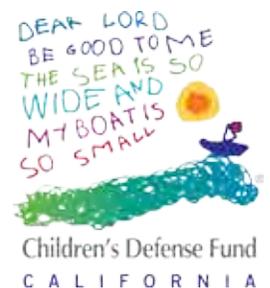




# LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR CALIFORNIA'S CHILDREN

2016 POLICY AGENDA



# WHO WE ARE ...

**The Children's Defense Fund** Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective and independent voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

CDF began in 1973 and is a private, nonprofit organization supported by individual donations, foundation, corporate and government grants.

**The Children's Defense Fund-California** (CDF-CA) is a state office of the Children's Defense Fund. CDF-CA was established in 1998 to meet the needs of underserved children in the state of California. With offices in Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento and Long Beach, CDF-CA champions policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, ensure all children have access to health coverage and care and a quality education, and invest in our justice-involved youth.



## INTRODUCTION

All children should have the opportunity to reach their full potential and thrive – their future, and ours, depends on it. Unfortunately, too many children face odds stacked against their success. There is not a level playing field for children in California, and all children’s lives are not valued or protected equally. The Children’s Defense Fund-California (CDF-CA) envisions a better future for our children – one where a child’s opportunity to lead a healthy and successful life is not dependent on the color of their skin, their family’s income or their zip code. To that end, we champion policies that seek to change the odds and create a level playing field for all children, especially poor children, children of color, and children with special needs.

Children do not come in pieces. We continue to fight for policies that lift children out of poverty, ensure all children have access to health coverage and a high-quality education, and transform the juvenile justice system to focus on prevention and rehabilitation. We work to break down silos and build systems and policies that support the whole child, their families, and their communities.

# END CHILD POVERTY

More than 1 in 4 California children (2.2 million children) live in poverty. Children of color are the poorest: 1 in 3 Black children and 1 in 3 Latino children in California are poor. Almost 1 in 10 California children live in extreme poverty (below half of the federal poverty line) on less than \$470 a week for a family of four. Research shows that poverty has a devastating impact on child health and well-being, and undermines academic and future economic success. Ending child poverty in California is possible with a combination of strategies and programs that we know work.

## Boost employment, wages and income for families with children

California must ensure parents and other caregivers have jobs that pay enough to support a family.

**Expand the newly implemented state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).** The state and federal EITCs are proven tools for reducing child poverty. The newly created state credit – which currently reaches 700,000 households with annual earnings below \$14,000 – should be expanded to benefit all working families living below the poverty line.

**Raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour.** Raising the minimum wage will help lift working poor families out of poverty and closer to self-sufficiency.

## Strengthen the safety net to meet the basic needs of all children

California benefits when children are protected from hunger, homelessness and extreme economic hardship, all of which profoundly limit their opportunities for success.

**Eliminate the CalWORKs Maximum Family Grant (MFG) rule and increase CalWORKs benefits.** The MFG rule denies additional basic needs assistance for children who are born while the family is receiving aid. This rule pushes families with newborn babies deeper into poverty at the most developmentally critical time.

**Invest in affordable housing by providing dedicated resources to develop rental housing that is affordable for extremely low-income families.** California's housing affordability crisis is a significant contributor to the state's high poverty rate. Investments in addressing homelessness and expanding affordable housing should pay particular attention to the specific needs of families with children who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless.

**Fund transportation for poor children.** Many poor families cannot afford essential transportation, making it difficult for children to attend school. California should ensure children have transportation to get to and from school, and access after-school and summer enrichment opportunities and jobs.



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## PROVIDE EVERY CHILD ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Every child needs access to comprehensive, affordable, quality health coverage and care to be able to survive and thrive. Unmet health and mental health needs can result in children falling behind developmentally and having trouble catching up physically, socially and academically. Poor children and children of color have worse access to health care and face critical health disparities.

### **Provide health coverage to all California children and their families**

Children with health coverage are more likely to get regular care that can help avoid costly hospitalizations and the long-term health consequences of treatable conditions. Insured children also do better in school on average and have higher educational attainment.

