

First 5 Current Status — Opening Comments and Welcome by the Chair for the October 22 Meeting (Halvorson)

As chair of this Commission, I thought I would open this final meeting of the year with an update and summary of the last couple of years status and a couple of comments about next steps for the Commission. This will reprise some of the points we discussed at the last meeting.

We continue to make progress on our five 90-percent goals.

When I became chair, we had been in a time of very low legislative visibility. We hadn't taken a stand on any legislative issues for a while — and continuing that level of visibility was not why I was asked by the Governor to chair the group.

Changing that low visibility at the legislature was our first 90-percent goal.

We set a first 90-percent goal of going from basically taking stands on no legislative issues to taking stands in a credible way on 90 percent or more of the issues that affected very young children in California.

We achieved that goal, by being heard on over 50 issues in each of the last several years and by actually having a couple of the pieces of legislation that we sponsored passed into law.

We are now asked for input on every relevant bill and we work hard to both know what bills are being considered and to work with friends and allies to influence what is being considered.

As Commissioners, you have heard those reports from our excellent legislative staff. Those positions and the work they do did not exist prior to us setting that goal. We are fortunate to have a very strong team doing that work.

I initially had to do multiple direct contacts with the speaker, several committee chairs, and multiple other legislative staff people and leaders in my initial time on the job. A measure of our success is that I have not had to even appear at anything at the legislature in more than a year. Camille Maben and her team and our new legislative coalition have done that work and done it well.

The First 5 Association has done excellent work in that space as well.

That first 90-percent goal was achieved.

Our second and even more important and highly visible 90-percent goal related to having low-income mothers in California know that they could exercise their child's brain and strengthen the brain.

California learning gaps in our schools have been horrible and getting worse — and part of the reason for those gaps was that a majority of mothers did not know what they could do to reduce them and to help their children have better lives relative to learning abilities.

We did a survey and discovered that more than 90 percent of the Medicaid mothers did not know that they could exercise children's brains and strengthen them — and that meant that the children were not learning ready when they arrived at school. That was hugely relevant to the Commission because the very first macro goal of this Commission that was clearly and intentionally written into the actual law when it was passed by the voters was to create learning readiness for California children and the tobacco tax funding was put in place by the voters very explicitly to help better the readiness levels of our children.

We had failed in that part of the First 5 effort at that point in time, but we knew from the new and old brain science what makes learning readiness happen for children and we learned from that work that we did not have California low-income mothers knowing or believing in the basic things that could be done to help achieve that goal.

We decided to run an ad campaign for California families to encourage that behavior and to support and recommend that highly beneficial set of interactions with all children.

We did not feel that teaching actual neuro science to every family was the best option, but we did want to have 90 percent of the mothers who gave birth in California knowing that they could, in fact, do some basic and positive things with their children to exercise the brain and create both a happier and more learning ready experience for their child.

We made that a very public 90-percent goal.

We set a goal of having 90 percent of the mothers knowing that possibility of strengthening their child's brain existed. The Superintendent of Schools and the Secretary of Health for the State of California stood with me at the microphone at the First 5 Summit and they shared their strong support for that number and that goal.

They agreed that we should not think small in our goal setting because the impact on children was so hugely important, and so we all stated with major visibility that we needed to flip the situation for California mothers from 90 percent not knowing they could have an impact to 90 percent of mothers in California knowing that the impact was possible and that it was a good thing to do.

We have succeeded in that effort.

Our Talk. Read. Sing.[®] ad campaign very directly and intentionally teaches that exact message. We have put together a very strong communications effort built on that recommendation.

We now have a couple of years where credible state surveys show that recognition levels by mothers of the Talk. Read. Sing.® campaign is in excess of 85 percent.

Eighty-five percent is close to 90 percent.

So the second 90-percent goal for the Commission has basically also been achieved. That message continues to be reinforced by the Talk. Read. Sing.® ads that are running now because new babies are being born every day and we can't ever stop helping families understand that process and opportunity for their children.

Some people think we should change themes for that campaign sometimes just for variety. Ad people like new themes. Departing from that message as long as new babies are being born in California would be a mistake.

Changing the approach just to change it would be a little like reducing infection rates in our hospitals by over 90 percent to nearly 'zero' percent and then changing the focus for our hospitals to some other topic. I know that process and thinking well.

