



Universal Preschool in California

Promising Practices for Mixed Delivery Systems

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Executive Summary

In 2021, California committed to providing preschool for all 4-year-olds and income-eligible 3-year-olds by 2025–26. The largest investment in public preschool was the expansion of transitional kindergarten (TK), a preschool program run exclusively in public schools. At the same time, state policymakers committed to maintaining a mixed delivery system (i.e., a system in which preschool and child care are offered in a variety of settings). In California, the mixed delivery system includes TK, the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, licensed family child care homes, and licensed child care centers.

Mixed delivery systems have many benefits. They increase capacity to serve children across the state, expand parent choice, and support small businesses. However, operating a mixed delivery system is challenging because the governance of preschool programs is spread across multiple agencies, and each program has different eligibility thresholds, quality standards, workforce supports, and reporting requirements. This complex system is difficult for families and providers to understand and navigate. It also results in programs of varying quality. In this report, we examine local implementation of preschool within California's mixed delivery system, elevating promising practices to support access to high-quality early learning experiences.

Case Studies of Local Preschool Delivery

This report examines two districts and two cities that are taking a range of approaches to align their preschool programs and increase access to high-quality early learning within California's mixed delivery system. We look at how they approach preschool governance and administration, access and enrollment, quality standards and monitoring, workforce compensation and development, and reinforcing the mixed delivery system. Case study sites are described below:

- **Alum Rock Union Elementary School District** (Alum Rock Union) in San Jose has built long-standing partnerships with community-based providers who run infant, toddler, and preschool programs on school campuses. Several partners have strong ties to the community and reflect students' linguistic diversity. The district partnered with a community organization to open a birth-to-5 early learning campus that helps coordinate services for families.
- **Lindsay Unified School District** (Lindsay Unified) in the Central Valley is the only public preschool provider in the area, and all 3- and 4-year-olds are eligible for preschool due to neighborhood eligibility for CSPP. To align its two programs, TK and CSPP, the district blends funding from multiple sources and requires classrooms to meet the highest quality standards of each program. The district also integrates TK and CSPP staff in professional development and uses consistent curricula and assessments across classrooms.
- **The city of Long Beach** coordinates early learning through the Long Beach Early Childhood Education (ECE) Committee. The committee unites district, city, nonprofit, and health partners around a shared strategic plan. The city, in collaboration with the Mayor's Fund for Long Beach, developed an online enrollment hub to help families find and enroll in ECE programs. The committee hosts annual festivals to help families learn about early learning programs and offers a citywide annual conference for early educators across the mixed delivery system.

- **The city of San Francisco** established a centralized Department of Early Childhood that coordinates enrollment with the help of a streamlined data system. It uses revenue from a commercial rent tax and state and federal dollars to fund ECE access for families with low and moderate incomes, supplement educator wages, and help providers meet the city’s quality standards. Anticipating that 4-year-olds would move from community-based preschool into TK as TK expanded, the city increased the supply of infant and toddler care. The city also provides coaching and professional development for all providers in its network.

Lessons From the Case Study Sites

The four case study sites reveal both common themes and variations in local approaches to ensuring robust preschool systems. These include the following:

- **Strong and consistent leadership focused on ECE, coupled with long-term strategic planning, are essential elements of local system coherence.** In the school districts, leadership comes from an early childhood director with support from the superintendent and school board. In the cities, San Francisco created a local governing agency for early childhood programs, while Long Beach relies on a coordinating body. All four sites are guided by an early childhood strategic plan that guides the work of diverse partners toward a common goal.
- **Collaborating with community partners and building centralized enrollment systems builds families’ awareness of programs.** Long Beach and San Francisco organize citywide events and coordinate messaging across partners so that information is consistent across the city. Community-based providers in Alum Rock Union and San Francisco run family resource centers that offer information to families in their home language. Long Beach and San Francisco developed centralized enrollment systems that include a universal application for care and that connect families to financial aid.
- **Setting common quality standards for all preschool classes helps address disparities in program quality requirements.** San Francisco developed quality standards that apply to all providers receiving city funding. The city provides funds to help classrooms meet the standards and established common tools to assess classroom quality. Lindsay Unified aligns quality by blending and braiding CSPP, TK, and special education preschool funding, using the same curriculum, child assessments, and quality measures across classrooms.
- **Local resources and government structures influence sites’ ability to improve ECE workforce preparation and compensation.** San Francisco uses city dollars to provide citywide professional development and coaching to providers within its network. Lindsay Unified supports coaching and joint professional development for TK and CSPP teachers with braided funds. Long Beach’s ECE Committee holds an annual citywide symposium for early educators. However, large disparities in pay persist between TK teachers and other publicly funded preschool teachers. San Francisco is the only site that has been able to raise teacher qualifications and compensation at scale due to its local commercial tax.
- **To sustain the mixed delivery system, using local resources to serve children birth through age 3 can help bolster community providers whose 4-year-old enrollment declines as TK expands.** Serving younger children is more expensive than serving 4-year-olds because they need smaller group sizes and age-appropriate facilities. San Francisco used local commercial rent tax revenue to

fund slots for infants and toddlers and offered grants to build or renovate facilities. Alum Rock Union converted an underenrolled elementary school into a birth-to-5 campus, expanding access to infant and toddler care. Long Beach has relied on philanthropy to fund child care scholarships.

Recommendations

The findings from these sites point to the following recommendations for state and local leaders as they work to strengthen California's mixed delivery preschool system. State and local leaders can do the following:

- **Consolidate or coordinate the administrative agencies overseeing California's various preschool programs.** California's early learning system remains fragmented across multiple state and local agencies. The state can coordinate preschool governance—through a unified department of early childhood or a state-level interagency working group such as a children's cabinet—that streamlines grant processes, data systems, and reporting and aligns the work of state agencies responsible for preschool and child care. Policymakers can also identify and fund a lead agency in each county to oversee preschool coordination, family outreach, and professional development—potentially expanding the roles of existing organizations such as county offices of education, First 5 commissions, or local planning councils. In the absence of state policy changes, cities and other municipalities should consider identifying a lead agency or coordinating body to oversee as many early childhood programs as possible.
- **Develop a universal application and enrollment system for families enrolling in publicly funded ECE programs.** To make it easier for families to find and enroll in care, cities or counties can build an online hub that shows preschool, child care, and TK availability in a geographic area and that offers a streamlined application. California has invested in similar efforts in the past, but they did not meet the needs of families and providers. State agencies can look to Long Beach and San Francisco for guidance, as well as states such as [Alabama](#). California can also require that providers regularly share information about their available slots with their child care resource and referral agencies to ensure that information on the state website is up to date. At the local level, resource and referral agencies, county offices of education, school districts, and family resource centers can work together to share what ECE options are available to families.
- **Align quality requirements across preschool programs and provide funding to meet these standards.** To ensure consistent quality across the mixed delivery system, California should align standards for TK, CSPP, and subsidized child care programs, including class ratios, curricula, assessments, and inclusion practices. Increases to quality standards should be supported by funding that reflects the cost of providing high-quality care. In the absence of a state requirement, districts can require consistent quality standards across their preschool and TK programs. Local governments can also set and fund their own quality standards, as in San Francisco.
- **Develop district leaders' abilities to support early childhood development.** Having a leader with early childhood expertise can help ensure that early educators receive appropriate support and that education for preschool students is developmentally appropriate. Districts should consider appointing an ECE coordinator or, where possible, a director to oversee TK, CSPP, and other early learning programs. Administrators overseeing TK teachers are required to have a California Administrative Services Credential, which is often difficult for experienced preschool directors to obtain because the experience and prior teaching requirements are focused on K–12 settings.

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing could facilitate pathways to the credential by allowing experience as an ECE director to count toward those requirements. California could build the ECE expertise of aspiring elementary school administrators by including early childhood learning standards along with the K–12 standards that govern licensing and accreditation. It could furthermore expand access to professional development on ECE for school principals through the 21st Century Leadership Academy or other avenues.

- **Align requirements for state-funded preschool teachers.** California can ensure consistent and adequate teacher qualification standards across early learning programs as it raises compensation. Currently, only CSPP teachers need to hold a Child Development Associate Teacher Permit. The legislature should consider requiring educators in subsidized child care serving 3- and 4-year-olds to hold comparable qualifications, while providing supports to increase access to higher education. Policymakers should also consider requiring TK assistant teachers to have at least 12 units of ECE coursework, similar to associate teachers in state preschool, phasing in that requirement over time.
- **Increase educator compensation.** Early childhood educator salaries in California remain far below livable levels and are uneven across programs. The California Department of Social Services is currently updating the state’s reimbursement [rates](#) for early childhood services, a critical step for the health of the mixed delivery system because it would increase funding for providers and allow them to increase salaries. In the interim, local governments can use tax revenues and philanthropic resources to supplement pay through stipends. For example, San Francisco funded educator stipends based on educators’ permit and degree levels. Where possible, school districts can use general funds to close wage gaps between their TK and preschool teachers.
- **Support sustained, job-embedded professional development across the mixed delivery system.** California can make quality professional development more widely available by developing a regional infrastructure for preschool professional development and coaching. Regional hubs, perhaps hosted by county offices of education, could support coaches and provide professional development, as in San Francisco. Cities and counties can also offer coaching and professional development where funding is available. These agencies, along with districts, can offer joint learning opportunities for CSPP and TK teachers. They can also provide professional development to preschool teachers who are shifting to work with younger children.
- **Help community-based providers make the shift to serving younger children as 4-year-olds move into TK.** To ensure a robust mixed delivery system, California can provide grants and technical assistance to preschool providers to modify their facilities and train their staff to work with younger children. The state also can assist programs in enrolling more 3-year-olds through the use of community eligibility, which offers universal eligibility in low-income neighborhoods. The California Department of Education could also provide technical and financial assistance to school districts facing declining enrollment that want to repurpose space for children from birth through age 3.

California has made meaningful progress toward expanding access to preschool, but realizing the full promise of the state’s mixed delivery system will require a shared vision and cooperation across state and local agencies. Streamlining governance, simplifying family enrollment, aligning quality standards, better supporting the workforce, and reinforcing the mixed delivery system can make the system more equitable and navigable for families and providers alike.

Introduction

In 2021, California committed to providing preschool for all 4-year-olds and income-eligible 3-year-olds by 2025–26. The largest new investment to support the state’s universal preschool goal was the expansion of transitional kindergarten (TK), a preschool program based exclusively in local education agencies (LEAs).¹ However, as TK expands, California policymakers have signaled their support for continuing to offer preschool in a mixed delivery system, meaning that preschool is offered in a variety of settings. These settings include TK, the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, and licensed family child care homes and licensed child care centers in which families can use child care subsidies.²

A mixed delivery system offers many benefits, including increased capacity for serving children, parent choice, and support for small businesses already serving young children. Mixed delivery systems also build from the assets already in a community, such as facilities and experienced staff who share the language or culture of the families they serve. However, offering preschool in a mixed delivery system poses many challenges, including ensuring that each family understands their preschool options and has equitable access to high-quality learning environments.³ Since the programs that comprise the mixed delivery system have different requirements (e.g., for educator qualifications, child–adult ratios, curriculum, participation in child care licensing), variation in quality across programs and settings is the norm. Research has found that families with lower incomes tend to have less access to high-quality programs.⁴

This report examines four localities across California’s mixed delivery system—two cities and two school districts—that offer promising practices for local preschool coordination. The purpose is to inform the ongoing development of local and state policies to provide families with equitable access to high-quality preschool in a variety of settings. Though the report is focused on the mixed delivery system in California, it includes findings applicable to other states and local jurisdictions that may be seeking to establish or improve their mixed delivery systems.

The remainder of this introduction provides an overview of California’s early learning system, including the programs that comprise the mixed delivery system, enrollment trends, and state efforts underway to improve the system. The following section describes each of the four localities studied, highlighting aspects of each site that contribute to high-quality preschool delivery. The next section looks across the four sites to examine the similarities and differences in how they approach preschool governance and administration, outreach and enrollment, quality standards and monitoring, workforce compensation and professional development, and stabilizing the mixed delivery system for children birth through age 3. The report concludes with recommendations to ensure that all families have equitable access to high-quality early learning.

California’s Preschool Programs

California has several publicly funded early learning programs for preschoolers: TK, CSPP, Head Start, and child care vouchers for working families with low incomes. As currently organized, California’s preschool programs are funded and administered by different federal, state, and local agencies, each with their own income-eligibility criteria. (See [Table 1.](#))

Table 1. California’s Public Preschool Landscape

Criteria	Transitional kindergarten	California State Preschool Program	Head Start	Subsidized child care
Ages served	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4-year-olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2- to 5-year-olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3- to 5-year-olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth to 12-year-olds
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School districts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School districts • Community-based organizations • Family child care homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School districts • Community-based organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based organizations • Family child care homes • Friend, family, or neighbor care
Income-eligibility threshold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% state median income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 130% federal poverty level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85% state median income
Administrative agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • California Department of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • California Department of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • California Department of Social Services
Funding source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State education fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State education fund • State general fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal Head Start appropriation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal Child Care and Development Fund • State general fund
2024–25 funding level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$2.6 billion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$2.2 billion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$0.9 billion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$7.5 billion

Notes: Subsidized child care includes several state-funded programs, including CalWORKs, the Alternative Payment Program, and General Child Care and Development. Head Start funding level does not include Early Head Start for children birth to age 3. Child care funding includes all subsidized programs and quality infrastructure for children birth through age 12 and is not limited to preschool-age children.

Sources: Legislative Analyst’s Office. (2025, November 14). *The 2025–26 California Spending Plan: Child care and state preschool*; U.S. Administration for Children and Families. *Head Start program facts: Fiscal year 2024*.

Each of California's programs has its own distinct purpose, described below:

- **Transitional Kindergarten.** Created by the California legislature in 2010, TK was originally designed as the first year of a 2-year kindergarten program for children who just missed the kindergarten eligibility cutoff. It operates only in school districts. In 2021, California's legislature and governor extended eligibility by 2 to 3 additional months each year until 2025–26, when all 4-year-olds would be eligible.⁵ TK is optional, and 4-year-olds remain eligible for the other state early learning programs. TK has become California's largest preschool program in terms of funding and enrollment and is funded on a per-pupil basis from the state's education fund, Proposition 98.
- **California State Preschool Program.** CSPP is a state-funded preschool program for 3- and 4-year-old children and was California's largest program serving preschoolers prior to TK expansion. CSPP programs are operated by school districts, community-based organizations, and family child care homes that are part of a family child care home network. Children are eligible for CSPP if their families earn less than the state median income, if they have a disability, or if they meet other eligibility criteria.⁶ Grants are provided directly from the California Department of Education to contractors. Funding for LEAs comes from the state education fund, while funding for community-based organizations comes from the state general fund. In 2024–25, the majority of funding for CSPP (60%) was allocated to LEAs.⁷
- **Head Start.** Head Start, operated by community-based organizations and LEAs, is available to children from families with incomes below the federal poverty line as well as children who are experiencing homelessness, those who are in foster care, and those who access public assistance.⁸ Head Start offers a variety of services to families in addition to early learning, including supports for health and family well-being, and preschool services operate in both home- and center-based settings. The federal government funds grants that are awarded directly to local programs.
- **Subsidized Child Care.** California and the federal government subsidize child care for families who are working, in school, or incapacitated. Most child care funding is administered as a voucher that is funded through California's welfare program, CalWORKs, or the Alternative Payment Program. Families receiving a voucher can choose to receive child care from any licensed center; family child care home; or friend, family member, or neighbor. The state also contracts directly with preschool and child care centers and school districts to offer free or subsidized child care for birth through school-age children. Funding for subsidized child care has grown substantially since 2021 due to a temporary increase in federal child care funding during the pandemic that was later continued through the state general fund.⁹

Children with disabilities may receive services in any of these programs (TK, CSPP, Head Start, or subsidized child care). Children with an identified disability may also receive services such as speech or physical therapy at their local school district or participate in "special day classes" run by the district for children with disabilities. Special education is funded by the federal government through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and district local funds.