**Ensure timely and effective implementation of the Medi-Cal expansion to all income-eligible children, regardless of immigration status.** Robust outreach and education efforts will be nec-

essary to ensure that more than 170,000 newly eligible children get enrolled in coverage. School districts can be key partners by asking families a question about health insurance status on their child’s enrollment forms, and connecting uninsured children to health coverage.

**Expand access to affordable coverage to parents and family members regardless of immigration status.** Covering parents and caregivers makes it more likely that eligible children will get covered and receive needed care, making families healthier. California should enable all income eligible parents and caregivers to enroll in Medi-

Cal or purchase health coverage through Covered California.

### **Ensure children are able to access quality preventive, specialty, dental and mental health care when they need it**

More than half of all children in California (approximately 5 million children) have health coverage through Medi-Cal. Therefore, ensuring that children in Medi-Cal are able to see a high quality, culturally competent, pediatric health provider when they need one is critical.

**Increase Medi-Cal provider payment rates to ensure there are enough pediatric-appropriate providers to serve children in Medi-Cal.** California's Medi-Cal provider payment rates are among the lowest in the nation, creating a deterrent for providers to serve Medi-Cal patients and undermining access to care for children. Targeted reimbursement rate increases, especially in rural and underserved communities, have the potential to increase network adequacy and improve access for children.

**Protect and enhance the California Children's Services (CCS) program for children with special health care needs.** CCS must continue providing

the highest quality care for Medi-Cal children with special health care needs. Any program changes must preserve access to pediatric specialty care services and treatment.

### **Prevent and address the effects of childhood trauma and chronic adversity.**

New neuroscience research shows what our community organizations and leaders have long known: exposure to trauma harms children's developing brains so profoundly that the effects show up decades later in the form of poor health and the perpetuation of violence and poverty.

**Increase access to trauma-informed mental health services for children and youth.** Intervening early with trauma-informed services can heal childhood trauma and create resilient children who can live healthy, productive lives.

**Integrate trauma-informed practices into all systems serving children and youth: primary care, education, human services, child welfare, and juvenile justice.** Training staff on trauma-informed practices, screening for trauma, promoting promising models, and ensuring access to treatment are important first steps.

## **ENSURE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY**

All children are entitled to access a high-quality public education. California should enact robust school discipline, school funding, and accountability policies that result in justice and equity for all students, particularly poor students, students of color, and students with special needs who need additional investments, protections, and interventions to succeed in school.



“Unmet health and mental needs can result in children falling behind developmentally and having trouble catching up physically, socially and academically.”

### Provide quality early childhood education

Children’s brains are developing rapidly in their first 5 years as they build a foundation for all future outcomes in school and in life. Studies reveal that those enrolled in high-quality early childhood education programs are subsequently healthier, more likely to complete higher levels of education and have higher earnings, and less likely to be incarcerated. California should make early childhood development programs accessible to every child by ensuring such programs are affordable, available and of high quality.

**Expand the number of child care slots to reach all eligible low-income children.** Investments in high-quality child care help enable parents to work, while also breaking the cycle of poverty in the long run by fostering children’s brain development.

**Increase access to high-quality preschool.** California should continue to move forward on its

commitment to expand access to preschool to all low-income 4 year olds by June 2018 by funding additional slots.

**Improve the quality of child care and early childhood programs.** Research shows that high-quality programs have the largest impact on children. California should leverage opportunities presented by the recent reauthorization of the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant to strengthen program quality. California should also raise reimbursement rates for child care providers.

### Foster positive alternatives to exclusionary school discipline policies

Children who are suspended from school are less likely to graduate from high school and more likely to enter the juvenile justice system. California schools issued more than 400,000 suspensions in the 2014-15 school year, with Black and Native American students three and two times more likely to be suspended, respectively, than their White peers.

**Require school districts to implement positive, child-centered, and trauma-informed approaches to school discipline.** Positive alternatives to punitive discipline include research-based practices such as positive behavior interventions and supports, restorative practices, and social-emotional learning.

