

California Universal Preschool

California families vary in structure, size, cultural priorities, linguistic needs and geographic location. A Universal Preschool (UP) system will provide options to allow families to decide which program best aligns with their individual needs and the needs of their young children. Many community-based programs are deeply rooted in their neighborhoods, with programming offered by and to communities of color—we need to preserve and enhance these. Given California’s population with a range of diverse ethnic and racial groups, the UP system must meet the needs of Black, Latinx, Indigenous and other communities of color and be developed in a way that is equitable and accessible. Education at its core must value love and community understanding for those who have historically lacked access.

The goal of a UP program is that all three and four-year-old children have access to free early care and education (ECE) programs. This paper presents a vision for a fully funded, integrated mixed-delivery UP system in California, which would be provided in community child care settings (including family child care), Head Start and school-based sites, in order to offer options for families to select the setting which best meets the needs of their child and family.

Three and four-year-old children have a wide array of needs for services that align with their cultural, linguistic and development needs. Care, nurturing and attachment are critical elements of quality necessary to ensure their healthy growth and brain development. These features along with age appropriate early learning opportunities should be offered in all settings. Private, community-based care providers offer flexibility in hours and length of care that many families need. Often, these providers care for children during non-traditional hours (nights, swing shifts, and weekends) *and* for a full instructional day. Most children in this age group have parents in the workforce and require extended and flexible hours to meet their child care needs. California’s UP system must support our 24/7 economy so that families can go to work knowing their child’s care needs are being met.

This paper outlines the key aspects necessary to develop an integrated, mixed delivery child care and Universal Preschool program for children birth through age five that promotes consistency, equity, and access to all families in California.

Parent Choice

Community-based providers offer language and cultural support for dual language learners and families. These providers also provide continuity for children to stay with the same provider for many years, and continuity for families with children of different ages. California’s UP system must support a family’s ability to select the provider and program that best fits their cultural needs and preferences.

A mixed delivery UP model will preserve community-based child care capacity for all children birth through school age and provide a broader range of choice for children and families. Transitional Kindergarten (TK) is only funded for school-based settings, which severely limits program offerings, including type, size, mixed age groups, location, length of day, non-traditional hours, and other services that families of young children need. Incorporating TK programs into a broader mixed delivery system would ensure that the UP system best serves children, families, and providers.

Universal Preschool Programming

California's UP program should align with and opt into the plan outlined in the federal Build Back Better Act to equitably divide spaces between child care, Head Start, and public schools in each 0-5 age group to ensure access and meet child and family needs. Families should have access to the broad array of center-based, home-based, or school-based program that best meets their needs without worrying about differing out-of-pocket costs, quality standards, or health and safety standards. We propose the following changes toward alignment with the Build Back Better Act:

- Universal Preschool ratios should not exceed 10 children to one adult, as established under Head Start criteria but not in the current public school system.
- Curriculum should be developmentally appropriate, including identity formation, social-emotional development, physical, and cognitive learning, rather than academic-only programs.
- Community-based and school based programs should be held to the same early learning licensing standards.
- The State should utilize the existing funding mechanisms of direct contracts with community-based organizations (Title 5 – CSPP and CCTR) and alternative payment through local child care infrastructure agencies (Alternative Payment Programs/Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies), which already have agreements with most licensed providers in the state. These agencies have a track record of over 50 years of helping families choose the best program that meets their family's needs and eligibility.
- The State should create a robust consumer education platform and offer families navigation to the types of services available to meet their preschool needs and directly enroll them in programs.

The advantages to this approach include:

- Continued and added holistic services for families with low incomes, including leveraging federal funding through Head Start and Early Head Start.
- Group size and setting options for children of differing needs.
- Stability for licensed providers such that they will not be forced to close due to declining enrollments of preschool-aged children.
- Increased efficiency by utilizing existing age-appropriate classroom space and minimizing the cost of converting or building additional classrooms.
- Full-day, full-year programs to meet the needs of parents who work full time and non-traditional hours.

California's UP program should be an active partnership between local education agencies, community-based early care and education providers, and child care resource and referral agencies (R&Rs) located in each county. This will ensure that all programs provide quality care that is culturally appropriate, flexible, and meets learning standards.

Enrollment

Under this proposal, families would enroll through a portal that allows them to access and review programs across a diversity of settings such as, child care center, family child care, Head Start, and school-based. In addition, families would have the capacity to select their preferred care option based

upon (but not limited to) program size, hours of care, curriculum and/or special services, and convenience of location.

The portal would provide information about all programs to inform families on how to contact their local R&R agency for further information and support. For example, the [New York City Pre-K online enrollment process](#) is a one-door option for families and shows a full suite of options for preschool. There should be a centralized information page on the California Department of Social Services and California Department of Education website that explains these options and offers additional resources. The website should be translated into multiple languages and written in a clear and concise manner.

