Zero to Three

A Vision for Universal Child Care in California

Authors: Jade Jenkins, Associate Professor, UC Irvine + Austin Land, Researcher, UC Berkeley

UC Irvine School of Education
UC Irvine Center for Population, Inequality & Policy
UC Berkeley Equity and Excellence in Early Childhood

Executive Summary

"Child care is a textbook example of a broken market… It does not work for the caregivers. It does not work for the parents. It does not work for the kids… therefore it does not work for the country." - Janet Yellen, 2021

The average cost of care for a single child in California ranges from $10,193 in Sierra County to $24,715 in San Francisco County, and it rivals housing costs for families with two children.[1] For single-parent families—who raise one in four children in California—this reality is stark. Some 600,000 children ages 0-5 lack reasonable access to licensed care, representing an estimated $34 to $53 billion in economic losses to the state.

A strategic vision for a child care system that can deliver affordable access to quality care can help policymakers work towards universal child care. This brief outlines **four building blocks** necessary for a universal child care system that works for families and providers alike:

Providers. Fragmented funding streams and regulatory barriers prevent providers from maximizing enrollment. The state should consolidate funding into a single source, establish universal eligibility with income-based copays, and ensure "no wrong doors"—allowing any family to enroll in any open seat.

Facilities. Construction costs, zoning restrictions, and licensing delays constrain child care supply. The state should work with municipalities to create flexible zoning, reduce licensing queues, and fund conversion of existing buildings—including municipal facilities and unused office space—into child care centers.

Workforce. Child care workers earn a median wage of $17.92 per hour, driving 19 to 29% annual turnover. The state should regulate compensation in publicly funded settings, scaling pay to comparable professions, and expand investments in the workforce pipeline, including scholarships and apprenticeships.

Marketplace. Families searching for care encounter outdated information, long waitlists, and opaque eligibility processes. The state should create a unified online portal for parents to find real-time vacancies and apply for subsidized care, for providers to register services and access public funding, while generating data to identify and address underserved areas.

Many important strategies may not be easily integrated into existing code or regulatory frameworks that have developed piecemeal over decades. We offer these building blocks as a foundation for that work—and as an invitation to continued dialogue among policymakers, practitioners, and researchers committed to making universal child care a reality in California.

Key System Building Strategies

- Gradually subsidize child care for families up to 575% of the FPL or 200% AMI
- "No wrong door": Integrate 14 funding streams and unify eligibility rules
- Proactively identify and invest in supports for underserved areas
- Ensure higher wages to expand the child care workforce
- Streamline facility development and ensure provider access to suitable spaces
- Establish an online portal for families to find and compare care options
- Consolidate governance and administration of early care

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Identifying the Problem

The social and economic benefits of access to quality child care—family well-being and broader economic gains—exceed what families can pay; this is a classic market failure. Consequently, the supply of child care for young children is too low to meet the needs of families. The shortfall in supply is concentrated among younger children, for whom costs are higher. In 2023, there were 5 times as many licensed center spaces per child for children ages 2-5 as there were for children 0-1, while child care referral requests per child were higher for younger children.[2]

Because of low wages, the early care and education (ECE) labor force is severely constrained. Providers often operate short of full capacity and cite difficulties hiring and retaining staff as an immense challenge.[3] Low pay drives high turnover—19 to 29% of ECE center staff leave their jobs each year.[4] This undermines continuity of care and teacher-child relationships.

Quality child care is expensive to provide, requiring trained staff, high staff-to-child ratios, and safe facilities. Market prices reflect these real costs, and most families cannot afford them. In response, parents reduce work hours, savings, investment, and spending—all of which can depress family well-being and incur economic loss in the aggregate. The child care crisis imposes large economic costs: A recent analysis reported that some 600,000 children ages 0-5 do not have reasonable access to licensed child care, representing an economic loss of $34 to $53 billion to the state.[5]

The costs of child care force tradeoffs that erode the quality of family life. Economic hardship may cause families to delay parenthood or reduce the number of children they have. Cost-constrained choices also force families into patchwork care arrangements that may not best support child development. The well-being of children is tied to the well-being of the adults that care for them, and one in five caregivers live on incomes near or below the federal poverty line.[6] Further, 47 percent of the early care and education workers' households are enrolled in safety net programs.[7]

Locating and accessing child care is far more difficult than it should be, impacted by coordination problems across public agencies. Information on local options for families is often opaque, including which providers accept subsidies or offer publicly funded slots and, of those, which they are eligible for. There is no central directory of providers, who themselves struggle to navigate a complex web of funding streams, administered by multiple public agencies. State auspices lack mechanisms for identifying and addressing shortages, while local agencies lack the power to respond to known shortages.

