



Building an Early Learning System That Works

Next Steps for California

By Hanna Melnick, Beth Meloy, Madelyn Gardner,
Marjorie Wechsler, and Anna Maier

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Executive Summary

Decades of research have established that the first years of a child’s life provide a foundation for long-term health and well-being, and that early childhood education (ECE) can have a positive effect on school readiness and development. In 2015–16, 1 million California children qualified for subsidized ECE, yet just 33% of those eligible were served. Funding for ECE represents a remarkably small portion of total state spending: Only an estimated 1.8% of California’s budget went to subsidized child care and preschool in the 2017–18 budget.

California can do better. All children should be able to access high-quality care and education starting at birth, and paying for this care should not cause financial hardship for families. California’s current ECE system, however, is unable to realize this goal. Building on the Learning Policy Institute report *Understanding California’s Early Care and Education System*, this report analyzes how ECE programs operate at the county level and describes challenges and promising practices for administration of ECE, access to care, the ECE workforce, program quality, and data systems. It concludes with actions policymakers can take to improve access to high-quality ECE for California children.

ECE Programs and Their Administration

California’s ECE system consists of many programs, developed incrementally over more than half a century, characterized by a complex administrative structure.

- **What does the ECE system look like at the state level?** California’s system encompasses a patchwork of programs with distinct but overlapping purposes and designs. These programs often are funded by and accountable to multiple uncoordinated agencies at the county, state, and federal levels.
- **How are ECE programs administered at the county level?** Many agencies are involved in administering programs at the county level, but these agencies lack the funding and authority to coordinate ECE effectively. District-run and special education preschool programs, in particular, are often isolated. Families struggle to navigate the confusing system. There are some bright spots, however. San Mateo and San Luis Obispo counties, for example, coordinate resources and have streamlined processes for families and providers. San Francisco and Sacramento counties maintain centralized waiting lists for ECE programs to efficiently link eligible families with available slots.

Access to ECE

Of California’s 2.5 million children birth to age 5, nearly 1 million are eligible for subsidized ECE, but many are unable to access it.

- **What is the unmet need for ECE in California?** All California counties have a large unmet need for subsidized ECE. Preschool and child care are provided to just 33% of all eligible families; only 14% of infants and toddlers receive subsidized care. Many counties are making strides to serve a greater portion of 4-year-olds through state or local programs, however, such as expanded transitional kindergarten in Los Angeles and the Big Lift in San Mateo. Yet subsidized care is not always directed to the children who need it most,

including children who are homeless or in foster care. Los Angeles Unified School District has begun to address this issue by prioritizing new preschool programs in areas of highest need. Finally, families that are ineligible for subsidized programs also struggle to afford care. Recent legislation to raise the eligibility threshold helps more families become eligible, but licensed care for all families remains scarce in every county.

- **What are the barriers to expanding subsidized care?** Low reimbursement rates have discouraged providers from accepting subsidies; affordable facilities are often unavailable; and short-term state contracts make it difficult for programs to plan financially. These barriers mean that scarce ECE resources sometimes go unused. Bay Area counties have worked to mitigate these problems through a pilot program that raises reimbursement rates, helps providers manage their contracts, and increases the income eligibility threshold for participating families.
- **What prevents families from accessing care?** Eligible families in California face both administrative and practical barriers to accessing services. In addition to complex enrollment processes, many parents need full-day or alternative hour care that can be difficult to find. Rural areas have few programs, and those that exist may be far from where families live or work.

ECE Workforce

Because early childhood educators play a key role in creating rich learning environments, California's ECE programs need educators who are well prepared and well supported.

- **Who is teaching our youngest children?** Over 107,000 professionals provide ECE in California, but inconsistent state requirements across programs lead to disparate qualifications among educators, even for children of similar age and need. Programs struggle to recruit and retain qualified educators, even when requirements are low, and high turnover creates instability that negatively affects children.
- **What are the barriers to recruiting and retaining a highly qualified workforce?** Compensation for almost all staff is extremely low and is often coupled with a lack of professional support; many programs have little or no paid professional learning time. Some school districts, such as Fillmore Unified, are trying to address this concern by including ECE educators in their k–12 professional development. To boost salaries, Elk Grove Unified combines funding from multiple sources to create full-day positions with a living wage.
- **What challenges do educators face in pursuit of higher education?** ECE educators pursue higher education to meet qualification requirements or advance in the field, but they often lack support to pay for and complete necessary courses. To encourage aspiring and current educators to complete their coursework, San Mateo's community colleges support full-time coordinators who specialize in advising ECE students. A cross-sector collaborative in Los Angeles County has made sure college courses are comparable and credits are transferable across colleges in the region.

Program Quality

Early childhood programs that have been shown to have long-term benefits are of high quality. Given the importance of quality, California needs to consider the following.

- **What quality standards govern California’s ECE programs?** California’s various ECE programs are held to very different quality standards. This variation can mean that children of similar age and need receive very different early learning opportunities, even within the publicly funded system.
- **How does California support quality improvement in ECE?** Recent state investments to monitor and enhance quality focus primarily on Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). California takes an unusual approach to QRIS: Counties administer QRIS locally, with the support of regional and state consortia. A panoply of categorical grants also support local quality improvement activities, but most of these efforts are small and diffuse.
- **How do counties approach administration of QRIS?** Counties are given significant latitude in QRIS administration. Participation in QRIS is voluntary, and each county determines which providers to include in its QRIS and what incentives it offers for participation. Most counties focus on coaching in their efforts to support providers. For example, Child360, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit, has employed a comprehensive data-driven coaching model for many years. Counties have often been slow to rate programs and publicize ratings, hoping to build trust and capacity among providers first.
- **How does funding affect California’s quality improvement efforts?** Quality improvement funding for ECE has been administered through time-limited categorical grants. Categorical funding impacts which providers have access to QRIS. Unstable and uncoordinated state funding makes it difficult for counties to plan for the future of QRIS efforts and to provide consistent support for providers. In Northern California, seven counties have pooled resources to develop a more comprehensive QRIS and offer stronger incentives and training than any county could offer on its own. Contra Costa County broadens the reach of its coaching program by supporting it with federal funds.

Early Childhood Data Systems

Data on child outcomes and program quality can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of ECE investments. Yet California has a fragmented, insufficient data collection system.

- **What ECE data does California collect?** The state collects enrollment and supply data from multiple sources, but these data are not centrally aggregated, thus limiting their utility. Through QRIS, county administrators have begun to provide valuable data on program quality, but workforce data are lacking.
- **What challenges do counties face in creating a coherent data system?** Efforts to collect data remain fragmented across programmatic and geographic lines, creating an unfunded burden for counties that must collect and report these data. Counties frequently lack the staff, technological capacity, and funding to collect, share, and analyze data. Some, however, have begun to build comprehensive local data systems: San Francisco’s data system, for example, provides a wealth of data that simplifies state reporting processes and informs decisions about how to best serve families.

Policy Recommendations

For California to provide all children access to high-quality ECE, state policymakers will need to adopt a comprehensive approach to turn an uncoordinated set of underfunded programs into a true system of supports for children, families, and providers. To build an early learning system that works, the state should take action in four areas.

1. **Build a coherent system of ECE administration.** California must ensure the state's early learning system is cohesive and easy for providers and parents to navigate. To do so, it should:

- Identify and invest in a state-level governing body with the authority and expertise to coordinate all ECE programs.
- Fully fund and grant decision-making authority to a single coordinating body at the county or regional level to streamline ECE administration.
- Develop a one-stop shop for parents and providers to make it easier for parents to find care and for providers to recruit families.

To build a more coherent system in the short term, the state should also take immediate steps, including fully funding Local Child Care and Development Planning Councils to support counties' child care needs assessment and planning as required by statute, reinstating funding for a centralized eligibility list to make it easier for families to connect with providers offering care that meets their needs, and creating a uniform intake process across agencies that streamlines eligibility paperwork.

2. **Make ECE affordable for all children birth to age 5.** To expand access to ECE, California should:

- Establish universal preschool for 4-year-olds, utilizing a mix of public and private providers that all meet quality standards set by the state.
- Make preschool affordable for all 3-year-olds using a sliding fee scale, offering preschool for which families pay progressively more as their incomes increase, thus eliminating the income cliff for families that earn just over the income threshold.
- Ensure access to subsidized child care on a sliding fee scale for all infants and toddlers by expanding existing ECE programs and supporting licensed providers.

California should expand access and ensure an adequate supply of licensed providers through a series of more immediate steps, including expanding the availability of full-day programs to better meet the needs of working families; providing funding for facilities to providers who are willing to serve more infants and toddlers; increasing funding for the Revolving Loan Fund, which supports the purchase and renovation of facilities for ECE programs; changing 1-year state contracts for pre-k and child care to 5-year grants; and increasing reimbursement rates for infant and toddler programs.

3. **Build a well-qualified ECE workforce.** California should support the ECE workforce by taking the following steps:

- Increase expectations and support for educators' higher education and training, starting with preschool, to ensure that children of similar age and need in state-subsidized programs have access to educators with comparable and adequate education and experience. California should pair these new requirements with significant investments in supports for higher education for ECE educators.
- Continue to raise reimbursement rates to enhance educator wages, and reform the state's reimbursement rate structure to ensure that programs requiring higher staff credentials are able to pay higher wages.

To help ECE educators increase their training and compensation in the short term, California should increase the availability of full-day slots in state-funded programs to enable more educators to work full time and earn a living wage; support alignment and articulation across the community college and university systems to ensure credits are transferable across institutions and degrees; expand funding for the Child Development Staff Retention Program (AB 212), which allows counties to provide higher education scholarships to improve the training of ECE educators; implement a Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) program, which provides scholarships to help ECE professionals pursue degrees; and invest in higher education advising programs to help early education students complete their degrees.

4. **Improve the quality of all ECE programs.** California should work toward a system of high-quality early learning by doing the following:

- Raise quality requirements for programs with the lowest standards and take steps to help programs improve.
- Ensure all state-supported programs participate in quality improvement activities.
- Ensure access to coaching and other job-embedded supports for all ECE providers by including these evidence-based strategies in QRIS and programs with state-funded contracts.

California should also take immediate action to improve program quality by making state quality improvement funds available to all providers by increasing the flexibility of their use, particularly for categorical grants, which are available only to certain providers; centralizing and supporting training for QRIS assessors to increase rating consistency and free up county-level staff to focus on supporting local providers; investing in research to continuously improve the effectiveness of the QRIS; and offering paid hours for professional learning time to state-contracted centers.

High-quality ECE can put children on the path to success in school and in life. But many California children do not have access to ECE, and not all ECE programs in California are of high quality. California should reconsider its approach to meeting the needs of children and families so that all programs are of high quality and that together, they create a coherent system. Increasing access and improving quality will require both budgetary and operational attention, but ultimately can create a system that, as a whole, will serve California's children better.

Introduction

California is home to nearly 2.5 million children birth to age 5—more than any other state in the country.¹ Decades of research have established that the first years of a child’s life provide a foundation for long-term health and well-being,² and that early childhood education (ECE) can have a positive effect on school readiness and development. High-quality ECE programs can give children a strong start on the path that leads to college or a career, conferring long-term benefits such as lower rates of special education placement, reduced grade retention, and higher graduation rates. These benefits are especially pronounced for children living in poverty and for dual language learners.³

Yet California, which has the world’s 6th largest economy, lags behind many states in providing access to high-quality ECE.⁴ Although the state has made significant strides in improving preschool access for 4-year-olds, only 48% of all families in California reported that their 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in any type of preschool in 2014.⁵ Compared to other developed countries, two thirds of which enroll more than 90% of 4-year-olds in preschool, California is behind the curve.⁶ Further, in 2015–16 only an estimated 14% of infants and toddlers in low-income families received subsidized care in California.⁷ The high cost and low availability of care are insurmountable barriers for many families.⁸

California can do better. All children should be able to access high-quality care and education starting at birth, and paying for this care should not cause financial hardship for families. California’s current ECE system, however, is unable to realize this goal. The state has made important new investments in ECE, such as increasing reimbursement rates for child care subsidies and increasing state preschool enrollment. But these investments have been made to an incoherent system—a patchwork of programs with different enrollment requirements and quality standards.⁹ Further, current investments are only a fraction of what is needed to ensure every child has access to high-quality ECE. Already dramatically underfunded before the Great Recession, California’s ECE system lost nearly \$1 billion in public funding from 2009 to 2011 and is only now beginning to recover.

All children should be able to access high-quality care and education starting at birth, and paying for this care should not cause financial hardship for families.

This report complements the Learning Policy Institute’s most recent report on ECE, *Understanding California’s Early Care and Education System*, which provides a comprehensive overview of the state’s ECE programs and addresses issues of administration, funding, access to care, program quality, and data limitations.¹⁰ In this follow-up study, we analyze how ECE programs operate at the county level in order to

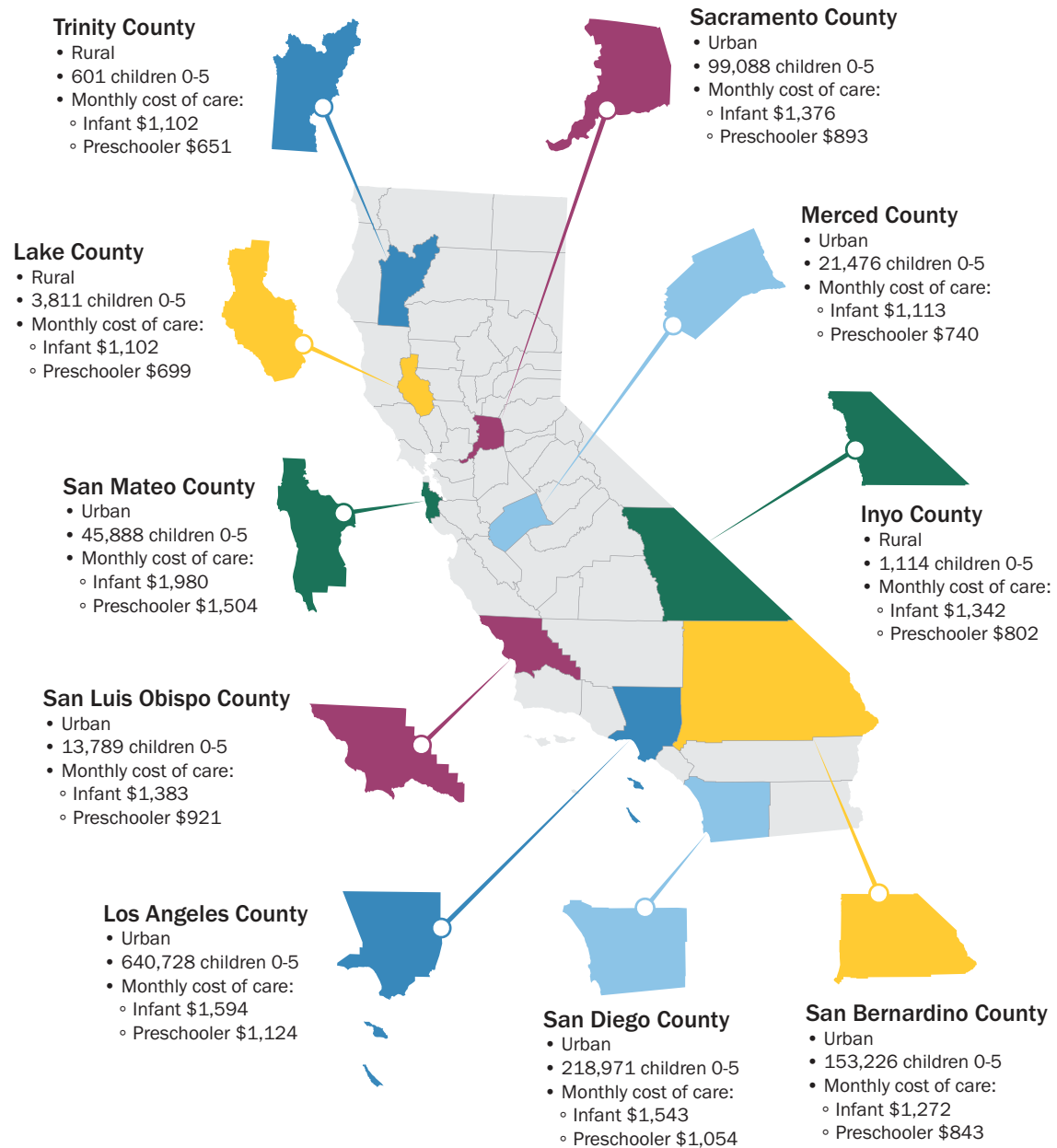
- describe the landscape of county services and systems;
- illuminate variation in access to high-quality ECE across the state;
- understand challenges that county agencies face in providing access to high-quality programs;
- highlight promising practices that can inform county and state policymakers; and
- recommend action policymakers can take to improve access to high-quality ECE for all California children, especially the most vulnerable.

This report examines 10 counties that vary by region, population density (i.e., rural, urban, suburban), child care affordability, and child care costs (see Figure 1). We collected documents and administrative data; conducted interviews with county-level administrators from various agencies (e.g., county offices of education, resource and referral agencies, and First 5 commissions); and conducted interviews with state-level administrators from various agencies (e.g., California Department of Education, First 5 California, and First 5 Association). We quote these interviews throughout the report. (See the appendix for the methodology, county case selection criteria, and list of interviewees.)

This report focuses on the system's essential features.

- Section 2 describes the county-level administration of ECE programs. It explains how programs are held accountable to multiple agencies at the county, state, and federal levels; describes the variation in administrative structure across counties; and highlights successful efforts to communicate and collaborate across agencies to better serve children and families.
- Section 3 chronicles trends in access to ECE. It quantifies unmet need and the inadequate supply of providers. It also describes strategies that some counties have used to improve access.
- Section 4 analyzes the challenges of building a strong early childhood workforce, including inadequate compensation, lack of professional support, and barriers to higher education. It also describes local efforts to develop a highly qualified and skilled workforce.
- Section 5 describes program quality and quality improvement activities, focusing on local Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) initiatives.
- Section 6 highlights the data that are currently collected on ECE, the limitations of these data, and local efforts to collect comprehensive data.
- Section 7 concludes the report with recommendations to policymakers about how to improve access to high-quality ECE.

Figure 1
Counties Studied Represent a Diverse Cross-Section of California



Note: **Monthly cost of care** reflects the 75th percentile of the 2016 Regional Market Rate survey for full-time care in a licensed center.

Sources: **Children 0-5:** National, state, and county resident population by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin, 2016, from the Population Estimates Program, U.S. Census Bureau. **Urbanicity:** United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2013). 2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/> (accessed 11/6/17). **Monthly cost of care:** California Department of Education and ICF Macro. (2017). 2016 Regional Market Rate Survey of California Child Care Providers. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education and ICF Macro.

ECE Programs and Their Administration

California's ECE system has been constructed incrementally over more than half a century and serves over 500,000 of California's nearly 2.5 million children birth to age 5.¹¹ This section answers the following questions.

- **What does the ECE system look like at the state level?** California's early childhood system encompasses a patchwork of programs. Many federal, state, and local agencies administer ECE programs, making the system complex and confusing.
- **How is ECE administered at the county level?** Many agencies administer ECE programs at the county level, with the administrative structures varying across counties. Many counties lack coordination across agencies, and families struggle to navigate the complex landscape.

What Does the ECE System Look Like at the State Level?

As in other states, California has a multifaceted early learning system. This report, and its earlier companion report,¹² find the following.

- California's system encompasses a complex hodgepodge of public and private programs.
- These programs often are funded by and accountable to multiple uncoordinated agencies at the county, state, and federal levels.

California's system encompasses a patchwork of programs with distinct but overlapping purposes and designs.

Of the state's ECE programs, some were specifically designed for school readiness, while others are meant to support working parents of children birth to age 12 in addition to supporting child development and school readiness.

Throughout this report, most analyses focus on the preschool and child care programs listed below.

- **The California State Preschool Program** (state preschool) provides center-based preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families.
- **Head Start and Early Head Start** are child development programs that include wrap-around family services for children from very-low-income families. Head Start includes preschool classes for 3- and 4-year-olds. Early Head Start provides several programs for low-income pregnant women and new parents, infants, and toddlers, including home visiting and child care.
- **Transitional kindergarten** is a school-based preschool program for children just below the age cutoff for kindergarten enrollment, regardless of family income.
- **The Alternative Payment program** provides voucher-based child care subsidies, mostly through California's state welfare program, CalWORKs.
- **General Child Care and Development** provides subsidized slots in state-contracted child care centers and family child care homes.¹³

Other programs are also part of the ECE landscape, but we did not analyze them in depth due to lack of data. These include district-based preschool programs that are voluntarily offered by school districts, typically supported by federal Title I or local school funding such as the Local Control Funding Formula or local tax initiatives. Where possible, we highlight local district programs in the 10 counties we studied.

Other ECE programs that are important to young children’s early education were outside the scope of this report. These include programs that seek to enhance child outcomes through parent coaching and education, such as the California Home Visiting Program and county-led home visiting programs that offer positive parent support for the parents of children under age 5.

We also do not include data on special education programs that work with children diagnosed with, or at risk of, developmental delay. In California, children with special needs birth to age 3 may participate in Early Start, a federally mandated program that offers early intervention services, and children ages 3 to 5 may participate in Special Education Preschool, which is a preschool program run by school districts. Data on these programs are often unavailable or difficult to interpret.

The administration of California’s system is complex and incoherent.

The picture of California’s ECE system grows more elaborate when taking into account the administration of these programs at the federal, state, and local levels. Figure 2 depicts the relationships between the major ECE programs and the agencies that are involved in administering them (for example, providing and/or monitoring funding, setting and/or monitoring quality standards and licensing, and providing technical assistance for program implementation). Within this maze of administrators sit California’s ECE providers, including for-profit and nonprofit child care centers, public schools, community-based organizations, and individual homes. Each of these providers may be accountable to one or more agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, depending on their funding sources. This complexity can create confusion and increase the burden of administrative and reporting requirements.

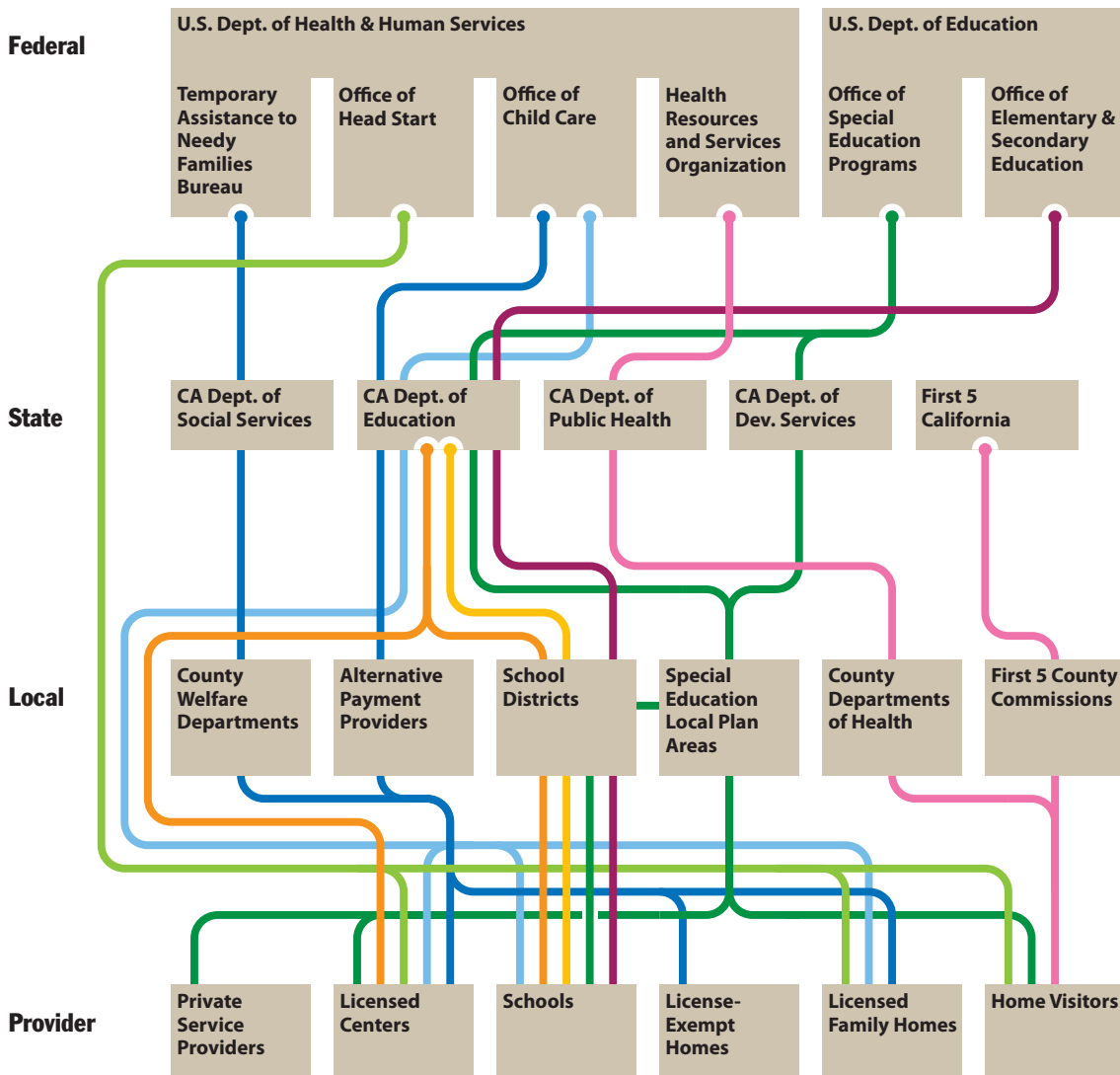
The disjointed state landscape has led to fragmentation at the county level, despite multiple coordinating bodies.

