



EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION ACCESS BRIEF

2023 LOS ANGELES COUNTY EARLY CARE
AND EDUCATION NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT US.

Office for the Advancement of Early Care and Education

Department of Public Health – Health Promotion Bureau

600 South Commonwealth Avenue, Suite 800, Los Angeles, California 90005

Office: (213) 639-6202 • Fax: (213) 639-1034

childcare.lacounty.gov

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LA County's Early Care and Education System.....	3
Licensed Early Care and Education Program.....	3
Subsidized Early Care and Education Services.....	4
The Shifting Early Care and Education System.....	5
Impact of Universal PreKindergarten on the Mixed Delivery System.....	6
The Invisible System: Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care.....	6
Summary and Recommendations.....	8

The Los Angeles County Office for the Advancement of Early Care and Education (OAECE) shapes policy recommendations, facilitates planning, and provides a range of services to improve the availability and quality of early care and education programs throughout Los Angeles (LA) County. One of the roles of OAECE is to convene the Child Care Planning Committee (Planning Committee), which serves as the County's state-mandated Local Child Care and Development Planning Council (LPC), funded by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). The Planning Committee conducts a needs assessment every five years and engages in planning to address access to quality, affordable early care and education for all children and their families. The 2023 Needs Assessment examines a pivotal point in the field -- recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the expansion of Universal PreKindergarten throughout the state, early education rate reform, and an increased awareness of the workforce challenges facing the field of early care and education. This brief is based on the Planning Committee's 2023 Needs Assessment and explores the issue of access to early care and education services for young children in L.A. County.



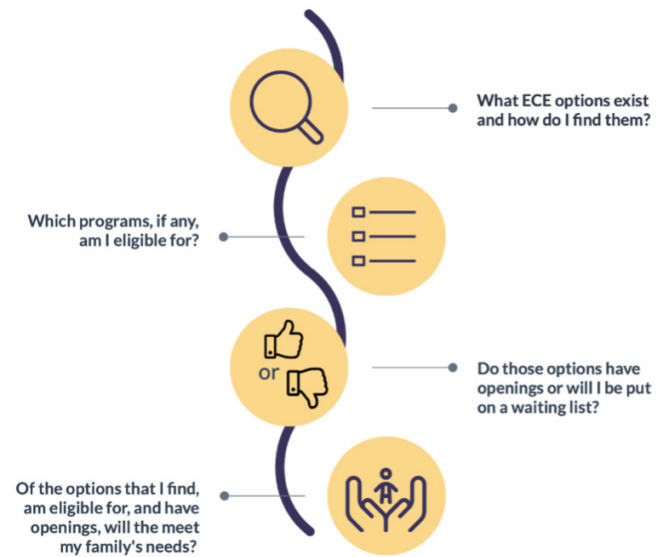
LA County's Early Care and Education System

Defining Access

Recognizing the need for a shared understanding and approach to defining and measuring access, the federal Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation convened an ECE Access Expert Panel and developed the following definition of access that acknowledges the importance of care that meets the needs of children and families: "Access to early care and education means that parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports the child's development and meets parents' needs."¹ This definition recognizes that parents and caregivers need to understand the ECE options available to them, those options need to be affordable, and the options must meet children and parents' needs in terms of location, hours, and other preferences such as setting, size, and the language and culture of the provider.



Parent's journey accessing child care



Licensed Early Care and Education Programs

Using the number of spaces in licensed programs (supply) relative to the number of children (demand) – L.A. County only has enough licensed early care and education spaces to serve 14 percent of children ages birth to twelve years.² Of course, not all families want or need licensed early care and education for their children.

The percentage available supply to demand increases to 24 percent when the demand number used is children whose parents are in the labor force. Since these caregivers are presumably in need of early care and education for their children while they are at work, the percentage is higher.³



**LA County has only enough
licensed child care spaces to serve 24%
of children birth to 12 years whose
parents are in the labor force.**



¹ Friese, S., Lin, V., Forry, N. & Tout, K. (2017). Defining and Measuring Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers. OPRE Report #2017-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ² Calculated using data from AIR analysis of American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data, five-year estimates, by location of family residence (2020) and California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, California Child Care Portfolio. ³ Kidsdata.org Availability of Child Care for Working Families 2021.

