

**Assembly Education Committee
Informational Hearing
Meeting the Post-Pandemic Academic, Well Being, and
Technology Needs of California Students**

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**Full Written Testimony
Tara Kini, Learning Policy Institute**

Chair Muratsuchi and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to address you today as you take stock of the well-being of California's students in the wake of the pandemic.

California's Context

I want to start by naming our challenge in California. Despite our state being the [5th largest economy in the world](#) and the home to 10% of the Fortune 1000 companies, in California, nearly 2/3 of our students come from low-income families—and that number is rising. [Three percent of California's students are experiencing homelessness](#), and about three-quarters are students of color. [Nearly forty percent](#) come from homes where English is not the first language, and about 1 in 5 of our students are learning English. We serve [the largest percentage of ELs of any state except Texas](#), and the greatest number overall.

So, on the one hand, California is an enormously diverse and wealthy state. And on the other, our system of public schools serves a population with significant needs who are facing a great deal of poverty...in a state with an extremely high cost of living. And here in California, we serve about 1 in 8 students nationally: *how* we serve our students carries big implications for our nation as a whole.

As you've heard about today, we're facing significant challenges as we work to recover from the effects of the pandemic—both in terms of academic outcomes as well as children's well-being.

I'd like to focus my remarks on our efforts to address these challenges and to support the whole child.

California's Whole Child Investments

What do I mean by [whole child supports](#)? I mean supports that recognize the interrelationships among all areas of development—physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional. These include access to nutritious food, health care, and social supports; secure relationships; educative and restorative disciplinary practices; and learning opportunities that are designed to challenge and engage students while supporting their motivation and self-confidence to persevere and succeed. With a whole child approach to education, all aspects of children's well-being are supported to ensure that learning can happen in deep, meaningful, and lasting ways.

California has taken this kind of whole child approach, responding to the challenges of the pandemic with a robust and coherent set of policies that together create a web of supports for children and their families, both in and out of school.

This includes providing [universal school meals](#)—which was first enabled by the federal government during the pandemic, but California was the first state to make that promise in an ongoing way by committing state funds (and is just [1 of 8 states](#) doing so).

Medi-Cal now covers [more than ½ of California children](#) (55%). And California has invested \$4.6B over 5 years in the [Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative](#) (CYBHI). This initiative is working to break down the silos separating the state’s child-serving systems and link the efforts of the health, education and other sectors to enable California’s children broader access to mental health and substance abuse supports.

California has also invested \$4B annually in providing expanded learning through the **Expanded Learning Opportunities Program**—before school, after school, and during summer—that is hands-on and engaging, and that helps to meet the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of students. These are not your remedial summer school programs!

In 2021, the state approved a plan to provide **universal preK** to all 4-year-olds and income-eligible 3-year-olds in the state by 2025-26, committing to provide universal pre-K at a pace and scale unprecedented in the United States. This policy change reflects a robust research base finding that [high-quality preK supports substantial early learning gains](#) and can have lasting impacts throughout school.

Several new investments have been made to make preschool universal in California, including

- More than \$700M in new funding in 2023 to expand TK and add a second adult to TK classrooms
- \$632M in new funding in 2023 to increase reimbursement rates in the California State Preschool Program
- and \$600M in UPK Planning and Implementation grants, of which \$100M was dedicated to supporting early educators in preK, TK, and K.

With these investments in universal preK, LEAs have been able to steadily roll out UPK across the state, with four-fifths of LEAs offering transitional kindergarten at all of their elementary sites, and over four-fifths offering full-day transitional kindergarten. Over one-third of LEAs offered early enrollment TK in 2022-23 and planned to continue this offering in 2023-24, expanding transitional kindergarten ahead of the legislated rollout schedule.

Additionally, a large majority (86%) of LEAs are combining multiple funding streams and programs, such as ELO-P, ACES, CSPP, Head Start, and more to offer full-day and extended-day for transitional kindergarteners and even 3-year-olds.

Finally, the state has invested more than \$4B to create and sustain **community schools**, which is a key strategy for organizing the resources of the school and community around student success. It offers a framework for integrating many of the supports we’ve talked about today in a way that attends to the needs of the whole child and whole family.

California’s Community Schools Partnership Program framework is centered on 4 pillars, or elements: (1) Expanded learning time/opportunities, (2) Integrated student supports, (3) Collaborative leadership & practices, and (4) Active family & community engagement, as well as key conditions for learning that reflect what we know about how children learn best. The state’s approach to community schools is grounded in [a strong research base finding benefits with wide range of community school models](#), with improvements in everything from test scores and grades to students’ attitudes toward school and reduced racial and economic achievement gaps.

California’s Foundational Investments in Teaching and Learning

These various whole child programs—and many others—are critical investments intended to provide a web of supports that wrap around children and schools to enable healthy development, respond to student needs, and address learning barriers.

The foundation that they rest on, of course, is the core work of teaching and learning. The state’s ongoing and substantial investments in the **Local Control Funding Formula** enable this core work. We’re now a decade into this more equitable approach that distributes funds based on student need and then allows local districts to make decisions about how to spend funding through an accountability system that is not just looking at test scores only, but also taking into account multiple measures of student and school success that reflect a whole child approach.

[Recently released research on LCFF from UC Berkeley professor Rucker Johnson](#) finds that LCFF-induced funding increases improved academic achievement for every grade and subject assessed, in both math and reading, with students in concentration grant districts having the largest achievement boost.

The other foundational investment the state has made is in the **recruitment, preparation, and retention of a well-prepared educator workforce**. California’s standards for teachers stand out nationally for their attention to preparing teachers who have the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the whole child and to partner with families—but our state has long struggled with shortages of qualified teachers. Well over 1/3 of new teachers enter the classroom on a substandard credential or permit, without having met these standards or completed teacher preparation. This has serious implications for student achievement and equitable access to opportunities.

