

# Making Early Education a Priority

Evidence from the 2019  
PACE/USC Rossier Voter Poll

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**G**overnor Gavin Newsom campaigned on a “cradle to career” education strategy that identified childcare and early education as key priorities. The Governor’s 2019 Budget Proposal follows through with the inclusion of several initiatives aimed at increasing support for children five and younger. Despite strong evidence that high-quality early education programs can have a powerful impact on children’s future success in school, college, and the workforce, California voters rank new investments in prenatal and early childhood services below other educational priorities, including improving the quality of K-12 education and making college affordable. Building public support for aggressive investment to expand access to and improve quality of early education programs is likely to require more active engagement on this issue by the Governor and his allies.

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## Introduction

The *Getting Down to Facts II* (GDTFII) project included a set of seven studies focused on educational, health, and social services that California provides to children five and younger.<sup>1</sup> The researchers found strong evidence showing that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) and pre-K programs can have a powerful impact on children's future successes. The study also found that the achievement gap based on children's economic backgrounds is already wide when children enter kindergarten, moreso in California than in most other states. The authors also show that California's ECE/pre-K programs are administratively fragmented, poorly regulated, and systematically underfunded.<sup>2</sup> They therefore conclude that the future prosperity of California and its citizens will require major policy reforms and large investments aimed at expanding and strengthening the state's ECE/pre-K programs, especially for the poorest children.

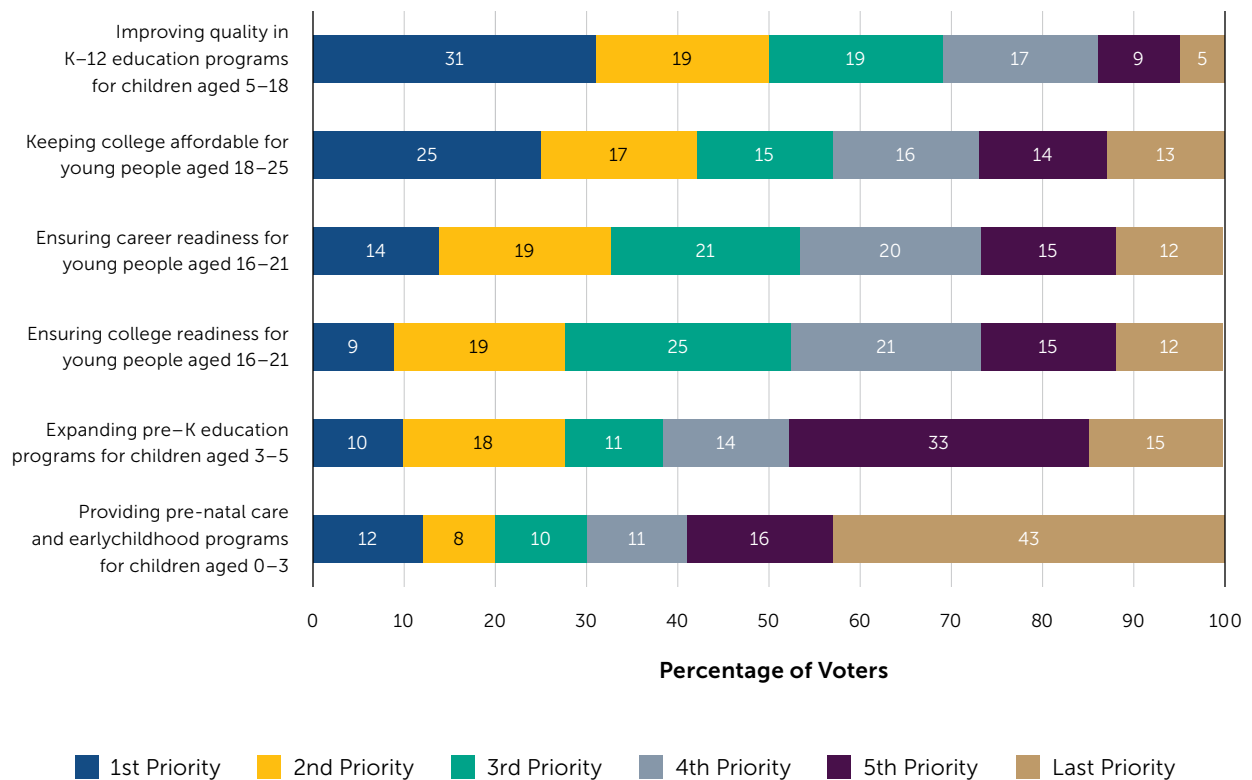
Governor Gavin Newsom campaigned on a "cradle to career" education strategy, promising to address critical issues at every level of California's education system and at every stage of young people's lives.<sup>3</sup> Expansion and improvement of early education are key priorities in this strategy. The Governor's 2019 Budget Proposal includes several initiatives that will increase support for children under the age of six, including funding full-day, full-year slots in state preschools for all eligible low-income four-year olds; expanding subsidized child-care facilities for children birth to age 3; and increasing investments in the education and ongoing training of the child-care workforce.<sup>4</sup>