In our hospitals in my last setting, we did achieve those 90-percent success goals but the reality is that we need to keep doing the right things forever or patients will die. We can't stop doing what works in each setting on any of those key process issues. We absolutely need to keep doing the right things every day in every hospital for every patient because yesterdays' successes and yesterday's good scores and even yesterday's safety awards do not make life safe for today's patient.

It's a never-ending process for both hospitals and children — and doing something like changing the First 5 and State of California communications agenda to a new topic would be like blindly increasing the death rate and the infection rates for patients in a care system because we changed our priorities for those processes and issues just to have variety of some kind.

The best hospitals would never do that — and we as a Commission need to keep teaching each new mother and each new father what those opportunities are for each new child because the life trajectory of each child depends to a very large degree on where it begins in those key areas of development.

The very high recognition level for the Talk. Read. Sing.® message meets the Goal Two and we need to continue to have that goal met.

We have been less successful with Goal Three.

The third 90-percent goal that we set and discussed multiple times was to actually have 90 percent of the low-income mothers in California either reading to their child or being able to have other people reading to their child in those first two and three years after birth when we have both neuron connections being made and epigenetic development

processes that supports each child that are strengthened by having parents and families and care givers reading to children and interacting with each child.

There are significant disparity and equity and major racial and ethnic discrimination issues involved in this book distribution goal.

We knew that the average non-Medicaid home in California has 12 to 20 books per child, and we knew and discussed that more than half of the Medicaid homes did not have a single book. We know from the great developmental research at the University of Ohio and at both Berkeley and Stanford, that the early interactions are extremely important and we had all the research showing that books are a key part of that tool kit. We know that children in the homes with no books hear an average of 5,000 spoken words before age five, and [we know that the homes with books who read every day hear closer to 300,000 spoken words before age five.](#)

We know that the neuron connections and the very best sets of learning connections happen with adults when the children hear spoken words and when the spoken words happen in the kinds of [interactions between adults and children](#) that are generally structurally choreographed in very natural ways by the reading process.

We knew as a Commission that low-income children had very few books.

We knew that California had publicly visible functional book deserts for far too many low-income children.

We knew we wanted to get books into 90 percent of the low-income California homes to give the children in those homes a more equitable start.

We were on a good path for achieving that goal. We had a plan to get books to those children.

We were building in that plan from a very solid foundation that had been largely built with First 5 money.

First 5 Los Angeles has done a wonderful job through their Little by Little program of using the WIC program and their team to get books to low-income children, and we have seen extremely positive numbers from that program about improving the learning readiness levels for those children.

That Little by Little program creates a very usable functional book distribution base. They are not perfect, but they are very good at what they do. They have set up a magnificent opportunity for continuous improvement with their first efforts and have gotten books to many low-income children in their settings.

My own sense, as someone who has done a lot of process improvement work in a number of organizational and public settings is that they will be able to achieve that 90-

percent goal on getting books to children as we give them the needed resources and as they continue to improve and enhance what they do.

I personally promised our Governor that we could achieve similar results to the Little by Little program across the state and that we would extend that blessing and benefit to almost all low-income families. I promoted that approach to him in a couple of settings and his response was extremely positive.

I based my own confidence on prior efforts I have seen in health care settings where we used continuous improvement thinking and goal-setting approaches to align people to achieve goals like reducing pressure ulcers in hospitals by 90 percent or more. We reduced the ulcers in our nearly 40 hospitals by 10 percent and then by more than 30 percent, and ultimately by very close to 90 percent by putting the right processes in place and then doing them consistently and well in every setting.

Other hospitals in multiple settings are learning from that model.

Governor Newsom told me that he was fully supportive of getting books to our low-income children — and based on his equally clear commitment to dealing with the huge and painful issues and the damage done by ethnic and racial disparities that exist in far too many settings in California, that goal of getting equitable numbers of books into those homes was entirely in accord and alignment and even scope with his entire anti-racism agenda.

We have had a major setback on the pathway to Goal Three.

Our plan and agreement a year ago was to get to that 90-percent goal by using that Little by Little tool everywhere. Sadly, the Covid disaster has taken that money out of the budget and cash flow for the state. The children are all now in isolation across the state — and their isolation is even more painful and damaging without books for the low-income families.

We are doing some things through several First 5 counties to get books to some children — as you will hear on agenda item nine today. We are passing some books out through the First 5 diaper program for essential worker families.

Little by Little continues to distribute books to their families in Los Angeles.

But we will not get near that original 90-percent goal for the state.

