POLICY BRIEF

Early Wealth Building at Scale: Policy Lessons from California's CalKIDS Program

By Libby Schaff

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About EdRedesign

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, EdRedesign provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career place-based partnership field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to well-being, educational attainment, civic engagement, and upward mobility. To support this growing field to effect transformational change that serves the needs and talents of individual children and youth, our work focuses on talent development, actionable research, our Institute for Success Planning, and our By All Means initiatives. Our mission is to ensure the social, emotional, physical, and academic development and well-being of all children and youth, especially those affected by racism and poverty.

About the Author

Libby Schaaf served as the 50th Mayor of Oakland, California (her hometown) from 2015 to 2023. Prior to being mayor, she ran Oakland's school volunteer program, worked as an attorney, a mayoral and legislative aide, public affairs director at the Port of Oakland, and Council member. As Mayor, Schaaf led bold initiatives to make the city more equitable and resilient and broke records in violence prevention, housing production, and road repair. In 2016, she founded Oakland Promise, recognized by experts as "the most comprehensive cradle-to-career initiative of its kind." By the end of her mayoral term, Oakland Promise had become its own 501c3 with a $15M annual budget and a $50M endowment raised by Schaaf, allowing it to make a commitment to the next generation of Oakland's children that every baby born to low-income parents will receive a $500 college savings account at birth and every low-income public-school graduate will receive $1,000 a year while pursuing a 2- or 4-year college degree or trade certificate. She also led The Children's Initiative ballot measure approved by Oakland voters in 2018, which is designed to provide 30 years of funding for universal preschool access and college access and affordability for Oakland's children. Schaaf was an EdRedesign By All Means Senior Fellow from 2023-2025. She also teaches at the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley and she also holds a fellowship with Mayors for a Guaranteed Income. Schaaf holds a B.A. from Rollins College and J.D. from Loyola Law School.

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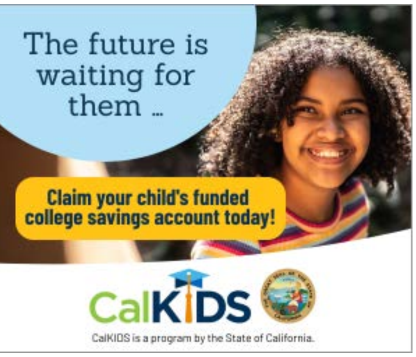
Introduction

The American Dream of intergenerational upward mobility is disappearing, wealth gaps are widening, and educational attainment gaps remain after decades of school reform.



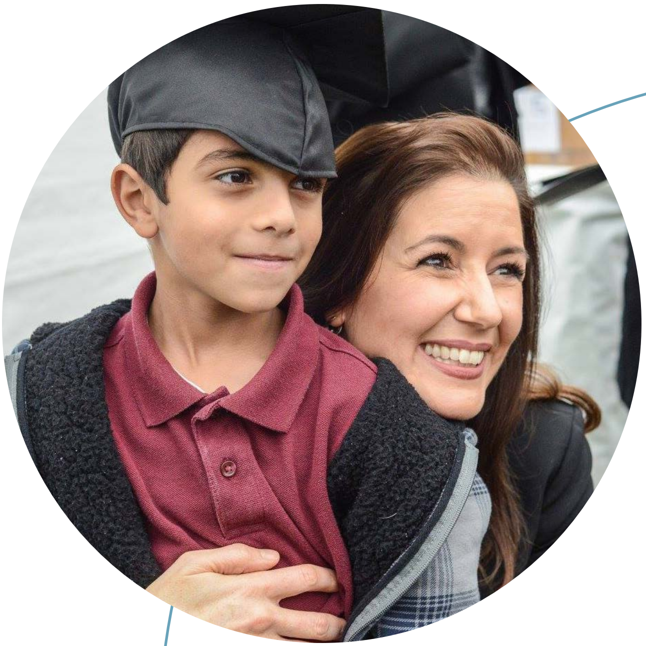
According to data from Opportunity Insights, children born in the 1940s had a 90% chance of earning more than their parents, while only 50% of children born in the 1980s did. According to the latest data from the Congressional Budget Office, the wealthiest 10 percent of families now control 60 percent of U.S. wealth, while the bottom half of families hold just over 6 percent. And there is a persistent negative correlation between socio-economic status and educational attainment.