The ECE/pre-K initiatives that the Governor has proposed are relatively modest, and several are funded with one-time appropriations drawn from the state's current budget surplus,<sup>5</sup> but they don't address the long-term fiscal commitment required to ensure high-quality ECE/pre-K programs for all California children. Polling by the Public Policy Institute of California and Choose Children found broad support among California voters for increasing the state investment in ECE/pre-K programs, but results from a recent poll conducted by the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California and Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) suggest that support for these programs lags that of other educational priorities, such as improving the quality of K-12 education and making higher education affordable. Building public support for greater investment in ECE/pre-K, therefore, could be challenging for the governor and other supporters of expanding ECE/pre-K education.

## Poll Results

When voters are asked about the specific initiatives included in Newsom’s cradle-to-career education agenda—expanding pre-K education programs for children age 3-5 and providing prenatal care and early childhood programs for children 0-3—the poll found relatively weak public support, as Figure 1 shows. Among the Governor’s six priorities, expanding pre-K ranks fifth and providing prenatal care and programs for infants and toddlers ranks last, with a notable 43 percent of voters identifying programs for very young children as their lowest education-related priority. This is true across all demographic and political groups.<sup>6</sup>

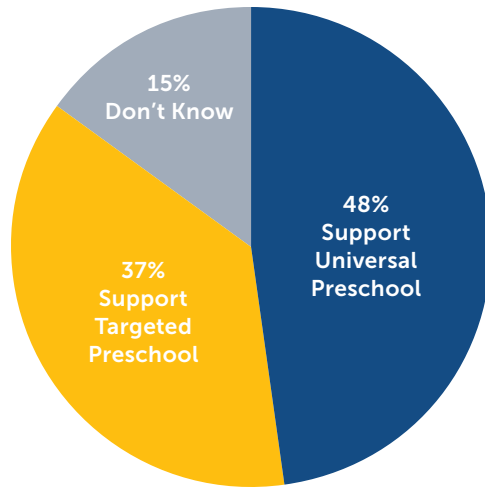
**Figure 1.** Voter Ranking of Education Priorities



