

designing options for California's young children

Core Principles to Guide Children's Policy THE PROBLEMS FACING FAMILIES



KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS

- A fresh policy opportunity.
- Defining key dimensions of the early care and education problem.
- Building policy from core principles.
 - Help families nurture newborns
 - Balance investments across infants, toddlers, preschoolers
 - Enrich quality
 - Accommodate irregular work schedules
 - Create a simple data system
 - Support vulnerable children
- From principles to policy
 - Widen children's access
 - Lift quality
 - Sharpen state and local responsibilities
 - Implement from long-term reform goals



BERKELEY
EARLY CHILDHOOD
THINK TANK

The Vitality of California's Families – CLARIFYING BARRIERS, CRAFTING SOUND POLICY

California policy makers – at state and local levels of government – have long invested in the well-being and early learning of young children. But only a fraction of families with children under 5 benefit from quality care and early education, even though the majority of young parents must work outside the home.¹

Child care is unaffordable for many families. Parents find limited information about options and confusing eligibility rules for public support. The quality of child care and pre-k settings – necessary to lift children's early learning – remains highly variable. This brief details these problems that parents confront. Then, we articulate core principles that might guide sound and comprehensive policy strategies to address the problems.

The early-childhood field manifests diverse interests – care for infants and toddlers, pre-k programs, children with special needs, advancing the status and working conditions of teachers. Too often, the field and policy makers focus on one narrow issue to the detriment of other parts of this patchwork quilt.

Instead, this brief identifies core problems and offers key principles that can guide comprehensive policy fixes. This brief begins by detailing intertwined challenges facing parents and fundamental tenets that inform sound policy options. We hope to foster a consensus over bold policy reforms that move the field toward agreed upon long-term goals.

IT CAN BE DONE

Policy makers and ECE advocates have made strong progress, going back to the second world war, as state and local agencies began extending access to child care and preschool options. Nearly two-thirds of California's 4-year-olds now attend a pre-k program, although often limited in quality or half-day in duration. State and federal agencies currently invest almost \$5 billion in California annually to provide child care and preschool to hundreds of thousands of young children.

Still, very few 3-year-olds attend quality pre-k statewide. Home visiting efforts can aid parents otherwise isolated. Middle-class parents are required to pay about \$1,900 per month on average for care in California, driving many out of the labor force, discovering their child-care bill exceeds their paycheck.

**Just one in eight families
raising an infant or toddler
can find any licensed center.**

Many children from middle-class homes experience low-quality care when their parents can't afford high fees, yet earn too much to qualify for public programs.²

The past half-century of research details the buoyant benefits of quality pre-k, especially for children raised in low-income households.³ Many middle-class families face the lowest quality of care, not qualifying for public programs, while earning only enough to pay low tuition at struggling preschools.

One-fifth of California's children are raised in poverty.⁴ Almost 35,000 newborns arrive with low birth weight yearly, many whose mothers receive no prenatal care.⁵ Even healthy infants and toddlers raised in poverty often lag behind better-off peers in cognitive agility and language skills before they start school.⁶

DISSECTING PIECES OF THE PROBLEM

Let's be clear on elements of the problem, the stumbling blocks that parents face as they search for affordable, high-quality care or preschool:

- *Job pressures compete with quality time for children.* Given the necessity of both parents laboring for wages, many lack time with their newborns and toddlers. About two-fifths of California workers labor during odd hours or face shifting schedules each week.
- *Scarce access to quality care and pre-k.* Just one in eight parents raising an infant or toddler can find a licensed care setting statewide, even though 60 percent of these families include two wage-earners. Parents raising a preschooler face one-in-two odds of finding a licensed program.
- *A confusing maze of options.* Most parents rely on informal advice from kin or friends when selecting child

