California Comprehensive Early Learning Plan

Governor's State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care ♦ Sacramento, 2013

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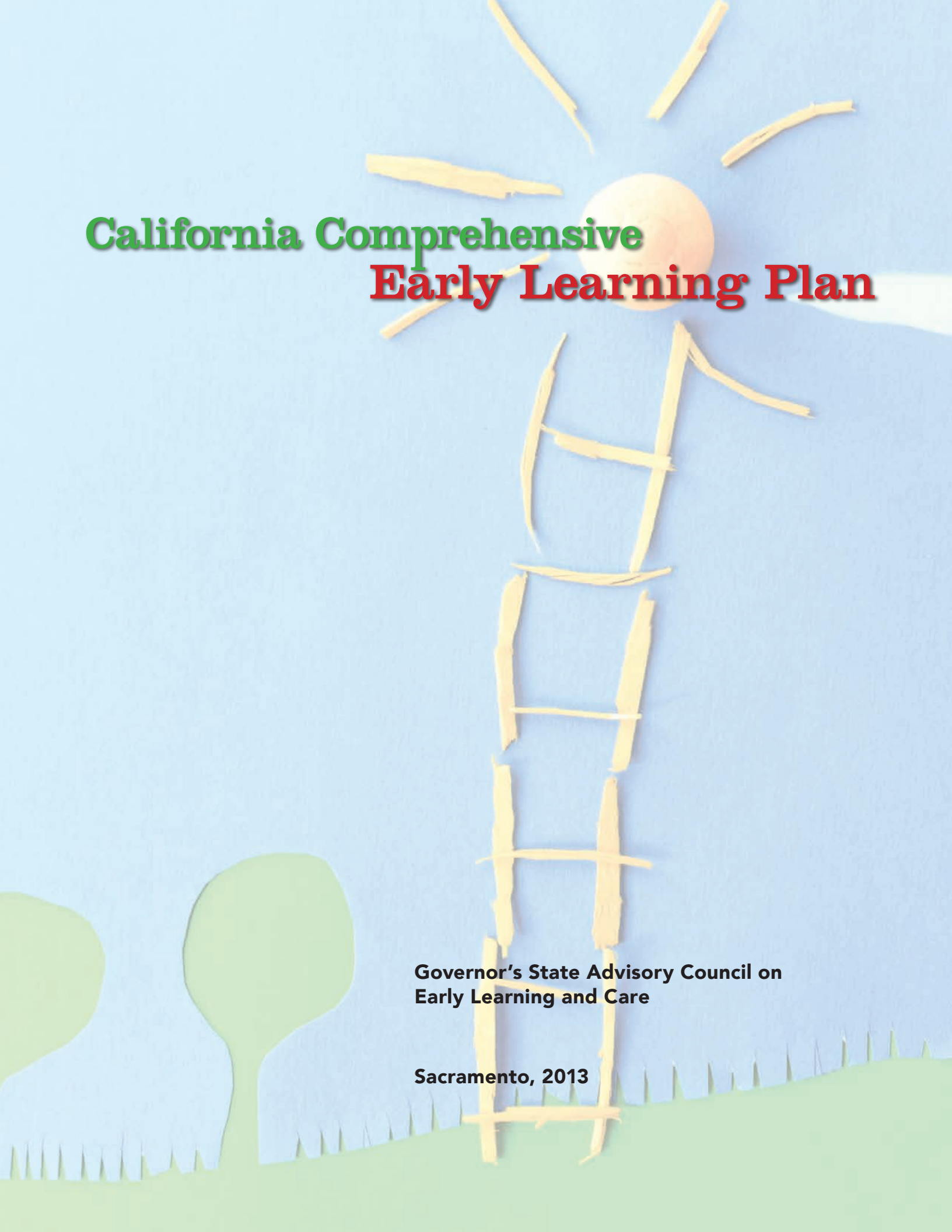

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Early Learning and Care

Sacramento, 2013

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State of California

TOM TORLAKSON
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

EDMUND G. BROWN JR.

CDSS
WILL LIGHTBOURNE
DIRECTOR

June 11, 2013

Dear Fellow Californians:

We are pleased to present you with California's Comprehensive Early Learning Plan. The enclosed Plan is based upon extensive research, and it represents the contributions of more than 2,700 stakeholders. We are grateful to the parents, early learning and care providers, state and local agency representatives, and higher education faculty, for participating in interviews, surveys, and meetings conducted throughout the state.

They framed the key drivers and essential elements of a coherent system we believe could deliver better results for children and families. This Plan lays out a direction for California in the development of a high-quality birth-to-five system that provides all children with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve long-term success. It suggests changes to make California's early learning system more coherent and effective. The first few years of life are critical to long-term brain development, and early experiences are essential to successful long-term academic and social outcomes.

Governor Brown and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Torlakson are deeply indebted to the members of State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care for their guidance of this work. We are especially grateful to the San Mateo County Office of Education and its subcontractors for their professionalism in taking on the essential role of coordinating and leading a highly talented and diverse team in this complex planning effort.

We are looking forward to this Plan's use as a touchstone during future work to improve early learning and care in California.

With the appreciation of your State Advisory Council co-chairs,

PETE CERVINKA
California Department of Social Services

LUPITA CORTEZ ALCALÁ
California Department of Education

Acknowledgments

The California Comprehensive Early Learning Plan (CCELP) could not have been developed without the support of the California Department of Education and the outstanding leadership of the San Mateo County Office of Education, as well as collaboration with a talented and dedicated team from the following organizations:

- American Institutes for Research
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- EducationCounsel
- The Glen Price Group
- The Ounce of Prevention Fund

Although it would be impossible to acknowledge every person who contributed to the CCELP, the input of more than 2,700 stakeholders was essential to developing the Plan, and those stakeholders are gratefully recognized.

The State Advisory Council (SAC) on Early Learning and Care comprises 12 members who offered guidance during the course of this project. Special thanks are given to three members of the council—Mark Friedman, Natalie Woods Andrews, and Sydney Fisher Larson—who worked closely with the CCELP planning team as liaisons during this process. Additionally, the guidance of co-chairs Pete Cervinka and Lupita Cortez Alcalá, as well as that of former SAC co-chair Camille Maben, was invaluable. Further support was provided by the staff of the California Department of Education, with special thanks to Cecelia Fisher-Dahms, Erin Dubey, and Sy Dang Nguyen.

The CCELP Web site (http://glenpricegroup.com/ccelp/) includes the Plan, meta-analysis from the American Institutes for Research, process documentation, a stakeholder engagement report, and other related resources.

In addition to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds granted to California under the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, generous financial support for the CCELP was provided by First 5 San Mateo County and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

List of Members: State Advisory Council on Early Learning And Care

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California's Comprehensive Early Learning Plan (CCELP), or the "Plan," provides key direction for the State in the development of a high-quality birth-to-age-five system that provides all children with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve long-term success. The Plan is based on extensive research and stakeholder engagement, and it suggests changes that, if implemented, would make California's early learning system more coherent and effective.

Why This Plan Matters

Significant research shows that the first three years of life are critical to long-term brain development, and that in those first three years of life the quality of a child's environment really matters. That means that early experiences are essential to long-term academic outcomes. Right now, California's educational outcomes for elementary school students are generally inadequate and show significant achievement gaps. Although high-quality early learning can have a strong, positive impact, many of the State's youngest children lack access to early learning programs, whether those programs are "high-quality" or not. The programs that are available are of mixed quality; in fact, many of them are not designed to improve long-term child outcomes. Given the diversity of California's population and the number of low-income children with needs not currently being met, the CCELP lays out significant improvements to early learning programs that could be made to systemically meet the needs of the State's young children.

Supporting Children And Families

Family choice is a deeply held value in California's early learning system—but supporting family choice means providing families with real options, including good services and the information needed to select among them. These services should include:

- for expectant mothers, high-quality prenatal care;
- for infants and toddlers, high-quality home visiting and Early Head Start or Early Head Start–like programs, along with better child care (in a variety of settings) that is more than just care but also assists with age-appropriate knowledge and skill building;
- for children ages three through five, a high-quality preschool that provides a strong educational experience and sufficient hours of high-quality care to meet the needs of working families;
- wraparound family and health supports that connect to culturally and linguistically sensitive early education and care programs;
- transitional kindergarten, kindergarten, and early elementary programs that build on the practices of the best early learning providers (including attention to the full range of child needs).

Families should be engaged as partners in all of these services, which should also create partnerships with each other, so that the families themselves are not solely responsible for managing transitions among programs. All of these services also need to recognize and support the many dual language learners and children who live in homes where English is not the primary language.

Infrastructure of the System

The Plan identifies four key, interrelated system drivers that must be addressed in order for the system to succeed:

1. Children need *access to high-quality early learning,* which will require resources both to ensure quality and to provide adequate opportunities for children to enroll.
2. To increase access to high-quality early learning, *program-level continuous quality improvement* will be required, with a framework to ensure that programs continue to get better at delivering services that improve long-term outcomes for children.
3. One essential element of continuous program improvement is *a great early childhood workforce,* which is the most important determinant of the quality of a child's experience in early learning programs. Improving the workforce will require strengthening the programs and policies related to preparation and professional development, as well as paying competitive wages.
4. Quality programs and great professionals work in partnership with families. At a system and program level, *family partnership* requires listening to the needs of families and working closely with them to see that their needs are met.