**Reduce school suspensions by eliminating “willful defiance” and “disruption” as a basis for suspension for grades K-12.** Suspensions for disruption and willful defiance – a subjective, catch-all category for a range of minor misbehaviors – declined after the basis for suspension was eliminated for students in grades K-3. Suspensions for willful defiance still account for approximately one-third of all suspensions in California.

**Invest resources in hiring additional school support staff who can assist students facing problems that affect their school experience** rather than school police and security. Counselors, mental health professionals, and school nurses improve a school’s learning environment and student outcomes.

**Protect boys and young men of color** by collecting more data disaggregated by gender, race, and income, and investing resources to support boys and young men of color in reaching paths to college and career.

### **Ensure adequate and equitable funding**

California must fulfill its promise to transform the way schools are funded under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to ensure equity for poor students, students with special needs, English

Learners, foster youth, and students of color.

**Require greater transparency from school districts.** Statewide requirements under LCFF should be enforced so districts publicly disclose all areas of their budgets in detail for community review.

**Create high performance standards and accountability.** California’s new public school evaluation system should include strong standards and metrics for school discipline, student achievement, student engagement, and parent engagement. The State Board of Education should make school climate a key indicator to assess school performance as California implements the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and LCFF.

**Uplift the on-the-ground lessons** from local communities to help shape sound statewide policies on LCFF and school discipline. CDF-CA merges policy with practice and links local and state policy advocacy through its work in Long Beach, where we engage high school students through youth leadership development and advocate with them to improve education programming and school climate practices in their schools, Los Angeles County, and the state.

### **Fully engage students and parents in decision-making processes related to budgets and programming at the local and statewide levels**

Students, parents and members of the community should be involved in shaping education policy and funding decisions that impact their lives. This is especially important now that ESSA makes states and local education agencies accountable



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for tracking the progress of subgroups of students and taking action when their performance is falling behind.

**Lower the voting age for school board elections to 16.** While youth are directly impacted by the decisions of school board members, they do not have a say in determining who those board members are. Young people will help enrich local education debates with their unique perspective, and will also learn about civic engagement through real-world experience.

**Promote meaningful stakeholder engagement in the development of Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs).** Students and parents have historically been underserved and excluded from funding decisions that impact them the most. LCFF presents community with a promise to genuinely share in critical information, debates, and decision making based on a district’s unique needs and strengths.

# TRANSFORM JUSTICE SYSTEMS FOR YOUTH

Across the nation, governments, courts, policymakers and the public are heeding growing research and advocacy that emphasize the fundamental vulnerabilities of justice-involved youth, as well as the negative consequences of system-involvement. Like other states, California has thus dramatically reduced the number of youth processed through its court and probation systems, as well as the number held in detention and locked facilities. California must continue to shift resources away from incarceration and invest in the development and healing of youth in their homes and communities wherever possible.

## **Reduce over-criminalization and incarceration of children, especially poor children and children of color**

California should decriminalize minor misbehaviors such as transit fare evasion, as well as a range of offenses that are fundamentally manifestations of youth, poverty, trauma or disabilities. Approaches to youth justice should focus on prevention, diversion and investment in communities, while using detention and incarceration as a last resort and for the shortest duration possible.