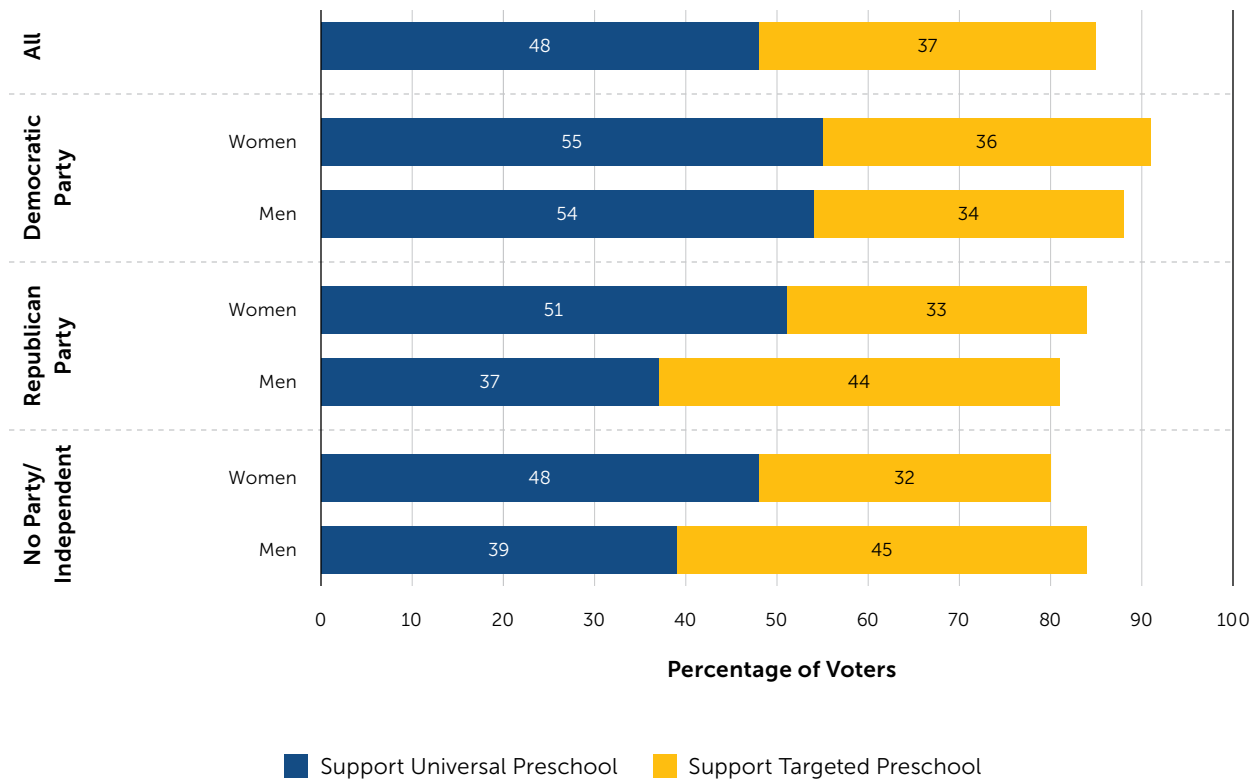
Note: Totals may not sum to 100 because of rounding errors.

On the question of whether preschool programs should be available to all families or targeted to those with the greatest need, a plurality (48 percent to 37 percent) favors universal over targeted programs (See Figure 2). The greatest support for targeted programs is found among men identifying as Republican and No Party Preference/Independent (NPP), and among high-income (\$250K+) voters; voters in all other demographic and political groups favor universal programs (See Figure 3).

