



## Preschool for California's Children Evaluation Findings 2008-2013

Harvard Family Research Project  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

February 2013

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2003, Harvard Family Research Project has been evaluating the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's ten-year commitment to the Preschool for California's Children grantmaking program. Summarized findings that have emerged since the strategy's 2008 midcourse review follow.

**A research-based case for preschool has been made and preschool is rooted firmly on the legislative policy agenda.**

When grantmaking began in 2003, preschool was rarely discussed in the policy arena. Since then, Packard-funded research, advocacy, and investments in target communities have helped to make the case for the importance of preschool to young children's development and long-term success. Champions for the issue now exist in the legislature and at the community level (particularly K-12 leaders and members of the business community), and state-level policy improvements to preschool access and quality are now part of the legislative agenda each year.

**Strategy Goal:** To achieve access to voluntary, high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year olds in California, starting with the children who need it most.

**Access to preschool has increased for four-year-olds in California; transitional kindergarten promises to serve 120,000 children each year.** At the end of 2010, the Governor signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act, changing the kindergarten entry date from December 2 to September 1 so that only children who are five will enter kindergarten. The Act also created the transitional kindergarten program, offering children with birthdays during the last four months of the year a developmentally-appropriate curriculum aligned with kindergarten standards and taught by credentialed teachers. Packard-funded advocates were key to the passing of transitional kindergarten, and have been critical to protecting it from budget cuts in a challenging fiscal climate.

**Access to high-quality development and early learning experiences for California's youngest children remains a need.** Packard's goal for its preschool strategy since 2008 has been to create publicly supported, high-quality preschool opportunities for all three- and four-year-olds in California—starting with the children who need it most. While transitional kindergarten increased access for four-year-olds, similar progress has not yet been achieved for three-year-olds.

**Incremental progress has been made on improving preschool quality, but additional advancements in this area will be important.** Packard grantees have been instrumental in the state’s advancements on several dimensions of what can support a quality early learning preschool experience. This has included progress on the development of systems for monitoring and improving quality; planning to create data systems for tracking children’s progress longitudinally; governance structures to coordinate and support early learning systems at the state level; and improvements in training and professional development for transitional kindergarten teachers. At the same time, much more progress on quality is needed to ensure that those with access to preschool have the experiences they need to succeed in school and beyond.

**Advocacy and communications capacity on early learning is stronger, and should be leveraged to protect past gains on access and secure additional advancements on quality.** When grantmaking began in 2003, California’s early learning advocacy community was disorganized. Organizations and individuals were not unified around common policy priorities or solutions. A decade later the advocacy landscape looks much different. As the main early learning advocacy funder in the state, the Packard Foundation and its grantees can take credit for this change. Now that advocacy capacity has been built, early learning advocates are well positioned to both protect their policy victories and tackle remaining gaps in early learning access and quality.

## STRATEGY OVERVIEW

In 2003, the Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program at the Packard Foundation began the Preschool for California’s Children grantmaking program (referred to here as the Preschool Program) to help achieve a bold and ambitious vision—voluntary quality preschool for all three and four-year olds in California. In 2008, in response to shifting economic and political realities in California and with Trustee approval, the Preschool Program’s goal was modified from its aim of achieving universal preschool for all three- and four-year-olds, to start instead with the children who need it most.<sup>1</sup> The preschool grantmaking program currently is in its final year of implementation.

**To achieve its goal, the Preschool Program has aimed for public policy changes to provide the funding and directives to ensure California’s children can access the quality preschool experiences they need to succeed in school and later in life.** More specifically, the Preschool Program has worked toward the achievement of several outcomes that can pave the way for policy changes. First, it endeavored to build *awareness and political will* among policymakers and other constituencies, making the case that the lack of quality preschool in California is an important problem in need of state-sponsored solutions. It also aimed to increase policymaker *willingness to support research-based policies on preschool*. Finally, the Preschool Program sought *political support for high-quality preschool approaches* that could be scaled up statewide.

