



STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2028



# LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

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**Erica Ruvalcaba-Heredia, EdD**

*Representative at Large, Corazón Latino*

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*American Academy of Pediatrics/ Patterson and Tedford Pediatrics*

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**Robert Watt**  
Representative at Large

*Coast Unified School District (Retired)*

## STAFF:

**Wendy L. Wendt**  
Executive Director

**Jason Wells**  
Associate Director

**Misty Livengood**  
Communications/Outreach

*June 2024*

Dear Community:

Young children and families worldwide, including those in San Luis Obispo (SLO) County, have faced significant challenges in recent years, highlighted in part by the global pandemic. This era has exposed and exacerbated existing disparities in health care, education, child care, and family support systems, particularly as related to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. These systems are ripe for recovery and reform, using “lessons learned” as creative fuel for building viable solutions. Now more than ever, we must meet the moment to build better foundations of support for our youngest population.

First 5 recognizes that the pandemic has uniquely impacted its core priorities: Early Learning, Early Health Foundations, and Family Resilience. In SLO County, there is an increasing demand for systemic improvements in child care, focusing on affordability, accessibility, and quality. The community has expressed a need for improved early health care access, with a focus on comprehensive supports ranging from mental to oral health; and enhanced family resilience resources, such as parenting education, leadership opportunities, and social connections.

Throughout this strategic planning period and well beyond, First 5 will continue to rely on its ability to respond to continuing and emerging needs – both the typically anticipated challenges related to new parenthood, as well as the societal and personal crises arising from trauma, environmental disaster, public health emergencies, climate change, etc. First 5 itself has experienced significant change and challenge over our 25-year history, as declining revenues from state tobacco tax have cut local allocations in each county by over 50%. While this is certainly welcome news as a sign of decreased tobacco use, it does mean that First 5s and the communities we serve need to develop new and creative ways to continue our work. We will be building on a 25-year legacy of investment, network building and advocacy that has helped shape San Luis Obispo County’s fabric of supports for young children and families. Moving forward, First 5 will leverage these new programs and systems, existing and new partnerships, and lessons learned, to achieve the outcomes of our 2024-2028 Strategic Plan.



**Penny Borenstein, MD**

*First 5 San Luis Obispo County  
Commission Chair, County Health Officer*

# WHO WE ARE

First 5 San Luis Obispo (SLO) County works to give our youngest children the best possible start in life. We are an independent public agency created in 1998 by California's Proposition 10. Proposition 10 was passed by California voters in November 1998. Entitled the California Children and Families First Initiative, it added a 50-cent per-pack tax on cigarettes and tobacco products. The tax was earmarked to promote early health, learning, and family support for children from the prenatal stage through five years of age.

Most of the money (80%) is channeled to First 5 Commissions in the state's 58 counties. The amount each county receives each year is calculated using its birth rate. The rest of the funding goes to the State Commission (First 5 CA).

We are governed by a Commission of nine local leaders who represent various fields and perspectives related to early childhood, and who receive official approval to serve in their roles by the SLO County Board of Supervisors. The Commissioners set policy and identify key activities that are overseen by a staff of four. First 5 SLO County is part of a statewide network of First 5 agencies in all 58 counties and at the state level.

Each commission prepares a strategic plan that outlines its efforts to address local needs of young children and their families. Plans are reviewed annually and are revised periodically.



## Our First 5 SLO County Commission

### Designated Representatives from:

- SLO County Board of Supervisors
- SLO County Public Health Agency
- SLO County Department of Social Services
- SLO County Office of Education
- SLO County Early Care and Education Planning Council

### Professional Representative from:

- Local Medical or Dental Society

### 3 Community At-Large Representatives

- Selected through a community application process

## Our First 5 Statewide Network

In addition to the First 5 agencies in all of California's 58 counties, there are two statewide umbrella entities that support both local and statewide work:

The First 5 Association and its research arm – the First 5 Center for Children's Policy – provide a bridge between local and state-level work to address critical issues in the lives of California's young children and their families. First 5 California provides administrative and fiscal services and monitoring to local First 5 activities.

