

A young girl with glasses and a blue jacket is kneeling on a colorful play mat, playing with wooden blocks. The mat features a winding road, green grass, and blue water. A wooden toy is also visible on the mat.

# START WITH EQUITY: CALIFORNIA

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CHILDREN'S EQUITY  
PROJECT

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## INTRODUCTION

In July of 2020, the Children's Equity Project and the Bipartisan Policy Center, with support from the Heising Simons Foundation, released a new report, [Start with Equity](#), outlining the state of equity in learning systems that serve young children across the United States. The report took a deep dive into the data, research, and policy landscapes surrounding three specific issues: harsh discipline and its disproportionate application; inclusion of children with disabilities in learning settings; and equitable access to bilingual learning for dual language and English learners. Informed by these analyses, the report provides an equity child policy agenda that includes cross-cutting recommendations across issue areas, and specific recommendations in the three key areas covered in the report.

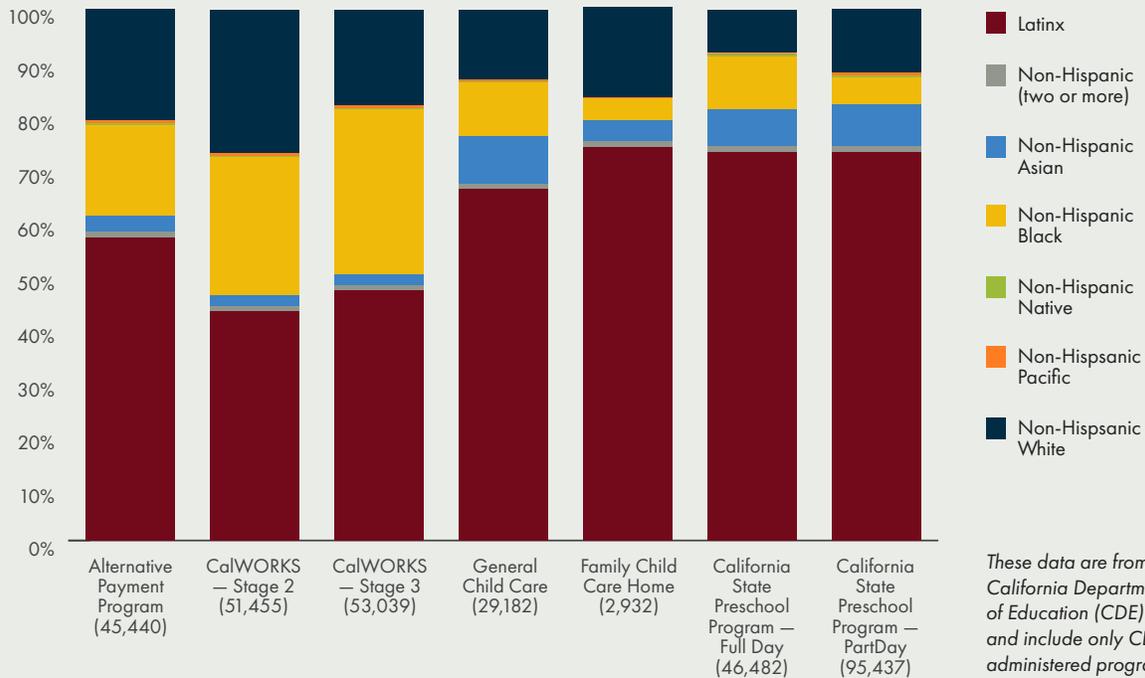
Among the key cross-cutting findings in the report were:

- Racial disparities were pervasive and existed across issue areas, child ages, and states. Children with intersecting identities including disability, race, and home languages other than English, were particularly affected.
- Inequities in early learning access, experiences, and outcomes are complex and influenced by a range of issues, including individual and systemic biases that affect policies and access to resources.
- Teachers preparation and development with respect to equity is woefully inadequate and under-resourced.
- It is common for children with disabilities to experience segregated learning, though the extent and scope of the segregation varies by state.
- Targeted programs for children with marginalized identities are severely underfunded at the state and federal level.
- Accountability and monitoring for these issue areas at the state and federal levels are insufficient or altogether absent.
- Gaps in the availability of data, particularly for dual language learners (DLLs), prevents a clear understanding of the extent to which systems are efficacious in supporting children.

