Early Learning in California: 2017

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California families need access to affordable child care and preschool to support working parents and to ensure that children start kindergarten ready to learn. During the first five years of life, children learn critical skills such as language and socio-emotional regulation, which provide a foundation for lifelong learning. High-quality preschool and child care can support healthy development and enable parents to work. Unfortunately, too many children are left behind by the status quo. In fact, differences in children’s cognitive abilities by income are evident at only 9 months old and significantly widen by the time children are age 2. Early learning has positive impacts for children, families, and the economy. It’s time to work to put these programs within reach.

California families need access to high-quality child care and preschool

California has 2,799,698 children under age 6, 61 percent of whom have all available parents in the workforce.

High-quality child care and preschool programs help narrow school readiness gaps, which is particularly important for children of color and those living in low-income families. Thirty-four percent of California children under age 6 live in low-income families.

The supply of high-quality child care is limited. Many states have implemented quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to assess and support quality in early care and education programs, but participation rates across the United States are low, and very few programs have been awarded the highest-quality ratings.

The cost of child care is out of reach for families

Annual costs at a child care center in California average $22,460 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 34 percent of the median income for families with children.

For low-income families and people of color, the average cost of child care would constitute the majority of income in most cases.
The current child care system is failing California families
On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) serves only 7 percent of federally eligible children in California. This results in only 108,600 California children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 54 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.

California families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs
The California State Preschool Program is a streamlined program of all California early childhood education programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. Eligible families must have an income at or below 70 percent of the state median income. The program is facilitated through school districts, Head Start programs, and private and faith-based agencies that apply through a competitive application process. This preschool program meets, on average, 4.4 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $6,639 annually per student.

In California, 17 percent of 3-year-olds and 43 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in a public preschool program.

Investing in high-quality early learning programs affects economies
Making child care more affordable for families can increase mothers’ workforce participation, resulting in a boost to the state’s economy.

In California, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $334.98 million.

We can do better for California families
The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for California families and create an early childhood learning continuum for children:

• If child care costs are capped at 10 percent of a family’s income, California families would save $6,703 a year.
• Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for 769,300 children in California.