First 5 California also funds special programs, public awareness campaigns and serves as a statewide voice for children prenatal to age 5 and their families.



# WHAT WE DO & WHAT WE STAND FOR

The experiences young children have and the conditions in which they live greatly influence the kinds of adults they will become and the kinds of lives they will lead. The premise behind First 5 is that, as a society, we must prioritize giving our children the opportunities and environment needed for the best start in their first five years of life.

## Our Vision:

Our vision is to see children thrive in nurturing respectful environments and enter school healthy and ready to learn.

## Our Mission:

First 5 San Luis Obispo County funds and advocates for quality programs and services, to support children prenatal to five years old and their families, so that every child is healthy, learning and developing to their optimal potential, and ready to succeed in school and life.

## Our Roles:

First 5 San Luis Obispo County works to bring its vision and mission to life in three ways:

- We **advocate** for policies and systems change that prioritize young children and their families.
- We **invest** over \$1 million each year in programs and services.
- We **connect** with others in collaborative activities to share resources, educate, and bring people together to address emerging issues surrounding early childhood.





# WHAT WE DO & WHAT WE STAND FOR

## Our Guiding Values:

At First 5, we are guided in our work by a set of values that are inspired by the life-stage we are honored to represent and uplift. So often, society focuses on the “innocence” of early childhood. Here, we listen to and learn from the wisdom of early childhood to help us focus on what is most important.

- **Early Foundations** – Every child is born with extraordinary capacities and potential. We recognize the equally extraordinary opportunity and responsibility before us to help lay early foundations for their healthy development during this critical time.
- **Equity** – Not every child is born into the same circumstances or resources or systems as they begin to grow and develop. We are committed to learning from families’ diverse experiences as we help eliminate early disparities in opportunity for families striving to raise thriving children.
- **Whole Family/Whole Community** – Children don’t raise themselves. Their capacities and potential are deeply linked to the capacities and potential of their families and communities. We approach our work with this always in mind – that the health and well-being of children depends on the health and wellbeing of the adults who surround them.
- **Innovation/Creativity** – Children are born with an innate sense of curiosity, wonder and readiness to experiment as they explore their new and unique-to-them world. We believe in this power of creativity to help us be optimally responsive to community needs and opportunities as they evolve.

- **Collective Impact** – Children aren’t the only ones who thrive best as part of a thriving family and community. Organizations and systems set up to serve children and families also thrive best when they approach challenges and opportunities with a collective mindset. We see First 5 as a collaborative partner in collective efforts to lay early and equitable foundations for children, their families, and the communities where they live.
- **Do What Works** – Children’s curiosity and experimentation also lead to an early understanding of “what works” for them. We remain dedicated to investing in effective models of support that are co-designed or co-identified with community members and proven in practice.



# WHY WE DO IT: THE CRITICAL FOUNDATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



Intuitively we've known for a long time that the first few years of a child's life are important. Relationships are established, core memories are created, lessons are learned, and a child begins to develop into the person they will be for the rest of their lives. Now we have data to prove it.

