



California Community Colleges

Transcription

California Community Colleges Podcast - Episode 19

Guests: Samantha Tran, Senior Managing Director of Education Policy at Children Now, and Heather Hough, Executive Director of Policy Analysis for California Education

Eloy: Hi there. This is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, and you're listening to another episode of the California Community College's Chancellor's Office Podcast. Today I have the pleasure of being joined by two very special guests, Samantha Tran, Senior Managing Director of Education Policy at Children Now, and Heather Hough, Executive Director of Policy Analysis for California Education. Welcome to both of you.

Samantha: Thanks so much for having us.

Heather: Thank you.

Eloy: So we're gonna be talking a bit about early childhood education, and particularly since the Governor-Elect has made a lot of news about early childhood education, or universal preschool, and maybe we can also talk about the difference in the two, because we hear those terms tossed around quite a bit. And a lot of folks have been entering this space and offering their own solutions. Of course, those of us in higher education, we value any effort to improve the education pipeline for our young people throughout the state. So question to both of you. First of all, tell us a little bit about what both of your organizations do. So let's start there. Why don't we start with you Samantha.

Samantha: Thanks again for having me, and for Heather on this important topic. Children Now, we're a research policy advocacy organization, primarily focused in California on issues that touch the lives of kids from prenatal all the way into transitioning through college to a career and adulthood. We have teams that focus on healthcare, on early education, on foster youth, and K-12, as well as transitions into higher ed.

Eloy: Great. And you, Heather?

Heather: Policy Analysis for California Education, or PACE, is a research organization that aims to bring evidence into conversations about policy and practice here in California. And we work on everything from pre-K, K-12, to higher education, and like to focus on key transitions in those periods. So bringing some system coherence, and helping to inform both policy and implementation state-wide.

Eloy: Great. So speaking of system coherence, tell us a little bit about your thoughts about universal preschool, and some of the key messages that the Governor-Elect was talking about during the campaign, and what you've heard brewing with his agenda going forward.

Samantha: Yeah, I think the research on this is clear. And it absolutely points to the fact that that we need to prioritize kids and start early. What our organization has really appreciated about how the governor's framed these issues is that he really is talking prenatal to transition into K-12, and ultimately impacting obviously higher ed. What we know about young children's brains is we're looking at some brain research recently that showed in the first three years of life, every second a child is making a million neuro-connections, right? That architecture of the brain is literally being built. And the relationships that they have with caregivers and their parents has a dramatic effect on their later success. You know, we see that kids become more ready for school, they're less likely to be in special education, they're more likely to graduate and transition to successful adults later in life. And right now, California is doing a really poor job in this space. We're not providing access to enough kids. And we're seeing the impact. I think the research that Heather was really involved in points to the problem, so I'll kick it over to you.

Heather: Yeah, so we're right now, because we haven't invested in early childhood, we're now asking our K-12 and higher education systems to fix a lot of those problems that kids are coming in with. So one of the pieces of research that we've just released through the Getting Down to Facts projects shows that our schools are actually doing a pretty good job of closing achievement gaps, or accelerating student achievement. But that the gaps are so big when kids start kindergarten that our K-12 system isn't able to close those gaps fast enough compared to other states, which means that if you really look at this aggregation of evidence, the evidence that Samantha pointed out, and evidence from our research, it points to needing to make that earlier investment so that we're not playing catch-up while kids are moving through the system.

Eloy: Right, so a lot of different communities in California have talked about introducing universal preschool. So I came from a community in Long Beach where the mayor there, Robert Garcia, and the superintendent, Christopher Steinhauser talk a lot about this issue of how to do this. So what are your thoughts? Are there good examples out there in California where this has been done? And also for our listeners' sake, there's this term universal preschool versus early childhood education tossed around a lot. Is there a difference between the two?

Samantha: So I can start on that one. Universal preschool, when people typically use that term, they're often focused on four-year-olds, which is a critical point in time. And we have seen a lot of success in that space in building up some capacity state-wide to serve more kids. I believe we're looking at some recent research of four students, I think about 69% of them are in some type of preschool. That's not necessarily all day. It's not necessarily meeting the needs to working families, and probably has varying types of quality. But that's usually what that term is referring to. And it's an important one.