SUMMARY

- *Fresh policy opportunity.* California families may enjoy a rare opening to gain affordable, high-quality child care and preschool options. Arrival of a new governor, matched with a family-friendly legislature, sets the stage for policy advances.
- *Defining the problem.* Smart policy must lower major barriers faced by parents with young children. This brief highlights how job pressures crowd-out sufficient time to nurture a newborn; scarce and unequal access to high-quality care and pre-k; a confusing maze of options with thin consumer information.
- *Policy built from core principles.* Early care and education advocates and researchers generally agree on firm principles that can guide policy making. Rising public investment should be balanced between infant and toddler care with access to affordable and high-quality preschool.
- *Quality gaps.* The quality of care providers varies widely. Much is known empirically about how to best enrich the quality of care settings. This will require sustained investment in better preparing the early education workforce.
- *Entry into the local child care world must be simple.* Parents now confront confusing (and multiple) rules for gaining public support, uneven data on quality differences, and long waiting lists. California has long funded a constellation of 'resource and referral' agencies locally.
- *Define state and local responsibilities.* Sacramento's role should be clarified, focusing on (1) raising and unifying quality standards, (2) tracking progress toward explicit enrollment goals, (3) simplifying funding streams and state management, and (4) tracking children's progress through a simple data system.

care, despite civic efforts to provide richer information about quality differences. Low-income parents must navigate among at least four major child-care or pre-k programs, each with differing eligibility rules. Some lose their child care when income rises, a gruesome distortion of incentives.⁷

- *Differing quality standards.* Quality indicators – teacher preparation, ongoing training, and wages – vary dramatically among programs and locales. Transitional Kindergarten (TK) requires a credentialed teacher, while teachers at a nearby center may just have completed a small count of college courses. Child-care vouchers support care by a family member, friend, or neighbor, provided they pass a criminal background check.



- *Insufficient, unstable funding.* Financing for young children and families has fluctuated wildly in recent decades, as business cycles or state priorities ride a fiscal roller-coaster. This confuses parents, spurs teacher turnover, and sustains uneven quality.
- *Underpaid caregivers and teachers.* Many care providers and teachers do not earn a liveable wage. Public aid and parent fees just don't provide sufficient revenue to pay humane wages for many caregivers. This diminishes professional growth and contributes to high rates of staff turnover.

CHILDREN'S VITALITY SHOULDN'T DEPEND ON WHERE FAMILIES LIVE

Counties and neighborhoods vary dramatically in their capacity and political will to invest in young children and support working families. The odds of even finding affordable care or pre-k depend on the zipcode in which parents reside.

Many counties – enjoying a stronger tax base and effective children's advocates – have succeeded in expanding access to a larger share of preschoolers.

Intervening earlier in the lives of young children can help narrow early learning gaps

Meanwhile, less affluent counties and neighborhoods – many situated in the Central Valley – possess less fiscal and political capacity to expand access or improve the quality of care and pre-k settings.⁸

Some local leaders rightfully focus on lifting quality, or improving the balance between infant, toddler, and pre-school options. In other counties, advocates and municipal leaders center their efforts on widening access to affordable care and pre-k.

TRACKING CHILDREN'S PROGRESS

California lacks a uniform way of gauging young children's preliteracy and social skills as they approach kindergarten. We know empirically that intervening earlier in the lives of young children can help narrow early gaps in learning – rather than applying bandaids later in school. Yet, California has no method for assessing kids' varying levels of growth as they begin school. Recent efforts in San Diego and Santa Clara counties do show how young children can be integrated into the state's CALPADS data to track progress and identify what pre-k models work.⁹

Overall, families face the *interwoven* problems of scarce child-care and pre-k options that offer affordability and high quality. As leaders in the field and policy makers consider a larger investment, we might set five-year targets for enrollment rates and quality markers – for all children under 5 years of age – that address the intertwined challenges faced by parents and early educators.



Policy makers and advocates often opt to pick-off one problem at a time: let's award child-care vouchers to support welfare to work; extend paid family leave for parents of newborns, but ignore the scarcity of ongoing infant-toddler care; widen access to care options that turn out to be of uneven quality.



Instead, the ECE community should agree to core principles that guide comprehensive policy fixes – building toward a continuum of family supports from prenatal care to quality pre-k and full-day kindergarten. Piecemeal policies and fragmented funding streams encourage competition rather than cooperation among players in the field.

A CONSENSUS ON PRINCIPLES – BUILDING COHERENT SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Let's start with core principles upon which we can all agree. Then, let's think big and long term, defining mindful policy steps that move us toward our shared North Star – providing equal family access to affordable and high-quality care and pre-k options.

In this spirit, the Berkeley Think Tank proposes these core principles – shared commitments that can guide the formation of specific policies.

