

2021

Pro-Kid Policy Agenda for California

The 2021 Pro-Kid Policy Agenda for California is the comprehensive state-level roadmap to ensure that all children have the necessary supports to reach their full potential. California has an obligation to end systemic injustices that create barriers to kids of color, as well as kids living in poverty and undocumented kids, from growing up healthy and ready for college, career, and civic life. This work has only become more urgent as the COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on the lives of California's kids, especially Black and brown children, and other children of color. Children and youth are increasingly experiencing stress, social isolation, disconnectedness and serious mental health issues. And the learning loss and lack of preventive health care because of the pandemic threatens this entire generation of children.

We urge policymakers to use the *Pro-Kid Agenda* as a guide to take long overdue action now to ensure California's systems for children are equitable, well-funded, high-quality, and accountable to kids' success. Doing right by all kids is not only the right thing to do, but also essential to our state's ability to thrive. Our continued economic growth and strong democracy is dependent on a healthy and educated workforce.

State policymakers urgently need to make smart, strategic, and quality investments in California's children to address poverty and close the widening income divide. Working together, we can build a California where all children have the chance to live out their dreams. *The Pro-Kid Agenda* can help us get there.

The Agenda was compiled by Children Now, California's whole-child organization focused on the range of issues critical to improving children's well-being, including early learning and development, K-12 and higher education, children's health, family and economic supports and foster care. The organization plays a lead role in more than 90 coalitions across the state and coordinates The Children's Movement of California, a network of more than 4,100 diverse organizations statewide, including direct service, business, civil rights, youth, parent, faith-based, and community groups. *The Agenda* reflects the top priorities of each of those coalitions and members. For questions or comments about the *Agenda*, please email agenda@childrennow.org



Health

Health Insurance

California policymakers must ensure that every single child is enrolled in health coverage and receiving comprehensive and consistent benefits across public and private insurance plans, so that all families can access high-quality, affordable care for their children. In the near-term, the California Department of Health Care Services should proactively work to streamline enrollment for all eligible-but-currently uninsured California children and youth up to age 26, and pregnant women into Medi-Cal coverage, especially since the number of uninsured California children is on the rise after two decades of steady decline. The state should continue to fight against damaging federal proposals, such as restrictive and punitive changes to immigration laws and poverty calculations, to protect California children's health coverage and well-being.

Health Care Accountability

California policymakers must make kids the priority in health care. Our leaders should ensure that the state is paying a fair rate for the services that kids need, and that kids are receiving those services. California should have strong contracts with Medi-Cal managed care plans that reward improvement in child health outcomes and are closely monitored and effectively enforced to guarantee children will get the care they need. In the near-term, the state should develop a new Medi-Cal contract for children's health care that establishes accountability and payment mechanisms for children's health care services that are: centered on equity; rooted in youth and parent voice; and firmly held to high standards that drive improvement in child health outcomes. The state also needs to comprehensively collect and analyze a full range of data to effectively hold the Medi-Cal system accountable for payments made to deliver quality medical, dental, and behavioral health care for children that is required by federal law.

Health Care Access

California policymakers must prioritize improving families' access to culturally-appropriate health care providers for their children in a timely way. In particular, there must be a stronger and more proactive focus on reducing the racial, socioeconomic, language, and geographic disparities in children's health care access and outcomes. In the near-term, the California Department of Health Care Services must promote better access and ensure better outreach about preventive and other health care services available for children. The state must also prioritize children's access needs when exploring Medi-Cal reforms or policy options to innovatively address the health care, social, and environmental conditions that can exacerbate chronic problems, like pediatric asthma.



Preventive Screenings

California policymakers must ensure that every young child receives required routine developmental, behavioral, and other preventive health screenings in a timely way and at the intervals recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Also, to meet the requirements of federal law, the state must invest in robust referral and early intervention systems to connect kids with services they may need for supporting their healthy growth and development. In the near-term, the state should maintain payments for child health screenings, proactively work to improve the low rate of kids receiving Medi-Cal screenings, and identify ways to strengthen and expand linkages to needed early intervention services.