The system also includes these essential elements:

- *Assessing and meeting the needs of children* through developmental screening and assessment, which will require ensuring that the workforce is prepared to administer these processes effectively
- *Supporting dual language learners* toward biliteracy in their cognitive and social development throughout the system
- *Effective data practices* to improve service delivery at both the system and program levels
- *Food, nutrition, and physical activity* policies that support improved health and educational outcomes
- *Kindergarten transition* to bridge the gap between what are currently two separate systems—early learning and K–12
- *Finance and governance* systems that are better organized and more effectively support local initiatives

The Plan describes all of these interrelated areas, with a focus on improving long-term outcomes for children through improved quality programs and supported by a more coherent state-level infrastructure. The table provided in the following pages includes a summary of key recommendations generated by the stakeholder engagement process, as well as research that is meant to support the key drivers and essential elements of the Plan.

CCELP Core Recommendations

KEY DRIVERS

Key Driver 1: Access to Quality Early Learning and Care

- More children need access to early learning and care programs that meet their individual and family needs.
- Programs need to be of consistently higher quality, which will require agreement on the definition of high-quality services (including both services and facilities).
- The lowest-income families should be given priority for access to quality services.
- Programs should be offered through a variety of school- and community-based settings to ensure that there are affordable, quality options that meet the needs of working families (including those that work nontraditional hours).
- To improve access, families need better information about early learning opportunities available to them.
- Funding will be necessary to ensure quality services are available to children who need them.
- Implementation of California's early learning standards should be built into the State's continuous quality improvement mechanisms, with resources targeted to necessary implementation activities.
- To address facility construction quality and design, include early learning in statewide school facilities bonds.
- Include facility design and environmental health criteria in systemic quality improvement strategies.

Key Driver 2: Program-Level Continuous Improvement

- Early learning programs that utilize federal, state, or local funding should participate in a continuous improvement process with benchmarked tiers of quality rating and action plans and resources tied to improvement plans.
- State funding streams should be informed by lessons learned from local quality improvement efforts and implementation of the Early Learning Challenge.
- Progress on improvement to program quality and related child outcomes needs to be measurable, and continuous improvement processes should be data-driven.
- Providers must be empowered to provide input and feedback on setting standards and being held accountable for them.

CCELP Core Recommendations

Key Driver 3: A Great Early Childhood Workforce

- California's Early Childhood Educator Competencies should be updated periodically to reflect best practices and the evolution of the State's early learning standards.
- Career pathways based on the Competencies with aligned curriculum should be developed, including through integration with higher-education course work and professional development.
- Credentials and staff educational qualifications need to be aligned with the Competencies and reflect mastery of those Competencies.
- The early childhood workforce must be provided with adequate resources, including competitive salaries.
- California's higher-education system must have the capacity to prepare the workforce (including program leaders), and individuals seeking degrees will, in many instances, need support to access available capacity.
- The early childhood workforce should be well-educated, well-trained, reflective of the State's cultural and linguistic diversity, and supported on an ongoing basis.

Key Driver 4: Family Partnership

- Family input needs to be considered in assessing early learning opportunities, program improvement, and policy development at the state and local levels. On a systems level, partnership requires inviting families to work with the State, involving them in the policy-making process, listening to families about what they actually need, and respecting their stated needs by working with them to meet those needs.
- All families should have better information about available early childhood opportunities, and information should be easy to understand and culturally sensitive.
- The early childhood workforce should be trained on best practices for authentic family partnership.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Essential Element 1: Assessing and Meeting the Needs of Children

- Educators should use developmental screening, observation tools, and authentic and developmentally appropriate assessments to determine and address children's strengths and needs.
- The workforce needs sufficient time for training on, administration of, and analysis of assessments—and on how to take action based on assessment results.
- Assessment should be an ongoing process to inform teaching and learning, not a one-time tool.
- Follow-up services, including mental health supports, need to be available.

CCELP Core Recommendations

Essential Element 2: Supporting Dual Language Learners

- Programs must provide culturally and linguistically sensitive services for the cognitive and developmental needs of dual language learners.
- Families should be made aware of center-based programs during the year before their child enters kindergarten.
- Teachers and providers need special training to meet the needs of dual language learners and their families.

Essential Element 3: Effective Data Practices

- The State should identify the key policy and practice questions it would like to answer and the data necessary to answer those questions.
- The State should identify existing data that can answer questions and acknowledge where data gaps exist.
- The State should develop a plan for working with communities to fill data gaps.
- Professionals working with children should be trained on data use so that they can use information effectively to serve children.

Essential Element 4: Food, Nutrition, and Physical Activity

- Early childhood providers should participate in better training in nutrition, child health, and physical activity.
- The State should work with the federal government to simplify requirements of the Child and Adult Care Food Program.
- The State should support improvement in design and environmental factors that impact the behavior and health of children and professionals in new and existing facilities.

Essential Element 5: Kindergarten Transition

- Prekindergarten and kindergarten professionals should participate in collaborative professional development to learn best practices and engage each other to support learning.
- Schools should be equipped to address the full range of child needs, including skills development and executive function.
- Learning standards should be aligned across years and systems.
- Elementary school principals should participate in training on the role of early learning.
- Families should be provided with information about the transition to kindergarten.
- The successful implementation of transitional kindergarten (TK) requires supports for districts.

CCELP Core Recommendations

Essential Element 6: Finance and Governance

- The State should focus funding on a system that supports child development and learning as part of a comprehensive education reform effort, with a specific focus on preschool-to-grade-three (P-3) integration.
- The State's child care governance system should support a consistent, systemwide focus on quality and continuous quality improvement, with increased accountability for delivering quality service and increased per-child funding to meet higher expectations.
- Funding should be tied to program quality and prioritize (1) children who are most at risk and/or have the highest financial need, and (2) infants and toddlers.

CALIFORNIA COMPREHENSIVE EARLY LEARNING PLAN

I. PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

The primary purpose of the California Comprehensive Early Learning Plan (CCELP), or the "Plan," is to provide a design for a high-quality birth-to-five system in California that provides all children with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve long-term success. The Plan identifies critical policy areas that the State could address, articulates a long-term vision that ties together the work in those areas, and in the Appendix provides a set of practical recommendations for achieving that long-term vision. In doing so, the Plan fulfills the requirements of the federal Head Start Act, which details certain issues on which the California State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care (State Advisory Council) must make recommendations.*

Another major purpose of the Plan is to bring the California early learning community together around a common agenda. That process already has begun through the stakeholder engagement process conducted to support the development of the Plan, and hopefully will continue during its implementation. The Plan was informed by a meta-analysis that synthesized recent research[1] and by a stakeholder engagement process that engaged more than 2,700 people through in-person meetings and online comments.[2] The research-informed process of developing consensus drew on the expertise of practitioners, parents, researchers, government leaders, advocates, and others from around the state.

This Plan should be read as an aspirational document that charts potential areas of action for the State and sets an overall trajectory for policy change. Its recommendations are broad in scope, and many of the individual recommendations would each require years of work to implement successfully. Reality dictates that progress toward the goals identified here would be incremental, that the increments sometimes may be small, and that not every policy can advance every year. But the Plan can have an immediate impact on the State's resource use and policy decisions.

The report will be submitted to the federal government in the summer of 2013, an opportune time for early learning in California. There is growing understanding within the California early learning community that it is time to move into a next-generation system that leads to better outcomes for children—particularly those children who, without a high-quality early learning experience, are least likely to succeed in school. This Plan is designed to help stakeholders understand what that system could look like and what steps should be considered.

*The State Advisory Council is an advisory body consisting of key leaders from the early learning community. Federal law requires that it be created with certain members and that it make recommendations on specified topics. Further information about the State Advisory Council is available at http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ce/.

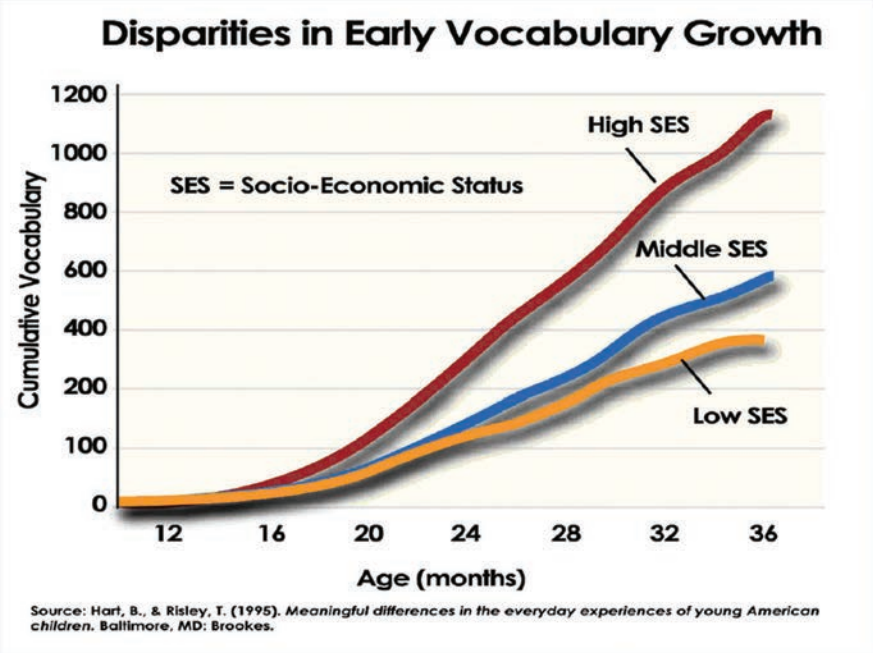
II. WHY THIS PLAN MATTERS

A. The Importance of Early Learning

Significant research shows that the first three years of life are critical to long-term brain development and that the quality of a child's environment has a meaningful impact on brain development. Given this knowledge, the achievement gap does not suddenly materialize as children continue through school.[3] Rather, disparities in early vocabulary growth between children from low socioeconomic status (SES) and high SES families can manifest themselves in children as early as 16 months of age.[4] Differences in language, social, and pre-mathematics skills are already apparent when children enter kindergarten, and the children who start behind tend to stay behind.[5] This early achievement gap is a critical issue for educators, as language proficiency, early literacy, and mathematical development are strong indicators for later school success. And the gap is not just about content knowledge; it is also about mastering the skills needed for long-term success in school and life.