When we talk early learning more broadly, we really are talking birth to transition into elementary. And what we know from the research is that there is that profound impact, those first three years of life as well, and that quality early supports have a dramatic effect. The other kind of policy political thing to be mindful of is the way our, using air quotes, system of early learning has been created over time. Back during World War II, it said that we had an early learning system that people envied in California. And then we systematically dismantled it. And then we started building back and having different programs that leverage federal funds, state leaders solve problems, and they work to solve those specific problems.

And so there were all these different funding streams that don't necessarily come together in a lined way. And it creates some dynamics that you wouldn't expect such that as you pull four-year olds potentially into a universal system, and you don't address what's happening in the early years, the zero to three space, you could actually have a counter impact, a perverse impact, where we start losing supply of high-quality childcare options for people because the financing doesn't fundamentally work. That said, and I know we'll talk about this in a little bit potentially, is there's some work being done to try and fix it.

Eloy: Great.

Heather: The other piece in the distinction between universal preschool and other approaches is often thought of as who gets access? What are we trying to build? And some of the disagreements are conversations in the policy sphere here are do we build something that is paid for for every kid or do we provide more funding for low income children, or children in certain communities. And I think that there are tradeoffs in those approaches. Of course, a universal program is more expensive, but it's also more inclusive. And I think then all of the community can see themselves in that investment, which has some political preferences.

Samantha: And we know that the research shows that those heterogeneous mixtures are really good for kids, right, to be able to learn from each other and have exposure to language. And so there's real value in having a broad system. At the same time, if our most vulnerable kids aren't getting support, then what are we doing?

Eloy: Right, and I think certainly from our perspective in the California Community Colleges where many of our colleges are in some very under-resourced communities throughout the state, whether in the far north, central valley, Inland Empire. So what do we need to consider in terms of a policy to ensure that our most vulnerable populations are getting access to the types of learning that your research shows would better prepare them for getting a post-secondary credential?

Samantha: So I think there are multiple interrelated issues, and Deborah Stipek who was on the Getting Down to Facts research, that Heather might talk about a little bit more, has a really nice piece on this front. But there's a finance problem, right, how we fund the

system and the fact that it's so convoluted and doesn't really make much sense. And how to bring that together, there's a real workforce issue here that we should talk more about. There's a data problem. We can't even track the number of kids that we have, or what the workforce really looks like. And just being able to have that information is key.

And then there's expanding access, right? Right now, we serve 14% of eligible infants and toddlers. When you look at three and four-year-olds, only 49% state-wide have preschool. So we know there's an access problem.

Heather: But it's not just access, and that's something that we always have to talk about. It's not just seats, although that's critically important. It's also quality. So as we expand the number of seats, and we expand the number of teachers, and the number of facilities, we have to make sure that we build in all of the system needs to make sure that we have high-quality teachers, and high-quality facilities for all of these kids that now have seats.

Samantha: Yeah, and actually building on that, when you look at this workforce, we've estimated there's about 200,000 caregivers that are providing services to young children. And yet every year, we lose a quarter of them. And the reason why we're losing so many of them is that we don't compensate them fairly. It's at minimum wage or below actually before we raised the minimum wage. 60% of them are on public assistance. So we're just not valuing this profession. And at the same time, we know that that's the most critical piece, right? It's the adult-child interaction that is what quality is about. It's about the way that they relate to one another, and support one another. And we need to, over time, raise the qualifications of this workforce while still keeping them.

Eloy: Well that's an excellent point. And I think that opens up a whole box of questions. So right now, some of this work and effort is being done in school districts. Some of it's being done by private organizations. Some of it's being done by self-employed individuals who are offering these services. How do you begin to normalize the system in a way that we can ensure quality and, of course, that also begs the question of will that raise the cost, and how do you finance this? How do you credential teachers in this space? These are a lot of questions. So I'd invite you to just, what should this new administration be thinking about as we begin to expand access?

Heather: I think that there are great lessons to learn from other states on this. And one of the pieces of advice that we've gotten for California from people in other states who've built quality systems is you have to start with the workforce. And one piece of that is paying those teachers the same as what you pay kindergarten or K-12 teachers, which is a very big difference from what we've done now. But in some ways if you raise the qualifications and you change certification, and you raise the bar, you can't keep the bar so low for pay, right? So I think having a clear sense of how we are going to finance that as a system, and keeping quality in the forefront through all of the development of that conversation.

