

# Building Blocks for Equitable Recovery

*Early Learning and Care Facilities and the COVID-19 Pandemic*

## Issue Brief

**Supporting the Third Teacher:**  
Investing in Early Learning and Care Facilities  
Upgrades and Modifications in California

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Often called the “third teacher” by educators, the physical space has a crucial role in the learning experience<sup>1</sup>. Especially for young children, the environment directly impacts their health and brain development, influencing cognitive skills, and social and emotional abilities. Well-equipped and well-designed facilities foster children's autonomy and independence, reduce challenging behaviors, and support educators' work effectiveness, increasing job satisfaction and staff retention<sup>2</sup>.

Unfortunately, this critical aspect of the early learning and care system has been long neglected in California's public budget decisions. The absence of public investment in facilities infrastructure reduces state-subsidized programs' capacity to provide quality services and adequately support economically insecure families and children. As a consequence of enduring structural inequality, this lack of investment produces multigenerational effects such as California's uniquely high education achievement gap<sup>3</sup> and the racial wealth gap<sup>4</sup>.

In times of COVID-19 pandemic, these inequities are exacerbated<sup>5</sup>, making providers and children of color particularly vulnerable to the effects of the coronavirus. Additionally, a convergence of other environmental health hazards related to climate change, such as heatwaves and wildfires, adds to the challenges early childhood educators face when serving the most vulnerable children in our state.

### Funding for Facilities in California

K-12 education facilities are primarily funded by the state and local school districts<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, early learning and care facilities are mostly privately funded. Center-based providers, many of them private community-based nonprofit organizations, must patch together many and varied public and private funding sources to cover the full cost of facilities development<sup>7</sup>. Family child care providers use their residences as facilities and rarely have access to public funds to invest in it.

Funds for facilities' upgrades and modifications are also quite limited in California. Head Start and Early Head Start programs are the only ones that have access to federal

startup grants for facilities renovation and receive annual allocations for repairs<sup>8</sup>. In previous decades, state-subsidized programs had access to a state's repair and renovation grant fund. As a consequence of the Great Recession, this program was incorporated into the *Child Care Facilities Revolving Loan Fund*<sup>9</sup> in 2014, but the cost of paying back a loan is not feasible for most providers.

In 2019, the state created the *Early Learning and Care Facilities Infrastructure Grant Program*, launching it with an allocation of approximately \$245 Million from the General Fund and \$18 Million from the Child Care Facilities Revolving Loan Fund. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Newsom and the State Legislature reverted this \$263 Million allocation to the state's General Fund as part of the 2020-21 Budget decision.

### COVID-19 Pandemic and the Need for Facilities Upgrades and Modifications

At the county and city level, San Francisco is one of few jurisdictions with dedicated funds for early care and education facilities. The City and County of San Francisco/San Francisco Office of Early Care & Education offers the *Renovation and Repair Grant Program* in partnership with the Low Income Investment Fund.

Before 2020, the *Renovation and Repair Grant Program* was designed to preserve the supply of quality, licensed child care provided by nonprofit child care centers serving children ages 0 – 5 with a minimum of 20% of the children from low-income households. The program benefited centers facing health and safety issues and/or needing to increase the accessibility to children and families with special needs. Grants of up to \$100,000 per facility were made available.

In 2020, this program was adapted to support center-based and family child care providers with COVID-related modifications as they begin to reopen or transition from emergency child care for essential workers to regular operations.

The Center for Disease Control and Departments of Public Health's COVID-19 guidelines include new child care protocols to ensure children, staff, and families' safety. These involve changes made to the physical environment to practice social distancing, including reducing class sizes, supporting outdoor learning, and implementing enhanced sanitation, hygiene protocol, and health checks.

### **The San Francisco Renovation and Repairs Grant Fund**

is being used to shore up center-based and family child care providers from the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Some examples of how funding is applied include:**

- ✓ **Room dividers for classrooms**
- ✓ **Bathroom modifications including adding partitions or motion-controlled sinks/appliances**
- ✓ **Permanent or portable sinks/hand-washing stations**
- ✓ **Portable HEPA or UV light air purifiers**
- ✓ **HVAC sanitation upgrades including UV light**
- ✓ **Fixed equipment for sanitation (dishwashers/washers/dryers)**
- ✓ **Extra cribs and/or crib dividers**
- ✓ **Upgrades to outdoor space to encourage outdoor learning**
- ✓ **Physical upgrades to outdoors: shade, sinks, other improvements to maintain social distancing**
- ✓ **Other upgrades suggested by Licensing or the Department of Public Health<sup>1</sup>**

### **The Need for State's Investment in Facilities**

Safe, healthy, and quality early learning and care experiences are only possible if provided in safe, healthy, and quality environments. In order for early learning and care programs to effectively implement guidance that mitigates COVID-19 virus exposure risk, elected officials must prioritize investments in early learning facilities. The health and safety of children and the adults who educate them depend on it.

Based on the San Francisco COVID-19 Renovation & Repair Program experience, **an investment of at least \$ 95.5 million as part of the 2021-22 State Budget would support approximately 20% of the licensed center-based and family child care providers in California.** In alignment with the newly released *California Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*, these funds would be allocated to the *Early Learning and Care Facilities Infrastructure Grant Fund*. This investment would cover the costs of support and operations to approve the purchases and grants, provide up to a year of technical assistance and training on facilities infrastructure on topics such as environmental health and safety, and use the physical space to promote children's independence and resilience.

These resources would support early learning and care programs' sustainability while promoting children and providers' health and safety. As our industry faces a new era, this short-term intervention's outcomes will bring long-term benefits and inform effective strategies for long-term sustainable solutions.

#### Sources:

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<sup>2</sup> Wells, M. B. (2015). *Predicting preschool teacher retention and turnover in newly hired Head Start teachers across the first half of the school year*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 30, 152–159. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.10.003

<sup>3</sup> Cano, R. (2020). *Mind the achievement gap: California's disparities in education, explained*. CalMatters Explainer. <https://calmatters.org/explainers/achievement-gap-california-explainer-schools-education-disparities-explained/>

<sup>4</sup> PolicyLink. (2020). *Principles for a Common-Sense, Street-Smart Recovery: Center Racial Equity*. Policy Brief. <https://www.policylink.org/resources-tools/center-racial-equity>

<sup>5</sup> PolicyLink. (2020). *Principles for a Common-Sense, Street-Smart Recovery: Center Racial Equity*. Policy Brief. <https://www.policylink.org/resources-tools/center-racial-equity>

<sup>6</sup> Brunner, E.J. and Vincent, J. M. (September 2018). *Financing School Facilities in California: A 10-Year Perspective*. Getting Down to Facts II Research Brief. [https://www.gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII\\_Brief\\_Facilities.pdf](https://www.gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII_Brief_Facilities.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Advancement Project. (2018). *Building California's Future: Tackling the Facilities Challenge for Our Youngest Learners*. Policy Brief. [file:///C:/Users/erickson/Downloads/FINAL-ECE-Facilities-report%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/erickson/Downloads/FINAL-ECE-Facilities-report%20(3).pdf)

<sup>8</sup> California Health & Human Services Agency. (2020). *California Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*. <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/home/master-plan-for-early-learning-and-care/>

<sup>9</sup> California Department of Education. (2020). *Child Care Facilities Revolving Loan Fund*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/op/ccfrf.asp>