



The Education Trust—West

# SIX WAYS SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN LEVERAGE THE LOCAL CONTROL FUNDING FORMULA FOR EQUITY IN THE EARLY YEARS

# Introduction

Access to early learning before kindergarten has wide-ranging positive effects for children—effects that are evident from a child’s early years into adulthood. Indeed, children who attend high-quality preschools are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and earn higher incomes.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these facts being well-known within many education spaces, children from low-income families and children of color lack consistent access to public early learning programs. For example, only about 30% of Black and Latinx 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in California’s state-funded preschool programs, and those programs meet just a handful of the quality benchmark standards established by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).<sup>2,3</sup> Education leaders and equity advocates alike should be concerned about the access and quality gaps for our youngest learners for the following reasons: High-quality public early learning programs are linked to improved kindergarten readiness and stronger long-term educational outcomes;<sup>4</sup> private early learning programs are too expensive for many low-income families of color;<sup>5</sup> and the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on the fragility of our early learning system due to historic underinvestment, as thousands of child care sites shuttered, three in ten child care jobs were lost, and costs of providing care increased.<sup>6</sup>

This report focuses on opportunities to leverage the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) along with other funding sources to ensure equity in the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and Transitional Kindergarten (TK), publicly-funded programs for 3–5-year-olds and 4-year-olds, respectively. We showcase six promising ways districts are using LCFF funds in the areas to provide increased options for early learning to families of color, families in poverty, and families of dual language learners:



Expanding preschool access and duration



Encouraging dual-language learning



Supporting children with disabilities



Collecting and analyzing early learning data




Engaging parents and families



Making distance learning accessible

California has recently committed to expanding early learning opportunities in the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care.<sup>7</sup> As districts begin planning for universal TK and continue to offer CSPP, district leaders should follow the recommendations outlined below to broaden access to learning opportunities for the most marginalized children and families.

A young child with dark hair and a yellow sweater is crawling through a green tunnel. The child is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting, likely a play area.

## California's Local Control Funding Formula and the California State Preschool Program

California's Local Control Funding Formula, enacted in 2013, is designed to tackle broad equity gaps in the state's PreK-12 public education system. The LCFF provides each district with a base grant per pupil and adds supplemental and concentration grants based on the number of students from low-income families, English learners, unhoused students, or foster youth. Districts must report how they spend LCFF funding to meet state priorities and increase or improve services for LCFF-targeted student groups in Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). This equity-minded formula recognizes that more resources must be directed at serving students whom the education system has underserved.<sup>8</sup>

However, the LCFF was initially designed to be—and is still largely considered—a K-12 funding formula. As a result, as administrators develop spending plans, they often struggle to incorporate early learning staff in their decision-making, including in their programming and staffing.<sup>9</sup>

To better assess the degree to which districts plan programming and resources for early learning programs in their LCAPs, we conducted a comprehensive review of LCAPs for districts that house CSPP programs. Our analysis finds that 51 of the 293 (17%) school districts operating CSPP programs do not reference preschool at all in their LCAPs, while many more referred to preschool just once or twice.





## Methodology

This analysis began in August 2020, when we reviewed the LCAPs of the 293 school districts that received CSPP funding in 2018-2019. For the vast majority of these school districts, we used the 2019-2020 update to the 2017-2018 LCAP, the latest LCAP available before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>10</sup> If that LCAP was not available on the Internet or was not published as a searchable PDF file, we reviewed an LCAP from a previous year (usually 2018-2019).

We identified recommendations for leveraging LCFF funds for expanding equity in early learning based on themes that repeatedly arose in the LCAPs. We also looked for cases where districts were explicitly leveraging LCFF funding for evidence-backed practices that support equity in early learning. Additionally, we conducted phone and email

interviews with early learning leaders from a sample of 11 school districts selected for their innovative approaches to serving marginalized families<sup>11</sup> to learn more about how combined LCFF and CSPP funding can work. In spring 2021, we followed up with some of these districts to gather additional information regarding their use of LCFF funds to support preschool programs.

We include six bright spot districts that stood out in our analysis<sup>12</sup> for their ability to braid together various funding sources, including LCFF, to serve families in CSPP and TK more equitably.