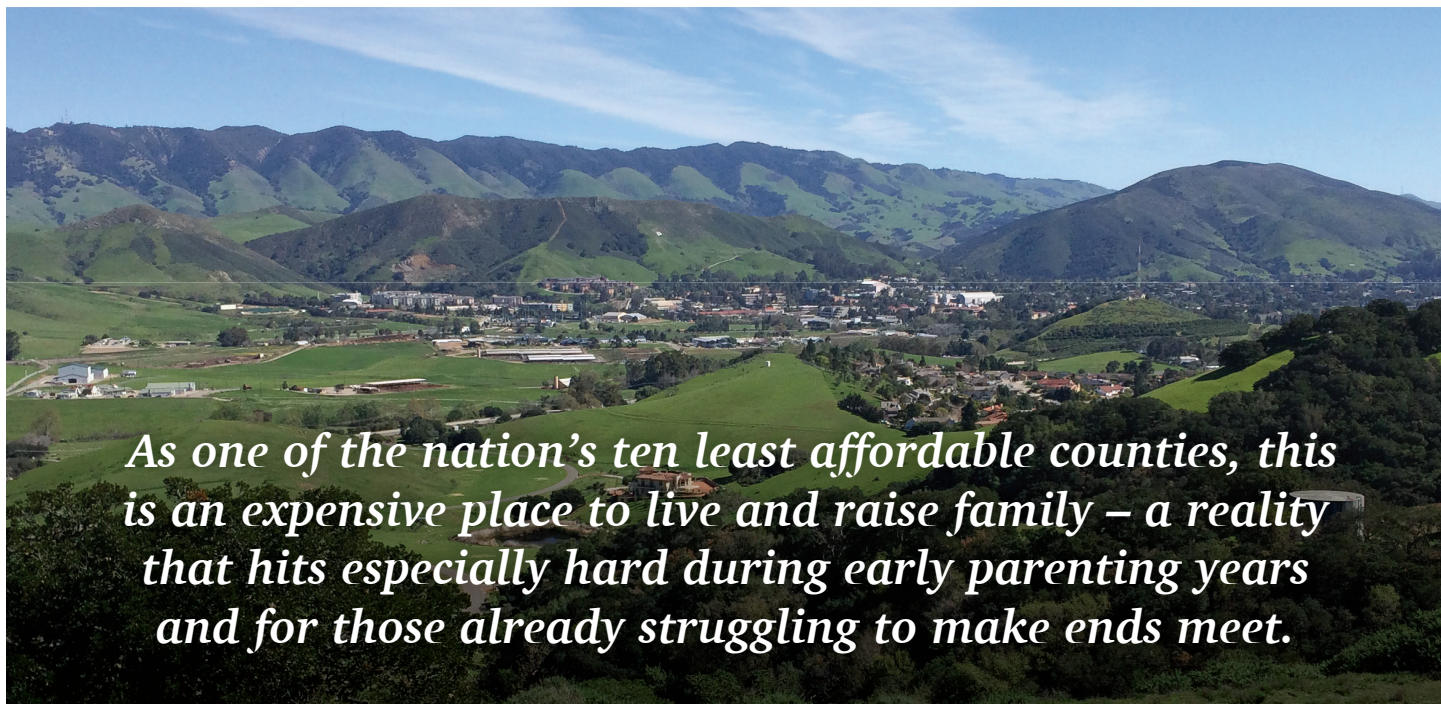
**Science** tells us it's critical. The first years of a child's life are the phase when the most growth happens. By age three, a toddler's brain is more than 80% developed. This rapid growth period gives families and communities a unique opportunity to build a strong foundation for our children. There are many simple things we can do to help reinforce this foundation and prevent avoidable problems early.

**Economics** tells us it's smart. A dollar invested in a young child's early development can save as much as \$13 in costs to society later on. Economic Development experts are increasingly aligning

their thinking with child development experts, backed by multiple studies that measure and quantify a range of long-term benefits that accrue from effective early childhood programs, including health, quality of life, employment/income, and reduction in crime and other costs. Increasingly, business leaders are also recognizing the critical link between a vibrant economy and an equally vibrant system of support for working families and their children.

**Our Hearts** tell us it's the right thing to do. Children are at their most vulnerable when they first arrive in the world. Children count on the adults in their lives to nurture and protect them – not just their parents, caregivers, and family members, but all adults, including community leaders, business leaders, and members of the public. Communities have a moral obligation to ensure that children's needs are always at the forefront of our minds.





Approximately 2,400 children are born each year in San Luis Obispo County. As of 2023, an estimated 15,017 children 0-5 are living here, making up approximately 5.3% of the total population (around 280,000). Overall, the child population is declining, though births in the Hispanic/Latino community are trending upwards. Higher concentrations of families with young children reside in the northern region in and around Paso Robles, the coastal community of Los Osos, and southern communities of Oceano, Nipomo and Grover Beach.