In addition to state- and federally funded programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, many children attend private child care and preschool programs that are not subsidized by the state or federal government and are typically paid for via family tuition. This care may be offered in preschool and child care centers; in family

child care homes; or by friends, family, and neighbors. Finally, expanded learning providers who offer care before and after school or during holiday and summer breaks are also part of the mixed delivery system. These providers include schools as well as community-based organizations.

State Efforts to Improve the Mixed Delivery System

California's preschool landscape has long been recognized as disjointed and inefficient for families and providers alike,¹⁰ and policymakers have made several efforts to align preschool programs within the mixed delivery system. In 2020, the state published the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care, which laid out a set of goals for California's early learning system, including free universal prekindergarten (UPK) for all 4-year-olds and eligible 3-year-olds in a system that is aligned and coordinated.¹¹ More recently, the legislature convened a Mixed Delivery Quality and Access working group that published a report with a series of long- and short-term recommendations for improving California's early learning system. The report emphasized supporting providers in different settings.¹²

Each county was subsequently issued a Mixed Delivery Planning and Access grant and was required to develop a plan to address its preschool system.¹³ In most counties, the planning process was led by the local planning councils. In the remaining counties, it was led by resource and referral agencies (R&Rs), which are public agencies responsible for helping families find child care and other services. Common activities during the planning process, according to annual county reports to the California Department of Education, were data collection, surveying families, developing materials and hosting events to inform families and providers about UPK, holding meetings to build or strengthen community partnerships, and hiring staff such as UPK coordinators to oversee the county's UPK work.¹⁴

More work can be done to streamline programs at the state level and support local coordination of programs. In the following sections of this report, we explore the priorities and strategies employed by four different localities to create more coherence among their preschool options.

Local Preschool Systems: Four Case Studies

In this study, we examined four sites—two districts and two cities—that are taking a range of approaches to align their preschool programs within California’s complex mixed delivery system. Sites include Alum Rock Union Elementary School District (Alum Rock Union) in the city of San Jose, Lindsay Unified School District (Lindsay Unified) in the city of Lindsay, the city of Long Beach, and the city of San Francisco. (See [Table 2.](#))

Each of the local contexts is unique. In rural Lindsay, for example, the school district is the sole preschool provider, while in Alum Rock Union, the district has long-standing relationships with community-based providers who have offered preschool services for years on their campuses. Long Beach and San Francisco each have their own complex landscape that includes a large school district as well as many community-based organizations and family child care homes run by local providers.

Table 2. Case Study Site Characteristics

Site	Jurisdiction	Urbanicity	Region
Alum Rock Union Elementary School District	School district	Suburban	Bay Area
Lindsay Unified School District	School district	Rural	Central Valley
Long Beach	City	Urban	Southern California
San Francisco	City	Urban	Bay Area

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2025).

We conducted interviews in spring and summer 2024 with local leaders such as county universal prekindergarten leads, local planning council coordinators, resource and referral (R&R) staff, district staff (e.g., early childhood education [ECE] coordinators, expanded learning directors, professional development leads), and program directors for the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and Head Start. For more information about site selection and study methodology, see [Appendix: Methodology](#).

Alum Rock Union Elementary School District

Alum Rock Union is a medium-size, suburban school district located in Santa Clara County. The district serves 8,598 students from transitional kindergarten (TK) to 8th grade, of whom 80% are Hispanic or Latino/a of any race, 12% Asian American, 4% Filipino, and 2% multiracial.¹⁵ Almost half of students (44%) are classified as English learners, 78% are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and almost 14% live in households with incomes below the federal poverty line.¹⁶

Alum Rock Union offers TK at each of its 11 elementary schools and offers CSPP, Head Start, subsidized child care, and expanded learning at several of these sites. TK is administered by the district, while CSPP, Head Start, and general child care contracts are administered by community-based organizations that partner with the district to offer services on its campuses. Some community-based providers offer

preschool services outside of school campuses too. For example, Grail Family Services offers CSPP in a community-based setting. This case study, however, focuses only on the services provided on Alum Rock Union school sites.

The district's early learning partners include the following organizations:

- **Kidango** is a nonprofit organization that operates over 50 centers across the Bay Area. It provides a range of early learning services in Alum Rock Union, including infant and toddler care, preschool, CSPP, Early Head Start, and family child care. Kidango has partnered with Alum Rock Union for about 20 years and currently operates on eight campuses.
- **Think Together** is a nonprofit organization that provides early learning programs, before- and after-school programs, and enrichment in almost 500 schools across California. For more than 10 years, it has partnered with Alum Rock Union to provide expanded learning services, and it recently began administering dual language preschool programs with the district using CSPP and local funds. It also offers extended-day services for children in part-day TK and kindergarten.
- **San Juan Bautista Child Development Centers** operates infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age programs across 15 schools, primarily in the San Jose area. It partners with Alum Rock Union to operate a child development center for toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children at one elementary school.
- **Santa Clara County Office of Education** operates Early Head Start, Head Start, and CSPP services across the county, including Head Start at two Alum Rock Union schools. The county's R&R agency is one of just a few in the state to be operated by the county office of education.
- **SOMOS Mayfair** is a community-based organization in East San Jose. Among other services, it runs two family resource centers at Alum Rock Union schools. SOMOS Mayfair has also partnered with the district to run a summer program that prepares incoming students for kindergarten and operate a cooperative preschool at an elementary school.

Alum Rock Union's Early Learning Department serves as the central point of communication for the partner organizations that operate on its campuses. In 2016, the district worked with its community partners to develop a strategic plan for early learning, which interviewees said enabled strong, reciprocal partnerships grounded in a common goal. Building on this plan, the district uses multiple strategies to support access to early learning services and create a "no-wrong-door" approach for family engagement. For example, the district repurposed an elementary school that was struggling with declining enrollment to create the Cesar Chavez Early Learning Center, a "one-stop shop" for families with children birth to age 5. These strong partnerships have supported meeting the current needs of the community and universal preschool expansion.

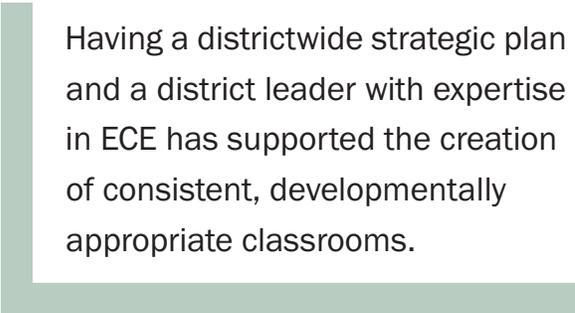
Lindsay Unified School District

Lindsay Unified, in central California, is a small, rural district in Tulare County that serves a total of 3,928 students from TK to 12th grade.¹⁷ Among the district's students, 95% are Hispanic or Latino/a and 3% are White.¹⁸ About one third (32%) of students are classified as English learners, most of whom speak Spanish.¹⁹ Most students (88%) are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals, and 40% live in households below the federal poverty level.²⁰

Lindsay Unified is the only public preschool provider in the city, serving about 90% of eligible children.²¹ Because all schools in Lindsay Unified are classified as CSPP Neighborhood School Sites (which allow enrollment of all 3- and 4-year-olds in the school's attendance zone regardless of income), the district can enroll any 3- or 4-year-old who lives within the district's attendance boundary.

Lindsay Unified serves children ages 3 to 5 years old across 17 classrooms at 6 elementary schools. Among children enrolled in these classrooms, 44% are 4-year-olds, 35% are 5-year-olds, and 21% are 3-year-olds.²² By braiding various funding streams, the district serves all 3- and 4-year-old children who apply and provides expanded learning for 4-year-olds. Of the preschool classrooms, seven are funded by both CSPP and TK and offer school-day programming. Ten are funded by CSPP and include four full-day and six part-day classes. In addition to CSPP and TK funding, the district uses various funding streams and programs to support services for children, including district general funds, California's Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program, special education funds for preschool-age children, district migrant funds, the After School Education and Safety Program, the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program, and the 21st Century Learning Centers Program. The district has prioritized fully inclusive learning environments in which children with disabilities learn in the same settings as their peers who do not have a disability.

Having a districtwide strategic plan and a district leader with expertise in ECE has supported the creation of consistent, developmentally appropriate classrooms. All classrooms, regardless of funding stream, use the same curricula, child assessments, and quality measures and have the same teacher-child ratio (one adult for every eight children). Further, the district supports alignment and quality by providing professional learning opportunities to preschool and TK staff.



Having a districtwide strategic plan and a district leader with expertise in ECE has supported the creation of consistent, developmentally appropriate classrooms.

City of Long Beach

The city of Long Beach is located on the southern coast of Los Angeles County. It is California's seventh-largest city, with nearly 450,000 total residents and almost 20,000 under the age of 5.²³ Long Beach is racially and ethnically diverse, with a population that is 43% Hispanic, 26% White, 13% Asian, 12% Black, 4% multiracial, and 2% Native American or other.²⁴ Nearly half (45%) of the city's population speaks a language other than English at home, and nearly 20% of its children live below the federal poverty line.²⁵

The city of Long Beach has a long history of early childhood partnerships. In 2003, the city created the Long Beach Early Childhood Education Committee, a collaborative partnership that includes publicly and privately funded child care programs, educators, parents, the Long Beach Unified School District, health and mental health organizations, and elected officials. Its mission is to ensure that all children in Long Beach are healthy, safe, and educated. Long Beach’s early learning ecosystem is supported by several key organizations, including the following:

- **The Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services** (Health Department) is one of only three city-run health departments in California. In 2005, it hired an ECE coordinator who leads the department’s ECE strategic initiatives. The Health Department oversees the city’s Early Childhood Education Strategic Plan.
- **The Mayor’s Fund for Long Beach** is an independent, nonprofit organization that works in collaboration with the mayor’s office. Its mission is to expand opportunities for Long Beach children, youth, and families, and one of its key focus areas is ECE.
- **Long Beach Unified School District** (Long Beach Unified) is the fourth-largest school district in California, serving over 64,000 students in 84 public schools. The district offers many different ECE options for families: TK, Head Start, Early Head Start, child development centers, Educare, and the Buffum Total Learning Center for children with disabilities.
- **Children’s Home Society of California** is the primary R&R agency serving the greater Long Beach area. It serves families who qualify for state and federal child care vouchers in addition to providing child care referrals, resources, and workshops.

The broad-based coalition of ECE interest holders established shared goals and a roadmap for the ECE sector, which guides the work of each organization individually and collectively. To increase access to early childhood services, joint efforts include outreach to families through city events and the Long Beach Early Learning Hub, an online system developed collaboratively and hosted by the Mayor’s Fund for Long Beach that helps families find child care options and financial assistance.

City of San Francisco

San Francisco is a densely populated city in the Bay Area. It is California’s fourth-largest city, with a population of just under 809,000, approximately 32,000 of whom are children under the age of 5.²⁶ The city’s population is racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. Thirty-one percent of the population is White, 29% Asian American, 24% two or more races, 10% some other race, 4% African American or Black, 2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.²⁷ One fourth (25%) of the population is Hispanic or Latino/a, and almost half (44%) speak a language other than English at home. Nearly 1 in 10 (9%) children in San Francisco live in households below the federal poverty level.²⁸

San Francisco has the highest cost of living—and the highest preschool costs—in the state. To make preschool affordable and allow providers to offer quality services, the city has made significant investments over the past several decades to develop a high-quality, universal preschool system that includes a large network of centers and family child care homes. The city has also invested heavily in

infant and toddler care. In 2022–23, the city funded 7,308 preschool and child care slots. Of those, 57% were for preschool-age children (ages 3 and 4), 19% for toddlers (age 2), and 23% for infants (under age 2).

San Francisco is unique in that the county includes just one city and one school district: San Francisco Unified School District. San Francisco’s mixed delivery system offers preschool in a variety of settings, including licensed centers and licensed family child care homes. Preschool in the city is supported by the following key entities:

- The **San Francisco Department of Early Childhood** (DEC) is the main agency overseeing policy and planning for publicly funded ECE in the city. DEC oversees the city’s Early Learning for All network. Of the city’s licensed providers, about half—174 centers and 363 family child care providers—are part of the network, meaning they meet DEC’s quality standards and are eligible to receive additional city funding.²⁹
- **San Francisco Unified School District** is the largest preschool provider in the city. (Note: The district had a moratorium on new research projects at the time of data collection, so it did not participate in this study.)
- **Children’s Council San Francisco** and **Wu Yee Children’s Services** are the city’s two R&R agencies. The Children’s Council oversees distribution of state and federal child care subsidies.

San Francisco has one of the highest rates of preschool enrollment in the country, due to a long commitment to high-quality ECE. The city has substantial, dedicated funding for early childhood programs, which allows it to provide more expansive services and child care subsidies than are typically offered in California. The largest and most recent source of funding comes from Proposition C, a commercial rent tax also known as “Baby Prop C,” which generates revenues of \$180 million to \$220 million annually, 85% of which is dedicated to ECE.³⁰ The city uses these funds to expand access to preschool and child care for middle-income families who are not eligible for other public funds. It also established unified quality standards, provided extensive coaching and professional development, substantially raised the wages of early childhood educators, and built shared data systems to support the quality of programs. San Francisco also used a software program to simplify data collection and make the braiding of funds easier for providers.

Lessons From Case Study Sites

This section describes promising practices from the case study sites in five focus areas: (1) local governance and administration, (2) outreach and enrollment, (3) quality standards, (4) workforce, and (5) system reinforcement. Within each topic, we examine the key challenges facing local mixed delivery systems, the solutions developed across case study sites, and commonalities in their successes.