AIR Meta-Analysis, Exhibit 1

Disparities in Early Vocabulary Growth, by Socioeconomic Status



Source: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2007). *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children.*

The child's family is and always should be the most important contributor to his or her development. But families often need support, both in mastering the art of raising a child at home and in choosing a rich and affordable environment for their children when those children are cared for out of the home. In California, at least three-quarters of preschool-age children and just under half of infants and toddlers are already in some form of out-of-home care,[6] and ultimately, all of these children will enter the K–12 education system. Early learning programs should be designed with that future in mind, building on the strengths of families to increase the chances that children will succeed in the long term. Further, families should not have to choose between their need to work and their child's need to learn and grow.

High-quality early learning provides a significant return on investment through its impact on educational and societal outcomes.[7] For children at risk of falling behind in school, attending a quality early learning and care program for preschool-age children has been found to help improve their readiness for school and for school success through higher test scores, better attendance, and reduced grade-level retention.[8] Other lasting benefits include higher rates of high school completion, greater likelihood of attending college, and greater lifetime earnings.[9]

Of course, child development begins long before preschool. Researchers have found that by age three, a poor child would have heard 30 million fewer words at home than a child from a professional family.[10] The disparity matters: the greater the number of words a child hears from parents, the better the child does in school. High-quality programs for infants and toddlers often focus on ensuring that they are in a language-rich environment.

This Plan is not about closing the achievement gap; it is about preventing the achievement gap from happening. For that to occur, and for California to earn the best return on its investment in early learning, the State should take better account of what children will ultimately need to succeed in school and beyond—creating a system that meets the dual goals of support for children's learning and families' self-sufficiency. And that system should focus on quality, because research shows that investing in low-quality programs does not lead to improved long-term outcomes.

B. The Educational Trajectory of California's Children

Between 35 percent and 55 percent of California's second- and third-graders are not achieving grade-level proficiency in core subjects, with even larger gaps for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, including Latinos and African Americans, dual language learners, students whose parents have less than a postsecondary education, and students with low family incomes.[11] These achievement differences have early roots. Early gaps in school readiness that are evident in kindergarten are mirrored in third-grade standardized test results.[12] Kindergarteners who enter school behind are likely to remain behind as they move through the education system,[13] and third-graders who are behind are far less likely to graduate from high school on time.[14]

There is no question that child development from birth to five years of age has a huge impact on long-term child outcomes. Successful investments in the birth-to-five system have the potential to dramatically reduce the level of spending needed on remedial programs in later years. Simply put,

California's K–12 system is not and should not be set up to play "catch-up" from the moment children enter kindergarten. Investing in children early in their lives is an essential strategy for improving long-term educational outcomes. A focus on child outcomes will be critical to any efforts to improve the State's early learning system; not all early learning interventions actually lead to improved long-term outcomes, and the State should increase its focus on and investment in those programs that do have positive long-term effects.

C. Existing Early Learning Programs

California already provides a wide array of services for children and their families prior to school entry. This report focuses on early education and care programs, consistent with the federal statutory mission of the State Advisory Council. California has a more diverse mix of preschool and child care programs than most states, and many of its programs have struggled with both access and quality.

Even before the budget cuts of the past few years, California preschool and child care programs were not reaching many eligible children, particularly infants and toddlers. As of 2010, subsidized programs served only 33 percent of the eligible three-year-olds and 57 percent of eligible four-year-olds.[15] Although most infants and toddlers who are in center-based care are in programs with a developmental focus, very few are in center-based or licensed care of any type;[16] as of 2010, only 12.8 percent of infants and toddlers were in any licensed setting.[17] Further, only 6 percent of children under three who are income-eligible for State programs were served in publicly supported settings. With regard to quality, based on measures of teacher–child interaction and the instructional quality in the program, only 13 percent of preschool children from low-income families are enrolled in early learning programs of sufficient quality to promote the kind of thinking skills associated with school readiness.[18]

California's licensing standards are designed to protect children's health and safety, not to promote school readiness or child development.[19] Moreover, the State's licensing standards and enforcement of requirements are among the weakest in the nation.[20] California's Title 5 standards for state-contracted programs do focus on quality and are considerably more stringent than the basic licensing requirements, but they still rank lower than preschool standards in many other states, especially in the area of teacher educational qualifications. California's voucher-based programs permit the greatest range possible in parental choice but do not link to quality standards to the extent of many other states.[21]

The deficiencies in State program requirements, as well as the lack of resources on a statewide basis to support improvements, have led to a series of programmatic efforts to augment the quality of state-contracted programs—thereby improving quality for portions of the population in certain parts of the state. Evaluations of some of these overlay initiatives, such as the First 5 California Power of Preschool (now Child Signature) programs, have shown that these initiatives have been quite successful. In many instances, statewide adoption of these overlays—e.g., higher program standards accompanied by relatively modest supplemental resources systemwide—could substantially improve California's support for children and families.

Each of California's preschool and child care funding streams was designed for distinct purposes, and although all of these streams have some strengths, stakeholders have questioned the need to have so many funding streams with different requirements. Stakeholders are frustrated with the incoherence of California's early learning system, including the lack of coordination and consistency at the State level. In a state where local decision making is highly valued, the State could serve its communities well by creating greater systemwide quality and consistency among its early learning programs—which could make it much easier for local communities to implement programs in ways that maximize the benefits to children and families. Done correctly, a State system empowers local decision making rather than stifling it.

A key State initiative that engages and empowers communities is First 5 California, created by voter passage of the California Children and Families Act of 1998. Each county has its own First 5 commission responsible for supporting the well-being and success of children from birth through age five and their families, through integrated and comprehensive education, health services, child care, and other programs. First 5's convening capacity, experience, and resources offer an important opportunity to strengthen and coordinate local systems as part of a statewide improvement effort.

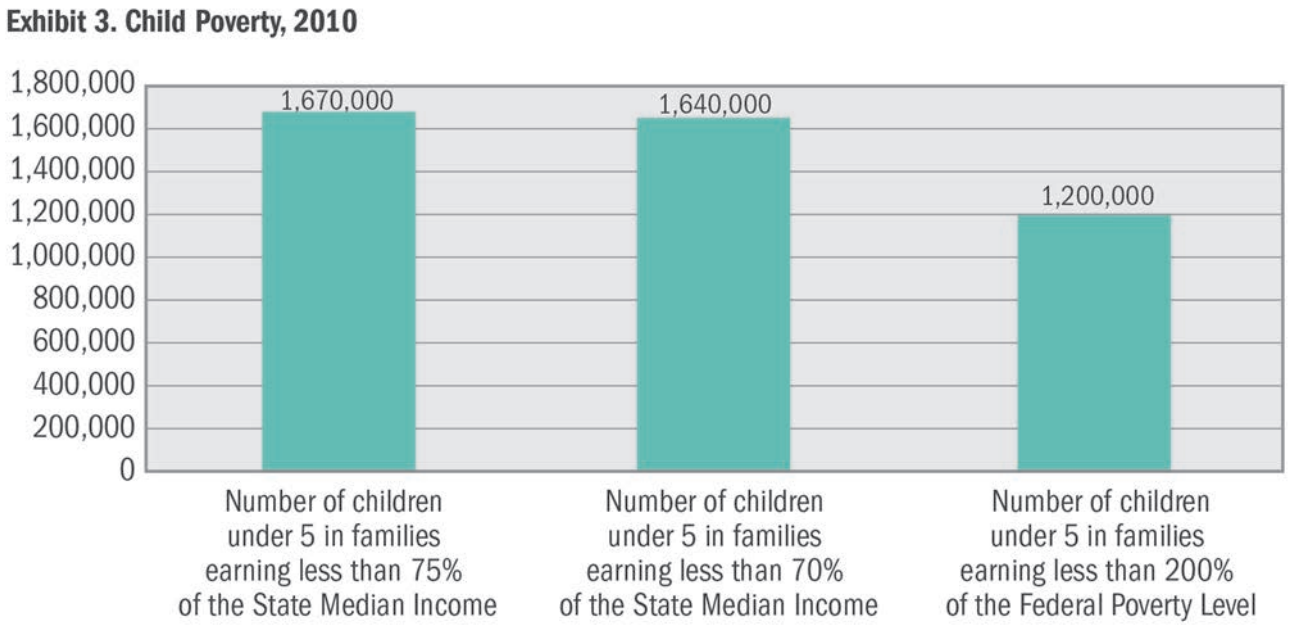
It is also important to emphasize the role of the federally funded Head Start program. Head Start serves more than 100,000 children in California, and Head Start leaders and providers play a critical role in early childhood policy at State and local levels. Although Head Start is independent of the State, it is an essential partner to the work of this Plan. Head Start partners with the State through the Head Start Collaboration Office at the California Department of Education, and improved State systems will have a positive impact on Head Start providers and the children they serve. For example, Head Start and Early Head Start are primary building blocks for the First 5 Power of Preschool/Child Signature programs, and together they represent some of the only programs in California that meet nationally recommended standards for early learning and care of sufficient quality to affect the trajectory of disadvantaged children.