Across these issue areas, one overarching theme is clear: states play a critical role in setting early childhood policy and determining whether their systems provide children with equitable learning opportunities or are complicit in exacerbating historically entrenched inequities in learning conditions. **At the request of policy makers and advocates in California concerned with the issues presented here, the Children's Equity Project has developed a California specific brief that contextualizes the report's findings with state-specific data and tailored policy recommendations to inform the state's Master Plan for Early Learning and Care and aligned efforts.**

## Race/ethnicity of children receiving subsidized

## child care by contract type (October 2019)



Young Californians represent a rich diversity of cultures, races, ethnicities, and languages. Over half of children under five years of age in the state are Latinx; 5% are Black; 11% are Asian; and 26% are non-Hispanic White. About six out of every 10 young children in California are DLLs, with the majority of these speaking Spanish at home (exclusively, or in addition to English), followed by Asian languages. In California, each month, over 320,000 children are served through the state’s subsidized child care programs administered by the CDE. Of those, just over 60% identify as Latinx, 16% identify as non-Hispanic White, 15% identify as non-Hispanic Black, 5% identify as non-Hispanic Asian, 1% identify as non-Hispanic of two or more races, and less than 1% identify as non-Hispanic Pacific and non-Hispanic Native American. The racial breakdown by program varies. Language background data across program types is not publicly available, so it is unclear what proportion of DLLs are served across program types.

Equity is necessary everywhere. But in a state as richly diverse as California, failing to be intentional and bold on issues of equity affects the vast majority of children. In this brief, we review the three key areas covered in the national *Start with Equity* report, and that we believe, can and should be explicitly addressed in California’s Master Plan for Early Learning and Care. They include discipline and its disproportionate application, the inclusion of children with disabilities in general early learning settings, and access to high-quality bilingual learning for DLLs. We briefly review state data and policies, as they relate to the national context, and provide a set of tailored and actionable equity policy recommendations that can contribute to addressing some of the persistent barriers in California’s early childhood system, including ensuring equitable access and experiences for children of color and DLLs, as well as supporting the social-emotional health of the state’s youngest children. As policy makers in California navigate the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, atop unprecedented wildfires, it is more critical than ever that a focus on equity be at the forefront of policy and budgets.

# HARSH DISCIPLINE AND ITS DISPROPORTIONATE APPLICATION IN LEARNING SETTINGS

Exclusionary discipline, including expulsion and suspension, happens early, often, and disproportionately across the United States, including in California. There is no evidence that indicates that exclusionary discipline results in any positive outcome for the child, the teacher, or the system. Instead, there is an abundance of evidence that indicates that harsh discipline results in a host of negative outcomes, both in the short term and in the long term. For example, expulsion and suspension are associated with school disengagement, grade retention, and school dropout.<sup>1</sup> What's more, early expulsion predicts later expulsion, indicating that expelling children from child care or early learning programs may place them on a negative trajectory toward expulsion later in their academic trajectories.

Black children are consistently — across data sets, ages, states, and settings — disproportionately the subjects of harsh discipline, despite the fact that there is no evidence of their displaying more severe or more frequent misbehavior. Research finds that these practices and their disproportionate application are influenced by implicit and explicit bias; lack of workforce preparation, training, and development; lack of access to mental health supports to build teacher or provider capacity in supporting children's social-emotional and behavioral health; poor working conditions — including long working hours with insufficient breaks and high ratios/group sizes; stress and mental health challenges of teachers and child care providers; and misguided or patchwork policies.<sup>2</sup> Various approaches, including Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, the Pyramid Model, and early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC), have been shown to be effective in reducing harsh discipline, supporting children's social and emotional development, and improving teachers' skills and school climate.<sup>3</sup> Research on the effectiveness of these approaches for reducing racial disparities is still emerging, but promising, particularly for PBIS.<sup>4</sup>

## The Data Landscape

Nationally, CRDC data indicate that although the number of preschool suspensions has decreased substantially between the 2015-2016 and 2018-2019 school years, racial disparities remain stark, with Black preschoolers being about 3 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, CRDC does not capture exclusionary discipline in child care or private preschool settings. Smaller-scale studies have found that the rate in child care settings may be even greater than in public Pre-K settings,<sup>6</sup> including infant/toddler child care settings.<sup>7</sup> In 2016, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services administered [a parent survey](#) and included a question on expulsion and suspension of preschool-aged children. Families reported more than 50,000 suspensions and 17,000 expulsions in one school year alone. These parent-reported numbers are larger than those reported in the national CRDC, potentially explained by the larger number of settings and systems included (any early childhood setting, as opposed to exclusively public Pre-K). The difference in the reporter — parents versus district administrators — cannot be overlooked, and may potentially explain some of the difference as well.

There is a dearth of discipline data in young children in California. Like in most states, there is no publicly available, state-collected data on exclusionary discipline across the early care and education system. Available federal data, via the Civil Rights Data Collection, only assesses the issue in public Pre-K programs. According to CRDC, in the 2015-2016 school year, 1,619 California State Preschools reported that 13 students received 35 out-of-school suspensions total. Of those 13 children, 11 were boys, 8 were children with disabilities, and 3 were English Learners. In terms of racial/ethnic breakdown, 10 were Latinx, 2 were Black, and 1 identified as "two or more races."