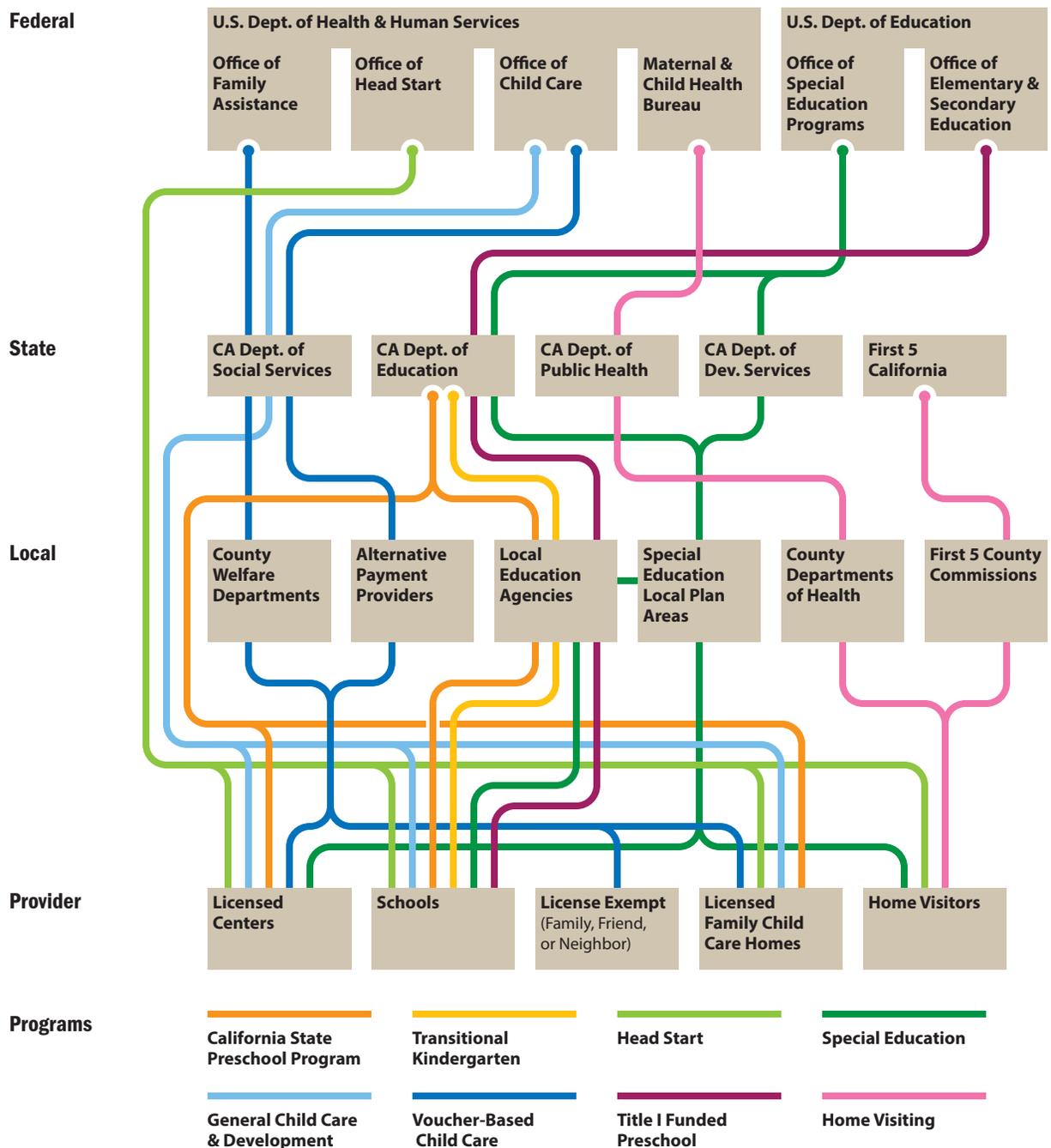
Local Governance and Administration

California's preschool programs are funded and administered by many different federal, state, and local agencies, with each having its own rules and regulations regarding eligibility, funding, and quality requirements, even though they all serve children of similar ages and demographics. [Figure 1](#) shows the agencies overseeing local providers based on the type of preschool programs they offer.

Two state agencies have primary oversight for preschool programs in California: the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the California Department of Education (CDE). Governance of preschool and child care has long been split between these two agencies, and coordination became even more complex in 2020 when oversight of child care programs was shifted from CDE to CDSS, meaning that many providers now have contracts with both agencies. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, meanwhile, oversees permits and credentials for early educators.³¹

California also has created several county-level entities to bring coherence to California's disjointed early childhood landscape, including local child care and development planning councils, First 5 county commissions, and Quality Counts California consortia. (See [Regional Governance: The Role of Local Agencies](#).) Although each of these local organizations plays an important role in coordinating preschool enrollment and professional development, none has the authority or funding to require providers to share enrollment data, participate in professional development, or meet specific quality standards. They also work primarily with private and community-based organizations and have little connection to local education agencies, which receive the majority of preschool funding through transitional kindergarten (TK) and the California State Preschool Program (CSPP).³²

Figure 1. Many Agencies Control California’s ECE Programs



Note: This graphic shows the multiple agencies that administer state- and federally funded early childhood education (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, such as county offices of education, First 5, resource and referral agencies, and Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) consortia, also provide considerable support to providers and programs, although their roles vary by county.

Source: Updated in 2023 from the original version that appeared in Melnick, H., Tinubu Ali, T., Gardner, M., Maier, A., & Wechsler, M. (2017). *Understanding California’s early care and education system*. Learning Policy Institute.

Regional Governance: The Role of Local Agencies

Local Child Care and Development Planning Councils (LPCs). LPCs were created to support counties as they plan for child care services based on family and community need. Each of California's 58 counties has an LPC whose activities are organized by the LPC coordinator, typically housed at the county office of education. LPCs are required by statute to conduct a comprehensive child care needs assessment every 5 years by analyzing the availability of and need for child care in their counties and then to generate a strategic plan. LPCs also annually determine which ZIP codes have the greatest gaps between early childhood education supply and demand. LPCs may also undertake other efforts, such as supporting providers who are not reaching their projected enrollment.

First 5 County Commissions. In 1998, Proposition 10 established a First 5 commission in every California county to fund local services for children birth through age 5 in four domains: family resiliency, child development, child health, and improved systems of care. Because they administered so much funding, First 5 commissions and their parent organization, First 5 California, have helped to set de facto policy such as establishing rules governing the state's quality rating and improvement system. However, First 5 commissions are funded by tobacco tax revenue, which has declined significantly (from a high of \$670 million in 1999 to \$236 million in 2023–24). In response, some commissions have shifted from funding direct services (such as preschool slots) to system supports.

Quality Counts California (QCC) Consortia. Each county has a quality rating and improvement system intended to improve the quality of early learning, with a focus on child development, teacher professional development, and program and environmental quality. Each county (or group of counties, as some small counties have formed consortia) operates its system independently, although all rate programs on a shared set of seven dimensions: child observation, developmental and health screenings, lead teacher qualifications, teacher–child interactions, teacher–child ratios and group size, program environment rating scales, and director qualifications. Local QCC consortia are governing bodies composed of representatives from various local programs and agencies who determine how local quality funds are spent. These consortia are responsible for collecting data from providers who opt to have their program rated on the state's QCC matrix and deciding how quality improvement funds will be spent. QCC is funded by First 5, which receives its funding from California's tobacco tax. With tobacco tax funding declining, QCC funds are expected to end in 2027; thus, the future of local QCC consortia is uncertain.

Sources: First 5 California. [About Quality Counts California](#). (accessed 08/15/2025); First 5 California. (2025). [Annual report 2023–24](#); California Department of Social Services. [Local child care and development planning councils](#). (accessed 08/15/2025).

How, then, do cities and school districts bring coherence at the local level to the multitude of federal, state, or local preschool programs they administer? The case study sites have taken a variety of approaches.

At the city level, San Francisco created a local governing agency for early childhood: the Department of Early Childhood (DEC), which offers local grants to incentivize preschools and family child care homes to meet certain requirements. The department's influence stems from the city's tax revenue, which is dedicated to making ECE more affordable and accessible. Long Beach, by contrast, does not have a dedicated agency or funding stream for ECE. It relies on a coordinating body, the Long Beach ECE Committee, which is made up of public and private early childhood organizations and providers from across the city that volunteer to work together to support early learning in the city. Its work is guided by a citywide early childhood strategic plan.

Each of the two school districts studied, Alum Rock Union and Lindsay Unified, supports an ECE director and has a strategic plan in place that has guided its priorities. However, there are notable differences in their approaches to local preschool administration. In rural Lindsay, the school district is the main source of preschool and child care for 3- and 4-year-old children, serving about 90% of eligible children, so the ECE director oversees the majority of preschoolers in the area.³³ She has blended and braided funding from several sources to have them work together. Alum Rock Union, in contrast, works closely with community providers to oversee preschool programs.

Below, we provide more details about the preschool administration in each case study site and assess the benefits and challenges of each approach.

San Francisco: A Centralized Early Childhood Agency

San Francisco's DEC is a dedicated early childhood agency that reports to the city's mayor. The agency was initially called the San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education when formed in 2013 and was renamed in 2022 when it merged with First 5 San Francisco, which also played a coordinating and funding role in early childhood initiatives.³⁴

Using Funding to Incentivize Change

DEC's ability to influence San Francisco's early childhood policy stems primarily from its power of the purse, as the agency is tasked with distributing substantial city funds. In 2024–25, DEC had a budget of \$337 million, more than half of which came from Proposition C (Prop C), a commercial rent tax.³⁵ DEC is the primary agency tasked with distributing Prop C funds and making related policy decisions. In a Prop C stakeholder engagement process, preschool and child care funding for low- and middle-income families, child well-being supports, and workforce compensation emerged as top priorities for the city.³⁶

DEC uses city funding to incentivize providers to join its Early Learning for All network, which gives the city agency leverage to place requirements on local ECE providers. In 2025, there were 174 centers and 363 family child care providers in the network, comprising more than half of the city's licensed centers and one third of family child care providers.³⁷ To join the network, providers must meet DEC's quality standards, which are higher than most federal and state requirements. They must also agree to accept children receiving child care subsidies and provide data regularly to DEC. In return, providers in the Early Learning for All network receive support from DEC, including supplemental funding, wage supplements for teaching staff, professional development and coaching, and family referrals.

Data Collection and Use

DEC takes the lead for early childhood planning and policymaking in San Francisco. It collects detailed data on child care and preschool access by child race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, home language, and neighborhood, which are used by the city's local planning council in a detailed needs assessment.³⁸ This needs assessment helps DEC prioritize uses of new funding in its [strategic plan](#), which guides its work.

San Francisco uses a software program to simplify data collection and make the braiding of funds easier for providers in its Early Learning for All network. For example, it efficiently creates enrollment reports for different state and local programs and simplifies child assessment reporting. This system makes it easier for providers who operate multiple contracts. Prior to the introduction of new software, San Francisco's ECE programs used as many as 10 different databases for each funding stream to collect enrollment, attendance, and funding data, which was challenging for providers who served children funded by different sources. It also made it difficult for city officials to understand the preschool landscape in the city.³⁹

Long Beach: A City ECE Committee

In contrast to San Francisco, where citywide coordination stems from a governmental department and a dedicated funding source, citywide coordination in Long Beach is driven by a voluntary committee and a citywide strategic plan.

The Long Beach ECE Committee as a Coordinating Entity

Launched in 2003, the Long Beach ECE Committee is a collaborative, nonprofit organization supporting ECE in the city. Its mission is “ensuring that all children in Long Beach grow up healthy, safe, and educated.”⁴⁰ The Long Beach ECE Committee is composed of representatives from local nonprofits, child development centers, preschools, family child care providers, social service agencies, Long Beach Unified School District (Long Beach Unified), the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, the Mayor's Fund for Long Beach (Mayor's Fund), the Long Beach Public Library, Long Beach City College, and others. The committee is led by a board of directors from across member organizations.

The Long Beach ECE Committee does not have a dedicated funding stream. Rather, committee initiatives are funded by the member organizations and local philanthropies, and committee members volunteer their time for any committee work beyond the scope of their regular jobs.

The committee has built a sense of shared commitment and collaboration among early childhood-serving organizations in the city. Alejandra Albarran Moses, Early Childhood Strategic Initiatives Program Manager at the Health Department, described the shared commitment among members:

I think the biggest strength is the relationships that we have and that we have pretty incredible trust in each other and shared commitment to the children of Long Beach. It's not a commitment to one program over another. It's saying, “You know what? We all care about all children, no matter where they are, and we are all willing to do whatever piece makes the most sense from our perspective.”

The committee works in a number of areas. Its public policy and education workgroup supports parents and other caregivers in advocating for their children at the local and state levels. It also tracks legislation that may impact children, families, and programs and engages members in activities such as writing

letters and making phone calls when a concern arises. The committee's community impact workgroup hosts community events. For example, the Celebration of the Young Child is an annual event to engage and educate families in early care and education. Its Early Learning and Kindergarten Festival supports the transition from preschool to kindergarten.

The Long Beach ECE Committee also supports the ECE workforce through its workforce enhancement workgroup, whose primary purposes are to enhance the quality of professional development available to early childhood educators and reduce barriers to professional development opportunities. Its largest activity is the annual Long Beach Early Childhood Education Symposium, a 1-day conference for early educators across the city. The committee also has a marketing and membership workgroup, whose focus is to build connections among committee members and conduct community outreach to build awareness of the committee and the importance of ECE.

Keeping Focused With a Strategic Plan

The second component supporting citywide coordination in Long Beach is the city's ECE strategic plan. The strategic plan was first developed with a federal grant in 2018 by the city's Health Department in collaboration with the Mayor's Fund, the Long Beach ECE Committee, and Long Beach Unified, with representation from parents, providers, and community organizations.⁴¹

Since its adoption, the strategic plan has served as a driver for action, coordination, and funding for many organizations, child care providers, and government agencies. It also solidified the citywide coordination around early education. As Whitney Leathers, Chief Impact Officer at the Mayor's Fund, described, "From 2018 forward, [the strategic plan] really served as a guiding star to continue bringing us together. ... [It] grounded us in some shared goals." Many of the Long Beach efforts described in this report are outcomes of the strategic plan.

The strategic plan was updated in 2024. The new 5-year strategic plan, like the original, was developed by the Health Department in collaboration with community partners. It focuses on "uplifting the unique cultural, linguistic, and familial backgrounds of Long Beach in order to identify and advocate for solutions that are deeply rooted in the community's voice"⁴² and focuses on six overarching goals:

1. Support strong and resilient families.
2. Increase access to early care and education services via a mixed delivery system.
3. Support the development of a strong early childhood-service workforce.
4. Strengthen the quality of early childhood programs and services across the city.
5. Support safe, healthy, and accessible environments for children and families.
6. Promote partnerships that align ECE services and integrate the voices of children and families.