Behavioral Health Care

California policymakers need to prioritize policies and programs that work across sectors to prevent behavioral health challenges as well as promptly and effectively treat difficulties that arise. The state should create a comprehensive plan to completely overhaul the current system because it has been unable to properly identify youth in need and provide supports. This plan must identify target metrics that will move the state forward on improving children's mental health outcomes, such as dramatically reducing youth suicides. In the near-term, the state should provide funding for all the school-county partnerships that applied but were not funded in 2020 to provide mental health services in schools. The state should invest in the newly-formed Office of Suicide Prevention and eliminate the requirement for children to receive a diagnosis prior to accessing treatment.

Preventing Trauma & Supporting Healing

California's leaders must work together to implement cross-sector policies to prevent childhood trauma, such as mandating trauma-informed training for all child-serving professionals, providing proactive coping skills coaching for all students via Multi-Tiered System of Support approaches at all schools, and scaling up parenting support programs. The state must also support the healing and wellness of children who have already endured trauma, through routine screening, referral to services for the child and their family, and follow up. In the near-term, the state should ensure strong implementation of the new trauma screenings benefit in Medi-Cal, expand trauma screenings to private insurance and provide clarity on connections between pediatric providers and community services.



Oral Health Care

California should achieve the vision of every child being cavity free at age three. Scaling local models that allow for data-sharing between medical providers and dental providers; using community health workers to help coordinate care and provide oral health education; and scaling effective telehealth modalities, including virtual dental homes, to bring and facilitate care, particularly in dental care shortage areas, can be used to help ensure that health plans are fulfilling their contractual obligations. Policymakers should also prioritize investments in preventive services that reach kids where they are, such as child care sites, schools, WIC centers, and pediatricians' offices, and ensure that dental providers, such as hygienists, are integrated into community and medical settings. Tobacco tax revenue should remain dedicated to incentivizing Medi-Cal Dental providers and recruiting providers in high-need areas.

Food Security

California's leaders must ensure that every child has access to nutritious food, and at the very least that every eligible child is enrolled in CalFresh, school meals, and other nutrition supports. Policymakers must also dramatically increase access to healthy food choices for kids in and out of school. In the near-term, the state should streamline applications and enrollment; make nutrition assistance benefits more easily accessible to all California children experiencing need, regardless of immigration status; and expand access to universal free school meals to more students across the state.



Education

Infant & Toddler Care

California policymakers must ensure all families with infants and toddlers can access high-quality, stable, affordable child care in a variety of settings to meet individual families' needs and preferences. It is especially important to ensure foster families, families living in poverty, and other families experiencing need or risk are prioritized. In the near-term, the state needs to immediately invest in shoring up the fragile child care system that has been decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and over time build capacity to at least triple the number of infants and toddlers that receive state-funded child care services while simultaneously investing in the infrastructure necessary to ensure all eligible infants and toddlers in the state have access to quality care. This includes targeting resources for workforce development and facilities. It is also critical to restructure rates in order to rationalize the finance system and incentivize quality improvement.

Preschool & Transitional Kindergarten

The state must ensure high-quality, universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds and align and elevate foundational elements of quality across programs, including student-teacher ratios, professional standards, and comprehensive, wraparound supports. In the near-term, it should at minimum sustain existing capacity, and over time expand access to preschool for 3-year-olds; lower student-teacher ratios in transitional kindergarten classrooms to ensure developmental appropriateness; and provide more wraparound care to allow for parents' varying work hours and ensure children have supportive services that enable them to learn and thrive. Finally, the state should leverage federal early learning investments including better coordination with Head Start and Early Head Start.

Early Learning Workforce Compensation & Training

California must elevate early care and education as a profession, by raising education and experience standards over time, ensuring compensation rises commensurate with higher qualifications, and building future expansions of preschool and child care upon the foundation of a highly skilled, well-compensated workforce. Greater investment is needed in a coordinated quality improvement and workforce development system that supports individuals in gaining research-based competencies and skills, as well as the implementation of a statewide workforce registry. In the near-term, it is critical to restructure financing and rates to raise compensation and stabilize the workforce, over time bringing pay to parity with the TK-12 workforce for equivalent education and training across the continuum of providers and programs throughout California's mixed delivery system. In addition, essential work includes articulating competencies, qualifications, and related career advancement pathways.