CRDC data indicate a relatively low number of suspensions of children in public Pre-K nationwide. California's figures are especially low. In fact, 41 states suspended children at a higher rate than California. Nationwide and in California alike, it is possible that the low numbers reflect issues associated with reporting. For example, anecdotally, it is common for early childhood programs to use terms other than "expulsion" or "suspension" when removing a child from a program. In some cases, families are pressured to unenroll a child due to behavior issues. In other cases, families are told children are "not developmentally ready" or "not a good fit" for the program. Families may be asked repeatedly to pick their child up early and may decide to unenroll their child due to the disruption this may cause in the child's learning and/or in their work

schedule. These are all variations of what researchers call “soft expulsions”, or the removal of a child without explicitly using the term suspension or expulsion, and without appropriately documenting it as such. This may be especially true in California given that the law places limits around suspensions and expulsions, with some exceptions, in public preschool settings.

Beyond these data, several reports have been released that examine exclusionary discipline, though almost exclusively in the K-12 system. For example, researchers from San Diego State University’s Black Minds Project released a report titled *Get out: Black Male Suspensions in California*, revealing in the 2016-2017 school year the highest racial disparity by grade occurred in the early grades (i.e. K-3) and that Black boys were 5.6 times more likely to be suspended than the statewide average. Another report, *From Boarding Schools to Suspension Boards*, reported that 7.2% of Native American children were suspended as compared to the statewide average of 3.5% and, like with Black children, the greatest disparities were in the early grades, where Native American boys were 2.5 times more likely and Native American girls were 3.7 times more likely to be suspended than the statewide average for their same-gender peers.<sup>8</sup>

The clear gaps in data collection, particularly in the state’s child care systems, and potential fidelity issues associated with reporting in the California State Public Preschool Program, obstruct a clear understanding of the problem and undermine equitable learning opportunities for California’s youngest learners. Valid, reliable, and accessible data is needed to understand the access, experiences, and outcomes of California’s youngest learners, including those who have been historically marginalized.

## The Policy Landscape

California has implemented some policy changes in response to these alarming data, though protections for children vary widely based on the particular system a child is in. In 2017, Governor Brown signed into law AB 752, a law limiting expulsions in the state. Unfortunately, the law only applies to state-subsidized preschool programs, and not to any of the various child care programs funded by the state and federal government. It also does not explicitly address suspensions.

Another important piece of legislation that addresses this issue, albeit indirectly, is AB 2698. The law defines ECMHC for the state, allows state-subsidized providers to use existing state funding for ECMHC, and provides financial incentives for child care and public preschool providers to use ECMHC, via larger child care reimbursement.

We also reviewed the state’s policies related to corporal punishment, restraint, and seclusion — three other issues that were reviewed in the Children’s Equity Project’s *Start with Equity* report. California prohibits corporal punishment in public schools, but not in private schools. With respect to child care, licensing standards for center-based settings explicitly prohibit seclusion, corporal punishment, and mechanical restraint, but allow physical restraint. They also include a list of other types of negative discipline strategies that are prohibited, including threats, coercion, and humiliation. In home-based settings, however, only corporal punishment is explicitly prohibited. Seclusion and restraint prohibitions or restrictions are omitted. The standards include the same list of negative discipline strategies as in center-based settings that are prohibited, but those do not include seclusion or restraint.

Currently, there are no policies limiting exclusionary discipline in the state’s large child care system(s); only children in the public preschool system enjoy modest protections. The state’s most recent Child Care and Development Fund plan for FY 2019-2021 indicates that the state has made some limited efforts to address the issue, including creating a new website with resources for providers to prevent expulsion and requiring licensing inspectors to attend training on the issue. Of note, the 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant required states to report on their policies to address exclusionary discipline in child care settings. Most states took that as an impetus to enact modest administrative action to prevent exclusionary discipline. State policies included actions like requiring data collection on the issue, mandating preventive steps prior to exclusion, requiring family notification of policies, and offering (though not requiring) trainings and professional supports to child care providers. California’s actions in the state child care system per their CCDF plan, by comparison, are less intensive than even these modest actions. What’s more, there are significant data gaps in tracking the frequency and disparities of harsh discipline, particularly in the various child care systems, preventing a precise and comprehensive understanding of the scope and severity of the problem.

Overall, the state has made important, but inadequate progress on exclusionary discipline, and has some policies in place limiting other forms of harsh discipline, but the extent of the limitation varies by system. This bifurcated system where children receive protections based on which funding stream they access is inequitable and a serious problem. The recommendations on the following page are actionable policies, investments, and supports that can help the state address inequities in discipline.