The young children and families who make San Luis Obispo County their home live in a region that is largely rural with a mix of small cities and towns. Agriculture and tourism anchor the economy across this coastal/farming landscape, along with significant and growing energy and tech sectors adjacent to the state's flagship California State University campus – Cal Poly. The county tends

to informally identify itself across several “regions” – North County (“above the Grade” from Santa Margarita to San Miguel and out to California Valley), San Luis Obispo (the centrally positioned County seat), South County (between San Luis Obispo and the Santa Barbara County line), and Coastal (Los Osos to San Simeon). As one of the nation's ten least affordable counties, this is an expensive place to live and raise family – a reality that hits especially hard during early parenting years and for those already struggling to make ends meet.

A majority of people in San Luis Obispo County are Caucasian (68%); the largest population of color is Latino/Hispanic (25%). A growing number of indigenous Mexican families who speak a range of Mixteco language variants are settling in parts of the county, most notably in the far-northern communities of San Miguel, Paso Robles and Shandon.

# OUR PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATIONS

First 5 collaborates with a number of ongoing initiatives in the county that support children prenatal to five and their families. Our strategic plan is designed to continue these partnerships to leverage the capacities they bring, while contributing what First 5 is uniquely positioned to add to our collective effort. In these collaborations we share resources, educate, and bring people together to address emerging issues surrounding early childhood. See examples below.

## First 5 As Collaborator

- SAFE System of Care and Family Resource Centers
- Maternal Child Adolescent Health
- Early Start/Special Education
- CalAIM
- Universal PreK/Transitional Kindergarten
- Child & Family Wellness Collaborative (prev. the Child Abuse Prevention Planning Team)
- Latino Health Coalition
- UndocuSupport
- We Are the Care/Early Care and Education Planning Council
- Help Me Grow
- Regional Home Visiting Collaborative



First 5 also serves as a thought partner for county-wide, multi-agency and multi-stakeholder plans designed to address critical issues to ensure that the needs of children prenatal to five and their families are taken into account. Examples are listed below.

## First 5 As Thought Partner

- SLO Health Counts/County Public Health Community Health Improvement Plan
- Local Early Care and Education Council Needs Assessment
- County of San Luis Obispo Strategic Priorities
- SLO County Child Abuse Prevention Plan
- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (SLO & Santa Barbara Counties)



# WHAT SHAPES OUR STRATEGIC PLAN?

First 5 San Luis Obispo County pays close attention to the needs and assets of the communities we serve and with whom we partner. This includes the children prenatal to five and their families who live here, as well as the array of providers, organizations and systems that address early childhood. We also take time to look inward, critically examining our capacities and strengths and determining how those can be leveraged, alongside our partners, to best support young children and their families. This section describes the Theory of Change and the partnerships that help shape our work as well as the process we undertook to develop the plan.



## Strategic Planning Process

Over the course of 2023, First 5 staff and Commissioners designed and implemented a strategic planning process that leveraged existing data and engaged external stakeholders to better understand where our agency could most strategically focus its efforts over the next four years. First, staff conducted an assessment to better understand current needs and gaps and how First 5 can best support these areas. They compiled relevant data sets and reports and shared them with the Commissioners to inform their understanding of the profile and needs of the county's prenatal to five-year-old population and their families. Then, First 5 staff, Commissioners, and the evaluation team conducted a series of key informant interviews and focus groups with community leaders, Commissioners, family service providers, and families regarding county needs, disparities, and First 5's role. This included more than 40 conversations with stakeholders across the county's geography, populations, and sectors. Then, using this information and the Theory of Change, First 5 staff and Commissioners identified the issues where First 5 can have the greatest impact and select priority strategies and goals in each of those areas.

