

A young child in a red shirt is playing with wooden alphabet blocks. The child is in the background, slightly out of focus, with their hands on the blocks. In the foreground, three blocks are stacked vertically: a red block with the letter 'A', a green block with the letter 'B', and a yellow block with the letter 'C'. The background is a soft, blurred indoor setting.

FORESIGHT LAW+POLICY

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BUILDING A COHERENT P-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CALIFORNIA

BY ELLIOT REGENSTEIN

Before moving to Los Angeles and San Francisco, respectively, baseball's Dodgers and Giants were fierce crosstown rivals in New York City. Their most famous game as crosstown rivals was played on October 3, 1951, when Giants third baseman Bobby Thomson hit a home run that ended a playoff game and sent the Giants to the World Series.¹ It is still considered one of the greatest moments in baseball history.²

Serious fans know that part of what made the home run dramatic is that the Giants had overcome incredibly long odds to catch the Dodgers in the first place. Less than two months earlier, on August 11, the Giants were 13 games back; they had to win 39 of their final 47 games to leap into a tie for first place and force a playoff. It remains one of the great comebacks in baseball history.³

Americans do love a comeback story. But part of what makes comebacks exciting is how infrequently they happen. In baseball, most of the time the team that is in first place on July 31 is still in first when the season ends in October.⁴ The 1951 Giants are compelling in part because they are so anomalous. History tells us that it's much better to be on pace to win and just trying to stay on track than it is to be way behind and trying to catch up.



Unfortunately, the premise of our education system seems to be an expectation that school districts can routinely perform like the 1951 Giants, making up a lot of ground after falling behind early. A handful of school districts might be able to catch up. But while school districts have shown they can do a good job of protecting a lead, it's not fair to them — or to children — to expect them to constantly be playing from behind. This report is about how we can get schools out of the business of playing catch-up. In education as in baseball, the best strategy is always to build a big lead and then preserve it.

Now is arguably the most challenging moment California's education system has ever faced. COVID-19 has created an entirely new world, one in which the safety risks to teachers and children make it impossible to continue with "school as normal." School districts are grappling with nearly impossible decisions about how best to manage multiple conflicting imperatives. Child outcomes will almost certainly suffer.

As the state plans its road to recovery from this systemic shock, it will be more important than ever to ensure that children are receiving all the help they need to complete high school — and stay on track for success after high school. And that will require a fundamentally different approach to the relationship between the early learning and TK-12 systems. California — like every other state — has made a set of policy choices that lead to discontinuity between the early childhood years (birth through five) and the K-12 years. Nationally, both the K-12 and early childhood world have suffered from what one analyst has called “problem blindness”⁵: they struggled for so long to overcome existing hurdles that it can be hard to envision fundamental changes that might lead to dramatic improvement. Perhaps this urgent moment will lead the state to reckon with the consequences of its historical choices and set a new direction for the future.

California’s TK-12 leaders have a growing understanding of the importance of the early years, but there are many ways policy and culture enforce a separation between the two. The goals of this report are to shine a light on the policy and cultural changes needed to develop the aligned education system that will provide California’s children the outcomes its leaders are striving for, and to propose some next steps that will lead to better support for children and families in the first eight years of life.

While the challenges facing the state may be daunting, California is fortunate to have state-level leadership with a real commitment to early childhood. Governor Gavin Newsom has been a champion on the issue, and is respected and appreciated by key leaders in the early childhood community. The California State Legislature has for years expressed its dedication and commitment to early childhood.⁶ Having people in charge who understand the importance of the early years is a great asset to the state. And in many ways their presence in leadership is a testament to years of hard work by leaders within state government, policy advocates, providers, and an entire early childhood community that has fought uphill battles for policy change over the course of decades.

The recent release of California’s Master Plan for Early Learning and Care is meant to provide a framework for the development of the state’s early childhood system.⁷ The Master Plan was written by a team of leading experts and is based on engagement with stakeholders throughout the early childhood system, including families. For the Master Plan to succeed will require a substantial investment of time and money, but its success is critical to the long-term health of the state. This report is meant to complement the Master Plan by highlighting the importance of early childhood to the achievement of the state’s TK-12 goals, analyzing the current relationship between early childhood and TK-12, and proposing activities and policy changes meant to create a better experience for children in the state’s education system.

This report first explains why it is essential for California’s education leaders to invest more time and attention in the early years; this includes the pre-kindergarten birth-to-five years, and in some instances the early elementary years (TK-2). It then explains how California policy influences the conditions for local action, and the cultural issues that contribute to a divide between TK-12 and early learning. The report concludes by proposing next steps for the state and its school districts.

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A Note on the Sources of Information for this Report

This report is modeled on the 2019 paper *Why the K-12 World Hasn't Embraced Early Learning*. Much of the analysis in this report, however, is based on interviews with a diverse group of more than 40 informants from around California conducted in 2020 — people who work at the state level and the local level, experts in TK-12 and early learning, and people from a wide range of professional settings: schools, private early-childhood providers, advocacy organizations and think tanks, state government, and more. Those informants are identified by name in the appendix. Without their collective willingness to be generous with their time and wisdom, this report would not exist.

To encourage candor informants were told that all of their insights would remain anonymous unless they specifically approved the use of their name in connection with an idea or statement. Accordingly, many of the references in this report will be to ideas shared by “multiple informants” — but the specific informants are not identified in order to protect their privacy. Where references are made to specific informants, or quotes attributed to them, those references and quotes have been verified by the speaker. The questions shared with the informants are listed in the appendix.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fewer than half of California high school students are considered “prepared” for college or career success. But in most school districts, children average at least a year’s worth of progress from third grade on. The primary reason California high school students are behind isn’t their elementary and secondary schools; it’s a system that doesn’t provide children the educational support they need before they get to third grade – and indeed, before they get to kindergarten. This systemic failure ends up having a disproportionately negative impact on Black and Latinx children.

California’s education system is set up to focus on the later years, not the earlier years. District and school accountability focuses on third grade and up. The state’s investments in pre-kindergarten education are inadequate and unfocused. Information about how children are doing in the early years is scattershot and not well understood. Teachers and principals aren’t well trained in child development, and aren’t supported to build real partnerships across age spans. In too many communities TK-12 and early childhood leaders work in separate silos, which makes the system harder to navigate for children and families.

As the state contemplates its post-pandemic policy landscape in both K-12 and early learning, there is tremendous opportunity to do better. State and local leaders can come together to identify best practices in family and community engagement, which can then inform state-level supports. California’s education accountability system can take better account of the years before federally-mandated tests begin in third grade. New approaches to early childhood funding can support better coherence and higher quality – and indeed, the state’s new Master Plan for Early Learning and Care lays out a plan to do exactly that. Leading districts can work with the state to define improved assessment practices, and the state can continue its efforts to improve the capacity of teachers and instructional leaders. By generating better information and using it more effectively, the state and its districts can accelerate the process of improving the relationship between K-12 and early learning.

The disconnects between the early years and TK-12 have taken decades to emerge and can’t be fixed overnight. But better policy can support a new mindset and improved practices. Improving the experience of children and families in those years will require fresh thinking about California’s TK-12 policies, and the way the state distributes resources. Accordingly, the state should:

- Align system incentives, supports, and accountability to incentivize a focus on high quality, coherent educational experiences across early education and the early elementary years, so that success in these years will set children up for success throughout the rest of their educational experiences
- Work collaboratively to develop a framework for community partnerships
- Engage partners — including schools, child care-providers, and families — to identify best practices in family engagement, and develop supports for districts and communities

- Define best practices for English Learners — and then provide continuous supports to early childhood providers and districts to implement these practices
- Consider incorporating goals related to early childhood and the early elementary grades into the LCAP template
- Disaggregate TK-2 chronic absenteeism and suspension rate data on the School Dashboard
- Develop a template of local early childhood indicators for districts
- Provide all 3- and 4-year-olds with a high-quality preschool experience
- Work toward a coherent approach to early childhood governance at the state level
- Build the capacity needed to use data effectively at the state level
- Lead the development of a framework for assessment use — preschool through second grade
- Strengthen teacher preparation programs, including consideration of new credentials focused on the early years
- Consider requiring early childhood content for superintendent and principal credentialing
- Build the capacity of professional development systems to improve practice in the early childhood and early elementary years

Many of these recommendations build on the proposals in the Master Plan — taking the policy trajectory it articulates and applying its ideas to a broader context that includes K-12 schools.

While state leadership is needed, there are important actions that can already be taken at the local level. School districts should:

- Consider children’s educational experiences from birth to second grade as a critical factor for their long-term success, with the understanding that it’s better to start out ahead than to have to catch up from third grade onward
- Consider the potential benefits of partnerships with non-school early learning and care providers, and seek to establish them where they would be helpful
- Evaluate practices in family engagement, and identify areas where collaboration with early-childhood providers might be beneficial to families
- Identify existing approaches to serving Dual Language Learners and English Learners and improve communication with early childhood providers to develop shared practices that support warm handoffs for families and coherence for children
- Include early childhood as part of their LCAP process, engaging early childhood stakeholders and then addressing early childhood in their plans
- Experiment with early childhood-focused dashboard indicators to track progress in early childhood and the early elementary grades
- Review existing practices for assessing the learning and development of young children to identify areas for improvement, including in the use of results

I. STRONG START

A Strong Start in the Early Years
is Necessary for Success



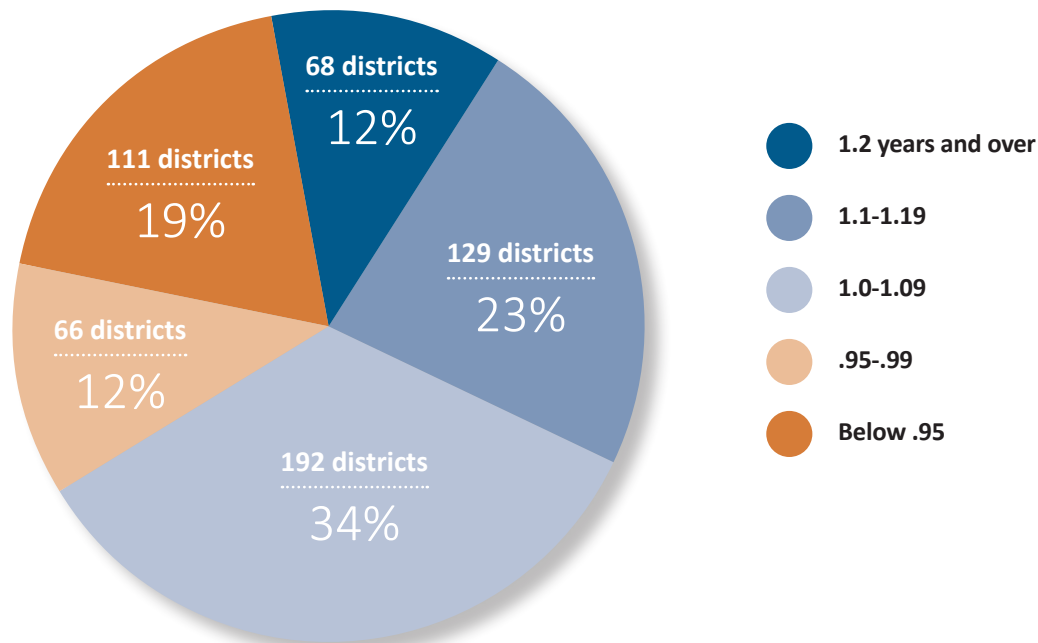
On California’s last statewide report card 44.1% of high school students were considered “Prepared” for college or career.⁸ The 2018 *Getting Down to Facts II* report showed that, on average, non-affluent students in California are almost a year behind their non-affluent peers in other states.⁹ These numbers should create a sense of urgency to do better.

But in considering strategies for improving the state’s performance, it is important to emphasize that the state’s TK-12 schools are already doing slightly better than the national average at helping students progress appropriately from third grade to the end of high school.¹⁰ The real issue is that some students are already quite far behind when they enter third grade. While California has wisely emphasized the fact that improving test scores is not the goal of the education system, the test result data does reinforce the idea that raising third grade performance may be the key to meaningful improvement in the system’s overall outcomes.¹¹

A. Most California Districts Help Students Progress at a Rate Better than the National Average

It should be reasonable to expect that in a year’s worth of schooling, children will, on average, experience a full year of growth.¹² In most California districts, that has been the case. In 389 of California’s 566 districts for which data is available (68.7%), students average at least one full year of growth during each year between grades 3 and 8. In another 66 districts (11.7%), students are showing .95 to .99 years of growth in a year, meaning that they are falling behind only slightly.¹³ In 111 districts (19.6%), students are showing less than .95 years of growth in a year.¹⁴ The chart below summarizes this data¹⁵:

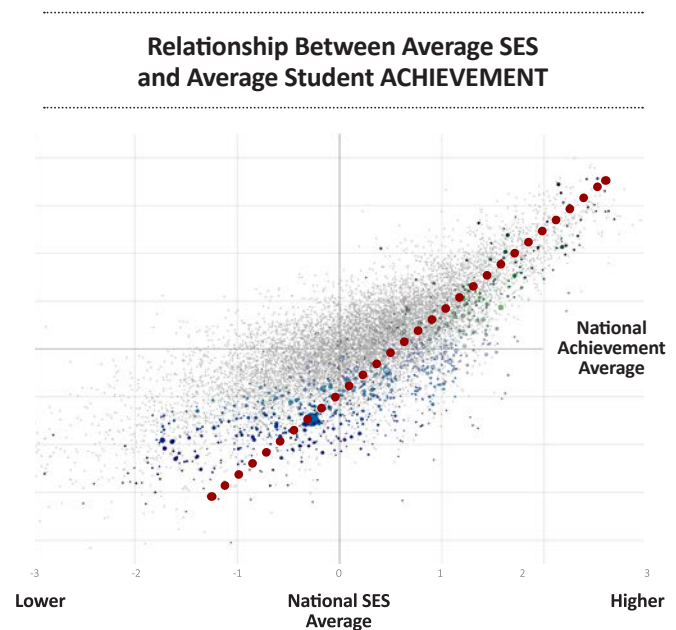
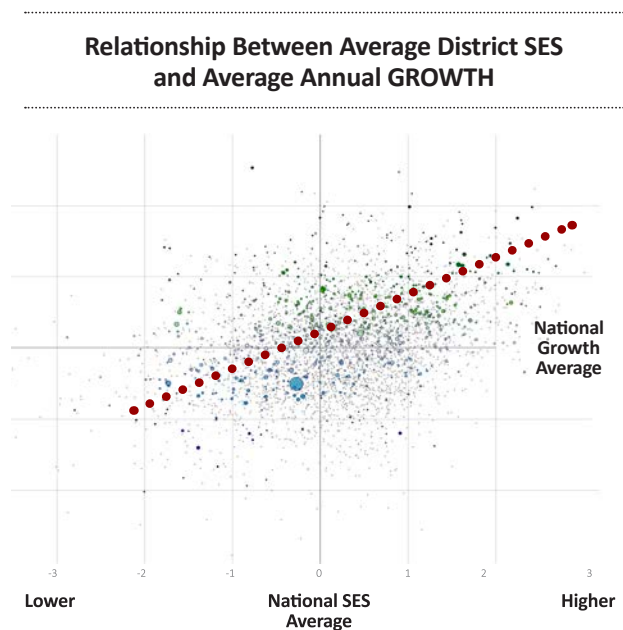
Student Assessment Annual Growth by District



So in most districts, a child who has been on track for college/career readiness at the end of third grade has had a good chance to remain on track through the end of high school. In California, the median level of annual growth for all students by district is 1.05, which means that in the years between third and eighth grade a typical California child actually makes 0.25 more years of academic progress than a typical student nationwide.¹⁶ For the most part, students across all racial groups meet or exceed national growth norms between third and eighth grade; the most notable exceptions are students who are in the bottom quartile of districtwide growth distributions. Among these students, only those who are enrolled in the wealthiest districts in the state achieve annual growth rates of 1.00 or higher.¹⁷ At this time it is too early to say how COVID-19 might affect growth rates going forward.