D. California's Diverse Population

Ultimately, the California early learning system should recognize that all children and families have different strengths, needs, and resources, so that the system can provide the right kinds of opportunities for all children rather than trying to make "one size fit all."

In 2010, California was home to approximately 2.77 million children aged five years or younger. Approximately 1.2 million of those children lived in families with a family income of less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level—and with the high costs of living in many California communities, it can be a struggle for families to meet the needs of these children.

AIR Meta-Analysis, Exhibit 3

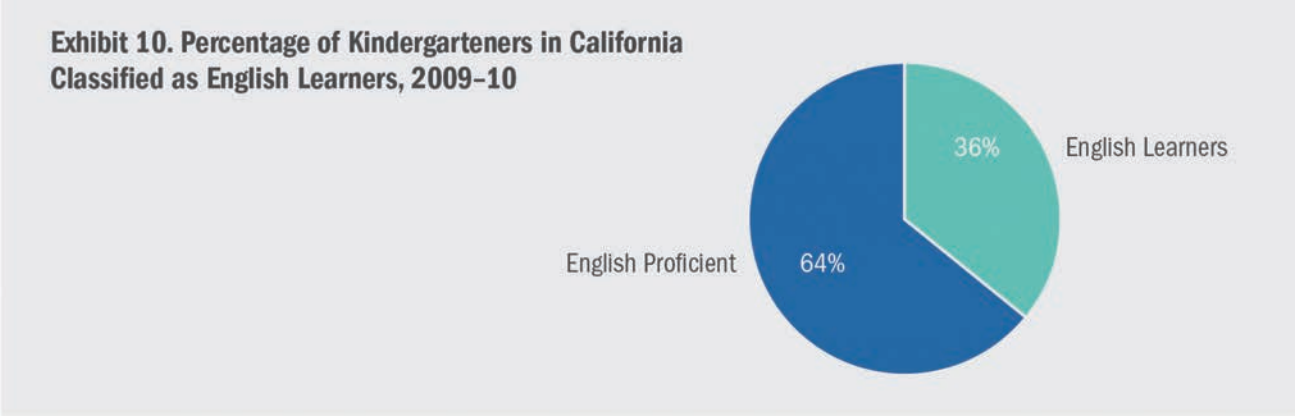


Research shows and stakeholders recognize that certain children need more help than others, or require specialized help to address a particular need. And beyond the needs of children whose families have low incomes, other groups with special needs include:

- *Infants and Toddlers.* California's youngest learners are the State's most underserved,[22] and it is generally more expensive to provide quality services to them than to older preschoolers. However, the research is clear that quality services for these children make the greatest long-term impact.[23]
- *Dual Language Learners.* In 2010, 36 percent of California's kindergarteners were classified as dual language learners,[†] living in homes where the primary language spoken is not English. These children represent a huge asset to the State in today's global economy, but cultivating their growth in two (or more) languages requires expertise in the early childhood workforce that is not always available.

[†]Note that in the exhibit on the following page, dual language learners are referred to as "English learners."

AIR Meta-Analysis, Exhibit 10



- *Children with Special Needs.* One of the major benefits that early childhood education can provide is a reduction in long-term special education expenses. These benefits are maximized when the special needs of children are both identified and addressed as early as possible—which, again, requires expertise and resources that are not always available to families or early childhood professionals.

These categories of people with special needs are far from exhaustive, and the system should acknowledge other types of special needs—such as children in foster care, children who are victims of or at risk for abuse and neglect, homeless children, and children of minor parents.

Another important element of California's diverse population is the nature of its communities. California includes some of the nation's largest cities, but it also includes small towns in rural areas—and communities at every size and scope in between. In addition, California's communities include families with a rich range of cultural backgrounds and spoken languages, reflecting California's proud history as a place that draws families from all around the world. Although the children in all of these communities share common developmental needs, the methods of delivering services that meet those needs will need to accommodate regional, cultural, and linguistic differences.

E. California's Part in the National Early Learning Movement

Roughly 13 percent of the young children in the United States live in California, and California accordingly plays a critical role in the national effort to provide high-quality early childhood education. Its statewide efforts play out against a larger backdrop that includes substantial federal and local funding.

At the federal level, the 2007 reauthorization of Head Start made an explicit recognition of the leading role that states play in supporting early learning, by requiring states to maintain state advisory councils. More recently, the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) competition has provided unprecedented support to states—including California—that are committed to advancing early learning policy in several key respects, including through the

improvement of program quality. California is now one of 14 states working to improve policy through the Early Learning Challenge and was one of nine Phase I winners. California's size gives it real power to influence federal-level policy, so that if its state-level goals require federal-level policy change, it has a better chance than any other state of driving that change.

III. SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

A. Supporting Family Choice

Family choice is a deeply held value in the California early learning system. For family choice to truly lead to good outcomes for children, however, families need (1) good information about what each choice entails, and (2) more than one high-quality choice that actually meets the family's and the child's needs. The State plays a critical role in ensuring that parents have information about their choices and that they have good options available. Policy and system development should incorporate parent voices in order to ensure that the options and choices developed and offered are as relevant as possible to parents' needs.

Families need access to high-quality settings that help children build their knowledge and skill base—that is, programs that build on the strengths of children and families. Family options should include a variety of settings, including school-based, center-based, and home-based; different communities and different families have different assets and needs, and the system should acknowledge that fact and be built on it. Both home- and center-based programs also need to be culturally and linguistically responsive to the strengths and needs of all families and children.

Families also need information to evaluate their options. Many parents may be unaware of the opportunities for them and their children, and better and accessible information on the attributes and quality of the programs is a key to informing parental decision making. Given that families participate in early childhood programs and services voluntarily, informing parents is one of the best ways to ensure that they take advantage of these services.

B. Serving Families Successfully

To meet the needs of families will require a suite of services, some of which currently exist and some of which do not. Participants in the public engagement process emphasized the importance of a coherent system, one integrated appropriately with K–12 education. Stakeholders also placed a high value on both access and quality, recognizing that they should be pursued in tandem rather than as competing goals. Access to high-quality programs has been a significant challenge for California; a 2009 report found that only 13 percent of children from low-income families were enrolled in early learning programs of sufficient quality to promote the kind of thinking that makes the most difference in school readiness and performance.[24]

Two major needs of families are (1) for their children to enter kindergarten ready to succeed, and (2) for their children to have sufficient hours of care while adults are working, preferably in a stable environment that provides continuity for the children. California's existing array of

programs includes multiple programs designed to help meet each of these needs, but there is no systemwide effort to meet both needs simultaneously.

Below are some specific essential supports that have been identified:

- For expectant mothers, high-quality prenatal care
- For infants and toddlers, high-quality home visiting and Early Head Start or Early Head Start–like programs, along with better child care (in a variety of settings) that is more than just care but also assists with age-appropriate knowledge and skill building
- For children ages three through five, a high-quality preschool that provides a strong educational experience and sufficient hours of high-quality care to meet the needs of working families
- Wraparound family and health supports that connect to culturally and linguistically sensitive early education and care programs
- Transitional kindergarten, kindergarten, and early elementary programs that build on the practices of the best early learning providers (including attention to the full range of child needs)

No program should be just a place or a person to whom children can be handed off; a child's family is the primary and lifelong factor in his or her life, and as such, families should be valued partners, actively engaged with the program about what is best for their children. Both providers and parents highlighted this need in the stakeholder engagement process. They want personnel to be strong partners with families, which may require training and support and will require many providers to be able to communicate with adults in languages other than English. Moreover, families will need these programs to partner with each other, so that the families themselves are not solely responsible for managing transitions among programs.

In addition, families desire policies that acknowledge the reality of the employment market. California's landmark Paid Family Leave legislation has helped parents bond with their newborns, lengthen the period of breastfeeding, and postpone the use of expensive care.[25] However, many families remain unaware of California's leave program and, with better information, would take more advantage of the program—which, in turn, would have a positive impact on children without requiring additional State budget appropriations. Another critical policy area for families is the frequency of program eligibility determinations based on income; for the many families where adult employment situations change frequently, children are often churned in and out of programs, creating administrative burdens for the State and significant disruptions in service and learning opportunities for vulnerable children. Continuous care would be better for children, families, and the State.

IV. INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE SYSTEM

Rather than focus on the needs or design of any individual programs, the Plan focuses on the attributes of a successful system composed of quality programs. Stakeholders stressed that they wanted an approach that emphasized coherence rather than division among existing programs. Accordingly, changes over time should build on the strengths of existing programs—and when existing programs do not contribute to achieving the goals of the system, they should be replaced or redesigned in a manner that allows them to contribute. The Plan identifies some of the critical elements of a successful system, adapted from the organization used in the meta-analysis and stakeholder engagement process. There is widespread recognition that all of these pieces ultimately should fit together, and that alignment and coordination among programs are critical. The Planning Team has divided these elements into *Key System Drivers* and *Essential Elements.*

A. Key System Drivers

The Plan describes four key system drivers, which are broad areas of change that have ripple effects on all other elements of the system. The key system drivers are (1) Access to Quality Early Learning and Care, (2) Program-Level Continuous Improvement, (3) A Great Early Childhood Workforce, and (4) Family Partnership. These four elements are interrelated. After all, access to quality early learning and care means access to a quality program—and quality programs are those that are continuously improving their ability to meet the needs of children and families. The most important element of those continuously improving programs is great people, and those people work closely with families as partners in each child's learning and development.

