

The Early Care and Education Landscape of Los Angeles County:

An Overview of Key Findings

The **Early Care and Education (ECE) Landscape in Los Angeles County: Access, Workforce and Quality**, a point-in-time assessment conducted by Advancement Project, with funding from First 5 LA, provides a snapshot of the status of young children and their ECE opportunities in L.A. County by exploring their access to ECE services, the ECE workforce and the quality of ECE programs. The findings have value for a broad audience whose interest lies in improving and expanding ECE in L.A. County. These include philanthropic leaders, policy makers, elected officials, policy advocates and community members. The goal of this analysis is to inform various stakeholders as they work to design, deliver, and advocate for meaningful opportunities to build a foundation for educational and life success for all of L.A. County's youngest children.

Participation in high-quality ECE has the potential to improve children's cognitive, language, physical and social development in the early years prior to the start of formal schooling (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.). On average, children who participate in high-quality early childhood education programs gain about one-third of a year of additional learning across language, reading and math skills. This is particularly true for children from low-income families of color, where early education experiences outside of the home can bolster children's skills so that they are ready to succeed in school. Due to lack of financial resources and

availability of affordable quality ECE programs within these communities, access to ECE is neither universal nor evenly distributed; early learning opportunities are often very limited for low-income families and families of color (Barnett, Carolan, & Johns, 2013).

From a financial standpoint alone, the return on investment in ECE is substantial. Studies of longer-standing, intensive interventions with decades-long longitudinal data, such as the Perry Preschool Program, as well as other contemporary, large-scale public preschool programs, such as Tulsa, Oklahoma's preschool program, reveal a return on investment ranging from three to seven dollars saved for every dollar spent (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

ECE Access

Access to services refers to the availability of early care and education providers within a given community. Licensed ECE programs in L.A. County are offered in center-based and family home-based settings that are funded from a variety of sources. In L.A. County, the availability of licensed ECE seats varies widely for the approximately 650,000 children under 5. As of June 2013, there were only enough seats in a licensed center for 2.4% of infants and toddlers and 41.3% of preschool-age children. The availability appears to vary depending on ZIP code and geography, family income



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level, age group served and type of care, including center-based programs and family child care homes.

- **Limited Access for Working Families:**

There is differential access to ECE services across L.A. County, and access differs considerably by socioeconomic circumstances. A key socioeconomic group in which to view access and needs for ECE services is families in which the parents are working, but earn 70% or less of the state median income. Analyses of varying geographic areas showed that licensed ECE seats and programs for low-income children are frequently not matched to where low-income children live. In some areas, there is as few as one licensed seat per 100 children under 5, implying extreme scarcity. Alternatively, other areas are home to as many as 482 licensed seats per 100 children under 5, that is, a local surplus of licensed seats. The areas of high need in the county are disproportionately among low-income communities and primarily affect African American and Hispanic or Latino families. These areas tend to be concentrated within southern and southeastern L.A. County. The availability of licensed ECE services is especially low for infants and toddlers from low-income families.

Although there is still a great need for additional early learning opportunities, California recently has made historic investments at the state level. Governor Brown signed the 2014–15 State Budget including \$273 million in ECE investments. These investments include \$87 million for 500 slots for the Alternative Payment Program, 1,000 slots for General Child Care and Development, and 11,500 full-day, full-year spaces in the California State Preschool Program for low-income four-year-olds. In addition, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) enacted in 2013 provides school districts with an opportunity to create budgets that utilize resources in a way that is both equitable and outcome driven, and is available to children in early learning programs through high school. The flexibility of district investments into the ECE program gives local school districts the opportunity to prevent the school readiness gap and better prepare its youngest students to read proficiently by third grade.



ECE Workforce

L.A. County accounts for approximately one-third of all child care workers in the state. An estimated 41,300 individuals, including preschool teachers and other child care workers, are employed in licensed centers and family child care homes in L.A. County (The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). The ECE literature places an emphasis on the quality and competency of the workforce. Despite acknowledgements of the need for a well-trained ECE workforce, a number

of factors make it difficult for providers to advance their professional development, both formally and informally. Coursework and training can be cost prohibitive, and relevant training and/or coursework may be difficult to schedule or unavailable in a professional's primary language. Additionally, there is little financial incentive to advance formal education for many providers. Clearly defined professional pathways are not available for many ECE professionals, making it especially difficult to reconcile the call for increased quality standards with the ability to meet the increasing standards to work as an ECE professional, especially for those professionals who may have entered ECE without a linear trajectory into the field.