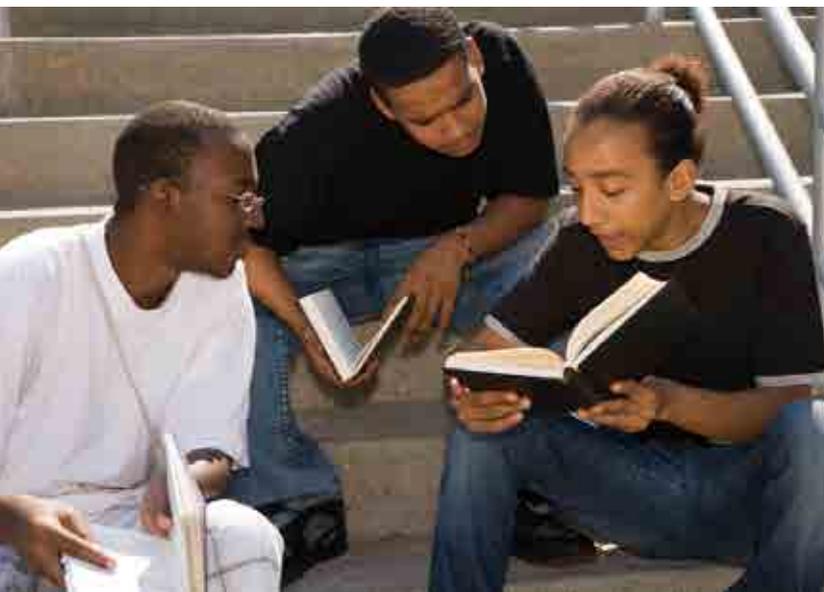
**Protect youth from criminalization resulting from transit fare evasion.** Transit fare evasion is the most cited infraction for children under age 18 in many counties. California law should ensure access to transportation for all youth instead of burdening them with court appearances and fines that their families often cannot afford to pay.

**Reduce numbers and length of stay of youth in detention and incarceration.** Juvenile justice systems should reassess locked facilities and the population of youth removed from their homes to

ensure they are detaining youth as a last resort. Working intensely in Los Angeles County with a range of stakeholders, CDF-CA has helped to rebuild a model secure facility for youth that is trauma-informed, child-centered and focused on education and rehabilitation.

**California should continue to evaluate, renovate and downsize secure facilities that are expensive, outdated and under-populated** and wherever possible, replace them with community-based alternatives that more appropriately address the needs of the youth.

**Direct funding awarded by state and federal governments for juvenile crime and delinquency prevention into a range of effective community-based supports.** Funding for juvenile crime prevention and juvenile justice realignment has disproportionately been awarded to improving locked facilities and law enforcement, including police officers and probation units in schools. California should shift spending on incarceration and law enforcement to community-based interventions that have been shown to work, including



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restorative justice practices, trauma-informed approaches, and positive youth development.

### Ensure fair, proportionate and developmentally appropriate treatment of justice-involved youth

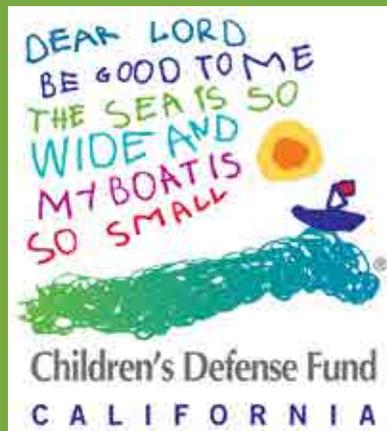
Where justified, system intervention should be fair and developmentally appropriate. Yet California continues to treat some youth severely, inconsistent with the recognition by the U.S. Supreme Court and human rights laws around the world that youth deserve leniency even when they break the law. Responses to youth delinquency must be grounded in the research that youth are developmentally different than adults, vulnerable and capable of change.

**Reduce adult criminal prosecution of youth.** Youth who are 14 years or older may face prosecution in adult court where they can be exposed to extreme sentences, including life without parole. In a limited number and types of cases, judges – not prosecutors – should determine whether

jurisdiction over a youth should be transferred to criminal court, grounding their analysis in the developmental vulnerabilities and rehabilitative potential of youth.

**End the use of solitary confinement in all juvenile justice facilities.** State and county juvenile facilities lock children as young as 13 in solitary confinement for days, weeks, and sometimes months. Solitary confinement further traumatizes already vulnerable youth and can undermine the safety of facilities as well.

**Ensure access to counsel and protections for youth during custodial interrogations.** Youth are especially vulnerable and less able to navigate and exercise their rights during interrogations by law enforcement. To protect youth’s constitutional rights, California should ensure meaningful consultation with a lawyer in the high-pressured environment of custodial interrogations.



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