For the purpose of this report, we use “students of color” to describe Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx, and Black early learners and students.

# Recommendation #1:

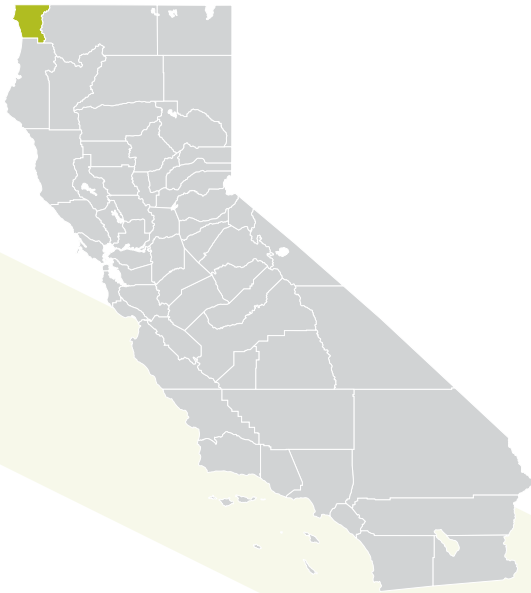
## Using LCFF to Expand Early Learning Access & Duration

According to their LCAPs, roughly 17% of districts with CSPP programs used LCFF base or targeted dollars to support or expand access to preschool programs, and 37% of districts with CSPP programs used LCFF dollars to improve their preschool programs and services. At the TK level, only about 5% of districts with CSPP programs used LCFF base or targeted dollars to expand access to TK programs. Districts should use LCFF dollars to expand access to preschool programs for low-income children and children of color in a few ways, including:

1. Paying for additional classrooms, teachers, and materials.
2. Establishing a district-run preschool program that is separate from any existing CSPP program, specifically for underserved students.
3. Expanding the sliding scale fee-based preschool program to subsidize the cost for families who are struggling financially but don't meet the income requirement for CSPP.
4. Offering full-day and year-round slots.

**“Families are looking for full-day services. Part-day preschools don't serve our community's needs.”**

—Superintendent Jeff Harris,  
Del Norte Unified



### Bright Spot #1: Del Norte County Unified: Centering the most marginalized students for increased preschool access

In addition to its CSPP program, Del Norte County Unified used LCFF funding to open a separate, district-run preschool program in a part of the county with a large concentration of students from low-income families, students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, or students who have high scores for adverse childhood experiences (ACES). This extra site provides full-day education and care and prioritizes children from low-income families, foster youth, and English learners. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Del Norte County Unified prioritized hybrid instruction for highly-impacted students with disabilities (e.g., non-verbal students, students identified as having an emotional disorder, and students who receive one-on-one instruction).

“Early learning is not something that I think anybody can do as an add-on,” said Del Norte Superintendent Jeff Harris. “There has to be as much focus on early learning as there is on K-12. Create a vision for what early childhood education could be, and then fund it. Everybody in your ecosystem—the county, the community—needs to be a partner in making it happen. Schools cannot be the only purveyor of education and neither can private providers. It takes a village.”

**3,706** Total Enrollment<sup>13</sup>

**68%** low-income

**50%** students of color

**7%** English learners

**14%** students with disabilities

# Recommendation #2:

## Encouraging Dual Language Learning Through LCFF

In California, nearly 60% of children ages five and under live in homes where a language other than English is spoken.<sup>14</sup> Research shows that dual language learners have improved cognitive, social-emotional, academic, and linguistic skills in comparison to their non-dual language peers.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, research shows that home languages are an important foundation for English language development and overall academic achievement.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, districts should support their dual language learners by affirming home languages and mitigating home language loss. Because home language loss can occur when children are quite young, districts should adopt practices that nurture the home language in early learning programs.

About 51 school districts in this LCAP review use LCFF funding to encourage dual language learning in their preschool and TK programs. Some districts implemented Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) programming in their PreK or TK classrooms,<sup>17</sup> while others extended dual language immersion (DLI) programs. The DLI classrooms include a mix of native and non-native English speakers, and instruction is in both languages. Most DLI programs are taught in English and Spanish, but some districts have implemented DLI programs in other languages, including Hmong, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. A handful of districts have established preschool programs that solely serve non-Native English speakers in their home language.



