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# Governance Brief

## The Preschool Landscape in California and Strategies for Expansion

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### Introduction

Governor Gavin Newsom has signaled a strong commitment to whole-child, lifelong learning as foundational to the “California Promise”—his cradle-to-career proposal to address inequitable educational outcomes that disproportionately affect low-income students and students of color. This commitment by state leaders reflects the growing evidence that high-quality early childhood education is a critical factor in later school performance, and specifically as a powerful tool to decrease opportunity gaps.<sup>1</sup>

CSBA’s first brief in this series, “[The Importance of Early Childhood Education Programs](#),” provided an overview of early childhood education programs in California, which include transitional kindergarten (TK), the California State Preschool Program, Title I-funded preschool programs, private preschool programs that serve three- to four-year-old children, Head Start, and general child care and development programs. This brief focuses specifically on California’s public preschool programs serving three- to four-year-old children, including guidance for districts and county offices of education to expand access to high-quality preschool programs.

### Options for Public Preschool Programs

Public preschool programs serving three- to four-year-old children in California are supported largely by three programs:

- » **The California State Preschool Program (CSPP).** Available to children from families whose income is at or below 85 percent of the California State median income (\$80,623 for a family of four in the 2019–20 school year),<sup>2</sup> to children experiencing homelessness, or to children receiving child protective services or that have been identified as being or at risk of being abused, neglected, or exploited.<sup>3</sup> It is administered by

### In this brief you will find:

- » An overview of preschool program funding options in California;
- » Evidence for the need to expand access to preschool programs;
- » Opportunities presented by California’s 2019–20 budget;
- » A review of strategies to strengthen and expand district preschool programs;
- » Case studies of districts or county offices of education that have invested in preschool programs; and
- » Questions for board members to consider.

multiple types of providers, including colleges, community-action agencies, private nonprofit agencies,<sup>4</sup> and local educational agencies (LEAs).

- » **Head Start.** A federal program that serves families with incomes under the federal poverty line (\$25,750 for a family of four in 2019).<sup>5</sup> While not purely a preschool program, it provides preschool and nutrition services for children and support services for their families. It is administered by a variety of local agencies, including school districts and county offices of education.
- » **Title I, Part A Preschool Programs.** Title I funds are allocated from the federal government to districts based on their enrollment of low-income children. Title I, Part

A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) encourages the use of these funds for preschool programs, which can be a schoolwide program or a districtwide program for eligible children.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond these three, there are additional pockets of funding, including programs to support low-income working families to obtain childcare (e.g. general childcare and development programs) and specialized care for children eligible for special education services.

**Transitional Kindergarten (TK).** This program is the first year of a two-year kindergarten program that uses age-appropriate curricula aligned with state standards. It has no income requirements and serves children who turn five between September 2 and December 2 within the school year. Districts can also expand services to children who turn five after the December 2 cutoff through expanded TK programs. While not specifically part of preschool, TK can be an important bridge between preschool and kindergarten.

## The Need for Expanding Preschool

A recent report by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) found that only 35 percent of three-year-old children and 56 percent of four-year-old children were enrolled in either a private or public preschool.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, access and enrollment reflect equity disparities that mirror (and are likely precursors) to academic achievement gaps later in school. For instance, only 39 percent of preschool-aged children that live at or near poverty enroll, compared to 42 percent of wealthier children; and only 42 percent of children of color enroll, compared to 55 percent of White children.<sup>8</sup>

Income requirements for preschool programs also disguise the massive need for care, particularly in the state's higher cost-of-living communities, where household incomes exceed eligibility cutoffs. However, changes that took effect on July 1, 2019, updated eligibility requirements from 70 percent of the California State median income to 85 percent. In addition, language in the 2019–20 California State Budget allows some CSPP programs to expand access to non-income eligible children, once all eligible children are enrolled. Programs eligible for this expanded access must be in a school attendance area that enrolls 80 percent or more students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Adding urgency to this gap in opportunity is the mounting evidence that quality preschool programs have a positive impact on student outcomes. A 2019 report by the Learning

Policy Institute highlighted strong evidence that quality preschool programs have a positive impact on the school readiness of students and, in late elementary and middle school, a positive impact on grade retention and fewer special education placements. Moreover, the report also summarizes promising evidence that preschool can lead to improved social-emotional and behavioral outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