Recent investments in scholarships for teachers and school counselors, teacher and counselor residency programs, and classified staff and undergraduate teaching programs are helping to turn this around—preparing a more diverse cadre of educators who are well equipped to serve California’s diverse students. [California is one of only a few states in the country where the number of entrants into teaching has been growing, rather than shrinking](#). Between 2019 and 2021, when many of the new state investments were beginning to be implemented, the number of fully prepared new entrants increased by about 3300, while the number of emergency-style permits decreased by about 2500.

Districts Leveraging Whole Child Investments to Support Academic Success and Student Well-being

I want to close by sharing a few examples of districts that are leveraging these various investments that California has made to support the whole child in ways that are making a difference for students' academic outcomes as well as their overall well-being.

Lost Hills is a small rural elementary district in Kern County serving a student population that is more than half English learners and more than 80% from low-income families. [This district has fully launched a community school strategy](#), leveraging first a federal grant and more recently state Community Schools Partnership Program grant funding. The district is part of the [West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools](#), which combines resources across several neighboring small, rural districts. Each school has a community school coordinator, a social worker, and an AmeriCorps mentor who work together to support students and families. The Consortium also sponsors afterschool programming, shared nursing services, and preschool. An innovative rural [Children's Cabinet](#) brings together key county-level decision-makers from education, health, human services, and housing alongside school leaders, community partners, and families to address challenges like chronic absenteeism and access to children's mental health services. The Consortium has been able to pilot the placement of MediCal-sponsored mental health services directly on school campuses one day per week.

On the academic front, the Consortium identified math education as a focus area, providing math coaching for teachers and instructional aides who work with small learning groups for mathematics. These efforts are paying off academically: [Lost Hills saw](#) double digit gains in both ELA and math, a 17 percentage point improvement in students meeting/exceeding the Smarter Balanced math proficiency standard and a 12 percentage point improvement for English language arts from the 2020-21 school year to the 2021-22 school year. Founding districts in the Consortium placed in the top 5% of districts in terms of math proficiency growth statewide.

Modesto City Elementary—which serves 14,000 students in the Central Valley, more than one-third of whom are ELs and 85% of whom are from low-income families—has been able to leverage ELOP and TK funding to provide expanded learning district wide, including after school programs at all of its TK-8 sites, serving nearly 4,500 students. This includes academic intervention classes taught by classroom teachers, enrichment classes, intramural sports, and community partnerships with the Boys and Girls Club, City Park & Rec, and County Sheriff's Department Policy Activities League. The district's data show that of the nearly 1,200 K-6 students who participated in academic intervention for ELA, more than 90% made 15% or more growth from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Chronic absenteeism, a major challenge in the district as for so many others, declined by 17 percentage points last year (from 47% to 29.7%), compared to a statewide decline of 6 percentage points.

Oakland Unified is another district that has leveraged both state Community Schools funding as well as federal Full Service Community Schools grants to implement community schools district-wide. This is work that the district has been undertaking for over a decade, but has been able to accelerate with state community schools investments. An LPI [study](#) published last spring documented the district's work to, for example, incorporate school-based health initiatives through county-level coordination; efficiently connect students and families to services and supports through Coordination of Services Teams (COSTs); manage and sustain relationships with external partners; and engage family members and include them in school decision-making.

With a focus on “joyful schools” supporting health and mental health services and restorative justice programs, along with expanded learning time after school and in the summer, the district targeted students’ learning recovery. The district also adopted strong foundational literacy programs along with the culturally relevant and engaging EL Education literacy curriculum for standards-based instruction connected to social-emotional learning. After-school providers provided aligned literacy supports to which high-dosage tutoring and small-group instruction were added for both literacy and numeracy. All of these efforts have helped the district to make notable gains since becoming a community school district. Since the pandemic, CAASPP data show that [Oakland Unified School District](#) was among other districts serving students from low-income families that gained ground in English language arts during the pandemic and lost less ground than others in math. The district still has a long way to go, but these are promising signs that its whole child approach is putting it on the right course.

Lindsay Unified School District is another district that stands out for, among other strategies, using all available funding to offer developmentally appropriate preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds in their districts. Lindsay is a small, rural district in the Central Valley, where preschool and child care programs are limited. For 3-year-olds, they’re using state preschool, LCAP, and migrant funds. For 4-year-olds, they are stacking TK, state preschool, and ELO-P funding to ensure that all children who need it have access to a full day of care, from 7:30 in the morning to 6 in the evening. All children have access to both a credentialed teacher, and co-teachers who hold a child development permit. The district is bridging the gap between early learning and elementary school: It aligns its curriculum and assessments across preK and the early elementary grades, offers joint professional development for CSPP and TK teachers, provides assessment training for kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators, and collects assessment data for kindergarten transitions. Expanded, flexible funding for universal preK have made this possible. The district has also leveraged state Community Schools Partnership Program as well as federal Full Service Community Schools funding to implement a community schools approach. And it has leveraged teacher residency grant funding to implement a Grow-Your-Own teacher residency in partnership with Alder Graduate School of Education to ensure it has a qualified workforce to implement these programs. Lindsay Unified is another district that saw gains in both ELA and math proficiency rates between 2022-23.

The whole child investments that California has made—as well as the ongoing investments in LCFF—are enabling educators in these districts and others like them to attend to the many aspects of children’s well-being that creates the foundation for learning.

I should note that we’re still early in implementation for many of these investments. There is much to be learned about how implementation is going and how it can be improved. The Learning Policy Institute is engaged in ongoing research on some of these initiatives, including on UPK, community schools, and educator workforce investments. My colleagues and I look forward to sharing that work with you in the coming months and years.