## California Recommendations to Address Harsh

### Discipline and its Disproportionate Application

- ✔ Prohibit corporal punishment in private schools.
- ✔ Align home-based child care standards with center-based standards in the explicit prohibition of seclusion and mechanical restraint.
- ✔ Prohibit suspension and expulsion across all programs that serve young children and receive public funding, including CalWORKS Child Care and other general Child Care and Development programs.
- ✔ Expand the California State Preschool Program expulsion policy to include a prohibition on suspensions.
- ✔ Include a “no expulsion/no suspension” clause in contracts the state signs with child care providers (via grants, contracts, or subsidy).
- ✔ Invest a greater amount of Child Care and Development Block Grant quality funds on early childhood mental health consultants or similar models to support the implementation of a no suspension/no expulsion policy.
- ✔ Collect, disaggregate, and publicly report data on suspension and expulsion across all programs that serve young children and receive public funding, including all of the various child care programs. Ensure the effort includes data on soft expulsion and that parents are included as a source of data.
- ✔ Create a feedback loop between the state’s data collection efforts on this issue and the state’s professional development system. Ensure the rapid deployment of targeted technical assistance and coaching resources to programs that show high levels of concern in rate or disparity.
- ✔ Work with the state’s systems of higher education to ensure that issues of systemic racism, bias, and disparities in the perceptions of behavior and use of discipline, in addition to a deep understanding of development and appropriate behavioral expectations, are core and required components of workforce preparation systems. Direct state- or federally-funded training and technical assistance providers in the state to ensure these issues are a core part of continuous professional development opportunities.
- ✔ Conduct a public information campaign directed at parents to raise awareness about their rights (particularly in public preschool where exclusionary discipline is currently limited by law).
- ✔ Develop a complaint intake system to receive parent complaints with respect to discipline issues. Tie the reporting system to the state’s monitoring and professional development systems to ensure issues are investigated and addressed.
- ✔ Provide guidance to counties to incorporate expulsion and suspension prevention indicators at each level of their quality rating and improvement systems, to include (but not be limited to) preventive supports including culturally responsive social and emotional behavioral coaching and consultation, training and coaching that explicitly and directly addresses implicit bias and disparities, collecting and using disaggregated data to track and address disparities in discipline, and policies that prohibit or restrict expulsion, suspension, and other forms of harsh discipline.

# INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS

A robust and longstanding research base indicates that high-quality inclusion is beneficial for children with and without disabilities across a variety of developmental and academic domains. These benefits are dependent on meaningful, consistent and continuous, and high-quality inclusion. Young children who start their educational trajectories in inclusive settings are more likely to continue their academic careers in inclusive settings. This fact in itself makes preschool inclusion pivotal and critically important to the long-term trajectories of children with disabilities. Unfortunately, national data indicate that less than half of all preschoolers served under IDEA Part 619 receive services in inclusive settings, a percentage that has inched up by only 5% in the last two decades.<sup>9</sup> Data show even lower rates of inclusion in California. Barriers to inclusion that have been cited in research include the ableist attitudes and beliefs; inadequate workforce preparation, development, and support; the intersection between race, disability categories, and placement decisions; a lack of will to change the status quo and policy misperceptions on the parts of administrators and systems leaders; and a lack of coordination between early childhood and IDEA systems.<sup>10</sup>

## The Data Landscape

According to IDEA section 618 data from Fall 2018, 136,631 young Californians with disabilities were served under IDEA, newborn through 5 years of age.<sup>11</sup> These data indicate that Latinx children (79,125) were the largest group of children ages 0-5 years old served in early intervention and preschool special education, followed by White children (30,306), Asian children (12,721), multiethnic children (7,173), and Black children (6,842).

## IDEA PART C: INFANTS AND TODDLERS

In California, the Department of Developmental Services is responsible for the administration of Early Start, California's early intervention system. In 2018-2019, early intervention services were provided to about 50,000 infants and toddlers in California.<sup>12</sup> In line with national trends, California's earliest learners with disabilities receive the majority of their services in home settings (86%), followed by community-based settings (9%). These numbers do not vary substantially by race, ethnicity, or gender.

The most recent IDEA report to Congress shows that nationally, there was a 16.7 percent increase in the percentage of the population birth through age 2 served under IDEA in the decade between 2008-2017. In California, there was a 20.5 percent increase.<sup>13</sup> This comes after a California saw a decrease of 7.4% over the previous reported period, 2008-2014, likely influenced by a slower recovery from the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>14</sup>

Settings where Part C services were received in California, by race

	AI/ AN*	Asian	Black	Latinx	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	Other races	White
% of all children served	<1%	9%	5%	59%	<1%	12%	23%
% receiving services in home	89%	83%	85%	86%	88%	82%	86%
% receiving services in community settings	3%	10%	8%	8%	6%	10%	8%

\*American Indian/Alaska Native

## IDEA PART B SECTION 619: PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Nationally, in the Fall of 2018, 815,010 preschoolers with disabilities received IDEA services, 86,456 of whom were young Californians. Similar to Part C, the percentage of the population 3 through 5 served under IDEA increased both nationally and in California over the last decade by 13.8 and 20.5 percent, respectively.