**Figure 2.** Support for Universal or Targeted Preschool Among California Voters

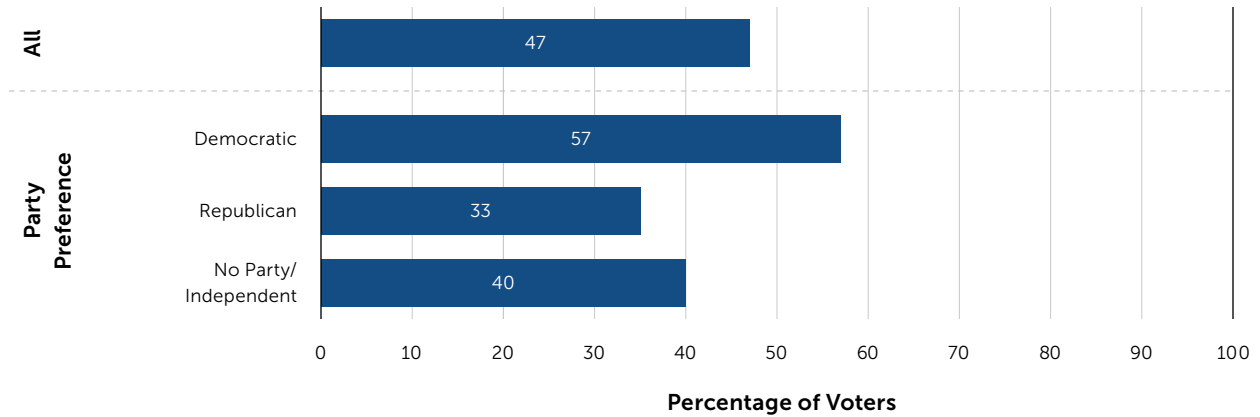


**Figure 3.** Support for Universal or Targeted Preschool Among California Voters, By Party and Gender



Voters are split in predictable ways on the question of whether California should spend more to expand and improve ECE and pre-K programs. A majority of Democrats expressed support, compared to just over a third of Republicans and 40 percent of NPP voters (See Figure 4). Voters from all income groups except the very highest (\$250K+) support spending more on these programs.