Subsidized Early Care and Education Services

California has several publicly subsidized early care and education programs for eligible families. These programs are made available through a complex system of services that vary in terms of setting (home-based vs. center), schedule (full-time, part-time, nontraditional hours), ages served, payment mechanism (voucher or contract), and eligibility requirements. Low-income families who are seeking early care and education must learn what options exist, which programs they are eligible to use, and whether those programs have open spaces. Only then can they evaluate their choices and decide what ECE setting meets their child's needs.

Mirroring state trends, the number of children in LA County who are eligible for subsidized care far exceeds the number of children enrolled in these programs. This is particularly true for infants and toddlers. Whereas 43 percent of eligible preschool-age children are enrolled in a subsidized program, only 8 percent of eligible infants and toddlers are served. The large difference between these groups is attributable to multiple factors, including the greater public investment in subsidized preschool compared to infant toddler care, the overall lack of licensed infant toddler spaces compared to preschool spaces, greater public awareness of the benefits of preschool, and families being more likely to enroll their children in formal ECE programs when they are older.

While funding enough spaces for low-income families is essential, it is not sufficient to increase access. A recent report by the California Budget & Policy Center ⁴ found that despite increases



43%

**of eligible preschoolers
are served in subsidized ECE**



8%

**of eligible infants and toddlers
are served in subsidized ECE**

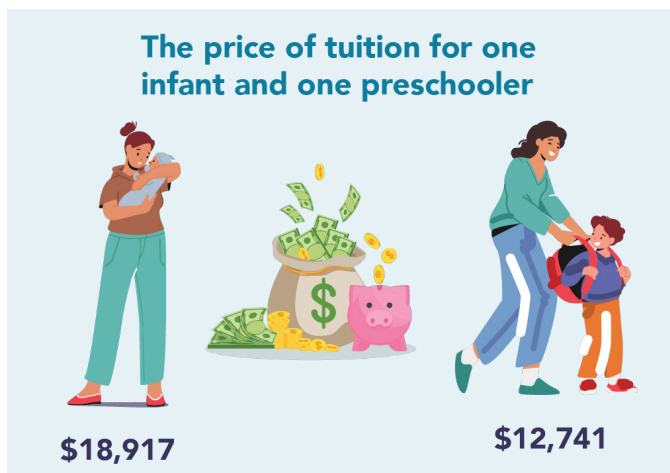
in funding, enrollment in some publicly funded programs has not increased; in some cases, it declined. For example, between 2014 and 2022, state funding for voucher programs, California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and Transitional Kindergarten (TK) all increased significantly. In fact, CSPP and TK, which both serve preschool-age children, received 3 to 3.5 times more funding in 2022-23 than they did in 2014-15. ⁵

Despite this dramatic influx of funding, enrollment in these programs remained stable or even decreased between 2014 and 2022, depending on the program. Clearly, funding more spaces alone does not solve the access equation.

⁴ Orbach-Mandel, H., Pryor, L., Saucedo, E., and Saucedo, M. (August 2023) Early Learning and Care: Building Opportunity for California Families, The Promise of a Mixed Delivery Early Learning and Care System. California Budget & Policy Center ⁵Orbach-Mandel, H., Pryor, L., Saucedo, E., and Saucedo, M. (August 2023) Early Learning and Care: Building Opportunity for California Families, The Promise of a Mixed Delivery Early Learning and Care System. California Budget & Policy Center,

The underenrollment is likely multifactorial, driven by a lack of public awareness, administrative challenges, the teacher shortage, and family preferences.

