



# Policy Agenda



2026

EARLY EDGE CALIFORNIA

## About Early Edge California

Early Edge California is a statewide policy and advocacy organization dedicated to supporting children from under-resourced communities, with a special focus on babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. Through targeted advocacy and policy development, we champion culturally affirming, multilingual environments for children and promote the professional growth of teachers and trusted caregivers, establishing a foundation for community resilience and economic mobility.

In 2026, California faces significant challenges, including recovery from wildfires, unprecedented and targeted immigration raids and enforcement, and budget challenges from federal policies and actions that directly impact children and families. California must continue to work towards ensuring that every family has access to the resources and supports they need to thrive, even in uncertain times. This requires innovative approaches to expanding access, including strengthening partnerships and rethinking how systems are governed.

Early Edge's 2026 policy agenda focuses on the most critical issues impacting young children, their families, and the workforce. This year, we will advance goals across the following key areas:

- Early Learning and Care (ELC) Systems Transformation;
- Birth-to-Three Child Care;
- Universal Preschool (UPK) Implementation;
- Workforce Compensation, Supports, and Pathways; and
- Dual Language Learners (DLLs).



# Early Learning and Care Systems Transformation



Create ELC systems change that meets the needs of children, families, and the ELC workforce. When existing systems do not fully serve the people they are designed to support, it is necessary to make intentional changes to ensure they function as intended and deliver equitable, effective outcomes. Currently, families often struggle to navigate these systems, particularly when they cannot access programs they qualify for or must go through multiple channels to find the information needed to understand their options. The system needs to work for families by providing clear information, guaranteeing access to subsidized programs when they qualify, and ensuring that children and families can access child care without fear of immigration enforcement.

## PRIORITY ACTIONS

### **Protect and expand investments in ELC funding to ensure more eligible children and families access ELC programs.**

Unlike TK–12 programs, ELC programs that fall outside of Proposition 98 do not have a dedicated funding stream. With ongoing threats to these programs, it is critical to protect and retain existing investments so families can access high-quality care, and providers and educators earn fair and just wages. At the same time, we must close corporate loopholes and ensure the wealthiest contribute their fair share to provide stable, sustainable funding that supports a strong, equitable ELC system for all children and families.

### **Improve early childhood coordination to meet the needs of California’s ELC providers and families.**

Early childhood programs are currently spread across multiple agencies, making it difficult for families to know where and how to access all the services they qualify for. A more coordinated system can improve data integration and efficiency, strengthen program alignment, and ensure all children, including Dual Language Learners (DLLs), have access to the care, learning, and support they need. Aligned and publicly accessible data, including DLL data, allows legislators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to guide decision-making, develop targeted supports, and strengthen bilingual education policies and programs.

### **Ensure the ELC system protects and supports immigrant children, families, and the workforce across California.**

Children, families, and providers across the state are experiencing the effects of attacks on immigrant communities, including fear of attending ELC programs or accessing services they qualify for, as well as coping with the trauma young children face. Strengthening the ELC system to respond to immigration enforcement is critical to ensuring families feel safe accessing the programs and supports available to them. Full implementation of [AB 495](#) is an important step toward establishing clear statewide protocols and best practices for programs. Supporting this work requires building systemwide capacity across ELC programs, including funding for training and professional development and compensating providers for the time needed to access these supports.



# Birth to Three Child Care



Increase access to high-quality, affordable infant and toddler care by addressing the urgent shortage facing families across California. With more than 1.7 million children ages 0-3 in the state, many families still struggle to find care that meets their needs.<sup>1</sup> Expanding access to infant and toddler care is essential to supporting working families and ensuring young children benefit from safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate ELC environments.

## PRIORITY ACTIONS

### **Ensure the Governor delivers on the [commitment to add 44,000 subsidized child care slots in 2026–27, moving toward 206,800 total slots by 2028.](#)**

Families across California continue to struggle to access affordable, high-quality child care. Currently, only 21% of eligible infants and toddlers receive subsidized care.<sup>2</sup> Expanding subsidized child care spaces is a promise made by Governor Newsom and the Legislature, and it is critical that these slots are funded as intended and mandated by [law](#).

### **Support parenting students with young children by ensuring they are provided with the resources and information needed to access high-quality Early Learning and child care services for their children while working towards their college degree.**

An estimated 300,000 undergraduate student parents are enrolled in higher education in California, and about half have at least one child under the age of 6.<sup>3</sup> Supporting the implementation of [SB 271](#) will help colleges connect parenting students to local child care resources and referral networks who can support access to child care and subsidies, and ensure students can access child care when needed. Providing these supports is essential not only for students' educational success but also for the well-being and development of their young children.