## Opportunities in California's 2019–20 Budget

California's 2019–20 budget provides several opportunities for LEAs seeking to expand preschool programs. These include:

- » **Funding to Expand Access to the CSPP.** Provides a total of \$1.5 billion for the CSPP, including \$980.6 million for part-day and \$500.4 million for full-day preschool. This includes an increase of \$27 million in ongoing funding for 2,959 full-day slots to LEAs (which were provided as part of the 2018–19 budget and took effect April 1, 2019), and \$31.4 million ongoing funding to increase the number of non-LEA full-day slots by 10,000 (commencing April 1, 2020).
- » **Updated CSPP Eligibility Criteria.** Changes to eligibility provide priority access to full-day slots to income eligible families with a need for full-day care (parents who are working or in school), with the remaining slots available for other income eligible families. In addition, programs operating in a public school attendance area where at least 80 percent of enrolled students qualify for free or reduced-price meals may enroll four-year-old children who reside within the attendance area but do not meet the income eligibility requirements, provided all income eligible students are enrolled.
- » **Special Education Early Intervention Preschool Grants.** Provides \$492.7 million for Special Education Early Intervention Preschool grants. Funding is to be provided to LEAs based on the number of three- to five-year-old children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) who are not enrolled in TK or kindergarten.<sup>10</sup>

The Governor's 2020-21 budget proposal affirms the administration's goal "that all children, regardless of income, have access to a high-quality preschool program before they begin kindergarten." The budget proposes funding for an additional 10,000 CSPP slots at non-LEAs. In addition, if the \$15 billion Public Preschool, K-12, and College Health and Safety Bond Act of 2020 is approved on the March 3, 2020 ballot, the budget includes a proposal for the State Allocation Board to provide a grant enhancement to LEAs planning to construct or modernize facilities to expand preschool programs on school sites. CSBA will

continue to stay engaged as these proposals move forward in the Legislature, with the final 2020-21 budget expected to be enacted in the summer.

## District Preschool Expansion Strategies

Districts across the state are challenged by operating budgets that have just recovered to their pre-Great Recession levels, and now face increasing fiscal obligations from employee pension debts and medical benefits, aging facilities, and calls for increased teacher wages. While the data clearly demonstrates that high-quality early learning positively impacts the academic success of students, California schools and districts still struggle to invest in and expand early learning programs. Strategies to meet the demand for quality, and ideally, full-day early learning, require creative and strategic use of federal, state, and local resources.

The role of districts can also vary, depending on the resources and programs provided by city, county, and external (private and nonprofit) preschool providers. While in some communities, the district is the main provider of preschool services, in others, the district works alongside external providers, including nonprofits, private providers, city and county government, and county offices of education to connect families to existing programs and provide resources, such as facilities, that can expand access.

The following are some strategies that districts have employed to expand access to preschool in their communities, including examples from districts and county offices of education from across California.

### *Allocate Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) Funds*

One of the goals of the LCFF is to encourage the exploration of new, comprehensive approaches to support high-need students, and address opportunity and achievement gaps. Recent research on achievement gaps suggests that for students that are already “behind” in second and third grade, even districts with more resources or effective strategies are unable to close these gaps at scale.<sup>11</sup> Some districts are taking this reality to heart and allocating targeted and concentration dollars to expand existing preschool programs.

### *Blend Public Funding*

In order to provide full-day early learning programs, some districts have leveraged Title I, Part A preschool funding to support programs in the morning, and CSPP funds

to support the subsequent afternoon hours.<sup>12</sup> Other districts have used capacity-building funds (e.g. Title I set-asides) to fund professional learning for early learning and elementary teachers to ensure quality and alignment. Districts that are pursuing blended-funding strategies, however, should be aware of the political savvy, administrative creativity, and complexity that is required to develop coordinated approaches. Creating and sustaining a seamless and stable program for children and families means that district staff must anticipate and adhere to the various (and sometimes conflicting) requirements of diverse funding streams.

### *Establish local partnerships*

Districts often cannot take on early learning alone, and there are many models and approaches to guide partnership. Community partners and resources (e.g. city, county, other public agencies, and nonprofit organizations) can be a major asset to LEAs interested in expanding and strengthening early learning programming. County offices of education and First 5 offices are invaluable resources for regional partnerships, supporting innovation, and ensuring effectiveness through quality-ratings assessments and professional learning. For LEAs that are unable to provide early learning programs themselves, engaging private and nonprofit providers can support kindergarten readiness for students and their families alike. Other nonprofit and community-based organizations, including faith-based organizations, are also important resources to raise awareness about the importance of early learning and promote strategies to support learning within the home.