That is sad news for many people and very bad news for low-income children.

The Superintendent of Schools and the State Librarian are both extremely supportive of us getting books to 90 percent of low-income children. The Superintendent received a standing ovation at our last First 5 summit for his clear and persuasive support of that agenda and goal. When First 5 and the State are ready to launch a literacy movement

for California, it will get extensive support from multiple directions and that literacy program will be a clear message to Californians from every group that those disparities and those painful and damaging inequities should not continue.

But for now, we have failed at our third 90-percent goal.

The fourth 90-percent goal was built off the first three.

We have an annual time of sadness, sorrow, regret and frustration in California when we announce the current learning gap data for California schools. The fourth 90-percent goal was to have 90 percent of the news stories written after that report citing and quoting and recognizing First 5 about the important and functional things that we are doing to make those gaps disappear — with the book distribution effort and the literacy program and movement as an anchor for that process.

My own plan and our new public relations effort strategy had been for actual members of our Commission to each meet with the media in each community to make that announcement and to do interviews on that issue when that report is released. It would strengthen the credibility of the Commission to have each of our Commissioners doing those media interactions.

That type of expanded exposure to members of the Commission isn't a new strategy for me as chair. In my last setting as chair, we went from a couple thousand media reports each year to over 20,000 media interactions by having local people from our organization in each setting interacting with local media. It strengthens the connection and extends the reach and enhances the credibility of our team.

We have had a couple of our Commission members test and pilot that approach this year and it has been extremely successful. Our Commissioners did great work with the Media and the media loved having that contact.

We should make that approach part of the Commission agenda a year from now when we have a book distribution and literacy enhancement program and goal to announce as an offset to the terrible and painful learning gap data.

For now, that goal is a failure.

We are having much better luck with the fifth 90-percent goal.

The fifth and final 90-percent goal has been to enhance our website to the point where 90 percent of the people who go there return to the website at least once.

We direct a lot of people to our website — and the number of repeat visits has not been as high as we wanted to have. We had an old-fashioned website with some good content that was not easy to access — and we had less than a third of the people who were going there returning to the site for additional use.

That was a clear opportunity.

I have spent a lot of time in several other settings on website enhancement, and I know how powerful, useful, and effective a really good website can be. Both KP and Mayo have literally millions of users for their websites, because they have really good websites. We have had an average website for First 5 and Goal Five was to turn that average website into a great site.

We have been working hard to make that happen.

Our Commission Communications Committee was heavily involved early in that process. We had a chance in the planning process for the new website to share and discuss and connect with some of the best features of the best sites. Our communications committee had a chance to do some deep dives into that process when it was a two-person working group.

That was enough to meet our needs to get that process going down the right roads with very high expectations for the result.

The new website team carefully looked at the best available sites from multiple other settings, and they have built a state-of-the-art website that is extremely family friendly, interactive, informative, and accessible to families and the community in a time when electronic connectivity and high value content is more important than it has ever been in our state and in our nation.

The new site is state of the art, interactive, and extremely useful in time when the internet and social media are primary services that we all use for learning and support.

We have begun to use the new site. Check it out.

More than half of the births in California are in our MediCal Program. They have not had a good tool to use to help new mothers and new fathers know important things about taking care of their children and helping them have both emotional security and high levels of learning readiness. This website can do some of that work for them.

It is an easy to use tool for the MediCal program and it is available just in time. The MediCal new leadership has expressed strong support in a meeting with Camille and myself for getting that tool into the hands of both caregivers and families.

We expect similar support from the Superintendent of Schools, and the State Librarian, and from all of the parenting groups and communities who care about our children for both the website and the literacy program that needs to be built in this time of Covid deprivation.

I am confident that the new website will achieve that initial Goal Five of 90 percent repeat visits. My own prediction is that website will not only achieve that goal, it will be on a path of continuous improvement that will make it a major tool for child development in California and the world for many years to come.

[Go here to link with the site.](#)

Goal Five will be achieved.

However —

[That only gets us part way to where we need to go for California kids.](#)

The California learning gaps are huge and they are creating increasing levels of damage for the state because of the simple mathematical reality that far more children are being born into the low end of that gap.

As chair of this Commission, I strongly believe that we now need to set and achieve a couple of extremely important new goals for both The Commission and the State of California. We need goals that can help align us as families and communities and as caretakers and providers for our children in key areas that will change life trajectories for children.

