

2023

Pro-Kid Policy Agenda for California

The 2023 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 effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to have a disproportionate impact on the lives of California's kids, especially children of color. Kids 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 kids have the chance to live out their dreams. The Pro-Kid Agenda can help us get there.

The Agenda was developed 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, TK-12 and higher education, health, family and economic supports, and child welfare. Children Now 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 5,000 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 work to expedite streamlined Medi-Cal enrollment for newborn babies, and quickly implement continuous coverage in Medi-Cal for all kids birth-5 years to reduce unnecessary loss of coverage and improve economic security for California children 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 health 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 effectively monitored and enforced to guarantee children will get the care they need. In the near-term, the State should continue to implement all recommendations from the September 2022 follow-up State Auditor report to strengthen accountability of Medi-Cal plans to ensure that the plans will deliver better health care for kids. The State must hold and enforce high standards that drive improvement in child health outcomes as well as reductions in racial and other disparities. The State must 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 Medi-Cal reforms (including the multi-year CalAIM initiative) and new Medi-Cal benefits (including community health workers) 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, blood lead, behavioral, oral, vision, hearing, and other preventive health screenings in a timely way and at the intervals recommended by pediatricians. To meet the requirements of federal law, the State must invest in robust referral and early intervention systems to connect kids with check-ups and 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 Adverse Childhood Experiences (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 services that reach kids where they are, including fluoride varnish applied in medical settings and/or dental sealants provided through school-based or school-linked programs. 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 practices like data-sharing between a child's doctor and dentist to make dental referrals, promote community health workers to help caregivers make and keep dental appointments, and use virtual dental home visits to bring care to areas where access is limited.

Environmental Health

California children are exposed to unhealthy air, pesticides, lead, and other toxins that threaten their well-being and healthy development. While environmental hazards present a risk for all of California's children, Black and Latino/a children are the most impacted by these exposures. The State should ensure that all children have access to lead-free drinking water at school and home, as well as routine blood lead testing. In addition, the State should drastically reduce children's exposure to pesticides, and at the very least ensure that communities are notified when pesticides are being sprayed nearby so that families can take precautions.

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). In a big win for children, California made school meals free for all public school students. The State should also ensure that meals are 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 adopt a cost-based model and begin a multi-year commitment to investing in living wages and benefits for providers, workforce development, and child care facilities expansion. And over the next few years, should at least triple the number of infants and toddlers that receive state-funded child care subsidies as a step toward universal access.

Preschool & Transitional Kindergarten

The State should develop a comprehensive mixed delivery system for our 3- and 4-year olds that incentivizes quality and supports family choice including traditional kindergarten, state preschool, child care, Head Start and expanded learning. The system must make the investments necessary to reach full Transitional Kindergarten implementation by the 2025-26 school year and ensure that all school districts receive additional funding for the additional students served, 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 with child development training, 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 providing universal preschool for all 3-year-olds. In addition, it will be critical to provide more high-quality 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 adopt a cost-based model and continue to increase subsidized child care provider rates to reflect the costs that providers face to offer living wages and benefits needed to maintain the workforce and build systems of professional development and support for the child care workforce. As increased compensation via rate reform is implemented to reflect current costs, the State should also increase education and experience standards with appropriate compensation and supports, over time, including articulating competencies, qualifications, and related career advancement pathways. In addition, implementing a statewide early care and education (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 immediately move to ensure pay parity between educators in child care and TK with equivalent education and training.



Expanded Learning Programs

As work to implement the Expanded Learning Opportunity Program (ELOP) progresses, California must provide clear guidance and support on how local education agencies 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, while prioritizing students from low-income families and those in need of additional academic and social-emotional supports. 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 ELOP 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 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 with the goal of transitioning to dual language proficiency as rapidly as possible. 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 must prioritize and complete this work 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 requires, and also continue to improve the accountability system to align expectations for English Learner's progress with the pace that must be met to ensure that no EL becomes a long-term English learner (LTEL) and that districts with high proportions of LTEL receive the support that they need.



