

May 27, 2009

EMBARGOED for Release at 12:01 a.m. Thursday, May 28, 2009

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California Must Increase Access, Improve Quality, Build Stronger Preschool System

New RAND Corporation policy recommendations provide strategies for investing in high-quality early childhood education system, confirm California is on right track

The final report in the RAND Corporation's series on California's preschool system confirms that early childhood education is a critical part of K-12 reform. The study shows how California can invest in a high-quality early learning system to help close the state's achievement gap.

It comes as California grapples with a state budget crisis. At the same time, the state stands to receive about \$500 million of \$5 billion in the federal stimulus package for early childhood education. Additionally, President Obama's FY2010 budget proposal calls for more than \$1 billion for new and existing federal programs supporting early education.

"For California, this couldn't come at a better time. We urge policymakers to maximize the opportunities presented by new federal funds to lay the foundation for long-term economic growth," said Preschool California President Catherine Atkin. "We can make a down payment on the success of our next generation by giving them a complete and competitive education – starting in their earliest years."

RAND's California Preschool Study, the first comprehensive statewide look at early care and education for preschool-age children in the state, concluded that California has a significant achievement gap that is evident as early as kindergarten entry. It finds that socio-economically disadvantaged children are more likely to begin kindergarten without the basic early reading and social skills that prepare them to learn and succeed.

By third grade, almost two thirds of children are not proficient in English-language arts, and 42 percent of students are not proficient in math. And the same groups of children who start out behind tend to stay behind. The proportion who do not reach proficiency is even higher for low-income children, and for children who are Latino, African American, and English learners.

The RAND report finds that high-quality preschool can help bridge the achievement gap. "Closing California's achievement gap begins with ensuring all of our children start kindergarten well prepared to learn," said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell. "High-quality preschool provides the foundation for children to succeed in school and in our increasingly competitive global economy."

Previous economic research shows that the earlier investments are made, the greater returns will be. Longitudinal studies show that that high-quality early childhood education that serves disadvantaged children provides a return of \$7 to \$17 for every dollar spent by saving government spending on K-12 education, public assistance and the criminal justice system and increasing tax revenues as a result of higher earnings.

California's system underfunded, unable to serve kids who need it most

The RAND study finds that only about half of low-income children are in preschool, compared to 80 percent of children whose families make more than \$100,000. Far fewer are in high-quality programs that develop language skills and promote higher-order thinking.

It also finds that the state's early care and education system is complex, fragmented and not set up to provide high-quality programs to the kids who need it most. Among the challenges are minimal regulations; lack of a clear accountability system with expectations for quality and outcomes; no financial incentive to achieve higher quality; and a funding system that makes it difficult for providers to use all funds available to them. Other challenges include the lack of a coordinated plan to prepare teachers, and a complex system that makes it difficult for families to navigate, for policymakers and the public to understand and for providers to administer.

RAND recommendations confirm California's path

To address these challenges, RAND recommends ensuring high-quality programs are available to the children who need it most; measuring and monitoring quality and providing higher reimbursements to providers who achieve higher quality; creating a well-designed, coordinated plan to prepare teachers; and advancing toward a more efficient and coordinated system.

California is already taking many of these steps:

- The state is developing a quality rating and improvement system to evaluate quality and provide financial incentives to reach higher quality. This includes supporting and growing the early childhood education workforce that serves our children.
- California has consolidated programs and reduced bureaucracy, making the most of the resources it has now.
- And it is establishing systems to follow and evaluate children's progress from early education to high school graduation.

The time to act is now. President Obama has called early learning the first pillar of education reform, and new federal funding presents an unprecedented opportunity to build on what California is already doing and act on the RAND recommendations.

For more information, including links to the RAND study and executive summary, visit: <http://www.preschoolcalifornia.org/rand>.