



April 23, 2020

ACTION ITEM

SUBJECT: CALIFORNIA READS TOGETHER INITIATIVE

Strategic Plan Priority Area: Child Development and Family Functioning

Goal: All children birth through age 5 have high-quality, nurturing environments that ensure their learning readiness.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUE

If we hope to prepare children for California's future and reduce achievement disparities, California must prioritize the early learning of its youngest residents. A wide body of research has demonstrated that exposure to books and positive parenting practices, such as being read to in the first three years of life, are critical to robust brain development. Many programs and organizations are hard at work in California to provide books and early literacy supports to young families. For example, First 5 California's (F5CA) Talk. Read. Sing.® campaign was initiated out of an understanding of the importance of a word-rich environment to support the brain development of infants and toddlers. The campaign encourages parents and caregivers to prioritize talking, reading, and singing, and provides parent-friendly messages about the importance of early brain development. F5CA also invests in new parent kits delivered to families at the birth of their child through home visiting programs and family resource centers throughout the state, linking materials with resources that help families utilize the materials. These investments promote evidence-based serve-and-return responsive communication between a young child and an adult, and are particularly critical during uncertain and stressful times, such as now. The importance of the caregiver-child relationship, and taking time to bond by reading and playing is outlined in this article: https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVIDProtectiveFactors_ChildTrends_April2020.pdf.

Leveraging key partnerships, F5CA can further these campaigns by contributing additional resources to ensure every young child has access to early literacy supports. This aligns with the Governor's Parent Agenda by providing needed resources to families. It also supports the Surgeon General's goals to increase community-based family engagement and reduce the achievement gap. Early literacy programs encourage parent/child bonding which promotes resiliency and therefore provides positive mitigation against adverse childhood experiences.

Program Description

Funding for the California Reads Together Initiative will be used to strengthen community-based efforts to distribute books along with early literacy family engagement by leveraging trusted messengers in the community. Low-income families with dual language learners and those with low literacy will be a priority. County agencies (which may include a county First 5, library or consortium of libraries, or county office of education) may apply for funding for any of the following purposes:

- Expand access to an existing evidence-based early literacy program (those that include book distribution and family engagement) that is based in WIC centers, health clinics, or that otherwise reach infants and their parents through trusted community messengers.
- Offer funding to libraries to partner with WIC centers, health clinics, or other community service organizations to expand programming at those sites on a regular basis, including story time, book distribution, and library card sign-up.
- Expand other book distribution programs that reach low-income families in rural and/or remote areas of the state that are coupled with connections to resources that support family strengthening and literacy.

California can leverage existing evidence-informed early literacy networks to scale up a state-wide approach, reaching at least 85 percent of low-income children between the ages of 0 and 5, with an effective intervention. In order to successfully leverage and grow these existing networks, California should fund network development and expansion for initiatives meeting the following criteria:

1. **Connection to positive child-level outcomes** – California should fund programs that are directly intended to promote child-level literacy outcomes, including improving child literacy rates, and parent engagement outcomes that may contribute to child-level outcomes.
 - Evidence of results – Documented evidence of the impact on child-level outcomes.
 - Family/parent/caregiver engagement – All programs must contain an adult engagement component to encourage a two-generation strategy around literacy.
2. **Presence in California** – This criterion considers whether programs are currently operating within one or more counties in California providing the capacity to build upon and leverage existing infrastructure.
3. **Scalability** – Given the interest in rapid scaling of programs, these criteria consider the feasibility of expanding programs to achieve desired scale to reach at least 85

percent of children ages 0 to 5 eligible for Medi-Cal within three years.

4. **Targeted** – Many coordinated book distribution programs in California are universal in approach, not targeted to high-need or at-risk infants and toddlers. In order to achieve a goal of statewide early literacy equity and cost-control, this criterion is necessary to focus on low-income children, ages 0 to 5, and their parents.

By applying these four criteria, F5CA has tentatively identified a list of six First 5-funded models currently serving low-income children in California that: 1) demonstrate positive child-level outcomes; 2) have some level of evidence or research-basis; and 3) have accessibility to high-quality, language-appropriate books: Little by Little, Parents as Teachers, Reach Out and Read, Story Cycles, Imagination Library, and Jump Start. Across California, at least 33 counties are implementing the identified models, including, Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Contra Costa, Del Norte, Fresno, Kings, Lake, Los Angeles, Mendocino, Merced, Modoc, Mono, Napa, Monterey, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, Santa Barbara, San Bernardino, Santa Clara, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Sierra, Solano, Stanislaus, Tehama, Tulare, Tuolumne, and Yolo. F5CA is now working with the State Librarian Association to identify any non-First 5 early literacy initiatives in the other counties.

The California Reads Together Initiative would issue grants to lead agencies, available to every county, to develop or grow early literacy programs that meet each of the above criteria, to reach at least 85 percent of low-income children in their region by 2024. These grants would require an on-going local match and commitment to the criteria. A total state-wide investment of just under \$23 million annually would achieve this goal.

Budget Estimates

The program budget is based on the number of low-income children ages 0 to 5 (an estimated 1,076,000 children ages 0 to 5 are eligible for Medi-Cal) and estimates of prominent program models’ costs for families served. County partners will be required to allocate additional funding to cover the full costs of services for low-income families.