## Cost Savings of Quality Preschool

In its 2019 report, *Untangling the Evidence on Preschool Effectiveness*, the Learning Policy Institute summarizes several of the analyses that point to a significant return on investment for preschool programs.<sup>13</sup> These estimates range from \$2 for every \$1 invested<sup>14</sup> to \$17 for every \$1 invested.<sup>15</sup> As district leaders balance competing priorities and budget constraints, this evidence makes a strong case that, on top of the benefits to student outcomes, preschool programs can be cost efficient when considering the savings that come from serving students effectively in the earlier grades as opposed to waiting until challenges are more pronounced.

## Examples of Districts Expanding Access to Preschool

The expansion strategies discussed in the previous section have been employed by many school districts across the state. This section highlights several district examples to provide insight into the variety of approaches districts are using to improve access to preschool education.

**Alum Rock Union Elementary School District** / Located in Santa Clara County. Serves 11,270 kindergarten to eighth-grade students, of whom 81 percent are economically disadvantaged and 41 percent are English learners.

Given the lack of access to preschool programs due to the high cost of living, the district turned to Kidango—a strong early learning provider in the community—and Santa Clara County. Through this partnership, they leveraged the county’s mental health and prevention funding sources to pilot a preschool program targeting families who did not qualify for state- and federal-funded preschool. The resulting preschool, located at Painter Elementary, serves three- and four-year-old children, and allows Kidango to offer more childcare slots to younger children and toddlers, thereby serving a larger proportion of the community.

*“Districts that serve high numbers of lower income and English learner students must include early learning as part of the services they provide. Without that foundation, it is nearly impossible to achieve academic success through any of our other initiatives.”*

– Dr. Linda Bauer, Superintendent at Alum Rock Union ESD

**Mountain View Whisman School District** / Located in Santa Clara County. Serves 5,132 kindergarten to eighth-grade students, of whom 34 percent are economically disadvantaged and 24 percent are English learners.

The district has offered preschool programs with state preschool funding since 1980 and has since expanded its programs across three school sites. The district also partners with the Santa Clara County Office of Education to serve as a Head Start site. To meet local needs (specifically for families who do not qualify for state preschool slots but are unable to afford private early education options), the district offers free and low-cost preschool, with a combination of state-funded and fee-based programs. The district also holds professional learning as a primary investment in its programs. This is

done thanks to a partnership with the Local Early Learning and Planning Council, the county’s California Preschool Instructional Network, First 5, and their participation in the Quality Ratings Improvement System.

*“For school districts to have robust early learning programs, they should be mindful that there should be a strong financial, staffing, and facilities commitment. High-quality programs can’t be sustained by state or federal early education funding alone. Districts have to be open minded and creative in how to make that happen.”*

– Terri Wallace, Preschool Programs Director at Mountain View Whisman SD

**Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified School District** / Located in Tulare County. Serves 4,125 kindergarten to 12th-grade students, of whom 95 percent are economically disadvantaged and 44 percent are English learners.

The district set the goal to offer preschool to all age-eligible students, especially given that most of the children come from working-class parents employed by the nearby farms, fields, and packing houses and have limited exposure to an English-language rich vocabulary at home. Access was a challenge to both income-eligible families given their need for a full-day program along with other families that were also just above the income cap. In response, the district now offers preschool to all students who are age appropriate, with the expansion of their California State Preschool Program funded by LCFF dollars.

The district also saw it as their responsibility to build community awareness about the importance of language-rich early learning in the future academic success of children. As a result, the superintendent and other staff speak to faith-based organizations, community groups, and community leaders to help parents understand the importance of early learning and the options that the district provides. The district also hired one family liaison for each elementary school (with funding from the Central Valley Community Foundation) to conduct home visits with families who didn’t send their children to preschool, and to teach parents how to apply early learning and vocabulary strategies in their homes.

To build the capacity of preschool and TK staff to strengthen alignment and connection to elementary level content and pedagogy, the district also leveraged local foundation, federal Title II, and LCFF supplemental and concentration funds to hire instructional coaches focused on early learning.