- *Help families nurture newborns.* State policy and employers should help parents bond with and dedicate quality time to infants. Home visiting can further aid isolated parents.
- *Balance public investment for infant-toddlers and preschoolers.* The bulk of current state spending focuses on preschool and TK programs. Yet, evidence shows that children's health and cognitive trajectories, along with social skills, are taking firm shape by age 3.
- *Enrich quality options.* Parents should continue to choose their preferred setting – center, school, or home-based environs – for their child. At the same time, low-quality

settings place children at risk. Public agencies and professional groups must ensure that every setting affords safety, developmentally rich learning activities, and robust growth for children. All providers should benefit from coaching and inservice training to advance their capacity.

- *Entry to these options must be simple, affordable, and accommodate irregular work schedules.* The myriad variety of state and local funding streams for ECE programs makes it difficult for parents to navigate this complex system.
- *Define state and local roles and priority tasks.* The state education department directly contracts with thousands of local school districts and nonprofits to run care and pre-k programs. In contrast, TK is run by local districts (while excluding community providers).

The legislature and governor could emphasize the state's role in defining quality standards, setting enrollment goals (for infants, toddlers, preschoolers), then track progress. The state should continue to experiment with local flexibility and build management capacity locally.¹⁰

- *Create uniform data for tracking children's progress.* California policy makers have no way of gauging returns to their nearly \$5 billion yearly investment in young children.¹¹ Counties have conducted sound evaluations to determine where their resources are benefitting children and where they are not.¹²



- *Build a linguistically and culturally diverse workforce.* We know that cultural consonance between child and teacher can advance early learning. Yet, our early care workforce does not match the rich language skills and social competencies found among California's diverse families.
- *Move along an implementation plan.* A simple blueprint for an easily accessed system should drive specific goals

for equalizing access, ensuring affordability, and raising the quality of teachers and allied caregivers. A multi-year plan should guide implementation, specifying annual implementation steps and keeping long-term goals front and center.

- *Support our most vulnerable children.* The state must first protect at-risk children. Then, state and local

programs must backstop the economic and social vitality of true middle-class families.

These core principles should guide the crafting of sound policy. Let's turn to how this can be done, scaffolding from the field's basic commitments. Evidence on the likely benefits and comparative costs also can help weigh the pluses and minuses of policy options.

MOVING FROM PRINCIPLES TO POLICY

These core principles emphasize building a simple-to-access set of child care and pre-k options, which are affordable, high-quality, and sustained by stable financing. Our mixed-delivery system – including centers and home-based arrangements – should serve children from birth to 5 years of age. Programs may be housed in schools or non-profit agencies.

Building a coherent and high-quality network of options should be guided by a blueprint that sets specific targets over the coming four or five years. Leaders in the field might agree on these essential foundations and avoid expanding one part of the system at the expense of another part.

The ECE implementation blueprint might begin with three elements, building from our core principles –

- **Access.** The state could establish enrollment rate benchmarks, ramping-up participation of infants, toddlers, along with 3 and 4 year-olds in quality settings. These settings could include the newborn's own home (paid family leave), homes of family, friends or neighbors (via alternative payments), licensed homes, and centers with credentialed teachers.

The state could establish enrollment rate targets for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

- **Affordability.** The state should continue to establish family income levels below which public subsidy is guaranteed with flexibility granted to counties. Target enrollment rates for children from low-income families should be set for the coming four to five years, including for paid leave, and infant and toddler programs. Sliding fee schedules should be preserved to help first enroll those children who benefit most from ECE, those from low-income families.

- **Quality.** First, the state should develop a data system to track children's progress. Second, it should unify quality standards for home and center-based programs. The state blueprint might bring together education and social service departments to arrive at uniform quality standards, including preparation of caregivers and teachers.



- **Governance.** The blueprint might nudge education and social service departments in Sacramento to (a) clarify their respective roles in ensuring the quality of caregivers and centers, (b) consolidate or coordinate their funding streams to local counties and providers, (c) track progress on enrollment and quality indicators, and (d) report on children's early learning and developmental gains across all child care and pre-k settings. Local providers must be held accountable for results as the state and private financing enriches the capacity of centers and home-based providers.

CONCLUSIONS - PRINCIPLED PILLARS OF REFORM

California faces a fresh opening to ensure quality care and early learning for young children. Wise policy must build from the state's existing investment – yet create a simple network for parents to locate affordable care and feel secure with their care provider. This brief has pinpointed barriers that families face and specified the principles on which bold policy can be built.

