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California's Patchwork of Early Care and Education Programs Leaves Many Young Children Without Access to Essential Learning Opportunities

New report examines California's early care and education system and identifies policy areas that need to be addressed in order to create a comprehensive, high-quality system

[Understanding California's Early Care and Education System](#)

PALO ALTO, CA — California is home to more than 3 million children from birth through age 5. These children are in a critical phase of development that will, in part, determine their long-term academic success, health, and well-being. And, while research shows that participation in high-quality early care and education programs (ECE) can have a highly positive impact on children's development, many of California's children don't have access to that care.

A forthcoming report by the Learning Policy Institute, *Understanding California's Early Care and Education System*, finds that access to high-quality ECE is a challenge because the state's ECE system has been constructed incrementally, has complex and fragmented funding and administration systems, and has a range of inconsistent requirements and services, creating a patchwork of programs that lack the coherence and capacity to serve all the state's children effectively (see figure at end of this release).

This lack of access is especially concerning for California's 1.3 million children from birth to age five who live in or near poverty and dual language learners, who make up a third of the state's incoming kindergarteners. High-quality, publicly funded ECE programs are important in supporting these young learners, giving them a strong start on the path that leads to college or career, fostering meaningful advantages in school readiness, and providing long-term benefits such as lower rates of special education placement and higher graduation rates.

Understanding California's Early Care and Education System first looks at the current landscape of ECE in California and details the state's various programs and funding sources, as well as levels of access and quality. It finds that there are several policy areas that must be addressed in order to achieve a coherent, equitable system. Specifically:

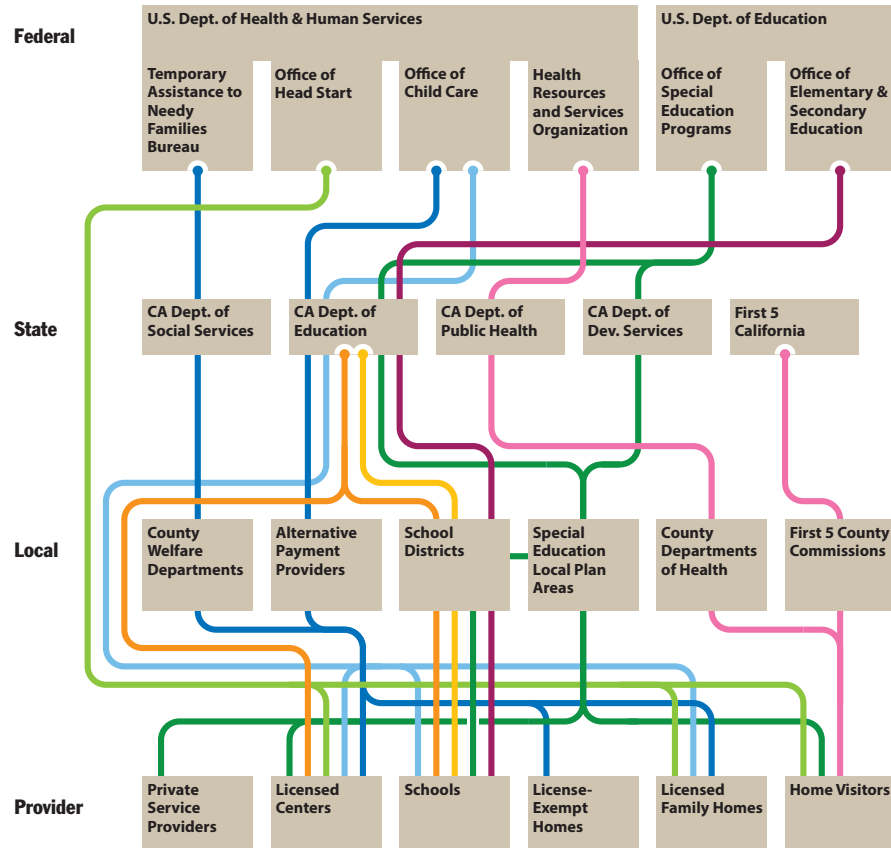
- Funding flows from an amalgam of federal, state, and local funding sources that make it vulnerable to economic fluctuations.
- A substantial unmet need for publicly funded ECE programs, including programs for infants and toddlers and full-day programs, which are particularly limited in scope and have uneven access across the state.
- Differing regulations that create programs of varying quality.
- A lack of consistent data, which makes it difficult for policymakers to make informed decisions.

The report also identifies five questions that state policymakers need to consider in order to create an ECE system that provides well-funded, high-quality care for all children:

1. How can California move from a patchwork of disconnected programs to a more unified ECE system?
2. How should California increase the availability of high-quality, full-day ECE programs that meet the needs of children and families?
3. How can California more sustainably fund ECE programs?
4. How can California continue to improve quality and supports for all ECE programs?
5. How can California improve its data systems to inform strategic decision making?

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Many Agencies Control California's ECE Programs



Programs



Note: This graphic shows the multiple agencies that administer state- and federally funded ECE programs in California. Administrative oversight includes setting regulations, allocating resources, managing contracts, and overseeing program quality, among other responsibilities. Administrators may, but do not always, provide funding. ECE programs (the colored lines shown in the key) may be offered by various kinds of local providers, some of whom offer multiple programs at a given time. Several other organizations, particularly First 5, resource and referral agencies, and QRIS consortia, also provide considerable support to providers and programs, although their role varies by county.

Source: California Department of Education. (2017). Child Development. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/>.

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

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