A complicating factor in using district-level data, of course, is that districts vary substantially in size. The state’s largest district by far is Los Angeles Unified, which ranks 505th of 566 districts in student growth. Average growth in Los Angeles Unified is 0.9 years of growth per year. Collectively, however, most large districts perform at a level similar to California districts as a whole. The weighted average of the 20 largest unified districts in the state for which data are available is 1.05, right in line with the statewide median.¹⁸

Importantly, the relationship between student growth rates and socioeconomic status has been substantially weaker than the relationship between socioeconomic status and student achievement levels. This suggests that the instructional effectiveness of schools and districts is more likely to be reflected in growth scores than in achievement scores.¹⁹ The charts below illustrate the point²⁰:



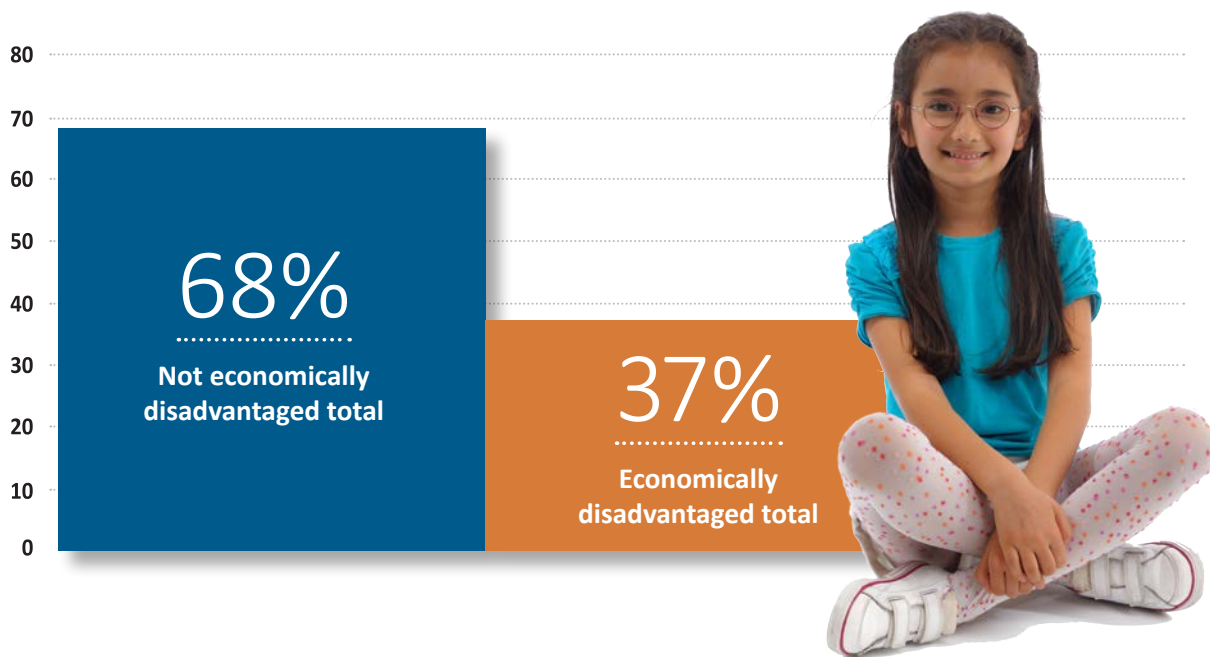
The chart on the left shows the relationship between socioeconomic status (horizontal axis) and annual growth rates (vertical axis). The chart on the right shows the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Blue and green circles represent California school districts; gray circles in the background represent all school districts nationwide. The chart on the left does show some relationship between the average socioeconomic status of a district’s population and the levels of growth a district produces (as indicated by the dotted line). But it also shows that there are many districts serving children from lower-income families that do a good job of providing a year or more of education every year. The steeper trendline in the chart on the right, meanwhile, shows that the relationship between SES and student achievement in California is much stronger than the relationship between socio-economic status and student growth. In addition, only a handful of California districts serving children from low-income households have average achievement levels that are at or above the national average.

The key take-away from these data are that, between 3rd grade and 8th grade, California’s education system has produced results that show students making steady progress. It is good news, of course, that California students are showing growth at a slightly faster rate than the national average. But for most students, that is not nearly enough to compensate for what is happening during the first eight years of their lives.

B. Too Many California Children are Starting Out Behind — and the Equity Implications are Significant

In 2018-19 in California, only 48.5% of third graders statewide met or exceeded state standards in English Language Arts, and 50.2% met or exceeded state standards in math.²¹ And because race and income are both strongly correlated with achievement, disproportionate numbers of students who did not meet state standards were low-income and/or students of color. The table below shows the percentage of California children who met state proficiency standards in English Language Arts based on income.²²

Percentage of California Third Graders Demonstrating Proficiency in ELA

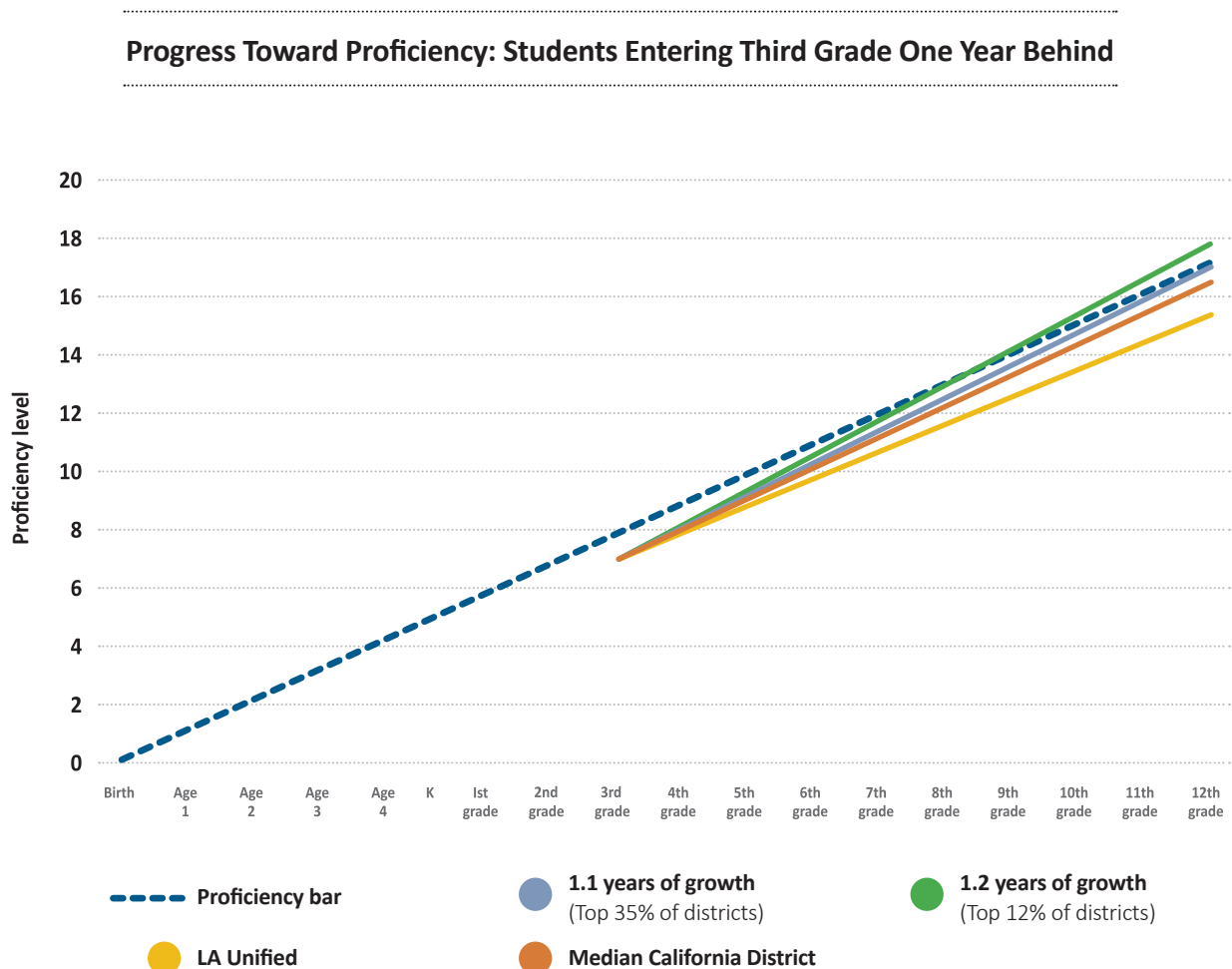


There are also substantial disparities by race. Among Economically Disadvantaged students proficiency rates for Hispanic or Latino students were 34%, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students were 33%, American Indian or Alaska Native students were 29%, and Black or African American students were 26%.²³ Importantly, these differences should not be attributed to schools and teachers, early childhood providers, or the children themselves; they should be attributed to a systemic failure to provide adequate support for children, families, and the professionals who serve them in the early years.

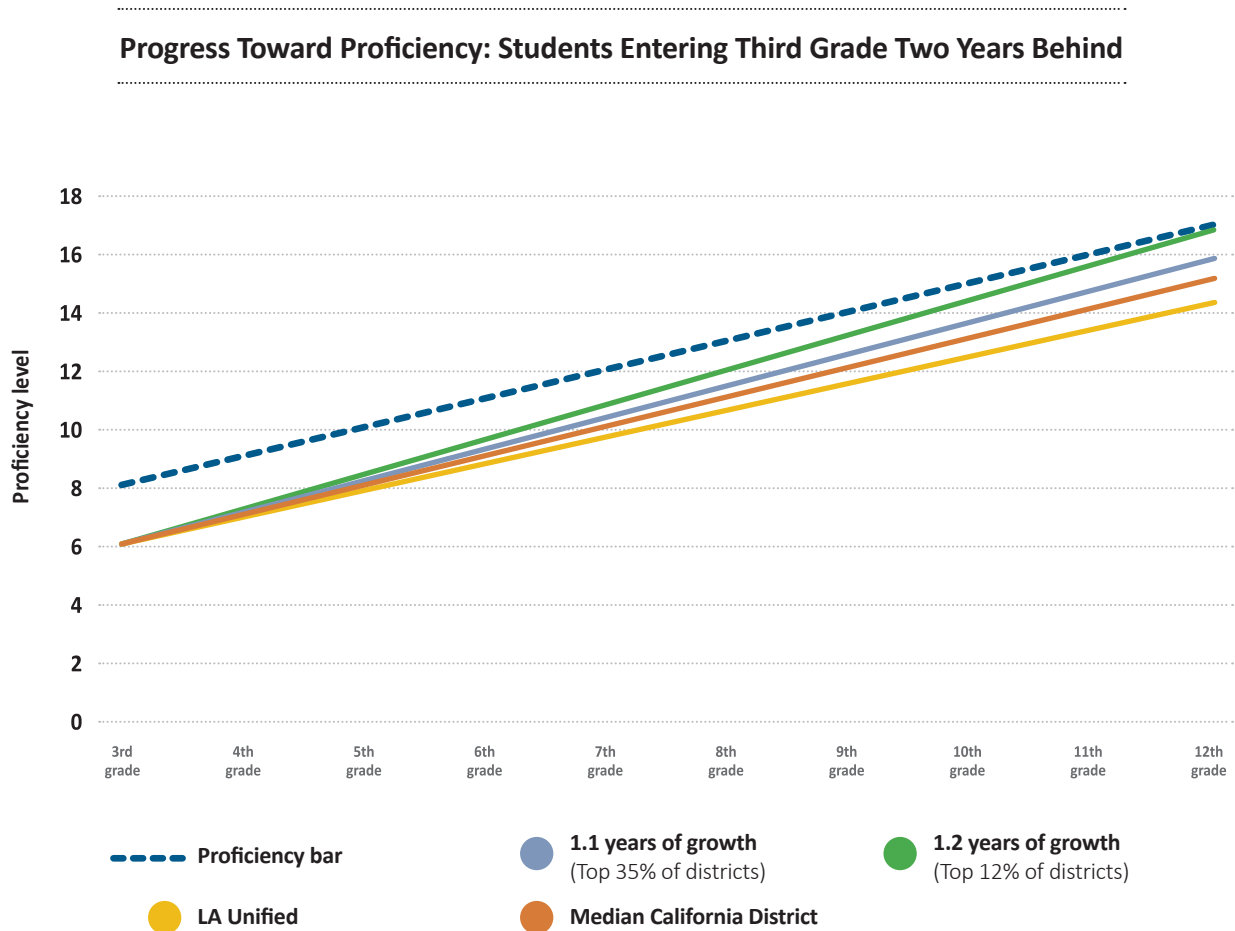
Similarly, assessment data shows that third graders who are fluent in English do much better than children who are English Learners. This is a definitional issue; a child designated as an English Learner is not expected to achieve scores of proficient on an English Language Arts assessment. One key goal for these children should be to ensure that they get the instruction and supports they need to achieve English language proficiency as quickly as possible.²⁴

C. Starting Out Behind Poses a Major Challenge

Pre-pandemic California school districts largely did a solid job of helping kids to progress appropriately after third grade. Currently, however, the odds are long that schools and districts will be able to make up lost ground with students who leave third grade a year or more behind — even assuming that schools can quickly recapture pre-pandemic growth levels. The chart below shows the impact that different rates of annual growth have on children who finish third grade one year short of proficiency.



This chart shows that if a cohort of children is a year behind at the beginning of third grade, the most highly effective districts in the state — those with average annual growth of 1.2 years or higher; the top 12% of districts, represented by the green line — will have the cohort caught up by roughly the end of middle school. In the top 35% of districts — those with average annual growth of 1.1 years or higher; the top 35% of districts, represented by the light blue line — the cohort will catch up by the end of high school. But in most other districts, a one-year gap at the beginning of third grade is too much to overcome in the ten remaining years of schooling.²⁵ If a cohort is two years behind, the chart below illustrates that the picture is bleaker still.



