



# David and Lucile Packard Foundation Starting Smart

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the David & Lucile Packard FOUNDATION | **STARTING SMART**

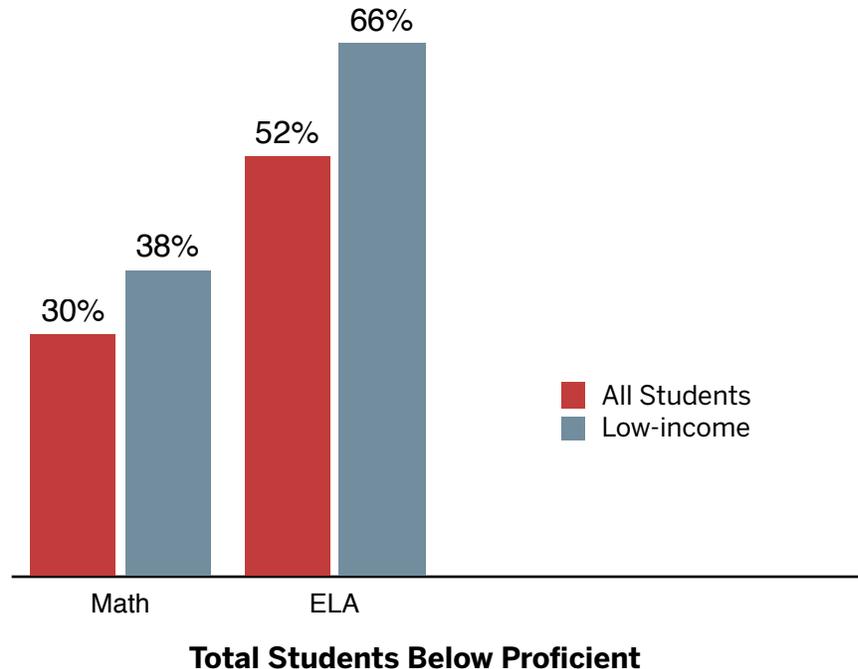
50  
YEARS

As we mark the Packard Foundation's 50th anniversary, we remain deeply committed to ensuring a strong and healthy start for all children in California. We believe that the foundations for long-term success in school and in life are laid in a child's first five years. We want all parents, caregivers, and teachers to know how to provide young children with healthy and engaging environments for growth, and we want health care providers to have the knowledge and skills to assess and meet the needs of each child. This brief provides context on the perspectives that motivate us as we undertake the next chapter of our work in service of California's children.

**Need: Increase kindergarten readiness, a key measure of early development**

Our commitment to a strong and healthy start in life for every child in California requires key measurements for development in the earliest years. Kindergarten readiness is absolutely critical for success in school and in life, and we will use it as an important threshold measure for development in the earliest years. When we say a child is "kindergarten ready" we mean she is healthy, has appropriate physical, motor, social, language and math skills, and is self-confident, eager, and able to learn. Thus, our goal is to ensure that as many children in California as possible enter kindergarten prepared with this set of competencies.

Approximately half of the 3 million children age five and under in California are eligible for state- or federally-subsidized child development programs.<sup>1</sup> Although California does not currently have consistent outcomes data on kindergarten readiness, the data that we do have indicate that too few children in the state are ready for kindergarten by age five. And we know that some children—particularly low-income children—are even more at risk of falling behind. This is reinforced when we look at 3rd grade proficiency levels—a key indicator for which data is available for all California children. It is clear that far too many children score below proficient, with significant disparities between low-income children and all children. This is troubling, as proficiency in 3rd grade is a key predictor of future academic success.<sup>2</sup> If we can improve those state- and federally-subsidized child development programs, we can reach up to half of California's youngest children—including many of those most at risk—helping them build the necessary skills for kindergarten readiness.



<sup>1</sup> American Community Survey. United States Census Bureau, 2012. Web. 30 May 2014. Note: Eligibility defined as being in a family with income <200% Federal Poverty Level.