To build a stronger, more stable economy and enduring democracy, we must confront our nation's wealth and opportunity gaps. Early wealth building, through Children's Savings Accounts (CSAs) and baby bond programs, is an effective strategy for addressing these issues. And no state is scaling these efforts more ambitiously than California. From its launch on July 1, 2022, to September 30, 2024, California Kids Investment and Development Savings Program, CalKIDS, opened nearly 4.8 million college savings accounts. And CalKIDS is expected to open more than 700,000 new accounts in 2025 and annually thereafter. Additionally, California's Hope Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment Program, HOPE, will open 58,500 trust accounts during its first year for vulnerable children who were bereaved by COVID or in foster care for more than 18 months.

As the 50th mayor of Oakland from 2015-2022, my office launched the Oakland Promise, a cradle-to-career initiative that starts by giving low-income families a 529 CSA for their newborns, along with financial coaching, and then gives every public school student a city-funded scholarship, along with college access and persistence support. We also launched Oakland Thrives, Oakland's collective impact backbone organization and children's cabinet. Oakland Promise has been recognized as an exemplary cradle-to-career model. I am also a founding member and advisor to the Northern California College Promise Coalition, which hosts the California CSA Coalition, both of which helped advocate for the creation and effective implementation of CalKIDS.

The EdRedesign Lab (EdRedesign) at Harvard Graduate School of Education has been exploring the role of the public sector in cradle-to-career place-based collaborative action since the launch of its By All Means community of practice in 2016, which I participated in as Oakland's mayor. Later, as a By All Means Senior Fellow from 2023-2025, I researched the effectiveness and impact of CalKIDS and other CSA programs, with the support of my EdRedesign Cross-Sector Leadership Associates, Aleks Czulak (2025 MPP, Harvard Kennedy School and MBA, MIT Sloan School of Management), and Amal Tariq (2025 MBA, Harvard Business School and MS, Harvard John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences). We conducted a literature review, in-depth interviews, which included 14 CalKIDS implementation partners and 13 statewide leaders, CSA scholars, and cradle-to-career partnership experts, and focus groups with CalKIDS-eligible parents, as well as attended and observed a CalKIDS parent engagement event. Finally, we engaged with the State of California's Office of Data and Innovation and other state leaders to explore simplifying public benefits for low-income families.

In this policy brief, we will outline CSA programs, including CalKIDS, highlight the research and evidence on their impact, and share challenges and actionable recommendations to make CSA programs more effective.



CalKIDS is by far the largest CSA program in the country, and it has continued to add more than 700,000 new accounts for eligible newborns and low-income first-graders each year.

Early Wealth-Building and Children's Savings Account Programs

Early wealth-building programs include Child Savings Accounts (CSAs), Child Trust or Development Accounts, and Baby Bonds. These financial tools are designed to help young people — especially those born in low-income families — build savings for earning a college degree or trade certificate, starting a business, buying a home, or investing in other long-term wealth-building activities.

CSAs are savings accounts opened in a young child's name to help save for a child's future expenses, most commonly for education after high school. CSA programs usually seed these accounts with an initial deposit, from government or philanthropic sources, and many allow additional contributions from family members or other programs. In addition to enhancing college access and affordability, CSAs have been shown to improve social and emotional well-being in young children, educational expectations, early academic achievement, and college outcomes. Many programs also aim to promote upward mobility, reduce racial inequities, and improve child development outcomes. After passing enabling legislation in 2019, the State of California launched the CalKIDS CSA program on July 1, 2022, by automatically enrolling nearly 4 million children in savings accounts. CalKIDS is by far the largest CSA program in the country, and it has continued to add more than 700,000 new accounts for eligible newborns and low-income first-graders each year. CalKIDS, funded by the state, makes a seed deposit of $100 into the accounts of every California newborn, regardless of income. It also opens accounts with $500 for every low-income public school first-grader, and adds another $500 for unhoused children, and another $500 for foster children. As of February 2025, CalKIDS' nearly 5 million accounts held more than $2 billion in investments.