1. Access to Quality Early Learning and Care

The stakeholder engagement process identified access as its top overall value and one of California's greatest weaknesses. Stakeholders also emphasize the importance of access to *quality* programs, recognizing that existing programs should be improved in quality.

The State Advisory Council is required by federal law to address access:

- [THE COUNCIL SHALL] CONDUCT A PERIODIC STATEWIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT CONCERNING THE QUALITY AND AVAILABILITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO SCHOOL ENTRY, INCLUDING AN ASSESSMENT OF THE AVAILABILITY OF HIGH-QUALITY PRE-KINDERGARTEN SERVICES FOR LOW-INCOME CHILDREN IN THE STATE.[‡]
- [THE COUNCIL SHALL] DEVELOP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING THE OVERALL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN EXISTING FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL CHILD CARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS, INCLUDING OUTREACH TO UNDERREPRESENTED AND SPECIAL POPULATIONS.

[‡] Text in small caps is taken directly from 42 U.S.C. § 9837b(b)(1)(D), which itemizes the responsibilities of all state advisory councils.

The approach taken in this Plan was to look at the actual needs of families, children, and communities and to recommend changes to how California funds early learning that will better meet the needs of families and children. There is broad agreement in the field that **programs need to be of consistently higher quality, and that more children need access to those higher-quality programs.**

There is also broad agreement among stakeholders that **families with the greatest needs should be given priority for access to quality services,** given the realities of the State budget and the likelihood that some children who could benefit from services will not be able to access them. Although some early learning programs are provided free of charge for eligible participants, child care is not, and affordability is a significant challenge for many families. Stakeholders recognize that services are not truly accessible if they are unaffordable. Moreover, services may not be accessible to families where parents work nontraditional hours or have language barriers. And children who need specialized services may not have access to such services if they are not provided in their community.

Stakeholders like the notion of **a diverse delivery system that provides high-quality programs in a variety of school- and community-based settings.** Not only should programs be in diverse settings, they should be distributed geographically in a manner that maximizes access for families. In addition, stakeholders felt strongly that **improving access requires that parents have better information about early learning opportunities available to them.** And once parents engage with programs, it is important that policies support **continuity of access** to stabilize support for families and allow children to build relationships.

Ensuring that children in California have consistent access to high-quality early learning will require two basic kinds of activities: (1) the policy and program design work necessary to ensure agreement among key stakeholders on what would constitute high-quality services, and (2) funding to ensure that these services are available to the children who need them. These two activities are neither sequential nor separate, but instead should be ongoing and mutually reinforcing. Although this Plan focuses heavily on the design work, it also recognizes that none of the design work will matter if the Plan is not supported with federal, state, and/or local funds.

- [THE COUNCIL SHALL] MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN STATE EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS AND UNDERTAKE EFFORTS TO DEVELOP HIGH-QUALITY COMPREHENSIVE EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS, AS APPROPRIATE.

California's early learning standards (known in the early learning field as Foundations) are highly regarded and instrumental in informing program quality; in the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge, California's narrative about its standards scored higher than any other state's. Stakeholders identify these content standards as the greatest strength of California's system. However, the implementation of these standards throughout the system is uneven and weak, and improving that implementation will be a major element of improving access to quality. **The successful implementation of standards should be built into California's continuous improvement**

mechanisms, so that programs will have a clear understanding of what it means to implement standards successfully and to ensure that resources can be targeted to the activities needed for successful implementation.

Although much of program quality is appropriately focused on adult–child interactions, another key element of access to quality is facilities—which were identified as a significant weakness for the State in the stakeholder engagement process. Recent studies have shown that facility construction quality and design are critical to healthy development and that common characteristics of California's aging early learning facilities threaten children's health and should be addressed.[26] **Stakeholders recommend including early learning in statewide facilities bonds as a strategy for ensuring that more children are in quality environments for their early learning experiences. Furthermore, systemic quality improvement strategies should include facility criteria designed to promote child health, learning, and development.**

2. Program-Level Continuous Improvement

Improving program quality is not a one-time or static event. Instead, it is a process of continuous improvement in which all programs should engage. Fortunately, California has undertaken major work focused on creating a process of continuous quality improvement. The 2010 *Dream Big* report prepared by the statutorily mandated California Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee and the California Department of Education provided a statewide framework for continuous quality improvement. A more recent development is California's Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant, which is supporting regional consortia that are developing local Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) with evidence-based common elements from a Quality Continuum Framework, including three common tiers. Moreover, those regional consortia have created a collaborative learning effort that helps each consortium learn from the continuous improvement efforts of the others.

California is committed to a regional approach to continuous quality improvement. Ultimately, **all early learning programs that utilize federal, state, or local governmental funding should be required to participate in a continuous improvement process—one that has benchmarked tiers of quality rating and action plans for improvement, with resources tied to improvement plans.** Progress on improvements to program quality and related child outcomes needs to be measurable. The Race to the Top consortia are drawing lessons from multiple programs (including Head Start and First 5's Power of Preschool/Child Signature Program) and focusing on quality elements such as ratios and group size, teaching and learning practices, family involvement, staff education and training, and program leadership, as well as validated tools for measuring effective teacher–child interactions and the quality of the program environment. The comprehensive planning process brought forth other potential elements of a quality rating system, and the implementation of the Race to the Top grants undoubtedly will yield new lessons.

California's local continuous improvement efforts provide a framework for a statewide continuous improvement effort. **The lessons from the RTT-ELC implementation—and other local quality improvement efforts—can inform the use of state funding streams so that they are**

designed to support improved quality at the local level. This process will be critical for a quality improvement effort that addresses what are now multiple programs in a variety of settings; although the continuous improvement process could support the important work of aligning requirements and increasing the focus on long-term outcomes, that work will take time. However, common themes that have emerged among local quality rating efforts could inform a state-level analysis of funding streams, based on evolving experiences and research at both state and local levels. Though the State should give itself space to learn real lessons from the work of the Early Learning Challenge and other nascent QRIS efforts, it should be prepared to act on those lessons as they emerge and agree to a framework for rethinking existing funding streams based on those lessons. When the new framework emerges, the State should also be realistic about the costs of achieving quality, including both direct program funding and resources for supports such as technical assistance.

Stakeholders acknowledge the importance of data-driven continuous improvement—and the importance of using relevant data to support child development. Stakeholders also stressed the importance of play-based learning and developmentally appropriate practice, which are essential to high-quality early learning. These key principles—data-driven improvement and developmentally appropriate, play-based learning—are complementary rather than competing. However, to design a system that funds programs to operate on the basis of both principles will require thought and care.

Ultimately, **continuous improvement will require a great deal of analysis of new data and attention to stakeholder feedback.** The stakeholder community broadly supports the idea of setting high standards and holding providers to those standards, but that process will end in failure if there is no engagement of the provider community about what strategies will be most effective in helping them meet the new high standards. Because resources will always be limited, it is essential to focus on strategies that are most likely to help achieve new, higher goals; at both the state and local levels, providers will have critical input on what those strategies are, how to execute them most effectively, and what resources are needed to ensure successful execution.

3. A Great Early Childhood Workforce

Research shows that early education teachers and family child care providers with higher levels of education and training (and appropriate compensation) provide higher-quality classroom environments that support child outcomes, in both center- and home-based care.[27] Because of its impact on child outcomes, this area was the second priority of stakeholders (increasing access was first). Simply put, California cannot have a great early childhood system without a great early childhood workforce—one that is well-educated, well-trained, reflective of the State's cultural and linguistic diversity, and supported on an ongoing basis.

Both preparation and ongoing professional development sustain an excellent teaching force and are issues that the State Advisory Council is required to address:

- [THE COUNCIL SHALL] ASSESS THE CAPACITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS.

- [THE COUNCIL SHALL] DEVELOP RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING STATEWIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS.

The primary needs of the workforce can be summarized by five "C's":[§]

1. Competencies
2. Career Pathways
3. Curricula (for preparation and training)
4. Credentials
5. Compensation

First, California has created a strong foundation through the creation of Early Childhood Educator (ECE) Competencies. **The ECE Competencies need to be updated periodically to reflect best practices in the field and evolutions in the Foundations,** but the current version of the competencies provides a strong base.

Second and third, work is already under way to **develop career pathways based on the ECE Competencies, with aligned curricula.** Stakeholders support the use of the competencies to define a clear career pathway with aligned credentials, and there is consensus in the field that existing efforts are heading in the right direction. Federal funds are being used for the Competencies Integration Project, which will integrate the competencies into higher-education course work and professional development.

