

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE UNTIL JANUARY 22, 2018, 9 PM PT

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Uncoordinated and Underfunded: How Do We Fix California’s Early Learning System?

New report identifies challenges with state’s early care and education system, provides recommendations for statewide improvements

Building an Early Learning System that Works: Next Steps for California [Note: URL will not be functional until the embargo lifts]

SACRAMENTO, CA — Extensive research shows that early childhood education (ECE) programs pay big dividends for children’s success in school and life, but according to a new report released today by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), only a third of the one million California children who qualify for subsidized early childhood programs receive services—and the quality of care they receive is highly variable. There are many reasons for this. Barriers to access to high-quality ECE include lack of system and program coordination, low reimbursement rates for providers, complicated enrollment processes, lack of full-day programs, and low compensation for providers. In addition, many providers lack access to supports for training and program quality improvement. But there are bright spots. A handful of California counties have found ways to overcome some of these stumbling blocks and increase families’ access to high quality early learning experiences.

LPI’s newest report, *Building an Early Learning System that Works: Next Steps for California*, documents these challenges and proposes comprehensive solutions. Released today at a forum in Sacramento, the report examines the flaws in California’s ECE system at the state level and the barriers counties face to overcoming these challenges, highlights promising approaches to solutions, and recommends actions policymakers can take to improve access to high quality ECE.

According to the report, the key challenges with the ECE system are:

- **Lack of coordination** between the numerous agencies administering programs.



- **Lack of access to programs** because the state invests too little, low reimbursement rates discourage providers from accepting subsidies, complex enrollment processes make it difficult to sign up, too few programs offer full-day or alternative hour care, and too few programs exist to serve infants and toddlers and children in rural areas.
- **An unstable and under-qualified workforce**, driven by inconsistent and often low qualification requirements, inadequate compensation, and a lack of professional support for ECE educators, including for those who wish to pursue higher education.
- **Inconsistent program quality** because quality standards vary dramatically across program types, and providers have uneven access to quality improvement activities. Moreover, participation in California's quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs) is voluntary, reaching relatively few providers, and funding for QRIS is unstable and uncoordinated, making it difficult for counties to plan and offer consistent support to ECE providers.
- **Fragmented data collection efforts within the state and counties**, which results in uneven collection of data that are difficult to analyze and share.

The report also provides a series of recommendations to address these challenges. They include:

- **Building a coherent ECE administration system** that includes a state-level governing body to coordinate all programs, a county or regional level body to streamline ECE administration at that level, and a one-stop shop for parents to find care and providers to recruit families.
- **Making ECE affordable for all children up to age 5** through universal preschool for 4-year-olds, a sliding scale to ensure affordable preschool for all 3-year-olds, and subsidized child care on a sliding scale for infants and toddlers.
- **Building a well-qualified ECE workforce** by increasing expectations and support for higher education and training, continuing to raise reimbursement rates to increase wages, and changing the reimbursement rate structure so that programs that require higher credentials for staff are also able to pay higher wages.
- **Improving the quality of all ECE programs** by raising quality requirements for programs with the lowest standards, ensuring all state-supported programs are able to participate in quality improvement activities, and ensuring coaching and other professional supports for staff are offered to programs with state funding.

The report also features examples of promising practices from counties that have successfully implemented efforts to increase access and improve quality throughout CA, including Contra Costa, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, and San Mateo.

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

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