Focusing for the Future

2015-2020 Strategic Plan Highlights

First5LA.org
Table of Contents
Why the Early Years Matter  P.3
A Changing Context  P.5
A More Focused Approach  P.7
How First 5 LA Will Contribute  P.9
Moving Forward  P.15
Introduction

For more than 15 years, First 5 LA has worked collaboratively across Los Angeles County to ensure that every child enters kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life. As a public organization, funded by Proposition 10 tobacco tax, we have invested more than $1 billion to improve the health, safety and school readiness of children prenatal to age 5.

Our 2015-2020 Strategic Plan lays out a clear path for First 5 LA to maximize our impact to strengthen families and improve outcomes for the greatest number of children prenatal to age 5 in L.A. County. The plan is the product of extensive research, input from parents about their strengths and needs, and feedback from communities and service providers. It is grounded in learning and insights gathered by our Commission and staff over 15 years of experience. The strategies presented in our plan provide a roadmap for increasing First 5 LA’s contribution to better outcomes for young children by strengthening families, the communities in which they live and the systems that support them.

“First 5 LA’s new Governance Guidelines and Strategic Plan usher in a new era for the organization. The Guidelines promote accountability and the plan provides greater focus. Together, they lay the foundation for First 5 LA to improve the lives of children and their families throughout Los Angeles County on a significantly broader scale, creating a brighter future for L.A. County’s children today and for many generations to come.”

Don Knabe
Commission Chair 2014
Los Angeles County Supervisor

“First 5 LA has a renewed purpose, a more focused approach and a clearly defined role that increase our ability to make lasting impact for the greatest number of children. We look forward to continuing our work with parents and caregivers, communities, elected officials, county agencies, and service providers to ensure that children in L.A. County enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life.”

Kim Belshé
Executive Director
Why the Early Years Matter

What happens to our youngest children today will impact all of us tomorrow. When we dedicate attention and resources to children at the earliest stages of their lives, we are laying the foundation for our community’s social and economic future.

Science tells us the basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth. In fact, 80 percent of a child’s brain is developed by age 3, which means that a child’s success in school and life starts from the earliest moments – before birth, at home, and with her parents and caregivers.¹ That’s why investing in the early years matter.

Much like building a house, a child’s brain development starts with laying a solid foundation and building up – step by step. Every interaction in a young child’s life – whether with a parent, in child care, at a park, or with a health provider – helps to build and develop his brain and ultimately impacts his ability to enter school ready to learn and succeed.

Similarly, negative interactions like stress and trauma can weaken and damage a child’s brain, hampering its ability to grow and function. Stress can come from things like fear, hunger, poverty or even interacting with a parent under stress. Chronic stress in a baby can literally stop the cells in her brain from growing and forming connections – leading to learning problems, behavioral issues and even physical and mental illness as an adult.

There are approximately, 650,000 children in L.A. County under age 5. Only 2.4% of infants and toddlers have access to licensed center child care, and 11.4% under age 5 have access to licensed family child care.²


FOLLOWING PAGE

When we invest wisely in children and their families, we are investing wisely in the future of L.A. County. By investing in the early years, we have the opportunity to positively affect a child’s development and create a solid foundation for that child’s future success in life. First 5 LA does so by working together with parents, communities, and service providers to ensure parents and caregivers have the skills, knowledge and supports to promote their child’s optimal development.

AT-RISK CHILDREN WHO DON’T RECEIVE A HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ARE:

• 25% more likely to drop out of school
• 40% more likely to become a teen parent
• 50% more likely to be placed in special education
• 60% more likely to never attend college
• 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime
A Changing Context

For more than 15 years, First 5 LA has been dedicated to serving children from prenatal to age 5 and their families. As we prepared for the development of our 2015-2020 Strategic Plan, it was time to take a deep look at the goals of our organization, the needs of parents and communities, and the effectiveness of First 5 LA-supported efforts.