For each goal, in addition to enumerating the successes of the past 5 years and needs for the future, the strategic plan sets forth specific objectives and identifies the responsible organization. For example, to support the development of the ECE workforce, one objective is to "enhance the professional growth and development of the ECE workforce by offering continued learning and workshop opportunities to support adaptation to the evolving demands of the field." To this end:

- the Long Beach ECE Committee will continue to facilitate professional development workshops that are tailored to the specific needs of professionals in the field and support the annual ECE symposium,
- the Health Department and the Long Beach ECE Committee will continue to support ongoing opportunities for ECE internships,
- California State University at Long Beach will support Child Development majors in completion of a “bridge program” in which students can earn their bachelor’s degree concurrently with a PK–3 teaching credential, and
- the Health Department will conduct a needs assessment of the ECE workforce to identify professional areas for growth.

Alum Rock Union: A District–Community Partnership

Alum Rock Union’s investments in early learning came about through partnerships in the community, and its work was sustained by an ECE director who has strong roots in the community.

Leading With Community Partners

Alum Rock Union’s focus on early learning began with community organizers and parents. In 2016, SOMOS Mayfair, a community-based organization based in Alum Rock, began working closely with parents in the community and identified a need for family services and greater access to early learning. In response, SOMOS Mayfair partnered with the district to open a family resource center at one of the district’s campuses. Additionally, in 2017 SOMOS Mayfair and several community partners worked with the district to articulate a broader vision and strategic plan for early learning, aided by the superintendent at the time, Hilaria Bauer.⁴³ The district renewed its commitment to preschool in its districtwide strategic plan in 2022, which made expanding access to preschool a top strategic goal.⁴⁴

Staff at partner organizations noted that the collaborative development of the district’s early learning vision and strategic plan enabled strong, reciprocal partnerships, grounded in the common goal of providing high-quality early education. As Stacy Galdamez, former Executive General Manager at Think Together, a community preschool provider, stated:

Every liaison ... with the superintendent was always like, “This is our vision for the school year” or “This is our 5-year plan.” They have never seen us as a separate entity, which I think has helped build strong relationships between us and supported us in figuring out how we make this a great experience for students.

The partners also noted that due to their close connections with the local community, they are able to make preschool more responsive to what families want. With its partnerships, the school district has been able to offer unique programs such as Spanish and Vietnamese dual immersion programs. These programs, in turn, draw more families into the district. “There’s a lot more interest from Vietnamese families around the area,” said Saúl Ramos, Executive Director of SOMOS Mayfair.

A Strong Early Childhood Leader in the District

To help implement its early learning vision, the district hired a Director of Early Learning, Dianna Ballesteros, to lead Alum Rock Union's Early Learning Department. Ballesteros came to the position with decades of experience in early learning and well-established community relationships. She brought a broad vision for universal preschool and a commitment to maintaining longtime community partners as TK expanded.

The Early Learning Department serves as the central locus of communication for the partners offering preschool and child care across the district. Community partners typically check in with the department monthly. According to Galdamez, "[The monthly check-ins have] created consistency for us. ... Making that time and effort on both ends is what makes the strong partnership."

The extent to which the district shares administrative and funding responsibilities with its community partners varies. Some partners, including Kidango and San Juan Bautista Child Development Centers, use the district's facilities to fulfill their own contracts for CSPP and child care. In other cases, the district holds the funding and contracts and then subcontracts with its partners to provide early learning services on its elementary campuses. For example, in its two dual immersion preschool programs, Alum Rock Union holds the CSPP contract and partners with Think Together to handle the day-to-day program administration, including hiring staff, training, providing coaching, drafting parent communication, and selecting curricula or assessments. In this particular partnership, Alum Rock Union's Early Learning Department also signs off on key decisions, such as child assessments, curriculum, and communication to parents.

Alum Rock Union also partners closely with Kidango to develop and run the Cesar Chavez Early Learning Center, a center that serves children birth through age 5. The campus hosts the school district's Early Learning Department offices as well as the family resource center run by SOMOS Mayfair, which makes it easy for staff to connect families to additional resources they may need. Community partners say that colocating the district's early learning office and community partners' offices on an early childhood campus has improved communication and enabled the creation of innovative programs on other campuses across the district, such as dual immersion and inclusive preschool settings. The colocation of organizations also makes it easier for families to access services and information, because staff are able to learn what each organization offers.

Lindsay Unified: A Strong District Leader With a Strategic Plan

Having a districtwide strategic plan and district leader with expertise in early childhood has supported the creation of consistent, developmentally appropriate classrooms in Lindsay Unified. The district serves preschool children across 6 elementary schools, with 10 classrooms funded by CSPP and 7 classrooms funded by both CSPP and TK. The district also offers before- and after-school programs to 4-year-old children.

Lindsay Unified's strategic design, adopted in 2007, laid out the district's vision for learning in preschool through grade 12, which helps all staff work toward common goals and use shared language.⁴⁵ According to Lindsay Unified staff, having a plan that fosters shared language improves their ability to collaborate

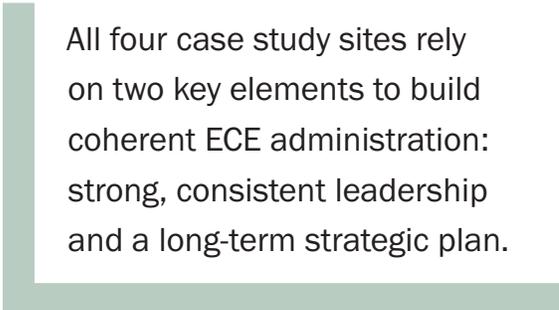
across departments and grade levels and builds a needed bridge between early learning and K–12. For example, early education and K–12 staff alike use terms like “learners” to refer to students and “learning facilitators” to refer to educators.

Lindsay Unified’s Director of Early Childhood Education, Cheri Doria, has made ECE a priority by building champions within the district and marshaling an array of funding streams to provide families with an accessible, high-quality preschool experience in the district. She works closely with district staff in other departments to consider how proposed expenses align with the goals in the district’s strategic plan.

Doria also educates and supports district and site administrators in understanding the importance of high-quality, developmentally appropriate early learning opportunities and how early learning connects to other elementary grades. She collaborates with the director of educational systems, who oversees expanded learning opportunities, to make after-school programming relevant to what preschoolers are learning during school hours and ensure activities are appropriate for their age. She helps train principals who oversee preschool and TK on the components of high-quality early learning. As part of the training, she hosts walk-throughs of preschool and TK classrooms and explains how the children are learning key concepts while engaging in play. She also joins principals in evaluating preschool and TK teachers, which has been helpful because principals do not always have an early learning background. Doria notes that these practices help to “push up” early learning practices into instruction in later grades.

Common Themes and Challenges

All four case study sites rely on two key elements to build coherent ECE administration: strong, consistent leadership and a long-term strategic plan. In the school districts, leadership comes from an ECE director with the support of the district superintendent and school board. In the cities, leadership comes from a lead organization (DEC in San Francisco and the ECE committee in Long Beach) with support of the mayor and city council.



All four case study sites rely on two key elements to build coherent ECE administration: strong, consistent leadership and a long-term strategic plan.

Each of these sites benefits from a long-term strategic plan with buy-in from the community. In the districts, the strategic plan elevates early childhood as an important component of the district’s work. In the cities, the strategic plan guides the work of a diverse array of actors toward a common set of goals.

Yet the sites also vary in their approach to governance and administration, reflecting the local contexts. Long Beach and Alum Rock Union support a coherent mixed delivery system by convening and coordinating diverse community partners. The Long Beach ECE Committee includes broad representation across the city’s mixed delivery system, bringing actors together to focus on shared goals and initiatives. Since the city does not have a dedicated ECE funding stream, the committee’s approach has been to identify areas of strength and overlap in partners’ work to reduce duplication and identify ongoing needs. At the district level, Alum Rock Union shares space and grants with community preschool providers to expand access to preschool. Rather than hire its own staff to run CSPP and family services, it relies on contracting and partnering with community-based organizations, many of which reflect the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the families served.

San Francisco and Lindsay Unified, by contrast, have more streamlined ECE programs, with an emphasis on having similar expectations for all classrooms serving young children. San Francisco has consolidated city- and county-level agencies serving young children into DEC. Dedicated city funding allows DEC to incentivize in-network providers to meet a unified set of early learning program standards and enhance educator wages. DEC helps individual providers blend and braid funding from multiple sources and has developed a data system that makes it easier for providers to report to various state and federal administrators. Lindsay Unified has strong leadership from a director of ECE who oversees preschool and TK programs and works to combine multiple funding streams. All 3- and 4-year-olds attend programs that meet standards.

Each of these approaches has its benefits and drawbacks. Long Beach and Alum Rock Union's convening power honors the diversity of the mixed delivery providers in each local community. It helps to maintain families' access to diverse providers, many of whom reflect the language and cultures of the families they serve. However, the system is complex and challenging to coordinate and explain to families.

San Francisco and Lindsay Unified's consolidation approach, on the other hand, has the benefits of a clear and consistent approach to quality and consistent supports for staff across classrooms. This approach will not work in all contexts, however. In San Francisco, city-level funding has been a key part of having providers opt in to DEC's quality standards and share data. In Lindsay Unified, located in a rural area, there are few community-based providers outside of the district.

Outreach and Enrollment

Offering preschool in a mixed delivery system can offer families choice, allowing them to select the type of environment they prefer for their child. However, as currently organized, California's mixed delivery preschool system can be confusing and difficult to navigate, similar to other states.⁴⁶ One challenge is that families often lack information about programs for which they are eligible. A second problem is that applying for programs, proving eligibility, and getting enrolled is burdensome for families, especially working families who must piece together multiple types of care to meet their needs for full-day, full-year care.⁴⁷ The lack of clear outreach and enrollment systems for universal preschool is a challenge for early learning providers too: Providers need to do their own marketing and outreach and find ways to connect with clients. When providers are underenrolled, their financial health can suffer.

To support families in finding and enrolling in care, each California county is required to have at least one publicly funded resource and referral agency (R&R).⁴⁸ 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. R&Rs receive federal child care funding administered by the California Department of Social Services.⁴⁹ R&Rs are also tasked with gathering data on child care supply and cost. They play an important role in the ECE system, but they face limitations. For example, while R&Rs have the names of all licensed providers in their county, they do not have access to information about the number of currently available slots at each provider, and they are not able to directly enroll families in programs.⁵⁰ Furthermore, R&Rs are only required to share referrals to licensed care, which does not include TK or other license-exempt programs such as after-school programs. Most families get their child care information from word of mouth and do not use their local R&R.⁵¹

To address gaps in information, each case study site has made it easier for families to understand their preschool options by advertising widely through trusted messengers. Long Beach and San Francisco, for example, advertise through citywide events and help coordinate messaging across partners so that information is consistent across the city. Alum Rock and San Francisco also rely on family resource centers run by community-based providers that offer centralized enrollment information to families in various languages.

To address enrollment challenges, the case study sites have coordinated enrollment in public ECE programs through streamlined enrollment processes. Long Beach and San Francisco have both developed centralized enrollment systems in which families apply for care through a universal application and families are connected to financial aid and providers. Alum Rock Union and Lindsay Unified created local outreach systems that make it easier for families to enroll in care.

The remainder of this section describes in more detail how the case study sites have provided families with information about their preschool options and helped them enroll in programs.

Long Beach: The Early Learning Festival and Online Enrollment Hub

One goal of the Long Beach strategic plan is to increase access to ECE services. To this end, the city hosts family events about early learning and developed a centralized enrollment system to make the enrollment process easier for families and providers.

Community Early Learning Events

For more than 2 decades, the Long Beach ECE Committee has hosted the annual Early Learning and Kindergarten Festival for families with children birth to 5 years old. The festival's goals include increasing parents' comfort level with the formal school experience and providing information to families about child care, TK, and before- and after-school care.⁵² Each festival offers workshops on child development as well as information about how to enroll in programs for infants, toddlers, preschool, TK, and kindergarten, including dual language immersion programs. There are also math and reading workshops, during which parents and their children engage in activities that can be replicated at home. The festival includes a resource fair where students can receive a free backpack and books as well as dental screenings and immunizations. To enable as many parents as possible to attend, the festival is held in person on three different dates during the second half of the school year and virtually on YouTube. Over 400 people attend the festival annually.⁵³

Online Enrollment Hub

The Long Beach Early Learning Hub (the Hub) is a new online centralized enrollment system that helps families identify child care options and apply through a single child care application. The concept for the Hub grew out of the 2018 ECE strategic plan. The Mayor's Fund led its development in collaboration with Long Beach Unified and the Long Beach ECE Committee. It was funded by the Long Beach Recovery Act and the school district. The Mayor's Fund continues to run the Hub under the auspices of an advisory committee composed of ECE providers, the Children's Home Society (the local R&R), the Health Department, and Long Beach Unified.

Families use the Hub to apply for specific child care and preschool programs. After inputting information about their child, family needs, and demographic data—including family income—the Hub connects families to providers based on family preferences (e.g., private centers, family child care homes,

community-based preschool and child care centers, faith-based centers), hours of care needed, location, income eligibility, and other program attributes. Karissa Selvester, Executive Director at the Mayor’s Fund for Long Beach, noted that the Hub is intended to enable family choice. She stated:

Families can make a decision that is really based on what is good for them, whether that’s the family child care provider in the neighborhood where they live, or around the corner from where they work, or in the district. ... This is a mechanism for them to ... find all of the options open.

Dora Jacildo, Executive Director of Child Lane, a nonprofit working in the Long Beach community, noted that in addition to “improving the access that families have to the multiple programs that are available here in the city,” the Hub also “makes it easier for programs to enroll families that are eligible.”

Beyond its function as a portal for accessing child care, the Hub also helps families identify financial assistance and scholarships to help cover the cost of child care. The universal application screens families for their eligibility for CSPP, Head Start, Long Beach Unified programs, and locally funded scholarships.

Providers interested in joining the Hub network must be licensed, sign a memorandum of understanding, create a program profile, and agree to provide weekly vacancy updates and process child care referrals. Initially piloted with only 50 early childhood programs, the Hub now has over 140 licensed early learning and child care providers in its network out of roughly 320 licensed providers in the city.⁵⁴ In the 2024–25 school year, the Hub had over 6,500 child care searches and over 330 universal applications submitted.⁵⁵

San Francisco: Data-Driven, Coordinated Enrollment

San Francisco’s preschool enrollment is the highest in California. Between 2016 and 2020, 81% of all 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in public or private preschool, compared to 60% in California.⁵⁶

Engaging the Community to Improve Outreach

San Francisco does concerted outreach to communicate preschool options to families. In 2023, DEC funded a parent outreach campaign to better understand how families learn about ECE and how DEC could connect with them. The campaign, led by a social impact consulting firm in coordination with a parent advocacy group, Parent Voices SF, included focus groups and a survey of more than 1,600 parents, interviews with ECE interest holders, and a racial equity audit of existing DEC outreach materials.⁵⁷

The study results provided insights into how DEC could better communicate with parents, such as communicating in multiple ways, making materials simple and visually appealing, and doing outreach in multiple languages. Partner organizations indicated the need for streamlined and cobranded marketing materials for families and a clearer, more coordinated system. They also wanted DEC to engage them quarterly and provide a repository of approved marketing materials. DEC, R&Rs, family resource centers, and the city’s public hospitals worked together on an information campaign.⁵⁸

A Coordinated Enrollment System

Further, San Francisco has a single application for ECE programs that allows families of all incomes to apply online for providers in its network, which includes licensed centers and family child care homes meeting the city’s quality standards. (TK is not included.) Families can complete the application on

their own; alternatively, staff at R&Rs, family resource centers, and other social services agencies are available to help families complete the application in person. DEC funded the application’s development. It also funded one of the city’s two R&Rs to train staff at city agencies on how to walk families through the application.