For a cohort that is two years behind entering fourth grade, even California’s highest-growth districts will not succeed in catching students up by the end of high school. In all other districts the gap will remain substantial.

These data show that California districts are, on the whole, doing a creditable job of growing student learning from the level students have achieved at the end of third grade. But without growth at scale that dramatically exceeds that of the state’s highest-growth districts, they cannot close gaps of a year or more that develop prior to third grade. Even if every single district in California achieved annual learning rates that are now only realized by the highest-performing 35% of districts, a proficiency gap of more than a year entering third grade would be too much to overcome by the end of high school.

These graphs are not just hypotheticals. In 2011, only 35% of California districts had average third grade achievement that was not one or more years short of proficiency; more than 25% of California districts had average third grade achievement that was two or more years short of proficiency.²⁶ The good news is that statewide gains between 2011 and 2019 were noteworthy. But for most districts, there was no realistic level of post-third-grade growth that could have gotten their students to achieve desired proficiency levels by the end of high school.



The trend lines shown in these charts are, of course, something of an oversimplification. Progress is rarely if ever linear over the course of 10 years. But the story the charts tell is not yet widely understood, much less reflected in state and federal policy.²⁷

If children in California enter third grade on track to achieve college/career readiness at the end of high school, the median K-12 district is well positioned to maintain that level of proficiency through high school graduation.²⁸

But the enormous gaps that already exist by the end of third grade are simply too large for most K-12 districts to close. While this has long been the case, the fact that it is “normal” should not mean that it is acceptable.²⁹ Early childhood education alone is not enough to address this issue; there are many structural disparities in health, parental employment, and other areas that impact student outcomes.³⁰ What the data tells us, though, is that California’s approach to

improving high school outcomes must include a great deal more focus on the first eight years of life. One key aspect of that work is strengthening the ties between the TK-12 system and the early learning and care system.



II. IMPACT

Policies Impacting the Relationship Between TK-12 and Early Learning

In considering California’s policies, it is important to think about the state’s impact as a “choice architect” framing important decisions for school districts.³¹ California has sought in the last decade to give school districts more control over their destiny, and there are many good reasons for this policy approach. But the state still influences district decisions in important ways, through both its actions and inactions.

In the last few decades California has made real progress in how it supports children in the birth to eight years. Some of the policy and cultural challenges facing the state are vestiges of an era when the importance of the early years was not as well understood. As the state continues its journey toward a more aligned system, there are several policy areas it can address that are likely to lead to an improved connection between TK-12 and early learning. These include accountability, funding, assessment, and teacher preparation and training.

A. California’s Accountability Systems Focus on Third Grade and Later

Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), California is required to measure the performance of TK-12 districts and schools. In response to this requirement California created a school dashboard³² that measures performance on a range of indicators. Moreover, California school districts are required to complete Local Control Accountability Plans that “set goals, plan actions, and leverage resources to meet those goals to improve student outcomes.”

These two accountability systems reflect the primary methods by which California monitors and shapes how school districts are doing. Both are the products of intensive stakeholder discussions, and are calibrated to reflect the best thinking of leaders from around California’s TK-12 sector. But neither of them say anything specific about what’s happening with children prior to third grade.

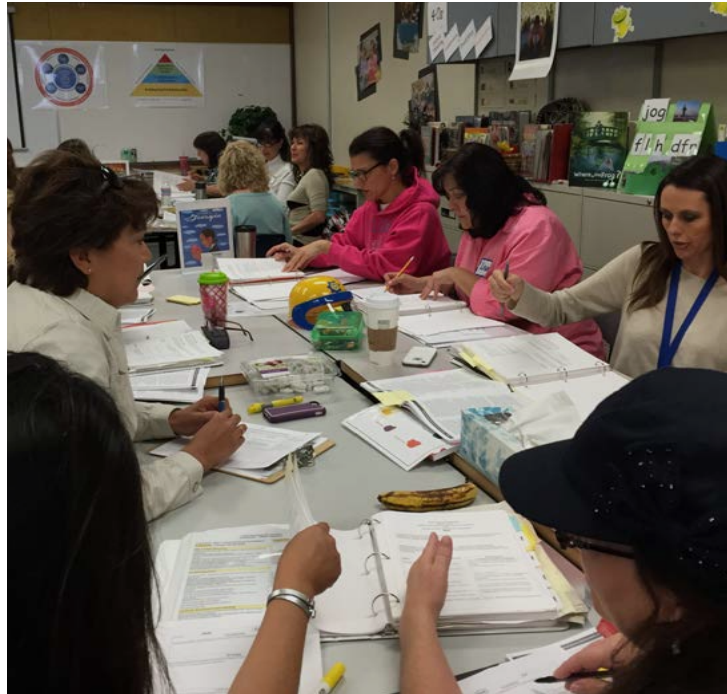
1. The Local Control Accountability Plan

In the last 50 years two defining events have shaped how California funds schools. One was the 1978 adoption of Proposition 13, which placed strict limits on taxation in California — including local property taxes.³³ Prop 13 ended up shifting responsibility for school funding to the state, which reduced the overall level of school funding³⁴ and led to meaningful inequities among school districts.³⁵ In 2013, California made a significant effort to devolve funding back to the local level through the adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).³⁶ The LCFF was meant to consolidate the state’s numerous “categorical” funding streams, giving local districts more discretion over how to use their TK-12 funds.³⁷ It also requires districts to complete a three-year Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which describes districts’ goals for the year and how they plan to achieve those goals.³⁸

The state has developed a template for districts to complete their LCAP plans, which represents the state’s viewpoint on the issues districts must address in order to be held publicly accountable.³⁹ Districts do have flexibility in the process, and can address issues not specified by the state if they so choose — including early childhood supports. Moreover, districts are required to have a parent advisory committee and to consult with students as part of the LCAP process;⁴⁰ in districts where more than 15% of students (at least 50) are English Learners, there must be a dedicated parent advisory committee to address their needs in the LCAP process.⁴¹

The LCAP process does not require districts to engage on the subject of early learning, or even to provide specific narrative about the TK-2 years — which are paid for by LCFF funds. There are certainly some districts that include TK-2 or early learning in their plan,⁴² and LCFF funds can in fact be used for early learning.⁴³ But many informants noted that a lot of districts have plans that say nothing about what goes on before third grade. A recent survey of 58 districts participating in the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) found that only eight were using LCFF funds on early childhood.⁴⁴

Informants largely agreed that the LCAP process was an underutilized opportunity to address the connection between TK-12 and early learning. Exactly how that problem should get fixed is deeply intertwined with larger questions about the struggles of the LCAP process, which multiple informants described as way too much work and far too compliance oriented. Concerns were raised that adding early childhood questions to the state template would only lead to compliance-focused answers that do not lead to behavior change. While the state should address this issue as part of its larger strategy for LCAP, an overall movement toward streamlining the LCAP process might be a difficult context in which to advocate for additional requirements.



Still, the fact that the state is requiring districts to analyze their performance with no reference whatsoever to the critical early learning years is a meaningful problem. There are many districts whose disappointing outcomes in high school are really the product of a cohort that entered kindergarten behind and simply never caught up — even if the district was doing a good job. The LCAP's focus on the later years may inhibit districts from truly addressing the root causes of low performance. This issue is likely to be particularly problematic in those communities where children are likely to enter kindergarten behind — which are in turn likely to be the districts with the most limited resources. And regardless of what is in the template, statewide and community-level early childhood leaders should look for opportunities to support districts willing to have important conversations about how early childhood fits into their overall strategy.

2. California's Accountability Dashboard

In the national K-12 literature there is broad acknowledgment that having an accountability regime focused on reading and math assessments in third through 8th grade has narrowed the curriculum.⁴⁵ For K-12 advocates the focus has been on how reading and math are crowding out social studies, science, the arts, foreign languages, and other subjects. But there's another dimension to that narrowing: a narrowing of focus not just on the *content* (reading and math) but on the *time span* (3rd-8th grade).

Under ESSA, elementary school accountability must be based on a combination of assessment results and other factors. California's accountability and continuous improvement system⁴⁶ is based on 10 priorities identified in the LCFF.⁴⁷ Two of these 10 priorities apply only to County Offices of Education.

California distinguishes between state indicators and local indicators.⁴⁸ State indicators apply to all districts and schools, and are based on data collected statewide. By contrast local indicators are collected locally, and not included in the state’s accountability formula. For four of the eight priority areas that apply to local schools, the only indicators are local:

- **Priority 1: Basic Services and Conditions at Schools**
- **Priority 2: Implementation of State Academic Standards**
- **Priority 3: Parent Engagement**
- **Priority 7: Access to a Broad Course of Study**

The dashboard does include statewide indicators reflecting four priorities:

- **Priority 4: Student Achievement**
- **Priority 5: Student Engagement**
- **Priority 6: School Climate**
- **Priority 8: Outcomes in a Broad Course of Study**



Priority 8 applies only to high schools, meaning that for elementary schools the dashboard reflects three priorities: student achievement, student engagement, and school climate. For student achievement the dashboard tracks academic performance in grades 3-8, and English Learner progress (where applicable); for student engagement, it tracks chronic absenteeism;⁴⁹ and for school climate the dashboard tracks suspension rate. Each indicator can be broken down to reflect performance of different subgroups, including socioeconomically disadvantaged students and students of different races.⁵⁰

California’s use of the dashboard represents a distinctive approach to reporting accountability results — one that has been better received by parents⁵¹ than by some education policy wonks.⁵² The dashboard includes information on multiple areas of school performance, going beyond the historical emphasis accountability systems have placed on standardized test scores. The dashboard does still include substantial information about standardized test scores, which are a required part of the state’s federal accountability plan.⁵³

Excessive pressure to increase test scores influences district leaders to focus on the tested years of third grade and up, and many district leaders do not feel like they have the bandwidth to implement long-term strategies. Multiple informants noted that the pressure on school districts to raise test scores is ever-present regardless of how the state chooses to contextualize the data on the dashboard. The problem of focusing too heavily on short-term quantitative measures at the expense of longer-term qualitative ones is not unique to schools, but it can be a powerful force in the education context.⁵⁴ The K-2 years (and the years before them) do not have any standardized tests that factor into the state’s accountability calculations, which means they are not likely to be the focus of attention within the world of K-12.

B. How the State Funds Early Childhood Education

Since 1965 California has funded preschool programs, under a program currently known as the California State Preschool Program (CSPP).⁵⁵ CSPP was created in 2008 by consolidating several previous programs, and serves both 3- and 4-year-old children. Funding is awarded to school districts and private providers through a competitive application process. CSPP currently serves 17% of the state's 4-year-olds and 12% of its 3-year-olds. Eligibility is restricted to families who demonstrate need based on income, housing status, or involvement (or risk of involvement) with child protective services. Economically integrated early childhood services have been shown to have a positive effect on children,⁵⁶ and one criticism of CSPP has been that it segregates children from lower-income families.⁵⁷



While CSPP is very similar to preschool programs available in other states, California has a much more distinctive program that also serves 4-year-olds: Transitional Kindergarten (TK). TK was first implemented in 2012-13, as part of a 2010 law that moved California's kindergarten eligibility date from December 2 to September 1. TK now serves children who turn 5 between September 2 and December 2, with children who turn 5 after December 2, with children who turn 5 after December 2, eligible to participate at district discretion. TK is largely designed to follow the requirements for kindergarten classes, and currently serves 21%

of the state's 4-year-olds.⁵⁸ Research has shown that TK has positive impacts on academic skills and engagement at kindergarten entry, and for English Learners has improved language, literacy, and math skills.⁵⁹

While preschool and TK are key building blocks of the California early childhood system, they are not the only ones. Head Start serves 7% of the state's 4-year-olds and 3-year-olds.⁶⁰ Many hundreds of thousands more are served by subsidized child care.⁶¹ The eligibility requirements for CSPP, Head Start, and subsidized child care are all somewhat different, but all of them are largely restricted to families whose economic resources fall below certain thresholds. TK is the largest early learning and care program without income restrictions, although it is only available to children born in certain months.

All of these services and experiences influence children before they enter kindergarten — and represent potential opportunities for school districts.

1. Local Investment

In many districts, state funding is all there is for early childhood – the district itself does not contribute any discretionary funds. A variety of reasons for this were raised by multiple informants:

- **Since Prop 13 California school districts have been in a constant struggle to provide what those districts consider adequate funding.** California’s per-pupil spending is below the national average,⁶² despite the state’s high cost of living.⁶³ This puts teachers in a squeeze, and means that whenever districts have access to funding increases there will be significant pressure to pay staff more.
- **Preschool is optional.** The compulsory school age in California is six.⁶⁴ So in the competition for district funds, preschool is at a disadvantage when competing with anything that the district is required to do. As one informant put it, some districts see early childhood as an expensive distraction from the district’s core mission. The fact that preschool has its own dedicated funding stream may discourage districts from adding discretionary funds to support it, especially considering that CSPP is not seen as providing adequate funding to run a high-quality program.⁶⁵
- **District superintendents are not really in a position to make long-term investments.** On average superintendents last about five years in a district, with the average slightly lower in districts serving lower-income populations.⁶⁶ But the children who are 4-years-old in the first year of a superintendent’s tenure won’t take any accountability tests until that superintendent’s fifth year.
- **In high-mobility districts, a significant percentage of preschool-aged children may have moved to another district by the time they reach third grade.**⁶⁷ Many of these children will still be in California, but from the district’s standpoint there will be no long-term payoff for the early investment.
- **Board members may be able to take a longer view than superintendents, but some informants noted that early childhood is likely not a major constituency for them.** School board elections generally do not have high turnout to begin with, and some informants explained that parents with children under the age of five – particularly low-income parents – may not be seen as a vote-rich target audience.

It is important to emphasize that districts can play an important and constructive role in local early childhood communities even if they don’t invest any of their own money in early childhood; that issue is discussed below. But given the number of children in California who are not receiving any early childhood services, it would certainly make a difference if more school districts were investing discretionary funds in the early years. This includes flexible federal Title I dollars.

Some districts do that already, for a variety of reasons. Early childhood can be a way to build relationships with parents early, and encourage them to remain in the community and enroll in district schools. This may be a particular valuable selling point in geographic areas where parents have multiple options for schooling. In some cases districts have recognized that early investment can reduce long-term costs, particularly special education costs; the research of Dr. James Heckman was cited as influential on this score.⁶⁸ One informant noted that if districts get an influx of new money for any reason it may be easier to fight for those new dollars than to claw away dollars that in previous years went to some other purpose. Once the funds have been invested in early childhood, they may stay there in future years.

2. Making Sense of CSPP and TK

Regardless of whether or not districts put their own money into early childhood, they play an important role in overseeing state funds to deliver early childhood services. Informants related that TK is very popular with school districts, but that it has reached an unusual equilibrium: it has been hard to cut, but also hard to expand. So although it doesn't make a ton of sense to have a program service 20ish percent of the population based solely on birthdate — which, one informant pointed out, is a substantial equity issue — it is hard to make forward progress toward some better solution.