How Is ECE Administered at the County Level?

In California, the county’s role can be quite substantial and may include planning, funding, and implementing ECE programs. We found the following.

- Much of the administration and oversight of ECE programs occurs at the county level.
- The disjointed state landscape has led to fragmentation at the county level, despite multiple coordinating bodies.
- School districts’ ECE programs often work in silos.
- Families struggle to make sense of the confusing system.
- In some counties, a single agency or collaboration of multiple agencies works to streamline ECE services, but these local administrators struggle to undo the administrative tangle created by the state and federal governments.

Figure 2
Many Agencies Control California’s ECE Programs



Note: This graphic shows the multiple agencies that administer state- and federally funded ECE programs in California. Administrative oversight includes setting regulations, allocating resources, managing contracts, and overseeing program quality, among other responsibilities. Administrators may, but do not always, provide funding. ECE programs (the colored lines shown in the key) may be offered by various kinds of local providers, some of whom offer multiple programs at a given time. Several other organizations, particularly First 5, resource and referral agencies, and QRIS consortia, also provide considerable support to providers and programs, although their role varies by county.

Source: California Department of Education. (2017). Child Development. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/>.

Programs

California State Preschool Program	Transitional Kindergarten	Head Start
Special Education	General Child Care and Development	Alternative Payment Program
Title I Funded Preschool	Home Visiting	

Many agencies administer ECE programs at the county level.

Several county-level agencies are responsible for administering and supporting California's ECE programs; however, counties differ in where agencies are housed and the scope of agencies' roles (see Figure 3).

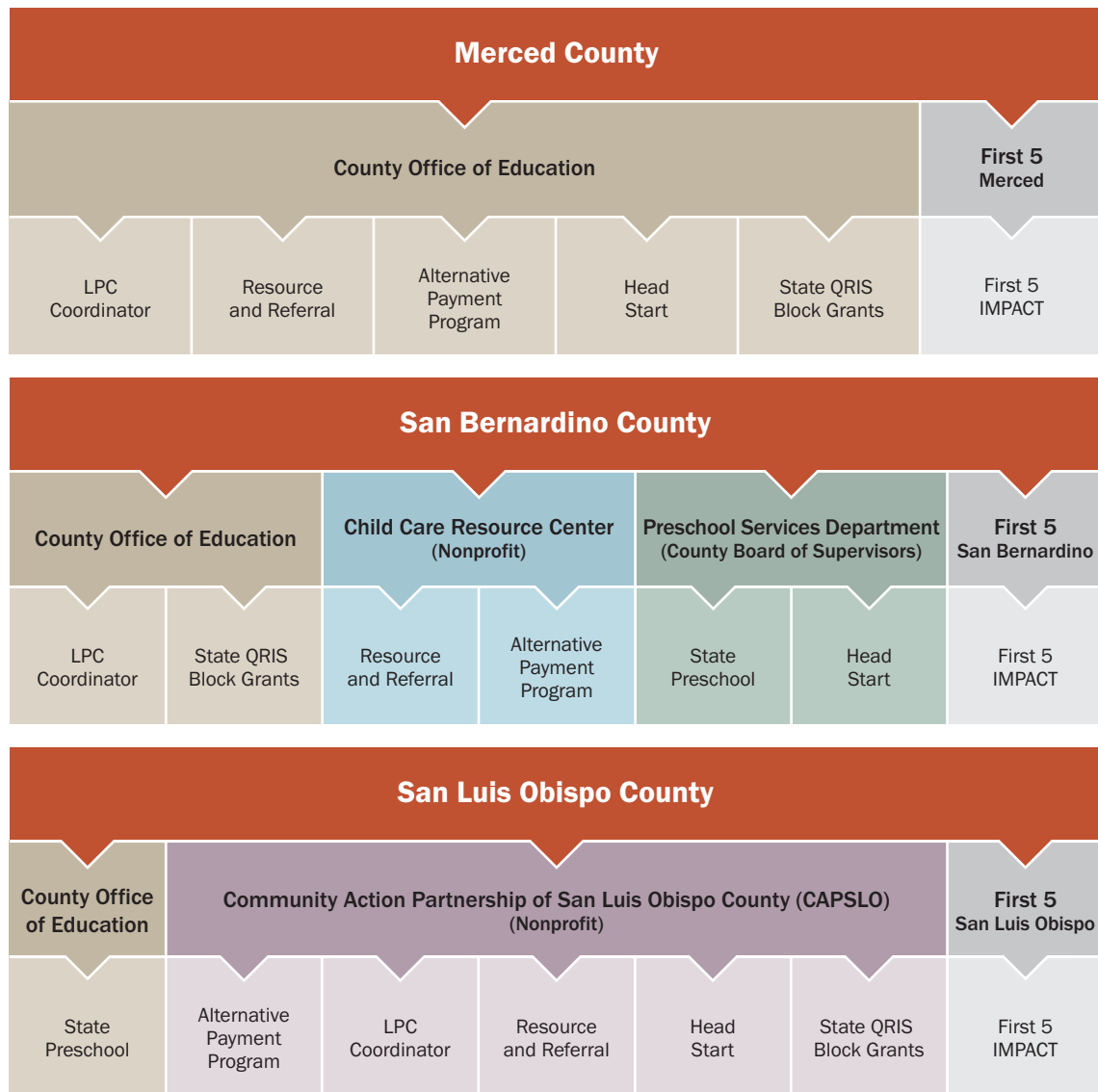
First 5 county commissions. First 5 county commissions fund and sometimes administer ECE initiatives, ranging from quality rating and improvement systems to home visiting programs and parent engagement initiatives. Historically, commissions also funded preschool slots. Commissions are composed of representatives from the board of supervisors; county health, welfare, and education agencies; and early childhood stakeholders including resource and referral agencies, local child care and development planning councils, and school districts. First 5 commissions are primarily funded by California's Proposition 10 tobacco tax, which generated \$559 million in 2014–15,¹⁴ about 80% of which went directly to counties.¹⁵ However, tobacco revenue has decreased significantly in recent years, leading many commissions to stop funding preschool slots. Instead, in April 2015, First 5 California approved \$190 million in funding to support quality improvement efforts through First 5 IMPACT (Improve and Maximize Programs so All Children can Thrive).¹⁶ While some county commissions are deeply involved in this work, others pass through funds to another county-level agency. At the state level, the California First 5 Association and First 5 California support county commissions in their work.

Resource and referral agencies. Each county has at least one publicly funded resource and referral agency. Some operate independently, while others are housed within other county agencies. These agencies help families of all incomes find child care by providing information on available child care options and assessing whether families qualify for subsidized services. They also often administer child care vouchers for children in the Alternative Payment program.¹⁷ Another core function of resource and referral agencies is to provide training for caregivers, especially licensed family child care homes and licensed centers.¹⁸ Agencies also help license-exempt providers register to receive subsidies and gather data on child care supply and demand.

Several county-level agencies are responsible for administering and supporting California's ECE programs; however, counties differ in where agencies are housed and the scope of agencies' roles.

Local Child Care and Development Planning Councils (LPCs). LPCs were created to support counties as they “plan for child care and development services based on the needs of families” and to “serve as a forum to address the child care needs of all families in the community, both subsidized and non-subsidized.”¹⁹ Each county has an LPC whose activities are organized by the LPC coordinator, who is housed in different agencies from county to county. Every 5 years, LPCs are required by statute to conduct a comprehensive child care needs assessment by analyzing the availability and need for child care in their counties, and then to generate a strategic plan for ECE. LPCs also annually determine which ZIP codes have the greatest gaps between ECE supply and demand.²⁰ Finally, LPCs administer stipends for providers who want to earn college credit toward an ECE degree while staying in the classroom.²¹ LPCs also may undertake other efforts, such as supporting providers who are not reaching their projected enrollment.²²

Figure 3
The Structures of County ECE Systems Vary



Note: This graphic shows how administration of certain ECE programs varies greatly from county to county. In cases where programs are administered by more than one agency, we listed the official lead agency. For example, while First 5 is the lead agency for IMPACT in these three counties, each works closely with at least one other agency.

Source: San Luis Obispo County Child Care Planning Council. <http://www.sanluischildcare.org/>; Merced County Office of Education. <http://www.mcoe.org/deptprog/earlyed/Pages/Links-to-Services-.aspx>; San Bernardino County Early Learning and Development Local Planning Council. <http://www.sbcss.k12.ca.us/index.php/student-services/early-learning-and-development/san-bernardino-county-early-learning-and-development-local-planning-council-lpc>.

County offices of education. Each county office of education has a department for overseeing work related to ECE, but the particular activities and roles vary greatly among counties. A county office of education typically administers at least one contract related to ECE (e.g., state preschool). Those in small counties tend to operate multiple contracts (e.g., state preschool and the resource and referral agency). The LPC coordinator is often an employee of the county office of education. County offices of education often, but not always, provide professional development as part of quality improvement efforts and support school districts in the implementation of transitional kindergarten and state preschool.

School districts. School districts run all transitional kindergarten programs, and some districts offer preschool programs funded by Title I or local funding. They also run most special education preschool programs, which are administered like other k–12 classrooms, with the school principal providing leadership and local school boards providing oversight and making funding decisions. Districts also operate about two thirds of the slots in the California State Preschool Program,²³ serving around 92,000 3- and 4-year-olds in 2016–17.²⁴ They also sometimes run Head Start programs. State preschool and Head Start programs usually have their own site directors in addition to the school’s principal, and teachers typically are not part of a union, unlike their k–12 peers.²⁵

County-level agencies lack the funding and authority to coordinate ECE effectively.

With so many state- and federally funded programs operating in each county, a significant amount of coordination is needed to make sure each agency and each program can meet its goals without duplicating efforts or leaving groups of children behind.

First 5 commissions often play a lead coordinating role in their counties. Many identify local child care needs, develop comprehensive plans, and facilitate the implementation of quality ECE, in part by establishing funding priorities.²⁶ First 5 needs assessments are distinct from the LPC assessments that are required by law, but they often serve a similar purpose by directing local early childhood investments. In some counties, First 5s mainly pass funds through to others. With declining funding, however, each First 5 commission has had to reimagine its role. In Sacramento County, for example, the local First 5 is moving away from funding pre-k slots directly and instead deepening its investment in wraparound services for children, such as early developmental screenings.

LPCs are legislatively tasked with coordination of ECE efforts as well, but lack of funding for their mandated activities makes this role unrealistic in many counties. The councils are composed of individuals with responsibilities outside of ECE, and they have only a single staff person, the coordinator, dedicated to the work. Because most coordinators are only partially funded, they take on other roles in order to create a full-time job. As a result, deliverable deadlines required by law are not always met. Of the 10 counties we examined, only four had completed a public-facing needs assessment in the past 5 years as statute requires, and those that had not cited a lack of adequate funding as the reason for not publishing a formal assessment.²⁷

Despite their coordinating roles, neither the LPCs nor First 5 commissions have authority over program directors or local, state, or federal agencies. Other agencies (with the exception of those that are grant recipients of First 5) are not required to share data or work with these coordinating bodies. For example, in order to get information on Head Start enrollment in their counties, some LPCs create and send their own survey to contractors, despite the fact that these data exist

elsewhere. Thus, the extent to which First 5 commissions and LPCs are able to serve a coordinating role reflects the strength of their relationships with other agencies.

Without county-level coordination, each agency, and often each ECE program site, independently conducts its own outreach, data collection, and professional development. In some cases, they compete for the same staff and facilities. They also miss an opportunity to have a unified voice when it comes to building a policy agenda at the city, county, or state level.

District-run and special education preschool programs are isolated.

School districts serve nearly one third of California's half-million 4-year-olds through transitional kindergarten, state preschool, and special education services.²⁸ Yet they often operate separately from other ECE agencies, even in counties with strong collaboration among other ECE stakeholders. LPC coordinators and First 5 staff often have little knowledge of what is happening in school districts, especially in regard to enrollment and quality improvement efforts. Transitional kindergarten and Special Education Preschool typically are not part of a county's quality rating and improvement system, and these programs provide their own professional development. District programs have better funding and access to k–12 professional learning opportunities.

Families struggle to navigate multiple programs and agencies.

Families find their way to ECE programs in California through several routes. Families in CalWORKs apply through their case managers; children with special needs go through their school district or Special Education Local Planning Area (SELPA); or families may sign up for preschool directly with their local school district, state preschool, or Head Start.

Figuring out which agency to go to can be challenging. Resource and referral agencies are typically the only agencies that can connect families to multiple programs and verify eligibility for multiple programs at once. Even working with a resource and referral agency, however, it is still up to each family to find a child care provider with space for their child. In most counties, each program runs its own wait list, so families must contact multiple programs to find one with available space. “There are so many different programs and so many opportunities ... but we really haven't worked out how, if a family comes to this program, how do we connect them to all the other programs,” said Rosa Barragan, Program Manager at Merced County's resource and referral agency. “Sometimes parents don't understand that you have to go to every program in the county that you're interested in and apply for it.” According to the Director of San Mateo's resource and referral agency, David Fleishman, “the system is complicated enough that funders allocated funds to have someone available just to help the families navigate the system of care. Is it complicated? Are parents confused? Unequivocal yes.”

From 2007 to 2011, resource and referral agencies maintained countywide centralized eligibility lists that facilitated their work of linking eligible families to providers as space became available. These lists also meant that parents did not need to contact individual providers to see if they had space available. Funding for such lists was eliminated in the recession, however, and now only some counties run a centralized eligibility list.²⁹

Successful Practice: Sacramento and San Francisco Counties Maintain Centralized Eligibility Lists

The lack of state funding for centralized eligibility lists means that counties need to identify other funding sources if they want to maintain one. Sacramento has done just that, maintaining a voluntary countywide eligibility list since losing state funding in 2011. The list is “very important to our work as a community agency,” said Anthony Garcia, Director of Community Services, Child Action Inc. “We see the centralized eligibility list as part of our assessment process that we use to determine eligibility for our subsidy program. So we embed the work that goes into maintaining the centralized eligibility list into work we’re already doing.”

San Francisco is piloting a new version of a centralized eligibility list—Child Care Connections—which is a priority for its data team. Like Sacramento, the county has been locally funding its list “to make sure there is a one-stop shop for families as they’re getting matched with programs that meet their needs and financial assistance, whether it’s federal, state, or local,” said September Jarrett, Executive Director of the San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education. The current system, however, does not keep track of family preferences. Instead, families at the top of the list receive a call whenever any new space is available. San Francisco’s new system, which Jarrett likens to the restaurant app Open Table, attempts to make better matches between available slots and family preferences. “If we keep organizing our system around what we have instead of what families want and need, we’ll miss the mark,” she said.

Sources: Interview with Anthony Garcia, Director of Community Services at Child Action Inc. (2017, June 28); Interview with September Jarrett, Executive Director of the San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education (2017, August 16).

Paperwork is also a challenge. For example, some families must provide paperwork to multiple programs to prove eligibility if their child participates in a part-day preschool program in the morning and receives a voucher for license-exempt care in the afternoon. Rosa Barragan, Program Manager at Merced’s resource and referral agency, explained that initial paperwork can still be a real barrier to access to programs. “Once they’re here, we say ‘this is what we need you to bring back,’ and they just don’t come back. Some of them have said to us, ‘it’s too much work, it’s too much paperwork, I’m just not going to do it.’”

Important changes have been made to reduce the paperwork burden, however. Until recently, families had to provide proof of eligibility for subsidies, sometimes as frequently as every few weeks if, for example, their work hours changed or they had small fluctuations in their wages. A change in federal and state law has extended eligibility to 12 months, so families do not need to reconfirm eligibility for a full year unless their income increases significantly. Four Bay Area counties have worked with their state representatives to pass legislation allowing families in their counties to stay eligible for 2 years. “The 2 years of eligibility doesn’t mean there’s a clean path and nothing happens with the families [if their income changes],” said Nirmala Dillman, Child Care Partnership and School Readiness Coordinator at the San Mateo County Office of Education. “But it does mean they don’t have to leave their job or school and come meet with us every time they have a slightly different need, or their school schedule changes.”

Successful Practice: San Luis Obispo and San Mateo Counties Build Coherent ECE Systems

San Mateo and San Luis Obispo counties have successfully worked to streamline processes for families and providers, maximize resources, and develop a more coherent vision of ECE. They have fostered collaboration through formal structures and strong relationships.

Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo (CAPSLO)

CAPSLO is a nonprofit agency encompassing a variety of programs aimed at helping low-income families, including ECE and family support services. CAPSLO is the fiscal agent for San Luis Obispo's resource and referral agency, LPC coordinator, Head Start programs, and the Alternative Payment agency, the latter of which administers child care vouchers. As such, it acts as a one-stop shop for many families and providers.

Having multiple ECE agencies working together under the umbrella of a single organization fosters collaboration and information sharing. According to Shana Paulson, Resource and Referral Director for CAPSLO, this collaboration makes life easier for the families they serve. For example, eligibility specialists from Head Start and the Alternative Payment program work together so that families can complete one intake rather than going to multiple offices. "That has been a really big thing for the children and parents," said Raechelle Bowlay-Sutton, the county's LPC Coordinator and Shana Paulson's colleague. Paulson agrees: "Working together, we are able to more efficiently serve and address family and community needs. ... As a result, CAPSLO is a better community partner, is better equipped to support families as they navigate systems, is a more knowledgeable advocate, and is able to draw upon resources to support early care and education professionals."

CAPSLO has applied this administrative streamlining to providers as well. Providers fill out one application for professional development funding, and CAPSLO staff do the complex work of determining how to allocate funds. If a provider comes in looking for professional development, staff are able to say: "'You want to be a part of it? Great, we'll figure out what funding stream you are in.' Versus, 'oh, this goes through IMPACT or that's through state preschool or infant-toddler,'" reported Bowlay-Sutton. This unified strategy works because CAPSLO administers most of the state quality improvement funding, from state block grants to a significant portion of First 5 IMPACT.

The only major ECE program that does not fall under CAPSLO's purview is state preschool, which is administered by the county office of education, and some General Child Care programs. To apply for these programs, families need to go to another office and complete another application. (This was not the case when the county operated a centralized eligibility list, before state funding ended in 2011.) But Nancy Norton of the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education reported that communication between her office and CAPSLO is improving, too, saying, "with the child care planning council [the county's LPC], there has been a new direction taken, and so we've had a lot better communication." For example, Norton explained, when Head Start was considering reducing slots in order to shift programs from part day to full day, CAPSLO and the county office of education worked together to identify additional funding to maintain enrollment.

Interagency Collaboration in San Mateo County

Although San Mateo County does not have a formal coordinating agency similar to CAPSLO, the county shows how interagency collaboration, through ongoing relationship building and communication, can lead to a more cohesive local vision of quality ECE. Administrators at the county's resource and referral agency, LPC, First 5 San Mateo, and the county office of education are in regular communication and work jointly on major county ECE efforts. According to Kitty Lopez, First 5 San Mateo Director, "the county covers a large area, but we work on the same task forces, are in the same kinds of meetings, so it really helps move the work forward."

Joint work on a few ambitious initiatives over the years has been both a result of, and a contributor to, these strong relationships. Big Lift, for example, is a major preschool expansion project that has required involvement and funding from all of the ECE agencies, the county supervisor who controls part of the budget and chairs the Child Care Partnership Council, and local politicians. Another initiative was a convening of stakeholders to conduct a facilities needs assessment, which led to a county priority on expanding access to facilities. This initiative was notable because it involved active participation of local businesses and the county's Human Service Agency—actors that do not typically get involved in ECE. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation, a local philanthropy, helped convene both efforts. A third joint effort was a campaign to adopt state legislation for a pilot program to raise the income eligibility threshold for subsidized child care and to increase reimbursement rates. This pilot allows funding that is not spent by some programs to be reallocated throughout the county—a process that requires close communication and a willingness to share resources.

Members of each ECE agency frequently serve on the same committees, enabling them to build a shared agenda. Jean-Marie Houston, Early Learning Support Services Administrator at the San Mateo County Office of Education, described the county's vision: "Our intention is to look at the broadest picture of quality in the county. ... We try not to silo our work." The Resource and Referral Director, David Fleishman, noted that his agency is active in ECE efforts throughout the county, which is not always the case. "One of the things I love about this county is how collaborative we are. ... In other counties, [resource and referral agencies] are not nearly as integrated. Sometimes they're quite on the outside." San Mateo County has also ensured its LPC coordinator has a fully funded position and support staff at the county office of education.

As in San Luis Obispo, San Mateo County hopes to make it easier for families to stay enrolled in subsidized ECE programs by streamlining paperwork. Officials across agencies are developing common enrollment forms so that a family fills out one form, regardless of whether it's for state preschool or a CalWORKs voucher. The one-form process "gives a chance for those enrolling families for us to be more supportive of families rather than always asking for paperwork," said Nirmala Dillman, Child Care Partnership and School Readiness Coordinator at the San Mateo County Office of Education. It allows the agencies to "infuse a different spirit" in their work while staying in compliance with existing regulations.

Sources: Interview with Raechelle Bowlay-Sutton, LPC Coordinator of San Luis Obispo County (2017, May 15); Interview with Shana Paulson, Resource and Referral Director, CAPSLO (2017, June 19); Interview with Nancy Norton, Director of Early Learning Educational Support at the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education (2017, June 29); Interview with Kitty Lopez, Executive Director of First 5 San Mateo (2017, May 26); Interview with Jean-Marie Houston, Early Learning Support Services Administrator, San Mateo County Office of Education (2017, May 23); Interview with Nirmala Dillman, Child Care Partnership and School Readiness Coordinator at the San Mateo County Office of Education (2017, May 30); Interview with David Fleishman, Executive Director, 4Cs of San Mateo County (2017, May 15).

Section Summary: ECE Programs and Their Administration

California's 58 counties have inherited a complex patchwork of ECE programs from the state and federal governments, and consequently they struggle to achieve a coherent vision for early learning. Agency coordination is stymied by a lack of staff capacity and insufficient authority for any one agency, leading programs to work in silos. This fragmented system is particularly difficult for families to navigate, requiring them to visit multiple agencies and sometimes fill out multiple sets of paperwork. San Mateo County has overcome this complexity with strong relationships fostered through collaborative local initiatives—a successful, but not easily replicable, strategy; San Luis Obispo County has created a more seamless system for families and providers through the creation of an umbrella organization from which others might learn. Yet the web of rules, regulations, and restrictions passed down by the state and federal governments limits the opportunity for success.

California needs to develop a coherent vision, shared goals, and effective administrative strategy at both the state and county levels, with the goal of serving children more comprehensively and seamlessly. The state's chosen strategy should build on agencies' strengths to unify the fragmented system, and will require formal means for collaboration and new lines of authority.

To build a more coherent system in the short term, the state should also take immediate steps, including fully funding Local Child Care and Development Planning Councils to support counties' child care needs assessment and planning as required by statute, reinstating funding for a centralized eligibility list to make it easier for families to connect with providers offering care that meets their needs, and creating a uniform intake process across agencies that streamlines eligibility paperwork.

Rethinking the entire system, with its component parts in mind, will allow the state to expand access in a more coherent, effective way.

Access to ECE

California's publicly funded ECE programs are too limited in scope to serve its young children adequately. This section answers the following questions.

- **What is the unmet need for ECE in California?** Every county in California has substantial unmet need for subsidized ECE. Preschool and child care are provided to less than half of all eligible families, potentially leaving out children most in need.
- **What are the barriers to expanding subsidized care?** Shortages in licensed care make it difficult to find care, even for families with a subsidy or those with high incomes. Some barriers are financial, stemming from low reimbursement to providers from the state and parents' inability to cover high costs on their own. Other barriers are bureaucratic, including complex requirements and short-term contracts. These problems lead scarce ECE resources to go unused.
- **What prevents families from accessing care?** Eligible families in California face both administrative and practical barriers to accessing services, from complex enrollment processes to a lack of accessible care options.

What Is the Unmet Need for ECE in California?

Far too few children in need get subsidized ECE in California. Specifically we found the following.

- Just one third of California's 1 million eligible children receive state- or federally subsidized ECE. Unmet need is severe in all counties, although some are making strides to serve a greater portion of their 4-year-olds.
- Subsidized care is not always directed to the state's most vulnerable children, including those who are homeless or in foster care.
- Families who earn just over the income eligibility limit struggle to afford quality care. Recent legislation to raise the eligibility threshold may help.
- There are too few licensed care providers, even to meet the needs of families with subsidies or middle-income families.

