

# The Power of Leadership, Partnership, & Planning



**62%** of California children from birth to age three experience one or more risk factors which, due to lack of access to resources and prolonged exposure to negative stress<sup>1</sup>, may undermine positive outcomes in education, health, and development.”<sup>2</sup>

California’s schools are facing increasing complexity when it comes to educating their student populations: the next generation of children is more diverse, more likely to live in low-income families, and are majority dual language learners. Research shows that providing supportive, enriching environments for children to connect with caring adults in the first years of life helps ensure the fundamental architecture of the brain is formed in healthy ways that impact a child throughout their life.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, emerging research is showing that parents also experience significant brain growth from the act of caregiving; ensuring positive relationships between the child and parent enables them to better support their child, even under difficult circumstances, helping them both to build resilience to better navigate future challenges.<sup>4</sup>

## Leveraging LCFF & Community Resources

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) allows school districts the flexibility to use resources to augment early childhood investments in service of improving outcomes for LCFF priority populations. Innovative leaders have further leveraged their investments by forming partnerships with local county agencies and community organizations that already offer services that benefit the school district’s community of young children and families. These partnerships help bridge the gap between California families who have access to high-quality resources and opportunities for their children from the very start, and those who don’t. Bridging this gap is essential to eliminating the well-documented structural barriers that, without intervention, mean children in LCFF priority populations are behind - before they enter school.<sup>5</sup> This brief spotlights school districts that have developed such partnerships and leveraged resources in their neighborhoods to better support young children and their families so they have every opportunity to thrive.



**“The transition to parenting is a true sensitive period – a time of openness, a time of vulnerability. Parents need to believe that we all have the capacity to be wonderful parents.”**

**Dr. Sarah Enos Watamura,  
Associate Professor,  
University of Denver**

Herald Tribune, February 19, 2017,  
Guest Columnist

## Focus on Families

Family Resource Centers (FRC) are designed to meet the local needs of families by providing diverse, community-based services and culturally-competent programs. Family resources centers represent a wide array of community-based organizations and may be located in a nearby community center or on school campuses.<sup>6</sup>

Family resource centers may be comprehensive or focus on a specific need or age group, providing services such as:

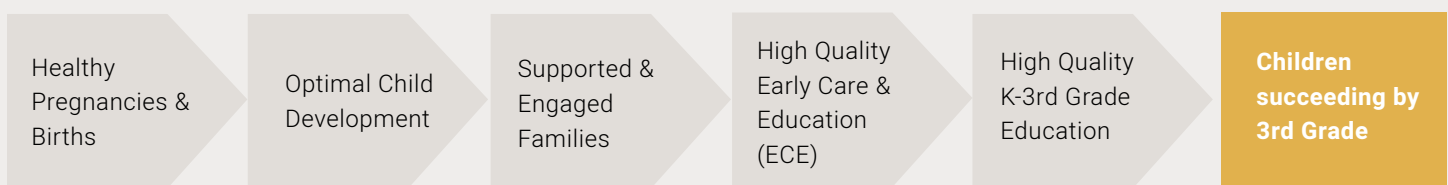
- Early intervention and developmental support services for infants and toddlers
- Physical and mental health screenings and referrals
- Parenting, early literacy and home visiting programs
- Coordinated service referrals/enrollment for county benefit and community-based programs
- Substance abuse programs
- Domestic violence support
- Family nutrition
- Early childhood and child development programs
- After school programs
- Legal support services
- Housing support and referrals.

## Spotlight: Santa Clara County

As part of a countywide Strengthening Families Initiative created by FIRST 5 Santa Clara County, 27 family resource centers (eight located on school campuses), are offering children and their families evidence-based early childhood programs, parent leadership trainings, links to needed community services, and supports to smooth the transition to preschool.<sup>7</sup> While many school districts have family resource centers on site or work in partnership with their local family resource center, it is the inclusion of evidence-based early childhood parenting and infant/toddler child development programming that makes these partnerships notable. Two school district partner efforts are featured below: Alum Rock Unified School District and Franklin-McKinley School District.