Once a family completes an application, their information is automatically entered into a centralized eligibility list. Staff from one of the two R&Rs then contacts the family, informs them of their eligibility for subsidized care (including Head Start and CSPP), and helps the family identify a preferred program. R&R staff clean the eligibility list regularly to remove families who have already found care.

A centralized enrollment system helps R&R staff provide referrals to providers with available space. Providers in the Early Learning for All network must regularly update the network’s website to ensure that data on vacant slots are up to date—a key component of ensuring that the enrollment system works efficiently. R&R staff check in periodically to ensure vacancy data are accurate. The process can be onerous, and providers do not always see immediate benefits through referrals. However, it has helped bring coherence to the system.

The centralized enrollment system also helps the city monitor its progress in enrolling families in care. According to DEC, there were nearly 4,000 families waiting for city-funded care in 2018; by 2023 there was a 72% reduction in the number of children waiting to enroll. DEC credits the reduction to increased subsidies as well as new investments that allowed the city to expand infant and toddler care.⁵⁹

Alum Rock Union: Family Resource Centers and “No-Wrong-Door” Enrollment

Alum Rock Union supports access to early learning services by collaborating with its community partners, operating family resource centers, and conducting proactive outreach to families.

Community-Run Family Resource Centers

Alum Rock Union has two family resource centers located on school sites that are run by SOMOS Mayfair and funded by First 5 Santa Clara.⁶⁰ The family resource centers serve as the district’s centralized enrollment hubs, offering information on programs, services, and activities for families. In addition to staff from SOMOS Mayfair, each family resource center houses a school linked services supervisor hired by the district who supports families in connecting to needed services.

The regional nature of the family resource centers, along with their operation by local, community-based organizations, enables trusting relationships with local families. Saúl Ramos, Executive Director of SOMOS Mayfair, noted that his organization can build on its existing relationship with families through its programs to connect them with the family resource centers: “They are families who are part of SOMOS’s ecosystem. ... We can do a little bit more navigating and advocating when needed.”

Coordinated Outreach

To inform families of their preschool options, the district reaches out to them in multiple languages and in multiple ways, including physical flyers, social media, door-to-door promotions, and events, timed for when families are beginning to think about enrollment for their preschool-age children. The district’s early learning department also hosts a variety of events with its early learning partners to support family

enrollment and access. During enrollment days, staff from family resource centers and the district support families in identifying and enrolling in early learning programs. The district also collaborates with its partner providers to host “Transition Into Alum Rock” sessions, where early learning staff lead information sessions at community organizations, both in person and virtually. During these sessions, families learn about their preschool options, the enrollment process, transition supports, and more.

Alum Rock Union’s partnerships also enable referrals across district departments and organizations within the community’s early learning system to create a “no-wrong-door” approach to serving families. Since family resource centers are on district sites, staff can walk a family over to the enrollment desk. Dianna Ballesteros, Director of Early Learning, shared:

We have all these different pathways [for families]. They can walk into the Early Learning Department. They can send us an email. They can call our number. They can walk into any department, [which will] call us and give us [the family’s] number. Families can go into family resource centers, elementary school offices, even middle school offices, and people now know how to put them in touch with us, and then we can further put them in touch with other entities if it’s not Alum Rock.

In addition to its local preschool providers, the district works with broader, regional organizations such as the San Jose Public Library system and the Santa Clara County Office of Education, the county’s R&R, to expand its ability to refer families, even outside of the district’s early learning system. (See [Santa Clara County Child Care Portal](#).)

Santa Clara County Child Care Portal

The Santa Clara County Office of Education built an integrated, countywide data system to help families in the county, including those in Alum Rock, learn about their child care and preschool options. Families can input their ZIP codes, child’s age, and address to receive a tailored list of early learning providers, including licensed child care, state preschool, and transitional kindergarten (TK). Parents can filter early learning options by type of care, subsidy acceptance, care schedules, transportation, special needs experience, and language of care. The site also indicates whether programs have available slots.

The county office of education has access to data on licensed care because it operates as the county’s resource and referral agency. Because TK is not licensed, the county office’s data team manually searches for data on TK by school district. Maintaining up-to-date data requires significant staff capacity, according to staff, but the county office emphasizes the importance of families’ access to both licensed care and TK locations and availability.

Sources: Interview with Michael Garcia, Director of Child Care Planning and Support at the Santa Clara County Office of Education, and Veronica Garza, Manager at Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems at the Santa Clara County Office of Education. (2024, April 11); Santa Clara County Office of Education. *Child care support for families in Santa Clara County*.

Lindsay Unified: Neighborhood Eligibility

All schools in Lindsay Unified qualify for the California State Preschool Program Neighborhood School Eligibility provision, which means all 3- and 4-year-old children living in the district's boundaries are eligible to enroll in CSPP.⁶¹ Using this provision has allowed the district to clearly market its program as available to all 3- and 4-year-old children in the area. No age-eligible child is turned away: The district uses general funds (from the Local Control Funding Formula) to cover the costs of the few students who do not live within the district's attendance boundaries.

Even with neighborhood eligibility, however, families are still required to verify their income. Income verification is a time-consuming process and is required by the state because children must be enrolled in order of priority, with children from lower-income brackets enrolling first. Lindsay Unified has space to enroll all children, however. ECE Director Cheri Doria said that removing the income-eligibility verification would save families time without changing who enrolls.

Common Themes and Challenges

The case study sites had several commonalities with regard to family outreach and making sure families were aware of programs in their neighborhood. These included relying on community partners, using multiple modes to convey preschool options, and developing centralized enrollment systems.

The case study sites worked with trusted community messengers to share information with families about their preschool options, especially through family resource centers run by community groups. Case study sites also fostered a no-wrong-door approach to enrollment by ensuring that multiple local providers were able to support preschool enrollment. In Alum Rock Union, this strategy meant supporting family resource centers run by community partners and on school campuses. In San Francisco, it meant training community-based providers and R&Rs to help families with the city's centralized ECE application.

Each of the case study sites also used multiple modes of contact with families, including hosting festivals or events, posting on social media, sending out flyers, and knocking on doors. Long Beach has its early learning festival in person and online. San Francisco created outreach materials in multiple languages for partners to share with families.

The two cities, Long Beach and San Francisco, have developed centralized enrollment systems that streamline the application and enrollment process for families and providers. Both have an online platform that allows families to learn about the ECE options available and their eligibility for financial assistance and to match families with providers that have openings. These online portals help simplify an otherwise complex application process.

Developing a centralized enrollment system is a big undertaking that requires strong relationships with providers, who must agree to participate; technical acumen to develop the platform; and constant contact with families and providers to make sure the system stays current. Large cities like Long Beach and San Francisco are better positioned than smaller cities or towns to make such long-term and complex investments. The technology, however, could conceivably be leveraged for use in smaller localities.

Quality Standards

California’s preschool programs have different quality standards for children of the same age, meaning that children’s learning experiences may vary merely due to their program’s funding and setting. These discrepancies likely lead to inequitable access to high-quality preschool. This section focuses on quality standards, including curriculum, assessment, ratios, and quality monitoring. The following section focuses on the workforce, another important aspect of program quality.

California’s ECE programs’ quality standards vary in several respects, including class size and child–adult ratio, curriculum, and quality monitoring. (See [Table 3](#).) For example, when it comes to child–adult ratios, CSPP allows no more than 8 children per adult, Head Start and TK allow no more than 10, and other licensed preschool and child care centers allow up to 12 children per adult. Only Head Start requires that providers use an approved curriculum; curricula are chosen locally in TK, while CSPP and licensed child care are not required to use any curriculum at all. In terms of quality monitoring, all CSPP and most Head Start providers use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS),⁶² while no quality monitoring tool is required in TK or other licensed child care providers.

Three case study sites—Alum Rock Union, Lindsay Unified, and San Francisco—have worked to address disparities in program quality standards by setting common quality standards or expectations for all classes in their jurisdiction and establishing common tools to assess classroom quality. San Francisco provides additional funding to help classrooms meet these standards. Long Beach is also working to improve classroom quality as part of its strategic plan but does not have common quality standards across programs.

Table 3. Program Quality Requirements

Program quality requirement	Transitional kindergarten	California State Preschool Program	Head Start	Licensed child care
Educational standards	Preschool/TK Learning Foundations and Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten	Preschool/TK Learning Foundations	Preschool/TK Learning Foundations	None
Curriculum	Required, must align to standards	Not required	Required, must align to Head Start Outcomes Framework	Not required

Program quality requirement	Transitional kindergarten	California State Preschool Program	Head Start	Licensed child care
Child assessment	Not required	Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) administered twice annually	An assessment aligned to Head Start Outcomes Framework administered twice annually	Not required
Maximum group size	24	None	20 (age 4) 17 (age 3)	None (centers) 14 (homes)
Child–adult ratio	10:1	8:1	10:1 (age 4) 8:1 (age 3)	12:1 (centers) 8:1 (homes)
Quality monitoring tool	Not required	Must use Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	Must use a valid, reliable tool	Not required

Note: The California State Preschool Program requires contractors to follow an “educational program” but does not require a curriculum.

Source: California Department of Education. (2024). [Universal prekindergarten mixed delivery quality and access report](#).

San Francisco: Uniform Quality Standards

San Francisco has made ECE quality a citywide focus by setting high quality standards, measuring program quality, and tying professional development to program observations.

Quality Standards With Enhanced Funding

All centers and family child care in San Francisco’s Early Learning for All network, which includes about half of the city’s centers and one third of family child care homes, are required to meet the city’s quality standards.⁶³ As of the 2024–25 school year, these quality standards included the following:

- **Child Assessment.** Administer an observational child assessment 2 times per year and use it for curriculum planning. The Desired Results Developmental Profile is strongly recommended but not required.
- **Curriculum.** Use a curriculum aligned to the California Preschool/TK Learning Foundations.
- **Developmental Screener.** Use the Ages & Stages Questionnaire, a developmental screening tool, with families.

- **Family Engagement.** Create a welcoming environment with multiple chances to engage with families, including regular communication with families and two parent–teacher conferences per year.
- **Classroom Environment.** Maintain a rich physical environment and conduct a self-assessment using a classroom environment rating tool, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, the National Association for the Education of Young Children classroom observation list, or another tool approved by the Department of Early Childhood.
- **Teacher–Child Interactions.** Participate in classroom observation and receive a Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) score above a specified threshold.
- **Group Size.** Maintain a ratio of no more than 10 children per adult, with no more than 20 preschool-age children per class. (CSPP classrooms may have a maximum of 24.)
- **Professional Development.** Ensure teachers complete at least 6 hours of professional development in four topic areas—child development/learning foundations, inclusion and special education, family engagement, and equity—at least once in their career.
- **Teacher Qualifications.** Ensure that center-based teachers have at least a Child Development Teacher Permit and center directors have an associate degree and a Child Development Site Supervisor Permit. Family child care providers must have at least 12 units of ECE.
- **Quality Improvement.** Develop and implement a quality improvement plan.

San Francisco’s standards are similar to requirements for CSPP and Head Start programs, but for licensed providers who do not have CSPP or Head Start contracts, they are substantially higher than what would otherwise be required. For example, licensing allows center-based preschool programs to have 12 children per adult; San Francisco allows no more than 10. Use of an observational child assessment and curriculum are not required of private programs. The common standards thus begin to align requirements across programs with different funding streams.

DEC provides funding to help providers cover the cost of meeting the city’s quality standards. Early Learning for All sites are eligible for an “enhancement rate” to supplement state and federal subsidies for Head Start, CSPP, and voucher programs when they are less than the city-determined rate.⁶⁴ Individual staff members in Early Learning for All sites additionally receive substantial wage enhancements, which helps retain qualified educators, as described in the next section.

Quality Monitoring

To assess quality, DEC funds independent assessors to rate each classroom in the city on the CLASS assessment every 2 to 3 years, similar to Head Start.⁶⁵ Data are used to get a sense of instruction and identify professional development needs. Early Learning for All providers must earn a score of at least 3 out of 7 on the emotional support and organization domains to be accepted into the network. Providers that score below 3 on the instructional support domain—the domain that gets the lowest scores in San Francisco and nationally⁶⁶—are required to develop an action plan to enhance child–adult interactions and are reassessed to demonstrate change. Improving CLASS scores in the instructional support domain is one of DEC’s top strategic priorities.⁶⁷

Each provider (including San Francisco Unified School District) is additionally required to use data from the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale to write a site-based improvement plan based on their needs. Historically, the city required providers to meet a minimum score on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale to receive program funding. That policy was changed after the introduction of the CLASS assessment, and scores no longer determine a provider's funding status.⁶⁸

Lindsay Unified: Aligning TK and CSPP Program Standards

Lindsay Unified, which blends and braids many funding streams, has enhanced the quality of its preschool programs by requiring programs to meet the highest quality standards of each program. The district has 7 combined TK/CSPP classes and an additional 10 CSPP classes. All classes meet the same standards, regardless of funding. Per CSPP requirements, classes have no more than eight children per adult, lower than the TK requirement. Preschool classes for 3- and 4-year-olds all use the same curricula, aligned to the Preschool–TK Learning Foundations.⁶⁹ They also all use the same child assessments, including the Desired Results Developmental Profile and the Ages & Stages Questionnaire that are required in CSPP. All of the district's classes are also inclusive of children with disabilities and thus draw on additional funding from the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the state-funded Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program grant. (See [Full Inclusion: Preschool Students With Disabilities in Lindsay Unified.](#))

To further boost quality, all Lindsay preschool and TK classes follow the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model, a research-based set of strategies for supporting multilingual learners. Staff receive training in implementing the SEAL model, funded by CSPP. Providing this training is costly, but the district sees it as a crucial part of educating its multilingual learners. All classes have at least one staff member who speaks Spanish, the home language of most preschool students.

To maintain consistently high-quality classrooms across the district, the district uses funding from many sources, including district general funds, California's Prekindergarten and Family Literacy Program, special education funds for preschool-age children, district migrant funds, funding from Tulare County First 5, an arts and music block grant, and more.

