



March 10, 2016

Michael Cohen, Director  
California Department of Finance  
915 L Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Early Education Block Grant Proposal**

Dear Mr. Cohen:

On behalf of the California Children and Families Commission, I want to express my thanks to the Administration for starting an overdue conversation about how to best fund and support a high-quality preschool and child care system in California. Even before the billion dollars in budget cuts sustained during the Great Recession, California's child care system was in need of a systemic review to ensure our strategic public investment in early learning was both efficient and effective.

Our Commission is interested in how a robust public review can address three primary system deficits: 1) the enormous child access gaps for low-income children ages 0 to 5; 2) an eroded and severely underfunded system infrastructure due to low per-child funding rates; and 3) a growing but still insufficiently resourced quality improvement system to support all child care and early learning environments. To be clear, access to high-quality early learning for children ages 0 to 5 living in poverty is going to require a substantial increase in funding. We urge the Administration and Legislature to seize this year's budget surplus as an opportunity to invest in our youngest children and not postpone these timely investments in order to discuss system reforms.

We share the Administration's goals to address the lack of cohesion in our mixed-delivery child care system; the differing quality standards across school-based pre-kindergarten programs; the access gaps our low-income, working families face in finding high-quality programs that meet their needs for care while providing beneficial early learning and development supports and opportunities; and the need to support Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) as leaders in utilizing early learning as an achievement-gap-busting strategy. However, this crucial system-building conversation is not purely a fiscal proposition. The complexities and importance of our early learning system, and the changes necessary to best invest in our youngest learners, necessitate a robust policy review process.

We respectfully ask the Administration to work with the Legislature on a robust public policy review of the system, the Administration's proposal, and the possible means to achieve the shared goals and deficits listed above. We recommend the Administration utilize the Governor's State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care for this purpose, and task the Council to prepare a multi-year transition and funding plan for our comprehensive early learning system, serving our low-income families. This plan should address our shared goals, the system deficits outlined above, and the following principles:

### **First 5 California Quality Early Learning System Principles**

- 1) Create a child and family-centered early learning system, focused on positive child outcomes and accessibility, beginning at birth and through K–12 education.
- 2) Provide a stable and meaningful per-child funding level to support both high-quality part- and full-day programs through the state's mixed delivery system.
- 3) Increase local and state agency system capacity, including facility and professional development infrastructure needs.
- 4) Maintain current Transitional Kindergarten funding stability and eligibility, but better integrate local Transitional and Expanded Transitional Kindergarten programs into local preschool and quality improvement systems with developmentally appropriate standards.
- 5) Create efficiencies and flexibility for high quality, local program delivery, which includes better use of child data.
- 6) Support coordination between mixed-delivery environments to support parent accessibility.
- 7) Increase state-wide quality improvement programs and system access for all early learning professionals through Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).
- 8) Increase state-wide baseline quality standards and supports for all early learning environments to ensure developmentally appropriate practices.
- 9) Ensure early childhood educator compensation is commensurate with K–12 educator compensation.
- 10) Increase child accessibility through a meaningful state baseline for eligibility.
- 11) Ensure access and continuity of care for all eligible children.

A comprehensive plan for California's early learning system as outlined above will be a step forward for increased access, quality, and ultimately, child outcomes. We are concerned the Administration's proposal, in its current form, may lead to a loss of program access for currently eligible 3- and 4 year-old children, a loss of stable funding for early learning systems in schools, and significant losses of both our mixed-delivery system and of recent gains in quality improvement infrastructure.

We look forward to working with the Administration and the Legislature on a robust policy process that creates an early learning vision worthy of our Golden State and all our children. Please find attached specific responses to the Administration's questions regarding the current Early Education Block Grant Proposal. If you have questions

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regarding First 5 California's position on this proposal, please contact Erin Gabel, Deputy Director of External and Governmental Affairs, at [egabel@ccfc.ca.gov](mailto:egabel@ccfc.ca.gov) or (916) 263-1093.

