Getting Down to FACTS

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From Expansion to Excellence: Addressing Systemic Challenges to Better Serve California's Youngest Learners

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Introduction

California has significantly transformed its Early Care and Education (ECE) landscape since 2019 through the implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK). The state has phased in Universal Transitional Kindergarten (TK), expanding access to a school-based early learning experience for four-year-olds. This expansion is supported by the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P), which provides before-school, after-school, and intersession care to children from low-income families. State investments in subsidized programs across the early childhood mixed delivery system, including the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), general child care and development programs, Head Start, and private providers, continue to give families options and remain the primary mechanism through which low-income children under age four are served.

This expansion, however, has moved faster than the systems needed to support it. The rapid pace has further exposed long-standing challenges across the ECE system. Fragmented oversight, significant data gaps, and an unevenly prepared and compensated workforce continue to make it difficult to monitor, evaluate, and improve programs despite billions in public investment. California has taken steps to address some of these systemic issues by developing the PK-3 ECE Specialist Instruction Credential, revising the Child Development Permit, and updating the preschool/TK learning foundations to better

align with K-3 standards. Even so, major initiatives, including TK and state preschool, have moved forward without dedicated resources to evaluate their implementation or effects.

Investments in Transitional Kindergarten and state preschool offer clear benefits, including the potential to narrow achievement gaps and relieve some of the financial stress facing California families. At the same time, the movement of four-year-olds into TK may destabilize community-based providers that rely on older children to subsidize the high cost of infant and toddler care. California also lacks the preschool-through-third-grade infrastructure needed to sustain and build on early gains, including aligned data systems, curriculum, assessments, and teacher preparation requirements and ongoing professional learning support. Although the state's recent accomplishments reflect a serious commitment to young children's learning and development, their long-term impact will depend on effective implementation across programs. Without evaluation resources, integrated data systems, and unique identifiers for children and educators, California cannot accurately track enrollment, assess program quality, or measure long-term outcomes.

The challenge for California now is not simply to expand access further, but to ensure quality and continuity of care in a complex, multi-agency system that families and providers often struggle to navigate. This brief, drawing on Getting Down to Facts III reports, describes the current state of ECE in California and what will be required to move forward. At the heart of that challenge are three recurring issues in the research: fragmented governance, uneven workforce preparation and compensation, and weak data infrastructure. The central issue now is whether California's expansion efforts are being matched by the coherence and quality needed to support children from birth through third grade.

Findings

1	**Universal Transitional Kindergarten has expanded access to early learning for California's four-year-olds, although access remains uneven.**

Enrollment in TK among eligible four-year-olds is high, and available evidence suggests that participation benefits children while easing financial pressure for many families. At the same time, not all families are aware that TK is an option, and others continue to face barriers to enrollment.

2	**California's stated goals are often weakly connected to measurable outcomes and instructional practice.**

California has invested heavily in early childhood education, especially through TK and CSPP. These investments have produced substantial, equity-enhancing gains in student achievement

and appear to reinforce one another alongside TK–12 investment through the Local Control Funding Formula across the preschool and early elementary years.

3 Significant supply gaps persist for infants, toddlers, and three-year-olds.

California continues to face major shortages in care for children under four. TK expansion has raised concern among some providers because many rely on older, less expensive children to subsidize the cost of infant and toddler care, and the gap between the supply of and demand for those slots remains substantial despite recent investments in CSPP and child care.

4 Preparation requirements vary widely across ECE settings, and ongoing professional support remains limited and fragmented.

Requirements for teachers and caregivers differ significantly across programs and do not always align with children's developmental needs. California's expectations for lead teachers in state preschool remain low relative to most states, and professional development is typically not organized around the job-embedded and sustained approaches that research has found most effective. Meanwhile, TK teachers are held to higher preparation requirements than teachers of 4-year-olds in many states.

5 Workforce support has improved, especially in TK, but compensation and training pathways across the broader ECE sector remain inadequate.

California has made meaningful progress in supporting the ECE workforce through reimbursement increases and expanded access to TK, where educators earn K–12-equivalent wages. However, compensation, preparation pathways, and working conditions remain inequitable and inadequate across much of the broader ECE workforce, contributing to staffing shortages and high turnover.

6 Oversight of ECE remains fragmented across state agencies, limiting accountability, support, and preschool-through-third-grade coherence.