Samantha: So building on that, there's been some really good work happening over the last year and a half or so with the different state agencies, and the number of advocates

and the stakeholders, to figure out how do we fix this convoluted system? And essentially what is being put forward that we're hoping policymakers will consider is by shorthand, we refer to as rate reform, where essentially we bring for those providers that, for example, are license exempt. They're not licensed, but they're still receiving vouchers. They'll get a certain portion of the resources. For those providers that have a slightly higher standard, they'll get a slightly higher reimbursement rate. For those that meet the current Title V standards, which are by California's system a higher bar, they'll receive an even higher rate.

Now we would argue that that current standard level is still pretty low. And that we actually need to be thinking more about what does the workforce need to have in terms of skills, and knowledge, and capacity? What is the environment that is really high-quality for kids? And we need to invest in that and actually resource it. And so by bringing it into one system, reforming the rates, and creating the right incentives for increasing quality over time, is critical. And I think your point, Heather, about making sure that that translates into real compensation is gonna be a core part of the discussion too.

Eloy: Right. And so I would imagine that labor is interested in how this transpires because I would imagine their argument to the quality question is we need to organize the educators in this space. What would be your advice to the administration on how to view this very difficult conversation about where does this workforce go? Should it be organized now? How would you deal with that question?

Heather: I think we're pretty certain that there will be a collective bargaining bill introduced this year from SCIU that will allow them to clarify some existing law. Because for family childcare providers in particular, it's a little ambiguous because they're their own business, and yet they're also receiving money from the state. Can they collectively bargain? And I think they found a strategy for how to do that to allow it to not be anti-trust. Invoke those provisions, that they can't organize to then advocate at the state level collectively. So we are very likely to see that come before policymakers this year in that discussion.

I think the broader issue is how do we actually set up a real infrastructure to support our caregivers, right? Because right now there's a lot of stuff. There's these stipends over here. There's some quality funds over there. There's some federal dollars for X. It is not an actual infrastructure that intentionally supports people as they decide to go into this profession and then progress through the profession. I think the community colleges are critical in this discussion, and have been a long standing partner in helping to build out the workforce in the early learning space. There's apprenticeships programs, there's ways we can be more intentional about coaching, and other types of professional development. So there's a lot we can do. But right now no one really owns it, and no one's really coordinating it. We don't really have a plan.

Heather: And K-12 teachers have to be included in these conversations as well because increasing the workforce, and especially if we increase the pay for early childhood, it will impact K-12. And we have a situation now in K-12 where we already have teacher

shortages, particularly in hard to staff areas, in certain regions, for positions serving certain kinds of kids. So we don't want to fix the early childhood problem and create a new problem in K-12. So we have to be thinking about that workforce comprehensively.

Eloy: Right, so speaking about K-12 and community colleges, you know, obviously both systems are funded through Proposition 98. If you're expanding access from a policy perspective, how do you finance this? Is it Prop 98? Is it general fund? Because that creates its own challenges. So what would be your recommendation?

Samantha: So currently, the system is funded in both spaces. There's some general fund dollars that go to childcare, and there's some Prop 98 dollars that go to preschool in particular, and TK. TK's part of the K-12 formula. I think the answer depends on what the fiscal climate looks like, and we have a sense for what the fiscal climate's about to look like.

And I'll use some jargon real quickly, but then explain it. Prop 98's about to enter into a test one year. And that test one year is likely to last for multiple years. And what that means for the lay audience is that attendance doesn't matter, enrollment doesn't matter. What matters is that K-12 and community college get 40% of the general fund no matter what. And so it creates a dynamic where as you add more kids in, you're not expanding the pie. You're basically divvying up the pie that's already there. And so I think that creates some unique dynamics where we know that Prop 98 is unfortunately become not just the floor, but the ceiling in this state. And that policymakers have gotten an out by not having a real conversation about what public schools need in terms of resources, both at the K-12 level and community college level. And there's this politic around we can't quote-unquote put more into Prop 98 than that formula requires. And it's absurd, right, because it's not really about what schools need.

