

Early Learning For All (The ELFA Plan)



Giulianna Stoothoff, age 8 Cambria Montessori

A Countywide Plan for Access to High Quality Preschool in San Luis Obispo County

April 2008

Developed by funding provided by the P-16 Council
of San Luis Obispo County

San Luis Obispo County P-16 Council

To the San Luis Obispo Community:

In April of 2005, a collaborative of leaders in education (preschool through college), business, and community leaders came together to form the San Luis Obispo County P-16 Council. At this watershed gathering, it was agreed that collaboration across institutions is the best approach to addressing critical gaps in educational achievement.

The achievement gap is defined as the difference between all students when compared with the achievement of various subgroups, such as students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students of color, and English Language Learners.

The Council has identified Early Childhood Education (ECE) as the first of its shared initiatives. The goal for this initiative is that *all 3 and 4 year old children in SLO County will have access to high quality preschool.*

The preschool goal was selected because of the cascading amount of research that demonstrates that investing in early education is an effective strategy to address the Achievement Gap by focusing on school readiness for entering kindergarten students. Studies show that a quality preschool experience reduces special education costs, reduces drop out and crime rates, increases student self-confidence, and promotes positive social and emotional behavior.

The P-16 Council mobilized the Early Childhood Education Task Force to develop a county plan for high-quality universal preschool. The ECE Task Force is comprised of a broad range of local experts, providers, and advocates, (public & private, faith-based and family child care) in the area of early care and education throughout our county. This Plan is entitled "Early Learning For All" in San Luis Obispo County or fondly referred to as "ELFA."

The ELFA plan reflects our best thinking on early childhood education in our community and is a collaborative work of the ECE Task Force members including early childhood and elementary educators, special needs providers, higher education instructors, funders and community organizations. We encourage you to review the ELFA Plan. This is not a "dusty shelf binder," but a living document to guide us as a launching pad for system enhancement, starting now.

We invite you to join us as we roll up our sleeves to tackle our first year "Action Items" for the benefit of all of our children and their families in San Luis Obispo County.

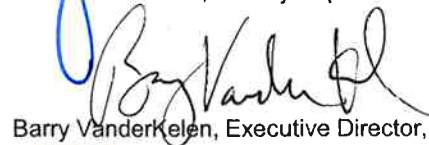
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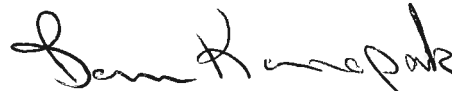
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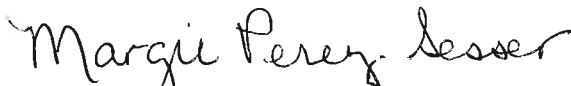
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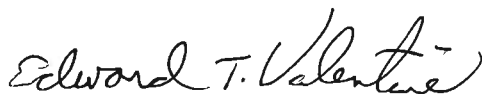
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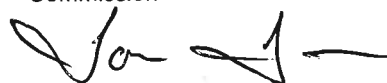
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SLO County Early Learning for All

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Introduction

A Vision and Case for High Quality Early Learning Experiences

The Broad Vision

The San Luis Obispo “Early Learning for All” Countywide Plan (ELFA) places high quality early learning experiences for all our children at the center of our community’s agenda. This is not a static, final report, but a work in constant progress. It truly does take a village to raise a child. The ELFA Plan holds this ideal at its forefront. ELFA and the children to whom this plan is dedicated depend on the knowledge and resources that the San Luis Obispo County community has to offer. ELFA represents an unprecedented commitment among educators, families, and policy makers to build towards a locally designed, universally accessible early education system that integrates a continuum of learning experiences for young children. ELFA offers a **broad vision** for San Luis Obispo County, that:

All young children, birth to age eight, regardless of their family’s economic status or location, have: 1) access to high quality early learning opportunities and experiences; and 2) families have access to integrated community resources and support services to assist them with the education and care of their children.

