

First 5 LA ECE Policy Advocacy Fund: Funder-Field Synergy

When a public funder leverages power differently, with a grantee-centered, field-building approach, a more durable field emerges with meaningful policy wins that support children and their families.

From 2016–2022, First 5 Los Angeles, an independent public agency, responded to a need for Early Care & Education (ECE) systems change in a way that was supportive, dynamic, and replicable. This resulted in a stronger Early Care & Education field that is respected in Sacramento and effective, even during the most trying times.

This is the story of how a government organization can be an agent of policy change while supporting a broader ecosystem of organizations. It's also the story of people leading with flexibility, trust, and relationships rather than focusing on merely transactional, tactical wins.

The Early Care and Education Policy and Advocacy Fund (ECE PAF) was a six-year, \$17-million investment established to both a) strengthen existing advocacy efforts and b) increase collaboration among organizations working to improve access to quality early care and education in Los Angeles County. The fund targeted a historically fragmented field struggling to elevate ECE as a priority in Sacramento. It also provided grantees an opportunity to deepen their relationships and strengthen the longstanding ECE Coalition. Unlike other initiatives that have identified a specific policy change and “hired” grantees to implement it, ECE PAF was a strategic investment by a public funder to support an *ecosystem of ECE advocates*.

ECE PAF DESIGN ELEMENTS:

While philanthropic policy advocacy and systems-change funding has increased in recent years, First 5 Los Angeles has been at the forefront of this journey for over 15 years, continually evolving their praxis. Beginning in 2008, First 5 LA began with a small but explicit systems and policy change focus through a subset of its capacity-building grantees, the Community Opportunities Fund (COF).

This commitment was deepened through the Policy Advocacy Fund (PAF), cohorts I and II. This fund, ECE PAF, built on the learnings from prior iterations to be multi-year and responsive. Grant pools and guidelines were co-designed with involvement from the funder, an intermediary organization, and learning team, but also prospective grantees, and other key stakeholders.

Symbiotic Funding Elements

What emerged was a multi-level funding strategy with three unique elements woven together to target and strengthen different parts of the ECE ecosystem. **Partnership Grants** were provided to six (6) larger organizations with a proven track record of state and local policy change; these ranged from \$200-450k, renewable annually for five years.

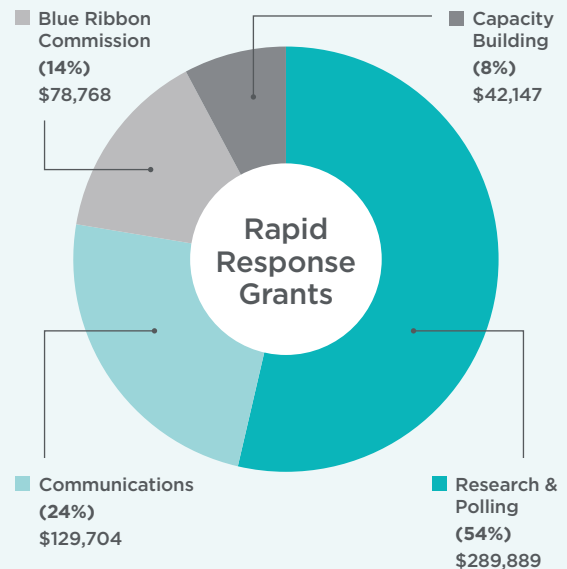
The **Field Building Grants** provided \$75,000 each to ten (10) organizations that could add value to the ECE space. These were either smaller, more niche ECE-focused organizations or successful multi-issue advocacy organizations newer to ECE work but who had a deep history in policy change and movement-building in Los Angeles.

Third, the **Rapid Response Fund** was a way for grantees to respond to shifting context in time-sensitive, targeted ways. The average grant award was \$50,000 and fulfilled needs that would benefit the field overall, such as research, polling, or communications. Over \$500,000 was distributed from this pool.

Typically, funders (particularly government funders) cannot move quickly. This results in a sense of scarcity rather than abundance, creating strained relationships and decreased effectiveness. This fund was able to address both issues—in real time—by maintaining a field-level orientation.



Strengthen the ECE Field



Intermediary

A key reason the ECE PAF fund was able to be dynamic was the intermediary structure. Community Partners, an organization that provides administrative infrastructure and connections for large-scale regranting, convening and capacity-building initiatives served an intermediary role by providing staff and consultants for support as needed. This resulted in an environment of thought partnership between peers rather than a formal grantee-funder relationship, which allowed the initiative to be highly responsive to opportunities that arose.

Community Partners' ability to absorb the bureaucratic load (managing proof of insurances, certifications, monthly cost-reimbursement invoicing, etc.) and simplify application and reporting processes allowed ECE PAF to look and feel more like private funding. This model allowed for First 5 LA to remain highly accountable as a public agency stewarding taxpayer funds and demonstrating positive outcomes, while limiting the administrative burden on grantees. The presence of an intermediary made it possible for First 5 LA staff to show up as policy advocates alongside grantees.

Convenings

The intermediary designed and facilitated highly interactive meetings where trust and relationship-building were paramount. The convenings were designed with opportunities for trust-building activities, with “walking breakout sessions” (out in nature, pre-COVID) planned for pairs or trios who may not have worked closely in the past so they could get to know one another. The intentionality behind what was seemingly a whimsical wellbeing-focused component of the meetings served as a powerful way to support field building.