Fourth, **credentials and staff educational qualifications need to be aligned with the ECE Competencies and reflect mastery of those competencies.** Different parts of the early care and learning system currently require different staff qualifications, and standardization across programs could improve the consistency of quality service. There has not yet been a systematic effort to ensure that providers have mastered the competencies—indeed, at this time there is not even a standard measurement that can gauge whether the competencies have been mastered—and many current professional providers in the field have not had adequate preparation or professional development. One important strategy for addressing this issue is to ensure that teacher preparation programs have adequate capacity and that individuals seeking to access that capacity have the support needed to do so; this would require engaging the California State University system and the California Community Colleges, among others. Beyond credentials and staff qualifications, the State may want to consider additional positive consequences for professionals who demonstrate mastery of the competencies. The State will also need to ensure that even as it raises expectations for the workforce, it simultaneously takes steps to ensure that the workforce is diverse and reflects the population of the State.

[§]The first four "C's" were identified by Lynn Karoly in *A Golden Opportunity: Advancing California's Early Care and Education Workforce Professional Development System* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2012).

Finally, stakeholders in the CCELP public engagement process—many of whom are early childhood administrators and teachers—support **providing adequate resources for providers to retain their best teachers.** Early childhood professionals with academic degrees that are comparable to those of K–12 teachers earn only about half of what K–12 teachers earn,[28] leading to very high turnover.[29] Better compensation will help programs recruit and retain qualified staff.

Although meeting the five "C's" would go a long way toward improving the quality of the workforce, stakeholders also noted the importance of improving the context in which teachers operate. Difficult working conditions make it hard for teachers to apply what they have learned in preparation and professional development, even when that preparation and professional development were adequate. Moreover, in some programs, staff members are not eligible for paid professional development days, making it a challenge to maintain quality on an ongoing basis. Program leadership is also an essential element of developing a great workforce; an important part of staff working conditions is the ability of program directors to provide feedback on the quality of professional work and interaction with children and families.

Stakeholders further noted that capacity-building efforts in preparation and professional development should include efforts to address the need for more skilled leaders. Workforce reforms should be undertaken holistically rather than in piecemeal fashion, building on and tying together existing efforts to improve the workforce. Strengthening the early learning system will relieve some existing pressures on the early learning workforce, but will also place new demands on that workforce; the State should have systems in place to help the workforce meet those demands and should engage in ongoing dialogue with the workforce to ensure that its needs are being met continuously.

4. Family Partnership

Stakeholders feel strongly that partnership between providers and parents is critical to long-term success. Such partnership requires system leaders, providers, and professionals to actively seek input from families and then act on that input. Partnership also requires system leaders, providers, and professionals to communicate with families in a manner that is clear and concise, with potential action steps plainly identified.

- On a systems level, **partnership requires inviting families to work with the State, involving them in the policymaking process, listening to families about what they actually need, and then respecting their stated needs by working to meet those needs. Partnership also requires providing families with good information about the range of quality services available to them,** including for infants and toddlers—with clear explanations of why quality matters to long-term outcomes. When the State and providers share information, they should do so in an actionable and culturally sensitive manner. In addition, the State should solicit feedback from families systematically rather than episodically; a regular feedback loop with families at the policy level will help ensure that as the system is reshaped, it will continue to meet families' needs. This will require changes to the formal structures currently in place at the state level to ensure that families are active participants in the policy process.

- At the program level, one key is to **ensure that partnering with families is a key competency in which the workforce is specifically trained,** with programs designed to welcome and facilitate such partnership. Families are the primary drivers of child outcomes, so true partnership between providers and families is the only way to maximize the impact on child outcomes. This importance needs to be reflected in the preparation and professional development of the workforce, whose members need to be able to partner with families successfully. Professionals will need to be prepared to work with adults in families to help them become ongoing advocates for their children as the children advance through the education system.

Family partnership will not succeed if it is just another box to check on a compliance review document; it will succeed only if it involves real communication, relationship building, and mutual respect. It is essential to value the strengths and funds of knowledge that all families possess and bring to the partnership. This will require sensitivity to the different needs of families—for example, those of working families (particularly those with unusual work schedules) and those of families in which the adults do not speak English. It will also require individual providers to have a greater awareness of the system around them, so that when a provider cannot meet a family's needs, referrals can be made to other providers who can.

The next few years should yield valuable information about effective strategies for establishing family partnership, which is embedded in the quality improvement efforts of the Early Learning Challenge. Even today there are examples of success in this area that can be built on, and as the Challenge progresses there will be more. This is also an area where the best practices of early learning likely could be continued into the K–12 system. And it is important to remember that partnership requires not only that the system get better at talking with families, but also that the system improve at listening to them; for the system to truly support families requires hearing from them about their evolving needs.

B. Essential Elements

Beyond the four key drivers, the meta-analysis and stakeholder engagement process focused primarily on six additional elements that are necessary for the system to succeed. All of these should be part of the State's continuous improvement process. They are (1) Assessing and Meeting the Needs of Children, (2) Supporting Dual Language Learners, (3) Effective Data Practices, (4) Food, Nutrition, and Physical Activity, (5) Kindergarten Transition, and (6) Finance and Governance.

1. Assessing and Meeting the Needs of Children

Individual educators should be using developmental screening, observation tools, and assessments consistently to determine the strengths and needs of children—and when specific needs are identified, there should be systems in place to ensure that those needs are met. Stakeholders support assessment use for this purpose, so long as the assessments are authentic and developmentally appropriate, the results of assessments are used appropriately in partnerships with families, and sufficient time is provided for training, administration, and analysis.

For assessments to be successful, it is critical for the workforce to be provided adequate training in both how to administer assessments and how to subsequently take appropriate action based on the results. This includes training for early elementary educators on how to use the results from kindergarteners' assessments to improve their instruction, and may eventually include the appropriate sharing of assessment results across age spans to inform instruction. Efforts can build on existing assessment course work, including course work aligned with competencies for health, safety, and nutrition. Stakeholders emphasized that **child assessment is not a one-time tool, but an ongoing process that professionals must be able to manage on an ongoing basis.** That process must include regular communication with families.

The meta-analysis and stakeholders also raised **significant concerns about the availability of follow-up services when needs are identified through screening.** Some existing initiatives—Project LAUNCH, administered by the California Department of Public Health, and the Help Me Grow initiative—are focused on addressing this issue. However, stakeholders identify the lack of early childhood mental health supports as a significant weakness of California's system.

Ultimately, state and local continuous improvement processes should provide the framework and resources for assessment systems to be implemented. Moreover, they should set a framework for following up on needs identified through the assessment process. If the process identifies significant needs for which no resources are available, that information should be brought to state and local leaders for their potential action.

2. Supporting Dual Language Learners

California should be a national leader in providing high-quality services to young dual language learners, who represent both a large and growing percentage of California's overall birth-to-five population and a tremendous asset for the State. National leadership will require **ensuring that services for dual language learners address their cognitive and developmental strengths and needs in a culturally sensitive manner.** Culturally inclusive learning environments support young children in bridging home and school by acknowledging the key role that a child's home language and culture play in identity, social–emotional, and cognitive development.

Given that the first five years of life are important to the language development of all children, support for young children who are dual language learners will be critical to helping them achieve successful long-term outcomes. Research has shown that dual language learners especially can benefit from a center-based program during the year before kindergarten, but at least a third of such children in California do not attend such a program.[30] **Outreach can make families aware of available opportunities.** Research also shows that children from birth to age five can and do learn in two or more languages—and that fluency in more than one language can provide cognitive advantages—so programs must be respectful of home language acquisition and use research-based practices to help support the learning of English.

Teachers must receive special training to ensure that programs can address the strengths and needs of dual language learners and their families. This is an idea that has strong stakeholder support. Federal funds are being used to define best practices for teachers who work with children with different home languages, and attention is being paid to cultural diversity. The next step could be to ensure that teachers are trained in these best practices and that programs are supported to implement them.

3. Effective Data Practices

The use of data is an issue that the State Advisory Council is required to address:

- [THE COUNCIL SHALL] DEVELOP RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A UNIFIED DATA COLLECTION SYSTEM FOR PUBLIC EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES.

The key for California is a commitment to best practices in data usage. California is already collecting a great deal of data, but has not fully tapped into its power. Early learning communities in other states have focused their efforts on first **identifying the key policy and practice questions that they would like to be able to answer, and then determining what data would allow them to answer those questions.** Ultimately, their goal is to support continuous improvement at both the policy and practice levels in ways that draw on available data (both new and old). The Plan helps to identify key questions for California, and these questions should reflect the information needs of local leaders and practitioners.

Once these key questions have been identified, **the State should map existing data that would help to answer the questions;** this will give the State the chance to identify places where it might better leverage work it is already doing. If gaps remain, the State should develop a plan for working with communities to plug those gaps. To ensure that data are used effectively to serve children, **professionals working with children should be trained in the use of data.** Moreover, **clear explanations must be given to families** about why data are being collected, the types of data being collected, how the information is being used, and why it is being used in those specific ways.

4. Food, Nutrition, and Physical Activity

Food, nutrition, and exercise are important elements of child health, and early care and education programs play an essential role in improving child outcomes in this area. Better child nutrition has a potentially significant impact on the State's long-term efforts to improve health outcomes. Stakeholders believe that **early care and education providers (including child care providers) need better training in nutrition and in supporting physical activities.** Stakeholders also note that the requirements of the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program are too complicated and lead to underutilization; **the State could do more to work with the federal government to make this program more accessible to providers.** Program designs should also take into account the need for children to engage in various forms of physical activity.