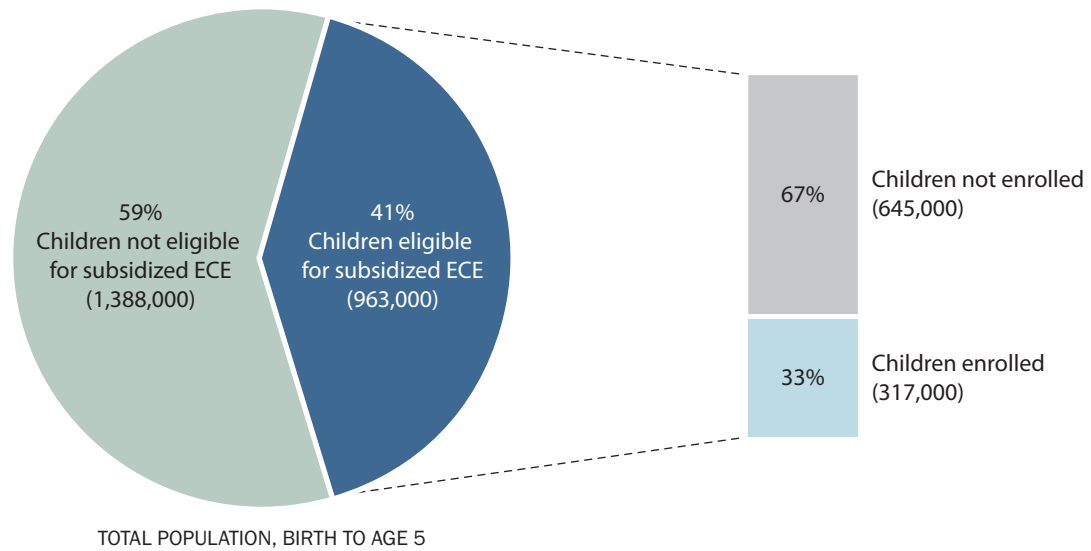
All California counties have a large unmet need for subsidized ECE.

California is home to nearly 2.5 million children birth to age 5, nearly half of whom live in or near poverty.³⁰ In 2015–16, 1 million of these children qualified for subsidized ECE, yet just 33% of those eligible were served (see Figure

4). More than 650,000 eligible children were left without access to federally and state-subsidized ECE, including state preschool, Head Start and Early Head Start, transitional kindergarten, state-contracted child care centers, and the Alternative Payment program (which provides families with vouchers for licensed and license-exempt care).³¹ Although some of these children may have enrolled in private ECE—data on the enrollment of nonsubsidized children in private care are not available—the cost of care was likely a financial hardship for their families.

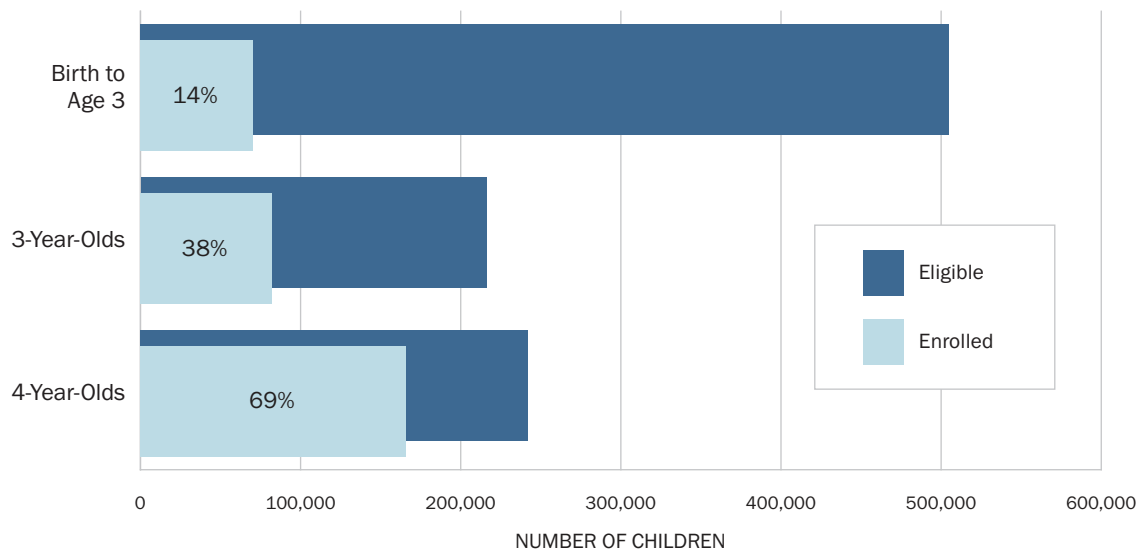
In 2015–16, 1 million children qualified for subsidized ECE, yet just 33% of them were served.

Figure 4
A Small Fraction of California’s Eligible Children Receive Subsidized ECE
 2015–2016



Source: Melnick, H., Tinubu Ali, T., Gardner, M., Maier, A., & Wechsler, M. (2017). *Understanding California’s early care and education system*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Figure 5
California’s ECE Programs Serve Few Eligible Children



Source: Melnick, H., Tinubu Ali, T., Gardner, M., Maier, A., & Wechsler, M. (2017). *Understanding California’s early care and education system*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Among children who qualify for subsidies, the state is making progress toward serving 4-year-olds. Yet it serves just over one third of its 3-year-olds, and a paltry 14% of eligible infants and toddlers receive subsidized child care (see Figure 5). In addition, a large portion of subsidized infants and toddlers are enrolled in family child care homes or license-exempt care provided by a friend, family member, or neighbor, which tend to be of lower quality than center-based care.

A lack of comprehensive statewide data makes it difficult to know precisely the degree to which unmet need varies across the state. As noted earlier, of the 10 counties we studied, only four had completed needs assessments within the past 5 years. Of those, only two—Los Angeles and Sacramento—have detailed, publicly available data. Both show big gaps between the need for and supply of preschool within their counties. Maps from both counties also show great variation in access in different areas of the county.³²

The Power of Subsidized Child Care: Jennifer’s Story

The importance of access to care, especially for working parents or those who are in school, cannot be underestimated. Access to subsidized care allows families to become self-sufficient and contribute to the economy, as described by Jennifer, a single mother who received child care vouchers through CalWORKs (California’s welfare program) in a story for the Women’s Foundation of California.

“I was making minimum wage just to get by and I had no other support. My ex-husband went missing. I didn’t make enough money for rent and child care, so I couldn’t keep working. I signed up for school and applied for CalWORKs. I felt shameful. That is, until women like Vickie Hay and Lydia Arbizo, at Orange Coast College, told me that I was not getting a hand-out, but a hand-up. I wasn’t going to drain the system ... because one day I would be making more money and paying more in taxes than I would be without these services. I would also be able to think critically and help my children to do so. I would be a positive contributing member of society and so would my children. I would have more choices, and I would not be a statistic in some sad discussion about single parents!

“Not only was I able to succeed, I was able to carry a cumulative GPA of a 3.97 through my Master’s Program. I know first-hand the changing power of an education. I was able to raise four amazing kids who also value education (with two in college and one who begins in fall—the other will be a high school senior). In addition to paying taxes, I give back in other ways to my community. I volunteer and I give other people the opportunities that were given me. I would not be as successful today if it weren’t for the supportive services I was able to utilize such as CalWORKs.”*

* Smith, S. (2012). *CalWORKs and child care: A hand up, not a hand out*. Oakland, CA: The Women’s Foundation of California. <https://womensfoundca.org/updates/calworks-and-childcare-a-hand-up-not-a-hand-out/>.

Successful Practice: San Mateo and Los Angeles Strive to Expand Access to Quality ECE

Across the state there have been several notable local attempts to expand preschool, including Big Lift in San Mateo and Expanded Transitional Kindergarten in Los Angeles. These efforts have begun to expand access in their communities, though Big Lift's progress has been limited due to a lack of stable funding.

San Mateo County: Big Lift

In 2013, Silicon Valley leaders committed to providing 2 years of high-quality preschool for all San Mateo children, with the goal of increasing the number of 3rd grade children reading proficiently. In 2016, the initiative, Big Lift, funded over 200 new preschool slots, raised the quality of existing programs for more than 1,700 preschoolers, and provided summer learning opportunities for 750 children.ⁱ The county began the initiative in four communities, with the goal of subsidizing 2 years of high-quality preschool for up to 3,000 children from low-income families who lack access, and expanding access to all families with an annual income up to \$98,500 for a family of four (less than 80% of the area median income).ⁱⁱ

Big Lift has also increased the quality of existing early learning sites. Quality improvement activities include coaching, professional development, and other services. San Mateo administrators have strategically allocated quality improvement funds so that all local classrooms receive similar levels of support. For example, some teachers receive coaching funded by a state preschool grant, while others receive coaching funded by Big Lift.

Because Big Lift is a collective impact initiative, multiple agencies are involved in leading and funding the work. The County of San Mateo, the San Mateo County Office of Education, and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation worked together to raise almost \$30 million from a federal social innovation fund. Additional support has come from a local tax, private philanthropy, businesses, and others. Just as the program was getting off the ground, however, the funding took a big hit as the federal government cut \$9 million from the social innovation fund that went to Big Lift.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, some slots will be cut—another reminder of the importance of dedicated funding for ECE. The fate of the preschool expansion is still uncertain, although quality improvement efforts continue.

Los Angeles Unified School District: Expanded Transitional Kindergarten

Since 2012, the state has funded transitional kindergarten for all 4-year-olds born September to December. As with grades k–12, transitional kindergarten is funded through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). In 2015, state law was changed to allow school districts to enroll children younger than the age of 4 years and 9 months in “expanded transitional kindergarten.” The state pays for enrollment in expanded transitional kindergarten once children turn 5, with the district paying for services until that point.

Los Angeles Unified School District has by far the largest expanded transitional kindergarten program in California. As Los Angeles Unified lost preschool slots with the decline in First 5 funding and the phasing out of a large preschool program called the School Readiness Language Development Program, the district responded by adding ECE to its 2016 strategic plan.^{iv} Expanded transitional kindergarten has since grown from 117 school sites in its first year to 288 in 2017—serving 6,100 4-year-olds who are from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth—by targeting schools in areas of high need.^v This means that the district currently serves about 12% of its 4-year-olds in expanded transitional kindergarten (an additional 27% of the district's 4-year-olds are enrolled in transitional kindergarten).^{vi} These are high-quality slots that meet standards similar to those of state

preschool: Teachers follow the Preschool Learning Foundations, have a staff-to-student ratio of 1:8, and can elect to use the same preschool curriculum as state preschool.

To pay for expanded transitional kindergarten, the district allocated \$44.1 million in funding from the district's LCFF budget in 2016–17 to cover the cost of slots until children reach age 5.^{vii} Because expanded transitional kindergarten was prioritized in schools that already served 4-year-olds as part of preschool programs that are no longer funded, funding to adapt facilities was not required.

ⁱ Big Lift also includes an early literacy and family engagement program and an informational campaign to reduce chronic absence. The Big Lift. (n.d.). Key programs. <http://www.thebiglift.org/key-programs/>.

ⁱⁱ The Big Lift. (2017). *Big Lift Inspiring Summers Eligibility*. Mountain View, CA: Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walsh, A. (2017, May 30). Big lift takes a big hit: Federal funding slash trims budget for local early education support program. *The Daily Journal*. http://www.smdailyjournal.com/news/local/big-lift-takes-a-big-hit-federal-funding-slash-trims/article_f15caf2e-4d33-5093-a7f5-c0fb21275885.html.

^{iv} L.A. Unified School District: Strategic plan 2016–2019. (2016). Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Unified School District. https://achieve.lausd.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=754&dataid=591&FileName=LAUSD_StrategicPlan16-17_vr19F.pdf.

^v Setting students up for success: Expanded Transitional Kindergarten. (n.d.). Los Angeles, CA: Advancement Project.

^{vi} LPI analysis of California Department of Education, 2017, Dataquest: Transitional kindergarten (TK) participation by race and ethnicity; Setting students up for success: Expanded Transitional Kindergarten. (n.d.). Los Angeles, CA: Advancement Project.

^{vii} Setting students up for success: Expanded Transitional Kindergarten. (n.d.). Los Angeles, CA: Advancement Project.

Subsidized care is not always directed to the children who need it most.

Access to subsidized ECE in California is governed by several factors, including income, parental work, special needs, involvement in the welfare system, and homelessness. Families are income-eligible for most state programs if they earn less than 70% of State Median Income (\$58,500 for a family of four).³³ Eligibility guidelines encourage serving certain children first, but it is unclear whether the state's most vulnerable children are receiving services.

Outreach to families of California's most vulnerable children—for example, those who are homeless or in foster care—is haphazard. Although all counties inform families of subsidies through community events, flyers in community buildings, and newsletters, many have long waiting lists, which limits their motivation to conduct extensive outreach. Michael Olenick, President and CEO of the Child Care Resource Center in Los Angeles and San Bernardino, said of the state's child care voucher program:

We don't advertise it a lot, because it's a capped entitlement, and it's very rare that we have any additional money to bring in any families. Once you're in, you tend to stay in for a very long time. We have probably six people on [the] waiting list for every one person that we're serving.

Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent targeted outreach to specific populations or interagency data sharing is used to ensure that children with the highest needs are served. A lack of both data and program coordination make it difficult to determine the degree to which children with special needs, those in the foster system, homeless children, and English learners are served.³⁴ While some programs, such as Head Start and state preschool, prioritize children by need, most ECE programs are run on a first-come, first-served basis.

Successful Practice: Los Angeles Prioritizes Communities of Concentrated Poverty

When it received funding for new preschool slots in 2015, the Los Angeles Unified School District reviewed priority ZIP code data provided by the LPC and the Advancement Project (a local nonprofit organization), along with k–12 data, to see which areas had the highest prevalence of children who were from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth. District staff then reviewed each elementary school in these areas to see if they needed preschool programs and worked with local administrators to expand access in schools with great need. “Within those areas, every school either has a state preschool or an [expanded transitional kindergarten] or an early education center. So we’ve really saturated those areas,” said Dean Tagawa, Director of Early Learning for the district.

The district also works in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services to identify areas with high percentages of foster youth. As part of a pilot program, each school or Head Start calls individual foster families to encourage them to enroll in ECE. If the family does not respond after three tries, district staff can click a button in the data system to alert the family’s case manager. Tagawa explains why this is important:

Maybe the family has a burner phone, or has moved addresses, or is in one of those in-flux [situations] to say hey, everyone is trying to reach this family. In the past, if they couldn’t reach the family, they may fall off the system—and that’s not what we wanted. We wanted to make sure these kids were getting some kind of support. That’s one new way to try to meet the needs of that particular population.

In the coming year, the district is looking to expand this pilot from 12 to 70 sites in areas of greatest need.

Source: Interview with Dean Tagawa, Director of Early Learning for the Los Angeles Unified School District (2017, June 9).

Families that are ineligible for subsidized programs often cannot afford care.

Many families earn just over the income eligibility threshold but still cannot afford the cost of high-quality ECE. From 2005 to 2017, families of four were eligible for subsidies if they earned under \$47,000. Eligibility is pegged to the state’s median income, but during the recession the legislature chose not to update the official State Median Income, resulting in progressively fewer eligible families. The income threshold was finally updated in July 2017, allowing families with incomes up to \$58,500 for a family of four to receive subsidies.⁵⁵

Families that do not receive subsidies struggle to afford the high cost of care.⁵⁶ In 2014, the average child care cost for two children under 5 would consume 42% of the income of a family at the income eligibility threshold. Yet researchers suggest that child care should account for around 10% of income for low- and middle-income families.⁵⁷ San Luis Obispo’s LPC Coordinator, Raechelle Bowlay-Sutton, noted that in her county, “there’s a huge gap between when they can qualify for services and when they can actually make it on their own as a family.” Rosa Barragan, Program Manager of Merced’s resource and referral agency, described a similar situation in her county. “One of the things here in Merced that we’re having to deal with is families who are working full-time, maybe it’s a two-parent household, and ... they’re not eligible for a subsidy program. We’re seeing it more and more now,” Barragan said. “They’re working 40 hours a week, and they’re barely making it.”

The income eligibility guidelines set perverse incentives for parents to turn down wage increases. Kim McDougal, Executive Director of YMCA Childcare Resource Services in San Diego County, said:

In the past, we would have families, sadly, decline increases in pay because they knew they would lose their child care, and the differential in pay was not going to cover their child care cost ... it's awful. You get a \$0.50 increase—which is going to be approximately \$1,040 a year—but you're not going to qualify for child care, which is then going to cost you \$15,000 a year.

Stories of this sort came up frequently in interviews. One interviewee described a mother losing her child care after picking up an extra Christmas shift. In San Mateo, where housing costs are notoriously high, an administrator described a mother who received a raise at work that caused her to lose her child care subsidy. As a result, she was unable to pay her rent due to increased child care costs, and she subsequently became homeless.

Legislation introduced in 2017 allows families to keep their child care for 12 months even if their income changes slightly, reducing the chance that small wage variations during the year will have a big impact on families' child care. The administrators we interviewed welcomed this change. However, a small, permanent wage increase can still make families close to the income threshold lose their care at the end of the year.

Licensed care for all families is scarce in every county.

Statewide data suggest that there is a severe shortage in the supply of licensed child care for all working parents, regardless of income. The California Resource and Referral Network reports that in 2014, California had licensed care slots for only 25% of the 2.6 million children under age 12 with working parents. This proportion varied by county, but most counties had licensed care slots for less than one third of these children.³⁸ Although not all working families choose to put their children in licensed care, interviews with resource and referral staff who field requests for child care suggest that parent demand greatly exceeds supply.

The supply of infant and toddler care is particularly low.³⁹ There are only 44,500 slots for children birth to age 2 in licensed child care centers but more than 851,000 children in this age group.⁴⁰ “I would actually call it a crisis,” said Ginger Hartnett, LPC Coordinator for San Diego County. “There’s not nearly enough places for the little guys. I don’t know what parents do. Your choices are really to leave the workforce and stay home, if that’s an option. Even toddler care is tough.”

California has seen a particularly large decline in licensed family child care homes, which decreased in slots by 7% between 2012 and 2014.⁴¹ The drop was severe in certain localities.⁴² Rosa Barragan reported a loss of “at least half of [Merced’s] licensed family child care providers” in recent years. The loss of family child care homes likely contributes to this growing overall problem for infant and toddler care, since these providers tend to offer much more affordable services and serve more infants and toddlers than centers.⁴³ The drivers for the lack of

One administrator described a mother who received a raise that caused her to lose her child care subsidy. As she was unable to pay her rent due to increased child care costs, she subsequently became homeless.

licensed care are similar to the challenges that will be faced in expanding subsidized care, which is discussed below.

What Are the Barriers to Expanding Subsidized Care?

To fulfill families' unmet need for ECE, California needs to expand access to subsidized care. Yet as explained above, the supply of ECE providers is low. Reasons for this include the following.

- Providers in low-income communities rely on child care subsidies to operate, yet subsidies are often too low to cover the cost of providing a quality program.
- Facilities are expensive, making it difficult to start or expand ECE programs, especially in areas with a high cost of living.
- Year-to-year contracts put providers in financial jeopardy when they over- or under-enroll.
- As a result of these challenges, counties frequently send ECE funding back to the state, despite having an unmet need for ECE.

Low reimbursement rates have discouraged providers from accepting subsidies.

ECE funding was cut deeply during the recession and has not fully recovered, despite recent investments. Starting in 2007, reimbursement rates flatlined for almost a decade. The 2016 and 2017 state budgets finally began to phase in rate increases. The Regional Market Rate for child care vouchers, which is meant to allow parents to choose from among up to 80% of the programs in their region, was not updated for many years. Ginger Hartnett of San Diego County described the effects of low reimbursement rates on programs' ability to remain solvent: "It's so low that you're really going to give up things if you accept it. It's in no way related to the actual costs of having a program."

Likewise, the inadequacy of the Standard Reimbursement Rate for state preschool and California Department of Education-run child care centers has been cited by many as a driver of program closures and a deterrent for program openings, especially in high-cost areas. Dean Tagawa, who oversees more than 80 ECE centers and state preschool programs in the Los Angeles Unified School District, said, "it becomes costly to run an early education center with a principal, an office manager, a custodian. While you may generate enough money to cover the teaching positions, all those other positions require an investment by either the organization or [the district]."

The 2016 and 2017 state budget finally updated these rates, increasing the Standard Reimbursement Rate by a total of 11% and raising the rate for vouchers to the 75th percentile of the 2016 rate.⁴⁴ "Increases in the Regional Market Rate and state [Standard] Reimbursement Rate hopefully will help child care programs stay in business," said Anthony Garcia, Director of Community Services at Child Action Inc. Yet with a rising minimum wage and such a low baseline, it is still not clear whether these increases will result in a rate that is adequate for covering the cost of high-quality staff and facilities.

The inadequacy of the Standard Reimbursement Rate for state preschool and California Department of Education-run child care centers has been cited by many as a driver of program closures and a deterrent for program openings, especially in high-cost areas.

ECE Reimbursement Rates Differ by Program

The Standard Reimbursement Rate applies to state preschool and subsidized child care centers, and is the same across the state regardless of local cost-of-living variations. The California Legislature sets this rate, and payments are awarded through annual contracts with the California Department of Education.

The Regional Market Rate applies to voucher-based child care, including CalWORKs, with regional rates differing by as much as 50% to account for cost-of-living variation. The Regional Market Rate is set according to the state's biannual survey of how much private ECE providers charge. In high-cost counties, the Regional Market Rate is often higher than the Standard Reimbursement Rate. Yet programs that receive the Regional Market Rate are required to meet less stringent quality requirements than those that receive the Standard Reimbursement Rate.

The Local Control Funding Formula is a weighted student-funding formula for transitional kindergarten to 12th grade. The state rate for transitional kindergarten is the same as kindergarten, which, in addition to federal and local revenues, is substantially higher than the Standard Reimbursement Rate, especially for part-day programs.

Sources: LPI analysis of Management Bulletin 16-11, 2016-17, California Department of Education; CalWORKs Child Care Programs RMR Ceilings, August 2016, California Department of Social Services; Funding Rates and Information, Fiscal Year 2016-17, California Department of Education.

Interviewees stressed that reimbursement rates for children birth to age 3 are especially low. Although providers receive reimbursement for infants and toddlers that is 40% to 70% higher than for preschoolers, depending on the setting and the program, the actual costs of serving infants and toddlers is much higher than the reimbursement. Garcia said that during the recession, centers serving children birth through age 5 eliminated their infant care: "It was a business decision, because it was not as cost effective to offer the infant care portion of their program. The staffing ratios are much lower." Michele Sartell, LPC Coordinator for Los Angeles County, explained that supply is depressed because of cost: "The barriers are around funding. Infant and toddler care is much more labor intensive and it's much more costly."

To account for the discrepancy between actual costs and reimbursement, some centers use tuition from older children to fund the younger ones. "If they're serving infants and toddlers, they're serving other age groups of children," said Sartell. "Because then they can, to some extent, finance their infant and toddler care on the backs of [other children]." Offsetting the cost of serving younger children with payment for older children is common for family child care homes and centers that serve infants and toddlers, with families paying similar rates for their children birth to age 5.⁴⁵ Yet as state preschool and transitional kindergarten programs have expanded, some program administrators say that older children are leaving mixed-age programs, making these programs less financially viable.

Fighting to Keep a Family Child Care Home Open: Betty's Story

Years of low pay and lack of resources takes a toll on providers, as explained by Betty, a long-time child care worker in Sacramento, in her testimony to the State Assembly's Blue Ribbon Commission on ECE.

"I love working with children. They keep you laughing, and they keep you on the move. It's perfect for an energetic person like me. For more than a decade, I worked in a child care center. But I decided to open my Family Child Care home in 1994. I wanted to create a comfortable, cozy home-away-from-home environment. ...

"But it's not easy. There's not a lot of support for us out there. ... I want to continue to provide quality child care. It's so important for my community. But low wages, no real voice on the job and a lack of resources to support the children in my care makes it very difficult. That's why so many of us end up closing our doors, which makes California's child care system so unstable.

"Some days I wonder how long I can continue doing this work at such personal sacrifice. But then I think about the children and their families who I care so deeply about. This has got to change."*

* Miller, B. (2017). *Child care workers need a voice on the job*. Sacramento, CA: Raising California Together. <http://raisingcaliforniatogether.org/2017/08/21/710/>.

Affordable facilities are often unavailable.

A lack of space for new ECE programs, whether classroom space in elementary schools or freestanding buildings for private or community-based care, is a problem that has contributed to the limited supply of licensed programs in each of the counties we examined. It is especially a barrier for the expansion of infant and toddler programs, which require more space and features, such as crib rooms or sinks by the changing table. Yet this issue tends to get little attention at the state level.

One major challenge is the sheer cost of purchasing new facilities given the cost of real estate and availability of land, especially in high-cost counties such as San Mateo County. In 2015, multiple groups in that county convened to form a facilities task force. Lack of affordable space was causing program closures, which was ranked in a 2016 survey as the biggest barrier to expanding care. The child care facilities needs assessment produced by the task force projected that the county's unmet need will increase 50% by 2025, and that it would cost \$428 million to build enough facilities in the next decade.⁴⁶

The expansion of transitional kindergarten exacerbates facilities shortages, particularly for state preschool, because classroom space—and especially space that is appropriate for preschool-age children—is limited in most districts. In San Diego and San Bernardino counties, interviewees cited the lack of classroom space as a reason they did not expand their state preschool contracts.