Initial Goal

Grounded in this visionary context, the first SLO County Early Learning For All (ELFA) Plan focuses attention on an **initial goal of access to quality programs for children 3 and 4 years of age**. Our intent is to offer a comprehensive plan that 1) builds upon the existing early care, education and family resource infrastructure, 2) reinforces the important transitional link between preschool and kindergarten/elementary school, 3) articulates shared ideals on best practice models to strive for, and 4) offers realistic actions, achievable in one year, that will move us in the direction of our shared goal.

Recognizing that differing family needs and desires require different types of early care and education, the plan assumes a **mixed delivery system** of licensed providers from the public and private sector including full and part day programs, center-based, faith-based and family child care programs. The benefits of a mixed delivery system allow us to provide families with better access to high quality programs with settings, locations and hours that meet their needs and preferences, and that support their aspirations for their children.

The ELFA Charge

ELFA has been called for and endorsed at the highest levels of educational, business and non-profit leadership in San Luis Obispo County. In 2006, a new regional collaborative of education and community leaders came together to form the San Luis Obispo County P-16 Council. This group charged itself with a mission to establish priorities, commit resources, and advocate across institutional boundaries for a coordinated approach to improve student achievement and eliminate the achievement gap in San Luis Obispo County. As its first order of business, the P-16 Council chose to focus its collective efforts on Early Childhood Education (ECE). A multi-stakeholder “ECE Task Force” (see Appendix A) formed to build the first San Luis Obispo “Early Learning For All” (ELFA) Countywide Plan. The ECE Task Force brought together representatives of the early childhood community, elementary

education, special needs providers, parents, higher education institutions, funders, and other community organizations, each with a specialized area of expertise. The members of this group brought their passion for the importance of early learning, their conviction to create a system that supports healthy child development, and a willingness to work as a team to design the Early Learning for All program in San Luis Obispo County. The following document captures the best of our combined research, experience, and commitment toward high-quality local early learning programs for all our children.

Research On The Value Of Preschool

In recent years, early childhood advocates, researchers, school reformers, and policy makers have drawn national attention to the valuable role that high quality preschool can play in children's lives. Public awareness has been heightened by studies showing that high quality early educational experiences--especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds--can lead to long-term gains, such as higher academic achievement, higher graduation rates, lower incidence of children being held back a grade or placed in special education programs, and lower delinquency rates.ⁱ Economic analysts have estimated significant cost savings associated with these gainsⁱⁱ, in turn fueling serious policy discussions at state and local levels to create a publicly funded universal preschool system.ⁱⁱⁱ

Closing the Achievement Gap

Public interest in children's early learning experiences also stems from concerns regarding a persistent "achievement gap" in the K-12 system along both socioeconomic and racial lines, even at the earliest grades.^{iv} It has been increasingly recognized that integrating high quality learning experiences for young children with what happens in the early elementary years (PK-3) is a critical starting point to permanently narrowing this gap.^v Increasingly, this early stage in the education continuum is seen as *the most important*: "Unprecedented attention to schooling from preschool to 3rd grade offers greater promise for improving outcomes that almost any other step that educators might take," argues Gene Maeroff in his 2006 book, *Building Blocks: Making Children Successful in the Early Years of School*.

To be sure, preschool access by itself is not a cure for all the challenges that young children experience, nor are the rewards always immediately evident. Even in the highest quality programs, benefits are often not revealed until the later years.^{vi} Substandard preschool programs actually have the potential to cause more harm than good.^{vii} Also, while there is strong evidence that many children -- especially those from low-income and/or limited English speaking families -- stand to profit from high quality early learning experiences,^{viii} additional support services for children and their families may be required to reap benefits.^{ix} Recent research shows that the long-term success of preschool programs depends largely on the continued quality of learning experiences and family support services available in the elementary years.^x These findings point to the importance of providing coordinated learning experiences and family support services in preschool and elementary school to maximize benefits from early childhood investments.^{xi}