5. Kindergarten Transition

A successful transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten requires support from both the kindergarten teacher and prekindergarten teacher and their respective systems. Ideally, these professionals would participate in some **collaborative professional development to learn best practices together, and then actively engage each other to support the child's learning.** More broadly, stakeholders support the notion of **"ready schools"** that are equipped to address the full range of children's needs, including development of skills and executive function. This can be supported by **ensuring that learning standards represent a continuum across years and systems,** including learning standards focused on social and emotional development; California has already worked to ensure that its Foundations are aligned with the Common Core State Standards. The same need for a continuum applies to assessments. Strengthening training for elementary school principals on the role of early learning, an initiative already under way in other states, also could support successful transition.

Active partnerships with families also help to accomplish successful kindergarten transition. Professionals and families should be in regular communication about this transition and what to expect in kindergarten, and families need teachers and school systems to partner with them in managing the transition.

At this time, the successful implementation of transitional kindergarten (TK) is an important immediate priority, one that substantially impacts the quality of many children's transition into kindergarten. **Stakeholders are strongly in favor of providing the supports needed for districts to implement TK successfully.** Some districts are going beyond TK implementation to create full-fledged "P-3" initiatives that develop partnerships and align practice across preschool and the early elementary years; these initiatives may offer some lessons that can be applied more broadly.

The transition into kindergarten is a bridge from early learning into the K–12 system. Ultimately, California's goal should not be to create two separate systems that somehow connect and align, but a smooth continuum of service in which children and families experience a steady progression from birth through high school graduation. The current work on kindergarten transition provides an opportunity to continue moving toward a more seamless system, one that incorporates best practices from what are now two relatively independent enterprises.

6. Finance and Governance

Although many stakeholders argue that California should increase the amount of money it invests in early learning, there was also recognition that the State might do well to change its spending approach. Every dollar spent should be focused on an early learning system that supports a child's development and learning. There is widespread acknowledgment that California's system of finance and governance is needlessly complex and inefficient; stakeholders identify this as the greatest weakness of the system.

Federal law requires the State Advisory Council to go beyond a needs assessment and recommendations to increase access and quality—it must also address system coherence:

- [THE COUNCIL SHALL] IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES FOR, AND BARRIERS TO, COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION AMONG FEDERALLY-FUNDED AND STATE-FUNDED CHILD DEVELOPMENT, CHILD CARE, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND SERVICES, INCLUDING COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION AMONG STATE AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR ADMINISTERING SUCH PROGRAMS.

Stakeholders strongly support early learning and care being part of a comprehensive education reform initiative that includes birth through grade twelve, with a specific focus on P-3 integration. This could be part of a broader effort to bring coherence among federal, state, and local programs, with each playing a role that builds on its unique institutional strengths. One key area in need of more attention is California's child care governance system, which stakeholders widely recognize as less than optimal. Stakeholders desire a **systemwide focus on quality to dramatically improve outcomes** and increased per-child funding to pay the real cost of delivering quality service, with a corresponding increase in accountability for actually delivering quality service.

Stakeholders support funding tied to program quality and recognize that when funds are limited, they should be focused on the children and neighborhoods where improved program quality will have the greatest impact. Research shows that the greatest impact of early education is on children with the most risk factors or financial need,[31] and on infants and toddlers. In prioritizing funding, California could first prioritize those children who are most at risk. Beyond that, the State might consider place-based strategies, serving communities where the need is greatest (an approach that has been used in other states) and where all children who live in an identified neighborhood would be allowed to participate.

The State's recent fiscal climate presented a significant challenge to the short-term possibilities for increased spending on early learning. Moreover, the fragmentation of services and misalignment of program standards cannot simply be willed away; it will take a great deal of effort and compromise to resolve these issues, which are challenging even in the most favorable political and fiscal climate. Transformation is difficult, and though it has a positive impact on the whole system it can pose significant challenges to many individuals within the system. The stakeholders of California's early learning system have made it clear that they want to engage in the process of transforming the system, which will require leadership and ongoing commitment from many people who could just as easily choose to focus on something else instead. But unless key stakeholders invest their time, commit to making changes when needed, and seek resources to implement an improved system, the opportunities identified in this Plan will never be realized—and stakeholders recognize that for the long-term success of California's children, that outcome is simply unacceptable.

V. CONCLUSION

Research and evidence show that an investment in high-quality early learning is likely to be one with a significant long-term payoff. The State Advisory Council initiated the Comprehensive Plan process in order to provide a design for a high-quality birth-to-five system for California. The recommendations identified in the Plan and Appendix are based on both research and stakeholder feedback, meaning that all of the recommendations have a constituency of support. With this Plan, the State Advisory Council has prepared a roadmap for early learning in California that is based on significant input from the field and fulfills the Council's federal obligations.

By articulating new trajectories in multiple and interconnected policy areas, this Plan represents a new opportunity for California's early learning community to advance its conversations about policy change. In the years ahead, the Plan should serve as a touchstone for California's elected and appointed officials, the State Advisory Council, families, community leaders, providers, and other early learning stakeholders to take action on these recommendations, collectively and individually. Together, these officials and early learning leaders can work together to design and build the system that California's youngest children deserve.

ENDNOTES

1. American Institutes for Research, *Condition of Children Birth to Age Five and Status of Early Childhood Services in California* (San Mateo, CA: American Institutes for Research, 2012).

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Appendix: Recommendations in the California Comprehensive Early Learning Plan

This appendix includes two tables. The first table captures the recommendations discussed in the narrative of the California Comprehensive Early Learning Plan (CCELP). The second table identifies recommendations from the meta-analysis** that were prioritized by stakeholders during the public engagement process and helped inform the development of the CCELP Core Recommendations.††

Table 1. CCELP Core Recommendations

KEY DRIVERS

Key Driver 1: Access to Quality Early Learning and Care

- More children need access to early learning and care programs that meet their individual and family needs.
- Programs need to be of consistently higher quality, which will require agreement on the definition of high-quality services (including both services and facilities).
- The lowest-income families should be given priority for access to quality services.
- Programs should be offered through a variety of school- and community-based settings to ensure that there are affordable, quality options that meet the needs of working families (including those that work nontraditional hours).
- To improve access, families need better information about early learning opportunities available to them.
- Funding will be necessary to ensure quality services are available to children who need them.
- Implementation of California's early learning standards should be built into the State's continuous quality improvement mechanisms, with resources targeted to necessary implementation activities.
- To address facility construction quality and design, include early learning in statewide facilities bonds.
- Include facility design and environmental health criteria in systemic quality improvement strategies.

**The stakeholder engagement process was substantially informed by an American Institutes for Research (AIR) report released in August 2012 and entitled *Condition of Children Birth to Age Five and Status of Early Childhood Services in California: Synthesis of Recent Research* (available online at http://www.glenpricegroup.com/ccelp/resource-documents/). This meta-analysis, prepared as part of the CCELP process, draws on and organizes the extensive base of research and policy analyses conducted in California in recent years.

††Stakeholder rankings of policy recommendations were developed through a statewide stakeholder engagement process that employed a survey, regional workshops, and local and virtual meetings. Although not all of the same elements or categories of policy recommendations from the stakeholder engagement process are used in the CCELP, the prioritized recommendations have been aligned as appropriate and thus honor stakeholder input. For the full summary of stakeholder engagement results, please visit http://www.glenpricegroup.com/ccelp/mainreport.

Table 1. CCELP Core Recommendations

Key Driver 2: Program-Level Continuous Improvement

- Early learning programs that utilize federal, state, or local funding should participate in a continuous improvement process with benchmarked tiers of quality rating and action plans and resources tied to improvement plans.
- State funding streams should be informed by lessons learned from local quality improvement efforts and implementation of the Early Learning Challenge.
- Progress on improvement to program quality and related child outcomes needs to be measurable, and continuous improvement processes should be data-driven.
- Providers must be empowered to provide input and feedback on setting standards and being held accountable for them.

Key Driver 3: A Great Early Childhood Workforce

- California's Early Childhood Educator Competencies should be updated periodically to reflect best practices and the evolution of the State's early learning standards.
- Career pathways based on the Competencies with aligned curriculum should be developed, including through integration with higher-education course work and professional development.
- Credentials and staff educational qualifications need to be aligned with the Competencies and reflect mastery of those Competencies.
- The early childhood workforce must be provided with adequate resources, including competitive salaries.
- California's higher-education system must have the capacity to prepare the workforce (including program leaders), and individuals seeking degrees will, in many instances, need support to access available capacity.
- The early childhood workforce should be well-educated, well-trained, reflective of the State's cultural and linguistic diversity, and supported on an ongoing basis.

Key Driver 4: Family Partnership

- Family input needs to be considered in assessing early learning opportunities, program improvement, and policy development at the State and local levels. On a systems level, partnership requires inviting families to work with the State, involving them in the policy-making process, listening to families about what they actually need, and respecting their stated needs by working with them to meet those needs.
- All families should have better information about available early childhood opportunities, and information should be easy to understand and culturally sensitive.
- The early childhood workforce should be trained on best practices for authentic family partnership.

Table 1. CCELP Core Recommendations

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Essential Element 1: Assessing and Meeting the Needs of Children

- Educators should use developmental screening, observation tools, and authentic and developmentally appropriate assessments to determine and address children's strengths and needs.
- The workforce needs sufficient time for training on, administration of, and analysis of assessments—and on how to take action based on assessment results.
- Assessment should be an ongoing process to inform teaching and learning, not a one-time tool.
- Follow-up services, including mental health supports, need to be available.