Facilities issues also are a reason for the decline of family child care homes. "There you're looking at issues in our county that people can't afford to buy or rent a home. You're dealing with that provider's basic housing affordability," said Kristen Anderson, Child Care Facilities Consultant to the San Mateo County Office of Education. Providers across the state lost their homes in the

recession, and in some counties, the cost of homeownership is particularly high. Rosa Barragan of Merced’s resource and referral agency explained: “It all started with the recession. We saw a lot of providers who lost their homes and a lot of families lost their jobs so they no longer had a need for providers. As far as family child care, we haven’t recovered.” Instead, she said, the number of license-exempt caregivers has risen due to licensing fees and regulations that make providing licensed care unattractive to many.

“Money gets returned as unused. It’s money that could serve more children, but it’s not able to be planned for in a very efficient way.”

The state offers limited support to address these facilities issues. Providers with current or pending state contracts have access to the Revolving Loan Fund, through which the California Department of Education provides no-interest, 10-year loans to providers. At one point, the fund had over \$178 million, but funding was reduced to \$30 million by 2015–16.⁴⁷ Anderson suggests that a lack of loan applications has plagued the program, and a main reason providers did not avail themselves of the funds may be the restrictions placed on loans. Revolving Loan funds may only be used in small amounts to fund portable classrooms or certain renovations, which does not serve the needs of many contractors, especially those who do not have the land to expand. These funds are also not well publicized and offer little technical assistance.

Short-term state contracts make it difficult for programs to plan financially.

Another reason for the inadequate supply of licensed care providers is the short duration of state contracts. Center-based state contractors, including state preschool and state-contracted child care programs, receive state funds based on their predicted enrollment at the beginning of the year. “They have to forecast how many children they are going to serve and how much they are going to collect in fees each year. The forecasting and the reality might not match,” explained Michele Sartell, Los Angeles County’s LPC Coordinator. And, if programs under-earn their contract, “they’re at risk of having their contract reduced.” The lack of a long-term contract makes planning difficult.

Another factor that makes planning difficult, said Nirmala Dillman, Child Care Partnership and School Readiness Coordinator at the San Mateo County Office of Education, is family fees. Full-day state preschool and child care programs collect fees from families on a sliding scale. Families with higher incomes pay more in fees, while the poorest families are not required to pay any fees at all, and the more a family pays, the less the state reimburses.⁴⁸ However, providers have to predict how much they will collect in fees throughout the year when they apply for state funds. If the program enrolls a child whose family fees are less than expected, the program has to cover the difference. Conversely, if the program collects more than expected by serving families with higher incomes and does not immediately use its state funds to serve other eligible children, they risk underspending their contract. Any unspent public funds must then be returned to the state. “So that money gets returned as unused. It’s money that could serve more children, but it’s not able to be planned for in a very efficient way,” Dillman explained.

By contrast, Head Start gives their contractors 5-year grants, allowing them some flexibility in how they spend over those 5 years. Head Start also provides a buffer of a few months for programs to be fully enrolled.

Successful Practice: Los Angeles County Helps Family Child Care Homes Operate Their Businesses

To help family child care homes manage their businesses and combat turnover, Child360 (formerly LAUP) offers financial services. The purpose of Child360's Business Services program is to offer "back-office administrative support to create greater efficiencies in the early learning sector, empowering providers to focus on improving their program's quality and building their staff's capacity."* Services include financial management and reporting, bookkeeping and data systems support, and fiscal coaching. Providers who receive fiscal coaching work with a financial coach who helps them write fiscal reports, compute payroll taxes, prepare a budget, and use accounting software.

Monica Cruz Flores, one of Child360's first fiscal coaches, remembers how challenging it was to get some preschool providers to embrace the fiscal coaching and compliances, but says that their attitudes changed over time.

There was resistance in the beginning. I heard a lot of 'I'm not a numbers person.' Slowly they started getting more familiar with the fiscal part of it and saw that it was an important part of their business. [Child360] has to make sure that the money it gives providers trickles down to the children in the most effective ways.

* LAUP. (n.d.). Business services. <http://laup.net/our-services/business-services/>.

Adapted from LAUP. (2014). *10 years, 10 reasons: Celebrating a decade of early education success in LA County—2014 annual report*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.

Low reimbursement rates and challenges with contracts cause counties to turn down state ECE funding.

The California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) estimates that in 2014–15, counties returned \$101 million, or 12%, of state preschool funding allocated for new slots to the state, a significant increase from prior years. In 2016, the first year of a 4-year expansion of state preschool, school districts across the state were given funding for new slots, but they utilized only 1,646 of the 5,830 slots allocated to them.⁴⁹ Each of the barriers listed in this section likely contributes to this problem: inadequate reimbursement rates, difficulty acquiring facilities, and short-term contracts that make it hard for providers to plan.

Low reimbursement rates are a particular disincentive for existing ECE providers to take on new funds. Contractors may initially accept contracts with the California Department of Education, but then have difficulty finding providers to accept funds for new slots. Kim McDougal of San Diego County's resource and referral agency said that her county is sending \$6 million in state preschool funding back to the state each year because "a lot of districts [are] opting for [transitional kindergarten] because the reimbursement rate is so much higher."

In other cases, funds are returned or not even applied for due to a lack of facilities for programs to use for expansion. Raquel Dietrich, Program Administrator in the Inyo County Office of Education, said that Inyo has not been able to apply for new funding that has become available. "[Facilities are] something really important

Low reimbursement rates are a particular disincentive for existing ECE providers to take on new funds.

that we struggle with. ... It's not just about slots, but access to facilities where we could put those children." The same is true for San Mateo: "Every year San Mateo County turns down about a million dollars that would support subsidized care [in child care subsidies] because there is no space within the existing child care supply," said Kitty Lopez, Director of First 5 San Mateo.

Finally, funds are returned because individual programs predict higher enrollment than they end up having. As described earlier, contractors must return these funds to the state—but if they enroll more children than expected, they will not be reimbursed. One stopgap solution that Bay Area counties are experimenting with is a legislative pilot that allows them to repurpose these funds.

Successful Practice: Bay Area Counties' Pilot Improves Access in High-Cost Counties

Bay Area counties have worked to bridge the gap between eligibility and access through a pilot program for subsidized care. The state passed legislation that currently allows four counties—Alameda, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara—to retain funds from under-earned contracts and use that funding to raise reimbursement rates for providers and to increase income eligibility thresholds for participating families. Representatives from several other counties have introduced legislation to support pilots in their areas as well.ⁱ

The pilot allows the counties to

- raise the income eligibility threshold from 70% to 85% of State Median Income in participating counties;
- increase reimbursement rates for providers of subsidized care;
- increase family fees to bridge the gap between subsidy payment and providers' costs; and
- move funds more easily from under-enrolled to over-enrolled programs.ⁱⁱ

The ability to more easily transfer funds among programs allows these counties to use funds from unearned contracts to maintain or increase enrollment across programs, rather than sending the funds back to the state. "We realized that as the cost of living and doing business in San Mateo County rose, we were losing state-funded contracts. And we were turning back money, or weren't able to utilize what we had. That was really having a very erosive effect," said Jean Marie Houston, Early Learning Support Services Administrator at the San Mateo County Office of Education. Annual evaluations of the San Mateo pilot show a number of successes associated with these changes: The county has retained 20 out of 22 participating contractors and has achieved a 50% reduction in funds relinquished to the state since it launched the pilot in 2004.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ California Department of Education. (2017). Pending early learning legislation. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ce/legupdateapr2017.asp> (accessed 10/30/17).

ⁱⁱ Mission Analytics Group. (2015). San Mateo County individualized child care subsidy pilot project 2014/15. San Francisco, CA: San Mateo County Office of Education; Fisher-Dahms, C., & Neville-Morgan, S. (2017). Quality Rating and Improvement System update. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ce/documents/grisupdatesapr2017.pdf>; Santa Clara County Office of Education. (2017). Individualized child care subsidy pilots in California. San Jose, CA: Santa Clara County Office of Education.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mission Analytics Group. (2015). San Mateo County individualized child care subsidy pilot project 2014/15. San Francisco, CA: San Mateo County Office of Education.

What Prevents Families From Accessing Care?

In addition to the limited number of slots available, families face challenges finding ECE that meets their needs.

- Many parents need full-day or alternative hour care that can be difficult to find.
- Rural areas have few programs, and those that exist may be far from where families live or work.

Many families need full-time or alternative hour care.

Sources in all counties noted that part-day slots do not meet the needs of working families. Just under half of children in California’s ECE programs are enrolled in full-day programs, and many of these operate for fewer than 7 hours per day.⁵⁰ Only one in four state preschool students were enrolled full day, compared to 63% of transitional kindergarten students.⁵¹ “For some families, it’s great that their child can be in [part-day] pre-k, but for many of them it’s their child care, because they’re working,” explained Raquel Dietrich, Director of Child Development at the Superintendent of Schools in Inyo County. It is infeasible, she said, for most parents to pick their children up after a morning state preschool session and take them to another provider for the afternoon.

Although the legislature has committed to expanding full-day slots for state preschool in recent years, interviewees mentioned that there have been some logistical challenges to utilizing these slots. For example, full-day state preschool must operate 250 days per year, yet two thirds of slots are operated by school districts that are typically only open for 180 days.⁵² The overhead cost of maintaining the facilities just for preschool classes can be high, making it difficult for districts to take advantage of full-day program funding.

Many county officials were very positive, however, about the impact of the Office of Head Start expanding its number of full-day slots in 2016. Samantha Thompson, Early Education Program Manager at the Merced County Office of Education, said:

Moving to those extended-day slots ... I think that’s huge. As great as it was that we were connecting our preschoolers to preschool settings [with part-day slots], it really was not meeting the need of the community in terms of full-day child care and development services.

Even full-day, center-based programs do not meet some families’ needs, especially low-income families who tend to work untraditional schedules. A national study suggests that of mothers employed outside the home, only 27% worked regular hours.⁵³ “Nontraditional hour care is an ongoing challenge. ... We continue to work with programs, encouraging and supporting them to extend their hours in order to fully serve families in our community,” said Shana Paulson of San Luis Obispo County’s resource and referral agency. In Merced, “we have lots of industries in the county, like agriculture, that work 24-hour shifts, and we don’t have centers that operate to meet ongoing demand,” said Samantha Thompson, Early Education Program Manager at the Merced County Office of Education.

Struggling to Find Child Care on an Unpredictable Work Schedule: Efuru’s Story

Many families deal with the stress of juggling multiple child care arrangements, as Efuru Lynch does. Her struggle is described in the following excerpt from a 2014 Al Jazeera America report.

“[Efuru] Lynch, a front-desk clerk at a San Francisco hotel, [is] a single mom. When Lynch is on the afternoon-to-evening shift, her day is long and hectic: Take the girls to Journie’s school, return with 3-year-old Anna, get ready for work, take Anna to day care, park at the train station, ride the BART to San Francisco, transfer to a bus, work eight hours at the hotel, commute back to Oakland, pick up both girls and get as much sleep as possible. Repeat. ... As a hotel clerk with unpredictable hours, Lynch needs flexible child care. Her hours are set week to week, and she isn’t guaranteed a full-time schedule. Sometimes, [her children’s grandmother] isn’t available to help out. ‘If not, I have to find somebody else,’ Lynch said. ‘Right now, it’s pretty much whoever’s around. I’m juggling three or four people.’

“Lynch is considered low-income, earning about \$40,000 per year for her family of three—about 200 percent of the federal poverty level. However, she earns too much to receive public child care assistance. ... ‘I’m thankful for what I have—that I do have a job, that I am able to provide for my kids. I don’t have to be on public assistance. But I’m still struggling.’”*

* Kim, E. T., & Vo, L. T. (2014, June 11). In between in America: Above the poverty line but not quite middle class. *Al Jazeera America*. <http://projects.aljazeera.com/2014/poverty-california/childcare.html>.

Families in rural areas face unique barriers to access.

Although access to high-quality ECE is a problem throughout California, families in rural areas face unique challenges. Transportation, for example, can pose a formidable barrier for families who live far away from any program that meets their needs, and ECE programs typically do not provide buses as k–12 does.

The small number of children in rural areas also limits ECE options for families. In San Bernardino County, Child Care Resource Center President and CEO Michael Olenick explained: “There are places where there aren’t enough kids to support a child care center, so you either have family child care or you are using a family [member], a friend, or a neighbor, because the other options aren’t there.” Jody Veenker, Executive Director of First 5 Inyo, agreed that care in the smallest population centers is often limited to family child care, and describes those slots as “competitive” in a county with fewer than 30 licensed child care homes. In both Inyo and Lake counties, this situation is exacerbated by a shortage of appropriate facilities that providers can use to open new programs or expand existing ones.

Section Summary: Access to ECE

Far too many children across California lack access to affordable ECE. Most eligible families, especially those with infants and toddlers, are not receiving subsidized services, and many more struggle to afford the cost of care. More families were made eligible in July 2017 when the income eligibility threshold was raised, but funding for available subsidies remains limited, and many

families, particularly those in rural areas, suffer from a lack of options. Some counties, however, have worked to expand preschool access to 4-year-olds locally.

The limited supply of licensed ECE providers is a critical barrier to expanding access. Low reimbursement rates, especially for infant and toddler programs, and the high cost of facilities in some areas are partially to blame. Adding to these challenges, short-term contracts with the state make it difficult for providers to keep their enrollment, and therefore their finances, stable. These are all reasons that counties return needed ECE funding to the state.

Access is further limited by challenges that families face in finding ECE that meets their needs. These challenges include a lack of full-day and alternative hour care. Families in rural areas also face inadequate transportation and limited program options.

There is an urgent need for greater state investments in California ECE to ensure that all 3- and 4-year-olds have access to preschool, and that all children birth to age 3 have quality child care when their parents work.

California should expand access to and ensure an adequate supply of licensed providers through a series of more immediate steps, including expanding the availability of full-day programs to better meet the needs of working families; providing funding for facilities with providers who are willing to serve more infants and toddlers; increasing funding for the Revolving Loan Fund, which supports the purchase and renovation of facilities for ECE programs; changing 1-year state contracts for pre-k and child care to 5-year grants; and increasing reimbursement rates for infant and toddler programs.

As the state works toward more ambitious, comprehensive investments and reforms to improve access, these short-term steps will help more children get access to ECE and more providers to keep their doors open.

ECE Workforce

Early childhood educators play a key role in creating the rich learning environments that define high-quality early childhood education. Neuroscience research has shown that stable and responsive relationships between children and caregivers are central to healthy brain development in the early years,⁵⁴ and the quality of instruction is the most important driver of child outcomes.⁵⁵ This section addresses the following questions.

- **Who is teaching our youngest children?** California has a long way to go to ensure that its workforce is well qualified and well supported. Training requirements for educators are inconsistent across programs, even for children of the same age, leading to a fragmented workforce with a wide range of education and experience. Programs struggle to recruit and retain qualified educators, even when requirements are low.
- **What are barriers to recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce?** Compensation for almost all staff is extremely low. Coupled with a lack of professional support and disparities in wages among programs, this leads to high staff turnover.
- **What challenges do educators face in pursuit of higher education?** ECE educators pursue higher education to meet qualification requirements or advance in the field, but they often lack support to navigate, pay for, and make time to complete their degrees.

Who Is Teaching Our Youngest Children?

There are over 107,000 demographically diverse professionals providing ECE to children birth to age 5 in California.⁵⁶ The majority are women of color, half of whom are English learners, mirroring the linguistic and ethnic background of California's children.⁵⁷ California's ECE programs need educators who are well-prepared and well-supported to teach and care for the state's youngest children. However, we found the following.













- Credential requirements vary widely across programs, even when programs serve similar children and offer comparable compensation.
- Educator shortages exist across counties and programs.
- Programs struggle to retain the teachers they hire, which can negatively impact children's development.

Inconsistent state requirements lead to disparate qualifications among educators.

Requirements for early educators vary substantially across programs, even for teachers of children of the same age. For teachers of preschool-age children, for example, several publicly funded ECE programs require specialized college-level training in early childhood education; others require only a high school degree or have no requirement at all (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Educator Credential Requirements Vary by Program

Minimum requirements for preschool teachers

		Minimum Teacher Requirements	
		Degree Requirement	ECE Coursework
Alternative Payment Program	License-Exempt Providers	 No requirement	 No requirement
	Family Child Care Homes	 No requirement	 No requirement
	Centers	 No requirement	 12 units
Transitional Kindergarten		 Bachelor's degree & teaching credential	 24 units
California State Preschool Program		 No degree requirement, must have 40 units of college coursework	 24 units
Head Start		 Associate or bachelor's degree*	 Degree must be in ECE or related field

* Although an associate degree or equivalent experience is the minimum requirement, the Head Start Act requires that 50% of all teachers in center-based programs nationwide have at least a bachelor's degree with a specialization in early childhood education.

Sources: Program Evaluation Process 5 CCR § 18279, 5 CA ADC § 18279; 22 CCR § 101216 (2004); Administration of Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). Head Start policy and regulations. <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>.

Among California's major ECE programs, transitional kindergarten has the highest standards for educators, with all educators needing a bachelor's degree, teaching credential, and coursework in ECE. State preschool and state-contracted child care centers require lead educators to have at least 24 units of early childhood development coursework in addition to other college coursework. Aides must have at least 12 units of early childhood development coursework or an associate degree in child development. Educators in Head Start programs must have an associate or bachelor's degree with a specialization in early childhood education, while Early Head Start requires a Child Development Associate or comparable credential with a focus on infants and toddlers.

Most other private ECE programs in the state, including those receiving state-subsidized vouchers through the state welfare program, have minimal requirements. Educators in licensed private

center-based child care programs must have completed 12 units of early childhood development coursework, while there is no education requirement for assistants. Educators in family child care homes and license-exempt caregivers need only pass a criminal background check; they do not have to meet any educational standards, although they must meet basic health and safety requirements.

ECE educators range from being school-based preschool teachers with a teaching credential to educators with no formal education, thereby creating an extremely fragmented field.

As a result, ECE educators range from being school-based preschool teachers with a teaching credential to educators with no formal education, thereby creating an extremely fragmented field. Marcy Whitebook, Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, said:

There is something really bizarre about the state having a preschool system, that if it's in a public school and kids are born in the fall, their teachers have master's degrees and get paid like other [elementary] teachers, and all of the other state preschool programs have a totally different thing. That's a fundamental problem around equity. No one would stand for it in k–12 education.

Further, California's requirements for educators in some programs, especially state pre-k, remain lower than many other states. Educators in over half of state pre-k programs nationwide are required to hold a bachelor's degree whether they teach in a school or private center.⁵⁸ Research indicates that pre-k teachers with a bachelor's degree and training in ECE are generally more effective than teachers who lack these qualifications, and that having specialized training in child development and age-appropriate instructional strategies is particularly important. This education and training prepares teachers to provide developmentally appropriate instruction that is warm, responsive, and language rich, to the benefit of children's skill development. It also prepares teachers to effectively scaffold children's learning—guiding them through the development of progressively more sophisticated knowledge and skills.⁵⁹ Likewise, both the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council recommend that states align qualifications for educators of children from birth to age 8, with a goal of all lead teachers having a bachelor's degree and specialization in early childhood.⁶⁰ Though the goal is aspirational for most states, including California, it underscores the variation and relatively low level of educator requirements in the state.

Programs struggle to recruit qualified educators.

Though data on the number of ECE vacancies in California are unavailable, administrators report that attracting individuals to the ECE profession poses challenges across the state. “Obviously it's difficult to [recruit] highly qualified staff if you aren't able to pay a living wage,” said Dawn Kurtz, Chief Program Officer at Child360 (formerly LAUP). In San Luis Obispo, Shana Paulson, Family Childcare Administrator, observed that “center-based programs continue to struggle to attract and sustain qualified staff. This includes state preschool and Head Start programs that can typically provide benefits and higher pay.” Administrators in rural counties, in particular, reported that hiring early childhood educators and administrators is consistently difficult due to limited hiring pools. In Trinity and Lake counties, program administrators recounted having vacancies that lasted several

years. Site supervisors, who must hold at least an associate degree and a state permit to oversee child development programs, are also in short supply.

Further, several interviewees reported that recruitment is particularly difficult for bilingual and special education staff. “They’re really challenged to find not only qualified staff, but also bilingual staff,” said Paulson. Likewise, Renee Menefee, Executive Director of Early Childhood Services at the Shasta County Office of Education, described the difficulty recruiting bilingual coaches, who need specialized knowledge and experience:

There have been some that have been able to limp along, but we also did contract with an interpreter. ... As we hire new mentors, the areas that we are really looking for are mentors that are bilingual, have specific infant/toddler background ... and special education because that is also a gap in services.

High turnover creates instability and disrupts continuity of care.

Retaining early childhood educators—particularly those who are highly credentialed—is also a challenge. National data indicate that the average annual turnover rate for early educators was 13% in 2012. In that year, about half of all ECE providers reported experiencing turnover, with the average turnover rate at 25%.⁶¹

Statewide data on educator retention do not exist, but interviewees consistently reported that ECE providers struggle to retain staff, especially in high-cost counties. In San Mateo County, where real estate is among the most expensive in the state,⁶² ECE programs are finding that “teachers can’t afford to stay,” explained Jean-Marie Houston, Administrator of Early Learning Support Services at the San Mateo County Office of Education. “So we’re really facing a huge crisis there.” Samantha Thompson, Early Education Program Manager at the Merced County Office of Education, agreed that retention is a critical issue: “One of our more poignant questions that we tend to ask is ‘how do we advocate for our existing workforce for increased salaries?’ and looking at retention for them.”

Though turnover is a challenge across the field, the problem is concentrated in some hard-to-staff areas. National data suggest that the problem of turnover is greatest among for-profit child care chains, with a 27% annual turnover rate, while school-based programs and nonprofit centers report turnover of 14% and 13%, respectively. Head Start rates are lower, at 10%.⁶³ In interviews with California stakeholders, school districts reported fewer challenges with turnover than did other types of providers. Dean Tagawa, Executive Director of Early Childhood Education for Los Angeles Unified School District, noted that the district “[doesn’t] have a high turnover rate with [its] teaching staff,” in large part due to above-average pay for the field. He also acknowledged that this low turnover is not the norm because “in the larger early education world, [providing] parity in pay and a livable wage is really difficult.”

Likewise, some non-district ECE programs reported losing educators—particularly those with higher education degrees—to positions in elementary schools that often pay more for comparable work and have better working conditions. Dr. Fabio Robles, Director of Early Education and School Readiness at the Trinity County Office of Education, explained: “We can’t compete with the school districts. They can offer a lot more overall packages than our state preschools and some of our other early childhood programs can offer.” Some see this transition to elementary school positions as an opportunity for early childhood teachers to advance, earning more in the process. Others, such as one early childhood leader in Los Angeles, worry that ECE programs can end up a “training ground”

for local districts, exacerbating the challenges that ECE programs face in building and maintaining a qualified workforce.

Turnover among early childhood staff is a concern because continuity of care is an important dimension of quality in ECE—one that helps to support the formation of stable and sensitive relationships between children and the adults who care for them.⁶⁴ Turnover can also be expensive. Across industries, the cost of replacing an employee is estimated to be around 20% of annual salary, while evidence from k–12 schools indicates the cost of replacing a teacher may be as high as \$20,000 in an urban school district.⁶⁵ Further, turnover may limit the impact of other investments, such as support for quality improvement initiatives or teacher development. Dawn Kurtz expressed concern that “if you have a lot of turnover, then all of that information leaves with the people that were trained.”

What Are the Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining a Qualified Workforce?

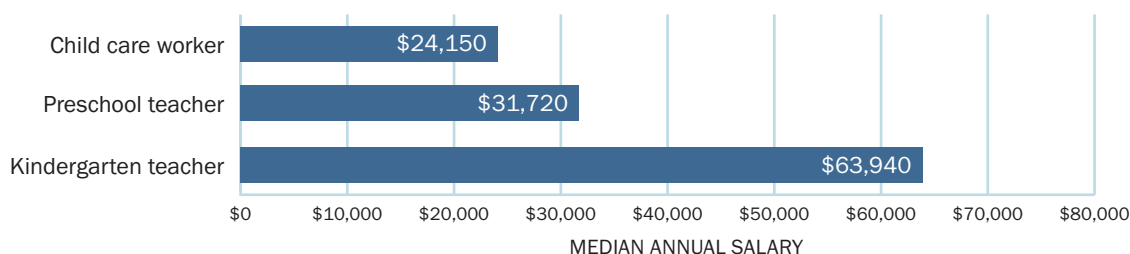
In California, and across the nation, early childhood programs face significant challenges to recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Reasons for this include the following.

- Compensation for early childhood educators varies but is typically very low, especially given the specialized education required in some programs. Some programs blend and braid funding streams to create full-time jobs and increase pay, but doing so can be challenging.
- Educators often get little professional support, making the profession highly stressful. Some districts are experimenting with joint professional learning with early elementary teachers, who have more professional development opportunities.

