

# 2025 Pro-Kid Policy Agenda for California

A comprehensive state-level roadmap to ensure that all children have the necessary services and supports to reach their full potential.

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Education · Health · Family Supports · Child Welfare  
Adolescents & Transition Age Youth



**Children Now**

The ***2025 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, kids living in immigrant families, 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 impacts of the LA fires, other environmental hazards, and lingering 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.

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 well-educated workforce.

State policymakers need to make smart, strategic, high-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 Pro-Kid 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 80 coalitions across the state and coordinates The Children's Movement of California, a network of more than 5,600 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 Pro-Kid Agenda, please email [\*\*agenda@childrennow.org\*\*](mailto:agenda@childrennow.org)

## 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 support 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, California 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 high 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. The state must prioritize attracting and retaining highly skilled, diverse, multilingual, and knowledgeable teachers and assistant teachers with child development training, 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 true cost of care 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, over time, the State should also increase education and experience standards with appropriate compensation and supports, 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 stabilize funding and include ELOP in programs eligible for annual COLA increases. Schools should have enough high-quality expanded learning programs available to serve every student who wants to participate, while prioritizing TK and Kindergarten students, 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 publicly report data by student group (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.

## 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. 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 (LTE) and that districts with high proportions of LTE 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).

## **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 and include science in our statewide and federal accountability system. 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, and expand the capacity of teacher preparation programs, particularly credentialed educator apprenticeship programs. To retain our existing workforce, investment in high-quality, ongoing professional learning for all educators to help ensure they are supported, effective, and stay in the profession is needed. Policymakers must reform teacher hiring practices and put in place protections against "last in, first out" layoff policies and 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 recent investments in improving the pipeline, quality, and diversity of new teachers and 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. 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.

## Birthing Health

Persistent racial disparities in newborn and perinatal outcomes show that California's leaders must do better in addressing birthing health equity, particularly for preterm birth indicators and perinatal mental health. Medi-Cal pays for a significant portion of births in the State and plays an outsized role in terms of closing disparities since Medi-Cal pays for more births to people of color than commercial insurance. Although doula services for Medi-Cal enrollees have been an important step towards establishing diverse care teams to support birthing people of color, the overwhelming number of maternity ward closures across the state is making access to maternity care more inequitable and inaccessible in some communities. To end racial disparities in perinatal health, the State needs to make significant and targeted investments in community services, public health programs, and social supports, in addition to access to high-quality prenatal, postpartum, and preventive health care services.

## Environmental Health & Justice

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 Californians, Black and Latino/a children are the most impacted by these exposures. The State should ensure that all children have access to lead-free surroundings at school and home, as well as routine blood lead testing. In addition, the State should dramatically reduce children's exposure to pesticides by regulating and transitioning away from their use, and quickly implementing legislation to improve notification when pesticides are being sprayed nearby so that families can take precautions. The State must also make targeted investments in historically disadvantaged communities, where lack of tree cover and extreme heat can exacerbate air pollution, asthma, and toxic exposures in children.

## 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. The State should also work to 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. The State must also ensure that private health insurance coverage is affordable for families and that coverage is comprehensive and inclusive of the health care that children may need, such as hearing aids and services.

## Health Care Access & Accountability

California policymakers must make kids the first priority in health care and improve families' access to culturally appropriate health care providers for their children in a timely way. In particular, there must be a more proactive focus on reducing the racial, linguistic, geographic, and other disparities in children's

health care access and outcomes. With new, stronger state contracts with Medi-Cal managed care plans,, the State can now reward improvement in child health outcomes and better monitor health plans to guarantee children will get the care they need. The State must enforce high standards that drive improvement in child health outcomes as well as reductions in racial and other disparities. Additionally, the State must work bidirectionally with caregivers, authentically engaging families in policy development and implementation to ensure the systems of care reflect the needs and experiences of those most impacted. The State must also use data to effectively hold the Medi-Cal system accountable for payments made to deliver and coordinate quality health care for children that is required by federal law, and 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.

## **Supporting Mental Health**

California must ensure kids grow up in environments that minimize the causes of common illnesses like anxiety and depression, while providing tools for emotional regulation and healthy relationships. Leaders should prioritize cross-sector policies and programs that prevent behavioral health challenges and treat difficulties that arise – including trauma-informed training for child-serving professionals, coping skills coaching for students, and parenting support programs. The State must also support the healing of children who have already endured trauma, through routine screening, referral to child and family services, and follow-up. California should create a comprehensive plan with target metrics for 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 specify strategies to build wellness, such as increasing peer support workers and other culturally competent providers, boosting youth mental health first aid training, and greatly expanding preventive services in community and school settings. Finally, the State should invest substantially in community-based organizations that help prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences and promote healing.

## **Preventing Substance Abuse**

California must ensure kids can grow up in conditions that minimize the root causes of substance use. Policymakers must prioritize policies and programs that work to increase family support and school connectedness to promote drug-resistant behaviors. In addition, leaders should fund youth-specific treatment programs, separate and distinct from programs that treat adults. California has made progress by banning the sale of flavored tobacco. 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 discourage school suspensions and expulsions for drug-related issues, instead prioritizing a culture of school connection that includes prevention services in community and school settings.

## **Oral Health**

To ensure every child in California achieves optimal oral health, policymakers must ensure all kids in Medi-Cal have timely access to services and a dental home, especially children with or at risk of having special health care needs. Policymakers must prioritize investments in preventive services that reach kids where they are, such as schools and increased use of virtual dental homes in areas where there are no Medi-Cal enrolled providers. Improvements to increase compliance with and reporting of Transitional Kindergarten Oral Health Assessment data also requires attention from the State. The Department of Health Care Services must improve monitoring and oversight of Medi-Cal managed care plan contracts for primary care providers to conduct initial dental health assessments, make dental referrals, and apply fluoride varnish to children. The State should also scale data-sharing practices between a child's doctor and dental provider to make and track closed-loop dental referrals, and leverage the Community Health Worker benefit to support members to make and keep dental appointments.

## **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. The State should also follow best practices for pregnancy and STI prevention by requiring public secondary schools to make free condoms readily available to students.

## **Food Security**

Every child should have access to nutritious food. The State must ensure every eligible child is able to access CalFresh, school meals, meals in child care settings, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The State should also ensure full, timely implementation of summer food benefits to maximize reach and limit the enrollment burden on families. In a big win for children, California made school meals free for all public-school students. The State should now 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 maintain and increase pandemic-era investments, technology improvements, and process simplifications to make nutrition assistance benefits much easier for families to access and use.

# 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 the duration of leave to 12 weeks per parent/guardian and aggressively pursue policies to boost awareness of the passage of SB 951 that raises wage replacement leave from 60-70% to 70-90%, based on income, to eliminate economic barriers that contribute to racial/ethnic and income disparities in Paid Family Leave 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 Kids in Foster Care**

California policymakers must ensure that all children in foster care have access to comprehensive health care and that ongoing statewide health initiatives are effectively implemented to ensure their care is well coordinated across this complex network. 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 due to high rates of school changes 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 rate 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 young people work to build the life skills necessary to thrive, policymakers must ensure their basic needs are met by improving access to transitional housing, food, and critical safety net programs. 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

## Supports for Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

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 youth-serving 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 continued economic uncertainty and greater housing instability, as well as the impact of the LA fires.

## 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 new county-based system serving young people who have been transferred back to their communities following the closure of the Division of Juvenile Justice is sufficiently funded and includes oversight and accountability to provide youth the best chance to heal and thrive.

## Opportunities for Youth Voice and 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.