Nationally, fewer than half of preschoolers with disabilities receive their services in regular early childhood programs, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>15</sup> IDEA Section 618 data indicate that in California, the data show even more alarming rates of segregated learning of children with disabilities. Only 37% of preschoolers receive their special education services in a regular program. When broken down by age, only 35% of 3-year-olds receive their services in inclusive settings, compared to 44% of 4-year-olds, and 53% of 5-year-olds. There are no substantial differences by race.

### California Data: Placement by Age

	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5
% of all children served	26%	35%	39%
% receiving services in home	4%	3%	2%
% receiving services in separate settings	66%	62%	56%
% receiving services in regular EC programs	30%	35%	43%

### California Data: Placement by Race and Language

	AI/AN	Asian	Black	Latinx	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	Other races	White	English Learners
% of all children served	<1%	9%	9%	58%	<1%	10%	22%	18%
% receiving services in home	<3%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	4%	3%
% receiving services in separate settings	51%	67%	61%	60%	58%	64%	60%	62%
% receiving services in regular EC programs	46%	31%	37%	37%	39%	33%	36%	35%

## The Policy Landscape

In the past decade, California's efforts to support the inclusion of young children with disabilities have included legislation authorizing funds to increase access to inclusive learning, guidance from the State Department of Education reaffirming its commitment to inclusion in early learning and care programs, and the creation of task forces to investigate and recommend improvements to the system.

In 2013, the California Statewide Special Education Task Force formed to evaluate and provide recommendations to improve California's special education system. The task force included an Early Childhood Special Education Subcommittee. In 2015, the Task Force released a report with recommendations to the Commission on Teacher Credentialing and the California Department of Education. The top priority was focusing on quality early intervention through a renewed focus on increasing access, funding, improved teacher competencies, and greater coordination across public health, early childhood, and the K-12 education systems.<sup>16</sup> The following year, the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) Task Force was created under the Department of Developmental Services and released a multi-year plan with recommendations for systemic improvements that would better support the social-emotional development of children with disabilities.

In 2018, Assembly Bill 1808 was passed and signed by Governor Newsom. The law establishes the Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program, including a \$167.2 million General Fund appropriation, which authorized the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to award competitive grants to districts for the purpose of increasing access to inclusive early learning programs for children with disabilities. It also includes funding to conduct an evaluation of the program. The following year, the

California Department of Education issued a letter reaffirming expectations for access to inclusive early learning and care programs for students with disabilities in California.

With respect to workforce systems, California has a specific credential for early childhood special educators.<sup>17</sup> Requirements include a combination of coursework and in-service placements working with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities. California also has a preschool inclusion facilitator certification program that certifies participants to support teachers in implementing inclusion practices. Finally, the Early Learning and Care Division and WestEd created Beginning Together, a professional development program aimed at promoting the inclusion of young children with disabilities, and ensuring that appropriate inclusive practices are a component of the state's training and technical assistance system.

Combined, legislation and funding to increase inclusion, the Department's guidance reaffirming its importance, and the embedding of inclusion across some of the workforce system, represent important steps toward increasing inclusive learning opportunities for young Californians with disabilities. Although these actions go further than the modest, non-legislative, and not financially consequential actions the vast majority of states have taken in this space, the state has much more work to do to even reach the already-low national average of preschool inclusion.

The recommendations on the following page support increased access to inclusive learning opportunities for young children with disabilities in California.

**In California, only 37% of preschoolers receive their special education services in a regular program, a figure ten percentage points under the national average.**