Low compensation drives workforce instability.

The median annual wage of California’s child care workers is \$24,150, putting them in the seventh percentile of earners in the state. Nearly half of these workers rely on some form of public income support.⁶⁶ Preschool educators earn somewhat more than child care workers, but still earn half the annual wage of kindergarten teachers, on average. In contrast, transitional kindergarten teachers have the same salary, benefits, and working conditions as other public school teachers (see Figure 7).

Figure 7
California’s Early Educators Earn Very Low Wages



Note: Transitional kindergarten teachers are on the same salary scale as kindergarten teachers, so their median annual salary is likely similar.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *High-quality early learning settings depend on a high-quality workforce: Low compensation undermines quality*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education.

Poor compensation contributes to the instability of the ECE workforce. Caedy Minoletti, Executive Director of the Human Response Network in Trinity County, observed, “it’s hard to find quality providers and preschool teachers when we can’t pay them what they deserve to be paid.” Kim McDougal, Executive Director of the YMCA Child Care Resources Service in San Diego County, noted that in her county: “There’s a lot of turnover because the pay is so low, and obviously the work is very demanding.” These observations are reinforced by evidence from research. One study of turnover in California child care centers found that educators earning lower wages were more likely to leave their positions than educators who earned relatively more.⁶⁷ National data from Head Start indicate that nearly one third of all staff departures stem from low compensation,⁶⁸ and surveys show that the vast majority of teachers—around 75%—would be more likely to stay in the field if pay were better.⁶⁹

Low compensation is exacerbated by the proliferation of part-time programs that do not provide full-time positions for early educators. In part-time programs, even relatively high hourly wages often do not amount to a living wage. Nancy Norton, Director of Early Learning Educational Support at San Luis Obispo County Office of Education, explained: “Even though the pay is good, it’s only a part-time position. ... Our area is very expensive to live in, and you cannot make it on one person’s salary or have a part-time salary and live in this area.”

The prevalence of part-time positions and small businesses such as family child care homes in ECE contributes to a lack of benefits, such as health insurance, worker’s compensation, or retirement fund contributions among early educators.⁷⁰ As Raquel Dietrich, Director of Child Development at the Superintendent of Schools in Inyo County, described, “my positions are for part-time teachers ... my positions don’t have benefits, I struggle.” Anna Rodriguez, a family child care provider in Santa Cruz County, described her own experience with strenuous working conditions and limited access to benefits in her testimony to the California Senate Labor Committee.

National data from Head Start indicate that nearly one third of all staff departures stem from low compensation, and surveys show that the vast majority of teachers—around 75%— would be more likely to stay in the field if pay were better.

Several years ago I seriously injured myself after falling backwards over a small child. I fell on my back while clutching a 7-month-old baby in my arms. My only thought as I fell to the ground was to do whatever I could to protect the baby in my arms and the small children running at my feet. In that moment, I knew how to protect the children in my care, but I did not know how to protect myself. ... I could not close my child care for even a day to recover. My family was counting on my income and the parents I serve were counting on my care. To add insult to injury, I had no health care. My only two options were to pay out of pocket or suck it up. I did not have the money to see a doctor, so I sucked it up.⁷¹

Some providers have found workable solutions for raising compensation by layering resources from multiple funding streams. For example, providers in several counties have layered state preschool and Head Start dollars to support full-time teaching positions. Per Ginger Hartnett, LPC Coordinator for San Diego County, this strategy has helped “to keep enrollment up and just to keep teachers employed” in the face of stagnant or declining state funding.

California's ECE programs will also need to contend with the state's forthcoming minimum wage increase, which will have implications for the compensation of early educators. Among California's child care workers, for example, median hourly pay is just over \$11,⁷² so wages for many of these educators will need to rise to comply with the new law.

At the Salvation Army's Booth Memorial Child Development Center and family shelter in Oakland, city minimum wage increases in 2015 immediately took a toll. "We're scrambling to find ways to keep the doors open," Captain Dan Williams, Alameda County Coordinator of the Salvation Army, reported to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. As in other child care centers, the costs of paying workers a \$12.25-an-hour wage have put his already stretched organization \$146,000 over budget and threatened 63 child care slots.⁷³

Wages for higher paid staff will likely also need to rise to avoid exacerbating wage compression, where there are only minor differences in pay between workers with different levels of education and experience, explained Ginger Hartnett: "There's that effect that if you're going to raise minimum wage for all of those folks, then the people who are a level up have to get a little bit of a raise, and there's sort of a snowball effect." Because salaries comprise a significant portion of the costs of providing ECE, many programs will likely need to increase rates to remain solvent without compromising services after the new minimum wage takes effect.⁷⁴ Managing these significant financial changes is difficult, especially for smaller businesses. Reimbursement rates for state pre-k and child care programs, which have traditionally been inadequate to cover the true cost of providing care, have risen recently, but it is not clear that even these higher rates will be sufficient to address rising educator wages.

Successful Practice: Elk Grove Boosts Educators' Pay by Braiding Funding

Elk Grove Unified School District in Sacramento County braids funds from multiple sources, including state preschool, Head Start, and federal Title I dollars, to create teaching jobs that have more hours and better pay than is typical in ECE. Through braiding, the district ensures that its district-employed preschool educators, all of whom hold teaching certificates, have full-time positions that are paid according to the district salary scale.

The district offers preschool educators two different classes to teach, explained Claudia Charter, a Program Specialist in Elk Grove's PreK-6 Education division. For example, an educator might teach a part-day state preschool class in the morning, followed by a part-day Head Start class in the afternoon. Educators can also teach a combination of state preschool and Title I, or Head Start and Title I classes, to reach full-time status. Though educators may choose to teach part time, most take full-time roles, according to Charter, who estimated that 21 of the district's 25 preschool educators are full-time.

District leadership has been a key ingredient in supporting ECE educators in the district. While funding ECE can have a big payoff, using local school funding comes at the expense of other k-12 programs, so not all districts are willing to invest. Charter believes that "the reason that it's worked for Elk Grove is because it's just been a really big commitment from the school district to have a really high-quality preschool."

Source: Interview with Natalie Woods-Andrews, Director of the Early Learning Department at the Sacramento County Office of Education, and Nancy Herota, Co-Director of School Readiness Department, Sacramento County Office of Education (2017, June 6).

Teacher stress and a lack of professional support contribute to turnover.

Working conditions, such as site leadership and opportunities for professional learning and collaboration, have a significant impact on retention of staff and staff effectiveness.⁷⁵ Early childhood educators often lack many of the professional supports that are common for k–12 teachers. For instance, paid time for collaborating with colleagues—routine in most k–12 schools—is uncommon in ECE.⁷⁶

Professional learning opportunities for early educators working in subsidized ECE programs generally vary extensively by program. Transitional kindergarten teachers, who receive the same supports as other k–12 educators, complete a formal induction program⁷⁷ and have access to ongoing professional development through their school and district. All Head Start programs provide a system of professional development for staff that includes at least 15 hours of training each year and will now offer intensive coaching to staff who would benefit most.⁷⁸ In state pre-k programs, educators complete at least 105 hours of professional development, such as college courses, conferences, and workshops, every 5 years, much of which is not compensated.⁷⁹ In licensed child care centers, there are no formal requirements for ongoing professional learning, though safety training is now required as part of the licensing process.⁸⁰ Across these programs, educators may have access to learning opportunities provided through local or state quality improvement initiatives, such as participation in instructional coaching through a local QRIS, or training on California’s early learning standards through the California Preschool Instructional Network, but this access also varies from county to county, and often depends on the type of program.

Though most programs require some professional development, early educators are not always paid for time spent on activities that occur outside of teaching hours, including professional learning and planning time. Staff in publicly funded programs such as state preschool and Head Start are more likely than private child care providers to receive compensation for these activities.⁸¹ A recent survey of ECE site administrators in Alameda County found that only about half of ECE staff in public or private programs are paid for work completed outside of the regular workday, including parent-teacher conferences or home visits. Similarly, just over half of these staff are consistently paid for required professional development or trainings and just over two thirds get paid planning time.⁸² “Because staffing is the biggest cost and because all of these programs are bare bones,” said Marcy Whitebook, “they don’t think about staffing the day with time for the teacher.” In the absence of paid planning and professional development time, ECE teachers may need to prepare for classes or attend trainings after hours or on weekends.⁸³

Teaching is a highly stressful profession relative to other fields,⁸⁴ and the combination of limited professional support and low compensation makes ECE particularly high stress. National data underscore the difficulty early educators experience in their work with children.⁸⁵ Further, a recent study of the ECE workforce in Washington, DC, found that, among educators who indicated they might leave the field in the next 3 years, the most common reasons included desiring more opportunity for career growth, seeking higher wages or better benefits, and stress. This stress contributes to high levels of turnover in the field and has implications for classroom instruction because teachers’ well-being can affect classroom environments and children’s behavior.⁸⁶

If California hopes to build a stable and healthy workforce, the state must better support its early educators, particularly those in private centers, who tend to have the lowest pay and the fewest supports.

Successful Practice: Fillmore Unified School District Supports Professional Learning by Bringing Together Educators From Preschool, Transitional Kindergarten, and Kindergarten

ECE teachers in Fillmore Unified School District have the rare opportunity to collaborate with each other and with kindergarten teachers to enhance their skill set in support of children’s learning. In just more than a year, Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services Martha Hernandez and her team have opened six full-day state preschool sites and three part-day transitional kindergarten classrooms. To support developmentally appropriate practice and provide professional learning for educators in the growing program, the district secured philanthropic support for a districtwide preschool pilot of their k–5 Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model.

The SEAL model provides support for a 10-day “summer bridge” professional learning program during which preschool, transitional kindergarten, and kindergarten teachers co-teach a small group of incoming kindergartners. This program allows for a rich exchange of learning among teachers who typically do not get to collaborate, and helps to prepare the students to enter the k–12 system. The teachers try out strategies, especially those for working with the district’s many dual language learners, then together debrief and plan the next day’s instruction each afternoon. SEAL trainers provide an opportunity to dig deeply into the research and rationale behind each teaching strategy.

This collaboration is difficult to extend into the school year, although the district is trying. State preschool teachers, as non-credentialed employees, do not qualify for the weekly common planning time that other teachers in the district receive. Instead, due to state preschool program hour requirements, preschool teachers often receive SEAL training in the afternoon or on the weekend. The Fillmore team is currently working with principals to negotiate a monthly time for preschool teachers to participate in joint planning. It can also be difficult to find the funding to support the inclusion of preschool teachers because their students don’t generate funding through the Local Control Funding Formula and are not included in federal Title I funds. However, because early childhood, early literacy, and support for English learners are all priority areas under the district plan, the district is allocating some local funding to its preschool program.

Despite the challenges, the Fillmore Unified team is committed to its investment in ECE. Hernandez notes that going into the ECE classrooms almost brought her to tears. She saw “the teachers working together, and the students, just from having a little bit of SEAL, seamlessly transitioned into TK and K. They all were participating; there was not one child on the first day who did not raise their hand and speak up.” The team has made great strides breaking down silos and working to fully include ECE programs in professional learning opportunities.

Source: Interview with Martha Hernandez, Assistant Superintendent of the Fillmore Unified School District, and Holly Harvin, Director of Early Childhood of the Fillmore Unified School District (2017, August 16).

What Challenges Do Educators Face in Pursuit of Higher Education?

Building an effective early childhood workforce requires that educators be well equipped to perform the complex work of supporting children’s learning and development. Higher education plays a crucial role in building educators’ core skills and knowledge. Yet there are challenges.

- Underpaid ECE educators often struggle to afford the costs of education.
- ECE educators have difficulty completing the required courses to qualify for higher paying jobs.

Pursuing higher education is often unaffordable for current ECE educators.

Lead educators in transitional kindergarten, Head Start, state preschool, and some child care programs are required to have some college-level coursework, if not a degree; however, many current early childhood educators began working in the field before college-level coursework was encouraged or required. Often, these educators are returning to school to earn required credits to meet the standards of higher paying early childhood programs.⁸⁷ However, pursuing a degree is costly.⁸⁸ In a field that pays notoriously low wages, Martha Hermosillo, Executive Director, First 5 Merced, noted, “it’s expensive to try to move forward educationally”—prohibitively so for many educators.

There are some supports for educators returning to school. The Child Development Staff Retention Program, administered by the California Department of Education and commonly known as AB 212, supports the ongoing education of the ECE workforce. AB 212 funding is allocated to each county’s LPC to support retention activities among educators working in state-contracted ECE programs. LPCs have flexibility in deciding how to spend these funds, but offering stipends and scholarships for higher education is common.⁸⁹ For example, Renee Menefee, Executive Director of Early Childhood Services at Shasta County Office of Education, said: “We know that one of the barriers for people taking classes is the initial upfront cost.” Shasta County and its local community college have developed an agreement, supported in part by the county’s AB 212 funds, to ensure educators are not required to pay any upfront costs to enroll in core ECE courses, even for textbooks. Los Angeles County similarly uses its AB 212 funds to award stipends to eligible educators who complete three or six units of college coursework in child development or a related field.⁹⁰ Though AB 212 is among the most significant sources of state support for educator education and retention, it amounts to less than \$11 million annually.⁹¹

Aspiring and current educators struggle to complete their degrees.

Even if educators can afford to return to school, planning coursework and finding time to attend courses can be challenging. Because many educators are balancing full-time jobs and coursework,⁹² they tend to enroll in courses intermittently, working to accrue credits over several years. As Mabel Munoz, Senior Program Officer at First 5 LA, observed, “we know people in the field go in and out of college education.” This churn in and out of higher education can complicate degree planning because colleges and universities make changes to curricula, course offerings, and degree requirements over time. Educators sometimes return to school only to find that “a lot of coursework they had taken before is not counted toward a degree at all,” explained Cindy Faulkner, Operations Manager at First 5 San Bernardino. That adds time and expense to achieving academic milestones.

In general, selecting the right courses to efficiently earn a desired degree or meet licensing standards is challenging. “A lot of people have a significant amount of coursework that’s not always toward a degree,” explained Munoz. Nirmala Dillman, Child Care Partnership and School Readiness Coordinator at the San Mateo County Office of Education, agreed.

The pipeline for 4-year degrees is difficult to navigate for early childhood teachers in general. ... They’ve tended to stay in community college and take a lot of units in early childhood instead of transferring to take general education, and transferring to a 4-year institution, and being further along [toward a bachelor’s degree].

The difficulty of completing a degree is exacerbated when aspiring and current educators attend multiple institutions in their pursuit of credentials. Credits earned at one institution may not transfer to another, or students may be required to take lower division courses that were not available at their previous institution.⁹⁵ These issues can impede steady progress toward a degree, especially when students hope to transfer from a community college to a California State University in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree or k–12 credential.

Successful Practice: San Mateo’s Community Colleges Offer Advising Tailored to ECE Students

Recognizing that ECE students face challenges in completing their degrees in a timely, cost-effective way, San Mateo’s community college district has collaborated with local early childhood stakeholders to provide supports to help guide students through their academic pursuits. Two local community colleges—Cañada and Skyline—now support full-time program service coordinators who specialize in advising ECE students on their academic pathway.

Jean-Marie Houston, Early Learning Support Services Administrator at the San Mateo County Office of Education, explained:

What we discovered was that the traditional guidance counselors at the colleges didn’t understand the ECE world, and the ECE students needed some help in getting through the appropriate coursework in an efficient way and that allows them to effectively move forward quickly to what their goals were.

Initially funded by First 5 San Mateo, the positions are now supported by ongoing funding from the community colleges themselves. This initiative has been complemented by other efforts to promote higher education attainment among ECE students, such as a textbook loan program that helps offset the significant costs associated with textbook purchases.

Source: Interview with Jean-Marie Houston, Early Learning Support Services Administrator, San Mateo County Office of Education (2017, May 23).

Alignment and articulation agreements can help students plan for and achieve degrees in a timely and cost-effective manner.⁹⁴ To be aligned, courses must have comparable content across schools or institutions, while articulation agreements ensure that credits smoothly transfer from one educational institution to another. There have been several major projects to promote alignment and articulation of college coursework in California in recent years. For example, the Curriculum Alignment Project convened a statewide group of community college stakeholders to develop an

eight-course core for early childhood educators that has since been adopted by 98 community colleges. The group has also undertaken work to develop consistent courses for specializations such as working with infants and toddlers or children with special needs.⁹⁵ PEACH (Partners in Education, Articulation and Coordination through Higher Education), a Los Angeles-based, First 5-funded consortium, is also working on articulation, among other efforts.

Successful Practice: Los Angeles County Supports Articulation of ECE Coursework

Partnerships for Education, Articulation and Coordination through Higher Education—PEACH—is an initiative designed to strengthen educational and professional development pathways for the early childhood workforce in Los Angeles County. Started in 2011 and funded by First 5 LA, the initiative brings together a diverse group of stakeholders from early childhood education and institutes of higher education, including 19 community colleges, four California State University campuses, the University of California at Los Angeles, and two private universities.ⁱ

In its first 5 years, one of PEACH’s central goals was to improve articulation and alignment among colleges in the Los Angeles region to make sure courses are comparable and credits are transferable across schools and institutions. To accomplish this, a formal working group teamed up with campus articulation officers, who manage articulation and curriculum coordination initiatives, and higher education faculty. The working group first took stock of existing alignment and articulation efforts in California and created a grid of articulated courses in Los Angeles (LA) County. Through this process, the group “defined their work,” explained Janet Fish, Professor Emeritus at California State University Northridge and Co-Lead Consultant for PEACH. The exercise allowed them to see, for example, that “LA City [College] might have [Child Development 1] articulated to the BA program at Cal State LA, but not Cal State Long Beach. There’s an opportunity” for further articulation.

With this information in hand, members of the working group began “one-on-one meetings with their own campus articulation officers,” according to Fish. They followed these meetings with regional gatherings of articulation officers to discuss options for advancing the work. For example, the Los Angeles Community College District worked with a child development discipline committee that included departmental representatives from each of the district’s nine community college campuses. These meetings and discussions helped the group identify who could best initiate important changes to advance articulation. In recent years, Los Angeles County has seen an average 20% increase in the acceptance of coursework among colleges and universities across the county in recent years.ⁱⁱ

Asked about the keys to the initiative’s success, Nancy Hurlbut, PEACH Consultant and Associate Dean at California Polytechnic State University at Pomona’s College of Education and Integrative Studies, explained: “I think one of the most important parts of PEACH is that it is truly a collaborative. ... One of the things that keeps people coming back, whether they are a partner or just a person, is the fact that everybody has a voice.” New philanthropic investments have provided support to create a PEACH North, focusing on the Bay Area, Monterey, and Sacramento.

ⁱ Lopez, G. V. (2015). *Los Angeles County early care and education workforce consortium: Program evaluation summary & systems change evaluation report 2014–15*. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Universal Preschool.

ⁱⁱ Schnauffer, J. (2016). *From schoolhouse to statehouse—First 5 LA helps build coalition for high quality ECE*. <http://www.first5la.org/index.php?r=site/article&id=3780> (accessed 10/6/17).

Source: Interview with Janet Fish, Co-Lead Consultant for PEACH; and Nancy Hurlbut, Associate Dean at the College of Education and Integrative Studies at Cal Poly Pomona (2017, August 15).

Section Summary: ECE Workforce

California sets inconsistent and generally low requirements for its early educators: Some must have a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential, while others just need a high school degree. Although teacher quality and continuity of care are important elements of high-quality programs, the workforce is underpaid and undersupported, and counties across the state are having difficulty recruiting and retaining educators. Although many educators are willing to take classes while working, higher education is often unaffordable and difficult to navigate.

Policymakers must increase expectations and support for educators' training, and improve compensation and professional support for the ECE workforce.

To help increase the training and compensation of ECE educators in the short term, California should expand the availability of full-day slots in state-funded programs to enable more educators to work full time and earn a living wage; support alignment and articulation across the community college and university systems to ensure credits are transferable across institutions and degrees; increase funding for the Child Development Staff Retention Program (AB 212), which allows counties to provide higher education scholarships to improve the training of ECE educators; implement a Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) program, which provides scholarships to help ECE professionals pursue degrees; and invest in higher education advising programs to help early education students complete their degrees.

Having a highly trained, highly skilled workforce will help young children gain the most benefit from their ECE programs.

Program Quality

Early childhood programs that have been shown to have long-term benefits are of high quality.⁹⁶ Given the importance of quality, California needs to consider the following.

- **What quality standards govern California’s ECE programs?** Current standards are inconsistent for publicly funded programs serving similar children.
- **How does California support quality improvement in ECE?** There are extensive efforts to improve the quality of ECE that are implemented locally. QRIS has attracted the bulk of the state’s investment in ECE quality improvement in recent years. California takes an unusual approach to QRIS: Although the state shares a common rating framework and set of assessments, each county runs its own system.
- **How do counties approach administration of QRIS?** Counties vary in whom they serve, what incentives they offer, how they support providers, and how they publicize ratings.
- **How does funding affect quality improvement efforts?** Quality improvement funding for ECE has historically lacked coordination and continuity, which has limited the effectiveness of quality improvement efforts.

What Quality Standards Govern California’s ECE Programs?

California’s various ECE programs are held to very different quality standards.

- Variation in quality standards means that children of similar age and need receive very different early learning opportunities, even within the publicly funded system.



















California sets requirements for quality that vary greatly by program.

Of the many features that influence an ECE program’s overall quality, there are three areas in which California’s publicly funded programs set requirements that vary substantially by program: educator requirements, class size and staff-child ratios, and educational program (including a developmentally appropriate curriculum for preschool programs) (see Figure 8). The requirements for each ECE program are determined by their funding sources and their attached regulations. Centers providing state pre-k and general child care slots, for example, must meet higher educational standards than private programs receiving vouchers, which are only required to meet basic licensing standards.

Educator requirements. In order for ECE programs to provide high-quality learning experiences, educators need to have knowledge about child development and instruction for young children, including child development knowledge that is specific to the age group they teach.⁹⁷ Research has indicated that in pre-k, teachers with a bachelor’s degree and specialized early childhood knowledge are most effective in supporting children’s preparation for school.⁹⁸ This training equips teachers to provide warm, responsive care that effectively supports children’s skill development. Many of California’s ECE programs require educators to have at least some college units in early childhood education or child development. Others, however, do not require teachers to complete any higher education.

Figure 8
California’s ECE Programs Have Different Quality Standards

Minimum program standards for 4-year-olds

		Minimum Teacher Requirements	Staff-to-Child Ratios	Curriculum Standards
Alternate Payment Program	License-Exempt Providers	 No requirement	 No requirement	 No requirement
	Family Child Care Homes	 No requirement	 1:8 ^a	 No requirement
	Centers	 12 ECE units	 1:12	 No requirement
Transitional Kindergarten		 Teaching credential and 24 ECE units	 No requirement ^b	 Developmentally appropriate curriculum
California State Preschool Program		 24 ECE units plus 16 general education units	 1:8	 Developmentally appropriate curriculum
Head Start		 A.A. or B.A. ^c	 1:10	 Developmentally appropriate curriculum

^a May include up to two infants and must include at least two children over the age of 6.

^b While there is no legally required teacher-child ratio, maximum class size is 31 students. Teachers may have classroom aides.

^c While an A.A. or equivalent experience is the minimum requirement, the Head Start Act requires that 50% of all teachers in center-based programs nationwide have at least a B.A. with a specialization in early childhood education.

Ratios and class size. Small class sizes and high staff-child ratios facilitate supportive and engaging learning experiences.⁹⁹ Head Start and state-contracted centers meet or exceed the staffing ratios outlined in professional standards.¹⁰⁰ Yet the licensing standards that regulate private providers in California, including those who receive vouchers, allow much larger group sizes and more children per educator. Transitional kindergarten has no requirements for ratios or class size.

Educational plan. The implementation of a developmentally appropriate educational plan, including a formal curriculum in preschool programs, is also critical to supporting young children’s learning.¹⁰¹ State- and federally contracted centers must provide a developmentally appropriate curriculum aligned to California’s Preschool Learning Foundations. However, private providers receiving vouchers are not required to implement any educational plan at all.

How Does California Support Quality Improvement in ECE?

High-quality ECE programs can be developed and sustained when they are part of systems that assess the quality of care they offer, incentivize programs to improve the quality, and support programs in their improvement efforts.

- California has invested much of its recent ECE quality improvement funding on developing its QRIS.
- The state funds several quality improvement programs not related to QRIS, but these efforts are small and diffuse.
- California's QRIS is one of only three in the nation that is administered at the county, rather than the state, level.¹⁰² Each of California's counties has or is building a QRIS, with support from regional and state consortia.
- Counties use a common framework, but otherwise operate their QRISs independently.
- Existing evidence is inconclusive about the effectiveness of California's QRIS, and there are no resources dedicated to studying the evolving system.

Recent investments to support quality focus on Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.

QRISs identify elements of quality on which programs are assessed and establish tiers or levels that identify progressively higher benchmarks. They also establish an infrastructure for supporting and incentivizing program quality improvement. The goal is to make quality ratings public so parents can identify programs with higher quality ratings, thereby incentivizing programs to continue to improve.