Early Intervention & Special Education

Every California child who needs special education supports should get them, seamlessly, and as early as possible. The state must ensure every eligible child has access to an accountable, results-oriented, continuum of cradle-to-career special education supports and services. In early childhood, this means ensuring universal developmental screening and significantly expanding and improving early intervention services. In the TK-12 system, the state must ensure that students are receiving appropriate services aligned with their IEP even in the context of school closures and distance learning. It is also important to improve the quality of services and invest sufficiently in special education to keep pace with need.

Education for Dual Language & English Learners

California policymakers must prioritize education supports for Dual Language and English Learners, especially given the disproportionate negative impact these children have faced given recent child care and school closures, as well as inequitable distance learning opportunities. While mitigating the learning loss that has occurred, it is critical that policymakers promote an asset-based approach to children's bilingualism by ensuring children who are Dual Language and English Learners have the support necessary to develop knowledge and skills in both their home language and English, while providing rigorous core content with a focus on creating equity in opportunities and eliminating achievement gaps. To help achieve this goal, California must make concrete investments in Dual Language and English Learner supports, ensure early childhood educators and K-12 teachers have the skills necessary to support bilingualism and continue to improve the accountability system to truly highlight English Learners' achievements and needs.

Education Investment and Funding Accountability

Policymakers should address the state's severe underfunding of education, both through prioritization in the state budget and revenue increases. At a minimum, the state should pay down deferrals in education funding, and investments should be made in COLA and growth to ensure schools have the resources to avoid cuts, as well as one-time investment to address pandemic related costs and to help mitigate the learning loss that has occurred. Overall funding also needs to increase much faster than the general cost pressures education faces, including those of special education, pensions, health benefits, and facilities. At the same time, California must ensure that the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) supplemental and concentration grant funds are directly benefiting students who are English Learners, children from low-income households and youth in foster care, as the law intended. This includes immediately addressing the supplemental and concentration carryover funding loophole and implementing effective transparency mechanisms, including a standardized approach for accounting, to ensure an equitable distribution of funding.



Digital Divide & Learner-Centered Instruction

The pandemic and unprecedented wildfires have caused widespread school closures that are exacerbating already intolerable gaps in opportunity and achievement. Access to devices and internet connectivity is now fundamental to ensure students receive their constitutionally-guaranteed right to a public education. Policymakers must ensure that every student is provided these resources and that students and families have the support necessary to utilize these tools. Students need to be supported with instructional strategies that build on what they know and can do and allow them to catch up on core competencies or accelerate ahead based on their learning needs. It is essential that all students have one-to-one access to technology, learning outcomes are articulated across the curriculum, there are aligned performance assessments that allow students to demonstrate their mastery, and teachers can facilitate learning that has more individualized pacing. Policymakers should invest in the training and infrastructure to better enable districts and schools to effectively implement these instructional strategies to meet the unique needs of students.

STEM Education

All California kids need to graduate high school ready to succeed in the 21st century economy, and that requires a high-quality STEM education – whether they go to college, further career education, or the workforce – and regardless of whether the occupation is STEM-based. Policymakers must make continuous, high-quality STEM instruction a core element of every child’s education from the youngest age. Specifically, policymakers need to make immediate and significant investments in our statewide capacity to prepare, support, and deliver teaching and learning to the state’s math, science, and computer science standards. That means more and better-prepared teachers, high-quality instructional materials, and fully-equipped classrooms for all kids. Simultaneously, district and school leaders must plan for, increase, and be held accountable for their investments in the multi-year implementation of standards-based curriculum and instruction, particularly in STEM, for all kids.

Teacher Pipeline & Retention

California policymakers must address the diminishing pipeline of new educators, improve the preparation of these new educators, and provide high-quality professional learning for all educators to help ensure they are supported, effective, and stay in the profession. Policymakers must also establish a fair, meaningful, and objective feedback and evaluation system for teachers. The state has a responsibility to ensure that kids of color and kids from low-income households are not disproportionately served by ineffective, out-of-field, and/or inexperienced teachers. In the near-term, policymakers should continue to increase investments in improving the pipeline and quality of new teachers, provide high-quality professional learning through California’s System of Support, and monitor the equitable distribution of educators.