**40,204** Total Enrollment<sup>18</sup>

**66%** low-income

**80%** students of color

**16%** English learners

**12%** students with disabilities

### Bright Spot #2: Riverside Unified: Recognizing the assets of non-English speaking children while offering holistic supports

Riverside Unified used LCFF funding to establish a sliding-scale preschool program, subsidizing seats for families who are not income-eligible for CSPP but cannot afford private preschool or child care. As a result, more families have access to preschool. These programs feature, among other things, a Spanish-language preschool program to prepare native Spanish speakers for Spanish-English dual language immersion in kindergarten. When necessary, parents and teachers work together to ensure children receive assessments and support from wellness and special education intervention teams. As a result of the preschool's strong relationship with Riverside Unified, the district included the preschoolers in their device distribution plan. Therefore, early learning program leads were able to put in requests for devices right away and provided devices to all students with needs.





## Recommendation #3: Investing LCFF Dollars in Stronger Supports for Young Children with Disabilities

Research shows that students of color and from low-income families are less likely to receive appropriate early intervention and special education services.<sup>19</sup> Yet when the special education needs of families and students are addressed, all students benefit. Changes are necessary to ensure that families of color and low-income families receive equitable education opportunities as they are often denied access to these services. Of the LCAPs we reviewed about 40 school districts with CSPP programs mentioned using LCFF funding to bolster special education

services in early learning programs. Using funds in this way has two benefits. First, if parents or teachers suspect that a child might have a disability or special need, the early learning and special education teams can quickly provide that child with an evaluation; if the child is found eligible for special education services, the teams can then create an individualized education plan. Second, early learning and special education staff can provide eligible children with inclusive learning environments.

Federal and state law entitles three- to five-year-old children with disabilities to special education and related services and guarantees that they have a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.<sup>20</sup> However, children with disabilities are often taught in segregated settings, away from their peers without disabilities. Research suggests that high-quality, inclusive preschool programs, where children with and without disabilities learn together, lead to improved cognitive, communicative, and social-

emotional outcomes for children with disabilities.<sup>21</sup> Some school districts with CSPP have inclusive classrooms where early childhood special educators and other specialists ensure that they meet these students' unique needs through differentiated instruction and specialized services as outlined in students' individualized education plans. LCFF funds should go toward high-quality inclusion programs that maximize the provision of the least restrictive environment for children receiving services under IDEA.

### **Bright Spot #3: Milpitas Unified: Integrating and accommodating young learners with disabilities**

Milpitas Unified uses both supplemental and concentration LCFF grants to support collaborative efforts between the early child development center coordinator and the special education director. This collaboration includes efforts that begin in the summer, with general education teachers receiving training in preventative and de-escalation behavioral interventions, co-teaching models, scheduling their preschool class to ease transitions and avoid triggers, and providing speech and language services within a class rotation schedule. At the start of the school year, special education and general education teachers have collaboration meetings twice monthly, decreasing to monthly as the year progresses. Under Milpitas Unified's model, most preschoolers with disabilities spend a majority—and for some, close to 100 percent—of their instructional minutes in general education classrooms. The district has added sensory areas to each classroom so that children with sensory needs have a quiet place to go if they become overstimulated in general education classrooms. These areas are painted muted white, free of clutter and excess furniture, next to natural light sources (but can easily be changed to a more covered or darkened area). Further, they have sensory cushions to sit on, provide weight jackets, and each sensory area has a rug and pillows for stretching on the floor or cocooning. The district has adopted open concept floor plans to allow for exploration and decorated bulletin boards in natural earth tones, which are more appropriate for young children with sensory needs.<sup>22</sup>