The informant interviews took place before the release of the Master Plan, which proposes to phase in a Universal Preschool that builds on TK — and that creates a unified state preschool program by combining CSPP and TK.⁶⁹ This approach is consistent with the recommendations of multiple informants that the state might not actually need both CSPP and TK. Informants did raise some issues that will have to be addressed in an expansion to universal preschool, particularly if much of it is school-based:

- **It is a potentially significant threat to child care providers.** In child care settings the state-mandated adult/child ratios demand closer supervision of younger children, making it more expensive to serve infants and toddlers. Because the margins are better on serving 4-year-olds, providers need to have 4-year-olds in their customer base or they may be unable to stay in business. While the Master Plan calls for universal preschool to be delivered in part through community settings, any reduction to the number of children using private child care as 4-year-olds could lead to a major loss of child care capacity — especially given the precarious current state of California's child care system.⁷⁰

There is actually a solution to this issue, which is to subsidize infant-toddler child care at something closer to its true cost.⁷¹ Indeed, the Master Plan specifically acknowledges the importance of incentivizing care for infants and toddlers.⁷² That is expensive, and the state budget is likely to be very limited in the years to come. But it may also be that if the state is really committed to universal preschool, the state's child care infrastructure could be built back in a manner that reflects the need to provide higher reimbursements for infant and toddler child care. The pandemic has exposed just how untenable child care's status quo actually was, and surfaced the need to do more to help early childhood professionals.⁷³

- **There is real concern that school-based programs for 4-year-olds will not be developmentally appropriate, given the limited knowledge of child development among school district superintendents, principals, and even early grade and early childhood teachers.** Multiple informants emphasized that if TK is going to be the basis for universal preschool, there needs to be a real strategy for ensuring that teachers are well grounded in child development — and that teacher-child ratios are appropriate for classrooms of 4-year-olds.

- **In some communities there is already tension between school-based preschool and Head Start providers, and this could exacerbate those tensions.** Head Start is a program funded by the federal government, which provides money directly to local grantees — bypassing the state entirely. Head Start providers are expected to maintain baseline enrollment levels, or they must return their funds. It is to the state’s fiscal advantage to have children served by Head Start programs where possible, so it would need a strategy for preserving Head Start capacity during an expansion of preschool. This is absolutely possible. For example, in Georgia, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin — three states with large state-funded preschool programs for 4-year-olds⁷⁴ — Head Start serves more 3-year-olds than 4-year-olds.⁷⁵ The federal government also allows the conversion of Head Start slots to Early Head Start where providers are able to do so.⁷⁶

These issues are not insurmountable — and indeed, regardless of whether or not TK becomes the base of a universal preschool program, the state would be better off addressing them.



Even with their substantially diverging requirements, it’s not impossible to run a combined program utilizing CSPP and TK. San Diego is doing that, with a plan that places CSPP students and TK students together in the same classrooms. Stephanie Ceminsky of San Diego Unified School District worked with the district’s human resources department to place CSPP teachers as co-teachers in TK classrooms, in an attempt to leverage the strength of both programs. But that is the exception rather than the rule, and most districts are not combining CSPP with TK.⁷⁷ Lessons learned from examples like San Diego’s could be very helpful in the development of a universal preschool program.

C. Kindergarten Readiness Assessment in California

Assessments in the years before third grade are formative, and can be used by teachers and leaders to identify children’s knowledge and skills — knowledge that can then be used to inform teaching and learning.⁷⁸ For that to work requires teachers to have the capacity to both administer assessments, analyze the results, and figure out how to use the results to guide their instruction.⁷⁹ Informants say that in many districts and preschool programs that capacity has not been built. The upshot is that many districts do not really know how children are doing in those early years, and there is certainly no larger statewide sense of how young children are progressing.

While some states have a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment administered by kindergarten teachers, California does not. California does have a statewide preschool assessment administered in the CSPP — the Desired Results Developmental Profile, or DRDP.⁸⁰ Informants generally believed that the DRDP addresses the right issues, but it is widely believed to be too cumbersome and concerns have been raised about its validity.⁸¹ Preschool teachers have a difficult time administering it, and then do not have adequate training in how to use the results. Moreover, many informants reported that in their district kindergarten teachers don’t even look at the DRDP results, meaning that they have no long-term impact on support for children.

At the kindergarten level there are in fact many districts conducting assessment, but there is no consistency among those assessments.⁸² This reflects varying opinions on what kindergarten readiness actually means, along with different ideas about assessment. Where assessments are being used, there may not be any connection between the preschool assessments and those that come in later years. And multiple informants indicated real concern about how much K-12 leaders actually know about early-grades assessment, raising the potential that assessment practices will not actually be supporting better teaching and learning. This may be particularly problematic for children who are English Learners, as English-based assessment tools and practices may lead to inappropriate conclusions about their development.

A significant problem underlying early years assessment is a sense that the content being taught in the early years is not aligned across preschool and the elementary grades. A recent report found that two-third of districts are working to align curriculum, standards, assessment, or professional development from preschool through third grade.⁸³ But most districts engaged in the work were doing so in only one of those areas, and generally supported by grant funding.⁸⁴ So in many districts the underlying content and teaching practices are not aligned, making it harder to build a coherent approach to assessment.



Of course, even when content and teaching practices are aligned it is not easy to develop a coherent assessment program. The obstacles include:

- **Districts have not always provided a compelling rationale for why it is important to use assessments to understand the growth and development of children in the preschool through third grade years. Indeed, district leaders may not actually understand why those assessments are in fact potentially valuable.**
 - o Some informants noted that there is meaningful opposition to the very act of assessing young children. Reasons for the opposition can include a belief that assessments are not developmentally appropriate, or in some cases a lack of desire to have more information about what really happens in the early years.
- **Once a decision has been made to build an assessment program, it takes time to get the work going.**
 - o Districts may be overwhelmed at the number of assessment tools available, or unsure of what they really mean. In part because of the perceived burden of assessments, informants relayed that some districts use lighter-touch “screeners” that provide some basic information on reading and/or math development, but nothing more. Proper assessment in the early years takes account of a child’s social and emotional development.⁸⁵

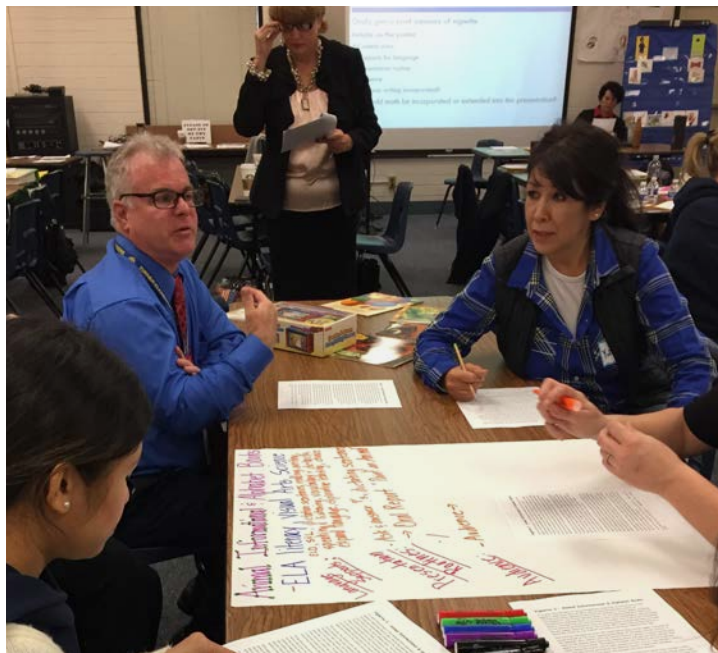
- o The challenges of developing aligned assessments from preschool through third grade are exacerbated by the fact that there are substantial disconnects in content and instruction between preschool and the early grades.⁸⁶
 - o Concerns about developmentally appropriate practice are important; while many early childhood leaders believe strongly that early-years assessment can be done in a developmentally appropriate manner,⁸⁷ the risk of developmentally inappropriate practice is real. Informants noted that this problem may be exacerbated in districts that have staffed the early grades with teachers who have been moved down from higher grades, who may not understand key differences between assessing young children and older children.
 - o It may take a few years before teachers really master administering the assessment – and using its results. Accordingly, in the first few years of implementation the cost/benefit analysis from a teacher perspective may legitimately be unfavorable. It is important to provide teachers with supports throughout this process, which many districts struggle to do.
 - o Another important concern is that the results of assessments may be misused. For example, KRA results should not be used to hold children out of kindergarten, or to evaluate the quality of preschools that children attended.⁸⁸ The primary goal of assessment should be to improve instruction.
- One informant noted that in some districts kindergarten readiness assessment results only prompt one of the two conversations that the results should inspire. Districts may gravitate toward using the results to plan how they will catch children up, rather than using them to spark a conversation about how they might increase kindergarten readiness.
 - Kindergarten readiness assessments may not be designed to properly capture information about children whose native language is not English.⁸⁹ While this is a national problem it is particularly important in California, where 60% of children under the age of 6 have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English at home.⁹⁰ Successful assessment of Dual Language Learners and English Learners requires not only appropriate tools but also specific training for teachers conducting the assessments.

In many districts these obstacles have yet to be surmounted. So the bottom line is that the TK-3 years are a black box when it comes to understanding how children are actually doing at the state level, and in too many districts — making it hard to understand what would help children to do better.

D. Higher Education and Teacher Preparation

Informants were generally discouraged by the current state of educator preparation and professional development. The problems run through multiple levels of the system.

A key driver of these problems is low pay for teachers. The salaries for childcare and preschool teachers in California is quite low.⁹¹



Occupation	Median Wage (hourly)
Child care worker	\$12.29
Preschool teacher	\$16.19
Center director	\$23.91
Kindergarten teacher	\$38.33
Elementary teacher	\$45.17

In child care and CSPP,⁹² teachers are not required to have bachelor's degrees — whereas they are in school district classrooms, including TK and kindergarten. In CSPP the state's level of reimbursement is low — so that if districts wanted to pay competitive salaries in order to attract more qualified teachers, they would have to put in their own money to do so. This is an uncommon use of

funds, given that CSPP is optional and not always well respected. Indeed, many informants related that when CSPP teachers do get bachelor's degrees, they then leave to become TK or early elementary teachers. The pay and qualification differences between TK-12 and early childhood can also contribute to a sense of hierarchy between the two.

The low pay for early childhood teachers influences higher education, which informants said has not prioritized preparing leaders and teachers who understand early childhood development. California's teacher training requirements in early education are low, and are uneven across programs.⁹³ Multiple informants shared a view that higher education simply does not understand early childhood, pointing to a lack of early childhood content in teacher and principal preparation programs (including a lack of supervised field experiences). One informant explained that coursework does not teach candidates skills they need — including instructional strategies, assessment, and data use. Another informant specifically emphasized that the preparation requirements for teachers relating to English Learners were inadequate, stating “That’s how institutional racism is perpetuated.”

In addition to the challenges noted in training early childhood professionals, informants expressed dissatisfaction with the training of TK-12 professionals. With regard to teachers, some informants expressed frustration with the fact that California's credentials are broad in their applicability.⁹⁴ This means that teachers whose primary training and experience is with older children — as old as middle school — can be moved into TK-2 classrooms, whether or not they know anything about early childhood development (and in many instances they do not).

Moreover, many informants were unhappy that principals and superintendents can obtain credentials without taking any coursework in early childhood. While some principals or superintendents have been trying to learn more about early childhood development, informants were frustrated that the system allows for the possibility that principals and superintendents can end up in positions of authority over early childhood development without having any grounding in its best practices.



Part of the challenge here is institutional. Because so many early childhood programs do not require bachelor's degrees, much of the preparation of the early childhood workforce takes place in community colleges. Thus, four-year institutions may simply not have the institutional structures or pathways to train teachers and principals on early childhood development. As long as California continues to have lower expectations for early childhood professionals and pay them lower wages, that is likely to remain the case.

With regard to professional development, informants see the system as uneven. Multiple

informants said that there were some successful approaches to professional development, with some County Offices of Education playing leadership roles. Other informants thought that professional development in their area is weak. Leadership from county offices was seen as a key variable on this issue, with some county offices offering robust opportunities and others largely ignoring early childhood.

A more universal problem is that the funding of CSPP may limit the ability of teachers to participate in professional development. The best professional development involves collaborative learning where information about children is shared and plans are developed to help support children. In CSPP and child care that kind of professional development often feels entirely out of reach. The programs simply don't provide adequate funding to allow the time for that kind of work; moreover, professionals haven't been trained in how to lead or participate in the kind of embedded professional development that is most effective.⁹⁵

The state is keenly aware that it needs to do more to support professional learning. In the state's application for Preschool Development Grant-Birth through Five renewal funds, it acknowledged "significant limitations" in the current system — including the lack of a standard credential, varying requirements by program type, a lack of articulation of college courses, and uneven integration of practice-based content and peer feedback in existing professional development.⁹⁶

And important work is underway in this area. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing has developed "California Early Childhood Education Teaching and Administrator Performance Expectations,"⁹⁷ as well as the "California Early Childhood Education Program Guidelines."⁹⁸ There are some promising initiatives to improve teacher preparation, such as work to develop apprenticeship pathways and efforts at San Jose State to prepare educators to teach social and emotional learning.⁹⁹ Through the PDG-B5 renewal grant the state is supporting the development of a competency-based performance assessment system for educators, among other projects.

III. PLAYING IT OUT

How the Differences Between K-12 and Early Childhood Play Out at the Local Level



State policy is one important influence on local behavior, but far from the only one. For a whole host of reasons early childhood and K-12 have developed different cultures. Cultures take a long time to change, but informants relayed that they are in fact changing — and mostly for the better. In addition, districts are slowly building better systems for managing early childhood. There is still important work to do to strengthen engagement with private providers and families, particularly families of English Learners. But there is real hope that more and more communities will build on the progress made by leading districts in these areas.

A. Cultural Differences Between Early Childhood and K-12

One fundamental question hanging over California’s early childhood system is whether it’s thought of as “education” or “care.” Many informants noted that there is not a consensus on this issue, with some adding that the terms should not be mutually exclusive. Although some informants talked about a shift toward an “education” frame over the last decade-plus, those who weighed in on the issue generally agreed that within the TK-12 community there are still many leaders who think of the early childhood years primarily through a “care” lens. The recent decision to shift child care oversight from the California Department of Education to the California Department of Social Services was seen as potentially reinforcing the “care” framing.

Many informants believe that content knowledge about early childhood has grown among TK-12 leaders in recent years, and that increasingly they understand the importance of early childhood development. But many informants also believe that while TK-12 leaders appreciate the importance of the early childhood years, they don’t see it as their job to do anything to improve early childhood education; they are stretched too thin as it is, and do not have the bandwidth to address early childhood — whether or not they see it as an education issue.¹⁰⁰ Some informants thought that there is widespread inattention to the TK-2 years within the TK-12 system, let alone the years that come earlier. Informants noted that superintendents and principals can be credentialed for their jobs without actually demonstrating knowledge about early childhood development — and while some superintendents and principals do have some of that content knowledge, if they are replaced by someone who does not have it then any nascent early childhood efforts are likely to lose steam.

