FIRST 5
VENTURA COUNTY

FIRST 5 VENTURA COUNTY
2020-26 STRATEGIC PLAN
Updated May 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

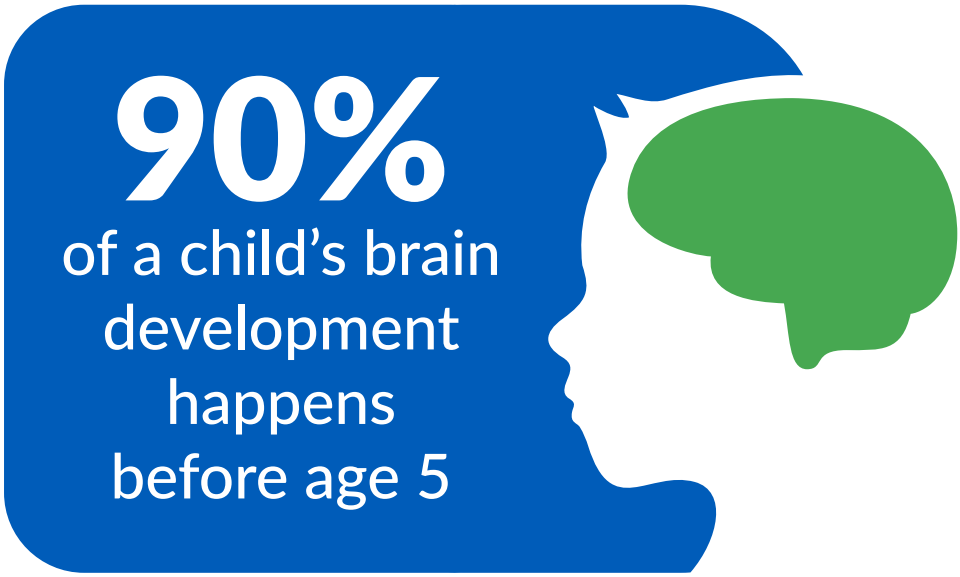
Background	Page 1
Strategic Direction	Page 4
Investments	Page 9
Parent Leaders & Desired Outcomes	Page 12

BACKGROUND

CREATED BY VOTERS, FOR CHILDREN

First 5 Ventura County (F5VC) is largely funded through Proposition 10, the California Children and Families Act. Passed by the voters of California in 1998, this tobacco tax is dedicated to developing locally managed resources and systems that improve health and education for our youngest Californians, from prenatal through age 5. Governed by a nine-member Commission appointed by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, First 5 Ventura County funding decisions are guided by its Strategic Plan, supported through the long range financial plan, and operationalized through funding decisions detailed in multi-year program allocations, annual operating budgets, and implementation strategies.

F5VC has made a significant, positive impact on early childhood systems in Ventura County by leveraging additional resources through partnerships, continually expanding collaborations with foundations, businesses, parents and local leaders to make sound, lasting investments in children. In addition to Prop 10 tobacco tax revenue, First 5 Ventura County is funded through leveraged state and federal dollars, grants and charitable donations: all together, **F5VC has invested over $223 million** since our inception.



"The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized a need to strengthen and support efforts that maximize learning opportunities for all students. The Ventura County Office of Education and First 5 Ventura County continue to collaborate to ensure our youngest learners have access to high-quality programs, recently including the Universal Prekindergarten mixed-delivery system, to give Ventura County children the start they need to succeed in school and life.

