

**Getting From Facts to Policy: An Education Policy Convening**  
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## **Policy Brief by Preschool California**

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### **Education Reform Starts with Effective Pre-K**

#### **Statement of Problem**

*Assuming an ultimate objective of improved student achievement, please summarize the pertinent facts of the existing problems or challenges that your policy ideas or recommendations aim to address.*

Recent state test scores show a persistent academic achievement gap between Latino and black students and their white and Asian classmates. These results are of particular importance to Californians because more than 1 out of every 2 infants born in California is Latino. An analysis of 8 national studies of racial differences show that at least half of the achievement gap observed at the end of twelfth grade can be attributed to the differences that exist at first grade.<sup>1</sup> A UC Santa Barbara study showed that half of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade achievement gap for California Latinos is observable when they enter kindergarten.<sup>2</sup>

A vast body of research shows that, when done right, preschool helps narrow the achievement gap before children start school. Effective pre-kindergarten programs can make a world of difference by building an important foundation in early cognitive and social skills and fostering a love of learning that endures through the K-12 years and beyond. Effective pre-k helps all children get ready to learn and ready to read and that early foundation will serve them well in their school careers.

In *Getting Down to Facts: Resource Needs for California's English Learners*, the authors' top recommendation is to provide part-day high-quality preschool for all English Learner students. However, our existing state and federal preschool programs do not have adequate quality standards or serve enough children to ensure that every child starts school with an equal opportunity to learn.

- Of the almost 466,000<sup>3</sup> low-income<sup>4</sup> 3 and 4 year olds in California, only a little more than half receive either Head Start or state-subsidized preschool.

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<sup>1</sup>Sadowski, Michael, *The School Readiness Gap*, Harvard Education Letter, page 1, July 2006, Volume 22, Number 4

<sup>2</sup> Rumberger, Russell, Anguiano, Brenda, *Understanding and Addressing the California Latino Achievement Gap in Early Elementary School*, UC Latino Policy Institute, page 19, July 2004

<sup>3</sup> *National Center on Children in Poverty, State Profiles*, Columbia University, 2005

- The patchwork quilt system of subsidized programs serving preschool-age children<sup>5</sup> lacks sufficient quality standards, resources and accountability:
  - teachers are only required to have 24 college units, far short of a college degree;
  - part-day state preschool is funded at one-third the rate of K-12<sup>6</sup>, and less than half that of Head Start<sup>7</sup>; and,
  - there is no valid, independent assessment of program quality.

### **Discussion of Policy Issues, Options, and Recommendations**

*Please address how the policy area you are discussing is related to improved student achievement, what the policy issues are, what some of the policy options might be, and what you or your group is recommending and why. Discuss how your policy recommendations might fit into a more comprehensive set of education policy reforms addressing school finance, governance, personnel and leadership, and state education data systems.*

#### **1. Effective Programs Maximize Child Outcomes**

California should provide access to effective preschool for all children, starting with those who need it most. The children who lack access to preschool space are disproportionately children of color, children whose home language is not English, and children whose parents did not graduate from high school. Effective preschool requires establishing high quality standards that have been shown to significantly increase child outcomes. These include:

- Developmentally appropriate, research-based learning standards (foundations), linked to an intentional curriculum, and a comprehensive professional development system.
- Classroom size no larger than 20 children with one teacher and one associate teacher.
- A program that provides a minimum of 3 hours of instruction a day for 175 days a year.
- Family involvement and education infused throughout the program.
- Culturally and linguistically appropriate curriculum that prepares English Language learners for success in school.
- Programs that serve children with special needs.
- Articulation with K-3, including kindergarten transition planning.
- Lead teachers have a B.A. with at least 24 Early Childhood Education (ECE).
- Associate teachers have 60 units with at least 24 ECE units.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Federal Poverty Guidelines, issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, define "low income" as below 200% of the federal poverty threshold.*

<sup>5</sup> *This refers to CDE Title 5 State Preschool, Full Day State Preschool, General Child Care for 3 and 4 year olds.*

<sup>6</sup> *National Institute for Early Education Research, State of Preschool, 2006 State Preschool Yearbook, California, page 49, 2006.*

<sup>7</sup> *National Institute for Early Education Research, State of Preschool, 2006 State Preschool Yearbook, California, page 49, 2006.*

- Time for teachers and associate teachers to reflect on their classroom practice, observe, and track children's progress, and develop curriculum plans based on the needs of each child.