While content knowledge of early childhood among school administrators and principals has grown, informants largely agreed that cultural differences remain. One informant described the difference as being between a “developmental culture” (early childhood) and an “accountability culture” (TK-12); many others had similar descriptions. A different informant said that early childhood fosters an asset-based culture, whereas too many TK and K teachers start from a deficit perspective — although another informant responded that neither of those statements are universally true, and that quality varies.

One informant identified a district culture of doing the best they can with whoever shows up, which leads to a lack of engagement with early childhood. Another informant did express optimism that kindergarten teachers are increasingly connecting with early childhood teachers about social and emotional development.

Multiple informants pointed out a tendency in education for each link in the chain to blame the preceding link for perceived deficiencies: higher education blames high schools, who in turn blame middle schools, who in turn blame elementary schools, who in turn blame early childhood. As one informant put it, it is natural for each teacher to think that what they are doing is most important — and made more difficult by the failure of teachers before them. Another informant noted that kindergarten teachers may not think of themselves as early educators, given their different preparation.

Importantly, the lack of understanding was identified by some informants as bi-directional. While the TK-12 world is larger and better funded — raising expectations about its capacity — some informants explained that early childhood leaders do not always understand its imperatives very well, or what’s expected in TK-12 classes. Many early childhood programs take place outside of school settings, so providers may not have a deep understanding of how schools operate. One informant explained that all teachers could benefit from a greater understanding of what happens in the years before and after them. Some informants also noted that the tendency of some TK-12 leaders to think of early childhood programs primarily as “care” rather than “education” is a tendency shared by some leaders in the early childhood community. This trend may be exacerbated by COVID-19, which has emphasized the need for children to have a safe place to be while their parents are working — and, of course, has created a crisis in child care.¹⁰¹

As leaders throughout the state seek to improve gender and racial equity, it will also be important to pay attention to how gender and racial dynamics might be influencing the disconnect between the TK-12 and early childhood sectors. The exact nuances will vary from community to community, but historical discrimination against people of color and women (often in an intersectional manner) are likely to be front of mind for numerous leaders in both TK-12 and early childhood. All participants in the work of building a shared culture will need to be sensitive to those dynamics and engage accordingly.

B. How K-12 Leaders Interact with Early Childhood Leaders

School district leaders can have exposure to early childhood leaders within their district and outside their district. In both cases there has been promising progress, and informants widely agreed that superintendents and principals have gotten better at engaging with early childhood leaders. While there is a long way to go, the trend is positive.

1. Early Childhood Within School Districts

Whether or not superintendents and principals understand best practices for early childhood development — or the early childhood provider community — they often will have an early childhood staff within the district with which they are supposed to interact. Informants largely opined that these relationships have improved in a meaningful way over the last couple of decades.

Many districts have a senior leader responsible for early childhood at the district level; several of the informants for this project work in that role. There is meaningful variation among districts in the level of empowerment of that early childhood lead, where they are situated in the org chart, whether they are integrated into district operations or stand alone, and how connected they are to the superintendent. Recent reports have showed that very few districts include the early childhood lead in the superintendent’s cabinet.¹⁰²

Some of the informants for this report who have been included in superintendents’ cabinets indicated that they had to work for some time to get there, and that they have seen the impact of being included in high-level conversations. One informant noted that TK-12 leaders are very busy, and even if they care about early learning they may not pay much attention to it — and that if the early childhood lead is not in the cabinet, districts may make important decisions without ever really considering their impact on early childhood. Another informant agreed that early childhood can be overlooked by districts but saw that as an advantage; enterprising early childhood leads may be able to simply start engaging in desired practices until somebody stops them.

The early childhood leaders who reported making headway within their districts indicated that knowledge and understanding of the TK-12 world was key to their success. In some instances that came from having worked as an elementary school principal, or in some other role that was seen as giving them important understanding of their TK-12 colleagues. In other instances it came from simply taking the time to learn the language and culture. Overall, there was a clear sense that for an early childhood lead to be effective they have to be committed to really understanding the K-12 functions of the district.

With regard to principals, numerous informants talked about a shift within some districts in how early childhood is managed at the building level. Informants explained that in some cases districts have had preschool programs in buildings that were originally not administered by the principal in that building, and that the district has sought to shift responsibility for the programs to those principals. When preschool classrooms are not accountable to principals, informants said it can increase the sense of preschool as “other,” and not part of the building’s overall educational program. Indeed, some informants gave examples of principals and early childhood site directors who were based in the same building yet had no working relationship.

Shifting accountability to the building principal is seen as a key strategy for integrating early childhood into a school’s overall approach. Moving responsibility for preschool to principals cannot be done haphazardly, informants emphasized – skill-building and development is needed for principals to be successful in the new role. Indeed, the lack of understanding principals have about early childhood development is one of the reasons they have not been assigned greater roles.¹⁰³

Informants raised concerns that principals may not be qualified to influence curriculum and practices in early childhood programs. Another concern raised is that because CSPP programs may serve children from a different attendance area than the schools they sit in, principals may be less likely to invest in the children who attend them. Special education is also an important expertise in the connection between K-12 and early learning, as some districts have preschool programs primarily or exclusively focused on children receiving services under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.



These problems are real, but they are solvable.

For example, according to informant Julie Montali, in Fresno the district developed an Early Learning Academy for principals, based on competencies articulated by the National Association for Elementary School Principals. The district used TK as a bridge to talk about what principals should be seeing in classrooms, and provided practical training for principals who had limited knowledge in supervising early childhood programs.¹⁰⁴

2. Partnerships Between Districts and Community Providers

In addition to the need to strengthen relationships within districts, there is also the opportunity to partner with community-based providers of preschool, Head Start, and child care. These collaborations can take place at the administrative level and at the teacher level. Potential benefits include improved alignment on a systemic level, and improved coordination of the experiences of individual families and children as they transition from one setting to another. But this work is also harder than building systems within a district, for a host of reasons.

For one, it can be very difficult for districts to figure out with whom they are supposed to collaborate. In the case of Head Start, Head Start providers are required by federal law to partner with school districts, and vice versa.¹⁰⁵ But beyond Head Start the early childhood provider community may include lots of small private and community-based providers, many of whom serve children from more than one school district. School districts may not have an easy time figuring out with whom they are supposed to partner, and those districts may not have leaders who are skilled at entering into partnerships with multiple private providers (who may have their own intramural disagreements that shape their relationships with districts). One informant noted schools are public institutions with a unionized workforce, which may make it difficult to partner with small private operators whose workforce has not been unionized; the expectations and practices of the two groups may be different enough that it can make collaboration difficult.

Moreover, the early childhood providers may not have adequate bandwidth to engage in successful partnerships. Providers operate on very low margins, and the staff in childcare programs make very little money.¹⁰⁶ Taking the time to build optional partnerships with school districts may seem impossible when providers have inadequate resources to perform their core tasks.¹⁰⁷ For some providers English is not their first language. And informants noted that many private providers don't even want to partner with school districts, who they see as competition.

The current pandemic has in some communities exacerbated existing tensions. In some communities teachers have been paid while working from home, while child care workers were expected to be present. Indeed, some informants noted that public school teachers may expect child care workers to take care of their own children — even while those teachers are working remotely. These interactions may surface longstanding frustrations early childhood staff hold about the perceived hierarchy that slots them lower than K-12 teachers, and the fact that early education and care are not treated as a public good in the same way that schools are.¹⁰⁸ One informant did note that in the pandemic the broader public seems to have recognized the importance of child care, and expressed hope that in the future child care workers would be treated with more respect.¹⁰⁹

So for all of these reasons and others, in many communities collaboration has not taken hold — but there are some where it has. Some informants talked about the value of regular meetings between district staff and community providers, which they saw as building stronger relationships. One informant said that district staff were able to work with child care providers to help them see themselves as educators. Having dedicated capacity to support collaboration is seen as key, and some philanthropies have provided that capacity over the years; unfortunately, informants noted that when philanthropic support stops the collaboration often proves to be unsustainable.

Informants indicated these partnerships are most likely to succeed if they are strengths-based, and focused on what partners do well and how that can be built on. Relatedly, multiple informants explained that if the relationships are seen as hierarchical they will fail; one informant said that districts may see private early childhood facilities less as partners than as service providers. But informants did say that districts and superintendents have a lot of power to set the tone in their relationship with the early childhood community. One informant pointed out that historically the onus for these partnerships has been put on early childhood providers, even though districts are in the power position with regard to early childhood.



Photo credit: Alexa D'Angelo/The Star

One district that has sought out partnerships is Oxnard School District, where Noemi Valdes — the Director of the district's early childhood program — says that the district has welcomed partner programs into district classrooms.

The Oxnard school board has chosen a partnership-oriented approach to delivering early childhood services that includes Head Start, migrant Head Start, and state pre-k run by partner agencies. The district collaborates with public health, behavioral health, and social work agencies, which engage students to provide services on district campuses. In addition, when the district has had bond funds to support facility improvements, the district prioritizes early childhood when refurbishing existing spaces.

Some informants pointed to County Offices of Education as potentially important conveners between TK-12 and early childhood, as some County Offices have strong relationships in both worlds. County offices of the California Commission on Children and Families (commonly known as “First 5”) were also identified as important partners, although one informant said that the existence of capacity at First 5s has sometimes let districts off the hook to develop their own. And some informants emphasized that while relationship-building is valuable, what really matters is changed behavior — how will the system operate differently and better?

C. Family Engagement

One area that multiple informants identified as a potential opportunity for improved collaboration is family engagement. Informants indicated that family engagement is much more of a focus in early childhood than TK-12, and that early childhood teachers are trained for that in a way that TK-12 may not be. This is important to relationship building, and may be an area where TK-12 can benefit from early childhood's expertise.

In addition, multiple informants talked about the importance of “warm handoffs” between early learning and K-12 – that is, when a child enters kindergarten, how do the professionals who worked with that child in preschool communicate with the kindergarten teacher about that child's development and learning? This process should include families, and may be one of the important outcomes of structured partnerships between K-12 and early childhood. This can be particularly important for children with special needs, and some informants expressed frustration at seeing school districts struggle to support young children eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; early childhood informants thought that in some instances districts do not take advantage of useful insights that early childhood providers could offer that would help those children. It is also likely to be of paramount importance in the next few falls, when schools will be welcoming a cohort of children whose early childhood experiences were seriously disrupted by COVID-19.

Several informants discussed the “warm handoff” in the frame of the difficulty parents may have in navigating the K-12 system. Multiple informants talked about an approach to family engagement in early childhood that emphasizes partnership, which they often said they did not see present in the K-12 schools. Informants also identified family engagement as a strategy for improving attendance in the early grades.¹¹⁰ With chronic absenteeism as an indicator on the state’s school dashboard, building stronger relationships with parents can have a concrete impact on school outcomes.

D. Effectively Serving English Learners*

In California 60% of children under eight are Dual Language Learners.¹¹¹ Many informants emphasized the importance of working with English Learners as early as possible, given that language acquisition is most likely to be effective with younger children. This may include enrolling English Learners in preschool at the first opportunity.

Informants also talked about the importance of using effective, research-based teaching practices with English Learners. Fortunately many of the approaches to learning that are most effective for English Learners — language-rich instruction, vocabulary development, family engagement, and culturally-affirming practices — are generally positive practices for teaching young children. These practices can be adopted by preschools and schools for their entire population, as long as they do so in a manner that is respectful of home language variation and the different linguistic experiences of their students. Informants also emphasized that in the early years the ability to speak multiple languages is consistently treated as an asset; some informants said they did not see school districts treating English Learners the same way.

Informants emphasized that it can be easier to build trusting relationships with English Learner families in the early years — relationships which could then be leveraged to smooth the transition into K-12. (Indeed, informants said the same about relationships with all families, but noted that it may be particularly important for the families of English Learners.) More systemically, informants emphasized the importance of partnerships between early childhood providers and K-12 to develop an articulated plan for language development. One challenge identified by informants was differing expectations for practices relating to English Learners across programs, meaning that children the same age will have different experiences based on their setting.

A challenge in this work is developing adequate capacity. Some informants indicated that not enough identification of English Learners occurs in the early years — and then once identification occurs, finding adequate support is also a challenge. This may be particularly true for children who speak languages that are not commonly spoken in the area where their family has settled, or where an immigrant population is growing rapidly and the provider and school communities have not been able to keep up. Moreover, the pandemic appears to have had a disproportionate negative impact on English Learners.¹¹²

* Multiple informants expressed dissatisfaction with TK-12’s use of the term “English Learner.” They preferred “Dual Language Learner,” which they thought emphasized that a child is learning two languages at once with respect for both languages. Others use terms like “emergent bilingual” or “multilingual learners.” One proponent of the term “English Learner” noted that English Learners can be dual language learners or emergent bilingual students, but the important focus is on ensuring that children from homes where English is not the dominant language are receiving adequate instruction in English. Multiple informants who weighed in on this issue — from a range of perspectives — emphasized the importance of using strengths-based terminology, and treating facility in more than one language as an asset. The fact that even the terminology is not aligned seems symptomatic of the policy and operational disconnect in services for this critical population.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS



*There is a powerful difference between how **schools** are doing and how **students** are doing, and assessment data about California’s school performance shows this quite clearly. In most instances school districts are doing the job they should be expected to do from third grade through the end of high school: helping students demonstrate a year’s worth of academic growth every year. But the students in that time period may not be succeeding, because they were too far behind at the end of third grade to get caught up during the rest of their school career.*

To date TK-12 leaders have largely not made the birth-to-third grade years a major focus. Importantly, the TK-12 leaders who have not been focusing on early childhood are in many instances taking an entirely logical approach based on their job as it’s been defined for them. District leaders and principals far too often are stretched very thin and have to focus on their most urgent priorities. As Section II demonstrates, California policy does not yet emphasize early childhood — or the early elementary years — as an urgent priority, a problem the Master Plan is seeking to change.

So it is important to not read this report as arguing that TK-12 leaders are behaving irrationally. Indeed, in many ways TK-12 leaders have behaved in a very rational manner when not focusing on early childhood education. A major goal of this report, then, is to encourage the state to do everything it can to create the policy conditions in which the rational choice for TK-12 leaders is to increase their focus on the early years.

There are encouraging signs that the relationship between TK-12 and early learning is improving. But there are multiple policy changes the state could make that would help to support that partnership at the local level. Some of the changes might have short-term impacts, while others might mean more in the long term — but all of them should be possible, even in the context of the state’s current fiscal crisis.