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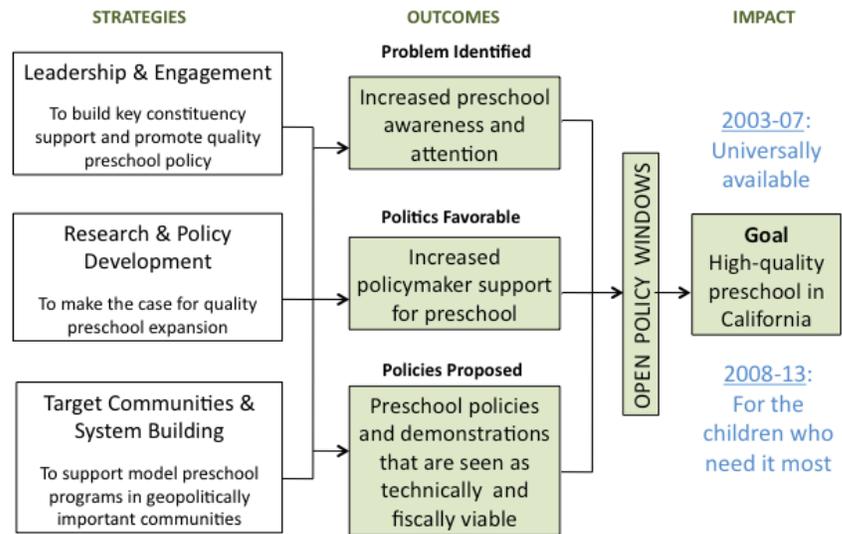
<sup>1</sup> Children who are eligible for state-funded preschool programs—basically, those with family incomes below \$48,000, which is 75 percent of the state median—but who are not currently served by those programs because of limited funding.

By 2012, the Preschool Program had invested \$77.3 million through 417 grants in three core grantmaking strategies.<sup>2</sup> *Leadership and engagement* grants supported education, outreach, and advocacy to political leaders and key constituencies. *Research and policy development* grants supported projects to reinforce the preschool evidence base and ground policy development in research. *Target communities and systems building* grants supported preschool expansion, quality improvements, and constituency building in geopolitically significant communities<sup>3</sup> to increase access to quality programs and to attract state and local political support.

The strategy has moved through different phases, and the level of investment in the three core strategies has shifted accordingly.

As the figure at right shows, the first phase leading up to the 2006 Preschool for All ballot initiative featured high investments in leadership and engagement with public constituencies. The second phase from 2007-09 emphasized legislative engagement and research investments to make the case for policy changes and solutions. The third phase continued legislative outreach, but with increased investments in target communities and to school districts moving forward with preschool expansion and quality improvements.

### Preschool for California's Children Theory of Change



### Levels of Strategy Investment



## EVALUATION FINDINGS

In evaluating the preschool strategy, Harvard Family Research Project addressed four main questions:

- 1) Have preschool awareness and political will increased?
  - 2) Have state preschool policies on access or quality changed?
  - 3) Have preschool access or quality improved?
  - 4) Where is there likelihood for future policy progress?
- Findings on Packard-supported progress and lessons related to each question follow.

<sup>2</sup> A cumulative count of annual grants, not the number of organizations funded, as many were funded in consecutive years.

<sup>3</sup> Fresno, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties.

# 1 Have preschool awareness and political will increased?

<b>Packard Areas of Investment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Research to document preschool gaps and opportunities in California (on access and quality)</li> <li>- Coordinated advocacy statewide and in target communities</li> <li>- Policymaker education and outreach</li> <li>- Champion development among policy “influencers” (e.g., K-12 leaders, business community)</li> </ul>	
<b>Points of Progress</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>A research-based case for preschool has been made in California.</i></li> <li>- <i>Preschool is more consistently on the legislative policy agenda.</i></li> </ul>	<b>Lessons</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Political support for preschool is not guaranteed and needs to be sustained.</i></li> <li>- <i>The case about how to invest in preschool quality still needs to be made.</i></li> </ul>