Compensation

Providers should be compensated at a wage that covers the full cost of high quality care and supports quality of life for providers, starting at no less than regional living wage, as outlined in the Build Back Better Act. The history of slavery and labor exclusions targeting Black and immigrant workers have led to poverty wages that are not acceptable.

Reimbursement rates should reflect the geography and area of a program, the age of children served, and the length of the service day. Furthermore, providers with competencies similar to early elementary teachers, as measure by credentials, permits, competency measures, and experience, should be compensated at the same level.

The State should work with necessary stakeholders to provide benefits and retirement for all providers, including the following stakeholder groups:

- Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers
- Family Child Care Home (FCC/FCCH) providers
- Child Care Center providers
- Tribal Child Care providers
- Parents and parent advocacy groups
- Provider unions and other advocacy groups

Workforce Development

The State should use funding as outlined in the Build Back Better Act to create workforce pathways for existing child care providers to meet the requirements to be teachers in the UP program.

The State should make free training and professional development opportunities and technical and classroom resources available to incentivize quality improvement and equitable classroom settings regardless of program type or geography. The program should also offer opportunities for providers to engage in cohorts or networks to create a support system for providers navigating this new system.

California should utilize workforce development dollars to build the professional capacity of Dual Language Learner providers to ensure they are included in the initiative. Thus, increase the number of educators who are able to support the diverse languages of children and families in the UP program, including high-demand languages such as Spanish, Cantonese, and Tagalog.

Apprenticeships should be developed in collaboration with local California Community Colleges and employers to help recruit providers and develop professional skills. All workforce and professional

development opportunities should be offered in multiple languages as well as presented in clear, plain language. Multiple sessions should be offered during evenings and weekends to maximize attendance and flexibility for interested providers.

Qualifications

In the Universal Preschool program, all teachers and private child care providers must meet minimum qualifications in alignment with the Build Back Better Act:

- Lead teachers shall have a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or a related field within six years (2027).
- The State shall create education and workforce development pathways to increase bachelor’s degree attainment in early childhood education, including models such as career pathways and registered apprenticeship.
- The above requirement shall not apply to individuals employed as a provider or early educator for a cumulative three of the last five years.

Curriculum

Learning principles should be age appropriate with an emphasis on cognitive, social and emotional development. Using play as the method for learning, children enrolled in either the school district program or in private care will have access to quality learning that is suited to early childhood development.

The UP program should be responsive to children’s needs for a sense of belonging, including support for language, anti-racism, and diverse cultural needs in all settings. In addition, all programs should have and demonstrate effort toward strategies that maintain and expand a racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse workforce.

Impact on the Field

As we rebuild after the loss of significant ECE capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical to leverage partnerships with both community-based and school-based providers, utilize and strengthen existing child care infrastructure, and blend local, state, and federal funds to create a statewide ECE program that serves the diverse needs of all California families.

Benefits to Families

Families living in rural parts of the state may not have access to the California State Preschool Program, Head Start, or a school district program or transportation. By allowing them to select a private provider who lives in close proximity, all families will have access to care.

A mixed-delivery system should leverage the comprehensive services of Head Start by promoting mixed income groups in Head Start. This will maximize the use of Head Start facilities and provide access for families who would benefit from the supportive services in Head Start.

Infant and Toddler Care

In other states, Universal Preschool programs that used a school-based only setting resulted in negative impacts on private, community-based child care providers. This had a cascading negative impact by

increasing cost to families or reducing the availability of infant and toddler care due to program closures.

Just as with Universal Preschool, California should opt into the universal child care plan in the federal Build Back Better Act. In addition, the state’s UP program should be integrated with the child care delivery system to ensure that expanding services for three and four-year-olds does not limit child care for children birth to age three.

Conclusion

As we envision and develop California’s early care and education system, it is critical to ensure it meets the diverse needs of families, stabilizes and grows the workforce, and uses an equity lens to fund and support effective systems in all communities. The Build Back Better Act has set clear guidance on how states could expand to a universal system for children birth through five.

In other states, like Oklahoma, where a school based only model was implemented had negative consequences to the overall supply of child care for infants and toddlers and school-age children. Many of these states and local areas, like New York City, had to change course and build a mixed delivery system to meet their goals. California should learn from this to avoid making similar mistakes.

We encourage California to follow the examples of successful Universal Preschool programs in other states and cities, and to develop a system that builds upon and strengthens the existing early care and education system rather than creating a new, bifurcated system that limits families’ choices and puts existing programs out of business.

Signatories:

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| California Alternative Payment Program Association | First 5 California |
| California Child Care Resource & Referral Network | Head Start California |
| California Rural Indian Health Board | KinderCare |
| Californians for Quality Early Learning | Learning Care Group |
| Child Care Law Center | Parent Voices |
| Child Care Resource Center | SEIU/CCPU |
| Children’s Council of San Francisco | Tribal Child Care Association of California |
| Crystal Stairs | UDW/CCPU |
| Early Care and Education Consortium | YMCA of San Diego County |
| Early Care and Education Pathways To Success | 4Cs Sonoma County |
| EveryChild California | |