

Preschool Expansion Key Leader Interviews

The preschool expansion key leader interviews truly revealed how diverse, dynamic and complex preschool expansion is statewide. Along with the enthusiasm and passion for early care and education that they expressed, it was clear there was uncertainty about their role in the future of progress for increasing the quality of and access to preschool for all children.

Following the preschool expansion online survey, eight First 5 county preschool leaders were selected to participate in interviews. Of the eight interviewees, four were commission staff, three were executive directors and one was a contractor – each represented a different county. All were selected based on their deep involvement in the implementation of preschool expansion in their counties as well as representing a diverse cross-section of counties. The following are themes that emerged from the interviews.

Preschool Expansion Activities

At the start of the interview, preschool expansion was defined as including all efforts to improve and expand preschool for all children such as funding new preschool slots, enhancing existing slots, quality enhancements for preschool, professional development, facilities improvements and even policy and advocacy efforts for early education. Given that definition, counties revealed the diversity in the foci and emphases of their programs. While several interviewees discussed the funding of new and enhanced slots in key regions/school districts in their counties, others talked more at length about their investments in professional development for early care educators and quality enhancements for existing preschool slots.

Professional development and early literacy

In Santa Cruz County, for example, the commission made a deliberate decision not to fund preschool slots but to use local and state match CARES dollars to fund an early literacy professional development program. The goal of this program is to increase later literacy success by improving preschool teacher practices and quality improvements for literacy, letter sounds and print knowledge by creating a print rich environment. First 5 Santa Cruz subsidizes providers in a three-unit course at community colleges. They have also started to work with “Family, Friend and Neighbor”¹ child care settings. First 5 Santa Cruz County uses ELLCO (Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Tool) to assess and measure progress in the early literacy environment

Systems integration for quality enhancement

In Santa Clara County, in addition to funding preschool slots in key, high-risk zip code areas, a significant effort has gone into developing an integrated, streamlined system with high quality preschool teachers at its core. These are preschool teachers that have participated in the county CARES (Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards) program administered by the E3 Institute. Over 80 percent of preschool teachers in Santa Clara County have participated in E3 Institute’s CARES program. In a county where there is

¹ “Family Friend and Neighbor” is considered an informal, usually unlicensed home-based child care setting where a person cares for the children of their friends, relatives and neighbors. Often their own child(ren) is/are included in the care setting.

not only geographic diversity, but diversity in the delivery of preschool services as well (State preschools, Head Start preschools, family-based preschools, private center-based preschools), Santa Clara County's PoP sites were all able to come to an agreement on the articulation of quality standards, using one set of measures (DRDP-R, ASQ, ECERS), and on rates and models of reimbursement. By coming together they believe they are "setting the baseline higher, overall" for the rest of the county. They meet regularly to make decisions together and exchange ideas on how creatively maximize the various funding streams as well as share practices. This approach to systems integration was aimed at "developing infrastructure and trying to develop practices that were consistent across programs." Another key component of the systems integration effort includes increasing the technical capacity of preschool teachers. "We are bringing everyone up by bringing to them and training them on technology." All teachers received training on how to enter and read data (attendance and measures), use computers, participate in online webinars and access vital resources online. Santa Clara County interviewees reported that not only did this "increase efficiency" but it also empowered them to "be more efficient and creative with their funding" and it "allows them to play."

The above counties are just two examples of how quality enhancement and professional development really took center stage in these interviews. There are more examples below.

Valuable Investments

When asked what they believed was their most important and meaningful preschool investment to date, the resounding response was quality enhancements and enhancing existing spaces and services. Interviewees felt that investing in quality enhancements fostered better, long-lasting partnerships as well as a more sustainable provisioning of quality services. In other words, as interviewees explained, the preschools were not dependent on First 5 funds for the slots to exist altogether. Instead, First 5 funds were used to help bring the preschools up to quality standards, including teachers. County leaders explained that once the preschools were brought up to standard and even exceeding levels of quality, they were more likely to be self-sustaining. Interviewees also discussed that funding quality enhancements and enhancing existing slots does not use up as much funds as funding new slots, therefore it is a more cost-effective approach to increasing the capacity of preschools. One county explained that their capital involvement of creating new spaces "hasn't yielded as many spaces but it has been a significant investment over the last years." The First 5 San Mateo County commission has made a fiscal and program decision to shift from funding new preschool spaces in targeted areas of the county to a Preschool Quality Initiative that focuses on countywide quality enhancements for every four-year old.