CalKIDS' automatic enrollment model ensures that every eligible child receives a CSA account, unlike opt-in programs that often exclude families who need the funds most and delay account activation and earnings. By eliminating enrollment barriers, CalKIDS allows funds to begin earning interest immediately, maximizing long-term growth regardless of when parents or students discover and engage with their accounts, or access it for eligible educational expenses. Children have until age 26 to utilize the funds for eligible post-secondary expenses before their unused funds are returned to the program's investment pool.

CSA programs include programs funded by state government, like those in California and other states, by local governments, and by private philanthropies. Prior to the launch of CalKIDS, six state CSA programs (Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Nebraska, Nevada, and Pennsylvania) and six large local CSA programs (including Oakland, Los Angeles, Boston, and New York City) had accounted for significant growth in the number of children with CSAs. In 2021, prior to the launch of CalKIDS, there were 129 CSA programs and 1.2 million children with CSAs holding $57.8 million in savings, $40.4 million of which came from public funds. The launch of CalKIDS drove a three-fold increase in the number of children covered by CSA accounts nationally when it launched in 2022.

The growing local and state support for, and bi-partisan Congressional interest in, publicly funded CSA programs is a promising indicator of sustainable systems change.

CSA program contribution types include seed funds when accounts are opened, funds to match or incentivize family deposits, and benchmark deposits that most often reward academic or health-related achievements. For example, CalKIDS is now partnering with Covered California to reward child vaccination completion with an additional deposit into the child's account. Many programs, like CalKIDS, also have targeted enhanced benefits for vulnerable populations. For example, while CalKIDS accounts for newborns are universal, low-income first-graders receive another $500 in their accounts, as do foster children and unhoused children, so that children falling into all three categories would have a total seed deposit in their CalKIDS account by first grade of $1,500. Most CSA funds are managed through federal-tax-advantaged 529 college savings accounts, which offer the potential for significant investment growth over time, but which can be harder to access for some families, particularly low-income families.

In recent years, there have been several federal proposals by both Democrat and Republican legislators for national early wealth-building programs. The American Opportunities Accounts Act reintroduced by Senator Booker (D-NJ), having gained 15 co-sponsors including then-Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), and Representative Pressley (D-MA), in 2021 would have created and seeded "baby bonds" savings accounts of $1,000 at birth with additional annual deposits of up to $2,000, depending on household income, which could be accessed by account holders at age 18 for allowable uses including buying a home, paying for educational expenses, or starting a business. The 401Kids Savings Act introduced by former Senator Casey (D-PA) in 2024 called for the automatic establishment of CSAs managed by state treasurers for all newborns and children under 18, with federal contributions of up to $500 per child per year and additional federal support for eligible low-income households.

In May 2025, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) introduced the Invest America Act, which would create private savings accounts for every US citizen child at birth that would be seeded with a one-time federal investment of $1,000. Senator Cruz's proposal became part of the so-called One, Big, Beautiful Bill that was signed into law by President Trump with some fundamental changes. The so-called Trump Accounts, tax-deferred savings accounts seed funded with a one-time $1,000 deposit, will be available to US citizen children born in 2025 through 2028 (President Trump's current term in office). Parents and others will be permitted to make limited after-tax contributions to the Trump Account of any child up until the age of 18 and employers will be able to make limited contributions that will be taxable income to the account owner. The account balances will be invested in a U.S. stock index fund. At age 18, the Trump Accounts substantively convert to individual retirement accounts. Accordingly, withdrawals prior to age 59 ½ are subject to a penalty and all withdrawals will generally be taxed at ordinary income rates. As such, these accounts operate more like retirement savings accounts than college savings accounts.