The state spent about \$184 million on quality improvement programs for ECE in 2016, of which nearly three quarters went to QRIS (see Table 1). The majority of this funding came from block grants administered by the California Department of Education and First 5.

California's QRIS rating matrix is similar to those used in other states, covering several key aspects of quality (see Table 2). Some of these are structural and can be measured through administrative records, such as class size and teacher credentials. Others are focused on the nature of children's interactions with educators, which requires direct observation by an outside assessor. Programs receive points for their performance on each quality benchmark, and raters sum the points to assign a quality rating. The lowest tier reflects minimum licensing standards, and programs must meet this entire block of standards to receive a rating.

Table 1
QRIS Receives the Majority of California’s ECE Quality Improvement Funding

Program	Purpose	2016–2017 Funding	Funding Stream
State Preschool QRIS Block Grant	Supports participation of state preschool programs in QRIS.	\$50 million	Proposition 98 General Fund
Non-QRIS-related state funding	Funds LPCs, resource and referral agencies, and licensing for health and safety.	\$43 million	Child Care and Development Block Grant
QRIS-related state funding	Supports over 20 state programs related to QRIS.	\$41 million	Child Care and Development Block Grant
First 5 IMPACT	Establishes local QRIS consortia and regional QRIS hubs; provides statewide QRIS technical assistance; supports participation of a wide range of providers in QRIS; and evaluates QRIS.	\$38 million	Proposition 10
Infant/Toddler QRIS Block Grant	Supports participation of infant and toddler providers in QRIS.	\$12 million	General Fund
Total		\$184 million	

Note: For funding allocated over more than 1 year, total funding is divided by the number of grant years. The Infant/Toddler QRIS Block Grant was allocated \$24 million from 2015–17, and First 5 IMPACT was allocated \$190 million from 2015–2020.

Source: Fisher-Dahms, C., & Neville-Morgan, S. (2017). Quality Rating and Improvement System update. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ce/documents/qrисupdatesapr2017.pdf>.

Table 2
California’s County QRISs All Measure Certain Quality Domains With Common Tools

Dimension of quality	Measurement tool
Use of observation-based child assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), an individual child assessment based on student observation Use of Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), a developmental screening tool
Educator-child interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an observation tool that measures child-educator interactions in emotional/behavioral support, classroom organization, and instructional support
Classroom environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental Rating Scale (ERS), a tool used to rate the physical environment, routines, use of language, and classroom structure and activities
Educator/director qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State-developed continuum starting at minimum licensing standards
Staff-to-child ratios and class size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State-developed continuum starting at minimum licensing standards

Source: First 5 California. (2017). *Quality Counts California: Rating matrix with elements and points for consortia common tiers 1, 3, and 4*. <http://www.cfcf.ca.gov/pdf/programs/impact/caqrisratingmatrix.pdf>.

The state runs a number of small, categorical grants related to QRIS.

California spent about \$41 million in 2016 on more than 20 small quality improvement efforts related to QRIS. These programs, the largest of which are described below, are funded by the federal Child Care Development Block Grant and administered by the California Department of Education.¹⁰⁵

- AB 212 provides financial support, often in the form of higher education tuition, for the training and retention of educators in state-contracted centers.
- California Preschool Instructional Network (CPIN) provides professional development and on-site technical assistance for state preschool and transitional kindergarten providers.
- Child Care Initiative Project is an effort by resource and referral agencies to recruit, train, and retain licensed family child care providers.¹⁰⁴
- Child Development Training Consortium is a community college-led hub for higher education-related training, technical assistance, and resources for ECE professionals.¹⁰⁵
- California Early Childhood Mentor Program supports teacher and director mentors working with college students and new ECE directors.¹⁰⁶
- Program for Infant/Toddler Care provides on-site training, mentoring, and coaching specifically for infant and toddler providers.¹⁰⁷

These programs may be in place of, or in addition to, quality improvement activities that providers participate in through QRIS. Some counties use these programs strategically to fill gaps left by QRIS funding. In Sacramento, Nancy Herota, Co-Director of School Readiness Department at the Sacramento County Office of Education,¹⁰⁸ described an effort to use CPIN to reach providers who are otherwise left out of the system, including teachers in transitional kindergarten classrooms. “We have a system in place through CPIN where we not only provide professional development but we provide on-site technical assistance support. ... There is a focus on ensuring we are supporting programs that aren’t in QRIS or are getting ready to enter QRIS.” Likewise, smaller counties such as Trinity also rely on CPIN to provide basic training to providers.

Each of these programs has its unique strengths, but the line between what they do and what is provided through QRIS is often blurred. Each of these grants is quite small (\$0.1 to \$10 million), so they do not go far in a state of California’s size.

Counties administer QRISs locally, with the support of regional and state consortia.

California is unusual in that it has 48 regional QRISs, rather than a single QRIS for the state. Individual counties administer most QRISs, although some smaller counties join together. Each QRIS is led by a local consortium, which includes agencies (such as the local First 5 commission and county office of education) that work together to implement the system. Each of these consortia, however, uses a single, statewide rating matrix.

The Quality Counts California Consortium (formerly CA-QRIS) is a governing body that includes representatives from all counties and regions. This state consortium developed and continues to refine the state’s common rating matrix and coordinates statewide quality supports such as coaching and professional development. Quality Counts California also

California is unusual in that it has 48 regional QRISs, rather than a single QRIS for the state.

offers trainings to foster consistent regional ratings, provides standard data definitions, develops policy recommendations for the state, and reports on statewide progress on QRIS.

Eleven regional hubs support the work of local consortia and the state governing body, with the goal of enabling counties to share resources to create more efficient systems. Regional hubs train assessors, coordinate quality improvement tools and supports, facilitate coaching, and support data collection.¹⁰⁹

Local QRIS consortia are responsible for recruiting providers, establishing and distributing incentives, conducting assessments, collecting data, assigning and publicizing ratings, and implementing coaching, scholarships, and other professional development to support program improvement at the local level.

A study of QRIS's early impact in California had mixed results; no further research is being conducted.

Although most states across the nation administer a QRIS, little is known about when and how they can be most effective. How each state's system is run, the extent of its funding, and who participates varies greatly. Research on QRIS, which is a new but growing field of inquiry, generally finds that there is inconsistent evidence of effectiveness. Specifically, validation studies of QRISs often find modest links between ratings and observed classroom quality, and limited, inconsistent effects of higher ratings on child outcomes.¹¹⁰ One set of positive findings comes from a recent study of North Carolina's statewide QRIS, which found evidence that the QRIS led to improved quality among lower rated providers and provided parents with useful information in selecting higher quality care.¹¹¹

The only large-scale study of California's system was conducted during Race to the Top, and it found mixed results. The study sought to understand whether the ratings produced through the QRIS are linked to other desired programmatic or child outcomes. There was some evidence that higher QRIS ratings were associated with higher quality interactions in ECE classrooms, which are an important predictor of children's development. At the same time, there was no direct evidence that higher ratings translated to improved outcomes for children. However, the study was conducted when many of the state's QRISs were still in the early stages of implementation, so it should not be considered conclusive evidence of the system's effectiveness.

The findings point to the importance of ongoing evaluation to monitor and enhance the performance of the QRIS as it develops.¹¹² In California, as in other states, research has not yet determined which design features are best suited for measuring quality and ensuring ratings reflect meaningful differences between programs. To design an effective system, policymakers need more information about how their decisions impact the effectiveness of the system. Yet despite these pressing questions, there is no large-scale research currently being conducted to inform the state's future efforts.

Despite pressing questions, there is no large-scale research being conducted to inform the state's future QRIS efforts.

How Do Counties Approach Administration of QRIS?

Counties are given significant latitude in who administers their QRIS. They vary significantly in

- the mix of providers they serve, with most counties focusing on center-based providers, particularly state preschool;
- how they incentivize quality improvement, which includes grants, bonuses for reaching higher tiers, and scholarships for continuing education;
- how counties support providers in reaching higher tiers on the matrix, with coaching as the most common strategy; and
- when and how they make providers' ratings known, with concerns about making ratings public, leading to a slow rollout of public ratings.

Each county determines which providers to include in its QRIS.

Only a small portion of licensed providers—around 14%—participate in QRIS.¹¹³ There is currently not sufficient funding to include all providers, and participation is voluntary. Most counties have chosen to focus on recruiting and rating center-based preschools first, while family child care providers and unlicensed providers participate at lower rates. Transitional kindergarten and special education preschool programs in California typically do not participate in QRIS, but instead get professional development and coaching along with elementary school teachers.

Centers. The majority of participating providers in QRIS are centers.¹¹⁴ Interviewees reported that there are some incentives for counties to work with these providers first when implementing a new QRIS. Center-based providers tend to have higher initial ratings than family child care providers, which means they need less support to achieve the highest ratings. Working with center-based providers also allows counties to reach more children with their initial quality improvement efforts. Among centers, state preschool programs comprise 40% of participating providers. They tend to have high QRIS participation rates because a substantial portion of QRIS funding was set aside by the legislature for state preschool providers.¹¹⁵ Other center participants include Head Start, state-contracted centers, and private centers receiving subsidy vouchers.¹¹⁶

Family child care homes. Despite a focus on preschool and center-based care, representatives from QRIS described a vision—if not a plan—to offer ongoing quality improvement activities for private providers, including family child care homes. Overall, in 2016, family child care providers made up 27% of the total providers participating in counties that received the first wave of funding for QRIS.¹¹⁷ In many counties, QRIS either has not yet begun to serve family child care providers or serves only a very small fraction of these providers. In San Diego, for example, “very, very few family child care homes are participating ... about 40, but there are 4,000 family child care providers in our county, and that’s where we know we are serving our youngest and most vulnerable children,” said Kim McDougal, Executive Director of the YMCA Childcare Resource Service.

Research shows that QRISs have difficulty recruiting family child care programs.¹¹⁸ One reason for the small proportion of family childcare providers in QRIS is the process itself. “Our sense is that they are going to look at that

Only a small portion of licensed providers—around 14%—participate in QRIS. There is currently not sufficient funding to include all providers.

matrix and go run for the hills screaming because it is such a daunting piece of documentation,” said Martha Hermsillo, Executive Director, First 5 Merced. Family child care providers in California tend to be rated lower than centers, consistent with national trends,¹¹⁹ which may also discourage participation for fear of a low public rating. The QRIS rating matrix can put family child care at a disadvantage, said Kevin Dieterle, Program Officer at First 5 LA. For example, the environmental rating scale requires that rooms be set up in a particular way that is more challenging in a home than a classroom. Many counties cited this fact as a disincentive for family child care provider participation in the system because low ratings can be bad for business.

Some counties have intentionally reached out to family child care providers and created programs to address some of these disadvantages. Merced, for example, has staff who meet with these providers to explain the process. Sacramento uses a program called the Preschool Bridging Model to provide professional development to providers who do not yet participate in QRIS and to increase the likelihood that providers will voluntarily participate in the rating system.

Unlicensed providers. Family, friends, and neighbors provide care for many children, especially infants and toddlers, including approximately 10% of children receiving subsidies.¹²⁰ Yet they are rarely included in QRIS. Michael Olenick, President and CEO of the Child Care Resource Center, which serves both Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties, said:

The QRIS system as it is currently conceived doesn’t include family, friends, and neighbors as a part of the system and has really ignored the fact that there are things that you can do to support those providers—even if they never get a license—to try to make sure they are providing care that is developmentally appropriate.

Each county determines which providers to recruit and what incentives to offer for participation in QRIS.

Because participation in QRIS is voluntary, counties need to entice providers to sign up and get rated. Financial incentives, such as grants, funds for supplies, or scholarships, are important carrots. However, each county determines how to dole out its incentives, and counties offer incentives of varying sizes.

Incentives may be awarded to programs, classrooms, or educators, and are awarded based on a variety of metrics, from child count to educators’ participation in workshops.¹²¹ In San Bernardino, providers who sign up for QRIS get access to a menu of resources, including scholarships for trainings and materials for their classrooms. Programs that agree to be assessed receive additional funds. In other counties, such as Lake, incentives for signing up are more modest, but providers who reach the highest tiers receive substantial bonuses. Contra Costa’s QRIS is also built to reward providers who attain the highest levels of quality. Highly rated programs receive cash bonuses, while providers at lower tiers receive more restricted incentives such as scholarships or coaching to help them improve.

Coaching is the focus of many counties’ quality improvement efforts under QRIS.

Many counties have relied on coaching as a key incentive and quality improvement strategy for QRIS participants. Coaching is not unique to QRIS—many school districts provide coaching for state preschool and transitional kindergarten teachers, for example—but QRIS is one of the only county-coordinated efforts to provide coaching. For example, 82% of participants in Race to the Top

counties received coaching in 2014–15.¹²² Research suggests that coaching is an effective method of improving the quality of early learning experiences,¹²³ and interviewees indicated that coaching is also an effective incentive for participation in QRIS. However, as Edirle Menezes, Early Childhood Education Program Officer at First 5 Contra Costa reports, the biggest challenge “is that coaching is very expensive, [so it’s] hard for counties to expand,” and counties need guidance about how to design systems that support early educators and are cost-effective.

With limited funding, counties often face a choice between providing coaching to a limited number of providers and serving more providers with less intensive supports, thereby reaching more children. “High-quality coaching comes at a price, observations come at a price,” noted Kevin Dieterle. His organization is grappling with the question of “how can we make this cost effective but also a powerful experience for providers?”

Some counties have made explicit efforts to offer coaching to a wide range of providers, including family child care homes. The Sacramento County Quality Child Care Collaborative is an initiative funded by First 5 Sacramento to help child care centers, family child care home providers, and family, friend, and neighbor caregivers provide quality care for children with a variety of special needs. Through the collaborative, a consultation team assists providers in improving care.

In several counties, finding bilingual coaches is imperative, and although many coaches are bilingual, particularly in Spanish, finding qualified coaches who speak all providers’ languages is difficult. In rural areas, supporting qualified coaches can also be challenging. In Trinity, for example, the coaching workforce spends significant amounts of travel time to engage with providers in remote areas. Although remote or distance coaching could be a solution, both cell phone reception and internet quality make even these options difficult.

Counties have been slow to rate programs and publicize ratings, hoping to build trust and capacity first.

Ratings are an important but controversial part of QRIS. Making QRIS ratings public is often viewed as a potential disincentive to participation in a voluntary system, yet educating families about the importance of quality and transparency of provider quality is a central goal of QRIS.¹²⁴ Except for providers funded through the state preschool QRIS block grant, which requires public ratings after a preliminary period, whether to make QRIS ratings public has been up to local discretion.

Several counties described their struggle to balance these goals with building provider trust and incentivizing participation in a voluntary system. In Trinity, the QRIS does not yet provide public ratings. The North State QRIS Consortium, of which Trinity is a member, had a long discussion about how to share ratings with the public. There were concerns that ratings could be “damaging to programs.” Hilary Bingham, QRIS Manager for the consortium, noted that “if someone is participating and they’re dedicated to making a change,” the consortium does not want to deter that provider from “participating for fear of a low, publicized rating.” However, the consortium’s ultimate goal is for families to know and “understand what quality is ... and what that means for their child.” The consortium’s current plan is to eventually label “providers rated tiers 1–3 as participating or improving quality and tiers 4 and 5 as having achieved higher quality. We hope to emphasize that just by participating in QRIS, sites are improving quality beyond licensing standards.”

Los Angeles also wanted to avoid the impression that participation in QRIS would put providers' "livelihoods at stake." As Kevin Dieterle, Program Officer at First 5 LA, described, "rating is one piece of QRIS. It's an important piece and it can be an empowering piece, but it's really important the way that you message what a rating means ... because a rating is not a panacea." He also noted that it's critically important to understand that providers who participate in QRIS, "by virtue of their participation, which is voluntary, are making a real commitment toward improving themselves as professionals" and improving care for the children they serve. This consideration is particularly relevant for family child care providers, who tend to be rated lower than centers.

Successful Practice: Los Angeles's Child360 Uses Research to Inform Coaching

Child360 has been providing coaching support to ECE programs in Los Angeles County for over 10 years. The organization coaches teachers and sometimes administrators within its network. The Child360 Coaching Model is unique for several reasons. Each provider is assigned three coaches: a Program Support Coach, a Fiscal Support Coach, and a Quality Support Coach. Each type of coach targets a specific area to improve the quality of the preschool experience for children.

Coaches use their specialized training to deliver customized support to educators. Program Support Coaches spend the bulk of their time in the classroom observing, usually utilizing a classroom observation tool, with the goal of ensuring that new providers reach a 3-star rating on the QRIS. This coaching is available for the first 10 months for new providers in the network. Fiscal Support Coaches spend their time outside of the classroom providing hands-on assistance in the administration and business aspects of the program. Quality Support Coaches offer highly individualized coaching to classroom teachers, focusing on improving instruction and classroom management. In each case, coaches keep detailed activity logs that are entered into a comprehensive database.ⁱ

Coaches, paired with staff from Child360's research and evaluation department, use these data to individualize coaching for educators and improve classrooms. Dawn Kurtz, Chief Program Officer at Child360, said:

We were really intentional about pairing our staff from research and evaluation with program staff from the very beginning ... so that the researchers are part of the development process and the planning process when we're making changes before the start of a new program year. ... They gather information on an ongoing basis and use that information throughout the course of the year.

This research-practice partnership within the coaching model has allowed Child360 to make the program more efficient while maintaining quality. Recently, for example, they have been looking at what indicators show that a program is ready to receive fewer hours of coaching, beyond whether a program receives a 4- or 5-star rating. According to Kurtz, they use data in a meaningful way "to inform the work that is being done, taking information from the observations in the classroom and coaching activity logs, and using that information to try and be really strategic about areas where we think we can build on teacher strengths."

ⁱ Lopez, G.V. (2013). *The effectiveness of the LAUP coaching model*. Los Angeles, CA: LAUP. http://laup.net/documents/resources/research/full_report_effectiveness_of_laup_coaching_model_12xx13.pdf.

Note: Child360's coaching model has been updated. For more, see Banuelos, N. (2017). *Evaluation of LAUP's Coordinated Quality Improvement Support Services Approach: A Case Study Method, FY 2016-17*. Los Angeles, CA: LAUP. http://child360.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/LAUP_CCHFELWD_BRIEF_COORD1617_rev20171213.pdf.

Source: Interview with Dawn Kurtz, Chief Program Officer at Child360 (2017, June 20).

How Does Funding Affect California’s Quality Improvement Efforts?

The variation in counties’ QRIS implementation can be traced to the history of QRIS development in the state and the availability of funding to support county systems.

- The 16 counties who received the first QRIS grants in 2012 tend to have the most mature systems.
- Grant restrictions have led counties to prioritize state preschool; infant and toddler programs have benefited less from quality improvement funding.
- There are multiple quality improvement funding streams that can be difficult to coordinate, although some counties are working to make applying for funding more seamless for providers.

QRIS has been funded through incremental, competitive grants, which has resulted in disparities across county systems

California’s development of a state QRIS framework began in 2012, when the California Department of Education received a \$52 million Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant from the federal government. With this grant, the department developed a statewide quality improvement matrix and awarded funds to 16 counties that had already begun to develop a QRIS to align their standards to the matrix and build additional infrastructure for recruiting providers to participate. Upon receipt of additional federal funds in 2013, the state added 14 “mentee counties,” which built their own QRIS with the assistance of the original lead counties.

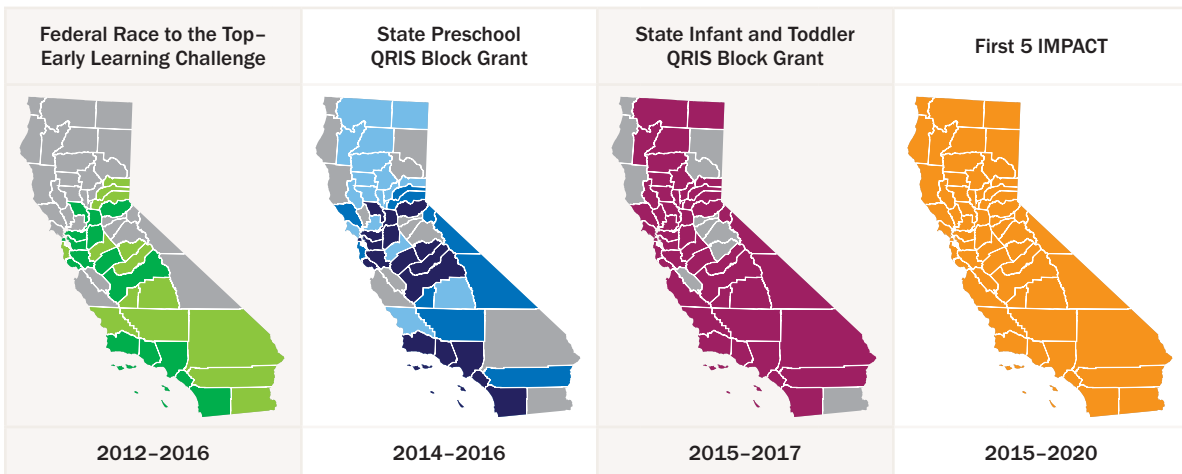
In 2014–15, the state invested additional funding from the California Department of Education for quality improvement of state preschools, which allowed most counties across the state to begin building a QRIS. In 2015–16, the California Department of Education expanded the state preschool QRIS block grant to include 45 counties,¹²⁵ and released one-time funding for infant and toddler quality improvement.¹²⁶ Also in 2015, the First 5 California Commission announced a significant investment in IMPACT (Improve and Maximize Programs so All Children Thrive), which allowed the remaining counties to join the QRIS movement, formalized regional consortia of county QRIS administrators that had already developed in several areas of the state, and created hubs for sharing resources across counties.

The first counties to develop QRISs have more mature systems, not just due to additional development time, but because they had an easier time winning successive grants, allowing them to progress much more rapidly than their peers. For example, counties that had already begun building a QRIS received the first federal funds; and those that participated in Race to the Top were prioritized in the first round of the state preschool QRIS Block Grant.¹²⁷

Counties that did not receive federal funds through the Race to the Top grant have generally received significantly less quality funding to date. The QRISs in these counties tend to be less developed. San Bernardino, for example, began recruiting providers less than a year ago. Cindy Faulkner, Operations Manager at First 5 San Bernardino, likened the current implementation of the QRIS in her county to a “soft opening” to allow time to build understanding of the system and “work out all of the kinks” before recruiting many providers.

Table 3
QRIS Funding Has Been Rolled Out Unevenly Across the State

Source	Purpose	Amount	Fiscal Year	Number of Counties (Out of 58)
Federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC)	Supported local quality improvement efforts for all ECE program types, required counties to use a common QRIS framework.	\$52 million	2012-13 to 2015-16	16
Federal RTT-ELC Mentees	Supported partnerships between first-year recipients and mentees to develop a QRIS that includes all ECE program types.	\$23 million	2013-14 to 2015-16	14
State Preschool QRIS Block Grant Year 1, Priority 1	Supported participation of state preschool programs in QRIS.	\$43 million	2014-15	18
State Preschool QRIS Block Grant Year 1, Priority 2	Supported participation of state preschool programs in QRIS.	\$7 million	2014-15	10
State Preschool QRIS Block Grant Year 2 (All Priorities)	Supported participation of state preschool programs in QRIS.	\$50 million	2015-16	45
State Infant and Toddler QRIS Block Grant	Supported participation of infant and toddler providers in QRIS.	\$24 million	2015-16 to 2016-17	43
First 5 IMPACT	Established local QRIS consortia and regional QRIS hubs; statewide QRIS technical assistance; participation of a wide range of providers in QRIS; and evaluation of QRIS.	\$190 million	2015-16 to 2019-20	58



Note: The shade represents the first year a county received funding from this grant. Funding for the State Preschool QRIS Block Grant and the State Infant and Toddler Block Grant have continued through 2017-18.

Successful Practice: Northern California Counties Pool Quality Improvement Resources

When federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge funding was released, none of the money was distributed to California’s rural northern counties. In response, a group of ECE stakeholders came together in Shasta County and invited neighboring counties to participate in a joint QRIS effort. Together, a seven-county cohort applied for state preschool QRIS block grant funding from the California Department of Education and began collaborating to improve local ECE program quality. Now, the North State consortium is also directing IMPACT resources to fund LPC coordinator positions in each county, and in exchange, the coordinator is responsible for presenting progress reports at monthly QRIS meetings and overseeing implementation of QRIS activities in the county.

Currently, 155 sites, including all state preschool and Head Start providers, as well as some family child care homes and private providers, together representing more than 1,000 ECE educators, participate in the regional North State QRIS. Participating providers receive mentoring from experienced coaches who help them to develop a quality improvement plan. Elements of quality improvement can include upgrades for facilities or classroom materials, additional education for educators, and special training for educators on how to work with students with behavioral challenges or special needs. Pooling resources allows North State counties to offer better incentives and training than any county could offer on its own.

Sources: Interview with Hilary Bingham, QRIS Coordinator for Shasta County; Wendy Dickens, Executive Director of First 5 Shasta; Brandy Groves, Director of Early Education and Instructional Services at the Shasta County Office of Education; Renee Menefee, Executive Director of Early Childhood Services at the Shasta County Office of Education; and Jackie Scott, QRIS T/TA Hub Coordinator for Shasta County (2017, June 5).