**Figure 4.** Voter Support for Investing In Early Childhood Education, By Party

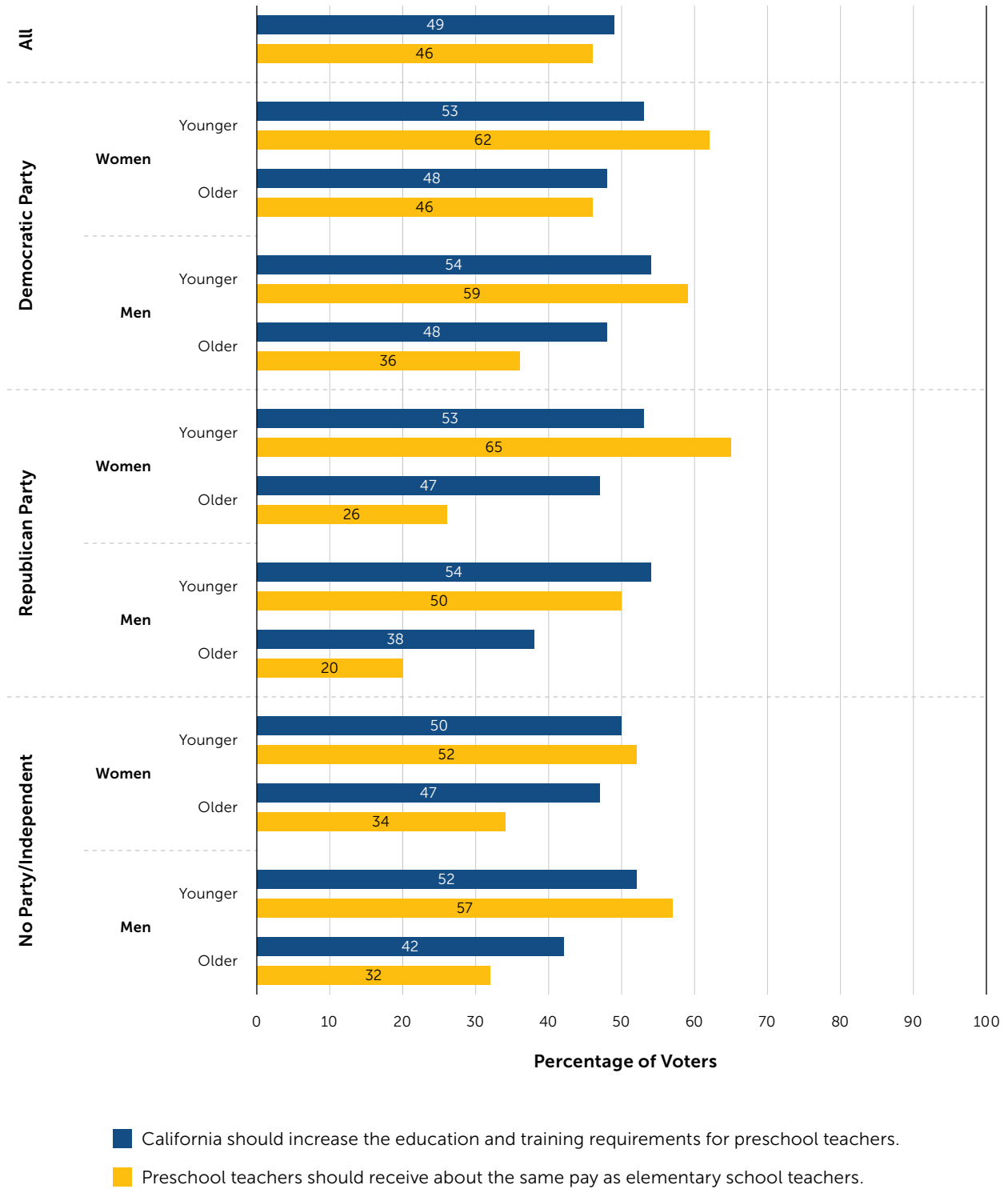


When proponents of additional spending were asked whether they would support raising taxes to pay for bigger and better programs most Democratic voters said yes, while most Republican and NPP voters said no, preferring to re-allocate funds from other uses. Most middle-class (incomes of \$35-75K) supporters of additional spending opposed raising taxes to support ECE and pre-K programs, while supporters from all other income groups favored higher taxes to expand these programs.

As the GDTFII studies have made clear, child-care workers and pre-school teachers in California are poorly paid and preparation requirements are very low compared to most other states. Many early-childhood educators have received only minimal preparation (12 to 24 college credits) for their jobs, and few experience supervised practice teaching. These poorly-prepared staff are also poorly paid. The median wage for pre-K teachers is about \$16 per hour, and nearly 60 percent of child-care providers rely on some form of public assistance.<sup>7</sup>

A better trained workforce is key to meaningful improvements in the quality of ECE/pre-K education in California, and that requires higher pay and benefits. Not quite half of all poll respondents said they favor increasing educational requirements for preschool teachers and paying them similar wages to elementary school teachers, but a substantial minority oppose both changes (See Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Support for Increasing Preschool Teacher Education Requirements and Pay, By Party, Gender, and Age



Voters generally support requiring pre-K teachers to earn a bachelor's degree. The exceptions are older Republican and NPP men, who oppose this change by a small margin. Among all categories of respondents who agree with the need for more rigorous education requirements, more than 50 percent favor BA degrees for pre-K teachers, even when told that this change would lead to a very large increase in state spending on preschool.

As seen in Figure 5, voters' views are mixed on the question of whether pre-K teachers should be paid about the same as their elementary school counterparts. Democrats and women generally support this change, while Republicans and men are generally opposed. While White and Asian voters are more split on this question, Latino and Black voters expressed strong support, and Asians are less strongly supportive. Age and income also play a role in voter preferences. A substantial majority of voters under age 50 support higher pay for preschool teachers, while nearly half of voters 50 and over are opposed. The majority of voters with incomes under \$75K agree that pre-K teachers should be paid about the same as elementary teachers, while the majority of voters with incomes over \$150K disagree. Voters with incomes between \$75K and \$150K are evenly split.

When supporters of higher pay for pre-K teachers are presented with an additional choice (pay pre-K teachers more than they are paid now, but less than elementary teachers) respondents in many (but not all) demographic and political categories favor this alternative. Overall, paying pre-K teachers more than they are paid now but less than elementary teachers is favored by 45 percent of those who support higher pay, while 40 percent favor paying pre-K teachers the same wages as elementary teachers. Interestingly, pluralities of Republican and NPP supporters of higher pay continue to affirm that pre-K teachers should be paid about the same as elementary school teachers, while a strong majority of Democrats (56 percent) supports paying them more but not as much as teachers in elementary schools.

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## Conclusion

Research from GDTFII and elsewhere makes a powerful and persuasive case for greatly increased investments in the education of children from birth to age 5, both to expand access to care and education programs and to improve quality. Previous polls have shown very strong public support for increased investment in early learning, including a preference for universal over targeted programs, which entails even higher costs to the state if services are to be free to all families.

Our poll confirms these findings, but also suggests that voters see investments to expand and improve programs for young children as less urgent than spending on other educational goals, including improved quality in K-12 education and keeping college affordable. There are many reasons why voters might assign a relatively low priority to early learning, but it is a political reality that will have to be taken into account in making the case for an expanded investment in programs and services for children aged 5 and younger.