The growing local and state support for, and bi-partisan Congressional interest in, publicly funded CSA programs is a promising indicator of sustainable systems change.

A widely-cited 2013 study found that low- and middle-income children with small-dollar education savings accounts of less than $500 are 3 times more likely to enroll in, and 5 times more likely to graduate from, college than similarly situated children without one.

The Impact of CSAs

CSAs can affect children through the "opportunity pipeline," which includes children's academic preparation, educational expectations, and early achievement. CSAs integrate young people into wealth-building systems and on a path to educational opportunity. The positive impacts of CSAs have been validated in numerous studies.

A widely-cited 2013 study found that low- and middle-income children with small-dollar education savings accounts of less than $500 are 3 times more likely to enroll in, and 5 times more likely to graduate from, college than similarly situated children without one. Beyond these post-secondary effects, a randomized control trial of children in SEED for Oklahoma Kids (or SEED OK), which gave a random sample of newborns CSAs of $1,000, found positive results after 12 years as compared to a random control group on each of the following impacts on both the SEED OK children and their parents:

- **Parent's educational expectations for the SEED OK child**
- **Family preparation, including additional savings, for the child's education**
- **Parent monitoring of child's schoolwork**
- **Parent's depressive symptoms**
- **Child's hope**
- **Child's behavior**
- **Child's academic self-concept**
- **Child's math skills**

Another recent randomized controlled trial in 2023 found a positive effect on Medi-Cal parents' hopes and educational aspirations for their 18-month-old toddlers who received $500 Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby college savings accounts, as well as improved health and lower stress among the caregivers. In those families who also received personalized financial coaching (a unique feature of Oakland's program), the program also improved caregivers' perceptions of financial well-being and led to greater participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Similarly, a report on the first year of a three-year evaluation of Boston Saves, an initiative that automatically provided each kindergarten student in Boston Public Schools with a $50 CSA (with opportunities to receive additional incentive deposits) found positive effects on parent-reported social and emotional development among economically disadvantaged children in Boston Saves and economically disadvantaged parents reported life satisfaction and expectations of college and post-secondary options for their children when compared to children who had been in kindergarten in the year immediately preceding the implementation of the initiative.

Challenges

The early positive effects on long-term educational aspirations and preparatory behaviors that come from having a CSA account indicate just how important it is to make children and their families aware of their CSAs as early as possible. For low-income children, simply knowing early in their lives that they have a CSA may be more valuable than the money itself.

Despite the benefits of CSAs, as of September 2024, according to a report by the ScholarShare Investment Board, only approximately 460,000 participants in CalKIDS, representing only 9.6% of the nearly 4.8 million account holders, had demonstrated they were even aware of their CalKIDS' accounts by claiming them and only 75,000 participants had requested distributions from their CalKIDS CSAs. These initial engagement rates were lower than hoped for by early wealth-build advocates and officials.

The Institute for Economic and Racial Equity (IERE) at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, has conducted a recent evaluation of the Massachusetts BabySteps CSA program. BabySteps was launched in 2020, provides a $50 seed deposit when families open a Massachusetts 529 account within one year of their children's birth or adoption. The report found that BabySteps led to a 17% increase overall in 529 accounts in its first two years, Nevertheless, the report noted challenges faced by low- and moderate-income families in engaging in the BabySteps program:

For low-income children, simply knowing early in their lives that they have a CSA may be more valuable than the money itself.