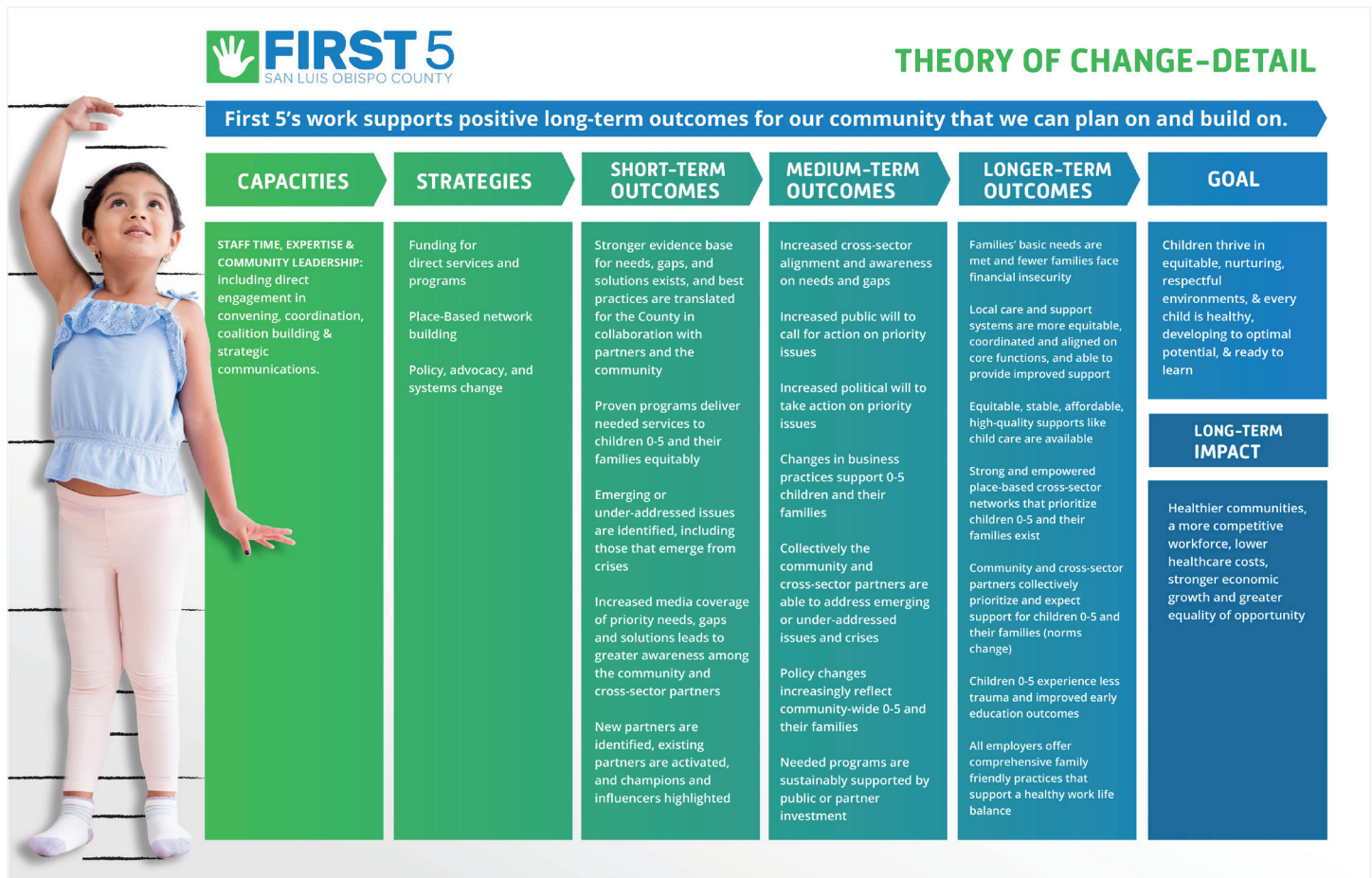


# WHAT SHAPES OUR STRATEGIC PLAN?

## Theory of Change Framework

First 5's work is guided by a Theory of Change, a framework for how we contribute to advancing the cross-sector work in and with communities that supports the health and development of children and lays the groundwork for positive long-term outcomes. Our Theory of Change takes into consideration our capacities and resources as an organization, including the expertise of our staff and Commissioners.