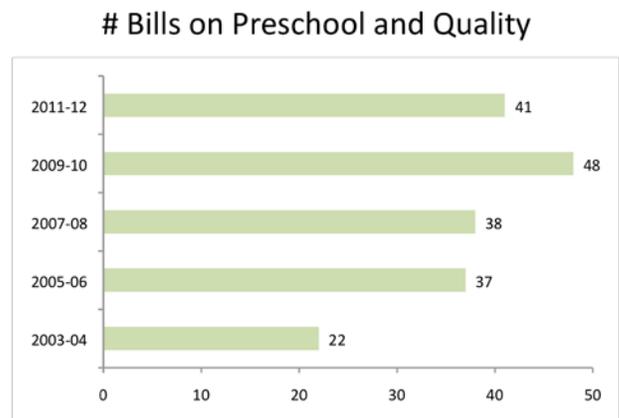
## Packard-Supported Progress

### **A research-based case for the importance of preschool and early learning has been made in California.**

When the Preschool Program began, CFC was convinced that research supporting the importance of, and need for, early learning investments existed but was not California specific enough to persuade in-state audiences. As such, the Foundation supported California-focused research (primarily conducted by the RAND Corporation) on preschool adequacy and efficiency; cost, return-on-investment, and financing; use and quality; and teacher training, compensation, and retention. Grantees then used this research to support policy development and advocacy.

Interviews with policymaker and policy influencers show that research-supported messages have been heard. Policymakers understand preschool as an education-related investment that can lead to improved school readiness, particularly for low-income children. They also understand that California has a preschool system in need of improvements in order to achieve the promise of high-quality preschool. Even when higher investments in preschool have not automatically followed from that understanding, increasing political awareness and salience of the issue has been a major accomplishment that now sets the stage for future policy progress.

**Preschool is more consistently on the legislative policy agenda.** Policy changes rarely happen quickly. For example, the bill on transitional kindergarten (discussed more later) was submitted unsuccessfully for ten years. The Foundation’s underlying strategy, particularly since 2008, has been to place and keep important issues on the legislative policy agenda and to be agile and ready when policy windows open. Examination of bills submitted that discuss both preschool and quality since the Preschool Program



began (see the graph) is an illustration of the success grantees have had in increasing attention to preschool and keeping the issue on the legislative docket.<sup>4</sup>

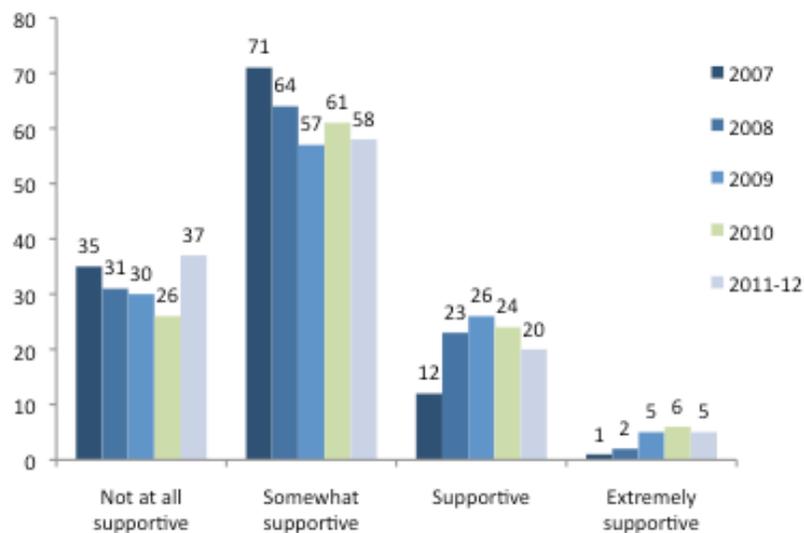
## Lessons

### Political support for preschool is not guaranteed and needs to be sustained.

While legislative support for preschool has increased during the last decade, without consistent attention to policymaker education and champion building, that power can erode, particularly with term limits that mean the regular turnover of legislators. As the graph at right illustrates, support for preschool has increased since 2007 among California’s 120 legislators, but there has been a slight erosion of support in recent

years.<sup>5</sup> In addition, it can be hard to sustain champions once significant policy victories (like transitional kindergarten) are achieved, as policymakers tend to move on and turn their attention to other issues. The Packard Foundation has made a significant 10-year investment in building California’s advocacy capacity on early learning. This capacity should continue to be leveraged in order to ensure policymaker support that exists now sustains and can be built on over time.