Categorical funding impacts which providers have access to QRIS.

Under the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge, QRIS funding could be used to rate and support a variety of ECE providers in a county, whether they were located in a center, home, or school and whether they were publicly or privately funded. Unlike Race to the Top, several of the state grants that have supported county QRIS development are only able to support the participation of a limited set of providers (see Table 3). Informants from several counties voiced concern about having categorical grants, which prevent them from serving all providers equally given grant restrictions. As Natalie Woods-Andrews, Director of the Early Learning Department at the Sacramento County Office of Education, explains, access to QRIS has thus far been “driven by funding.”

For example, the state preschool QRIS Block Grant is limited to providers of state-contracted preschool. As Kevin Dieterle explained,

Things like the QRIS block grant are great, but ... it’s [California Department of Education] funding, so it’s very prescribed in what it can and cannot be used for. For example, that money cannot necessarily be used for infants and toddlers, but you’re providing a site-level intervention, and they may have infant/toddler classes that may get rated. If you really want to improve a site, you have to work with the site, not just a part of them. So when funding is very rigid in its parameters, it makes it really difficult.

Many counties have used First 5 IMPACT funding, which can be used to support the participation of a variety of providers, to build upon previous work with state preschool and other center-based providers, but this work is newer.

Unstable state funding makes it difficult for counties to plan for future QRIS efforts.

Stakeholders in almost every county voiced concerns about the sustainability of funding for quality improvement activities. Implementing an effective QRIS is expensive relative to local ECE budgets, and the funding to support county-level QRIS implementation is not guaranteed from

year to year, leaving counties reluctant to expand their systems to include more providers. Race to the Top was a 5-year grant without follow-up funding, as is First 5 IMPACT. Funding amounts and priorities have, thus far, varied from year to year under the state preschool QRIS block grant. And the Infant/Toddler QRIS Block Grant was initially released as a one-time grant, although the California Department of Education recently followed up with some additional funding. Dieterle noted that “sustainability is a really big [question] in QRIS” because so many aspects of quality improvement are expensive, “and the money may or may not be there next year.” It also requires strong infrastructure, such as data systems, which counties may be reluctant to develop without a guarantee of continued funding.

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Uncoordinated funding streams make it challenging for counties to provide consistent support.

The insufficient and uncoordinated nature of multiple, often categorical, funding streams for quality improvement has also hindered county progress toward building cohesive and coherent QRISs. Some counties have developed separate infrastructure for quality improvement activities to support different types of providers. For example, of the 34 counties that receive both IMPACT and QRIS block grants, only 17 have the same lead agency for both.¹²⁸ In several counties, the county office of education administers QRIS for center-based preschools, while the resource and referral agency or another agency administers IMPACT grants.

Some attempts have been made at the state and regional levels to streamline funding. The state now allows counties to report their quality improvement activities in a single evaluation instead of one for each categorical grant.¹²⁹ And First 5 IMPACT, which consolidated several First 5 grants, is the result of calls for more flexible spending. At the county level, the San Mateo County Office of Education blends its quality improvement funds so that “instead of running those as independent separate programs,” the county offers one program funded by multiple sources. County-level agencies braid funding from the State Preschool QRIS Block Grant, the local Big Lift program, and IMPACT to ensure that all providers get a similar level of coaching, for example, regardless of their provider type. Though the blending of funds has made reporting requirements for each grant more difficult, Nirmala Dillman, Child Care Partnership and School Readiness Coordinator at the San Mateo County Office of Education, said that “it’s worth it because you can do more when you put the funding together, you can touch more children, more teachers.”

Successful Practice: Contra Costa County Braids Funding to Offer Coaching to More Providers

For Contra Costa County, coaching was a natural investment. Sean Casey, Executive Director of First 5 Contra Costa, explained that coaching

is an incentive but it's also the I in QRIS, it's about improvement. It's really about having people who are knowledgeable ... to work with providers on improvement plans that will actually help them improve not only on the matrix but also in the actual [classroom].

Contra Costa broadens the reach of its coaching program by braiding IMPACT funding with Infant and Toddler Block Grant funding and coordinating with Head Start programs to support the coaching they provide with federal funds. In addition, coaches provide either technical assistance or one-on-one coaching to participants based on two factors: their level of engagement in IMPACT and their current program quality. Providers who have not yet been rated receive technical assistance by phone or email. Providers who are participating in the full QRIS receive between one and three one-on-one coaching visits per year, as needed. This tiered approach allows Contra Costa to reach as many providers as possible with limited staff.

Sources: Interview with Sean Casey, Executive Director of First 5 Contra Costa (2017, September 7); Interview with Edirle Menezes, Early Childhood Education Program Officer at First 5 Contra Costa (2017, September 15).

Section Summary: Program Quality

Quality standards and improvement efforts are uneven among programs and across counties in California. Although programs conduct their own quality improvement activities locally, QRIS is the main lever for quality improvement at the state and county levels—but overall, participation rates in QRIS are low.

A county-led approach to QRIS has enabled some counties to innovate but has also resulted in uneven systems of support. Counties do not have enough funding to attract and support new providers, especially providers who might be disinclined to participate without clear rewards. They must choose between offering in-depth quality improvement activities, such as coaching, to a few providers and offering less intensive supports to more providers. Funding for these activities often is limited in duration, which makes system building difficult. Finally, there is a reluctance to publish QRIS ratings until providers receive adequate support, which prevents QRIS from fulfilling one of its key functions.

California will need to ensure that all ECE programs meet high quality standards and have the support they need to improve.

California should also take immediate action to improve program quality by making state quality improvement funds available to all providers, particularly by increasing the flexibility of categorical grants, which are available only to certain providers; centralizing and supporting training for QRIS assessors to increase rating consistency and free up county-level staff to focus on supporting local providers; investing in research to continuously improve the effectiveness of the QRIS; and offering paid hours for professional learning time to state-contracted centers.

California's ultimate goal should be that all providers receive the support they need to provide children with a high-quality education. These interim steps can help ensure that the state's current limited funding is better spent.

Early Childhood Data Systems

Data on child outcomes and program quality can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of ECE investments. This section seeks to answer the following questions.

- **What ECE data does California collect?** Several agencies collect data on program enrollment and QRIS, but data are not coordinated to give a clear picture of unmet need in the state.
- **What challenges do counties face in creating a coherent data system?** Efforts to collect data remain fragmented across programmatic and geographic lines, creating an unfunded burden for counties that must collect and coordinate these data.

What ECE Data Does California Collect?

California's piecemeal approach to ECE affects its ECE data system.

- California collects, or requires counties and programs to collect, data about the supply of licensed care slots and enrollment in state ECE programs.¹³⁰ These data are not centrally aggregated, and it is not clear how many children are double counted.
- QRIS has created data about program quality for the small portion of ECE providers who participate. However, in many cases, these data are uncoordinated and incomplete, and data about the ECE workforce is especially lacking.

The state collects enrollment and supply data from multiple sources, but lack of coordination limits their utility.

California collects and compiles valuable data on many elements of the ECE system at the state level. For example, state agencies such as the California Departments of Education and Social Services generally collect administrative data on the number of children participating in state preschool, transitional kindergarten, voucher programs, and state-contracted centers. The California Department of Social Services also collects state licensing data, including the location, capacity, setting (center or home), and ages served among licensed child care providers. The Resource and Referral Network gathers data biennially on the supply and demand for care in each of the state's counties based on demographic data and parent requests for child care referrals. In addition, each LPC is required by law to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment that analyzes the availability and need for child care in its county, though in reality, as discussed earlier, these needs assessments are often out of date or incomplete.

Despite the current data collection efforts, there remain key limitations to California's ECE data. Head Start, transitional kindergarten, and state preschool enrollment are each reported separately. Some data, such as participation in programs for children with special needs, are extremely difficult to access. Likewise, enrollment data for most ECE programs, with the exception of Head Start, do not reliably include the number of children who are dual language learners, in foster care, or experiencing homelessness, so understanding whether the system is serving the needs of these populations is challenging.

Further, because children participating in ECE programs are not assigned unique identifiers, the number of children served may be over-counted; children accessing multiple programs or entering,

leaving, and reentering the system may be counted separately each time, making it difficult to answer questions about the level of unmet need in the state. The lack of unique identifiers also complicates the task of tracking children’s outcomes after leaving ECE programs.

QRIS has begun to provide valuable data on program quality, but workforce data are lacking.

First 5 California and the California Department of Education have recently partnered to develop a common data upload system for sites participating in QRIS—the main vehicle for quality improvement initiatives in most counties—regardless of which agency funds their participation. The upload system includes data on program funding, QRIS ratings, languages spoken by providers, and number of children served.¹⁵¹ The system, which first accepted data for the 2015–16 program year, will enable more comprehensive tracking of QRIS sites across the state. First 5 California has also provided stipends for counties implementing QRIS to access Pinwheel, a data management and reporting tool, to support data collection efforts.

Although there are increasingly more data available related to QRIS, little is known about California’s ECE workforce, a key factor in providing high-quality ECE. Currently, there is no shared system for tracking information on educator credentials, experience, retention, or pay across counties and programs. Without these data, it is nearly impossible to know which children have highly qualified educators, how educator quality is related to compensation, or the impact of investments in educator development and training.

San Francisco and Los Angeles counties have taken the lead in piloting an early childhood workforce registry to consistently track educator employment, education, and professional development. The workforce registry has the potential to go statewide, yet experts such as Marcy Whitebook, Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, worry that unless it includes all ECE providers and is sufficiently funded to keep it up to date, such a registry will fall short of its potential.

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What Challenges Do Counties Face in Creating a Coherent Data System?

Creating a coherent data system can be a herculean task. In California, counties are responsible for collecting data.

- To the extent they wish to use data for strategic planning and decision making, counties must build their own systems for inputting, compiling, and analyzing data.
- The staffing, technological, and financial burdens of building a coherent data system for ECE are significant. Some counties have found the funding and expertise to build such a system, but many counties are still struggling.

Counties lack the staff, technical capacity, and funding to collect, compile, and analyze data.

Counties are responsible for collecting data and running their own independent data systems, and must cobble together a combination of federal, state, and local investments to do so. Some counties, including San Francisco and San Mateo, have sought to build their own integrated data systems that combine numerous local ECE data sources in a centralized place. Others do not have the technological expertise to do this on their own, so they pay for off-the-shelf data systems, such as Pinwheel, which “is hugely more expensive [than other programs],” said Sean Casey, Executive Director of First 5 Contra Costa. “It’s really hard because IMPACT is only going to be around for a couple more years and that’s the main source of funding for data systems, so it’s not clear where this is all going to go.”

Although every county in California is expected to collect some data, many face fundamental challenges compiling it due to limited financial and human resources. Data collection is a particular challenge in some of the state’s smaller counties, which tend to have limited staff. Trinity County’s LPC Coordinator, Fabio Robles, said it is hard to find “just the people to work and gather the data. I mean, it can be done, but I wear many, many hats and so do many people in our county.” The county, which has prioritized its LPC needs assessment this year, has brought in an outside staff person to help their small, underfunded office run the numbers.

Even in counties in which data collection has been a local funding priority, getting a functional system up and running has proven challenging. The Bay Area QRIS Partnership, a group of five counties that received federal Race to the Top funds, has encountered technical barriers to accomplishing its goal of developing a regional QRIS data system. Though the counties in the Bay Area QRIS Consortium “still hold the idea that we want to be able to pool our data,” explained Sean Casey, “we are still struggling to get that going” due to software and vendor challenges.

Analyzing data also requires staff time and expertise, which can further pose challenges. For instance, San Mateo County adopted an integrated data system based on San Francisco’s model. The system is a powerful tool for understanding the local ECE landscape and contains a variety of data points on children, families, educators, and programs. Jean-Marie Houston, Early Learning Support Services Administrator at the San Mateo County Office of Education, noted that her team is “swimming in data” as a result, and is currently determining how to most strategically and effectively use it. “Data is where we’re headed,” Houston explained, but “this is an underfunded system and data entry, data analysis, data cleaning all take a lot of time, so you have to have people to do that ... making sure that there’s enough time to do it well.” San Mateo County has dedicated staff, including a full-time manager for its data system, to help figure out the best applications of its new data. The county has leveraged several grants to grow its local capacity for data use.

Although every county in California is expected to collect some data, it is a particular challenge in some of the state’s smaller counties, which tend to have limited staff.

Successful Practice: San Francisco Builds a Better Data System

San Francisco County has taken the challenge of building an integrated local data system head on. Cocoa, as the system is called, is a child enrollment data system developed by First 5 San Francisco in partnership with WestEd to support implementation of San Francisco’s universal preschool program. September Jarrett, Executive Director of the San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education, describes Cocoa as a “master enrollment system” that the county began to develop 12 years ago to “automate or align some of the required state reporting, in particular, for Title 5 funded preschools.” The current system tracks enrollment for all ECE programs in the county. Cocoa also holds demographic information about participating children, attendance patterns, and child assessment results from the Desired Results Developmental Profiles, a function that Jarrett describes as providing the “connective glue for how children are faring.” Educator qualifications such as permit levels are also included in Cocoa because this information is required for state data reporting.

Prior to Cocoa, San Francisco had 10 different databases tracking various components of the ECE system, illustrating the overly complex web of information sources that can emerge without intentional investment. Strengthening local data systems can be a costly endeavor, and Cocoa is no exception. However, the county is committed to supporting an efficient state reporting process, and is continuing to improve its integrated data portal for San Francisco children birth to age 5. The next step will be to incorporate a locally funded, centralized eligibility list into the system so that families seeking care can receive up-to-date information on provider openings that meet their individual needs.

Cocoa has been an important resource for county-level decision making in San Francisco. Jarrett notes: “It’s really become a place where we can know the beginning picture of who our young child population is, what programs they’re matched with, and how they are faring.” The county has also begun to use Cocoa data to address chronic absenteeism problems in specific communities. A partnership with Attendance Works, a national nonprofit, has provided customized data dashboards and toolkits to help providers engage deeply with the data, identify patterns, and put strategic family supports into place.

Several challenges have emerged during the course of developing Cocoa. There is a lack of alignment between state reporting requirements for programs overseen by the California Department of Education and those overseen by the Department of Social Services. Even a 30-minute difference in the definition of a “full-day” program (6.5 hours for the California Department of Education compared to 6 hours for the Department of Social Services) can make it difficult to design a robust data infrastructure that effectively responds to both reporting systems. Cocoa also generates time and attendance data for providers through an automatic thumb pad sign-in, which has allowed for a hugely successful “electronic signature” pilot program in San Francisco. However, county officials were initially unable to fully eliminate paper time sheets, even after 3 years of successful piloting, because voucher-based subsidy programs still require the paperwork. Relatively simple changes to rules like these could help to better align state requirements, making it more feasible for counties to implement integrated data systems. Jarrett also notes that it is difficult to make local investments in data infrastructure and to support the necessary training for providers learning how to use a new system given the general lack of state investment in ECE.

San Francisco officials do not claim to have figured out a perfect approach to building a local data system. They acknowledge substantial local funding is required for this type of ambitious investment, and that it can be challenging to roll out and determine how to effectively use an integrated system. At the same time, Cocoa provides access to a wealth of local data that can simplify state reporting processes and help counties to make strategic decisions about how to best serve families with children birth to age 5.

Source: Interview with September Jarrett, Executive Director of the San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education (2017, August 16).

Section Summary: Early Childhood Data Systems

California's ECE data systems are uncoordinated and collect insufficient data about student demographics, program characteristics, and child outcomes. These limitations make it difficult for policymakers and program leaders to make informed decisions about the system and to ensure that California's children are efficiently and effectively served. There is significant variation in capacity and the level of investment that California's counties have made in ECE data systems. Though all counties gather data for tasks such as creating LPC needs assessments, some counties have made more significant investments in formal data systems than others.

California needs to ensure that decision makers at the state and local levels have the information they need to strategically direct investments.

The state can do so through investments in an online portal that could be used to compile valuable information about programs and children, such as enrollment demographics, educator credentials, professional learning activities, and educator wages. To support this portal, California would also need to address the current lack of county capacity for data collection and use.

Policy Recommendations

Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that experiences from birth through the preschool years are critical to children's development¹³² and that high-quality early learning opportunities support children's school readiness, promote later life success, and yield a return of up to \$7 for every \$1 invested.¹³³ Given the long-term benefits of early childhood education (ECE) and the economic returns they generate, California will clearly benefit if all children, from birth to kindergarten, have access to high-quality ECE. Yet, as a state with the 6th largest economy in the world, California lags behind many states and developed countries in providing ECE. In 2015–16, 1 million Californian children qualified for subsidized ECE, yet just 33% of those eligible were served.¹³⁴ Funding for ECE represents a remarkably small portion of total state spending: Only an estimated 1.8% of California's budget went to subsidized child care and preschool in the 2017–2018 budget.¹³⁵ Furthermore, child care and preschool funding was cut drastically during the recession, and the 2017–18 funding level is still \$500 million below pre-recession levels.¹³⁶ California can do better.





For California to provide all children access to high-quality ECE, state policymakers will need to adopt a comprehensive approach to turn an uncoordinated set of underfunded programs into a true system of supports for children, families, and providers.

For California to provide all children access to high-quality ECE, state policymakers will need to adopt a comprehensive approach to turn an uncoordinated set of underfunded programs into a true system of supports for children, families, and providers. For infants and toddlers, this means access to high-quality care for all families—without creating financial hardship. For preschoolers, it means universal access to a high-quality, center-based early learning experience that readies them for school. Early childhood education of all types should be staffed by a well-qualified and fairly compensated workforce. Further, an effective system of quality improvement should support all early educators and providers in creating meaningful learning experiences for children. To build an early learning system that works, the state should take action in four areas.

1. Build a Coherent System of ECE Administration.

California's current ECE system is composed of a patchwork of programs, with multiple state agencies responsible for their administration, including the California Department of Education, the California Department of Social Services, the California Department of Developmental Services, and First 5 California. The complexity at the state level is passed down to county administrators, who do not have the capacity or authority to untangle the web. Navigating this system is daunting for parents and providers. Efforts to link eligible parents to services are often uncoordinated and sometimes fail to match parents to care that meets their needs. The incoherence of this fragmented system inhibits efforts to address ECE need, access, and quality at the state and county levels.

Table 4
Recommendations for California’s Early Care and Education System

<p>1 Build a coherent system of ECE administration. </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Identify and invest in a state-level governing body with the authority and expertise to coordinate all ECE programs. › Fully fund and grant decision making authority to a single coordinating body at the county or regional level. › Develop a one-stop shop for parents and providers to make it easier for parents to find care and providers to recruit families. 	<p>2 Make ECE affordable for all children birth to age 5. </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Establish universal preschool for 4-year-olds. › Make preschool affordable for all 3-year-olds using a sliding fee scale. › Ensure access to subsidized child care on a sliding fee scale for all infants and toddlers with working parents.
<p>Immediate steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fully fund Local Child Care and Development Planning Councils to support counties’ child care needs assessment and planning as required by statute. • Reinstate funding for a centralized eligibility list to make it easier for families to connect with providers offering care that meets their needs. • Create a uniform intake process across agencies that streamlines eligibility paperwork. 	<p>Immediate steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the availability of full-day programs to better meet the needs of working families. • Provide funding for facilities to providers who are willing to serve more infants and toddlers. • Increase funding and technical assistance for the Revolving Loan Fund, which supports the purchase and renovation of facilities for ECE programs. • Change one-year state contracts for state pre-k and child care to five-year grants, as is the case with Head Start. • Increase reimbursement rates for infant and toddler programs.
<p>3 Build a well-qualified ECE workforce. </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Increase expectations and support for educators’ higher education and training, starting with preschool. › Continue to raise reimbursement rates to enhance educator wages. <p>Immediate steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the availability of full-day slots in state-funded programs to enable more educators to work full time and earn a living wage. • Offer paid hours for professional learning time to state-contracted centers so that educators can be paid to collaborate with colleagues and attend trainings. • Support alignment and articulation of higher education programs across the community college and university systems to ensure credits are transferable across institutions and degrees. • Expand funding for the Child Development Staff Retention Program (AB 212), which allows counties to provide higher education scholarships to improve the training of ECE educators. • Implement a Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) program, which provides scholarships to help ECE professionals pursue degrees. • Invest in higher education advising programs to help early education students complete their degrees. 	<p>4 Improve the quality of all ECE programs. </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Raise quality requirements for programs with the lowest standards. › Ensure all state-supported programs participate in quality improvement activities. › Ensure access to coaching and other job-embedded supports for all ECE providers. <p>Immediate steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make state quality-improvement funds available to all providers by increasing the flexibility of their use, particularly for categorical grants which are available only to certain providers. • Centralize and support training for QRIS assessors to increase rating consistency and free up county-level staff to focus on supporting local providers. • Invest in research to continuously improve the effectiveness of the QRIS and to ensure it accurately identifies high-quality environments and teaching practices, supports program improvement, and provides parents with useful information.

Long-term goals

California should take the following steps to ensure its early learning system is cohesive and easy for providers and parents to navigate.

- **Identify and invest in a state-level governing body with the authority and expertise to coordinate all ECE programs.** The governing body should provide guidance on how to effectively coordinate the state's various ECE programs with each other and with federal and local ECE initiatives, such as Head Start, transitional kindergarten, and special education preschool. It should also set statewide goals for ECE, develop data and information systems to inform these goals, and build a shared policy agenda. The state could house the governing body for children's services under a new or existing agency, or it could create a cabinet-level department that works across agencies.

The state of Washington created the cabinet-level Department of Early Learning, which oversees preschool and child care, as well as other services for children and families. Michigan consolidated early childhood programs in the Office of Great Start, which is housed in the Department of Education under the supervision of a deputy state superintendent of public instruction.¹³⁷

- **Fully fund and grant decision-making authority to a single coordinating body at the county or regional level.** The local coordinating body should make decisions about local ECE priorities and services, and ensure that school districts, which often operate separately from other ECE agencies, are included in ECE planning so that transitional kindergarten and special education preschool are considered in local decision making. A First 5 Commission, a Local Child Care and Development Planning Council (established by the California Education Code to assess and plan for child care services), or a separate overarching agency could play this role.

Several counties in California have successfully coordinated programs at the local level using different approaches. In San Luis Obispo County, most ECE agencies are run by a single nonprofit organization, Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo (CAPSLO). San Mateo County built strong relationships among local agencies to coordinate the county's ECE efforts and fully funded the coordinator of its Local Child Care and Development Planning Council.

- **Develop a one-stop shop for parents and providers.** This one-stop shop would allow families to easily find programs and services that meet their needs and for which they are eligible, and ensure providers are able to fill their available slots to stay in business. Parents and providers should be able to access the one-stop shop through both an online portal and existing brick-and-mortar resource and referral agencies where parents and providers meet with ECE program experts in person. It could offer clear information about ECE programs, their quality, and whether they have space available, as well as a simple form for parents to apply for and renew their eligibility for subsidies.

The online portal also could be used to compile valuable information about programs and children that informs administrators' and policymakers' decisions. For example, it could collect information about educator credentials, professional learning activities, and educator wages to inform quality improvement efforts. In building the portal, the state

could learn from San Francisco's success in constructing a comprehensive database, and address the challenges the county has faced, including the misalignment of state reporting requirements for various ECE programs. The state would also need to address the current lack of county capacity for data collection and use.

North Carolina's investments in coordinating and streamlining early childhood services through a public-private partnership, Smart Start, provide a model for a one-stop shop. The initiative began in 1993 and includes 75 nonprofit agencies that assess local needs and direct early childhood investments in the state's counties. In addition to offering services such as parenting classes, child care program consulting, and case management or referral services for families, Smart Start provides administrative oversight and strategic planning for early childhood programs. In some North Carolina counties, Smart Start coordinates applications and enrollment across programs or agencies to create a single point of entry for families entering the system. For example, in Durham County, the local Smart Start has developed a shared application process that encompasses the state preschool program, Head Start, and Title 1 preschool programs. Families fill out a single application, which they can turn in to any local agency that administers ECE, including the local Department of Social Services, Child Care Services Association, Smart Start, Head Start, and Durham Public Schools. These local partnerships have helped unify what could be a fragmented ECE landscape and developed a more seamless experience for families.¹³⁸

Immediate steps

California should also streamline access to care for families and ECE administration, through a series of more immediate steps.

- **Fully fund Local Child Care and Development Planning Councils**, which are currently only partially funded and often lack funding to complete their legislatively mandated needs assessments. Increased funding would allow local planning councils to assess and plan for child care needs.
- **Reinstate funding for centralized eligibility lists**, which were maintained by local resource and referral agencies from 2007 to 2011 to help link eligible families to providers. Reinstating centralized eligibility lists would make it easier for families to find care that meets their needs and for providers to recruit families. Some counties still run these lists but must cobble together local funds.
- **Create a uniform intake process across agencies that streamlines eligibility paperwork.** Families should be able to complete one intake form rather than submitting paperwork to multiple agencies, making it easier for them to apply for programs, as is being done in San Luis Obispo and San Mateo counties. A uniform intake process would support communication between county agencies about children who qualify for multiple programs—especially children who are homeless, in foster care, or otherwise at high risk—to ensure they receive the services they need.