School Climate: Caring Professionals at School

California must move from the bottom of the country in terms of teacher, school nurse, administrator, and counselor ratios to ranking among the top ten states, to ensure students have sufficient access to more adults to provide much needed supports, services, and relationships. In addition to increasing education funding overall and re-directing funding from current police presence at schools, the state must ensure that counties and other government agencies charged with providing health and social services to kids are providing those supports in collaboration with schools to ensure easy access to those services. This includes providing transportation support and telehealth when needed.

School Climate: Discipline & Attendance

California policymakers must promote systemic changes in our schools to significantly improve students' experiences, ensure a non-punitive and positive school climate, address unconscious bias and increase student engagement and connectedness. Preparation and ongoing professional learning for all teachers and administrators should be based on restorative, trauma-informed, culturally-responsive practices that promote social-emotional learning. Further, suspensions and expulsions for defiance or disruption should be eliminated for all students. California must continue to track chronic absence, investigate its root causes, and develop effective strategies to improve attendance. Policymakers should also develop and require common surveys to measure school climate, to identify problems and track progress over time. In addition, state leaders should continue to make substantial investments of Proposition 47 dollars designated for at-risk students, and other funding, for research-based practices through the Multi-Tiered System of Support framework to match service levels with student need.

Afterschool & Summer Learning Programs

California should have enough quality afterschool and summer programs available to serve every student who wants to participate. Policymakers must build on proven, quality afterschool and summer programs so all kids — particularly children experiencing racism, poverty, or other circumstances of need or risk — have access to safe environments where they can be active and engaged. In the near-term, policymakers should significantly invest in efforts to mitigate learning loss due to the pandemic and provide social emotional and mental health supports for students, prioritizing students that have been disproportionately impacted by school closures and uneven distance learning. This approach should build on and strengthen partnerships between schools and afterschool and summer programs, and ultimately ensure all students have access to these opportunities.

Higher Education

California policymakers need to reinvest in the University of California, California State University, and community colleges, and remove the often insurmountable barriers of attending college, such as the high cost of tuition and housing, food insecurity, and limited access to child care for students with children. Our state leaders must also develop long-term plans to accommodate more students, close the attainment gap, provide adequate and stable funding, increase graduation rates, and create accountability through transparency and measuring performance.



Family Supports

Voluntary Evidence-Based Home Visiting

California policymakers must continue to significantly expand voluntary evidence-based home visiting programs statewide, so that these effective programs reach every low-income family who wants them. To ensure families have maximal access to home visiting through a variety of pathways, and that programs are high-quality and responsive to the diverse circumstances of families, the state must leverage multifaceted funding – including maximizing the use of federal Medicaid dollars – and align and coordinate efforts across state departments and at the local level.

Paid Family Leave

California must put families first by guaranteeing at least six months paid family leave per child, and ensuring leave is affordable and accessible for all types of families. In the near-term, the state should continue to extend duration of leave to eight weeks per parent/guardian, and aggressively pursue policies, such as boosting the wage replacement percentage, to eliminate the disparity for families of color and families who are low-income utilizing PFL in California.

Income Assistance for Low-income Families

All California families should have the basic income needed to house and feed their children. In the near-term, the state must continue to expand and enhance income assistance programs, including CalWORKs, EITC, and the Young Child Tax Credit, with the focus on families with young children, families in deepest poverty, and families with mixed immigration status.



Child Welfare

Stable Homes & Enduring Relationships

California policymakers must ensure children and youth in foster care and their caregivers have access to the resources, supports, and services they need to build and maintain strong and nurturing relationships, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Policies must be implemented that maximize stability in family homes, avoid institutionalization, and increase access to trauma-informed supports. California must provide the needed services and supports to children and youth who have come to the attention of the child welfare system so they can remain safely with their families or with caregivers in their communities.