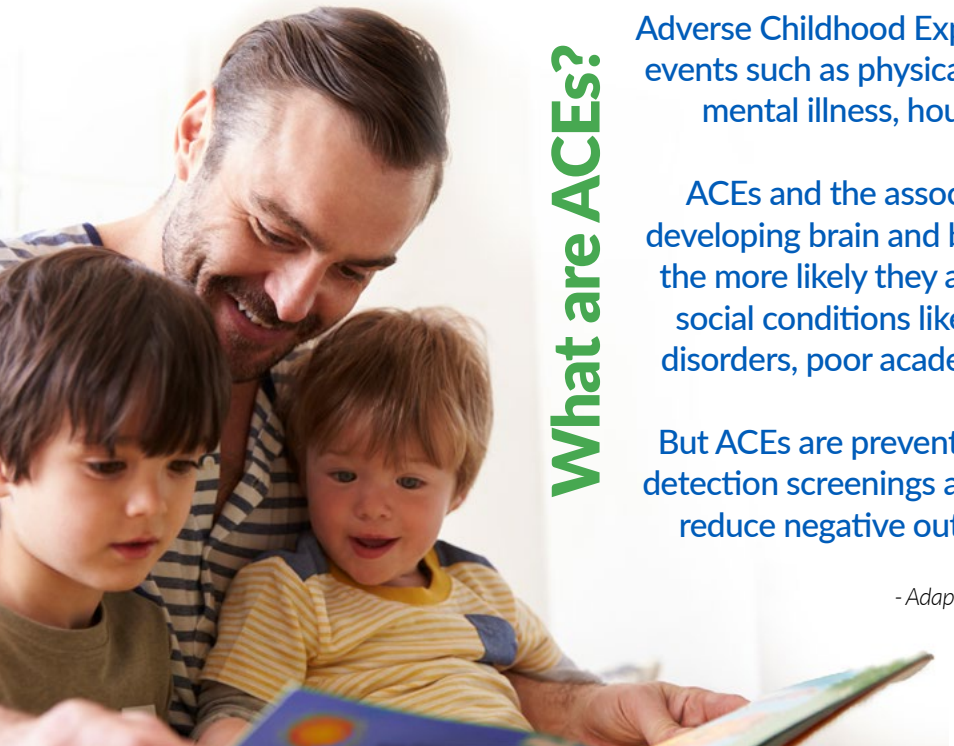
- Dr. César Morales, First 5 Ventura County Commissioner
Ventura County Superintendent of Schools

Recognizing that no one agency can do it alone, F5VC has been an active participant and convener of several community-wide initiatives for combating child abuse and neglect, improving oral health, promoting developmental screening, and improving the quality of early childhood programs.

THE CONTEXT FOR OUR WORK

Brain research clearly tells us that **the first five years** of a child's life are critical for developing lifelong social, emotional and learning skills. Extensive research on the biology of stress shows that healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and the brain, with damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan. It is crucial to reach children early in life for programs to have the greatest possible impact.

In partnership with parents, school districts, community leaders, and social and healthcare agencies, First 5 Ventura County works to connect a **network of essential services** for young children and their families–a network that strenghtens the futures of children, families and communities. The First 5 Ventura County Neighborhoods for Learning and Help Me Grow Ventura County are two of our cornerstone investments that are at the heart of our work.



What are ACEs?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic events such as physical and emotional abuse, neglect, caregiver mental illness, household violence, poverty, and racism.

ACEs and the associated toxic stress can damage a child's developing brain and body. The more ACEs a child experiences, the more likely they are to suffer from detrimental health and social conditions like heart disease, diabetes, mental health disorders, poor academic achievement, and substance abuse.

But ACEs are preventable. Research shows that through early detection screenings and evidence-based interventions, we can reduce negative outcomes and prevent these experiences.

- Adapted from the Office of the California Surgeon General, ACEs Aware

STRATEGIC PLAN YEARS 2020-2022: INVESTING IN CAPACITY BUILDING AND SYSTEM CHANGE

The Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years (FY) 2020–22 called for increased investments in capacity building and systems change **to strengthen the overall system of early childhood services.** F5VC also expanded its role as an advocate and convener to build communities that prioritize the well-being of young children and families. In July 2021, the Commission **brought all operations and implementation of the Neighborhoods for Learning (NfLs) initiative in-house**, which allowed F5VC to increase fidelity in program design, enhance program quality, and rapidly innovate. The Commission also developed and **implemented countywide system initiatives** that promote parent engagement, community collaboration, early intervention, and improve access to resources.

STRATEGIC PLAN YEARS 2023-2026: EVALUATING IMPACT AND A PATH TO PANDEMIC RECOVERY

The Commission engaged in a series of activities **to better understand the conditions impacting young children and their families** and evaluated FY 2020-22 strategic priorities to ensure investments are aligned with local, state, and federal opportunities and priorities. Due to the substantial shifts during FY 2020-22 and the unique needs accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission decided to **adopt a three-year extension of the current Strategic Plan through FY 2026.** This extension allows the Commission to evaluate the impact of FY 2020-22 investments before determining any program changes in future years.

Extending the current strategic plan also increases staff opportunities to engage in advocacy and systems change activities, build capacity in system partners, support the redesigned NfL initiative, and use lessons learned from FY 2020-22 to sharpen and refine our focus.

The Strategic Plan is a **high-level guiding document designed to work together with the long-term financial plan.** It is put into action through funding decisions, annual operating budgets, implementation strategies, and evaluation frameworks. The Commission has implemented an evaluation framework to measure progress on our goals, desired outcomes and to remain accountable.

