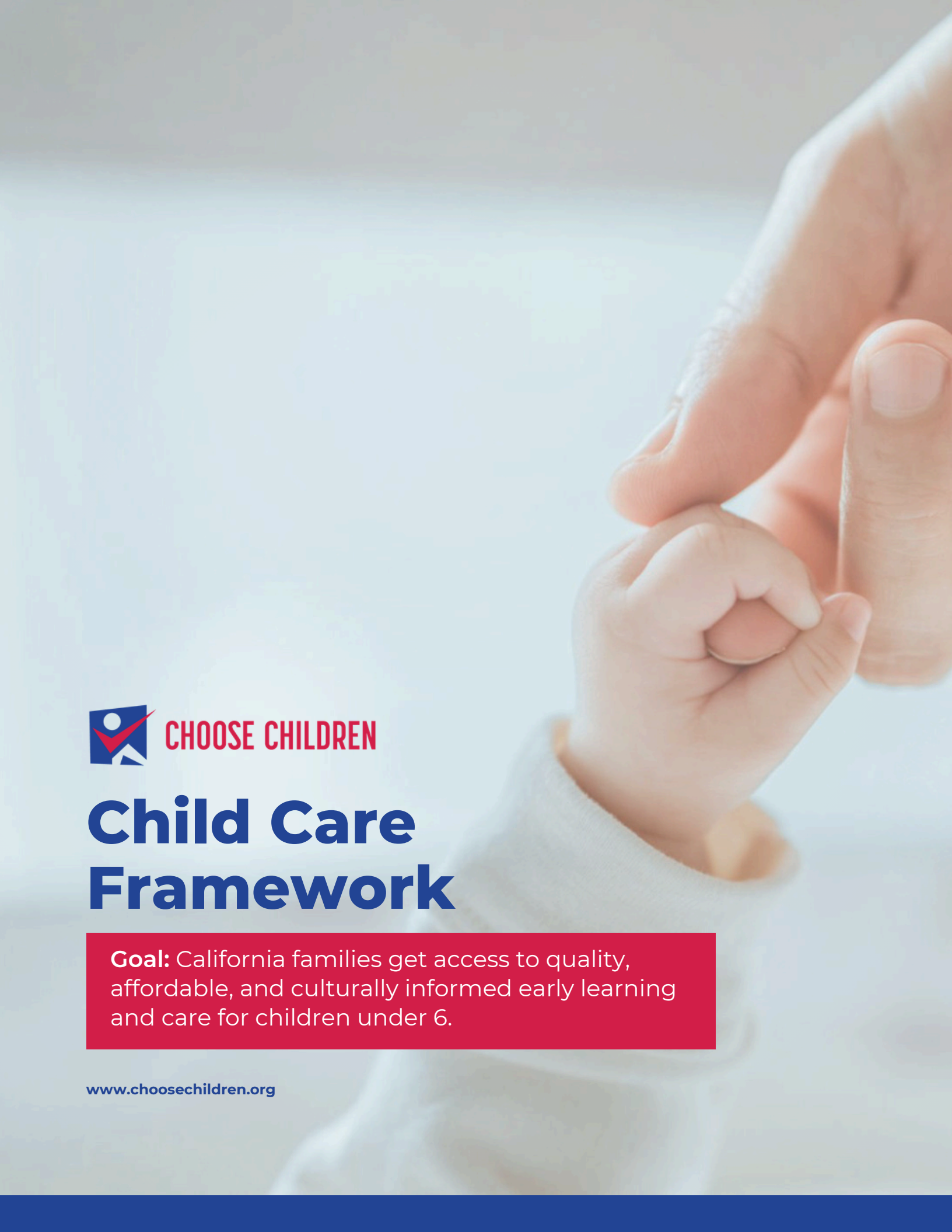


CHOOSE CHILDREN

Child Care Framework

Goal: California families get access to quality, affordable, and culturally informed early learning and care for children under 6.

www.choosechildren.org



WHAT CALIFORNIA NEEDS

California's mixed-delivery child care system includes centers, family child care homes, family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care, Head Start, and school-based programs. Yet for many families, none of these options are within reach. Care now costs $25,000 or more per year, and there are far too few available slots to meet demand. As a result, many parents are struggling to find care they can afford, or any care at all.

The child care affordability crisis is inseparable from a workforce crisis. High turnover among providers, driven by low wages and economic stress, is linked to weaker outcomes for children (SIEPR, 2026). Meanwhile, gaps in child care access keep more than 100,000 California mothers of young children out of the workforce, costing the state as much as $23 billion in GDP (SIEPR, 2026).

KEY FACTS & FIGURES

Affordability:

In 2023, 70% of households with children under 5 spent $200 or more on child care weekly–a considerable increase from pre-pandemic costs (First 5 California, 2025).

KEY Facts & Figures (cont)

Affordability:

Median annual child care costs across California counties range from $10,980 to $24,636, averaged across care types and ages, county-level costs range from 8% to 21% of household income, with the largest shares in rural and agricultural counties (Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research 2026 [SIEPR]).

