

Investments in Early Childhood Education Workers Key to Expanding Access and Improving Quality



The California Federation of Teachers (CFT) believes that access to high-quality education is the right of every student and the responsibility of us all.

The early years of a child's life are key to healthy development and future productivity. High-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs have positive impacts on young children's learning and long-term life outcomes and can help make a difference in our state's future economic competitiveness. They are a valuable investment.

This fourth report from RAND's *California Preschool Study* shows that publicly-funded preschool in California is currently:

- **Underfunded.** The state invests approximately \$2 billion per year in preschool programs; cutbacks are likely in the current budget environment.
- **Not accessible to enough children.** Only one-half of eligible three- and four-year olds are served.
- **Of uneven quality.** The state provides minimal regulation and weak quality standards and offers no incentives to preschools based on the quality of their programs.
- **Inefficiently allocating resources.** A bureaucratically complex system of contracting and reimbursement leads to some available funds going unspent.

RAND recommends ensuring that high quality programs are available for children who need them most. Central to the list of RAND policy recommendations is creating a well-designed, coordinated plan to prepare teachers. The study also provides valuable guidance on how California can get the most for its money by smartly and efficiently using ECE dollars to help close the achievement gap.

Quality Preschool Matters

Many of California's children don't have an equal start in life. Children from low-income families often receive less support for early language, literacy, and social development than their more affluent peers. Research shows that between one-third and one-half of the achievement gap already exists by the time children begin first grade.

"We must at a minimum meet the challenge of improving our early childhood education system."

President Obama

**For a free copy
of the California
Preschool Study,
go to www.cft.org**

High-quality ECE programs can improve young children's learning and help narrow this achievement gap. This report shows how California can make some smart investments.

Unfortunately, only one of every seven California children are in high-quality pre-K programs. Those with the biggest readiness gaps are least likely to attend center-based preschool programs of any quality.

While children from all backgrounds benefit from participation in quality ECE programs, research demonstrates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds make the greatest gains. RAND recommends expanding preschool access by promoting higher quality preschool experiences for those in subsidized programs.

We Can't Let Budget Difficulties Take Us Backwards

California's multi-billion dollar budget deficit threatens many early childhood education investments. As the state prepares to cut ECE programs, obtaining funds to partially offset these reductions to preschool education may be possible with the new federal funding from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), as well as that proposed in next year's federal budget.

These budget realities necessitate prioritization of policies that can be implemented with *few additional resources*. The RAND study recommends:

- Prioritization of eligibility and allocation of publicly-funded preschool slots to those children who can benefit the most;
- Modification of the state's preschool contract and reimbursement system to increase efficiency;
- Increased regulation and inspection of pre-schools, and development of a quality rating and incentive system; and
- Improvement of the ECE workforce development system to better prepare preschool teachers to deliver high-quality programming and to support ongoing professional development.

We can't afford to wait. Making the investments now to build quality preschool programs and then progressively expanding access to those programs is critical to narrowing the achievement gap for all students.

Key Components of High-Quality Early Childhood Education

High-quality ECE programs employ qualified teachers, have small class sizes, and use developmentally appropriate curricula.

The RAND study identifies four elements common to the best preschool programs:

1. Promotion of school readiness by providing developmentally appropriate learning opportunities;
2. High levels of teacher education and training;
3. Use of research-based curricula; and
4. High standards for children's health and safety.