SPOTLIGHT ON
CAPACITY BUILDING
SHARED SERVICES ALLIANCE

F5VC works with funded partners, public agencies, and community organizations serving children prenatal - 5 and their families to build the local knowledge base and develop a shared language and understanding through **capacity-building efforts.**

Family childcare providers excel at supporting healthy child development but sometimes struggle with the financial aspect of their business. To **assist in the sustainability of local family childcare providers,** the Commission partnered with the Ventura County Office of Education and Child Development Resources to create the Shared Services Alliance of Ventura County (SSA). In 2023, the SSA successfully strengthened the business practices of 35 local family childcare providers.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on the childcare industry. With an understanding that supporting the future of Ventura County begins with quality early childhood education programs, the SSA is collaborating with the Economic Development Collaborative (EDC), a Ventura County-based nonprofit. EDC Business Advisors have been professionally trained to assist family childcare providers with their business concerns and finding childcare-specific resources. This partnership is committed to building more childcare and early childhood education capacity by ensuring providers have the tools and necessary resources to provide quality care and run a successful business.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The Commission recognized several years ago that, in light of declining tobacco tax funds, F5VC needed a new approach to focus the Commission's work and make the greatest impact on the children of Ventura County and their families. If F5VC continued to primarily invest in individual direct services, only a relatively small number of families and children would be helped, and only for a limited time.

Therefore, the Commission focused its investments on advocacy, capacity building, and supporting populations where it can make the greatest positive impact. This strategic plan expands F5VC's role as an **advocate** to build and support communities that prioritize the well-being of young children and families. This strategic plan also shifts strategic investments towards **capacity building** to support and build the overall system of services. F5VC has allocated funds to continue **Help Me Grow** and maintain **Neighborhoods for Learning** locations countywide, focusing on Parent and Child Together (PACT) classes, developmental screenings, parent education and leadership opportunities, and connections to community resources. Additionally, with a historic opportunity presented by the American Rescue Plan Act, the Commission secured $3.5 million in funding to support families recovering from challenges exacerbated by the pandemic.

Neighborhoods for Learning
FIRST 5 VENTURA COUNTY

Help Me Grow
VENTURA COUNTY

While F5VC continues to support families with children prenatal to five years old, this strategic plan recognizes that investments will have a greater impact when they reach children in the first three years of life. **A child's brain develops faster from birth to age three than at any other postnatal period.** The parent-child dyad and the environment of the family – which includes all primary caregivers – are the foundation of children's well-being and healthy development. Parents and other caregivers play a lead role in their child's healthy development, but often they are stretched for time and resources. First 5 Ventura County's Neighborhoods for Learning and Help Me Grow initiatives provide parents with support and helpful resources to meet their family's unique needs.

"During the earliest years of life, research tells us a baby's brain develops rapidly, and nearly all of a child's experiences are shaped by parents, caregivers, and the family environment. These experiences impact a child's cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional well-being throughout life. It's never too early to begin to practice "Talk. Read. Sing" ™ with your precious one! "

- Barbara Marquez-O'Neill
First 5 Ventura County Commissioner

FIRST 5 VENTURA COUNTY

VISION

All Ventura County children are born healthy, thrive in nurturing environments, and enter school prepared and eager to learn.

MISSION

Our mission is to strengthen families, communities and systems of care for children prenatal to 5 years through investments, expertise, and leadership so all children reach their full potential.

CORE VALUES

Integrity and Equity: We commit to acknowledge, identify, and address systemic inequities and racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and ability disparities in early childhood experiences, opportunities, and outcomes.

Family: We focus on the whole-child, prenatal to age five, in the context of their family and community.

Strategic: We prioritize solutions that produce results, are innovative, have a strength-based approach, highlighting protective factors and prevention.

Accountable: We are transparent, collaborative and accountable to one another, families and the community.

Informed: We are data- and research-driven and informed by developmental science.

FIRST 5 VENTURA COUNTY STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FISCAL YEARS 2020-26

PROGRAMS AND SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

Align and integrate systems of care to ensure that the youngest children and their families have timely and seamless access to supports and services that best meet their needs through:

COMMUNICATION & MESSAGING

- Provide communications that educate, promote and shift attitudes and behaviors regarding early childhood development

ADVOCACY & POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- Strengthen policies, increase funding, and elevate early childhood priorities at the State and local level

CAPACITY BUILDING & TRAINING

- Support the capacity of partners and families, increase skills, and help local providers increase quality standards quality standards

CONVENING & COLLABORATION

- Bridge agencies, sectors, and providers to create an integrated system of services for young children and families

INNOVATION & LEARNING

- Use a data driven approach to support the development and continuous improvement of best practices

"F5VC works closely with nonprofits, schools, and county agencies - from MICOP to the Health Care Agency - to ensure young children and their families have timely and seamless access to supports and services tailored to their needs, particularly those communities furthest from opportunity."