Sincerely,



Camille Maben  
Executive Director

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Marty Block, Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review  
Subcommittee No. 1 on Education  
The Honorable Holly Mitchell, Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review  
Subcommittee No. 3 on Health and Human Services  
The Honorable Kevin McCarty, Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 2 on  
Education Finance  
The Honorable Tony Thurmond, Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 1 on  
Health and Human Services  
George Halvorson, Chair, First 5 California  
Joyce Iseri, Vice Chair, First 5 California  
Conway Collis, Commissioner, First 5 California  
Muntu Davis, Commissioner, First 5 California  
Shana Hazan, Commissioner, First 5 California  
Lupe Jaime, Commissioner, First 5 California  
Erin Pak, Commissioner, First 5 California  
Jim Suennen, Ex-Officio Member Designee, First 5 California

## **First 5 California Response to Specific Administration Questions Regarding the Current Early Education Block Grant Proposal**

- *To what extent should the state define program quality standards and what should be left to local determination?*
- *Should classroom content and pedagogical methods employed be left to local discretion? If so, how much? Should pre-kindergarten programs focus more on social-emotional development, literacy and math skill development, highly structured learning, open-play, etc., or some combination of these?*

Quality standards in curriculum, teacher, and other adult qualifications and ongoing professional learning, adult-to-child ratios, child assessments, and classroom environment are the responsibility of the state to ensure a minimum baseline of quality is maintained in programs that are funded with state and federal dollars. QRIS can and must be funded to incentivize and support increased levels of quality at the local level beyond the state's baseline.

Quality standards for individual funding streams should be reviewed to better allow flexibility and efficiencies for mixed-funding models, while supporting a sustained or increased level of quality. For example, the state could create ratio flexibility for LEAs and community-based preschool providers that administer both federal Head Start and state-funded Title 5 programs.

Curriculum standards tied to the Infant/Toddler and Preschool Learning and Development Foundations and Frameworks, with an emphasis on developmentally appropriate learning environments for all children, should be maintained. The California Department of Education should be tasked and funded to keep the Foundations high quality, relevant, and accessible to support all early learning and care environments.

- *If the state maintains a mixed-delivery system for pre-kindergarten education (including both LEAs and non-LEAs), and allows for more local control, what should the local governance and administration of funding look like? Who should have control over pre-kindergarten funding and decisions?*

The state should continue to fund a mixed-delivery system that meets the diverse needs of our state's families, but also ensures coordination between LEA and non-LEA providers within regions to provide centralized eligibility and access services for families. Instead of continuing to fund LEAs through a contract mechanism, alternative funding methods that streamline the allocation process but do not decrease quality standards should be explored.

- *What child outcome measurements (if any) should the state track as part of a pre-kindergarten program for purposes of accountability?*

Instruments to inform and guide teacher practice within preschool programs and provide school readiness information for kindergarten teachers on all children, and instruments to assess and improve the quality of child-teacher interactions in all sites should be maintained, improved, and expanded. The purpose of administering these instruments is improving child outcomes, not for site accountability purposes, and should not be used as such.

Site participation in a local QRIS, and ultimately rating scores within that local QRIS, should be integrated into any accountability system.

Early learning is a highly effectively achievement-gap busting strategy, and early learning planning and accountability should be integrated into Local Control Accountability Plans in a meaningful way that promotes continuous improvement.

- *Keeping in mind that funding is limited, should the state set requirements for required minutes and days of the pre-kindergarten school year? What should the length of school day and year be? What are the tradeoffs inherent in choosing longer or shorter days and years?*

The dual purposes of child development and high-quality care for working families must be maintained in the preschool system. Research shows increased quality preschool dosage, both in terms of program duration and length of day, yields better child learning outcomes. In addition to the quality standards via the QRIS, minimum program duration and length of day standards for children from non-working families should be set, and full-day, full-year programs that serve both the development needs of the child and the working hour needs of families also must be maintained.

- *If the state cannot afford to provide services to all pre-kindergarten children, which demographics of children (including age demographics) do you believe ought to be prioritized for services?*

No group of children should lose access to pre-kindergarten programs as a result of policy reform. Increased quality, access, and resources should be prioritized for low-income families and dual language learners, with additional increased resources for full-day, full-year programs to serve working families. The state should push forward with meeting the Preschool Promise to serve all eligible low-income working families with preschool-age children.

- *What are the benefits and barriers to establishing closer partnerships between local educational agencies and private providers? What should that relationship look like?*

Increased accessibility for families and better data on child outcomes should drive a systems integration between all providers in our mixed-delivery system. These systems should include streamlined eligibility requirements between programs, eligibility determination and referral, information on program quality, and linkages to California's K–12 student data systems. These systems will require additional funding.