It also takes into consideration the array of partners that we work with and the critical role that they play in an ecosystem of supports for children and families. Our Theory of Change helps us to better understand how our capacities and strategies support outcomes over time. Most importantly, our Theory of Change is a living document. As we and our partners learn more about what works, we can refine our strategies and identify new outcomes.





# WHAT SHAPES OUR STRATEGIC PLAN?

Within the context of its Theory of Change Framework, First 5 uses three types of strategies to effect change in the community:

- **Funding for direct services and programs:**

Throughout the County, parents and children under six are often unseen or unsupported during the most essential developmental time in a child's life. First 5 funds innovative programs and expands existing resources in order to equitably meet the needs of this key population.

- **Place-based network building:** We lead and participate in cross-sector efforts that engage community members and partners to address common issues by forging relationships that can be leveraged over time. San Luis Obispo County has the collective power to identify problems and work together to address them. By connecting with and listening to families, aligning with organizational partners and leading the charge on Cross sector collaboration, First 5 is creating innovative ways to deliver services and a more nimble, cohesive and sustainable approach to care and support for young children and families.

- **Policy, advocacy, and systems change:** San Luis Obispo needs sound and equitable public policy and adequate public investment in systems that prioritize children 0-5 and nurture strong, resilient families. The County also needs those systems to be connected, coordinated and aligned in their goals and vision. First 5 supports positive long-term outcomes for communities by advocating for the policies and systems that children and families need. First 5 collaborates with partners in the County, as well as with other regions and statewide First 5 partners in its policy and systems change work.

These strategies are implemented by staff and through funded partners. For the latter, First 5 enters into contracts with partner agencies based on priorities identified in the strategic plan and emerging community needs. New partners are added as issues arise that require an immediate response; project funding is sunsetted when it is no longer core to the strategic plan, the need has declined, other funding is secured, or the project is completed. Partners are chosen based on well-established, documented success in the local community, with larger projects bidding in an RFP process or emerging through a strategic collective impact partnership.

During our strategic planning process, our Theory of Change helped us identify goals and outcomes in the short and medium-term for our priority investment areas, as well as the strategies that would best support those outcomes.



# OUR 2024-2028 STRATEGIC PLAN: PRIORITIES

The final plan is organized by into “Strategic Support Areas” and “High Priorities.”

## STRATEGIC SUPPORT AREAS

Strategic Support Areas are those where First 5 plans to stay apprised of efforts, ensure the prenatal to age 5 lens is accounted for when key groups are advocating and network-building around these issues, and assist others in amplifying messaging as needed.

- Basic Needs (housing, food security, livable wages, transportation)
- Early Literacy
- Nutrition & Physical Activity (and other lifestyle factors that support healthy bodies)
- Safety & Healing (addressing trauma, domestic and community violence, abuse and neglect)
- Substance Use Prevention & Treatment

## HIGH PRIORITIES

High Priorities have been identified through the strategic planning process for First 5's core attention, through its capacities as funder, network-builder and advocate.

- **EARLY HEALTH FOUNDATIONS**
- **PARENT ENGAGEMENT, CONNECTION, AND EDUCATION**
- **EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE**





# OUR 2024–2028 STRATEGIC PLAN: EARLY HEALTH

## EARLY HEALTH FOUNDATIONS

### What is it?

Developmental screening, resources, and referral pathways for early intervention. Medical, vision, dental, and mental health screening, prevention and care.

### Why is it important?

This was a top need identified through the needs assessment. Prenatal to age 5 is a critical time in a person's life for setting good health foundations. In addition, First 5 has a long track record of supporting this need, and there are opportunities to increase impact. To-date, First 5 has:

- Expanded developmental screenings and cultivated champions to advocate for this as a key best practice.
- Increased the evidence base around the benefits and challenges of screening in pediatric offices.
- Ensured that many young children receive developmental screenings and dental, medical, and optometric screening and care.