Knowing where to find early care and education and how to access it is not an easy task, and studies have shown that families typically rely on friends and family to find early care and education. After the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many families have reported more difficulty finding early care and education. According to the Stanford Center on Early Childhood's RAPID survey, as of January 2022, nearly two-thirds of parents surveyed in their national sample reported that they had difficulty finding an early care and education space in a home- or center-based program.⁶ The high price of tuition and fees for early care and education can be a significant challenge for many families. For example, the price of tuition for one infant and one preschooler in a child care center is \$18,917 and \$12,741, respectively.⁷ Combined, the price for care would be \$31,658, or over one-third of the total median family income for a family of four of \$90,735 in Los Angeles County.⁸



Historically, lack of affordability has affected both tuition-paying families and those receiving subsidized care. While families earning 85 percent of the state median income or less could access care through subsidized programs, they still had to pay family fees of 10 percent of their monthly income. While the Federal government requires that states charge families a fee, it is up to the state to decide how much to charge and for whom. Fortunately, in the California Fiscal Year (FY) 23-24 budget agreement reached between Child Care Providers United (CCPU) and Governor Newsom, families who make less than 75 percent of the state median income will no longer have to pay any family fees. Families who do have to pay a fee will not have to pay more than 1 percent of their income.

The Shifting Early Care and Education System

Transitional Kindergarten Implementation

California's new universal transitional kindergarten (TK) program extends the public education system to all 4-year-olds. Enrollment in this new program has been lower than expected, which is likely due to multiple factors, including the challenge that school districts face in implementing the program post-COVID and the teacher shortage experienced across the country. In the 2021-22 school year, 21,392 children participated in TK programs in Los Angeles County.⁹ The slow uptake also reflects the complexity of the definition of "access" and demonstrates that it is not enough to provide families with affordable and available slots. They also need to be made aware of and understand the benefits of the program, and the program must be able to meet their own and their child's needs.

⁶ RAPID (March 2022). Child Care Difficulties On the Rise for Parents of Young Children. ⁷ California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, California Child Care Portfolio (Jan. 2023). As cited on kidsdata.org, a program of Population Reference Bureau. ⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Median income in the past 12 months (in 2020 inflation-adjusted dollars), Table S1903 ⁹ California Department of Education, 2021-22 Transitional Kindergarten (TK) Program Participation State Report by County, Total Kindergarten TK Program Participation (Census Day). Retrieved from: <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/tkreports/TkLevels.aspx?cdscode=00000000000000&year=2021-22>

Impact of Universal PreKindergarten on the Mixed Delivery System

In California, the term “UPK” is used as an umbrella term to refer to all early care and education programs, including Transitional Kindergarten (TK), California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, district and local community-based preschool programs, early learning services for students with disabilities, private pay preschool, and expanded learning options to support access to a full day of services.¹⁰ While families can choose which preschool program under the UPK umbrella is right for them, TK is the only option that will be available universally and free of cost for all families whose children turn four by September 1, starting in the 2025-26 school year. This significant shift in the system is anticipated to have an impact not only on the other preschool programs under the UPK umbrella but also on parents’ access to quality early care and education for their infants and toddlers. This is because many early care and education programs serve children from birth to age five, and the loss of enrollment of the preschoolers to TK will have an impact on the birth-to-five programs as a whole. Since preschool care costs less per child to operate than the more labor-intensive infant and toddler care, birth-to-five programs are dependent on the revenue from preschoolers to “subsidize” the higher cost of infant-toddler care. As a result of the loss of preschool enrollment, it is anticipated that programs serving birth to school-age children will be left with the options to raise their prices, permanently close their business, or compromise the quality of care they provide to infants and toddlers.

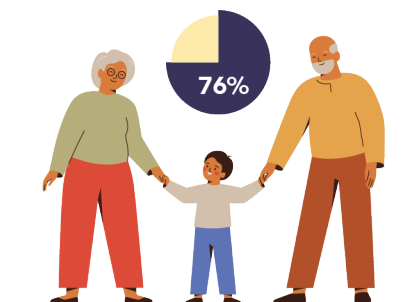
¹⁰California Department of Education, Universal Prekindergarten FAQs, “What is UPK and how is it related to Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK)?” Updated May 27, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kinderfaq.asp#:~:text=UPK%20is%20an%20umbrella%20term,and%20expanded%20learning%20options%20to> ¹¹Brown, Jessica, Does Public Pre-K Have Unintended Consequences on the Child Care Market for Infants and Toddlers? (December 8, 2018). Princeton University Industrial Relations Section Working Paper 626, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3360616> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3360616> ¹²Datta, A. R., Milesi, C., Zapata-Gieti, C., & Srivastava, S. (2021). NSECE Chartbook - Home-based Early Care and Education Providers in 2012 and 2019: Counts and Characteristics. OPRE Report No. 2021-85. Washington DC: OPRE