<sup>2</sup> "2013 STAR Test Results." California STAR Program. California Department of Education, n.d. Web. 30 May 2014. Note: "Economically disadvantaged" as defined in STAR reporting, indicating students who are eligible for free / reduced-priced lunch.

Achieving much higher rates of kindergarten readiness will require improving young children's opportunities for healthy development and early learning. Children from birth through age five are cared for in a variety of settings before kindergarten, ranging from parental care to center-based care. Regardless of the setting, what matters most for the healthy development of an individual child is the quality of interactions the child has with adults and the experiences to which adults expose the child.

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**Adult-child interactions & experiences lay the foundation for the development of good health, social skills, and the love of learning.**



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Fortunately, as a field, we are learning more about the kind of adult-child interactions and experiences that help children become ready for kindergarten:

- For example, "serve and return" interactions are essential for shaping the architecture of the developing brain. Young children "serve" through babbling, facial expressions, gestures or questions. Caregivers, parents, and teachers "return" by talking, singing, reading, asking questions, encouraging curiosity, and providing appropriate stimulation based on each child's developmental stage and approach to learning. This back-and-forth process is fundamental to developing the wiring of the brain, especially in the earliest years.<sup>3</sup>
- We are also learning more about how formal settings support high quality adult-child interactions. Early evidence suggests that several elements are especially important to quality: having a clear set of goals and standards, assessments to measure progress, instructional support for providers and teachers, financial incentives to improve and maintain quality, and parent engagement in a child's early learning experiences.<sup>4</sup>

This increased understanding of the most important determinants of early development is promising—the more we know about how adults can positively and effectively foster healthy child development, the more we can focus on what matters, investing our efforts and resources in the solutions that have the greatest chance to drive the improvements we seek.

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<sup>3</sup> "Serve & Return Interaction Shapes Brain Circuitry." Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, n.d. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Muenchow, Susan, et al. "Local Quality Improvement Efforts and Outcomes Descriptive Study: Final Report". American Institutes for Research & RAND Corporation, 26 July 2013. Web. 30 May 2014.

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## Our approach: Improving adult-child interactions across all settings

Given what we know today, we seek to significantly improve the quality of adult-child interactions across *all* settings where children learn and grow in early life, as a means to significantly increase healthy and strong child development, and thus kindergarten readiness in California.

As we think about what it will take to achieve this improvement, we recognize the need to:

- Improve professional development for educators and caregivers to improve the quality of care provided through the formal system, such that children enjoy learning, exploring, and making friends—skills they need for success in life—and adults have pride and confidence in the education and care they provide.
- Provide parents, family, and friends that care for children with the skills and support they need to provide nurturing environments for children to grow and learn to ensure they are on track and ready for school by age five.

We plan to invest in approaches with scale in mind so that we can reach many more adults—and benefit many, many more children. As Bridgespan's Jeff Bradach and Abe Grindle have described in "Transformative Scale: The Future of Growing What Works," we are looking for pathways in the early childhood field that can move us from incremental change to actually *solving* the problem of low kindergarten readiness rates.<sup>5</sup>

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## The path forward: Working together to ensure that all of California's children are ready for kindergarten

Our best chance for making progress toward this goal is to work together across settings to identify approaches that successfully and significantly improve adult-child interactions and the quality of the learning experiences for our youngest children. This will require developing and sharing knowledge, collaborating, innovating, measuring, improving, and scaling what works.

We hope that the Starting Smart Convening will catalyze and inspire you—our partners, experts, and advocates—to join us in this endeavor to craft solutions to empower parents, caregivers, and teachers to prepare children to be healthy, ready for school, and on track to reach their full potential.

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<sup>5</sup> Bradach, Jeff, and Abe Grindle, "Transformative Scale: The Future of Growing What Works." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 19 Feb. 2014.