Overall, the study found that Hispanic children started kindergarten well behind white youngsters on measures of reading and math skills, and that they were still well behind in both subjects at the end of the fifth grade.” Latino children are also much less likely than their non-Latino peers to attend preschool programs before kindergarten.⁸⁵ And they are more likely to attend high-poverty schools and be taught by less experienced teachers.

While there is significant overlap between Latino and English-language-learner students in California, and the two groups face some similar challenges—lack of access to preschool, less access to experienced and credentialed teachers—they are not identical. California policymakers must ensure that educational reform efforts address the needs of English-language learners from a variety of home language backgrounds, and they must also pay special attention to reducing gaps in preschool access and academic achievement for Latino students—both those who are English-language learners and those who aren’t. ❖

Recommendations

A seamless, high-quality PreK-3rd early education system may seem like an unattainable goal for California. The state persistently lags behind the rest of the country in both its K-12 educational outcomes and independent estimations of the quality and reach of its early childhood programs. The relationship between the early childhood field and the K-12 system has often been tense. The 2006 ballot measure to establish universal pre-K, which some groups thought would make California an early education leader in the country, failed. And today an enormous state budget crisis threatens even the flawed early childhood programs and rudimentary infrastructure that the state already has.

Yet in these frustrating times, bright spots illustrate the potential of California’s early education system. The defeat of Proposition 82 has actually sparked improvements that could be more meaningful for the wide variety of providers in the state. California’s education community is indeed in the midst of a new conversation about the role of early childhood education—in its many forms—in preparing children for school and narrowing the state’s persistent achievement gaps. New bridges are being built between early childhood advocates and school reformers. A handful

of school districts are building integrated PreK-3rd early education programs that could become models for other districts and the state. And despite the financial crunch, the state is moving forward, consolidating preschool programs and establishing the groundwork for a quality improvement system for early education programs.

Despite the financial crunch, the state is moving forward, consolidating preschool programs and establishing the groundwork for a quality improvement system for early education programs. These developments create opportunities for California policymakers—even now—to support quality and alignment across the PreK-3rd spectrum, to lay the groundwork for more substantial gains in early education quality and access when the economy rebounds.

These developments create opportunities for California policymakers—even now—to support quality and alignment across the PreK-3rd spectrum, to lay the groundwork for more substantial gains in early education quality and access when the economy rebounds. California policymakers should take the following steps to build a stronger system of PreK-3rd early education:

- 1) **Replicate and scale up models of effective partnerships occurring between local school districts and early childhood education providers, allowing successful local practices to “trickle up” to the state level.** Numerous school districts, counties, and charter schools in California are experimenting with PreK-3rd educational models that improve quality and access in pre-kindergarten programs while strengthening alignment between pre-K and the K-12 education system. State officials could create a Web site to promote local examples and “recommended practices.” Policymakers should also study ways in which the state can encourage and support more PreK-3rd initiatives and meaningful transition activities through grants and professional development.

2) **Create incentives for districts to use Title I funds to build seamless PreK-3rd early education systems** that include high-quality preschool, full-day kindergarten, shared professional development for all PreK-3rd educators, and aligned standards, curriculum, and instructional practices across the PreK-3rd spectrum. Districts in which a large percentage of poor children and English learners are not enrolled in quality preschool programs should be particularly encouraged to use Title I funds for preschool. California school districts receive \$1.6 billion annually in federal Title I funds, and will get another \$1.1 billion in federal stimulus funds for Title I in fiscal years 2009 and 2010. But only a tiny percentage of these funds are used to support preschool programs. More districts have begun using Title I for these purposes in recent years, and California should leverage existing state early childhood dollars by creating incentives for more districts to spend Title I funds on pre-K. Even districts that cannot afford to significantly expand preschool access can work toward creating seamless PreK-3rd experiences for children by investing in shared professional development for teachers in both district elementary schools and community-based early childhood settings or helping community-based providers implement common preschool curricula aligned with the district's early elementary grades.