### **Develop an infant and toddler statewide communications strategy to uplift the need for increased state investment in infant and toddler child care, and promote the availability and benefits of subsidized child care to families.**

In California, the average cost of infant and toddler care is \$21,945 annually or \$1,829 per month,<sup>4</sup> making it imperative for our state to invest more in creating child care options that are affordable or free for families. Additionally, many families are unaware of both the availability of subsidized care they may qualify for or the benefits for both their families and young children. Clear, accessible, and culturally responsive information can help families navigate eligibility, enrollment, and accessing high-quality care.<sup>5</sup>



# Universal Preschool (UPK) Implementation



Ensure high-quality implementation of universal preschool by incorporating developmentally appropriate practices across the mixed-delivery system and leveraging partnerships between school-based providers and community-based organizations to meet the needs of children and families. California has the largest universal preschool program in the nation with over 250,000 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled across the state, creating a unique opportunity to support children during their most formative years through high-quality programs that reflect and respond to local community needs.<sup>6</sup>

## PRIORITY ACTIONS

### **Expand Family Child Care Home Education Networks (FCCHENS) by making them more accessible to Family Child Care Home (FCCH) providers.**

FCCH providers are a vital part of California’s mixed-delivery system, offering home-based environments, smaller adult-to-child ratios, and culturally and linguistically affirming care. Many FCCHs face barriers to participating in FCCHENS, which provide training, coaching, mentorship, and shared resources to improve quality and sustain their businesses. Broadening access to FCCHENS will give more providers resources and support, expand high-quality UPK opportunities for families, and strengthen the mixed-delivery system.

### **Support the identification, adoption, and rollout of a developmentally appropriate Multilingual Learner (ML) screener in TK.**

In 2024, [AB 2268](#) was signed into law, exempting TK from using the English Language Proficiency Assessment of California (ELPAC) to identify children as English learners, as it was not developmentally or age appropriate. In addition, \$10M was allocated in the 2025-26 state budget for the selection and adoption of a developmentally appropriate ML screener in TK. Implementing the ML screener is critical to accurately identifying Multilingual Learners and providing targeted support that strengthens both their home language and English development.



### **Increase family awareness and understanding of the UPK programs they qualify for, prioritizing families with the greatest need and families of 3-year-olds, who are currently underenrolled.<sup>7</sup>**

Many families with 3- and 4-year olds still do not fully understand the array of programs available, including vouchers, California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, and Transitional Kindergarten (TK).<sup>8</sup> Intentional communication and outreach are needed to connect families with programs that meet their needs and the developmental needs of their children. When families have access to this critical information, they can make informed decisions that support their children’s learning and growth.

# Workforce Compensation, Supports, and Pathways



Advance rate reform by adopting an alternative methodology that reflects the true cost of care and supports just, livable wages and essential benefits for the ELC workforce. Provide supportive resources and professional development opportunities, while addressing barriers to licensure and access to subsidies, to ensure educators have the supports they need, enabling children across all settings from birth through age five to thrive.

## PRIORITY ACTIONS

### **Fully implement rate reform through an alternative methodology that reflects the true cost of care for providers.**

The workforce has been underpaid and undervalued for far too long. It is absolutely critical that providers be reimbursed at the actual true cost of care so that we have a system that is ready and equipped to support the needs of working families. Too many providers are struggling to make ends meet, with 43% having to rely on public assistance programs.<sup>9</sup> When providers earn a fair and livable wage, they can fully support children and families and keep their programs open, ensuring stable access to care.



### **Support equitable educator pathways by ensuring current and future educators have fair and accessible opportunities to enter and advance in the field.**

Support the successful implementation of [AB 753](#) in order to help strengthen and expand career pathways in ELC. These efforts help ensure a well-supported workforce of educators who can meet the diverse needs of young children. In addition, providing equitable pathways through both the Child Development Permit and the PreK-3 ECE Specialist Instruction Credential is critical to recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce of educators who can effectively support the learning, development, and well-being of young children.

### **Support Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers by ensuring their fair inclusion in rate reimbursement reform, reducing administrative burdens, promoting pathways to licensure, and guaranteeing access to social safety net programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program.**

FFN caregivers provide care for over half of children under 5, yet they are often overlooked in the ELC system,<sup>10</sup> and currently face barriers in accessing key resources to support their work. They need access to eligible subsidies, professional development opportunities, support networks, and pathways to licensure. With these supports in place, FFN caregivers can provide stable, high-quality care, helping children thrive in a setting that meets families' needs.

# Dual Language Learners (DLLs)



Ensure California's future thrives by embracing the cultural and linguistic strengths of DLLs starting at birth. DLLs are children who are developing two or more languages, including English, or whose first language is not English, and they represent nearly 60% of California's children under age five.<sup>11</sup> When multilingualism is recognized and nurtured as an asset, rather than a barrier, it strengthens children's self esteem, identity formation, and lifelong learning.<sup>12</sup> Ensuring these children succeed requires advancing language equity through expanded multilingual resources and culturally responsive programs that reflect California's rich diversity, supporting healthy development and long-term opportunity.