Families' Barriers to Accessing the BabySteps Program

Barriers that exist independently of BabySteps

- Immigration status
- Homelessness or housing instability
- Digital divide
- Difficult to save
- First year of parenting is a stressful and overwhelming time

Barriers related to the application and program structure

- No knowledge of the program or no information received
- Lack of familiarity or comfort with 529s
- Confusing or overwhelming application
- Believed had to deposit their own funds
- Language barriers

Barriers after account opening

- Confusing website
- Fear of losing money in investment account
- Need for continued engagement with families after account opening

During our in-depth assessment of the CalKIDS programs, participants in our focus groups and in-depth interviews raised many of these same concerns. Here are four more they raised, which were not included in the BabySteps report:

1. California's automatic enrollment process has no appeals procedure or eligibility clarification process, making parents and program partners question the fairness and transparency of the program when they discover their child does not have an account and cannot understand why not.

2. Local, place-based program partners are ready to lend their legitimacy and localized knowledge to the state's engagement efforts but feel strongly that the state needs to support them more in their local and collective work. These partners want more convenings, learning platforms, an official certification for program outreach ambassadors, and a formalized role, such as an official advisory board, to advise and shape the statewide program.

3. Contracted place-based partners resented that they were prohibited from using public funds for local needs or innovations. CalKIDS has outreach contracts with several community-based programs, but their funding is tightly restricted to traditional outreach activities and cannot be used to meet local needs or for program innovations. CalKIDS' local outreach partners gave examples of activities they wanted to expand using the state funding but were denied, such as providing childcare at information sessions. Examples of the innovations being tried locally include:

   In Semillitas County, their local Medi-Cal plan deposits funds into the child's college savings account to reward key health milestones, like a baby's first dentist visit or completing vaccinations.

   In Oakland, parents are offered a financial coach to develop and pursue overall financial goals for their families.

   In San Jose, the local representative from their nonprofit credit union goes into high school classrooms to walk students through claiming their CalKIDS accounts and then offers a financial literacy curriculum.

4. Many program partners expressed frustration with respect to data-sharing restrictions, which severely limit their ability to do meaningful research on improving program outcomes.

Recommendations for State-Run Early Wealth-Building Programs

As demand for the tremendous benefits of early wealth-building programs grows, and the federal government has pivoted away from the CSA model, more states and big cities should consider creating their own publicly run CSA programs. The challenges faced by large-scale CSA programs like BabySteps and CalKIDS are instructive and they have informed the following recommendations for public entities as they look to CSAs and other early wealth-building programs as an effective means to accomplish their economic mobility goals.

When designing new state CSA programs, start with the consensus program design principles.

For those looking to design a new program, an excellent place to start is the 2024 report from the Center for Social Development at the Brown School at Washington University, *"Wealth-Building for All Children: Convergence and Evidence to Support a Nationwide Policy"* (the Consensus Report), which emerged from a 2023 meeting of a group of engaged policymakers and researchers hosted by the Urban Institute. While its six policy principles were intended to inform a federal policy on early wealth-building, they apply just as well to any large-scale publicly run program. They are:

- **Start at the beginning:** Enroll babies at birth. Enroll all children up to age 18.
- **Ensure inclusion and reduce wealth inequities:** Set up automatic enrollment. Create universal participation with financial progressivity. Measurably reduce racial wealth inequities.
- **Make real investments:** Provide large, initial [government-funded] deposit for the benefit of participating children. Consider the opportunity for ongoing deposits from other sources. Create investment growth over time in the context of fiduciary responsibility. Provide opportunities for participants to access financial planning and additional supports specific to allowable uses of funds.
- **Structure, scale, and transparency:** Create a centralized savings plan structure. Allow flexibility and detail in accounting and reporting.
- **Ease of access and use:** Allow use of funds by participants starting at age 18. Minimize limitations on accessing funds starting at age 18. Exclude from calculations means-tested public benefits.
- **Support vertical connections:** Facilitate both state and community engagement.

CalKIDS sought to incorporate all six of the consensus-based best practices into its design, and yet it still experienced significant challenges in its early implementation. The following recommendations are derived from our general research and in-depth assessment of CalKIDS. They underscore the importance of continually improving the implementation of even the best designed programs.

CSA programs with automatic universal enrollment and targeted needs-based funding need a transparent process for correcting mistakes, adjusting for children's changed circumstances, and explaining eligibility determinations to families. Fairness matters.