### Power of Leadership, Partnerships, & Planning

Woven throughout the efforts at Alum Rock Unified School District and Franklin-McKinley are the recurring themes of leadership and partnership. None of the efforts would have been possible if leaders at the district, Santa Clara County, partner organizations, funder organizations and others, had not identified a challenge and found opportunities to pool their limited resources and leverage them to better serve children and families. These leaders' effective use of data and understanding of early childhood development and brain research, engagement with diverse stakeholders, and will to break down service silos to meet the needs of families are what make these examples worth highlighting and repeating. California's families face complex challenges – the systems that support them should not add to the complexity in their lives. These efforts recognize that a child is part of a family and community of support and builds upon those components, rather than fragmenting them. In addition to being a key partner, FIRST 5 Santa Clara is also providing funding to conduct research to understand how these investments and strategies are benefitting participants and ensure learning is embedded into the partnership. Both districts have adopted the "Pathway to Success" (see below) which guides their partnership efforts.<sup>8</sup>



**The work that Alum Rock and Franklin-McKinley is doing is impressive," said Dr. Mary Ann Dewan, Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools. "Their strategic plans ensure that by third grade, all children in their districts are healthy, thriving and on the path to reach their full potential in school and life."<sup>9</sup>**

## Alum Rock Union Elementary School District

ALUM ROCK UNION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT serves more than 11,270 diverse students in San Jose who are 41 percent English learners and 85 percent free and reduced-priced lunch recipients. Upon arrival, Superintendent Dr. Hilaria Bauer reviewed data that showed that just 33 percent of kids were reading at grade level by third grade, the lowest level in the county.<sup>10</sup> To address these issues, Dr. Bauer formed a close partnership with local leaders including FIRST 5 Santa Clara County and local nonprofit Somos Mayfair. Together, the partners created a Prenatal through 3rd grade Initiative, a comprehensive strategic plan to improve school readiness which included hosting family resource centers on school district campuses to provide a centralized venue for families with young children to engage in enriching activities with their fellow parents and caregivers, learn about healthy child development, access community-based services, and build relationships with their local school educators and leaders.

The family resource center helps bridge the gap for families who may understand the importance of supporting their child's healthy development, but may not have the resources or information they need to fully benefit from their awareness. They also provide school district leaders including elementary principals, superintendents and board members the opportunity to engage and build relationships with families from the very start, broaden their own understanding of early childhood development and encourage continued enrollment within the district. Camille Llanes-Fontanilla, Executive Director with Somos Mayfair the nonprofit that operates the FRC on campus stated, "Buy in from the beginning is very important. You need buy in from both the campus and district leadership." Llanes-Fontanilla also emphasized the importance of engaging parents as active agents of change, "The resources, programs and strategies at the Chavez FRC are intentionally designed to build the capacity of families. We support the voice and leadership of the parents and families themselves, who are not only recipients of services but become catalytic change agents in their homes, schools and community."

## Franklin-McKinley School District

FRANKLIN-MCKINLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT serves 10,596 students who are 45 percent English learners and 73 percent free and reduce-priced lunch recipients.<sup>11</sup> District leaders were interested in expanding supportive services for families with young children, so they worked in collaboration with Catholic Charities to knock on doors in their community to ask families with young children about their concerns and needs. The district also used the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a tool which helps to measure school readiness at the community level and can be conducted every two to three years. Based on the findings from the EDI, the district found that more than half of kindergarten students are vulnerable or at risk across all of the developmental domains.<sup>12</sup> Families from Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking communities were also engaged in focus groups where they raised concerns with trusting and leaving children in the care of non-family members.<sup>13</sup> This elevated the need for the district to provide coaching and professional development opportunities that address cultural sensitivity and supporting dual language learners.

**"For many, many years, school districts did not engage in early learning. We waited for the students to walk onto our campuses at Kinder, and we took it from there," said Franklin-McKinley Superintendent Juan Cruz. "But we realized if we're really going to change, or really move the needle around, closing the achievement gap, we actually have to start early. We have to try to prevent the gap from showing up. And the only way to do that is engage in early learning."**<sup>14</sup>



**"The Family Resource Centers gives the community a pathway - starting with hope - bringing intentional, generational change for families."**

**Dr. Dianna Ballesteros,  
Director of Early Learning.**



Families in the area now have access to the early learning programs available at Educare, the family resource center operated by partner Catholic Charities and multiple indoor/outdoor play spaces. The district also created a professional development institute for the staff who serve the families which aims to build local capacity – both formal and informal – who are building essential nurturing relationships with children.<sup>15</sup>

The district has created a system of care, with a focus on the family. “A family walks in and needs care, they don’t have to navigate, they get identified using a screening application which tells us what they qualify for relative to benefits and programs. If they don’t qualify for Head Start or state preschool or TK, they are connected to programming at the family resource center.” Melinda Waller, Early Learning Director, Franklin-McKinley School District.

## Conclusion

Researchers and policy experts from around the country have made it clear that if California wants to improve outcomes for its students, it must improve how young children are supported from the very start. By leveraging community resources and building effective partnerships, school district leaders throughout California have the opportunity to ensure the children in their community have access to high quality, enriching and supportive programs that enable their students to thrive before they enroll as preschoolers or kindergarteners.

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