A New Era in Public Education: A Focus on Early Childhood

Nurturing and supporting every single child to achieve their full potential must be the utmost priority for every school district leader. To get it right the research is clear: we must start early.

There is a tremendous opportunity for California to be one of the best educated, most diverse, multilingual populations in the world. Unfortunately, the state continues to lag behind other states, as well as many comparable nations, in educational outcomes in part due to decades of underfunding in education,[1] and an acute failure to invest in early childhood.[2]

EARLY CHILDHOOD INVESTMENT SPOTLIGHTS

With the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the state's more than 970 school districts have flexibility to decide which programs and investments best support their student population, with particular focus on supporting students who are low income, English learners, and in foster care. Innovative school district leaders have used their LCFF resources and leveraged partnerships to add and expand programs that support children and families in the early years. Children Now, in partnership with First 5 Santa Clara, has created a series of briefs spotlighting diverse investments that help boost positive outcomes for students, increase public school enrollment, reduce costly special education, and improve English Learner reclassification rates. Within this series, district leaders provide insight into how they initiated these investments and why they were the right approaches for their students and community.

While preschool often dominates discussions on early learning, school district leaders are increasingly focusing on children from prenatal to age 8. Indeed, districts that have leveraged and developed effective programs and partnerships **started off with a strong strategic plan** at the district or county levels that focus on young children. Examples include:

> Alum Rock Union School District adopted the "Quality for All" plan, which was developed collaboratively with community partners and is the driving force behind all decisions related to early childhood within the district.
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> The Birth through Third Grade Challenge (B3 Fresno County) effort developed a comprehensive model for addressing the reading gap and included all three school district superintendents, private partners and county agency leaders.
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> The Los Angeles Unified School District recently convened a Birth to Eight Roadmap steering committee, charged with creating a three-year plan that included staff from the large district's major divisions, community stakeholders, county agencies and board members.

There is a compelling body of research available on the importance of the early childhood years: stable, positive relationships nurture healthy brain development;[3] early identification and intervention can reduce special education costs over time;[4] and access to quality early childhood programs can improve executive function[5], promote healthy social emotional development, improved English language proficiency at kindergarten entry,[6] close achievement gaps and improve graduation rates.[7]

NEW LEADERSHIP: CALIFORNIA'S GOVERNOR

With the election of a new governor in 2018, California marked a turning point in its approach to supporting children from the very start of their lives. Governor Newsom's first actions in office made his intentions clear: he prioritizes investments in California's greatest resource, young children. The Governor's first budget identifies opportunities to improve the quality of and expand access to key early childhood programs and the need to address these issues over the long term through strategic planning. In order to take advantage of new opportunities to expand programming and make new investments in early childhood supports, savvy school district leaders should assess their district's capacity to deliver early childhood programs to more young children from birth to age 5 in their community including:

- The number of qualified teachers and local providers with education and training in early childhood development and dual language development;
- Identifying facilities conducive to high quality early learning environments (indoor and outdoor) for infants thru kindergarteners;
- Supporting early developmental screenings and robust special education supports;
- Systems and resources necessary to provide ongoing professional development for early childhood educators; and
- Improving transition between stages and aligning curriculum in child care, preschool and kindergarten through third grade.

Policy Recommendations for Districts

The table below provides examples of opportunities that districts can implement in support of strengthening local early childhood programs and systems in their communities. This list represents a small set of programmatic and partnership opportunities that exist.

The Support	The Impact	The Opportunity
Pregnant and Parenting Teen Programs, a former categorical program, California School Age Families Education Program (Cal-SAFE), provide childcare, academic supports, and linkages to social services programs to pregnant and parenting students[8]	• CalSAFE achieved a 73% graduation rate among parenting teens that was 35 percentage points above the national average of 38%[9] • Nearly 2/3 of children of participating students were enrolled in state-funded child-care programs[10]	Districts can provide and leverage existing supports for pregnant and parenting students by improving: • Availability of subsidized childcare • Referrals to services and benefits, such as WIC and CalFresh • Enactment of policies and partnerships that meet comprehensive student needs • Co-locating key services such as home visiting programs
Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are community hubs that are focused on providing comprehensive services that improve the well-being of children, youth, and families. They can be located in the community and on school sites.[11]	• Increase stability and family functioning through referrals and assistance in accessing critical resources and supports including: Parenting Programs, Interactive Time for Parents and Children, Health Referrals, Housing Supports, etc.[12] • Improve attendance among students being served [13]	Districts can partner with FRCs to provide access to a portfolio of whole-child supports, this includes: • Providing access to on-campus and district facilities • Building strong referral and support systems • Leveraging funding to secure additional state, federal and private grant dollars
Dual Language Immersion Programs are designed to serve both English learners (EL) and English-speaking students together in the same classroom. The goal of the program is for both groups of students to become bilingual in English and a second language.	• Increases reading proficiency by 13-22 percentage points [14] • Expedites the probability of reclassification by four percentage points [15] • Results in longer-term, higher performance in reclassification rates and overall English language arts proficiency than English-immersion programs [16]	Districts can collaborate with early learning and care providers to: • Provide professional development opportunities to align practices • Establish programs and supports in communities with high concentrations of non-English speakers • Align instructional practices to meet the needs of non-English speakers
Improve Alignment and Expand Professional Development for Birth through Age 8 Professionals[17] **and Elementary School Principals** to increase understanding of developmentally-appropriate educational standards and curricula, and promote best practices for young learners.	• Improves quality of learning from the beginning and ensures developmentally-appropriate methods and curricula along the entire continuum. • Strengthens the successful transition of children between the early learning and TK-12 systems [18] • Builds a shared commitment to quality and promotes accountability for student outcomes	District leaders and early learning providers can help build a shared culture of high expectations and high-quality, developmentally-appropriate programs by: • Providing access to district professional development to early learning and care providers • Coordinating joint planning meetings between early learning and TK-3rd-grade professionals

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