## California Recommendations to Increase Access to

## Inclusive Learning for Children with Disabilities

- ✔ Conduct a statewide, district-level analysis to identify the areas with the greatest levels of segregated learning for children with disabilities, including all segregated preschool special education systems. Examine the factors leading to segregated learning within the counties or districts with the lowest levels of inclusion.
- ✔ Increase funding for the Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program (IEEEP) and target supports first to communities with segregated, self-contained preschool special education programs.
- ✔ Ensure that the funded evaluation of the IEEEEP includes an analysis of equitable access to new inclusive opportunities, including by race and DLL background.
- ✔ Develop a plan to transition all self-contained preschool special education systems to integrated systems within the local early education system, with articulated benchmarks and a timeline.
- ✔ Increase funding and expand the state's Better Together effort to assist in the transition from self-contained systems to inclusive systems. Deploy "inclusion TA teams" to localities with the highest levels of segregated learning. Work with local communities and systems to adjust funding models, staffing structures, implement co-teaching or itinerant teaching models, shared professional development experiences for early educators and special educators, and formalize partnerships with local community-based early childhood providers to expand the number of inclusive slots available to children with disabilities.
- ✔ Ensure all coaches supported by state or federal funds in the state (e.g. quality coaches, instructional coaches, mental health consultants) are knowledgeable about supporting inclusive practices to facilitate the learning and development of children with disabilities.
- ✔ Issue guidance and hold statewide trainings for IEP and IFSP administrators and teams that review the provision of the least restrictive environment to ensure placement decisions are in line with federal law.
- ✔ Align California's State Preschool Program with Head Start's standard to require 10% of enrollment be children with disabilities. Ensure that all children with disabilities are included at the classroom level with individualized supports and appropriate accommodations.
- ✔ Conduct a review of all statewide early childhood policies and initiatives and ensure children with disabilities are meaningfully included. These should include (but not be limited to) quality rating improvement systems, early learning guidelines, California Public Preschool standards, state child care subsidy policy, licensing standards for the various child care programs in the state, and early childhood personnel standards and credentialing/certification across levels (i.e. entry-level to leadership level).
- ✔ Incorporate classroom inclusion assessments as part of all global classroom quality measurement, monitoring, and evaluation systems, including QRIS and licensing.

# EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY BILINGUAL LEARNING FOR DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Research indicates that DLLs are a large and growing population in the United States, with an estimated 1.8 million, the largest number of any state in the country, residing in California.<sup>18</sup> In fact, 60% of California's young children live in a house where a language other than English or in addition to English is spoken. The majority of these children, over 70%, identify as Hispanic and speak Spanish at home. The next most populous group is children speaking an Asian language (16.8%, either exclusively or in addition to English).<sup>19</sup> They are diverse by almost every measure — regionally, socioeconomically, racially, linguistically, and by country of origin. They have an abundance of strengths, including cultural and linguistic strengths, as well as a host of cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism.<sup>20</sup>

Research finds that dual language or bilingual approaches to learning yield several important academic, social, and cultural benefits to young DLLs. Strengthening children's first language, especially very young children, helps children learn other languages, including English, faster. Children in dual language models outperform their peers in English-dominant models in math and reading.<sup>21</sup> **Indeed, a 2017 report released by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, found that intentionally fostering children's home language, alongside English, sets children on a strong and positive educational trajectory.**<sup>22</sup> What's more, DLLs who keep their home language, compared to their DLL peers who eventually lose (or weaken) their home language, are more likely to attend a 4-year institution of higher education after high school and make greater earnings in adulthood.<sup>23</sup> **Beyond the cognitive, academic, and economic benefits, dual language models embrace and value linguistic diversity — explicitly, provide a greater sense of belonging and cultural validity by centering children's home language, foster a sense of self, and may be more amenable to direct family engagement with parents, grandparents, and other family members who do not speak English.**

Unfortunately, access to dual language immersion programming is still out of reach for most of California's young DLLs, though lacking data and an array of data coordination challenges make it difficult to identify exact levels of access. In some states and districts where Dual Language Immersion models are more robust, preliminary data find that DLLs are under-represented, presenting a serious equity problem<sup>24</sup> and pointing to the need for equitable enrollment policies explicitly prioritizing DLLs. **The robust evidence base supporting dual language learning, particularly for DLLs, combined with the large number of DLLs in California, make it clear that building an infrastructure to expand access to early dual language immersion programming is among the wisest investments the state can make.**

## The Data Landscape

For years, California has been home to the largest population of multilingual families in the United States. About 60% of California's young children are DLLs, the majority of whom speak Spanish, and more than a third of children entering kindergarten are English Learners. The state is home to an estimated 1.8 million DLL children, birth to age five. There is great linguistic diversity in the state. For example, data from the California Department of Education indicate that about 73% of children in the state-subsidized child care program speak English as their primary language, 22% speak Spanish, and the remaining 5% have 58 different primary home languages, 23 of which consist of more than 100 children. According to a [special report](#) on DLLs and public Pre-K from the National Institute for Early Education Research, nearly 63,000 DLLs are enrolled in the California State Preschool Program, comprising 47% of enrollment, a notably smaller percentage than their overall representation in the state (i.e. 60%). There is no data available, to our knowledge, about these young learners' access to dual language programming, and even more concerning, there is no publicly available data on DLLs in the various child care systems in the state, including enrollment, quality of services, and access to dual language programming.