Another county replied as follows when asked about their most meaningful investment.

Enhancement of existing services. Preschool services have been so underfunded and First 5 efforts have allowed support at the environment level and in professional development bringing up the quality and qualifications. Expansion [with new spaces] efforts are small – new spaces are limited because of the expense.

Related to funding quality enhancement activities, although most agreed that preschool expansion and implementation is complicated due to multiple funding streams with a different set of requirements, they also recognized and discussed the value of braided funding as a way to be more creative and innovative with preschool expansion investments. As one county stated, "blended funding is so important to PoP and CARES." Many preschools are receiving state preschool or head start plus other forms of funding. What some counties described doing was to direct First 5 funds towards initial start-up or "ramp-up" funds, quality enhancements,

facilities, and professional development while existing funds went to base operations (day to day operation). Many preschools don't have enough start-up capital so First 5 funds are used to accomplish that.

With enhanced preschool services, we implement financing models that force [them] to think creatively – they use their base funding with state or parent fees, then apply First 5 funds for quality enhancement, professional development activities for teachers, provide ramp-up funding and other types of programmatic and business support.

Finally, all of the counties interviewed received state First 5 match funds for CARES. All interviewees expressed in different ways how they believed professional and workforce development was tied to both quality preschools and improved child outcomes. Counties described how beyond providing early educators with stipends they were also implementing “teacher institutes covering different areas of child development domains,” English language learner (ELL) programs to help teachers understand and work with children and families that are ELL's, providing mental health consultants to help teachers work with special needs children, helping teachers with foreign education transcripts, instituting a textbook lending program, and partnerships with community and state colleges. As one county explained regarding their professional development program focusing on the early literacy environment,

There has been a major cultural paradigm shift around disparities in reading success. It has gone from ‘it will be ok if we let them lay low,’ and ‘don’t push it,’ to understanding the importance of standards and that literacy is one of the biggest inequities.

Interestingly, the quantitative data shows that although 87 percent of participating counties are doing work in workforce development, the highest proportion of preschool funds are allocated to preschool implementation (40 percent of budget), followed by workforce development (29 percent of budget). As discussed earlier, this may be due to the cost of funding new spaces in comparison to the cost of providing necessary enhanced services.

Community Support for Preschool Expansion

Most interviewed counties believed that they had excellent support from their commission as well as support outside of the commission such as from local policy- and decision makers and key community leaders and stakeholders. The challenges they faced were not in finding or gaining support throughout their local community as it has been from garnering and securing funding for preschool. As one interviewee said, “competition for funding is stiff.” They found, more recently, that they were competing for funding within school districts where primary and secondary school teachers are getting laid off, and within health systems where funding for children's health insurance is a priority.

They also believed that legislators were not educated enough about early education to support their efforts, which has resulted in challenges such as the failure of proposition 82, the introduction of proposition 1d, competing for public funds locally and consistent threats to First 5 funds.

Partnerships for Preschool Expansion

For First 5 preschool expansion efforts, partnerships are the cornerstone of operations because the partners are not merely providing resources, but they are delivering the preschool services. All interviewees identified an extensive list of key partners in their preschool expansion and implementation efforts. Not surprisingly the majority identified school districts and county offices of education as their key partners, which confirms the online survey findings. Most also described having very positive and successful partnerships, particularly because they were able to provide expertise and leadership in an area of need.

Counties that described substantial CARES and professional development programs said that community colleges were integral partners. Community colleges provided the link between higher education in early care and child development and the delivery of quality preschool education. Community colleges enable the “teaching staff... to move up the permit matrix.” Other counties have provided examples of how they have utilized such a partnership.

We have a symbiotic relationship with teachers and site managers to develop their skill set and acquire new skills – so we leverage funding around professional development.

In the coaching model trained instructors work closely with teachers in the classroom. They work with teachers one on one on a monthly basis and go over assessment planning and review assessment scores and set plans to improve those scores. Teachers feel supported all the way around.

Ventura County described venturing into the business community to discuss with key business leaders, including the chamber of commerce, the importance of early childhood experiences and the possibility of onsite or near sites preschool options. Although this is a new and early-stage partnership, they have received a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to expand this type of partnership by working with employers to increase employer supported child care options.

