



SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT
OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Strategic Plan 2023–2027

Executive Summary



LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

More than three years ago, when First 5 San Francisco (First 5 SF) and the San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education (OECE) first began planning together and exploring the possibility of more closely integrating our work on behalf of San Francisco's young children and their families, we had no idea how much our world would change from then to now. In the ensuing months and years, the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic, ravaging its populations, decimating its economies, and interrupting learning for hundreds of millions of children. The United States reckoned with its racist past and present in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. We saw an unprecedented rise in misinformation and the greatest challenge to the country's democratic institutions since the Civil War. Wildfires across the state torched our landscapes and filled our air with toxic smoke.

With so much loss, devastation, and disruption to our lives around us, it would be easy to miss that something truly special was happening in the world of early childhood in San Francisco. After years of political infighting and hypothetical talk of better planning and coordination across City agencies serving our youngest residents, we took concrete steps to come together around common goals, leading to the merger of First 5 SF and OECE and the official formation of the new Department of Early Childhood (DEC). Almost three years after the 2018 passage of "Baby Prop C" and subsequent lawsuits by special interests challenging its legality, the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the City, children, and families, unlocking hundreds of millions of dollars of funding that has already begun transforming the early childhood system in San Francisco. DEC-funded Family Resource Centers proved their worth in the City's pandemic response, delivering critical support and services to families to meet basic needs during the most trying of times. Continued DEC funding kept early care and education programs open and at the ready to aid in the pandemic and economic recovery. Early educators began receiving unprecedented wage increases that finally recognized their qualifications and essential role in children's education and development, and families started to benefit from the largest expansion of eligibility for free, high-quality early education that the City has ever undertaken, giving us greater reach into working- and middle-class families.

There has never been so much promise and opportunity for young children and their families in San Francisco, but DEC cannot rely on expanded resources alone to close the significant gaps in opportunity and outcomes faced by our youngest children. We strategically engaged parents and caregivers these past two years, and learned that families indeed value and benefit from DEC's core strategies of early learning, family strength, and child health, yet, their experiences and outcomes are tied to structural racism, and voiced the need to have service improvements in parent engagement, cultural responsiveness, and ease of access to information and services. Therefore, this strategic plan lays out a path to not only expand the reach of our programs and services but more importantly strengthen their effectiveness by addressing these strategic priorities tied to racial equity.

The task before us is immense as we grow our capacity to implement these ambitious reforms while improving outcomes for more children and families. We are grateful to the generosity of San Francisco voters who bestowed financial resources and invested in the collective power and commitment of our grantees and partner organizations, the wind is at our backs. Great things have already arrived, and even greater things are on the horizon.



Ingrid X. Mezquita, Executive Director
Department of Early Childhood

Executive Summary

This inaugural strategic plan guides the work of the newly formed San Francisco Department of Early Childhood (DEC). The five-year plan defines our vision, mission, and values; sets ambitious goals and strategies; and establishes a shared foundation for action. With the convergence of several key opportunities, now is the time to make bold changes for our youngest children and their families.

Over the next five years, with unprecedented resources and clear purpose, DEC will make a holistic, tangible, and lasting impact on early learning, child health, and family strength.

This unique position allows San Francisco to implement innovative practices that can transform our early childhood system and drive better outcomes for our City's youngest learners. This five-year plan makes the case for racial equity as one such transformative approach, and demonstrates that when you engage families, it benefits our children and the people who care for them.

There is already significant work being done by DEC, and we are building on decades of groundbreaking political leadership and innovative policy and practices, and some of these standout early childhood services are highlighted. DEC will leverage the significant

local, state, and federal resources in early childhood programming – \$380 million annually through DEC alone – to generate equitable early learning opportunities, strengthen families and our communities, and improve compensation and working conditions for all the incredibly talented people that make up our early childhood system of care.

VISION

Every child in San Francisco has the best start in life and our City is a great place to raise a family.

MISSION

To weave together family, community, and system supports so that all children who grow up in San Francisco have a strong foundation of nurturing, health, and learning.



GUIDING VALUES

As the Department of Early Childhood, we are committed to:

- 1. Racial Equity:** We prioritize taking concrete action with Black, Latino, Indigenous, and Pacific Islander communities to address the disparities that persist across early childhood development outcomes for their families. We hold ourselves and one another accountable to measurable change and consider equity impacts in all our shared decision making.
- 2. Universal Access:** All families should have access to high-quality education and services to support healthy early childhood development.
- 3. Collaboration with Community:** When we engage parents, providers, and grantees as partners in decision-making, we expand the reach and impact of our work for countless children and families.
- 4. Continuous Learning and Improvement:** To have our desired impact, we must consistently and frequently engage parents, providers, and grantees in helping us understand what is working well and where improvements are needed—and use what we learn to shift and adapt our work.
- 5. Transparency:** To build and maintain trusting and productive relationships, we are open, authentic, and clear in our communication with parents, providers, grantees, and staff.

INTENTIONAL APPROACH

Kindergarten readiness is a key educational benchmark that leads to continued success in future years. Decades of research show that access to high quality early care and education, child health, development and early intervention services, and family and parenting support are critical contributors to children’s kindergarten readiness. The City of San Francisco has made significant and sustained investments in each of these areas. Over time, these investments have led to:

- 90% of SF 4-year-olds participating in preschool
- thousands of families working with Family Resource Centers (FRCs) developing increased confidence in their parenting skills
- over 3,000 children receiving developmental screenings annually

Despite these significant advancements in the early childhood development field, we still see racialized outcomes in kindergarten readiness. Our strategic planning process was designed to determine what we need to do differently to achieve different results.

To understand and address why research-based investments have not produced the outcomes we hope for, we took an intentional approach to strategic planning based around two core tenets:

- Equity-centered strategy can only be developed through equity-centered planning
- Parents and families know what is best for their children

With these tenets in mind, we co-designed our strategic planning process with parents most impacted by structural racism, engaging them in deep and sustained conversations. Only by truly listening to these parents about what they want for their children and implementing their feedback, could we identify the missing link between current investments and the outcomes we hope to achieve.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Time and time again, parents affirmed that the City is already investing in the right services. However, parent insight made it clear that to address racialized outcomes, we must advance racial equity across our system of care by improving the user experience, accessibility, and delivery of all programs and services.

The DEC strategic plan is structured according to a theory of change that centers on this key finding. It begins with a recognition of the challenges faced by San Francisco’s young children and their families and describes DEC’s three “core strategies” to solving these challenges that cover early learning, child health, and family strength. In accordance with parent input, we will continue to develop and expand these core strategies while also implementing improvements specific to equitable access and experiences—which we are calling “Strategic Priorities.” These critical Strategic Priorities are:

1. Amplify parent voice and influence in shaping policy and programs.
2. Increase cultural responsiveness of all early childhood development services.
3. Increase transparency in communications and open access to information and services.

THEORY OF CHANGE



If DEC and its grantees and partners are successful in carrying out these plans, we expect to see improvements in children’s kindergarten readiness, children’s health and access to quality health care, and families’ sense of self efficacy – and that race will no longer be a determinant of these critical outcomes.

CALL TO ACTION

With the energy, commitment, and passion of the entire early childhood development network of care working together, we will achieve our vision of a San Francisco where every child has the best start in life and our City is a great place to raise a family. Over the next five years, DEC’s imperative is to advance racial equity, disrupt racialized child outcomes, and create greater shared accountability. We will ensure all families have access to culturally and linguistically responsive information and services by engaging parents and communities as partners and leaders, working side-by-side to make our City a place where race is not a predictor for early childhood outcomes.

