

2022

Pro-Kid Policy Agenda for California

The *2022 Pro-Kid Policy Agenda* for California is the comprehensive state-level roadmap to ensure that all children have the necessary services and 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, undocumented kids, and kids in the foster care system, from growing up healthy and ready for college, career, and civic life. This work has only become more urgent as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a disproportionate impact on the lives of California's kids, especially children of color. Children and youth are increasingly experiencing stress, social isolation, and disconnectedness, and youth mental health issues have reached crisis proportions. In addition, 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 it is also essential to our state's future and ability to thrive. California's continued economic growth and strong democracy is dependent on a healthy and educated workforce.

State policymakers 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 research, policy development, communications, network building, and advocacy organization that covers the full range of children's issues prenatal to age 26, including early learning and development, K-12 and higher education, health, family and economic supports, and child welfare. 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 4,600 diverse organizations statewide, ranging from direct service, business, labor, youth, and parent organizations to civil rights- and community-based groups.

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 work to streamline enrollment into Medi-Cal coverage for all eligible-but-currently-uninsured children, and the State should also eliminate Medi-Cal premiums that act as a barrier to coverage and economic security for California children, pregnant individuals, and families.

Health Care Accountability

California policymakers must make kids the first 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 actually receiving those services. California should have strongest-in-the-nation contracts with Medi-Cal managed care plans that reward improvement in child health outcomes and are also closely monitored and effectively enforced to guarantee children will get the care they need. In the near-term, the State should continue to implement all recommendations from the March 2019 State Auditor report to improve accountability as well as revise the contracts with Medi-Cal plans to ensure that the plans will deliver better health care for kids. The State needs to hold high standards that drive improvement in child health outcomes as well as reductions in health care disparities, and use 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, linguistic, geographic, and other 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 quality improvement of health care service delivery for children. The State should also prioritize children's access needs and health outcomes during implementation and oversight of upcoming Medi-Cal reforms (including the CalAIM initiative) to 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. 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 California Health and Human Services Agency should take action with all available data to improve the rate of kids receiving preventive health and developmental screenings in Medi-Cal, and identify ways to strengthen and expand referral linkages to and coordination with needed early intervention services.

Behavioral Health Care: Mental Health

California must enact policies to ensure kids can grow in environments that have minimized the root causes of common illnesses like anxiety and depression, while equipping children with the ability to recognize and regulate their emotions and maintain healthy relationships. 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. In the near-term, the State should create a comprehensive plan that identifies target metrics that will move California forward on improving children's mental health outcomes, such as dramatically reducing suicide attempts among LGBTQ+ youth and youth with child welfare system involvement. The plan should also determine optimal inputs to build child and youth wellness, such as increasing peer support workers and other culturally competent providers, boosting youth mental health first aid training for those who work with kids, and greatly expanding preventive services in community and school settings.

Behavioral Health Care: Substance Use

California must ensure children can grow in environments that minimize the root causes of substance use. Policymakers need to prioritize policies and programs that work to increase familial support and social-emotional learnings that promote drug-resistant behaviors. In addition, policymakers should fund youth-specific treatment programs, separate and distinct from programs that treat those over age 25. In the near-term, the State should invest in culturally competent programming to deter drug use in children and youth, and specifically target metrics such as reducing the number of drug overdoses among young people and decreasing the number of youth who vape. The State should also expand preventive services in community and school settings.



Preventing Trauma & Supporting Healing

Identifying children who have experienced trauma is not enough; California's leaders must work together across sectors to implement policies to prevent childhood trauma from happening at all. Prevention includes efforts 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 significant investment in community-based organizations that work to help prevent ACEs and promote healing.

Oral Health Care

California should achieve the vision of every child being cavity free at age 3. To do so, policymakers must ensure all kids in Medi-Cal have access to timely dental services and prioritize investments in preventive service programs that reach kids where they are, including fluoride varnish applied in medical settings. Local implementation of state laws and contracts require improved monitoring and oversight by the Department of Health Care Services. The State should ensure that school districts have sufficient resources – outside of education dollars if needed – to collect and report Kindergarten Oral Health Assessment data. Policymakers should also scale local models like data-sharing agreements between a child's doctor and dentist, using community health workers to help caregivers make and keep dental appointments, and using virtual dental homes to bring care to areas where access is limited.

Food Security

Every child should have access to nutritious food. The State must ensure every eligible child is able to access CalFresh, school meals, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). School meals should continue to be free for all students, and be served at times that students can access them, with enough time to eat, and with healthy food choices that are a cultural fit for the student population. The State should make ongoing investments and build on technology improvements and process simplifications necessitated by the pandemic to make nutrition assistance benefits much easier for families to access and use.



Education

Child Care

California policymakers must ensure all families with young children have access to a variety of child care options that are stable, affordable, and foster children's healthy development. It is especially important to ensure that foster families, families experiencing poverty, and other families in circumstances of enhanced need or risk have comprehensive, supportive child care settings. In the near-term, the State should at least triple the number of infants and toddlers that receive state-funded child care subsidies as a step toward universal access, while simultaneously investing in living wages for providers, workforce development, and child care facilities expansion.