To do this, we listened to parents, community leaders and residents, elected officials, nonprofits, our grantees, First 5 LA Commissioners and staff. Everyone was invited to the table to share their concerns and hopes for L.A. County families and communities, as well as their thoughts about how First 5 LA could become a more effective partner.

What we heard was clear: while First 5 LA has strong support, we lacked focus. We had no clear direction or driving purpose; no guiding “North Star.” Our strategies were not connected or aligned to achieve meaningful, lasting change. This lack of direction was reflected in our funding, which was seen as being scattered, trying to address too many issues and, primarily, supporting direct services and programs that had limited impact to only those who participated. We had been trying to be all things to all people, as evidenced by the more than 50 initiatives we were funding. In short, we heard that, for First 5 LA to maximize our contribution to improving outcomes for young children, we must
focus and clarify our strategic direction, role and intended impact. In addition, First 5 LA is funded by tobacco tax. Every year, fewer people are smoking. While this is very good news, it also means that tobacco tax revenues are decreasing. In the 15 years since the passage of Proposition 10, tobacco tax revenues (First 5 LA’s primary source of income), have decreased 50 percent. This means we need to be even more strategic in how we invest so we are able to live within our means.

If we continue to conduct “business as usual” and focus the majority of our spending on individual direct services, we would only be able to help a relatively small number of families and children for a limited time. Working this way is like addressing the problem leaf-by-leaf instead of curing it at the root. We needed a new approach, a new way to focus our work in order to make the greatest impact on the children of L.A. County and their families.

First 5 LA’s Commission established a set of distinct mandates to guide all strategic decisions and to define a successful Strategic Plan that would:

1. Maximize return on First 5 LA’s future investments to achieve the greatest possible impact for children prenatal to age 5 and their families.
2. Determine a clear, well-defined focus for First 5 LA.
3. Align goals to long-term financial projections and strategy.
Parents at the center
Parents are at the center of our work. This is because parents, including caregivers, are at the heart of a child’s development. To help all children enter kindergarten ready to succeed, parents need skills and knowledge to support their child’s development and access to services in times of need. Research has shown that when parents have certain skills and supports, child outcomes improve.

These skills and supports are known as “Protective Factors.” First 5 LA interprets these Protective Factors as the ability of parents and caregivers to:

1. Manage stress
2. Have positive relationships and social connections
3. Understand how a child develops and their role in supporting his growth
4. Provide positive environments for their children
5. Have access to concrete support in times of need

First 5 LA’s Strategic Plan for 2015-2020 supports parents to develop the Protective Factors in the context of families, communities, and systems of services and supports.

We are aware that parents do not operate in a vacuum. They live in neighborhoods and belong to communities. They send their children to child care and preschool. They rely on systems to access services and supports. First 5 LA works with partners to promote the communities, environments, policies, and systems that strengthen parents’ and caregivers’ skills, knowledge and access to the supports they need to help their children thrive.

WHAT DOES “CHANGING SYSTEMS” LOOK LIKE?

- Organizations and communities working better together
- Improving how services and supports are delivered
- Changing people’s attitudes and behaviors
- Putting new practices and safeguards in place to protect families
- Offering better services and programs
We want all children in Los Angeles County to enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life.

The way we will work
Addressing the challenges faced by today’s families is a big task; we can’t, and shouldn’t, do it alone. We are just one of many organizations in this large county that is working to improve the lives of children and families. Only by working together with parents, communities, and other organizations to change policies and improve service delivery systems can we address the core issues that are preventing so many children and their families from getting the supports they need. If we work together to improve the effectiveness, coordination, and quality of the services and supports families need to help their children succeed, we will help many more children and families – now and for generations to come.

So what will this take?

- Parents and caregivers have the skills, knowledge and supports they need to promote their child’s development.
- Communities and neighborhoods are safe, healthy places where young children and families can thrive.
- And everyone, from elected officials and teachers to your neighbor next door, take action to improve the policies, public funding, and systems that support parents and create better childhood outcomes.
How First 5 LA will Contribute

Based on our research, we have identified four Outcomes where we can achieve broad, lasting impact affecting the greatest number of children and their families. The strategies we use to reach these Outcomes are connected and mutually reinforcing, providing a clear, focused path for First 5 LA’s work with our partners to help children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life.