Responsibility for ECE is split across multiple funding streams and agencies, creating a misaligned system for providers that rely on multiple funding sources. This fragmentation complicates efforts to align preschool with the early elementary grades and leaves monitoring and improvement efforts limited, duplicative, and often focused more on compliance than meaningful quality improvement.

7 California lacks the integrated statewide data infrastructure needed to evaluate quality and

support continuous improvement.

Although the state has made substantial investments in ECE, fragmented and ineffective data systems limit its ability to assess participation, quality, coordination, and long-term outcomes. Without reliable, systematic, and integrated data, California cannot answer basic questions about how well the system is working or whether its investments are being used effectively.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

Universal Transitional Kindergarten has expanded access to early learning for California's four-year-olds, although access remains uneven

In 2021, California Assembly Bill (AB) 130 enacted a five-year phased-in expansion of Transitional Kindergarten (TK) to create universal access for all children who turn four by September 2nd of a given school year. The state also enacted a significant expansion of before- and after-school, as well as intersession care through the ELO-P, which requires school districts to provide free expanded learning options to eligible students starting in TK. "Rebenching" of Proposition 98 provides funding to accommodate the costs of both of these programs.

As reported by Meloy and Stipek, enrollment in TK is high among eligible children, with 65 percent of all eligible four-year-olds enrolled in the 2024–2025 school year. According to Fisher, Arpino, and Liu, awareness of the TK program is higher among higher-income families (81 percent) than lower-income families (64 percent). While interest in Transitional Kindergarten (TK) is high, with 90 percent of all parents—and 94 percent of lower-income parents in 2024—expressing a likelihood of enrolling their child, families face barriers such as program hours incompatible with work schedules, transportation challenges, and a lack of available slots at preferred sites.

UPK is offered through a variety of programs, in addition to TK, to serve three- and four-year-olds, including the state-funded California State Preschool Program (CSPP), the federally-funded Head Start Program, and other subsidized preschool programs. This mixed delivery system reflects the legislature's intent to give families equitable access to meaningful choices and potentially offers alternatives that can address the barriers some parents face in accessing TK.

Parents view TK as both a developmental resource and a source of financial relief, with some parents reporting that childcare costs can exceed $40,000 annually per child. This matters for families with young children, 84 percent of whom reported difficulty meeting at least one basic need in a given

month as of December 2025, including utilities (72 percent), healthcare (52 percent), food (45 percent), housing (42 percent), and child care (21 percent). This economic hardship affects families far beyond those living in poverty, supporting the philosophy behind universal access to TK and other early childhood programs (Fisher, Arpino, and Liu).

Investment in Universal Pre-Kindergarten improves child outcomes for most students

California's substantial investments in both early childhood education (through TK and CSPP) and K–12 education (through LCFF) have produced significant, equity-enhancing gains in student achievement that reinforce one another across the preschool and early elementary grades. Johnson and Land found a powerful "developmental multiplier effect" when these public investments are sequenced and funded adequately. Specifically, increasing CSPP per-pupil spending by $1,000 resulted in nearly a quarter of a year's greater learning gains in math and reading several years after kindergarten. These gains were consistently and substantially larger in schools that received higher levels of per-child funding.

Likewise, TK attendance delivered strong results for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Low-income, English-speaking students who attended TK showed an average of six months more learning gains in third grade math and reading achievement than similar children who did not attend. TK effects were mutually reinforcing with LCFF-induced spending increases and were amplified when children had first attended CSPP. For non-English-speaking students, whose average gains from TK alone were modest (1.8 to 2.4 months), attending CSPP beforehand significantly boosted the impact, leading to roughly half a year of learning gains in math and reading. These TK-induced achievement gains persisted into the fourth grade, especially in math, further demonstrating the long-term value of these early investments.

While the benefits are widespread, the data suggest that effects are smaller for non-poor children, likely due to their greater access to high-quality private preschool. Furthermore, the effects of TK were found to be smaller for children whose parents are low-income and do not speak English, highlighting a persistent gap that requires continued attention to ensure universal success across all demographic groups.

Significant supply gaps persist for infants, toddlers, and three-year-olds

Meloy and Stipek find that there are still important gaps in families' access to child care for infants, toddlers, and three-year-olds. Community-based early childhood providers have raised concerns that TK implementation has exacerbated these gaps because their budgets often rely on revenue from older, less expensive children (four-year-olds) to subsidize care for younger children (infants and toddlers), who are more expensive to serve due to higher required adult-to-student ratios (e.g., 1:2 or 1:3 for

infants vs. 1:10 or 1:12 for four-year-olds). The legislature has taken steps to mitigate the effect of losing four-year-olds for these providers by increasing rates and changing enrollment priorities to encourage serving more three-year-olds, particularly in CSPP.