If the ECE field is to build a more competent and qualified workforce, it is important to understand both the formal and informal opportunities currently available and the barriers to accessing workforce development programs. In Advancement Project's ECE landscape of countywide assessment, two projects emerged—Partnerships for Education, Articulation and Coordination through Higher Education (PEACH) and the Gateways for Early Educators (Gateways) from the Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles—as examples with helpful details related to the systems of formal and informal professional development. The PEACH project works with faculty from local colleges and universities to strengthen the ECE formal education system. Gateways offers diverse and individualized pathways to professional development through seven resource and referral (R&R) agencies in L.A. County (Savage & Pilado, 2013). The R&R agencies provide child care information, technical assistance and training to child care providers and referrals to community resources. Both PEACH and Gateways are projects under the ECE Workforce Consortium funded by First 5 LA.

Professional Development: There are two broad categories of ECE professionals: (1) “traditional” high-school and college-educated ECE providers with more linear career trajectories and (2) “nontraditional” providers who are less comfortable with and less commonly found in formal education settings. For many in this second group, their challenge is accessing traditional formal education pathways to increase their knowledge and skills, and remain working in the ECE field. Despite considerably different profiles, both traditional and nontraditional groups share the common need for more relevant formal and informal ECE coursework, clearer professional development pathways and financial support to complete their formal education.

- **Salary Disparities in the Workforce:** Pay scales are contingent on the type and amount of funding each program receives and the policies of individual employers. Typically, Head Start has more per-child funding than programs funded by the California Department of Education. Income to non-funded programs varies depending on the level of fees charged to parents with family child care operating similarly to private centers, who set fees based on the market in which they operate. In addition, increased educational attainment is not associated with higher salaries for those working in licensed family child care homes. For those working in licensed centers, increased educational attainment is associated with increased wages but the wage increase is small. For the majority of ECE professionals in L.A. County, there is little financial incentive to pursue additional formal education.

ECE Quality

A focus on the quality of early learning in L.A. County is paramount because a child’s early years set a trajectory for healthy development. An at-risk child armed with a high-quality ECE experience is less likely to drop out of school, become a teen parent, be placed in special education or be arrested for a violent crime (The Ounce of Prevention Fund, n.d.). Alternatively, poor-quality ECE settings have been associated with negative outcomes for young children. A National Institute of Child Health and Human Development study found that children who received low-quality care in their first 4½ years exhibited academic and conduct problems that persisted through to age 15 when compared to those children who received high-quality care (Vandell et al., 2010).

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a method for assessing and improving ECE programs in a systematic way. A QRIS is defined as “a method to assess, improve and communicate the level of quality in early care and education settings” (Mitchell, 2005). QRIS efforts are frameworks that use observational, assessment and benchmarking tools to assess the quality of a participating ECE program, classroom or provider for the purpose of quality improvement. Advancement Project’s ECE landscape of countywide assessment looked at the three different QRIS efforts in L.A. County.

(STEP).

2. Los Angeles Universal Preschool’s (LAUP) 5-Star Quality Assessment and Improvement System.
3. Race to the Top (RTT)–Early Learning Challenge Los Angeles administered by the L.A. County Office of Child Care and LAUP, who each have their own cohort of Race to the Top participants.

California was one of nine states to win a RTT-Early Learning Challenge grant in 2012, which is a “federal grant to improve the quality of early learning programs and close the achievement gap for young children with high needs” (Children Now, n.d.). In addition to RTT, there are two QRIS systems in Los Angeles consisting of LAUP’s 5-Star Quality Assessment and Improvement System and the L.A. County Office of Child Care’s STEP, with each system using different scales to rate ECE providers. Recently, QRIS efforts have committed to using one QRIS standard, RTT, by December 2015.

- **Nascent Reach of QRIS:** Less than one-tenth of all ECE centers and less than 2.5% of all licensed family child care homes in L.A. County had received an overall rating from a QRIS effort in the county at the time of the ECE Landscape report’s analysis. Fewer providers serving infants and toddlers have received an overall rating from L.A. County’s QRIS efforts compared to providers serving preschool-age children.
- **Limited Funding and Other Supports Impact Ability to Grow and Embed QRIS:** The relatively small number of participant providers in the QRIS efforts in L.A. County appear to be related at least in part to insufficient funding for larger-scale expansion, coupled with the fact that participation is mostly voluntary (with LAUP being the only organization that requires its providers to participate in QRIS). Additional funding, incentives and supports are needed to address barriers to participation in, and advancement through, QRIS systems in order to work toward establishing universal and sustained quality improvement efforts.



1. L.A. County Office of Child Care’s Steps to Excellence Program

The “*Early Care and Education Landscape in Los Angeles County: Access, Workforce and Quality*” is the first in a series of three reports produced by Advancement Project for First 5 LA. Two other reports are the “*Past Roles and Strategies of First 5 LA and Other Funders*” and “*Opportunities and Considerations for Addressing ECE Gaps in Los Angeles County.*”

All three reports will be available at the end of 2014 on the First 5 LA website at www.First5LA.org. For questions about the ECE Landscape, please contact Kim Pattillo Brownson, Director of Educational Equity at Advancement Project, at KPattillo@AdvanceProj.org. For questions about First 5 LA, please contact Young-Ji Lee, Program Officer, at YLee@First5LA.org.

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