In several instances, the recommendation here is to launch a collaborative process between the state and districts, leading to the creation of a shared framework for action. This approach is based on a few assumptions about the current education policy landscape in California:

- **The state budget forecast is uncertain.** While the immediate budget picture for spring of 2021 is unexpectedly favorable,¹¹³ not long ago operating deficits were projected in upcoming fiscal years.¹¹⁴ The hope is that the turbulence of 2020 will not be repeated, although it is hard to be sure what the future holds.
- **Both TK-12 and early childhood providers are experiencing major turmoil and daunting challenges, so** there may not be much bandwidth to advocate for major new policies focused on anything other than mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 and budget cuts.
- **At some point post-pandemic the budget and district operations will stabilize.** At that time either the state will have a coherent framework for action or it won’t. Taking the time to create a coherent framework now will be helpful when the state’s economy rallies. When the time comes that framework can form the basis of more aggressive policy change.

- **Whatever the state’s long-term budget prognosis, having a coherent framework for action will be helpful to districts interested in these issues** — and might also be able to have an incremental impact on state policy implementation.
- **Prior to the onset of the pandemic there was increasing support for the idea of connecting early childhood to the TK-12 system.** Indeed, strengthening those connections may be an important part of mitigating the negative impacts of COVID on child development — which could be substantial.

It would be far more exciting and dramatic to propose more ambitious changes — and if the state is amenable, those changes are there to be had. Perhaps this unsettled moment could lead to one or two major changes, surrounded by some smaller changes meant to amplify that central reform. But in this raw moment, a measure of humility seems warranted about what is actually possible.

The current policy and cultural conditions surrounding the relationship between TK-12 and early learning took generations to develop, and they could not be radically changed in a few years even under the best of circumstances. These are generational changes, so the recommendations in this report take the long view and focus on next steps that seem possible under present conditions. In some ways the fact that these changes will take a long time is a good thing; even if the state can’t solve all of its problems now, it can commit to a direction it will take in rebuilding the system.

Indeed, informants noted that California has a history of cutting early childhood services during crises, and then building the early childhood system back in the same dysfunctional way when the crisis is over.¹¹⁵ They hope that the pandemic will not represent yet one more instance of this Sisyphean approach, but will instead be the moment when California really identifies a new direction and sticks to it. Behavior change is hard, but informants agreed that the impact will be worth it.

Providing better incentives and guidance is an important but limited strategy; even if California did every single thing recommended by this report, it doesn’t guarantee that all districts will implement best practices effectively. Moreover, some of these levers will not lead to quick results even under the best of circumstances — and the next few years will not be the best of circumstances. What’s proposed here is a set of changes that will likely require years to achieve their full potential. The hope is that these recommendations will help California set a direction for future activity, and then move forward as quickly as circumstances permit.

Who's At the Table?

The recommendations here call for numerous conversations to be convened by “state government leaders.” All of the initiatives listed here could benefit from the involvement of the Governor’s office, the California Department of Education, the California Department of Social Services, First 5 California, and the Assembly. The specific relationship among those entities may vary from issue to issue, but all of them should have a place at the table for any of the conversations identified here. And while state government is the logical convener for critical policy discussions, the conversations will only succeed if they include representatives of providers, schools, families, advocates, and others — and that collectively the discussants represent the full diversity of California’s population. Philanthropy can play a critical role in supporting these conversations.



At the local level, one important practice for superintendents will be to include early childhood leaders in their cabinet. Some districts are already doing so, but according to informants the practice is hit or miss.¹¹⁶ Superintendents should have early childhood leaders at important tables to ensure that the early childhood perspective is heard on the full range of decisions districts face.

Engaging Families and the Community

Building relationships in a community will always be a local job, not a state one. But state-level guidance might support improved district practices. State government leaders can bring together expert practitioners from around the state — in both K-12 and early learning — and build out frameworks for engagement that draw on California best practices, along with national research and lessons from other states. Frameworks for engagement can then be connected back to LCAP, either officially or through the advocacy process.

And even if these frameworks aren't intended to have the force of law, they can be useful not only in individual districts but to inform statewide efforts to build field capacity. It is very difficult to support statewide improvement when districts around the state have different goals and practices. Creating a more systemic approach to each of these areas would allow the state to develop a common knowledge base and shared practices. Building district expertise is absolutely critical to the state's success. That is part of why it is essential for the state to build on the lessons already learned by districts that have been leading in these areas.



- **Community partnerships.** Many districts already have or are building successful partnerships with community providers, and those districts can help educate their peers about why that is beneficial and what it takes. To help scale that work, TK-12 and early learning leaders could partner to develop guidance for districts on what it takes to partner with community providers.¹¹⁷ Identifying best practices may make the work easier for districts that are favorably inclined but lack experience and expertise. It's worth noting that federal law already requires partnerships between school districts and Head Start; where those partnerships are strong, that may be a good base from which to engage additional providers in the community.

For partnerships to work will require a clear understanding on the part of both TK-12 and early learning leaders of exactly what benefits they expect to achieve from the partnership. There is an understandable tendency for organizational leaders — especially leaders of organizations that are underfunded and pressed for capacity — to “tunnel” by focusing on only their most pressing and urgent needs.¹¹⁸ It is not at all surprising that both TK-12 and early learning leaders have struggled to get out of their own tunnels, given the policy and cultural pressures that keep them apart. So the first step in partnership has to be the articulation of common cause and expected benefits to all involved, followed by the identification of sustainable resources that can help leaders work together toward those common benefits.



- **Family engagement.** Early childhood providers are already engaging families,¹¹⁹ and stronger partnerships between TK-12 and early childhood can help create a pathway for strengths-based family engagement to continue as children get older. Here too guidance on best practices could help interested districts succeed in this important work. The family engagement already required by LCAP may be a useful starting point, but informants suggested that even in districts that are fulfilling their LCAP obligations more dynamic and useful family engagement may be needed. Specific supports may be needed for immigrant families, and one informant noted that many child care providers are themselves immigrants — which can be a significant asset in terms of connecting with families, but may mean that the providers are less knowledgeable about the TK-12 system.

Supporting English Learners

Districts have important legal obligations to English Learners, but do not always have the guidance needed to perform them well — or even understand what they are. In addition to any policy changes that could lead to earlier engagement and identification, guidance for districts on how to engage English Learners in early learning — and create continuity for them into TK-12 — could lead to improved student experiences.¹²⁰

The Master Plan includes a discussion of the importance of equitable treatment of all children, including English Learners.¹²¹ Specific recommendations include more proactive identification of child needs, specialized training for professionals, updated early learning guidelines, better data, and equitable access.¹²² In pursuing all of these recommendations California should look at opportunities for alignment with TK-12.

The Advancement Project and Early Edge California have developed a “Dual Language Learner Policy Platform” that makes recommendations for policies that align early learning with TK-12, promote high quality early childhood experience, and support the early childhood workforce to serve dual language learners. Acting on these recommendations could substantially advance opportunities for Dual Language Learners throughout the state.¹²³



It will be important to include a focus on English Learners in the state’s data and analytics work. Identifying where multilingual children are, where multilingual professionals are, and what supports each group needs will be key to improving services. At this point it is widely understood that the need is widespread, but more data could be beneficial to the efforts to improve services.

Accountability and Continuous Improvement

Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)

In an LCAP planning process that connects TK-12 and early childhood, districts would be addressing questions like the following:

1. What are our children’s skills and needs at kindergarten entry?
2. If the district is not satisfied with the state of its children’s skills and needs at kindergarten entry, what is it doing to address that issue?
3. How are the district’s children progressing between kindergarten entry and third grade?
4. If all or some are not progressing as they should be, what can we do to improve their outcomes?

These kinds of questions would direct district attention to the early years, and ideally would prompt analysis of what’s happening in those years and what the district could do about it. Indeed, it would be productive for districts to start having conversations about some of the underlying agreements needed to answer those questions — such as how skills and needs will be measured, and what would represent a satisfactory state of child skills and needs (discussed further below).

The fact that early childhood is not on the LCAP radar screen at all suggests that there might be some benefit to including a few questions in the template about the early years. Even if those questions only produce compliance-driven answers, they could at least bring the issue to the surface and help to generate awareness. It is understandable if the state is reluctant to add more questions to a template that is already being criticized for demanding too much, but if the state decides to revamp the template it should at least consider how it might seek to inspire some local conversation about early learning.



And whatever is in the template, local advocates can push districts to include early learning as part of their LCAP process.

They can address those four questions, or whatever variant of those questions most resonates with them. Early childhood providers and parents can engage in the LCAP process to educate districts about the importance of the early years. Engagement with district leaders can help educate boards and superintendents about what is possible, which over time could lead to new approaches by districts. Indeed, Eileen Chen of the Pittsburg Unified School District says that she encourages preschool families to get involved in the LCAP process. Statewide early childhood advocacy organizations could provide toolkits to help providers and parents engage in the process.

One opportunity for districts is to identify some local indicators that track their work in early childhood. The LCAP provides for districts to choose some indicators that they use to measure their own performance, even though the indicators are not used statewide. Statewide advocacy organizations could convene key leaders from the field to propose suggested local indicators, which districts might then choose to use — and which community-level early childhood leaders can use in their advocacy. Whatever tools are developed statewide should recognize that specific strategy decisions must be made locally. It may be appropriate for the state to instigate local conversations, but the spirit of LCAP is that any decisions about strategies and tactics must be district-led.

Dashboard/Every Student Succeeds Act Accountability

While states are allowed under ESSA to have accountability indicators focused on the K-2 years, it can be really hard to come up with indicators that fit the bill.¹²⁴ Federal law is very limiting on what can actually go in the state's primary accountability formula. But California has shown itself to be creative in the past when it comes to education accountability, and may have more room for creativity on this issue.

One approach California might consider is to disaggregate its reporting of chronic absenteeism, which is already reported on its school dashboard. The dashboard already allows chronic absenteeism to be broken down by demographic groups.¹²⁵ If the dashboard also showed breakdowns by grade — or at least allowed TK-2 to be broken out as a separate category — that would create an indicator schools could track to create some specific focus on the TK-2 years. The same breakdown could also be done for suspension rates. This approach would minimize the burden of new data collection — and even if it required some up-front work to implement, it would then provide a basis for having data-informed conversations about TK-2 outcomes and practices in districts around the state. This increased emphasis on TK-2 would create more focus on the early elementary grades among school administrators, helping to create more favorable conditions for partnerships with early childhood providers.

Another approach would be to develop a set of recommended local indicators that districts could track with regard to early learning. These indicators would not necessarily need to comply with ESSA's tight requirements, but could be a method by which districts could hold themselves accountable to focus on the early years. Ideally those indicators could be tied to elements that are already on the dashboard, to help strengthen the sense of a continuum across years.

Bringing together TK-12 and early childhood leaders to develop a template would provide districts with a useful starting point, and they could then make their own decisions about which indicators fit best in their context. While there is value in each district having its own conversation about the indicators, there's no reason every district should have to start from scratch — and having multiple districts using the same data would allow for some analysis of statewide trends. Collecting some initial wisdom to help jump-start the conversation could be a valuable exercise, and statewide advocacy groups could then monitor implementation and performance in the years ahead. Local experimentation should inform this statewide process, both in developing initial recommendations and then refining implementation in the decades to come.

Funding

California's current fragmented funding and governance were a source of frustration to many informants.¹²⁶ There are no easy fixes to these challenges, and they may be difficult to address while the state recovers from the pandemic. Any conversation about the future of funding in California must not only address TK and CSPP, but also child care, Head Start, and other funding streams. Even organizing that conversation in a structured way would be a substantial step forward; the Governor could charge an existing advisory body or dedicated task force with making recommendations.

The Master Plan for Early Learning and Care proposes to create “one unified system of state-funded preschool for three-year-olds and four-year-olds.”¹²⁷ This ambitious proposal would build on CSPP and TK to create a new approach to preschool service delivery, phased in over time.¹²⁸ Included in the proposal are recommendations for comprehensive and aligned early learning standards, foundations, curricula, and linked assessments.¹²⁹ The Master Plan specifically urges the state to prioritize expansion in attendance areas of high-poverty elementary schools, recognizing that high-quality preschool is an important part of an overall school improvement strategy.¹³⁰

Before the release of the Master Plan, one idea that was already on the table was to use TK as the base for a new universal preschool program. This would create greater consistency in the experience of 4-year-olds, and make it clear that improving TK is the primary strategy for improving the educational experiences of 4-year-olds. Informants acknowledged that support for TK expansion has been far from universal — but to the extent advocates are looking for a potentially dramatic change in early childhood that seems to have support in the K-12 world, this issue is one that clearly warrants further exploration. Advocates for this approach noted that it could turn TK into a preschool program that bridges the current ECE and K-12 systems, creating new opportunities to strengthen teacher professional development, curriculum alignment, assessment practice, and more. In January 2021, Governor Newsom proposed a substantial increase in funding for TK.¹³¹

The Master Plan includes detail about a variety of critical issues that would need to be addressed if a new preschool program were to be created.¹³² Of course, if the state were to instead focus on just expanding TK, that would also raise a host of issues the state would need to address.¹³³ The Master Plan proposal is more comprehensive than an approach focused on TK expansion, and the expanded focus on serving three-year-olds is a good thing. If the state seriously pursues the proposal in the Master Plan — as it should — its process should include enough engagement with school districts to ensure that the final design of the rollout strengthens the connection between K-12 and early childhood.

Statewide Governance and Data

A related coherence challenge is governance. For years in California child care was divided between DSS and CDE, and this year DSS took on new responsibilities from CDE. But fragmented governance at the state level means that there has not been a state-level champion for early childhood. States like Washington, Oregon, and New Mexico have a single senior leader in their administration with programmatic authority.¹³⁴ There is no equivalent to that role in California, despite meaningful efforts by current Governor Gavin Newsom to have strong early childhood leaders in his administration.¹³⁵



The members of the Assembly’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood Education called for a new approach to governance and administration,¹³⁶ but the state has not yet convened a broad conversation about what state-level governance structure would make the most sense to support providers and communities. Having that conversation in a serious way could lead to changes that bring greater coherence to the currently fragmented system.¹³⁷ That would also support more coherence in distributing resources to local providers, as a new oversight entity could potentially manage that process more effectively.

California’s new Master Plan points out that the consolidation of functions at the Department of Social Services is itself a chance to make deeper changes. The Master Plan emphasizes that DSS now has “the opportunity ... to align and combine existing programs.”¹³⁸ That is an important and valuable opportunity, but taking advantage of it will take intentional and focused effort.¹³⁹ Other states have found that simply moving programs into a single agency can leave them feeling that they merely “moved the silos closer together.”¹⁴⁰ The outcomes that the Master

Plan calls for — including simplified and aligned systems, streamlined eligibility and enrollment, and a unified and equitable rate structure — will only be achieved if DSS has the capacity to lead a change management process that engages the many constituents affected by these potentially valuable actions.

Another closely intertwined issue is that of data systems. Several informants pointed out the need for better information to fuel state and local decision making.¹⁴¹ The Master Plan reached the same conclusion, specifically recommending the creation of an integrated data system.¹⁴² Shortly after the release of the Master Plan WestEd released its long-awaited Legislative Report proposing a framework for a Cradle-to-Career Data System.¹⁴³

In developing a stronger culture of data use, the issues California will need to address include:

1. Improving the quality of raw data that it draws from its programs;
2. Building better statewide infrastructure to integrate data from multiple sources, which the Cradle-to-Career Data System should address; and
3. Providing the analytic capacity to make sense of the new information being produced, and translate it into action. How this capacity is located and structured is deeply tied to any plans the state has to improve its overall early childhood governance. Even before any changes in data governance are implemented, the state should consider how additional data use capacity could allow it to leverage its current spending more effectively.