- Barry Zimmerman, First 5 Ventura County Commission Chair
Chief Deputy Director, Ventura County Health Care Agency

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES- *The areas we are working to improve in our community*

F5VC applies a Program and Systems Integration lens to the following strategic priority areas to focus our efforts on achieving our vision and mission:

- **Comprehensive Child Health and Development**
- **Strong and Resilient Families**
- **Quality Early Learning**

First 5 Ventura County cannot meet all the needs of the County's youngest children and their families. Funding must be directed to a few specific initiatives that are aligned with statewide priorities, opportunities and challenges. By aligning F5VC's priorities with First 5's statewide, our advocacy and systems change efforts will have greater impact.

INVESTMENTS- *What we will invest in to achieve our mission, vision and strategic priorities*

To complement our Advocacy and Systems Integration efforts, F5VC continues to invest in **Neighborhoods for Learning** and **Help Me Grow** to achieve our goals and improve outcomes in each priority area. Examples of specific investment strategies are included for each strategic priority.

Comprehensive Child Health and Development

Support services for families that support healthy infant/toddler development

- Access to and utilization of health care services
- Early identification of developmental delays and social emotional issues
- Increased emphasis on parental mental health
- Enhanced primary care practices to include social and emotional development

Strong and Resilient Families

Provide families with the foundational support and knowledge to be their child's first and best teacher

- Parent and Child Together (PACT) classes support positive parent-child relationships
- Parent education enhances parents' skills, competencies, and knowledge of child development
- Community resource and referral, service coordination, and case management helps families access services when needed
- Parent Engagement strategies support parents as leaders and advocates for their children, family and community

Quality Early Learning

Promote access to high quality early learning opportunities as early as possible (0-3), especially for children most at risk

- Quality enhancement of PACT through parent engagement, intensive provider coaching, and screening and supporting children with special needs
- Take 5 and Read! early literacy campaign to champion the importance of early literacy as a pathway to school success
- Expand access to early education and preschool through Community Investment Loan Fund

CORNERSTONE INVESTMENTS

As F5VC continues to focus on systems integration, two cornerstone investments remain at the forefront of our work to achieve F5VC's goals in Fiscal Years 2020-26: Neighborhoods for Learning and Help Me Grow.

Neighborhoods for Learning

Since our inception 25 years ago, the First 5 Ventura County Neighborhoods for Learning (NfLs) have been a cornerstone in the community, providing early childhood education, health, and family support services. The redesigned Neighborhoods for Learning initiative (first implemented in FY 2019-20) gives us the ability to utilize a streamlined and standardized model that meets the needs of the local community and relies on sustainable investments and innovative partnerships. Neighborhoods for Learning services are available at key locations throughout Ventura County and include:

Parent and Child Together (PACT) Classes

The goal of PACT classes is to ensure that families have the knowledge, confidence, and support they need to give their children a **strong foundation for success in school and life.**
Led by a trained teacher, these classes:

- strengthen parent/caregiver and child **relationships** and bonding,
- support children's **early learning,**
- enhance parent/caregiver **knowledge** of child development,
- provide **social connections** for parents/caregivers, and
- enable **access** to community services.

NEIGHBORHOODS FOR LEARNING OFFER:

- Parent and Child Together Classes
- Developmental Screenings
- Parent Education and Leadership
- Connections to Community Resources

SERVING CHILDREN 0 - 5

> **"The impact of parents may never be greater than during the earliest years of life."**
>
> - Petra Puls
> F5VC Executive Director

Child Health and Development Services

NfL staff connect parents to a variety of health screenings and needed support services to ensure parents and other caregivers have the help they need to keep their children thriving.

- ASQ and ASQ-SE Developmental Screenings check on a child's **development,** help parents celebrate their child's milestones, and determine whether follow-up steps are needed.
- Prenatal and Postpartum Screening provides the opportunity to identify mothers at-risk for **depression** and connect them to appropriate services.
- Social Determinants of Health Screening helps parents and caregivers meet their **basic human needs** and overcome stressors that impair effective parenting.