### What are the Outcome Goals in this area?

#### Short-Term Outcomes

1. More families with children prenatal to age 5 are screened, referred, and receive early intervention to support optimal development, physical health, and mental health.
2. More families and providers are using early development resources and support.

#### Medium & Longer-Term Outcomes

1. Children experiencing any level of delay or impairment (including mild to moderate) have access to services.
2. Greater multilingual and multicultural capacity with a specific focus on primary Spanish-and Mixtec-speaking families, and other high-need populations.
3. Improved coordination of care including clearer referral pathways and more resource sharing.
4. Increased and more stable public financing for health/mental health supports for early childhood.



# OUR 2024–2028 STRATEGIC PLAN: PARENT ENGAGEMENT

## PARENT ENGAGEMENT, CONNECTION AND EDUCATION

### What is it?

Helping parents and caregivers develop social support – connecting families to other families and to local resource providers – and parent skill-building.

### Why is it important?

This was a top need identified through the needs assessment. Families are struggling to reconnect after the pandemic. First 5 has a history of supporting parent education through workshops, events, and resource distribution and is well positioned to expand efforts in this area.

### What are the goals in this area?

#### Short-Term Outcomes

1. More families with children prenatal to age 5 participate in available parent education/ social connection programs and services.
2. More families have a strong network of support. This can include friends, family members, providers, teachers, and others.
3. Replicate promising programs (e.g., SCYC parent pods) in geographic areas and/or for specific groups where they don't exist.

#### Medium & Longer-Term Outcomes

1. Greater parent involvement in planning, implementation, and replication to ensure programs and policies are rooted in community context.
2. Increased parent leadership and advocacy on behalf of their needs and the needs of their children.



# OUR 2024–2028 STRATEGIC PLAN: CHILD CARE

## EARLY LEARNING & CHILDCARE

### What is it?

Quality early learning and child care in all its facets including full time, part-time, and nontraditional care as well as licensed center/family child care, non-licensed, recreational, school-based prekindergarten/transitional kindergarten, and Family Friend and Neighbor-based approaches.

### Why is it important?

This was a top issue identified through the needs assessment. First 5 is well positioned to effect change in this area: we can build on past wins and there are few others who can support this work at the scale First 5 can. To date, First 5 has:

- Engaged diverse players who are effectively advocating for change on these issues.
- Increased the evidence base that supports increased investment and service options (through Child Care Study).
- Increased political and public will to act on and support these issues.
- Successfully advocated for allocating emergency Federal, state and local funding to child care supports.
- Advanced systems change and engaged the private sector by supporting the expansion of child friendly workplaces.
- Expanded preschool access for families.

### What are the goals in this area?

#### Short-Term Outcomes

1. Increased awareness of the importance of child care as an issue for shared attention and responsibility among the private and public sectors.
2. More residents and community organizations across sectors are engaged in child care as an issue.
3. Greater alignment between early care and education sector and school districts now
4. serving younger students.

#### Medium & Longer-Term Outcomes

1. Greater child care capacity (in unmet/targeted need areas – e.g. infant toddler, nontraditional hours).
2. More private sector businesses and public agencies are offering child care support.
3. Expanded capacity across community-serving organizations to coordinate child care infrastructure.
4. Increased/sustained public and private policies and funding to support child care.



# WHO WE HOPE TO BE



As we take the first steps in implementing this plan, we do so as part of a powerful collective committed to the shared vision of a better, brighter, and healthier future for children and families in San Luis Obispo County – and across the state. The time is now. The challenges and opportunities that lie ahead will be met with unparalleled, steadfast resolve by First 5, which, for 25 years, has proven to be a leader, visionary, mobilizer, and movement maker in early-childhood systems of care and policy change. We press on with this work bearing a renewed sense of purpose and urgency for building a stronger community of support dedicated to enriching the lives of children and empowering families with the resources they need to thrive.



**Join us on the journey to identify, create, and activate  
solutions that ultimately benefit ALL of us!**



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