**10,308** Total Enrollment<sup>23</sup>

**31%** low-income

**96%** students of color

**27%** English learners

**8%** students with disabilities



# Recommendation #4:

## Using LCFF Funds to Collect & Analyze Early Learning Data

We know that data improves equity for young learners, but many educators lack the training, support, and time to collect, analyze, and use data to support students. To help meet this goal, the 2021-22 California State Budget provides over \$15 million on the next phase of the statewide data system, which will help educators follow and assess children's progress as they enter the K-12 system.<sup>24</sup> To ensure the best outcomes for young learners, district leaders should leverage LCFF funding to gather data on how young children are learning across private and LEA-based early learning programs and elementary schools. They should also use this funding to train teachers and families to interpret the data and to support

teachers to modify their instruction based on results (for example, providing time and support on learning how to use the data). CSPP requires that program quality be continuously monitored and improved based on data collection.<sup>25,26</sup> But some districts with CSPP programs leverage LCFF funding to go further: they conduct regular assessments across preschools and early elementary (using those assessments to analyze outcomes, improve instruction, and share feedback with parents), provide collaboration time for preschool and early elementary teachers to review students' files as they transition between levels, and add staff to analyze early learning data.



### Bright Spot #4: Oakland Unified: Increasing equity through data-driven practice and supports

Oakland Unified has a robust early childhood education data collection system. Currently, the district conducts the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) and Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) assessments in ECE. Further, it monitors its ECE classrooms' quality and has its kindergarten teachers administer the Early Development Instrument (EDI) every three months, starting within the first six months of the teacher knowing the child.

While the ASQ and DRDP are commonly-used developmental assessments for early learners used by Oakland Unified,<sup>27</sup> child observation, developmental and health screenings, minimum qualifications for lead teacher, and effective teacher-child interactions (assessed via classroom observations) are also used to determine whether students' needs are met.<sup>28</sup> The EDI focuses on physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

The district uses the data from these screenings and assessments to make investments in the classroom and to think more intentionally about how to support the whole family through a social-emotional, academic, racial equity, and trauma-informed lens. For example, data from the ASQ was crucial for remote learning's success: it revealed to teachers that many of the materials used in the classroom were unavailable to families at home. As a result, the district used Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) family engagement funds to supply backpacks to students with multicultural art supplies, multicultural books, whiteboards, and math and literacy manipulatives.

**36,154** Total Enrollment<sup>30</sup>

**71%** low-income

**88%** students of color

**33%** English learners

**14%** students with disabilities

Oakland Unified aims to create a data-informed bridge from preschool to third grade. Two hallmarks of these efforts are teacher collaboration and family engagement. An example of the former could be teachers creating an asset-based portfolio for each preschool student, and teachers in each subsequent grade continuing to add to the student's portfolio. An example of the latter might be the district conducting outreach to the families of every

preschool student when they age out. Oakland Unified collects teacher and parent narratives, leveraging family input as an essential part of decision-making within its TK to kindergarten transition program. Whenever district leaders and practitioners discuss the analysis of this data, it is paired with participant photos to remind administrators to center teacher and family voice.



# Recommendation #5:

## Using LCFF Funding to Ensure Parents & Families of Young Children are Engaged

Partnering with the families of early learners is an integral part of a successful early childhood education program. Robust family engagement helps to improve trust between the district and its families, to identify a child's specific needs, provide wraparound services to families in need, improve programming based on parent feedback, and to encourage families to support their children's learning at home.<sup>31</sup>

The state establishes some basic family engagement requirements for CSPP providers, including a parent orientation, two parent-teacher conferences per year, parent meetings with program staff, an open-door policy allowing parents to participate in class activities, a parent advisory committee, and referrals for health or social service needs.<sup>32</sup> Approximately 93 districts with early learning programs use LCFF funding to significantly expand these

efforts. Notably, many districts invest heavily in hosting regular educational workshops that build parents' capacity to support their children's learning. This includes hosting trainings on academic and social-emotional learning curricula, and bilingual, culturally competent, and race-conscious programming for families of color. While this extensive programming is not required for CSPP or TK, it is a promising way to leverage LCFF dollars and better engage families in the education of their young learners. Districts should use LCFF funds to engage families through multiple approaches, such as hiring a family advocate, expanding workshops that build the capacity of parents and caregivers to support their children's learning, as well as leaning into family members' expertise to strengthen programming around race, culture, and multilingualism.