*“You need to start by asking, ‘What is your outcome? What do you want for the youngest kids in your district?’ I wanted depth and breadth of the language, language skills, readiness for kindergarten—socially and emotionally. So then, what are we offering already and how can we expand our offerings?”*

*– Yolanda Valdez, Superintendent at  
Cutler-Orosi Joint USD*

**Twin Rivers Unified School District** / Located in Sacramento County. Serves 32,538 kindergarten to 12th-grade students, of whom 85 percent are economically disadvantaged and 29 percent are English learners.

Twin Rivers USD runs Head Start and early learning programs and has taken a strategic look at their current programs and community needs for ways to maximize integration, coherence across programs, and alignment to support kindergarten and early elementary success. The district, like many others across California, has many students in preschool programs that are funded by a combination of CSPP and Head Start funds.

*“Districts and boards need to ask the right questions as part of expanding high-quality Pre-K. Fundamentally, board members need to know how much districts can really serve the needs of the community, identify the gaps, and understand how their investments help to fill those gaps.”*

*- Dr. Julie Montali, Early Childhood Education  
Director at Twin Rivers USD*

**Merced County Office of Education** / Supports 20 school districts serving a total of 58,812 kindergarten to 12th-grade students, of whom 78 percent are economically disadvantaged and 25 percent are English learners.

Merced County Office of Education’s Early Education Department manages various subsidy and referral programs; the county Head Start and Early Head Start programs; and family and parent education programs, such as the Caring for our Black Children program, a collaborative capacity-building effort funded by First 5 Merced County to support and strengthen early learning educators’ work with African American families. In partnership with local community organizations and leaders, the Caring for our Black Children

program explores the strengths and weaknesses of existing family engagement efforts, provides professional learning around the quality of adult/child interactions for Black and Hispanic boys, and identifies areas for improvement to meet the unique needs of African American children and families in Merced County. In addition, the program works with caregivers—e.g. parents, grandparents, educators, childcare providers, foster parents, community members, and others—to build their capacity to advocate for their children.

*“(This program) enlightened me and showed me more tools to use with my kids and some I already used in other ways. It taught me that it’s okay that I am not perfect and to take pride in my own blackness, and to not live in shame. Taking this class has made me prouder than I was before and I’ll put what I learned into every kid that passes through my life going forth. Because of this class, my head is much higher, and I fixed my crown.”*

*- A parent participating in the Caring for  
our Black Children program*

## Examples of Partnerships with Other Organizations

**Educare Early Learning Schools** is a network that connects 22 schools across the country. The model blends federal, state, and local funding, with the majority of funding from federal Head Start and Early Head Start grants. Educare-Silicon Valley (opened in 2015 and located in the Franklin-McKinley School District in San Jose) serves as an early learning school and resource center for children from birth to age five and their families, and as a hub for professional development and research.<sup>16</sup> Educare Los Angeles at Long Beach (opened in 2018 and formed through a public-private partnership between multiple organizations, including Long Beach Unified School District) has increased access to high-quality early learning across Southern California.<sup>17</sup>

**Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative (SAELI)** supports the economic needs of families with young children through a training program for families, “Padres Poderosos/Powerful Parents.” The program’s workshops address topics such as language development, early literacy, STEM, health and

social-emotional development, and school readiness. SAELI was created in 2015 as a partnership between the Delhi Community Center, El Sol Science and Arts Academy, and the Orange County Labor Federation. In 2017, the Santa Ana Unified School District joined SAELI to strengthen its investments for children in preschool through fourth grade.

**Kidango** is a partnership with local school districts, community organizations, and government. It has helped to expand access for low-income children and families to high-quality learning across the Bay Area. Some program locations are hosted by school districts to help educators establish a long-term relationship with students and families as they grow.

## Questions for Board Members

The following are questions that board members can consider in expanding access to quality preschool in their district or county office of education.

### **A. Learn what the early learning landscape looks like in your community.**

1. What are the primary early learning goals for the district or county office of education? What are the goals for each stakeholder, including schools, families, and the business community?
2. What are the preschool program options available to children in your community? Who operates these programs and how are they funded? How do these program options meet the district or county office of education goals?
3. How many students are served by the district or county office of education preschool programs? What are the demographics of these students?
4. What are the number and types of students that are currently in need of preschool programs? What are the barriers to access and enrollment (lack of information, lack of funding, lack of program openings, etc.)?
5. Who are the leaders and organizations that support preschool (including community, elected, nonprofit, and private sector leaders)? Are there opportunities to create or expand partnerships with these entities?