Valuing Quality Teachers

Perhaps the loudest call for action in the nationwide dialogue on improving preschool quality is a need for qualified career-oriented teachers. Unfortunately, the demand for well-educated early educators who stay in the profession is far greater than the supply. Today about 60-70% of 3- and 4-year-olds in the U.S. are enrolled in some type of early educational program (regardless of quality) and the demand is growing. Because preschool teachers often earn poverty-level wages, there is a great deal of turnover, and little incentive to meet higher educational requirements. Teacher turnover is a major culprit in compromised preschool experiences for young children, who are subjected to unstable and frequently changing relationships with their educator/caregivers. The big question remains *how* to strengthen the ECE workforce, given the persistent challenges related to defining the qualifications of an early care provider, refining a system that supports their professional development and creating funding that supports viable wages.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is one of many vocal advocates for raising expectations for preschool teacher qualifications, education and preparation: “If early childhood practitioners have higher levels of formal education and specialized training, they are much more likely in their work with young children and families to use the evidence-based practices and possess the ongoing professional commitment we know are essential to make a positive difference in children’s lives.”^{xii} While there is some consensus that children are better served in programs with teachers with a Bachelor’s degree, it is also clear that holding a degree is not sufficient to ensure high-quality without ongoing professional development and support systems. Teachers also need extensive background in child development, experience and regular support when handling the challenges that come with special needs and challenging behaviors.

Existing Models

Fortunately, we know a great deal about what high quality entails in early educational programs, and professional organizations such as NAEYC and the National Family Child Care Association (NFCCA) have provided exemplary models and guidelines to follow. Research shows that *structural* features—such as teacher education, teacher-child ratios, classroom facilities and materials, and curriculum—contribute in key ways to quality and positive child outcomes. *Process* features—such as teachers’ instructional and social interactions with children within everyday and play activities—are equally, if not more, important in predicting gains in children’s achievement and adjustment.^{xiii}

Local Progress

Findings on the value and challenges in early childhood education have motivated a surge in local efforts to build and improve an accessible system of preschool programs and ECE workforce preparation. One notable initiative funded through the Children and Families Commission of San Luis Obispo County has launched two comprehensive, free early childhood “school readiness” programs in the county’s two neighborhoods with lowest performing elementary schools – Oceano and North Paso Robles. These two communities in partnership with the early childhood educators and family support providers who work with them have put into practice many of the quality ideals for which ELFA Plan advocates on a broader scale: safe and stimulating facilities, well-planned curriculum, qualified and well-supported teachers, significant family involvement, and active partnerships with other community agencies and schools, among other features. The ELFA Plan has benefited from the experience of these pilot initiatives, and hopes to build on them towards broader accessibility for families to a network of quality “ELFA” programs throughout the county.

Principles of Quality Learning for All

The ELFA Plan holds the following to be significant factors in creating quality learning experiences for young children:

1. A system that meets the needs of families
2. High quality learning experiences
3. A diverse, educated work force
4. Facilities that support healthy development
5. Continuing funding that supports ELFA goals
6. Advocacy to create a supportive community

Plan Organization

The remainder of this document is organized into six chapters that explore each of these areas in some detail. Most chapters open with a **“Challenge” Statement**, followed by a collection of proposed ideals, best practice examples, and suggested directions for future work. **“Year 1 Action Items”** have been identified at the conclusion of each chapter, and also appear as a full list at the end of Chapter 6. Additional resources on a variety of related topics can be found in the appendices.

Join the Dialogue

One final note: The ELFA Plan is meant to be read as an ongoing dialogue, in which you – the reader – are an active participant. We ask you to find the way that you can contribute to the success of ELFA and get involved in this very important community action. Please contact us at 805-782-7272 for more information.

Chapter 1 Needs Assessment

What do we know about San Luis Obispo's youngest children, families, programs and staff?

Our Challenges

The Early Learning for All Plan is built upon local findings that document the extent of three important and intersecting areas of need in considering a comprehensive early learning system:

- 1) **Program Quality** (i.e. stimulating and safe early learning environments),
- 2) **Workforce** (i.e. staff characteristics including longevity, training, compensation), and
- 3) **Program Capacity** (i.e. available "slots").

Program Quality Gap

There are several types of existing preschool providers in the county offering various types of programs, from part day programs for 3 & 4 year olds only (often referred to as preschool) to full day programs serving children 0 – 5, (often referred to as child care). For the purposes of developing and acting on the ideas put forth in this ELFA Plan, we recommend using the term **preschool** for *any* ECE program that serves 3-4 years olds. In other words, "high quality preschool" refers to a high quality program for 3 and 4 year olds, regardless of the setting.