Raising education requirements for early childhood educators (as GDTFII recommends) would require the state to pay higher salaries in order to ensure a sufficient supply of candidates for these jobs. Although there is substantial support for increasing both education standards and pay, voter support for large new expenditures in pre-K education is far from solid if they believe the investment in early learning will result in reduced support for older students. If the Governor and the Legislature want to expand and improve services for California's youngest residents, they will have to educate the public on the benefits of early childhood education, and build political support for the significantly larger costs to the state.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Stipek, D., Pizzo, P., Hunt, N., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., Chávez, R., Bardack, S. R., & Anantharajan, M. (2018). *Getting down to facts II: Early childhood education in California*. Retrieved from [https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII\\_Report\\_Stipek.pdf](https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII_Report_Stipek.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Stipek, D., Pizzo, P., Hunt, N., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., Chávez, R., Bardack, S. R., & Anantharajan, M. (2018). *Getting down to facts II: Early childhood education in California*. Retrieved from [https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII\\_Report\\_Stipek.pdf](https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII_Report_Stipek.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Fischer, K. (2018, September 23). Newsom's 'cradle-to-career' education pledge will require sweeping changes in California. Retrieved from <https://edsource.org/2018/newsoms-cradle-to-career-education-pledge-will-require-sweeping-changes-in-california/602720>
- <sup>4</sup> Welcome to California's 2019-20 Governor's Budget. (2019, January 10). Retrieved from <http://www.ebudget.ca.gov/budget/2019-20/#/Home>
- <sup>5</sup> Hough, H., & Myung, J. (2019, February 01). The Governor's Budget Proposal and Getting Down to Facts II: Evidence to Inform Policy. Retrieved from <https://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/governors-budget-gdtfii>
- <sup>6</sup> The one exception is in our relatively small sub-sample of African-American voters (n=80). Among Black voters support for prenatal and ECE programs is exceptionally strong, outranking support both for pre-K programs and also for programs aimed at ensuring college and career readiness for young adults (age 16-21). A larger share of African-American voters identified prenatal and ECE programs as their first priority than did so for any other item on the cradle-to career agenda.
- <sup>7</sup> Stipek et al. (2018). *Getting down to facts II: Early childhood education in California*.

## Author Biographies

**David N. Plank** is a Senior Fellow with Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). Dr. Plank served as Executive Director of PACE for over 10 years, and was a Professor at Michigan State University, where he founded and directed the Education Policy Center. Plank is the author or editor of six books, and has published widely in a number of different fields, including economics of education, history of education, and educational policy.

**Deborah Stipek** is the Judy Koch Professor of Education at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, where she served as Dean. She is also the Peter E. Haas Faculty Director of the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University and is a faculty director of PACE. Her scholarship focuses on early childhood education policy, particularly as it impacts children of color and children living in poverty. She currently chairs the Heising-Simons Development and Research on Early Math Education (DREME) Network.

## Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

Founded in 1983, PACE

- Publishes policy briefs, research reports, and working papers that address key policy issues in California's education system.
- Convenes seminars and briefings that make current research accessible to policy audiences throughout California.
- Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

### Related Publications

Cynthia Coburn, Elizabeth Friedmann, Kelly McMahon, Graciela Borsato, Abigail Stein, Natalie Jou, Seenae Chong, Rebekah LeMahieu, Megan Franke, Sonia Ibarra, Deborah J. Stipek. **Fostering Pre-K to Elementary Alignment and Continuity in Mathematics in Urban School Districts: Challenges and Possibilities.** PACE. 2018

**Deborah Stipek. Early Childhood Education in California.** *Getting Down to Facts II.* PACE. 2018.

Heather Hough and Jeannie Myung. **The Governor's Budget Proposal and Getting Down to Facts II: Evidence to Inform Policy.** PACE. 2019.

Morgan S. Polikoff, Heather Hough, Julie A. Marsh, David N. Plank. **Californians and Public Education: Views from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier Poll.** PACE. 2019.



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