[The learning gaps need to end.](#) We now need to set goals as an entire state on Literacy for our children.

Learning readiness is key.

We need to set learning readiness goals for our children and then achieve them. Eighty percent would be a good, inspirational, important, and achievable goal.

We should do whatever we need to do as a state to have 80 percent of our children learning ready at kindergarten instead of only 40 percent of our children being learning ready today.

For the new Goal Two, we should do something very achievable that can have an almost immediate impact on our children. We need to start by doing something that is very achievable and that can make it possible for us to achieve the learning readiness goals. Books are key.

We need to get books into 90 percent of low-income homes.

Getting books to low-income homes is an achievable goal, and it is extremely possible to do.

We can easily afford to do it. Even in Covid times. Particularly in Covid times. Books do not cost that much money and they are generally felt to be a priceless treasure in every family that has books. We need children to read in order to succeed and thrive — [and books help us go down that path.](#)

At a very grim level as a state and nation, some people point to the link we see in America between prison and high school dropout rates.

Those well-known numbers that link literacy to prison are clear and painful. We know that 60 percent of the African American males in their 30s who have dropped out of high school are in prison, today, compared to 10 percent of the graduates. Ten percent is a very bad number and 60 percent is even worse.

We know from the work at Columbia that we can predict with an extremely high level of accuracy in the first year who will be dropping out.

Racism and prejudice and other major economic disparities all point in the direction of prison.

The direct relationship between dropping out and incarceration is particularly important because we know from that data that we can change those trajectories by helping children to read.

We functionally know that we can reduce the number of people who drop out by doing things like getting books into homes.

We are not alone as a nation in having those clear and important patterns for imprisonment.

Interestingly, Canada imprisons far fewer people than we do, but 70 percent of the people in the Canadian prisons are also high school dropouts and do not read well.

[In Scotland](#), 80 percent of the people in prison can't read.

We need to change the dropout rates here and [we need to end the major learning gaps](#) in all of our schools and the best way of doing that is to help every child in the First 5 timeframes when helping each child has a permanent and extremely positive impact on each life.

The Master Plan for Children for the State of California is being developed. That plan will fail in important and permanent and extremely expensive ways if literacy goals are not built into the plan.

The master plan designers need to recognize those very explicit realities. The people building that plan aspire to make California better for our children.

The truth is that we will not be able to change the lifetime earning trajectories and we will not be able to change the huge wealth disparity realities if most of the people children from the groups at the low end of those trajectories cannot read.

It is wishful thinking, magical thinking, and highly dysfunctional and significantly flawed and almost voodoo-level economic thinking to believe that the California children who cannot read and California children who cannot adequately count will somehow be able to benefit fully from the other elements of the Master Plan.

We can fix that problem and correct that deficit.

We need relevant, functional, visible and unifying goals to address those issues and to support the opportunity levels for each child.

The Master Plan should have at least two clear and unifying goals to motivate people and align actions and words toward eliminating those gaps for our children.

As an anchor and clearly understood goal, [we need 80 percent of those students to be learning ready](#).

To achieve that goal — at a highly important functional level — as a second and highly relevant logistical level, we need to get equitable numbers of books into 80 percent of those low-income homes.

In alignment with the five original First 5 90-percent goals that I just described, the State of California should set one 80-percent goal and one 90-percent goal — both enabling and supporting literacy for California children.

We need to have our Governor and our Superintendent of Schools and our State Librarian to ask everyone from every group and setting to help in a wide variety of ways to achieve that goal.

People who claim to believe that Black Lives Matter need to prove that belief by giving equitable support now and immediately by making sure that we provide that early literacy support to all African American children in California who we can reach with any programs and we also to provide that support to all of the children in our MediCal program — and that needs to happen for all children with no books in their homes because that support and resource is so badly needed by those children.

We have a very strong agenda for our meeting today.

We are going to talk about Covid related issues — and we are going to celebrate some very good work we are doing to support essential worker families with very young children. Helping essential worker families with very young children with essential supplies and even with remote thermometers for those homes was the right thing to do.

We are also going to hear about our most recent legislative successes.

We are going to talk about using our money in ways that extend our resources into the future in effective ways.

Covid times are terrible times for us all. Thank you, Commissioners, for your perfect attendance at this meeting and for all of the excellent work that the Commission committees are doing in so many key areas.

[We will hear about that work in the meeting today.](#)

I now officially call this meeting to order and call for the official roll call of attendees by our counsel.