Ventura County also described the benefits of what they perceive to be strong and positive partnerships within the county which allowed them to be one of very few counties statewide that submitted just one county application for AB172 funds. As she explained,

Because of work that that occurred in the past year, we were able to bring players together and really figure out what we already have, who has facilities, how to better meet the needs of communities rather than competing against each other. We approached the work that is built on partnership and strengthened what we have to work with.

Riverside County is an ABCD (Affordable Buildings for Children’s Development)² location. With ABCD funds they formed a taskforce that brought together partners from different disciplines from planning and faith-based organizations that otherwise “may not have been involved.” The interviewee explained that this has

² The David and Lucile Packard Foundation with the Low Income Investment Fund launched ABCD which seeks to build a comprehensive and sustainable financing system for quality child care facility development in California by utilizing existing organizations and adapting a proven model drawn from the affordable housing development system.

so far resulted in increased capacity within facilities, increased awareness or the importance of access to quality preschools and a commitment to “involvement that will last” in preschool expansion in Riverside County.

Plans for the Future

As funds for First 5 state match programs such as CARES phase out, interviewees were asked what their future plans are for those programs. Most stated that their commission has committed to maintain local funding, but they have not made a final decision on how or if to replace match dollars. Most interview participants believed that their commissions will be unable to replace match and will need to adjust accordingly. Many indicated, however, that they will be able to maintain their current level of funding for one more year (09-10) but will need to make decisions on what to do after that. Others have indicated that due to multi-year (3-5 year) strategic planning they have taken the reduction of state match into account and will be able to function as planned through the end of their strategic plan.

Interestingly, a few interviewees explained that how they proceed into the future will also depend on how “direct services” becomes defined in the next year. Since many of the services that First 5 counties fund may or may not be what they consider to be “direct services,” once it is defined upon the passage or failure of proposition 1d, they may need to make adjustments on how programs and services are funded, accordingly. So for some counties the definition of direct services may be instrumental in deciding how to move forward. One county stated that they will definitely be “asking grantees to be more succinct about their service delivery models in their RFP’s and/or program descriptions.”

CARES

Counties are having to make decisions on how to implement CARES in the future. Based on responses to the interviews it appears that counties have the least amount of resources and options to replace these matching funds, unless county commissions deliberately had CARES services a priority in strategic planning (like in Santa Cruz County).

Counties are deciding to reduce or eliminate stipends while others are deciding to do the opposite and eliminate a lot of the professional development enhancements such as community college partnerships, text book lending, special workshops or teacher coaching.

Local Bond Measure

San Francisco is on a unique situation where county voters passed Proposition H which is essentially a local investment in preschool. Proposition H will cover approximately 90% of the current investment so when state funds for preschool expire, they believe they will be in good shape. “We are in a very different position because our preschool money is county funds not our local commission funds. We are staying the course and will continue to focus on our universal preschool effort.”

Additionally, with Proposition 1d on the ballot there was an exceptional amount of anxiety and uncertainty for their future plans. Two counties mentioned that they are planning for and believe they are facing a “worst case scenario of 50 to 65 percent reductions.” On the other hand some counties are hoping to benefit from the Federal stimulus package.

Visions of the Future of Preschool

There was resounding agreement when asked what they believed was the most important investment any state entity or agency can make in preschool and early care and education. All interviewees believed that a multi-pronged comprehensive approach that addresses safe and structurally sound facilities, quality preschool environments, professional development and access to affordable quality preschools is the only way to go. Interviewees expressed that agencies cannot make “a single investment in any one area,” and that “the biggest bang for a buck is a comprehensive approach.” One county suggested that the state invest in in-depth research on the current models of delivery so that counties have “good reliable data and information on what has been done, what improvements need to be made, and then funding should be tied with those improvements and changes.”

Most of the interview participants also discussed the importance of developing a uniform system with streamlined funding that demonstrates better coordination at the state levels. As one county described, “Right now there are six funding streams in one classroom. It’s crazymaking.” Several counties believe that the state Department of Education has just overlaid requirements on top of each other which can prevent “early educators from delivering services in a smart way.”

One county representative summed up their preschool expansion work with this statement, “There are so many implications to policy, and it contributes a basic level of ensuring quality preschools.” Similarly, all the interviewees hoped that in some way their county can be a model for the state and that they will be able to produce results that unequivocally demonstrate the long term benefits of investment in early education, that is, school readiness and success in school.