## PRIORITY ACTIONS

### **Equip and empower educators with the knowledge and tools to effectively support children who speak Black (English) Language.**

Black Language—also known as African American Vernacular or Ebonics—is a rule-governed language with deep roots in Black communities across the United States. Supporting and honoring children's home languages, including Black Language, supports their overall academic success. We must therefore affirm and celebrate Black Language as an asset that enriches children's linguistics repertoire and cultural development.

### **Support asset-based identification and data collection of DLLs, as outlined in [AB 393](#) and [AB 1363](#), to ensure they receive appropriate services as well as support in both their home language and English.**

In collaboration with CDE and CDSS, provide the field with clear guidance, aligned resources, and ongoing technical assistance to support effective and consistent implementation across programs. In addition, ensure DLL identification data is included in the [Cradle-to-Career \(C2C\)](#) data system. This data is critical for understanding program participation, measuring outcomes, and ensuring resources are effectively targeted to support DLLs across programs.

### **Support the expansion of bilingual programs beginning in the earliest years of learning and strengthen the bilingual educator pipeline to ensure young DLLs have consistent access to high-quality programs.**

Although 94% of families with multilingual children value bilingualism for their children, access to bilingual and dual-language programs remains limited in many communities.<sup>13</sup> Expanding these programs supports the developmental benefits of bilingualism and honors children's home languages, and aligns with the goals of the state's [English Learner Roadmap](#). In addition, the state must advance the bilingual specialization within the Child Development Permit to create a more prepared, diverse, and responsive workforce. Embracing and fostering California's diversity demonstrates that, despite the federal push for English-only policies, we will remain a leader in fostering and celebrating our linguistic diversity.

## Learn more and contact us

Explore our [policy priorities](#) and [history of legislative and budget achievements](#) to learn more about our work.

**Contact Us:** [info@earlyedgecalifornia.org](mailto:info@earlyedgecalifornia.org)

**Visit Us:** [earlyedgecalifornia.org](http://earlyedgecalifornia.org)

<sup>1</sup> Kidsdata. (n.d.). Child population, by age group and gender [Data table]. Kidsdata.org. Retrieved February 9, 2026, from <https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/34/child-population-age-gender/table>

<sup>2</sup> “Unmet Need for Subsidized Child Care Impacts All Age Groups,” Datawrapper chart, accessed February 9, 2026, [https://www.datawrapper.de/\\_/DLnyZ/](https://www.datawrapper.de/_/DLnyZ/)

<sup>3</sup> California Student Parent Alliance. *Juggling roles and achieving goals: California’s undergraduate student parents*. [CASTUDENTPARENTALLIANCE.ORG/ALMANAC](http://CASTUDENTPARENTALLIANCE.ORG/ALMANAC)

<sup>4</sup> Economic Policy Institute, Child care costs in the United States: California (interactive fact sheet), Economic Policy Institute, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/CA>

<sup>5</sup> Economic Policy Institute, Child care costs in the United States: California (interactive fact sheet), Economic Policy Institute, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/CA>

<sup>6</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Hodges, K. S., Garver, K. A., Duer, J., Weisenfeld, G., & Siegel, J. National tables. In *The state of preschool 2024: State preschool yearbook (2025)*. National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/yearbook/2024/national-tables>

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Fuller et al., *Pre-K Pivot? How Preschools Shift to Younger Children in Los Angeles* (University of California, Berkeley, 2025), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/18KAT7-aXb1DoHDiFzaknPL9dNXgipril/view>.

<sup>8</sup> RAPID Survey Project, Interest in Using Transitional Kindergarten Is Linked with California Parents’ Awareness of the Program, July 23, 2025, <https://rapidsurveyproject.com/article/interest-in-using-transitional-kindergarten-is-linked-with-california-parents-awareness-of-the-program/>

<sup>9</sup> McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., Powell, A., Jaggi, S., Kim, Y., Knight, J., Muñoz, S., & Schlieber, M. (2024). *Early childhood workforce index—2024*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024>

<sup>10</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty. *Demographics of family, friend, and neighbor child care in the United States*. <https://www.nccp.org/publication/demographics-of-family-friend-and-neighbor-child-care-in-the-united-states/>

<sup>11</sup> Migration Policy Institute. (n.d.). *Young dual language learners in the United States and by state*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-state-profiles-young-dlls>

<sup>12</sup> The Children’s Partnership. (2024). *Uplifting the Power of Culture: Protective Factors for the Health of California’s Children*. [https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Protective\\_Factors\\_Brief.pdf](https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Protective_Factors_Brief.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Williams. (2025, November 12). *What Families Want: New Data on Public Demand for Bilingual Education*. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/report/what-families-want-new-data-on-public-demand-for-bilingual-education/>