Where we are now: Enormous progress, crucial plans shelved

There is a lot of good news to go around in California, despite the depth and complexity of the child care crisis. Universal Transitional Kindergarten is available to all four-year-olds in the state, a generational win for children and families. Despite supply shortages and the high cost of care, the ratio of licensed ECE spaces and workers per child is greater than it has been going back at least a decade, driven largely by population decline. The child care budget has doubled from pre-pandemic levels, reaching record highs. In recent years, the state has made major efforts to expand the child care system and address family needs. Yet many strategies from CA's 2020 Master Plan for child care show few signs of implementation.

- Efforts to "create a simplified and aligned system of care" met some success, but further fragmented funding streams and introduced new burdens on providers. The vision of a streamlined, "no wrong door" child care system for young children will not be realized absent unified eligibility rules and unified provider contracts.
- The injection of dollars into voucher-funded child care expanded access for thousands of families, but regulatory barriers blunt the impact of voucher dollars on expanding the supply of child care slots, despite making existing slots more affordable.
- The Master Plan's critical vision of a centralized eligibility system for child care—reviving plans abandoned during Great Recession budget—and a parent portal to identify programs sits on a shelf.
- Expansion of TK eligibility for younger children—implemented via pure public provision and drawing revenue from other programs—destabilized the child care market, which was already fragile after COVID disruptions struck just as budgets were recovering from recession cuts.

COVID reshaped the economy and workforce, and we face a different set of circumstances in CA's early childhood education landscape. COVID also brought the child care crisis into sharp focus. This crisis will not end absent new approaches to building a child care system that works for both families who need care and the providers that serve them.

Charting a way forward

We envision a system in which all families can arrange affordable child care that supports their children's development and meets parents' needs. In this brief, we outline four major building blocks necessary to build such a system, *grounded in the perspective of a family seeking care for their young children:*

1. **Providers** operating child care services;
2. **Facilities** in which those services are provided;
3. The **workforce** of caregivers;
4. An online **marketplace** in which families can quickly and easily find care that meets their needs, and where providers can apply for funding.

With respect to funding and recommended reforms, our policy designs are not minimalist, providing the floor of quality or the lowest wages for the lowest bill to the legislature; this would make gestures towards child care access but fail in effectiveness. Conversely, our recommendations also do not take the "Cadillac" funding approach often urged by advocates; rather, we aim to meet our messy, fragmented early childhood policy system right where it is. We walk the line of policy realists, identifying the aspects of CA's child care policy system that are movable, can be adapted locally, with a funding structure to adequately achieve its aims.

How do families find care? Parents searching for child care that fits their budget and schedule encounter a complex landscape of options. Many begin their search online, striving to find a loving environment in which their child will learn and grow. They find an array of websites that frequently include unreliable and outdated contact information and that do not include tuition costs, waitlist applications, or openings. Most families end up relying on word-of-mouth recommendations, only to encounter long waitlists and uncertain timelines after several phone calls and returned messages. Families seeking subsidized care will need to verify eligibility during multi-hour intake processes before they can join a waitlist. Each provider that is directly funded by the state will need to verify eligibility independently. If their preferred provider is not directly funded but accepts vouchers, the family will need to register with Alternative Payment agencies and verify eligibility. The process that unfolds to determine eligibility, complete application paperwork to reserve a spot on the waitlist can be dumbfounding. Read details of this process in several CA regions here. A recent study found that most professionals who help connect families with child care do not believe families seeking subsidized care for young children are finding affordable options.[8] 21 to 34% of parents end up patching together multiple care arrangements.[9]