To monitor program quality, all classes participate in Tulare County's quality rating and improvement system, and at the time of data collection all had a 5-out-of-5-star rating. As part of their participation, each classroom teacher is observed on the CLASS. Participation in CLASS is required for CSPP but not TK; however, all classes in Lindsay Unified participate.

Full Inclusion: Preschool Students With Disabilities in Lindsay Unified

Lindsay Unified School District has prioritized fully inclusive classes in which children with disabilities learn in the same settings as their peers who do not have a disability. The district has a robust preschool/TK special education team that coordinates services. This team includes the director of early childhood education, two preschool/TK specialists, two district psychologists, a preschool/TK speech and language pathologist, two registered nurses, a case manager, a child mental health therapist, an early childhood social-emotional inclusion specialist, and a Healthy Start Family Resource Center program coordinator. The special education team provides supports for children and staff, such as meeting with educators at the beginning of the year to discuss individual

children’s needs; monitoring children’s progress and adjusting supports throughout the school year; leading professional learning sessions on inclusion; and providing direct supports, such as speech services, to children in the classroom.

Children receive special education services from specialists in their classrooms, using a “push-in” model rather than being pulled out of class. The district leveraged state funding from the [Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program](#) to lower child–adult ratios in classrooms serving higher numbers of children with special needs, but this funding was one-time only and will need to be replaced.

Sources: Interview with Cheri Doria, Director of Early Childhood Education in Lindsay Unified School District (2024, June 3).

Alum Rock Union: Setting Partnership Criteria to Ensure Quality

To ensure that all early childhood providers operating on its campuses meet high standards, Alum Rock Union developed a set of 10 quality criteria that partners must meet as a condition of collaboration. Specifically, the district requires its partners to do the following:

- Use the Desired Results Developmental Profile for child assessments.
- Adopt a play-based, hands-on curriculum, with bilingual curricular materials for its dual immersion programs.
- Implement a social-emotional learning curriculum.
- Use a standardized developmental screener, such as the Ages & Stages Questionnaire or SOMOS Mayfair’s screener for dual immersion classrooms.
- Follow the National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation standards.
- Utilize classroom observation tools such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System to monitor instructional quality.
- Proactively engage families through regular communication and culturally responsive events.
- Participate in the Quality Rating and Improvement System.
- Be licensed for 24 students and maintain an 8:1 child–adult ratio.
- Allocate dedicated professional development time, closing 2 days per year to provide a minimum of 16 hours of staff training.

Through these requirements, which are similar to CSPP requirements, Alum Rock Union is able to partner with multiple community providers while providing a unified standard of quality that promotes alignment across its early learning system.

Long Beach: A Local Approach to Quality

Quality improvement and alignment efforts in Long Beach have been primarily driven by individual providers, reflecting its governance structure that emphasizes multisector partnerships and collaboration.

One goal of the Long Beach ECE strategic plan is to improve the quality of programs and services offered to children. While there is no shared definition of high-quality programming and no single set of standards driving quality across providers in the city, there are many efforts by individual providers aimed at meeting this goal. Child Lane, for example, a nonprofit working in the Long Beach community, holds a contract through CDSS to provide reimbursement to its network of approximately 45 Long Beach licensed family child care providers (in addition to providing other services to children and families in the local area). To ensure and maintain the quality of providers in its network, Child Lane requires providers to meet specific expectations related to the environment, child-educator interactions, materials, and professional development. Child Lane supports quality improvement by visiting each network partner at least once per month to provide technical assistance and support; offering quarterly professional development; and providing funds for items such as curriculum, equipment, and tuition assistance to attend a conference.

Another effort to improve early learning quality in Long Beach is evident within Long Beach Unified, which offers a variety of early learning options with different funding sources. Specifically, the district has worked to ensure that all classroom spaces, including TK, are developmentally appropriate and that the TK environment looks more like preschool than kindergarten. Toward this end, the leaders of Head Start, the child development centers, and [Educare](#) collaboratively reviewed curricula, instructional practices, classroom furniture, and materials and supplies. As a result of the review, during the summer of 2022, the district retrofitted over 400 classrooms with new furniture, materials, and supplies that were developmentally appropriate for 4-year-olds. In addition, the district purchased outdoor equipment and materials, funded by federal pandemic-relief dollars and other sources, so that children could engage in outdoor learning activities.

Common Themes and Challenges

Alum Rock Union, Lindsay Unified, and San Francisco have committed to aligning quality across classrooms. Changing quality standards required the authority to set new standards and the funding to enable providers to meet them. Since none of these sites has authority over regulations governing programs' quality standards, they have gotten creative.

San Francisco's approach has focused on using local tax-funded incentives to encourage preschool and child care providers to meet the city's quality standards, reaching over half the centers and one third of the family child care providers in the city. However, there are still many providers that do not participate in San Francisco's network and therefore do not need to meet the quality standards. The main reason they choose not to participate, one interviewee stated, is that the quality monitoring and enrollment process are too cumbersome and meeting the requirements is not worthwhile for providers that are already fully enrolled.

Lindsay Unified, on the other hand, blends and braids funding, requiring all classrooms to meet the highest quality standards of TK and CSPP. However, blending and braiding is a substantial administrative burden. Lindsay Unified does not have many ECE providers outside of the district, which means quality alignment is not an issue, but it also means that families have few choices.

Alum Rock Union uses common criteria in its selection of partner providers that address curriculum, assessments, professional development, and more. These requirements align quality across providers on Alum Rock district campuses only, however, and do not extend to providers in community-based organizations nearby.

Long Beach does not have consistent quality standards but has made quality programming a key goal. Without the authority or funding to govern quality standards, however, the city can only encourage, not require, providers to meet high standards.

Workforce

Since educators are the linchpin of a high-quality preschool program, it is imperative that staff are well trained and supported.⁷⁰ However, as with other aspects of program quality, California's public preschool program requirements vary greatly in terms of teacher requirements, compensation, and professional development. (See [Table 4](#).) In terms of entry requirements, CSPP teachers are required to hold a Child Development Associate Teacher Permit, which requires 12 units of ECE and 50 days of instructional experience in an ECE setting; no degree is required.⁷¹ Head Start requires that teachers hold at least an associate degree in ECE, with at least 50% of teachers nationally holding a bachelor's degree. TK, meanwhile, requires a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential, typically obtained in a 1- to 2-year postbaccalaureate program. Beginning in the 2025–26 school year, TK teachers with a Multiple Subject credential must additionally have 24 units of ECE, a Child Development Teacher Permit, or equivalent experience as determined by their local education agency. Other licensed child care providers typically are not held to any specific educational requirements.

Meeting educational requirements can be challenging for a workforce that is not adequately compensated. Early educators in public and private ECE programs earn substantially less than a TK–12 teacher, leading to high turnover rates.⁷² In California, TK teachers earn an average of \$81,000 per year, compared to \$55,000 for teachers in CSPP and Head Start and less than \$48,000 for teachers in private programs.⁷³ (See [Table 4](#).)

Table 4. Lead Preschool Teacher Requirements and Wages

Feature	Transitional kindergarten	California State Preschool Program	Head Start	Licensed child care
Minimum permit or credential requirements	Teaching credential plus 24 units of ECE, a Child Development Teacher Permit, or equivalent experience	Child Development Associate Teacher Permit	Associate degree (50% nationally must have a bachelor's degree)	12 units of ECE (centers) None (homes)
Median lead teacher wages, 2023	\$81,700	\$55,000		\$47,800 (center) \$32,000 to \$58,000 (family child care provider)

Sources: California Department of Education. (2024). *Universal prekindergarten mixed delivery quality and access report*; Muruvi, W., Powell, A., Kim, Y., Copeman Petig, A., & Austin, L. J. E. (2024). *The economic well-being of early educators in California*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

Providing ongoing, high-quality professional learning opportunities—in addition to adequate compensation—is also critical for building a workforce that can effectively support children. Research suggests that high-quality professional development is content-focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, provides coaching, offers opportunities for feedback and reflection, and is of sustained duration.⁷⁴ Coaching, in particular, can be a particularly effective form of professional learning.⁷⁵ However, early educators’ access to in-service professional development varies widely. Instructional coaching is built into the Head Start model, and TK teachers typically have professional development days included in their paid annual schedule, as well as access to local education agency–based coaches. CSPP, on the other hand, has just 2 days allocated for professional learning. Coaching may be provided through Quality Counts California, the state’s quality improvement system, but it is only funded for providers with a low quality rating.⁷⁶

As with raising quality standards, increasing supports for educators requires both authority and funding. As such, the sites’ approaches have varied greatly given their local resources and governance structures. San Francisco provided extensive citywide professional development and coaching to providers within its network, funded with city dollars and administered by DEC. Lindsay Unified has also supported coaching and joint professional development for its TK and CSPP teachers, and it has done so with extensive braiding and blending of funds. The Long Beach ECE Committee organized an annual citywide symposium for its early educators’ professional learning. Alum Rock Union also had efforts underway to support teacher compensation and professional development, but these initiatives did not yet reach teachers

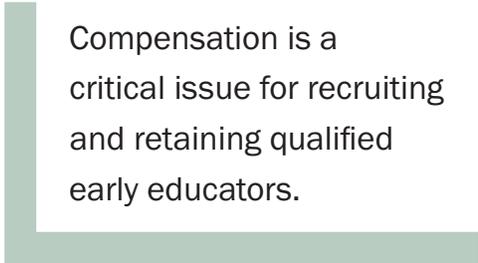
across its mixed delivery system. In terms of raising required teacher qualifications and compensation, Alum Rock Union, Lindsay Unified, and Long Beach all have large disparities in pay between TK teachers and other publicly funded preschool teachers. San Francisco is the only site that has been able to make progress, due to its local commercial tax.

San Francisco: City-Supported Compensation and Professional Development

Building a stable, well-trained workforce is at the core of San Francisco’s early learning work. To improve program quality, DEC has identified increasing compensation and providing professional development, including coaching, as funding priorities.

Raising Wages With the Workforce Compensation Initiative

Compensation is a critical issue for recruiting and retaining qualified early educators in San Francisco, where the cost of living is too high for many early childhood teachers to reside. In 2018, San Francisco voted to use funding from Prop C for ECE teacher salaries as part of the [Workforce Compensation Initiative](#). The goal of the initiative is to recruit and retain teachers in ECE classrooms and, in turn, improve outcomes for children.



Compensation is a critical issue for recruiting and retaining qualified early educators.

The initiative offers wage supplements to all teachers who work directly with children for at least 20 hours per week. Stipends are designed to incentivize degree completion. All lead teachers in San Francisco’s network are required to have at least a Child Development Teacher Permit or meet equivalent education requirements.⁷⁷ Teachers with an associate degree, bachelor’s degree, or master’s degree and at least 24 ECE units are eligible for progressively higher wage stipends. Stipends are also higher for teachers who serve larger shares of children receiving subsidies: Teachers working with at least 50% subsidized enrollment get the largest stipends. The city additionally established a minimum hourly compensation scale by teacher education level. Stipends are awarded twice annually. The total amount per year ranges from \$4,000 for a part-time associate teacher without a degree serving less than 20% subsidized enrollment to more than \$39,000 per year for a full-time family child care provider with a master’s degree who serves a majority of subsidized enrollment.⁷⁸

The Workforce Compensation Initiative is administered by DEC, which subcontracts to Children’s Council, one of the city’s two R&R agencies. To get a wage supplement, teachers must participate in the Workforce Registry—a database that stores information on teacher education level and the professional development they complete. Children’s Council confirms that teachers meet all qualifications and helps enroll them in its payroll system. Getting all teachers and family child care providers into the data systems was initially challenging, said Amy Latterman, Chief Advancement Officer at Children’s Council, given that the state does not require administrators to collect any teacher data. But almost all teachers in the network are now registered.

Because family child care providers, on average, have lower education levels than center-based teachers, they are generally less well compensated, raising equity concerns. However, more than half of family child care providers in California have at least an associate degree,⁷⁹ and the compensation increases have

made a big difference for many family child care providers. “It shows people that the work we do has value, that quality matters, [because] quality is tied to compensation,” said Patricia Sullivan, former chair of the San Francisco Family Child Care Association.

The compensation initiative is perceived as a success, and a formal evaluation began in 2025. “We have definitely stopped the hemorrhaging of the workforce,” said Latterman from Children’s Council. In addition to being a critical financial support in a high-cost city, it indicates that educators are valued, explained Jerry Yang, Executive Director of Kai Ming, a Head Start provider. He recounted a story of an assistant teacher crying with happiness because the supplement enabled her to pay for her child’s college tuition. Future phases of work will extend wage supplements to non-classroom teachers (such as program administrators), improve working conditions, and expand degree attainment and professional development.⁸⁰

Supporting Educators Through City-Organized Professional Development and Coaching

DEC funds professional development sessions, training institutes, and instructional coaching for all providers in its Early Learning for All network, and in some cases to providers across the city. Professional development focuses on the city’s strategic priorities, such as inclusion of children with disabilities, use of the Desired Results Developmental Profile assessment, and equity. Opportunities to participate are advertised on a citywide [professional development calendar](#).

Coaching is available to all family child care providers and center-based teachers in the Early Learning for All network who need it, although not every educator has a coach. DEC funds a large cadre of trainers and technical assistance providers, including approximately 50 instructional coaches, who are deployed across the city to support classroom instruction. Larger providers, such as San Francisco Unified and the city’s three Head Start contractors, receive funding from DEC to employ their own coaches. Smaller providers receive coaching from coaches who contract directly with DEC and work with multiple providers. Each coach is assigned to work with a program for a certain number of hours, determined by the number of subsidized children enrolled. Coaching sessions are focused on the needs identified in a program’s quality improvement plan.

To make sure that professional development is accessible to the city’s diverse teaching staff, all professional development sessions and coaching are available in at least three languages: English, Spanish, and Cantonese. Professional development is also tailored to the needs of family child care providers. DEC convenes cohorts of family child care providers in its network to support specific needs, such as curriculum development or offering credit-bearing child development coursework. In the application to become a coach, applicants must describe their experience working with family child care providers.

DEC convenes a monthly coach collaborative for professional development. In the 3 years since DEC was founded, these sessions have focused on training coaches in the new validation process and quality improvement system, particularly since the city hired many new coaches after it began receiving Prop C funding. In future years, as the coaching pool is trained, the focus will shift to aligning around instructional approaches and coaching pedagogy, explained Meenoo Yashar, Deputy Director of Early Learning at DEC. In this way, DEC supports coaching across the diverse mixed delivery system, setting baseline expectations for coaches while allowing them to respond to individual site needs.

Lindsay Unified: Professional Learning for Principals and Teachers

Lindsay Unified has made several efforts to develop both teachers' and leaders' understanding of developmentally appropriate practice. These efforts included providing dedicated time for professional learning, offering coaching for new teachers and teachers who want extra support, and supporting school leaders overseeing CSPP and TK. Notably, all teachers receive the same professional development and coaching, regardless of whether they have a teaching credential (for TK) or a Child Development Permit (for CSPP).