Even with automatic enrollment, some eligible participants may be missed. Similarly, programs with progressive investments that seek to close income and wealth disparities can fail to provide eligible support to children whose circumstances have changed after the initial assessment is made. Examples include mothers in a state border area who utilize birthing centers in a neighboring state, so their babies did not automatically receive newborn accounts in their state of residence. Another example is a child who entered the foster care system after their account was created, so they are then eligible for an extra contribution to their CSA account. State programs should include an appeals process to correct mistakes and address changed circumstances.

CalKIDS enrollment partners expressed frustration when they were unable to explain why a student who appeared to meet all eligibility requirements did not have an account. This had a chilling effect on partner outreach efforts. An appeals process, or at least an explanation process, would be fairer and improve trust in the program.

State-run CSA programs should fund and coordinate with trusted place-based partners to do outreach and experimentation. Specifically, they should (a) pay community-based organizations to conduct coordinated outreach, (b) support them with convenings, learning communities, and certifications, and (c) create formal processes for them to give advice and feedback on implementation. Place-based community partners are key to awareness, trust, and innovation.

Using community-embedded, culturally competent messengers to conduct outreach on behalf of state-run CSA programs is a unique opportunity to optimize impact. This is particularly important for programs with large numbers of participants across a large geographic catchment area, like CalKIDS. Nearly every interviewee in our CalKIDS assessment stressed the importance of using peers and place-based community organizations as trusted messengers to promote engagement with the CalKIDS program more effectively.

Studies have shown that using community-based trusted messengers can improve uptake and design and delivery of public benefits. For example, as reported by the National Adult and Influenza Immunization Summit in 2024, vaccination uptake rates were improved when led by community-based organizations with local expertise using trusted messengers. Using trusted messengers and community-based organizations to enroll and engage families in establishing or claiming CSAs is a widely used practice.

The California Early Wealth Accounts System (CWAS) Plan aims to ensure the state's most vulnerable children fully benefit from every available wealth-building opportunity. This comprehensive planning approach that embraces partnerships is one that other states should follow.

Interestingly, according to a Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper, more formal government communications were consistently more effective at getting recipients to act than informal communications that attempted to be more engaging and accessible. These studies found that this "formality effect" gave the message more credibility and importance, making recipients view it as more trustworthy and important to act on. The authors acknowledged that these findings were contrary to both scholars' and practitioners' expectations.

State-run CSAs that partner effectively with place-based programs can enjoy the benefits of both approaches. Local partners can avail themselves of the "formality effect" by using government co-branding and having officially certified outreach workers. Community partners can identify outreach opportunities and tailored messaging that a large centralized public agency cannot.

Local programs receiving state funding could also test innovations. Data-sharing agreements would allow them to assess their efforts in real time and rigorously evaluate their innovations so that the most effective ones could be incorporated into the program at scale.

Our CalKIDS assessment validated this recommendation. Several interviewees stressed the effectiveness of messengers who were a combination of a community-based peer and a governmental official, like school principals, school secretaries, and public health care nurses and doctors. Additionally, place-based community partners recognized that using the State of California's formal endorsement as an official CalKIDS outreach partner improved their effectiveness. One observed that "[using] the CalKIDS logo can help the community feel more faith and trust [in the program]."

Finally, we found an overwhelming desire from place-based partners for more formal convenings and learning communities, and a desire for an advisory body that would formalize their ongoing feedback and advice on the program.

In July 2025, numerous California public, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders contributed to the release of a comprehensive plan to integrate partnerships more effectively into a coordinated early wealth accounts system, including both CalKIDS and HOPE programs. The California Early Wealth Accounts System (CWAS) Plan aims to ensure the state's most vulnerable children fully benefit from every available wealth-building opportunity. This comprehensive planning approach that embraces partnerships is one that other states should follow.

State-run CSA programs should plan to fund and design technology systems that can reach and engage large, diverse populations with regular reports and access to meaningful financial planning at scale.