3) **Study and develop alternative funding mechanisms to ensure that pre-K spending is adequate, stable, and in line with overall K-12 spending levels.** The budget situation in California has highlighted the shortcomings in its school finance system and added new urgency to calls to address them. Any effort to substantially reform the system of education finance must include pre-kindergarten programs as a core component of the state's educational system, on par with K-12 education, and ensure equitable, adequate, and stable funding for early education. Bringing pre-kindergarten funding into the same school finance system that funds K-12 education is an important step toward building a seamless PreK-3rd system in California.

4) **Implement a comprehensive early childhood data system that is fully integrated with the**

state's longitudinal student data system for public schools and leads to improved support and outcomes for students in PreK-3rd. California has taken crucial steps toward implementing a system that collects comprehensive data on children's early learning experiences and links that information with K-12 data, making it possible to track individual children's progress from early childhood through high school graduation. The state must maintain its commitment and move forward to fully implement these systems. The state must also ensure that policymakers and educators can use this data to improve practice and program quality, build connections and strengthen alignment, and improve children's PreK-3rd outcomes.

5) **Engage families, providers, policymakers and the media in efforts to improve California's recently consolidated State Preschool Program as a foundation for a seamless PreK-3rd system statewide.** Previously, the presence of several different funding streams providing early education to California's low-income children led to confusion among parents, providers, and policymakers in the state, and made it difficult to align state-funded early childhood programs with one another or with the public schools that served children after preschool. Now consolidated, California's State Preschool Program has become one of the largest state-funded pre-K programs in the country. State officials should actively educate key stakeholders about the newly consolidated program and engage them in efforts to improve preschool quality and strengthen alignment between preschool and the elementary grades. Because this program is already located within the Department of Education, state officials have an opportunity to improve integration and alignment between state-level early childhood and elementary programs and policies. State officials must show leadership to advance PreK-3rd alignment and reforms in California.

6) **Ensure that providers participating in the State Preschool Program receive per-pupil payments that are at least competitive with those provided through the Alternative Payment (child care vouchers) program.** In many counties, early childhood providers receive less per-child to offer the

State Preschool Program than they would through childcare vouchers. California policymakers should correct this inequity by reimbursing contracted centers participating in the State Preschool Program at rates that are at least competitive with the Regional Market Rates currently used in the state's child care voucher program. Ideally, providers offering higher quality programs should receive higher reimbursement rates.

7) **Establish a PreK-3rd teaching credential.** The existing Multiple Subject Teaching Credential does too little to prepare teachers to meet the unique needs of younger elementary school students. California's five-year teacher credentialing is prohibitively time-consuming for early educators in community-based programs who wish to become certified teachers. To address these problems, the state should replace the Multiple Subject credential for teachers in the early grades with a new PreK-3rd credential based on research about child development and what teachers of young children need to know and be able to do. Prospective teachers should be able to earn this new credential through either a four-year undergraduate program or an alternate route. The state should create incentives and supports for pre-K teachers to obtain the credential, and should require it for newly hired teachers in grades K-3. Existing early elementary teachers who hold a Multiple Subject credential should be provided opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to teach young children via performance-based assessments. This new PreK-3rd credential would raise standards for pre-K teachers, strengthen early elementary school teachers' knowledge and skills to work with young children, and allow Multiple Subject credential programs to focus more closely on the skills teachers need to work in the later elementary grades.

8) **Allow some outstanding community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and a PreK-3rd teaching credential.** California's community colleges are a critical tool for raising the educational credentials of the state's early childhood workforce. But with half of all Head Start teachers required to earn a bachelor's degree by 2013, and advocates seeking to raise the

credentials of teachers in state-funded pre-K programs, demand for programs that enable current preschool teachers to earn bachelor's degrees will increase. California policymakers should consider allowing some community colleges—those with a strong track record in preparing early childhood educators—to begin offering bachelor's degrees in early childhood education. These programs and their graduates should be rigorously evaluated to ensure the courses are producing high-quality early childhood educators, and if they are effective, the programs should be made permanent and expanded to other community colleges and teacher credentials.

9) **Use data to identify schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism in pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades, and target these schools for interventions to reduce early absenteeism.** Research shows that chronic absenteeism in the early grades is a strong leading indicator for later school failure. California is one of a few states that bases school funding on average daily attendance instead of taking an enrollment count once or twice a year. The state should use this data to examine attendance by grade level, identify schools with high rates of early absenteeism, and require school districts to implement interventions—such as parent education and social worker visits to student homes—aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism in the early grades.