Professional Development and Coaching

TK and CSPP staff have 1 hour of professional learning each week and 5 professional learning days throughout the school year. Lead teachers provide professional learning to their instructional assistants once per month. The focus of the professional development is based on classroom observations, staff goals (determined annually in partnership with the preschool program coordinator), evaluations, surveys, and staff input. The district also takes advantage of free professional learning opportunities provided by the Tulare County Office of Education. The main cost of professional learning is hiring substitute teachers to come in for the day while staff are away.

As part of the district's professional learning efforts, staff are encouraged to observe other CSPP and TK classrooms throughout the year, and the district's special education team provides professional learning for teachers once per month to support inclusion. The professional learning offered by the special education team is optional for teaching assistants and takes place outside of their work hours, but most attend.

The district provides optional professional learning opportunities for after-school staff too. The special education teacher, for example, led a learning session about student needs and behavioral issues. The special education teacher also worked with after-school staff to suggest more developmentally appropriate activities and checked in with staff throughout the year. Like CSPP and TK teachers, after-school staff are encouraged to observe other classrooms. In the beginning, working with younger children was a learning curve for many after-school staff, explained Melissa Hawkins, Director of Educational Systems at Lindsay Unified. Observing TK classrooms, including bathroom routines and play-based learning, was particularly helpful, she said. She would like to offer more opportunities for after-school staff to train and collaborate with CSPP and TK teachers, but finding a common time is difficult.

In addition to providing dedicated time for professional learning, the district provides coaching for teachers and instructional aides. Coaching is typically offered to new teachers or teachers who want or need extra support. Among other supports, coaches help teachers implement the SEAL model, a program to support language development for multilingual learners, and provide individualized instructional support. Many CSPP, TK, and assistant teachers are observed by a coach once in the fall and once in the spring. Some receive more individualized coaching sessions, which are typically provided at least once per week over the course of 6 weeks. Coaching is funded through CSPP and the district's curriculum funds.

Support for School Leaders

Lindsay Unified provides support to school leaders overseeing CSPP and TK, since instructional leaders' knowledge of ECE is a key ingredient to successful preschool.⁸¹ According to Eric Sonnenfeld, Assistant Administrator of Early Education for the Tulare County Office of Education, many school leaders need training on working with younger children and understanding “why TK is different, why rows of desks for 4-year-olds to sit in for 6 hours is not appropriate, and the importance of play.”

Lindsay Unified's Director of ECE, Cheri Doria, has helped develop school leaders' understanding of age-appropriate instructional strategies in various ways. For example, she has hosted walk-throughs of CSPP and TK classrooms, explaining what children are doing and how they learn key concepts while engaging in play or moving between different stations. These observations help school leaders recognize key differences between CSPP/TK settings and the K–12 settings principals are familiar with where children tend to sit for long periods of time, said Doria. She also collaborates with school principals to jointly evaluate CSPP and TK teachers.

Long Beach: Mixed Approaches to Workforce Development

One goal of Long Beach's strategic plan is to support the development of a strong early childhood workforce. To that end, there are both communitywide and provider-specific efforts. Annually, the Long Beach ECE Committee, in partnership with Long Beach Unified, the Mayor's Fund, and the Health Department, host the Long Beach Early Childhood Education Symposium. This daylong professional learning event is geared toward early childhood educators and administrators, ECE support staff, district leaders, and TK and kindergarten teachers. In 2024, there were over 600 attendees. Workshops cover ECE topics such as play, assessment, social and emotional learning, developmentally appropriate practice, challenging behaviors, family engagement, and diversity and inclusion. Some workshops are presented in Spanish. Participants receive a professional development certificate for 8 hours.

There also are other, smaller efforts to support the ECE workforce in Long Beach. For example, the Munzer Foundation has established the Early Childhood Educator Scholarship Fund through the Long Beach Community Foundation.⁸² The scholarship is available to employees of six local providers: Child Lane, Children Today, Long Beach Day Nursery, the Long Beach YMCA, Un Mundo de Amigos, and Young Horizons. It covers tuition as well as other expenses, such as books, so that the child care teachers can continue their education.

Finally, some providers implement their own workforce supports. Long Beach Unified, for example, instituted a 3-day summer institute on developmentally appropriate practice for preschool, TK, and kindergarten teachers. The district also offered professional development for principals focused on best practices in early education. Finally, the district offers training for support staff, such as the recreation aides who monitor the children at lunchtime and outside, on topics such as how to engage children, how to ask open-ended questions, positive behavior strategies, and how to encourage children to choose among centers.

Common Themes and Challenges

All four case study sites identified compensation and professional learning for the workforce as important components of providing high-quality early learning, but providing learning opportunities widely and increasing compensation requires funding and governing authority.

The only case study site that has made substantial progress on both issues citywide is San Francisco. The city is an anomaly because of both its wealth and the concerted, multiyear advocacy effort that secured a new local tax for ECE. Having a dedicated early childhood agency, DEC, to plan for the implementation of the workforce initiative has been a critical factor in distributing the tax funds to educators across the city in a systematic way. DEC made a plan for how the funds would be allocated (based on teacher education level and number of high-need children served) and oversaw the allocation of the funds. Through the efforts of a local R&R, the stipends were sent to educators citywide in short order.

San Francisco and Lindsay Unified also made progress in providing a combination of learning opportunities for staff, combining instructional coaching, an evidence-based practice, with targeted professional development workshops. At the city level, San Francisco has funded coaching and professional development workshops that are available to all providers. DEC's role as funder and organizer may be especially useful to smaller providers who might not otherwise be able to afford instructional coaching. DEC has even used city funds to support instructional coaching at the school district.

At the district level, Lindsay Unified provides joint professional development for CSPP and TK staff to bridge the gap between staff who are funded by different programs. The district ensures that all of its staff have access to coaching, including a coach dedicated to serving multilingual learners through the SEAL program.

All four case study sites ensure that early learning staff in their district or city are invited to county-level professional development sessions, which are typically provided for free, with the main cost being teachers' time. It is unclear how many staff participate, however, and whether this professional learning is tied to teachers' day-to-day work, which is an important component of professional development that leads to changes in practice and child outcomes.⁸³

Stabilizing the Mixed Delivery System

The expansion of TK eligibility to all 4-year-olds has altered California's preschool landscape significantly over the past 5 years. Between 2019–20 and 2024–25, TK enrollment climbed quickly (from 89,000 to 177,000) while the 4-year-old population declined (from nearly 500,000 to around 434,000).⁸⁴ This combination of factors has meant higher access overall, but fewer 4-year-olds enrolling in community-based preschool and child care, including family child care homes.⁸⁵ Losing 4-year-old enrollment threatens the stability of the mixed delivery system, as many community-based providers rely financially on their enrollment.⁸⁶ It is less costly for providers to serve 4-year-olds than to serve infants, toddlers, and 3-year-olds, who need smaller group sizes and thus higher staffing levels.⁸⁷

California has the opportunity to shift early learning efforts to younger children as TK expands, but doing so will require financial investments to stabilize the mixed delivery system. As providers look to serve younger children, they will need to update their facilities and build staff capacity. Facilities often are not

adequate to serve younger children because they lack changing tables, sinks, and cribs. Staff who have traditionally worked with 4-year-olds need to be trained on how to work with younger children (and surveys show that many do not want to).⁸⁸

The state has taken some steps to address these issues. For example, by substantially raising reimbursement rates for providers serving 3-year-olds in CSPP and child care to allow preschool providers to lower group sizes. The state has also begun the process of reforming rates for infants and toddlers to cover the full cost of their care. Still, community providers are a long way from a business model that works, especially if they do not receive state subsidies.

The case study sites offer examples of various ways localities have adapted to TK expansion to shore up the mixed delivery system. San Francisco has used local funds to subsidize ECE for children birth through age 3 and provided grants to create and renovate facilities to serve infants and toddlers. Long Beach has provided ECE scholarships for children enrolling in community-based providers and is beginning to create more facilities serving infants and toddlers. Alum Rock Union has used facilities freed up by declining school-age enrollment to open a birth-to-5 campus and serve younger children.

San Francisco: Expanding Access to Children Birth Through 3 With a Local Tax

Through Prop C, San Francisco has substantial, dedicated funding for early childhood programs, which allows it to provide more expansive services than are typically offered in California. Prop C has allowed San Francisco to expand access to infants and toddler care, which has historically been in short supply. Shifting funding from preschool into infant and toddler care made sense, given that San Francisco's preschool-age population has significantly declined and more 4-year-olds are moving to TK.

In 2022, the city had enough licensed care capacity to serve every preschool-age child, and preschool providers were having a hard time filling their open slots. At the same time, the city had only 4,100 licensed infant and toddler slots available for the 25,000 children in this age group. From 2018–19 to 2022–23, the city tripled the number of infant slots it funded, from 675 to 1,693, primarily through use of Prop C funds. DEC gave out \$40 million in grants to create new infant and toddler facilities and \$30 million to convert existing classrooms to serve younger children, since licensed facilities for infants and toddlers require more space per child as well as distinct features such as sinks near diaper changing stations.⁸⁹

Many of the city-funded slots were for middle-income families who earn too much to qualify for federal- and state-funded ECE but still cannot afford the high cost of care. Under this middle-income scholarship, families earning up to 110% of the area median income (about \$171,000) are eligible for free tuition for their infant, toddler, or preschooler, and families earning up to 150% of the area median income (about \$234,000) are eligible for a 50% tuition credit. Funds are administered by Wu Yee Children's Services, one of the two R&Rs in San Francisco.⁹⁰ This tuition support is not only critical for families but also helps to shore up enrollment for private providers.

Long Beach: Using Philanthropic Funds to Support the Mixed Delivery System

While not nearly as extensive as the efforts in San Francisco, Long Beach has similar efforts underway to serve younger children and support the viability of the mixed delivery system. For example, Child Lane, a nonprofit working in the Long Beach community, has increased investments in infant and toddler care.

Dora Jacildo, Child Lane’s Executive Director, noted that a declining preschool population citywide and TK expansion was negatively affecting the 4-year-old enrollment in Child Lane’s child development programs. In response, the organization built a new infant center and converted three preschool classrooms to toddler classrooms. Jacildo reported that the city historically has “struggled” to serve infants and toddlers, and “as it takes longer to fill the preschool classrooms, we can begin to serve the younger zero to 3 population.”

Long Beach’s Back-to-School Boost Scholarship Program is available to help families who earn up to roughly 30% above other subsidy programs’ income thresholds. This scholarship has been awarded to 72 Long Beach families. Like in San Francisco, tuition support helps families afford care, and it helps community-based providers by enabling families to enroll in them.

Alum Rock Union: Providing Facilities to Expand Access to ECE

Alum Rock Union has used district resources, including a school building, to support access to ECE for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. In 2023, Alum Rock transformed an elementary school campus struggling with enrollment into an “all-in-one” campus for young children and their families: the [Cesar Chavez Early Learning Center](#). The school board approved leasing campus space to its longtime community partner, Kidango, to expand its infant and toddler classes, CSPP, and expanded learning programs. The campus was a win for the community, which needed infant and toddler care, as well as for the district, which needed a use for its existing facility.

Initially, the day-to-day center operations were led by Kidango’s center director and Alum Rock Union’s early learning coordinator, who served as the center’s school principal. Kidango ran its programs with funding from CSPP and state child care contracts, as well as Early Head Start funding, while the district oversaw TK. The two directors ensured smooth operation of the center through regular meetings. As a one-stop shop, the campus also hosts the school district’s Early Learning Department offices, the Social Emotional Learning Department, a school link officer, the district’s preschool assessment center, Kidango staff offices, and the SOMOS Mayfair family resource center.⁹¹

In the 2025–26 school year, the district consolidated TK and kindergarten at its other elementary school campuses, which had additional space available due to declining enrollment. With this change, the district eliminated its early learning coordinator at Cesar Chavez Early Learning Center. The child care and preschool programs continue as before, however.

The district hopes that the center will attract new families to the district. As Stacy Galdamez, the former General Manager of the Bay Area Region of Think Together, noted, “These partnerships are opportunities that are hopefully going to lead to less declining enrollment in years to come.”

Common Themes and Challenges

The recent shifts in the early learning landscape presented challenges, especially for community-based providers who previously relied on 4-year-old enrollment. In order to maintain a healthy and balanced mixed delivery system for children birth through age 5, case study efforts focused on increasing access and supports for community-based organizations to enroll more younger children. San Francisco is the only site that has made substantial gains in expanding infant and toddler care, because it has substantial local funding as well as a dedicated city-level agency with authority to determine how this funding is spent.

The city's Prop C funds also are used to fund slots for children who do not qualify for state and federal funds and to supplement per-child funding for programs. These supplements fill critical gaps in public funding to make sure that providers can stay open in a high-cost area.

Most challenges created by the shifting landscape are difficult to overcome locally; however, there are efforts of varying scale. Alum Rock Union and Long Beach provide less extensive examples of investing in programs for younger children, financing facilities renovations, and financially supporting middle-income families so they have more choices in the mixed delivery system. Most localities, however, do not have the revenue to fund infant, toddler, or preschool slots; supplement provider wages; or increase rates, especially at scale like in San Francisco.

Recommendations

The goal of this study is to inform the development of state and local policies that promote equitable access to high-quality preschool in a variety of settings. Below, we offer recommendations for policy, drawing on the promising practices observed in the case study sites as well as the common challenges they experienced. We also draw from our [study](#) of mixed delivery systems in other states to inform state-level policy recommendations. The recommendations are geared toward California policymakers at the state, county, city, and district levels but are relevant to policymakers in other states. They include the following:

- **Consolidate or coordinate the administrative agencies overseeing California’s various preschool programs at the state and county levels.** Accessing preschool and other early learning services in California is challenging for families and providers, in part because of California’s disjointed system that is overseen by many agencies. At the state level, California could streamline its own governance to simplify local administration and align the work of state agencies responsible for preschool and child care. One way it might do so is through an intergovernmental working group like a [children’s cabinet](#). Children’s cabinets formally bring together heads of agencies overseeing programs that serve children and families to coordinate decision-making.

Another way to improve governance is to consolidate early learning programs in a unified Department of Early Childhood, as Colorado and several other states have done.⁹² In either form of governance, agencies can streamline grant timelines, applications, and data reporting for the programs they oversee. They can also develop compatible data systems that make it easier for providers to blend and braid funding from multiple programs. California has made some progress in recent years, but the split in governance between two state agencies, the California Department of Education and the California Department of Social Services, has ultimately made holding multiple contracts even more onerous for providers.