More than ever before, the state is working toward a better approach to using data in the improvement of early childhood programming — and connecting early childhood to TK-12. This is exciting and important work.¹⁴⁴

But it's also risky work, and plenty of other states have seen these efforts flounder for a variety of reasons. Common problems have included system designs that even if properly executed wouldn't be responsive to stakeholder needs; runaway costs due to poor system design and inadequate project oversight; insufficient focus on user needs coupled with a lack of understanding of student privacy laws, leading to cumbersome data request processes that inhibit productive data use while not actually enhancing protections of student privacy;¹⁴⁵ and then an inability to provide the ongoing capacity to make the system work as it was intended.¹⁴⁶ Given these potential pitfalls, it is critical for the state to sustain its commitment and ensure that better data leads to real changes in practice.

If the Cradle to Career Data System is built it would represent an enormous step forward for the state's data capacity. But this system has an extremely broad purview.¹⁴⁷ For the new data to truly tie together early childhood and K-12 will require an ongoing commitment to providing analytic support focused on that issue. Moreover, the Cradle to Career Data System will be focused on analytics and is not an operating system.¹⁴⁸ Additional effort will be needed to meet the ongoing operating needs of schools and early childhood providers seeking to work together more effectively.

Assessment

The value of early-years assessment is increasingly understood by TK-12 leaders, but the benefits of assessment remain potential more than kinetic. Improved assessment practice would yield valuable information for California educators and policymakers.¹⁴⁹ But while many districts are already doing some assessment in the early grades, there is no organized system of support for early grades assessment — and a meaningful segment of the early childhood community resists assessment. This has led to not enough assessment being done, and the results of the assessments that are being done aren't being used effectively enough.

While some states have adopted statewide kindergarten readiness assessments, that approach seems unlikely to be successful in California under the current circumstances. An approach more likely to make incremental headway would be for a group of leaders in the field — including at a minimum CDE, First 5 California, leading districts, early childhood leaders, and national experts on assessment practice — to develop a voluntary assessment framework that could be used by districts and early childhood providers.

The framework could address the following issues:

- The benefits districts should expect to achieve from a well-designed assessment program;¹⁵⁰
- What kind of aligned and culturally sensitive assessment tools should be used to provide a consistent and holistic picture of child development from preschool through second grade — including tools that can be used with children whose home language is not English;¹⁵¹
- What kind of teacher practices would be needed to administer the assessments effectively, and to then use the assessment results to improve instruction;
- What kind of leadership supports would be needed to help those teachers succeed;
- How the assessment process can support an improved relationship between schools and early childhood providers;
- How assessment results can be communicated to parents in a culturally-responsive manner that supports their engagement with their child’s educational process; and
- A multi-year timeline for implementation that acknowledges the work needed to launch a successful program.

If a framework is to be developed, it should engage leaders from districts who have already done this work successfully — along with statewide and national experts in assessment practice. The idea would be to create a tool that interested districts could use to improve their practice. Over time, as more and more districts engage successfully, the state can revisit how it wants to support early childhood assessment — but right now more is needed to instigate locally-led best practices.

Assessment in the early years is a particularly important policy area, because of its impact on all the other areas around it. While we know that many children are behind when they get to third grade, at the moment we have very little understanding of where those children were in their development up to that point — which makes it extremely difficult to mobilize resources to help them. If there is no framework for districts to use in collecting information, it will be very hard for them to discuss early childhood needs in their LCAP plans.

All children develop differently and assessment tools should not be used for inappropriate purposes. In particular, assessments in the preschool and early elementary years should not be used for accountability purposes — either for early childhood providers or schools. The very real fear of this misuse may have contributed to a lack of appetite for more assessment in the early childhood community, and protecting against this misuse will be essential to making progress in this area.

Moreover, the heavy focus on reading and math in accountability assessment raises concerns that early childhood assessments will not adequately address the full range of child development domains. Early childhood educators will want assessments that reflects best practices in child development, and that take a strengths-based approach to the many cultural contexts children in California experience. And the capacity-building needed in TK-2 will also be needed in early childhood, where teachers and instructional leaders need the expertise and bandwidth required to implement assessments successfully.

Ultimately, the potential benefits of assessment data are potentially significant enough that the state should look for a path forward that allows for beneficial use while minimizing the risk of improper use. A broader and more consistent assessment approach should be a key building block of a system that provides the supports families and professionals need. Developing a shared framework for assessment use could be an important first step on the path to having a better understanding of children’s skills and needs in the birth to third grade years.

Teacher Preparation and Support

As long as pay for early childhood educators remains similar to what it is today, the ceiling on what the state can accomplish will stay relatively low. Even if a sea change in educator compensation is not on the immediate horizon, policymakers should work toward the day when it becomes possible — and put in place the systems needed to support a workforce that is compensated at more competitive levels.

One major reason that higher education has not built capacity to meet the needs of early childhood education is the lack of demand. Many early childhood professionals are not required to have bachelor's degrees — and those who are get paid very little by the standards of college graduates.¹⁵² Higher education may be slow to change, but over time it will respond to market demand. For example, in 1970-71 computer science majors made up 0.3% of college graduates nationally, but by 2017-18 that number was up to 4% — with health professions growing from 3% to 12% over the same period.¹⁵³



During that same time education shrank from 21% of graduates to 4%. The market forces that drive employment choices play out in the higher education system, and not to the benefit of early childhood teacher preparation programs.¹⁵⁴

The Master Plan correctly includes a major focus on improving supports for the early learning and care workforce¹⁵⁵ — including preparation programs.¹⁵⁶ And the state is already working to put in place the building blocks needed for higher education to be successful. The Commission on Teacher Credentialing is establishing a set of standards and expectations that higher education can use to deliver quality preparation for early childhood teachers, which will need to include the mastery of specific competencies and well-designed clinical experiences.¹⁵⁷ Stronger connections can be built between community colleges and four-year institutions to create a more seamless pathway for early childhood professionals seeking bachelor's degrees. Providing credit-bearing opportunities for professional development could also help make it feasible for low-income early childhood professionals to make progress toward higher levels of educational attainment.

There are also other opportunities the state could take advantage of. Apprenticeship pathways can support the development of early childhood educators,¹⁵⁸ and the state is already building up apprenticeship programs focused on early childhood. “Grow Your Own” approaches that recruit community members to become teachers¹⁵⁹ are already being used in California for some subjects,¹⁶⁰ and could be expanded in early childhood. New efforts to support school administrator professional development could be used to expand knowledge of early childhood development.¹⁶¹

It will be important as the state moves forward to keep a strong focus on equity, a need highlighted in the Master Plan.¹⁶² As part of California's equity focus any policy changes the state adopts should be monitored for their potential impact on diversity. There is an emerging research base on practices that can support an early childhood workforce that is both diverse and highly qualified.¹⁶³ Key policy levers include expanded clinical opportunities, stronger connections between 2- and 4-year colleges, specialized supports and advising, financial assistance, and clear expectations.¹⁶⁴ The state should use all of these levers to demonstrate its ongoing commitment to diversity among educators.

Relatedly, it will be important to ramp up the state's efforts to develop educators who can support the state's Dual Language Learners and English Learners. The earliest years are a critical period for language development, and better engagement with Dual Language Learners and English Learners can have significant long-term impacts. This will require intentional focus on developing an increased number of educators who are skilled at working with Dual Language Learners and English Learners in the birth to age eight years, in the full range of languages that reflects California's population.

The Master Plan also calls for a comprehensive professional learning system.¹⁶⁵ That system should include an intentional focus on connecting across age spans, leveraging the expertise of county offices who have led in this area. This would be in keeping with the Master Plan's call for greater birth-to-third-grade alignment.¹⁶⁶ Better continuity in assessment practice — and better assessment practice overall — could be one key element of this work.

In addition, the state should consider requiring early childhood content as a requirement to earn administrative credentials for principals, and really ensuring that good content is available for them as they earn those credentials.¹⁶⁷ It should also re-evaluate its credentialing requirements for teachers with an eye toward creating aligned consistency for the requirements at different age levels — an issue specifically called out in the Master Plan.¹⁶⁸ States can and have developed credentials focused on the early years that require teachers to build their knowledge of child development and effective educational practices. A new look at credentialing could build on the CTC's emerging framework, and be informed by any changes to the state's overall approach to pre-kindergarten education.

Improving teacher and principal training may not have a dramatic impact on the relationship between K-12 and early learning in the next few years — but it could have a fundamental impact on the relationship a generation from now. Many informants identified the lack of understanding of early childhood among K-12 leaders as a significant barrier to progress, along with the perceived hierarchy between K-12 and early childhood teachers. Those barriers cannot be overcome quickly — but if the state does not rethink its preparation, credentialing, and professional development policies, those barriers might never be overcome at all.

Conclusion

Since 1959 a team from California has played in the World Series 26 times, including three years where both teams were from the Golden State.¹⁶⁹ Most of those 26 teams were in or tied for a playoff position on July 31; only one was more than two games back.¹⁷⁰ So as much as sports fans love a comeback story, the narrative of California's Major League Baseball teams actually reveals that the key to success is to get ahead and stay there.

That lesson should apply in education as well. While of course the state should be working to improve education from third grade through the end of high school, it is unlikely that in the near future every district in California will be performing at what is now a near-elite level. Even if that happened, though, it wouldn't be enough to achieve proficiency at scale if students are even a year behind at the beginning of third grade. There is only so much California's education system can achieve if its approach continues to emphasize third grade and up.

The primary problem is not the people working in the TK-12 system. Indeed, the data shows that in most districts they are doing the job they can reasonably be expected to do. The problem is that the state hasn't done enough to help children before they enter the TK-12 system, and the TK-12 system can't catch them up. But while school districts are largely already doing a solid job in third grade and above, the early childhood system is deeply underfunded and fragmented, and not well connected to the early elementary years (which themselves face many challenges). Given that, the strategy most likely to have a serious impact on California's overall educational performance is a dramatic improvement in what happens before third grade.

The birth-to-third grade years offer California's best opportunity to improve long-term outcomes, and California's current political leadership is more aware than ever of just how important those years are. Improving the relationship between TK-12 and early learning is a critical strategy for taking advantage of that opportunity at scale. Too many kids aren't receiving any services at all prior to kindergarten entry and are entering TK and kindergarten behind, and then the state and its districts are not using all of the tools at their disposal to catch them up during the TK-2 years. California can change all that – and the impacts of that change would ripple through its entire education system.



Appendix

The author is enormously grateful for the time and insight provided by informants to the process, who are listed below:

NAME	ROLE
Alethea Arguilez	Executive Director, First 5 San Diego
Linda Asato	Executive Director, California Child Care Resource & Referral Network
Catherine Atkin	Founder and Senior Advisor, the Early Learning Lab
Angel Barrios	Executive/Program Director, The Institute for Human and Social Development
Scott Borba	Superintendent/Principal, Le Grand Union Elementary School
Carla Bryant	Executive Director, District Innovation and Leadership for Early Education
Stephanie Ceminsky	Director, Early Childhood Programs, San Diego Unified School District
Eileen Chen	Executive Director, Educational Services, Pittsburg Unified School District
Heather Cleary	Chief Executive Officer, Peninsula Family Service
Mary Ann Dewan	County Superintendent of Schools, Santa Clara County Office of Education
Ruth Fernandez	Executive Director, First 5 Contra Costa
Catherine Goins	Assistant Superintendent for Early Education, Placer County Office of Education
Jessica Gomez	Principal, Alice Birney Elementary School, Colton Joint Unified School District
Roberta Gonzalez	Director, Early Learning Program, El Rancho Unified School District
Patti Herrera	Associate Vice President, School Services of California, Inc.
Laura Hill	Policy Director and Senior Fellow, Public Policy Institute of California
Heather Hopkins	Organizing Member, Community Equity Collaborative
Ree A. Harris-Hudson	Director, Early Childhood Programs, Pasadena Unified School District
Phyllis Jacobson	Administrator, Commission on Teacher Credentialing
Lupe Jaime	Senior Director, Fresno County Superintendent of Schools
September Jarrett	Program Officer, Heising-Simons Foundation

continues

NAME	ROLE
JoAnne Lauer	Assistant Superintendent, Riverside County Office of Education
Ted Lempert	President, Children Now
Patricia Lozano	Executive Director, Early Edge California
Elisa Magidoff	Executive Director, Coastside Children's Programs
Peter Mangione	Senior Managing Director, WestEd
Rick Miller	Board President, Rocklin Unified School District
Julie Montali	Director, Early Childhood Education & New Teacher Support K-12, Twin Rivers Unified School District
Elena Montoya	Research and Policy Associate, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Scott Moore	Chief Executive Officer, Kidango
Sarah Neville-Morgan	Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, Opportunities for All Branch, California Department of Education
Peggy Pizzo	Director of the Early Learning Project, Stanford Graduate School of Education
Glen Price	Founder, Glen Price Group
Mary Sandy	Executive Director, Commission on Teacher Credentialing
Rick Simpson	Former Deputy Chief of Staff to the Assembly Speaker
Wesley Smith	Executive Director, Association of California School Administrators
Deborah Stipek	Professor, Stanford Graduate School of Education
Dean Tagawa	Executive Director Early Education, Los Angeles Unified School District
Samantha Tran	Senior Managing Director, Education Policy, Children Now
Noemi Valdes	Director, Early Childhood Education Program, Oxnard School District
Bernardo Vidales	Superintendent, Jefferson Elementary School District
Ashley Williams	Senior Policy Analyst, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Randi Wolfe	Executive Director, Early Care and Education Pathways to Success
Theresa Zighera	Interim Executive Director, First 5 San Francisco

Interviews were semi-structured and – as noted above – informants were promised that their comments would not be quoted directly, unless they specifically gave permission. Accordingly, any reference to the informants in the main text or quotes attributed to them have been pre-approved. Informants were provided one of two sets of questions, one for statewide leaders and the other for local leaders. These were as follows:

STATEWIDE

- How do you hear about early learning being discussed as part of the development Local Control and Accountability Plans?
- In California’s school improvement process, how are you seeing early learning in needs assessments and root cause analyses? In resource allocation reviews?
- What are you hearing about the implementation of kindergarten readiness assessment, and how it’s affecting the relationship between K-12 and early learning?
- Does that fact that early childhood is managed by multiple agencies at the state level seem to have an impact on local partnerships?
- How much content knowledge about early childhood development do district leaders and principals have? What if anything is being done to build that knowledge?
- What are some of the competing pressures district leaders face that might be inhibiting their ability to work on early learning?
- How have district and early learning leaders worked together to build a shared culture? What are some of the cultural differences that have proven challenging?
- How do you see early childhood being staffed in districts you’re familiar with? Are the people leading the early learning work closely connected to their superintendents?
- What has been the role of philanthropy in supporting the relationship between K-12 and early learning in your community?
- Overall, what do you think have been some of California’s biggest successes in connecting K-12 and early learning? What do you think are some of the biggest remaining challenges?