10) **Implement a voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System that rewards early childhood programs with higher reimbursement rates if they reach higher levels of quality.** Because such a system would require new investment in infrastructure to support quality improvement, it, may be some time before the state has resources available to implement such a program. In the meantime, however, state officials should continue to support the Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee's effort to build the groundwork for this system. The Advisory Committee should ensure that the state's move toward QRIS is informed by lessons learned in other states, provides for the inclusion of family child care providers as well as centers, and encourages participation by license-exempt providers.

11) **Build capacity of preschool providers, elementary schools, and districts to meet the needs of English-language-learner students and to implement consistent strategies to develop children’s skills in both English and their home language throughout the PreK-3rd continuum.** Research suggests that the debates over how to teach English-language-learner students, which have consumed so much energy in California, are less important to student outcomes than building the capacity of schools and early childhood providers to support children’s language development. Unfortunately, too many California schools currently come up short on that front. Education leaders should also work to strengthen connections between elementary schools and preschool programs serving young English-language learners, so teachers in the primary grades can gain better knowledge about the literacy skills of children entering their classrooms, and preschool teachers have a better idea of what children need to know in kindergarten and the supports available to them there. School districts should seek out bilingual parents or community members who can serve as liaisons between schools, preschool providers, and families to strengthen collaboration and build awareness of the importance of supporting young children’s language development in both their home language and English.

12) **Implement strategies to specifically address the underrepresentation of young Hispanic children in high-quality preschool programs.** Identify cultural, linguistic, geographic, and information barriers that currently prevent Latino families from accessing pre-kindergarten services. Partner with Latino advocacy organizations to support outreach campaigns to low-income Latino communities. Increase efforts to improve quality in non-Title 5 programs and family child care homes serving Latino communities.

13) **Develop and implement a state-level strategy to address early childhood facilities needs.** Future school construction bond issues should include funding for preschool facilities, especially those that are part of integrated PreK-3rd early learning programs. To facilitate this, the state should conduct a thorough analysis of licensed preschool facilities and identify areas of the state where the demand for classroom space is the greatest. The state should also work to improve the Child Care Facilities Revolving Loan Fund so that more providers can take advantage of this program and so that it encourages preschool providers and school districts to implement models of co-location that facilitate greater engagement between preschool and early elementary educators and students, rather than segregating preschoolers in separate modular facilities. ❖

Interviews Conducted

W. Steven Barnett, director, National Institute for Early Education Research

Gabriela Chavarria, director of child development and primary programs, Hacienda La Puente Unified School District

Rory Darrah, consultant, former director of early care and education for First 5 Alameda

Bruce Fuller, professor, University of California, Berkeley

Carmen Garcia-Gomez, school readiness coordinator, First 5 Sacramento

Margaret Gaston, president and executive director, Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning

David W. Gordon, superintendent, Sacramento County Office of Education

Elizabeth Gutierrez, director, Education Opportunities, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund

Karen Hill-Scott, founder and president, Karen Hill-Scott and Company

Arron Jiron, program officer, David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Elizabeth Laird, program manager, Data Quality Campaign

Camille Maben, director, Child Development Division, California Department of Education

Gary Mangiofico, CEO, Los Angeles Universal Preschool

Ofelia Medina, education project coordinator, Alliance for a Better Community

Scott Moore, senior policy adviser, Preschool California

Molly Munger, co-founder and co-director, Advancement Project

Carol Nicoli, past president, California Kindergarten Association

Kris Perry, director, First 5 California

Robert Pianta, dean of education, University of Virginia

Maria Raff, director, Affordable Buildings for Children's Development, Low Income Investment Fund

Carrie Roberts, Consultant, California Department of Education

Lois Salisbury, director, Children, Families, and Communities Program, David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Brad Strong, education director, Children Now

Ginger Swigart, president, California Association for the Education of Young Children

Glen Thomas, California Secretary of Education

Marcy Whitebook, director, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

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