6. How will families and the community be engaged in developing or expanding a preschool program?

### **B. Address specific student groups.**

1. Are current preschool programs meeting the needs of each student group (including low-income students, English learners, students with disabilities, and others)? Are there programs that provide inclusive settings for children with disabilities? Are there programs that allow children to learn in a multilingual setting?
2. What communities need targeted outreach and support (e.g. migrant, tribal, English learner, or African American families)? How will you engage these communities about the preschool program options available and empower them to identify improvements and areas of need?

### **C. Support preschool workforce recruitment, retention, and professional development.**

1. What are the staffing needs of current and proposed preschool programs?
2. What are the opportunities to partner with post-secondary early education programs to meet staffing needs?
3. How can the district or county office of education support professional learning for preschool staff? Are there city, county, state, or national organizations that can help?
4. How does the compensation of preschool educators compare to that of K-12 educators? How does it compare to that of other early childhood education entities in the community?
5. How will kindergarten and early elementary teachers and administrators be supported to develop connections and alignment with preschool and other early learning programs?

### **D. Examine and secure resources.**

1. What state and federal resources might fund your early learning priorities (Title I preschool, state preschool, the county's mental health and prevention programs, workforce funds, etc.)? How will these funding sources be leveraged or blended to minimize fiscal impact on other programs?

2. Is LCFF funding used to support preschool and other early learning programs? How is that reflected in your Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)?
3. Which departments, outside agencies, or community partners can we collaborate with to support staffing, quality assessment, and professional learning?
4. Which facilities can support expanded programming? What resources are needed to bring physical spaces to code?
5. How do we communicate our vision, needs, and goals to the community and district staff?

## Conclusion

With the strong evidence that quality preschool programs lead to improved student outcomes and cost savings for districts and county offices of education, it is important for board members to understand the preschool landscape in their communities and explore options for expanding access. Equally important is considering the barriers that some families face in attempting to take full advantage of available programs. All students, regardless of background or characteristics, should have equal access to quality preschool programs.

## Resources

### CSBA Resources

- » **The Importance of Early Childhood Education Programs (August 2019).** CSBA governance brief that outlines the early childhood education landscape in California, summarizes key research evidence about their impact on student outcomes, and highlights questions that board members can ask. <http://bit.ly/35k0cQy>
- » **GAMUT Policy.** CSBA's policy tool includes sample policies and administrative regulations for subscribers, available at [www.gamutonline.net](http://www.gamutonline.net)
- » **BP/AR 5148.3—Preschool/Early Childhood Education**

### Additional Resources

- » **Untangling the Evidence on Preschool Effectiveness: Insights for Policymakers (January 2019).** Learning Policy Institute report that includes reviews of evaluations of 21 public preschool programs, finding that quality preschool programs improve student success. <https://bit.ly/2lu6A1n>
- » **California Assembly Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood Education Final Report (April 2019).** Report that offers findings and detailed recommendations for improving the early childhood education landscape in California. <http://bit.ly/331NsN9>
- » **KidsData.** Project by the Lucile Packard Foundation that includes data on measures of child health and well-being. Data is available by California county, city, school district, and legislative district; and by family income, race/ethnicity, age, and other descriptors. [www.kidsdata.org](http://www.kidsdata.org)
- » **Race Counts.** Comprehensive tool by the Advancement Project that includes data of racial disparities across California by seven issue areas, including education. [www.racecounts.org/issue/education/](http://www.racecounts.org/issue/education/)
- » **Early Development Instrument (EDI).** Population-based measure of early child development in five key domains, developed by the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities. <http://bit.ly/2qs9Hyw>
- » **Early Learning Needs Assessment Tool.** Tool that produces reports on the supply and demand for early care and education by county and California legislative district, developed by the American Institutes for Research. <http://elneedsassessment.org/>
- » **Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice (2014).** Guide to support the role of principals in creating and supporting quality early learning systems, by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. <http://bit.ly/2KzpmME>

## Endnotes

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- 11 See Endnote 1.
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