## **2. Increase Teacher Qualifications and Invest in the Teaching Workforce**

It requires special skills and training to teach young children, particularly in a population as culturally, linguistically and economically diverse as California. When children have expert teachers, they make progress. The well-studied programs around the country that have produced significant results for children have all been taught by teachers who hold BA degrees.

- Access to financial aid will be particularly important to maintain a highly qualified and linguistically competent workforce that preserves the diversity of the existing ECE workforce.
- Bring together institutions of higher education, the California Department of Education, stakeholders from K-12 and early care and education as well as others to develop teacher competencies that are up-to-date and widely supported.
- To meet demand for better qualified preschool teachers, leadership will be needed at local levels around the state to encourage collaborations among community colleges, CSUs, UCs, and County Offices of Education to ensure the availability of classes where students need them.
- Courses should offer college credits and include on-the-job mentoring, reflective practice, and opportunities for peer collaboration.
- Ongoing professional development and mentoring should be required for preschool teachers and associate teachers.

## **3. Create Incentives for High Quality**

Creating an effective pre-k system will require a significant investment of public resources. As preschool programs meet increasingly high standards, they should be funded accordingly. A Quality Rating Scale (QRS) is one method for tracking this progress. A QRS could also be used as an information tool for parents to learn about the quality of their child's preschool.

## **4. Collect Data**

Effective preschool requires a substantial investment and with such investment should come assurances about programs' ability to produce the outcomes that quality preschool promises. At the moment, little is known about the outcomes produced by California's subsidized preschool programs.

- Existing data on state subsidized preschools should be analyzed and reported on an annual basis.
- Methods for tracking student progress in preschool and K-12 should be instituted.

## **5. Provide Full-Day Services**

Many California families, especially working poor families, need full-day care for their children. Right now, California has a patchwork quilt of funding for full-day care, with a complex web of regulations and standards. Below are some ideas for improving this system:

- Maximize opportunities for full-day care including giving funding priority to preschool programs that offer full-day services for families who need it.
- Any part-day preschool program should have the flexibility to braid other publicly funded ECE programs to create a full day.

## **6. Zero to Three and the Whole Child**

It is critical to understand and support the development of children prior to beginning preschool. Quality care for infants and toddlers is important, whether in a group setting or provided by a parent or guardian. As effective preschool investments are made, we should also support quality infant/toddler programs.

- Supporting the whole child means reaching out to parents before they enter preschool.
- For preschool and infant/toddler care, a holistic approach to child development and family support is critical to success.
- This begins by building strong relationships with families and by supporting family literacy, parenting skills, health, and other family needs

## **7. Meet Facilities Needs**

There is a clear need for building new preschool facilities. A 2007 study by the Advancement Project shows that California lacks facility space for 1 out of 5 preschoolers. This analysis of the facilities gap remains the same in both universal and targeted preschool scenarios. This analysis assumes utilization of the state's existing preschool facilities, including Head Start and state subsidized preschool.

- Identify significant financing, through education bonds, for building new preschools in the many low-income communities and attendance areas of Academic Performance Index deciles 1 through 3 schools that currently lack them.
- Provide repair and renovation funding for existing subsidized preschools.
- Open up the existing Child Care Facilities Revolving Loan fund to allow for more than just portables to be built.
- Work with the Department of Social Services Licensing division to streamline the licensing process for new facilities.