At the low end of the income distribution, child care costs can reach 75% of annual household income; only 40% of mothers with young children in the lowest income decile are in the labor force, compared to much higher rates at the top of the income scale (SIEPR, 2026).

Fewer than half of California children ages 0–5 have a regular child care arrangement, and the state's licensed-slot shortfall exceeds 600,000 children, concentrated in rural areas (SIEPR, 2026). In 2022, only 1 in 9 children eligible for subsidized care actually received it (First 5 California, 2025).



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Workforce:

Early educator turnover in California runs 19 to 29% annually, compared to about 3% turnover across all industries statewide (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2025 [CSCCE]).

ECE workers earn roughly 23% less than peers with comparable education and demographics. Center-based assistant teacher starting pay was about $18/hour in 2025 - below the state's $20/hour fast-food minimum wage; while lead teachers started around $21/hour (CSCCE, 2026).

47% of early educator households participate in one or more public safety-net programs (First 5 California, 2025); nationally, 53% of child care workers rely on Medicaid or SNAP (SIEPR, 2026).

The 2026-27 proposed state budget does not increase ECE funding beyond a cost-of-living adjustment that falls short of inflation, leaving voucher-funded programs, which are already the lowest payers, further behind (CSCCE, 2026).

CALIFORNIA'S SOLUTIONS

California has invested in expanded child care slots, preschool, TK and School Age programs over the past 8 years and the payoff is expected to be monumental. Research indicates that high-quality, 0-5 early childhood programs lead to an annual return on investment of more than 13% (Heckman Equation) and children who participate in Head Start are more likely to graduate high school and secure stable jobs (NHSA). These investments can be used as a foundation to chart a path toward universal access with smart investments and collaboration.

By combining existing state infrastructure with new investments, we can expand access to affordable child care, improve compensation for all care givers, and build provider spaces for California's children and their families.

WHERE TO BEGIN:

In his first 100 days, California's next governor should issue an executive order setting a north star to achieve universal child care for all children from birth through 12 years old.

The order should clearly define "universal" to build upon California's mixed delivery system to maximize longstanding investments while leveraging the existing workforce and infrastructure. The order should state explicitly that the goal is affordable, high-quality early learning and care for every family who wants it and adequate pay for providers.

Additionally, in partnership with local CBOs, child care partners, and agencies, the Governor should launch a public information campaign connecting families to their local child care options. Whether in the public or private setting they choose (a child care center, licensed

family child care home, transitional kindergarten, or a trusted relative or friend), families should know how and where to access care from quality providers.

To close out their first 100 days, the Governor should create a multi-year investment plan to leverage California's existing child care system to expand access, increase compensation for workers and create sustainable career pathways. This can be built in partnership with industry leaders, families and providers who will reference numerous reports and studies conducted in the past decade to add provability.

5 BEYOND THE FIRST 100 DAYS:

While the first 100 days will be critical, the work will not end there. To ensure continued results, California's new Governor should:

Make needed investments to implement a single, regionalized state reimbursement rate system that compensates all providers, including centers, family child care homes, and Family, Friend and Neighbor care, for the full cost of providing quality care.

Continue expanding Universal PreK in a true mixed-delivery system, including Transitional Kindergarten, California State Preschool Program, Head Start and community-based child care providers.

Incentivize partnerships between LEA's and community-based child care providers.



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BEYOND THE FIRST 100 DAYS (cont):

Invest in professional development, career ladders, and apprenticeships for the early learning workforce across all settings.

Build career ladders and apprenticeships for the early learning workforce ranging from family, friend, neighbor care providers through child care agency administration and leverage existing work in Quality Counts, Child Care Initiative Project and other best practice models.

Target investments to communities with the greatest access barriers, guided by an equity framework such as the Whole Child Equity Tool.

Launch a multi-year facilities grant program including flexible funding and technical assistance for expansion, deferred maintenance, renovations, and disaster-resilience upgrades, paired with streamlined state and local licensing and permitting.

Establish legal and financial resource pathways for undocumented child care workers, and expand access to multilingual programs and workforce supports.

Expand access to multilingual programs beginning at birth and supporting the multilingual workforce.

Align curriculum frameworks and approved instructional materials with developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically-affirming practices that are relevant for TK (Ed Trust).



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5 BEYOND THE FIRST 100 DAYS (cont):

Enhance state coordination and accountability for English learner outcomes and require adoption of culturally and linguistically affirming instructional materials.

Affirm commitment to defend federal funding for early care and education, including threats, cuts and harmful administrative changes to Head Start quality and safety standards; and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).

6 FINAL THOUGHT: SEQUENCING IS IMPORTANT

We have learned over the past decade that investing in only one part of the system at a time creates pressures and unintended outcomes in other areas. It is important to work in partnership with industry leaders to make sustainable, effective change across the 0-12 care system.

