FIRST 5 ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA (https://first5association.org)

California's Early Childhood System Needs a Rethink

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This month, I joined a team of California leaders at the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center's (https://pn3policy.org/)State Policy Academy on Early Childhood Governance (https://pn3policy.org/early-childhood-governance/). Teams from eight states came together to learn from national experts and each other, examine governance models, and identify ways to better serve young children and families.

My clearest takeaway? Governance matters. How we structure decision-making, authority, and accountability across early childhood programs shapes how families access support, how providers deliver services, and how effectively public resources are used.

California's early childhood system is especially complex. Programs serving children and families from the prenatal period to age three spread across multiple agencies, departments, funding streams,

contractors, and local systems. Each part may have a legitimate purpose, and some are still being built, but together they often create duplication, confusion, and unnecessary barriers. (https://first5association.org)

We should not accept this complexity just because it’s familiar.

Governor Leadership Matters

Through expert testimony and state leader experiences, academy attendees were frequently reminded that meaningful governance reform requires leadership from the governor. Agencies can attempt to coordinate better, advocates can develop recommendations, and legislators can advance targeted reforms. But changes that cross departmental boundaries, clarify accountability, or shift authority require executive leadership.

California’s next governor should set a clear vision for how the state supports young children and families, then align the administration around it. The central question is how to optimize the system to make it easy for families to get help and for providers to serve them. Too often, families face disconnected programs, repeated applications, and unclear entry points. Providers manage overlapping requirements and administrative processes that take time away from serving children.

Governance reform should solve these problems.

California Has Already Shown It Can Change (https://first5association.org)

California has recently taken important steps to simplify early childhood governance and funding.

Before 2021, child care and development programs were divided between the California Department of Education and the California Department of Social Services. The state moved nearly all of those programs under one roof at the Department of Social Services in an attempt to align and streamline child care services and reduce barriers to accessing them.

More recently, California tackled TK-12 education governance by adopting a new governance structure that shifts greater public education oversight to the Governor and State Board of Education. As the Legislative Analyst's Office wrote (https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/5165), these changes "allow for voters to hold the Governor accountable for change, reduce confusion about who is in charge, and improve oversight of existing programs."

Neither change was an end in itself. Consolidating child care programs and strengthening oversight of public education were each steps toward the same larger goal: a system attempting to be coordinated, accountable, and easier for families and providers to navigate. These examples show that long-standing structures are not fixed. California can rethink them when they no longer work well for families, providers, or the state. The next step is to bring that same willingness to the broader prenatal-to-three system.

Start with Existing Local Infrastructure – The First 5 Network

(https://first5association.org)

Governance reform must strengthen the connection between state policy and local implementation. California already has a statewide foundation for that work through the First 5 Network (https://first5association.org/about/about-us/).

First 5s are voter-approved, locally governed public entities in all 58 counties (https://first5association.org/county-first-5s/). For nearly three decades, they have funded services, coordinated local systems, implemented state initiatives, and worked directly with families, providers, and community organizations.

California does not need to build new infrastructure from scratch to deliver state policy, services, and programs at the local level. It can maximize the value of the First 5 Network to connect services alongside counties, providers, and community organizations, carry state policy into communities, and bring local experience back into state decision-making.

A Governance Agenda for the Next Governor

As California families with young children continue to shoulder the state's affordability crisis, better governance should, at a minimum, make public services easier to access and deliver. Families should not have to submit the same information repeatedly. Providers should not be required to

complete duplicative reports for multiple departments. Contracting, referrals, data sharing, and reimbursement should not be delayed by unnecessary and costly administrative layers. (https://first5association.org)

California's next governor does not need to look far for answers. A coalition of advocates and providers developed the Choose Children policy platform (https://choosechildren.org/policy-platform/), which offers a strong starting point. Its recommendations call for a state infrastructure that puts families first and makes support easier to navigate.

The next governor should make prenatal-to-three governance an early priority by establishing clear leadership, identifying where authority is fragmented, and determining where coordination, realignment, or consolidation would improve outcomes.

California has the commitment, expertise, and local infrastructure to help children and families thrive. It now needs a statewide governance structure equal to that ambition.

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This blog is the first in a series on rethinking California's early childhood system. Our aim is to provide increasingly specific governance concepts, examples, and recommendations in the coming weeks.

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