FIRST 5 LA’S STRATEGIES WILL FOCUS ON SIX INVESTMENT AREAS

1. **Families:** Increased family Protective Factors

2. **Communities:** Increased community capacity to support and promote the safety, healthy development, and well-being of children prenatal to age 5 and their families

3. **Early Care and Education Systems:** Increased access to high-quality early care and education

4. **Health-Related Systems:** Improved capacity of health, mental health, and substance abuse services systems to meet the needs of children prenatal to age 5 and their families

**Research and Development:** Promote the widespread use of proven best practices that are grounded in research and real-life application.

**Public Policy and Advocacy:** Increase public investments of funds dedicated toward young children and improve policies that effect those investments.

**Provider Training:** Build the knowledge and skills of the people providing support and services to parents and children.

**Community Capacity Building:** Help individuals and groups that live and work in neighborhoods and communities take greater ownership and responsibility for the children and families who live within them by fostering safe, healthy and vibrant communities.

**Service Delivery System Improvement:** Increase the quality, effectiveness, and coordination of how services are accessed and provided.

**Communications:** Educate the public about the importance of investing in young children and families.
Work with parents and caregivers to make sure they have the skills, knowledge and access to resources they need to support their child’s development.

Research shows that when parents and caregivers have the know-how and the support to help in their child’s development (i.e., when the Protective Factors are present), they are able to create nurturing environments and stable relationships for their children. Home visiting programs offer a variety of family-focused services to expectant parents and families with new babies and young children. They are one way to effectively build the Protective Factors by engaging parents and caregivers in their child’s development at the earliest stages. These programs make a positive difference on a range of outcomes, including child health and development, school readiness, as well as prevention of child abuse and neglect. When quality programs are properly implemented, they lead to increased family self-sufficiency, lower healthcare costs and reduced need for remedial education.

First 5 LA continues to invest in parents at the earliest stage possible in their child’s development through our Welcome Baby...
initiative. Welcome Baby, a free and voluntary hospital-based home visiting program, is an example of how early supports can help parents develop the skills needed to create a supportive home-learning environment and get linked to the information and services they need to ensure healthy growth, reduce abuse and neglect, and help get children ready to enter kindergarten. Through Welcome Baby, families are referred to a more intensive home visiting program for additional services and support, if required.

Our investments in programs and practices that help to build the Protective Factors for parents and caregivers will also be supported by research and advocacy investments to change policy or improve the systems that support families. We will assess the effectiveness of our home visiting program and other parent-engagement efforts to gain public and private support to create more of these types of programs and make them available to all new parents and families in L.A. County.

Support a community’s ability to foster safe, healthy, engaged neighborhoods that help children and their families thrive.

Just as a child is dependent on his parents to thrive, families are stronger when they live in neighborhoods and communities that support parents’ ability to raise their children. Simply put, place matters.

Communities – from family and friends, to those around the neighborhood, including service providers – give parents a sense of belonging and provide them with information, knowledge and supports to be the best parent they can be. By building community capacity, First 5 LA and communities can partner with parents to identify and improve a parent’s ability to create social connections and access much-needed services, removing barriers that negatively impact a child’s development.

That is why First 5 LA is continuing our commitment to the 14 Best Start communities. Through Best Start, we help to strengthen the capacity of these communities to support families, promote parent and caregiver participation within their community, improve the coordination of the systems that serve them, and support the enhancement of the environments in which children live, learn and play. Central to First 5 LA’s work in

For every dollar spent on quality home visiting programs, at least $2 in future public spending is saved.6

Best Start communities is our engagement of parents, residents, and local organizations to create a shared vision and action plan. This work promotes collective action to remove barriers, eliminate gaps in service, expand effective programs, and increase awareness of the resources that are available to young children and families when they need it. By actively engaging residents to collectively solve challenges, First 5 LA can help communities strengthen families and neighborhoods and achieve long-lasting improvements where children can thrive.