Child care arrangements among children ages 0 to 3

29-34%	**38%**	**14-18%**	**29-46%**	**21-34%**
of parents use parental care only	of parents use FFN or nanny care	of parents use a family child care (FCC) provider	of parents use a child care center	of parents who use child care make multiple arrangements

Source: Powell, A., Adejumo, T., Austin, L. J. E., & Copeman Petig, A. (2023). *Parent preferences in family, friend, neighbor, and nanny care*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

1. The Providers

CA is the home of an infamously complex public child care finance regime, in which services are subsidized through a labyrinth of 14 different funding streams. The Master Plan consolidated the administration of voucher funding sources under CDSS but split contracts for providers—accounting for the majority of 0-3 enrollment—across CDSS and CDE. While sophisticated providers with business managers can navigate complex regulations to blend and braid funding streams, the administrative burden is prohibitive for many.

Regulatory barriers effectively preclude most providers from enrolling contract-funded, private pay, and voucher-funded children in the same classrooms, turning what could be complementary funding sources into competing substitutes while simultaneously segregating classrooms by family income and, by extension, race/ethnicity. The result is systemic inefficiency: providers cannot leverage public funding to maximize enrollment, ultimately constraining overall supply. *The $3.1 billion increase in funding for child care and state preschool between FY 2019 and FY 2023 yielded zero growth in total licensed capacity for children under six.*[10]

Access to child care for young children cannot and will not expand without rate reform and funding growth. However, these efforts to expand access will be hobbled so long as the tangled knot of funding streams continues to constrict the flow of funding to providers. Recent funding growth included supports to protect providers from pandemic-induced enrollment collapse, increases in per child reimbursement rates, and the expansion of voucher programs. While funding child care vouchers for qualified families (i.e., demand subsidies) can expand their access to existing slots relatively quickly, direct contract funding for providers (i.e., supply subsidies) can create new child care slots, and serve to stabilize the provider infrastructure that families depend on.[11] Reimbursement rate increases have helped providers adapt to serving younger children as TK expands and the child population declines.

Family child care homes (FCCHs)—a critical source of child care supply for many families—added 5,000 spaces across the state from FY 2019 to FY 2023. Razor-thin margins make their businesses exceptionally fragile, administrative costs impede FCCH access to stabilizing contract funding, and voucher reimbursement rates have failed to keep pace with the minimum wage growth.[12] This drives up labor costs and pulls family child care providers out of the market for better-paying jobs in other sectors.

How to move forward? Any effort to expand child care access and move toward a universal system must unify funding streams, simplify regulations, and finance providers at levels sufficient to fund competitive staff compensation and incentivize expansion. But the state cannot rely on financial incentives alone to expand access equitably. New and existing providers must be actively recruited to build supply in underserved areas.

☑ indicates low- or no-cost legislative solutions

1. **Service rates:** Successful implementation of a unified rate structure for provider payments will decouple funding from cost-minimization in the private sector, which can undermine service quality. A new rate structure can also reflect financial incentives for providers to offer competitive wages and professional pay scales, higher staff-child ratios, smaller class sizes, non-traditional hours, inclusion services for children with special needs, and transportation services.
2. **Build toward universal eligibility:** All families can be eligible to enroll with any provider, with need- and income-based prioritization and sliding scale copays. The state can move incrementally towards universal care simply by adjusting the copay scale in tandem with total funding.
   a. **Geographic eligibility:** Universal eligibility for families residing in low-income areas substantially alleviates administrative burdens on both families and providers. Families can establish eligibility with proof of residence, removing onerous documentation of family size, income, and other criteria. Geographic eligibility rules were tremendously successful in expanding access to school meals.[13] ☑
3. **Single-source funding:** Consolidate state child care funding streams into a single source, with a single set of eligibility and prioritization rules, to reduce administrative burdens and barriers to entry for providers. If the state must draw on multiple sources (e.g. General Fund and Prop 98), blending and braiding of funds should be handled by state or county auspices so that, from the service provider's perspective, there is a single source administered by a single office. For most providers, less time spent on regulatory administration means more time for the care of children. ☑
   a. **Integrate with and leverage Head Start:** Make federal Early Head Start and Head Start grantees automatically eligible for state-funded contracts and waive other application requirements. ☑
4. **Targeted recruitment in child care "deserts"**: Create capacity to identify underserved areas and recruit providers—city governments and school districts, if necessary—to establish operations in areas of need. State auspices that possess information sufficient for action currently lack any mechanism to do this, while local auspices lack both information and authority over funding allocations.
5. **Start-up cost financing:** CA can draw new providers in the market with grants and favorable small business loans, in partnership with the Small Business Administration.