And so we want to make sure we're not pitting the segments against each other. We actually need to have a conversation in this state about investing in kids, and investing in our public education system at large.

Eloy: So this also begs another question, which is if you're going to expand in this area, then you're gonna need to expand the availability of qualified teachers in this space. Qualified childcare providers, and the community colleges that you've mentioned, many of which have programs to support the educating of individuals in early childhood education. So what do you see the role of community colleges in terms of developing the workforce, and what do you think are the keys skills that are gonna be needed for this workforce as we continue to improve quality?

Samantha: One of the things that I personally really appreciated about what the community colleges have done in the past, and I think this was cut back during the recession. There used to be lab schools, right, where it wasn't just about the intellectual processing of what it takes to be a good caregiver, but they were actually working with kids, right? They were able to experience how do you manage a classroom? How do you effectively engage a child where they're at, and use the environment to support their

growth and development? And you know, those types of opportunities are good for all caregivers. One, you can decide really quickly if this is what you wanna do. And two, then you get some real practical experience. I do think there's an interplay here between the community colleges' ability to build out this space, and compensation. Because what we are consistently hearing is when community colleges are thinking about moving into this area, they're like yeah, but we're training people for dead end jobs, or jobs where they're not gonna make a living wage. Is that fair to them, you know? And from that perspective, you can absolutely get it. So if we can raise compensation, make it a more attractive job, we can see how the infrastructure may come along and provide that support too.

Heather: And I also think this is true for community colleges and other institutes of higher education, that partnering with early childhood and K-12 systems, to help train teachers for the job that they're going to be in is critically important. We see a lot of turnover in young teachers for a lot of reasons. But some of it is disconnect between what they're trained to do and what they're doing. And some of it is a lack of support, or you know, feeling like you belong in this job. And I think that there's a lot of that that sits with the K-12 and early childhood system. But I think that also sits with the systems that are training these teachers. And I think better alignment can lead to better outcomes for everybody.

Eloy: Do you see on the horizon that there will be a need to credential cadres of new teachers? Or how do you see that play now? I mean, the reason I raise this is we're already having a challenge with teacher credentialing in some parts of the state.

Samantha: I think core to this challenge is that we've got to stabilize the field that we have and build from there. And also attract new folks to the field. So what we know about the early childhood field is that they are much more reflective of the children that they're serving, right? They're more diverse. There's more bilingual, dual language ability. And we need to view that as an asset, right? And we've seen this done in other states where, like New Jersey, a number of us have gone back to look at that particular model. And they were very intentional about it. They said we're going to raise expectations in terms of, you know, we want everyone to have a BA. We want them to have knowledge and skills in the early learning space. We're not gonna do it overnight. We're going to build an infrastructure. We're gonna actually finance it. We're gonna compensate people, commiserate with their skill level, and the additional resources that are on the table are gonna be for training, and support, and the infrastructure to get it done. So I think there's a path there. It's a big lift. But you know, we're California. We can do it.

Heather: That's right. I do feel that we need to have credentials. That's the way that you can ensure quality at scale. But I agree completely with Samantha that we need a path to get there, that saying you need to meet this bar in order to have this job, is not going to be the way that we build a workforce for early childhood. It's going to be supporting the existing workforce to build that capacity to get them to where we want them to be.

Eloy: So Governor-Elect Newsom has talked a lot about cradle to career, and the importance of building a really robust pipeline that allows more Californians, particularly Californians from underrepresented backgrounds, to have access to quality post-

secondary education, and to have the opportunity to gain a credential. Clearly, all the data suggests that jobs that are being created for the workforce today, and into the future, are going to require post-secondary credentials. So from your perspective, how does this policy to open up more early childhood education for more Californians meet the goals of the Governor-Elect to create this cradle to career pipeline? From a policy perspective, why is this so important?

Samantha: It's a long play that the kids that would be going into a coherent high-quality, early childhood program, when they are in the position where they're deciding what to do after high school graduation, the idea is that they have a lot more options. Right now, our pipeline is already leaky before kids start kindergarten. And throughout the K-12 system, a lot of kids aren't getting the opportunities that they need to be ready to start college prepared. And so I think in the meantime, you know, the kids starting early childhood programs now, it's a while before they're in college. So we still have to make sure that we're plugging those holes as we build what happens at the beginning. But right now we know that we have to invest earlier so that it's not when kids are going into college, we say, uh-oh, what do we do now? We need to do a better job of helping them get there.