Despite these concerns, overall licensed capacity is relatively stable and has actually grown by six percent since before the pandemic. A significant gap remains between the supply of and demand for licensed infant and toddler child care, due in part to staffing shortages. As of 2023, the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network reported 54,433 infant and toddler slots in childcare centers and 271,537 slots in Family Child Care Homes serving children from birth to age twelve. Even if all of these slots were leveraged to serve infants and toddlers, only 26 percent of all infants and toddlers (1,229,808) in California would have had access to care in 2023. Likewise, despite efforts to increase access to CSPP, only 22 percent of three-year-olds had access to publicly funded Pre-Kindergarten or child care.

Preparation requirements vary widely across ECE settings, and ongoing professional support remains limited and fragmented

Stipek and Meloy found that preparation requirements in California are highly variable, based on the funding source rather than the age or needs of children. In California, a four-year-old could be in TK with a teacher who has both a BA and a teaching credential, or in a publicly-funded childcare center with a teacher who has only 12 units of preparation. California's requirements for Title 5 programs, even with expected revisions to Child Development Permit that will require lead teachers to hold at least an associate degree in ECE, remain lower than those in most other states, 43 of which, as of 2023, required lead state preschool teachers in public schools to have a BA, and 22 of which had the same requirement for teachers in nonpublic schools. California will require only an associate degree, and only for new educators.

Professional development for ECE educators remains fragmented, relying primarily on short-term, disconnected workshops rather than the job-embedded, sustained approaches that research has shown to be most effective. Furthermore, the lack of rigorous evaluation makes it impossible to distinguish which quality improvement investments successfully enhance teaching and student learning. Districts lack guidance and support for aligning critical policies, such as curriculum and assessment, to ensure cohesive instructional practices.

Workforce support has improved, especially in TK, but compensation and training pathways across the broader ECE sector remain inadequate

Most teachers of four-year-olds in CA now earn parity with K-12, because they hold positions as TK teachers. However, Stipek and Meloy also found that the payment rate for contract childcare providers has not kept pace with minimum wage increases, contributing to staffing shortages and high turnover. The inadequacy of compensation across the broader field is reflected in the median hourly earnings for California childcare providers in 2024 which was $18.38, less than that of animal trainers ($22.49). The poverty rate for the ECE workforce (11.8 percent) is nearly double that of other workers (6.5 percent). Furthermore, in 2022, 47 percent of early educator households participated in one or more public safety-net programs. Critically, disparities in pay and benefits among childcare providers, preschool teachers, and TK teachers are significant and cannot be entirely explained by differences in required education levels or job demands.

California has made progress in expanding opportunities for educators to increase their education and, in turn, their pay, but those efforts remain insufficient and will soon run out of funding. As reflected in Grossman and Kaul, teaching credentials required for TK are unobtainable to many who need to work full time, although the availability of internships and residencies help. The costs of attending four-year colleges, and lack of articulation agreements between four-year and community colleges, where many early childhood education students begin higher education, likely contributes to limited diversity among TK teachers compared to teachers in other ECE sectors.

Oversight of ECE remains fragmented across state agencies, limiting accountability, support, and preschool-through-third-grade coherence

Monitoring of licensed early childhood programs in California is limited, less frequent than in nearly every other state, and often centered on compliance rather than meaningful quality evaluation (Stipek and Meloy). California has a voluntary early childhood Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), but participation rates are very low with only 17.2 percent of eligible centers and 1.9 percent of eligible family childcare programs participating in 2023. There are also many concerns about equity and effectiveness of QRIS implementation in California.

The new requirement for all CSPP programs to implement the CLASS is a step forward because the CLASS provides information on adult-child interactions, a central component of quality. The CLASS, however, does not assess literacy or math instruction and is currently being implemented only to inform improvement plans in CSPP programs, so its value will depend on resources available to support improvement and potential expansion to support more programs.

Finally, a lack of internal alignment across ECE monitoring and quality-improvement systems limits opportunities for alignment with the K-12 system across curriculum, assessment, professional learning, and other areas where P-3 coherence could improve child outcomes.