Essential Element 2: Supporting Dual Language Learners

- Programs must provide culturally and linguistically sensitive services for the cognitive and developmental needs of dual language learners.
- Families should be made aware of center-based programs during the year before their child enters kindergarten.
- Teachers and providers need special training to meet the needs of dual language learners and their families.

Essential Element 3: Effective Data Practices

- The State should identify the key policy and practice questions it would like to answer and the data necessary to answer those questions.
- The State should identify existing data that can answer questions and acknowledge where data gaps exist.
- The State should develop a plan for working with communities to fill data gaps.
- Professionals working with children should be trained on data use so that they can use information effectively to serve children.

Essential Element 4: Food, Nutrition, and Physical Activity

- Early childhood providers should participate in better training in nutrition, child health, and physical activity.
- The State should work with the federal government to simplify requirements of the Child and Adult Care Food Program.
- The State should support improvement in design and environmental factors that impact the behavior and health of children and professionals in new and existing facilities.

Table 1. CCELP Core Recommendations

Essential Element 5: Kindergarten Transition

- Prekindergarten and kindergarten professionals should participate in collaborative professional development to learn best practices and engage each other to support learning.
- Schools should be equipped to address the full range of child needs, including skills development and executive function.
- Learning standards should be aligned across years and systems.
- Elementary school principals should participate in training on the role of early learning.
- Families should be provided with information about the transition to kindergarten.
- The successful implementation of transitional kindergarten (TK) requires supports for districts.

Essential Element 6: Finance and Governance

- The State should focus funding on a system that supports child development and learning as part of a comprehensive education reform effort, with a specific focus on preschool-to-grade-three (P-3) integration.
- The State's child care governance system should support a consistent, systemwide focus on quality and continuous quality improvement, with increased accountability for delivering quality service and increased per-child funding to meet higher expectations.
- Funding should be tied to program quality and prioritize (1) children who are most at risk and/or have the highest financial need, and (2) infants and toddlers.

Table 2. Stakeholder Priority Recommendations

KEY DRIVERS

Key Driver 1: Access to Quality Early Learning and Care

- To provide better quality services will require the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers and providers. Because compensation of professionals is a key element of recruitment and retention, this will affect program costs.
- Early learning and care should be included in a comprehensive birth-to-grade-twelve education and reform package that includes equitable and adequate financing.
- The child care reimbursement system for publicly funded infant/toddler and preschool programs should be restructured to reflect the true cost of providing quality care.
- The quality of early learning and care programs should be raised through a multipronged approach that includes quality measurements and monitoring, financial incentives and supports, and accountability via evaluating child outcomes.
- The State should create a new revenue source that supports early learning, with a set-aside of at least 30 percent for infants and toddlers.

Facilities

- A percentage of child care and development funding should be dedicated to ongoing facilities maintenance and upgrades, with funding guidelines broadened to address environmental and health-related issues such as asthma triggers and toxins.
- Facility criteria should be integrated into quality rating and improvement systems, health policies, licensing, renovation and repair grants, and the Child Care Facility Loan Fund to improve existing facilities and reduce exposure to environmental hazards.
- Guidelines or criteria for high-quality facility design that include elements to support optimal child health and development should be created and promoted.
- Land use policies should support facilities development and improvements, including through regulations that streamline zoning and permitting, reduction of fees for facilities development, the inclusion of child care needs in city and county General Plans, and child care planning information in the State OPR General Plan Guidelines.
- Local facility financing should be increased by identifying potential public sources of capital and engaging local businesses in establishing efforts to advocate for increased funding.
- Early learning facilities should be part of the next statewide education facilities bond, with the largest bond amount that is feasible.
- Districts should use K–5 campus lands for early learning centers, especially on campuses experiencing declining enrollment.

Table 2. Stakeholder Priority Recommendations

Key Driver 2: Program-Level Continuous Improvement

- Once quality rating and improvement systems are in place, providers should participate in technical and financial assistance to improve their ratings.
- Tiered systems should be assessed on the following quality elements: ratios and group size, teaching and learning, family partnership, staff education and training, and program leadership.
- The locally developed quality rating systems funded by the Early Learning Challenge should be studied closely over the next few years, and lessons learned from the Challenge should be used to develop models for local use.

Mental Health

- A common approach to facilitate children's social–emotional development should be established in all early care and childhood programs using the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) model, which aligns with the State's Social–Emotional Domain in the Preschool Learning Foundations.

Key Driver 3: A Great Early Childhood Workforce

- If early childhood education (ECE) standards are to be set higher, higher compensation levels for ECE teachers must be set to improve recruitment and retention.
- A well-defined ECE career pathway with associated credentials aligned with the Early Childhood Educator Competencies, postsecondary education and training programs, and potential or actual quality rating and improvement systems must be developed.
- College courses and professional development opportunities for infant/toddler caregivers must be broadly available, and infant/toddler caregivers must participate in additional supports for college readiness to help them satisfy course requirements.
- Degree programs and training should be focused on areas where research suggests teachers and providers are not yet strong, such as dual language learners, children with special needs, and adult–child interactions that support cognitive and language development.
- There should be financial supports for practitioners to pursue additional education and professional development, either through workforce investment programs or the quality rating and improvement systems.

Mental Health

- The mental health system, policymakers, and funders must commit to creating and sustaining a trained workforce in mental health.
- Professionals who provide mental health treatment and interventions should have basic knowledge in key areas, such as those outlined in the publication *California Training Guidelines and Personnel Competencies for Infant–Family and Early Childhood Mental Health (Revised);* for more information, visit http://cacenter-ecmh.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Training-Guidelines-031212.pdf.

Table 2. Stakeholder Priority Recommendations

Key Driver 4: Family Partnership

- Teachers and providers should participate in training on best practices and ongoing support for building and maintaining partnerships with families.
- Family partnership in developmental and early learning services for infants and toddlers should be supported from children's earliest points of entry into programs.
- The following California Early Childhood Educator Competencies should be used to create a specific, measurable menu of best practices for engaging families: Culture, Diversity, and Equity; Family and Community Engagement; and Dual-Language Development.
- Additional evidence-based strategies such as home visiting and mental health services should be embedded in early learning and care programs that serve children and families with multiple risk factors.
- State-level policy should directly engage families to understand their needs so that policy can be designed to meet those needs.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Essential Element 1: Assessing and Meeting the Needs of Children

- Child assessments by Early Childhood Education caregivers and teachers should be promoted to inform and improve practice. Correspondingly, professional development and time must be provided to the workforce to support effective use of assessments.
- Children's needs should be identified and addressed earlier through ongoing, developmentally appropriate assessments, including the adoption of a statewide kindergarten assessment observation instrument.

Children with Special Needs

- Screening for developmental and health problems should be conducted for all children in all settings, early in the program year, to determine if children are eligible for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) services.
- Training, professional development, and coaching on working with children with special needs should be provided.

Essential Element 2: Supporting Dual Language Learners

- Teachers and providers in all settings should participate in training on dual language learner strategies, including home language support, self-reflection to address cultural diversity, evidence-based classroom strategies, and ways to expand repertoire of language.
- Educating English learners should be viewed as a systemic issue, relevant to all early childhood educators and not simply English-language specialists.
- In the classroom, dual language learners should have the opportunity to use oral language for varied purposes, forge connections between familiar and new material, and utilize visual clues to assist with comprehension.

Table 2. Stakeholder Priority Recommendations

Essential Element 3: Effective Data Practices

- The State should fund the implementation of a P-16 longitudinal data system, including a unique child identifier.
- Infants and toddlers should be included in a longitudinal child data system.
- A child identifier should be used to link across program data sets, to determine the extent to which children are served in multiple settings and whether enrollment in programs is associated with improved long-term child outcomes.

Essential Element 4: Food, Nutrition, and Physical Activity

- Some activities in early care and education settings should focus on the Preschool Learning Foundations' Physical Development domains.
- Training on nutrition and physical activity should be expanded in child care programs.
- The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) compliance requirements should be streamlined and updated to increase participation and incorporate a broader view of nutrition and physical activity.

Essential Element 5: Kindergarten Transition

- Systems should encourage preschool and kindergarten teachers to visit each other's classrooms to share data and learn from each other's practices, attend common workshops and professional development sessions, and collaborate with each other regarding teaching strategies and methods.
- There should be more guidance to districts regarding transitional kindergarten (TK) standards, frameworks, curriculum and instruction, assessment strategies, and tools and planning.
- School entry policies should focus on offering opportunities for early educational experiences and preparing schools to meet developmental, social, and educational needs, especially among children from low-income families.

Table 2. Stakeholder Priority Recommendations

Essential Element 6: Finance and Governance

- The Standard Reimbursement Rate for state-contracted programs meeting Title 5 standards should be raised so that they are above the rate for programs of similar duration that only need to meet Title 22 standards.
- Children and families should not experience a system that is siloed and fragmented (i.e., there should be greater coherence in reporting, eligibility, and other programmatic requirements).
- Options for alternative governance structures should be evaluated and structures should change where greater efficiency and effectiveness can be attained.
- A Children's Cabinet charged with promoting and implementing information sharing, collaboration, increased efficiency, and improved service delivery should be established; the Cabinet should be composed of the heads of all agencies and departments that serve children's needs.
- Strengthen county- and local-level collaborations to more effectively implement and support federally and state-funded programs, identify local needs, and provide more comprehensive support to parents, including better leveraging of local child care and development planning councils and resource and referral agencies.

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