Samantha: And building on that point, the focus on early learning is critical. We have not really investing and done the work over the last several years on that front. But that doesn't mean that we need to neglect the K-12 system or the community college system, right? So we've done significant work in the K-12 space to streamline the finance formula, you know, get it more rational and bent towards equity. Actually really trying to invest in our most vulnerable kids. We've set up a new accountability system that has multiple measures. We're building a system of support to make sure that educators, and districts, and schools that need that support get access to, and especially our struggling schools and districts.

So a lot of work is underway, but we're nowhere near done. And we know that we've not adequately invested. You know, going to our earlier conversation about Prop 98, the result of those previous decisions mean that California has less adults per kids than virtually every other state in the nation. We have less teachers. We have less administrators. We don't have any school nurses or librarians. You know, a few counselors. But that has an absolute detrimental impact on our most vulnerable kids. The average kid who has support at home, they're gonna get by okay, right? And we could do better there too. But a kid that has any kind of challenge, you know, they are gonna not have the adults that actually provide the support that they need. And so this is why we see these massive gaps, and the challenges in closing those gaps.

Eloy: So as we wrap up, I'd like to pose a question to the two of you. Clearly, there's a lot of excitement around the Governor-Elect's focus on cradle to career. And I think it is an opportunity to unite educators from all spectrums, to really think about how we build a pipeline to support all of our students, and help them with their future in this ever-changing economy. So if you were to drop into the capital and have an opportunity to give the Governor-Elect your advice on what he should do to really lay a firm foundation,

to make this a successful endeavor, and to really make a mark on California's education pipeline, what would be your top one or two things that you would tell him?

Heather: Well, I think the...

Eloy: Because he's gonna be listening to this podcast, by the way.

Heather: Excellent, all right, so listen up. I think the first and most important thing is that we have to build will across the state to make a bigger investment in public education. Because beyond us kind of walks, sitting and knowing what needs to happen for the system, it's a lot more money that we're asking for. And that's taxpayer money. And we have a lot of restraints on our system that are going to make it hard to get that money into the system. So I think the groundwork, the first step, is to make the case to Californians.

Samantha: I would ditto that absolutely. And this is less for Newsom because I think he understands this. It's more for policymakers writ large, it's that every single child absolutely counts. And I know we sitting here at this table believe that from a moral perspective, but let's argue it from an economic perspective. Back in 1970, 1 out of 3 Californians was a kid. A third of the state was a child population. By 2030, only 1 out of 5 Californians will be a kid, right? So we have a dwindling child population, and we have an aging adult population that will be retiring. We have, as we talked about earlier, a pipeline problem where we're not providing enough access for kids to be successful in their later career and life. And so we've gotta step up. We have got to step up and invest in kids, and prioritize them, and that policymakers need to understand that at a visceral level that this is a call to action. And it's not just about doing something nice for kids. It actually is about our future here in California.

Heather: And one additional point that I think shouldn't go undiscussed is how important data is to this, that data can help us track every single child from a system perspective. And make sure that each kid is getting what they need when they transition from the early childhood system to K-12, from K-12 to higher education. And we don't have something like that now. And we direly need it.

Eloy: Well this has been a great conversation. And I'm sure we will have opportunities to continue this conversation over the next several months. It's exciting that we're having this conversation. I think it's time. I think the Governor-Elect has a unique opportunity to build on what Governor Brown has laid in terms of an infrastructure. And I'm excited about the possibilities. So I wanna thank you both for joining us. Thank you, Samantha. Thank you, Heather, for joining us.

Samantha: Thank you so much for having us.

Heather: Thank you.

Eloy: It's been fun. And we'll have more to say about this in the near future. So again, this is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, and you've been

listening to another episode of the California Community College Chancellor's podcast. It's been a pleasure to be joined by Samantha Tran and Heather Hough, and we will come back to you soon with our next set of guests. So thank you for listening in.

Man: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast.

Man: This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.