6. **Paid family care:** If the public will pay for a working-age adult to care for a parent's child, it should be willing to offer family members compensation to care for their own children. Eligibility for family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) child care subsidies should be extended to parents.
7. **Tax credits for employer-provided child care:** Employers creating their own on-site child care or offering reduced-price rental agreements to private providers serving employees families.

Expanding and simplifying funding for providers will not be sufficient to address workforce and facility shortages, the two largest inputs for providers. These major supply constraints each require a separate suite of strategic reforms and investments.

2. The Facilities

In 2023, California could offer about one child care center space for every 14 infants. Construction costs, permitting, zoning restrictions, and licensing queues blunt the impact of new subsidy dollars on child care supply expansion and create major delays. Fortunately, there are several mechanisms through which CA can address the cost and availability of facilities suitable for young children.

How to move forward? A county-level office with consolidated authorities would help providers find facilities and interface with municipalities to negotiate solutions to zoning, permitting, licensing approvals, and other local barriers to facilities development.

☑ indicates low- or no-cost legislative solutions

1. **Reducing zoning and municipality barriers:** Expanding child care for all communities and families will require state leaders working closely with cities (with county delegates identifying priority locations) to create more flexible zoning that adapts to the areas where families with young children migrate over time, much like recent senate efforts to revise zoning to expand ADUs and address housing shortages. ☑
2. **Reducing the child care and fire safety licensing approval queue and timeline:** Initially, bringing on a larger number of providers will put greater demand on child care licensing and fire departments. Fund additional licensing officials to approve licensing and permitting in a timely manner or pursue third-party licensing options for a specified expansion period. ☑

Cutting back state-imposed regulatory burdens is an important component of supply building. Yet strategic funding for supply building is also needed to convert existing infrastructure into child care facilities. Grants may be administered by county-level delegates tasked with cultivating local supply, ensuring that they have access to facilities, and even managing facility construction when needed.

3. **Repurpose municipal facilities:** Working with county and city municipalities, local delegates can identify municipal buildings that can be repurposed for child care facilities. These can be offered to providers in search of facilities at below market costs.
4. **Expand employer-based child care facilities:** Both private and public employers can be offered one-time grants to renovate unused office space for use as child care facilities that can be leased to providers at below market rents.
5. **Conversion grants:** The expansion of TK has drastically altered the child care market and providers have struggled with the many challenges of adapting services and classroom facilities to accommodate infants and toddlers. CA can issue capital grants for required renovations of playground, classroom, toileting equipment, and safety infrastructure.
6. **Revive infrastructure grant funds** to support construction of new child care facilities.

Streamlined Governance – Current fragmentation creates competing incentives and coordination problems that severely impede comprehensive 0-3 child care expansion. A standalone department may be necessary to address state-level fragmentation.

At the county level, governance is fragmented across First 5, Local Planning Councils, County Departments of Education, County Departments of Education, Alternative Payment contractors, Social Service Administration, and multiple school districts. A single county office should consolidate authority over four critical functions: (1) allocate funding to support child care providers and recruit new providers in underserved areas, (2) negotiate zoning and permitting solutions to ensure provider access to adequate facilities, (3) coordinate workforce development, and (4) maintain information systems that help families understand and navigate options.