There are approximately 111 licensed center-based programs and 318 licensed "family childcare" home-based providers in SLO County. Preschool experiences are being provided in settings including but not limited to, college campuses, faith-based institutions, family child care homes, part day pre-school programs, full and part day child care centers, recreation centers, school-based programs, or other locations. We find value in the diversity of all of these programs and the ability of a diverse delivery system to meet the needs of children and families.

San Luis Obispo County is home to over 257,000 people living across 3,304 square miles. People of Latino origin represent the largest minority group, and make up 18% of the county population. According to census data from the 2006 American Community Survey, 12,150 children under the age of five live in San Luis Obispo County. Population forecasts indicate a 1% growth countywide over the next five years, with higher estimates for North County.

However, licensing standards address minimal basic health and safety requirements, not quality standards. Many programs voluntarily exceed these minimum standards to offer developmentally appropriate programs that serve families with the settings, locations and hours that meet their needs and preferences and support their aspirations for their children, but a wide range in the quality of these spaces still exists. The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association for Family Child Care accreditation standards are considered the national standards for high quality programs in both center based and family child care programs, yet in SLO County, we have only 3 accredited centers and only 1 accredited family child care program. Most programs continually struggle with

balancing the additional costs of providing a high quality program and keeping tuition rates at the level that parents can afford. Other funding sources often determine the level of quality as many parents cannot afford to pay tuition that would allow for a program to develop all elements that reflect objective standards of quality such as classroom environment or staff qualifications. At the heart of this ELFA Plan is a call for increased investment in preschool as *the* best strategy to raise quality across the board.

Workforce Gap

According to the California Employment Development Department, San Luis Obispo County is home to well over 1,000 ECE educators serving as teachers and care workers for children up to the age of five, and who bring to their professional practice varying levels of education and experience. While some ECE programs have been able to maintain highly trained staff and have met accreditation standards, others face high staff turnover, struggle to provide professional development opportunities and experience difficulty staying in compliance with licensing regulations.

Surveys with future and current ECE professionals consistently highlight a passion for the profession that is dampened almost exclusively by the near poverty level wages that the current system pays. San Luis Obispo County preschool teachers make, on average, \$13.00/hour. Compare this with the estimated \$30.00/hour earned by a first-year kindergarten teacher straight out of college.

California state labor market data project a 22% overall increase in the demand for preschool teachers in San Luis Obispo County between now and the year 2014. Head Start, one of the county and nation's biggest employers of preschool teachers, is anticipating a new requirement, as part of Head Start Act reauthorization, that 50% of its ECE staff hold a bachelors degree. Meanwhile, enrollment in local ECE and child development programs at the community and four-year college levels is low relative to the perpetual need for new teachers to keep up with increasing employer demand and to compensate for the high turnover rate (30% in California). Over a four-year period between 2001 and 2005, Cuesta College, the county's 2-year community college, awarded fewer than 100 Associates Degrees in ECE. Only an estimated 20% of Bachelor's level graduates from Cal Poly State University's Child Development Department stay in San Luis Obispo County following college, and the vast majority eventually opt *not* to enter the ECE teaching profession.

The presence of qualified bilingual-bicultural ECE educators has been shown in numerous studies to make a notable positive impact on children from non-English speaking homes. ECE programs in SLO County recognize this priority and actively recruit bilingual/bi-literate staff. However, the county's current supply of qualified staff is not keeping pace with demand. Employers point out that, while they *are* able to find bi-lingual Spanish-speaking staff with solid skills in the classroom, they struggle to find enough staff with strong enough English communication skills to either a) carry out required paperwork associated with program licensure, or b) pursue continuing education beyond entry level course work. Recent recruitment efforts by the county's Head Start, the county's largest preschool employer in the county, offer a good illustration of this challenge. Two current openings for bilingual/bi-literate ECE educators have been listed for more than five months, with virtually no applicants.