### Bright Spot #5: Mountain Empire Unified: Parents treated as partners in early learning

Mountain Empire Unified's early education department facilitates quarterly meetings with early education lead teachers, TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary school principals to talk about student files, assessments, and goals for incoming students. The district hires a family advocate to work with the early education program and hosts parent education classes on multiple ECE-related subjects. The district also teaches its parents to complete the ASQ, recognizing that students often act differently at home than in the classroom. In response to the pandemic, they adopted an online program parent curriculum from the San Diego County Office of Education. Parents received texts on how to work with their students at home through this platform. Additionally, the family advocate hosted trainings and classes to support the parents in completing the ASQ and support their children's learning.



**1,713** Total Enrollment<sup>33</sup>

**69%** low-income

**88%** students of color

**28%** English learners

**16%** students with disabilities



# Recommendation #6:

## Leveraging LCFF Dollars to Make Distance Learning Accessible for Young Children

The shift from in-person instruction to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the significant inequities between the wealthiest and poorest families in California. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some early learning programs pivoted to virtual offerings, and early learners without devices or reliable internet access were left without a valuable way to connect to their teachers and their classroom. In a poll that Ed Trust—West conducted in spring 2020 with parents of children birth through five years, 91% of parents indicated that providing free or increased internet access to families would be helpful, and over 90% of parents requested free online resources and other tips to help support their child’s social, emotional, and cognitive development while at home.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, districts should make the same investments, including distributing devices

and promoting access to reliable internet, to help ensure that their earliest learners are not left out of distance learning.

As the pandemic evolves and some families continue to keep children home for health and safety reasons, districts should strategize on ways to provide distance learning supports that align with the needs of their families through the LCAP engagement process. Districts can engage young learners remotely through live and pre-recorded virtual lessons they make available to families. Further, they can post printable classroom activities online and provide families with the resources to do class activities at home. This could include providing printed versions of materials for families without printers, as well as supplies such as playdoh, crayons, paints, and scissors.<sup>35</sup>

### Bright Spot #6: Lynwood Unified: Providing devices and connectivity young children need to access distance learning

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Lynwood Unified, a district whose students are 90% or more from low-income families, foster youth, currently unhoused, or students of color, has worked tirelessly to support its early learners and their families.<sup>36</sup> By fall 2020, every child in the ECE program was given a Chromebook and a tablet. Typically, students used the Chromebooks to log in to their virtual classrooms at least twice a day and used the tablet to interact with education programs bought and installed by the district. The district also provided monthly materials distributions, including hard copies of activities for families without printers and art supplies. In addition, the district established a hotline staffed by clinical social workers and is running a weekly food bank for families through its nonprofit foundation. The COVID-19 pandemic “has shown how disenfranchised and disconnected parents feel—especially working-class parents,” said Early Education Program Director Veronica Bloomfield. Leveraging LCFF funds in these ways allowed Lynwood Unified to meet the needs for connectivity in tangible ways, while also prioritizing family engagement and being responsive to feedback.



**13,245** Total Enrollment<sup>36</sup>

**93%** low-income

**99%** students of color

**27%** English learners

**12%** students with disabilities



## Conclusion

The historic expansion in early learning investments in the 2021-22 California State Budget positions the state to make significant strides toward truly equitable education in these crucial years. At the same time, the Local Control Funding Formula provides ways for districts to better and more holistically integrate early learning into how they think about their district’s educational pipeline. Recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic must mean forging a new, more equitable path forward—one that requires education leaders to think about creative ways to maximize new and existing funding. Beyond the recommendations made in

this report, an important foundational step to ensuring equity in education is for local education agencies to engage families of young learners and early learning educators and providers in the LCAP process to determine the best ways to leverage LCFF funding for early learning. The vast amount of research tells us that supporting equity in the earliest years in a child’s life is crucial for their educational journey. Therefore, it is imperative that district leaders, armed not only with new financial resources but with the flexibility of LCFF, seize this opportunity to support the millions of young children in the state.







## Endnotes

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