3. The Workforce

The median hourly wage for child care workers in California was $17.92 per hour in 2023, on par with pay for cashiers and retail salespersons.[14] Providers struggle to compete with employers who often pay higher wages for less demanding work. Compensation for child care workers lags behind most other industries with similar qualifications in part because prevailing prices are largely constrained by what families can pay individually. Pay for child care workers is further depressed by systemic labor market discrimination, as the vast majority of workers are women, predominantly women of color.[15] In turn, child care teachers in CA are 4.9 times more likely to live in poverty than elementary and middle school teachers who enjoy median hourly wages of $41.06.[16] Low wages drive labor shortages that constrain overall supply. Across the state, only about 1,800 new child development permits for classroom staff were issued in 2023-24.[17]

Another consequence of low wages for demanding, labor-intensive work are the very high turnover rates of child care workers—around 19 to 29% compared with approximately 11% for elementary school teachers.[18] No parent wants a new, different person caring for their young child from one week to the next. Furthermore, a tenet of child developmental science is that trusted relationships with caregivers give children—especially infants and toddlers—the confidence to learn, explore, and engage in multi-turn conversations that build language, curiosity, and confidence.[19] Teacher turnover is therefore especially detrimental to children's learning and development.

Caregiver compensation and staff-to-child ratios are the largest cost drivers for child care providers. They are also important, regulable features of program quality. A vision for universal child care that supports the child's development has no room for a revolving door of underpaid caregivers living in poverty. The sector requires professional wages—on par with wage scales in elementary schools—or public dollars risk inducing parents to arrange lower-quality care than they may have received absent public support.

How to move forward?

1. **Regulate compensation in publicly funded settings:** The state can pilot wage scales in reimbursement rate structures, appropriately treating pay as a component of quality that grow with employee's experience. Pay and benefits should be scaled to other care and education industries. If entry-level staff were paid as much as nursing assistants, child care jobs would be competitive with employers like Costco. As higher pay attracts a larger workforce, regulations may require stronger staff qualifications and training, but not before. Regulation is also important when expanding child care access through for-profit entities, which brings quality into direct conflict with cost-minimization incentives.

2. **Expand the labor force pipeline:** To recruit new talent into the field, the local county delegate can work with colleges and universities to expand initiatives to increase the number of students pursuing caregiver education and training. This could take a variety of forms:
   a. **Scholarships, fellowships, and loan forgiveness programs that support the educational costs of pursuing a child development degree** with the contingency that they work in the field.
   b. **Support for ECE course offerings** with funded demonstration projects, modeled after similar efforts to increase enrollment in associate degree nursing programs.
   c. **Apprenticeship training programs** in high schools, community colleges, and state universities with clear career pathways to teacher positions offering qualifying wages.
3. **Create FCCH business incubator programs** to build the supply of family child care providers. These programs can be conducted in partnership with the Small Business Administration program. With the right amount of business and child care knowledge alongside financial support for startup costs and peer business mentorship, CA can draw new care providers into the market.

How it would work: A county-level delegate would be tasked with supporting local colleges in offering and advertising ECE coursework, credentialing, and scholarships as well as disseminating information to local high school guidance counselors. The county delegate would also coordinate FCCH incubators.

4. The Marketplace

Across the state, parents struggle to find a child care arrangement near their home at an affordable cost. A simple web search for “child care near me” returns a bewildering array of lists of names, locations, websites, telephone numbers of child care providers, and vacancy and price information is opaque. Child care search costs are too burdensome for parents, and the market relies heavily on word of mouth to connect families with providers. Private and public child care providers—and Alternative Payment agencies, which contract to distribute vouchers—compete for visibility in a manner that obscures options for families. Further, there is no policy mechanism for state auspices to identify or direct funding to underserved areas. The state relies on local providers to pursue public funding, when it becomes available, neglecting families in communities where no local organizations take action to serve them.

We envision a unified, one-stop-shop for both parents and providers, where parents can find and apply to open slots and providers can list slot availability and secure funding through an integrated portal. This vision is not new; however, its importance to the expanding child care access has never been clearer. Parents of young children today grew up relying on web-based information and services to find food, housing, and other essentials. Online portals for accessing public benefits like benefitscal.com are critical for building social programs that reach the people they serve, and a similar portal is needed for child care. Successful examples like Washington D.C. and Long Beach, CA, demonstrate clear models for easy access to real time child care availability with search filters and translation tools to meet the needs of all families.[20]

How would it work?