Number of children to be served (85 percent of children ages 0 to 5 eligible for Medi-Cal)		914,600
Program costs (\$25/child)	\$	22,865,000
Evaluation costs	\$	2,000,000
<i>Total annual program cost</i>	<i>\$</i>	<i>24,865,000</i>
F5CA Annual Program Investment	\$	12,865,000
Proposed First 5 County Annual Program Match	\$	10,000,000
F5CA Annual Evaluation Investment	\$	2,000,000

Program Oversight and Administration

Launch funds could be one-time in nature, over a three-year period, to build the implementation infrastructure and bring the program to scale. A commitment to on-going annual funds is needed for stability.

To launch the program, F5CA will disseminate funding to the counties and ensure they identify an evidence-based program model or approach that meets the goals of the program. Funds will also support an evaluation of the program, including an analysis of number of children served, and parent and child outcomes. After initial infrastructure development and implementation, the administration of the program may be transferred to another state department or agency.

F5CA could also fund and facilitate the ongoing California Reads Together state leadership group, consisting of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the State Librarian, the State Librarian Association, the California WIC Association, and the First 5 Association, to ensure state-level focus, cost-efficiencies, and continuous improvement.

Outcomes Measurement

The California Reads Together Initiative will need to include both systems and child outcomes measurements, to be developed by F5CA, including number of sites, children, and parents served, and an independent evaluation for child and parent-level outcomes for participants, over time. Book possession and reading frequency data will be included in the California Health Information Survey, to track the impact of California Reads Together Initiative at the population level.

Program Goals and Scaling

The California Reads Together Initiative will build on existing local programs and could reach 85 percent of children ages 0 to 5 eligible for Medi-Cal in three years.

RECOMMENDATION

F5CA staff recommends the Commission commit \$44,595,000 million over three years to launch the California Reads Together Initiative.

BACKGROUND OF KEY ISSUES

Reading to children ages 0 to 5, as well as exposure to books, has been shown in myriad studies to have profound positive impacts on cognitive development that lasts well beyond a child's fifth birthday. Children who are read five books per day, for example, hear an estimated 1.2 million more words than children who are read only one book per day. This is commonly referred to as the "million-word gap," and significantly impacts a child's vocabulary development and school performance. Exposure to books in the home also has been shown to be strongly correlated to a child's educational performance and reading test scores. The more books a home has, the better a child does in school. Importantly, the effect of each additional book is highest in homes with the fewest books (the law of diminishing returns), and households in low socioeconomic categories. Variety is as important as volume when it comes to books effects on cognitive development. While many programs that distribute books focus on concept books (shapes, colors, animals, etc.), exposure to narrative books is important to develop language and cognitive development.

Daily reading, singing, and storytelling are recognized as positive parenting practices which research shows have significant impacts on child development, as well as reducing toxic stress in children, a recognized adverse childhood experience. Children who are not read to at all, for example, have been shown to have their risk of developmental delays increase by over 50 percent. Nearly all of the book distribution programs identified by F5CA include an education and training component for participating families, emphasizing the benefits of reading books together and using them as a bonding activity. Reading together and engaging in active questioning about what is in the books provides an opportunity for socialization, bonding, and even fun. The Talk. Read. Sing.® campaign focuses on the importance of these activities and their myriad benefits. Access to books is the foundational element that enables families to engage in these important activities with their young children.

Recognizing the importance of getting books into households with small children, many programs, both private and public, have developed distribution strategies designed to increase the number of books children have in the home. Little By Little leverages existing service provider networks (WIC) to distribute books and reading education information to families during the course of pre-existing service visits. The State Library and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library deliver books to families through the mail while also leveraging programs like WIC to serve as entry points into their programs. F5CA operates the Talk. Read. Sing.® campaign, which encourages families to engage in these activities, through advertising and local events and distributes more than 175,000 books to new families through the *Kit for New Parents* annually. All of these efforts have an impact. According to the most recent California Health Interview Survey, 87 percent of parents recognize the Talk. Read. Sing.® messaging, and almost 90 percent of parents report reading to their children at least 3 times per week.

A frequent challenge for distribution programs is scalability. Unlike education campaigns that focus primarily on delivering information, such as Talk. Read. Sing.®, book distribution programs must contend with the relatively high cost of purchasing and delivering books, as well as personnel support to provide training for families in how to maximize the positive effects. There is currently little ongoing state funding available to support these programs, despite the significant evidence base demonstrating their criticality in child development and success.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS COMMISSION DISCUSSION AND ACTION

In January 2020, the Commission was presented with examples of programs and organizations providing books and early literacy supports to young families. Presentations were given on four models used in several counties in California: Little by Little, Dolly Parton Imagination Library, Raising a Reader, and Reach Out and Read.

FISCAL ANALYSIS

Thirty million dollars (\$10 million per year for 3 years) in program cost would be funded through the Education account. The remaining \$8.595 million (\$2.865 million per year for 3 years) for program cost would be funded through the Research and Development account. An additional \$6 million (\$2 million per year for 3 years) for an evaluation of the California Reads Together Initiative would be funded through the Research and Development account. Utilizing the Education and Research and Development accounts is appropriate given the work outlined in this item. Funding at the recommended amount would allow for flexible funding for other projects in outlying years and not jeopardize the accounts in the short or long-term.

ATTACHMENTS

A. First 5 California Book and Literacy Programs Survey