Access to Services

If a need is identified, **referrals** are offered to services provided by local community-based organizations and agencies. **Care coordination** is provided by NfL staff to help families connect to and utilize services, such as:

- CalWorks (e.g., income support, childcare, job training, and transportation assistance)
- CalFresh nutrition assistance program
- Medi-Cal health assistance program
- Other basic needs

Help Me Grow Ventura County

Help Me Grow (HMG) is a framework for advancing local early identification efforts. As an affiliate of Help Me Grow National, F5VC collaborates with partners working towards a goal that **children are linked to the support they are entitled to receive.**

Help Me Grow
VENTURA COUNTY

Help Me Grow Ventura County works to ensure a child's optimal development by strengthening the systems connecting families to early identification and intervention services by:

- Creating a network of local partners dedicated to developmental monitoring and early intervention.
- Educating and training local medical providers and early childhood educators on best practices around developmental screening and referral.
- Providing tools and resources to support screening and referral.
- Helping families navigate the system of services available to them.
- Collecting and reporting data around developmental screening outcomes.

PARENT LEADERS

Children, families, and communities thrive when parents are engaged partners. **Harnessing the power of parents** and giving them the space and support to share their expertise, wisdom, and knowledge ensures that the Commission keeps families at the center of our work. Through collaborations with The Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (EC-LINC), the Commission has created a space for parents to collaborate nationally, build leadership skills, advance race equity, and advocate for change within early childhood systems.

The Ventura County Parent Leader Network and the NfL Parent Advisory Groups are integral in developing and evaluating First 5 Ventura County's programs and investments. We will **continue to elevate and honor parent voices in Ventura County.**

DESIRED OUTCOMES- *How we will measure progress on our goals and remain accountable*

First 5 Ventura County's results-based accountability framework incorporates its desired outcomes and indicators to monitor and measure progress on its strategic priorities and investments. The accompanying evaluation plan emphasizes **F5VC's focus on equitable change, sustainable improvements, and community impact.** We also track program performance in order to facilitate capacity building and continuous quality improvement.

Furthermore, annual reports are issued by the Commission on the overall results-based accountability framework to ensure optimal allocation of public resources and to guide strategic decision-making. The Commission recognizes that now, more so than ever before, families' needs are changing rapidly.

F5VC will continue to serve as an **early childhood leader** and remains committed to building a comprehensive early childhood infrastructure and system of care that can respond to the **unique and dynamic needs** of Ventura County families.

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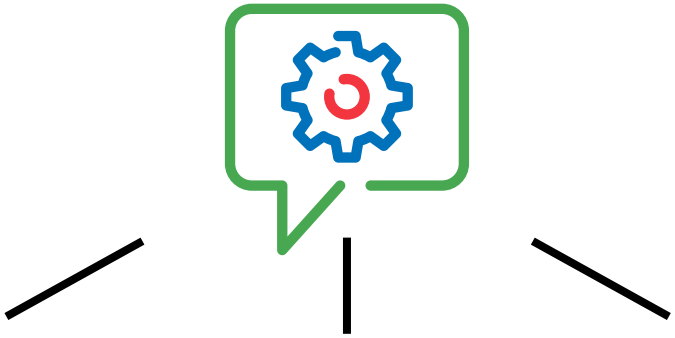
DESIRED OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

Program and Systems Integration

We will measure progress towards achieving our mission and vision through desired outcomes.

- Early Childhood Systems are strengthened with increased capacity of partners
- Early Childhood Systems are integrated with increased cross-systems understanding, resources, sharing, referral, and collaboration
- Early childhood resources, services and supports are sustained with legislation and policy

We apply a program and systems integration lens to the following strategic priority areas to focus efforts in achieving our vision and mission.



Comprehensive Child Health and Development

Strong and ResilientFamilies

Quality Early Learning

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES	INVESTMENTS	DESIRED OUTCOMES
Comprehensive Child Health and Development	• Access to and utilization of health care services • Early identification of developmental delays and social emotional issues • Parental mental health screening • Pediatric Support for Social and Emotional Development	• Children are meeting developmental milestones, have health insurance, and are up to date with well child & dental visits • Children with developmental or health concerns are identified and connected to services • Mothers identified at-risk for depression are connected to appropriate services and support
Strong and ResilientFamilies	• Social Needs Screenings • Parent and Child Together Classes • Parent Education and Supports • Community Resource and Referral • Service Coordination and Case Management • Parent Engagement	Parents have: • Knowledge of and capacity to promote healthy child development • Access and connections to essential community services/resources • Confidence in their ability to meet their child's developmental needs • Positive relationship with their child and secure attachment • Opportunities for social connections and sources of support
Quality Early Learning	• Quality enhancement of PACT • Take 5 and Read! Early Literacy Campaign • Community Investment Loan Fund	• Parents have access to high-quality early care and education • Parents promote their child's early learning and literacy

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FIRST 5 VENTURA COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

MAY 2023

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