1. **The marketplace would provide universal information for all CA families on child care supply.** Providers would register service locations, detail hours and services offered, and maintain up-to-date vacancy information using simple SMS or mobile-friendly applications to enable monthly vacancy updates.

2. **Parents and providers could apply for child care funding within the marketplace.**
   a. **Parents** would fill out a common application for services upon registering within the marketplace. Child care listings on the marketplace would display individualized copays to registered parents. Vouchers would be awarded electronically and integrated with the marketplace portal so that parents could see nearby vacancies and out-of-pocket costs clearly.
   b. **Providers** seeking public funding would complete a common application that consolidated forms and documentation required for licensing, funding, and registration with resource and referral agencies to accept vouchers. The marketplace provider platform would also accept all required ongoing provider reports and other documentation associated with the receipt of public funding, thereby reducing provider burdens. User support would be available to assist providers with contract reporting.
3. **Parent registration in the marketplace would reveal monthly child care demand.** The information generated by the use of this marketplace—revealing local demand and supply—would serve to identify child care deserts and inform intelligent allocation of state resources in a manner responsive to local need. The alternative (i.e., status quo) creates the cyclical problem where families don't see any care options nearby in the marketplace and thus don't bother to signal their demand for care. In turn, local needs remain less than fully visible.

***Key Questions for Policy Makers**:* How will the state ensure that all providers participate in this marketplace? If marketplace registration is entirely voluntary, many providers will not participate. The state could require marketplace registration and participation as a licensing requirement or through financial incentives. Alternatively, it may be a limited requirement for providers receiving public funding.

Conclusion

Child care is fundamental to American life as long as parents must work to support their families. Yet the sector's fragmented structure—with no central planning, 14 disparate state funding streams split between education and welfare agencies, and delivery through a patchwork of public and private providers—creates formidable reform challenges. These systemic issues are compounded by acute problems: severe teacher shortages, razor-thin operating margins for facilities, and prohibitive rents and regulations that discourage the expansion needed to meet demand.

Implementing and scaling child care will require answers to many questions. How can public dollars and policies support wage growth in the child care sector without exacerbating the already high costs of care for families? How can contract dollars, which typically support providers offering higher pay, better reach family child care homes and small-scale providers that often lack the administrative capacity to manage contracts? How many licensed spaces do families want or need and how many credentialled caregivers are needed to create those spaces? We do not answer these questions here, but the strategies we outline are critical to creating a public infrastructure for child care that can support providers in serving families, secure the availability of appropriate facilities, expand and support the workforce, and ensure families can understand and navigate their child care options.

Many important strategies may not be easily integrated into existing code or regulatory frameworks that have developed piecemeal over decades. Realizing a vision for universal child care will require continued inquiry—into wage structures and provider financing, coherent governance solutions, and adaptive implementation strategies that respond to family preferences as they evolve with expanding access. We hope this brief invites continued dialogue among policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, and that California's approach can ultimately serve as a model for other states.

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UC Berkeley Equity and Excellence in Early Childhood is an interdisciplinary public impact alliance dedicated to understanding and transforming California's early childhood system to ensure all young children and their families flourish. For more information, contact Executive Director Katie Albright at kalbright@berkeley.edu.

About the Authors

Jade Jenkins is an Associate Professor at UC Irvine's School of Education and Co-Director of the Center for Population, Inequality, and Policy. Her work examines early childhood policies and their impacts on children, families, and providers. She also serves as the Board Chair of Orange County Head Start, Chair of First 5 Orange County's Technical Advisory Committee, Parent representative for the Orange County Child Care and Development Planning Council, and Chair of the UC Irvine Chancellor's Childcare Advisory Committee.

Austin Land is the Policy and Evaluation Lead for Universal Preschool at UC Berkeley Equity and Excellence in Early Childhood. His work focuses on the impact of early childhood programs on children's developmental trajectories. He has worked with and for several early care and education agencies across California since 2018.

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