Health Care for Children & Youth in Foster Care

California policymakers must ensure that all children and youth in foster care have access to comprehensive health care, including the behavioral health services they need to heal from the trauma of abuse, neglect, and removal from their families while also coping with the severe stress brought on by the pandemic. Policymakers should ensure a broad continuum of behavioral health services, including non-traditional therapeutic supports, are universally available and that children and youth in foster care can easily access needed services without requiring a diagnosis or deterioration in their emotional well-being. Additionally, policymakers should continue to promote cross-system collaboration between child welfare and health and strengthen cross-system oversight and accountability to ensure children and youth in foster care receive timely, coordinated services that are targeted towards their individualized needs and experience continuity of care with trusted providers.

Education Supports for Students in Foster Care

California policymakers must ensure that all students in foster care receive the targeted supports they need to recover from pandemic-driven learning loss, engage in distance learning, and succeed in school. In the near-term, policymakers must ensure that students in foster care have the technology and targeted educational supports and services they need to fully participate and thrive in a distance learning environment. Policymakers should also ensure that caregivers have the resources they need to support the children and youth in their care with distance learning. Finally, policymakers should provide stronger oversight of LCFF to ensure funding is being used to provide the critical services students in foster care need to overcome educational obstacles, and that Learning Continuity Plans and Local Control and Accountability Plans adequately address their needs.



Adolescents & Transition Age Youth

Relationships & Sexual Health Education

California's leaders need to ensure all youth receive proactive education about healthy relationships and sexual health in developmentally appropriate ways. In the near-term, policymakers should improve monitoring of California Healthy Youth Act implementation across the state so that all youth are learning about sexual and reproductive health and building the skills necessary to establish and maintain healthy relationships, regardless of where they live, their gender identity, or sexual orientation. The state should also increase resources for public health agencies to track, treat, and prevent the spread of STIs. Lastly, the state should ensure the preservation of Proposition 56 supplemental provider payments for the Family Planning, Access, Care, and Treatment Program, women's health services, and HIV-AIDS waiver services which are set to sunset at the end of 2021.

Supports for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

California policymakers must ensure no young person is homeless or forced to live in unsafe situations. Special attention should be paid to youth exiting the child welfare and juvenile justice systems who can experience barriers accessing and maintaining stable housing. In the near-term, policymakers should ensure that young people are prioritized in all housing policies and allocate additional funding to strengthen youth access to a continuum of housing options.

Decriminalization of Youth

California must ensure a supportive environment for youth in the juvenile justice system so they have opportunities to transform and improve their lives. Trauma-responsive justice systems that are grounded in adolescent development, including diversion programs, yield better outcomes for youth, reduce racial inequities, and increase public safety more effectively than punishment alone. In the near-term, policymakers should ensure that the closure of the Division of Juvenile Justice and transfer of young people back to their communities is thoughtfully planned and sufficiently funded, and includes oversight and accountability of the new county-based system to provide detained youth the best chance to heal and thrive.

Opportunities for Youth Voice & Civic Engagement

State and local leaders must work to involve and amplify the voice of young people, especially low-income youth and youth of color, in decision-making by offering varied, numerous opportunities for civic education and engagement in supportive settings. Students in leadership positions, such as school board members, must be provided with training tailored to them and have recommended leadership pathways to facilitate increased numbers of engaged youth. Engagement programs should build the capacity for youth to provide policy input at the local level and in state departments and agencies so that more youth can weigh in on policy issues that impact their lives. Specifically, policymakers should support and promote the implementation of the State Seal of Civic Engagement by providing tools and establishing a Civic Engagement Lead Agency within the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. Seventeen-year-olds should be able to vote in primary elections if they will turn 18 by the general election, and policies should be enacted to make it easier for students to register or pre-register to vote before they leave high school.



Coordinated Systems

Connected Cradle-to-Career Systems

Policymakers must ensure that government systems are linked to provide first-class coordination and support to children and families. In the near-term, this includes building an early learning data infrastructure and ensuring the early learning, TK-12, higher education and workforce data systems are all linked together. With the foundation of a comprehensive education information system in place, children could be even more effectively served through additional linkages to health and social services. Simultaneously, policymakers should provide resources and training to help integrate, use, and protect available data to support improvements in local policies and practices, building upon existing collaborative efforts.