TK-12 Education Funding

While recent significant investments in TK-12 provide an opportunity for schools to make progress on closing opportunity and achievement gaps and to provide students with essential supports in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of any guarantee of ongoing funding to support much of this work in the future raises significant concerns. And even with these recent investments, California schools still rank last in the nation in student-teacher ratios, with an additional 7.5 students per teacher than the average for the rest of the country, and California ranks below 20 other states in expenditures per pupil (average daily attendance). 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. Additional funding is also needed to dramatically improve staffing ratios for school nurses, counselors and other adults on campus (see below). [As TK implementation progresses, the state should invest in and incentivize the creation of educator preparation programs for the Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential (PK-3 Credential) in order to meet the demand for educators for specialized training in the early years of education].

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-related. 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.

Educator Pipeline, Retention & Diversity

California policymakers must address the diminishing pipeline and lack of diversity of new educators, continue to improve the preparation of these new educators, provide incentives to enter the profession, 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, quality, and diversity 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 to student ratios to ranking among the top ten states. Improving ratios ensures students have sufficient access to more adults on campus which will result in the delivery of much needed supports and services, and the development of positive 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 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 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 better served through additional and stronger 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 must invest in the University of California, California State University, and California community colleges, and remove the often-insurmountable barriers of attending and completing 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 attainment gaps, provide adequate and stable funding, increase completion rates, and strengthen accountability through increased transparency and measuring performance. Policymakers should continue to prioritize state funding to make college more affordable, including tuition-free community college, additional investments in student financial aid, on-going funding for student mental health and basic needs, and ensuring affordable housing for students attending all three segments of public postsecondary education.



Family Supports

Voluntary Evidence-Based Home Visiting

California policymakers must continue to expand voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs statewide to ensure these effective programs reach a more significant share of eligible families. In addition, the State must leverage multifaceted funding that includes maximizing federal Medicaid dollars, ensure Access to home visiting through various pathways, provide high-quality and responsive programs to the diverse circumstances of families and communities, and strengthen alignment and coordination at state and local levels.

Paid Family Leave

California must ensure 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 Paid Family Leave (PFL) utilization in California. Longer term, the state should lead the country in ensuring many more months of leave for parents and guardians with newborns.

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 the COVID-19 pandemic-driven learning loss and keep them from falling further behind in school. 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 LCFF 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.

Supportive Transitions to Adulthood

California policymakers must ensure that older youth in foster care have access to the supports and services they need to successfully transition to adulthood. As youth work to build the life skills necessary to become self-sufficient, policymakers must ensure youth's basic needs are met by improving access to transitional housing, food, and critical safety net programs, including ensuring youth remain connected to Social Security benefits, as appropriate. Furthermore, the State must provide targeted supports that promote youth's future economic security, including those designed to improve their academic engagement and achievement, aid their transition to postsecondary education, and equip them to find and maintain employment. Finally, California must help youth strengthen and increase lifelong connections to caring adults in their communities as they navigate increasing independence.



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 Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) contact tracing and case management.

Supports for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

California policymakers must ensure no young person experiences homelessness or is 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, by encouraging collaboration among these systems, as well as the McKinney-Vento homeless education programs and local homeless service systems. In the near-term, policymakers should ensure that young people are prioritized in all housing policies and should allocate additional funding to strengthen youth identification and access to a continuum of youth-friendly housing options and supportive services. Additionally, the State must provide targeted resources to support the success of college students experiencing homelessness, such as increasing access to year-round, on-campus housing, food, and resources to meet other basic needs. These critical actions are even more necessary because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 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 juvenile justice systems that are grounded in adolescent development and include diversion programs that serve children at home with their families in their communities yield better outcomes for youth, reduce racial inequities, and increase public safety. 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 implemented and sufficiently funded, and includes oversight and accountability of the new county-based system to provide youth the best chance to heal and thrive.

Opportunities for Youth Voice & Civic Engagement

The State must involve and amplify the voices of young people – today's leaders - 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 the California Youth Empowerment Commission, provide resources for ongoing school district implementation of the State Seal of Civic Engagement, enhance voting rights for student school board members, and engage more youth on state boards and commissions to help make policy decisions that impact their lives.