Members of the Berkeley panel include Catherine Atkin, Erin Gabel, Angie Garling, Rebecca Gomez, Scott Moore, Kim Patillo Brownson, Karla Pleitez Howell, Patricia Lozano, Sarah Neville-Morgan, Michael Olenick, Chris Steinhauer, Gerry Shelton, Pete Weldy, and Lisa Wilkin. Panel members have discussed and helped craft the ideas presented in this brief. The authors are responsible for the content, along with any errors or misinterpretations. Special thanks go to the Heising-Simons Foundation for their steady support.



We emphasize the importance of setting long-term goals for affordable and high-quality care and preschool, then moving steadily toward our North Star aspirations. These core principles would ensure the careful implementation of high-quality options for California parents, from supporting family, friends and neighborhoods, to more slots in pre-k centers.

Young parents experience widely differing, often uncertain work schedules week to week. Many face an unrelenting economic squeeze. So, the state's early care and education network must be flexible, while pressing for high quality and palpable results for young children. This means that state and local policy makers must legislate wisely, advancing elements of quality that pay-off for young children, implementing reform carefully (learning about what works over time), and committing to stable financing.

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THE BERKELEY THINK TANK ON EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY

Policy thinkers and seasoned practitioners have come together to delineate feasible policy options for equalizing access to quality child care and pre-k. Scholars at Berkeley's Institute of Human Development facilitate deliberations of the 17-member Think Tank panel.

The panel aims to synthesize key pieces of evidence regarding demographic trends, enrollment in extant programs, and dimensions of quality that elevate children's early growth and learning. Then, we put forward realistic policy options, estimate costs, and focus on trade-offs – based on core principles and always thinking long term. Broad consensus among stakeholders is required to boldly move forward. Our North Star shines bright: seeking to build an easily accessed set of quality early-childhood options for California's families.

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ENDNOTES

1 An earlier brief from the Berkeley Think Tank details low and varying enrollment rates among California counties for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Online: <https://news.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/UC-AIR-Pre-K-Scarcity-Report.pdf>.

2 For breakdowns of quality levels by family income – on pre-k centers and family child-care homes – see Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland & Yoshikawa (2017). *Cradle to Kindergarten: A new plan to combat inequality*. New York: Russell Sage.

3 Specific enrollment rates by county are detailed in the Think Tank's brief: <https://news.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/UC-AIR-Pre-K-Scarcity-Report.pdf>.

4 Data on child poverty trends for California appear in: Bohn, Danielson, & Thorman (2017). *Child poverty in California*, October 2017. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. Online: <http://www.ppic.org/publication/child-poverty-in-california/>.

5 Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation. Online: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#CA/2/0/char/b..>

6 Poor black and Latino children remain at high risk of lower cognitive functioning (independent of language) by 3 years-of-age, compared with middle-class peers (e.g., Fuller, Bein, Kim & Rabe-Hesketh, 2015).

7 Zero to Three (2019). Infographic on from whom parents glean information about child care options. <https://goo.gl/AGnHzX>.

8 Early QRIS scores across counties were reported by Collier, M. (2016). Thousands of early ed programs receive first quality ratings. *Ed Source*, March 6. Online: <https://edsourse.org/2016/thousands-of-california-early-ed-programs-receive-first-quality-ratings/95501>. Berkeley researchers have reported on variability in quality among centers and neighborhoods. See: Bridges (2018). Gauging growth: Assessing the benefits of preschool dosage and quality in Santa Clara County. Santa Clara: First 5. Also,

Fuller, Kagan, Loeb, & Chang (2004). *Child care quality: Center and home settings that serve poor families*.

9 See, for example, the First 5 Santa Clara project in Bridges et al. (2018), and similar efforts in San Diego County.

10 Legislation has awarded flexible discretion to 14 counties in adjusting family eligibility rules and allocating dollars among programs. San Diego County, for instance, moves dollars from under-subscribed programs to those with long waiting lists, ensuring efficient use of funding allocated from Sacramento.

11 This estimate in annual spending includes state and local programs, paid family leave (entirely financed by workers), federal Head Start, and parental fees paid for care or preschool. It excludes child health costs.

12 Mindful data development could identify what inputs and facets of quality payoff most for children, where money is wasted, and ease the regulatory burden of licensing and inspection of local providers.