Preschool & Transitional Kindergarten

The State must make the investments necessary to reach full Transitional Kindergarten implementation by the 2025-26 school year, while ensuring that the instructional model prioritizes equity and the needs of participating students by attracting and retaining highly skilled and knowledgeable teachers and assistant teachers, including a focus on recruiting teachers of color and multilingual staff in classrooms; providing developmentally appropriate curriculum; and lowering the student-teacher ratios (ideally 8 to 1 or, at minimum, 10 to 1). The State should also expand access to the California State Preschool Program for children currently eligible for services based on need and ultimately commit to provide universal preschool for all 3-year-olds. In addition, it will be critical to provide more wraparound care to allow for parents' varying work hours and ensure children have supportive services that enable them to learn. Finally, the State should leverage federal early learning investments including better coordination with Head Start and Early Head Start.

Early Care & Education Workforce

California must continue to increase child care provider rates and build systems of professional development and support for the child care workforce. In tandem with compensation, the State should also increase education and experience standards over time, including articulating competencies, qualifications, and related career advancement pathways. In addition, implementing a statewide ECE workforce registry will be essential to better understand the composition and needs of the workforce. At the same time, California needs to ensure the effective recruitment, training, and equitable distribution of TK teachers throughout the state. This should include providing incentives to place knowledgeable and skilled TK teachers in schools with the highest concentrations of students who are low-income, in foster care, and English Learners. Finally, the State should invest in strategies to ensure pay parity between educators in child care and TK with equivalent education and training.



Expanded Learning Programs

As work to implement the ELO Program progresses, California must provide clear guidance and support on how LEAs can leverage partnerships with community-based expanded learning providers and seamlessly integrate with existing Afterschool Safety and Education programs and 21st Century Learning Centers. Schools should have enough high-quality expanded learning programs available to serve every student who wants to participate. To reach that goal, policymakers must require the California Department of Education to collect and publicly report student groups (race/ethnicity, language, income, and housing status) and school-level financial and program data, to ensure funding for the ELO Program is sufficient to meet the needs of students and families as implementation progresses.

Early Intervention & Special Education

In order for every California child who needs special education supports to receive them, seamlessly, and as early as possible, the State must ensure an accountable, results-oriented, continuum of birth to adulthood 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 improve the quality of services by increasing the number of fully prepared, diverse special education teachers and invest sufficiently in special education to keep pace with need. In addition, the State should provide greater funding to cost share for the highest-cost students.

Education for Dual Language & English Learners

California policymakers must continue to promote and deepen an asset-based approach to children's bilingualism. At a minimum, this should include ensuring children who are dual language learners (DLL) and English Learners (EL) 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 achieve this, state leaders should continue to invest in DLL and EL teacher training and professional development to support expanding access to bilingual education and effective English language development instruction. In addition, the State is taking steps to standardize the criteria for reclassification with the implementation of a designated level of English language proficiency and a standardized observation protocol for teacher input and parent notification. Still outstanding is a correlation study between English Language Proficiency Assessments for California proficiency levels and California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress English Language Assessment results to determine which level of English proficiency correlates with an academic score similar to native English-speaking peers of the same grade level as required by federal law. Policymakers should complete this work within the 2021-22 school year, allowing California to provide greater reclassification consistency for English Learners across the State. California must also ensure that Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) supplemental and concentration grant funds are directly benefiting English Learners, as the law intended, and also continue to improve the accountability system to truly highlight English Learners' achievements and needs.



Education Funding

Policymakers should prioritize investing in California's youngest learners by significantly expanding access to child care and preschool in tandem with investments to stabilize and support both programs and the workforce. In addition, while the significant investment in TK-12 provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity for schools to make progress on closing opportunity and achievement gaps and to provide students with essential supports in the aftermath of the pandemic, the lack of any guarantee of ongoing funding to support much of this work in the future raises significant concerns. Policymakers should prioritize providing adequate ongoing funding for the TK-12 system in order to expand the educator workforce and build capacity to ensure that students have the essential services and supports needed to be successful. Finally, with respect to higher education, policymakers should continue to prioritize providing state funding for college affordability, additional investments in student financial aid, and ongoing funding for student mental health and basic needs; and increasing the capacity of the community colleges, California State University, and University of California to enroll and graduate more students, particularly students of color.

STEM Education

All California kids need to graduate high school college and career 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 directly into the workforce – and regardless of whether their chosen 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 increase and make permanent the recent 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, continue to improve the preparation of these new educators, expand the capacity of teacher preparation programs, and provide high-quality, ongoing professional learning for all educators to help ensure they are supported, effective, and stay in the profession. Policymakers must put in place protections to ensure that kids of color and kids from low-income families are not disproportionately served by ineffective, out-of-field, and/or inexperienced teachers. In addition, policymakers should make permanent investments in improving the pipeline and quality of new teachers, in high-quality professional learning, and, through the California School Dashboard, monitor the equitable distribution of well-prepared educators.



