

First 5 Commission of San Diego County

April 16, 2025

(deferred from February 18, 2025)

Learn Well Initiative – Contract Sole Source

Request

The request before the Commission is to approve a sole source contract with the San Diego County Superintendent of Schools (dba San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE)) for the Learn Well Initiative. The Learn Well Initiative contract period will be from July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2030. SDCOE qualifies for a sole source contract as a provider with unique knowledge, skill, or ability not available from other sources.

Background

The Commission approved a total of up to \$43,183,938 to fund the Learn Well Initiative over a five year period (FY 2020-21 through FY 2024-25). The goal of Learn Well is to positively impact the growth and development of children ages birth to 5 years by providing direct supports to early care and education providers throughout the county. Participating providers benefit from direct coaching, engagement in learning communities, access to ongoing no cost professional development, in addition to receiving an annual retention stipend. The Learn Well Initiative is part of a greater quality improvement system called San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative which aims to ensure that all children have the foundation they will need to transition to kindergarten, experience success in school, and become life-long learners. The approach to achieve this goal has been through direct support to participating early care and education providers throughout San Diego County in order to achieve the highest quality according to the Quality Counts California (QCC) standards.

Quality Counts California (QCC) is a statewide effort to strengthen California's early learning and care system to support young children and their families. QCC uses an equity approach to close the education gap by:

- Prioritizing communities where we can make the greatest impact
- Providing access to tools and resources for quality partners, including administrators, coaches, trainers, and higher education faculty
- Linking early educators to resources and support to advance their commitment to quality early learning and care
- Informing parents and families about the importance of quality early learning and helping them identify quality early learning and care environments
- Offering information and research to help policymakers communicate the value and importance of quality early learning and care

QCC is funded by a collaboration between First 5 California (F5CA), the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).

The governing structure for quality early learning programming is directed by Quality Counts California (QCC) and is the statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System. QCC is a statewide, locally implemented quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that funds and provides guidance to local and regional agencies, and other quality partners, in their support of early learning and care providers. QCC helps these agencies enhance the quality of early learning and care programs and informs parents and families on what different quality levels mean for the child's early learning and care setting (see graphic below).



In 2006, First 5 San Diego began supporting quality early learning efforts with the Preschool For All initiative supporting local subsidized providers working with preschool age children. This included local early childhood education providers that received funding from the California Department of Education (CDE) and the Office of Head Start. This aligned with the statewide quality rating and improvement system that provided a Rating Matrix outlining 7 quality elements in the three core areas outlined above.

In 2012, First 5 San Diego created the next phase of supporting the quality journey by funding the Quality Preschool Initiative (QPI) through an open competitive procurement process. QPI has engaged many providers throughout the County and supported them on the path towards achieving the highest quality rating and sustaining the quality elements throughout their programs by providing targeted teacher and administrator coaching to participating agencies. The coaching intervention supports the growth and development of both the teacher working directly with children and families, and the administrator that supervises the teaching teams. The goal is to see an improvement in the quality of the interactions between teachers and children to support the child's growth and development. Additionally, the San Diego QPI has focused on family strengthening efforts by providing parent workshops on positive parenting, nutrition and linking families to needed supports.

Participation in Quality Counts California mandates the following representation within each County in the State to create a local QCC Consortium: 1) **First 5 Commission**, 2) **County Office of Education**, 3) **Resource and Referral Agency** and 4) **Public Institution of Higher Education**. The funding structure from CDE requires First 5 Commissions to work directly with their respective County Office of Education in applying for quality early learning funds. Ultimately, this partnership leverages and aligns First 5 Commission quality early learning funds with other funding sources to support the greater initiative that is known as the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative.

First 5 San Diego has contracted directly with the San Diego County Superintendent of Schools, also known as the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), to oversee the local First 5 San Diego QPI contract and has the primary role of integrating the various quality funding that is received through CDE and First 5 CA. SDCOE is the designated San Diego County rating entity for the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in California, which is called Quality Counts California (QCC). The QCC effort is funded via multiple sources at the state level and it is required that the local county office of education apply for all funds allocated by the California Department of Education (CDE) for this purpose. There are currently four (4) Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) related grants being leveraged in the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative lead by SDCOE totaling over \$7,094,000. These grants are scheduled to end in 2025 and 2027. In addition, in FY2025-2029, First 5 California is allocating \$5,728,000 in funding towards QRIS through the IMPACT and IMPACT Hub allocations. The new funding cycle is for FY2025-2029 and is estimated to be at \$1.4M each year. All of these funding sources are leveraged to support the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative.

In 2012, SDCOE was awarded the QPI contract following an open competitive procurement process. At that time, the only funding allocation was from First 5 San Diego. Subsequently, additional funding was secured from First 5 California. Starting in FY 2014-15, SDCOE and First 5 San Diego have collaborated on applications to also draw down funding made available from CDE. A partnership and collaboration between the SDCOE and the First 5 San Diego Commission are required for San Diego County to be able to draw down the CDE and First 5 California funds allocated to support our local QRIS, the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative. In addition, First 5 San Diego and SDCOE are required to also leverage efforts with the Resource and Referral agency (YMCA-CRS), the Local Child Care and Development Planning Council, and Institutions of Higher Education. SDCOE also serves as the convener of this, the local Quality Counts California (QCC) Consortium, in our collective effort to support increased quality in early learning and care settings.