LOCAL: IN YOUR COMMUNITY ...

- How was early learning discussed as part of the development of your district’s Local Control and Accountability Plan, if at all?
- If your district was subject to an intensive intervention as part of California’s school improvement plan, was early learning a part of the needs assessment and root cause analysis? The resource allocation review?
- Is your community using or planning to use kindergarten readiness assessment? If so, how is that affecting the relationship between K-12 and early learning?
- What community partnerships has the district established to support successful preschool and TK, if any?
- In trying to establish local partnerships between K-12 and early learning, has it mattered that early learning is managed by multiple agencies at the state level?
- Is your County Office of Education involved in early learning?

- How much content knowledge about early childhood development do district leaders and principals have, and what if anything is being done to build that knowledge?
- What are some of the competing pressures district leaders face that might be inhibiting their ability to work on early learning?
- How have district and early learning leaders worked together to build a shared culture? What are some of the cultural differences that have proven challenging?
- How is early childhood staffed in your local district? Who leads the work and what is their relationship to the superintendent?
- What has been the role of philanthropy in supporting the relationship between K-12 and early learning in your community?
- Overall, what do you think have been some of your biggest successes in connecting K-12 and early learning? What are some of the biggest remaining challenges?

Not all informants addressed all of these questions.

Paul Zavitkovsky of the Center for Urban Education Leadership, University of Illinois at Chicago provided enormous help in analyzing and making sense of the data in the Stanford Education Data Archive, which is itself an extraordinary resource. Without Paul the section on data would not have been possible, and the author is deeply grateful for the assistance.

The author also appreciates research assistance provided by Jo Anderson, recently retired from the Consortium for Educational Change; Thomas Bjorkman and Jonathan Isler of the California Department of Education; Earl Franks of the National Association of Elementary School Principals; Diana Harlick of the San Mateo County Office of Education; David Jacobson of the Education Development Center; Camille Maben of First 5 California; Hanna Melnick and Cathy Yun of the Learning Policy Institute; Jeff Sunshine of the Packard Foundation; and Christine Thorsteinson of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

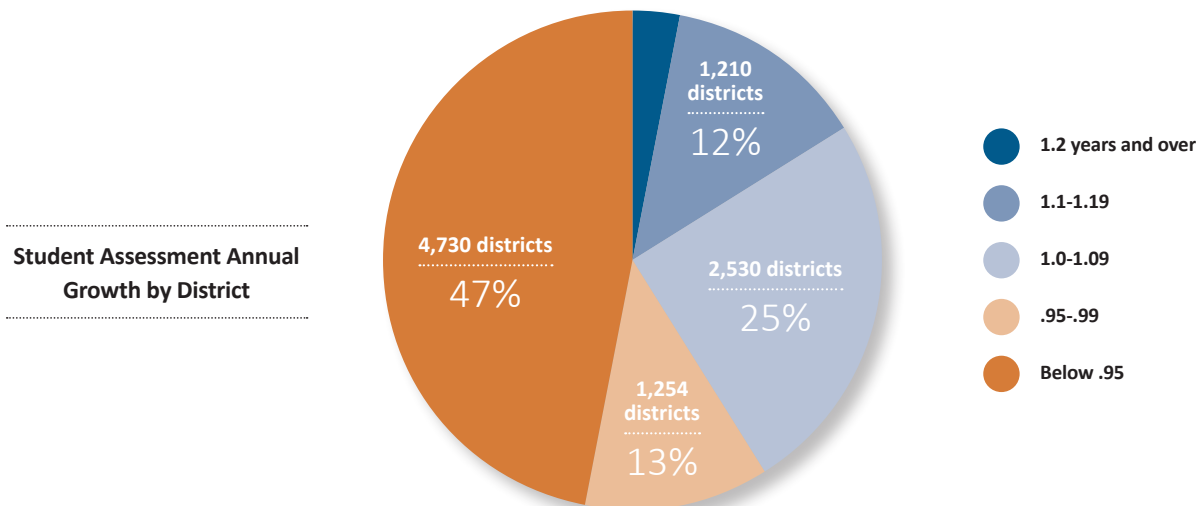
Several people provided assistance by talking through tentative conclusions in a way that informed the final report. These included Ted Lempert and Samantha Tran, Hanna Melnick and Cathy Yun, Camille Maben, Scott Moore, and Kim Pattillo Brownson. Carla Bryant, Shawn Gerth, Anya Hurwitz, September Jarrett, Laura Schwalm, Maggie Steakley, Deborah Stipek, and Caitlin Vaccarezza were kind enough to provide comments on drafts of the report. Angel Barrios, Julie Montali, and Amanda Regenstein provided photographs to be used in the report.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of any specific informant, reviewer, or person who provided assistance.

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- ¹⁰ For purposes of this paper, the term “progressing appropriately” means that students are meeting or exceeding national growth norms.
- ¹¹ The proper role of assessment in the evaluation of school quality is a robustly debated topic. This section of the report does not take a position on that role, but simply accepts the role as it is currently defined by federal law – which is to say, as the primary measure of school quality in state accountability systems. It is also important to emphasize that this section describes different cohorts of children, and that past results are not a guarantee of future performance.
- ¹² This report uses national growth norms developed by the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) to define “a full year’s growth.”
- ¹³ For example, an annual growth average of 0.95 means that students will only make 4.75 years of growth during the five years of schooling between the end of grade 3 and the end of grade 8.
- ¹⁴ Data from the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), organized by Paul Zavitskovsky at the Center for Urban Education Leadership, University of Illinois at Chicago. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
- ¹⁵ Data in this chart comes from the Stanford Education Data Archive. Retrieved from: <https://edopportunity.org/explorer/#/>. For comparison, the national chart looks like this:



Analysis conducted by Paul Zavitkovsky, based on the SEDA national percentiles reported in the New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/05/upshot/a-better-way-to-compare-public-schools.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0&mtref=undefined&gwh=D15E94794A66CF3A2BE1A495D35865B3&gwt=regi&assetType=REGIWALL) and based on an estimate of 11,000 school districts nationally with reliable data. California outperforms the nation as a whole primarily because, on average, its districts that are at neither extreme in socioeconomic status – between -0.5 and 1.0 standard deviations from the national average – are producing higher growth than comparable districts nationally.

¹⁶ The SEDA database actually measures progress from the end of third grade through the end of eighth grade, tracking the years of testing required by the ESSA. In several instances this paper extrapolates outward, and assumes that cohorts of children will progress at the same pace either before or after that 3rd-8th grade period.

¹⁷ Analysis conducted by Paul Zavitkovsky using data assembled by the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA). Because higher-poverty districts also have lower attainment rates (on average), gaps in growth rates between 3rd and 8th grade magnify prior 3rd-grade attainment gaps by the end of 8th grade.

¹⁸ Data for this analysis was drawn from data about California’s 25 largest districts, excluding Los Angeles, excluding high school districts (Kern and Sweetwater), and then excluding two districts for which data was not available (Oakland Unified and Twin Rivers Unified). California Department of Education. *Largest and Smallest Public School Districts – CalEdFacts*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/ceflargesmalldist.asp>.

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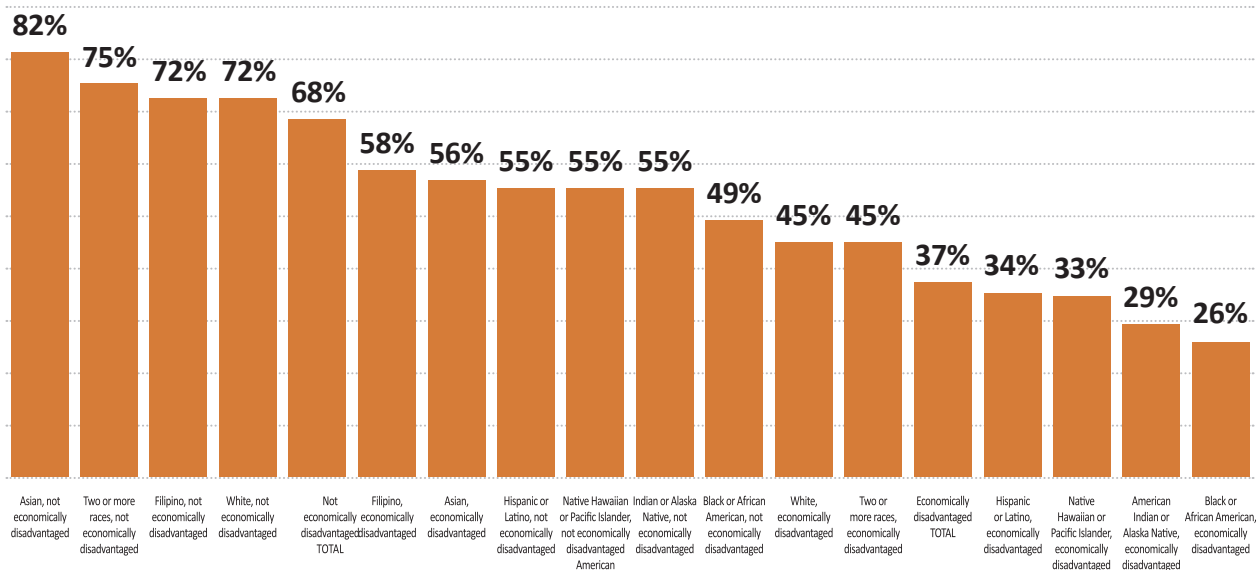
²⁰ Reprinted with permission from the Stanford Education Data Archive Retrieved from: <https://edopportunity.org/explorer/#/chart/ca/districts/grd/ses/all/5.32/37.42/-119.27>. Chart prepared by Paul Zavitkovsky.

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²² Derived from the California School Dashboard: <https://caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.gov/caaspp/DashViewReport?ps=true&lstTestYear=2019&lstTestType=B&lstGroup=12&lstSubGroup=227&lstGrade=3&lstSchoolType=A&lstCounty=00&lstDistrict=00000&lstSchool=0000000&lstFocus=a>. The chart uses California’s definition of “proficiency,” “Economically Disadvantaged,” and “Not Economically Disadvantaged.”

²³ A more detailed breakdown by race and economic status:

Percentage of California Third Graders Demonstrating Proficiency in ELA



²⁴ This is especially important given recent data from a Chicago study showing that children who began as English Learners had long-term achievement and growth very similar to children who were never English Learners – but that children who were not reclassified by the end of eighth grade had outcomes that were not nearly as positive. De la Torre, M., Blanchard, A., Allensworth, E.M., and Freire, S. (2019). *English Learners in Chicago Public Schools: A New Perspective*. UChicago Consortium on School Research. Retrieved from: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/English%20Learners%20in%20CPS-Dec2019-Consortium.pdf>.

²⁵ As noted above, this involves making a ten-year projection based on the available data – which covers the end of third grade through the end of eighth grade.

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²⁷ A recent book takes this same argument and extends it even further. In *How Schools Really Matter*, Douglas Downey explores the same phenomenon this section discusses: the fact that achievement disparities open early and remain consistent through the school years. Downey, D. (2020) *How Schools Really Matter: Why Our Assumption About Schools and Inequality is Mostly Wrong*. The University of Chicago Press. His analysis reinforces the conclusion that student achievement has a much stronger correlation to student socio-economic status than student growth. *How Schools Really Matter* (pp. 44-52). Downey goes beyond the analysis here to argue that to the extent gaps are opening during the school years they open over the summers, not while children are actually in school. *How Schools Really Matter* (pp. 34-43). This has significant implications for how schools are viewed, as it reinforces the notion that they are not the source of the achievement gap.

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²⁹ Noguera, P.A., Wing, J.Y. and Stahl, M.K. (2008). *Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools* (p. 142). Jossey-Bass. The issue of learning loss is particularly poignant for K-12 leaders right now given the expected learning loss caused by the pandemic. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., and Viruleg, E. (December 8, 2020) *COVID-19 and learning loss – disparities grow and students need help*. McKinsey & Co. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help#>.

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- Ensuring that child care providers are being reimbursed for children aged 0-4 at a sufficient level that they can remain in business even if TK becomes a full grade;
- Designing and funding TK so that classrooms have manageable student-teacher ratios, which might require using teacher aides;
- Identifying the support districts will need to implement TK effectively, with aligned curriculum, teachers who have expertise in teaching 4-year-olds, and principals who know how to provide instructional leadership for those teachers;
- Figuring out the right timing to robustly expand TK, recognizing the impact of the current recession on education funding and that TK expansion will have significant implications for Proposition 98 funding (California Legislative Analyst's Office (2017). *A Historical Review of Proposition 98*. Retrieved from: <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/3526>). These decisions will influence how districts are likely to react to the change;
 - Figuring out how the ramp-up will work, and which children will be added on what timeline;
 - Working with the Head Start community to support a greater focus on 3-year-olds and Early Head Start, which has been done successfully in some other states with universal 4-year-old programs; and
 - Figuring out what to do with CSPP – which could include turning it into a program for 3-year-olds, or repurposing the funds in some other way.

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¹⁶¹ In 2019 the California Department of Education launched a new effort to improve professional learning for administrators and school leaders, the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ai/ca21csla.asp>).

¹⁶² *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*, pp. 17, 19, 21-22, 24, 25.

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¹⁶⁶ *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁷ Koppich, J.E. and Stipek, D. (2020). *PreK-3 Alignment: Challenges and Opportunities in California* (p. 17). Retrieved from https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/r_koppich_jan20.pdf; Illinois has implemented a requirement that could serve as a model. Lieberman, A. (2019). *Preparing Principals for Pre-K in Illinois: The Prairie State's Story of Reform and Implementation*. New America. Retrieved from: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/preparing-principals-pre-k-illinois/>.

¹⁶⁸ The Master Plan recommends the creation of a "Pre-K-3 Early Learning and Care teaching credential for those who are interested in supporting children in center-based preschools through grade three, including transitional kindergarten." *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁹ *World Series History: Recaps and Results*. Retrieved from: http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/history/postseason/mlb_ws.jsp?feature=recaps_index.

¹⁷⁰ Information derived using the Baseball Reference website: <https://www.baseball-reference.com/boxes/?month=7&day=31&year=2018>. Note that the number of teams making the playoffs has changed over the years in Major League Baseball; the threshold for making the playoffs was lowered after the start of divisional play in 1969, the addition of a wild card team in 1994, and the addition of a second wild card team in 2012. The 2020 season got off to a very late start and had an expanded postseason; the eventual World Champion Los Angeles Dodgers were on July 31 in position to claim a wild card spot, although they had only played eight games. And if you're wondering who the one team was to come from more than two games back – it was the 1962 San Francisco Giants, who were four games behind the Los Angeles Dodgers on July 31. As they did in 1951, they overtook their rivals to win the National League, before losing to the New York Yankees in the World Series. But it hasn't happened again since.

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