**School Climate:
Connections with
Adults on Campus**

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. Improving ratios ensures students have sufficient access to more adults on campus which will provide much needed supports, services, and relationships to improve school climate. This includes building on the \$1.1 billion provided through the LCFF concentration factor by maintaining the requirement that funding will be used to hire staff in schools with high concentrations of low-income students, English Learners, and foster youth and by providing additional investments to support this goal in future years. In addition to increasing education funding, the State must ensure that counties and other government agencies charged with providing health and social services to kids are providing those supports at schools, where the kids already are – which could include leveraging new state investments in Community Schools and School-County Mental Health Partnerships – or at a minimum, ensuring easy access to those services, including transportation support when needed. The State also needs to standardize a set of core survey questions about school climate across district surveys, and collect the results statewide to improve comparisons and to support school climate playing a greater role on the California School Dashboard.

**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, 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 – a subjective category of overly broad and minor offenses that are vulnerable to disproportionate racial impact – should be eliminated for all students. In addition, school districts should use investments that might otherwise be used for school policing, surveillance, or other school hardening measures toward strategies that properly attend to the social-emotional and mental health needs of students, address trauma, and support conflict resolutions strategies. California must also continue to track chronic absence – including now in the context of remote learning through independent study – investigate its root causes, and develop effective strategies to improve attendance.



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 the Cradle-to-Career (C2C) Governing Board and Managing Entity building an infrastructure and ensuring TK-12, higher education, and workforce data systems are all linked together. In addition, building on investments in the California Department of Social Services, it will be essential that California develops a comprehensive, integrated early childhood data system that ultimately links to the C2C and provides families and providers with real-time information to bridge access gaps and increase information exchange. 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 to collect new data, and training to help integrate, use, and protect available data to support improvements in local policies and practices, building upon existing collaborative efforts.

Higher Education

California policymakers need to continue 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 completion rates, and create accountability through transparency and measuring performance.



Family Supports

Voluntary Evidence-Based Home Visiting

California policymakers must continue to expand voluntary evidence-based home visiting programs statewide, so that these effective programs reach a greater share of eligible families. The State must leverage multifaceted funding – including maximizing federal Medicaid dollars – to ensure access to home visiting through a variety of pathways, programs that are high-quality and responsive to the diverse circumstances of families, and alignment and coordination at state and local levels.

Paid Family Leave

California must put families first by 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 12 weeks per parent/guardian and aggressively pursue policies to boost the wage replacement percentage to a minimum of 90%, to eliminate economic barriers that contribute to racial/ethnic and income disparities in PFL utilization 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 invest in and implement focused outreach efforts to ensure all eligible families benefit from enhanced income assistance programs, including CalWORKs, EITC, and the 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 family relationships. The State must also work to ensure children and youth in foster care can remain safely with relatives and in their communities whenever possible. Policies must be implemented that maximize placement stability, avoid institutionalization, increase access to trauma-informed supports, and meet the needs of children in foster care in family-based settings, especially children with more intensive needs.

Health Care for Children & Youth in Foster Care

California policymakers must ensure that all children in foster care have access to comprehensive health care, including the behavioral health services they need to heal from the trauma of abuse and neglect and removal. Policymakers should ensure a broad continuum of behavioral health services, including non-traditional therapeutic supports, are universally available. The continuum must include services that are culturally specific and responsive to the needs of children of color and LGBTQ+ youth who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. Policymakers should also ensure seamless cross-system collaboration occurs 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 children in foster care receive the supports they need to recover from pandemic-driven learning loss and keep them from falling further behind in school. In the near-term, policymakers must ensure students in foster care who return to in-person learning receive effective supports and services and that independent study is reformed to better support students who continue to learn from home. Additionally, schools must provide students in foster care with expanded learning opportunities, including tutoring and academic supports and must develop targeted reengagement strategies for students in foster care who are disengaged from school. Policymakers should also provide stronger oversight of the Local Control Funding Formula education law, to ensure funding is being used to provide the critical services foster youth need to overcome educational obstacles, and that Local Control and Accountability Plans incorporate planning and accountability that adequately address the needs of youth in foster care. Finally, the State must work to vastly improve the dismal graduation rates of youth in foster care so that it meets or exceeds that of all other student groups.



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 take swift action to strengthen public health efforts for targeted, high-quality adolescent-focused sexual and reproductive health education; invest in California Healthy Youth Act implementation and monitoring; improve access to confidential clinical services, including screening, testing, and treatment; and bolster public health efforts focused on STI contact tracing and case management.

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 should allocate additional funding to strengthen youth access to a continuum of housing options. Additionally, the State must provide targeted resources to support the success of college students experiencing homelessness, such as increasing access to on-campus housing, food, and resources to meet other basic needs. These critical actions are even more necessary because of the pandemic, due to increased economic strain and greater housing instability.

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 leaders must involve and amplify the voices of young people, especially low-income youth and youth of color, by offering varied, numerous opportunities for civic education and engagement in supportive settings. Policymakers should ensure robust state support for ongoing school district implementation of the State Seal of Civic Engagement, and engage more youth on state boards and commissions to help make policy decisions that impact their lives.