In order for San Diego County to continue to leverage state-level funding to support the local First 5 San Diego early education initiative to continually increase quality in early learning and care settings, it is necessary to contract with the SDCOE as a Sole Source entity through the next local First 5 initiative funding cycle, therefore assuring continued and future access to state-level funding sources. SDCOE is the designated organization in San Diego which oversees QCC because its Early Education Programs and Services Unit provides:

- Early intervention services to infants/toddlers with special needs birth to three years of age and their families.
- Unique positioning in the County to leverage existing formal relationships with Local Educational Agency (LEA) and public/private partnerships across San Diego County
- Professional development and coordination to support quality early education programs for children birth to five, in alignment with California Department of Education Early Learning tools, assessments and recommended practices for children ages birth through 5-years in all types of early learning settings.
- Leadership in developing cross-sector and cross-agency systems to support early learning experiences for children ages birth through 5-years that are developmentally appropriate and designed to promote school readiness for all children.
- Operates the Local Child Care and Development Planning Council, funded by the California Department of Education, under a subcontract from the County of San Diego.

Additionally, SDCOE's Credentialing Department is the only local agency that provides the credentialing services to school districts, charter schools, universities and individuals, which includes, but is not limited to, child development permits and English Learner authorization.

On January 6, 2020, the Commission approved a sole source contract with SDCOE to lead the Learn Well Initiative in FY 2020-21 through FY 2024-25. The following is an overview of the current Learn Well Initiative scope of work and how it continues to support early care and education providers throughout San Diego County.

Design of the Learn Well Initiative

The purpose of the Learn Well Initiative (Learn Well) is to continue as a partner within the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative (SDQPI) and build the early care and education systems and supports providers need to serve families with children ages birth to 5 years of age. Learn Well will prioritize small center based and family child care home providers that are located in child care deserts, in communities with lower healthy places index ratings, and/or serving children ages birth to 5 years. The current Learn Well expanded upon the foundation established by the Quality Preschool Initiative through a Multi-Tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework to provide quality improvement strategies and supports based on providers' needs. The MTSS framework approach will focus on Systems Structures, Instructional Practices and Data reviews to continually assess the effectiveness of strategies in changing adult practices that result in improved learning opportunities for children. Participation in Learn Well will allow SDCOE to support providers through self-assessment and determine what level of support they need to make systematic and continuous improvements towards achieving the highest quality rating. Three (3) levels of support will be made available: 1) Access to structures and supports to **ALL** providers; 2) Intentional Structure and supports designed and provided to **SOME** providers based on assessed need; and 3) Intensive supports to a **FEW** providers also based on assessed need. Support level (i.e. **ALL, SOME, FEW**) is determined based on the evidence of the provider's ability to 1) Implement practices that support achieving or maintaining a quality Tier 3 or higher rating; 2) Continually make progress towards quality Tier 3 or higher by accessing all available resources and supports available to all participating sites.

The primary goal is to support providers, serving families with young children ages birth to 5 years of age, to continually improve the quality of the learning environment and adult-child interactions, while receiving support in the form of technical assistance, instructional support, coaching and ongoing professional development. The targeted early care and education provider base will be expanded to include family

childcare homes, faith based and private providers. This priority aligns with the direction of both the CA Dept of Education and First 5 CA Commission funding that is forthcoming. This is due to the expansion to include early learning and care settings and family childcare homes in an asset-based approach.

The Learn Well Initiative's MTSS Framework supports whole system engagement in the most inclusive environment over a sustained period through the following structure:

- Students and Family: One coherent system of support begins with students and families.
- Learning/School Site: Schools have the most direct influence on students, and they are the place where transformation occurs.
- Lead Educational Agency (LEA)/District: The LEA/District is the point of intervention that enables sustainable interventions and school-wide transformation.

Commission History

- On January 16, 2020 (Item 2): Commission approved a contract with SDCOE for up to \$40 million FY 2020-21 through FY 2024-25 for the SDCOE Learn Well contract.
- On June 26, 2023 (Item 1): Commission approved an amendment to add additional funding from First 5 CA to lead the Impact Legacy Grant in the amount of \$3,183,938 through June 30, 2025. This grant has optional 2 years through June 30, 2027 that are pending approval by the First 5 CA Commission.
- On December 17, 2024 (Item 1): Commission approved a 5-Year Strategic Plan that supports Health, Learning, Family and Community as critical Strategic Goal Areas.

Link to the Strategic Plan

The following key strategies from the Commission's 2025 – 2030 Strategic Plan will be directly addressed by the First 5 San Diego Learn Well Initiative:

- Equity Focus – through prioritizing early care and education providers that are serving families with the greatest needs in the lowest healthy places index communities and where child care deserts exist.
- Learning goal is to strengthen the system to improve the quality of early care and education. The strategy to achieve this goal is:
 - Quality Enhancement of Early Education - Provide parent and provider engagement and targeted provider supports to increase the quality of early care and education
- Parents and caregivers education – equip parents and caregivers with the knowledge and resources they need to support their children's early development.