**The robust research supporting dual language immersion, combined with the large number of DLLs in California, indicate that expanding access to such models is among the wisest investments the state can make.**

## The Policy Landscape

California is woefully underperforming in both targeted investments and policies to support DLLs. This inadequate action would be problematic anywhere, but in a state where DLLs make up the majority of the young child population, the results may be especially devastating. In general, the state has a patchwork of policies and limited targeted investments that are not proportionate to the size of the population. **No program has a comprehensive set of policies to support DLLs, and some, like the state's various child care programs, barely address DLL issues at all.**

The California Transitional Kindergarten program has a set of specific standards related to supporting DLLs. According to a 2018 analysis from the National Institute for Early Education Research,<sup>25</sup> California's TK program requires written program plans for serving DLLs, provides extra funding for serving DLLs, monitors the quality of DLL supports, and mandates specialized training for teachers working with DLLs.<sup>26</sup> They also allow for and monitor the quality of bilingual learning and require lead teachers serving DLLs to have specific training and hold a bilingual certification. The report noted that the program does not have a policy for screening or assessing children in their home language, a notable limitation. Nonetheless, an independent evaluation of this statewide intervention has begun to demonstrate highly positive outcomes in areas of language, literacy, and numeracy at the beginning of kindergarten, and, some continued positive effects through second grade.<sup>27</sup> Notably, the Los Angeles Unified School District's TK program has been piloting, and slowly expanding, dual language immersion programming since 2016. In the 2019-2020 school year, ten sites were part of the dual language pilot, in Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, and Armenian.

The California State Public Preschool program, by comparison, has fewer requirements or standards related to DLLs. They allow bilingual learning models, and screen and assess children in their home language. There are no

**Children's positive racial socialization, feelings of belonging, pride in home language, and more direct opportunities for family partnerships are important aspects of culturally responsive DLI models.**

noted requirements for the workforce, though professional development in the area of dual language learning is available. Both the TK and CSPP programs use the home language in recruitment efforts and communication with families.

Policies specific to DLLs in California's child care system are much more basic. A review of the state's Child Care and Development Fund Plan for Fiscal Year 2019-2021 included the provision of bilingual caseworkers to support families who speak a language other than English, the availability of applications in non-English languages, and child care provider trainings offered in Spanish through child care resource and referral agencies. The plan also cites the state's early care and education competencies, which include a bullet on DLL knowledge. **Notably, none of these policies directly relate to children's experiences in the classroom or the extent to which providers are prepared, trained, or supported to meet DLLs' unique language and developmental needs. Given that most of California's young learners are DLLs, this is an alarming and consequential gap in the system.**

Legislatively, the issue of dual language learning has seen important movement in California, especially since 2016, when 74% of Californians passed Proposition 58, opening greater opportunities for bilingual learning. The passage of Proposition 58 marked an important turning point for the state's support for DLLs. The proposition mandates that if a threshold of families from a school collectively request dual language or bilingual programming, the school is required to at least explore the possibility. Notably, schools are not required to implement a model.

The year following the repeal of the state's English-only mandate, the California English Learner Roadmap was unanimously passed by the State Board of Education. The EL Roadmap, which declares biliteracy as a goal of the state, is a comprehensive policy guide that promotes an asset-based approach to education for DLLs. It includes a focus on children reaching high levels of English proficiency, mastery of grade level standards, and opportunities to develop multilingualism.

The state has also made investments in DLLs. In 2017, First 5 California approved \$20 million in funding, supplemented by local investments, for a three phase DLL Pilot to identify and evaluate effective teaching practices for young DLLs. The California Department of Education also funds DLL Professional Development grants to support organizations in offering professional development around DLLs. AB 2514, a bill to establish dual language programs in state preschools and higher grades, was signed into law in 2018 — but without accompanying funding, limiting its effects.

Many advocates cite the shortage of credentialed bilingual lead teachers as a key barrier to expanding access to dual language immersion models. California was the birthplace of the popular Seal of Biliteracy in 2012, and in 2019 was home to more than half of all students who earned the distinction. Of note, while research has found that nationally whiter and wealthier schools are more likely to offer the Seal, in California, 63% of those awarded the Seal were current or former English learners, or were bilingual and spoke a language other than English at home.<sup>28</sup> Ensuring that these biliterate students have access

to teaching preparation programs and career trajectories in the early care and learning system will be key to the state realizing greater access to bilingual learning for DLLs.

Beyond work around the Seal, the DLL professional development grant program, and TK's requirements for staff training to work with DLLs, it appears that there is still a lack of funding, requirements, and standards related to growing the well-trained and compensated bilingual early childhood workforce needed to meaningfully and equitably expand access to dual language learning opportunities for the state's youngest DLLs. This is especially alarming given that DLLs comprise a majority of young children in the state. The recommendations on the following page help address these shortcomings.