2. Make ECE Affordable for All Children Birth to age 5.

California has a large unmet need for affordable, high-quality ECE. A mere 33% of children from birth to age 5 who are eligible for publicly subsidized ECE receive it. Care for infants and toddlers is particularly scarce, with subsidies available to just 14% of eligible children. There are also thousands of children in California whose families earn just over the income eligibility threshold but cannot afford the cost of high-quality ECE. A lack of funding is the biggest barrier to access; specifically, a lack of direct investments in slots and low reimbursement rates keeps providers from entering and remaining in the field and leads to an undersupply of licensed care. There are also administrative barriers that suppress the supply of care, such as inflexible 1-year contracts that make it difficult for providers to plan financially.

Long-term goals

California should take the following steps to making ECE affordable for all children under the age of 5.

- **Establish universal preschool for 4-year-olds.** Through transitional kindergarten, the state has begun to expand the availability of ECE to 4-year-olds, regardless of family income. It should continue down this path to universal pre-k, as has been done by Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Washington, DC.¹³⁹ As in other states, this universal preschool program could include a mix of public and private providers, as long as all providers meet quality standards set by the state. Incorporating existing private preschools into the system would preserve choices for parents and ensure the stability of current providers, many of which also serve infants and toddlers. Full-day programs should be available for children whose families work. California’s universal preschool program could also offer wraparound services, such as health screenings and family engagement services, to children from low-income families and children with special needs.

Oklahoma and West Virginia included private providers as they rapidly expanded their publicly provided universal preschool programs. Both states provide public funding to private providers through locally determined contracts between districts and providers, who are required to meet the same standards and be subject to the same monitoring as public schools.¹⁴⁰ West Virginia explicitly requires districts to partner with private providers to maximize existing resources and offer families choice.

- **Make preschool affordable for all 3-year-olds using a sliding fee scale.** Pre-k programs could be made available to 3-year-olds on a sliding fee scale based on a family’s ability to pay for care, with full subsidies for the lowest income families. All of California’s full-day ECE programs, except transitional kindergarten and Head Start, currently use a version of a sliding scale that requires families to pay fees of up to 10% of family income. However, these programs also have an “income cliff,” meaning that once families earn even a dollar over the maximum income level, they lose their benefits entirely.

Over time, California should eliminate the income cliff by using a sliding fee model in which families pay progressively more for care as their income increases. This model would prevent parents who receive a small raise from losing their child care benefits or their opportunity to work. It would also increase socioeconomic integration in California’s ECE

programs, which has been linked to better child outcomes.¹⁴¹ Finally, a sliding fee scale has the benefit of requiring a smaller state investment than universal preschool by capitalizing on both public dollars and private contributions from higher income families. Funding that currently goes to state preschool and child care vouchers for 3- and 4-year-olds could be leveraged to subsidize lower income families.

- **Ensure access to subsidized child care on a sliding fee scale for all infants and toddlers.** Working parents should have access to high-quality child care, also on a sliding fee scale, that provides significant subsidies for families with low incomes and requires greater contributions from families with higher incomes. This child care should include enough full-day care to meet parents' needs, with some providers offering night and weekend care.

To meet the demand for care, there are two programs the state could expand: the Alternative Payment vouchers that families can use on the private market, and state-contracted child care centers and family child care homes. The voucher system allows families to find care that matches their needs and preferences, and is the program that can be most readily expanded without major investments in infrastructure. State-contracted centers and family home care providers are held to higher quality standards, but they do not currently have capacity to serve more infants and toddlers. To support either option, the state would need to address the insufficient supply of licensed providers by providing adequate reimbursements and supporting their operations. The state has begun this process in recent years with modest increases in the reimbursement rates paid by the state to subsidized providers, but it needs to go further.

Immediate steps

California should expand access to and ensure an adequate supply of licensed providers through a series of more immediate steps.

- **Expand the availability of full-day programs** to better meet the needs of working families. Allowing state preschool programs, especially those that utilize school facilities, to operate for a full day on a school-year calendar is one way to increase the availability of full-day slots.
- **Provide funding for facilities to providers who are willing to serve more infants and toddlers.** Funding could be used to convert facilities built for older children or expand the capacity of family child care homes.
- **Increase funding for the Revolving Loan Fund,** a current program run by the California Department of Education to support ECE contractors' efforts to purchase and/or renovate facilities. To make the loans useful to providers, the state should provide technical assistance and relax overly severe restrictions on the type of buildings and renovations allowed. Assisting providers with facilities likely will reduce the amount of funding returned to the state because difficulty acquiring facilities is one of the barriers to expanding subsidized care.

- **Change 1-year state contracts for state pre-k and child care to 5-year grants**, as is the case with Head Start. Five-year grants would allow providers to plan more effectively for the future and to reduce unspent funds currently being returned to the state. Additionally, the state could allow counties to reallocate unspent funds within the county when programs under- or over-earn their contracts, as several Bay Area counties have done under the child care subsidy pilot.
- **Increase reimbursement rates for infant and toddler programs.** Reimbursement rates for infant and toddler care are woefully inadequate to support the cost of maintaining sufficient staff-to-child ratios and providing high-quality care. Raising infant and toddler reimbursement rates could help address the state's severe shortage of care for this age group. The state only offers state-contracted centers 1.4 times the preschool rate to serve toddlers and 1.7 times to serve infants, despite requiring more than twice as many staff to care for these younger children.¹⁴² A rate for infant and toddler programs that is at least double the preschool rate would better reflect the differences in staffing needs across infant, toddler, and preschool settings.

3. Build a Well-Qualified Workforce.

Specialized preparation for ECE educators focused on child development and early childhood learning is associated with stronger outcomes for children.¹⁴³ However, ECE programs across California struggle to recruit and retain qualified educators due to low wages and challenging working conditions. Wages are so low that half of the child care workforce receives public assistance,¹⁴⁴ leading to substantial turnover, which is detrimental to children and costly to programs. Federal and state ECE program regulations increasingly require educators to have higher levels of education, but California's credentialing requirements for ECE educators have lagged behind.¹⁴⁵ In addition, most early childhood educators struggle to pay tuition and have difficulty completing relevant coursework due to a lack of alignment and articulation across institutions of higher education.

Long-term goals

California should take the following steps to build a well-qualified workforce.

- **Increase expectations and support for educators' higher education and training, starting with preschool.** California should ensure that children of similar age and need in state-subsidized programs have access to educators with comparable education. Research has found that pre-k programs with the strongest sustained impact on child outcomes—including transitional kindergarten—require educators to have a bachelor's degree and specialized training in ECE.¹⁴⁶ Currently, California's preschool programs have varying, often low, expectations for staff teaching the same age group. Transitional kindergarten, for example, requires a B.A. and a teaching credential, while there is no degree requirement for California's state preschool program or private preschool programs receiving vouchers.

ECE permits for various roles are based on the number of credits individuals have secured, without a framework for the content of those credits. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing has proposed changes in ECE teacher licensing requirements to strengthen the knowledge base of educators based on research about what teacher competencies are associated with strong student learning outcomes, though these changes have not been enacted.¹⁴⁷ Increased requirements for educators should be paired with support in attaining a higher degree. New requirements should be phased in over time, in order to retain the current workforce and ensure an adequate supply of educators.

Following the creation of its state pre-k program in 1999–2000, New Jersey gave pre-k teachers, many of whom held only an associate-level degree, until late 2004 to earn their bachelor's degree and credential.¹⁴⁸ The state accompanied this new requirement with scholarships of up to \$5,000 per year for tuition as well as supplemental support for books and materials.¹⁴⁹ During this time period, an expanded pool of substitute teachers was also available so that teachers could attend school. New Jersey concurrently expanded the capacity of higher education to train early childhood educators by developing a specialized preschool to 3rd-grade certification with multiple pathways to licensure and by supporting the development of transfer agreements between 2- and 4-year schools.¹⁵⁰ Universities were supported to offer training through online and on-site courses and clinical support as well as coursework on campus. In 2000, only 15% of early childhood teachers in private settings met the state's criteria. By 2004, approximately 90% of the participating districts' early childhood teaching force had a bachelor's degree and were at least provisionally certified. By 2007, 97% were fully certified and had completed college.¹⁵¹

- **Continue to raise reimbursement rates to enhance educator wages.** As the state raises qualifications for ECE educators, it should make investments that can support higher wages so that providers can recruit and retain educators with the specialized knowledge and skills they need to teach young children. One avenue for supporting higher wages is increasing program reimbursement rates for all publicly subsidized providers, which the 2016 and 2017 budgets begin to do. For preschool, the state should aim to raise rates to the level of per-pupil funding spent on transitional kindergarten, which supports educators with a bachelor's degree, a teaching credential, and coursework in ECE. Rates should similarly increase to support a living wage for educators of younger children, especially given that they are required to have specialized knowledge in child development and age-appropriate instructional strategies.

The state should also reform its reimbursement rate structure to ensure that programs requiring higher staff credentials are able to pay higher wages. The state's current system utilizes two different rates: the Standard Reimbursement Rate and the Regional Market Rate. As a result, state-contracted centers in high-cost counties are reimbursed as much as 50% less than their counterparts on the private market, despite the fact that educators in state-contracted centers are held to higher qualification standards.¹⁵² This means that educators with stronger credentials in state centers may receive lower wages than their less-educated peers on the private market. Unifying state reimbursement rates and staff qualifications expectations into a single system would help to improve staffing quality and create more equitable wage structures across the public and private sectors.

Immediate steps

California should also help ECE educators increase their training and compensation through a series of more immediate steps.

- **Increase the availability of full-day slots in state-funded programs** to enable more educators to work full time and earn a living wage. Because there are too few full-day programs, many ECE educators must work part time, which further undermines their ability to earn an adequate salary. The state could facilitate more full-day slots by offering technical assistance to providers for combining funds from multiple part-day programs to create full-day programs.
- **Offer paid hours for professional learning time to state-contracted centers** so that educators can collaborate with colleagues and are not forced to attend trainings, unpaid, on nights and weekends. The state could support professional learning through higher reimbursement rates or grants. The state might also incentivize school districts to include ECE staff in professional learning with early elementary teachers, facilitating preschool-to-kindergarten transitions.
- **Support alignment and articulation among higher education programs** across the community college and university systems. In Los Angeles, Partnerships for Education, Articulation, and Coordination through Higher Education—PEACH—provides a model for improving articulation and alignment among colleges to make sure courses are comparable and credits are transferable across schools and institutions.
- **Expand funding for the Child Development Staff Retention Program (AB 212).** AB 212 allows counties to provide higher education scholarships to improve the training of ECE educators, but it is currently underfunded at only \$11 million annually. Expanding AB 212 would boost the number of ECE educators pursuing additional coursework or an advanced degree.
- **Implement a Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) program,** which provides scholarships to help ECE professionals pursue associate, bachelor's, or master's degrees in early childhood education and supports improvements to higher education, such as articulation agreements, to ensure coursework for an associate degree also counts toward a bachelor's degree. T.E.A.C.H. was developed in North Carolina in 1990, and states can license the program, which gives them access to unlimited technical assistance and requires they follow the research-based model. Currently 26 other states have implemented a T.E.A.C.H program, which often includes a small bonus or raise at the completion of a degree.¹⁵³ In some states, such as North Carolina, this program is paired with funding to supplement ECE educators' salaries based on their level of education.¹⁵⁴
- **Invest in higher education advising programs** for current or aspiring ECE educators. Advising programs should have specialized ECE advisers who help students choose coursework that culminates in a degree, as San Mateo's community college district has done.

4. Improve the Quality of All ECE Programs.

California's ECE programs vary greatly in their quality standards, meaning that similar children may receive very different opportunities within the state's subsidized system. Quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs) have been the main policy lever for raising the quality of care in recent years, but, unlike those in other states, California's QRISs are implemented regionally and have been implemented differently across the state. California's QRIS measures many aspects of quality, including the quality of adult-child interactions through the research-based Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which has been linked to improved child outcomes.

QRIS participation, however, is voluntary for providers. Further, although the state's QRISs rely on a shared method for evaluating program quality, there is local variation in which providers participate, which incentives are provided, and what types of supports are available to help providers improve. Counties must choose between in-depth quality improvement activities for a few providers or less intensive supports for more providers. Overall, only 14% of providers participate in QRIS,¹⁵⁵ leaving most providers with little support. Categorical grants, such as the California State Preschool QRIS Block Grant, which is available only to preschool classrooms in state-contracted centers, have complicated county and regional efforts to support all providers equitably. Further, quality improvement activities outside of QRIS are uncoordinated and supported by relatively small local grants. Because QRIS is California's primary mechanism for improving quality, it is important that the QRIS framework continue to be improved to ensure its effectiveness. Yet, research on how to improve the QRIS process is scarce: The only large-scale study of California's QRIS was conducted during its first years of development.

Long-term goals

California should take the following steps to build a system of high-quality early learning.

- **Raise quality requirements for programs with the lowest standards.** Programs receiving state funds currently vary greatly in their requirements for educators, staff-to-child ratios, and educational standards. Quality requirements for private programs receiving state-funded vouchers are particularly low compared to the state's other ECE programs. The state should ensure that all of its investments go toward high-quality programs. For example, preschool programs should require lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree and ECE-specific coursework. Programs for younger children should require educators to have the specialized knowledge and training they need to work effectively with young children. All programs should be expected to have an age-appropriate curriculum or educational plan. Recognizing that the state currently offers subsidies to many private providers, it should phase in increased requirements over time and take steps to help programs improve.

The Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCP) initiative provides an example of how to invest in private providers to raise the quality of child care programs at scale. The EHS-CCP program blends funding from two federal sources, Early Head Start and the Child Care Development Fund, to support higher quality care in private settings. Investments go toward improving staff-to-child ratios and reducing class sizes, supporting educators' skills through ongoing job-embedded professional learning, and enabling effective family engagement. Quality enhancements are offered to child care centers and family child care providers that meet the needs of working families by offering flexible and convenient full-day and full-year services. Because EHS-CCP is in its early stages, the extent of the program's impact is not yet known. However, national studies of the program report early successes with regard to the number of providers receiving support such as coaching and the number of infants and toddlers receiving comprehensive services.¹⁵⁶

- **Ensure all state-supported programs participate in quality improvement activities.** Currently, a very small portion of providers participate in QRIS, and counties have been left to their own devices to choose who participates and how. The state should play a greater role in ensuring equity of access to quality improvement activities among providers and the children they serve. California should continue investments in QRIS with the goal of universal participation, eventually requiring the participation of all providers receiving state funds. To support county QRISs in achieving this goal, the state could increase investments in the state QRIS hub, Quality Counts California, which provides technical assistance and promotes cross-county exchanges of expertise.

North Carolina, which first started its QRIS in 1998, has a statewide system that requires participation in its QRIS for all licensed programs, including state preschool and Head Start. State-subsidized programs must meet a minimum QRIS rating; for instance, state pre-k programs are required to maintain three out of five stars. Further, the QRIS allows the state to reimburse higher quality centers at a higher rate. A five-star child care center in Mecklenburg County, for example, receives a 63% higher reimbursement rate than a provider offering one-star care in the same community.¹⁵⁷ This higher rate helps to offset the cost of paying better educated teachers or purchasing additional classroom materials and incentivizes quality improvement. North Carolina has also supported extensive parent outreach and education to publicize ratings and inform families about the features of quality. Recent research indicates that the QRIS has been effective at boosting the quality of care across the state.¹⁵⁸

- **Ensure access to coaching and other job-embedded supports for all ECE providers.** The state should provide all educators with the opportunity to participate in activities that research has linked to effective educator development, especially coaching and staff collaboration time.¹⁵⁹ Coaching is not funded or required for California's ECE programs except Head Start, although many California counties are already investing in coaching for educators through QRIS. The state could begin to expand access to coaching by making greater investments in this aspect of QRIS and supporting training for ECE coaches at the state or regional level. For programs with state contracts, such as state preschool and state-contracted centers, it could require and fund coaching for all providers.

In some states, coaching is built into program models and provided to all ECE educators. In Michigan, for example, each state pre-k classroom works with an early childhood specialist through its QRIS, who provides curriculum training and visits classrooms on a monthly basis to support and mentor teaching teams.¹⁶⁰ These specialists have graduate degrees in early childhood education or child development and at least 5 years of relevant job experience to ensure they are equipped to effectively support educators' improvement. New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program similarly provides coaching for state pre-k teachers. Coaches in Abbott preschool classrooms must have a bachelor's degree and teacher certification; at least 3 years of experience teaching in preschool programs; and experience providing professional development, implementing developmentally appropriate curricula, and using performance-based assessments. Coaches have a maximum caseload of 20 preschool classrooms to allow them to visit classrooms on a regular basis to observe and provide feedback to teachers.¹⁶¹

Immediate steps

California should also improve program quality in the short term through a series of more immediate steps.

- **Ensure state quality improvement funds are available to all providers** by increasing the flexibility of their use, particularly for categorical grants such as the California State Preschool QRIS Block Grant, which is available only for state preschool providers. This would be consistent with First 5's IMPACT grant, which fosters the participation of all types of providers in QRIS. Making this change will mean that QRIS funding is not tied to a limited subset of providers.
- **Centralize and support training for QRIS assessors.** Counties currently train and deploy their own staff to rate programs on the QRIS matrix. Having centralized training could increase rating consistency and free up county-level staff to focus on supporting local providers.
- **Invest in research to continuously improve the effectiveness of the QRIS,** especially as more providers and program types participate, so that the QRIS framework, which sets standards of quality and is shared across all counties, accurately identifies high-quality environments and teaching practices across all ECE programs, supports program improvement, and provides parents with useful information about quality.

Conclusion

High-quality ECE can put children on the path to success in school and in life. But many California children do not have access to ECE, and not all ECE programs in California are of high quality. The patchwork of underfunded programs and services available to young children and their families is incoherent and insufficient. California should reconsider its approach to meeting the needs of children and families so that each piece of the system is of high quality and together they create a coherent system. Model practices exist in many of California's counties and in other states. It is time for the state to build on these successes. Increasing access and improving quality will require both budgetary and operational attention, but ultimately can create a system that, as a whole, will better serve California's children.

Appendix: Methodology

This report builds on a recent report published by the Learning Policy Institute, *Understanding California's Early Care and Education System*, which provides a comprehensive state-level overview of California's ECE system, describing its administration and funding, access to care, program quality, and data limitations.¹⁶² In this follow-up report, we analyze how ECE programs operate at the county level in order to

- illuminate variation in access to high-quality ECE across the state;
- understand challenges that county agencies face in providing access to high-quality programs;
- highlight promising practices that can inform county and state policymakers; and
- recommend action state policymakers can take to improve access to high-quality ECE for all of California's children, especially the most vulnerable.

We selected 10 counties that, as a whole, represent the geographic and economic diversity of California. To ensure geographic diversity, we selected one county from each of the First 5 IMPACT regions (see Figure 1).

Within these regions, we selected counties that differed with regard to the following characteristics:

- **Population density.** We included a mix of urban, rural, and suburban counties based on rural-urban continuum codes from the Economic Research Service (USDA).¹⁶³
- **Child care affordability.** We selected counties representing a range of affordability using local data comparing the cost of care to the median salary for a single mother, from the California Budget and Policy Center.¹⁶⁴
- **Child care costs.** We included a mix of low-, medium-, and high-cost counties based on California Regional Market Rate ceiling data.¹⁶⁵

We employed a multi-method research design. Data came from the following sources:

- **Document and administrative data review.** We gathered and analyzed publicly available documents and datasets related to California's major early learning programs and initiatives in each county. Documents included county-level ECE needs assessments; First 5 strategic plans and annual reports; county office of education, First 5, and resource and referral agency websites; and statewide datasets that contain county-level information.
- **County-level interviews.** In each county, we interviewed LPC coordinators, resource and referral agency directors, First 5 Commission executive directors and other administrators, and county office of education staff. We conducted additional interviews with administrators in the focal counties and in additional counties across the state to understand successful practices identified in initial interviews. We included examples of successful practices from within and outside of the 10 focal counties.
- **State-level interviews.** We also conducted interviews with state-level administrators who have knowledge about ECE across California counties.

**Table A1
Focal County Interviewees**

County	Interviews conducted
Inyo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raquel Dietrich, Program Administrator, Inyo County Office of Education • Jody Veenker, Director, First 5 Inyo
Lake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cindy Adams, Director of Child Development Programs, Lake County Office of Education* • Colleen Campbell, LPC Coordinator* • Megan McDonald, Assistant Director of Child Development, Lake County Office of Education* • Brandy Perry, Resource and Referral Manager, North Coast Opportunities/Rural Communities Child Care (resource and referral agency) • Carla Ritz, Executive Director, First 5 Lake County*
Los Angeles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kevin Dieterle, Program Officer, First 5 LA* • Dawn Kurtz, Chief Program Officer, Child360 • Mabel Munoz, Senior Program Officer, First 5 LA* • Michael Olenick, President and CEO, Child Care Resource Center (resource and referral agency)† • Michele Sartell, LPC Coordinator • Dean Tagawa, Executive Director of Early Childhood Education, Los Angeles Unified School District
Merced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rosa Barragan, Program Manager, A.C.C.E.S.S. (resource and referral agency) • Martha Hermosillo, Executive Director, First 5 Merced • Samantha Thompson, LPC Coordinator
Sacramento	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claudia Charter, Program Specialist, PreK Education, Elk Grove Unified School District • Anthony Garcia, Director of Community Services, Child Care Action, Inc. (resource and referral agency) • Nancy Herota, Co-Director of School Readiness Department at the Sacramento County Office of Education (currently Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services)* • Monin Mendoza, Program Planner, Early Care/School Readiness, First 5 Sacramento • Natalie Woods-Andrews, Director of the Early Learning Department at the Sacramento County Office of Education*
San Bernardino	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cindy Faulkner, Operations Manager, First 5 San Bernardino • Michael Olenick, President and CEO, Child Care Resource Center (resource and referral agency)† • Kathie Resendez, LPC Coordinator • Karen Scott, Executive Director, First 5 San Bernardino
San Diego	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gloria Corral-Terrazas, Assistant Executive Director, First 5 San Diego* • Kim Gallo, Executive Director, First 5 San Diego* • Lucia Garay, Executive Director, Early Education Department, San Diego County Office of Education • Virginia (“Ginger”) Hartnett, LPC Coordinator • Kim McDougal, Executive Director, YMCA Child Care Resources (resource and referral agency)
San Luis Obispo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raechelle Bowlay-Sutton, LPC Coordinator • Nancy Norton, Director of Early Learning Educational Support, San Luis Obispo County Office of Education • Shana Paulson, Children’s Services Manager, Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County (resource and referral agency) • Debra Welch, Child, Youth, and Family Services Regional Director, Head Start and Early Head Start • Wendy Wendt, Executive Director, First 5 San Luis Obispo
San Mateo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kristen Anderson, Child Care Facilities Consultant to the San Mateo County Office of Education and the Countywide Child Care Partnership Council • Nirmala Dillman, LPC Coordinator • David Fleishman, Executive Director, 4Cs of San Mateo County (resource and referral agency) • Jean-Marie Houston, Administrator, Early Learning Support Services, San Mateo County Office of Education • Kitty Lopez, Executive Director, First 5 San Mateo
Trinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caedy Minoletti, Executive Director, Human Response Network (resource and referral agency)* • Fabio Robles, Assistant Superintendent, Trinity County Office of Education • Sheri White, Project Director, Human Response Network (resource and referral agency)*

* Interviewee participated in a group interview.

† Interviewee participated in one interview representing two counties.

Table A2
Non-Focal County Interviewees

County	Interviews conducted
Shasta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hilary Bingham, QRIS Coordinator, First 5 Shasta* Wendy Dickens Executive Director, First 5 Shasta* Brandy Groves, Director, Early Education & Instructional Services, Shasta County Office of Education* Renee Menefee, Executive Director, Early Childhood Services, Shasta County Office of Education* Jackie Scott, QRIS T/TA Hub Coordinator, First 5 Shasta*
San Francisco	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> September Jarrett, Executive Director, San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education
Ventura	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holly Harvin, Director of Early Childhood, Fillmore Unified School District* Martha Hernandez, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, Fillmore Unified School District*
Contra Costa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sean Casey, Executive Director, First 5 Contra Costa Edirle Menezes, Early Childhood Education Program Officer, First 5 Contra Costa

* Interviewee participated in a group interview.

Table A3
State-Level Interviewees

Area	Interviews conducted
Higher education and research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Janet Fish, Co-Lead Consultant, PEACH* Nancy Hurlbut, Associate Dean at the College of Education and Integrative Studies at Cal Poly Pomona* Marcy Whitebook, Co-Director, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
First 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Erin Dubey, Early Learning & Healthy Development Office Administrator, First 5 CA* Erin Gabel, Deputy Director of the External and Governmental Affairs Office, First 5 CA* Maira Kenney, Executive Director, First 5 Association
California Department of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cecelia Fisher-Dahms, Education Administrator, Early Education and Support Division, California Department of Education* Sarah Neville-Morgan, Director, Early Education and Support Division, California Department of Education*

* Interviewee participated in a group interview.

Endnotes

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