California Legislator Support for Preschool



**The case about how to invest in preschool quality still needs to be made.** To be effective, research shows that early learning experiences must be high quality. While a strong and convincing case about the importance of quality early learning opportunities has been made, and the substandard level of quality in California has been established,<sup>6</sup> there is much less understanding among policymakers about what high-quality early learning actually looks like and what it will take to achieve it. Quality is multi-faceted and includes, for example, attention to early learning standards that can be used to guide early care and education; qualified teachers and caregivers with opportunities for ongoing professional development; guidelines on class sizes and teacher-child ratios; and ongoing monitoring to ensure that quality is sustained. These dimensions require state-level investments to guarantee that the early learning system in California can function at scale with quality. Research, advocacy, and communications to build awareness and political will for these investments remains an important area for further work.

<sup>4</sup> Source: California Legislative Information: [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov](http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov)

<sup>5</sup> Source: Policymaker ratings: Grantee Preschool California annually rates all 120 legislators on their support for preschool.

<sup>6</sup> Karoly, L.A., Ghosh-Dastidar, B., Zellman, G.L., Perlman, M., Fernyhough, L. (2008). *Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Age Children in California*. RAND Corporation.

## ② Have preschool policies on access or quality changed?

<b>Packard Areas of Investment</b>	
- Policy proposal development	- Coalition building and mobilization
- Nonpartisan policy analysis and research	- Non-lobbying advocacy outreach
<b>Points of Progress</b>	<b>Lessons</b>
- <i>On access, Transitional Kindergarten marked an important leap forward.</i>	- <i>Early learning investments in California are still a zero-sum game.</i>
- <i>On quality, some incremental policy commitments have been made.</i>	- <i>No major commitments have been made on preschool quality.</i>

### Packard-Supported Progress

When CFC refreshed the preschool strategy in 2008, four potential avenues for promoting the preschool agenda were considered: (1) state legislative reforms, (2) new federal funding for early learning, (3) a ballot initiative on school financing that would include preschool, or (4) more local preschool expansion. Of these options, the Foundation saw legislators (along with local champions) as the most likely avenue for achieving change. Policy achievements related to this focus follow.

**On access, Transitional Kindergarten marked an important leap forward.** Until 2010, California was one of only four states in which children who were still four could enter kindergarten. Educators and advocates had long argued that four-year-olds often lack the maturity and social and early reading and math skills they need to succeed in kindergarten. For many years, California legislators and policymakers had attempted to change the kindergarten entry date with no success.

From 2008-2010, however, Packard grantees successfully re-introduced the idea and crafted a proposal to create transitional kindergarten so four-year-olds eligible for kindergarten (those born between September and December) would instead receive a year of kindergarten preparation. The proposal attracted support based on the argument that it would not cost any more money right away. Rather, in the beginning, existing state and federal funding for children with fall birthdays would be redirected to transitional kindergarten and would employ existing teachers and classroom facilities. Advocates, including K-12 and business champions developed through Packard's investments in target communities, argued that the \$700 million required for the first cohort's extra year in school would not come due until the thirteenth year, when those children graduated from high school.

In September 2010, after months of careful work by Packard-funded advocates and committed legislators, Governor Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act creating the transitional kindergarten program. By fall 2012, more than 2,000 transitional kindergarten classrooms were serving about 40,000 students. Schools will continue to phase in transitional kindergarten by moving the kindergarten entry date one month a year until full implementation occurs in 2015.

**On quality, incremental policy commitments have been made.** Packard-funded research by the RAND Corporation in 2008 found that while there are some good examples of high-quality programming in California, overall preschool quality is lacking. No demographic or socioeconomic groups, on average, are in high-quality programs that will prepare them for kindergarten. In addition, no statewide system exists in California to measure and monitor quality and to support quality improvement.

