

Opinion: \$120,000 for California preschool

By Joe Mathews

Since the 1990s, California's leaders have promised to make preschool universal for every child.

Maybe they'll do it by the time I have grandchildren.



Joe Mathews

It's already too late for my own kids. The youngest of my three sons graduated from preschool last week. I celebrated by writing my final preschool check, for monthly tuition of \$1,165. With that payment, my total spending on preschool tuition for all three boys surpassed \$120,000.

All that tuition has wiped away most of my family's savings. And yet, my kids are extremely lucky—because they got to go to preschool at all.

Today, only half of California's 4-year-olds and 21 percent of our 3-year-olds are enrolled in either a public preschool or federally funded Head Start, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. By comparison, 90 percent of 5-year-old Californians attend a public kindergarten.

Left on their own, California families, especially in the middle class, struggle to find anything affordable (many

preschool tuitions are greater than the University of California's) and full-day (to accommodate their working lives). Most existing pre-school programs are targeted at low-income kids, though an estimated 170,000 eligible children can't go because there simply aren't enough spots. Only 13 percent of low-income kids are in high-quality programs, advocates say. In a state with the high poverty and inequality, those numbers are unconscionable.

Preschool makes liars of California adults, demonstrating the canyon between progressive rhetoric ("children are the future") and reactionary reality ("kids don't vote so who cares?"). Investments in early childhood education are of enormous social value: Kids who get high-quality preschool are less likely to fall behind in school, be victims of crime, and drop out of high school.

But California hasn't managed to match Oklahoma, which adopted universal preschool in 1998. California voters turned down a ballot initiative for universal preschool in 2006. Even part-way measures get blocked. In 2015, Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed a bill guaranteeing one year of part-day preschool to every low-income 4-year-old. This year, instead of making preschool universal, the new state budget throws \$16 billion into rainy-day reserves.

Since experiencing big cuts in the recession, preschool programs have seen progress: an increase in the number of subsidized slots, the establishment of transitional kindergarten for 4-year-olds, some local taxes to support early childhood education. But all this falls short of a universal system in which preschool is guaranteed like another grade in school; instead, early childhood education is provided through a complicated patchwork of nine programs with different settings, standards, hours and fees. And transitional kindergarten is limited to students born between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2.

This lack of commitment to preschool undermines quality and staffing. It's hard to get talented people to devote their careers to early childhood, and the training necessary for such careers, given the uncertainty. And California relies far more than most states on unlicensed providers.

Despite these challenges, I do have hope. That hope is grounded in four Marin County children—the four kids, all under the age of 9, of Gavin Newsom.

Our likely next governor proposes to create a robust system of public early childhood services that starts in the womb (with greater prenatal care), emphasizes coaching for parents, and includes universal preschool that is integrated with K-12 schools and even universities.

This could be one more of a generation's worth of unfulfilled promises, but there are reasons to take him seriously: As mayor of San Francisco, he implemented a "Preschool for All" program, funded by a voter-approved tax. And Newsom's cannabis legalization ballot initiative directed marijuana money to early childhood.

Newsom will have to negotiate with change-wary preschool providers and education and health interests who see universal preschool as unwelcome competition for public funds. He should build a broader constituency for preschool by making sure that his expansion reaches middle-class families. Middle-class support is why Social Security and Medicare more popular than targeted programs for the poor.

And he shouldn't wait. Those early years fly by. In the fall, my youngest will start kindergarten at our local public school. And while I no longer will be paying preschool tuition, I still will be writing checks.

California guarantees only half-day kindergarten, which means that he'll be in the classroom for just three hours and 25 minutes a day, 8:10 to 11:35am. Since my wife and I work,

we're very relieved that we can keep him at school for the rest of the day, by enrolling him in a "kindercare" program for the 11:35am-3pm stretch, and then an after-school program to cover 3 to 6pm.

Those two extra programs will allow us to keep our jobs. They also will cost us \$750 a month.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.