California lacks the integrated statewide data infrastructure needed to evaluate quality and support continuous improvement

As described in Meloy and Stipek, California's existing ECE data systems are heavily siloed, with separate, unintegrated systems maintained by agencies such as the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). For example, each agency runs an independent database to collect basic contract and enrollment information. Furthermore, funding for key quality improvement systems previously supported by First 5 California is set to end. The voluntary California Early Care and Education Workforce Registry lost funding at the end of 2025, and state-level information on the ECE workforce is largely absent.

Systematic collection of child academic achievement data begins only in third grade, which is too late to track progress through the critical early years (child care, preschool, and TK through second grade). Furthermore, the primary quality measure, the QRIS rating, is available for only a small proportion of programs. Finally, the absence of a unique identifier, before children enter TK-12, makes it impossible to track total enrollment, assess specific geographical and program needs, or integrate data systems for school facilities and teacher credentialing in the early childhood years, creating what Meloy and Stipek describe as a "data vacuum." Without reliable, systematic, and integrated data, the critical questions about ECE system effectiveness, coordination, and overall outcomes cannot be answered.

Implications for California

The research points to four areas where the evidence has direct bearing on decisions California is now facing.

Continued support for Universal Pre-kindergarten

Investment in universal access to a pre-kindergarten learning experience has increased access, eased financial burdens on families at a time when economic hardship is widespread, and improved child outcomes, especially when paired with sufficient K–12 funding. At the same time, not every family can access one of the state-subsidized programs available to four-year-olds, and some groups of children appear to benefit more than others. The broader implication is that future progress will depend not only on maintaining access, but on whether California can build a truly universal pre-kindergarten system that works for working families and responds to the developmental needs of all children.

Early Childhood Education for children under four

Children's experiences in their first five years have an outsized influence on later success in school and in life. California has made major progress in expanding access for four-year-olds, but the most severe supply gaps remain among children under four. In 2023, only 26 percent of California's infants and toddlers had access to licensed care and 22 percent of 3-year-olds had access to publicly funded Pre-K or child care. The evidence suggests that the next phase of early childhood improvement will depend in part on whether the state can address the preschool and childcare needs of younger children and the higher costs associated with providing that care.

Teacher credentialing, preparation, and compensation

The credentialing structure required for TK, which offers a living wage, remains difficult to access for many adults who need to work full time, even with internships and residencies. More accessible pathways into credential programs, stronger articulation between community colleges and four-year institutions, and support for the costs of higher education would make the route into teaching more realistic than it currently is for many prospective educators. The same is true for the Child Development Permit system, where course access and financial support remain important constraints. The broader implication is that a more accessible and better compensated system is likely to be central to sustaining a diverse ECE workforce, increasing diversity in the TK workforce, and supporting the benefits that educator diversity can provide for young children.

Governance, oversight, and evaluation

California's current ECE system remains disjointed in both authority and administration. Disconnected decision-making at the state level increases administrative burden for providers and makes the system harder for families to navigate. The consequences of decentralized governance are also visible in heavily siloed data systems and in weak, duplicative approaches to monitoring and quality improvement. The evidence suggests that California's ability to improve consistent access to high-quality ECE will depend on whether it can create a more coherent governance structure, strengthen monitoring beyond basic compliance, and build an integrated early childhood data system that allows children's experiences to be connected to outcomes over time. Intentional evaluation of major initiatives is also likely to be essential if the state is to understand and improve the returns on its substantial investment in ECE.

Conclusion

California has made historic strides in expanding early childhood education through Universal Transitional Kindergarten and the broader Universal Pre-Kindergarten initiative. These investments have increased access for four-year-olds and provided important financial relief for families across the state. In doing so, California has established a stronger foundation for supporting young children's learning and development.

At the same time, substantial inequities remain within the mixed delivery system. Supply gaps for infants and toddlers persist, community-based providers remain financially vulnerable, and the broader ECE workforce continues to face inadequate compensation and fragmented preparation pathways. These challenges make clear that expansion alone is not enough.

The long-term effects of California's recent investments will likely depend in part on how coherently its early childhood system functions across programs and agencies. That includes stronger governance, better data infrastructure, and more aligned approaches to quality improvement and professional learning from birth through third grade. Without that coherence, the state will struggle to sustain early gains and ensure that all children have access to a high-quality early learning experience.

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