The Preschool Program's refreshed strategy in 2008 aimed for policy changes to improve preschool quality, including changes in the areas of workforce development; teacher competencies, certification and credentialing; facilities expansion; quality ratings; tiered reimbursement; and curriculum frameworks. Specific policy-related achievements since 2008 that Packard grantees have contributed to are listed at right. Advancements have been made in the areas of quality ratings and curriculum frameworks.

## Lessons

**Policy gains remain at risk.** Particularly in the early childhood arena where funding often is approached with a zero-sum mentality, policy gains are regularly at risk of being cut or underfunded, particularly in times of fiscal crisis. For example, in 2012, Governor Brown proposed to save about \$223 million by eliminating funding for the transitional kindergarten program. While advocates fought those cuts and state lawmakers ultimately signaled their support for the program by rejecting the Governor's proposal to eliminate it, the state's FY 2012-13 budget still included across-the-board cuts of \$100 million to child care and \$30 million in cuts to the state preschool program. As stated earlier, continued advocacy for early learning investments made over the last decade is needed to ensure that the state does not roll back progress that already has been made.

**No major policy commitments have been made on preschool quality.** While the findings above demonstrate that some policy-related advancements on preschool quality have occurred, those advancements primarily have been incremental and have focused more on the *development* of systems to support quality than on the roll out or *implementation* of those systems statewide. For example, while the federal Early Learning Challenge grant is helping California to move forward with the development of a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) to monitor early learning quality and reward improvements, the state ultimately will need to invest in the implementation of that system to ensure it supports quality improvements statewide. Also, improvements have not yet been achieved in

### Quality-Related Policy Advancements

- **2008: Development of a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) Advisory Committee** to develop a policy and implementation plan for a QRIS for early care and education programs serving children birth to age five.
- **2008: Formation of a Data Commission** to plan a statewide education information system that connects K-12 and other systems including preschool to promote information sharing and evaluation as students move across systems.
- **2009: Formation of an Early Learning Advisory Council** to promote statewide collaboration among early childhood programs birth to kindergarten (later eliminated by Governor Brown and now housed within CDE as an advisory committee).
- **2011: Early Learning Challenge grant** (\$52.6m in federal funds) to fund the development of a QRIS in the state.
- **2012: California Preschool Learning Foundations** were completed, providing the state's first early learning standards.

all areas the Foundation chose to target. Quality improvement remains a critical need in the state to ensure that children get the early learning experiences they need.<sup>7</sup>

### ③ Have preschool access or quality improved?

<b>Packard Areas of Investment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support and technical assistance for county- and school district-based preschool and Transitional Kindergarten programs</li> <li>- Preschool program quality enhancements</li> <li>- Improvements in teacher education and training</li> </ul>	
<b>Points of Progress</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CFC aimed for the creation of 80,000 new preschool spaces by 2013; that target has been met.</li> <li>- Quality improvements are occurring in targeted ways.</li> </ul>	<b>Lessons</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access has increased for four-year-olds, but not three-year-olds.</li> <li>- Low preschool quality is still a major issue.</li> </ul>

### Packard-Supported Progress

**CFC aimed for the creation of 80,000 new preschool spaces by 2013; that target has been met.**

Transitional kindergarten means that 120,000 four-year-olds will be served; of those, 60,000 will be most in need. Another 19,000 spaces were created through a 2008 bill (supported by Packard grantees) that consolidated and streamlined Title V child development programs serving preschool-aged children.<sup>8</sup> Combining the funds resulted in cost savings that enabled those children to participate in the state preschool program.

**Quality improvements are occurring in targeted ways.** Since 2008, the Foundation has supported investments in target communities that have helped to both develop local leaders and champions for preschool and to seed innovation on preschool quality. Before policy problems like quality can be addressed, policy solutions need to be developed and tested to ensure they are both implementable and effective. As such, over the last five years while the state has grappled with a deep economic crisis, the Foundation has supported grants to develop and test various approaches to quality improvement such as curriculum and standards alignment; integrated professional development models; a specialized early childhood education teaching credential; and student monitoring tools.