This phenomenon was observed in New York City after the implementation of their universal preschool program.¹¹ Economist Jessica Brown found that there was both a loss of between 15-20% of available infant-toddler spaces as well as a decrease in the quality of infant-toddler care in private programs, as evidenced by greater licensing violations and public complaints in programs located near UPK sites. Extrapolating from Brown’s study, L.A. County could be facing a potential loss of up to 20 percent of licensed infant-toddler spaces, or 6,800 spaces. The only option for many of these families will be to rely on unlicensed or license-exempt family, friend, and neighbor care for their infants and toddlers, yet there is currently no infrastructure in the county to provide resources, training, or support for this essential part of the ECE landscape.

The Invisible System: Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care

Given that the supply of licensed child care is only sufficient to serve just under one-quarter of children whose parents are in the labor force, who is caring for the other 76 percent of these children while their parents are working? Family, friends, and neighbors (FFN) are. Care provided by people who are related to or friends/neighbors with families of young children is the most common type of child care in the U.S., according to data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE).¹² In fact, FFN providers play a critical child care role for many, if not most, families at some point in their child’s life. Families from all socioeconomic, racial, and cultural backgrounds rely on FFN care; however, it

is especially common among families with infants and toddlers, immigrants, refugees, and families of multilingual learners.¹³ Data also indicates that the number of families relying on this unlicensed or license-exempt form of child care, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴ Despite the prevalence of FFN care, particularly for infants, toddlers, and school-age children before and after school, supports for these providers is practically nonexistent.



**76% of children with
working parents are cared for
by family, friends and neighbors**

¹³ Park, M., & Pena, J. F. (2021). The invisible work of family, friend, and neighbor caregivers and its importance for immigrant and dual language learner families. Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute.¹⁴ RAPID. (2022, October 8). RAPID Survey Project. Retrieved from RAPID Survey Project latest data and trends: <https://rapidsurveyproject.com/latest-data-and-trends>

Summary and Recommendations

FINDING: There is not enough licensed child care for infants and toddlers, and there could be further loss infant and toddler spaces as TK is fully implemented.

Recommendation: Create a mechanism for Local Education Agencies to contract with early care and education providers in their community to provide Transitional Kindergarten so that those providers do not lose the revenue that they need to remain solvent and provide much needed infant and toddler care.

Recommendation: Prioritize public funding for infants and toddlers and incentivize non-Local Education Agency providers to expand services to children birth to three.

Recommendation: Invest in research to understand how the expansion of Transitional Kindergarten will impact the early care and education mixed delivery system.

FINDING: Despite increases in public funding, many subsidized programs are experiencing low enrollment. One factor that is contributing to low enrollment is that parents lack support navigating the complex and confusing subsidy system.

Recommendation: Establish a user-friendly, parent-facing system to enroll in early care and education subsidy programs.

Recommendation: Strengthen capacity of Resource and Referral agencies, Alternative Payment Administrators, LA County Department of Social Services, and Local Education Agencies to establish a coordinated, yet localized, parent-centered approach to support enrollment.

Recommendation: Establish a unified enrollment platform for publicly funded early care and education programs (TK, CCTR, etc.).

FINDING: Even if subsidized programs were fully enrolled, there is not enough subsidized care available to serve all children whose parents are in the labor force. Some early care and education programs that would be open to accepting children with subsidy, may not understand the child care voucher system.

Recommendation: Create a system to inform all LA County licensed providers about early care and education subsidies and connect providers willing to accept subsidies with parents looking for care.

FINDING: Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care is the most common form of child care, yet the most overlooked when it comes to resources and quality supports.

Recommendation: Invest in family support models to strengthen the care provided by Family, Friends, and Neighbors.

Recommendation: Increase investments to support Family, Friends, and Neighbors in becoming licensed family child care providers.