Increase access to affordable, quality child care and preschool.

By participating in quality early care and education programs (such as child care and preschool programs), children are more likely to have better socio-emotional skills (e.g., ability to make friends, find solutions to conflict in a healthy way, follow directions, etc.), be ready for school, and achieve key academic milestones such as third grade reading proficiency. However, in L.A. County, there are significant gaps and needs in early care and education access, quality of programs, and workforce capacity and skills. For example, there is limited availability of quality programs for infants and toddlers and preschool-age children, which is especially prevalent among families living in low-income communities of color. Within the workforce development system, there is a need for increased alignment across qualifications, competencies, and preparation and training.

In order to close these gaps and truly expand access to quality, affordable, and sustainable early care and education, there must be a focused effort to increase public funding in L.A. County.

First 5 LA works with elected officials, legislators and other advocates and funders to build support for additional investment
in early care and education that increases the number of affordable and sustainable child care programs and improves the quality of those programs. We advocate at the local, state, and national level for more resources for child care and preschools – for infants and toddlers as well as preschool-age children – to improve the availability of affordable programs. In addition, First 5 LA collaborates with partners to develop a kindergarten readiness assessment that can help inform and drive early care and education policy, and fiscal and systems change.

To empower parental decision-making and drive program improvement, First 5 LA supports a uniform way to measure the quality of early care and education programs. This allows parents to make more informed decisions about their children’s care and leads to improvements in early care and education programs. First 5 LA also works to improve professional development systems so that early care and education providers have strong skills and the knowledge necessary to help young children get ready for school.

Health, mental health and substance abuse issues can have a significant effect on the healthy development of children prenatal to age 5. Therefore, it is vital that health-related systems diagnose problems in a timely and appropriate manner and deliver effective care that is responsive to families in need. However, navigating these systems is difficult and complicated for many, which results in families and children falling through the cracks.

53% of third graders are NOT reading at grade level.\(^7\)

Disparities for children of color persist, with only 34% of Latinos and 37% of African-American third graders reading at or above grade level.\(^8\)

---

7 California Department of Education Assessment and Accountability Division, 2003-2012 STAR Results retrieved from Dataquest http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/

Additionally, one of the most damaging factors in a child’s development are the effects of trauma and chronic stress. Children often face lifelong physical and emotional health problems when they experience trauma, such as abuse, neglect, loss and chronic stress. These traumas can be a result of poverty, community and family violence, homelessness, parental substance abuse, and maternal depression.

First 5 LA has identified two ways we can advance improvements across these health-related systems and help the greatest number of children and families. First, First 5 LA focuses on strengthening how health-related systems connect, coordinate and assist families in receiving early intervention services needed for their child’s healthy development. Specifically, First 5 LA works to improve how systems work together to provide timely screening, effective care coordination and appropriate referrals so that more young children at risk of developmental delays have access to the care they need to thrive.

Second, we respond to the effects of trauma on a child’s development in two ways: (1) First 5 LA collaborates with experts to learn about the impact of trauma on a child’s development and the gaps in service providers’ ability to respond to families affected by trauma, and (2) we develop an action plan to build and promote the capacity of health care providers and systems to realize, recognize, and respond to families and their young children who have experienced trauma in their lives.
Moving Forward

We are excited to share our new strategic direction that reflects First 5 LA’s driving purpose to help every child enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life. While the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan provides a clear roadmap, our work has only just begun.

Most importantly, we need you. We welcome your feedback and ideas. Whether you are a parent, community leader, teacher, business owner, service provider, or elected official, we are looking for new ways to work with you to achieve real and meaningful change. We invite you to visit First5LA.org to learn more about our work – including Welcome Baby, Best Start communities and other initiatives – and how you can join us in making sure kids get the best start in life.