At the local level, cities, counties, or municipalities also need clear governance to oversee strategic planning, convene interest holders, develop priorities, and ensure alignment of early childhood initiatives. The local governing agency is also critical for leveraging local funding for early childhood education (ECE), as demonstrated by San Francisco and [other municipalities](#) across the country that have successfully expanded preschool. California could identify and fund a clear lead agency in each county to communicate preschool options to families and foster collaboration between private providers and school districts. There are already county agencies that have some of these responsibilities—including county offices of education, local planning councils, resource and referral agencies (R&Rs), and First 5 commissions—each of which could, with sufficient funding and authority, expand their role and scope.

In the absence of state policy changes, cities and other municipalities could consider identifying a lead agency to oversee as many early childhood programs as possible. This governing entity might hold contracts for the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, and child care voucher programs, for example. The ideal governance model will vary across the state—what works for rural Shasta County will be different from what works in the city of Oakland, for example—but each should have a strong relationship with local school districts and have ways of systematically gathering input

from families and providers across the mixed delivery system. Where consolidated local governance is not feasible, another option is to create and fund a coordinating body to set regional goals, work together to improve preschool quality, and support families in finding and enrolling in programs that meet their needs. The Long Beach ECE Committee, which includes representatives of a variety of public and private organizations serving young children, exemplifies this approach. Coordinating bodies have the benefit of being inclusive of the full early childhood field; conversely, progress takes more time and accountability may not always be clear.

- **Develop a universal application and enrollment system for families enrolling in publicly funded ECE programs.** It can be difficult for families to find and enroll in early learning programs. To better support families, California could invest more in communication, technology, and navigation systems. For example, the state could fund an online hub that shows preschool, child care, and transitional kindergarten (TK) availability in a geographic area where families can apply for care using a streamlined application. While there have been some attempts at a state child care portal in the past, none has had the functionality that families and providers need (for example, it lacked up-to-date information on provider openings and slot availability and information about school-based options). California can look to Long Beach’s Early Learning Hub, San Francisco’s portal, or Santa Clara County’s child care portal for guidance. States such as [Alabama](#) have created similar websites that include a universal application. Creating a centralized application and enrollment system will require collaboration between various state and local agencies.

The legislature could furthermore require that providers regularly share information about their available slots with their R&R to ensure that information on the state or county website is up to date. All providers that receive public funding for preschool and child care (i.e., licensed centers and homes that receive vouchers or state contracts, as well as local education agencies (LEAs) that run TK and expanded learning) could be required to share information about their availability. Local R&Rs could be responsible for ensuring that regional waiting lists are regularly updated to include only families who are actively seeking care. This is a time-intensive process that will require funding, even with automated processes. Eventually, all providers, family resource centers, R&Rs, and LEAs could use this portal to help families find and enroll in care.

At the local level, R&Rs, county offices of education, school districts, and family resource centers can work together to share information about the ECE options available to families. For example, they could offer joint events, cobrand communication materials, and share information about each other’s early learning offerings to close information gaps. They could also partner with trusted community-based organizations to provide tailored navigation to families in their home language.

- **Align quality requirements across preschool programs and provide funding to meet these standards.** California could continue to bring TK, CSPP, state preschool, and licensed child care requirements into alignment so that all providers are held to the same standard when working with 3- and 4-year-old children. The legislature recently brought TK child–adult ratios into alignment with Head Start by reducing the maximum number of children per adult from 12 to 10; licensed child care providers receiving child care subsidies for preschool-age children could be held to the same standard. Curriculum and assessment requirements could also be brought into alignment. The legislature could require that state preschool providers use a curriculum, for example, and provide

funding and technical assistance accordingly. Teacher qualifications are another important quality standard, discussed in more detail below. All increases to quality standards should be supported by funding that reflects the cost of providing high-quality care.

Districts could take steps to align the quality of preschool on their own campuses in the absence of direction from the state. For example, they could ensure that TK classrooms meet state preschool standards, such as offering lower ratios and wraparound services for families. They could also ensure that their TK and CSPP programs have access to the same curricula and assessments, including use of the Desired Results Developmental Profile in TK, and support TK and preschool educators through joint professional development, as in Lindsay Unified School District. Districts could also ensure that all programs are fully inclusive of students with disabilities.

Finally, cities and counties may also choose to develop their own local quality standards and incentivize providers to meet them, as in San Francisco. Strong local governance and funding are both key to implementing higher quality standards.

- **Develop district leaders' ability to support early childhood development.** Continued investment in early learning leaders will be important for the success of universal preschool implementation. At the district level, having an early childhood leader with early childhood expertise can help ensure that early educators receive appropriate support and that the education for preschool students is developmentally appropriate, as demonstrated by both Alum Rock Union and Lindsay Unified. Districts should consider appointing an ECE coordinator and, where possible, a director who is part of a superintendents' cabinet to oversee TK, CSPP, and other early learning programs. This leader should have the authority needed to influence key areas, such as curriculum and professional development.

Administrators overseeing TK teachers are required to have a California Administrative Services credential. The administrative credential is often difficult for experienced preschool directors to obtain because the experience and prior teaching requirements are focused on K–12 settings. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) might consider allowing experience as an ECE director to count toward those requirements to facilitate pathways to the credential.⁹³ Another challenge is that principal preparation programs include little coverage of early childhood. CTC could consider including early childhood learning standards along with the K–12 standards that govern licensing and accreditation of administrator preparation programs to ensure that new administrators gain early learning expertise.

California can also support increased professional development for current school principals overseeing TK and state preschool. The 21st Century Leadership Academy already offers free modules on TK, but these courses only reach a small fraction of school leaders. Professional development could be expanded through increased access to these academies or other county-led efforts.

- **Align preparation requirements for state-funded preschool teachers.** California should continue to align its expectations for preschool teachers and ensure that all educators have the training needed to support young children. There are currently large disparities in lead teacher requirements for TK, Head Start, CSPP, and child care. At a minimum, the CTC should increase the requirements for a

Child Development Teacher Permit to at least an associate degree in early childhood, as specified in the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care. These changes were proposed to the CTC but not implemented because of concerns about raising requirements prior to raising compensation. Currently, only CSPP teachers need to hold a permit; the legislature should consider requiring it of educators in subsidized child care as well, while providing funding to increase child care providers' access to higher education.

California could align requirements for assistant teachers, too. Assistant teachers play an important teaching role in ECE classrooms, but concerningly, assistant teachers in TK are not required to have any early childhood knowledge or experience. The legislature could consider holding these paraprofessionals to the same education requirements as associate teachers in state preschool classes (12 units of ECE coursework or the equivalent), phasing in that requirement over time with funding to support staff in meeting new requirements.

- **Increase educator compensation.** Educator compensation varies considerably across the mixed delivery system, with many educators earning less than a livable wage.⁹⁴ To close this gap, the state would need to provide additional funding to providers to increase educator compensation, since it is difficult to increase wages at scale at the local level. California is on a path to increase funding for subsidized providers through [rate reform](#), the process of updating the state's reimbursement rate for early childhood services. Increasing rates and compensation is critical to the health of the mixed delivery system.

Cities and counties, in the meantime, could use local tax revenue and philanthropic dollars to invest in compensation through stipends tied to educator education and experience. Dedicated local funding for ECE is becoming [increasingly common](#). Municipalities can learn from San Francisco's example in creating Proposition C. For example, San Francisco created a minimum salary scale and stipend structure for educators, based on their permit and degree level. The city partnered with its R&Rs to collect workforce data through the Workforce Registry, which enabled the city to quickly push out compensation increases and tie stipends to teacher education. Districts, for their part, could help reduce or eliminate the compensation gap between TK and other early learning teachers on their campuses using district general funds or other local funding sources.

- **Support sustained, job-embedded professional development across the mixed delivery system.** High-quality professional development that is sustained and embedded in educators' day-to-day jobs can have important benefits for children's learning, yet preschool teachers' access to professional development is highly variable and often consists of one-time workshops.⁹⁵ California could improve access to effective professional learning by developing a regional infrastructure for preschool coaching and professional development, similar to [Michigan](#) or [Washington](#). For example, the state could dedicate funding for preschool professional development and direct some of that funding to county offices of education or R&Rs to hire shared coaches for providers that are too small to employ their own. These regional entities could maintain a cadre of coaches and provide professional development and oversight to them, as in San Francisco.⁹⁶ This coaching could include supports for educators who are transitioning to work with younger children.

Cities and counties could also strengthen their regional coaching and professional development infrastructure on their own, where funding is available. El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego all provide [models](#) of coaching at the county level. Counties have also supported professional development and coaching in the past with Quality Counts California consortia. While funding for most professional development under Quality Counts California sunsets in 2027, some counties, such as Alameda and San Francisco, have identified local tax funding that can continue these efforts.

LEAs also have an important role to play in professional development. Districts with CSPP contracts should consider offering joint professional development and coaching that brings CSPP and TK staff together, as in Lindsay Unified. LEAs could also invite ECE staff from community-based state preschool providers, as is required in [New Jersey](#). Professional development leaders, including coaches and principals, should be well versed in developmentally appropriate practices for preschoolers.

- **To sustain the mixed delivery system, help community-based providers make the shift to serving younger children as 4-year-olds move into TK.** As 4-year-olds move out of center- and home-based preschool and into TK, California should support providers in serving younger children if they choose. One strategy is to support expanded use of the CSPP neighborhood school eligibility provision, which allows all 3- and 4-year-old children in the attendance zones of the state's lowest income schools to participate in CSPP. This provision could make it easier for CSPP providers to market their services to 3-year-olds with a simple message: Everyone in this neighborhood is eligible. The California Department of Education could also provide technical assistance to community-based CSPP providers who are least likely to use the provision.

California could additionally expand the supply of infant and toddler slots by offering grants and technical assistance to preschool providers to convert underutilized preschool classrooms. Grants could support facility upgrades (such as adding sinks and changing tables), professional development to support providers as they work with younger children, incentives for new staff with infant and toddler expertise, and marketing to new demographics. Cities and philanthropy could also support these grants, as San Francisco did when it tripled the number of infant and toddler slots in the city.

Districts also have a role to play in serving younger children as TK expands. Districts with declining enrollment could repurpose space to serve children birth through age 3, as Alum Rock Union did by creating a birth-to-5 campus on a site that was slated to close. Early learning services could be offered in partnership with existing early childhood providers in the community who already have expertise and relationships with families. The California Department of Education could provide technical support and financial assistance to convert existing schools to serve younger children.

Conclusion

California has made meaningful progress toward expanding access to preschool, but realizing the full promise of the state's mixed delivery system will require a shared vision and cooperation across state and local agencies. Streamlining governance, simplifying enrollment, aligning quality standards, better supporting the workforce, and reinforcing the mixed delivery system can make the system more equitable for families and providers alike. Local leadership will remain critical: Cities and districts can foster collaboration across public and private preschool providers, align strategic goals, and leverage local funding to fill gaps in access and quality. Together, these efforts can create a more coherent, family-centered system that supports children's learning from birth through school entry.

Appendix: Methodology

Findings presented in this report come from four in-depth case studies. In choosing sites to study, we first reached out to experts with knowledge about the preschool landscape in California and asked for recommendations of school districts, cities, and counties in California that were implementing innovative practices in their preschool system. We then conducted background research to gain more insight into specific practices and strategies demonstrated at each recommended site. Our goal was to select sites that met as many of the following criteria as possible:

- has strong partnerships in place between two or more publicly funded preschool programs;
- has a well-articulated approach to standards, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy that aligns with research on high-quality early education;
- provides relevant professional learning to teachers and leaders, ideally shared across programs;
- communicates clearly with families about the different preschool options available to choose a program that meets their needs; and
- collects data on child enrollment and outcomes.

We additionally looked for sites that were diverse in terms of geographic region, urbanicity, and child demographics.

We collected data in spring and summer 2024, which included document review and approximately eight semistructured, 1-hour interviews per site. Documents reviewed included strategic plans, organizational charts, enrollment data, grant documentation, and websites. We conducted interviews with local leaders, such as county preschool leads, local planning council coordinators, resource and referral agency staff, district staff (e.g., early childhood education coordinators, expanded learning directors, professional development leads), program directors for the California State Preschool Program, and Head Start staff.

The following individuals participated in interviews for this study.

Alum Rock Union Elementary School District

- Dianna Ballesteros, Director of Early Learning, Alum Rock Union Elementary School District
- Julia Chavez, former Regional Director, Kidango
- Stacy Galdamez, former General Manager of Bay Area Region, Think Together
- Michael Garcia, Director, Child Care Planning and Support, Santa Clara County Office of Education
- Veronica Garza, Manager, Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems, Santa Clara County Office of Education
- Maeva Marc, Vice President of Advocacy and Policy, Kidango
- Scott Moore, Executive Director, Kidango
- Saúl Ramos, Co-Executive Director, SOMOS Mayfair

Lindsay Unified School District

- Cheri Doria, Director of Early Childhood Education, Lindsay Unified School District
- Melissa Hawkins, Director of Educational Systems, Lindsay Unified School District
- Eric Sonnenfeld, Assistant Administrator, Tulare County Office of Education

City of Long Beach

- Rachel Dailey, Program Administer, Children’s Home Society of California
- Kristina Damon, Principal, Educare
- Sarah Forrester, former Director of Child Development Centers, Long Beach Unified School District
- Dora Jacildo, Executive Director, Child Lane
- Whitney Leathers, Chief Impact Officer, Mayor’s Fund for Long Beach
- Alejandra Albarran Moses, Early Childhood Education Coordinator, Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services
- Karissa Selvester, Executive Director, Mayor’s Fund for Long Beach
- Sarah Soriano, Executive Director, Young Horizons
- Cindy Young, former Senior Director of Early Childhood and Expanded Learning, Long Beach Unified School District

City of San Francisco

- Amy Latterman, Chief Advancement Officer, Children’s Council of San Francisco
- Ingrid Mezquita, Executive Director, San Francisco Department of Early Childhood
- Patricia Sullivan, former Chair, San Francisco Family Child Care Association
- Wei-min Wang, Deputy Director, Evaluation, Policy & Communications, San Francisco Department of Early Childhood
- Jerry Yang, Executive Director, Kai Ming Head Start
- Meenoo Yashar, Deputy Director of Early Learning, San Francisco Department of Early Childhood

Endnotes

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93. For example, “licensed child care” could be added to the list of places where a candidate could earn qualifying experience, and a Child Development Program Director Permit could be added as one of the alternatives to a teaching credential. California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (2026). *Administrative Services Credential For Individuals Prepared in California*. [https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/leaflets/admin-services-credential-california-\(cl-574c\)](https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/leaflets/admin-services-credential-california-(cl-574c))
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95. Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/122.311>; Stipek, D. (2019). *Getting down to facts II: Early childhood education in California* [Technical report]. Stanford University & Policy Analysis for California Education. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/GDTFII_Report_Stipek_v2.pdf
96. Sacramento County Office of Education already plays this role for other forms of professional development by hosting the California Preschool Instructional Network. Similarly, the El Dorado County Office of Education is the state lead for CLASS training and professional development.

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