In addition, the Foundation began supporting school districts directly in their preschool expansion and quality improvement activities. For example, grants since 2010 have supported the development of transitional kindergarten programs in target community school districts. In addition, the Foundation invested in the quality of those programs by supporting the development of a professional learning community to address transitional kindergarten quality implementation challenges. The learning

<sup>7</sup> Karoly, L.A. (2012). *Advancing the Professional Development System for California's Early Care and Education Workforce*. RAND Corporation.

<sup>8</sup> HFRP's 2008 midcourse review report covered this policy accomplishment on access.

community combines peer learning with expert technical assistance to help early transitional kindergarten implementers create high quality transitional kindergarten programs that can serve as models for other districts in California. These efforts have begun to put in place important building blocks that can become the foundation for further advocacy efforts focused on quality.

## Lessons

**Access has increased for four-year-olds, but not three-year-olds.** The Preschool Program will start and end having made a commitment to increase access to preschool for both three- and four-year-olds in California. Transitional kindergarten increased access for four-year-olds, but similar successes for three-year-olds have not yet been achieved.

**Low preschool quality is still a major issue.** All states require preschools to meet some quality standards to receive public funds. The National Institute for Early Education Research tracks state requirements using a checklist of 10 quality benchmarks and then compares states on their performance.<sup>9</sup> As the table at right demonstrates, state-funded preschool in California currently meets only three of the 10 standards, down from four in 2008, and on par with the state’s performance of meeting three back in 2003.

While transitional kindergarten programs meets a higher number of these quality standards because they use a developmentally-appropriate curriculum aligned with kindergarten standards and are taught by credentialed teachers with a B.A. degree, large numbers of children will not experience transitional kindergarten. Clearly, California has significant room for improvement on quality.

**Quality Standards Met by California’s State-Funded Preschool**

Preschool Quality Benchmarks	2003	2008	2011
1. Early learning standards			
2. Teacher B.A. degree			
3. Teacher specialized training	YES	YES	YES
4. Assistant teacher CDA degree			
5. Teacher in-service		YES	YES
6. Maximum class size			
7. Staff-child ratio 1:10	YES	YES	YES
8. Health screening and referral and support			
9. At least one meal			
10. Site visits and monitoring	YES	YES	

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research

<sup>9</sup> National Institute for Early Education Research (2003, 2008, 2011). *The State of Preschool*. Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

## ④ Where is there likelihood for future policy progress?

### Packard Areas of Investment

- All investments together aim to improve chances for preschool advancements in the policy arena

### Points of Progress and Lessons

- *Early learning advocacy capacity has been built and is an important resource for future work.*

### Lessons

- *The political and economic climate currently is favorable for more progress.*
- *Advancements on quality and transitions are essential.*

## Packard-Supported Progress

**Early learning advocacy capacity has been built and is an important resource for future work.** The Preschool Program positioned the Packard Foundation as a field builder of early learning advocacy. The Foundation has acted as a long-term resource base for statewide advocacy organizations like Preschool California and Children Now, and has been a capacity builder and connector for a broader network of individuals and organizations that regularly work on early learning issues. Packard has substantially altered the early learning advocacy landscape and patterns of interaction among advocates. The Foundation also has positioned itself as a player in the public policy arena. This stronger advocacy field and reputation can and should be built on as the Foundation moves into the implementation of a new early learning strategy.

## Lessons

**The political and economic climate currently is favorable for more progress.** The majority of the Preschool Program’s ten-year run has occurred while the state faced multi-billion-dollar deficits. For the first time in many years, however, there is cause for fiscal optimism in Sacramento. In addition, Democrats currently have a supermajority in both the Assembly and Senate, giving many education reformers and public education advocates cause to believe that opportunities for change lie ahead. Continuing early learning advocacy, particularly on quality issues, makes strategic sense in this climate.

**Advancements on quality and transitions are essential.** The clear message emerging from this report is that while access has moved forward in California over the last ten years, quality has not. To ensure children who need preschool most can benefit from better access to preschool opportunities, the Foundation should turn its focus more acutely toward the goal of improving early learning quality in California. As part of the quality equation and building on its work with transitional kindergarten and with school districts, the Foundation also should pay attention to how early learning experiences can better coordinate and line up to support children’s development longitudinally—from infant and toddler care, to preschool, to kindergarten, and on to the early elementary years.