Due to the nearly 5 million account holders in CalKIDS, the program has yet to expend the millions of dollars needed to mail annual account statements to all its families. As more states consider establishing large-scale programs, they should either budget sufficient communications funds or, preferably, develop SMS text messaging systems to communicate account activity to families. Targeted text messaging may help increase awareness and engagement of CSA account holders as several pilot programs have shown to be the case for awareness of automatic enrollment in WIC.

Additionally, large-scale programs need significant funding to deliver financial planning at scale. As demonstrated by the randomized control trial of Oakland's Brilliant Baby program mentioned above, the group with both CSAs and individualized financial coaching showed significant benefits after only 18 months, including greater likelihood of saving for their child's future education, greater participation in WIC, and increased financial well-being. Culturally competent financial coaching is effective but labor intensive so resources must be sufficient to staff financial coaching or design financial coaching technology solutions that center diverse community contexts.

State-run CSA programs should be integrated into other family-serving public benefit programs, and these public benefit programs should be easier to access and use. Low-income families deserve integrated, flexible, automatic access to the benefits they are entitled to by law, delivered to them with dignity, agency, and trust.

During our CalKIDS assessment, Becca Loya, Co-chair of the California CSA Coalition and Research Director - Innovation & Impact to the San Francisco Treasurer, expressed her wish that CalKIDS do what community groups and schools cannot, which is to integrate CSA outreach and access into other state programs for families.

The 2023 Playbook for Integrating Statewide College Promise Programs & Children's Savings Accounts highlights the effectiveness of state agency collaboration. For example, to support the Pennsylvania Keystone Scholars CSA program, the state's Treasury works closely with its Department of Health to provide data on newborns, while information about registering for the Keystone Scholars program gets included with every birth certificate mailed to families. Pennsylvania Keystone Scholars also partners with school districts during the kindergarten registration process, because parents and families must bring their children's birth certificate numbers that can then also be used to claim their CSA accounts on the spot.

State-run CSA programs can promote early wealth building at scale, providing a public benefit built on positive mindsets, trust, and long-termism. Policymakers on both sides of the aisle see the wealth-creation potential of CSA programs.

But integrating CSAs into other public benefit programs will not be as effective if these programs continue to place severe time and psychological burdens on the low-income families who use them. The federal Office of Management and Budget's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OMB) in a 2022 memo, identified four costs of public benefits and services to eligible recipients:

- **Informational and learning costs**
- **Compliance costs**
- **Psychological costs, including cognitive load, discomfort, stress, distrust, and loss of dignity**
- **Redemption costs where recipients must navigate third-party agencies or vendors**

The OMB memo recommended several high-impact administrative burden reduction strategies that government agencies could employ for public benefits, including providing information, minimizing required actions by beneficiaries, providing multiple methods of submitting applications where needed, automatic enrollment, and simplifying or eliminating unnecessary requirements. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities published a useful guide for state and local policies and programs to leverage opportunities under federal law to streamline access and enrollment by linking to federal public benefit programs. These strategies could be used to increase awareness of and engagement with CSAs to public benefit recipients that include families who would benefit most from early awareness of CSA programs.

Research suggests that one way to address the negative psychological costs of current cumbersome public benefits programs is to make them operate more like guaranteed income programs, which give their recipients complete agency to decide how to spend the funds they receive. The Center for Guaranteed Income Research has conducted several randomized control trial studies that have found, among many of the sites and populations evaluated, an overall positive impact on participants' financial health, housing quality, employment choices and opportunities, and time spent with family.

Conclusion

CSAs are an impactful investment in our children's future. State-run CSA programs can promote early wealth building at scale, providing a public benefit built on positive mindsets, trust, and long-termism. Policymakers on both sides of the aisle see the wealth-creation potential of CSA programs. Let us hope that the compelling evidence of their profound benefits to children and their families will spur expansion of state and federally funded early wealth building programs, as well as spread their ethos of trust and agency to other family-serving public benefit programs.