Grantee evaluations continually noted how the convenings were not only enjoyable, but that trust was actively built. In addition, the funder was able to take a “both-and” approach, supporting the grantee convenings while at the same time participating in and funding the broader ECE Coalition, a separate table where the more policy-focused strategy discussions were taking place.

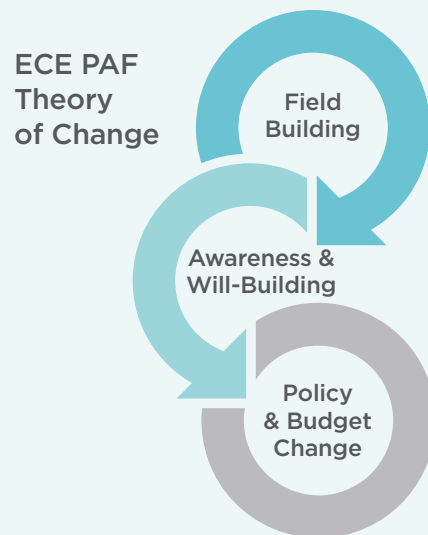
IMPACT:

ECE PAF had a clear framework whereby the initiative would impact policy *and* strengthen the broader ECE field. During the six-year period, substantial impact was noted across three (3) outcome areas.

Field-Building

Fragmentation in the field declined from a baseline of 75% of grantees identifying it as an issue in 2017 to only 38% in 2021. Furthermore, compared to 2017, grantees reported that the ECE advocacy field in 2021 is more effective at making both budgetary impacts (100% agree) and policy changes (88% agree).

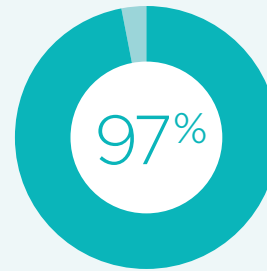
Increased communication among grantees and increased policy advocacy collaboration were reported as well. Substantial work done through ECE PAF strengthened the ECE Coalition's ability to impact the broader field by creating internal policies, procedures, and guiding bylaws; this resulted in 88% of grantees feeling confident in the ability of the ECE Coalition to secure meaningful policy wins.



¹ First 5 LA funds the facilitation of the ECE Coalition which advocates for state budget investments and policies that promote equity by serving the highest-need children first. The ECE Coalition's initiatives are informed by current research and led by the expertise of families and ECE professionals within 35 diverse member organizations, of which all Partnership grantees and many Field Building grantees are members.

Increased Awareness

Over 2,400 visits (in-person and virtual) to elected officials and their staff took place. In addition, grantees engaged in various coalitions, networks, and non-traditional venues to share the vision and agenda of the broader ECE field.



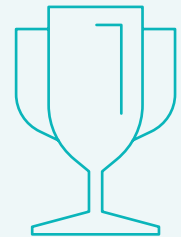
97% of California legislators were visited by a PAF ECE Grantee.

Policy & Budget Outcomes

In the 2018–19 budget cycle, grantees collaborated on the unprecedented “Billions for Babies” budget request, a \$1 billion investment, improving access for approximately 100,000 children and needed supports for providers to care for more infants and toddlers. This marked the first time the ECE Coalition had clear budgetary asks aligned to bills.

After having grantees support and/or sponsor over three dozen pieces of ECE legislation during the six-year period, five bills were signed into law, along with nine of the budgetary requests made.

Since 2017, the ECE Coalition has advocated for and won **\$7.8 billion.**



LESSONS LEARNED:

Trust can be built structurally. Intentionally creating spaces to develop relationships yielded clear results in grantee-to-grantee rapports. Taking the time to thoughtfully create these opportunities was key to ensuring relationships were fostered during this initiative.

The presence of an intermediary can preempt difficult funder-grantee issues. By keeping an arm’s length between the grantees and the funder, the intermediary ensured the policy agenda of First 5 LA did not drive the agendas of the PAF grantees but rather created a buffer so that grantees could interact more freely with the funder in thought-partnership.

Braided-funding streams allow for intentional field development. The impact of three, multi-year funding streams cannot be underestimated. Funds covered staff time and space for grantees to engage in their work, as well as the ability to respond to emergent needs in real time.

Valuing—and acting on—grantee input creates an engaged learning environment. Grantees were regularly asked about their ideas and inputs; these suggestions were factored into decisions, allowing the initiative to evolve more meaningfully, learning from reflections in ways that supported grantees.

Centering equity in initiative design is critical. Racial justice—including prioritizing the expertise of people directly impacted by ECE policy—was not incorporated upfront and was a missed opportunity for this iteration of the fund.

Looking Ahead

PAF ECE has demonstrated the impact a public funder can have on policy outcomes by supporting, strengthening, and focusing on field-building. Overall, the gamble paid off. What was lost in certainty, was gained in innovation, and providing resources where and when support was needed. Public and private funders looking to become social change agents can consider elements from this approach as they move forward in their particular fields of interest.

Author:

Leah Ersoylu, PhD is the President of Ersoylu Consulting, a WSBE firm focused on strategy and data for policy and systems-change initiatives. She would like to thank **Cynthia Freeman** and **Jessica Villasenor** of Community Partners and **Jaime Kalenik, Becca Patton** and **Katie Kurutz** of First 5 LA for their thought-partnership and editing support.

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