**The lack of policies directly related to DLLs' experiences in the classroom and workforce requirements on dual language development, especially in the state's various child care programs, are alarming gaps.**



## California Recommendations to Increase Access to

## High-Quality Bilingual Learning Opportunities for DLLs

- ✓ Increase funding for early childhood programs to transition to dual language immersion models. Prioritize programs serving the greatest numbers of DLLs.
- ✓ Conduct a statewide analysis identifying existing publicly funded early childhood dual language programs, including the number of total and available slots, their location, and the demographics of current enrollment.
- ✓ Publish a registry of dual language immersion early childhood programs and partner with parent organizations to ensure that families, especially immigrant families and families of DLLs, know about these programs.
- ✓ Publish quality benchmarks for dual language learning models in early childhood programs. Use these benchmarks to conduct an analysis of the quality of existing dual language programming. Deploy technical assistance supports to programs not meeting benchmarks.
- ✓ Conduct an analysis of enrollment in dual language immersion models, including demographic characteristics of children in existing slots. Use this analysis to inform equitable funding allocation for expansion of dual language immersion, prioritizing localities or programs that serve greater numbers of DLLs.
- ✓ Provide guidance to all state-contracted early childhood providers who serve significant proportions of DLLs to transition away from English-only instruction and toward dual language approaches. Stress the importance and policy strategies to ensure equitable expansion, prioritizing DLLs.
- ✓ Adopt Head Start's DLL standards in the California State Preschool Program and across all other programs that serve young children and receive public funding.
- ✓ Work with institutions of higher education and workforce professional development systems to ensure that knowledge and competencies about DLLs and bilingual learning are core to their preparation, ongoing coaching, and professional development efforts.
- ✓ Ensure that workforce credentialing, across levels and systems, starting with the Child Development Permit, requires knowledge and demonstrated competencies related to dual language learning and working with linguistically diverse children and families.
- ✓ Implement a standard home language survey in the enrollment process across all early childhood programs and use data to inform resource allocation, specialized training, coaching, and other supports related to dual language learning.
- ✓ Require bilingual teaching staff if at least 20% of a program's students are DLLs with a common home language in all programs that serve young children and receive public funding.
- ✓ Ensure all screenings, assessments, and evaluations, including kindergarten readiness assessments, are conducted in children's home language and English.
- ✓ Conduct review of all state-level policies and systems and ensure that considerations about DLLs are incorporated throughout, including but not limited to the provision of bilingual staff, the use of home language surveys at enrollment, home language instruction and assessment, equitable access to dual language immersion models, and meaningful and ongoing staff training and development on issues associated with dual language learning and linguistically diverse families.
- ✓ Create a new workforce preparation fund that affords credentialing and higher education opportunities to existing ECE professionals, with a priority for existing bilingual staff who are not already in lead teacher roles, including paraprofessionals and teacher's aides.
- ✓ Encourage localities to incorporate DLL specific indicators across every level of Quality Counts California, the state's QRIS, including the provision of bilingual staff, instruction, and assessments, as well as the overall quality of DLL programs.

# MOVING FORWARD

California is at a critical and potentially pivotal moment in developing an early childhood system that centers equity, celebrates the diversity of the state’s young children, and bridges long standing opportunity gaps. But efforts to meaningfully integrate equity across the early childhood system must be explicit and bold. Considering the rich diversity of the state’s young learners, and the fact that most of California’s young children are DLLs, to date, the state has not done enough to embed equity across the various early care and learning systems. Both targeted policies and investments have been insufficient and inadequate.

Data gaps are wide and obscure a clear understanding of how the state is faring in supporting young children across program types. Standards vary across systems, resulting in children having divergent experiences depending on what funding stream supports their care. Discipline policies are uneven and only provide modest protections to children in one part of the system. The state educates preschoolers with disabilities in segregated settings at rates substantially above the national average. Though much attention has been paid to dual language immersion opportunities

since the passage of Proposition 58, there is still little supply of such opportunities for young children, especially considering the number of young DLLs in the state that stand to benefit. Workforce standards are lacking in DLL content and focus, a notably alarming issue considering the state’s rich linguistic diversity. This linguistic diversity warrants systems going beyond merely including DLL content in workforce standards, preparation, training, and development, to centering it. This policy landscape, paired with limited targeted investments to build more equitable systems, shortchange California’s youngest learners.

Change across the three issue areas reviewed here, and others including equitable funding formulas, workforce equity, and authentic integration, is necessary to build a quality early childhood system that works for all children, including those who have been historically marginalized. Under the leadership of Governor Newsom, and the collective movement of early childhood advocates and families, the state can use the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care and other aligned efforts to optimize this moment and fulfill California’s commitment to the wellbeing of all children, regardless of language background, race, or zip code.

**Through leadership and collaboration, California can optimize this moment and ensure a bright, equitable future for all children, regardless of language background, race, or zip code.**



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